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## "Between Two Fires": Gender and American Socialism in the Progressive Era

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“Between Two Fires”:

Gender and American Socialism in the Progressive Era

This submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for a B.A. in History

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Linfield College

McMinnville, OR December 12, 2019

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In August of 1909 Theresa Malkiel, a Russian immigrant to the United States who led the Woman's National Committee of the Socialist Party of America, published her essay *Where Do We Stand on the Woman Question?* in which she challenged her fellow socialists on their treatment of women. Malkiel states, "For the workingwoman of today finds herself between two fires," the first fire being a capitalist society which seeks to exploit her and, "in her anguish the workingwoman turns toward her brothers in the hope to find strong support in their midst, but she is doomed to be disillusioned, for they discourage her activity and are utterly listless towards the outcome of her struggle."<sup>1</sup> Here Malkiel perfectly sums up the paradox socialist women were faced with during the Progressive Era. In their effort to find empowerment in the socialist movement they were instead confronted by the same barriers put up against them in the American capitalist system. Their fight against oppression was ignored, leaving them in caught between two American economic ideologies which would do nothing to save them from their mistreatment. Despite the wave of progressivism rolling through The United States from the 1890s to the 1920s, one of this era's most liberal movements, socialism, was poisoned by deep seated misogynistic understandings amongst its male leaders.

Socialism found its beginnings in 1848 when Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Engels advocated for revolutions of the proletariat, or the working-class. If victorious, these revolutions would overthrow capitalist systems across the globe and replace them with socialist economic systems. The basic principles of socialism seek to establish social ownership of the means of production and self-management by workers. Marx believed that once socialism was in place, a society could work its way towards a communist utopia. This socialist ideology took hold across the globe as many countries saw socialist parties

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<sup>1</sup>Theresa Malkiel, "Where Do We Stand on the Woman Question?" *International Socialist Review* 10, no. 2 (1909), 160-161.

and movements sprout up within their political systems. The United States was no exception. During the Progressive Era, a formidable socialist movement gained traction in the United States. Marx and Engels' work, as well as Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), were translated into English, and some Americans read and began to sympathize with their ideological perspectives. As these ideas spread across the United States, socialism began to gain popularity and eventually, the Socialist Party of America became an increasingly influential force on American politics. The socialist movement attracted reformers and leftists who saw a brighter future for the United States if it adopted a socialist economic system.

Socialism was formalized in the United States by the formation of the Socialist Party of America in 1901. Led by former populist and then prominent socialist, Eugene V. Debs, the party created a platform and began running candidates in elections across the country.<sup>2</sup> The Socialist Party of America's take on socialism differed, however, from the classic perspective put forth by Marx and Engels. American socialist leaders sought to keep their ideology and movement consistent with the country's democratic system.<sup>3</sup> This was not entirely agreed upon in the lower ranks of the party, as some members advocated for a true socialist revolution that would overthrow the current American government. The party would, however, maintain its position and only sought to gain power through democratic elections.<sup>4</sup> In the presidential election of 1912, Debs and his running mate, Emil Seidel, garnered almost one million votes or about 6% of the total votes cast.<sup>5</sup> Support for socialism was also evident on the local and state levels. In

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<sup>2</sup> David Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (Chicago, Illinois: Quadrangle Books, 1955), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Kazin, Rebecca Edwards, and Adam Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 759.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 759.

<sup>5</sup> John Nichols, *The "S" Word: A Short History of An American Tradition...Socialism* (New York, New York: Verso, 2011), 103.

1912, “the Socialist Party had elected thirty-four mayors, along with city councilors, school board members and other officials in 169 cities from Butte, Montana, to New York City.”<sup>6</sup> This short period surrounding the 1912 elections was really the peak of the American socialist movement as they had created strong third party presence in a country dominated by a two party system. Socialists were, however, active in the United States for the majority of the Progressive Era.

Socialism appealed to average Americans by making the argument that, in a period marked by a rise in the power of the corporation, American democracy was being undercut.<sup>7</sup> As corporations grew stronger and gained the financial and political power to influence elections, America was no longer truly living up to its democratic promise. Therefore, in order to rebuild American democracy, average Americans needed to be able to access political decision making. The ability of working-class Americans to once again have a decisive say in American politics could be achieved through giving them better protections and wages, socialists argued.<sup>8</sup> Economic stability of the worker would empower them politically. American socialists believed that once average and working people had more power in American elections the country would once again be a democracy by the people and for the people, no longer controlled by corporate whims.

Despite the moderate success of the American Socialist Party in the Progressive Era, it suffered from serious internal tensions. Much of this tension arose from arguments within the party about how to address the oppression of historically marginalized groups in the United

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 104.

<sup>7</sup> Kazin, Edwards, and Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, 759.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 759.

States. Leaders in the party had very different opinions about what positions the party should take, especially when it came African Americans and women. Victor L. Berger, a founding member of the Socialist Democratic Party of America, which morphed into the Socialist Party of America in 1901, led an overtly racist faction of the party. Sally Miller, author and Professor of Social Sciences stated that Berger, “saw the Negro as unrecognizable, as a socialist he thought him irrelevant, and as a German he believed the Negro, and indeed all others, to be inferior.”<sup>9</sup> Miller later continues that, “Berger held a pronounced vision of the natural inequality of peoples. In almost a pyramidal view he spelled out distinctly superior and inferior racial and ethnic classes.”<sup>10</sup> This quote illustrates the attitude some party members had toward African Americans, viewing them as inferior and destined to be in a lower class. Party leader Eugene V. Debs, on the other hand, refused to give talks in front of audiences that were segregated and joined forces with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to condemn the film *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>11</sup> Debs was not perfect when it came to racial issues, but he and others who shared his beliefs were more open to minorities joining the socialist movement. The socialist party was not united on how to address the plight of African Americans in the United States. Because of this, very few African Americans ever joined the party.<sup>12</sup>

Another hotly contested issue within the American Socialist Party was the issue of women’s suffrage and women’s issues in general. Many male socialists believed that focusing on women’s issues held the party back from achieving its larger goals. Yet, thanks to the undying advocacy of socialist women’s suffragists, these women managed to get female voting rights

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<sup>9</sup> Sally M. Miller, "The Socialist Party and the Negro, 1901-20," *The Journal of Negro History* 56, no. 3 (July 1971): 222.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Kazin, Edwards, and Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, 759.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 759.



onto the socialist party platform.<sup>13</sup> A declaration in their platform, however, did not mean that socialist men actively agreed or supported this aspect of the party's promises. In fact, women's issues were largely ignored and concerted efforts by men to bring women into the party were not made.

While it was still a viable movement the Socialist Party of America seemed to the friendliest political party to women's rights during the Progressive Era. The party's platform called for, "Equal civil and political rights for men and women and the abolition of all laws discriminating against women."<sup>14</sup> The reality of the socialist party's treatment of women does not, however, reflect this emphatic declaration of equality. Indeed, socialist women were largely ignored by their male counterparts and their issues were consistently pushed to the side. This brings up the question: if the Socialist Party of America was committed to equality of the sexes on paper, why did the movement stray from this idea in its actions? What prevented American socialists from truly moving toward women's equality? Answering these questions requires a discussion of why women were drawn to socialism in the first place. What about socialism made women believe that it would aid them in their journey towards emancipation and freedom? Then, once women were brought to the movement and trying to take part in it, how did male socialists justify their exclusion of women from socialism?

