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The Socialist Party of America and the 'yellow peril' (1904–1908)

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ABSTRACT

Since 1890, the growth of Eastern nations' power was perceived as an imminent threat by broad sectors of American society, articulated under the concept of the 'yellow peril'. This paper examines the positions of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) on this notion between 1904 and 1908, a period marked by increasing diplomatic tensions between Japan and the United States. Through an analysis of the SPA press and the minutes of its conventions, the study identifies how the party comprehensively addressed the three main meanings of this concept: economic competition from Asian immigrants, the industrialization of the East, and the rise of Japan as an imperialist power. These aspects were of great importance for shaping the SPA's positions on imperialism, colonial policy, and inter-imperialist war. On the one hand, the anti-immigration sentiment within the SPA undermined any potential for bonds of friendship and internationalism with Japan and also affected its critique of colonial policy, which focused on the competition from native workers. On the other hand, Japan's modernization and rise as an imperialist power rendered imperialism no longer a viable strategy for American capitalists, ultimately contributing to the collapse of capitalism due to its failure to find new markets.

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Introduction

Since 1890, American society witnessed a growing number of books, articles, and editorials warning of the imminent danger that the increasing power of Eastern nations posed to Western civilization. By 1900, these ideas were grouped under the general label of 'yellow peril', a term that summarized the various ways in which the East was perceived to threaten the West.

Richard Thompson has summarized the three main threats associated with this term. The first was the competition from Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the United States, seen as both an economic and cultural problem. On one hand, the arrival of Asian workers on the U.S. West Coast generated strong opposition among most of the American working-class, who believed that these immigrants, with their lower wages and lack of interest in unionizing, represented unfair competition. On the other hand, there was fear that they would impose their own deeply rooted customs and ways of life rather than integrate into American culture (Thompson, 1978, p. 3).

The second threat was the potential industrialization of the East, which alarmed the United States, as China represented a key market for absorbing the surplus production that had caused several economic depressions in the last quarter of the 19th century. For those most concerned, the greatest

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threat was that the import of Eastern goods would undermine the American industrial system itself (Thompson, 1978, p. 4).

The third threat was the rise of Far Eastern nations to prominent positions in the global balance of power. In this regard, Japan stood out from the rest of the Asian countries due to its victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), its participation in the Eight-Nation Alliance during the Boxer Rebellion (1900), and especially its overwhelming victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) (Thompson, 1978, p. 4).

In this way, this notion took on shifting meanings according to the political context of the time. Generally, no one considered all aspects of this expression in a single work. In fact, some people specifically rejected certain aspects of it while embracing others (Thompson, 1978, p. 2). However, during Roosevelt's second presidential term (1905–1909), there was a historic moment when all these issues – Eastern immigration, Eastern industrialization, and the rise of Eastern nations as global powers – were synthesized in the case of Japan and its diplomatic crisis with the United States (1906–1909).

Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 demonstrated its emergence as a modern and dominant power in the Far East, ready to challenge the United States' influence in the region. In this context, a Japanese immigration crisis occurred on the Pacific coast, triggered by events such as the school segregation order for Asians in San Francisco at the end of 1906 and the racial riots that the Japanese population suffered in the same city in May 1907. These incidents caused a diplomatic crisis between the two countries and heightened the possibilities of armed conflict (Neu, 1967, p. 25).

Given this scenario, President Roosevelt pushed for substantial increases in the U.S. Navy's strength through Congress, which was also crucial for maintaining the arms race against Great Britain and Germany. The journey of the U.S. fleet around the world between 1907 and 1909, known as the Great White Fleet, helped generate popular support for the U.S. Navy and demonstrated to Europeans and Japanese the power and readiness of the United States (Neu, 1967, p. 227). In this way, the issue of 'yellow peril' became intertwined with the problems of war, national defense, and the imperialist competition between nations. Within the labor movement, these issues were closely followed by organizations such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which paid particular attention to Japanese immigration, as addressed in Philip Foner's works, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*. The AFL took a stance in favor of the exclusion of the Japanese starting in 1904, when a number of delegates, led by Gompers, managed to pass a resolution to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act to include Japanese and Korean workers. This position was upheld through the 1914 convention, not only for the economic protection of organized workers but also due to 'the racial incompatibility between the peoples of the Orient and the United States' (Foner, 1964, pp. 270–272). In contrast, the IWW maintained an open position toward immigrants. They considered Chinese and Japanese workers to be susceptible to union-ization and, therefore, made efforts to incorporate them into the unions (Foner, 1965, pp. 81–82).

