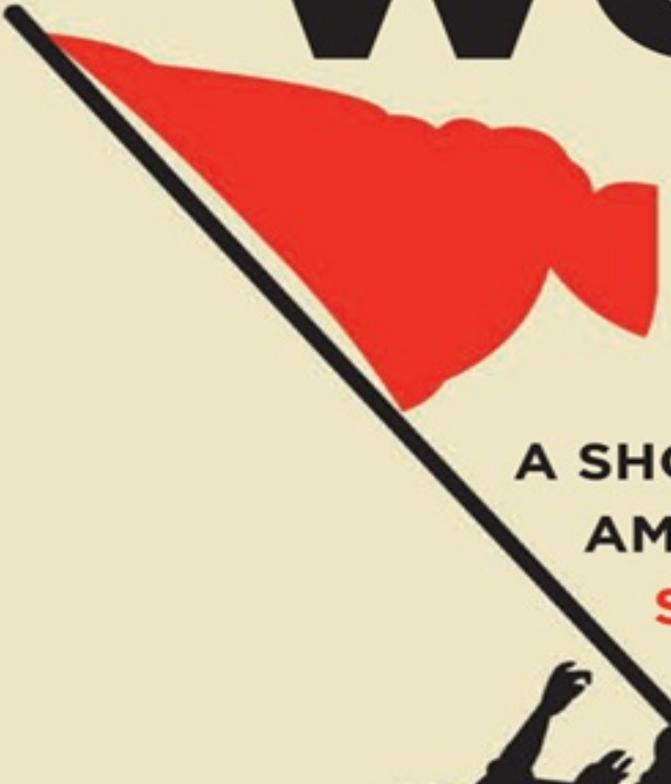
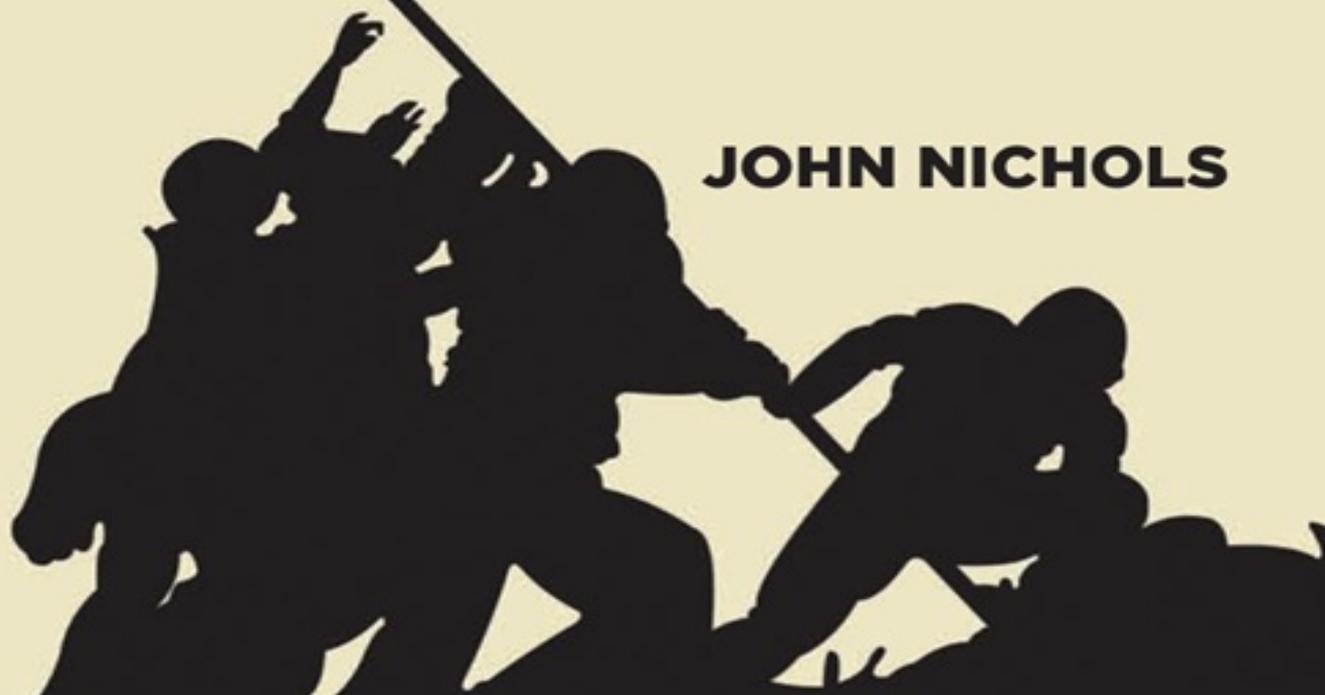


THE
“S”
WORD



A SHORT HISTORY OF AN
AMERICAN TRADITION...
SOCIALISM

JOHN NICHOLS



“A crucial book.” —NAOMI KLEIN

THE "S" WORD

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A Short History of an American
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John Nichols



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Whitman, Sylvie and the Emmas

On a cloudless day in the second summer of Barack Obama's presidency—when even the children who were so enamored of his election had begun to ask: “When is the president going to end the war?”—my daughter Whitman and I boarded the ferry that would deliver us to a place where it was still possible to believe in the very best of America's promise. I had been to the island in New York harbor before, but this was Whitman's first visit to the Statue of Liberty. We would, of course, climb as high as permitted, purchase modestly absurd souvenirs and sample the various ice creams proffered by the National Park Service and its assigns. But our primary purpose was a more patriotic one: Whitman is, by virtue of her name and parentage, of a literary bent. And we were inclined this day to read one of America's finest poetic expressions in the setting where the author intended.

Every child should know America not as the foreboding behemoth a succession of misguided and ill-intended presidents have sought to make it but in the light that Emma Lazarus saw it, as the great and welcoming land that would proudly take upon herself the title: “Mother of Exiles.”

“Keep ancient lands your storied pomp ...”

And, yes: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

With those thrilling lines—still possessing “the power to raise goosebumps” that author Caleb Carr heard—Lazarus transformed what was to have been a monument to those ideals of international republicanism that linked the American and French revolutions—“La Liberté Eclairant le Monde” (Liberty Enlightening the World) is the actual name of the copper statue—into something altogether more radical and egalitarian. It was not the sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi who made the Statue of Liberty into what Paul Auster properly proclaimed to be “a symbol of hope to the outcasts and downtrodden of the world.” It was Emma Lazarus who would imagine the “beacon-hand” that “Glowed world-wide welcome ...” and who would inspire the rest of us to do the same.

That Lazarus, with her poem written in the service of a fund-raising drive to erect the statue on its pedestal, gave the great lady of New York harbor her “raison d'être”—as James Russell Lowell mused a century ago—is no longer questioned by any but the most crudely unwelcoming of Americans (a unsettling number of whom, with supreme irony, now refer to themselves as “Republicans”). Lazarus's poem, “The New Colossus,” has entered the pantheon of American statements—a part of National Public Radio's “credo of America”—along with Tom Paine's hope that this experiment might “begin the world over again,” Abraham Lincoln's promise that “all men are created equal” and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call to bend the arc of history toward the realization of that promise with a civil rights revolution sufficient that all Americans might declare themselves to be “free at last.”

All of the words in the credo are radical. And so it should come as no surprise that Emma Lazarus was a radical. Nor should it come as any surprise that, like Paine, Lincoln and King, Lazarus was an American who entertained and advocated ideas that can reasonably be described as “socialist.”

