American dreamers

How the left changed a nation

By michael kazin

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Following the election of William McKinley as president of the United States in 1896, labor leader Eugene V. Debs declared himself a socialist. "Money constitutes no basis of civilization," he told members of the American Railway Union. "The time has come to regenerate society - we are on the eve of universal change."

Debs' forthright and sincere critique of capitalism, Michael Kazin, a professor of history at Georgetown University, suggests, "made the dogma read like poetry." But his message "left most Americans cold." His great spirit could not overcome "the futility of his cause."

Throughout American history, Debs' left-wing brothers and sisters have suffered the same fate. Rarely, if ever, did they pose a serious threat to the power elite in the government or the economy. Nonetheless, Kazin argues, in this lively and informative account of radicalism in the United States, American dreamers had a substantial impact on culture, society and politics, expanding the meaning of equal opportunity, equal rights and personal liberty and pushing their fellow citizens to re-evaluate the nation's role in the world.

Drawing on the substantial body of work published by his fellow historians, Kazin endorses the generally accepted view that American radicals faltered because they did not adequately sort out means and ends, or find the right balance between ideological purity and political compromise. Rent by factional disputes, they never came together in a dominant organization. And in the 20th century, an animus toward nationalism and organized religion hobbled their efforts to build a mass movement.

Although radicals were not able to enact their grand visions, Kazin demonstrates, they forced some Americans to think hard about the gap between the nation's founding ideals and its practices. Toiling at first on the margins of American politics, black and white abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips used the controversy over the expansion of slavery to the territories acquired in the Mexican War in the 1840s and '50s to get a hearing for their view that all men were, indeed, created equal; that self-sovereignty was a gift from God to every individual; and that human bondage, quite clearly, was a sin. They may have played a role as well in convincing some Americans that it would take a bloody conflict to eradicate "the peculiar institution."

Radical feminists also altered the American agenda. Although they thought focusing exclusively on a woman's right to vote was a mistake, they helped create a climate conducive to the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. Fifty years later, Kazin points out, the women's liberation movement had grown "into a counterculture of impressive size and influence." Although the gender-conscious left created a backlash that contributed to the rise of the New Right and the failure to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, radicals were in part responsible for a host of reforms, including acceptance of the right of women to enter all professions; gain equal pay when they performed the same work as men; express their own sexuality; and choose their own lifestyles.

Kazin does not measure the influence of American radicals with much precision. And at times, he's guilty of "after-this-therefore-because-of-this" reasoning. He indicates quite accurately, for example, that the Communist Party was the first (and, for a time, the only) white-led organization that demanded the integration of professional baseball. Young Communists picketed Yankee Stadium, and the Daily Worker contained editorial after editorial "ripping the veil from the 'Crime of the Big Leagues.' "

And so, without probing cause and effect, Kazin makes the dubious claim that the party deserves some of the credit for the decision of the Brooklyn Dodgers to sign Jackie Robinson to a minor-league contract in 1945. He then adds, more broadly, that the "anti-
racist position once found primarily on the left was spreading out to the liberal mainstream."

As he celebrates radicals for advancing individual freedom, gender equity and racial justice, Kazin laments their failure "to advance the collective might of workers and the poor." Surprisingly, he does not give American dreamers much credit for pushing Franklin Roosevelt to create a limited welfare state, with a safety net for the elderly and the poor. The New Deal, and for that matter, the Great Society, were liberal achievements, he writes. Fair enough. But so, too, was the expansion of personal liberty in the 20th century.

Kazin, no doubt, has his eyes fixed on our present predicament. He's worried, and with good reason, that although "a world of freebooting capitalisms has delivered neither material abundance nor social harmony," the left in America has lost its "passion for beginning the world over again." Without pressure from radicals, Kazin concludes, neither Bill Clinton nor Barack Obama "could become the transformative figure each aspired to be." No wonder hope for social equality remains dim.

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