

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - EAU CLAIRE

VICTOR BERGER AND THE AMERICANIZATION OF SOCIALISM IN
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN, DURING THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

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Abstract

Victor L. Berger was among the most prominent Socialists in the United States during the first quarter of the 20th century, and played a major role in the success of the Socialist Party in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Over the course of his political career Victor Berger engaged in an intellectual dialogue between Socialism and other political ideologies of the period that attempted to implement reform, such as the Progressives and the Communists. Victor Berger attempted to differentiate himself from these two prominent groups and at the same time promote a form of Socialism that was compatible with contemporary American values.

Part I

Introduction

The State of Wisconsin during the Progressive Era witnessed many groups intent on reform, with Robert M. La Follette and other contemporary Progressive Republicans being the most notable. While not as well known as his contemporaries, such as La Follette, Victor L. Berger and the Social-Democratic Party of Milwaukee played an important role in the history of the state. During the years between 1910 and 1929, Berger successfully promoted socialism in the city of Milwaukee by making it compatible with contemporary American philosophies and values, including the right to private property. He demonstrated how socialism brought about change, through the use of a democratic system of government, without endangering the individual liberties that Americans enjoyed. In addition, Berger attempted to explain how Social Democracy was compatible with Christian values.

Throughout his writings, Berger went to great lengths to distinguish the ideology of Social Democracy from other contemporary competing ideologies such as communism and progressivism. Berger opposed progressives not so much as a matter of tactics used to promote reform, but in the long-term intention behind the reforms. On the other hand, Berger's opposition to communism was due to both differences in desired goals as well as the methods used to bring about change. The shared Marxist heritage of socialism and communism posed a particular problem for Berger because of the conflation of socialism and communism. Berger went into great detail when he described the position of Social Democrats and how it differed from communists.

Berger is also noted for his success in making the Social-Democratic Party a major political force in the city of Milwaukee and for his successful election to the House of Representatives as a member of the Socialist Party. Although for a time Berger's brand of Socialism achieved great success in Milwaukee and the surrounding region, the Social Democrats eventually saw their political power decline in the subsequent decades.

Despite his importance to the history of Socialism in the United States as well as the history of the city of Milwaukee and the State of Wisconsin, neither Victor Berger nor his contributions to Wisconsin politics in general, and socialism specifically, have received much attention in the historical literature. The material that does exist tends to focus on Victor Berger and the socialist movement in Milwaukee and comparatively little on how they interacted with other political ideologies, such as the progressives and the communists. The intention of this paper is to examine more closely the intellectual dialogue that took place between Victor Berger and the major competing political ideologies of the period.

Victor Berger

Born in the Austrian Empire in 1860, Victor L. Berger attended the University of Vienna and the University of Budapest before immigrating to the United States with his family in 1878, and settled in Milwaukee by 1881.¹ According to Roderick Nash, Berger and others worked during the first decade of the 20th century to build Milwaukee's

¹ Sally M. Miller, *Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973), 17.

Socialist political machine.² Berger published both an English and German language newspaper, which he distributed for free on the night prior to elections.³ Berger became a leading national spokesman for the right wing of the Socialist party and brought his party into power in Milwaukee in 1910; in the same year he was elected to the House of Representatives as a member of the Socialist Party.⁴ Berger won re-election to the House in 1918, only to have his colleagues refuse to seat him. He finally took his seat in 1923, when the United States Supreme Court acquitted him of charges brought under the Espionage Act for making public his opposition to American entry into World War One.⁵ His conviction resulted in the suspension of mailing privileges for the *Milwaukee Leader*, his English-language newspaper.⁶ After he was finally seated, he served in the House for the next six years and three successive terms until his death, retaining personal popularity even while his party was in decline.⁷

² Roderick Nash, "Victor L. Berger: Making Marx Respectable," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 47 (1964): 302.

³ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Milwaukee Sewer Socialism," Wisconsin Historical Society: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-043/?action=more_essay (accessed 17 Feb 2010).

