

Miguel Requena

# Socialism, Roast Beef, and Apple Pie. Werner Sombart on Socialism a Hundred Years Later

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Flashback

# Socialism, Roast Beef, and Apple Pie

## Werner Sombart on Socialism a Hundred Years Later

by Miguel Requena

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### Introduction

In 1906 Werner Sombart published a brief essay, in book form, entitled *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* [English title: *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*].<sup>1</sup> To the great surprise of his readers, the work ended with logical acrobatics leading to an unexpected prediction. After devoting more than two hundred pages to analyzing, in an elegant, penetrating, and convincing way, the reasons why socialism does not exist in the United States, Sombart [2009 (1906), 184] concludes his study as follows:

These are roughly the reasons why there is no Socialism in the United States. However, my present opinion is as follows: all the factors that till now have prevented the development of Socialism in the United States are about to disappear or to be converted into their opposite, with the result that in the next generation Socialism in America will very probably experience the greatest possible expansion of its appeal.

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the work first appeared under the title of “Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des noredamerikanischen Proletariats” in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* [1905, 21, pp. 210-36, 308-46, 556-611]. An abbreviated version of the introduction and first section appeared as “Studies of the Historical Development and Evolution of American Proletariat” in *International Socialist Review* [1905, 6, pp. 129-136, 293-301, 358-67]. Just a year later it would be published as a book in Tübingen by Mohr.

Why is reading a book that ends with such an erroneous prediction still interesting more than a hundred years after its publication? It is very clear that foreknowledge was not one of the author's virtues,<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that some European commentators are now determined to see Barack Obama as a sort of postmodern embodiment, *à la américaine*, of social democracy. But the fact, certain and stubborn, is that the United States is the only industrial society which has not developed either a powerful socialist party or an important proletarian movement with a class conscience. The social democratic tinge of F.D. Roosevelt's New Deal [Hofstadter 1972, 308] or the so-called New Left in the sixties, are only exceptions, with few political implications for the formation of a socialist movement, to the great exception: the obstinate absence of socialism in American society.

At least three reasons still make reading Sombart's work on the United States recommendable today. The first is a purely propaedeutic reason: it is a good chance to approach an author who, while not strictly forgotten in sociological thought, is not well-known today. This may be because he only occupies a marginal position in the history of social thought, or because of the theoretical oscillations and incongruences that he underwent throughout his career, or simply because he does not stand up well in comparison with his great contemporary and friend, Max Weber. Whatever the reason,<sup>3</sup> Sombart continues to be an author who is very representative of his period, with interesting work to his credit, work which, straddling economy, history, and sociology, is worth reviewing. The second reason that reading Sombart's book is still advisable is a substantive one, the intrinsic – macrosociological, historical and theoretical – interest of the problem he presents: Why is the United States the only developed country where no socialist movement with a relevant political and electoral impact has arisen? The third reason is methodological: Sombart's work on the socialist movement in the United States contains important teachings, that ought to be emphasized, on the practice of controlled comparison in the social sciences. In this article I will deal, in this order, with these three reasons that invite us to read again Sombart's essay. Yet Sombart's famous question not only has an undeniable propaedeutical, substantive or methodological interest, but it has become pertinent again today due to the combination of two extremely current circumstances: the

<sup>2</sup> The only plausible explanation for such a mistaken prediction is that Sombart was then a "convinced Marxist" and didn't want to deviate from his ideological orthodoxy. His prediction appears – in a sudden, unexpected, and unfounded way – in the penultimate paragraph of his book. In the last paragraph, Sombart adds that he does not have enough space to provide the basis for his forecast but expects to do so later on. It goes without saying that he never did.

<sup>3</sup> See Grundmann and Stehr [2001] for an explanation of why Sombart is not part of the core of classical sociology today. It is interesting that Sombart's name is not included in standard textbooks of the history of sociological theory: see, for example, Ritzer and Goodman [2004] and Turner [2002].

global economic crisis that capitalism is undergoing and the recent election in the United States of a new Democrat president, with some views that seem similar to those of European social democracy. In the conclusion I point very briefly to some political implications of Sombart's book.

