

THE FAILURE OF AMERICAN SOCIALISM RECONSIDERED*

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Of all the questions that have bemused observers of political life in America, perhaps none has been as perplexing as that of why the United States, **alone among** the advanced industrial countries, never developed a truly mass-based socialist movement. Foreigners, in particular, have long been struck by the almost universal antipathy of Americans toward **socialist** ideas. Writing of the America of the 1830s, Tocqueville astutely observed that in 'no other country of the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States, and nowhere else does the majority display less inclination toward doctrines which in any way threaten the way property is owned'. This attitude, Tocqueville argued, was uniquely suited to a society in which most of its members possessed property. Yet more than half a century later—and long after the formation of a massive wage-earning class—Engels, in a letter to Sorge, observed that the pervasive attachment to private property witnessed by Tocqueville persisted among American workers: 'It is remarkable,' he wrote, 'how firmly rooted are bourgeois prejudices even in the working class in such a young country.' Perhaps, suggested an exasperated Engels, the dogged resistance to socialist ideas among American proletarians reflected a pronounced theoretical backwardness: 'The Anglo-Saxon race—these damned Schleswig-Holsteiners, as Marx always called them—is slow-witted anyhow.'

Theoretical backwardness was, to be sure, in no short supply in the brashly self-confident America of the Gilded Age, but as **Engels** himself well understood, socialism failed to take root in the American working class for reasons more substantial than the crude pragmatism of the national culture. The United States, **Engels** noted, was the quintessential bourgeois society, free of feudal remnants, but free also of a 'permanent and hereditary proletariat'.

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As such, it was a society lacking in class consciousness: the worker, seemingly surrounded on every side by opportunities to become an independent man, directed his energies toward rising *from* his class rather than *with* it. Indeed, in 1892, a year prior to the publication of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay on 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', **Engels** put forward a thesis arguing that the existence of 'free land' promoted a 'speculative mania' among native-born workers which diverted them from the class struggle and the formation of a labour party.

With the closing of the frontier, however, the stage would be set for the growth of class consciousness in the indigenous American working class. This, combined with the inexorable spread of wage labour into segments of the population that had previously been self-employed, would, **Engels** thought, be sufficient to stimulate the development of a mass socialist movement. And once this movement gained momentum, the absence of pre-bourgeois barriers and the 'corresponding colossal energy of development' would enable it to advance 'with an energy and impetuosity compared with which we in Europe shall be mere children'.

For a time, **Engels'** vision of an increasingly powerful American socialist movement seemed amply confirmed by events. The Socialist Party of America, founded in 1901 with 10,000 members, had, by 1912, grown to 118,000. More impressively still, it had elected some 1200 public officials throughout the nation, including the mayors of such cities as Milwaukee, Schenectady, Berkeley, and Flint. As the movement pressed forward, a vibrant socialist press spread the party gospel across the land in over 300 periodicals. The *Appeal to Reason*, a weekly journal published in Kansas, was the most popular of the socialist publications, reaching an extraordinary circulation of 761,747 in 1913.

Yet one should not exaggerate the height of the socialist wave, even at its crest. In 1912, the high point of Socialist Party strength, Eugene Debs, by far the Party's most popular leader, received a bare 6 per cent of the popular vote. To put this figure in perspective, it suffices to note that George Wallace's third-party presidential candidacy in 1968 received more than 13 per cent of the vote, and that even James B. Weaver, the lacklustre candidate of the Populist Party in 1892, did considerably better than Debs. After 1912, though Socialist Party strength did not decline nearly as precipitously as has been suggested by some, there can be no denying that the optimism that had infused the Party in its first dozen years waned with the reforms of the first Wilson administration. Despite a

brief upsurge during the First World War, particularly among immigrants opposed to American participation in the conflict, the Socialist Party of 1919, wracked by bitter internal disputes and staggering under the weight of massive state repression, found itself shattered almost beyond recognition.'

The Communist Party of America was soon to take the place of the Socialist Party as the dominant force on the left, but it was never to gain the degree of popular support once enjoyed by the party of Debs. Not even the Great Depression, which struck the United States with an extraordinary ferocity, was sufficient to give birth to a mass-based radical movement, either of the Communist or the Social Democratic variety. The American working class, it seemed, was immune to the appeal of socialism even under the most auspicious conditions. But why?



One of the boldest attempts ever to address this question is Werner Sombart's *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* First published in German in 1905 as a series of articles in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (where Max Weber had just recently published *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), it was initially hailed by the American Socialist Party, and an abbreviated version of the introduction and first section appeared in the theoretical journal, the *International Sozjalst Revzew*. American Socialist leaders were, however, offended upon reading the second section of the work, for in it Sombart argued that the economic success of American capitalism had made the average worker into a 'sober, calculating businessman without ideals'. The *International Sozjalst Revzew* thereupon ceased further translation and, indeed, in 1907 published a bitterly hostile review of Sombart which had appeared in *Vorwärts*, the newspaper of the German Social Democratic Party.²

Only now fully translated into English, *Why Is There No Socialism?* sets out to explain how socialism, supposedly a necessary reaction to capitalist development, could be so weak in the very nation where capitalism was most advanced. Sombart's manner of posing this question, which assumes that politics is a direct outgrowth of developments in society's economic substructure, betrays his considerable debt to the evolutionary, and at times mechanistic, Marxism then fashionable in academic socialist circles.³ His answer, however, reveals a keen and original intelligence unwilling to remain within the bounds of orthodoxy.

