We ask questions of radicalism in the United States. Many on the left and amongst historians researching and writing about its past are driven by high expectations and preconceived notions of what such radicalism should look like. Our queries reflect this: Why is there no socialism in America? Why are workers in the world’s most advanced capitalist nation not ‘class conscious’? Why has no ‘third party’ of labouring people emerged to challenge the established political formations of money, privilege and business power? Such interrogation is by no means altogether wrong-headed, although some would prefer to jettison it entirely. Yet these and other related questions continue to exercise considerable interest, and periodically spark debate and efforts to reformulate and redefine analytic agendas for the study of American labour radicals, their diversity, ideas and practical activities.\(^1\) Socialism, syndicalism, anarchism and communism have been minority traditions in US life, just as they often are in other national cultures and political economies. The revolutionary left is, and always has been, a vanguard of minorities. But minorities often make history, if seldom in ways that prove to be exactly as they pleased.

Life in a minority is not, however, an isolated, or inevitably isolating, experience. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the US gave rise to a significant left, rooted in what many felt was a transition from the Old World to a New Order. Populists, anarchists, Christian socialists, early feminists, bohemian intellectuals, trade unionists, immigrant Marxists, exiles from failed European revolutions, Wobblies, co-operators and countless other stripes of radical rubbed shoulders in metropolitan centres, in the towns of middle America and in frontier settings, all of which sustained varied institutional and cultural spaces in which the sociability and politics of the left were generated and

\(^*\) ‘Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism’, *American Communist History*, 2 (2003), 139–73.

\(^1\) Among many studies that might be cited: Sombart 1976, a reprint of the original 1906 German publication; Laslett and Lipset 1974; Wilentz 1984a, pp. 1–24; Foner 1984, pp. 57–80; Kirk 2000, pp. 1–26.
regenerated over time. It was a heady time for those who thought themselves revolutionaries, although it would not be without its dangers, most evident in the wave of repression that engulfed radicalism in the period from 1917 to 1921. Many on the US left emerged from the turmoil of these post-World War I years convinced that the newly established Soviet workers’ state was a revolutionary breakthrough of unparalleled significance and that a Communist Party was precisely what was needed in America.\footnote{As an introduction only, see Weinstein 1969; Stansell 2000; Dawley 1994, pp. 139–294; Draper 1957.}

Joseph Freeman, whose \textit{An American Testament} (1936) was praised by Theodore Draper as ‘one of the few Communist human documents worth preserving’ and by Max Eastman as the ‘best and most engaging book written by an American communist’,\footnote{Draper 1957, p. 129; Eastman 1964, p. 604.} vividly recalls the developing radical politics of the US in the early 20th century. He captures a sense of its disruptive, destabilising impact on all aspects of life:

\begin{quote}
Socialism was an aspect of the American scene long before the war, and I felt its impact in my daily experience. But it was so sharp a break with the prevailing order, that you had to adjust yourself to it at every point of your existence … [Y]ou were caught in the conflict between the old world and the new, and felt you had to choose between them … The American generation of which I am a member had neither the catastrophe of capitalist economy in this country, nor the rise of fascism in western Europe, nor the astounding successes of the Soviet Union to guide its choices. Its development was consequently confused and painful … For we were compelled to be conscious of every step when we grappled with unprecedented problems raised by the war, the October Revolution, the American class struggle, the melancholy capitals of postwar Europe, the frank and free life of Greenwich Village, the rise of the Communist Party in this country, the critical relations between art and society, the transformation of love, marriage, and the family.
\end{quote}

Writing between 1934 and 1936, Freeman, like most radicals who gravitated to the revolutionary left in the period associated with World War I and the Russian Revolution, came to regard the Communist Party of the United States (CP), for a time at least, as the place where the struggle for the new radical order was to be carried out to best effect: ‘Every day brings a living testament to the nobility and