

Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960
By Gary Gerstle
Cambridge University Press
356 pp., \$39.50

By Dana Frank

I MUST CONFESS I'VE ALWAYS LIKED Earl Browder's 1940s slogan for the Communist Party U.S.A., "Communism is 20th-century Americanism." Despite a certain comic preposterousness, it was a sincere attempt to equate socialism with the best of the American demo-

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cratic and egalitarian tradition. Why shouldn't "Americanism" be ours, for the left?

What is Americanism anyway? Is it evil rampant nationalism, celebrating uncritical allegiance to presidential mandates, upholding the patriarchal family and trampling the vineyards of the Third World with Coke bottles?

Or is Americanism the protection of free speech, true participatory democracy, the vision of a country "with liberty and justice for all"?

Gary Gerstle's fascinating new book takes on precisely this question, asking not only what Americanism has meant historically but also exploring whether Americanism can, indeed, be 20th-century socialism.

His greatest contribution is to show that Americanism was neither totally reactionary nor totally liberatory—it was, rather, contested terrain. The use of Americanism has been embedded in class conflict, in the conflicting goals of employers and workers.

One of the great feats of this book is Gerstle's ability to show that intellectual history is not some ethereal, separable history of abstract "ideas" but is rather a product of class relations born at the workplace.

Political language, Gerstle argues, is a form of power. And when working people lose control of the language in which to express their ideals, they lose the ability to legitimize and effectively fight for those ideals.

Industrial democracy: Gerstle tells the story of a small city, Woonsocket, R.I., from just before World War I through the early '60s. It was a one-industry town: 75 percent of Woonsocket's industrial workers labored in woolen-textile mills.

Woonsocket was also a French-Canadian town. Its 35,000 French-Canadian immigrants—out of a city of 50,000—went to French-Canadian Catholic churches, sent their children to French-speaking parochial schools, read newspapers in French and spoke French on the street.

In the 1910s and '20s, Gerstle argues, they were under the sway of an authoritarian ethnic Catholic hierarchy, which preached unwavering deference to parish authority and remained suspicious of both unionization and any pot that threatened

Reclaiming the high ground of Americanism

to melt their community.

Woonsocket wasn't exactly fertile ground for militant unionism. Yet two radical organizers, Joseph Schmetz and Lawrence Spits, were able to build a mass union movement in Woonsocket in the early '30s.

They began with a base among the city's most skilled workers, Franco-Belgian mule skinnners, and cast their appeal in terms of the promise of American life: by joining a union, French-Canadians could cast off their ethnic stigma and become true Americans. Through Americanist language, Woonsocket's immigrant workers could transcend ethnic identity with class identity.

It worked. By 1941 Woonsocket's union, the Independent Textile Union (ITU) had not only organized all the city's textile workers but had expanded to include locals in a range of trades throughout the city's hinterland.

The ITU was far more than just a traditional labor union. Services to members included a medical clinic, life insurance, a credit union, cooperative housing and a library. Ultimately it embodied a tiny version of the Belgian socialism within which union president Schmetz had come of age.

The key to Schmetz' success (and the union's) was casting working-

class or neosocialist ideals in the language of Americanism. "We want a declaration of independence," the union demanded, for example. On other occasions it denounced the "tyranny" of local employers.

Most centrally, though, it was the "democratic dimension" of Americanist language upon which unionists seized. In the context of the late '30s, that became industrial democracy—a justification for workers' rapidly expanding powers at the workplace.

Seeing Reds: The "democratic Americanist" moment in Woonsocket was over quickly. The ethnic workers that Spitz and Schmetz had nurtured in the '30s decided in the early '40s to run the union's shop themselves, and the first thing they did was to kick out their leaders. The charge: communism.

Anti-communism didn't arrive out of thin air. It was consciously bred, Gerstle argues, by a new church-sponsored secret organization, the Ligue Ouvriere Catholique, itself encouraged by a new wave of grassroots French-Canadian activism, both pro-unionist and anti-communist.

But it was the intervention of the wartime state that really spelled doom for the Americanist militant unions of Woonsocket. Gerstle shines here, underscoring the fundamental impact of the federal govern-

ment on local politics and ideology.

The government had its own notions of Americanism and mobilized the full force of its national propaganda machine to spew forth a new vision of Americanism onto every cereal box, bus ad and magazine cover in the country.

Americanism now became "cultural pluralism," in which blacks and whites, Jews and Catholics, the native-born and immigrants joined in the war effort like loving brothers and sisters. Those who didn't like each other were traitors.

The catch? One of those harmonious pairings was labor and capital. It was all to be one big happy family now. Thus as part of the package deal of cultural pluralism, anyone who acknowledged—let alone exacerbated—class conflict was promoting race hatred and therefore likened to Nazi Nordic supremacists.