The topic of women in American socialism during the Progressive Era, as well as their treatment by men in the movement, lacks extensive scholarship. Scholars have, however, investigated women's lives in the Progressive Era and, to a lesser extent, their relationship with the American socialist movement. It was not until the publication of Mari Jo Buhle's *Women in*

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 759.

<sup>14</sup> "Social Democrats in Convention," *Appeal to Reason*, no. 225 (March 1900): 2.

*American Socialism* in 1983 that women's experiences in the American socialist movement were revealed.<sup>15</sup> Buhle's argument centers around the internal relationships of socialist women based on their differences in race and class. While Buhle's contribution is crucial for understanding who these women were and why they were attracted to the movement, a thorough explanation of how they were treated by their male counterparts is lacking. The experience of women in socialist movements around the world has been covered more comprehensively, especially in European countries where socialism was often more prominent and successful.<sup>16</sup> These sources aid in the understanding of women's experience with socialism from a more global perspective, as well as giving insight on women's lives when they actually lived under socialist systems of government.

As the historiography of American women and their interactions with socialism has expanded it is has mostly focused on the intersection of socialism and the first wave of the American feminist movement. Some of these works describe how socialism was often used as an argument against suffrage, as anti-suffragists portrayed giving women the vote as a sort of socialist conspiracy to overthrow American democracy.<sup>17</sup> While others described how women fighting for their civil and political rights saw hope in a socialist society and therefore participated in both suffrage and socialist movements.<sup>18</sup> Julia Mickenburg, a historian of women

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<sup>15</sup> Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism 1870-1920*, (Chicago and Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Susanne Baackmann and Katherine Stone, *Women and National Socialism in Postwar German Literature: Gender, Memory, and Subjectivity*, (Rochester, New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2017); Jill M. Bystydzienski, "Women and Socialism: A Comparative Study of Women in Poland and the USSR," *Signs* 14, no. 3 (1989): 668-84; Helmut Gruber, and Pamela M. Graves, *Women and Socialism, Socialism and Women: Europe between the Two World Wars* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998); Charles Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens?: Women and Socialism in France since 1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Higgins, "Adulterous Individualism, Socialism, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Suffrage Writing," *Legacy* 21, no. 2 (2004): 193-209.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Allison, "Utopian Socialism, Women's Emancipation, and the Origins of Middlemarch," *ELH* 78, no. 3 (2011): 715-39; Julia Mickenburg, "Suffragettes and Soviets: American Feminists and the Specter of Revolutionary

and twentieth century radical movements, has also discussed the impact of Soviet Russia on American feminists. Her works link how socialism on a global scale influenced American feminists and drew them to support socialist causes in the United States and abroad. Mickenberg notes that “the Russian revolutions in 1917, and the ‘new Russia’ that emerged from them, became touchstones for a cosmopolitan, social democratic vision of female citizenship in the United States that encouraged American feminists to set their sights well beyond suffrage.”<sup>19</sup> Although these works discuss women in socialism, they are more focused on the connections between socialism and the women’s suffrage movement and how that impacted early American feminism.

Another important facet of this study is the changing roles women took during the Progressive Era. This is a topic that scholars have covered more as a result of women’s history in general becoming increasingly investigated over the past few decades. These works have often focused on the transitions in American society, labor, and technology that shifted the traditional dynamics of womanhood.<sup>20</sup> As the experiences of women were broad and difficult to generalize, works covering women in the Progressive Era often focus on particular geographic areas, such as the American South.<sup>21</sup> These works illustrate the way in which women interacted with the new society that was forming around them and whether or not women embraced this emerging era

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Russia,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 4 (March 2014); Julia Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Mickenberg, “Suffragettes and Soviets”, 1023.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Schneider and Carl Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (New York, New York: Facts on File, 1993); Nancy S. Dye, “Introduction”, in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, ed. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991); Erin Holliday-Karre, “From Production to Seduction: Women and Power in the Progressive Era,” *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 9, (January 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Giselle Roberts and Melissa Walker, *Southern Women in the Progressive Era: A Reader. Women’s Diaries and Letters of the South. Columbia, South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019); Mary A. Evins, *Tennessee Women in the Progressive Era: Toward the Public Sphere in the New South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013).

through joining progressive movements, or rejected it by joining conservative ones. Overall, the historiography of women in the Progressive Era speaks to the way in which traditional household labor fundamentally changed for upper-/middle-class women thanks to new technologies and household servants. Also, how working-class women entered the labor force and were now depended upon as both wage-earners and mothers.

All of these works shape the historiography of women in socialism and in the Progressive Era. There are, however, some gaps that need to be filled. In order to begin filling those gaps it is important to add context on why women wanted to be a part of the socialist movement in the first place. By understanding what opportunities women saw in socialism one can better understand why those issues were ignored by male socialists. A more nuanced discussion of women's exclusion from the socialist movement would also add valuable insight to both women's history and the history of the Progressive Era. Scholars of American women's history have long revealed the ways in which women have often been ignored and sidelined due to preconceived notions of traits based on gender. It is easy to assume such arguments were articulated only by conservatives who reject social progress and clung onto tradition. However, in the case of the American socialist movement, we see that despite the movement being inherently progressive, it was not free of these conservative notions of gender. In fact, it was a combination of traditional gender stereotypes as well as newer and more scientific notions of female inferiority that perpetuated misogynistic practices within the American socialist movement. Revealing that even in one of the most forward-thinking ideologies of its time, misogyny was able to take hold and have an extensive influence on individual and party actions.

Upper-/Middle-Class Women and Socialism:

As the United States moved into the Progressive Era, white upper-/middle-class women found their lives shifting as they increasingly began to participate in the public sphere. This development was facilitated by an overall change in American social and political understanding, as well as fast-paced industrial and corporate development. Between the panic of 1893 and America's entry into World War I, Progressivism became a leading ideology in the United States. Its rise to prominence was in reaction to intense industrialization, urbanization, and increasing corporate power. Upper-/middle-class women benefitted from this transformation as their traditional roles in the home were increasingly passed off to paid help or to newly developed in-home technology. The extra time that these women now had as a result of their reduction in household duties aided in the formation of organizations and networks of like-minded women. These networks and groups grew into formidable social movements bent on enacting societal and political change. Joining such organizations helped upper-/middle-class women realize how gender influenced and shaped their lives. This recognition pushed some of these women towards radical political movements that they believed would finally enfranchise them and make them equal members of society.

