

Socialism in the United States: Hidden in Plain Sight

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has attracted some of the largest crowds of the 2016 presidential campaign thus far: 11,000 in Phoenix, 25,000 in Los Angeles, and 28,000 in Portland, Oregon. Sanders, a democratic socialist who for three decades has won office as an Independent, is now running in the Democratic Party primaries. While he does not advocate the original goal of socialism—that “a nation’s resources and major industries should be owned and operated by the government on behalf of all the people, not by individuals and private companies for their own profit,” in the words of one U.S. history textbook¹—Sanders has put “socialism” back in American political discourse.

Sanders assails the “billionaires” and the “1%,” charging that income inequality has increased as median wages stagnate, and that the super-rich avoid their fair share of taxes as shredded campaign finance laws provide them undue political influence. Only a “political revolution,” Sanders states—by which he means an insurgent movement of voters and activists, not a violent storming of the barricades—can make the U.S. work for the majority of its citizens. His vision of democratic socialism begins with the idea that “real freedom must include economic security,” as he put it at Georgetown University in November 2015, drawing on President Franklin Roosevelt’s call in 1944 for a “second Bill of Rights.” Achieving that security, Sanders believes, requires universal health care coverage (he favors the “Medicare for all” model), tuition-free access to public universities, public sector jobs to rebuild “our crumbling infrastructure,” initiatives to help achieve full employment, a greatly increased minimum wage, and a sharply graduated income tax.²

Drawing still further on FDR’s experience, Sanders asserted at Georgetown that much New Deal social legisla-

tion—Social Security, banking regulations, and collective bargaining provisions, among others—was denounced as “socialist” at first but has “become the fabric of our nation and the foundation of the middle class.” He added that the same is true for some of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs, such as Medicare and Medicaid. Indeed, Sanders squarely positions himself along one pole of the socialist tradition, striving to improve people’s lives without overthrowing capitalism entirely: “I don’t believe government should own the means of production, but I do believe that the middle class and the working families who produce the wealth of America deserve a fair deal.”³

Sanders’s electoral odds are long, but his campaign reminds us as educators that there is a socialist tradition in American politics and society. Our students should know that Sanders and his ideas did not appear from nowhere; people with such views have often played important roles in reform movements. While sometimes labeled by opponents as un-American, unrealistic, or simply destructive, many (though by no means all) socialist goals have

become, as Sanders notes, broadly accepted—or at least part of mainstream debate.

The Invisibility of Socialism in U.S. Textbooks

As we seek to increase our students’ sophistication as citizens, discussing Sanders’s ideas alongside those of other candidates, it is a matter of concern that in the textbook accounts of U.S. history, Socialists have often been hidden in plain sight.

Most U.S. history textbooks note the towering figure of American socialism, Eugene V. Debs, who usually appears three times: as the leader of the American Railway Union jailed for leading the 1894 Pullman strike; as the Socialist Party (SP) presidential candidate in the four-way 1912 race who received 6% of the vote; and as one of hundreds jailed for opposing U.S. involvement in World War I.⁴ Gary Nash graphically emphasizes Debs’s powerful oratory and public appeal,⁵ while Jesus Garcia and his co-authors use Debs’s progression from union leader to Socialist to introduce the popular outrage over massive economic inequality which inspired the Progressive Era.⁶ While it is true, as Donald Ritchie observes,⁷ that some Progressives feared the more radical Socialists—and President Wilson’s wartime jailing of Socialist leaders constituted a devastating blow to the SP—it is equally true to say that Debsian socialism influenced Progressivism. Upton Sinclair’s account of conditions in the Chicago packinghouses spurred passage of the 1906 Meat Inspection Act, while



Eugene V. Debs, member of the Socialist Party of the USA and presidential candidate, speaks at a political meeting in New York on Aug. 17, 1912. (AP Photo)

Margaret Sanger, who was a Socialist, courageously disseminated information about contraception to working-class women. Milwaukee's Socialist elected officials pioneered the provision of public services and zoning regulation now standard in many cities.