This certainly wasn't a terrain on which Woonsocket's radicals could assert Americanism as industrial democracy, let alone socialism. As Gerstle argues, radicals in Woonsocket's ITU lost control of the political language of Americanism. Cast out by their own constituency, the

The Independent Textile Union was far more than a traditional labor union.

terrain of Americanism became anti-socialism.

Without their vision, the union swiftly fell apart. The new ethnic leadership juxtaposed communism with class harmony, smiling away at the city's textile capitalists. But smiles couldn't stop the owners' post-war flight to fields of cheaper labor in the U.S. South and abroad, and Woonsocket's employment base in woolen textiles evaporated.

More than words: Gerstle's book ultimately reveals Americanism to be as much a vessel as a contested terrain: once a given group believed in a given political or economic ideal, well, that was Americanism.

One lesson here for the left today is to seize upon Americanist language and speak about socialism as 21st-century Americanism. Gerstle's conclusion—alone worth the price of the book—underscores this, as he outlines the sequence of events through which the '80s right ended up in complete possession of the high ground of Americanism.

But Americanism is not the only language. We have our own terrain too, an economic one. Gerstle's story serves as an illustration. Woonsocket's French-Canadian unionists charged the radicals not just with communism but with outrageous demands that would make the textile mills unable to compete and cause them to leave town. And indeed, when the new leadership took charge, their union fell swift victim to exactly that fate as textile capital sought cheaper pastures.

Americanist dialogue alone couldn't solve this dilemma. Woonsocket's socialists could have turned this to their own ends: by talking socialism, as well as Americanism, they could have articulated a broader critique that said local industrial democracy wasn't enough—the structure of capitalism was the root cause of the Woonsocket workers' plight.

In other words, as socialists we have to put structural questions about capitalism on the table from the beginning; otherwise, our militant demands can, in fact, appear to undermine the interests of working people in the short run.

At the deepest level, we also have another terrain that is our own: the terrain of idealism. In a time of "lowered expectations," the left today can seize the high ground. We hold an ideal of a society that respects human dignity, that fights for true equality across racial and sexual lines, and that sees jobs and homes as basic rights.

All this may not be what Americanism has always historically been used to describe. But, as Gerstle shows so wonderfully, the future of what Americanism means is determined by fights both nasty and visionary in our own communities. And the powers we have to win those fights are by no means only those of language. ■

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Cover illustration of the ITU News from April of 1939.



Rhode Island Historical Society

One man's decade in 25 books or less



By John B. Judis

THE '80S PRODUCED BETTER BOOKS on politics and economics than the previous decade. Perhaps this suggests a political awakening in the '90s as the wisdom in these books penetrates into everyday politics. But as with political books of the '70s, most of them shy away from the larger task of reconceptualizing our era.

The last great reconceptualization occurred from 1955 to 1967. It produced William Appleman Williams' *Contours of American History*, C. Wright Mills' *Power Elite*, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* and so on! No book written in the last decade measures up to any of these, either in depth or impact.

The best books of recent years are, typically, biographies—a medium conducive to commercial success but also limited as a means of appraising an era and country. Two of the best biographies of the last decade—Robert Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* and Edmund Morris's *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*—are literary rather than political achievements. Caro's biography seems too Shakespearean to trust as history and politics. Morris' book is a wonderful kid's

tale.

Many of the better political books also adopt the technique of personal, novelistic journalism pioneered by Tom Wolfe in the '60s. At its best, the personal drama illuminates the larger social history; at its worst, it becomes a vehicle of anti-intellectualism. But even in the most outstanding instances, like Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On*, I find myself growing impatient waiting for the author to get to the point.

Despite the decade's rightward drift, conservative intellectuals produced few good political books in the '80s.

Conservative intellectuals, who had their golden age in the early '50s, produced few good political books in the '80s. George Gilder's books (*Wealth and Poverty*, *The Spirit of Enterprise*) were parodies of economic thought, and Allan Bloom's screed against relativism (*The Closing of the American Mind*) was based on a parody of American liberalism. But conservatives with a small "c" like Chalmers Johnson or Paul Kennedy continued to make a vital contribution.

Naturally this "best 25" list reflects my own limitations. While I read and review a lot, I don't read much about Latin America, Africa, the Mideast, the environment or nuclear war. I've left out novels, even though this means slighting authors like Alice Walker whose works have a political impact. I've limited the list to books by American authors, except for Alec Nove. I include Nove only because his book and Chalmers Johnson's, both written at the beginning of the decade, are the best guides to the world of the 1990s.

1. Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, Little Brown, 1980. A wonderful biography but also a cogent argument for a more realistic foreign policy. Along with the works of Paul Kennedy, James Chace (*Solvency*) and David Calleo (*The Imperious Economy*), this was a major argument against the imperial nostalgia of the Reagan years.