This fact, while self evident in her time, and historically evident to this day, is a neglected chapter of the story of Emma Lazarus, of one of our nation's most enduring tribunes and, indeed, of the creation of America.

Just as the rough and revolutionary edges of Paine, Lincoln and King have been buffed away by time, public relations and a dumbing down of our history that makes them over as temperate men of limited imagination and capacity to inspire, so the memory of Emma Lazarus has been robbed of meaning by those who would have America be something it was never intended to be: a conservative land ever at odds with a forward march of human progress from the enlightenment to liberation to the cooperative commonwealth. There is an imagining now of Lazarus as a sort of uptown do-gooder penning kind words with regard to the less fortunate. But that crude characterization would have horrified the poet.

Emma Lazarus was a radical reformer who sought out and embraced socialists, communists and others who proposed transformational responses to the economic and social disparities that diminished not just "ancient lands" with their "storied pomp" but the "New World" of America. She recognized in the tenements of Manhattan and Brooklyn of the 1870s and 1880s a circumstance of inequality that doomed both new immigrants and the descendents of the slaves, indentured servants and religious dissenters who had arrived long before the republican revolt of 1776 to experience wrenching poverty that, when companioned with racial and ethnic discriminations, made the promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" seem vague at best, and at worst empty.

In her poem "Progress and Poverty," written several years before "The New Colossus," Lazarus challenged the elites of the Gilded Age to recognize that their wealth was forged through the exploitation of impoverished laborers. Imagining America as a "vessel, manned by demigods, with freight of priceless marvels," she asked,

But where yawns the hold
In that deep, reeking hell, what slaves be they
Who feed the ravenous monster, pant and sweat,
Nor know if overhead reign night and day?

"Progress and Poverty" was penned as a paean to the political economist and social philosopher Henry George, whose book of the same title inspired an international movement to reorder property relations so that the earth's resources would no longer be the possession of wealthy and powerful elites. Arguing that the "fundamental mistake" of capitalism was "treating land as private property," George declared: "We must make land common property." George became a hero to the urban radicals of the 1880s through his advocacy for taxing the rich and his campaigns for public ownership of communications and transportation systems and for municipal control of water supplies and delivery of basic services. Lazarus and her circle embraced George's conviction that: "The progress of civilization requires that more and more intelligence be devoted to social affairs, and this not the intelligence of the few, but that of the many. We cannot safely leave politics to politicians, or political economy to college professors. The people themselves must think, because the people alone can act." George's followers became popular educators. In Lazarus's case, her poetry was not merely a vehicle for vibrant wordplay but a tool for transforming the politics of her native New York, America and the world. "For Emma Lazarus, George's utopian vision had the force of a revelation," observed her biographer, Esther Schor. "It showed her both her complicity in exploiting the poor and her ethical responsibility to remedy it. 'Your work is not so much a book as an event,' she wrote, 'the life of

thought of no one capable of understanding it can be quite the same after reading it ...” Embracing the “indisputable truth” of George’s arguments, Lazarus told the author: “No one who prizes justice or common honesty can dine or sleep or read or work in peace until the monstrous wrong in which we are all accomplices be done away with ...”

A secular Jew haunted by the news of pogroms abroad and addressable grievances at home, Lazarus would, as Schor observed, use “the model of a Jewish duty to repair the world,” to conceive “of a mission for America”—a mission emphasizing that “when you have the benefits of freedom, you have more than rights; you had duties.” To that end, Lazarus published essays, articles and poems—earning considerable recognition in the US and Europe—that marked her in her time as a political activist who would be celebrated not merely as the author of a sonnet associated with the Statue of Liberty but, in the words of a contemporary, Rev. Dr. H. P. Mendes, as “a voice against all injustice.”

Lazarus wrote before Eugene Victor Debs and Victor Berger imagined a Socialist Party, even before a campaigner for Henry George’s 1886 New York mayoral campaign, Daniel DeLeon, began in the early 1890s to popularize the Marxist platform of the Socialist Labor Party. That we know of, she never carried the card of a party or declared a political preference. While socialists and communists would eventually claim her, Lazarus was not a political joiner. Yet, she acknowledged the influence of socialist ideas on her writing and set out to popularize those notions that inspired her. She penned manifestos that were determinedly progressive in their sympathy for workers and immigrants. She traveled to Europe to meet and interview the most radical thinkers of the day—fellow Zionists, literary adventurers and Marxists of varying creeds. One of her most widely circulated essays was a portrait of author and utopian socialist William Morris, whose “extreme socialistic convictions” the poet presented as an understandable response to “glaring” social and economic inequalities on display in his native Britain.

Though she would wrestle with and reject some radical ideas, Lazarus recognized their power and urged that they be included in the great debates about America’s future. In this, she was a true child of the enlightenment, a believer in the very American precept that the radical ideas of one moment could become the common-sense solutions of the next.

For much of the twentieth century, before the beneficial influence of feminist and people’s history projects opened up our past, Lazarus was a relatively neglected figure. When she was all but forgotten by genteel society, however, the poetry of Emma Lazarus was reintroduced to America by left-wing groups such as the American Committee for the Foreign Born and the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs, a radical organization that began as the Women’s Division of the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order of the International Workers Order. The “Emmas,” as these activists were known, celebrated Lazarus’s birthday each year on Liberty Island, urged New York and other cities to declare “Emma Lazarus Days,” and campaigned for economic and social justice “in our own time in the same spirit as Emma Lazarus did in her day.” They experienced their share of political persecution—in 1960, June Gordon, the executive director of the Emma Lazarus Federation, was threatened with deportation because of challenges to her immigration status (more than three decades after her arrival in the country) and her long involvement with left-wing causes—yet they persevered. There is a lovely photograph from the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, in which a few dozen Emmas are seated beneath their banner on the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial. What image could possibly have made their mentor more proud?

The Emmas did not just honor the memory of Emma Lazarus, however. They kept it alive and vibrant. Today, Lazarus is an iconic figure. Yet, the “spirit” of which the Emmas spoke is not so well

understood as it should be.

The story of Emma Lazarus, the whole story, is an important one for contemporary Americans. It reminds us that the authors of “the American credo” were not free-market capitalists preaching laissez-faire mantras of “eat or be eaten,” “survival of the fittest,” “close the borders” or “government is the problem.” In fact, this country, founded in radical opposition to monarchy, colonialism and empire, has from its beginning been home to socialists, social democrats, communists and radicals in every variation. Criticisms of capitalism were not “imports” brought to our shores by the tired, the poor, the huddled masses of ancient lands. They were conceived of, written about and spoken by Americans long before Karl Marx or Fidel Castro or Nelson Mandela or Hugo Chavez put pen to paper or grasped the sides of a lectern. Emma Lazarus was not, as is often thought, an immigrant; she was a fourth-generation American with family roots planted in the soil of America before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Socialist ideas, now so frequently dismissed not just by the Tories of the present age but by political and media elites that diminish and deny our history, have shaped and strengthened America across the past two centuries. Those ideas were entertained and at times embraced by presidents who governed a century before Barack Obama was born.

That does not mean that America is a socialist country, nor even the “social democracy that does not speak its name” that author Michael Harrington once imagined. But it does mean that, to know America, to understand and appreciate the whole of this country’s past, its present and perhaps its future, we must recognize the socialist threads that have been woven into our national tapestry.

This book traces those threads, not with the narrow purpose of producing a simple history of American socialist or social democratic enterprise but with the broader purpose of producing a whole history of the American experiment—a history that reflects all of the influences and ideals that inspired the development of a nation that I love in the way that Emma Lazarus did.