However, one political organization that closely followed all the issues encompassed by the 'yellow peril' was the Socialist Party of America (SPA). Founded in 1901 through the merger of the Social Democratic Party and a faction that split from the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), the SPA maintained a critical stance against U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean and the Pacific from its inception. At the same time, it grew steadily across the country during the early 20th century. Its dues-paying membership rose from an average of 20,763 in 1904 to 41,751 in 1908, spiking to 84,716 in 1911 and peaking at 118,045 in 1912. It was only after 1915 that its average membership fell below 90,000. The party's growing influence was also evident in its increasing presence within the AFL, where it managed to gain varying degrees of control over the more industrially organized unions. At the 1912 AFL convention, the SPA candidate for president, Max Hayes, received 36 percent of the vote as the opposition candidate to Samuel Gompers (Ross, 2015, pp. 142–144). All of this made the SPA the leading socialist organization in the United States at the time, far surpassing the reach of the SLP, which in 1912 could claim a membership of only 3,000 people (Girard & Perry, 1993, p. 33).

Historians' interest in the Socialist Party of America's positions on the 'yellow peril' has been minimal. Ira Kipnis (1952), in his well-known work on the early 20th-century U.S. socialist movement, does not address the socialists' views on the 'various threats' posed by the East. Instead, he focused exclusively on the party's controversy over Asian immigration between 1907 and 1910, analyzed without connection to the issue of the rise of Eastern nations as global powers or the potential threat posed by their industrialization. The same applies to Peterson's (1957) work, The Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Theory of the American Socialist Party, where he highlights that at the party's 1908 and 1910 conventions, American socialists did not see immigration laws as having any effect on the United States' relations with other foreign powers (Peterson, 1957, pp. 77–78). The positions of these two authors align in their dismissal of the socialists' stance on imperialism. Both were very emphatic in stating that until the outbreak of World War I, imperialism was not on the party's agenda.

Two other articles are related to the subject of this paper. Daan Musters' (2023) work is a direct precursor to this study, as it addresses the immigration debate at the 1907 Stuttgart Congress and, in part, the domestic debates on migration within the SPA and the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Another article by Daniel A. Métraux (2009) focuses on Jack London's view of the Yellow Peril in his literary works and his coverage as a correspondent during the Russo-Japanese War. However, it does not address London as a socialist militant or frame his views within the context of the SPA, as the works cited by Métraux are from non-socialist publications such as *San Francisco Examiner*, *Sunset Magazine*, and *McClure's Magazine*.

Building on this, the present work focuses on the Socialist Party of America's (SPA) interest in the 'yellow peril' and adopts the period from 1904 to 1908 as its temporal framework: from the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), which sparked significant interest in Japan within the SPA, to the Root-Takahira Agreement of 1908, which stabilized relations between Japan and the United States and dispelled any threat of war. We argue that, following the Russo-Japanese War, the body of work produced by the SPA offers a comprehensive examination of this issue, according to the themes outlined by Thompson (1978): Eastern immigration, Japan's modernization and rise as an imperialist power, and the potential for war with that country. These themes were explored as the SPA responded to key events such as the Russo-Japanese War, the Portsmouth Treaty, and the immigration crisis on the West Coast (1906–1907), all of which had a significant impact on the SPA's stance toward inter-imperialist war, colonialism, and imperialism. On the one hand, the anti-immigration sentiment within the SPA undermined any potential for bonds of friendship and internationalism with Japan and also affected its critique of colonial policy, which focused on the competition from native workers. On the other hand, Japan's modernization and rise as an imperialist power rendered imperialism – defined as a policy designed to secure profitable outlets for surplus U.S. goods – no longer a viable strategy for American capitalists, ultimately contributing to the collapse of capitalism due to its failure to find new markets.