Traditionally, mainly white upper-/middle-class women took the role of pious homemaker in American society, but this fundamentally changed in the Progressive Era. For decades, these women's lives revolved around caring for their children and keeping their households in order. By the late 1800s and early 1900s upper-/middle-class women instead found themselves increasingly relying on new technologies for house work and handing off other household duties to hired help, nannies, cleaning ladies, and cooks.<sup>22</sup> The emergence of a more

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<sup>22</sup> Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 13-14.

affluent class as a result of 'new money' earned through emerging industry allowed the growing upper-/middle-class to afford these types of luxuries. As the work these women were expected to complete in the home reduced over time, they found themselves with extra time on their hands. To fill the time many of upper-/middle-class women began to seek out connections with other women of similar class status, as traditionally women were socialized to form friendships with people of the same gender. Overtime, these initial friendships grew into formalized organizations that supported particular churches, causes, or reforms.<sup>23</sup> The Women's Christian Temperance Union, the American Women's Suffrage Association, and the Catholic Daughters of the Americas are all important examples of the types of organizations upper-/middle-class women began to populate. The creation of these organizations hinged on upper-/middle-class women using their free time to volunteer, organize events, and raise money for their causes.<sup>24</sup> As socialist writer Josephine Kaneko pointed out, "the invention and improvement of machinery is emancipating womankind. The inevitable force of economic necessity is driving the world onward, and is drawing women, whether she will or not, out of the seclusion and ignorance of the old time home."<sup>25</sup> This quote makes clear that women's roles were fundamentally changing, pushing women out of the domestic sphere and giving them the opportunity to become more involved when it came to political and social issues.

As women were pulled out of their home and into the public sphere, they began to develop a newfound gender awareness. Progressive Era feminist organizations in particular were formalized as a result of women recognizing their lack of civil and political rights. Based on conversations amongst themselves and their treatment when entering the public sphere, it

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>24</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Josephine C. Kaneko, "The Women's Cause is Man's," *Socialist Woman* vol. 2, no. 13 (August 1908): 11.

became clear to upper-/middle-class that American society purposefully held them back. Women were barred from exercising either social or political power because of degrading notions of gender stereotypes.<sup>26</sup> This gender consciousness amongst upper-/middle-class women grew to a larger scale than ever before as organizations and groups formed by women began to agitate for women's rights on a large scale. Messages put forth by feminist organizations spread across the country, allowing for national women's organizations to build membership and thrive. As women's issues gained more attention the concept of the "Woman Question" was created. This question referred to debate around women's entrance into the public sphere and the nature of their rights. Those who believed the answer to the "Woman Question" was female emancipation led the first wave of feminism in the United States. The first wave of feminism focused on allowing women to move into the public sphere by fighting for equality in land ownership, in education, and in suffrage. This movement was led by primarily white, upper-/middle-class women who were frustrated with the way their gender prevented them from being active members of society.<sup>27</sup>

Upper-/middle class women held on to some traditional values of women's roles in society in order to argue for greater political rights. American society had long put women on a pedestal, demarking them as moral beings charged with instilling important values into the country's children. Female activists used this perception to their advantage as, "they clung to a romantic notion of womanhood expansive enough to encompass a vision of women organized as the ultimate force against corruption."<sup>28</sup> Arguments relying on these perceptions were often made by proponents of women's suffrage, as well as emerging socialist women who believed

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<sup>26</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 50-51.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

greater political participation by women was the answer to American government corruption. Socialist writer Mary M. Strickland, in making an argument for both socialism and suffrage stated that, “there remains a large percentage of women who are housewives who do not work wages, but for food, clothing, and shelter. They are not asking for higher wages, but for their freedom.”<sup>29</sup> This freedom, meaning gaining access to civil and political rights, would allow women clean up the corruption that they saw as plaguing government. Socialist writer M. Youtz argued against the idea that women were too pure for politics in saying, “but you say – the women consider it disgraceful to go into politics, and they are right. It is disgraceful for anyone to enter into such political conspiracies as are carried on by the two old parties, and that is the very reason women should go into politics.”<sup>30</sup> This quote makes clear that upper-/middle-class women fighting for their rights saw themselves as the answer to the misconduct taking place in America politics, as women had long been touted as unadulterated and honest.

American socialism promised across the board equality for men and women. This proclamation drew upper-/middle-class women to the movement who were particularly concerned with gaining their emancipation. Upper-/middle-class women were not as concerned with getting better wages or workers’ rights for themselves, as they often did not work. These women were instead focused on using socialism to strengthen arguments for their emancipation. Because of this, upper-/middle-class women began entering into the socialist party in order to pursue their political freedom. It would become clear to many feminists at the time that the ideology which best suited their pursuit for political emancipation and for a less corrupt society would be socialism, as it expressly promised the equality they sought. In 1879 August Bebel, a German socialist politician published his transformative work, *Woman and Socialism* which

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<sup>29</sup> Mary M. Strickland, “A Practical Effort to Reach Women,” *Socialist Woman* 1, no. 12 (May 1908): 5.

<sup>30</sup> M. Youtz, “Why Women Should Have the Right to Vote,” *Socialist Woman* 1, no. 11 (April 1908): 2.



articulated this promise of equality. Although this work was published in 1879 it continued to be circulated, widely read, and referenced amongst female socialists in the Progressive Era. Bebel's work not only made clear that socialism would give women freedom but also that socialism could not be effective without doing so. Bebel argued that the emancipation of women was a vital aspect of socialist ideology since without doing so capitalism could not be overthrown and socialism could not function.<sup>31</sup> Bebel made clear that,

In the new society woman will be entirely independent, both socially and economically. She will not be subjected to even a trace of domination and exploitation, but will be free and man's equal, and mistress of her own lot. Her education will be the same as man's.... She chooses an occupation suited to her wishes, inclinations and abilities, and works under the same conditions as man.... She studies, works, enjoys pleasures and recreation with other women or with men, as she may choose or as occasions may present themselves. In the choice of love she is as free and unhampered as man.<sup>32</sup>

This quote paints a picture of society that so many American feminist women were searching for. A world where women had complete social and economic autonomy and equality.

Upper-/middle-class socialist women believed the combination of socialism and increased women's rights would stymie the corruption taking place in American society. One of the most virulent forms of corruption upper/middle-class women saw taking place in was the treatment of their working-class sisters. Upper-/middle class women were devastated to see other women degraded at the hands of their capitalist system. As Theresa Malkiel states, working-class women were now, "standing alongside man and often doing his work while receiving but half the wage."<sup>33</sup> The idea of women not only being degraded by being forced to do the same work as men, but also being treated as inferior while doing that work, was extremely difficult for upper-

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<sup>31</sup> August Bebel, *Woman and Socialism* (New York: Socialist Literature Company, 1910).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

<sup>33</sup> Theresa Malkiel, "Woman and the Socialist Party," *Socialist Woman* 1, no. 12 (May 1908): 8.

/middle-class women to come to terms with. Josephine Kaneko stated that socialist women desired to free working-class women from the “industrial bondage” they were experiencing.<sup>34</sup> Kaneko goes on saying that, “the socialist woman is becoming intensely concerned about the right of working women to vote. She is concerned because she has learned through study and observation...that women never have been fairly represented by councils composed wholly of men.”<sup>35</sup> It is important to recognize that the women writing in socialist publications about working-class women were usually upper-/middle-class. Therefore, these women often made arguments on the behalf of working-class women about social and political rights when working-class women were often more concerned with workers’ rights. Upper-/middle-class women did recognize that working-class women were hurting as well but believed that the answer to their issues would also be female emancipation.

