

1959

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Walfred H. Peterson
Bethel College

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Recommended Citation

Peterson, W. H. (1959). The American Socialist Party and the Mexican Civil Wars. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science, Vol. 27 No. 1*, 54-58.

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POLITICAL SCIENCE

THE AMERICAN SOCIALIST PARTY AND
THE MEXICAN CIVIL WARS

WALFRED H. PETERSON

Bethel College, St. Paul

The American Socialist Party, organized in 1901, reached the zenith of its strength before World War I. During the pre-war period, it possessed remarkable vitality. Its members were active, its organization was widespread, its lecturers and organizers crossed the nation, its national office staff included translators who rewrote Socialist propaganda for the Party's various foreign-language affiliates, and its efforts were augmented by the support of a press with a surprisingly large circulation. Two Socialist dailies, the *New York Call* and the *Milwaukee Leader*, had sustained success. The flamboyant weekly, *Appeal to Reason*, reached a national circulation of over 500,000 by using all manner of capitalistic sales techniques. The Minneapolis *New Times* was published weekly in full newspaper format for general circulation for almost eight years. Periodicals dedicated to the Socialist cause were very numerous. *Wilshire's Magazine* and the *International Socialist Review* had a large national audience. The support for socialism that resulted was substantial, producing nearly 1,000,000 votes for Eugene Debs in 1912.

During this era, the Socialist Party brought a program to the American public which was almost exclusively concerned with domestic affairs. In spite of an avowed internationalism the Socialists with only rare exceptions were not significantly interested in American foreign policy. The Party's platforms, the resolutions of their national committees, and their official and unofficial propaganda centered attention on the American scene. To the pre-war Socialist mind society's critical problems were found within the nation-state. Theodore Roosevelt might pick up the big stick, Panama might be "acquired," and Russians and Japanese might wage war, but these happenings were treated as if they were of only minor importance.¹

To the extent that Socialist attention was called to foreign policy matters, Socialist writers almost invariably reacted with the quick application of a Socialist theory about international relations. The theory, a pivotal element of this paper, posited the following ideas

¹ These generalizations are defended in my unpublished thesis, Helfred H. Peterson. *The Foreign Policy and the Foreign Policy Theory of the American Socialist Party 1901-1920*, University of Minnesota, 1957, pp. 10-83.

pertinent to our discussion: 1. International conflict and imperialism are the inevitable products of the capitalistic economic order, 2. Governments necessarily act in international affairs almost exclusively for the interest of their capitalistic classes, 3. The working class and its true spokesman, the Socialist Party, can find no interest in supporting the typical foreign policy actions of the state. This compound theory was almost universally accepted by Socialists, and it remained largely unchallenged in Socialist Party circles until 1915.²

The theory did not rest upon massive American Socialist scholarship, nor was it found precisely in this form in any pre-war, official Party document. It was found rather in varying degrees of development in some official statements, such as platforms, and in scattered writings of many Socialist authors. It may be suspected that the theory and its elements were for the most part originally borrowed from European Marxists. It has been possible to locate only one extensive and scholarly American Socialist analysis of imperialism prior to 1913. It appeared in 1900 in the *International Socialist Review*, and it contained conclusions including the three elements of the theory just mentioned. (Boothman 1900:286). In contrast to this article, most American socialist writing on foreign policy in the period was very brief and specifically related to a single governmental act. But in spite of a shallow intellectual base, the Socialist Party held its foreign policy theory with remarkable tenacity. The tenacity was a reflection of the doctrinaire quality of early American socialism.

This paper will evaluate American Socialist foreign policy theory in light of official and unofficial Socialist reactions to American foreign policy affecting the Mexican civil wars of 1910-1916. This evaluation will not attempt to recross the much scarred battleground where Socialists and their opponents have clashed over the validity of Marxist theory. No new weapons can be brought to that field. Rather, the evaluation will be related to the utility of the theory for the Socialist Party's political purposes. Three considerations will be treated.

First, the theory helped give a high degree of consistency to official Socialist statements concerning the American government's action affecting Mexico. (It can perhaps be effectively argued that the Party's political theory controlled in decisive measure its political action). As socialists applied the theory, they concluded that America's Mexican policy was shaped solely for the benefit of the capitalist class and that it was inimical to the interests of American and Mexican workers alike. It was a policy of aggressive expansion to protect American business interests and preserve the reactionary status-quo in Mexico. Therefore, all official Party statements demanded or clearly implied complete non-interference in Mexican matters. On two occasions, when United States troops moved toward the border in 1910 and 1911, the Party officially issued a protest demanding withdrawal and the cessation of the military threat. (Proceedings 1910:304; Soc. Party Bull, March 1911). One of these protests, entitled "Withdraw the Troops," was so effectively promoted as a petition, that Victor

² *Ibid.*, pp. 111-133. In these pages Socialist theory on international relations and imperialism is more fully developed.

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Berger introduced it into Congress with 87,600 signatures. (Amer. Labor Yrbk. 1916:237). When troops landed at Vera Cruz, the National Executive Committee heatedly denounced the war which it feared had begun as an unwarranted American aggression. (Party Builder, Apr. 25, 1914). In 1915 the same committee, alarmed at what it thought was an implied military threat in a policy statement by President Wilson, protested any threat of armed intervention in affairs south of the Rio Grande. (Amer. Soc. June 19, 1915). When the first Villa raid occurred in 1916, the committee called upon American workers to use their power to prevent war and preparation for war. (Amer. Soc. Mar. 25, 1916). After the second Villa raid, the committee relented a bit by demanding that the border be protected by purely defensive actions solely on the American side. (Amer. Soc. June 24, 1916). In all of this, the Socialist Press stood staunchly with the Party and even those Socialists who bolted the party to support the government in the first World War stood in complete unity. (Peterson 1957:90-91).

