

Werner Sombart, *Why is There no Socialism in the United States?*, edited and with an Introductory Essay by C.T. Husbands, foreword by Michael Harrington; White Plains: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1976, 187 p., \$4.95.

There are a number of reasons why it is worthwhile to read *Why is There no Socialism in the U.S.?*, the first complete English translation of Sombart's work. In the opening statement of his "Foreword" Michael Harrington gives us perhaps the most important one:

The questions raised by Werner Sombart in 1906 about the absence of Socialism in the United States are relevant to American politics in the 1970's.

Two recent political events suggest that Sombart's observations are even more relevant in the 1980s. The victory of Francois Mitterand and the creation of a socialist government in France was instructive in the reaction it generated over here; a response which underscored both our ignorance of European Socialism, and the slim chance of any sort of socialist alternative in America. On the other hand, the election of Ronald Reagan demonstrates once again that particular stability of the American political process, with its relatively narrow vacillations between "progressive" or "conservative" representatives of the liberal tradition.

The book itself is a classic statement on a fundamental issue by an important, if somewhat neglected, scholar, a contemporary and associate of Max Weber.<sup>1</sup> Sombart's comments are valuable as those of a trained, "neutral"<sup>2</sup> observer of the American scene in the first decade of the 20th century. Beyond mere historical interest in the book, however, is the fact that most of his assumptions about factors undermining Socialist organization in America continue to be put forth in much of the same form today.

*Why is there no Socialism* is divided into four parts. In the introductory section Sombart described the situation in America as he saw it. He began by noting the great vigor of capitalism in

America at the turn of the century, and some of the reasons for it (such as fertile soils, abundant resources, harbors, and the willingness to innovate). This discussion set up the central problem of the book:

If, as I have myself always maintained and often stated, modern Socialism follows as a necessary reaction to capitalism, the country with the most advanced capitalist development, namely the United States, would at the same time be the one providing the classic case of Socialism, and its working class would be supporters of the most radical of Socialist movements (p. 15).

The difficulty, of course, was that this had not occurred, and alongside his description of a vigorous capitalism he noted the almost complete absence of Socialism or even "social democratic" ideals in working class politics. After citing statistics which pointed out the weakness of the Socialist Party in America, he examined the principles of the one labor organization which did have a certain degree of political clout, the American Federation of Labor. These he found to be quite conservative, representing what Marxists of the period termed "trade union consciousness."

(t)he leadership of the Federation lies in non-Socialist hands and the great majority of unions united within it favor the distinctly American viewpoint about the position of the wage labourer. . . . They rely on a purely business approach and this leads them to protect the interests of the occupational groups whom they represent by remaining exclusive and by seeking monopolies, without much regard for the proletarian class as a whole, and with even less regard for the underclass of unskilled workers (p. 22).

There are a number of reasons given by Sombart for the weakness of Socialism in the U.S. To begin with, he felt that unlike those European nations that retained numerous remnants of traditional attitudes and institutions, the U.S. was almost

completely dominated by the spirit of competition and material acquisitiveness. This was seen as part of a general American "national character" that cut across class lines (p. 19ff.), and example of what Weber would call an *instrumental* rationality. Even the *worker* in America had a favorable attitude toward capitalism as a whole. Sombart often exaggerated statements to illustrate a point, as in the following comment:

I believe that emotionally the American worker has a share in capitalism: I believe that he loves it. Anyway he devotes his entire body and soul to it. If there is anywhere in America where the restless striving after profit, the complete fruition of the commercial drive and the passion for business are indigenous, it is in the worker, who wants to earn as much as his strength will allow, and to be as unrestrained as possible (p. 20).

The social, political, and economic factors behind this attitude are examined in the sections of the book that follow.

Sombart's strongest (and most modern) arguments come in his analysis of the "Political Position of the Worker" in America. Here he made two points regarding the failure of a radical politics. First, in addition to the generally favorable attitude toward capitalism, Sombart argued that the worker in America had a high regard for the American system of government and his own participation in it. This was seen to be an effect of formal democracy and universal (male) suffrage, and an almost fetishistic belief in the Constitution and the political rights guaranteed therein (p. 55f.). A second, less idealistic explanation concerned the tremendous power and stability of the two-party political system. Sombart devoted four chapters to an analysis of the party process in America, and in a discussion that included a number of historical examples of third party failures, made several relevant observations. A key factor in the maintenance of the status quo was seen to be the ability of the major parties to control financial resources and political "spoils," and thus attract members while co-opting leaders of potential opposition movements. Similarly, Sombart noted that the major American parties were often able to absorb potential opposition through

temporary adjustment in party platform. While this may signify "flexibility" to some, for Sombart it indicated a "complete lack of political principles" and exclusive concern for obtaining and controlling political office on the part of the American parties, versus their European counterparts (see pp. 48ff.). Such an "adjustment" on the part of the Democratic Party in 1896 led to the demise of the most successful third party challenge to the system up to Sombart's day—the People's (Populist) Party (pp. 42-3). A third crucial difference between European and American politics was the lack of any significant *class* distinction between the two major parties in America. Both were able to use their hierarchical political machines to mobilize support at the "grass roots" level.<sup>3</sup>