⁴ Nash, 303.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 303. This position was, of course, held by a variety of groups and individuals at the time, including the Progressives that Berger and the Social-Democrats were in competition with.

⁶ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Milwaukee Sewer Socialism," Wisconsin Historical Society: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-043/?action=more_essay (accessed 17 Feb 2010).

⁷ Nash, "Victor L Berger: Making Marx Respectable," 303.

A major reason for Berger's success in promoting socialism was that he himself was not an Orthodox Marxist, thus allowing him to promote a pragmatic approach to the application of socialist theory in the United States.⁸ Over the course of his political career, Berger expressed his views on various political issues of the period in the form of both political speeches and newspaper editorials. In these writings he took great care to expound on his brand of socialism. In his proliferous writings, Berger attempted to answer a number of the criticisms leveled against socialism. In the editorial "For Whom Is There Freedom?" written on July 29, 1905, Berger attempted to formulate an answer to the objection that socialism would take freedom away from the people.⁹ Berger claimed that although communism was in his view open to this objection, and that this might also be the case under certain other versions of socialism, Social Democracy did not pose such a threat.¹⁰ Berger claimed that under his version of socialism individuals in fact had more freedom than in the capitalist society in which they currently lived.¹¹ Berger stated that with the exception of a handful of what he referred to as "Plutocrats", no person in America was free, and that "a man is not free who is dependent upon another for a job – for a chance to make a livelihood."¹² The passages that follow indicate that Berger

⁸ Ibid., 301-302.

⁹ Victory Berger, "For Whom Is There Freedom?" reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 711.

¹⁰ Ibid., 711-712.

¹¹ Ibid., 712. It should be noted that the definition of liberty Berger referenced, and claimed to have been given by an unnamed individual, was that liberty "... is the right of an American to do as he d--- pleases.... This is the ideal of American manhood."

¹² Ibid., 712-713.

viewed liberty as being strongly connected to the economic system. According to Berger, under the capitalist system of the period, businessmen were encouraged by the system to be corrupt in order to achieve success, with the standard always being set by the “unscrupulous rogue.”¹³ Berger also attempted to turn objections against those using them. In April of 1907 Berger wrote an editorial answering the criticism that Social Democracy opposed individual freedoms by arguing that it could also be true of the current system under which he lived.¹⁴ Berger argued that there is no society where there are absolutely no restrictions on an individual’s personal liberty. One particular freedom that Berger seemed to view as absolutely inviolable was the freedom of speech. According to Berger, Social Democrats were in favor of “absolute free speech, in favor of a free press, and for unlimited freedom of association of any kind.”¹⁵

Berger also voiced strong support for the right of citizens to own and bear arms. Berger wrote on April 15 of 1905 “An armed people is always a free people. With the nation armed (as, for instance, in Switzerland) reforms of all kinds are carried easily and without bloodshed.”¹⁶ Berger goes on to say that riots were less numerable in

¹³ Ibid., 713.

¹⁴ Victor Berger, “Capitalist Liberty” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 716-717.

¹⁵ Victor Berger, “The Old Social Question Is Still New” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 214.

¹⁶ Victor Berger, “Moving by the Light of Reason” reprinted in *Berger’s Broadides* (Milwaukee Social-Democratic Publishing Company, 1912), 22.

Switzerland than in Russia despite the Russians being less armed than the Swiss.¹⁷

Berger expanded on this view in “An Armed People is Always a Free People” written on August 14, 1909 in which he wrote that “history teaches us that an armed people has always been a *free people*.”¹⁸ He went on further to praise Switzerland, a nation where:

every citizen is a soldier and owns his own weapon and keeps it at home.... And although the Swiss workingmen are by no means better situated materially than their American brothers, and although the Swiss bourgeoisie sometimes carries on regular baiting against labor agitators, we hear nothing of revolutions or dangerous insurrections in Switzerland.... On the contrary, if the social question is settled in any country without spilling a drop of blood, that country is Switzerland.¹⁹

The strong support for the individual right to keep and bear arms is very much in line with his views on other issues.