As first wave feminism and the socialist movement progressed, they would intertwine seamlessly for upper-/middle-class women who saw socialism as an best ideology to aid in achieving women’s political emancipation.<sup>36</sup> Many upper-/middle-class women began to form and populate organizations that advocated for socialism at home and abroad. A number of prominent suffragists, such as Alice Stone Blackwell, were active members in the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom which supported the prospect of a Russian Revolution and the installation of a socialist government in Russia.<sup>37</sup> These activist women, “hoped for a new era of female possibility, in which women would not be merely politically empowered and economically independent, but also equal partners in love and equal builders of a new world, a

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<sup>34</sup> Josephine C. Kaneko, “Why the Socialist Woman Demands Universal Suffrage,” *Socialist Woman* 1, no.10 (March 1908): 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Mickenberg, “Suffragettes and Soviets,” 1029.

<sup>37</sup> Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia*, 4.

classless society, where culture, education, and social welfare counted for more than profit.”<sup>38</sup> Because of this, they looked at home and abroad for opportunities to create this new era of opportunity through socialism movements.

The Russian Revolution served as a powerful influence on women who participated in both the American socialist and suffrage movements. The revolution came as a result of discontent with the Tsarist regime that had been building for some time in Russia. Russian citizens were well aware of the Tsar’s carelessness toward his power and responsibilities, as well as his inability to govern effectively.<sup>39</sup> In 1917, on International Women’s Day, Russian workers gathered to demonstrate their frustration with the Tsar, his incompetent government, and the scarcity of food across the country. These demonstrations escalated into violent riots which the Russian military did not stop and in fact, eventually joined the protesters.<sup>40</sup> Over the next few days the Tsar was deposed, and a provisional government took over in Russia. This government was eventually challenged by the Petrograd Soviet who managed to get control of the Russian military.<sup>41</sup> Soon Russian Bolsheviks seized power in Russia on their platform of “peace, land, and bread”, and went on to establish the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.<sup>42</sup> Decades later the oppressive nature of the Soviet Union would come to be understood, but initially this was a welcomed revolution for progressive American reformers.

At the outset, the USSR began setting an example of women’s liberation that American women felt they deserved as well. The Soviet government quickly began implementing reforms

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 5.

<sup>39</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Russian Revolution," Encyclopædia Britannica, April 02, 2019. Accessed May 24, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Revolution-of-1917>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

which had a massive impact on the lives of Soviet women. As historian Julia Mickenberg observes:

Within ten years of the Revolution, in addition to women gaining the vote, abortions were legalized, divorce was dramatically simplified, and women were given the option of keeping their names in marriage (sometimes a man even took his wife's name). Barriers to women's education and professional advancement were officially eliminated, generous maternity policies were instituted, and efforts (admittedly inadequate) were made to create public laundries, dining halls, and childcare facilities to free woman from what Lenin called "petty house- work [that] crushes, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery."<sup>43</sup>

American suffragists were insulted that their country would not allow them the basic privileges of citizenship, like voting, while Russian women were enjoying such freedoms. It is however important to note that this expansion of women's rights under the Soviets was strategic. Mickenberg makes clear that, "whatever genuine idealism was at work, the ideals of 'liberating' women, including them in the public sphere, always contained a degree of instrumentalism, a sense that transforming women's place in society and in the state represented an opportunity that was only partially about the women themselves."<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the depictions of the empowered and strong Soviet woman became prolific in American popular culture.<sup>45</sup> This reinforced the image some American women had of Soviet Russia as a place of opportunity and women's freedom. Because many feminist women wanted a similar type of life, the most logical thing to do was to advocate for a socialist system of government in the United States in the hopes it would yield similar results for women's rights.

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<sup>43</sup> Mickenberg, "Suffragettes and Soviets," 1043.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia*, 28.

Upper-/middle-class women in the Progressive Era saw their lives shift dramatically with the emergence of new technologies and wealth. These shifts enabled them to move away from their traditional roles in the home and out into the public sphere. Upper-/middle-class women recognized that in regards to labor and politics, “what was once a ‘woman’s sphere’ is no longer her exclusive sphere, but also man’s sphere, And what was once man’s sphere is no longer his sphere exclusively, but belongs also to women.”<sup>46</sup> This allowed for upper-/middle-class women to make connections with similarly minded women in the initial form of friendships, that later developed into formalized women’s organizations. These organizations advocated for various rights and policies such as suffrage and socialism. Some of these women were particularly drawn to socialism and suffrage as they saw both causes as a way to gain their ultimate freedom. Upper-/middle-class women saw opportunities in both movements to clean up a corrupt political and economic system, as well as a chance to protect the emerging labor force of working-class women who were being exploited by the capitalist system. Examples of socialism abroad doing good for women also reinforced their adherence to the socialist ideological perspective. Therefore, these women tried to become increasingly involved and vocal in the socialist movement and advocated for women’s rights within it.

#### Working Class Women and Socialism:

Working-class women of varied ethno-racial backgrounds experienced the changes of the Progressive Era differently than their upper-/middle-class counterparts. Industrialized wage work in factories became the norm for women who moved from country sides and small communities into growing urban areas. Despite becoming wage earners, these women were expected to fulfill

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<sup>46</sup> Kaneko, “The Woman’s Cause is Man’s,” 11.

traditional gender roles, placing them in a sort of double bind. Because of this new reality, working-class women developed not only a newfound gender consciousness in the Progressive Era, but also a sense of class consciousness. Working-class women began to realize the harm America's capitalist society inflicted upon them as wage workers as well as the unique harm it did to them as working women. This realization drew working-class women towards left leaning ideologies, like socialism, which purported to increase the rights of both workers and women.

Working-class women became increasingly aware of their stereotypical roles and how those roles shaped their treatment in and outside of the labor force during the Progressive Era. In 1898, novelist and social reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, wrote *Women and Economics*. In it she argued that female economic independence is necessary in order to improve society as a whole. Gilman stated, "we are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation."<sup>47</sup> This quote illustrates a conflict that more women began to grapple with during this era, that despite their hard work in and out of the home they could not survive without their husbands or fathers. Power dynamics and established social norms forced women into positions of subservience. Women in general began to become increasingly aware of how their gender influenced all aspects of their lives. They started to realize that being a woman put certain constraints on them economically, politically, and socially. And yet, at the same time that women were becoming aware of this fact their traditional roles in the home were becoming more complicated as a result of modernization and industrialization.

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<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1898), 7.

Major shifts in American society that brought working-class women into the growing labor force ensured that they did not have the luxury of staying at home or having “leisure time” like upper-/middle-class women. Working-class women did not create the same types of formal organizations and groups that developed amongst upper-/middle-class women because their time was split between working and taking care of their families. Instead, they created informal networks among themselves to help support one another. Unmarried immigrant women who moved into cities to find work lived in intensely crowded tenements with little privacy, where traditional housework took a backseat to their wage work jobs.<sup>48</sup> Yet, women were still expected to eventually fulfill their role of motherhood despite their social class status, necessitating that they continue working in order to keep their families afloat.<sup>49</sup> These expectations created a unique situation for working-class women whose paid and unpaid labor was not only expected, but necessary. As one Lithuanian mill worker put it, “it all depended on the season, on the kids, on what ya needed to get by. You see, there was always something to do, you know...My husband was often out of work, you know, slack times, so in the summers or spring I’d do a bit of mill work.”<sup>50</sup> Women labored as mothers and as workers, depending on their families’ needs. These women therefore inhabited a unique proletarian role as both wage earners and mothers. This aided in their recognition of how they existed in a liminal space between worker and woman and how that disadvantaged them.

