Halfway There

Why the Left Wins on Culture and Loses on Economics

Michael Kazin, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Sept/Oct, 2014

Two big and important American social movements, both pioneered by the left, are heading in opposite directions. In recent years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists have scored one victory after another. Homosexuals now serve openly in the U.S. military and can legally marry in at least 19 states and the District of Columbia, and discrimination against them in other areas of public life is rapidly diminishing. At the same time, organized labor -- another (at least former) pillar of left-wing politics -- seems trapped in a downward spiral. Private-sector labor unions are struggling to survive, and organized public workers have become the villains of choice for numerous governors and state legislators. Understanding why the fates of these two great movements have diverged so dramatically reveals a great deal about the real influence of the left on American society today -- and the limits of that influence, as well.

Since its earliest incarnations appeared nearly 200 years ago, the American left has pursued two overarching goals: expanding individual rights for people in historically subordinate roles (such as women, African Americans, and recent immigrants) and creating a new economic and political order based on an equality of outcomes and motivated by a spirit of social solidarity. Leftists, or radicals -- the two are historically synonymous -- have striven, in short, to realize the promise of both liberty and equality, two of the holiest concepts in the American political tradition. With the help of reformist politicians (often known as progressives or liberals) and, at times, a sympathetic media environment, they have achieved some success in both spheres.

But most of the left’s greatest and most lasting victories have come in the first of these two areas of reform: individual freedom and dignity. Radicals played a vital role in the movements to abolish slavery, gain women the vote, legalize birth control, win civil rights for blacks and Latinos, and affirm the identity of racial minorities. Such now iconic figures as Frederick Douglass, Margaret Sanger, and Betty Friedan began their activist careers in left-wing circles, shunned by respectable opinion and opposed by the holders of political power. But all three are now celebrated for what they did to free Americans from laws and authorities that repressed individual rights.

The left has also found success when it has sought to influence society through culture and the arts, rather than through political activism. For decades, artists, writers, and performers have managed to introduce once radical ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and economic justice into the mainstream, subtly shifting public views on contentious issues. Employing cultural means has often allowed leftists to sway public opinion about their cause more thoroughly, and to gain ground more quickly, than focusing on political tools alone (and to do so without first winning the support of political elites, a factor usually required for substantive change). In recent years, advocates of individual rights and ethnic identity have been more successful at this endeavor than those who promote greater equality. Americans live, after all, in a libertarian age, when the old labor motto “An injury to one is an injury to all” sounds archaic, if not downright utopian.
The LGBT movement fits firmly within the pattern of expanding individual liberty through culture as much as through politics. The women and men who formed a homosexual insurgency during the 1960s confronted what they viewed as a repressive status quo. After being fired from his government job simply for being gay, the astronomer Frank Kameny took his case all the way to the Supreme Court, which, in 1961, declined to hear it. Then, with a band of fellow activists, he went on to confront psychiatrists who labeled homosexuality an illness and picketed Lyndon Johnson’s White House with hand-lettered signs demanding full citizenship for homosexuals. At the end of the decade, younger radicals created the Gay Liberation Front as an explicitly revolutionary project, adapting the name from the South Vietnamese guerilla movement the National Liberation Front (which its enemies called the Vietcong). The U.S. organization was formed days after the Stonewall riots, the now famous series of confrontations in Greenwich Village between police and patrons of a gay bar on a sweltering night in June 1969.

“It was a movement for the right to love,” wrote the author Paul Berman in *A Tale of Two Utopias*, describing the spirit that motivated the struggle for gay rights during its early phase. Before that time, few radicals thought sexual liberty should be a priority; some even opposed it as a form of bourgeois decadence. But LGBT activists gradually gained respect and legal standing by denying that they wanted anything more than the freedom to pursue happiness as they pleased. Critical to this shift was the increasing legitimacy, in law and culture, of the right of all Americans to choose their sexual partners, even if they were of a different race or unmarried. Since the 1960s, a growing number of people have been able to go public with their sexual orientation without the fear of losing their jobs or enduring social ostracism. Popular television shows such as *Will & Grace* and openly homosexual celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres, Elton John, and Suze Orman both advance and reflect this transformation.

On the other hand, U.S. leftists pushing for economic equality have run up against higher and more durable barriers. During the nineteenth century, many were active in unions that had few rights that either their employers or the federal government felt bound to respect. Courts often ruled their work stoppages and boycotts illegal, police and the National Guard broke up their mass strikes, and the daily press routinely condemned their leaders as petty dictators out to destroy free enterprise. Indeed, many of those leaders were attracted to some version of socialism and dreamed of transcending the wage system that placed a majority of Americans at the mercy of a few. The labor unions did not win federal protection for the right to organize until the National Labor Relations Act (known as the Wagner Act) was passed in 1935, and they did not sign up a sizable minority of wage earners until the late 1930s.

