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CHAPTER I

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Conventional wisdom tells us that Americans are not class conscious. America's workers seem to lack the desire for class struggle that motivates socialist movements around the world. France and Italy have large Communist parties that capture much of the working-class vote; Austria, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries have worker-based Social Democratic parties; England and Australia have Labour parties that have won elections and governed during some if not most of the post-World War II period. Throughout Europe, workers' unions have sought not an accommodation to industrial capitalism but its replacement by a system of collective ownership. Working-class revolutions were fought in Paris in 1871, in Germany in 1918, and, of course, in Russia in 1917. And the newly formed working classes of Latin America, Africa, and Asia have looked to Marx, Lenin, and Mao for guidance in their struggles for national liberation and economic emancipation.

In comparison, the accomplishments of the American working class appear meager indeed: a mild, accommodation-oriented union movement that is losing membership; a reformist Democratic Party that, even when successful, fails to deliver much of consequence for the working class.

The seeming conservatism of the American working class has long confronted our best theories of industrial society with the enigma of "American exceptionalism." In Europe, nineteenth-century industrialization provoked a working-class resistance that developed into a "specter" haunting the world economy. It was assumed that America would soon follow this pattern and might even become its outstanding example. But the historical signs were often ambiguous. European radicals rejoiced at signs of American working-class militance, then despaired at the weakness of its socialist movement. American business celebrated the glories of "triumphant capitalism" but worried whether the radicalism abroad would invade these

shores. By the turn of the twentieth century, America remained a paradox of industrial strength and working-class weakness.

In 1906 the German sociologist Werner Sombart asked the now familiar question, "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" Although Sombart's question was premature in 1906 (the Socialist Party of America enjoyed its fastest growth right after the publication of his essay; see Weinstein, 1967; Aronowitz, 1983:17), it was perhaps prescient; unlike the industrialized countries of Europe, the United States never sustained a socialist movement. By the mid-1920s the American Left was in disarray.

The failure of American socialism and the weakness of the American labor movement have intrigued social scientists since Sombart; their explanations have become an entire academic industry.¹ Every facet of American life has been singled out and examined as a possible cause. For the popular press (see Thernstrom, 1964:57), American workers are not revolutionary because America is the land of *opportunity*: the "American Dream" directs workers' energies toward individual mobility rather than collective protest. For Sombart (1906), the main difference is that *prosperity* showers American workers with material abundance; in contrast, the greater deprivation of European workers fuels their demands for revolutionary change. For Louis Hartz (1955), it is America's *lack of a feudal past* that has obscured class lines and promoted instead an individualistic ("Lockian") ethos. For several recent Marxist interpreters (e.g., Jerome Karabel, 1979; Mike Davis, 1986), America's working class is weak because of *racial and ethnic divisions*: the more homogeneous populations of European nations present fewer natural barriers to working-class solidarity. For Seymour Martin Lipset (1960:73; 1983:2), *political suffrage* is a key: male American workers won the right to vote earlier than European workers, so their economic demands were not combined with a political movement into a revolutionary ideology. For C. T. Husbands (1976) the main obstacle is the *two-party system*. For Frederick Jackson Turner (1920), the *American frontier* drained the discontent that was bottled up in the teeming urban centers of Europe.

The debate over American exceptionalism continues to generate contro-

1. Some summaries can be found in Bottomore, 1966:48–55; Lipset, 1977; Karabel, 1979; Shalev and Korpi, 1980; Katznelson, 1981:10. Our list, which follows, cannot do justice to the complexities of the theories cited. Karabel notes that most of the factors discussed today had already been cited by Sombart in his 1906 essay. We explore each explanation in greater detail at the appropriate point.

versy because American conditions provide a test case for Marx's theory of socialist revolution (see Sweezy, 1967:26). Over a century after his death, Marx still sets the terms of the debate. It is as if the gods of social theory constructed an experiment with all the necessary ingredients and waited to see whether the predicted reaction would occur.

Marx and Engels identified the working class as the revolutionary element within modern capitalism. The proletariat was both the unique product of capitalist society and the agent of its destruction. This irony gave the historical process a grand inevitability: "The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers" (Marx and Engels [1848], 1976:496). The gravediggers were to be the modern working class.²

If capitalism produces its own destroyers, the progression toward working-class revolution should be clearest where capitalism is most advanced. As Marx ([1867] 1976:8–9) declared in his preface to *Capital*, "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future."