The communities that formed through working-class women supporting each other aided in their realization of their unique position in society. The type of paid labor working-class

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<sup>48</sup> Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 10.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 15.

<sup>50</sup>Ardis Cameron, “Landscapes of Subterfuge: Working-Class Neighborhoods and Immigrant Women,” in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, ed. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 58.

women participated in was a result of industrialization. Working-class women, especially those who had immigrated to the United States from southern and eastern European countries, often found themselves working in textile factories.<sup>51</sup> In these factories and the communities which sprung up around them, working-class immigrant women created their own community bonds which fostered both class consciousness and gender consciousness. Their gender consciousness grew out of recognition of the double bind they were confronted with. Along with their jobs at the factory, women were still expected to take care of their husbands and children at home because traditional gender roles persisted in the context of marriage. Their class consciousness came about as a result of their understanding that American workers in general were mistreated and abused at the hands of emerging industry.

For working-class women to keep their lives functioning effectively they depended on informal networks of other women for support. Working-class women moved from having to help out on family farms or in family run trades to working in modern factories.<sup>52</sup> As the prominent author and intellectual of the time, Olive Schreiner, points out in her work, *Woman and Labour*, published in 1911, “the changes which have taken place during the last centuries, and which we sum up under the compendious term ‘modern civilisation’, have tended to rob woman, not merely in part but almost wholly, of the more valuable of her ancient domain of productive and social labour.”<sup>53</sup> This was a major shift for working-class women as they were spending more time away from home as members of the American workforce, but were still expected to fulfill their traditional role as mother and homemaker. As a result of inhabiting this dual role, it was crucial for working-class women to make connections with other women in their

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Schneider, *Women in the Progressive Era*, 54-56.

<sup>53</sup> Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (New York: Fredrick A. Stokes Company, 1911), chap. 1, accessed October 21, 2019, [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1440/1440-h/1440-h.htm#link2H\\_INTR](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1440/1440-h/1440-h.htm#link2H_INTR)



position. Working-class women depended on each other to watch over one another's kids, to offer advice, and to provide medical help, among other things. The bonds made by these women would be vital to their understanding of how class and gender impacted their lives. Although they were not formalized organizations like that formed by upper-/middle-class women these groups of women still were able to commiserate, talk politics, and learn from each other. This resulted, for some working-class women, in the same type of radicalization and turn toward socialism that upper-/middle-class women experienced.

Working-class women also began to realize that their gender was holding them back from any sort of upward mobility at work.<sup>54</sup> Despite women often outnumbering men at the textile factories in which they worked, it was men who usually held management positions and ultimately controlled the means of production.<sup>55</sup> Women were kept in low wage jobs and consistently paid less than men because of traditional interpretations of gender roles.<sup>56</sup> They were expected to get married and have kids, meaning that they could theoretically not be depended upon for consistent work. Therefore, keeping them in low paid, easily replaceable positions was common.<sup>57</sup> All of these factors worked together to show working-class women how their gender negatively influenced their position in society. As Theresa Malkiel pointed out, these women, "began to understand her inferior position, and to rebel against it."<sup>58</sup> Working-class women were frustrated by their position and sought a way to better their lives, leading some to socialism.

Heightened awareness regarding gender power dynamics amongst working-class women took a back seat, however, to their experience with gaining class consciousness. Much like

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<sup>54</sup> Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Cameron in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Malkiel, "Woman and the Socialist Party," 8.

<sup>57</sup> Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Malkiel, "Woman and the Socialist Party," 8.

upper-/middle-class women discussed their lack of rights, working-class women commiserated with one another when it came to their position in the social and economic order. Unlike upper-/middle-class women, working-class women saw their life experiences dictated more by class than by gender. The negative impacts of their social class were deeply felt through their exploitation as workers. Women who worked as servants in wealthy homes often experienced the worst treatment.<sup>59</sup> In her autobiography, Russian Jewish immigrant Rose Cohen noted that, “my every hour was sold, night and day. I had to be constantly in the presence of people who looked down upon me as inferior.”<sup>60</sup> The exploitation and rampant sexual abuse of female household servants led many of them to work as prostitutes, a potentially more dangerous prospect.<sup>61</sup> This shows how the work of women in the labor force was exploited and devalued, forcing them unwillingly into harmful situations. Working-class female factory workers also suffered from unfavorable treatment and conditions. 1,2500,000 women were employed in factories, 75% of which were immigrants or the children of immigrant parents.<sup>62</sup> Women worked in dangerous conditions in which they were subjected to the abuse of harsh overseers and constant filth<sup>63</sup> Marie Van Vorst, a journalist who reported on the state of female factory workers observed, “of all that came under my observation, not one who was of age to reflect was happy.” She continued, “the most sane and hopeful indication for the future of the factory girl and the mill-hand is that she rebels, dreams of something better, and will in the fullness of time stretch toward it.”<sup>64</sup> The very wish to rebel that Van Vorst referred to is what drew working-class women to

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<sup>59</sup> Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 26.

<sup>60</sup> Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*, (New York: George H. Doran, 1918), pp.180-181.

<sup>61</sup> Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 26.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 56

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>64</sup> John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst, *The Woman Who Toils, Being the Experiences of Two Gentlewoman as Factory Girls* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1903) pp. 212, 73.

socialism, as they sought a better life and fairer treatment. Recognition of their exploitation at the hands of the American capitalist system pushed some of these working-class women toward adhering to socialist ideologies.

The combination of harsh working conditions and the various, common abuses working-class women experienced shaped their conception of the world around them. In order to survive, they relied on their support networks not only for help as mothers but also as workers. Working-class women helped each other as economic forces outside of their control shifted their wages, rents, and cost of living, resulting in steady financial stress.<sup>65</sup> As American Studies Professor Ardis Cameron notes, working-class women, “shared the burdens of economic hardship and understood that loss of income, economic deterioration, and poverty were seldom the results of personal failure.”<sup>66</sup> Working-class women knew that the forces which kept them in their socio-economic position were bigger than themselves. This understanding was crucial to developing class awareness among working-class women, as they recognized the lack of protections and rights in America’s capitalist system afforded them. It may not have been so explicit for these women, but it was clear that when economic hardships befell them, they were not to blame, but at the same time they could do nothing about it, as they were not in control of their economic destiny.