Some of the hurdles facing the economic left are ideological: Americans tend to believe that every individual has a chance to succeed in the free-market economy. At the same time, many white Americans have long resisted, explicitly or implicitly, the idea that dark-skinned minorities deserve the same opportunities as whites. Finally, the strong socialist and communist movements in other countries made it easy to condemn homegrown leftists as anti-American. After all, they shared a vision of class equality with Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Fidel Castro -- even if they disagreed with such ruling Marxists on how to pursue it.
The left’s economic agenda has also faced structural hurdles. The U.S. Constitution deters those who hope to transform society swiftly or thoroughly. A small, largely rural state such as Wyoming elects as many senators as a huge, mostly metropolitan state such as California. And it is exceedingly difficult to amend the founding document, written largely by white men of property over 200 years ago. Moreover, private donations undergird the U.S. two-party system, giving richer men and women, who seldom favor the redistribution of wealth, more leverage than working-class Americans. Finally, the U.S. legal system elevates freedom of contract above all other economic rights, which long frustrated legislative efforts to set minimum wages, ban child labor, and regulate workplaces.

All these factors have placed labor, the pivotal movement for those who yearn for an egalitarian society, on the defensive. In recent years, unions, widely viewed as collectivist, coercive, and class-bound, have had to repeatedly reestablish their right to exist and prove their ability to represent working people. Over the past two decades, thousands of American employees have even been fired for trying to organize, and few employers have been punished for these violations of the Wagner Act, which explicitly banned such “unfair labor practices.” Still fewer Americans even know that these abuses have occurred. Considering society’s current sensitivity to gay rights -- news that a prominent figure has used a homophobic slur will flash across the Internet in seconds -- the contrast between the health of these two movements looks stark indeed.

There have been significant exceptions to this pattern, of course: moments when millions of ordinary Americans felt abandoned by the economic system and acted on it, allowing the left to grow in size and influence. One such moment occurred in the 1880s, when popular discontent crystallized around a single word: “monopoly.” At the time, the U.S. economy was booming, but the fruits of that boom were being doled out in grossly unequal shares. Companies such as Standard Oil and the Southern Pacific Railroad enjoyed unprecedented market dominance and engaged in flagrant union busting and price gouging. These actions led many citizens to start seriously questioning a core American credo: that hard work would receive its just reward.

Radicals seized on what was then called “the labor question.” As the journalist Henry George argued in a speech in 1886, “Work is the producer of all wealth. How does it happen that the working class is always the poorer class? Because some men have devised schemes by which they thrive on the work others do for them.” George was the author of Progress and Poverty, a lengthy critique of private landownership that sold more copies worldwide than any other economic treatise in the nineteenth century. In 1886, as the candidate of a local labor party, he was nearly elected mayor of New York City. (A 28-year-old Republican named Theodore Roosevelt finished a distant third.)

In protest and anger, millions of workers during this period waged the most violent mass strikes in American history. In 1886, a strike for the eight-hour workday closed factories and workshops throughout the Midwest. In 1894, workers shut down most of the nation’s railroads; it took thousands of state militiamen and federal troops (and dozens of deaths) to quash the uprisings. The Knights of Labor, the most prominent labor organization of its time, signed up more than one million members -- including African Americans and women -- before a disastrous strike on the Great Southwest Railroad in 1886 and subsequent internal conflicts tore it apart. The class upheaval frightened Americans, but it also stirred the conscience of many of them, including
ministers and theologians who began preaching the ideas of the Social Gospel -- a religious movement that argued it was the prime duty of Christians to help end the exploitation and suffering of workers and the poor.

All this tumult helped spur the passage of a wave of progressive legislation in the early twentieth century. Among its fruits were laws providing workers’ compensation, limiting child labor, requiring regular factory inspections, and mandating increased tolerance of unions. But such reforms fell far short of what radicals desired. The Socialist Party, founded in 1901, grew larger than any Marxist party in American history and was able to get elected hundreds of local officials and two members of Congress. But it never approached the size or influence of its counterparts in Europe.

Then, the Great Depression made the old charges about economic injustice sound urgently relevant again. The crisis provided the left with an unmatched opportunity. What made the Depression of the 1930s “great” was that it affected nearly everyone -- workers, consumers, investors -- and that it lasted for an entire decade. The self-confident, scientific way in which Marxists analyzed the crisis appealed to many journalists and intellectuals struggling to explain the debacle to a bewildered public.