In this sense, the paper is organized into four sections. The first examines the SPA's positions on the Russo-Japanese War. The second focuses on the party's views on two of the meanings of the 'yellow peril': war with Japan and Japan's modernization. The third section analyzes the organization's positions on Japanese immigration and assesses its impact in relation to the war with Japan and the colonial question. Finally, the central role Japan played in the imperialism analyses developed during these years is studied.

The work is based on primary sources, including the SPA's press and the minutes of its conventions. Overall, it aims to offer a socialist perspective that integrates the issue of perceived threats from Asian economic and cultural competition more broadly with that of imperialism.

SPA and the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905)

The armed conflict between Russia and Japan over control of territories in Manchuria and Korea received swift condemnation at the party's National Convention. Hoehn, a delegate from St. Louis, noted:

> Whereas the conflicting commercial interests of the ruling classes in Russia and Japan have induced the governments of those countries to bring about war between the Russian and Japanese nations, and
>
> Whereas the workers of Russia and Japan have no interest in waging this campaign of bloody warfare;
>
> Be it resolved, that this convention of the Socialist Party of America sends greetings of fraternity and solidarity to the working people of Russia and Japan, and condemns the Russo-Japanese war as a crime against progress and civilization; and be it further
>
> Resolved, That we appeal to the wage workers of Russia and Japan to join hands with the International Socialist movement in its struggle for world peace. (Socialist Party of America, 1904, p. 66)

This was noted by Peterson (1957), who highlighted that the lack of debate following this resolution, along with the absence of recommendations to the U.S. government regarding the conflict, indicated the party's limited interest in international affairs (Peterson, 1957, p. 29). However, this conclusion did not take into account the analyses of this war that appeared in the party's press, which generated a series of interpretations regarding the 'yellow peril' that were debated in the following years. These analyses are important for two reasons. First, they offer a comprehensive view of this issue, linking the capitalist development of the United States with Asia's economic growth and showing how this impacted the emigration of Eastern labor to the United States. Second, party members were astute in foreseeing the increasing tensions between the United States and Japan that would unfold in the coming years.

The Russo-Japanese War received chronological coverage in the organization's newspapers. Although it had been condemned as a form of imperialist war in which the working classes of both countries would be harmed during the 1904 National Convention, American socialists tended to sympathize with a Japanese victory over Russia. For them, Russia's defeat would accelerate the fall of Tsarism – a reactionary stronghold of capitalism in Europe – which could eventually favor the development of socialism in the region. In particular, it might spark a revolution in Russia. In July 1904, barely three months after the conflict began, William Edlin wrote in *The Comrade*:

> All the friends of the Russian Revolution must be thankful to Japan for the thorough manner in which it showed the Russian people the uselessness of their autocratic rulers. This is perhaps the only useful thing that will be accomplished by the present war. It is the only thing which, in the estimation of Socialists, justifies the wholesale butcheries on Manchurian soil. (Edlin, 1904)

However, this position was one of mere sympathy. The Bureau of the Socialist International (BSI) declared at the beginning of 1904 that, in the event of a war between Japan and Russia, socialists in all countries should strive 'to prevent any expansion of the war and to influence their own countries to refrain from participating in it, instead working to restore and maintain peace' (Serwy, 1971, 105–106). In line with this, SPA newspapers promoted resolutions and letters from Russian and Japanese socialists against the war, encouraged petitions to the U.S. government for the release of Russian prisoners, and organized meetings in the United States to inform the public on the issue ('The Real Russia,' 1904; 'Socialists are for,' 1904; 'International Solidarity,' 1904; Untermann, 1905). Some of these meetings included the presence of Sen Katayama, the Japanese socialist leader, who in 1904 delivered a series of lectures in St. Louis, Seattle, and Chicago on social conditions in Japan, the development of capitalism in the East, and the war with Russia ('Party News,' 1904; 'Notes from Yankeeland,' 1904). Others featured a significant number of Japanese socialists affiliated with the SPA (Morrow, 1904, 4). The SPA's adherence to the BSI's directives in this instance calls into question the disinterest in international affairs alleged by Peterson (1957).

