

## **Unfulfilled Promise**

**By: Joel Rogers**

**From: *The Nation Online***

**Date: 6/21/2004**

Jim Weinstein has spent most of his adult life writing about the failures and possibilities of the American left. He has done so in many books--among others, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State*, *The Decline of Socialism in America* and *Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics*--and countless articles and editorials, most appearing in publications he helped found, fund and edit: *Studies on the Left*, *Socialist Review* and *In These Times*. His questions have always been these: How should we understand the past century of the American left, particularly the fate of its more explicitly socialist elements? And how can we now advance a distinctively American democratic socialism?

Weinstein's answers to these questions, over nearly half a century of writing, have demonstrated an amazing, not to say worrisome, consistency. Sometimes expressed in elegiac tones, sometimes with near belligerence, his answer to the first question is that the American left actually had substantial public influence and stature in the first quarter of the twentieth century, but then squandered it through a series of bad strategic choices. On the second question, the answer is to develop a practical electoral strategy that will allow the left to connect to the mass public and get some power in the state.

How the left blew its early-twentieth-century prominence, and kept blowing it, comprises much of *The Long Detour*, and most of it reprises arguments Weinstein has made elsewhere. To telegraph this sorry story, as Weinstein tells it: First the left came under the influence of Communists enamored of a Russian Revolution already turned worse than rotten. Their error was not merely in identifying socialism with Stalinist terror, but in ever hoping that a country as economically backward as the Soviet Union would, even under more democratic conditions, ever hold much instruction for socialist practice in rich countries like the United States.

Then, under the influence of many of the same characters, the left blurred its voice to the point of unintelligibility in the "popular front" politics leading up to and through World War II. Afterward, with the commencement of the cold war and more or less complete discrediting of Soviet Communism, the left was numbly defensive, and barely tried to offer a homespun alternative. The New Left of the early 1960s actually began this project, but never matured as an organization, and soon began tearing itself apart in sectarian disputes and "can you top this" acts of radicalism. In its worst and bleakest moments, like the Weathermen, it even succumbed to the fatal appeal of violent anarchism.

After Vietnam, the left spent most of the 1970s and early 1980s pursuing identity politics. This made inclusive organization more difficult, and its worst excesses offended the mass public. Then we had the Clinton years, when the left (outside trade disputes) largely faded out again, at least until Clinton's scandalous near end. The 2000 election brought some resurgence, but in the wrong direction: Prominent parts of the left identified themselves with the Pied Piper candidacy of Ralph Nader, whom Weinstein squarely blames for having thrown the election to Bush, and the shameful disaster that is our present national government.

But now, Weinstein argues in *Detour*, we can put these failures behind us. Lessons have been learned. The key historic forces preventing the emergence of a vital American socialism--the pull of Soviet Communism and the push of the cold war struggle against it--are no longer present. The productive forces have continued their steady advance, relieving material constraints on our happiness and pressing political ones into sharper relief. America has also become a far more tolerant place on race and sex and sexual orientation. So the possibilities of articulating a new popular politics, and new social relations and solidarities to harness those more advanced productive forces, are in fact greater than ever. Like a radical Rip van Winkle, American socialism could finally wake up from its long sleep, revived and potentially stronger than ever.

To realize this hope, however, Weinstein argues once more that the left needs an electoral strategy, which it does not have at present. With American politics hardwired against third-party efforts, that will require building an election-minded organization that is not a formal party. Such an organization could enter the primaries of the major parties with identified candidates of its own, but without the baggage of maintaining and defending its own party line. On the right the Christian Coalition is a recent example of such a non-party party. Nebraska's Nonpartisan League, which successfully dominated that state's politics for half a century, provided an earlier and very important, if understudied, example on the left. Weinstein thinks we should build a modern equivalent.

This bare-bones summary of its core argument does not do justice to *The Long Detour*, which is chock-full of colorful profiles of different personalities on the left, and instructive extensions and asides to the core argument on matters as diverse as Marx's theory of history, early American utopian experiments, the path of corruption in the Soviet Union and the peculiar culture and romance of American Communism.

