

## Why is there no socialism in America?

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**Abstract:** The weakness of socialism in America remains a puzzle in the eyes of Marxists because socialists never develop a strong force in this most advanced country. The German scholar Werner Sombart in his book *Why is there no Socialism* tried to provide several possible reasons which remain true today. The author of the article attempt to give a more comprehensive analysis after more than a hundred years of the publishing of the book.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In the view of traditional Marxists, the weakness of socialism in America is a puzzle. According to Marxist theory, the most advanced capitalist society should develop into a socialist society. Yet in America socialists remained a quite weak force--one that declined rapidly from its modest high-water mark of 6 percent of the national vote just before the First World War. In 1906 German scholar Werner Sombart published the book *Why is there no Socialism in the United States* raising the question that scholars around the world continue to pursue. And actually many factors to interpret this problem offered by Sombart are still true. Yet because more than a century has already passed since his interpretation, there are some possible reasons that he didn't envision.

### II. THE MAJOR REASONS STATED IN THE BOOK

Firstly, the political system of America makes it difficult for socialist force to become dominant in the country. In his book, Sombart states that the United States' political system with universal suffrage as its basis is quite well-established and very complicated. To ensure such a political machine to function well, a large number of professional politicians have to work for it and a huge financial support is necessary. So the difficulty for a workers' party to succeed under such system is obvious. From the beginning of the United States, the two major parties have dominated public life for a long time. To get even the most modest post in the office requires party membership. This is also true of trade-unionists, who are the leaders of workers. So frequently these social democrats are bought off for their self-interests or rich reward by the politicians of the major parties. In this way capitalism is strengthened because the possible workers' party is weakened by the two major parties' lure. The unique character--the lack of principles of the major parties increased the difficulty of the emergence of a third party. The two major parties are undistinguishable either by social class or by political principles. They make themselves appear to be neutral groups organized for particular purposes rather than representatives of particular classes. Even the class-conscious workers are easy to identify themselves with one of the major parties. The lack of principles also makes it possible for the major parties to absorb the principles of the third party into their platform to appeal to the support of a third threatening party.

Secondly, the long economic prosperity in America brings about the economic integration and makes American workers develop favorable attitude towards capitalism. More than a hundred years ago, Somber did a detailed research on the economic conditions in America and compared that with Germany. He concluded that monetary wages earned by the United States were two to three times as high as the German counterparts with the American workers enjoyed a relatively low cost of living. Ordinary workers dressed like gentlemen and ladies. So even outwardly, they didn't realize the gap between them and the socialists. Sombart concluded that "all socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie." [1] By the 1950s, when America was enjoying an economic boom, the country was on the verge of complacency. One consensus reached by the Americans of that time was that American capitalism had abolished the working class and that everybody in America was now middle class. Most people in America believed in the goodness of American society and believed it could solve the social problems with the increased wealth.

Thirdly, the existence of frontier offered the Americans greater opportunities to move to the upper class and thus reduced the radicalism of those who are dissatisfied with the capitalism. Sombart states that the existence of the frontier provides the opportunity for the workers to “escape into freedom” if the tension between workers and capitalists becomes intense. [2] According to statistics, when the tension between capitalists and workers was getting intense, there was usually a larger influx of immigrants to the frontier. The felling of becoming a free farmer at any time made the American workers feel secure and content. The frontier is a place full of opportunities, which helps to foster the spirit of self-reliance and individualism. Thus many workers believed in the idea of “going from rags to riches”. This social mobility weakened their class consciousness because they still had free land to count on. The frontier spirit also sheds light on the idea of equality that has evolved in America. The meaning of equality in America to a large extent means the equality of opportunity. This idea makes the workers suspicious of the appeal to class solidarity and reinforces their appeal to free-market system. It also helps to explain why American workers were not particularly concerned with the failure of the redistribution of income as long as everyone is getting richer.

### **III. SOME OTHER POSSIBLE REASONS**

Sombart said little about America’s unique historical experience of immigration, which I think plays an important part in explaining the weakness of socialism in America as well. America is a country formed out of diversity by a common ideology. Historian Dick Hofstadter once said that one of America’s problems is that it’s not a nation, it’s an ideology. [3] From the founding of the country, the key notion of the Americans as is stated in the Declaration of Independence is equality and liberty. It means the equality of opportunity and mobility and the freedom to the pursuit of happiness. So in American ideology there is an emphasis on freedom and also a strong anti-statist emphasis. Thomas Jefferson, the man who wrote the declaration of independence said that the government governs best which governs least. This ideology runs counter to socialist ideas. The diverse ethnic groups make working class in America quite divided because the sense of belonging to particular ethnic group often takes priority over class solidarity. Thus class line is obscured. In practice it often happens that the lower-class vote for the politicians whose policy actually runs counter to their interest just out of ethnic-loyalty. The historical experience of immigration also had another less obvious effect. America is claimed to be “the city upon a hill”. The immigrants are inclined to be assimilated into American society and prove them to be good Americans. Class-solidarity and radicalism are considered to be Un-American.

The problem of ethnic diversity is complicated by the racial division in America. The racial basis of the American political system which is derived from the struggle over slavery made it a fact that there was no great party of the Left to represent the interest of the working class. Within the two-party system, it must be the Democratic Party which represents the interest of working-class. But the Democratic Party not only represents the interest of the immigrants and the working class, it is also the party of the conservative natives of the south.

Actually in American history there used to be a party that showed the inclination for socialism. In the Great Depression, the New Dealers and some Democrats advocated the responsibility of the government to intervene in national economy and carried out a series of relieve programs to help the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged because economic crisis was their immediate concern. Yet it is important to make a distinction between social democracy and socialism. The former refers to a movement to mobilize the workers on behalf of State intervention, planning and social priorities within capitalism, and the latter is a description of a political movement which seeks to transform capitalism fundamentally.[4] So these New Dealer and Democrats can actually be identified as social democrats. Although their reform programs showed some inclination for socialism, these measures were actually within the capitalist system. After the economic situation improved, they diminished their concern for social reform. By the 1950s, with the rapid development of American economy, these even “near-socialists” converted themselves to be New-left or liberals. Although they still supported some liberal programs, they believed in the perfection of American capitalist system and for American foreign policy they strongly advocated anti-communism and anti-socialism. This liberal ideology became predominant in the nation.

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, the above factors, which are interwoven together, are largely responsible for the failure of socialism in America. I am not going to provide an exhaustive interpretation for there are still other less obvious reasons. To a large extent the failure of socialism in America is connected with American “exceptionalism”. So the question why there is no socialism in America is still quite relevant to contemporary American studies.

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