In a Congressional speech given on February 3, 1926 he stated that Socialists were opposed to making a government all powerful.²⁰ Explicitly stating that he did not want to follow the example of the Russian Revolution, Berger wrote that Social Democrats were opposed to a “dictatorship of the proletariat” and that

We shall always resist the abuse of even the democratic majority rule, and always insist on sufficient guaranties for the rights of minorities. It is usually the minority that has made human progress possible in the world’s history.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸ Victor Berger, “An Armed People is Always a Free People” reprinted in *Berger’s Broadides* (Milwaukee Social-Democratic Publishing Company, 1912), 207.

¹⁹ Ibid., 209.

²⁰ Victor Berger, “The Old Social Question Is Still New” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 213.

²¹ Ibid., 213.

Although it is clear that there were very pragmatic reasons to disassociate himself and his party from the type of socialism practiced in the Soviet Union, the support of freedom of speech and opposition to what was considered a tyrannical government is in line with his political philosophy, as it already existed. At the same time that he was detailing his political views, Berger also made sure to answer critics.

One particular source of criticism against Berger was the Roman Catholic Church, which he also attempted to answer in the October 1906 editorial “Words of the Saints.” In response to criticisms against socialism leveled by members of the Roman Catholic Church, Berger stated that one of the platforms of the Social Democratic party was that “Religion is a matter of private concern.”²² In answer to criticism from religious figures, Berger pointed to what he claimed was evidence of socialist and communist philosophy in the Bible and the writings of figures including Pope Basil the Great, St. Clement, and St. Ambrose.²³ He claimed that, “these saints, if they were living today, would be Socialists.”²⁴ The use of scripture and quotations from well-respected figures in Christian history was clearly intended, not simply as an answer to the objections voiced by churchgoing citizens, but to argue that the policies of socialism were more in line with the tenets of Christianity than capitalism. His efforts at attracting Catholic voters, the

²² Victor Berger, “Words of the Saints” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 704-705.

²³ *Ibid.*, 708-711.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 711.

Polish-Americans of Milwaukee in particular, proved to be successful, as seen in his victory in the 1910 Congressional election.²⁵

Socialism in Milwaukee

There were a number of reasons for the successful rise of socialism in Milwaukee, including Berger's attempts to make socialism compatible with contemporary American traditions and values, including the right to private property and the need to work within a Democratic system of government. Through distinct methods, Berger attempted to make his brand of socialism appealing to a wider constituency of the electorate, including middle class and rural voters. Berger exerted great effort to differentiate the views of both him and his party from the doctrines of other Marxist based philosophies, such as communism and other reform groups including progressive Republicans.²⁶

Founded in Milwaukee in 1897, the Social-Democratic Party became a powerful force in the city, with Milwaukee known as the first Socialist city in the United States.²⁷ Socialism in Milwaukee was often known, as "Sewer Socialism" because of its association with improving sanitation through municipally owned water and power

²⁵ Henry Pelling, "The Rise and Decline of Socialism in Milwaukee," *Bulletin of the International Institute of Social History* 10 (1955): 95.

²⁶ There were, of course, other notable groups, populists, etc., but as due to the scope of this paper the Progressive movement will be the main focus in that facet of the discussion.

²⁷ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Milwaukee Sewer Socialism," Wisconsin Historical Society: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-043/?action=more_essay (accessed 17 Feb 2010).

systems.²⁸ They also focused on cleaning up the legacy of the industrial revolution on a local level, through the institution of community parks, as well as improving the educational system.²⁹ The socialists of Milwaukee downplayed social theory and emphasized the need for honest government, an appealing idea in a city “notorious for corruption and administrative inefficiency.”³⁰ Their efficient management of the city of Milwaukee was in fact one of the major reasons behind their continual electoral successes. Many voters in the city believed the “old parties” to be unfit and inefficient.³¹ According to Marvin Wachman, as the only party not viewed by the public as having a reputation tainted by corruption, and also happening to present honest candidates and appearing more sincere than their opponents, many voted for them based on the fact that they were not Democrats or Republicans.³² Given this political opening, the socialists made good on their initial successes and by 1910 obviously succeeded in keeping their honest image intact. The general public of the city found it difficult to take seriously the criticism made by members of the old party, that Berger and his Social Democratic Party were plotting the sudden overthrow of society.³³ Although the party eventually declined in power, in 1916, the citizens of Milwaukee elected Socialist Daniel Hoan to the position

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Marvin Wachman, *The History of the Social-Democratic Party of Milwaukee, 1897 1910*, (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1945), 71.