The conservatism of the American worker could be traced, Sombart suggested, to his unique political, social, and economic position. Politically, what was most distinctive about the United States was the extraordinary power of the doctrine of 'popular sovereignty'. This doctrine, though laden with elements of myth, ultimately derived its strength from the real power of workers to vote, to remove unpopular officials from public office, and to get themselves elected to positions of influence in the two major political parties and even in the state itself. Socially, the American worker found himself in a society in which daily relations between people of different classes were uniquely egalitarian. Further, his chances to rise from his class were considerably greater than those of workers in Europe, in part because of America's more democratic character, in part because of the special opportunities provided by free land in the West. Though Sombart did not, contrary to the impression conveyed by some of his interpreters, consider mobility to be the keystone of his argument, he did believe that a 'confrontational mentality' would most certainly have developed in America .. if escape from the orbit of the capitalist economy, or at least from the restricted confines of wage labour, had not stood open to so many groups of workers'.

In the end, however, Sombart, himself deeply influenced by the vulgar materialism that then dominated the German left, looked to economic factors to explain the antipathy of American workers to socialism. Indeed, by far the longest section of *Why Is There No Socialism?* is devoted to establishing a proposition that, even then, was hardly in need of documentation: that the average American worker enjoyed an immensely higher absolute standard of living than his German counterpart. In the United States, Sombart wrote in an oft-quoted phrase, 'all socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie'.

During the three-quarters of a century that has intervened since Sombart's essay first appeared, it has exerted a profound influence, at times unacknowledged, on those who have kept alive the perennial debate about American 'exceptionalism'. In retrospect, what is perhaps most remarkable about Sombart's contribution is how central the factors he enumerated—affluence, mobility, the frontier, universal suffrage, the two-party monopoly, and the democratic tenor of daily life—have remained in contemporary discussions of the question.' Sombart's essay, worthy of assessment in its own right as one of the most powerful analyses ever written about the sources of American socialism's enduring weakness, also merits

careful examination for what it can reveal about the limits of conventional explanations. For if recent advances in historical research have permitted the debate about American exceptionalism to inch forward in some respects, the general explanations offered continue to bear a striking, and in some ways a disconcerting, resemblance to Sombart's own.



In pointing to the sheer affluence of the American working man as the main obstacle to the development of socialism in the United States, Sombart was hardly alone. Even Engels, whose materialism was generally more nuanced than Sombart's, once wrote: 'The native American working man's standard of living is considerably higher than that of the British, and that alone suffices to place him in the rear for some time.' The assumption underlying this perspective—that the spread of material affluence inexorably undermines the appeal of socialism—is an engagingly straightforward one, but it is much too crude to account for the complex historical relationship between **affluence** and radicalism. Under some circumstances, as in the increasingly prosperous Germany of the late nineteenth century and in France in 1968, affluence may in fact be accompanied by an upsurge in socialist activity. And within the working class itself socialism often finds its greatest support among the most favoured sectors of the proletariat: craftsmen and other skilled workers.

In the specific case of the United States, there are perhaps even more compelling reasons to reject the affluence thesis, at least in the unrefined form presented by Sombart. For from the perspective of a worker accustomed to a certain standard of living, the absolute level of wages may be less important than the rate at which they increase over time. And here, contrary to what analysts of both left and right have assumed to be the case, the evidence suggests that real working-class wages rose less rapidly in the United States in the crucial 1860-1913 period than in Sweden, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—all of which spawned major socialist movement. Farther, the American economy during the years between the Civil War and the First World War was perhaps even more subject to violent cycles of boom and bust than the economies of other capitalist nations. During the not infrequent years of depression, hundreds of thousands of American workers were forced into the ranks of the unemployed, and millions of others faced real

declines in their standard of living. Throughout the period, substantial segments of the working class tottered precariously at the margins of subsistence. For them, as for the countless other Americans who led grim, poverty-stricken lives, the image of the United States as a land of affluence must have seemed a sordid myth.

Yet to observe that life was not all 'roast beef and apple pie' for American wage earners is not to deny that the standard of living enjoyed by the average American worker compared very favourably with that of the typical proletarian in even the most advanced European countries. Nor is it to deny that America's relative wealth exerted a significant influence on the trajectory of working-class politics. But it is to deny that affluence undermined working-class radicalism in America in the simple manner suggested by Sombart and other celebrators of American 'abundance'. For if the sheer wealth of American society militated against the emergence of a mass-based socialist movement, it did so less through the *embourgeoisement* of the proletariat as a whole than through facilitating the development of a special relationship between capital and strategic sectors of the working class.



When Sombart visited the United States in 1904, he was struck, as had been **Tocqueville** before him, by the informal and egalitarian tone of daily life in America. In the United States, wrote Sombart, the 'bowing and scraping before the "upper classes", which produces such an unpleasant impression in Europe, is completely unknown'. On the contrary, the American worker 'carries his head high, walks with a **lissom** stride, and is as open and cheerful in his expression as any member of the middle class'. While in Europe the carriage and countenance of the proletarian marked him as a member of a class apart, in America, Sombart suggested, the impression conveyed by the worker made it veritably impossible to distinguish him from members of the middle class.

If **Sombart's** rather hyperbolic portrait of the social position of the American worker at the turn of the century betrayed a woeful lack of familiarity with the subtleties of American class relations, it nonetheless managed to capture an elemental, if often neglected truth—that there really *was* something different about the texture of daily life in the United States. The evidence for this was everywhere: in the lesser visibility of class differences in speech, manner and

dress; in the free and easy interchange between individuals of sharply differing circumstances; in the widespread refusal of Americans to become personal servants; in the preference of even the rich for labour over leisure; and in the respectability accorded to virtually any kind of honest work.

This 'absence in America of a sense of 'rank'—a sense that, as Bryce once put it, some men are made of porcelain and others of earthenware—does not, to be sure, substantively alter the system of class domination; on the contrary, it may, by according to even the most common labourer a modicum of dignity and respect, help sustain it. A certain egalitarianism in personal relations, though hardly to be confused with an egalitarian distribution of wealth and power, can prove surprisingly effective in softening the intensity of class conflict.⁶

A quintessentially capitalist society, the United States, Sombart suggested, accorded status not on the basis of who one was, but rather what one did. Born bourgeois, the United States was a society without feudal residues and free, accordingly, of those pre-capitalist groupings—the aristocracy, the peasantry, and the **artisanry**—whose presence gave European societies a pervasive sense of class consciousness. Whatever other resources a nascent socialist movement in America might possess, the ability to tap a deep reservoir of popular class consciousness was not among them.