But this is the core: The long detour of left engagement with the essentially irrelevant case of the Soviet Union is over. This wicked old witch is dead, and the munchkins can reclaim Oz--but only if they reinvent the Nonpartisan League in new millennium garb.

Unfulfilled Promise:

I had three, pretty mixed, reactions to *The Long Detour*.

First, and maybe most relevant to potential readers, this is an extremely accessible book that covers a huge amount of ground, and about as good

a short introduction to the history of American socialism as you're likely to find. It's worth reading, and is also something that can be safely given to undergraduates or others who have not made a lifetime study of the American left, but might benefit from knowing something about our past.

Second, whatever one makes of Weinstein's cramped views on the social movements of the last quarter-century, his emphasis on the importance of developing an effective progressive electoral strategy seems exactly right. Progressives need some platform for their own coordination; they need to show what they can do with government power; and they certainly need to connect with the mass public in ways that are politically meaningful. All these are either facilitated by or require electoral work, in addition to our present, largely non-electoral, organizing and advocacy. And we need to get over thinking of electoral politics as competitive with other organizing. It can be fully complementary, using power within the state to build power outside it.

And building an effective electoral strategy isn't exactly rocket science. We need a positive program for what we propose to do with government--ideally, of five or six items that could be printed on a postcard. We need to repeat that program endlessly. We need to recruit, train and run a vast number of candidates, at all levels of office, to run on it, and support them in office if they win. This is a lot of work, much of it boring, but it can be done. We just don't do it at present on any scale, much less on a movementwide basis. But we should.

I also agree with Weinstein that it's generally impossible to do these things in the United States within the organizational structure of a "third" or minor party. He does miss a very important and instructive exception to this rule--namely, the Working Families Party in New York. But the WFP is able to do what it does because of a peculiarity in New York electoral law, viz. its allowance of "fusion" between parties on the ballot. That means that minor parties can join major ones in jointly nominating candidates, with votes cast on any nominating party's ballot line counting in those candidates' total. This permits minor party to vote their values--by voting on their own party's line--without wasting their votes or spoiling. It also permits them to build their own candidate stock, by bargaining their support for mainstream candidates on parts of the ticket for major-party support for their own people on other parts.

Fusion was critical to all minor-party efforts in the second half of the nineteenth century. It provided a distinctive answer to the question that in other systems is answered more straightforwardly by proportional representation: namely, how to give meaningful weight to minority electoral sentiment. But fusion also only survives today in a handful of states, and the ban on the practice was upheld by the Supreme Court in its 1997 ruling in *Timmons v. Twin Cities Area New Party*. Proportional representation is also vestigial here. So Weinstein is basically right that under present law, third parties are a hopeless waste of time, which does indeed recommend that we pursue our electoral ambitions through something like the Nonpartisan League or Christian Coalition.

But third, and much less happily, *The Long Detour* is very thin on just how any of this work might actually get done, what barriers it faces and why it hasn't happened thus far. Recent history has not been kind to the prediction that Soviet collapse would renew social democracy. It hasn't because social democracy's ills have long owed less to a fear of Communism than to more mundane problems: diminished confidence in the nation-state as an effective agent (owing both to globalization and the prominence of demands not easily met by national government), changing structures of work and corporate organization, the growing imbalance between labor and corporate power, etc. About these, Weinstein has little to say. And he is almost eerily silent on recent left practice directly relevant to his own argument. He doesn't mention the third-party defeat in *Timmons*, even though it helps seal his argument. But neither does he say anything about recent efforts (predating the current mass efforts against Bush) to build other sorts of left electoral capacity; or the way new productive forces like the Internet are facilitating organizing (the words "Internet," "net," and "web" don't appear anywhere in his index); or changes within organized labor that show promise politically, including the voter mobilization strategies that the Christian Coalition copied, and that he so admires. And so on and so on.

The Long Detour would have been much stronger if it paid more attention to these things. Under different political constraints than in the past, with both success and failure, the American left is making its own history now no less than in the past. It is odd and disappointing that Weinstein, who argues that this particular moment is so ripe with opportunity for the American left, has so little to say about what it is actually doing.