³² Wachman, *The History of the Social-Democratic Party of Milwaukee*, 76

³³ Wachman, 76

of Mayor, a position he held until 1940.³⁴ Their continual success in mayoral elections, however, was not reflected in the Common Council of Milwaukee, control of which proved elusive after 1910.³⁵

One theory explaining the success of Socialism in Milwaukee was its high population of German immigrants. Historians such as Henry Pelling drew a connection between the successes of the Socialist movement in the city of Milwaukee and its early German immigrants. These immigrants were liberals and freethinkers who left Germany during the period of the 1848 revolution in Germany.³⁶ According to historian Sally Miller, those who arrived in the second wave of German immigration in the 1870s and 1880s, were even more likely than their predecessors of a generation earlier to have an industrial background. They brought the ideas of labor unions, socialist parties, and social legislation.³⁷ Pelling also wrote that another reason for the success of the Socialist movement in Milwaukee was an alliance between the Socialist Labor Party, Populists, and the Federated Trades Council of Milwaukee.³⁸ During the early 20th century, Berger and the Social-Democratic Party gained strength both within the Federated Trades Council and among the workers of Milwaukee in general, and in 1904 campaigned on a

³⁴ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Milwaukee Sewer Socialism," Wisconsin Historical Society: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-043/?action=more_essay (accessed 17 Feb 2010).

³⁵ Robert Booth Fowler, *Wisconsin Votes: An Electoral History*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 114.

³⁶ Pelling, "The Rise and Decline of Socialism in Milwaukee," 92.

³⁷ Miller, *Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism*, 19.

³⁸ Pelling, 93.

platform of municipal reform.³⁹ In addition, Pelling stated that while the Socialists placed a great deal of importance on the German-speaking constituents of Milwaukee, they recognized the necessity of winning votes among other ethnic groups, particularly the Poles.⁴⁰ Because the Polish Catholic priests strongly opposed the Socialist movement, the party directly courted voters in Polish districts in order to gain votes. The party began printing a special Polish paper in 1909 and recruited Polish speakers to campaign in Polish districts.⁴¹

Berger further attempted to expand the base of the Social Democratic Party by working to gain support from rural voters.⁴² Berger saw the interests of farmers as similar to those of urban labor and, between 1910 and 1912, worked with other socialists to form a “farm-labor coalition.”⁴³ Although there was initial skepticism from some, Wisconsin witnessed the growth of a rather substantial Socialist movement in rural and small town areas of the state.⁴⁴ In the March, 1907 editorial “Is an Alliance Possible?” Berger stated that socialism; specifically the “national ownership of the means of transportation and communication” benefited rural farmers and helped to raise their

³⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

⁴¹ Ibid., 95.

⁴² James J. Lorence, "The Milwaukee Connection: The Urban-Rural Link in Wisconsin Socialism, 1910-1920" *Milwaukee History* 3, (1980): 102.

⁴³ Lorence, "The Milwaukee Connection: The Urban-Rural Link in Wisconsin Socialism, 1910-1920", 102-105.