This book has been on my mind for more than a decade, going back to the closing years of Bill Clinton’s wasted presidency. I toyed for many years with a different title, *The Need of Socialism*, as a frame for arguing that America needed to at the very least consider socialist alternatives to free market fundamentalism in order to have a full and functional debate. But that was when socialism was neglected. Now, it is the subject of daily derision, a derision that is at once more intense and more ignorant than at any point in the long history of the United States—with the possible exceptions of the few years after World War I when America experienced its first “red scare,” although even then Socialists were still being elected to Congress, and the dark age of the 1950s and the second “red scare,” although even then Socialists were still serving as mayors of major American cities.

The intensity of the current anti-socialist fervor on the right has surely been enhanced by a 24-hour news cycle that always needs something to shout about. But the shouters have been more successful in frightening the political class than the people, as polling suggests that the constant referencing of the “S” word has created more interest in—and support for—socialist ideas than at any time in recent American history. That interest is a healthy thing, not merely because it has the potential to free up the debate and introduce new and useful ideas to a national discourse that has grown gaunt and pale, but also because it invites a robust exploration of where we come from and who we are.

Americans are disconnected from their history now, and they run the risk of becoming more disconnected. It is not so much a matter of specific details—dates, names, outlines of old debates—it is one of basic understanding. That basic understanding helps us to respond rationally to challenges, to recognize that an oil spill may call for nationalization of an energy company’s US assets, to understand that real health-care reform should replace insurance companies rather than enrich them.

to know that a no-strings-attached bailout of big banks will not cause bankers to make more loans to small businesses or to forego foreclosures. These are basic premises not merely for socialists but for all citizens whose recognition of economic and political reality is broader and healthier when it is informed by a range of ideas that includes a socialist critique.

My dear friend and frequent co-author Bob McChesney and I have talked about this notion for many years. Many of the core ideas of this book are rooted in our conversations. He is the wisest and best of public intellectuals (and friends) and this book would not have been possible without his counsel, questioning and constant encouragement. The same goes for my longtime editor Andy Hsiao, who jumped at the idea of doing this book; how he remains so enthusiastic and yet so rational is a marvel and a delight. Andy and I have done a number of books together, but this one is our true collaboration. I am proud to be associated with Andy and the folks at Verso, including my friend Tom Penn, along with the original street-fighting man, Tariq Ali. My editors at *The Nation*, especially Katrina vanden Heuvel, Roane Carey, Richard Kim and Betsy Reed give me the time, space and encouragement a writer needs to explore the American experiment in ways that few writers can. I cherish our relationships. That is also true of the people I work with at *The Capital Times* newspaper, an old progressive daily, in Madison, Wisconsin, where Dave Zweifel, Paul Fanlund, Chris Murphy, Judie Kleinmaier and Lynn Danielson are grand colleagues. Matt Rothschild of *The Progressive* is a great friend and editor who asks the right questions and guides me to the right answers, as do Russ Conniff and Amitabh Pal. Amy Goodman, Juan Gonzalez and the *Democracy Now!* crew have given me great forums for broader political discussions and continue to give me hope for independent and adventurous journalism, as do my hosts on the BBC, RTE, Al Jazeera, MSNBC, and public and community radio stations in the US and abroad, especially Jon Wiener and Sonali Kolhatkar at KPFA, Mitch Jeserich, Philip Maldari, Aimee Allison and Brian Edwards-Tiekert at KPFA, Norm Stockwell at WORT, John “Sly” Sylvester at WTDY, Joy Cardin, Jean Feraca and Ben Merens at Wisconsin Public Radio, as well as Rick Perlstein, Dave Zirin, Bill Lueders, Jeremy Scahill, Chris Hayes, Adam Berman, Alex Cockburn and dozens of other wise and supportive colleagues in print and online.

I owe an immense debt to the many historians I cite in the source notes, but I want to pay particular tribute to Paul Buhle, whose talent for combining scholarship and warm humanity matches that of my late friend Howard Zinn. This book benefited from his insights and those of Tony Benn, Bernie Sanders, Gore Vidal, Medea Benjamin, Billy Bragg, Gary Lucas, Barbara Lawton, Bob Kimbrough and Phyllis Rose, Ben and Sarah Manski, Allen Ruff, Inger Stole, John Stauber, David Panofsky, Patti Smith, Sharon Lezberg, Brian Yandell, Nikki Anderson, Lee Cullen, the baristas at Ancora, the rockers at B-Side, the crowd behind the counter at Cork and Bottle and hundreds of other friends and neighbors, as well, of course, as the remarkable Mary Bottari.

Writers work best when they are part of a community, or communities, and I am blessed by mine in Madison, Milwaukee, New York, Washington, San Francisco (hey Sue and Leah), London and beyond. I am especially indebted to my fellow Tom Paine enthusiasts, as well as the media reformers and independent bookstore owners who make me welcome wherever I travel. The soundtrack for this book was provided by Mr. Dave Alvin; Tom Robinson; Billy Bragg, who sang about a “socialism of the heart”; Max Romeo, who sang that “socialism is love”; and Patti Smith, who taught us: “People Have the Power.”

People do have the power. Whitman’s great aunt, Carolyn Fry, taught me that. Aunt Cary was not a socialist. She was a Wisconsin Progressive, of the old-school Robert M. La Follette breed. She knew that La Follette sought the presidency in 1924 with the endorsement of the Socialist Party of Eugene Victor Debs and Norman Thomas. And that the Wisconsin Progressive Party—which governed the

state in the 1930s—was a coalition of rural Republicans and Milwaukee Socialists. She also knew that the Milwaukee Socialists ran a clean, corruption-free city that was prosperous, debt-free and enlightened. So the “S” word did not frighten her. She could take socialist ideas or leave them depending on their relevance to the debate at hand.

Whitman’s friend, Sylvie Panofsky, had a grandmother, Gianna Sommi Panofsky, who knew far more about socialism than Aunt Cary. Gianna was a native of Parma, Italy, whose sensibilities were framed by the partisans who battled fascism before and during World War II. She laughed at the ignorance of contemporary conservatives who conflated fascism and socialism as the same thing; her experience told her that they were opposites. And she knew which side she was on—not just in Italy but in Chicago, where she threw herself into campaigns on behalf of civil rights, economic and social justice and peace and international solidarity.

It happened that, during the writing of this book, both Aunt Cary and Gianna passed away. Neither death was entirely unexpected, but each was deeply felt. I spoke at both memorial services. And, one day, when I was volunteering in the lunchroom at Lapham Elementary School, Whitman and Sylvie asked me to talk about the book I was working on. I told them it was about America. Aunt Cary, Daughter of the American Revolution, and Gianna, an Italian immigrant who knew more about her adopted land than most natives, would have understood that a book about socialism could indeed be a book about America. It would not have surprised either of them to think that Emma Lazarus kept company with socialists, that she popularized socialist proposals, and that her loveliest poetry was informed by socialist ideals and hopes for America and the world. Indeed, it would have surprised them had Lazarus not been so fully engaged with and inspired by the great ideas and ideals of her time.

This book is written in the hope that Whitman and Sylvie will know as much about America as their ancestors did, and that they will act as well and wisely on its behalf. As such, it is dedicated to four women, two now gone and two coming on, and a country still bold enough to tell ancient lands to keep their pomp while she lifts her lamp beside the golden door.