Socialist influence continued during the Great Depression and World War II. E.Y. (Yip) Harburg, a Socialist, who also wrote the songs of "The Wizard of Oz," penned the stirring song now generally considered the anthem of the Great Depression, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"⁸ Six-time Socialist candidate for president Norman Thomas, who received almost a million votes in 1932 and worked to push FDR to the left, was eulogized as America's "social conscience" upon his death.⁹ The Social Gospel tradition, which arose in the late 1800s, became more rooted in main-line Protestantism during the interwar period; the leading main-line non-denominational magazine, *The Christian Century*, editorialized just before the 1932 election that "the existing capitalistic system is basically unchristian and unjust," and that the Socialist program was "far more closely in accord with the ideals of Christianity than ... either of the major parties."¹⁰ African American labor

leader A. Philip Randolph, who first ran for public office as a Socialist in 1920, organized the March on Washington Movement in 1941, which forced FDR to issue an executive order banning racial discrimination in war industries.

While the Socialists as an organized political party declined further after 1940, several leaders still made their mark. Michael Harrington, their newspaper editor, wrote *The Other America* in 1962, and that exposé of continued poverty is generally credited as a spur for Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Harrington, in turn, best articulated the new Socialist strategy of working electorally within the Democratic Party, of being "on the left wing of the possible," as he put it. Meanwhile, Randolph and fellow Socialist Bayard Rustin were the main organizers of the now-celebrated March on Washington in August 1963. Frank Zeidler, the last of the Milwaukee Socialist mayors, worked tirelessly in the 1950s to legalize public sector collective bargaining—which had been omitted from 1935's National Labor Relations Act—and Wisconsin became the first state to institutionalize the practice, in 1959. Union leaders such as Jerry Wurf of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees

and Walter Reuther of the United Autoworkers retained their Socialist ties even as the AFL-CIO as a whole became less critical of capitalism in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Socialist Party-affiliated League for Industrial Democracy helped to launch Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1960. SDS soon swung in an even more radical direction, especially in its opposition to American foreign policy, and spread socialist ideas to a wide range of 1960s radicals. Sanders himself was a member of the SP youth group at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s. After a factional split in 1972, the most visible SP offshoot became the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in 1982. Harrington, its most prominent member, died in 1989, but DSA later counted among its leaders United Farmworkers co-founder Dolores Huerta, Rep. Ron Dellums of California, author Barbara Ehrenreich, and philosopher and theologian Cornel West.

And yet, aside from Debs and other opponents of World War I, Socialists are all but invisible in most secondary-level U.S. history textbooks, and, I imagine, from the lessons most teachers prepare. Including this dissenting and activist



Supporters cheer for U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders during a campaign rally at Cleveland State University in Ohio, November 16, 2015.

perspective in the curriculum is important, and not that difficult. All secondary textbooks, for example, describe Sinclair's *The Jungle* and its impact as key examples of the muckraking and government regulation of business typical of Progressivism. While most textbooks explain Sinclair's main goal as arousing sympathy for immigrant workers who toiled in unsafe stockyards and packinghouses, only one textbook among those I surveyed identifies Sinclair as a Socialist.¹¹ Another adds that the "radical" *Appeal to Reason* commissioned Sinclair to undertake his study; why not mention specifically that this was a Socialist newspaper with 760,000 subscribers at its height in 1913?¹²

