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Haymarket, Henry George, and the Labor Upsurge in Britain and America during the Late 1880s

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At least one excellent new book has been published to mark the centenary of the Haymarket riot of May 4, 1886, which resulted in the death of eight policemen and the wounding of many others, and the arrest and conviction of eight anarchists in one of the worst miscarriages of justice in American history.¹

Paul Avrich's recent work represents a major advance over the only other previous book-length assessment, which was written by Henry David fifty years ago, and was based almost entirely on secondary sources.² Avrich's meticulous account confirms that it was the Chicago police who precipitated the violence at the meeting, which had been called to protest the fatal shooting of several strikers at the McCormick Harvester factory the previous day. It throws fresh light on the still unsolved question of who actually threw the fatal bomb. Avrich argues persuasively that it was the German shoemaker George Schwab, rather than the usually named Rudolph Schnaubelt, who was responsible. He also demonstrates that although Haymarket may have hastened the demise of the International Working People's Association (the so-called Black International), the affair did not terminate interest in the ideas of anarchism in America. To the contrary, the political convictions of Emma Goldman and Bill Haywood, as well as other future leaders of the I.W.W., were partly shaped by the unfairness of the trial, the savagery of the sentences, and the character and bearing of the defendants.³

But Avrich's biographical approach, and his somewhat narrow focus upon the protagonists of the trial and its victims, prevents him from seeing Haymarket as part of a far-reaching social upheaval which lasted throughout the whole of 1886 and much of 1887, and which had important international, as well as domestic American dimensions. Domestically speaking, the Haymarket incident took place during one of the greatest strike waves in American history. The catalyst was the defeat of the second Gould railroad strike of May, 1886. That strike helped spawn a nation-wide eight-hour movement which, between February and May of the same year, brought out more than half a million U.S. workers in a wide range of occupations in places as far apart as Milwaukee and New Orleans. Many of these turnouts were spontaneous.⁴

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Each of these events was followed avidly in the international socialist press. “The social revolution announces itself in the United States,” wrote French Marxist leader Jules Guesde in *Le Socialiste* soon after the Haymarket riot took place, “and is the tocsin for the social revolution in England, France, Germany, in a word, in all the civilized world.”⁵ Equally well received abroad was the spectacular success which came to the United Labor Party of New York when it ran single taxer Henry George for mayor in November, 1886. Temporarily uniting the S.L.P., District Assembly 49 of the Knights of Labor—the largest city-wide body in the Order—and large numbers of Irish and other immigrant workers under his banner, George came in second to Abram Hewitt, the successful Democrat. Henry George’s 68,110 votes were the largest number ever secured by a nineteenth-century third-party candidate for the mayoralty of New York.⁶

More than anything else, it was this near-victory, coupled with the impressive showing that other K. of L.-backed, independent labor parties made in cities all across the U.S.A. in 1886 and 1887, that prompted Friedrich Engels’s optimism about the American labor movement in the celebrated preface that he wrote to the English-language edition of *The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844*. The book was published in 1887. In its preface Engels argued not only that 1886 had enabled the American labor movement to catch up with its hitherto more advanced European counterparts. He also implied strongly that the movement in the U.S.A. had now taken over the lead.⁷

There were expressions of similar optimism in the European labor press. In September, 1887, for example, *Reynold’s Newspaper*, which was one of the most influential British working-class papers of the time, compared the militant activities of the American Knights of Labor favorably with the conservative craft union policies of the English Trades Union Congress. “The make-shift rule of thumb economics of Trade Unionism are simply a disgrace to British workmen,” the paper stated, “and the sooner they take a leaf out of the book of their American brethren the better.”⁸

The remainder of this article is not limited to examining the impact of Haymarket on the small body of English anarchists led by William Morris and the Socialist League, or on the British labor movement generally.⁹ The source material readily available does not warrant such an exercise.¹⁰ It is devoted, instead, to the more interesting question of whether in fact the American labor movement was more advanced than the British movement at the end of the 1880s; what its more advanced character consisted of; and what the relationship of Haymarket was to those developments. It also addresses—although in a far briefer manner—the issue of why, as the 1880s came to an end and the 1890s began, that lead faltered, and ultimately was lost.

My argument, in a nutshell, is that for a brief period the American labor movement did take the lead over the British. It may also have done so vis-à-vis a number of the continental labor movements, although that issue is not dealt

with here. By lead I do not mean intellectually more advanced, since the American labor movement at this time did not manifest any ideas that were strikingly original in their content. I mean that in the late 1880s the U.S. labor movement in general, and the Knights of Labor in particular, adopted progressive policies both on independent labor politics and on industry-wide organizing that the British labor movement was later to follow.