“More of a Socialist Than I Thought”: Walt Whitman and a Very American Ism

*Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades ...*

*For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.*

—Walt Whitman, “For You, O Democracy,” 1855

The fellowship that you celebrate is the finest that ever filtered through the ages. It is the quintessence of human kinship, born of freedom, consecrated to brotherhood, and expressed in love. It is immortal and eternal. Its power is omnipotent. It changes beasts into gods, and hells of anguish and despair into heavens of peace and joy. In grateful, loyal, loving memory of Old Walt, I am yours.

—Eugene Victor Debs to the Walt Whitman Fellowship, 1907

On a hot July afternoon in 1888, Horace Logo Traubel hurried along an indistinct avenue in his native city of Camden, New Jersey, to a small Greek Revival home at 328 Mickle Street. There, as he did each day, the young writer, reformer and socialist sat in conversation with the “good gray poet” who had, using royalties from an 1882 edition of his most popular collection, purchased a home on a street populated according to city records by “laborers, roofers, carpenters, railroad workers, a dentist and physician, a baker, painters, clerks, sawyers, dressmakers, designers, a minister, machinists, an iron moulder, a blacksmith, a publisher, salespeople, and milk dealers.”

Though he was by then one of the world’s most well-known and wellregarded literary figures, Walt Whitman spent the last years of his long life on and around the “teeming cities’ streets” of a working-class neighborhood in a working-class town. The poet was attended to by bohemian radicals and outliers in whose disdain for aristocracy and airs he found far more communal connection than he ever had in the salons of his more elite enthusiasts. Chief among them was Traubel, the son of a Jewish immigrant who like “Old Walt” had quit school early and gained his informal education as a typesetter, printer and eventual journalist for daily newspapers. Introduced to Whitman shortly after the poet’s 1873 arrival in Camden, Traubel revered Whitman and paid little mind to the neighbors who “protested against my association with the ‘lecherous old man.’ ” Like his mentor, Traubel moved comfortably and respectfully among “the drunken gentlemen and respectable toughs” of Camden and nearby Philadelphia. By that summer of 1888, the younger man, now thirty, had determined to become Boswell to the sixty-nine-year-old Whitman’s Dr. Johnson. At the poet’s urging, the younger man started in the spring of that year to “jot down” what would, in the words

the literary lion's biographer, Jerome Loving, become Traubel's "greatest contribution to world literature ... a day-to-day summary with quotations of his generally half-hour meetings with the aging poet."

Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* is remarkable not merely for its detail but also for the insight it provides into the late-in-life understandings of one of the most historically expansive American writers, a man who was born when the former presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison remained active citizens and who would die some years after the births of the future presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. On the day of our particular interest, July 16, 1888, Whitman and Traubel engaged in a sort of Socratic dialogue about the literary life. "Are you the last of your race?" asked the younger man. "Neither the first nor the last," replied the elder. "Will there be more poets or less?" "More—more: and greater poets than there have ever been." "What kind? You mean what kind?" "I don't know about that: some free kind, sure: they are bound to come—to come soon." Whitman bemoaned lesser poets who "talk about form, rule, canons, and all the time forget the real point, which is the substance of poetry." "But," he continued, "here and there, every now and then one, several, will raise the standard. *Leaves of Grass* will finally make its way."

When a great poet gets to discussing his craft and legacy, especially when the soliloquy references his greatest work, it is easy to lose sight of the rest of the conversation. But Traubel was at least as interested in Whitman's politics as his poetry. And, this afternoon, there was much to discuss. In the post, Whitman had received a copy of the British radical journal *Today*, which described itself as "the exponent of scientific Socialism, and the unsparing assailant of all our modern forms of competition and anarchy," and to which George Bernard Shaw, Eleanor Marx (Karl's daughter and tribune), Annie Besant and James Ramsey Macdonald, who in 1924 would become Britain's first Labour Party prime minister, were contributors. Whitman's articles and poetry appeared in *Today* as well, along with pieces by the American poet's most enthusiastic British champion, socialist agitator, poet and gay rights pioneer Edward Carpenter. The July 1888 edition featured a lengthy extract from Marx's *Capital* and a piece by a British essayist and contemporary of William Morris, Reginald A. Becker, titled "Walt Whitman as a Socialist Poet."

Had Whitman read the piece, inquired Traubel. "Yes, I read every word of it—not, however, because of its literary quality (though that is respectable enough) but just to see how I look to one who sees all things from the standpoint of the socialist. Of course, I find I am a good deal more of a socialist than I thought I was: maybe not technically, politically, so, but intrinsically, in many meanings."

"A good deal more of a socialist than I thought"?

Could Walt Whitman have known what he was saying? This is the writer whose *Leaves of Grass* was described by no less a critic than Ralph Waldo Emerson as "indisputably American," who John Burroughs hailed as "our poet of democracy," who inspired everyone from Carl Sandburg (admittedly a socialist, but a socialist who saw "America in the crimson light of a rising sun fresh from the burning, creative hand of God") to Woody Guthrie (admittedly, another socialist, but one who wrote what ought to be the national anthem), who Ronald Reagan and Allen Ginsberg and every schoolchild has quoted from memory. That Whitman might have been red or, at the least, a little bit pink twists the national narrative.

Everything that there is about America is, we are frequently informed, supposed to be at odds with socialism. Everyone who ever mattered, or ever could matter, to America must be a true believer in the free-enterprise system, in no-holds-barred capitalism, in a patriotism that attaches the dollar sign to the flag and preaches the necessity of invading oil-rich lands while dismissing environmental

necessities at home because—to quote the supposedly wiser of the two Presidents Bush—“the American way of life is not negotiable.”

If we have been led to believe anything by the current discourse, it is the basic premise that America was founded as a capitalist country and that socialism is a dangerous foreign import best barred at the border. The increasingly if not quite wholly accepted “wisdom” holds that everything public is inferior to anything private; that corporations are always good and unions always bad; that progressive taxation is inherently evil and the best economic model is the one that avoids the messiness of equity by allowing the extremely wealthy to skim off their share before letting what remains trickle down to the great mass of Americans. No less a historian than Rush Limbaugh informs us with some regularity that proposals to tax people as rich as he is in order to provide health care for sick kids and jobs for the unemployed are “antithetical to the nation’s founding.” Limbaugh, the loudest voice in an anti-Barack Obama echo chamber, says that the president is “destroying this country as it was founded.”

The shrillest of Limbaugh’s flattering imitators, Fox News’s Sean Hannity, charged when Obama offered tepid proposals to organize a private health-care system in a modestly more humane manner that “the Constitution was shredded, thwarted, the rule of law was passed aside...” Hannity got no argument from his guest on the day he assessed the damage done to the Constitution by those who would care for our own: former speaker of the US House of Representatives Newt Gingrich. “This is a group prepared to fundamentally violate the Constitution,” the former congressional leader who fancies himself a future president said of an Obama administration that he argued was playing to the “30 percent of the country [that] really is [in favor of] a left-wing secular socialist system.” Then, for good measure, Gingrich compared Obama with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez—an actual and ardent socialist who, though the former speaker apparently missed the report, had recently referred to the American president as “a poor ignoramus [who] should read and study a little to understand reality”—with a crack about Obama’s previous employment as a constitutional law professor. “Which constitution was he teaching? Venezuelan constitutional law?” opined Gingrich. “I mean, you know, I can’t imagine how he could have actually taught American constitutional law and be this wrong that often.”

The former speaker, who swore more than a few oaths to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States ... without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion,” surely knows that the document makes no reference to economic systems, to capitalism, to free enterprise or to corporations or business arrangements. Unfortunately, as James Madison warned, partisan excess can cause even former history professors at West Georgia College to lose their bearings. The same can be said for former heads of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at Wasilla High School.