2. Sidney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign*, Beacon 1980. Blumenthal explains how political campaigns, once the province of precinct captains, are now run by Washington consultants and pollsters. Published during the first Carter-Reagan campaign, it explains what produced Roger Ailes and Willie Horton in 1988.

3. Tracy Kidder, *The Soul of a New Machine*, Little Brown, 1981. The best book about the people who design computer hardware and

software. Important for understanding the social base and sensibility of new Democrats like Gary Hart and Michael Dukakis. Also the best written prologue to the '80s.

4. Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, Stanford Univ. Press, 1982. Johnson's book explains what is different about Japanese (and East Asian) capitalism. Much of the middle is too detailed for non-specialists, but the introduction is

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spellbindingly brilliant and one of the best things written about modern capitalism.

5. Kevin Phillips, *Post-Conservative America*, Random House, 1982. Like Phillips' classic *Emerging Republican Majority*, this book is off in its immediate predictions but brilliant on long-term trends and underlying angsts.

6. Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*, George Allen & Unwin, 1983. Nove's argument for market socialism anticipates the collapse of East Bloc communism. It is the best book on Marxism and socialism since Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital*, and in many ways the superior to that.

7. Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power*, Summit, 1983. Hersh's portrayal of Kissinger is a little too Manichean for my taste and slights Kissinger's philosophical dimension, but this is still the best book on Kissinger and on Nixon's foreign policy—an antidote to the recent silliness written about both men.

8. Robert Reich, *The Next American Frontier*, Times Books, 1983. A compelling brief for industrial policy and against what Reich calls "paper entrepreneurialism."

9. Jerry Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, South End, 1983. This book shows how Paul Nitze and his Committee on the Present Danger built the political foundations for the Reagan arms buildup. A good antidote to Strobe Talbott's panegyrics on Nitze.

10. Thomas Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality*, Norton, 1984. Edsall shows how, as the popular movements of the '60s receded, aggressive business lobbies began to dominate Washington. A good companion piece is David Vogel's *Fluctuating Fortunes*.

11. Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Univ. of California Press, 1984. Luker explains the different *Weltanschauungs* that underlie the enduring conflict between pro-lifers and pro-choices. A model of political sociology and the best book on the abortion controversy.

12. Robert Kuttner, *The Economic Illusion*, Houghton Mifflin, 1984. With an eye toward European social democracy, Kuttner shows how planning and social justice are not inconsistent with economic growth.

13. William Greider, *Secrets of the Temple*, Simon and Schuster, 1987. Greider's book is impossibly long and too populist for my taste, but like Hersh on Kissinger, Greider has

set a standard for books about Paul Volcker and the Reagan years that will take decades to match. Indispensable for understanding the Carter and Reagan years.

14. J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground*, Knopf, 1985. Lukas' book is somewhat too long and burdened by a little too much background music but is the best book on the busing controversy of the '70s and a guide to the continuing racial strife in America.

15. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Simon and Schuster, 1987. Kennedy's best chapters are his earliest, but the book as a whole is the most powerful statement of the thesis that the U.S. is following Great Britain down the path of imperial overextension and economic underattention.

16. Stephen S. Cohen and John Zysman, *Manufacturing Matters*, Basic Books, 1987. Cohen and Zysman destroy the myth that America can prosper as a service society.

17. Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, St. Martins, 1987. This book is both highly informative and very moving. The best single book on the AIDS crisis.

18, 19. (A tossup.) James Miller's *Democracy in the Streets*, Simon and Schuster, 1987, and Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties*, Bantam, 1987, both do justice to the '60s. Gitlin's has more scope and poetry, but Miller's is a pointed reminder of what was most positive in the early new left.

20. Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988. Sklar's history of corporate progressivism is astonishingly relevant to the debates about government and the free market that are going on today.

21. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, Simon and Schuster, 1988. Branch's biography of Martin Luther King Jr. clearly establishes the religious roots of the civil-rights movement and makes an eloquent case for King's genius and heroism.

22. Clyde Prestowitz, *Trading Places*, Basic Books, 1988. Prestowitz's book is the most telling memoir by a Reagan official and the best book on U.S.-Japan relations in the '80s. It contains a persuasive case for industrial policy from a lifelong Republican.

23. Leo Lowenstein, *What's Wrong with Wall Street?*, Addison, Wesley, 1988. A Veblenesque analysis of Wall Street by a former Wall Streeter turned professor. The best book about the takeover mania, program trading and institutional investors.

24. David Osborne, *Laboratories of Democracy*, Harvard Business School Press, 1988. Osborne explains how most of the innovative social and economic policy is coming from the states.

25. Max Holland, *When the Machine Stops*, Harvard Business School Press, 1989. An eloquent case study of how attention to finance rather than manufacturing destroyed the American machine-tool industry. ■