The key to this development lay in the enormously rapid growth of large-scale manufacturing in the U.S. in the post-Civil War period, and in the rise of monopolies in key areas of the economy.¹¹ In America itself these monopolies provided the main rationale both for the single tax philosophy of Henry George, and for the broadly based structure of the Knights of Labor. In the United Kingdom, they provided a rationale for socialist intellectuals in their first, tentative efforts to persuade radical opinion of the need for a collectivist answer to the problems of modern capitalism. At the same time, the brutally repressive role which private capitalists played in the red scare period that followed the Haymarket riot in America gave British workers a frightening vision of what their own future might be if they did not take steps to avoid it.

Although the Knights of Labor sought to organize workers in all areas of industry, it has long been clear that their greatest animus was reserved for U.S. companies, such as Standard Oil and Carnegie Steel, whose monopolistic practices threatened the independence and dignity of those workers who had lost all control over the value of their product.¹² Henry George, who through his lectures, his speaking tours and his celebrated work *Progress and Poverty* (1879) was in his day far better known than Grand Master Terence V. Powderly of the Knights of Labor, pointed with equal vehemence at monopoly as the cause of industrial and social evil. For him, in particular, it was monopoly over land, and over the railroads, that prevented free market competition; that denied equality of opportunity; and that caused industrial depressions and urban poverty.¹³ Indeed, in much of his analysis George, save for his emphasis on the single tax on land, spoke in the same language as the Knights.

For example, George contended that the fundamental struggle in society was not between labor and capital, but between producer and non-producer, between those who created wealth and those who lived off the wealth produced by others—landlords, speculators, bankers and professionals. Production, he argued, consisted of three main elements: labor, capital, and land. The first two were active partners, not enemies, in the creation of wealth. Land, however, was a totally passive force which, while necessary, contributed nothing to the actual process of production. Nevertheless, land, or more precisely the landlord, received a share of the profits in the form of rent. Hence, because the value of land rose as it was put to industrial as well as to agricultural use, the answer to the problem of social injustice was a single tax on land.¹⁴

As the 1880s opened, each of the elements in this antimonopolist message

seemed increasingly to make sense both to radical English intellectuals, and to elements within the British labor movement. Public opinion there was becoming acutely aware that the period of British industrial supremacy was coming to an end. The “great depression,” which lasted from the mid-1870s to the mid-1890s in various segments of the British economy, was bringing chronic agricultural distress and reduced industrial profits. The agricultural problem was at its worst in Ireland, and in parts of Scotland, where gouging landlords were driving crofters and tenants from the land. Hence the popularity of Henry George’s single tax, as a possible solution to the Irish problem. Yet British agriculture also suffered in part because of the greater productivity of large-scale, midwestern U.S. wheat farmers. So George’s message had an indirect relevance to that aspect of the “condition of England” question, also.¹⁵

As for industrial distress, that was in part occasioned by the loss of British overseas export markets to more efficient, and usually larger, industrial magnates in the Pennsylvania and West Virginia coal and steel industries. The result was declining British profit margins, pressure on wages at the local level, and a defensive attitude on the part of the rather elitist craft unions of the Trades Union Congress.¹⁶ As a consequence of all this, the first manifestation of the more advanced state of the U.S. labor movement compared to the British at the end of the 1880s was to be found in the brief but significant role which the Knights of Labor played in organizing workers in the United Kingdom.

So far little is known in detail about the K. of L.’s organizing activity outside America. Nevertheless, at its peak between 1885 and 1889 it did have branches in countries other than the United States. These included Canada, Germany, Belgium, New Zealand, and France. But unless further research demonstrates otherwise, the Order’s largest overseas numbers were to be found in Great Britain, where between 1883 and 1889 it signed up more than ten thousand members among Scottish miners, Liverpool dockers, Lancashire glassworkers, and in a variety of small metal trades establishments in the midlands near Birmingham.¹⁷

The British Knights appear to have brought with them across the Atlantic the full range of policies that they pursued in the United States, including an emphasis upon conciliation and arbitration as the preferred method of settling industrial disputes.¹⁸ Nevertheless, several of the activities which they pursued in Great Britain in the late 1880s were also marked by the forward-looking policies which made the Knights one of the most advanced labor bodies of its day. For example, one of the Order’s international functions was to regulate the flow of migratory labor into the United States in trades where skilled European workers were imported to develop American industry. This was shown in the activities of the transnational glassworkers Local Assembly 300, which sought to control the movement of glassworkers between St. Helens, in Lanca-

shire, Charleroi, in Belgium, and its home base of Pittsburgh in the United States. In doing this the K. of L., (whose basic motto was 'an injury to one is the concern of all'), although far from being Marxist, reformulated the concept of the international solidarity of labor in more advanced ways than any that were then being pursued in Great Britain.¹⁹