The Communist Party was then the dominant group on the left, a fact that both helped and hindered its ability to aid wage earners. Its activity was inspired by Leninist discipline and fueled by the esteem of belonging to a global movement headquartered in the vast Soviet Union, where the state employed most citizens (although at dismal wages). Party members set up councils of the unemployed and became key organizers in the unions that sprang up in the auto, steel, and electrical industries. More than any white-led group since the abolitionists, the American Communists also dedicated themselves to eradicating racial inequality. But their fealty to Stalin’s leadership made them apologists for his violent dictatorship. Persisting in this viewpoint once the Cold War began essentially terminated the party’s significance in American political life.

Seven decades after the Great Depression, the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent deep recession gave radicals another chance to thrust class grievances into the center of public debate. In the late fall of 2011, opinion polls showed that a plurality of Americans sympathized with the Occupy Wall Street insurgency, the wave of sit-ins and street protests that had begun near Wall Street that September. For the first time since the 1930s, the inequality of wealth once again became a passionate cause and an inescapable political issue.

Unlike its historical precursors, however, the Occupy campaign did not grow into a full-scale movement: the protests didn’t last long enough. The fondness of many young participants for what they called “horizontalist” ideas -- intended to foster a consensus-based, leaderless revolution -- helped galvanize their protests. But those ideas soon ensnared them in endless meetings and battles with the police. Many who camped out in urban parks confused the romantic ideal of autonomous, self-governing communities with a strategy capable of weakening, and even transforming, the corporate order. Labor unions and some liberal Democrats cheered the occupiers and adopted their identity as representatives of “the 99
percent.” But suspicious of existing institutions and intent on keeping their encampments in place, the young radicals did not use that support to build a broad coalition.

FROM RADICAL TO ROUTINE

The history of the labor movement traces the limits of the American left, if not its failures. The most that U.S. radicals ever accomplished -- at least according to the conventional wisdom -- was to scare or pressure the major parties into enacting modest reforms in order to dilute the potential for more radical changes. Some leftists became minor partners in large progressive coalitions, including those that backed Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom, Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. Leftists did a great deal of work for successful mass movements but took little of the credit, in part because they feared being rejected or suppressed if they proclaimed their true objectives. Even Martin Luther King, Jr., the most honored movement leader in U.S. history, was careful not to reveal his private belief in democratic socialism, although he did seek to forge an alliance between working-class whites and blacks. In spite of their mighty exertions, American radicals did not merely fail to achieve their ultimate ends (including large-scale wealth redistribution, workers’ control of production and the state, and absolute racial and gender equality). They were also unable to sustain either a mass movement or a political party committed to their goals.

But politics is not the only way to alter the power relationships that shape society. Although American radicals failed to create major change through political action, they have been remarkably successful in spurring such change indirectly, through their influence on American culture. Leftists have been central in introducing now common, if still controversial, features of American life: novels, films, and song lyrics that put forth antibusiness and populist messages; the idea of equal opportunity for women, racial minorities, and homosexuals; the celebration of sexual pleasure unconnected to reproduction; and an educational system that is sensitive to racial and gender oppression and embraces what is now called “multiculturalism.” “The most enduring aspects of a social movement,” the British historian J. F. C. Harrison wrote in 1969, “are not always its institutions but the mental attitudes which inspire it and which are in turn generated by it.”

The roster of radicals who have left their stamp on U.S. culture is long and illustrious. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional exposé of slavery’s horrors, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852, outsold every other novel in nineteenth-century America. Edward Bellamy, author of the 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward*, sketched out a future nation run according to Christian socialist principles, nudging countless readers to support labor rights and curbs on private wealth. Woody Guthrie, the bard of Dust Bowl migrants who influenced songwriters from Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen, was close to the Communist Party. And the writer Allen Ginsberg, who was gay, used his poetry in the mid-1950s to declare independence from the conformist rigidity that he and his fellow Beats believed was throttling the nation. By winning a well-publicized obscenity trial, Ginsberg also helped convince the courts to abandon their role as moral guardians of the arts.

The cultural contributions of such artists and intellectuals have consistently proved more palatable to Americans than the political programs of leftist parties and movements. One reason
for that gap is the difference in the level of commitment required by each approach. It is easier and often more pleasurable to see, read, hear, or sing a radical message than it is to join a radical party or movement. Oscar Wilde reportedly once quipped that, despite his sympathy for the left, he wouldn’t like socialism because it would take too many evenings. The consumption of culture is less risky and takes less time than active political participation. But over time, such consumption can change attitudes, and new attitudes can lead to new political realities.