⁴⁴ Lorence, 108.

standard of living.⁴⁵ Between 1900 and 1910, the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee achieved their first real electoral victories.⁴⁶ This combination of strategies gave socialists their first major success in 1910, with the election of Socialist mayor Emil Seidel in Milwaukee and the election of Victor Berger as congressman for Wisconsin's Fifth District.⁴⁷

Part II

Social Democracy vs. Communism

In defining the positions held by himself and his party, Berger made known his opinions regarding other contemporary political groups, and went into great detail to explain how his positions differed from both the more mainstream Progressive groups and the more radical groups such as communists. Berger distanced his views from those of communists in a number of ways. One major distinction Berger made was that he strongly opposed the goals of communism and the means they intended to use in reaching them. In a December 1907 editorial "Socialism or Communism?" Berger wrote "Communism would be a step backward, would be a retrogression to a very primitive and low stage of human society," while in contrast, Social Democracy would "mean a step

⁴⁵ Victor Berger, "Is an Alliance Possible" reprinted in *Berger's Broadides*, (Milwaukee: Social-Democratic Publishing Company: 1912), 150.

⁴⁶ Wachman, 41.

⁴⁷ Pelling, 95.

forward toward a higher civilization than history has ever known.”⁴⁸ Berger strongly opposed the idea of violent revolution as a means of political change. In March of 1903, Berger wrote of the dangers of violent revolution that he viewed as looming in the future, stating:

Within a short time we shall have two nations in every civilized country, and especially in America – both of native growth. One nation will be very large in number, but semi-civilized, half-fed, half-educated, and degenerated from overwork and misery; the other nation will be very small in number, but overcivilized [*sic*], overfed, overcultured [*sic*], and degenerated from too much leisure and too much luxury. What will be the outcome? Some day there will be a volcanic eruption. The hungry millions will turn against the overfed few. A fearful retribution will be enacted on the capitalist class as a class – and the innocent will suffer with the guilty. Such a revolution will retrograde civilization – it might throw the white race back into barbarism. Let us heed the warning of history.⁴⁹

Although he considered himself a revolutionist, Berger supported using the current democratic system as a means of bringing about change. Berger wrote in September of 1906 that:

We are revolutionary not in the vulgar meaning of the word, which is entirely wrong, but in the sense illustrated by history, the only logical sense. For it is foolish to expect any result from riots and dynamite, from murderous attacks and conspiracies, in a country where we have the ballot, as long as the ballot has not been given a full and fair trial. We want to convince the majority of the people. As long as we are in the minority we of course have no right to force our opinions upon an unwilling majority.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Victor Berger, “Socialism or Communism?” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 748.

⁴⁹ Victor Berger, “Are Socialists Practical?” reprinted in *Berger’s Broad­sides*, (Milwaukee: Social-Democratic Publishing Company: 1912), 15-16.

⁵⁰ Victor Berger, “Real Social Democracy” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 685-686.

Berger states that “no true Social-Democrat ever dreams of a sudden change of society.”⁵¹ Indeed, Berger viewed the transition from capitalism to socialism as being an evolutionary change in society.⁵² This view contrasted strongly to the beliefs of Orthodox Marxists, whose dialectical philosophy claimed that the transition to socialism would be born of “sudden, revolutionary upheaval in which the bourgeois state was totally destroyed.”⁵³ Berger went on to elucidate his point, when he wrote that:

We know perfectly well that force serves only those who have it, that a sudden overthrow will breed dictators, that it can promote only subjection, never liberty. The Social-Democrats do not expect success from a so-called revolution – that is, a smaller or bigger riot – but from a real revolution, from the revolutionizing of minds, the only true form of revolution there is.... It is clear that this revolution of the minds cannot be brought about in a day or two, nor can it be arranged according to the pleasure of a few. It can only be attained by patient work and intelligent organization.⁵⁴

Berger’s opposition to the use of violence as a means of political reform was a major aspect of his attempt to make socialism more compatible with contemporary American society.⁵⁵ This view was also consistent with his emphasis on the need to utilize the democratic process as a means of bringing about change in society. His vehement opposition to violent revolution and the warnings he gave pertaining to the

⁵¹ Ibid., 686.

⁵² Ibid., 685.

⁵³ Nash, “Victor L Berger: Making Marx Respectable,” 301.

⁵⁴ Victor Berger, “Real Social Democracy” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 685-686.

