
**Reviewed by** Bruno Walter Renato Toscano (University of Pisa)

**Published on** H-Migration (March, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Matteo Pretelli (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

One of the most renowned hypotheses in US political history stems from a German scholar at the beginning of the twentieth century. Werner Sombart, an economist, sociologist, and historian, authored a pamphlet that significantly influenced American historiography. Entitled *Why is there no socialism in the United States?*, Sombart's pamphlet posed a fundamental question underlying the notion of American exceptionalism: a nation where capitalism appeared to have reached an irreversible stage of expansion, yet lacked a deeply entrenched socialist movement.

Lorenzo Costaguta's book delves into the roots of socialism in the United States, not only challenging Sombart's assertion but also, more importantly, exploring how socialism during the Gilded Age revolved around two central concepts: class and race. Through meticulous archival research, Costaguta examines the history of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), which emerged from the activism of German migrants in the aftermath of the Civil War. Following the trajectories of various socialist intellectuals such as Adolph Douai, Friedrich A. Sorge, and Paul Grottkau, Costaguta elucidates how US socialists endeavored to address a pressing question: How to unite the working class, transcending the racial divisions ingrained in American history?

This question was far from trivial. Those familiar with the history of the American Left know that the relationship between class and race (and also gender) has been a primary concern for organizations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often leading to internal strife and fragmentation. During the last part of the nineteenth century, amidst the prevalence of scientific racialism, the SLP and other socialists grappled with the challenge of overcoming racial differences. While some activists embraced racialist theories, others sought to foster international class solidarity as a means of combating racism.

This dichotomy between scientific racialism and internationalism fueled a complex intellectual and political debate in the decades following the Civil War. Costaguta meticulously analyzes the ef-
forts to nurture a color-blind socialism, culminating in the rejection of scientific racialism in favor of a class-based socialism by the end of the century. To illustrate these efforts, Costaguta dedicates four chapters to various aspects of the debate, focusing on African Americans, Chinese immigrants, and Native Americans.

Throughout Costaguta’s work, it becomes evident that those advocating for class unity often failed to grasp the nuances of the nonwhite working class or the extent to which racism shaped US capitalism. Attempts by the SLP to bridge racial divides, such as their support for African American workers, were hindered by their inability to establish a foothold in the racially charged environment of the South. Moreover, their prejudiced attitudes toward Chinese immigrants underscored their failure to fully embrace Marxist principles of working-class solidarity. In particular, “for a clear majority of socialists, race remained a more important lens than class in approaching the issue of Chinese immigration to the United States” (p. 89). These standpoints did not exclude, for example, even Native Americans. As Costaguta writes, “Socialists discussing Native Americans rejected the idea that Indians were inferior from a physical or biological point of view, while at the same time, they contended that Native Americans had less developed social and economic structures” (p. 131).

Costaguta’s thorough archival research and meticulous reconstructions contribute significantly to our understanding of the intersection of race and class in the history of political movements in the United States. His book is a must-read for those who want to understand the complexity of race and class in American working-class history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-migration

URL: [https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60534](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60534)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.