A basic truth about the growth of social movements also helps explain why the left has had more luck influencing society through culture than through formal politics. For a political movement to achieve any major goal, it needs to win over a section of the governing elite -- and it doesn’t hurt to gain support from wealthy philanthropists, as well. The abolitionists did not succeed in ending slavery until they secured the backing of President Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party. Industrial unionists did not become a power in mines, in factories, and on the waterfront until the launch of the New Deal. And a civil rights bill that could help break down race and gender barriers in schools and workplaces was not passed until the black freedom movement struck an alliance with the Great Society liberals.

When the left sought to gather support on its own, it was unable to gain even a sliver of national power. But radical ideas never needed elite support to become popular -- for that, all they required was an audience. And leftists who were able to articulate or represent their views in creative ways were often able to find one.

LIBERALISM FOR THE MASSES

One reason American radicals have been so successful in their use of the arts is that, rather than attack mainstream culture and seek to provide a fully realized alternative, they have exploited the media that most Americans were already consuming: newspapers, radio broadcasts, popular magazines, and film. Ironically, it was the American left’s very inability to create its own durable mass institutions that forced some of its more talented figures to learn how to speak to a much larger audience.

This was particularly true in the twentieth century and continues to be the case today. During the early 1900s, John Reed, who would go on to write the first popular history of the Bolshevik Revolution in English and contribute to radical journals, wrote for mass-circulation magazines such as Collier’s. In the 1930s through the 1950s, the singer and actor Paul Robeson, who was also a star on Broadway and at concert halls around the world, frequently donated his talent to numerous rallies organized by pro-communist organizations. Friedan began her writing career as a journalist for a left-wing news service during World War II. Two decades later, she made her name attacking businesses that promoted “the feminine mystique” -- but did so in the pages of mass-market women’s magazines and in a book issued by a major New York publisher. Michael Moore began his journalistic career editing small radical magazines in the 1980s, but his satirical documentaries about major industries and presidential administrations soon began playing at neighborhood multiplexes. All these cultural products appealed to many Americans who otherwise gave little thought to voting for a left-wing candidate or joining a radical party.
A caveat is necessary here. Culture and politics are not separate spheres. A cultural change can have important political consequences. For example, the feminist awakening of the 1960s and 1970s started a process that led to more liberal state-level abortion laws and then to *Roe v. Wade* -- as well as to new funding for child-care centers, laws against sexual harassment, and an increase in the number of women running for and winning public office. Conversely, a profound shift in the political sphere can alter private opinions and behavior. The Civil War did away with slavery, which made it possible -- albeit through painfully slow steps -- to establish a moral imperative to treat blacks and whites equally.

But the radicals who struggled for political power were usually different from the ones who tried to change public opinion through mass media. For most leaders of the organized left, cultural projects were less important than political ones; they were the lyrical icing on the cake of material struggle, and the province of intellectuals, artists, and bohemians.

The irony is that many of the American left’s cultural victories have proved more durable and influential than their political ones. The process of cultural transformation is obviously not as clear-cut as that of political change. But culture needs builders, just as mass movements and parties do. And American radicals have always been among the most significant members of the first group, while remaining on the margins of the second.

**UNITY WITHOUT UNIONS**

Today, the American left faces a paradox of a different kind. A majority of Americans embrace some of the changes that radical activists have helped bring about. But most are unaware, at least since the Occupy insurgency collapsed, that a radical movement still exists. The discourse of politics reflects this invisibility. In current parlance, “the left” includes everyone from Harry Reid, the centrist U.S. Senate majority leader, to Noam Chomsky, the famous linguist and anarchist who is an unstinting critic of U.S. foreign policy.

According to a 2012 Gallup poll, almost 40 percent of Americans hold a positive view of socialism -- roughly equal to the share of respondents who said they thought well of President Barack Obama’s performance. Yet this similarity is probably due more to conservative charges that the president’s policies are socialist than to an understanding of the true content of that ideology. It hardly means that a politician who favors collective ownership and management of the economy will ascend to national office anytime soon. Bernie Sanders, an independent senator from Vermont, does occasionally call himself a democratic socialist. But the positions he takes are those of a very liberal Democrat, and he caucuses with the party of Reid.