For much of the twentieth century, the United States has boasted the most advanced capitalist economy. By Marx's logic, therefore, the United States should harbor the most militant working class.³ Instead, socialist movements are weaker here than in other capitalist countries, and workers least revolutionary.⁴ The image of the future appears to be class accommodation, not class struggle. Critics of Marx quickly cited the failure of this

2. See also Engels ([1880] 1972:58–59): "Socialism: Utopian and scientific."

3. This was still part of the Marxist orthodoxy at the turn of the century. The leading European Marxists, Karl Kautsky, August Bebel, Eduard Bernstein, and Paul Lafargue, all endorsed the view that socialism would come to the United States first (see Moore, 1970; Lipset, 1977:49).

4. It is precisely this paradox that attracted Sombart's interest: "If, as I have myself always maintained and often stated, modern Socialism follows as a necessary reaction to capitalism, the country with the most advanced capitalist development, namely the United States, would at the same time be the one providing the classic case of Socialism, and its working class would be supporters of the most radical of Socialist movements. However, one hears just the opposite. . . . In fact, an assertion of this kind cannot fail to awaken our most active interest, for here at last is a country with no Socialism, despite its having the most advanced capitalist development. The doctrine of the inevitable Socialist future is refuted by the facts" (1906:15–16).

“test case” as conclusive evidence against the entire opus of Marxian theory.⁵

Today, the problem has taken a new twist. Many now think of the working class as only a nineteenth-century problem. The shift to a “postindustrial” economy has relegated the class struggle to the background as the labor force has become less industrial and more white collar, and as nineteenth-century robber barons were replaced by bureaucratic managers (Wattenberg, 1974; Naisbitt, 1982). From this new, postindustrial perspective, not only was Marx wrong; he is now irrelevant.

As in all such ideologically loaded subjects, it is important to get the facts straight first. America has indeed been exceptional but not always to the extent that our mythology would have us suppose. The evidence that American exceptionalism *exists*, much less what causes it, is not unequivocal. As Ira Katznelson (1981:9) points out, it is not just America that has been exceptional in failing to fulfill Marx’s prediction of a revolutionary working class. The fact is that *no* advanced industrial society has transformed itself into a socialist state. We need to be careful, therefore, to specify precisely what it is about American society that is exceptional. The problem requires a carefully balanced appreciation of seemingly contradictory facts. Our contention is that the American working class is neither small nor passive. It is, however, *weak*, and it is this combination of size and militance with political and economic weakness that demands explanation.

American Class Conflicts

American exceptionalism does not mean that class conflicts have been absent in this country but rather that these conflicts never escalated to a point where they became a permanent battle line dividing society into well-entrenched encampments. In particular, it is *unions* and *parties* that have pro-

5. In fact, the opposite theory soon proved popular: revolutions are more likely during the early phases of industrialization and in economically backward areas of the world (Moore, 1954:226; Bendix, 1956:437; Mills, 1963:256; Sweezy, 1967:43; Lipset, 1979:14; Gouldner, 1980:50; Katznelson, 1981:9). Even Engels once seems to have subscribed to this theory: “The class struggles here in England, too, were more turbulent during the *period of development* of large-scale industry and died down just in the period of England’s undisputed industrial domination of the world. In Germany, too, the development of large-scale industry since

vided European workers enduring bases for their class protest, and it is these institutions that, in the United States, have consistently failed radicals' expectations. Moreover, it is a joint failure, the failure of both parties and unions, that marks American society as exceptional. Elsewhere there are union movements as weak as the American, and political systems where the Left is equally excluded, but the United States stands alone in the extent to which neither institution provides an outlet for working-class protest (Korpi and Shalev, 1980).⁶