### The Author

Werner Sombart's (1863-1941) biography is well known [Lenger 1994]. Suffice it to say here that he was born in Ermsleben (Germany) and that, after studying law and economy in several German and Italian universities, he became one of the representatives of the last generation of the German School of National Economy, an intellectual niche that had become very fertile through its approach to the task of historical analysis, using a perspicacious combination of economic and sociological perspectives. Together with Max Weber and Edgar Jaffé, he coedited the prestigious *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, where some of the most important works of German sociology in that period appeared. His university career were rather eccentric and his consolidation in academia was late.<sup>4</sup> Once established at the university, he turned toward radical nationalism in the last years of his life.

However, Sombart's initial theoretical inspiration was closely linked to Marxism, something that distanced him from the idealizing normativism of his teachers' generation and, in particular, from the group of Gustav von Schmoller. The eulogistic essays that he dedicated to Engels and Marx are characteristic of this first period, as well as a book on the socialist movement, *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung* [1896, English title: *Socialism and the Social Movement in the 19th Century*], which was very successful in its day among the German public. His texts on the United States which are reviewed here also correspond to this first stage, when he concentrated on socialism and on the proletariat as a social class.<sup>5</sup>

Following these first works, he wrote a series of studies devoted to the genesis and historical development of capitalism which have proven to have a lasting influence, as well as probably being the best of Sombart's legacy. Several of the titles – *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* [1911, English title: *The Jews and Modern Capital-*

<sup>4</sup> He spent a good deal of his life striving to achieve, without much success, a stable position at the university in Germany. It was only at the age of fifty-four, after a long pilgrimage through several institutions of lower academic ranking, that he attained a full professorship at Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (later Humboldt University) in Berlin.

<sup>5</sup> It is common knowledge that what triggered Sombart's interest in the United States was the trip he made in 1904, together with Weber and other German scholars, to participate in the Congress of Arts and Sciences at the Universal Exhibition in St. Louis, Missouri.

*ism*], *Luxus und Kapitalismus* [1913, English title: *Luxury and Capitalism*], *Krieg und Kapitalismus* [1913], *Der Bourgeois: Zur Geistesgeschichte des modernen Wirtschaftsmenschen* [1913, English title: *The Quintessence of Capitalism: A Study of the History and Psychology of the Modern Business Man*] and *Der moderne Kapitalismus: Historisch-systematische Darstellung des gesamteuropäischen Wirtschaftslebens von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* [1928, never fully translated into English] – reflect his insistence on the importance of spiritual or psychic factors in economic life and document in various ways modern capitalism's genetic links with the Enlightenment's ideal of rational control over the world. Some of his theses, such as the one concerning the role of the Jews in the origin and development of capitalism, became quite popular in their time, although they were also polemical [Mendes-Flohr 1976; Mosse 1979; Loader 2001]. It is a widely-held view that he prepared many of his most important arguments during this period of his life through dialogue and debate with Weber himself. And although historians have, with the passage of time, questioned numerous details of his work, his influence on authors such as Schumpeter and Braudel, for example, must be acknowledged.

Sombart's late work has received very little recognition, in part because he tended toward increasingly nationalistic ideological positions, under the growing influence of German romanticism. As early as World War I, he began to show a pugnacious patriotism, with the publication of *Händler und Helden: Patriotische Besinnungen* [1915, English title: *Traders and Heroes*), where he compared, with disparaging fervor, the mercantilistic, hedonistic, practical, calculating spirit of the English with the hard-working, sacrificing Teutonic character: in contrast to the individualism of the first group, Sombart's compatriots oriented themselves toward the collective welfare because of the heroic virtues that had taken root in their nation. His nationalism became exacerbated during the Weimar Republic, reaching its highest point in his work *Deutscher Sozialismus* [1934, English title: *A New Social Philosophy*], whose very title, in German, plainly evokes the ideology of the national-socialist dictatorship. Sombart's supposed anti-Semitism and his relationship with national-socialism during this last period seem to be well-documented [Harris 1942; Lenger 1994], something which has not exactly helped make him more attractive to later generations.

