It Didn’t Happen Here is an argument for ‘American exceptionalism’. Despite the subtitle, the question Lipset and Marks ask is not why socialism failed in the US, hardly an exception among the developed capitalist nations, but why no mass-based labour or social-democratic party took root in American soil. The authors open with a more-or-less classic presentation of the question as Marxists and anti-Marxists alike saw it in the early years of the twentieth century: the United States was the most developed capitalist country in the world, yet it did not have a mass socialist movement or even a labour party as did the other developed capitalist nations. There must have been something different about the US.

Lipset and Marks restate the argument made by Werner Sombart, as favourably summarised by none other than George Plekhanov, namely, the

> democratic character of North American political institutions . . . the extremely favourable economic position of the North American workers compared to that of the European, and . . . a multitude of free lands which made it possible for the proletariat ‘to escape to freedom’ from capitalism. (pp. 26–7)

Although they do not mention it, this description might have fitted Canada, a country that did develop a social-democratic party, as well or better. In the US, by the time both Sombart and Plekhanov made their argument, the last of the conditions, free lands, had long passed beyond the hope of all but a few – certainly beyond the reach of the millions of immigrant workers who composed the majority of the industrial working class in the early twentieth century. The classic ‘frontier thesis’ was overruled by the corporate land grabs that followed the removal and partial extermination of the native population of the West and made possible the expansion of capitalism across the continent following the Civil War. In any case, the Homestead Act of 1862 which created the free lands did not eliminate class conflict or consciousness. As one historian put it,
On the contrary, the three decades following its passage were marked by the most bitter and widespread labour trouble that had yet been seen in the United States.\(^1\)

In fact, Lipset and Marks reject many of the classic arguments for ‘American exceptionalism’. Early white male suffrage, lack of feudal hierarchy, upward mobility, these are all dismissed or given low status. Instead, their explanation for the lack of a labour party in the US rests on four theses which compose the bulk of the book’s text and are placed mostly in the period from the 1880s through the First World War. The first is the failure of the American working class to develop large inclusive industrial or general unions in the years before the Great War that could have provided the stable mass base for such a party. Obviously, the lack of such unions does go a long way to account for the failure of the attempts to form a labour party that did occur in this period. Their particular explanation of this rests solely on the exclusive craft nature of the organisations of the American Federation of Labor, which is contrasted with the general unionism in Britain and Australia in those years (pp. 85–97). The second thesis is a Weberian cultural-determinist argument that the American working class was too deeply imbued with both individualism and antistatism to embrace socialism (pp. 97–100, 265–8). The last two arguments concern the ethnic fragmentation of the working class and the alleged sectarianism of the Socialist Party of that era (pp. 125–66, 167–202).

Lipset and Marks present a mass of interesting, if sometimes self-contradictory, material on the impact of immigration and the politics and problems of the Socialist Party. The authors, however, do not provide any clear analytical framework in which all this information and argumentation can be embedded. There is no notion that the development of capitalism in North America might have a bearing on how things unfolded. Working-class subculture is assumed to be determined by the dominant ideas of society: individualism and antistatism. The ideas of American workers in the nineteenth century are not placed in the context of the larger republican and radical ideas shared across the Atlantic economy of the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition, those ideas are assumed to remain static in spite of the earth-shaking changes in the size, composition, and economy of the country. Despite the emphasis on immigrant workers and ethnic conflict, there is no sense that the workers from abroad had any impact on working-class culture or institutions in the US. Most of all, there is no recognition of the impact that capitalist development in the US, which was different from that in England or the rest of Europe in important ways, had on the class consciousness and the ability of workers in the US to develop organisations sufficient to the task of creating even the sort of reformist party Lipset and Marks