Unions

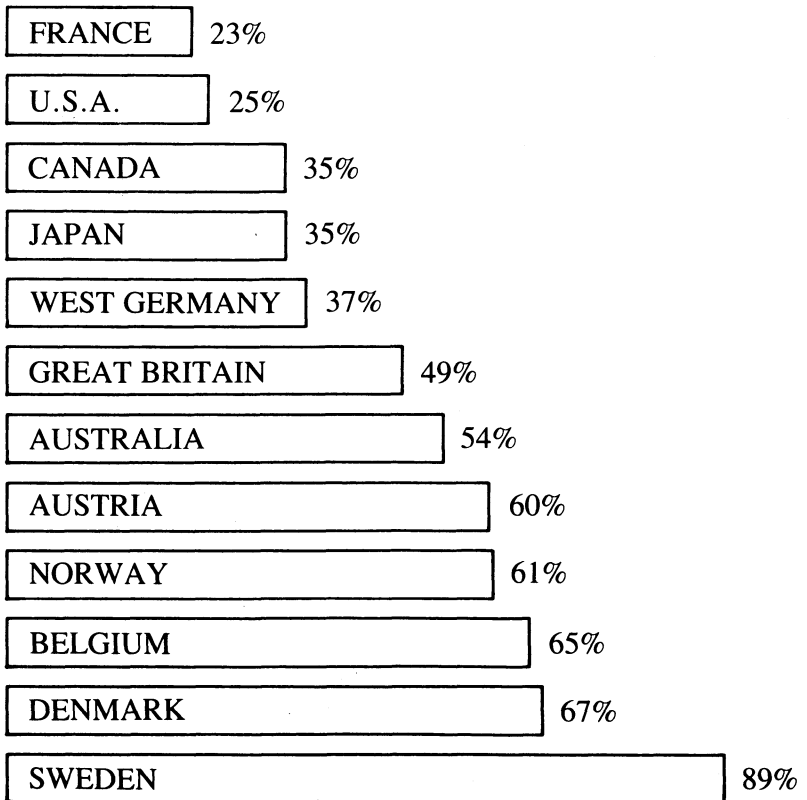
The union movement in the United States is relatively small: in 1985 only 18 percent of employed Americans were union members (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1986). American unionization rates are near the bottom of international statistics (see Figure 1.1).⁷ Swedish workers are the most thoroughly organized, 90 percent of them now reporting union membership. Many other countries report approximately 50 percent: Austria, Aus-

1850 coincides with the rise of the Socialist movement, and it will be no different, probably, in America. It is the revolutionizing of all traditional relations by industry *as it develops* that also revolutionizes people's minds" (Marx and Engels [1892], 1953:244). Lenin ([1920] 1975 [vol. 3]:326) acknowledged that it was easier to begin a revolution in Russia than in the more developed nations of Europe.

6. Not recognizing the joint failure of unions and parties is the main flaw in Ira Katznelson's (1981) otherwise insightful study of American exceptionalism. Katznelson argues that American workers are militant at the workplace but have been diverted by ethnic antagonisms in a community-based politics. This analysis overlooks the fact that workplace militance has been as frustrated as socialist politics: despite the militance, the principal outcomes have been low unionization rates and conservative unions.

7. International statistics on union membership rates are sometimes unreliable and often not comparable. The percentages reported here should be interpreted cautiously, although all sources agree that U.S. rates are exceptionally low. The numbers for Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Australia, Great Britain, West Germany, Canada, and the United States are from Bain and Price (1980) and are probably the most reliable. The Belgian, Austrian, Japanese, and French rates are from Coldrick and Jones (1979) and are best interpreted as rough estimates. Barkan (1984) cites an Italian rate of 36 percent. All these estimates are roughly similar to Stephens's (1980) estimates for 1970 nonagricultural wage and salary workers in 16 countries. Korpi and Shalev (1980) aggregate unionization rates for 18 countries across 1946–1976; in this longer perspective U.S. rates are still low (27 percent) but are not so dissimilar from five other countries with rates below 30 percent—Japan, Canada, France, Switzerland, and Italy.

FIGURE 1.1. Unionization rates of industrial countries, c. 1975



SOURCES: Coldrick and Jones (1979); Bain and Price (1980).

ustralia, Belgium, Great Britain, Denmark, and Norway all have unionization rates at least double the U.S. rate. Nevertheless, the low French rate (23 percent) reminds us that low unionization, like each facet of American exceptionalism, is shared with some other industrial societies.⁸

But these bare statistics belie the complexity of the American labor

8. The low U.S. membership levels can be excused to some extent by the low (and declining) U.S. levels of blue-collar manufacturing employment, the traditional stronghold of

movement. As we will observe throughout this study, American labor conflicts have generated as much sustained violence as has working-class protest anywhere in the world.⁹ It is well to remember that the May Day celebrated in Moscow's Red Square and throughout the world as a day of labor solidarity commemorates events that occurred not in Paris, Berlin, or St. Petersburg, but in Chicago.¹⁰

Political system

The absence of a viable socialist or Social Democratic party makes the U.S. political system almost unique among advanced industrial nations. A political program that in the U.S. context would seem mindlessly radical is, in every other advanced industrial country, one of the alternatives regularly offered to voters.

