

# The Homeland of Equality

*by Charles Lenoir*

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**While many see the United States as a land of freedom, Sean Wilentz questions the passion for American equality. He takes a new look at the country's political life and the deep antagonism to political parties, periodically played out in the country.**

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*Reviewed: Sean Wilentz, [The Politicians and the Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics](#), W. W. Norton & Company, 2016, 384 p.*

Sean Wilentz is a professor at the History Department of Princeton University. His latest book defends an argument that may, at first glance, seem iconoclastic. At a time when traditional American parties generate deep mistrust, the author considers that partisan organisations have always played a key role in social transformation in the United States. He states that these changes were encouraged by the constant quest for equality, an essential force of public action that politicians serve best when they are skilled in the art of compromise and party building.

## **Long-term Partisan and Egalitarian Dynamics**

The first part of the book studies the two fundamental facets of American political life in the long term. These are the pursuit of equality and the essential role parties play. In the first chapter, Sean Wilentz shows that only the latter seem to be motors of change (p. 28). Partisanship led to the adoption of fundamental reforms like Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal, his cousin Franklin Delano's New Deal, and even Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. This demonstration allows the author to better emphasize the limits of an anti-partisan trend that dates back to Independence. The rejection of parties can be traced back to George Washington, who saw them as artificial and illegitimate (p. 6), and this attitude has

resurfaced several times over the last two centuries. We find it both amongst the Confederates as well as the Mugwumps, the liberal Republicans who were disappointed in the way the country was rebuilt after the Civil War. But it also appears in the progressive dissident, Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Campaign adventure in 1912. Through their post-partisan politics, Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama are only expressing a latent mistrust of parties. Now, according to the author, the desire to surpass party cleavages has always ended in failure, both electoral and political.

Sean Wilentz states that at some point in their history, all the major parties were driven by a solid egalitarian tradition, and the second chapter of the book traces the history of this tradition. The revolutionary period sees the culmination of an egalitarianism fed by anti-monarchism and a rejection of privilege. This protean tradition fights two fundamental types of inequality: racial (as well as sexual) inequality and economic inequality. The responses to these inequalities nonetheless vary depending on the periods and the political actors who promote them.

During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Jacksonian Democrats denounce financial monopolies, while the Whigs tend to see the source of economic inequality in individual moral differences. In other words, poverty would only be the result of bad personal choices and a refusal to apply the virtues of "industry, economy, and temperance" (p. 45). However, these different egalitarian traditions agree on a point inherited from the Revolution, which sees value as the product of free work. This theory encouraged harmony between work and capital and saw the capitalist primarily as a workingman (p. 44). It hence led to a valorization of capitalism and even a moral denunciation of slavery.

From the 1860-1870s onwards, a new economic order emerges, threatening the labor theory of value. The theory of a self-regulating economy encourages a conservative economic discourse, favorable to the world of business that attacks any kind of regulatory approach. After the New Deal and the 'Great Compression', a period when economic inequality was drastically reduced (p. 59), this discourse returned to the forefront in the context of the economic crisis of the 1970s. New gaps in wealth emerged in American society, marked by the "great divergence" (p. 63) between the richest and the poorest.

The struggle against racial inequality is interspersed with similar failures, punctuated by the so-called Jim Crow segregation laws at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the conservative reaction to the struggle for civil rights in the 1940s and 1950s. The strength of the American egalitarian tradition was nonetheless rooted in its constant ability to reinvent itself, from Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal against the excesses of the capitalist order and the defense of the middle classes, to Barack Obama's egalitarian platform, in reaction to the 2008 crisis, not forgetting the final civil rights victory in the 1960s.

The connection between a quest for equality and partisanship dynamics allows the author to put forward an analysis of recent American political life. He thus highlights the

limits of Barack Obama's post-partisan politics (of which he was highly critical<sup>1</sup>) at a time of strong polarization between political parties, where party cleavages took greater precedence than ever over ideological differences (p. 30). Similarly, he underscores that the struggle for equality has made a major comeback since the 2008 crisis. On the part of the Democrats, in particular, this theme was a key feature of the 2016 Presidential election debates, and it was on the eve of this election that Sean Wilentz's book was released.

