

A Popular Superstition

By Daniel De Leon

Upon being asked last week, whether a third party was to come up, Senator John Sherman promptly and emphatically answered: "No, this country cannot afford more than two parties."

An expression of this sort would not be surprising from people of less intelligence and information than Senator Sherman; indeed, it is a common one on the lips of a large number of ignoramuses, who inflict their opinions upon a patient public. That this opinion should be shared by Senator Sherman shows, however, the power of popular superstitions, and goes far to confirm the suspicion that even the ablest among the plutocratic politicians is an intellectual bankrupt.

The political history of our own country, as much as, if not more so than, that of any other, establishes the maxim that progress is due wholly to third parties and that, not only has this country ample room for such, but that its people have periodically raised such third parties into power; crowded both the old parties, in existence at any such time, out of the way; annihilated one of them; and maintained the quondam third party in power until it had run its course, and a new broom, representing an advanced idea, became necessary, when the old process would be renewed—each time despite the protests of the then existing parties that the country had no room for more than two parties. The most amusing feature of this recurring phenomenon is that the party most emphatic in the assertion of this dogma is always that one which itself rose from the "third party" stage to that of "one of the two great parties."

Senator Sherman illustrates the truth of this statement. Thirty-seven years ago there was no Republican Party in existence in the United States. The Democratic and the Whig parties then divided, in the main, the political convictions of the country. The question of chattel slavery had forced itself forward. The Democratic Party, true to its moss-back, reactionary instincts, upheld slavery, the Whig Party did not dare to grapple with, and dodged the problem. The aspirations of the antislavery movement had to find expression in a new, third, political party; and in that way, and for that reason was the Republican Party born. It sprang up as a third party, in the teeth of the declarations of the Whigs—who had similarly sprung up before—that there was no room in the

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country for more than two parties; it put a quietus on the Whig [Party]; overthrew the Democratic Party; came into power, and there developed the class characteristics of the class that had called it into being—the capitalist class: it wiped out chattel slavery, the last vestige of feudalism in America, and introduced “free competition” among the working class.

The present situation is identical in all essential respects with that under which the Republican Party was born as a third party, destined to make an epoch in the history of the country. Not only had this country room for a “third party” it is now again ripe for one. All the signs of the times point positively to that conclusion. Indeed, that third party is now forming despite the chestnut protests from the defunct Republicans that there is no room for it. Its motto is “The Abolition of Wage Slavery—The Cooperative Commonwealth.” Its victory is assured; as surely as, 31 years ago, the Republican banner was raised over the ruins of the Whig and the Democratic parties; or, some 20 years before, the Whig banner was raised over the ruins of the Federalist and Democratic forts; so will the standard of socialism be triumphantly planted in the near future over the ruins of both the Republican and Democratic together with whatever other parties may enter the lists for capital and resist the absolute emancipation of the proletariat.

In the history of “third parties” in this country, the Socialist is the third in the line of succession. But its glory will eclipse the brightest pages of either of its predecessors, whether Whig or Republican.

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