## **The Book**

Sombart's text on the United States is a seminal sociological piece in the debate about the political dimension of American exceptionalism. Ever since Alexis de Tocqueville published *De la démocratie en Amérique* in the 1830s, the peculiarities of

United States society have persistently aroused curiosity in Europeans. As the century went on, and as the United States developed into a great industrial power, this curiosity focused on the decisive political consequences of the progress of United States capitalism, particularly on the inexistence of the working-class radicalism so typical in Europe. In the case of the socialists and, especially, of the Marxists, this curiosity was tinged with an unease that is easily understood. But the reasons for this unease were not only political. From the point of view of any good Marxist who understood socialism as the more or less inevitable outcome of capitalist development, the fact that no socialist mass movement worthy of the name had appeared must have been theoretically compelling. The issue did not fail to worry Marx and Engels, faced with the cruel historical irony of underdeveloped socialism where capitalism had made the most progress. In several of his letters,<sup>6</sup> for example, Engels emphasized that the United States was a purely bourgeois society that, without a feudal past, had nourished capitalist prejudices among the working class that made it difficult for socialism to arise. The same year that Sombart's study on the United States came out, *The Future in America: A Search After Realities* by Herbert G. Wells [1906] also appeared. The then-Fabian-socialist English writer viewed the libertarian or anti-state spirit – the authentic antithesis of socialism, according to Wells – as one of the features that most clearly defined United States politics.

Sombart approached the problem from the very point where Marx and Engels had left it. The United States being the promised land of capitalism, the country where all of the conditions for its fullest flourishing were satisfied, how could it be possible that no powerful socialist movement or party had arisen? The monograph starts with a brief description of the United States economy, of its unequalled financial power and its great concentration of capital, and Sombart moves on from there to the most decisive feature of its social structure: everything in United States society comes from capitalism and, therefore, there are no relics of the old feudal classes there. In contrast to the situation in Europe, there is no hereditary aristocracy, nor are there any feudal artisans, and this produces an open, highly permeable society, impregnating the different spheres of life with a peculiar economic flavor. Among the people in the United States, the pecuniary value of things and people prevails over all other considerations, success is identified with material prosperity, and the economic sphere has become a powerful attractor for the most capable and talented individuals.

Immediately following this, Sombart reviews the state of the socialist movement in the United States, using statistical data to document workers' lack of inclination

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Engels' letters to Joseph Weydemeyer (1851) and to Friedrich Adolph Sorge (February 8, 1890 and December 31, 1892).

toward radicalism and the resulting electoral irrelevance of the socialist parties. This review also includes a characterization of United States unions that presents them as closed organizations limited to their own trades, restricted to improving the economic conditions of their own members, and oriented to pure business in a kind of monopolistic collusion with their respective managements, with their common purpose being to exploit the public. This crude portrait of unionism allows Sombart to make his first incursion into the mechanisms which, in his judgment, explain the absence of socialism in the United States. The workers there are not at all unhappy with the status quo and their vision of the world is markedly optimistic. If we add untarnished patriotism and ardent trust in the mission and greatness of their country to this breeding ground, made up of acquiescence to the established order and optimism about the future, it is easy to understand that the emotional seeds of class consciousness – feelings of envy, bitterness, and hate towards those who have more – have not managed to sprout among the United States working class.

Sombart then goes straight to the root of the issue that he proposes to clarify. In order to do this, he begins by dissecting the political structure of the United States. What does he find there? He finds a hyperdemocratic machine which, plagued by elective institutions, forces citizens and workers to constantly vote; he finds a situation where the two main parties maintain a monopoly and, with their incessant position-hunting, adapt to the most varied situations by means of ideological indefinition and mutual reconciliation. He finds third parties that continually fail and whose political opportunities have faded away repeatedly in the tragic destiny of their electoral inanity. He finds the reign of public opinion in which the adoration of the majorities shuts the door on divisive options. The two great parties are, in short, large organizations of interests with more than enough capacity to avoid strong ideological positions in order to integrate any possible dissidence within themselves.

