

traditional society with its top-down ranking of humankind and modern ultra-competitive society with its survival-of-the-fittest ethics.

The conviction that power should be distributed on a vastly more participatory basis – that every gardener may govern, to adapt an old formulation – has led the radical left to dissent from conventions that many take to be natural. The left has tended, if not with total consistency, to oppose the division of people into superior and inferior castes or groups, whether by social class (wealthy, poor, intermediate), gender (male and female), or race (“whites” over African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and other people of color). Some past social structures of division, such as slavery and state-mandated racial segregation, have succumbed to radical challenges, but even today privileges accorded on the basis of class, gender, and race remain the focus and target of radical action, supplemented by concerns such as promoting peace, environmental sustainability, and freedom of sexual orientation. What makes left-wing criticism radical is the conviction that freedom, equality, democracy, and solidarity will demand changing the existing order of social life in fundamental ways – supplanting, for example, the power of multinational corporations – and devising new egalitarian ways of social interaction and political engagement. In this way the radical left differs profoundly from the so-called “radical” right, which works to reinforce class, gender, and racial privileges, if often in the guise of liberty, patriotism, populism, tradition, or merit. The radical left has always been a minority current in an American society that is reluctant to entertain possibilities of dramatic change. Indeed, U.S. culture has seen implacable, enduring hierarchies despite the country’s founding declaration that “all men are created equal.” Nevertheless, the left has propelled major changes and frequently given shape to what Americans broadly take as the nation’s core traditions.

This comprehensive history of American left-wing radicalism since the Second World War will cover the left’s surge right after the Second World War, adversity in the McCarthy era, growth in the 1960s and 1970s, and precariousness in more recent decades. The waxing and waning of radical fortunes across this entire period are best understood by apprehending *margin* and *mainstream* as the constitutive duality of the American radical experience. Radicals must exist in estrangement from society, in opposition to the whole established order, as when the Black Panther Party condemned a white-dominated “Babylon” or radical feminists opposed “the patriarchy.” Radicals oppose existing society, placing them on the outside, but at the very same time desire a future in which their values

are made the basis of a restructured society. Toward that end, they must strive to transform, by whatever means available to them, the culture and society they oppose, which requires engaging larger currents that can issue in victories. The task of maintaining ardent opposition to the status quo, as outsiders if need be, while also seeking solidarity with strong social forces, here and now, that might be capable of changing it root and branch poses a dialectic of margin and mainstream. That dialectic entails a tension between two commitments: the willingness to hold fast for a minority view and the struggle to imagine and help fashion a new majority. Such a tension can be, at different times, fruitful in generating new strategies and tactics of change or disabling as it tempts leftists in either direction, toward unjustified pride in their isolation or toward an appeal to popularity that sacrifices their radical goals. Margin and mainstream, together, provide the fulcrum of our analysis of the history of American radicalism.

So characteristic of the radical experience is this duality that it dates to American radicalism's formative phase, prior to the Civil War, when to advocate immediate freedom for all slaves was a *radical* idea embraced by a prophetic minority, an idea that made one a pariah. Wendell Phillips, one such pariah, is an exemplary case study in how margin and mainstream works powerfully as a descriptor of the condition of radical commitment. A well-bred Boston attorney, Phillips risked comfort and found himself relegated to the margins when he decided to give full measure to his beliefs when he saw another abolitionist attacked by a conservative mob. As a result, Phillips became "the first and greatest American agitator," even the "inventor" of the "method of agitation," according to his first biographer, and as a result was compelled to suffer "the decree of social outlawry."<sup>8</sup>

If a rebel, however, Phillips was not alone. The decades before the Civil War saw abolitionism spill over, stimulating other egalitarianisms. Communal experiments in socialism mushroomed. The early labor movement challenged onerous working conditions and poor pay. Experimental free-thinking flourished against the restraining orthodoxies of established religion, public opinion, and custom. Radical women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Wright, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Victoria Woodhull, and others – were regarded as scandalous for

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Martyn, *Wendell Phillips: The Agitator* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1890), pp. 105, 179.

their advocacy of equal rights for women, abolition, and freethinking about religion and marriage. These combined campaigns shocked and outraged the American public even if they presaged many social and cultural changes later widely accepted. They give enduring clues as to the sensibility of American radicalism, for radicals ever since have repeatedly acknowledged them as forerunners, as when A. Philip Randolph said of the “New Negro radicals” of his generation, “We stood upon the shoulders of the civil rights fighters of the Reconstruction era, and they stood upon the shoulders of the black abolitionists.”<sup>9</sup>

Wendell Phillips understood full well that the abolitionist cause he had joined was that of a distinct and beleaguered minority subject to vitriolic opprobrium, as he stated in 1853: “The press, the pulpit, the wealth, the literature, the prejudices, the political arrangements, the present self-interest of the country, are all against us. . . . The elements which control public opinion and mould the masses are against us. We can but pick off here and there a man from the triumphant majority.” Simultaneously, his radicalism rested on a deep belief in the cause of democracy, the rule of the majority among a self-governing people. In the very same year as his unblinking recognition of his marginality, he said, “The convictions of most men are on our side, and this will surely appear, if we can only pierce the crust of their prejudice or indifference.” He was committed to change by means of moral suasion, because he believed the democratic age required “a government of brains, a government of ideas. I believe in it – in public opinion.” In these words, Phillips made clear the tension between the necessity of accepting marginality as a principled oppositionist, even to the point of inviting scorn and persecution, while simultaneously orienting toward, indeed *believing in*, the people at large.<sup>10</sup>

