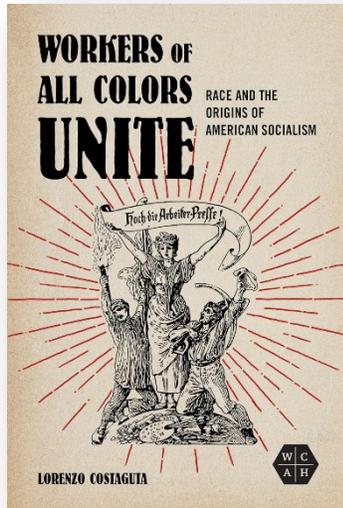


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Workers of All Colors Unite: Race and Origins of American Socialism

Lorenzo Costaguta

University of Illinois Press, 2023.

175 pp + Notes & Index. Illus. b&w. \$40.00.

ISBN 978-0-252-08707-3

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Workers-All-Colors-Unite-Socialism/dp/0252044924>

Review by Shelby Shapiro, with author's response.

First published online 20 February 2026 and will appear in Volume 11 of *The Independent Scholar*.

Lorenzo Costaguta has written a very interesting work that fills in holes in labor history and the histories of race and ethnicity in America. It will also be of interest to scholars of the radical and ethnic press. This volume covers the period prior to the Civil War into the early twentieth century, with occasional mentions of events and movements thereafter. His book meets at the junction of labor history and socialism in America, within the contexts of developing Darwinism, the ideas of Herbert Spencer ("survival of the fittest") and scientific racism. Specifically, Costaguta examines changes in the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) as it went from being centered in the German-American immigrant community prior to 1890 to its more "Americanized" version under the leadership of a non-German immigrant, Daniel DeLeon.

Costaguta does an exemplary job of tracing the interactions of ideas and ideologues. He traces the ins and outs of radical politics from before the Civil War with skill, noting that the Radical Republican abolitionist Wendell Phillips opposed any compromise on the issue of Chinese exclusion (p. 76).

Costaguta starts, not with the SLP, but with the Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS) and then its California rival, the Workingmen's Party of California (WPC). The book focuses on American labor history from before the Civil War into the early decades of the twentieth century, with occasional mentions of what followed that period. Among those dealt with at length is the early German-American socialist, Joseph Weydemeyer, who emigrated to the US after the failed 1848 revolutions in Europe. He joined the Union Army

and rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Weydemeyer was one of the American connections of Karl Marx to the US.

Costaguta examines the changing attitudes and activities of socialists in various arenas: slavery and racism; Chinese exclusion; and matters concerning Native Americans. Unfortunately, there are significant sins of omission in his account. While talking about the policies of the First International Workingmen's Association and the activities and analyses of Karl Marx, nowhere does Costaguta mention why the First International left London for new headquarters in New York, where it would fade and die. Nor does he even mention the name of Marx's main rival in the International, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, or any other rival, for that matter. To correct this, readers should turn to a major and recent (2016) study, Gareth Stedman Jones's *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Penguin Books).

Equally disturbing is that there is not a single, solitary mention of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, which organized everyone from timber workers in the Northwest to pine workers in the South, longshoremen on the East Coast, agricultural workers in the Midwest, and textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Patterson, New Jersey. The languages employed by the IWW went beyond German and English, as noted in a website devoted to its press.¹ Publications appeared in "Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Flemish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Yiddish," in addition to English and a daily paper in Finnish. Its organizers and orators were likewise multilingual. Moreover, it sought to organize industrially, seeking to enlist both skilled and unskilled workers under the slogan of "One Big Union" for All. The AFL excluded the unskilled and racial minorities, and the IWW became a main rival of the SLP's organizational efforts. Not even mentioning the IWW is thus a serious omission in Costaguta's account.

Even though the IWW is not mentioned at all, Costaguta cites one of its most famous leaders, Big Bill Haywood—once (p. 171), without noting Haywood's connection with the IWW, the Socialist Party (from which he was expelled), or the Western Federation of

Miners. He also does not note that Haywood recommended refusing to follow state law banning interracial meetings. This, he said, was a law that needed to end by direct action—just doing it.

Arguably one of the best chapters in the book is the one entitled "Must They Go? American Socialism and the Racialization of Chinese Immigrants, 1876-1890". The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 spurred the Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS) into action. With Black and White workers standing shoulder to shoulder in the eastern states, a different reaction occurred on the West Coast, as Denis Kearney of the Workingmen's Party of California (WPC) rallied workers in California to mob action under the slogan and program of "the Chinese must go." Three years earlier the Cigar Makers Association had devised something new—the union label. This union label served less to denote a product made by unionized workers, but was a way to let buyers know these goods were made by white men.² (This fact too is strangely omitted by the author.) Costaguta relates the interactions between the WPUS and the WPC. The question of whether to oppose Chinese exclusion in accordance with socialist internationalism came face to face with a desire to be "with the masses" (p. 74). Ultimately the SLP would sacrifice principle for expedience, as did the American Federation of Labor.

It was not only the SLP which supported Chinese exclusion: In 1904, Morris Hillquit (born Hillkowitz) of the Socialist Party of America supported a resolution before the International Socialist Congress in favor of immigration restriction, justifying it by stating that it "only" sought to restrict "Asiatics." *Dos yidishes tagblatt*, a conservative anti-radical daily paper, lambasted him, writing "Morris Hillquit belongs to those who hide their Jewish nationality . . . who crawl after the Gentiles on all fours. It was not enough for him to change his name . . . not only did he run away from his people, he . . . backed closing the door of the land of freedom to those who like himself wished to find a

¹ ("IWW Newspapers-IWW History Project", see <http://depts.washington.edu/iww/newspapers.html>).