Realizations of about the influence of class and gender increasingly drew working-class women to populist political ideologies. Unlike upper-/middle-class women, working-class women often found themselves identifying with their class more than their gender. Their lived experiences centered more around their treatment as workers. Gender had a role to play but, their class status was more important component of their lives. Because these women worked, they

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<sup>65</sup> Cameron in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, 64.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid, 63.

did not feel disillusioned with their domestic lives in the same ways as white upper-middle class women. These working-class working women were concerned with worker exploitation, not gender discrimination. Working-class women understood socialism as the ultimate equalizer. That the equality they would gain under a socialist economic system would inherently make them equals regardless of gender. Despite understanding that being a woman in capitalist system uniquely harmed them, they believed that as workers in a socialist system these harms would disappear thanks to the empowerment of worker control. Therefore, agitating for gender equality in particular was seen as unnecessary when the issue of workers' rights was the focus of socialism.<sup>67</sup> Because of this, working-class women saw themselves as workers first and wished to benefit from the class equality socialism promised.<sup>68</sup>

Some working-class women who believed labor issues to be the most important even argued that the women's suffrage was unnecessary on the grounds that it would not do anything to emancipate the worker. They believed in the equality of men and women, but also that this equality would not come from equal suffrage but instead, radical political change. Prominent political activist and anarcho-socialist Emma Goldman proclaimed that working-class men who enjoyed the right to vote were still subject to "stringent labor laws prohibiting the right of boycott, of picketing, in fact, of everything, except the right to be robbed of the fruits of his labor," she continues, "yet all these disastrous results of the twentieth century fetish have taught woman nothing."<sup>69</sup> This quote shows that working-class women didn't see women's suffrage or the issue of women's rights in general as the end all be all fix to their oppression.

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<sup>67</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 42.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 32-33.

<sup>69</sup> Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1910), ch. 9, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/emma-goldman-anarchism-and-other-essays>.

August Bebel's *Woman In Socialism* claimed that socialism could only succeed by bettering the condition of women. Therefore, some socialist men called forth women of the proletariat to mobilize for the cause.<sup>70</sup> Working-class women saw this as an opportunity to better not only their treatment at work but also their economic position in society. Eventually, some women headed the call and began to join networks of women and formal labor groups, such as the Women's Trade Union League, in order to push for protective labor legislation. While some working-class women actually became involved in the socialist movement, a lack of actual organized outreach kept their numbers small. As a result, the plight of the working-class woman was not as well understood, and they were often spoke for by upper-/middle-class women. Therefore, despite all of the reasons these women were drawn to the socialist cause they were ultimately disillusioned by it.

#### Why and How Women Were Excluded:

As was common in most aspects of American society during the Progressive Era, the socialist movement in the United States was largely led and facilitated by men. Often, these men subscribed to traditional ideas regarding female inferiority as well as new scientific conceptions of males having an evolutionary advantage over females. As women became increasingly outspoken and involved in politics during this period, men in general felt challenged by what they saw as an attempt to subvert male authority. Socialism, as a progressive movement, created a space for outspoken and politically driven women to thrive, causing men in the movement to reject the party's initial promises of equality. These outspoken women, often members of the upper-/middle-class, advocated loudly for women's rights, causing this topic to often be the

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<sup>70</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 31.

focus of male disagreement. Despite the claims of equality between the sexes in their party platform, many socialist men actively ignored women's issues and sidelined women in the movement by relegating them to menial jobs within their organizations and not putting forth the resources to recruit women into the party. These men further utilized conservative and new pseudo-scientific arguments to justify the exclusion of women from the socialist cause.

Early on in the movement, socialist men were uncomfortable with women's entry into the labor force during the Progressive Era. The traditional roles that women were expected to fulfill were that of the mother and of the home maker. Traditional Victorian values posited that the "chief aim of women's vocation was the rearing of moral, trustworthy, statesmanlike citizens."<sup>71</sup> Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs himself believed that, "women, while deserving of the vote, were also by nature the guardians of the home."<sup>72</sup> Women's value was only truly acknowledged by society within the context of the home as mothers and teachers of proper citizenship. Despite the irony of their lack of political rights to actually exercise the rights of citizenship themselves. An early American socialist platform even called for an end to women's exploitation in factories by barring them from working in them altogether.<sup>73</sup> Although it eventually became clear that women's entry into the work force was not something that could be stopped, the uneasiness among men about dirtying the paragons of virtue women were expected to be through women entering the labor force remained.

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<sup>71</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 94.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Pittenger, *American Socialist and Evolutionary Thought, 1870-1920* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 167.

<sup>73</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 31.

The labor of women in the workforce was devalued by socialist men and not seen on equal footing with male labor. Seeing women as equal workers in the fight for equality through socialism was difficult for men, even if they were working the same types of jobs.<sup>74</sup> Women's role was seen as taking place in the home, not in the workforce. Even working-class women who understood the plight of the working-class were not viewed on the same level as men because of their gender. As Josephine Kaneko stated, the labor of working-class women in the eyes of socialist men, "is a thing apart. It is without dignity. It is, to sum it up, 'women's work.' 'Female labor.' And female labor wasn't much, even to the workingman."<sup>75</sup> Despite, laboring alongside men, women were still not seen as equals when it came to their identity as workers.

Another factor driving female and male socialists apart was the emergence of Social Darwinism and the role it played in socialist thought. Social Darwinism became increasingly accepted during the Progressive Era and appealed to many socialist thinkers. As cultural historian Mark Pittenger points out, "Americans of all political stripes during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era were enamored with science and sought its sanction for their views, but none more ardently than socialists."<sup>76</sup> Socialists believed that their progressive movement was a product of social evolution and that this scientific perspective validated their ideology. This new scientific perspective, however, led to the exclusion of groups of people seen as less developed. Women, immigrants, and African Americans found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy created through this so-called scientific understanding.<sup>77</sup> Much like scientific racism inaccurately put forth ideas about the inherent biological inferiority of African Americans,

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<sup>74</sup> Pittinger, *American Socialist and Evolutionary Thought*, 189.

<sup>75</sup> Kaneko, "Why the Socialist Woman Demands Universal Suffrage," 3.

<sup>76</sup> Pittinger, *American Socialist and Evolutionary Thought*, 3.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid, 167.

scientific misogyny posited that women's lower position in society was simply a result of their evolutionary and biological makeup.

Two main evolutionary arguments pervaded male socialist thought during the Progressive Era. The first argument was that women were biologically more conservative, while men were naturally more progressive. One psychologist in the 1890's stated, "Woman's body and soul is phyletically older and more primitive, while man is more modern, variable, and less conservative. Women are always inclined to preserve old customs and ways of thinking."<sup>78</sup> This idea of women having a 'natural conservatism' made women, in the eyes of socialist men, fundamentally unable to participate in a progressive movement such as socialism. Some men saw women as entirely incapable of grasping the concepts of socialism because of the evolutionary trajectory. Therefore, it was a waste of time to make an effort to include them in the movement. It was no longer a matter of tradition that was keeping women from actively engaging in socialism, but innate biological facts. To some extent this made the justification of women's exclusion more concrete for men as scientific facts could not be argued with.