However, the innovative role that the K. of L. played in the British labor movement was seen at its best in the efforts which it made to organize the Liverpool longshore industry at this time. The charter of Local Assembly 443 in that city was granted in May 1889, four months before the London dockers' union inaugurated the great dock strike which came to symbolize the upsurge of new unionism in Britain. As a mixed assembly L.A. 443 encompassed many of the virtues that were later to be associated with new unionism itself: inclusion of dockers at all levels of skill, as well as workers in a number of ancillary trades; support for local Socialists, represented in this instance by Sam Reeves, an iron worker and leader of the Liverpool Social Democratic Federation; renewed emphasis on internationalism, in the attempt to link unionization of Liverpool's own dockers with longshore Knights on the U.S. eastern seaboard; and an attempt to capitalize on Vatican approval of the Knights by organizing poor, Catholic Irish navvies who settled in the port area.²⁰

Soon after this the aid of the Irish Catholic labor leader Michael Davitt was enlisted in the effort to expand the Knights' membership in Great Britain, although the full extent of Davitt's efforts on the K. of L.'s behalf are not yet known. In July 1887, *Reynolds' Newspaper* publicly urged Davitt to take the lead in the work of organizing the unskilled in Britain, many of whom were Irish, along the lines of the Knights. Apparently taking the hint Davitt, who was known to Powderly and spoke at the Minneapolis convention of the Order that year, spent some time in Smethwick in May 1888, organizing in the Birmingham iron trades. According to one account, he became District Master Workman of D.A. 208 in that area for a time.²¹

It would be going too far to suggest that the K. of L.'s organizing efforts in Britain carried a major share of the responsibility for stimulating the development of new unionism. The 1888 London match girls' strike, and the efforts of Will Thorne and other Socialists to organize the gasworkers, both occurred before the Knights made their major effort in Liverpool and elsewhere. However, it is true to say that the K. of L. acted as part catalyst, and part actor in the movement towards trades amalgamation and general unionism, the weakness of which in Britain before 1889, as the *Boottle Times* put it somewhat later in praising the Knights' Liverpool actions, had been "a national curse."²²

The brief but meteoric rise of the Knights of Labor in England can be linked to a second argument in favor of the view that the labor movement in America was more advanced, this time in an insurrectional sense, than it was in Britain at this time. In June 1889, a leading British newspaper, upon hearing that the K. of L. was organizing in England, asserted that the news would pro-

duce “a reaction ‘almost akin to panic’ ” among segments of the British public, “with visions of a succession of huge strikes resulting in the loss of our foreign trade and of labour candidates splitting the Liberal vote.”²³ Exaggerated though it was, this remark reflected a view that was widely—and on the whole correctly—held in Britain during the late 1880s. This was that the social upheaval in the United States of which the Knights were a part, represented a far more serious threat to the existing order than did any contemporary movement in Great Britain.

This point can be demonstrated by comparing the outcome of some of the protest meetings which occurred in London in the 1886–87 period, with those that took place in the United States. On February 8, 1886, a crowd of about twenty thousand London dockers, building tradesmen and others, led by S.D.F. leaders Henry Hyndman, John Burns, and H. H. Champion, gathered in Trafalgar Square to demand public works and a protective tariff as a solution to unemployment. Later, they marched down Pall Mall looting shops, and overturned several carriages in Hyde Park before being dispersed. On the following two days rumors swept the capital of large insurrectionary mobs marching from south London and the Deptford area to threaten property in the West End. Similar fears were expressed at various points in the following eighteen months, culminating in the so-called “bloody Sunday” of November 13, 1887, when Life Guardsmen confronted a large crowd of the unemployed.²⁴

These demonstrations should not be seen as isolated events, since they were accompanied by rising discontent on the part of a minority within the Trades Union Congress, and by the initial organizing efforts of the Fabian Society (1884), and the Socialist League (1884). Nevertheless, they were minor outbreaks compared to the great upheaval then underway in America. Despite the fears of large insurrectionary mobs in London, the twenty thousand who gathered in Trafalgar Square in February 1886, appear to have been the largest group to have come together. Moreover, despite severe recessions in engineering, ship-building, chemicals, and textiles, the demonstrators consisted almost exclusively of casual workers, or of what Charles Booth later called the “residuum,”²⁵ by which he meant unorganized laborers, the unemployed, and roughs and toughs who, legitimately angry though they were, were in no position to threaten a revolution. Nor were there any detectable number of insurrectionists among them. Frank Kitz, Joseph Lane, and other anarchist or neo-anarchist leaders from the tiny but influential group of anarchists within the Socialist League were conspicuous by their absence.