Sombart's observations on the American two-party system anticipate many current positions, especially those of theorists like William Domhoff who are concerned with the mechanisms through which a "power elite" or "governing class" exercise power and influence. The similarity of his critique of American politics in 1906 to contemporary statements underscores the continued relevance of his work.

Other of Sombart's explanations for the lack of radical political consciousness in America are more questionable, particularly those pertaining to the economic situation of the worker (these, too, have their counterparts in modern social theory). A key element of Sombart's argument was the "embourgeoisement" thesis. He spent several statistic-laden chapters comparing the wages and standard of living of the European and American working class, concluding that in essence the latter had been "bought off" by the greater material rewards generated by American capitalism. More money, better housing and clothing, and the absence of a traditional aristocracy made the American worker much more "middle-class" in both appearance and attitude. In addition, there was the factor of greater social mobility in the U.S. versus Europe, mentioned somewhat ambiguously by Sombart (he states that "there is a grain of truth in the nonsense" about possibilities for upward mobility in America on page 115) but not elaborated. Finally, he concludes the book by presenting a crude version of Frederick

Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis"—the argument that the availability of land and the possibility for moving West in America served as a pressure valve to the build-up of class conflict:

I fully believe that the fact supplying the principle reason for the characteristic peaceable mood of the American worker is that many men with sound limbs and no capital or hardly any were able to turn themselves into independent farmers almost as they wished by colonising free land (p. 116).

Citing somewhat dubious statistics, Sombart argues for a significant movement *away* from densely settled urban areas to more sparsely populated regions with free land in the late 19th century! But he also stated that it was not just the number of workers who *actually* migrated that was important; indeed "the mere knowledge that he *could* become a free farmer at any time could not but make the American worker feel secure and content" (p. 118).

There are a number of problems with Sombart's analysis of the American working class, which are instructive in that they tend to reappear continually, even today. The most important error, given the problem he set out to solve, lay in his depiction of the working class as if it were homogeneous. He completely neglected the *crucial* heritage of immigration and slavery in America, and the effects of racial and ethnic divisions on working class unity. In addition, his "affluence" argument is undermined by the tremendous poverty and *inequality* of income and standard of living that existed *within* the working class at the turn of the century. As C.T. Husbands notes in the introduction, part of the problem is Sombart's focus on *average* wages (as opposed to their *distribution*) in his data. Average wages were indeed higher in America than in Germany, for example, but the inequality in distribution was greater here (p. xxiv). Sombart's neglect of these factors is all the more surprising in that he mentions them early in the book, and even cites Robert Hunter's famous work on the subject, *Poverty*. Finally, the "escape

value" frontier thesis is extremely problematic, as a number of historians have shown (a useful review of the subsequent literature is given by the editor in footnote nine on page 1965).

A final comment on *Why is There no Socialism* is necessary here. Sombart's ideas are useful in themselves for the reasons given. But what makes this particular edition valuable is the contribution of the editor, C.T. Husbands. Not only is the editing excellent, but his "Introductory Essay" is extremely worthwhile in itself for setting out the key problems concerning the existence of Socialism in the U.S., and supplying the historical context for Sombart's views. His footnotes clarify Sombart's more obscure passages, and tie his arguments to the contemporary literature. Together with the Foreword by Michael Harrington, Husbands' work makes this book valuable reading for those interested in the nature and history of the American political process.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Along with Edgar Jaffe, Sombart and Weber were co-editors of the influential *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*.
2. This is not meant entirely ironically. Sombart's own political views were ambiguous and fluctuated greatly throughout his life. It is generally argued that at this time he leaned toward socialism, and later grew much more conservative, even to the point of partially accepting fascism in the 1930s. See Husbands' remarks, pp. xv-xvi.
- 3.- Sombart, of course, was writing before the New Deal coalition of FDR, which led to the general identification of working-class interests in America with the Democratic Party. Interestingly, the class distinctions between the two major parties has once again blurred with the resurgence of the Republican Party in recent years. See, for example, Godfrey Hodgson's discussion of the breakdown of what he calls the "liberal consensus" in the Democratic Party in *America in Our Time*, New York: Vintage, 1978.

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