The second evolutionary argument which socialist men saw as another reason women did not belong in their organizations was that gender roles were biologically preordained because of maternity. Therefore, the traditional role of mother and homemaker women inhabited was scientifically meant to be. This argument was represented by the work of Dr. Edward Clarke who believed that, "the human body was a closed energy system, and that social evolution required specialization and divergent gender roles," Clarke continues in saying that, "woman's finite resources were inadequate for the excessive strains of higher education and should be reserved

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid, 188.



for her primary duty of motherhood.”<sup>79</sup> This idea, that because women are the sex that gives birth their main job in life is taking care of children and nothing else, was a common at the time. Such arguments harken back to traditional ideas about women’s place being in the home but solidifies it with pseudo-science. It also worked to undermine the labor of working-class women by stating that they did not belong in the workforce in the first place, but rather the home, making their work illegitimate. Therefore, the argument was still being made that women should focus on homemaking and taking care of children, it was just being framed differently.

The scientific nature of these arguments allowed progressive men to stand behind them with a newfound sense of justification. This strengthened the idea that women were not necessarily workers in the same way as men. That women’s biological destiny was traditional, conservative, and that of being a mother. Therefore, proletariat men and women could not be equal forces fighting against the injustices of capitalism if women’s jobs were homebound and not seen as actual labor. Men saw themselves as the ones who needed to take the lead in fighting for economic independence as their traditional role was working outside the home in the capitalist system. In contrast, women existed in their own separate domestic sphere at home and therefore, politics did not apply to them.

Ernest Untermann, a German-American author and socialist, described the hypocrisy taking place within the socialist party by stating, “[I]t seems inexplicable at first sight that even...Socialists should look with indifference or disfavor upon the efforts of their wives, sweethearts, mothers, sisters to secure equality with men. The fact is indisputable, however. It does exist and persist in our own ranks.” Untermann goes on to say that the root of sexism in the

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid, 188.

socialist party was male fear of women becoming “less willing to swallow all the crooked logic of the ‘superior’ male mind.”<sup>80</sup> This quote proves that it was no secret that misogyny was permeating the socialist movement, driven by a male desire to continue holding power over women. Interestingly, in the very same publication that Untermann published his article, socialist writer A.A. Graham warned his fellow socialists about giving women equal education, opportunities, and the right to vote. Graham cautioned that, “women are getting what they want, but deplore the result and seek to shirk the responsibility,” he continues, “their complete political emancipation will give them advantage over what the advanced women no longer considers the stronger sex.”<sup>81</sup> Graham extends his argument by stating that if women are given full emancipation they will begin to compete with men in the public sphere. Graham even goes on to say that due to certain rights women currently hold, giving them more will allow women to eventually hold ultimate power over men, which could not be accepted.<sup>82</sup> This is the exact type of argument that Untermann refers to in saying that, “this particular fogyism against equality for women is far more deep rooted than any prejudice created merely by the capitalist environment. It reaches back into the primitive society and appeals to the most individualistic instinct of the male brute, the lust for domination.”<sup>83</sup> Men were concerned that giving in to women and aiding them in achieving their emancipation would threaten their power over not only women but society in general.

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<sup>80</sup> Ernest Untermann, “A Campaign Against Fogyism,” *Railway Carmen’s Journal* no.1, vol. 17 (January 1912): 289-290.

<sup>81</sup> A.A. Graham, “The Final Result on Society of the Enlarged Industrial Sphere of Women,” *Railway Carmen’s Journal* no. 1, vol. 17 (January 1912): 436.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 436.

<sup>83</sup> Untermann, “A Campaign Against Fogyism,” 289.

Because of the belief that women did not belong in the socialist party, attempts at reaching out to women to join and support the party were minimal. As Mari Buhle asserts, the socialist party, “never wholeheartedly encouraged women to organize or allocated significant resources for that end.”<sup>84</sup> This exclusion of women was pointed out time and time again in female socialist publications. Josephine Kaneko makes this clear in saying, “it is sad to the point of almost being tragic, but it is a truth that the organized workingmen do not always represent the interests of their working wives and sisters and daughters in their councils. The working women are not encouraged to organize to join unions. They are not always given assistance in the matter of wages and hours.”<sup>85</sup> May Strickland noted that, “the message of socialism has been adapted to reach men in all walks of life. Small effort has been made to reach women.”<sup>86</sup> Socialist women were frustrated with the fact that women were not being given the same attention when it came to socialist issues as men. Upper-/middle-class women were able to still find places in the movement through writing or forming their own women’s organizations because they were motivated and had the necessary resources. Working-class women, on the other hand, did not have the same opportunities to respond to this exclusion and therefore remained wholly ignored.

Indeed, socialist leaders only ever concerned themselves with the needs of men and barely mentioned the struggles of women. Josephine Kaneko covers this topic once again, stating that socialists have, “worked always as a matter of expediency along the line of least resistance with the male portion of humanity,” she continues, “as we have chosen our meeting places in the favor of men, we have also directed our speeches and our published matter to mankind. His wrongs and his needs have filled our mouths and newspaper columns with the exceptional

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<sup>84</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 145.

<sup>85</sup> Kaneko, “Why the Socialist Woman Demands Suffrage,” 3.

<sup>86</sup> Strickland, “A Practical Effort to Reach Women,” 5.

moment we have given publicity to the oppression and needs of women.”<sup>87</sup> This quote proves that the socialist movement was essentially ignoring women’s issues and only tailoring their content towards men. Thereby, excluding women from the conversation by simply not acknowledging their issues. After much agitation by women threatening to form separate organizations to challenge the Socialist Party of America, plans were approved in 1908 to create the Woman’s National Committee.<sup>88</sup> This strengthened women’s position in the party, but to a limited degree. Men still largely ignored their opinions and did not put forth a more active effort to recruit women or to address their particular issues.

Although some women were eventually given a place in the socialist party, they were relegated to roles traditionally deemed to be “women’s work.” Theresa Malkiel stated at the 1908 New York Women’s Socialist Conference that she and other women like her were “tired of their positions as official cake-bakers and money-collectors.”<sup>89</sup> Women took matters into their own hands by creating publications like *The Socialist Woman*, holding meetings specifically for socialist women, organizing strikes, and advocating for women’s issues like the right to vote and access to birth control.<sup>90</sup> These efforts were all done with little help from the party but still found some success in their outcomes. Events and actions organized by women did to some extent, however, work to strengthen the divide between the men and women within the party as it began to seem like the two groups were fighting for different outcomes. The issues brought up and

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<sup>87</sup> Josephine C. Kaneko, “Are the Interests of Men and Women Identical?,” *The Socialist Woman* vol. 1, no. 12 (May 1908): 5.

<sup>88</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 150.

<sup>89</sup> Theresa Malkiel, “Some Impressions of the New York Socialist Women’s Conference,” *The Socialist Woman* 2, no. 15 (August 1908): 12.

<sup>90</sup> Kazin, Edwards, and Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, 759.

focused on by socialist women were also often in regard to the concerns of upper-/middle-class women, as they had the resources to speak out and organize on the behalf of all socialist women.