Fewer textbooks than one would expect discuss the efforts of Sanger—a founder of Planned Parenthood—to disseminate birth control information, and none that do identify her as a Socialist. Nash merely explains that Sanger, a nurse, was arrested in 1914 for violating laws against "obscenity," and that even after charges were dropped she "faced constant opposition."¹³ (Garcia and his co-authors avoid controversy—and context—by labeling Sanger only "a reformer who focused on women's health issues."¹⁴) In view of the recent attacks on Planned Parenthood, it seems incumbent on teachers to discuss

the group's origins and the mix of support and opposition it has received over the years—including the Socialist connection. Sanger joined the SP after the 1911 Triangle factory fire, and the following year the Socialist *New York Call* published her serialized pamphlet, "What Every Girl Should Know," on sex and sexually-transmitted diseases. When the Post Office censored one installment, the newspaper left the page blank except for these words: "What Every Girl Should Know—NOTHING: By Order of the Post Office Department."¹⁵ This incident demonstrates that Socialists a century ago welcomed new roles for women—they had years earlier endorsed women's suffrage—and that they pressed against restrictions on the press.

Most textbooks and teachers mention the American Civil Liberties Union for its defense of biology teacher John Scopes in the 1925 "monkey" trial. Providing background on the organization—historically as controversial as Planned Parenthood—can help students link important issues related to World War I and its aftermath. The National Civil Liberties Bureau, founded by Socialist Crystal Eastman and pacifist Roger Baldwin, unsuccessfully defended Socialist Charles Schenck, who was

arrested for distributing anti-draft literature in the case that led to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's 1919 "clear and present danger" doctrine. With the Palmer Raids and other attacks on labor activists and leftists after the war, the NCLB became the permanent ACLU.¹⁶ Thus, an organization dedicated to defending free speech and other rights of all Americans began as an offshoot of the Socialist movement—an association that some ACLU critics are happy to note (and exaggerate) on the Internet.

When introducing the Great Depression, innumerable teachers play "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"—easily available on YouTube. Nash states that this song, which dominated radio air-waves in 1931 and 1932 and highlighted labor's role in building America, "captured the prevailing mood of desperation and shock."¹⁷ Harburg's song did not usher in socialism, but, like Sinclair's *The Jungle*, it demonstrates socialist influence on American society.

A more analytical class project would compare the Democratic and Socialist platforms of 1932 with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies.¹⁸ Students will quickly agree with one recent historian that the Socialists more nearly anticipated the New Deal than

the Democrats.¹⁹ The 1932 Democratic convention called for *decreased* federal spending and a balanced budget, and for “old age insurance” under state laws. Meanwhile, Socialists demanded \$5 billion for public works (about what the Works Progress Administration would spend), a national system of old age pensions (achieved through Social Security), the abolition of child labor and the establishment of a minimum wage (largely accomplished through the Fair Labor and Standards Act), and “laws enforcing the rights of workers to organize into unions” (largely embodied in the National Labor Relations Act). To be sure, Roosevelt did not follow Socialist calls for racial equality, bank nationalization, or public ownership of power resources, although the Tennessee Valley Authority faintly echoed this last point. Ironically, Democrats called for separating investment banking from commercial banking, a reform realized in the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act but repealed in 1999—and which the socialist Sanders wishes to restore.

To their credit, textbook authors Appleby, Brinkley, and McPherson state that Socialists and Communists “proposed sweeping changes” to end the Depression. However, these esteemed historians give no specific examples, so students cannot evaluate the worthiness of the alternatives or their influence.²⁰ Nash accurately notes that some New Deal programs, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), did not help the poorest and most vulnerable, and he points out that the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) fought back against the AAA’s injustices.²¹ Teachers could add that Socialist Norman Thomas assailed the AAA, asserting—with some hyperbole—that the program’s crop limitation program sought to achieve “prosperity through starvation.” Thomas was also among the most important supporters of the embattled STFU.²²

Discussion of Randolph’s 1941 March on Washington Movement and Randolph and Rustin’s 1963 March

are now standard in textbooks—but all ignore the Socialism of these African American leaders.²³ That affiliation not only shows continuity between Debs and the 1960s—remember, Randolph first campaigned for office as a Socialist in 1920, when Debs ran for president from his jail cell—but should affect the way students understand the 1963 March. According to most textbooks, the March focused on support for the civil rights bill which President Kennedy had endorsed that summer, and its highlight was Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.²⁴ In fact, the demonstration, officially called the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” demanded not only civil rights, but a comprehensive federal jobs program—as can be seen in the graphics reprinted in some textbooks whose narrative ignores this socialistic demand.²⁵ Similarly, highlighting Harrington’s Socialism, which no textbooks do, reaches back to Upton Sinclair (with a socialist tract inspiring reform), and forward to Sanders (now running as both socialist and Democrat).²⁶