Nor could an emergent American socialist movement draw strength from another vital carry-over from feudalism—a powerful artisan tradition whose origins could be traced to the guilds of the late Middle Ages. This tradition, which showed a remarkable degree of persistence into the era of industrial capitalism, provided the early European working-class movement with both a leadership and a mass **base**.⁷ Heirs to the corporatist legacy of feudalism and to a system of production in which the workers controlled the labour process, artisans could envision, albeit perhaps only in a fragmentary way, an alternative social order in which workers would be their own masters and production would be for use rather than profit. More critically still, their capacity to translate their visceral opposition to the encroachments of industrial capitalism into solidarity action was immensely enhanced by a deeply ingrained sense of mutual trust and group distinctiveness that came to them almost as a matter of birthright. The absence in the United States of an analogous group of traditional artisans meant that the early American working class confronted the introduction of the factory system without the distinctive set of pre-capitalist values and the

extraordinary capacity for organized political action that such a stratum would have provided.

But if America was, as Sombart insisted, free of the residues of pre-capitalist classes found in greater or lesser degrees in the post-feudal nations of Europe, what kind of society, then, was the United States? To a greater extent than any nation before and perhaps since, white America in the early nineteenth century was a society of independent producers—a society consisting overwhelmingly of farmers, shopkeepers, and craftsmen who owned the property they worked. There were, to be sure, vast disparities of wealth in the America of Tocqueville, but these were softened by a wide distribution of property which extended to perhaps four-fifths of the free men who worked? Especially in the freewheeling early years of the Republic, the widespread availability of free land and the absence of sharp class lines made the opportunity to acquire property seem well within the grasp of all who had the industry to work for it. Thus when Abraham Lincoln, in an address to Congress, praised the 'just, and ~~generous, and prosperous~~ system' in which the 'prudent, penniless ~~beginner in the world,~~ labours for a while... then labours on his own **account** for another while, and 'at length hires another new beginner ~~to help him~~', he was espousing not the values of an emergent industrial capitalism, but rather the conventional wisdom of a society of small property owners.

But was the self-made man, whose reputed existence did so much to justify the vast inequalities of turn-of-the-century America, anything more than ~~mere~~ myth? On this question **Sombart** was cautious, for he ~~was~~ well aware that 'the Carnegies and those parroting them'. wished 'to lull the "boorish rabble" to sleep by telling them miraculous stories about themselves or others who began as newsboys and finished as **multi-millionaires**'. Yet despite his scepticism about the rags-to-riches stories then so common in America, Sombart insisted that the 'prospects of moving out of his class were undoubtedly greater for the worker in America than for his counterpart in old Europe'. This thesis—that the political quiescence of the American worker was intimately related to his uniquely high chances of rising from his class—is perhaps the most famous single argument in *Why Is There No Socialism?*, but it is also one of the least well documented. Fortunately, however, the recent appearance of a spate of painstaking quantitative studies permits us

to examine Sombart's oft-cited contention in light of new evidence.

If a single result stands out from the growing body of historical research on social mobility, it is that relatively few individuals moved very far, either upwards or downwards, in the supposedly open American class structure. Short-range mobility—for example, from skilled worker to clerk or shopkeeper—has, to be sure, been fairly common in the United States, and at least three in ten sons of blue collar workers seem to have obtained white collar status in the past century. Long-range mobility, however, has been much less frequent; in Boston, for example, no more than one youth in ten born into a working-class home ever succeeded in becoming a professional or a substantial businessman.

Was there, then, nothing at all to the Horatio **Alger** stories of boys of modest origins rising to the very top—stories read, according to one estimate, by perhaps fifty million **Americans**.⁹ About one point, there can be little doubt: members of the business elite have, in America, historically been recruited overwhelmingly from the scions of the upper and upper-middle class. Yet before relegating the notion of the self-made man to the **dustbin** of history, one must acknowledge the small, but not insignificant, number of men who began as workers and managed to make themselves into large-scale **businessmen**.¹⁰ Especially in a culture in which the virtues of the self-made man were ceaselessly celebrated by politicians, journalists, schoolteachers, and clergymen alike, the existence of even a few such spectacular cases may have been sufficient to sustain the national cult of individual success.

Sombart's mobility thesis, however, consisted of something more than the argument that a small number of workers rose to the top in the United States; it asserted, in addition, that escape from the confines of wage labour was more common among American workers than their European counterparts. Perhaps because this formulation conformed so closely to the common-sense wisdom of the laymen, sociologists have long found it fashionable to deflate the notion, arguing instead that mobility rates have been roughly similar in the United States and **Europe**.¹¹ Yet this new orthodoxy has itself been challenged in recent years by the findings of several meticulously documented studies in social history. The sons of nineteenth-century workers in Boston and Poughkeepsie, it seems, had appreciably greater chances of obtaining non-manual jobs than their confreres in Bochum (a middle-sized German town in the Ruhr) and **Marseille**.¹² While one should be careful not to make too much of the findings of such a small number of studies, they do

provide support for Sombart's argument that the American wage earner had comparatively high chances of escaping from his class.

Perhaps even more damaging to working-class solidarity than widespread vertical mobility and the Horatio Alger ideology it helped to sustain, however, was the oft-noted American penchant for moving from place to place. For if vertical mobility undermined the working class's capacity to engage in collective struggle indirectly by legitimating the ideology of individual self-advancement, geographical mobility did so directly, by destroying the bonds of mutuality and trust that make collective working-class action possible.