Though Sarah Palin famously struggled to name a “favorite founder” when asked to do so by Glenn Beck, and though she made remarks about the role of the vice presidency that provoked a live national debate about whether she had ever read the nation’s founding document, that did not in the spring of 2009 prevent the former governor of Alaska from raising constitutional concerns about Obama’s proposal to develop a system of “universal building codes” in order to promote energy efficiency. “Our country could evolve into something that we do not even recognize, certainly that is so far from what the founders of our country had in mind for us,” a gravely concerned Palin informed a nodding Sean Hannity on the Fox News Channel.

Hannity had an idea about the direction in which Obama was evolving the country.

Arching an eyebrow and leaning forward with all the “I play an anchorman on TV” sincerity someone who had recently volunteered to be waterboarded for charity, he interrupted Palin with a one-word question.

“Socialism?”

“Well,” the immediate former vice-presidential nominee of the second-oldest political party in the nation responded, “that’s where we are headed.”

Actually, it’s not.

Palin is wrong about the perils of energy efficiency. And she is wrong about Obama.

That is no cover for the president. This book is not written as a defense of Barack Obama against any charge. In fact quite the opposite, as the closing chapter will detail. What is important for the purposes of introduction is that the president says he is not a socialist. And the country’s most outspoken socialists heartily agree with him on that point. Indeed, the only people who seem to think Obama displays even minimally social-democratic tendencies are those pundits, politicians and pretenders to concern about the republic who imagine—out of sincere if misguided faith, or for the purposes of crude electioneering—that the very mention of the word “socialism” should inspire Americans a reaction not unlike that of a vampire confronted with the Host.

It is arguable, if we take seriously Obama’s own reactions to questions about his ideological beliefs, to indicate, that he may be more frightened by the “S” word than Palin.

When a *New York Times* reporter asked the president during a ninetyminute interview on Air Force One in March of 2009 whether his domestic policies suggested that he was a socialist, as had by that point become something akin to gospel truth in the precincts of right-wing talk radio and in congressional hallelujah chorus, Obama chuckled. “The answer would be no,” replied a relaxed chief executive, who asserted that he was simply taking criticism because he was “making some very tough choices” on the budget. (In fact, the president was avoiding tough choices and erring on the side of compromises, with an eye toward drawing Republican support for an economic stimulus proposal that—in reflection of those compromises—would ultimately spend more money on Republican-favored tax cuts than on the New Deal-style job creation initiatives that progressive Democrats favored.)

Once Obama had returned to the circle of his hyper-cautious political counselors, however, he was no longer relaxed. The president who is arguably more familiar with socialist theories and actual socialists than any commander in chief since Franklin Roosevelt, and whose monitoring of the print broadcast and digital discourse is the most sophisticated of any chief executive in history, was worried. Had he been too casual in his chatter about socialism? He called *Times* reporter Jeff Zelenko from the Oval Office. “It was hard for me to believe that you were entirely serious about that socialism question,” Obama said. Then, as if reading from talking points, he declared: “It wasn’t under me that we started buying a bunch of shares of banks. And it wasn’t on my watch that we passed a massive new entitlement, the prescription drug plan, without a source of funding.”

“We’ve actually been operating in a way that has been entirely consistent with free-market principles,” said Obama, who concluded with the kicker: “Some of the same folks who are throwing the word ‘socialist’ around can’t say the same.”

Nice spin. And, as with any good spin, there’s more than a kernel of truth at the heart of the statement.

Obama really is avoiding consideration of socialist, or even mildly social-democratic, responses to the “very tough choices” that confront him. He took the single-payer “Medicare for All” option off the table at the start of the health-care reform debate, rejecting the approach chosen by other countries.

that have provided quality care to all citizens while dramatically reducing costs. His supposed “socialist” response to the collapse of the auto industry was to provide tens of billions in bailout funding to General Motors and Chrysler, multinational corporations that used the money to lay off tens of thousands of auto workers and mechanics in the US while relocating work to new plants in Mexico and China—about as far as a country can get from the social-democratic model of using industrial policy to promote job creation and the renewal of depressed communities and neglected regions. And when BP’s Deepwater Horizon well exploded and threatened the entire Gulf Coast instead of seizing control of the crisis by putting the Army Corps of Engineers and other government agencies in charge of capping the well, Obama left the job to a foreign corporation that lied about the extent of the spill, made decisions based on its own corporate well-being rather than environmental and human needs, and failed at even the most basic tasks.

In every instance, Obama rejected sound socialist or social-democratic solutions in favor of private sector fantasies. So perhaps we should take Obama at his word when he says he is “operating in a way that has been entirely consistent with free-market principles.” The problem, of course, is that Obama’s rigidity in this regard is causing him to dismiss ideas that are often sounder than the “free-market fixes” presented by a self-interested private sector. Borrowing ideas and approaches from socialism would not make Obama any more of a socialist than Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt or Dwight Eisenhower, all of whom sampled suggestions from Marxist tracts or picked pieces from Socialist Party platforms with a frequency that ultimately caused the *New York Times* to note in a 1954 profile of an aging Norman Thomas, the steadiest of Socialist presidential contenders, that “he had made a great contribution in pioneering ideas that have now won the support of both major parties”—ideas like, and this is the *Times*’s list: “Social Security, public housing, public power developments, legal protection for collective bargaining and other attributes of the welfare state [that] were anathema to Democrats and Republicans when Mr. Thomas abandoned the Presbyterian ministry to become an apostle of pacifism and social reform” forty years earlier.

To the extent that Obama is bent on remaining consistent with “free-market principles”—even when those principles require him to reject the sounder solutions and superior ideas contributed to the current debate by socialist and social-democratic thinkers of the twenty-first century, many of whom are our most visionary and innovative academics, policy analysts and on-the-ground activists—Obama is a very different American president from predecessors who read Marx and were conversant with the career of the author of *The Communist Manifesto*, who consulted with Socialist candidates and writers who invited prominent Socialists to serve in their administrations, who forged whole policy initiatives based on books written by socialists and who recognized that the embrace and implementation of sound socialist or social-democratic solutions did not put them at odds with the American experiment or constitution.

So, while this book is not a defense of Obama, nor necessarily a defense of socialism, it is a defense of history—of American history, with its rich and vibrant hues, some of them red.

America has always suffered fools who would narrow the nation’s range of options so that the debate might begin and end on the right. But the real history of America, the history that matters because it empowers rather than constricts, tells us that the only thing unique about our present station on the national journey is that we have suffered the fools so thoroughly by now that a good many Americans—not just Tea Partisans or Rush Limbaugh “Dittoheads,” but citizens of the great middle-class might actually take Sarah Palin seriously when she gets to ranting and raving about how socialism, the form of building regulations, is antithetical to Americanism.

Palin is not the first of her kind. While consistent construction codes have never before been seen

quite so serious a threat, there is nothing new about the charge that a president who is guiding “the government” toward endeavors other than the invading and occupying of foreign countries is “socialist.” What is new is the cautious response of more serious citizens to the fools and fearmongers who abandon Tom Paine’s imagining of an American as one who “by casting their eye over a large field, takes in likewise a larger intellectual circuit, and thus approaching nearer to an acquaintance with the universe, their atmosphere of thought is extended, and their liberality fills a wider space.”

In the spring of 2009, just months after Barack Obama and a Democratic Congress took office—with the most sweeping mandate afforded the party since 1964, the year when Lyndon Johnson and his Democratic administration called upon one of the leading lights of American socialism, Michael Harrington, to help frame a “war on poverty”—twenty-three political professionals of the highest order, members of the Republican National Committee, proposed that the party of Obama, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid be formally rebranded as “the Democrat Socialist Party.”