It would, of course, be equally misleading to suggest that a revolution was in the offing in the U.S.A. in 1886–87. Yet both as to size, character, and clarity of purpose the militant cohorts who struck, agitated, and voted for local independent labor parties in America in these years possessed in nearly all respects a higher level of consciousness than their British counterparts. Although

elements of the “residuum” were no doubt present, most of the men and women who took part in the 1886 strike wave were gainfully employed in a wide range of industrial occupations, many of them being either members of trade unions or of the Knights of Labor. Table 1 tells part of the tale.

Table 1. *Mid-1880s Strikes in the United States*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Strikes</i>	<i>Establishments</i>	<i>Numbers On Strike</i>
1884	443	2,367	147,054
1885	645	2,284	242,705
1886	1,411	9,891	499,489

Source: J. Brecher, *Strike! The True History of Mass Insurgency in America* (San Francisco, Straight Arrow Books, 1972), 31.

In the depression years that preceded 1886 many of the striking U.S. workers had protested wage cuts. But in 1886 itself the greater number not only sought the eight-hour day—some of them on the basis that such a reform could bring about a change in the whole industrial system, not just to cut their working hours—they also sought to advance the cause of workers’ control over mine, mill, and shop floor by protesting such issues as hiring and firing practices, the organization of work, and the arbitrary power of foremen and superintendents. Violence frequently accompanied these protests, as when Gould railroad strikers tried to prevent the operation of the Texas and Pacific railroad by tearing up rails and setting fires at terminals, water tanks, and repair shops.²⁶ As for independent political action, Leon Fink showed recently that in 1886 alone independent labor tickets—variously called “Union Labor,” “United Labor,” “Knights of Labor,” “Workingmen,” and “Independents”—were put forward in 189 towns and cities, in 34 out of 38 states then in the union.²⁷

But what gave the U.S. upsurge not just the appearance but the reality of class war, to a much greater extent than its British counterpart at this time, was the ferocity of the repression that both preceded and followed the Haymarket bombing. E. P. Thompson has described the baton charges of the London police when they broke up the large crowds who gathered in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square during 1886–87.²⁸ But these were relatively moderate compared to the red scare hysteria that swept across America during the Haymarket period, and which drew down indiscriminate repression on all and sundry. One expression of this difference lies in the fact that whereas four of the eight Haymarket arrestees were actually hanged for a crime that virtually everybody later admitted they did not commit, Hyndman, Burns, and Champion (who had led the February 8, 1886, Trafalgar Square demonstration) were acquitted of charges of seditious conspiracy on grounds of insufficient evidence. But there was more to it than that. London’s so-called “bloody Sunday” of No-

vember 13, 1887, saw a squadron of Life Guards disperse the crowd with only two casualties; the American repression saw citizens' posses attacking strikers, police deputies firing repeatedly into crowds, and East St. Louis, among other cities, put under martial law.²⁹

The impact of these repressive tactics in America upon radical intellectuals and others in Britain was itself a matter of considerable significance. In his contribution to the *Fabian Essays* (1889), for example, which were to form one of the most important bases of socialist thought in Britain for over half a century, radical journalist William Clarke accepted a Marxist position to a much greater degree than did other authors like Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb, in part because of his view of the class war that had developed in America. Whereas Shaw was content to accept the views of Henry George about America—about which more in a moment—Clarke argued that Fabian gradualism might not be sufficient to deal with the problems of monopoly capitalism, as it could be seen on the other side of the Atlantic. Instead he anticipated the day when the people would seize control in a revolutionary act from “the weak hands of a useless possessing class.”³⁰

Another advantage that the U.S. labor movement held over the British unions in these years lay in the unifying effect which the ideology of republicanism had in drawing workers together during the great upheaval, for which there was no proper analogue in Great Britain. Although it was shortly to be challenged by more modern orthodoxies, the ability of the Knights of Labor to depict large-scale capitalists as enemies of the American republic, by virtue of the disproportionate amount of wealth that they held, enabled Terence V. Powderly and other labor leaders to appeal to a far wider spectrum of workers than they might otherwise have done. In Britain at this time, by contrast, the working classes were not united behind an ideology that offered any serious challenge to late Victorian liberalism. In the 1890s and thereafter Lib-Labism was to offer such a challenge. But in the 1886–87 period, it had not yet matured sufficiently to become a unifying force.³¹