In communities in which the population is constantly changing, it is difficult for people to get to know one another, much less to develop the intimate friendships that form the sinews of class solidarity. Yet such communities have been typical not just of the mobile suburban America of the post-First-World-War era, but also of the America of the past. Indeed, if the figures of a dozen studies are to be believed, they provide an astonishing portrait of American rootlessness; throughout the past century and a half, no more than 40 to 60 per cent of the population residing in a given community at a specific point in time could be found there a mere decade later.¹³

The extraordinary willingness of Americans to uproot themselves cannot be understood apart from the allure of a rich and unexplored continent. If in other countries the itinerant wage earner was commonly viewed as a victim of class exploitation, in the United States he became transformed into a symbol of individual initiative and resourcefulness. The worker on the move was, according to national mythology, the worker on the make.

In such an ideological atmosphere, Sombart observed astutely, even those workers who did not move could derive a certain serenity from the feeling that they, too, *could* move and, in so doing, escape from their class. Their main route of escape, Sombart wrote, echoing but never explicitly citing the 'frontier thesis' made famous by Frederick Jackson Turner, was to the vast expanses of unsettled land in the West. For Sombart, it was well-nigh impossible to exaggerate the significance of 'free land'—its existence, he suggested, enabled 'many men with sound limits and no capital . . . to turn themselves into independent farmers' and was, accordingly, 'the principal reason for the characteristic peaceable mood of the American worker'.

Though not without appeal, Sombart's argument that the open lands of the West served as a 'safety valve' for discontented workers

faces a simple problem: very few industrial wage earners ever, in fact, became independent farmers or, for that matter, farmers of any sort. Migration between 1860 and 1900 was not primarily, as Sombart had implied, from East to West, but from the farm to the city. Indeed, for every industrial labourer who moved to the land, as many as twenty farmers may have moved to town. If a safety valve existed at all during this period, it was perhaps to be found less on the frontier than in the rapidly growing cities which absorbed the surplus population of politically volatile rural areas.¹⁴

Yet the frontier may have undermined the appeal of socialism in more subtle ways. By absorbing large numbers of Eastern farmers and immigrants who might otherwise have flooded the labour markets of the large cities, the unsettled lands of the West indirectly supported the maintenance of relatively high wage levels in the industrial working class. Further, the frontier, through the apparent plenitude of the opportunities it offered, lent crucial support to the cherished American belief that the way for those at the bottom to improve their condition was through individual mobility rather than collective struggle. And finally, the frontier was instrumental in the formation and maintenance of the national ethos of ceaseless movement from place to place—an ethos that, by encouraging transience among industrial wage earners, must have rendered them less able to mobilize themselves for political and social action and therefore more subject to the control of the community's more stable and affluent members.¹⁵

Transience among Americans, however, was limited neither to the adventurous who sought their fortune on the frontier nor to those more conventional souls who migrated from farm to city. Indeed, many of the millions of immigrants who swarmed into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did so with the intention of ultimately returning to the familiar villages and towns of the Old Country. Arriving en *masse* in the United States at precisely the moment of greatest potential conflict between labour and capital, these itinerant immigrants helped give American society its distinctive character. For in the United States, alone among the advanced countries, the actual work of industrialization was to a considerable extent carried out by wage earners who were not indigenous.¹⁶

Strangely enough, Sombart, otherwise so sensitive to those aspects

of life in the United States that undermined working-class solidarity, had almost nothing to say about the massive immigrant presence in the American working class and its role in fragmenting the proletariat into a bewildering array of mutually suspicious nationality groups. This insensitivity to the immigrant **experience**—undoubtedly the most serious oversight in Sombart's search for the sources of socialist weakness in the United States—led him also to ignore a fundamental feature of American working-class life: the pervasive tendency among foreign-born workers to view their status in America as temporary. Yet this sense of transience, especially widespread among workers in such key industries as mining and steel, was to profoundly affect the political trajectory of American labour.

Contrary to national mythology, most immigrants did not come to the United States with visions of freedom and democracy foremost in their minds. Instead, the majority embarked on a voyage to a distant and alien land for a much more prosaic reason—they simply could not make a living in their native countries. Apolitical peasants whose position as property-holders was endangered by the disintegration of the traditional agrarian life of Eastern and Southern Europe, they came to America for one reason: to make money. If all went well, they reasoned, their earnings in the United States would enable them to return to the lands of their birth with sufficient funds to purchase a piece of land. As one Slavic steelworker put it: 'A good job, save money, work all time, go home, sleep, no **spend**'.¹⁷ Most of such workers went to America alone, many of them fully expecting that they would rejoin their families in Europe within a few short years.

Many immigrants to America thus viewed their status in the New World **as** a temporary one. And, to an astonishing degree, it was. Between 1907 and 1911, for every 100 Italians who were arriving in the United States, there were 73 who were returning to Italy. For Southern and Eastern Europeans as a whole, between 1908 and 1910 (a bad, a middling, and a prosperous year), 44 departed from the United States for every 100 who **arrived**.¹⁸ And these figures, if anything, underestimate the extent of feelings of transience among immigrants, for they do not include those countless individuals who hoped to return to the Old Country but somehow never managed to do so.

Patterns of immigrant movement back and forth across the Atlantic showed a striking correspondence with the fluctuations of the business cycle. As immigration peaked during periods of boom,

so it plummeted during the not infrequent years of bust, when veritable throngs of immigrants boarded ships bound for their native lands. Nor surprisingly, those immigrants who were least successful in the United States seem to have been the most likely to return to **Europe**.¹⁹ If, as Frederick Jackson Turner had suggested, a 'safety valve' did indeed exist for the discontented American worker, it was apparently to be found less on the frontier than in tired old Europe.