U.S. Socialism in Historical Perspective

Of course, this discussion of the Socialist movement’s impact on American life goes against what most Americans thought they knew. Indeed, over 100 years ago, in 1906, German socialist Werner Sombart seemed to dismiss the movement here with his book, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* Best remembered for the formulation that socialism foundered upon the “roast beef and apple pie” enjoyed by relatively prosperous American laborers, Sombart in fact credited a combination of factors for this outcome. A careful student (albeit with a few blind spots) of economic statistics and comparative politics, he argued that the abundance of land for capitalist expansion and as a safety valve for upwardly mobile workers, the tradition of universal manhood suffrage and of social equality, and the two-party system (replete with both cor-

ruption and opportunity) made the U.S. different from his native Germany, where the Social Democratic Party would soon become the largest political party. Sombart by no means ignored American industrial conflict, and pointed out that the path to economic development here was “strewn with corpses” and that the repression of strikes routinely degenerated into “civil war.”²⁷

Some scholars—and socialists—have argued that Sombart overstated the prosperity of the American worker, overlooked the impact of race in shaping American society, and exaggerated the contrast between Socialist movements in the U.S. and Europe.²⁸ Moreover, Sombart ended his book optimistically: “in the next generation Socialism in America will very probably experience the greatest possible expansion of its appeal.”²⁹ In any case, his analysis could not take into account the impact that World War I would have on Socialism worldwide, or the fateful rupture between Communists and Socialists caused by the Bolshevik Revolution.

The relative lack of attention to Socialist activism in U.S. history textbooks owes something to Sombart’s analysis; periods of economic distress and class conflict have traditionally been regarded by most Americans—including textbook authors—as aberrations from the more usual prosperity for most and progress for even more. To be sure, Sombart and the textbooks are correct that no U.S. Socialist party has achieved or credibly contended for government power. Moreover, the conflicts that have received the most attention in textbooks since the 1960s—formative years, presumably, for many recent textbook authors—have centered on race, ethnicity, and gender rather than class. Indeed, many secondary-level textbooks have outside consultants for multicultural and gender issues, but there are no analogous positions for issues of labor and class.³⁰ The dearth of attention to socialism after 1912 is mirrored in most textbooks by inattention to labor unions after 1945, including the wholesale omission of

the rise of public employee unionism.³¹ Finally, some state education departments from the 1950s and textbook adoption boards in recent years have insisted that schools teach the virtues of “free enterprise,” so perhaps some textbook publishers have been reluctant to include much about American socialism.³²

The splits and developments within the broader Socialist movement also contribute to the difficulties of textbook authors. These include the often bitter rivalry between Socialists and Communists after the Bolshevik Revolution, and the notion of the SP as a political party became more abstract from the 1960s on as it increasingly supported Democrats rather than running its own candidates for office. Even terminology can be confusing: “socialist” refers to a person or policy aligned with the concept in general, while “Socialist” refers to a member of a specific organization. Moreover, most textbooks highlight socialism’s original goal of ending capitalism through government (or social) ownership of business. But socialists also struggle to improve workers’ lives within existing society, so they vigorously participate in labor unions, and often in movements to expand democracy for women, racial minorities, and others. This dual nature of the movement requires a nuanced presentation; of the textbooks I surveyed, *The Americans*, by Gerald Danzer and his co-authors, best captures it.³³ This nuance is also important in evaluating Bernie Sanders’s platform to reform rather than overthrow capitalism.