Notice that, up to this point, Sombart has developed his analysis of the inexistence of socialism in the United States by moving, quite agilely, from the economic sphere and class structure to the workers' cultural representations and the guidelines of the political system. In the second and third parts of the monograph, he crowns his explanatory exercise with a detailed inquiry into the material situation and the social position of United States workers. Sombart summons up a large amount of the empirical material available in his time to conclude that United States workers' wage incomes are higher than those of European workers, that the essentials – housing, food, and clothing – are not more expensive, and that United States workers devote the difference between income and expenditure to savings, to satisfy their needs better, and to a more generous consumption of luxury items. In short, United States workers have a much higher standard of living than European workers and

their comfortable economic situation guarantees patterns of consumption that seem more middle-class than working-class, according to European criteria. Sombart's famous dictum [2009 (1906), 174] turned out to be oracular in this respect: "All the Socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie" in the United States. But it is not only the workers' comfortable material situation that prevents socialism from developing. Remarkable social mobility, both vertical and horizontal, gives the working class the permanent "escape into freedom" of changing their social class: tremendous economic dynamism and the colonial expansion to the West have made this all possible.

The explanation Sombart offers for the absence of socialism considers the most important ingredients of what has been called by sociological literature, in the wake of Alexis de Tocqueville, United States exceptionalism [Lipset 1996]. This is a socio-cultural syndrome that usually includes an excessive religiosity spurred by the vertiginous dynamics of the Protestant sects and denominations, egalitarian social relations with a high degree of social mobility, and considerably high rates of delinquency. The list could, however, easily be extended to several other ingredients, such as the way the country was created by successive waves of immigrants, the heterogeneous ethnic composition of its working class, and, today, a peculiar demography with a relatively exuberant fertility. The main political dimension of this American exceptionalism is, without a doubt, the absence of socialism [Bell 1996; Lipset 1977; Lipset and Marks 2000].

All of these exceptional features not only appear linked to one another, but they fully tally with the country's national ideology: the so-called *American creed*. This creed combines five main precepts – freedom, equality, populism, individualism, and *laissez-faire* – and it has been transcendently important for the collective identity of United States citizens who, for lack of a long, more or less glorious common history, define themselves by means of an ideology or, if you will, a political religion: *Americanism* itself. Two of the most important corollaries of this creed are chronic hostility toward the state and the exaltation of meritocracy. In addition, this whole doctrine also holds an unlimited promise of social promotion which is also typical of United States exceptionalism.

In their egalitarian orientation, people in the United States believe that equal opportunity must be the basis of social selection and that the only possible effect it can have is unequal results; and they are actually capable of living with levels of income inequality and poverty rates that are unparalleled in other developed countries. As Sombart very sagaciously pointed out, the absence of a premodern pattern of stratification in the United States and great social mobility do not mean that there were no inequalities. Quite the opposite in fact, as the differences in income between



the rich and the poor were, in his time, already among the highest in the world.<sup>7</sup> So it hardly matters that their social mobility has not really been higher than in other advanced societies,<sup>8</sup> because the citizens continue to believe, with shatterproof faith, that they live in the most open, mobile, and fluid society in the world. In their political economy, the historical consequences of this exceptionalism have been a reduced social welfare system with few public services (compared to continental and Nordic Europe), and a meager, not very progressive tax levy; but another consequence – and this must be emphasized – has been a singular economic dynamism during many periods of its short history, making the United States the number one world power and guaranteeing a higher average standard of living for its citizens than any other society in the developed world.<sup>9</sup> Not least among other possible merits are its survival and contribution to defeating the communist block.

### **A Sound Comparison**

According to specialists' usual criteria, Sombart's study unites the distinctive characteristics of the so-called *comparative historical analysis* tradition: concern with explanation and causal analysis, emphasis on processes over time and systematic and contextualized comparisons of similar and contrasting cases [Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003; Mahoney 2004]. Also typical for this tradition, Sombart's focus of interest – the inexistence of socialism in the United States – can be considered, without a doubt, a “big question,” that is, an issue regarding large-scale society results that are important, both for experts on the subject and for the uninitiated, from the scientific and political point of view.