But consistency is not always a virtue, and there were times when the Socialist's demand for non-interference ran counter to the Socialist's hope for the success of the Mexican revolutionaries. This brings us to the second point in the evaluation of Socialist foreign policy theory. The theory did not always fit the facts as Socialists saw them. Sometimes, Wilson's policies were very different from what Socialist theory anticipated. When the president declared his intention to support the constitutionalist cause and isolate Huerta, some Socialist editors began to believe that an evil tree could produce good fruit. The *New Review* and the *Party Builder* editorially praised the president for his stand, but both expressed doubt that he could maintain his position against the reactionary pressures of his "bourbon" supporters. (New Review, Oct. 1913:805; Party Builder, May 2, 1914). When it was realized that Wilson was not permitting the troops to move out from Vera Cruz, the *New York Call* became appreciative of the President's capacity to resist jingoist pressure. (May 15, 1914:1). Similarly, the *Call* and the *Party Builder* applauded Wilson's demand for greater reform in Mexico, but old Socialist instinct required the *Call* to insert, "surprising as it seems." (May 18, 19, 1914; Party Builder, June 6, 1914). This approval of governmental policy even crept into a National Executive Committee resolution in a most confusing way. In 1915 the committee interpreted a presidential statement as a military threat to Mexico. Its reflex response was to resolve against "meddling or interfering in the present crisis." Yet the same statement praised the president's policies which in that very crisis aided the enslaved people of Mexico. (Amer. Soc. June 19, 1915). A statement demanding non-interference praised policies that interfered. This confusion was the product of the Socialist foreign policy theory which insisted that a capitalistic state could not follow truly progressive international policies for the workers' benefit.

We can mention another situation in which Socialist theory did not fit the facts. The theory assumed that an advanced power like the United States would be the imperialistic aggressor when it was pitted

against a backward economic power. But when Villa became an aggressor, the theory was wanting. Of course, the Party tried to find an explanation for the aberration. After the first raid, it said that the episode was "doubtless inspired by the same American capitalist interests who have so freely hired gunmen to kill to break strikes in the past." (Amer. Soc. March 25, 1916). It repeated the claim after the second raid, but in demanding that the "frontier should be protected . . . by troops stationed on our side of the Rio Grande," the Party conceded that aggression could be from the Mexican side. (Amer. Soc. June 24, 1916). This solution to the raiding problem was inappropriate for the Socialist Party. The Party was so committed to the idea that any American troops would be used for aggression, that it had passed a constitutional amendment in 1915 requiring that all Socialist legislators vote against any military appropriations. (Amer. Labor Yrbk., 1916: 128). Thus, raids by a Mexican revolutionary made the Party's National Executive Committee demand military effort which the Party could not constitutionally support!

At this point a curious dualism of Socialist history must be mentioned. In domestic affairs a majority of the Party composed of the center and right wings were willing to admit that a capitalist government could and did act for the benefit of the workers in some situations. In socialist terms, this meant that the American Party was "opportunist" on domestic matters. (Kipnis 1952:107-37). The majority believed reform by capitalistic governments was both meaningful and possible. Had this opportunism been transferred to international affairs, the Party's theory would not have stressed so sharply the inevitableness of an aggressive foreign policy that promoted only the interests of the capitalist class. Also Socialist policy could have flexibly supported Wilson on those actions which aided the revolutionary cause in Mexico. However, until 1915 the Party was not opportunist in foreign policy. On such issues, the Party with scarcely an exception assumed the minority left wing's general "impossibilism." Socialists, it appears, treated foreign policy under capitalism as if a basic reform for the interests of the workers was quite impossible. (Peterson, 1957: 108-172; 205-224).

The impossibilist position explains the Party's consistent demand that Washington not interfere in Mexican civil wars. The demand had to be negative at all times, for it assumed that under capitalistic government there were only purely capitalistic goals for all foreign policy.

An understanding of impossibilism brings us to the third point in the evaluation of Socialist foreign policy theory. The consistent application of an impossibilist theory limited in some measure the party's appeal at the polls, because the theory prohibited the development of an attractive foreign policy program. To vote for the Socialist Party, the voter had to swallow socialism whole. He was not enticed to it by the tempting bait of a well developed foreign policy program. Of course, some voters might like the non-interference policy on Mexico, but sooner or later the voter not committed to Socialist theory would find some need in international affairs which he thought the

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government could meet. Then, that voter would opt for a positive program. He would support a reform ticket.

This, of course, is speculative. No one can say for certain that the Party lost voters on this count. However, Socialists in 1915 were saying that unless the Party produced a positive and currently pertinent program to meet the challenges of the war in Europe, they would be by-passed by the voters preoccupied with those concerns. This consideration helped spur the Party to the development of a positive and creative foreign policy, but the effort was not extended to offer a program for easing American-Mexican tensions. Here the Party had only a negative offering. (Peterson, 1957: 205-224).

In summary then, the foreign policy theory of the Socialist Party as applied to the international problems created by Mexico's civil wars produced a consistent demand for the non-interference of the American government. But consistency in the policy meant that the Socialist Party did not officially support the progressive elements in Wilson's Mexican policy which the Party's theory denied could exist. As a result, the Party's foreign policy was purely negative and a poor tool for capturing voter imagination.

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