How did Phillips hold to opposition in the face of overpowering hostility while claiming democracy was on his side? Only by a powerful sense of futurity: a confidence that today’s persecuted minority would in the long run forge popular sentiment. Radicals by necessity tack back and forth between the aspiration to represent a broad popular constituency and the actual status of being a political minority engaged in agitation, persecuted by authorities, and abhorred by much of popular opinion. Small bands of radicals can reshape the mainstream when, given the right

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Wendell Phillips, *The Lesson of the Hour*, ed. Noel Ignatiev (Chicago, Ill.: Charles H. Kerr, 2001), pp. 46, 70, 80.

combination of changing circumstances and wise and creative strategy, the agitators' ideas and ambitions succeed in mobilizing sufficient numbers to demand great change, whether by electoral means or mass protest outside the doors of formal legislatures, compelling new policies and popular majorities.

A democratic dilemma arises insofar as opposition to the status quo places agitators in a literal or figurative stance of outlawry. Disobeying existing conventions, they often must face a reactionary, resistant mainstream – not only among constituted authorities but much of the public too. For a radical politics, then, “democracy” cannot mean whatever majority opinion holds at any particular moment but must speak to the promise that masses of people will at some point prove amenable to radical ideas, whether consciously or not. At the same time, the radical left must expect and be prepared for rapid changes in circumstances, so its agitators must address themselves not to routine government and party competition but cultivate readiness for “extraordinary politics,” revolutionary situations that are not in any strict sense predictable or well scripted. Phillips recognized this, declaring in 1853, “Politics is but the common pulse-beat, of which revolution is the fever-spasm.” The latter could be found in those exceptional moments when marginal agitators suddenly gain access to mainstream sentiment and in crises that demand dramatic improvisations. Thus even though Phillips began as a pacifist, he proved ready to change his tactics and strategy as the Civil War broke out. He and the escaped slave Frederick Douglass bent all their agitation toward compelling the reluctant Republican Party leadership to make abolition of slavery the Union’s cause of arms. The fact that war provided the occasion for Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and ride to reelection in 1864 on a platform endorsing a new Constitutional amendment for an absolute end to slavery in the republic – ideas far outside the mainstream only a few years before – proved Phillips’s revolutionary anticipation correct. The anti-slavery crusade remains one of the clearest cases in all American history of how forbidden, vilified radical opinions and organizing can suddenly propel dramatic and almost completely unexpected new futures.<sup>11</sup>

For black abolitionists and the most radical of white abolitionists, the eradication not only of slavery but also of racism was the aim. Beyond that profoundly radical objective, abolitionism gave rise to all manner of

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, *Lesson of the Hour*, p. 73.

ferment, from women's rights to resistance to imperialism and war, thus giving birth to the modern American radical left. These varied currents did not always coalesce, and sometimes they even clashed (many women's suffrage advocates were white supremacists, for example, and socialists could be too), but many individual radical thinkers did combine all of the most egalitarian of these demands. The ensemble that emerged was truly a "movement of movements," to use a phrase that would gain ground at the end of the twentieth century to convey the range of protests for freedom, autonomy, social justice, and collective self-determination in the United States and the world.

Following the Civil War, "the Labor Question" became a central focus of the American left. The nineteenth-century phraseology would not survive, but the constellation of issues of property, work, and class that it summoned very much remained at the center of radical thought and action up through the Second World War. The older radicalism against slavery was not immaterial to that development. Although many abolitionists hewed to the bourgeois belief that "free labor" lay in freedom of contract, abolition seemed radical in its day precisely because it proposed to confiscate property without compensation – for slaves had been, after all, valuable owned property. Some opponents of chattel slavery sought also to surmount "wage slavery": the condition of workers within the modern order of private property, production for profit, and capital accumulation. Radicals faulted capitalism for its glaring inequalities of power and wealth, for exploitation of wage labor, for a headlong rush of market-oriented life that perpetuated such hierarchies as the Victorian subordination of women to men, and for fostering extreme individualism in personal accumulation of wealth, attenuating ethical responsibility to others. Many looked to Europe as harbinger of new societies to come. When the Paris Commune of 1871 erupted, Wendell Phillips proclaimed, "There is no hope for France but in the Reds." His fellow veteran of abolitionism, Theodore Tilton, held, "The same logic and sympathy – the same conviction and ardor – which made us an Abolitionist twenty years ago, make us a Communist now."<sup>12</sup>

Criticism of capitalism and bourgeois life came in two forms. One, social, assailed inequalities of wealth and power; the other, artistic,

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998), p. 103, 106.