Government ownership of industry. In the United States, former Senator Adlai Stevenson's proposal to create a government-owned oil company never received serious consideration. But a nationalized oil corporation is hardly a radical proposal. Nationalized telephone, electric power, airline, and railway industries are the norm in most "capitalist" economies (see Table 1.1). There is also significant government ownership of the automobile, steel, and shipbuilding industries in many of these countries. The United States stands at the bottom of the distribution of government ownership. American private capital enjoys unchallenged control in almost every sector of the economy.

union movements. The United States has more white-collar workers (52 percent of its work force) and a larger service and retail sector (66 percent) than most other countries (ILO, 1982; OECD, 1983). Everywhere, the service-sector and white-collar workers are the most difficult to organize, so the American labor movement begins with a serious handicap.

9. Philip Taft and Philip Ross (1969:270) begin their report to the National Commission on Violence by claiming: "The United States has had the bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrial nation in the world." Only occasionally do studies of American exceptionalism acknowledge this violence (see Dubofsky, 1975:12, and Katznelson, 1981:9, for useful attempts to develop theories that incorporate the paradox of extraordinary violence and a weak Left; also Lipset, 1963:202–5, for a less successful attempt).

10. In fact, our long history of labor militance has led some European Marxists to reinterpret the American working class as the true vanguard working class (e.g., Tronti, 1976: 104). See also Michel Crozier's recollections (1984) of his enthusiasm for the American labor movement of the 1940s.

TABLE 1.1. Government ownership of basic industry in nine countries

	Approximate Percentage					
	<i>Railways</i>	<i>Telecommu- nications</i>	<i>Electricity</i>	<i>Airlines</i>	<i>Steel</i>	<i>Autos</i>
Austria	100	100	100	100	100	100
England	100	100	100	75	75	50
France	100	100	100	75	75	50
Italy	100	100	75	100	75	25
W. Germany	100	100	75	100	0	25
Sweden	100	100	50	50	75	0
Canada	75	25	100	75	0	0
Japan	75	100	0	25	0	0
United States	25	0	25	0	0	0

SOURCE: Kerbo (1983:170; from *The Economist*, Dec. 30, 1978).

Much, but not all, government ownership is the result of pressure from working-class parties to remove the key sectors of the economy from the direct control of private capital.¹¹ The Democratic Party in the United States does not dare to suggest such an alternative. Yet what is unthinkable in the U.S. context is routine for French Socialists and British Labourites. One international study of political party programs (Janda, 1970; see also Monsen and Walters, 1983:30–33) found government ownership of industry to be the single most consistent element of leftist politics around the

11. Nationalization may not be an unambiguous defeat for capital. Often it is the “sick” but necessary industries that are taken over by the government and run at the expense of the taxpayer—to the benefit of the rest of the capitalist economy. These complexities, however, do not contradict the overall associations between government ownership and the strength of working-class parties.

world. Its virtual absence in U.S. political programs is an apt indicator of the atrophy of working-class politics in this country.¹²

Class divisions in party support. Because the *output* of the U.S. political system has not much affected class interests, the *input* is not organized along class divisions either. Neither voting nor finances are determined by class appeals. The bulk of Democratic money comes from the same source as Republican money—business (Domhoff, 1972). Elizabeth Drew (1983) reports that Democrats appeal to business for campaign funds by citing the “danger” of a political system in which one party represents business and the other labor. Such a “dangerous” arrangement is, of course, precisely how most other industrial democracies have been politically organized throughout this century.

One of the favorite topics of political sociology in the opinion poll era has been the analysis of the class complexion of Democratic and Republican voting. In the usual course of American politics, labor supports, and the working class votes for, Democrats; business supports, and the middle class votes for, Republicans. Many factors interfere to confuse this relationship: among voters, regional, racial, ethnic, and now gender loyalties often override class sympathies; and in given elections, candidate popularity or foreign policy traumas may mask domestic economic concerns as a basis for voting. But the working-class-Democrat and middle-class-Republican affinities are quite resilient and constitute the drone against which the individual notes of contemporary politics are played.

