



***Conservative Counterrevolution:
Challenging Liberalism in 1950s Milwaukee***

Tula A. Connell

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Reading present-day political pundits gives the impression that the modern conservative political movement began with the rise of Ronald Reagan, first as Governor of California, and then as President of the United States. Those with a longer historical memory might push this date back to Senator Barry Goldwater becoming the Republic presidential candidate against Lyndon Baines Johnson. One of the great values in reading Tula A. Connell's *Conservative Counterrevolution* lies in her convincing demonstration that the modern conservative movement's birth started with opposition to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

The story Connell tells is eerily relevant. Relevance is not a requirement for this reviewer; too often attempts are made to fit historical events into patterns which would be unrecognizable to those in the past. But the ascension to power of Scott Walker in Wisconsin, and his successful attempts to end state employee collective bargaining, underscore the importance of Connell's work. The activities of Walker and his confederates are the most recent manifestations of a long struggle. Of special importance in this book is Connell's tracing of opposition to labor unions to the rise of the conservative movement.

Milwaukee had a long tradition of electing Socialist mayors: the first, Emil Seidel, a protégé of Socialist Party Congressman Victor Berger, served from 1910 to 1912. In 1916, Daniel Webster Hoan started a remarkably long career as a Socialist mayor, staying in office until 1940. Hoan's reign lasted through the Great Depression. Zeidler served from 1948 to 1960. All three were members of the Socialist Party of America, a characteristic of Socialist electoral officials in all states but Vermont. Prior to becoming mayor, Zeidler was elected to other offices, including the school board, where he sat beside Victor Berger's wife, Meta.

Just as those people – such as Seth Low – who sought reform in New York City were derided by Tammany Hall regulars as “goo-goos” (short for “Good Government”), Morris Hillquit of the Socialist Party of America employed “sewer socialists” as his term of derision for Socialist politicians who emphasized efficient and honest government which would publicly control and develop utilities, sanitation and education, in short, would manage the effects of industrialism in America.

Both Tammany Hall (and other political machines) and the “sewer socialists” delivered. But where Tammany benefitted both from the perpetuation of conditions

as well as their eradication, the sewer socialists made it their business to eliminate blight, ill health, poor education, and so forth.

Connell takes a number of struggles as emblematic of Zeidler's governance and the opposition of the anti-New Deal forces arrayed against him: the fight for a public educational television station, affordable city housing, and attempts to expand the city through annexation. She places this within the context of the urban disintegration of Milwaukee; unlike other cities, Milwaukee politicians, whether of the left or right, opposed bond issues and other forms of municipal debt. The only answer lay in expanding the tax base through annexation of surrounding areas – areas opposed for reasons of race, class and general fiscal conservatism. Hence the activities of both allies and enemies are made integral parts of the story as she continually demonstrates the complexities of historical situations.

Throughout the book, Connell demonstrates a remarkable ability to keep multiple issues, themes and factors juggling simultaneously. While clearly sympathetic to Zeidler, she does not blindly worship at his altar; furthermore, she does not demonize his opponents.

Connell's research includes massive archival work, examining personal papers and records from the press, as well as personal interviews. She deftly interweaves important factors often treated separately (such as race and gender) into her narrative. The activities of people of color and women, for example, are not simply tacked onto the end of a chapter in their own separate ghettos. Zeidler, a strong supporter of civil rights, was both red-baited and race-baited. Originally having decided not to run in 1956, he changed his mind because of the racism exhibited by many city residents – including union members. His ally on the housing issue in the Common Council, Vel Phillips, is discussed at length. Phillips had two strikes against her: race and gender. She became the first African American and the first woman to serve on the Common Council, and later in other State offices.

Zeidler's tragedy was his relationship to municipal workers' unions. A strong supporter of the labor movement who relied on union support in elections,

he drew a line in the sand over striking against the public. Although willing to engage with municipal workers unions ("meet and confer"), Zeidler opposed collective bargaining with municipal workers' unions. Though a Socialist, Zeidler veered more towards the ideal of a Cooperative Commonwealth than Marxian class struggle. The concept of the government providing for the public good and civic virtue animated and underscored Zeidler's career, whether as land surveyor, school board member or mayor. That Zeidler and his conservative enemies should have this labor issue in common, albeit for different reasons, constitutes a major irony.

This reviewer's only reservation has to do with the imputation of power to the media. Were the media as powerful and persuasive as represented, Zeidler could not have been re-elected multiple times during that very period of right-wing media growth and consolidation. The Yiddish right-wing, anti-labor daily paper *Morgen zhurnal* [Morning Journal] was read by thousands of Jewish labor union members, not for its ideology, but rather because, as a morning paper, readers could immediately find the day's job openings. If we look at how these readers voted, it is clear that reading the *Morgen zhurnal* did not translate into activity in the ballot box.

However, despite this reservation, Tula Connell has written an important work. This is an outstanding piece of historical research, and should serve as a model for those interested in municipal history in all its nuances.

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Shelby Shapiro is an independent scholar who obtained his Ph.D. in American Studies with a dissertation on the Yiddish press and how various publications of differing political and religious viewpoints sought to construct different identities for Jewish immigrant women. He has written variously about jazz, anarchism, and the labour movement, and is presently Associate Editor of Records of the State of Connecticut.