² Shah, Nayan, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 160.

home in America.”³ Costaguta notes Daniel DeLeon’s opposition to the Hillquit resolution (p. 160).

In dealing with Black Americans, Costaguta writes about Peter H. Clark, the first African-American in the SLP. Clark represented lost potential for the SLP, since he soon moved on—a pattern in Clark’s career as he moved from movement to movement, starting as a protégé of Frederick Douglass, and ultimately ending up in the then-segregationist Democratic Party.⁴ Clark’s short, two year life within the SLP, could have been contrasted with that of IWW leader, Ben Fletcher (1890-1949), who led Local 8 of the Maritime Transport Workers Union, whose membership consisted of African Americans, Irish-Americans and European immigrants. At the height of its influence it controlled most of Philadelphia’s docks for almost a decade. Fletcher served three years of a ten-year sentence for criminal syndicalism at Leavenworth (commenting to Haywood that the judge spoke ungrammatically—his sentences were too long . . .).⁵ While arguably Fletcher’s activities fell outside the time period for the rest of the book, Costaguta mentions the Black Panther Party, the New Left, the Communist Party, and others who certainly fell outside the book’s time period.

In the chapter on the SLP and its positions and reactions to the situation of Native Americans, the author discusses the changing attitudes of Socialists

when dealing with race, evolution, Darwinism, and associated topics. Although interesting, the section concerning Karl Marx’s final attitudes on these matters has no relevance, since his notes were not published until 1971 (p. 142). The same goes for the writings of Kevin B. Anderson (b. 1948) and Raya Dunayevskaya (1910-1987) (p. 142). Neither person, no matter how informed, was part of these discussions.

Workers of All Colors Unite is well worth reading, with notes of the author’s sins of omission. Even with the author’s sins of omission in mind, there is much to be gained from this volume.

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies) served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt*, *To the Point*, the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication, and was Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut 2012-2021*. In 2024 Palgrave Macmillan published his *Words to the Wives: The Yiddish Press, Immigrant Women and Jewish-American Identity*. He is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism. He is presently researching a history of the “Yiddish Fleet Street”, New York City’s East Broadway.

Author’s response

I would like to thank The Independent Scholar and its editor for the in-depth review of my book. I am glad they found value in my scholarship and considered it worth to be read, discussed and criticized. I am also grateful for reaching out to ask if I wanted to respond to some of the critiques raised. I am taking this opportunity as a chance to give to the journal’s readers some further reasoning about what the reviewer calls “sins of omissions.” I do not want to abuse the readers’ patience, so I will keep my reply short and engage with what I found were the most significant points raised.

Upon reading Shelby Shapiro’s review of my book, I got the impression that his intention was to revive one of the oldest and most venerable clashes in the history of left – the clash between socialism and anarchism. Most of the points raised by him relate to episodes in the history of European and American anarchism that I was guilty of not discussing or mentioning in my book. I admit I found those critiques puzzling.

³ Gorenstein, Arthur, “A Portrait of Ethnic Politics: The Socialists and the 1908 and 1910 Congressional Elections on the East Side,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 50, no. 3 (March 1961): 202-238.

⁴ See Taylor, Nikki M., *America’s First Black Socialist: The Radical Life of Peter H. Clark*. (Lexington: The University

Press of Kentucky, 2013), for a full treatment of his life and career.

⁵ For more on Fletcher, see, Cole, Peter, *Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly* (PM Press, 2021).

Anyone with some familiarity with the history of the Western left (i.e., anyone that has or will read my book) knows that the First International failed because of the contrasts between Marx and Bakunin. In the first chapter of my book, in a section entirely dedicated to the internal contrasts between English- and German-speaking members of the American branch of the First International, adding details on the Marx-Bakunin debate would have been distracting if not simply out of place.

Even stranger is the expectation that I discussed in my book episodes in the history of anarchism that happened outside its timeframe (1848-1899), like the history of the Industrial Workers of the World, founded in 1905, and the life of Ben Fletcher, an African American leader who was active in the IWW from the 1910s onwards. The only part of my book where I venture in the twentieth century in some depth is the conclusions. In that section, my goal is clear: establishing the relevance of the socialist Gilded Age debate on race in the history of socialism in the United States. If the Black Panther Party, the New Left and the CPUSA (to mention the three organizations that the reviewer points at) are part of my analysis, it is because they are very clearly part of that history. But the IWW? Scholars of anarchism would be the firsts to contest this characterization, with much reason.

One last critique I would like to address is the reviewer's opinion that including a sustained discussion of Karl Marx's thought on anthropological theories (and later debates by Dunayevskaya and Anderson) in my chapter on Native Americans had "no relevance", because no American socialist in the 1880s could be part of these discussions. Nowhere in the book I stated that they could. The point of including Marx's ideas was to show how, unbeknown to one another, Marx and SLP members followed similar intellectual trajectories, struggling to square historical materialism with contemporary anthropological science (with different levels of complexity and different results, of course).

Thanks to the readers for their attention and to the reviewer for this occasion of debate and exchange. I look forward to further discussions on my book and on shared topics of interest.

Lorenzo Costaguta