In addition to the influence which American economic developments had in shaping the ideas of the Fabians, there were numerous other cross fertilizations between British and American socialism in these years. The Fabian Society itself was in part a spin-off from the vaguely Owenite Fellowship of the New Life (1883), which had been founded by the Scots-born “wandering scholar” Thomas Davidson, who had spent much of his life in America. Laurence Gronlund's *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884), went through two editions in London in the late 1880s, the second of which was edited by Bernard Shaw. And although most socialists in both Britain and America drew statist conclusions from the problems of monopoly that William Clarke had adumbrated in his contribution to the *Fabian Essays*—including Edward Bellamy, whose *Looking Backward* (1887) circulated widely in Great Britain—the poet-anarchist William Morris was one who did not. In fact Morris, who was one of

the most outspoken English critics of the outrageous treatment meted out to the Haymarket martyrs, wrote his Utopian romance *News From Nowhere* (1891) in part to depict an alternative ideal to the one which Bellamy had put forward in his work, namely a society in which both state control and large-scale industry had been banished from the scene.³²

Yet no work by an American radical had more of an impact on Britain's political scene, especially when it was accompanied by the personal eloquence of its author, than Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, which sold more than 100,000 copies there in the 1880s.³³ As indicated earlier, George made five tours of Great Britain during that decade; his first and most important effect was to persuade British audiences that there was economic distress in America (hitherto thought naively by many to be immune to "European depressions"), which measures of purely political reform were powerless to alleviate. In itself this revelation, which was pushed home by George in dozens of speeches delivered throughout the British Isles, had a powerful effect. For example Bernard Shaw attributed his own conversion to socialism to one of George's speeches, which, he later recalled, "struck me dumb and shunted me from barren agnostic controversy to economics,"³⁴ can largely be credited to George's influence. A similar thing occurred in the case of H.H. Champion, who read *Progress and Poverty* while on a visit to America in 1881, and who returned to England to become secretary of the English Land Restoration League, which was set up in 1883 for the express purpose of carrying on Georgite single tax propaganda.³⁵

Mention of the Land Restoration League leads us to the second of the two main reasons for George's influence in Great Britain, namely the popularity of his single-tax proposal. A brief consideration of this aspect of the matter throws further light on the ways in which U.S. working-class politics were more advanced than their counterparts in Britain in the late 1880s, while also suggesting some of the reasons why this lead was soon to be lost. Allying himself with Michael Davitt and the radical wing of the Irish Land League—which had tremendous support in America—as well as with other land reform associations, George capitalized on the gravity of the Irish crisis by advocating indirect nationalization of the land via state appropriation of rents.³⁶

Had he stopped there, Henry George might merely have exacerbated the divisive role which the Irish question played in British left wing politics. But both in his speeches and in a pamphlet entitled *The Irish Land Question*, George attacked Charles Stewart Parnell's proposals for peasant proprietorship as "class legislation," which excluded artisans and laborers from access to the land; he played down Irish nationalism; and he called instead for a union of Irish, Scottish, and English workers to drive landlordism out of the British Isles.³⁷ In doing all this, he presented the paradoxical spectacle of an American reformer seeking to defuse ethnic politics, and to unite around a potent political issue a working class which had been traditionally assumed to be far more homogeneous than its counterpart in the United States.

As a result, George was at first welcomed with open arms by the small British socialist sects, both as a powerful political ally, and as a potential convert to their cause. Thus on March 20, 1882, George spoke under socialist auspices at a mass meeting in Glasgow, for the purpose of establishing a Scottish branch of the Social Democratic Federation. On his second U.K. visit, in 1884, William Morris praised him as “our friend and noble fellow-worker,” a man who “rising from among the workers, . . . forces them to look into the misery surrounding them.”³⁸ And at the end of his third visit in the spring of 1885, even the sectarian Henry Hyndman, who was beginning to find George’s exclusive focus on land reform inadequate for Marxists such as himself, concluded a private debate with him on excellent terms. British socialists were also much encouraged by George’s spectacular showing in the fall 1886 New York City mayoral campaign.³⁹