Yet immigrants to America, though possessing the very real and not infrequently exercised option of returning to their native countries, were nonetheless capable of engaging in militant struggles in their adopted land. Such struggles were especially likely to take place when reductions in their wages or layoffs threatened to undermine their chances of realizing the goal that lured many of them to the United States in the first place—to accumulate enough money to purchase a parcel of land in their home country. Over such bread and butter issues as these, tightly bound ethnic communities time and again exhibited an extraordinary solidarity. Immigrant struggles—in **McKees** Rock, in Paterson, in Lawrence—were among the most bitter in American labour history. Yet the militancy shown by immigrants during prolonged and frequently violent class struggles generally did not reflect a commitment to socialism. For immigrants, with the exception of a small minority who brought with them from Europe a strong history of political radicalism, showed no greater capacity than native workers to translate their economic grievances at the work place into a broad political movement for fundamental social **change**.²⁰

If class consciousness—as the more subtle of the Marxist historians have insisted—grows not only out of common experiences of exploitation at the point of production but also out of common experiences of association in the community, then its relative weakness among immigrant workers is quite **explicable**.²¹ For while immigrants, often clustered together in tightly-knit ethnic **neighbourhoods**, had no shortage of common communal experiences, these experiences tended to reinforce not class but ethnic identity. From the local tavern to the lodge to the neighbourhood church, ethnic segregation in daily life outside of the work place was the rule rather than the exception. And marriage, at least within the first generation, was almost always within the ethnic **group**.²² Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that a feeling of ethnic identity was more deeply ingrained among immigrant workers than a sense of class consciousness.

The political system, too, served to accentuate ethnic consciousness and to deflect any stirrings of class solidarity. For by its very structure, the highly decentralized American state elevated to great importance politics at the level of the local community—the very level where ethnic divisions were most salient. Within the ethnic community, an extensive network of local affiliates of powerful urban political machines inducted immigrant workers into the American way of life. For many of them, their first and primary contact with the political system was via the neighbourhood ward boss. Often of the same ethnic group, he would provide **them**—in return for loyal support of the machine—with jobs, housing, relief, and, when necessary, help in court. These benefits, while real, advanced the short-term, individual interests of immigrant workers at the expense of their long-term collective interests. Yet in New York and elsewhere, many of the immigrant workers were so well integrated into the local machines by the turn of the century as to make socialist organizing among them virtually impossible.

For most immigrants to America, life in the United States, however brutal and degrading it might have been, was better than life in the Old Country. Especially for those who remained in America long enough to settle down, slow but steady progress was commonplace. In the steel industry, for example, the constant arrival of new waves of workers provided wide opportunities for those immigrant labourers who stayed in the mills to move into better paid semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. Upward movement among the children of immigrants was even more common, though their position in America's class structure remained far beneath that of the offspring of the native born. Compared to their own parents, however, the children of immigrants were notably successful in moving into non-manual jobs, not only as clerks and shopkeepers, but also, in exceptional but much publicized cases, as managers and professionals.

Yet for most immigrants, and for their children as well, life remained confined to manual labour, often of the most onerous and unremunerative variety. If many of them guarded a feeling that something was fundamentally wrong with a society that possessed so much but gave them so little, few were willing to run the risks of embracing socialist ideologies in a nation evidently so hostile to any form of radicalism. To be 'American', the hard-pressed and vulnerable immigrant knew, meant to renounce all beliefs that in any way threatened the regime of private property. Life in America

was hard enough for a 'Hunky' or a 'Dago'; one did not need to make it harder by being a 'Red' in addition.

Those immigrants who, despite these conditions, nonetheless adhered to traditional notions of worker solidarity found their commitment sorely tested by the attitude of their American brethren. To many working men born in the United States, the immigrant labourer, especially the Eastern and Southern European, was an alien and inferior being. Indeed, in the eyes of his old-stock counterpart, the immigrant worker was not even a 'white man'.²¹ An unwelcome intruder who supposedly endangered jobs and depressed wage levels,²⁴ the strange-tongued foreigner, with his peculiar customs, was separated from the native worker by a cultural chasm. 'Here I am with these Hunkies,' complained an old-time steelworker whose friends had left the plant. 'They don't seem like men to me hardly. They can't talk United States. You tell them something, and they just look and say "Me no fustay, me no fustay", that's all you can get out of 'em.'²³

Employers were quick to capitalize on the deep antipathies that existed among workers of varying cultural and ethnic origins. One preferred tactic was to hire workers of several different, and preferably antagonistic, nationalities to work in the same plant. There, management characteristically reserved skilled positions for native-born workers or 'old' immigrants and relegated 'new' immigrants to the ranks of the semi-skilled and unskilled. Ethnic lines thus coincided with skill lines, thereby adding a sharp cultural edge to already existing cleavages of economic interest between craft workers and common labourers.

The split between relatively privileged native-born and 'old' immigrant workers, on the one hand, and overworked and underpaid 'new' immigrant workers, on the other, had fateful consequences for the working-class movement. For it permitted the formation of a native-born and old-stock working-class aristocracy which, aided and abetted by the state and by segments of the capitalist class, was able to exert a controlling influence over the whole of organized labour. This control—exemplified by the almost uninterrupted tenure of the brilliant and pugnacious Samuel Gompers as president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 until his death in 1924—was bitterly contested by socialists. Indeed, as late as the American Federation of Labor convention of 1894, a plank calling for the 'collective ownership of the means of production and distribution' was only narrowly defeated. Yet by 1901, the year in which the Socialist Party was founded, the

American Federation of Labor had decisively rejected the idea of an independent working-class party and had adopted in its place a philosophy of securing immediate bread and butter gains for the worker within the framework of the market ~~economy~~.²⁶ Organized labour, in other countries the very foundation of socialist strength,¹ thus became in the United States a powerful ally of the existing capitalist order.



