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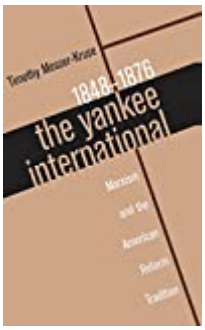

Timothy Messer-Kruse. *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition, 1848-1876.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xi + 319 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-2403-0.

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German Marxism and Homegrown

How radical has been the American radical tradition? What are the factors that have limited that tradition's impact on the nation's labor movement and on American society generally? These are among the basic questions raised anew in Timothy Messer-Kruse's fresh examination of the world's first international socialist organization, the short-lived International Workingmen's Association (1864-1876), featuring the ideological clash between the home-grown American "Yankee" Internationalists and their German-born Marxist comrades.

Messer-Kruse's opening chapter broadly summarizes the diverse traditions of thought that animated the "Yankee radicals": American Revolutionary and labor-artisan republicanism, land reform, utopian socialist creeds, abolition and antislavery, feminism, spiritualism, and evangelical religion with its own egalitarian impulses. Specialists in antebellum reform culture will, of course, be familiar with this subject matter. [1] Equally familiar, perhaps, will be the author's conclusion that the widening, intensifying northern crusade against slavery extension and the South was among the important factors tending to unite the various northern reform movements–in particular, that crusade helped dissipate some of the antagonism that had heretofore divided abolitionist and labor leaders. Not really addressed here is the further possibility, also raised by previous scholars, that the growth of northern nationalism acted in the late antebellum years more to eclipse and blunt various antebellum utopian and radical sensibilities than it did to truly unite them. However, this issue is not of central importance to Messer-Kruse's subject.

What is of central importance is the author's emphasis in this chapter and those that follow upon the eclectic perspectives that in fact persisted within Yankee radicalism. In the years following the Civil War, the author writes, "men and women who had devoted decades of their lives to struggling against the evils of slavery, political inequality, and social immorality now turned their considerable organizational experience and willingness to confront authority and convention to the task of elevating the working class" (p. 42). Yet in part out of respect for their diverse legacies, radicals like Richard Joseph Hinton, Joshua King Ingalls, and Victoria Woodhull never achieved, or even particularly sought, any

definitive doctrinal consensus. Their common enthusiasm for applying "the principles of radical democracy and universal equality to this new field of reform"–the " 'labor question' " (p. 43)–itself entailed a marked willingness to agree to disagree. And in their disposition to recognize, and tolerate different paths to radical progress lay the fundamental, and ultimately fatal, difference between "these descendants of the native radical tradition" (p. 43) and the orthodox Marxists with whom they briefly allied under the banner of the IWA. The characteristics that these two groups shared, including "a passion for social justice and economic equality," would prove "too weak a glue to hold them together" (p. 128).

One of the more controversial features of Messer-Kruse's account is likely to be his highly unflattering characterization of the IWA's German Marxist contingent, and of above all, Karl Marx and his right-hand man in the United States, Friedrich Sorge. Although the author does not appear to doubt the sincerity of their socialist convictions, both individuals emerge in his pages as utterly manipulative, unscrupulous, and ruthless in the methods they employed to control the agenda of IWA. For Messer-Kruse, moreover the organizational infighting exposed not merely the character shortcomings of Marx and Sorge; it also revealed, more fundamentally, the ideological rigidities and inadequacies of their materialist interpretation of history, at least as it applied to the mid-nineteenth-century United States. In marked contrast to the more open-minded, non-exclusionary, and racially and sexually egalitarian idealism of the Yankee members of the IWA, the orthodox Marxist commitment to "but one true line of socialist progress" (p. 43) increasingly amounted, in the 1870s, to an altogether misguided preoccupation with wooing the politically conservative, anti-socialist workers of Irish descent who made up a high proportion of the organized rank-and-file. This economist, trade union strategy of Marx, Sorge, and their minions reflected both their dismissive contempt for American political democratic institutions and electoral processes as part of the capitalist-controlled "superstructure," and their tactical disregard–despite their own nominal commitment to the ideals of racial and sexual equality–of the potential significance of blacks, women, and other segments of unorganized labor as constituent elements of the American left. The German Marxists' "Irish strategy" proved, in Messer-Kruse's account, to be as futile as it was ugly. (Not the least part of the author's damning profile, in this connection, is his inclusion of some of Marx's own unsettling references to American "niggers.")

