Karl Kautsky’s 1906 essay ‘The American Worker’, published in English translation for the first time in this issue of Historical Materialism, provides rich insights into the actual history and struggles of the working-class majority of the United States. Readers should engage directly with that essay – the primary purpose of the present article is not to summarise and explicate what readers can easily find on their own in Kautsky’s discussion.

Our purpose here is to fit what Kautsky writes into a larger context. Specifically, we will explore the way in which a variety of thinkers and activists, operating within the Marxist tradition for well over a century and a half, have wrestled with the question posed by Werner Sombart: why is there no socialism in the United States? Of course, Kautsky and the others sought to do more than that. They also struggled to comprehend the nature of capitalism in the United States, the peculiarities of the US working class, the specific dynamics of American history. And, as is appropriate with Marxists, this was always within the context of seeing how socialism might be advanced, in ‘the New World’, in Europe, and globally. In a sense, we will be tracing a fluctuating but definite
pattern in the evolution of analyses – from *simplicity* to *complexity*. Interwoven in this are shifting patterns of optimism and pessimism regarding the straightforwardness – or, even, the possibility – of building a working-class movement capable of bringing a transition to socialism in the United States.

Sombart himself focused on what ex-Marxist economic historian Louis M. Hacker termed ‘the triumph of American capitalism’, and we will want to explore ways in which this recurring and self-renewing triumph has impacted on various analysts.\(^1\) Actually, there are two counterposed strains of ‘*simplicity*’, and both operate from an assumption of inevitability (elements of each can be teased out of the early Sombart): the inevitability of capitalist durability versus the inevitability of socialist revolution in the United States.

We will see that, within the Marxist tradition (and within Kautsky himself), there was a tension between an activist and a fatalist dynamic, the former lending itself to greater sensitivity of *complexities* and openness to possibilities, the latter closing off possibilities and reducing reality to much more simple propositions (in a manner consistent with either a dogmatic optimism or pessimism).

Actually, within Marx himself (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in his co-thinker Engels and his talented daughter Eleanor) we find a methodological approach that facilitates greater openness to complex and contradictory realities – with the result that we find fresh observations and flashes of insight regarding realities in the United States.

Such qualities were less apt to come into play as Marx’s thought became congealed into a simpler theoretical orthodoxy providing an ideological orientation for a mass movement in the international working class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Essential elements of ‘open Marxism’ tended to endure particularly among some of the more revolutionary theorists of international socialism. Kautsky himself, as he tilted toward the revolutionary dynamic in Marxism, was able to contribute useful elements (although not a rounded and fully coherent analysis) that remain useful today in studying the history and complexities of the US working class, and were not surpassed – or even approached – by US co-thinkers employing the more standard (and fatalistic) version of ‘scientific socialism’.

\(^1\) See the introduction and conclusion of Louis M. Hacker’s classic *The Triumph of American Capitalism* (1941), and Paul Sweezy’s perceptive review, Sweezy 1953a, for striking examples of disillusioned ex-socialist and optimistic persistent socialist.