For the SPA, the primary cause of the conflict was the conquest of markets and territories in the East. This was expressed by its leader, Eugene Debs, who stated that 'the Russo-Japanese war is purely a war of exploitation, a war of conquest, with its immediate focus on territory and material spoils, and its ultimate aim the control of the rapidly developing markets of the East' (Debs, 1905). In this sense, the conflict brought nothing new to the party's positions on imperialism, as the Spanish-Cuban-American War (1898) had already been seen in this perspective.

The SPA and the modernization of Japan and the danger of war

Japan defeated Russia in September 1905, and the terms of peace were mediated by Theodore Roosevelt in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In the articles about the Portsmouth Treaty, an analysis began to take shape that addressed all the meanings of the 'yellow peril' as outlined by Thompson (1978): Japan's emergence as a global power, Oriental immigration, and the possibility of war with this country.

Within the framework of the negotiations, it was emphasized in *The Worker* that while the 'manifest destiny' of the United States had been the expansion of capitalism over China and East Asia, it was undesirable for Japan to make 'unreasonable demands' to reap the fruits of its victory. The goal of the bourgeois powers was:

> To see capitalist Japan exhausted by the struggle and yet disappointed by the main prize, official Russia weakened in her international relations but preserved in its position as 'the backbone of reaction.' and the Far Eastern field left open for the profit lords of Western Europe, England, and the United States to exploit to the detriment alike of the proletariat in their own countries and of the people of those Far Eastern lands. ('The peacemakers' role', 1905)

Beyond the exhaustion caused by the war in Japan, it was highlighted that the country was rapidly entering a period of modernization, driven by 'rapid capitalist development, of high finance and jobbery and the intense exploitation of the workers and rapid concentration of property' ('The peacemakers' role', 1905). The diagnosis was that Japanese products, made by a 'cheap, skilled, diligent, and thrifty' working-class, could be sold at prices that would surpass any competition from American industries. This situation could lead to the ruin of North American and Western industries, which, in order to compete with Eastern nations, would be forced to drastically lower wage levels, inevitably plunging all of the West into anarchy (Wayland, 1906).

This assessment took place in a context where relations between Japan and the United States were deteriorating. In late 1906, a Japanese immigration crisis had erupted on the Pacific Coast, triggered by events such as the order for the segregation of Asian students in San Francisco at the end of 1906 and the racial riots that the Japanese population suffered in that same city in May 1907. By mid-June of that year, rumors of an armed conflict spread throughout the American sensationalist press (Neu, 1967, 81). The members of the SPA did not ignore these events and announced that a war between the two nations was inevitable. Every Japanese move in the Pacific was perceived by them as a sign of hostility, such as the occupation of the Pratas Islands or the alleged infiltration of Japanese spies in the Philippines ('Jap move may,' 1907).

Furthermore, two events strengthened the idea that armed conflict was imminent. On the one hand, the around-the-world tour carried out by the U.S. Navy between 1907 and 1909, known as the Great White Fleet, was closely followed by daily newspapers such as the *Chicago Daily Socialist* and *New York Call*, each time the fleet reached an important port. This tour took place within the context of the resumption of the arms race with Britain and Germany, initiated by the appearance of the dreadnought battleship at the end of 1906. Britain was steadfast in maintaining its naval superiority, while Germany was equally committed to building its fleet after refusing to discuss arms limitation at the 1907 hague Conference (Neu, 1967, 111).

On the other hand, the financial panic of 1907 was understood by many socialists as a crisis of overaccumulation of goods, which could be solved through armed conflict. This notion was widespread in the party press but found its most prominent proponent in Gaylord Wilshire, one of the SPA members most interested in the problem of imperialism, who argued:

> Inasmuch as labor cannot buy what it produces, there is a constant tendency to a state of over-production and of chronic depression in trade. However, a period of depression, after it has endured long enough, will, by the partial cessation of production, finally allow consumption to overtake demand, and bring in a temporary period of prosperity. What a period of depression does slowly, a great war does quickly—both tend to bring about a condition in which more goods are consumed than are produced; war merely acts more effectively. (Wilshire, 1907a)