What is startling in international perspective is how weak this class-to-party relationship is in the United States. In virtually every other democracy in the world, class membership is more closely aligned with party vote than in the United States. One 1970–71 study compared seven European countries with the United States (see Inglehart, 1977:199). Britain had the largest class cleavage: the British working class was 34 percent more likely to vote Labour than was the British middle class. Other international studies (e.g., Lipset, 1981:21) report Swedish voting to be even more class divided than British. In the remaining European countries (see Table 1.2), the class difference varies between 13 percent (West Germany) and 21 percent (Switzerland). But again, the United States has the smallest difference, only 8 percent—about half that of the other democracies. Of

12. The Democrats' lack of any program of nationalization disputes Michael Harrington's (1972:250–69) contention, endorsed by Lipset (1974:40), that the U.S. Democratic Party is the equivalent of Europe's Social Democratic parties.

TABLE 1.2. Class support (voting) for Left parties in eight democracies

	Percentage Left Voting		Difference
	<i>Manual Occupation</i>	<i>Nonmanual Occupation</i>	
Sweden	73	29	- 44
Britain	67	32	- 35
Netherlands	64	43	- 21
France	72	53	- 19
Italy	60	46	- 14
W. Germany	65	51	- 14
Belgium	45	35	- 10
United States	41	33	- 8

SOURCE: Inglehart (1977:205); Stephens (1981).

NOTE: Occupation is head of household. Left parties are defined as in Inglehart.

course, the 1972 comparison may be unfair, since class voting was particularly obscured in the McGovern–Nixon confrontation. But other studies using different time frames (e.g., Alford, 1967; Lipset, 1981) report similar conclusions: American political parties simply do not draw on class-based support to anything like the same extent as parties elsewhere around the globe.¹³

Again, however, we must warn the reader that these frequently cited data are in fact more complicated than most interpreters have realized. Most cross-national studies omit the voting category that is, in the United

13. Alford (1967) reports even weaker class voting in Canada, but subsequent reanalyses (Ogmundson, 1975) suggest that a recoding of Canada's four parties reveals a greater class division than Alford discovered. It turns out that Canada's Liberals, like the U.S. Democrats, are not truly the party of the working class.

States, most distinctively working class: the nonvoting category. The thing American workers are most likely to do on election day is stay home. And no wonder, given that the output of the political system provides them with so little to excite their class loyalty. Nonvoting is not the usual working-class option in elections elsewhere. As Walter Dean Burnham (1974) has pointed out so well, precisely that type of voter who in Europe votes for socialist and Social Democratic parties, is the one who, in the United States, doesn't vote at all. As we elaborate in Chapter 7, it is party structure, not the voters' psychology, that explains America's distinctive voting patterns. The lack of a genuine Left alternative fosters both the high rates of nonvoting and the low relationship between class and party.

The size of the working class

Postindustrial theorists have long engaged in a statistical shell game that shuffles workers according to varying classification schemes to support the claim of a decline in the American working class. One such scheme, for example, banishes janitors and waitresses to nonworking (middle-class?) status (Galbraith, 1967:276; Naisbitt, 1982:2). Andrew Levison's (1974) *Working-Class Majority* exposed many of these efforts a decade ago (see also Blumberg, 1980).

Our own classification, which we defend in Chapter 4, limits the middle class to the self-employed (that is, the "old" middle class of storekeepers and independent farmers) and professionals and managers (the "new" middle class whose members share the responsibilities of managing the lives of other workers). Additional workers who have sometimes been counted as middle class (e.g., white-collar clerical workers, technicians, salespersons, and even the more affluent craftworkers) do not attain the control over other workers or even over their own lives that sets the middle class apart from Marx's proletariat.¹⁴

In this accounting scheme the working class has not shrunk at all; it has, in fact, expanded during much of this century. Our estimate of the working class in 1980 totals almost 70,000,000 workers; in 1900 it was only

14. We justify our more inclusive definition of the working class in Chapter 4, where we analyze the respective roles of working-class and middle-class jobs in the functioning of advanced capitalism. Measuring the size of the working class is a by-product of this more important need to understand the nature of working-class positions and what separates them from middle-class positions.

18,000,000 strong. Relative size has grown, as well: the 1980 working class was 70 percent of all working Americans; in 1900 it was only 61 percent (see Figure 1.2).