An RNC resolution, advanced by top Republican leaders from every region of the country—including Ron Kaufman, who served as White House Political Director for former President George Herbert Walker Bush and a top political adviser to President George Walker Bush—proposed to put Palin’s “logic” into the practice of the Republican Party and, by extension, into the national political discourse:

WHEREAS, the American Heritage Dictionary defines socialism as a system of social organization in which the means of producing and distributing goods is owned by a centralized government that often plans and controls the economy; and

WHEREAS, the Democratic Party has outlined their plans to nationalize the banking, financial and health care industries; and

WHEREAS, the Democratic Party has proposed massive government bailouts for the mortgage and auto industries; and

WHEREAS, the Democratic Party has passed trillions of dollars in new government spending, all with strings attached in order to control nearly every aspect of American life; and

WHEREAS, the Democratic Party and its leadership have dedicated themselves to a new taxing objective of direct income redistribution which takes additional taxes from one group of people and gives it in direct cash transfers to another group of people who pay no federal income taxes at all; and

WHEREAS, the American people are crying out for truth, honesty and integrity in politics; therefore be it

RESOLVED, that we the members of the Republican National Committee recognize the Democratic Party’s clear and obvious purpose in proposing, passing and implementing socialist programs through federal legislation; and be it further

RESOLVED, that we the members of the Republican National Committee recognize that the Democratic Party is dedicated to restructuring American society along socialist ideals; and be it further

RESOLVED, that we the members of the Republican National Committee call on the Democratic Party to be truthful and honest with the American people by acknowledging that they have evolved from a party of tax and spend to a party of tax and nationalize and, therefore, should agree to rename themselves the Democrat Socialist Party.

Cooler heads prevailed. Sort of.

At an “emergency” meeting of the RNC—an august body that traces its history to the first Republican National Convention in 1856, where followers of the French socialist Charles Fourier and Karl Marx’s editor and their abolitionist comrades initiated what was the most radical restructuring of American political parties in the nation’s history—it was suggested by a group of senior Republicans that included Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, a former RNC chair and rumored presidential prospect, that the proposal to impose a new name on the Democrats might make “the Republican party appear trite and overly partisan.”

In a compromise, the suggestion that the opposition should “agree to rename themselves the Democrat Socialist Party” was dropped. But the “march toward socialism” language remained. Thus the members of the Republican National Committee now officially “recognize that the Democratic Party is dedicated to restructuring American society along socialist lines” and that the Democrats have as their “clear and obvious purpose ... proposing, passing and implementing socialist programs through federal legislation.”

Seeking to calm the more fevered of his compatriots, the chairman of the group’s resolution committee, Mississippi Republican National Committeeman Henry Barbour (Haley’s nephew) “denied that the final resolution was markedly different from what had originally been proposed” in an interview with the *New York Times*. The younger Barbour explained that it was only a shift in “tone”: “We wanted to be respectful but we wanted to be firm.”

In fact, the Republican Party is now firmer in its assertion that the Democratic Party is steering the nation “toward socialism” than it was during Joe McCarthy’s “red scare” of the 1950s, when the senator from Wisconsin accused another Democratic president of harboring Communist Party cells in the federal government. That president, Harry Truman, had stirred the outrage of conservatives by arguing that the federal government had the authority to impose anti-lynching laws on the states and by proposing a genuine national health-care plan. (Ultimately, Truman would go even further: seizing control of a major industry—steel mills—in an exercise of his commander-in-chief powers that would have made George W. Bush drool with envy.) But what really bugged the Republicans of 1950 was that Truman, who was supposed to lose in 1948, had not just won the election but restored Democratic control of the House and Senate.

To counter this ominous electoral trend, Republicans, led by Ohio Senator Robert Taft, announced early in 1950 that their campaign slogan in the year’s congressional elections would be “Liberty Versus Socialism.” To that end, they produced a 1,950-word addendum to their national platform, much of which was devoted to a McCarthyite rant that began: “The major domestic issue today is liberty versus socialism.” The statement proceeded to charge that Truman’s Fair Deal program “was dictated by a small but powerful group of persons who believe in socialism, who have no concept of the true foundation of American progress and whose proposals are wholly out of accord with the true interests and real wishes of the workers, farmers and businessmen.”

But the Republicans of the Cold War era backed off the “Liberty Versus Socialism” line after they were called out by President Truman, who reminded his critics that his Fair Deal policies were outlined in the 1948 Democratic platform, which had proven to be wildly popular with the electorate. “If our program was dictated as the Republicans say, it was dictated at the polls in November, 1948. It was dictated by a ‘small but powerful’ group of 24,000,000 voters,” said Truman, adding: “I think they knew more than the Republican National Committee about the real wishes of the workers, farmers and businessmen.”

Truman did not cower at the mention of the word “socialism,” which in those days was we

distinguished in the minds of most Americans from the Stalinism of the Soviet Union, with which the president—a mean Cold Warrior—was wrangling. Nor did the president, who counted among his essential political allies trade unionists like David Dubinsky, Jacob Potofsky and Walter Reuther, any of whom had in the not too distant past allied with socialist causes and in many cases with the Socialist Party of Eugene Victor Debs and Norman Thomas, rave about the evils of social democracy. Rather, he joked: “Out of the great progress of this country, out of our advances in achieving a better life for all, out of our rise to world leadership, the Republican leaders have learned nothing. Confronted by the great record of this country and the tremendous promise of its future, all they do is croak—socialism.”

Duly chastened, savvy Republicans moved to abandon the whole “Liberty Versus Socialism” campaign. The return to realism was led by Maine Senator Margaret Chase Smith, who feared that her party was harming not just its electoral prospects but the country. That same spring she would issue her “Declaration of Conscience”—the first serious challenge to McCarthyism from within the Republican party—in which she rejected the anti-communist hysteria of the moment and declared:

Those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism in making character assassinations are all too frequently those who, by our own words and acts, ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism—

The right to criticize;

The right to hold unpopular beliefs;

The right to protest;

The right of independent thought.

Republicans might be determined to end Democratic control of the Congress, Smith suggested in her declaration:

Yet to displace it with a Republican regime embracing a philosophy that lacks political integrity or intellectual honesty would prove equally disastrous to this nation. The nation sorely needs a Republican victory. But I don’t want to see the Republican Party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny—Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry and Smear.

I doubt if the Republican Party could—simply because I don’t believe the American people will uphold any political party that puts political exploitation above national interest.

Most Republicans lacked the courage to so directly confront McCarthy. But Smith’s wisdom prevailed among leaders of the RNC and the chairs of the Republican Senatorial Committee and the Republican Congressional Committee, who ditched the “Liberty Versus Socialism” slogan and reduced Taft’s 1,950-word manifesto to a ninety-nine-word digest that Washington reporters explained had been cobbled together in order to “soft-pedal” the whole “showdown on ‘liberty against socialism’ ” thing. Pennsylvania Congressman James Fulton, who like many other Republican moderates of the day actually knew and worked with Socialist Party members and radicals of various stripes in groups such as the United World Federalists, was blunter. The cheap sloganeering of the “Liberty Versus Socialism” wing steered his party away from what should be the fundamental question for Republicans in the post-war era: “whether we go back to Methuselah or offer alternative programs for social progress within the framework of a balanced budget.”