Racial and gender blinders, together with an overattention to organized labor's oppression at the point of production, were thus embedded in what Messer-Kruse sees as the orthodox Marxists' fundamental misreading, in all their intellectual certitude and arrogance, of social and political conditions in the United States. This interpretation, of course, is consistent with the non-institutional, anti-hierarchical turn of labor history scholarship of the last decade or so. The author, moreover, has more than a small bone to pick with such chroniclers of American radicalism as the labor historians David Montgomery and Philip S. Foner, and the author of an earlier full-length study of the IWA, Samuel Bernstein. All have erred in faulting the Yankee radicals more than they have the German Marxists on points of ideology and strategy. Bernstein especially, in Messer-Kruse's corrective narrative, is guilty of misrepresenting the exchanges on this or that issue and of generally distorting the historical record.

How such historians have most of all erred is in following Marx and grievously understating the radicalism of the Yankee Internationalists, usually by dismissing them as "sentimental" and "bourgeois" reformers with an inordinate interest in achieving a superficial civil and political equality for all. Thus Messer-Kruse disapprovingly quotes Bernstein's insistence on the essentially nonsocialist character of the New Democracy, the immediate organizational forerunner of the Yankee wing of the IWA. The New Democracy believed, Bernstein wrote, that labor enjoyed a basic "compatibility with capital" and its aim was "not the abolition of private property, but its wide distribution" (pp. 75-76). Marx himself had always been inclined to similar suspicions regarding American reformers; Messer-Kruse's recitation of these suspicions recalls Marx and Engels' scornful dismissal back in 1846 of the nonrevolutionary appeal that the National Reform program held for land-hungry immigrants: "Which Europeans are those whose 'dreams' have been fulfilled here? Not the communist workers, but bankrupt shopkeepers and artisans or ruined dirt farmers who strive for the good fortune of becoming petty bourgeois or farmers again in America. And what kind of 'wish' is it that is to be realized through fourteen hundred million acres? No other than to transform all people into private property owners, a wish that is as realizable and communistic as the one that would transform all people into emperors, kings, and popes."[2]

But Messer-Kruse disagrees: the view of Marx and his scholarly sympathizers to the contrary, the various programs championed by the National Reformers and, more

importantly, by their Yankee Internationalist successors should not be summarily dismissed as utopian, "unscientific," and "bourgeois" any more than their indigenous American language of equality, republicanism, and antimonopoly should be misconstrued as sentimental and intellectually flaccid.[3] Here we come to one of the most important, and also one of the more problematic, features of Messer-Kruse's study. Certainly the thrust of much recent scholarship in nineteenth-century American reform and labor movements, as in the accounts of labor republicanism, has been to insist on the authentically radical, "anticapitalist" dimensions of those movements. But little or none of this literature has gone so far as to claim that such movements' disaffection with existing economic and social arrangements equaled the radical vision of Marxist thought itself. Indeed, recent American labor historians have been inclined to follow the British historian Robert Gray's suggestion that Marxism raised the bar too high. Furthermore, Gray suggested that Marxist theory has served to impede historians' acceptance of labor and other plebeian and oppositional movements on their own, more lowly terms by creating "The straw person model of a class conscious and revolutionary working class, equipped with a rigorous class ideology and theoretical understanding of the capitalist economy."[4]

But Messer-Kruse himself does goes further, insisting that the anticapitalist radicalism of the Yankee Internationalists, for all their eclecticism and frequently fuzzy language, was fully equal to that of Marx and his followers. In seeking to make his case, the author quite persuasively documents the Yankee Internationalist radicals' antipathy to capitalist power and waged labor, and their attendant promotion of consumer and producer cooperatives and the collectivization of private industry. The Yankee Internationalists, he concludes, were "socialists within the framework of republican belief" (p. 140). But here one might still ask: did the radicalism–the "socialism," as it were–of more than few of these Internationalists also extend to the point that they favored the abolition of all private property in the United States? Certainly this had not been true of the great majority of their antebellum reform antecedents: with the primary exception of the American followers of Robert Owen, virtually all such reformers had rejected community of property arrangements as "the grave of individual liberty." Messer-Kruse appears to agree that while most Yankee Internationalists firmly opposed landed and other "private possessions" beyond a fixed point as "exploitative," they too held to the insistence that "what individuals produce for themselves, with their own labor power, is rightfully and absolutely theirs" (p. 258). Marx himself, at least, embraced a more far-reaching "communist" vision, one that entailed the dissolution of all private property. Given this difference, the possibility therefore suggests itself that there may indeed have been some justifiable grounds for orthodox Marxists' ultimate repudiation of the Yankee Internationalists as bourgeois reformers. There may, in other words, be more validity in the conventional Marxist interpretation than Messer-Kruse acknowledges.[5]

One has a sense, in any case, that in his zeal to provide an antidote to the previous Marxist-oriented scholarly accounts, Messer-Kruse himself has given us less than the complete picture. At the same time, it remains conceivable that Yankee Internationalists' attitudes toward the place of private property in the good society, whatever these may have been, simply did not play a significant role in their growing conflict with the German Marxists. To insist otherwise would be to argue for an overly rarefied interpretation of what in fact often amounted to sheer power struggles between competing factions over other issues and more immediate strategies. More important still: the possibility that the ideology of Yankee Internationalists was less radical than Marxist thought in certain limited, if still important respects is not to dislodge Messer-Kruse's other primary argument: that this ideology remained better-suited to diffusing radical, anticapitalist principles throughout the American working-class and American society generally.

Something has already been said of the author's opinion of the wrong-headed trade union strategy favored by Marx, Sorge and their followers in the IWA. Messer-Kruse believes that the Marxists' inability to come to terms with Yankee radicalism, followed by their successful purge of the Yankee Internationalists in 1871, had disastrous implications for the American labor movement and for the American left. As a young member of the "inner circle of the immigrant Marxist milieu" (p. 228), Samuel Gompers imbibed the Sorgeans' materialist contempt for Yankee idealism. However unwittingly, Sorgism would help pave the way for the hegemony of Gomperism–in other words, a racist and sexist, economist business unionism that was bereft of the redeeming revolutionary ideals and goals of orthodox Marxism. "In the final analysis," the author writes, the American Federation of Labor's ideology of " 'pure and simple' exclusionary unionism"–"a conception that narrowed the horizons of the labor movement to improving wages, hours, and conditions of employment for its

own members"– "originated out of Sorge and his Tenth Ward Hotel faction's collision with the American reform tradition and its refusal to adapt Marxism to American conditions" (pp. 229-30).[6] It was just such internecine conflicts, and not only "the antagonisms between workers and employers," that produced "the modern American labor movement" (p. 246). As a result of the purge, too, Messer-Kruse concludes in his Epilogue, the Yankee Internationalists "lost their connection to the organized American Left" (p. 252). In their dogmatism the German American Marxists thus "took the first decisive step" in severing from the "institutional Left" its connection with the nation's vital republican reform tradition (p. 257). The particular "internal dynamics" that was played out within the IWA accordingly emerges, for the author, as the heretofore neglected piece of the old puzzle, "Why is there no socialism in the United States" (p. 257).[7]