First of all, the interest in causal analysis and in identifying causal configurations that produce sociologically relevant results is obvious in the way the work's title is formulated: what Sombart is interested in is producing an explanation for the failure of the socialist movement in the United States, and the entire development of his essay is specifically aimed at clarifying the different causes of this failure, its relative importance, and the way these combine to produce the result in which the author is interested. Second, Sombart's analysis is explicitly temporal, in the sense that it does not

<sup>7</sup> And have remained the highest until today: see, for example, Smeeding [2005] and Massey [2009].

<sup>8</sup> This is, by the way, really difficult to determine. The comparison of social mobility between occupational classes in different societies is a very intricate matter for several reasons, from the availability of homogeneous data to the suitability of statistical techniques to be used. For the reference work in this field, see Erikson and Goldthorpe [1992].

<sup>9</sup> Except for Luxembourg; see Brandolini and Smeeding [2009].

deal with a static reality but rather with a sequence of events and factors that explicitly propel a specific historical process toward a certain state of things; in this sense, the development patterns of American capitalism are one of the keys Sombart uses to explain why there is no socialism there. Third, except for a few brief, circumstantial references to the British case, Sombart constructs the majority of his argument about the inexistence of socialism in the United States by means of a systematic, contextualized comparison of just two cases: North American society and German society of his time. To summarize, in the distinctive way of this research tradition, Sombart directs the explanation of an important outcome within a delimited historical context by focusing on a small number of cases – indeed, just two [Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, 13].

The comparison to which Sombart resorts to study the non-existence of socialism in the United States is visibly individualizing, and his methodological strategy is a case-oriented approach. This is an individualizing comparison because it intends, above all, to make the singularity, specificity, or exceptionalism of a case manifest by confronting it with others: its objective is to “establish exactly what is particular about a particular historical experience” [Tilly 1984, 88]. And it is a case-oriented strategy [Ragin 1987] because: *i*) it focuses on delimiting the causal configuration of a relevant historical result by reconstructing and analyzing the appropriate evidence for the cases to be compared, *ii*) the cases are dealt with in a holistic manner, that is, they are not broken down into variables, and *iii*) the sample base used is very small. Also, as is common in this kind of comparison, the product of Sombart’s work is a generalization that is limited and context-sensitive, constituting the most likely result expected from applying this strategy. Therefore, Sombart’s comparative strategy is interesting insofar as it is a good illustration, as it were *avant la lettre*, of one of the two dominant approaches in comparative social science tradition: the case-oriented approach, also called the qualitative approach, as opposed to the variable-oriented approach, often labeled quantitative.<sup>10</sup>

Another distinctive feature of the case-oriented strategy is that it is based on the causal methods of J.S. Mill [1967]. Although Sombart does not mention Mill in his essay, it is obvious that he uses Mill’s methods to carry out his work of comparison. Concretely, what Sombart does in his study of the United States is apply the familiar method of difference. The method of difference serves to analyze situations in which the values of the dependent variable are different in the cases studied. Once the

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the case strategy, the variable-oriented approach develops the comparison by analyzing the relationship between the general characterizations of several social units that have been translated into variables: that is, the object of interest is the possible patterns of statistical association into which the units of analysis (often countries or nations) are broken down, and the researcher always prefers to have a high number of cases to increase the inferential basis of his arguments.

phenomenon is identified, the analyst then proceeds to study systematic patterns of variation among the independent variables in order to verify which ones vary or not jointly with the dependent variable. Only the independent variables that covary with the dependent variable can explain it; those variables present when the dependent variable is not and those variables absent when the dependent variable is present can be ruled out. The researcher thus selects the independent variables that change along with the dependent variable as causes of the phenomenon being analyzed. In Sombart's application, the dependent variable is, clearly, the failure of the socialist movement (failure's occurrence in United States, non-occurrence in Germany) and the decisive variables for the explanation – i.e., the causes – are the variables that are present in American society (its peculiar political structure, its working class's high standard of living, its intense patterns of social mobility, etc.) but not in German society.