Imagine if today a prominent Republican were to make a similar statement. The wrath

Limbaugh, Hannity, Palin and the Tea Party movement would rain down upon him. The Club for Growth would organize to defeat the RINO (“Republican-In-Name-Only”) and the ideological cleansing of the party of Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower and Margaret Chase Smith would accelerate. Some of my Democratic friends are quite pleased with the prospect; as the Republicans of the current moment approach cliffs of extremism that they avoided even in the days of Joe McCarthy, these Democrats suggest, the high ground will be cleared for candidates of their liking. The results of the November 2010 mid-term elections cast doubt upon this assumption. And even if this theory eventually proves electorally sound, it neglects the damage done to democracy and democratic governance when the popular discourse collapses, when ideas are subsumed beneath personalities and slogans, and when the only real fights are between a party that positions itself on the fringe and another that positions itself slightly closer to the twenty-first century—with the expectation, now common among Democratic strategists, that the way to a win on election day is to troll the center right for the votes of the old “Main Street Republicans” and then presume that fear of totalitarian right will keep everyone who stands to the left of center on board.

If universal building codes and protections for children with pre-existing conditions can be presented as assaults on American values and the rule of law—and reported upon as such in major media that turn a promise of balance into an excuse for airing nonsense—then the debate has been dumbed down to such an extent that the right has already won, no matter what the result on election day. And a nation founded in revolutionary revolt against empire, a nation that nurtured the radical Republican response to the original sin of slavery, a nation that confronted economic collapse and injustice with a New Deal and a “war on poverty,” a nation that spawned a civil rights movement, and that still recites a Pledge of Allegiance—penned by the great socialist preacher Edward Bellamy in 1892—to the ideal of an America “with liberty and justice for all,” is bereft not merely of the prospect for meaningful change, but also of what has so often in our history been the essential element of progress.

That element—a social-democratic critique combined, frequently, with pressures from an active Socialist Party and Communist Party, along with independent socialist activism in labor and equal rights campaigns for women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, gays and lesbians and people with disabilities—has from the first years of the American journey been a part of our public debate and our political life. It has influenced, shaped and advanced the cause of a more perfect union. One need not be a Socialist, nor the follower of any tendency or party of the left, to recognize the contribution made by socialists to America. This country would not be what it is today, indeed might not even *be*, were it not for the positive influence of social democrats, socialists, communists and their fellow travelers. The great political scientist Terence Ball reminds us that “at the height of the Cold War a limited form of socialized medicine—Medicare—got through the Congress over the objections of the American Medical Association and the insurance industry, and made it to President Johnson’s desk.”

That did not just happen by chance. A young writer who, in the depths of the Cold War, had recognized that it was entirely possible to reject the totalitarianism of the Stalinist Soviet Union and its satellites while still learning from Marx and embracing a “democratic socialism,” left the fold of Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement to join the Young People’s Socialist League. Michael Harrington wanted to change the nature of the debate about poverty in America, and, perhaps remarkably or perhaps presciently, he presumed that attaching himself to what was left of the once muscular but at that point ailing American Socialist Party was the way to do so. In a 1959 article for the American Jewish Committee’s then-liberal magazine *Commentary*, Harrington sought, in the

words of his biographer, Maurice Isserman, “to overturn the conventional wisdom that the United States had become an overwhelmingly middle-class society. Using the poverty-line benchmark of \$3,000 annual income for a family of four, he demonstrated that nearly a third of the population lived below those standards which we have been taught to regard as the decent minimums for food, housing, clothing and health.”

He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

The article led to a book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. The book became required reading for American policymakers, selling more than 70,000 copies in its first year of publication. “Among the book’s readers, reputedly, was John F. Kennedy, who in the fall of 1960 began thinking about proposing anti-poverty legislation,” recalls Isserman. “After Kennedy’s assassination, Lyndon Johnson took up the issue, calling in his 1964 State of the Union address for a ‘unconditional war on poverty.’ Sargent Shriver headed the task force charged with drawing up the legislation, and invited Harrington to Washington as a consultant.”

Harrington’s proposals—made in conjunction with his friend and drinking pal Daniel Patrick Moynihan—for the renewal of New Deal public works projects with the purpose of improving infrastructure and renewing communities, ending unemployment and redistributing wealth, were never fully embraced. America did not “abolish poverty.” But Harrington’s advocacy, and that of others who adopted the view that the government of the world’s wealthiest nation could and should intervene to address the suffering of those who lacked the resources to care for themselves or their families, underpinned the rapid advance of what the author described as the necessary work of “completing Social Security” by providing health care for the aged. It cheered on the Johnson administration’s “Great Society,” including enactment of the Social Security Act of 1965 establishing Medicare. Johnson took his hits—his 1964 Republican challenger, Barry Goldwater, objected: “Having given our pensioners their medical care in kind, why not food baskets, why not public housing accommodation, why not vacation resorts, why not a ration of cigarettes for those who smoke and of beer for those who drink”—but Americans agreed with their president (and with Michael Harrington): “The Social Security health insurance plan, which President Kennedy worked so hard to enact, is the American way. It is practical. It is sensible. It is fair. It is just.”

Could a plan decried as “socialized medicine” by the American Medical Society because it was, in fact, socialized medicine, really be “the American way”? Practically, of course, it is just that. During the Medicare debate in the early 1960s, Texas US Senate candidate George H. W. Bush may have denounced the proposal as creeping “socialism,” and Ronald Reagan may have warned that if it became a reality citizens would eventually find themselves “telling our children and our children’s children what it once was like in America when men were free.” Yet, Bush and Reagan managed the program during their presidencies and Tea Party activists now show up at Town Hall meetings to threaten any congressman or woman who would dare to tinker with their beloved Medicare.

Americans would not have gotten Medicare if Harrington and the socialists who came before him—from Socialist Party presidential candidates such as Eugene Victor Debs and Norman Thomas, to organizers such as Mary Marcy and Margaret Sanger, and the Communist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn—had not for decades been pushing the limits of the debate about health care to the left. No less a player in the national health-care debate than the late Senator Edward Kennedy declared: “I see Michael Harrington as delivering the Sermon on the Mount to America.” The same was true in abolitionist days, when socialists—including friends of Marx who had immigrated to the United States after the crushing of the 1848 revolutions in Europe—energized the movement against slavery and helped give it political expression in the form of the Republican Party. The same was true in the early years

of the twentieth century, when radical editors—especially the Socialist Victor Berger—battled attempts to crush civil liberties and defined our modern understanding of freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to petition for the redress of grievances. The same was true when a lifelong Socialist, A. Philip Randolph, called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and asked a young preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr., who had surrounded himself with socialist counselors to deliver what would come to be known as the “I Have a Dream” speech.

Again and again across the great arc of American history, at the critical junctures in our nation's journey, socialist citizens, thinkers and organizers, supported by Socialist candidates and elected officials (at the federal, state and local levels), have provoked and prodded the body politic in progressive directions. Despite their determined efforts, America is not a socialist country—at least not in any formal sense. It may be true, as historian Patrick Allitt suggests, that “millions of Americans, including many of these critics [of the Obama administration], are ardent supporters of socialism, even if they don't realize it and even if they don't actually use the word” to describe public services that are “organized along socialist lines,” like schools and highways. In fact, contemporary American socialists and Tea Partiers might reach unexpected, not to mention uncomfortable agreement with Allitt's argument that “socialism as an organizational principle is alive and well here just as it is throughout the industrialized world”—even as they would disagree on whether that's a good thing.