While Sombart neglected the extraordinary ethnic heterogeneity of the American working class, he lavished considerable attention on what he considered to be its distinctive political position. For him, this distinctiveness resided in the very extensiveness of American democracy, with universal suffrage and the popular election of the great majority of important public officials. To an extent unknown in Europe, the ideology of popular sovereignty—the belief that the people, and the people alone, actually govern—reigned supreme among American wage earners. If adherence to such an idealistic doctrine betrayed a certain *naïvete* among supposedly hard-headed American workers, it also testified to their genuine capacity to secure remarkable concrete results: the removal of unpopular judges and police chiefs, the election of professed pro-worker candidates to crucial state and local offices, and, above all, the granting to wage earners of an astonishing number of patronage jobs. The 'strong aversion of the American worker to Socialist tendencies', Sombart suggested, was 'explained in part' by this unusual relationship to the state.

Yet for all his insights into the peculiarities of the political position of the American worker, Sombart somehow managed to miss the essential point: in the United States, alone among industrial nations, the lower classes were incorporated into the institutions of parliamentary democracy *prior* to the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of a modern proletariat. As Selig Perlman pointed out in his neglected classic, *The Theory of the Labor Movement*, socialist movements in Europe derived their initial strength more from the struggle for elementary political rights than from the battle for economic *advancement*.²⁷ In America, however, the free gift of the ballot and the extension to workers of the basic rights of citizenship preceded the birth of the labour movement. Possessing the same political rights as members of other classes, American workers were denied the very experience of exclusion that

might have brought them together as a class. As Karl Kautsky, bemoaning the difficulties faced by his Socialist comrades in America, put the matter in 1904: 'Just as the struggle for truth is much higher than the untroubled possession of a truth earlier discovered, so the struggle for freedom is very much superior to the effortless possession of a freedom that others have won before.'¹⁸

By the time American workers faced the full brutality of industrial capitalism, a long heritage of faith in the existing political system, if not the prevailing order, had already established itself in the labour movement. This faith, while based in part on certain formal democratic rights enjoyed by the white working class—among them universal suffrage, equality before the law, and basic civil liberties—was also rooted in the real power of workers to use the political system to advance their interests. At the community level, as Alan Dawley has shown in an illuminating study of the Industrial Revolution in nineteenth-century Lynn, this power could be used to remove strike-breaking police chiefs via the election of pro-labour *mayors*.¹⁹ The elevation of 'friends of the working man' to the highest position of honour in the community did not, to be sure, pose a threat to the rule of private capital, but it did give workers a strong feeling of power. If Dawley goes a bit far in insisting that in the eyes of the working men, 'the government was but the executive committee of the people', there can be no denying that the great majority of early industrial workers viewed what was then the world's only political democracy with something approaching reverence.

Another vital source of the widespread legitimacy enjoyed by the existing political order was the unusually open and inclusive character of the two major American political parties. Democrats and Republicans alike, Sombart observed, recruited numerous party activists from the ranks of the working class. Party leadership, too, had a strong popular cast, and the choice of former wage earners, often of immigrant extraction, as candidates for high office offered vivid evidence of the system's openness. To an extent unknown in Europe, at least during the early stages of the **Industrial** Revolution, promising working-class leaders would be co-opted into the system through the powerful allure of elective or appointive office. This capacity to absorb talent from the working classes has been cited by labour historian David Montgomery as 'perhaps the most effective deterrent to the maturing of a revolutionary class-consciousness among the nation's workers during the turbulent social conflicts of the late nineteenth century'.²⁰

A deep-seated adherence to the institutions of political democracy thus developed in the early American working class—an adherence based in part on ideological commitment, in part on the provision of tangible benefits. When, in the late nineteenth century, the struggle between labour and capital had become an unmistakable feature of the economic landscape, a substantial proportion of the working class had already developed deep loyalties to one or the other of the two major parties. Thus, by the time that the Socialist Party of America was founded in 1901, a powerful institutional framework—its cornerstones a reformist labour movement and a highly sophisticated, but self-consciously non-ideological modern party system—had arisen to incorporate into the existing order the farmers and immigrants then streaming into the nation's factories. Once this institutional framework was in place, it was, as 'the Socialists were soon to learn, remarkably difficult to dislodge.

The absence of a set of institutions capable of introducing new entrants to the ranks of wage labour to collectivist viewpoints proved particularly damaging to the prospects for socialism in the United States, for the American working class was, perhaps more than any other, constantly infused with waves of non-working-class elements: native-born farmers, Southern blacks, and European peasants. Those forces that did shape the political consciousness of the American working class—organized labour, the two major parties, and, above all, the dense cultural life of the working-class neighbourhood—encouraged the growth not of class consciousness, but of a narrow interest-group mentality. In America, the same individual could, as a worker, wage bitter economic struggle against his capitalist employer while, as a neighbourhood resident, follow the conservative leadership of the local ethnic elite.

In the split between the worker as labourer and the worker as community resident may lie the solution to one of the great riddles of American history: why a working class so evidently capable of extraordinary militancy in its struggles at the point of production, was apparently incapable of translating this tradition of economic militancy into a broader demand for fundamental political change. For in America linkage to the political system had, since the abolition of property requirements for suffrage during the era of Jacksonian democracy, been rooted not in work, but in the community. If, by the late nineteenth century, the conflict between capital and labour had become starkly visible at the point of production, the same could not be said for daily life in the community. Yet it was at the level of community, where bonds of

ethnic solidarity were typically stronger than the ties of social class, that the Socialists, if they were to succeed, had to carry out the difficult task of party organization."

The failure of the Socialist Party to establish roots in working-class communities during the early part of this century and its inability to survive the repression unleashed upon it in the years during and immediately after the First World War have left an enduring legacy of defeat from which the left has never really recovered. Even the Great Depression, seemingly the ideal economic setting for the emergence of a socialist movement, could not, despite the tireless organizing efforts of radicals of various persuasions, shake the commitment of the great majority of Americans to the two-party system and the capitalist order of which it was a crucial component. And the New Left, whatever its other accomplishments, failed miserably in its awkward attempts to establish links with a working class which, though restive itself, was deeply suspicious of the privileged young people who dominated the movements of the 1960s.