Yet soon after this there came a fundamental shift away from the positive view which most British socialists had taken regarding Henry George, with the exception of the gradualist Fabians. His support for the expulsion of the S.L.P. element from the United Labor Party coalition which had fought the New York mayoral election was one reason for this shift. Another was his declaration, in October 1887, that in his view the Haymarket anarchists had been guilty of throwing the bomb, which caused William Morris to burst out in anger: “Henry George approves of this murder; do not let anybody waste many words to qualify this wretch’s conduct. One word will include all the rest—TRAITOR!!”⁴⁰ Still a third reason for disaffection was the fact that on his last two visits to Britain, in 1888 and 1889, George (who threw his support to Democratic presidential contender Grover Cleveland in the fall of 1888) came to England to aid the electoral aspirations of moderate Radicals within the British Liberal Party.⁴¹

For our purposes, however, it was Hyndman’s dissatisfaction with the conclusions that Henry George drew from his analysis of the nature of monopoly capitalism, coupled with George’s own divisive role within the United Labor Party of New York, that suggests some of the reasons why the brief lead which the U.S. movement had taken among the labor movements of the west would shortly begin to fade. The damaging effect of George’s decision to side with the labor politicians, the land reformers, and the more orthodox radicals in expelling the Socialists from the United Labor Party at the New York state convention of the organization in August 1887 can be seen in the sudden collapse of the third-party movement throughout the United States after 1888.⁴² In many areas, this signified a decision on the part of the independent political movement to pursue middle-class voters at the expense of its support within the working class.

In the months after his defeat, George had become convinced that the New York mayoralty had been lost because the Democrats and Republicans were able to portray the U.L.P. as a class-based party. In fact, however, as a

recent commentator has pointed out, the U.L.P. was a class-based party, whose main appeal was to trade unionists, Knights of Labor members, Irish laborers, and a broad range of other working men and women.⁴³ Although George received some votes from small manufacturers, merchants, and professionals, this broadly based working-class constituency was certainly large enough for his needs. Instead of moving to the left and consolidating his support among workers, however, George argued that the path to future victory lay in broadening his appeal among the middle class. Similar kinds of mistakes were made by other labor parties throughout the country.

In Britain, in addition to outrage on the part of William Morris and the English anarchists over George's response to the Haymarket affair, dissatisfaction with him took the form of increasing skepticism concerning his failure to identify the central threat which monopoly capitalism posed to the dignity and independence of the workers. It was also expressed in a growing sense of puzzlement at George's narrow focus on a matter which in a largely urban society was growing less and less relevant, namely a single tax upon land. As *Justice*, the official organ of the S.D.F., put it in reviewing *Progress and Poverty* in March 1884, "no one who thinks for a moment can believe that the landlord is the chief enemy of the laborer in our modern society." Hence it was strange that George did not see that the worker was not merely destitute of land. He was also destitute of "tools, machinery, and raw materials wherewith to produce useful articles." This being true, a plan for the mere confiscation of rent was "a half-hearted, and go-nowhere measure."⁴⁴

Nor was this all. Behind George's naive faith in the ability of the single tax to right all social wrongs lay an equally naive faith—which was shared by most of the leaders of the Knights of Labor, with even direr consequences for the long-term future of the American labor movement—in the neutrality of the state as an agency of government. This idea, which stemmed from earlier concepts concerning the nature of the American republic, may have made some sense in the pre-Civil War period. But as the brutally effective use which individual capitalists made of state militias, of police detachments, and of extralegal citizens' posses in the post-Haymarket period of repression demonstrated, by then such a concept of republican virtue had either been abandoned by the larger manufacturers, or had been reformulated in ways that served their own interests better. One of the strengths of Avrigh's *The Haymarket Tragedy* is his demonstration of how the Chicago Citizens' Association, which represented powerful entrepreneurs like Marshall Field and the meatpackers' trust, successfully exerted pressure on local authorities to execute the alleged bombthrowers.⁴⁵

If we shift the focus slightly to include the early 1890s, this point also has considerable comparative significance. For in Britain the long-term consequence of the great dock strike of August 1889 was not only the successful establishment of the Dockers, the Gasworkers, and of other general unions that

organized workers at all levels of skill. The growth of new unionism in Britain ultimately helped bring about a permanent shift in the political orientation of the Trades Union Congress, which led it to ally itself with the Labor Party. In the United States, by contrast, the outcome of the labor upsurge of the late 1880s and early 1890s was different. There was no lack of comparably militant industrial trade unionists with either a socialist or a syndicalist orientation. Eugene Debs's American Railway Union (1892), the Western Federation of Miners (1893), and the United Mine Workers of America (1890), were in many ways the U.S. equivalents of the English new unions. The crucial difference between the two countries lay in the fact that, with the exception of the U.M.W., the American new unions failed to survive the onslaught of capital during the great strikes of the 1890s and early 1900s with the same degree of resiliency and strength that the British new unions did.⁴⁶