⁵⁵ Berger’s opposition to violent revolution almost seems prescient given that he made such a statement regarding the dangers of violent revolution as early as 1903, nearly two decades prior to the communist revolution in Russia.

dangers posed by such violence very likely helped not only to improve the image of his party by disavowing connections to more radical groups, but also likely elevated his political philosophy to a more respectable level, setting it apart from generally disruptive groups such as anarchists.

In addition to his opposition to the use of violence as a means of bringing about social change, Berger's views also differed from communism on the issue of private property. Berger wrote in December of 1907:

Socialism simply demands the collective ownership of the means of production and distribution. We will produce in common, but the consumption will remain individual. Socialism will control only our capital, not our property. A Socialist Commonwealth will not do away with individual ownership of property, but only with individual ownership of capital.⁵⁶

In contrast to Socialism, Berger stated, "It is Communism that denies individual ownership of all property."⁵⁷ The emphasis on these particular differences illustrates one of the ways in which Berger attempted to make socialism compatible with mainstream American society.⁵⁸ At the same time that he was distancing himself from communism, Berger also wrote about how his views and those of the Social Democratic party differed from those of popular progressives, who were a major political force in Wisconsin during this period.

⁵⁶ Victor Berger, "Socialism or Communism?" reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 746.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 746.

⁵⁸ This is a noteworthy distinction to make, especially with regards to developing a form of socialism compatible with a society like that in the United States that places great importance on individualism.

Social Democracy vs. Progressivism

Berger also attempted to differentiate the aims of socialism from Progressivism. One of the central ideas of the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin was that one of the duties of the government was to serve the people, and based on this belief, sought to curb the power of corporations and big business when they interfered with the needs of the individual citizen.⁵⁹ Progressive Republicans, such as Robert M. La Follette Sr., appealed to voters who desired, among other things, honest government and moderate economic reforms, expansion of democracy, and improving public morality.⁶⁰ Wisconsin itself was a hotbed of Progressivism during the first quarter of the 20th century, with Robert M. La Follette Sr. as one of the most influential individuals, and a symbol of Progressive reform recognized nationwide.⁶¹ The Progressive Movement was responsible for a number of accomplishments in Wisconsin and included the passage of legislation providing for effective workers' compensation, the regulation of factory safety, the passage of laws limiting working hours for women and children, as well as laws extending the power of the government to regulate transportation.⁶² Unlike the

⁵⁹ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Progressivism and the Wisconsin Idea," Wisconsin Historical Society: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-036/?action=more_essay (Accessed 31 March 2010).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Socialist Party, which advocated sweeping changes, Progressives favored orderly change over a sudden and fundamental shift in existing economic and social order.⁶³

Despite some of the similarities between the two groups, Socialists and Progressives rarely cooperated due to each of them being mutually suspicious of the other.⁶⁴ One reason for this was that the Socialists viewed the Progressives and their parent party, the Republicans, as weak on reform.⁶⁵ Berger criticized the Progressives for trying to “steal the revolutionist thunder.”⁶⁶ Berger went on to say that their goals did not go far enough, “Of course, La Follette Bryan, Hearst, etc., want to ‘steal our thunder’ for exactly opposite purposes from ours. They want to preserve the system.”⁶⁷ Berger conceded that the two groups were similar in a number of ways, having stated in one editorial that the tactics utilized by Social Democrats were in many cases identical to those used by other social reformers.⁶⁸ However, he stated that this was only true “up to a certain point”, and that Social Democrats differed from other reformers on the essential point that there was need for change and improvement beyond social reforms.⁶⁹

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Wisconsin Historical Society, “Milwaukee Sewer Socialism,” Wisconsin Historical Society: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-043/?action=more_essay (accessed 17 Feb 2010).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Victor Berger, “Real Social Democracy” reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 685.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 685.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 687.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 687.

One of the first of the most apparent differences can be found in how Berger intended to deal with corporate trusts. Unlike progressives like Theodore Roosevelt, who was famous for breaking up these large monopolies, Berger wanted to keep them in place with the goal that the government then took over their ownership and management.⁷⁰ Berger stated that the aim of the Socialist party was for the government to gain national ownership of the nation's natural resources, to have "national ownership of the means of transportation and communication – railroads, telegraphs, telephones. Furthermore, we must stand everywhere for the principle of public ownership of public utilities."⁷¹ Berger explained that:

We believe that everything that is necessary for the life of the Nation, for the enjoyment of everybody within the Nation, the Nation is to own and manage. Therefore we shall take over the trusts, railroads, mines, telegraphs, and other monopolies of national scope. Everything that is necessary for the life and development of the State, the State is to own and manage. There are certain business functions that the State will have to take care of, like interurban lines, for instance. Everything that is necessary for the life and development of a city the city is to own and manage, as, for instance, not only street cars and light and heating plants, but also abattoirs, public bake shops, the distribution of pure milk, and so forth. Everything that the individual can own and manage best the individual is to own and manage.⁷²

Berger's intention was that everything necessary for the functioning of the state and the production of goods be under the democratic management of the people of the

⁷⁰ Victor Berger, "Speech Accompanying Socialist Platform" reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 462-463.

⁷¹ Victor Berger, "The Old Social Question Is Still New" reprinted in *Voice and Pen of Victor L. Berger: Congressional Speeches and Editorials*, (*The Milwaukee Journal*, 1929), 214-215

⁷² *Ibid.*, 214.

United States.⁷³ This of course goes far beyond what progressive reformers intended and involved massive changes to the existing system. Among other differences, this was likely part of the reasoning behind Berger's previous statements that progressives and other reformers did not intend to go far enough. The different views held on the issue of dealing with trusts of course illustrates what Berger meant when he said that progressives like La Follette were reforming the system in order to preserve it. The dismantling of trusts kept intact the capitalist economy by removing what many viewed as excesses of the system. On the other hand, Berger and other like-minded individuals wanted to reform the system with the intention of changing the system itself. Their goal of nationalizing the industries under the control of trusts was for the purpose of a massive alteration to the capitalist system. This difference in the aims of both groups was part of the reason that they often refused to cooperate with one another even though they often supported the same reforms.

Conclusion

The Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee was one of the most successful Socialist parties in the history of the United States. The success of the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee had a great deal to do with the great lengths that the prominent Socialist, Victor L. Berger, went to in attempting to make socialism compatible with contemporary American philosophies, ideologies, and values of the period. Over the course of his political career Berger worked to describe his political philosophy in great

⁷³ Ibid., 214.

detail in his attempt to answer objections to whether or not socialism was compatible with American beliefs. In the course of his time in politics, Berger attempted to document the aims and positions of his party in great detail, with part of his goal being to differentiate himself from more radical groups such as the communists as well as mainstream groups such as the progressives.

Berger's Social Democracy was intended to be a form of socialism that took control of the means of production in the United States and placed them under the control of the government so that they could be put under public management. At the same time that he favored collective ownership of the means of production and of natural resources, Berger also made it clear to voters that he did not support communism and fully intended for individuals to be able to retain ownership over private property. Additionally, Berger stated that he had full and unwavering support for the rights of freedom of expression and the right to keep and bear arms. Berger continuously and consistently voiced his opposition to the idea of bringing about change through violent revolution and instead strongly favored using the existing democratic system to bring about the change the Social Democrats desired. Berger railed against the dangers of tyrannical governments and dictatorships that he warned were the ultimate outcome of the type of violent revolution that communists declared necessary. Berger voiced his disagreements with the very goal of a communist society, instead stating that socialism would evolve out of the current system. Berger's main criticism of progressives, on the other hand, was that in his view their aim in reforming the system was to preserve it, rather than replacing it with (at least in his view) a better system. A great deal of importance can be placed on the political platform of the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee and the personal views of

Victor Berger, but the socialists of the city also owed part of their success to the fact that voters viewed them as honest and efficient managers of the city. The electoral successes of both Victor Berger himself and the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee in general seemed to indicate that his attempts to develop and promote a form of socialism compatible with American ideals bore fruit, although their successes did not last in the long run.

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