The consequences of this legacy of defeat are with us still. Perhaps the most dramatic is the growing unwillingness of the populace to participate in a political system that offers them no genuine choice; in the 1976 presidential election, despite much talk about a massive turnout, a mere 53 per cent of those eligible to vote even bothered to show up at the polls. The absence of a vibrant socialist movement is also responsible, at least in part, for the persistence, on a scale unknown in Europe, of appalling public squalor amidst immense private wealth. The United States, one suspects, is the only advanced industrial society in which even the middle class lives in constant fear that a relatively brief stay in the hospital may lead to financial ruin; the feeble American Welfare State, now the object of a concerted attack from the right, remains by far the least developed of the advanced capitalist societies.

Writing in 1905, Sombart described the particular form of capitalism then existing in America as the most exploitative in the world. If in the seventy-three years that have since intervened, this has not fundamentally changed, perhaps it is because the type of mass socialist movement which elsewhere has challenged and substantially circumscribed the power of private capital has, in America, still to be constructed.

NOTES

1. For an incisive analysis of the specific factors that led to the disintegration of the Socialist Party, see James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America* (New York, Vintage, 1969).
2. The review was accompanied by a footnote from A.M. Simons, the editor of the *International Socialist Review*, noting that the journal had printed the 'valuable statistical portions' of Sombart's study, but had stopped further publication when it came to 'the nonsense on the conditions of American workers'. Simons's ire had been aroused by Sombart's claim, in the preface to the 1906 book edition of *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?*, that American Socialist leaders had endorsed the correctness of his interpretation and that *International Socialist Review*, in reproducing sections of his work, had expressed agreement with his viewpoint.
3. Himself a former Social Democrat who, at the time of his visit to the United States (1904) retained a certain sympathy for socialist ideals, Sombart wished to address a question of urgent interest to radicals everywhere—whether the trajectory of capitalist development was likely to lead the worker toward or away from socialism. Of his later relationship to National Socialism, the book jacket says simply that 'his political orientation became progressively more reactionary as he grew older'. Yet as C.T. Husbands notes in his scholarly and provocative introduction to the volume, 'it is only with considerable good nature that one can refrain from calling him a Nazi during the last years of his life'. As anyone who has read Sombart's *Deutscher Sozialismus*, written in German in 1934 and translated into English as *A New Social Philosophy* in 1937, can testify, even this is something of an understatement. For it was in the foreword to this volume that Sombart, noting that he had refrained from commenting directly on the politics of the current government, insisted that that was not because he was 'indifferent or unfriendly to the Hitler government; not in the least'.

In the text of *A New Social Philosophy*, Sombart betrays a chilling anti-Semitism. Reflecting upon the so-called 'Jewish question', he writes: 'In order to free ourselves from the Jewish spirit—said to be the chief task of the German people and, above all, of Socialism—it is not enough to exclude all Jews, not even enough to cultivate an anti-Jewish temper.' Arthur Mitzman, author of the most detailed treatment of Sombart's life and work now available in English, has suggested that his later fascism was already foreshadowed in his analysis of the First World War as a conflict between *Heldenvölker* (hero nations, notably Germany) and *Handlervölker* (trading nations, historically exemplified by the Jews but best represented in the twentieth century by England). For a fascinating discussion of Sombart's complex, and in many ways contradictory, personality, see Mitzman's *Sociology*

and *Estrangement: Three Sociologists of Imperial Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

4. A representative collection of recent contributions to the debate about American exceptionalism is contained in the stimulating volume edited by John H. M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974). See also Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Why No Socialism in the United States?', in Seweryn Bialer and Sophia Sluzar (eds.), *Sources of Contemporary Radicalism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977), pp. 31-149, 346-63 for a comprehensive treatment of the topic which includes an excellent bibliography.
5. E. H. Phelps Brown with Sheila V. Hopkins, 'The Course of Wage-Rates in Five Countries, 1860-1939', *Oxford Economic Papers* (June 1950), p. 236.
6. Bryce, commenting upon the America of the late nineteenth century, understood this very well: 'though the troubles that have arisen between capital and labour may not soon pass away', he wrote in 1888, 'the sense of human equality, the absence of offensive privileges distinguishing class from class, will make those troubles less severe than in Europe, where they are complicated by ... arrogance on the one side and envy on the other'.
7. On the persistence into the late nineteenth century of the corporatist traditions and institutions of the pre-industrial European working class, see the study of William H. Sewell, Jr., 'Social Change and the Rise of Working-Class Politics in Nineteenth-Century Marseille', *Past and Present* (November 1974), pp. 75-109. For a general treatment of artisans in late-eighteenth-century England and France, see Gwynn A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968).
8. For detailed evidence on the massive inequalities of pre-Civil-War America, see Edward Pessen, 'The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality: Wealth, Mobility and Equality in the "Era of the Common Man"', *American Historical Review* (October 1971), pp. 989-1034. The figure on the proportion of the white working population that owned property in the time of Tocqueville is from C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford, 1951), p. 7.
9. R. Richard Wohl, 'The "Rags to Riches Story": An Episode in Secular Idealism', in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status, and Power* (New York: Free Press, 1966), pp. 501-6.
10. Evidence on the social origins of the American business elite, as well as an interesting case study of manufacturers in nineteenth-century Patterson, is contained in Herbert Gutman's 'The Reality of the Rags-to-Riches "Myth"' in his collection of essays; *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage, 1977), pp. 211-33.
11. The classical statement of this argument is presented in Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California, 1959).
12. The precise figures are Boston—41 per cent; Poughkeepsie—26 per