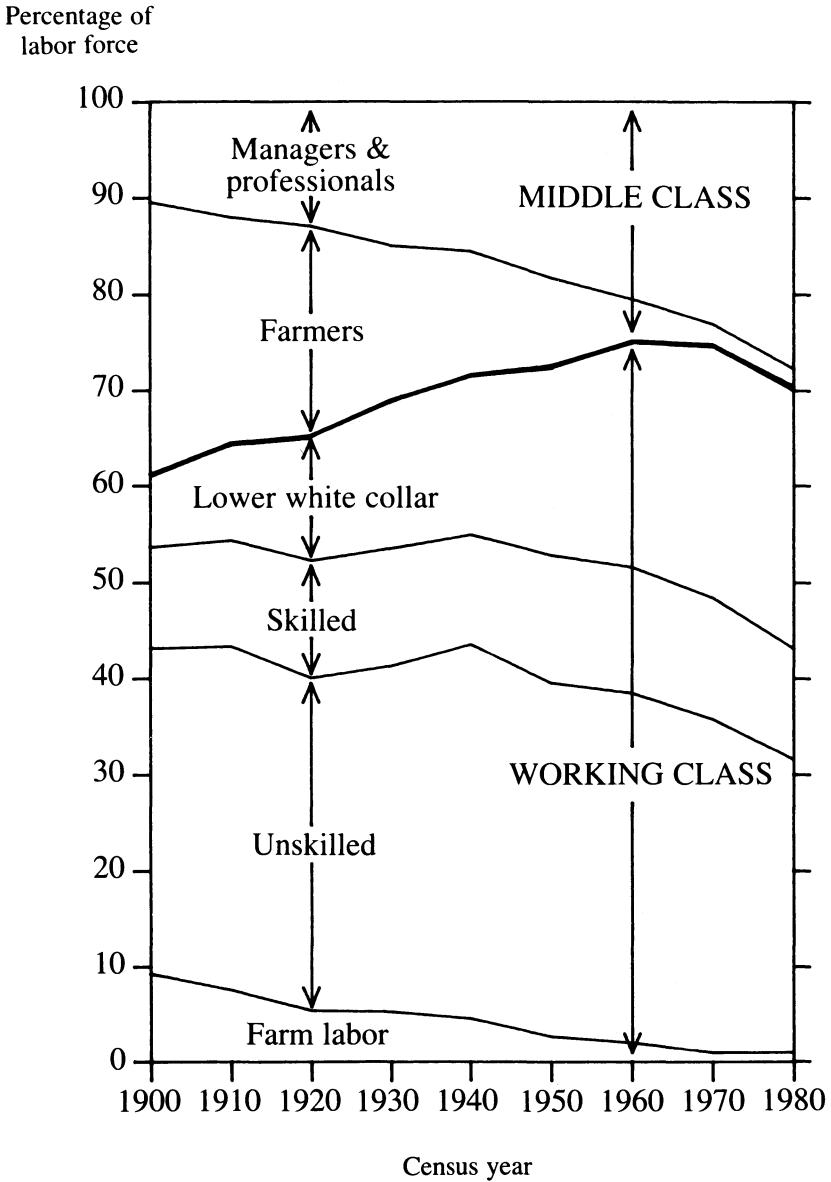
What has happened is not so much a change of the class structure itself as a change within the class categories. The growth of the “new” middle class of managers and professionals has almost exactly offset the decline of the “old” middle class of self-employed storekeepers and farmers. The middle class as a whole remains about the same size. Similarly, within the working class the decline in unskilled blue-collar labor has been matched by a growth in white-collar clerical and sales work.

Class Consciousness

The failure of the American Left is usually blamed on its inability to win support from a conservative working class (see especially Sombart, 1906; Perlman, 1928; Hartz, 1955; Lipset, 1963; Hochschild, 1981). According to their analyses, U.S. workers do not even think in the usual class categories; they see no sharp division separating capital and labor, but instead blur economic differences into a gradual hierarchy of status ranks. The workers’ individual efforts to climb the status ladder leave them with little enthusiasm for collective action to change the hierarchy itself. Like middle-class Americans, workers are more concerned with individually getting ahead than with collectively organizing for class action.¹⁵ Accord-