Left-wing ideas, however, continue to gain adherents, even in the absence of a coherent movement. The growth of discontent over economic inequality is the most prominent example. Wealth has rarely been an impediment to political success in the United States, at least during times when most Americans felt relatively secure. The elections of Herbert Hoover, Nelson Rockefeller, and Michael Bloomberg all attest to that fact. Yet in 2012, Obama won a second term promising to defend the interests and values of the hard-working majority against the amoral designs of big business and the rich. And Obama’s ads blamed his opponent, Mitt Romney, for making profits by laying off ordinary workers.
What might be called a soft class consciousness also demonstrated its appeal in some well-publicized local elections during 2013. Bill de Blasio won the mayoralty of New York City in a landslide after pledging to address the inequality that had transformed the Big Apple into “a tale of two cities.” Voters in Boston and Seattle chose new chief executives who declared similar missions. A few months later, the remarkable popularity of Capital in the Twenty-first Century, a book by the French economist Thomas Piketty, underscored the growing popular concern with inequality.

But concern, however widespread, does not by itself yield a solution. During the Gilded Age, neither the huge acclaim for the work of Henry George -- the Piketty of his day -- nor the anger of striking workers and the sympathy of middle-class progressives did much to improve the lives of ordinary city dwellers. It took a powerful industrial labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s, organized by Communists and Socialists, as well as some liberal Democrats, to create a limited welfare state in the United States. Institutions, both unions and parties, made the difference.

The decline and political impotence of most unions in the United States today have made it difficult to channel mass discontent over inequality into a drive for significant change. The problem is not a lack of ideas. On the contrary: various experts have started pushing for a more progressive tax system, a strict curb on corporate donations to political campaigns, a big boost in the minimum wage, a path to legalization for illegal immigrants, and a redefinition of the right to join a union so as to make it a civil right (which would help prevent employers from punishing workers for organizing one). Most union officials support such reforms and do what they can to lobby for them. But labor and its allies on the left have neither the funds nor the economic leverage to counteract their opponents in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and among well-heeled conservative political donors.

The weakness of unions matters for another reason: the labor movement was once a vital source of political education. The working-class mobilization of the 1930s was driven, in part, by men and women who had studied history, economics, and the techniques for organizing at such institutions as the Brookwood Labor College, in New York, and the Highlander Folk School, in Tennessee. In the 1950s and 1960s, under the leadership of Walter Reuther (a socialist without a party), the United Automobile Workers ran an extensive program to train its local officials in these and other subjects. That tradition still flickers at Working America, a group affiliated with the country’s largest federation of unions, the AFL-CIO. The organization schools its three million members in a pro-labor economic agenda and then organizes them to campaign for politicians who support it.

White men and women who belong to unions, the journalist Harold Meyerson has documented, are far more likely to support progressive ideas on a variety of issues and to vote for Democrats than are their nonunion counterparts. That was even true in 2010, when a poor economy helped Republicans capture the U.S. House of Representatives. That year, white voters who lacked college degrees but who either belonged to a union or had a union member in their households were 24 percent more likely to vote for the Democratic Party than those who did not belong to a union or did not have a union household member. (Of course, most African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans already supported the more liberal party.)
LABORING FOR EQUALITY

Even if organized labor enjoys a modest revival, ordinary Americans will still need new kinds of institutions that can speak to their economic discontent and offer compelling alternatives to their pervasive cynicism and alienation. The impressive achievements of the LGBT movement were built on just such institutional support. Groups such as the Equality Federation, Freedom to Marry, and the Human Rights Campaign raised substantial war chests and built impressive networks of lawyers to press their demands in courts and state legislatures. The activists also argued a moral case, similar to the one made earlier by the black freedom movement: namely, that extending full civic equality to minorities would make the United States a freer and kinder society for all.

Thanks in large part to the work of those activists, homosexual identity is on its way to becoming an uncontroversial social fact in the United States. To truly appreciate just how much progress LGBT groups have made -- and just how far labor unions have to go in order to catch up -- consider the cases of Mary Kay Henry and Randi Weingarten, the current presidents of two of the biggest unions in the country. Henry leads the Service Employees International Union, with 2.5 million members, and Weingarten heads the American Federation of Teachers, which represents 1.5 million. Both women also happen to live openly as lesbians, and they have long championed same-sex marriage and antidiscrimination clauses in union contracts.

Their labor unions are among the most controversial ones in the nation. Critics accuse Henry’s organization of abetting voter fraud and beating up workers who decline to join it. Opponents of Weingarten’s federation demonize it for allegedly protecting incompetent teachers and trying to prevent parents from setting up nonunion charter schools. But even the most vitriolic opponents of these unions seldom mention the sexual orientation of the women who lead them. Americans who dislike these spawns of the left, it seems, have moved on, or perhaps back, to other, more winnable causes.

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