- cent; Marseille—11 per cent; Bochum—12 per cent. These figures are derived from Stephen Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1973); William Sewell, Jr., 'Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century European City: Some Findings and Implications', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Autumn 1976), pp. 217-33; David Crew, 'Definitions of Modernity: Social Mobility in a German Town, 1880-1901', in Peter N. Stearns and Daniel J. Walkowitz (eds.) *Workers in the Industrial Revolution* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1974), pp. 297-332. For a lively general discussion of rates of mobility in Europe and America, see the debate between Thernstrom and Lipset in Laslett and Lipset, *Failure of a Dream?*, pp. 502-52.
13. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians*, pp. 221-32. In 1880 London, in contrast, 63 per cent of the residents were native to the city. See Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, p. 40.
 14. Fred A. Shannon, 'A Post Mortem on the Labor Safety Valve Theory', *Agricultural History* (1945), pp. 31-37. On the debate over the frontier thesis, see Ray Allen (ed.) *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966) and Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Lipset (eds.), *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York: Basic, 1968).
 15. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians*, pp. 231-2.
 16. The sheer magnitude of the immigrant presence in American life was most deeply felt in the great industrial cities. In 1880, between 78 and 87 per cent of the residents of San Francisco (78), St. Louis (78), Cleveland (80), New York (80), Detroit (84), Milwaukee (84), and Chicago (87) were immigrants or children of immigrants. In 1880 London, on the other hand, 94 per cent of the inhabitants were from England and Wales. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, p. 40.
 17. Quoted in David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 100.
 18. Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 28; Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, p. 106. Overall, between 1820 and 1924, approximately 30 per cent of those immigrating to the United States returned to their home countries, with the proportion of returnees increasing substantially during later periods. For a general discussion of patterns of intercontinental migration, see Gerald Rosenblum, *Immigrant Workers: Their Impact on American Labor Radicalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 45-53.
 19. Kessner, *The Golden Door*, p. 29.
 20. Socialist tendencies among immigrants were perhaps most pronounced among workers of German and East European Jewish backgrounds. Both groups, it is worth noting, had considerable experience in Europe as urban wage earners, and both exhibited strikingly low rates of repatriation.
 21. Among those Marxist scholars who have been in the forefront of those insisting on the importance of cultural as well as work experiences in

- the formation of class consciousness have been Herbert Gutman, E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963); and John Alt, 'Beyond Class: The Decline of Industrial Labor and Leisure', *Telos* (Summer 1976), pp. 55-80.
22. Evidence on ethnic intermarriage among first-generation immigrants is available in Julius Drachsler, 'Intermarriage in New York City: A Statistical Study of the Amalgamation of European Peoples', in *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* (New York: Columbia, 1921); Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, 'Single or Triple Melting-Pot? Intermarriage in New Haven, 1870-1950', *American Journal of Sociology* (July 1952), pp. 56-9; Bessie Bloom Wessel, *An Ethnic Survey of Woonsocket, Rhode Island* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1931).
 23. The tendency of native-born American workers, as well as foreign-born Northern European workers, to call themselves 'white men' as a means of distinguishing themselves from Southern and Eastern Europeans is noted by John Higham in his superb study of American nativism, *Strangers in the Land* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, 1955). In general, the American working class at the turn of the century was split not just into natives and foreign born, but also 'old' and 'new' immigrants. Revealingly, the former were often referred to as 'English-speaking men', although they included Dutchmen, Germans, and Scandinavians. The 'new' immigrants—principally Italians, Slavs, Hungarians, and Jews—were thus seen not only as foreign and non-English speaking, but also as racially distinct. See Issac Hourwich, *Immigration and Labor* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1922).
 24. Contrary to what native wage earners believed, the arrival of masses of immigrant labourers actually improved their position, propelling many of them upward into the ranks of skilled and supervisory workers. Indeed, it was only because Eastern and Southern European immigrants were available in large numbers to fill the least desirable jobs that it was possible for native-born workers to be elevated into a relatively aristocratic position. For documentation of this point, see Hourwich, *Immigration and Labor*, pp. 148-76 and Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians*, pp. 111-44.
 25. Quoted in David Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, p. 119.
 26. Faced from its inception with the opposition of the American Federation of Labor to an independent working-class party, the Socialist Party adopted a strategy of 'boring from within'. The results of this strategy were not impressive, for despite substantial strength within the American Federation of Labor—at times between 1901 and 1912 it controlled as many as one-third of the delegates to the national convention—the Socialist Party was unable to move the organization in the direction of either industrial unionism or independent political action. William M. Dicks's *Labor and Socialism in America: The Gompers Era* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1972) provides a useful account of the complex relations that existed between the American Federation of Labor and the Socialist Party and John

- H.M.Laslett's *Labor and the Left* (New York: Basic, 1970) contains some interesting material of socialist influence in several major industries.
27. Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1928), pp. 167-8.
 28. Quoted in R. Lawrence Moore, *European Socialists and the American Promised Land* (New York: Oxford, 1970), p. 110. Lenin, too, shared Kautsky's belief that the problems of socialists in America derived from the separation of the struggles for political and economic democracy effected by the early granting to the working class of elementary political rights. If socialism was a feeble force in American life, Lenin wrote in 1907, this was because it faced 'the most firmly established democratic system, which confronts the proletariat with purely socialist tasks'.
 29. Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1976). Herbert Gutman, in a careful study of a number of small industrial communities, also found that workers in late-nineteenth-century America often wielded considerable political power. This power, Gutman suggests, reflected not only the numerical strength of the working class, but also the substantial sympathy that its plight aroused among middle-and-upper-middle-class elements hostile to industrial, as opposed to traditional, business enterprise. Herbert Gutman, 'The Worker's Search for Power: Labor in the Guilded Age', in H. Wayne Morgan (ed.), *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963), pp. 38-68.
 30. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862-1872* (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 215.
 31. For a provocative discussion of the split between the immigrant worker as labouring ethnic at the point of production and cultural ethnic in the community, see Ira Katznelson, 'The Patterning of Class in the United States: An Approach to American Exceptionalism', presented at the 1976 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago.