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Labor History

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Labor History symposium: responses

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Goldstein's repression: crude conceptualization, biased evidence, weak explanation

The United States is the only democracy that developed without an effective socialist, social democratic or labor party. Until 2010 it was the only democracy without universal health care and it still lacks a decent system of welfare for those unable to provide for themselves. Economic inequality is greater than in other western societies. While incomes for the wealthiest one percent increased more than threefold over the past four decades, median family income has hardly budged.

There are plausible grounds for believing that these facts are causally linked. Political parties help to shape political cleavages; they provide a capacity for strategy on behalf of the groups they represent. The unwillingness or inability of labor to form an effective political party prior to 1914 took this country down a fork in a road that stretches to the present.¹

The article by Robert Goldstein claims that repression shaped the American labor movement towards conservatism. The piece, like the 1978 book on which it is

based, is marred by its crude conceptualization of repression, its selective use of evidence, and its lack of attention to alternative explanations.

Goldstein's 1978 book claims that 'American social scientists have not seriously considered repression', that there is 'neglect of political repression', and that repression has been 'an important and neglected factor'. He tells us that 'social scientists have downplayed the importance of political repression, and no one has systematically studied and analyzed political repression's importance in American history . . . there is no single study of *all* [author's emphasis] the different periods and major groups affected by political repression'.² Now, three decades later, we hear that there is 'a lack of work in this area' and 'a paucity of scholarly work specifically focused on political repression'.

Individuals who have identified with radical political groups have frequently been subject to social and economic sanctions. Socialist radicalism has never been a popular cause in America. Labeled as extremist, undemocratic, and un-American, many adherents have suffered for their views. Their punishment has included ridicule and ostracism, loss of or failure to attain employment, physical abuse by vigilante groups and enraged mobs, and indictment and conviction on an assortment of criminal charges. Experience or awareness of such harassment must have discouraged some members and supporters, or perhaps more important, potential supporters, from acting on their beliefs.³

In writing these words, Lipset and I were referring to a history of discrimination and violence which has been documented by activists and scholars in dozens of books published over the past decade.⁴ To assess the influence of repression, however, one must conceptualize it clearly, weigh its consequences comparatively, and pay close attention to additional factors. Goldstein does none of these things.

Crude conceptualization

In his 1978 book, Goldstein defines political repression as '*[g]overnment action* [my italics] which grossly discriminates against persons or organizations . . .' This is in line with an extensive literature that conceptualizes political repression as (a) repression of civil rights, including the rights of association and expression; (b) repression of the right of workers to combine in the labor market; and (c) repression of citizenship, including the right to vote.⁵ However, Goldstein now broadens the concept to encompass both government *inaction* in the face of private efforts to suppress unions and *non-government* (e.g. employer) action to suppress unions. He defends this conceptual slippage by claiming that 'whether state or private bodies violated organizational freedom, the effect was the same'. Even if this were true, it would not justify conceptual conflation. But it is demonstrably not true. Laws that allow governments to imprison or execute their opponents are not equivalent to acts of private violence, and opposition movements respond differently. Confounding employer suppression and government repression biases comparison and clouds explanation. Goldstein's comparison of the United States and Germany is a case in point.

Biased evidence

The principal empirical claim in Goldstein's article is that political repression in the United States was as severe as that in Germany in the period 1870 to 1914.

Germany was an authoritarian regime in which the government was responsible to the Kaiser, not the Reichstag. The Kaiser could call a state of emergency and impose martial law, was head of the civil service and armed forces, and had the final word in 'interpreting' the constitution. Constitutional constraints were superficial. The Reichstag, though elected on male suffrage, had little effective power.

The Second Reich's anti-socialist laws were drawn up in the shadow of an abortive rebellion in neighboring France in the spring of 1871. While a German army sat outside Paris, French government troops arrested, and executed, more than 20,000 workers and their allies, including a generation of union and socialist leaders. The anti-socialist laws in Germany were less deadly, but their intent was to eliminate the leading unions and the political movement of which they were part. August Bebel proclaimed that his movement had never engaged in violence, but to no avail. In the event that the legislation was rejected, Bismarck was prepared to dissolve the Reichstag and engineer a *Staatsstreich* (putsch) that would emasculate the already weak constitutional constraints on the Kaiser's authority.

Organizations that promulgated views against the government were outlawed, their meetings, processions, and demonstrations were banned and their publications confiscated. The government's *index expurgatorius* listed 1200 titles; 80 newspapers were banned, thousands of unionists and socialists were tried, 900 were exiled, and 1500 were imprisoned. A 'minor state of siege' – martial law – was imposed in several cities, including Berlin, Leipzig and Hamburg. The Minister of the Interior responsible for the application of the law expressed the hope that socialism would 'be wiped from the face of the earth'. Socialist leaders could continue to sit in the Reichstag, though several were put on trial.

Unionists and socialists went underground to form a subculture of semi-organized resistance and socialist support grew. Repression, short of extermination, raises the costs of resistance, but increases the sense of grievance. The anti-socialist laws were not renewed in 1890, but unionists and socialists continued to be treated as the 'enemy within'. Several *Bundesstaaten* (regional governments) curbed workers' votes by introducing curial systems. The right of association was severely constrained. Labor unions were banned from political alignments and could be dissolved if they associated with a political party. Only in 1916, during World War I, were German unions accorded the status of legal bargaining agents. The Second Reich, dominated by Prussia, was a profoundly authoritarian regime whose leaders regarded socialism as a mortal threat. The ruling class was divided among softliners in the south and hardliners in Prussia, but the latter dominated the courts, the civil service and the army, and counted the Kaiser as one of their own. One of the reasons that Carl Legien, head of the Free Union movement, gave for opposing the general strike is that this would provide the Prussian authorities with a pretext for massive bloody repression.

It is worth noting that the number of fatalities, enumerated by Goldstein, is a poor measure of repression. Fatalities may be low in a regime that is able to suppress political opposition. Industrial conflict in the United States was intense, open, dispersed, and often spontaneous. The federal government had little control over state or local coercion and employers sought to mobilize local police, country deputies, or state militias to protect strikebreakers. The parties to the conflict were decentralized. National associations of employers were weak; unions were fragmented by occupation. Firearms were uncommonly accessible.

One need not downplay the extent of political repression in the United States to believe that it was not nearly as severe as in Germany between 1870 and 1914. In Germany, repression was built into the structure of the regime, and most workers' organizations responded by demanding fundamental political change. The political rights, formal and real, of American workers were much greater than those of German workers. The group that was most subject to violence – negroes – comprised a minority, and this served to divide, rather than unite, labor as a class. While laws in the Second Reich were imposed top-down by the regime, those in the United States sometimes reflected worker pressures. Labor unions were legally permitted to fund and support political parties; the policies of governments were at least partly responsive to political competition among candidates in elections. Unions in the American Federation of Labor were militant in confronting employers. Strike rates in the United States were relatively high. American unions were tough, resourceful and determined, as were their members. But they did not form a durable labor or socialist party.

Weak explanation

To understand why, one must do what Goldstein does not, and that is set out a multi-causal explanation. In *Political Repression in Modern America*, Goldstein warns the reader that '[t]his book does not attempt to give a balanced account of modern American history; it is a history and analysis of political repression, so naturally it stresses events relevant to this subject'. However, without providing a balanced account, it is not possible to estimate the relative weight of repression compared with alternative factors. Goldstein wishes to claim a greater causal role for repression, but never explains how existing explanations are invalid. Instead, he repeatedly admits that his emphasis on just one factor 'does not mean that political repression *alone* [author's emphasis] explains these aspects'.⁶ His current essay 'seeks to focus . . . on the role of repression in shaping emerging labor movements, without in any way suggesting that other factors have not also played major roles'.

Goldstein's interpretation of American labor history through the lens of a single factor, repression, leads him to impose motivations on those, like Gompers, who do not share his preconceptions. Goldstein claims that repression 'haunted' Samuel Gompers into 'a fear of radicalism'. The evidence Goldstein summons for this claim is indirect and biased. Over the course of his life, Gompers himself presented a battery of reasons for his opposition to labor representation – but he never referred to his brief imprisonment or the violent opposition of employers to unions as reasons for opposing independent labor representation. Gompers was a tough man who did not shy away from the struggle for better working conditions for unionists—but his conception of his constituency was but a subset of the American working class. He fought for legislation to restrict immigration, to enforce safety standards, and much else besides, but he believed that unions could achieve more by bargaining with employers and supporting one of the major parties than they could by supporting a third party.

To probe the validity of alternative explanations, one needs to examine the United States across time and compare states and localities within the United States, and the United States with other countries, including especially the

English-speaking democracies. Balanced, multivariate analysis suggests that several variables have played a role. Craft unions, which in the early 1900s accounted for around two thirds of AFL members – a large proportion compared with other industrialized societies – conceived of their mission as the defense of skilled workers.⁷ Mass immigration from eastern and southern Europe in the decades around the turn of the century reinforced the distinction between native unionized workers and non-unionized immigrants. The American working class was religiously, as well as ethnically, diverse. Several unions were led by Irish Catholics who rejected socialism on religious and cultural, as well as political, grounds. For their part, socialists failed to reconcile their desire for an inclusive working-class movement with a penchant for ideological correctness. While some influential socialists, including Victor Berger, Morris Hillquit, and Frank Hayes, collaborated with non-socialist unions, they were never able to bring the party with them. They were opposed by those, like Eugene Debs, who rejected the AFL outright and who thought it was better to have a Marxist party than an inclusive labor party.

Denied union backing, the American Socialist party never became a mass party. Its membership peaked at 120,000 in 1912, less than one fifteenth the size of the membership of the British Labour party in the same year. The party remained a party of activists and intellectuals, unalloyed by a large blue-collar base. This fatally determined the party's policy on intervention in World War I. Socialist leaders in Europe and beyond were traumatized by the prospect of war in the years before 1914, but once the war began, they were pressed by unionists to give their support to the war effort. In the United States the AFL participated in the war effort, but this did not constrain the American Socialist party. Nathan Fine, writing in 1928, observed that the party's decision to oppose US entrance in the war was 'due primarily to the fact that unlike the parties of Europe the Socialist Party of the United States . . . was not a mass movement'. According to Fine, the party's 'absence of control over the trade unions with their bread-and-butter demands, its lack of political strongholds and a large organization to conserve, all this made the American party primarily a party of propaganda and education'.⁸

Every country is exceptional in certain respects. What is worthy of note is that American workers never established a durable labor or socialist party, nor were they able to take over one of the major parties. This has had profound consequences for American society and politics. Goldstein provides a detailed account of repressive events, but he ignores or rejects the basic tenets of social scientific inference in assessing their influence.

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Notes

1. This argument is set out chapter 8 of Lipset and Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*.
2. Goldstein, *Political Repression*, x, xiii, 547, xv.
3. Lipset and Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 239ff.

4. 'The study of state repressive behavior is rapidly emerging as an area of inquiry in its own right' (King, 'Exploring the Ameliorating Effects of Democracy', 217).
5. Marks et al., 'Radicalism or Reformism', distinguishes among types of political repression in arguing that a Marxian ontology provides a plausible explanation of socialist strategy in the United States and beyond.
6. Goldstein, *Political Repression*, 547.
7. This argument is set out in Marks, *Unions in Politics*.
8. Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties*, 302, 307.

Notes on contributor

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Response

Many thanks to professors Halpern, Dubofsky and Marks for taking the trouble to comment upon my article. I am especially grateful to Professor Halpern for his kind words and useful suggestions, but, as a firm believer in the First Amendment and the importance of vigorous scholarly debate, I also welcome the more critical commentaries of professors Dubofsky and Marks (and will, where appropriate, vigorously respond). I can, of course, respond only to major points rather than to each and every statement of the three commentators.