Overall, bias against women in the socialist movement as a result of traditional beliefs and emerging evolutionary arguments worked to continuously exclude women and their issues from ever being fully embraced by the socialist party. Even working-class women who would seemingly have more legitimacy in the movement because of their socio-economic status were quickly written off and their work not thought of as equal to man's. Women's concerns about their unique exploitation at the behest of America's capitalist system were not seen as relevant to the cause. Therefore, the women who did participate in the party were mostly upper-/middle-class women who focused on issues like suffrage, drawing ire from men who saw increased female political rights as a threat. Women had been drawn to socialism because its promises were seen as a way for them to finally gain some freedoms, whether that be from political rights or worker protections. Yet, instead of finding the salvation they had hoped for in socialism American women instead found a movement filled with broken promises. Women were left trying to fend for themselves but never getting the investment or resources they needed to enact serious change on behalf of socialism.

### Conclusion:

Socialism was one of the most radical movements in an era named for its immense number of emerging progressive organizations and ideologies. Socialism advocated for a complete overhaul of America's economic system and a fundamental change in the way politics functioned. This, and the promise of equality, as laid out in the party's ideology and concrete platform, drew women across the spectrum of socio-economic classes to the cause. Yet, women

did not find the freedom and equality they hoped for in the socialist movement. They instead found an organization which devalued their labor and never made a concerted effort to reach out to women in order to organize them properly. Traditional gender roles, fear of men losing their authority, and scientific misogyny all worked to turn American socialist men away from women's inclusion. Because of these beliefs' women were not given to same attention and opportunities to organize effectively to support the cause. This shows that even one of the most progressive movements of the era could not overcome the institutionalized misogyny that permeated American culture as a whole. The untapped potential women had when it came to American socialism is something one can only speculate about. With successful women driven movements like suffrage and temperance, however, one has to wonder if socialism could have been more successful in the United States if the movement truly embraced and propped up women instead of pushing them down.

The overall decline of the American socialist movement resulted from deepening party disagreements and a growing fear within the American public of movements on the radical left. Indeed, the emerging ideological factions in the wake of the Russian Revolution played an important role in the disintegration of the party. The different factions that emerged in Russia were exported, and worked to create tenuous relationships between American socialists.<sup>91</sup> Those who wished to follow the Russian government structure were inconsistent in ideology as a result of their attempts to emulate Joseph Stalin's policy procedures.<sup>92</sup> Stalinists and Trotskyites in the United States disagreed over whether or not worker control was imperative to socialism, as Stalin had only instituted state ownership. This, already existing disagreements over marginalized

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<sup>91</sup> Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2015), 178.

<sup>92</sup> Kazin, Edwards, and Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, 655.

groups, and whether or not a full-fledged socialist revolution should take place were never solved, and therefore slowly tore the party apart from the inside.

The Socialist Party of America was especially hurt when the United States entered WWI. The only socialist in Congress, Meyer London, was one of six congressmen to vote against the declaration of war in 1917.<sup>93</sup> Anti-war sentiments were strong amongst American socialist. On April 7, 1917, the day after the United States joined the war, the Socialist Party of America adopted the St. Louis Platform which stated:

We brand the declaration of war by our government as a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world. In all modern history there has been no war more unjustifiable than the war in which we are about to engage. No greater dishonor has ever been forced upon this nation against its will. In harmony with these principles, the Socialist Party emphatically rejects the proposal that in time of war the workers should suspend their struggle for the better conditions.<sup>94</sup>

The platform also called for “continuous, active, and public opposition to the war,” “unyielding opposition to all proposed legislation for military or industrial conscription,” “consistent propaganda against military training and teaching in public schools,” and “widespread educational propaganda to enlighten the masses as to the true relation between capitalism and war.”<sup>95</sup> Other Americans saw this move by the Socialist Party as unpatriotic and borderline suspicious. The Espionage Act, which was passed on June 15, 1917, significantly hurt socialists as their activities and publications were significantly suppressed by the U.S. government for their anti-war sentiment. Several prominent party members, including Eugene V. Debs, were charged under the act, further delegitimizing socialists in the eyes of the public.<sup>96</sup> Debs was imprisoned

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<sup>93</sup> Ross, *The Socialist Part of America*, 182.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid, 183.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid, 184.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid, 184.

as a result of his anti-war activism.<sup>97</sup> The American public increasingly distrusted socialists as most of the population rallied around the war effort.

Hostilities toward the American socialist movement reached their peak between 1919 and 1920 during the first Red Scare. In 1919 wartime shipbuilders staged a strike in Seattle, Washington that grew into a general strike where workers protested their treatment in wartime industries.<sup>98</sup> The large scale protests cause many Americans to fear that the United States would face a Bolshevik revolution like the one that took place in Russia. This fear was intensified by further strikes, riots, and anarchist bombings, which appeared to be happening more and more frequently.<sup>99</sup> Fear of leftist radicalism culminated in what were known as the “Palmer Raids,” led by U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. These raids cracked down on radical groups in the United States in the hopes of restoring law and order.<sup>100</sup> Immigrant activists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, both prominent anarchists, were deported in order to lessen their influence on the American public.<sup>101</sup> Deportations, arrests, and sensationalized press coverage turned many Americans away from socialism and labor movements in general. As a result, the socialist movement went into a steady decline, unable to regain its former power and influence.

Today, the United States is seeing a revival of some of the progressive movements which marked the Progressive Era. The fourth wave of feminism, rising populism, and the return of socialist ideologies are all occupying our current political zeitgeist. Democratic socialist Bernie

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<sup>97</sup> Kazin, Edwards, and Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, 655.

<sup>98</sup> Adam Hodges, “The First Red Scare,” Oxford Research Encyclopedias, posted February 2019, accessed May 23, 2019. <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-555>

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Kazin, Edwards, and Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, 655.



Sanders made serious waves in the 2016 Democratic primaries and is on course to do so again in 2020. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, both democratic socialists, were elected to the United States House of Representatives in 2018 representing New York's 14<sup>th</sup> district and Michigan's 13<sup>th</sup> respectively. In May of 2019 Gallup ran a poll which found that 43% of American's believed that socialism would be good for the country as a whole, up from just 23% in 1942.<sup>102</sup> Similarly as they did in the Progressive Era, socialists today are appealing to Americans through pointing out inherent corruption in our government. The obscene power of corporations, the harm private equity has done to American workers, and the overall immense wealth gap the country faces are all central issues for Democratic Socialists of America. They too argue that these forces are subverting American democracy and taking power away from the people. Therefore, democratic socialists argue that their ideology and policies will return power to the people.

With socialist ideology clearly on the rise once again it is important, now more than ever, to recognize and understand the history of the socialist movement in the United States. Especially the track records this movement has had when it comes to women and other historically marginalized groups. Recognition of the mistakes made by socialists in the past and a concerted effort to keep those mistakes from happening again is necessary if the movement seeks to continue being legitimate going forward. This not only matters in respect to the history of socialism, but the history of women in social movements in general. Women were shouted down and excluded from groups and movements that should have been their biggest advocates. This speaks to a deeper truth, that despite what one proclaims to be their political ideology deep

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<sup>102</sup> Mohamed Younis, "Four in 10 Americans Embrace some Form of Socialism," Gallup, May 20, 2019, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/257639/four-americans-embrace-form-socialism.aspx>.

seated societal constructions can still subvert those ideals. Without recognizing this, the door towards complacency is opened, allowing for prejudice to make its way into even the most forward thinking of movements. Therefore, by understanding the arguments and tactics used to exclude women in the past we can break them down in the future.

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