Even if programs “organized along socialist lines” do not make a country socialist, and even if America's relationship with social democracy is more nuanced and more complicated than that of many other nations, the United States is a country that has always been and should continue to be informed by socialists, socialist ideals and a socialist critique of public policies.

That may read to some as a radical statement.

It's not, at least for those who choose to be realistic about our history, about our moment and about the future that has yet to be written.

We live in complex times, when profound economic, social and environmental challenges demand a range of responses, not merely those calculated to protect the economic advantages of some very, very wealthy men (and a few women) who have over the past quarter century, through Republican and Democratic administrations, marshaled sufficient campaign contributions, lobbying muscle, spin and media acquiescence to assure that public policies are made in the name of the American people but without our informed consent and against our best interests. Socialists may not have all the answers that the American people are seeking, even if polls suggest that more Americans find appeal in the word “socialist” today than at any time in decades. Indeed, socialists of different tendencies and traditions are not even in agreement among themselves. This book does not seek to sort out specific ideological, tactical and historical debates. What it does seek is a broader recognition that, without socialist ideas and advocacy of many kinds and characters, there is an insufficient counterbalance to the pull of an anti-government impulse that has less to do with classic libertarianism than with the manipulation of the debate by corporations that do not wish to be regulated, taxed or otherwise governed.

Which returns us to our friend Walt Whitman, who preached that “the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people.”

Just as America is not a socialist country, Whitman was not a socialist poet—at least not in an

pure or political sense. Whitman was not a joiner, and despite the encouragement of his compatriots in later years, he did not carry the card of any socialist or social-democratic tendency. This was the character for a poet who celebrated the “varied carols” he heard America singing and who delighted in contradicting himself. But Whitman was a determined egalitarian, a small-“d” democrat who spent his lifetime evolving and expanding his understanding of what these words meant, not merely for the white male sons of Paumanok but for sons of slaves, for women, for new immigrants and first-generation Americans. His was a conscious poetry that said of America: “Other lands have their vitality in a few hands, a class, but we have it in the bulk of our people.” So it is not really so shocking that, in old age, Whitman recognized himself as “a good deal more of a socialist” than he had earlier imagined. The man who spoke those words was surrounded late in life by socialists who had read in his poetry the truth of their convictions. Some, like Horace Traubel, were American-born and, in fact, from just around the corner in Camden. Others came from around the world. Several of the most revealing books on Whitman’s last years were written by British socialists who traveled to the United States with the specific purpose of meeting the sage. Among Whitman’s most frequent correspondents in the late 1880s and early 1890s was J. W. Wallace, an architect from Bolton, near Manchester in the north of England, who found in the poet’s celebration of comradeship and democracy the ideal language of romantic socialist commitment. Wallace made the pilgrimage to Camden to meet Whitman in 1891, a year after another Bolton radical, Dr. John Johnson, had paid a similar visit. Together they penned a lovely book, *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890–1891*. The radical reformer Edward Carpenter, whose Whitman-steeped writing would inspire and influence both the British socialist and gay rights movements, was another visitor, as was Oscar Wilde, whose 1891 pamphlet *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* expressed a libertarian socialist perspective that seemed to merge Whitman and Kropotkin in its declaration that: “With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.”

What was it that so many socialists found so very satisfying in the words of the poet who Emerson hailed as the author of “the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that *America* has yet contributed”?

What they detected in *Leaves of Grass* was something Whitman had understood from his youth: the “roughness and spirit of defiance” of the American people, the supreme safeguard against the “hour when tyranny may ... enter upon this country,” had first been expressed by the most radical of its founders. As a champion of the writings of Tom Paine, the “citizen of the world” pamphleteer whose calls for revolution and ultimately for economic justice would so inspire the socialists of early nineteenth-century Europe and America, Whitman had few competitors. Paine was widely dismissed and denigrated by the political and intellectual elites of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, as a young man, Whitman sought out New Yorkers who had known Paine, with the purpose of imbibing as much of the pamphleteer’s spirit as he could. As an old man, he would declare, on the 140th anniversary of Paine’s birth:

That he labor’d well and wisely for the States in the trying period of their parturition, and in the seeds of their character, there seems to me no question. I dare not say how much of what our Union is owning and enjoying today—its independence—its ardent belief in, and substantial practice of, radical human rights—and the severance of its government from all ecclesiastical and superstitious dominion—I dare not say how much of all this is owing to Thomas Paine, but I am inclined to think a good portion of it decidedly is.

Chapter 2 of this book will sojourn with Paine, whose outsized role in the shaping of social democratic theory has yet to be fully appreciated by the likes of Glenn Beck or, for that matter, Paine enthusiast Barack Obama. It is enough to note here that Whitman associated Paine with the cause of “radical human rights.” So too did Fanny Wright, the daughter of a Scottish acolyte of Paine’s, who would become in the words of her conservative detractors “the great red harlot” of American radicalism in the late 1820s and early 1830s. An ardent abolitionist and feminist, Wright was the first woman to edit an American journal of opinion and the first to regularly lecture before audiences of men and women. Her following was so immense that candidates who championed her utopian socialist views, while officially running on the ticket of the Working Men’s Party—which identified itself as the political voice of “the working class of society”—were frequently described as campaigning on “the Fanny Wright ticket.”

Whitman adored Fanny Wright, who was promoting the radical Popular Health Movement when he was a young “scribbler” for the newspapers of Long Island, Brooklyn and eventually Manhattan. As he told Horace Traubel fifty years later:

In those days I frequented the anti-slavery halls, in New York—heard many of their speakers—people of all qualities, styles—always interesting, always suggestive. It was there I heard Fanny Wright ... a woman of the noblest make-up whose orbit was a great deal larger than theirs—too large to be tolerated for long by them: a most maligned, lied-about character—one of the best in history though also one of the least understood. [My] remembrance of her all centers about New York. She spoke in the old Tammany Hall there, every Sunday, about all sorts of reforms. Her views were very broad—she touched the widest range of themes—spoke informally, colloquially. She published while there the *Free Inquirer*, which my daddy took and I often read. She has always been to me one of the sweetest of sweet memories: we all loved her: fell down before her: her very appearance seemed to enthrall us.

Wright was not the only socialist the young Walt Whitman would encounter. He was surrounded by radical reformers in the New York City of the 1840s and 1850s, a time when Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* was running columns by Karl Marx, when back-to-nature experiments in communal living were all the rage, and when a young New York lawyer named Alvan Bovay, having recently promoted the free-soil agenda with a campaign that urged newly-enfranchised workers to “Vote Yourself a Farm,” was beginning to conceive of a new political party that he and his compatriots would dub “Republican.”

The young Walt Whitman embraced elements of the radicalism that was all around him—unsettled by the slave auctions he had witnessed while visiting New Orleans, he returned to New York in 1840 to launch the *Freeman*, a newspaper supporting the Free Soil Party that briefly became the vehicle for the anti-slavery and economic justice campaigners who would eventually reconfigure as Republicans. But more often than not, the poet endeavored to “be curious, not judgmental” as he moved among “the gangs of kosmos and prophets” that populated his “Mannahatta.” He would emerge, in the words of the trenchant *New York Times* reviewer Ralph Thompson, as “essentially a man of the broadest social, political and moral capacities.” Thompson was, of course, correct when he observed that “Whitman is too complex to be ticketed Type A, B or C.” But equally correct was the great literary historian of the mid-twentieth century, Newton Arvin, who used Whitman’s words themselves, the poems and the prose, to argue: “Enough and more than enough remains to fortify the writers and the men of our time in their struggles against a dark barbarian reaction, and to interest and animate the peoples of a new

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