

Book Review

Auvo Kostiaainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism, 1917–1924. A Study of Ethnic Radicalism.* The Migration Institute, Turku, Finland. 1978. 225 pp.

Historians have generally agreed that the American Socialist Party, in the period before and during World War I, followed a surprisingly militant line. Judgments about the degree of someone's or something's radicalism are of course always relative. This particular judgment about American Socialism has derived from comparisons between the attitudes of American SP leaders (respecting such issues as the war, cooperation with reformist politicians, bread and butter trade union demands) with those of their European counterparts. The reasons that historians give for the relatively radical posture of American SP leaders usually have to do with the peculiar circumstances of American life. Louis Hartz made the argument best: the struggles that European socialists waged on behalf of the working class in Europe, struggles that made European socialists effective champions of "reform," had in too many cases already been won in the United States. American workers, alas, had been heirs to the country's free political traditions. SP leaders in the early twentieth century consistently made revolutionary demands because, unlike European Socialist leaders, those were all that they had.

The view that pre-war SP radicalism was the product of American exceptionalism has been reinforced by the view that most of the immigrants flooding into the country in the early twentieth century were not importing radical ideas. The vast majority entered the United State with peasant (read "conservative") perspectives. While Marxist ideas themselves were obviously an European import, the appeal of those ideas to American SP leaders had nothing to do with the attitudes of non-English-speaking immigrants. According to this view, Attorney-General Palmer's notion that American radicalism was the consequence of recent immigration (hence curable by deportation) was utterly misguided.

Auvo Kostiaainen, in *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism, 1917–1924*, does not seek to reverse this interpretation. But in telling the story of Finnish-American socialists and communists, he does focus on a phenomenon that the above arguments omit. That is, some important groups of American immigrants did arrive in this country with well-formulated radical ideas. Moreover, they clung to their radical perspective for many years after their arrival in the United States. They acted as pressure groups to make native-born radical leaders more militant than they might otherwise have been. Attorney-General Palmer was right about this much. Organized radicalism in the United States, before and

immediately after World War I, would have had a rather different history had it not been for recent immigrants to America.

First-generation Finnish-Americans, the subjects of Kostiainen's history, are a remarkable illustration of this point. They were the leading force in getting American Socialist Party leaders to make a reluctant attempt to affiliate with the Third International. When that attempt finally collapsed, many of the same Finnish immigrants moved on to join what in 1921 became the legal arm of the American Communist movement, the Workers Party of America. Kostiainen takes on himself the considerable task of explaining how this happened, why it happened, and what significance it had for the post-war American socialist and communist movements.

As Kostiainen recognizes, the Finnish-Americans were not a typical immigrant group. Indeed, a central concern of his study is to explain why radicalism was so much more appealing to Finnish-Americans than to other American immigrant groups. He estimates that almost one half of the membership of the American Workers Party in 1922 were Finns (the next largest foreign language group in the Party constituted only 7% of the total) and that communism appealed to perhaps a quarter of the American Finnish population in the early 1920s (although only 5% of American Finns belonged to a communist organization).

Kostiainen begins his study in the 1890s. The introductory section includes, among other things, a discussion of the formation of the Finnish Socialist Federation, which became the largest of the foreign language affiliates of the Socialist Party. Here and there in the narrative he ties in the connections of Finnish American radicalism with the Industrial Workers of the World. However, the major part of Kostiainen's book focuses on post-1917 developments. He analyzes the impact of the Bolshevik revolution and the failed Finnish socialist revolution (1918) on American Finns. He traces the quarrels among Finnish-American SP members that eventuated in a split (in 1921) between the Finnish Federation of the Socialist Party (loyal to the SP) and the Independent Socialist Federation (independent of both the SP and the underground American communist parties but supportive of the Third International). Kostiainen then outlines the steps by which the latter organization gravitated toward affiliation with the Workers Party (achieved in 1922) and the contribution (considerable in Kostiainen's view) that Finnish Americans made to that party. The study ends in 1924, the year which Kostiainen sees as marking the end of American communism's formative period.

Kostiainen suggests a number of reasons to explain why Finnish Americans, were peculiarly susceptible to radical movements in this country. As already noted, many brought radicalism with them. Kostiainen demonstrates that Finnish-American communists came in disproportionate numbers (compared with other Finnish immigrants to America) from the industrial sections of Finland. The radicalism they had undoubtedly encountered in those areas was fed in this country not only by events in Europe but also by conditions of work that Finns encountered in the United States. In America they often worked in unskilled positions for low wages. That last fact in itself did not distinguish Finnish immigrants from many other immigrants. But the Finnish immigrants according to Kostiainen had an unusually high rate of literacy (compared, for

example, with Italian immigrants), and their ability to read made it much easier for them to articulate their grievances.

Kostiainen is better at listing reasons than at assigning them relative weight. But one suspects that the major reason for the popularity of radicalism among American Finns was in a curious way also the reason that Finnish American Communists were less radical than some other ethnic Americans who joined the communist movement. That is, for reasons peculiar to the way Finnish American communities were formed in this country, radical clubs became a strong socializing and bonding force among the Finnish immigrants. They provided the same kinds of social activities that the Finnish Church and Finnish temperance societies did. Their very success, although it accounts for the receptivity of Finnish American Socialists to the internationalism of the Comintern, explains as well why they did not enthusiastically support the illegal tactics recommended initially by the Bolsheviks. Finnish Americans became important to the American communist movement only after a legal communist party had been formed. Participation in the underground and illegal activities of the first American communist parties would have sacrificed too much of the community building functions of the radical organizations that the Finns had created. In other immigrant communities, in which radical clubs had not become an important socializing force, these constraints were not present. Individual radicals in those groups were therefore more easily attracted to the communist underground.

Konstiainen's book has surely established itself as the most reliable repository of information about Finnish-American radicalism. It is not, however, easy reading. The chronology of the narrative is needlessly confusing, and only the closest readers will have much luck piecing events together. The level of analysis is even more disappointing. One would not mind the trouble of getting through this extremely detailed story if it settled more questions than it does. In the end, however, Kostiainen leaves most questions open. With candor he writes: "There seems to be no way to arrange systematically the various factors that have been presented here as contributing to the proneness of Finnish-Americans to take part in radical movements." He more or less concludes the same thing when he deals with questions about the varying strength of radicalism in Finnish-American communities in different sections of the United States. Kostiainen lists reasons and gives readers all the raw material they could want. But he doesn't sort these things out sufficiently in clearly stated conclusions.

One must nonetheless be grateful for what Kostiainen has done. It is a great deal more than anyone else has been able to do with a rather striking phenomenon. The major interpreters of early American socialism and communism (Bell, Shannon, Glazer, Coser, Howe, Draper) recognized the importance of the Finnish-Americans to the movements they described, but they lacked the language skills to investigate their activities. Kostiainen's book does not suggest a new interpretative framework and perhaps even indicates that we don't need one. By the 1930s the proportion of Finnish Americans in the Communist Party had dropped sharply. Many of them had traveled to Russia to work in Moscow with radical refugees from their own country. Others simply changed their politics. Gus Hall, a second generation Finnish American, was the only important legacy of the first generation of Finnish Americans to the later communist movement.

Kostiainen is most concerned with telling a story about American radicalism. That part of his story peters out in the mid-1920s. But he has also supplied information about the ways in which one group of American immigrants preserved their ethnic identity while searching for some comfortable place in American society. That part of the story is the more important part for anyone wishing to understand American experience. It can be related to events that began long before the years that concern Kostiainen and that have not yet ended.

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