There is plausibility in these provocative, and ably advanced, arguments. But readers may still feel that Messer-Kruse overreaches, and lays an inordinate degree of responsibility in the laps of Marx and his followers in the IWA. Certainly they have the appeal, but also the limitations, of other counterfactual arguments. We simply cannot know, even had the Yankee brand of republican idealism/socialism prevailed within the IWA, whether that organization would have endured for longer and wielded greater impact in the United States. Citing the popular following won by the Yankee Internationalist-like schemes of Henry George and Edward Bellamy, Messer-Kruse suggests that an organized socialism grounded in indigenous, "easily understood" (p. 252) republicanism would have made far greater inroads among American workers than did such late-nineteenth-century Marxist-inspired efforts as the Socialist Labor Party. But he also recognizes that the Yankee radical agenda, through its "overlooked" influence on the "inclusive and egalitarian ideology" of the Knights of Labor, only antagonized many workers, and "provoked a trade union backlash" (p. 246) that ultimately led to the AFL's organization in 1886. Even had the Marxists incorporated rather than cast off Yankee Internationalism, it must remain questionable whether the late nineteenth-century American labor movement would have somehow followed a more sweeping and more broadly egalitarian, less exclusionary course, and whether the American institutional left in general would have developed into a more formidable presence grounded in a widely-based, "republican" appeal. After all, "labor republican" activists, land reformers, utopian socialists, and other antebellum radicals, drawing earlier and equally on "home-grown" traditions and impulses, had remained more or less marginalized, unable to mount a truly effective challenge to ongoing capitalist forces. Messer-Kruse's suggestions to the contrary, there remains some plausible reason to doubt that the Yankee Internationalists' programs would have been any more successful in this regard even had their struggle with the Sorgians resolved itself in their favor.

Perhaps most of all, it seems likely that the author rather understates what radical reformers–whether of the native Yankee socialist or the "foreign" dogmatic Marxist stripe–were up against, and this included not only the conservative values of the trade union rank-and-file of which he does take ample note. Consider Barrington Moore, Jr.'s recent description of what he identifies as merely "the third obstacle to an egalitarian society," one deriving from the division of labor: "An elaborate division of labor into numerous types and grades of skill, ranging from eye surgeons to trash collectors, is an inherent characteristic of modern industrial societies. The serious egalitarian would have to find a way to recruit, train, allocate, and motivate each of these different kinds of labor without resorting to differences in pay, or at most using very small differences. To state the problem is enough to show that it is just about insoluble short of a near total destruction of modern society. Even if.... the capitalist division of labor and corresponding system of rewards display many irrationalities, an egalitarian one is hardly the remedy, and looks like an impossibility if taken at all seriously." [8]

Notwithstanding all of the foregoing reservations and caveats regarding Messer-Kruse's arguments, he has for the most part successfully rehabilitated a group of Yankee radicals whose "historical legacy," he recognizes, "may be one of failure" (p. 246). The author's arguments are themselves evidence that his contentious book offers much food for thought, and constitutes a valuable addition to the literature of American radicalism.

Notes:

[1]. For a recent study of evangelical religion's contribution to antebellum labor movements and their embrace of a radical labor theory of value, see Jama Lazerow, *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

[2]. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Economics of the *Volks-Tribune* and Its Attitude Toward Young America," in *Circular Against Kriege*, Section 2, May, 1846, repr. in *On America and the Civil War. Karl*

Marx, ed. and trans. by Saul K. Padover (New York, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 5.

[3]. We are, as Messer-Kruse no doubt recognizes, speaking in relative terms: while the reform traditions on which the Yankee Internationalists drew were certainly, as a whole, more indigenous to the United States than was orthodox Marxism, some of these (Owenite and Fourierist socialism among the most obvious) themselves had vital intellectual roots in the Old World.

[4]. Robert Gray approvingly quoted in Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *Journal of American History*75 (June 1988): 123.

[5]. That the mature as well as the "young Marx" retained the vision of a communist society without private property, together with the most radical of distributionist principles, is evidenced in his work of 1875, *Critique of the Gotha Program*; repr. in Lewis S. Feuer, ed., _Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1959), 112-32.

[6]. In an instructive illustration of how the passage of time yields shifting perspectives, Daniel Bell's classic study coupled somewhat similar criticisms of the dogmatism and "foreignness" of orthodox Marxism with an appreciation of Samuel Gompers and "pure and simple" unionism for their flexibility and pragmatic accommodation to American circumstances; *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952).

[7]. Not at issue here is the fact that various scholars have for a variety of reasons found this famous question, the title of Werner Sombart's essay of 1906, a misleading formulation of the phenomenon of the left's marginalization in Amerian society.

[8]. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Moral Aspects of Economic Growth, and Other Essays*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 142-43.

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