The problems that arise upon applying Mill's causal methods to social phenomena are well-known to comparative scientists today. The main drawback is that Mill's methods are logical, not statistical and, therefore, they are not an appropriate tool for dealing with the non-deterministic relations typical of the social world. They thus prove to be a rather useless instrument for evaluating explanations and theories of a probabilistic nature [Goldthorpe 2007]. They do not work well to detect causes in processes that depend on multiple causation, circumstantial causation, and interactive effects: they fail miserably in these cases [Ragin 1987; 1989]. In addition, they require very strong assumptions about the absence of errors in measurement and about correct specification (the precise delimitation of all the factors) of the causal model. Finally, because they are based on very small samples – often just a few cases – they require the very risky assumption that the same pattern discovered in the comparison carried out would also occur if different cases were analyzed [Lieberson 1992]. In short, they provide a poor basis for making scientifically based valid causal inferences from a number of cases that is often very small.

Despite all these problems, and given Sombart's circumstances, his binary, contextualized intensive comparison strategy, applied to the American and German cases, does not seem wholly preposterous. On one hand, neither the methods that have recently been proposed to overcome the problems of working with a small number of cases nor the data that would make it possible to attempt a variable-oriented comparison with a larger sample basis were available to Sombart in his time. First, the methods thought up to increase the number of comparisons, for example, the methods based on the development of Boolean algebra [Ragin 1987], had obviously not yet been developed at that time and would be unavailable for a long time still. Second, even though Sombart made a notable, worthy effort to collect a large amount

of quantitative empirical information about the working class standard of living, income, and patterns of consumption in the United States and in Germany, his data are clearly incomplete and partial, if not quite poor, as is the case with the data regarding social mobility. It is easy to imagine the probably unsolvable problems which he would have faced if he had decided to gather data equivalent to the ones he used from other countries. These are the reasons that Sombart would have had a hard time following the dominant, quite reasonable advice that comparativists who want to strengthen their inferences receive: to broaden their sample base by increasing the number of observations [King *et al.* 1994].

On the other hand, it is not completely unreasonable to focus on a small number of cases when, as often happens and as did in fact happen in Sombart's case, the quantity of information available is limited. As all comparativists know quite well, their work always means a painful trade-off between the number of cases considered and the quantity of comparable information that can be gathered in each case. Because of this, having more information about a smaller number of cases can often be preferable.<sup>11</sup> What is more, the case-oriented strategy in fact only works well when the number of cases is limited, because *i)* an in-depth treatment of the cases becomes hard to manage when the number of cases is high; *ii)* the possible comparisons increase geometrically as the number of cases increases, the number of comparisons equalling the following ratio:  $[(N)(N-1)/2]$  [Ragin 1987; 1989]; *iii)* the abundance of information on a small number of cases allows the researcher to specify the causal effects that he or she wishes to contrast more precisely, to prepare better causal models, and to thus reduce the risk of erroneous inferences; and *iv)* broad, detailed, intensive knowledge of the processes analyzed places the researcher in a more advantageous situation to open the black box of established relations, an indispensable step if we hope to create better causal interpretations or refine them more effectively.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, two additional arguments guarantee the interest of Sombart's comparative exercise. First, although we can admit that the scope of his conclusions regarding socialism's failure in North America is obviously limited and very context-sensitive, as is utterly logical given the comparative strategy he uses, his essay – and this is what is important here – certainly was and continues to be extremely useful for

<sup>11</sup> As Kohn very aptly put it: "It is not necessarily true that the more nations included in the analysis, the more we learn. There is usually a trade-off between number of countries studied and amount of information obtained... By and large, though, I would opt for fewer countries, more information" [Kohn 1989, 95].