15. Louis Hartz (1955) explained American exceptionalism by the individualism of its liberal Lockian tradition. It is also a major theme running through Lipset’s many inquiries (see esp. 1963:194,202; 1977). Ironically, radical theorists now echo the same individualistic note. For instance, Michael Parenti: “When one looks horizontally, that is, towards one’s own peers and coworkers, it is usually not for solidarity but for cues as to how one’s intraclass competitors are doing. Most often one’s gaze is fixed vertically on those above and the goal is to fight one’s way up the greasy pole. In contrast, class consciousness is essentially a lateral perception, the ability to make common cause with others who are normally defined as one’s competitors” (1978:96). Parenti’s comments are especially puzzling because they immediately follow the claim that capitalists are the most class-conscious group in America—yet capitalists are at least as individualistic as Parenti’s description of workers. We explain this paradox (in Chapter 3) by arguing that individualism and class consciousness are not as mutually exclusive as usually presumed (see also Katznelson, 1981:16). Others who emphasize individualistic values are John Commons, 1908:758; Robert and Helen Lynd, 1937:453; Walter Dean Burnham, 1974:654; and Michael Burawoy, 1979:106–7.

FIGURE 1.2. Changes in the class structure of the U.S. labor force



SOURCE: U.S. Census, 1973a, 1983.

ing to this familiar reasoning, the American Dream has effectively tranquilized American class consciousness.

The data we have gathered tell a very different story. Our central proposition is that Americans do perceive classes in American society—true classes: not just vague status distinctions between the elegant and the uncouth but actual conflict groups that are divided by opposing interests in the capitalist organization of society. The vision of opposing classes is not limited to the European proletariat or a few wishful American radicals. Rather, class divisions are widely held popular perceptions. Americans may not use a radical vocabulary to describe these class divisions, but they fully recognize the categories being described.

Americans who know the country's working class readily testify to this instinctual if not fully articulated class consciousness. Ed Sadlowski, the maverick steelworkers' union official, is typical:

There's a certain instinct that a worker has, much more so than some candy-assed storeowner. He understands who's screwing him, but he doesn't understand how to get unscrewed. The little chamber of commerce storefront man, he never understands he's gettin' screwed. He's part of Main Street, America. I place my faith in the working stiff, regardless of his hangups. He's still the most reliable guy on the street when push comes to shove. (Quoted in Terkel, 1980:267)

This class consciousness is ineffectual, however, because mental states cannot always be translated into observed behavior, much less into any successful outcome of class conflict. Workers may choose not to act—either because they are too poorly organized to express their true wishes effectively, or because they realistically recognize that they face too powerful an opponent. In Sadlowski's language, they know who's screwing them but don't understand how to get unscrewed. And even if workers do act, there is no guarantee that they will succeed. Class conflict is a contest between *two* parties, and even the most class-conscious proletariat will not easily overcome a vigorous and united dominant class. In fact, it is often not possible to get "unscrewed."

Our analysis throughout this book depends on a crucial distinction for explaining American exceptionalism: studies of American workers must distinguish the opinions of the workers themselves (their class consciousness) from the forms that the class conflict eventually takes (such social structures as unions and political parties). These structures have multiple

causes beyond the volition of American workers. We do not dispute the facts of American exceptionalism; at least within broad outlines, it is true that working-class movements have not had the impact on the United States that they have had on other industrialized countries. What we do dispute are the views that locate the explanation for these facts in the consciousness of the American worker. Most such explanations, even those that are sympathetic to workers and their plight, only *blame the victims* for their own oppression (Ryan, 1971).

This is not a new problem. Failure to maintain the distinction between workers' consciousness and the results of class conflict is an example of the fallacy of *psychological reductionism*—the assumption that the structure of any society can be reduced to the wishes and motivations of its members. Society is much more than a straightforward embodiment of the wills of the people within that society. Working-class movements fail for many reasons: workers' economic hardships, police repression, political co-optation, and ineffective leadership, to name a few. Many of these conditions are largely outside the control of workers. It is logically incorrect, therefore, to single out weak working-class consciousness as the main reason for the failure of the American Left. Instead, we must investigate that consciousness independently from the structural outcomes and then test whether the consciousness actually explains the results of the conflict.