Based on this assumption, Wilshire offered an interpretation of the economic depressions that affected the United States between 1880 and 1907, where armed conflicts were central to inaugurating periods of prosperity. Thus, the first recession occurred between 1882 and 1885, when 'thousands of men had been out of employment, machinery idle and going to rust, a condition nearly as effective in destroying wealth as is war'. The second recession (1889–1890) began a period of economic depression that was only alleviated at the end of the 19th century by the demand for goods generated by the Spanish-American-Cuban War (1898). This conflict brought a brief period of prosperity, lasting until the last months of 1902, primarily driven by the outbreak of the Second Boer War (1899–1902). Subsequently, a general price decline occurred, leading to another recession that continued until about six months after the start of the Russo-Japanese War in February 1904, which resumed a period of prosperity and a boom in markets that lasted until early 1907 (Wilshire, 1907a).

In the face of the possibility of war, only a very small sector expressed opposition. The party section from Marion County (Indiana) drafted a resolution against 'the efforts of capitalism in this country to promote feelings of animosity against the Japanese, culminating in war' and issued an 'earnestly appeal to the workers of the United States and the workers of Japan to refuse to take up arms' (Hart, 1907). The socialists of this section resolved to send a copy of this resolution to the National Party Congress, to the local press, and to the workers' press across the country, but it was only reproduced by the *Chicago Socialist* newspaper. Another sign of activism to prevent a possible conflict was the conversations held by Nicholas Klein, the correspondent for the *Appeal to Reason* newspaper, with the socialist leader Sen Katayama, advocating for peace between the two countries (Klein, 1907).

If we consider that the socialist press consistently spread the guidelines of the BSI to avoid armed conflict between nations, and that it regarded European socialists as the main guarantors of peace, supporting and spreading their activism to prevent conflicts in specific situations – such as the Morocco Crisis (1905), the potential war over the dissolution of Norway and Sweden (1905), or the Dutch-Venezuelan crisis of 1908—it is striking that only two concrete actions were taken to strengthen ties of solidarity with the Japanese people ('Report of Comrade,' 1905; 'Work of International,'; 1905; Slade, 1906; Hillquit, 1905; 'The Political Situation,' 1906; 'Socialism stands for,' 1905; Wayland, 1908).

We believe that a possible explanation for this lack of sympathy can be found in the SPA's stance on Oriental immigration to the United States, a topic we will address in the next section.

The SPA on Eastern immigration

Authors such as Kipnis (1952) and Musters (2023) have explored the debates within the SPA regarding the exclusion of Eastern immigration, and how these discussions unfolded in the press, at the party conventions of 1908 and 1910, and at the 1907 Stuttgart Congress. However, they analyzed this issue in isolation, without considering that these positions were expressed in a broader context, where the possibility of war with Japan and the prospects of its industrialization were seen as a threat by many. Below, we will outline the main positions on the matter to frame the immigration issue within the broader context of the 'yellow peril'.

In 1907, the party's national congress passed a resolution opposing 'artificially stimulated' immigration and the immigration of workers from backward countries who were 'incapable of being assimilated with the workers of the adopting country,' primarily referring to Asian immigration on the Pacific coast. In August of that year, the SPA delegation at the Second International Congress in Stuttgart presented this proposal, but it was rejected and replaced by one that, while condemning the immigration of previously contracted workers, opposed any measures aimed at restricting immigration freedom based on national or racial characteristics (Kipnis, 1952, p. 277).

This led to intense debates within the National Executive Committee and at the National Conventions of the Party. At the end of 1907, Berger and Untermann attempted to pass a motion rejecting the Stuttgart resolution on immigration and supporting the exclusion of Asians. Hillquit,

who had been present at the International Congress, believed the resolution was appropriate and that the issue was not urgent, so he rejected their proposal. The debate was resolved when Algie Simons proposed that the issue be revisited at the party's 1908 Congress, but in the meantime, the party should position itself 'against Asian immigration'. Berger's intervention in support of his motion demonstrates the level of racism in his arguments:

> We don't want to give our country up to the Chinese, Japanese, etc. The Mongolians will have to work out their own salvation in their own countries. We are willing to assist them and help them at home. If they come here they will ruin us absolutely —make Socialism impossible here—conquer us both economically and ethnically—and not better the conditions of their own countries. ('Minutes of the,' 1907, p. 3)

It is important to note that while Untermann and Berger were the most fervent advocates for the exclusion of Asians based on openly racist positions, the rest of the executive members – regardless of whether they agreed with the Stuttgart resolution or not – did not discuss the supposed inferiority of the Japanese. This suggests that the -Japanese sentiment had broader support within the party.