Yet there was also a second crucial difference which helped to shape a different political outcome in the United States. This was the ability of reform elements within both the Democratic and Republican parties to coopt many of the workers who had voted for independent labor parties in 1886–87. This did not necessarily mean that these independent labor parties had “failed.” To the contrary, in several cities United Labor Parties helped democratize local government, and forced state legislatures to adopt new laws regulating child and female labor, establishing boards of mediation and arbitration, and prohibiting employers from pressuring employees not to join unions.⁴⁷

But the alacrity with which old party politicians moved to integrate workers who had been disaffected in 1886–87 is testimony to the flexible nature of the American two-party system. Its significance becomes clearer when we examine the fortunes of the British Liberal party in London in this same overall period, which moved in the opposite direction. After 1885 the working class formed a majority in thirty-eight of the fifty-eight parliamentary constituencies within the county of London. Yet in the five general elections between 1885 and 1900, the Liberal Party, formerly dominant, won only 72 seats to the Conservatives' 218, thereby opening the way for the replacement of the Liberal by the Labor Party. The main reason for this, according to one authority, was the inability of the Liberal Party, which in London was dominated by wealthy businessmen, to reconcile its working-class and its middle-class supporters.⁴⁸

The anachronistic, neagrarian character of Henry George's antimonopolism, the repressive role played by the state in America in the post-Haymarket period, and the ability of the two major parties to coopt workers who formerly supported independent labor parties were not, of course, the only reasons for the weakening of American labor's lead in these years. Nor should the possibility of a powerful farmer-labor party coming into being in the United States during the Populist period of the mid-1890s be altogether discounted. Additional reasons for the loss of the U.S. lead included the split between the

Knights of Labor and the A.F. of L.; resurgent nativist attitudes on the part of Anglo workers towards the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe; and the inability of the radicals to dislodge Samuel Gompers's entrenched labor aristocracy.

Yet the fact that the American labor movement was able, if only for a brief period, to assume a leadership role vis-à-vis its British counterparts—and perhaps in relation to a number of labor movements on the European continent, also—carries important implications for the debate over American exceptionalism, which has recently been reopened in the pages of this journal. Much of that debate, in my opinion, has been carried out at too high a level of generality to be convincing; or else it has been written up in a form which analyzes the American side of an issue in some depth, yet only deals with Europe in passing. The evidence from this article suggests that comparative history concerning a particular event can shed much light on the exceptionalism controversy; and that what we now need is a more rigorous form of analysis that devotes the same, or a similar amount of attention to each country under discussion.

NOTES

I would like to thank Steven Ross for reading an earlier draft of this article.

1. Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, 1984).
2. *The History of the Haymarket Affair, A Study in the American Social-Revolutionary and Labor Movements* (New York, 1936).
3. Avrich, 205–14; 432–34; 437–45.
4. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike! The True History of Mass Insurgency in America* (San Francisco, 1972), chap. 2; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, vol. 2 (New York, 1955), chaps. 6–8.
5. Quoted in R. Laurence Moore, *European Socialists and the American Promised Land* (New York, 1970), 71.
6. Foner, 127–28.
7. This preface is reproduced in *Letters to Americans, 1848–1895, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, ed. Alexander Trachtenberg. (New York, 1953), 285–91. Before the Civil War most European Marxists believed that the agricultural character of the American economy had given Europe a convenient outlet for its surplus manufactures. But after the war it was hoped that the massive and uncontrolled industrialization of the U.S. economy would present a competitive challenge for British products, thereby stimulating unrest in Europe, and at the same time raise the possibility of revolution within America itself. See Moore, chaps. 1–3.
8. Quoted in Henry Pelling, *America and the British Left: From Bright to Bevan* (London, 1956), 63.
9. For accounts of British anarchism and its influence on the Socialist League, see George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth, 1962), 414–28; G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought, Marxism and Anarchism, 1850–1880*, vol. 2 (London, 1961), 414–24; and E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955).