Throughout this book we will see how often explanations of American exceptionalism have fallen into this simple trap of inferring levels of class consciousness from the outcomes of class conflict, rather than investigating the class consciousness itself. For the most part, our "knowledge" of working-class consciousness is little more than a set of "unproved assumptions" (Dubofsky, 1975:12). Evidence of American exceptionalism becomes confused with evidence for weak class consciousness. The collapse of Eugene Debs's 1894 Pullman strike, the electoral decline of the Socialist Party after 1912, and the conservative character of contemporary unions have all been accepted as evidence of the lack of working-class consciousness. In fact, these events demonstrate only the repeated failures of the American Left. That failure cannot be doubted. But the failure of working-class protest is not equivalent to the failure of working-class consciousness.

Of all the structural factors explaining the failure of the American Left, the most important is the strength of the opposition. This would seem to be the most obvious, as well, but it is surprising how many discussions of American exceptionalism neglect the dominant class. It is as if all that mat-

ters in political conflict is the strength of *one* of the parties, and the subordinate party, at that. Labor historian Melvyn Dubofsky has been one of the few to recognize that the *other* party to the conflict may have determined working-class failures in the United States. "The Wobblies and socialists failed not because American society was exceptional, but because they reached their respective peaks when the nation's rulers were most confident [and] united" (Dubofsky, 1974:298; see also Brecher, 1972:258; Dawley, 1976:188).

In contrast, successful socialist revolutions have all capitalized on the internal weakness of the ruling class (see Skocpol, 1979). Surely it is no accident that the two crucial revolutions of the twentieth century, the Russian and Chinese, both followed world wars that devastated the Russian and Chinese ruling classes. And it cannot be insignificant that throughout its industrial history the United States has not been invaded or even suffered major military defeat.

It is not our purpose yet to develop in detail an alternative theory of American exceptionalism based on the strength of its capitalist class. We merely want to suggest now that alternative explanations do exist—explanations that need not rely on working-class consciousness: explanations are more clearly structural because they are based on the situation in which workers find themselves rather than on the attitudes or desires of the workers themselves.

The Plan of the Book

Our thesis of a class-conscious U.S. proletariat contradicts conventional wisdom and several generations of social research. We suffer no illusions about the difficulties of breaking down this consensus. Fortunately, there are some well-accepted guidelines for conducting such an enterprise. First, the past conclusions must be examined and their logical errors exposed. Then new evidence must be presented, consistent with the new thesis. Finally, a new theory must be constructed that not only incorporates the new evidence but also accounts for the old facts that the accepted wisdom was designed to explain. By and large, this is the agenda for our work. We follow it more or less in the order outlined, although we do not resist the temptation to mix the various steps when we think that doing so clarifies the direction of our argument.

We begin by sampling several different lines of work that have been cited as evidence of weak class consciousness. We argue that each has fallen prey to the fallacy of inferring psychological states (the absence of class consciousness) from objective social structures (the failure of the U.S. Left). We concentrate most of this critique in Chapter 2 but scatter reminders throughout the text. Our strategy is to demonstrate the tantalizing ease with which so many diverse analyses have slipped into psychological reductionism.

Next, we introduce our new evidence, most of which is based on sample surveys, liberally balanced with appropriate selections from personal interviews and relevant histories of labor unrest. These new analyses constitute the bulk of the text. Unlike much earlier research on American exceptionalism, we focus directly on workers' attitudes and perceptions. We believe that the evidence demonstrates that Americans do recognize divisions within their society, divisions based on the control of production, divisions that the recent class scholarship identifies as the basis of modern capitalist class conflict. The analysis also shows that Americans have perceived these divisions for some time, and there is little indication that awareness of them is diminishing. Other tests question whether factors such as mobility, ethnic identification, and the frontier ideology—the traditional explanations of American exceptionalism—do in fact interfere with class perceptions. Cross-national tests cast doubt on American uniqueness.

It is the *consistency* of these many results that we find most convincing. Together they add up to a coherent statement about the perception of class divisions in the United States. One might dismiss a single test by itself as an aberrant deviation from the accepted wisdom, but it does not seem reasonable to reject the entire series.

The final chapter concentrates on the task of making sense of both the old and new evidence. As has already been suggested, our explanation of American exceptionalism focuses on U.S. capital, the dominant antagonist in class conflict. We venture the idea that the outcome of most class conflict is determined by the strength of the dominant class, that in most circumstances the dominant groups can control the extent and violence of the conflict. That is the nature of dominance, after all.