## Key Moments Revisited

The second part of the work illustrates the connection between partisanship and the egalitarian struggle, through a study of key characters and episodes in American political life. A new light is shed on the personalities who were victims of a misunderstanding or a sometimes overly severe historical judgment. Thomas Paine, the famous author of *Common Sense* thus appears as a forgotten figure of egalitarianism, who favored a more radical and democratic version of the American Revolution. John Quincy Adams, the depressive president obscured by the shadow cast by a more flamboyant Andrew Jackson, is presented as one of the heralds of the anti-slavery struggle at the end of his life. John Brown, a ferocious sworn opponent of slavery is seen as a 'positive agent for change' as the failure of his disastrous raid against the federal armory at Harpers Ferry opened the door to the White House for Abraham Lincoln. The major worker's strikes of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the Homestead Strike of 1892, are placed in the egalitarian American tradition, even though they often failed to break the new capitalist order, a product of the alliance between the triumphant industrial world and the national government.

We also see the author's audacity in the way he takes a stand on issues that continue to disturb the historiography of the United States. Based on a rigorous identification of the literature, he offers a new reading of his country's political life, viewed from the crucial perspective of the partisan approach or the egalitarian tradition. Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner, is presented as heir to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment philosophers. He also appears as someone who played a significant role in the development of Republican Democracy and participated actively in political life, while progressively embracing an anti-slavery discourse, particularly towards the end of his life. Abraham Lincoln emerges as neither an emancipating saint nor an underhand racist, but above all as a statesman, rigorously playing partisan politics, while being capable of evolving politically with the profound transformations he sees taking place in American society. As for Lyndon B. Johnson, he appears as the 'good' president of the Great Society and of civil rights, and the 'bad' commander in chief, responsible for the disastrous intensification of the Vietnam War. He stands out mainly for his obvious political skill, which he uses to shepherd the most egalitarian political program in America's recent

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Wilentz, 'Live By the Movement, Die By the Movement', *The New Republic*, 9 November 2010.

history through Congress, thanks to his knowledge of the secret workings of the system. In each case, major reforms seem to be born out of a convergence between the forces of protest, like the anti-slavery groups or the movement for civil rights, and political personalities, particularly the progressive reformers, rather than solely the pressure exerted by a handful of radical or social movements acting independently.

## **Historiographic Paths That Deserve Further Investigation?**

The strength of Sean Wilentz's demonstration should not, however, deter us from highlighting certain limitations. We could accuse the author of having an incomplete vision of American history as he leaves aside important aspects of the country's political life, like the Reconstruction, the New Deal, or the post war struggle for civil rights. These are often mentioned but not dealt with specifically, despite their importance in the struggle for equality. The choice of certain characters to the detriment of others also raises several questions: why W. E. B. Du Bois rather than Martin Luther King? Why John Quincy Adams rather than Andrew Jackson? Why Lyndon B. Johnson rather than Franklin Delano Roosevelt? Obviously the author is aware of the difficulty of covering two centuries of national history in a few hundred pages.—Thus, he defuses this objection in the introduction by willingly recognizing that his work is a sketch that stops at outlining 'avenues', for a new understanding of American political history (p. xvii).

*The Politicians and the Egalitarians* could also seem to be writing history from above, as it minimizes the impact of certain social movements on political realignment and the reform process. When he mentions the relative failure of the farmers' and workers' movements at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (p. 57), the author underestimates the role this movement played, both in the emergence of a regulatory State, as well as in the transformation of the established political forces. Primarily, the Democrat party progressively fuses with the Populists and various farmers' movements, guaranteeing William J. Bryan's dominant position for over fifteen years.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the same party finally returns to power under Wilson's presidency in 1912. The political or electoral failure of the movements that arise beyond the traditional parties, should not, however question their ability to restructure the political field or overthrow established power relationships, as illustrated by the antebellum anti-slavery parties or even the Segregationists' American Independent Party gathered around George Wallace during the presidential election of 1968.

Lastly, we could question the content of different American egalitarian traditions, on their similarities or differences with other comparable traditions in European countries. For

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

example those that have also undergone processes of political democratization, and economic and social transformations related to industrialization. It is highly surprising to note that party relationships to ideology, fundamental to partisan configurations and transformations, are never really addressed.<sup>3</sup> It is true that the author was not dealing with ideological issues, but a discussion of both the issue of equality and the partisan structure, should inevitably have involved a consideration of political ideas.

Written in a pleasant, fluid style, with well-inserted touches of humor, Sean Wilentz provides a new historical view of his country's political life. Nonetheless, his work also provides food for thought, given the current situation in the United States, and the disruptions caused by Donald Trump's deeply unequal economic and social policies. The author's central argument could, in fact, seem out of step, given the results of the presidential election of 2016. We should nonetheless bear in mind that the election of the current occupant of the White House is primarily the result of a rejection of the workings of classical partisanship. This book should hence be seen as an invitation to explore other aspects of American history from a new perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828-1996*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Hans Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013.