When the issue was revisited at the SPA Convention in May 1908, a compromise resolution was reached, very similar to the one in Stuttgart, opposing the 'mass importation by the capitalist class of foreign workers with lower standards of living'. However, it also did not commit the Socialist Party 'to any stance on specific legislation aimed at the exclusion of any race or races as such'. Additionally, the convention stated that it was not yet competent to decide on the racial differences involved in the exclusion of Asiatic immigrants due to the lack of scientific investigation. It recommended the creation of a special five-member committee to examine the entire issue of immigration, including its racial and economic aspects, and to report their findings at the next convention (Socialist Party of America, 1908, p. 105)

In the meantime, various positions on the exclusion of Eastern immigration were expressed in all the party's newspapers. As Daan Musters notes, these positions followed the division between the left and right wings of the party, with the right wing being composed of those 'generally friendly or at least neutral' toward the reformist American Federation of Labor (AFL), while the left wing was made up of individuals sympathetic to the radical and internationalist syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) (Musters, 2023, pp. 79–80).

A minority sector of the party, associated with the left wing, opposed the exclusion of Asian workers. Louis Boudin, the most recognized member of this group, emphasized that it was illogical and contrary to international principles to 'divide immigrants along racial lines into "organizable" and "unorganizable"' and to establish as a rule of socialist policy, based on this principle of division, the demand for the exclusion of the so-called 'unorganizables'(Boudin, 1908, p. 491). Others, such as Knopfnagel or Feldman, pointed out that the enemy of U.S. workers was capitalism, not immigrants (Kipnis, 1952, p. 281).

However, the majority of the organization supported some form of measure to exclude Asian workers. This position found supporters across all sectors of the SPA, with militants from the right wing, as well as part of the center and left wing, expressing their views on this issue repeatedly. The main arguments were that the lower standard of living among Asians would drive down wages for American workers and that they were difficult to integrate into the unions and the party (Berger, 1907; Hayes, 1907; King, 1908; Lee, 1908).

In the center and right-wing factions of the party, racial arguments were more common. Many of them did not rule out that some peoples were 'backward' or 'inferior' by definition (Musters, 2023, 98). For example, Frederick Brockhausen, as a member of the Wisconsin legislature, referred to the Japanese as a 'depraved and inferior race of people' (Brockhausen, 1907). The well-known editor and socialist, Arthur Brisbane, emphasized that the 'destruction of the white race in the future. . . would be the inevitable consequence of an uncontrolled invasion by the yellow people of Asia' (Brisbane, 1908). Some actively participated in the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL), an organization based in the United States and Canada that actively sought to prevent Asian immigration. This was the case of Edward Fowler, who founded a section of the AEL in Seattle and played a leading role in the racial

riots in Bellingham, Washington, in September 1907 (Wynne, 1966). These kinds of positions were accompanied by the promotion of petitions by the AEL in favor of excluding Japanese people from the United States (Brockhausen, 1908; The World of Labor, 1908).

In this atmosphere, imbued with a certain chauvinism and animosity toward Oriental workers, it seems logical that bonds of friendship and internationalism toward Japan did not flourish. This concern was expressed by the Japanese socialists themselves, who sent letters to the National Executive Committee, alarmed by the racist positions of the Americans and asking whether they would uphold 'the spirit of international unity among workingmen' ('National Notes,' 1907, p. 4).