Socialism’s influence in the United States was strongest from roughly 1900 to 1916, during the 1930s, and in the late 1960s. The first period was one of great income and wealth inequality. The second was the decade of economic depression, and the third period was marked by protests against racial inequality and against a government that had lost its credibility because of the Vietnam War. In each case, there was also a broader group of people who were not commit-

ted socialists but were willing to expand government’s role in regulating the economy or guaranteeing civil rights. Some of these same factors are surely behind the surprising level of support for Sanders in the run-up to the primary season. The growing income inequality of the past 15 years has led to comparisons with the Gilded Age; the Great Recession of 2007–08 by its very name alludes to the Great Depression and the decline of manufacturing jobs; and the surge in support—by some, not all—for lesbian and gay rights, for environmental regulation, and for “Black Lives Matter” recalls the movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Perhaps the Sanders candidacy fits into this framework; it certainly reveals that socialist ideas and personalities appeal to more Americans today than most had expected. In order for students to analyze and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this renewed socialist perspective, our textbooks and teaching must examine socialism’s prior influence in the United States. 🌍

Notes

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- Bernie Sanders, “My Vision for Democratic Socialism in America,” *In These Times* (Nov. 19, 2015), available online.
- Ibid.
- See, e.g., Gerald Danzer, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Larry Krieger, et al., *The Americans, Teacher’s Edition* (Evanston, Ill.: McDougal Littell, 2005), 452, 514, 536–37, 602–03.
- Gary Nash, *American Odyssey: The 20th Century and Beyond, Teacher Wraparound Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill/Glencoe, 2005), 276–77, 318–19.
- Jesus Garcia, Donna Ogle, C. Frederick Risinger, and Joyce Stevos, *Creating America: A History of the United States, 1877 to the 21st Century* (Evanston, Ill.: McDougal Littell, 2005), 244–46.
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- Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 19–21; Amy Goodman, “Tribute to Yip Harburg,” *Democracy Now*, Dec. 25, 2008.
- “Norman Thomas” (editorial), *The New York Times* (Dec. 20, 1968); James Duram, “Norman Thomas as Presidential Conscience,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20 (Summer 1990): 581–89.
- “The Stakes in the Election” (editorial), *Christian Century* (Oct. 26, 1932): 1295.
- Ritchie, *American History*, 397. Even here, the

identification of Sinclair as a socialist comes 10 pages earlier than the explanation of his book and its influence.

- Nash, *American Odyssey*, 244–45; Virgil Dean, “Appeal to Reason,” *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, at <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.pd.007>.
- Nash, *American Odyssey*, 257; see also *National Standards for United States History* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, [1994]), 169–70.
- Garcia, *Creating America*, 312.
- Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), esp. 57–66; Jill Lepore, “Birthright: What’s Next for Planned Parenthood,” *New Yorker* (Nov. 14, 2011).
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- Nash, *American Odyssey*, 424–25.
- Donald Bruce Johnson, ed., *National Party Platforms, vol. I: 1840–1956* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 331–333, 351–354.
- Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln, Neb.: Potomac Books, 2015), 341.
- Appleby, *American Journey*, 731.
- Nash, *American Odyssey*, 465–66.
- W.A. Swanberg, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), 158–60.
- See, e.g., Paula Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). Nash, *American Odyssey*, 543–46, covers Randolph extensively, but ignores his socialism.
- See, e.g., Garcia, *Creating America*, 418, and Ritchie, *American History*, 672.
- See, e.g., Appleby, *American Journey*, 832–33. See also William Jones, “The Forgotten Radical History of the March on Washington,” *Dissent* (Spring 2013).
- Ritchie, *American History*, 729–30; Danzer, *The Americans*, 888.
- Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, trans. Patricia Hocking and C.T. Husbands (White Plains, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1976 [1906]), 106, 5, 39.
- John Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
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- James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: New Press, 1995), chap. 7; Valerie Strauss, “Proposed Texas Textbooks are Inaccurate, Biased, and Politicized,” *The Washington Post* (Sept. 12, 2014).
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