10. This is not to say that Haymarket had no impact on the small anarchist movement in Great Britain. One of its effects was to increase their influence inside the Socialist League. See Thompson, 591–95.
11. For a comparative discussion of the role of monopolies and large-scale business corporations in the British and American economies in the late nineteenth century, see Philip S. Bagwell and G.E. Mingay, *Britain and America, A Study of Economic Change: 1850–1939* (London, 1970), chap. 6.
12. This view is most clearly expressed in Gregory S. Kealey and Brian D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be, The Knights of Labor in Ontario* (Cambridge, 1982).
13. The most recent life of Henry George is Jacob Oser, *Henry George* (New York, 1974). His views on monopoly are summarized in Steven J. Ross, “Culture of Political Economy: Henry George and the American Working Class,” *Southern California Quarterly* 65 (Summer 1983): 148.
14. Ross, 148–50. See also Arthur N. Young, *The Single Tax Movement in the United States* (Princeton, 1916).
15. Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party, 1880–1900* (London, 1965), 7–12.
16. For the outlook of the T.U.C. before the “new unionism” of the 1890s, see H. A. Clegg, A. Fox, and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889* (Oxford, 1964), chap. 1.
17. On the Knights of Labor in Canada, see Kealey and Palmer; for Belgium, see Leon Watillon, *The Knights of Labor in Belgium*, trans. Frederic Meyers (Los Angeles, 1959). For the Knights in Britain, see Henry Pelling, “The Knights of Labor in Britain, 1880–1901,” *Economic History* 9 (1956): 313–31; and Ronald Bean, “A Note on the Knights of Labor in Liverpool 1889–90,” *Labor History* 13 (Winter 1972): 68–78. For Scotland, see Fred Reid, *Keir Hardie, The Making of a Socialist* (London, 1978), appendix 2. For non-European countries, see H. Roth, “American Influences on the New Zealand Labor Movement,” *Historical Studies* 9 (1961): 413–20.
18. Bean, 69–71.
19. Pelling, “The Knights of Labor in Britain,” 314–20.
20. Bean, 71–78.
21. Pelling, *America and the British Left*, 63–64; Pelling, “The Knights of Labor in Britain,” 321.
22. Quoted in Bean, 72.
23. *Ibid.*, 75–76.
24. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London, A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), 291–96.
25. *Ibid.* 288–89.
26. Brecher, 32–34.
27. Leon Fink, “The Uses of Political Power: Toward a Theory of the Labor Movement in the Era of the Knights of Labor,” in *Working-Class America, Essays on Labor, Community, and Society*, ed. Michael M. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz. (Urbana, 1983), 113.
28. Thompson, 572–82.
29. *Ibid.* 574–77; Brecher, 33–50; Avrich, chaps. 17–25.
30. Quoted in Pelling, *America and the British Left*, 60.
31. For the weakness and disunity which characterized British socialism in the late 1880s, see Thompson, part 3. For the role of republicanism as a unifying ideology in the U.S. in these years, see Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788–1890* (New York, 1985); and David Montgomery, “Labor and the Republic in Industrial America, 1860–1920,” *Le Mouvement Social*, 111 (April–June 1980): 201–15.
32. Thompson, 60–64; Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, 34–35; Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Indianapolis, 1964), 83.

33. Pelling, *America and the British Left*, 55, n.3.
34. Ibid. 56.
35. Ibid. For other material on the Land Restoration League and the land agitation in Britain as it related to Henry George, see F. Sheehy-Skeffington, *Michael Davitt, Revolutionary, Agitator and Labour Leader* (London, 1908).
36. Elwood P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (East Lansing, Mich., 1957), chaps. 1–3.
37. Ibid. 10.
38. Elwood P. Lawrence, “Uneasy Alliance: The Reception of Henry George by British Socialists in the Eighties,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 11 (October 1951): 63–65.
39. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles*, 79. See also J. A. Hobson, “The Influence of Henry George in England,” *Fortnightly Review* (London) 62 (July–December 1897): 835–44.
40. Elwood P. Lawrence, “Henry George’s British Mission,” *American Quarterly* 3 (Fall 1951): 240.
41. Lawrence, “Uneasy Alliance,” 70.
42. Foner, chap. 10.
43. Ross, 159–60.
44. Lawrence, “Uneasy Alliance,” 66.
45. Avrich, chaps. 21–22. See also Frederic C. Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago and Los Angeles* (Urbana, 1982), 503–05.
46. Clegg, Fox, and Thompson, chap. 2; Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, chap 5; Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross, A Biography of Eugene V. Debs* (New Brunswick, 1949), chaps. 4–6; Vernon H. Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict, A Study of Labor Relations in the Non-Metalliferous Mining Industry* (Ithaca, 1950), chaps. 1–4.
47. For evidence of the achievements, as well as the limitations, of the labor party movement in 1886–87, see Steven J. Ross, “The Politicization of the Working Class: Production, Ideology, Culture, and Politics in Late Nineteenth Century Cincinnati,” forthcoming in *Social History* (London).
48. Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London, 1885–1914* (London, 1967), 90–91.