<sup>12</sup> Remember that process analysis and concern with explanation are two of the distinctive features of this research tradition. In the words of Mahoney [2004, 88] "Analysts have long recognized that this kind of 'process analysis' facilitates causal inference when only a small number of cases are selected."

understanding why there was no socialism in the United States. In other words, it is quite possible that, in the end, his comparative research is not very helpful in constructing, verifying, or falsifying a general, nomothetic, macrosociological theory<sup>13</sup> of the development of socialism in industrial democracies; but it is very likely that his comparison is a powerful vantage point from which the persistent exceptionalism of North American society can be distinguished clearly. An so it has been recognized by many sociologists, political scientists, and political commentators through several generations. Second, Sombart's effort is notable in another sense. For what Sombart really does in his essay on the United States is develop what has, as time has passed, become standard practice in the social sciences. When all is said and done, a large part of normal social science, as it is practiced ordinarily and as it appears in the field's most relevant publications, consists purely and simply of single-case studies or comparisons of only a handful of cases. So why should we demand more of Sombart than what we have been able to demand of ourselves over more than a century?

## Conclusion

Apart from its possible propaedeutical, substantive and methodological interests, Sombart's essay continues to be relevant today from a political point of view. After the collapse of the communist regimes, during the decade of the eighties and the nineties in the last century, the exceptional character of United States politics seemed to be dissolving in a rather unexpected way: western democracies and their economies were the ones that seemed to be *Americanizing*. However, the current economic crisis puts Sombart's essay on the table for discussion today, a hundred years after it was written. Is there a future for socialism in the United States now that capitalism is facing its worst economic nightmare since the decade of the thirties? For now, the democratic victory and the democrats' initial response to the challenges of the recession seem to reedit Keynes' formulas and give New Deal prescriptions: greater state intervention in the private sector, stricter control over the markets, massive public expenditure programs, and the development of welfare institutions. Will the reaction to today's recessive economic cycle be enough to make people in the United States renounce their *creed* and establish social democracy in their country? Will Sombart's prophecy finally be fulfilled, a century later? The future is not set in stone, but historical experience advises us to be prudent. The United States came out of the Great Depression with its party system, its public institutions, and its values

<sup>13</sup> For a sceptical view of the possibility of these kinds of theory in the social sciences, see Rueschemeyer [2003].

intact [Lipset 1996] and, apparently, quite prepared to take delight in the prosperity of golden age of western capitalism and continue to enjoy the American dream.

In an intelligent essay published fifty years after Sombart's book, Ralf Dahrendorf [1963] described Sombart's foolish prediction about socialism's imminent future in the United States as a rather comical dissonance. Another fifty years later, after the communist systems have fallen, turned to the market, or entered into a terminal phase, Sombart's original question can be split into two different ones. If socialism means socialist regimes – so-called real socialism –, then the pertinent question is the one Dahrendorf suggested: Why hasn't there been socialism anywhere in the world except – one could add – during relatively short periods of time in a handful of backward societies? But if socialism means social democracy, then we should really continue thinking about why people in the United States have, until now, preferred the risk of inequality, with its continuously renewed promise of individual prosperity, to the collective security that the State provides.

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## **Socialism, Roast Beef, and Apple Pie**

### Werner Sombart on Socialism a Hundred Years Later

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**Abstract:** In this article the possible interest of a new reading of Sombart's essay *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* is evaluated. The book, published more than a century ago, has not achieved the status of a sociology classic; nevertheless, it is intellectually interesting from a triple point of view. First, re-reading Sombart's book is a very good chance to approach an author who, while not a total outsider to the sociological tradition, is not very well known today. Second, the question of the failure of socialist movements in the United States is an intellectual puzzle – one of the key features of American exceptionalism, indeed – that has a clear theoretical and historical interest from a sociological point of view. And third, from a methodological point of view, Sombart's work on socialism in the United States is, according to the standards of his time, scientifically insightful and sociologically penetrating, and it illustrates the practice of controlled and sound comparison in social sciences very well. Moreover, Sombart's essay can regain some relevance today due both to the current economic crisis, with capitalism facing its worst nightmare from the thirties, and the recent election of a new Democrat president in the United States, whose political positions could appear to be close to European social democracy.

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*Keywords:* socialism, Sombart, USA, exceptionalism.

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**Miguel Requena** is Full Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Structure (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid, Spain). He has been Senior Associate Member at St. Antony's College (Oxford University) and visiting professor at Princeton University. His research interests are demography and sociology of the family, social stratification, and social change.