Once again, Wilshire was able to synthesize all aspects of the 'yellow peril', considering the issue of immigration in relation to the threat of war with Japan and inter-imperialist competition. He highlighted that the growing unemployment following the Panic of 1907, exacerbated by competition between American and Japanese workers, was causing an increase in war tensions between the two powers:

> We are soon to be face to face with a great unemployment problem, and this unemployment problem is surely going to accentuate the Japanese question on the Pacific Coast. As I have said before, when the whites find they cannot get another job when displaced by Japanese, they will resent their displacement even more strongly than they do now. (. . .) Therefore, we say it is perfectly logical to assume that an unemployment problem in the United States is going to make our position with Japan extremely critical, owing to the increase of labor conflicts on the Pacific coast. (Wilshire, 1907b)

In addition to this internal competition between workers was the dispute over international markets:

> With the decline of the domestic market our capitalists will find an absolute necessity for an outside market, and then they will again come into competition with the Japanese and other countries which will necessarily tend to make a conflict more likely. Finally, the absolute necessity of such a war to consume goods otherwise unconsumable can be easily shown, if we desire to extend the existing system. (Wilshire, 1907b)

On the other hand, the controversy surrounding Asian exclusion seemed to influence socialists' perspectives on other issues. In the *Chicago Daily Socialist*, an interpretation of colonialism in South Africa appeared that bore a strong connection to the immigration issue in the United States. The text criticized British imperialism for introducing Asian labor that competed with the native population, bringing ills such as the bubonic plague or opium. 'The Black Man's Burden', as the article was titled, seemed to focus more on competition with Chinese labor than on the weight of British imperialism and presented a tragic view of the consequences of introducing Eastern labor for South African workers:

> Chinese laborers were imported by thousands, with the result seen in the Daily Socialist picture of today —the black man with only one garment which he must wash surreptitiously at the running stream when the running stream is handy and otherwise not wash at all and take the consequences. ('The Black Man's,' 1908)

In this way, the party's focus on Asian immigration shaped its critique of colonialism, at least in South Africa, shifting the emphasis from broader critiques of exploitation and colonial control to a more specific and concrete concern with the impact of Asian labor immigration.

The SPA and imperialism

Members of the SPA had been interpreting American imperialism as a logical consequence of the state of overproduction within American capitalism. This notion was widely circulated in the party's press, especially during the 1900 election season, when imperialism was a central issu e in debates among both Republicans and Democrats.

The two most comprehensive analyses of the issue – Henry Boothman's 'The Philosophy of Imperialism' and Gaylord Wilshire's *Trusts and Imperialism*—both agreed that the productive capacity of the United States had reached such a high level that it created a situation of commodity overproduction, as internal consumption was stunted by the wage system, which limits workers to

mere necessities. At that point, capitalists were forced to seek a solution to overproduction in foreign markets (Boothman, 1900; Wilshire, 1901).

In the period following the Russo-Japanese War, a new perspective emerged in which the modernization of Asian countries, particularly Japan, would put an end to the idea that foreign markets constituted the solution to the problem of overproduction. An editorial in *Appeal to Reason* emphasized that the production and export of modern, improved machinery to Japan had, until then, been a fundamental pillar for U.S. economic prosperity. The problem was that hundreds of industrial establishments were now operating in Japan, and since Japanese labor was cheaper and more skilled than European and American labor, competition would soon drive all of Europe and America out of world markets. The dispatch of the U.S. Navy to the East was thus perceived as a futile attempt to preserve those markets ('War with Japan,' 1908).

This idea extended to more popular books that spread the fundamental principles of socialism. In *The Reason for Socialism*, Essel diagnosed the same phenomenon, providing figures on the decline of U.S. trade with Japan and China.

> The total value of merchandise exported to China in the eight months ending August, 1906, is but twenty-two millions against forty-two millions for the corresponding month of 1905, and to Japan twenty-one millions against thirty-nine millions for the same months of 1905, while to the whole of Asia the exports are but fifty-eight millions against ninety-five millions in the corresponding month of 1905. (Essel, 1909, p. 58)

Consequently, he declared that 'the entire nation of Japan has formed itself into a trust to manufacture every article that is needed for home consumption, and to supply the trade of the East'. As a result, foreign trade ceased to serve as a release valve for American products. In the United States, the productive surplus would accumulate to such a degree that it would paralyze production, increase unemployment, and ultimately lead to the collapse of the capitalist system. In the author's words:

> What is to be done with the products that these nations, as trusts, produce in such abundance when there is no foreign market wherein they can be sold, and when the people see that these products are hoarded while they are starving? Is it too much to expect that the people in every country will sooner or later demand that these things shall be made for use, not for profit; that commerce shall consist only in exchanging such articles as can be produced in one country but not in another; that every worker shall have the full product of his toil; that none shall benefit by a profit system which enables some to live by the toil of others? This is indeed the Kingdom of Heaven, wherein the laborer cannot be oppressed—this is what Socialism stands for and teaches. (Essel, 1909, p. 59)

In *Principles of Scientific Socialism*, Charles Vail made the same diagnosis, with the difference that he extended the industrialization processes to all Eastern countries:

> Russia, China, Japan, Australia, and the East Indies are already developing into industrial states, and will soon be able to supply their own wants. These nations are beginning to produce for themselves; they are adopting our inventions and improvements and will soon cease to be customers and become competitors. Every extension of the market has been tantamount to conjuring up a new competitor. When these new foreign markets are closed, what will be the result? There is but one answer. The whole capitalistic system will fall. It will end in the bankruptcy of the capitalist society. This cataclysm will engulf the whole world unless forestalled by the Socialist Commonwealth. (Vail, 1908, p. 188)

At this point, there seems to have been an agreement that sooner or later the system's inability to find new markets would lead to the inevitable collapse of the system (Brackett, 1906). For many of these socialists, the task of the SPA was simply to adopt a posture of attention and waiting: they were to 'understand the importance of these great world movements and interpret them to the toilers of the world that they will be ready to enter into their heritage when the conditions are ripe and the psychological moment arrives' ('Capitalist development,' 1904).

The exception to this attitude was Boudin's stance. Positioned on the left of the party, he shared the view that the disappearance of new markets would lead to the collapse of capitalism; however, he attributed a central role to the proletariat. He criticized those socialists who viewed revolution as

the inevitable result of an economic crisis, arguing that, in reality, it would be enough for existing laws and structures to become obstacles to production for the conditions to be set for the seizure of power (Boudin, 1906).

By 1908, diplomatic relations between Japan and the United States seemed to stabilize, and the issue ceased to be a prominent topic in the SPA press. On one hand, the 'Gentlemen's Agreement,' signed in early 1907 between Japan and the United States, was being implemented more effectively, and immigration was no longer an acute problem on the Pacific coast. On the other hand, the Root-Takahira Agreement (1908) was arranged, a political-commercial alliance aimed at promoting and defending free trade development in the Pacific. This agreement guaranteed respect for both countries' territorial possessions in the region, reaffirmed an open-door policy and territorial integrity for China, and stipulated that, in the event of complications threatening the status quo, the United States and Japan were obligated to consult each other and act jointly (Gordon, 1908).

The relationship between Japan and the United States was stabilizing, and the anti-Japanese sentiment was dissipating in the United States. However, in the same editorial where the terms of the Root-Takahira Agreement (1908) were outlined, socialists warned that, in the not-so-distant future, 'another war cloud may easily grow in the Eastern sky' due to the potential tensions arising from British and German enclaves in Chinese territory, which could conflict with Japan's demand to maintain China's integrity (Gordon, 1908).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the positions of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) regarding the so-called 'yellow peril' between the period beginning with the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and culminating with the signing of the Root-Takahira Agreement (1908), which stabilized relations between the United States and Japan. The study has shown how the SPA addressed the various meanings associated with this term: the competition of Asian immigration with the American working class, the dangers posed by the industrialization of the East, and the rise of Japan as a first-rate imperial power capable of challenging the United States for influence in the Pacific. At the same time, it demonstrated that the issue of the 'yellow peril' had a significant impact on the SPA's stance on imperialism and its related issues such as war and colonialism. On one hand, the widespread anti-Asian immigration sentiment within the SPA – often accompanied by racist positions regarding the supposed inherent inferiority of the Japanese – discouraged the development of solidarity between the two nations in the event of war. On the other hand, imperialism, understood as a policy that ensured the profitable outlet for surplus U.S. goods, ceased to be a valid option for American capitalists due to the industrialization of Eastern nations, triggered by the export of means of production from the United States.

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