

Socialism and the City: Is There a Connection?

I took a breather from work the other week and trotted off to visit a friend. While there, I spent some time in the North Carolina mountains.

They were beautiful. Winding roads. Soaring slopes. Mountain streams and lakes. The paintbrush of fall touching the trees.

Nestled amidst this beauty is Connemara, the last home of American author and poet Carl Sandburg. The three-time Pulitzer Prize winner moved to this mountain retreat in 1945 after his wife Lillian decided it was an ideal place to raise her internationally acclaimed goats. According to the tour guide, Sandburg greeted Lillian's request to buy Connemara with a comment about the steep price. Then he resignedly said, "Well, I guess I'll have to go on a few tours." Those tours paid off, and soon the Sandburgs settled at Connemara mortgage free.

I chuckled at Sandburg's ready use of capitalistic practices, for Sandburg was a Democratic Socialist, a political affiliation keen to spread wealth around through collectivist practices.

Yet as I looked around, I couldn't help but see why Sandburg was willing to take full advantage of capitalism to buy his beautiful farm. Who wouldn't want to live there? What a place it would be for a writer! Solitude and majestic scenery.

It was this same scenery that gave me pause. It recalled one of Sandburg's contemporaries, Whittaker Chambers. Like Sandburg, Chambers was what one might label an activist, yet in a much more subtle way. His life was undergirded by Marxist philosophy, first as a member of the working class, then later as a member of the Communist underground in America. Yet all

through his autobiography, *Witness*, there runs a thread of longing and wonder for the beauty of the countryside. As Chambers himself testifies:

Communism is a faith of the cities, and can look upon the countryside only to organize, that is to say, to destroy it. And while simply to enter a city is for me always a little like entering a grave, in those years I forced myself to live in New York and learned to shut my mind and my eyes against it because to open either to it filled me with dislike and disgust. As a Communist, that is to say, a man dedicated to directing history, I had no choice. For it is clear that the history of the 20th century will be determined by the cities, not by the countryside.

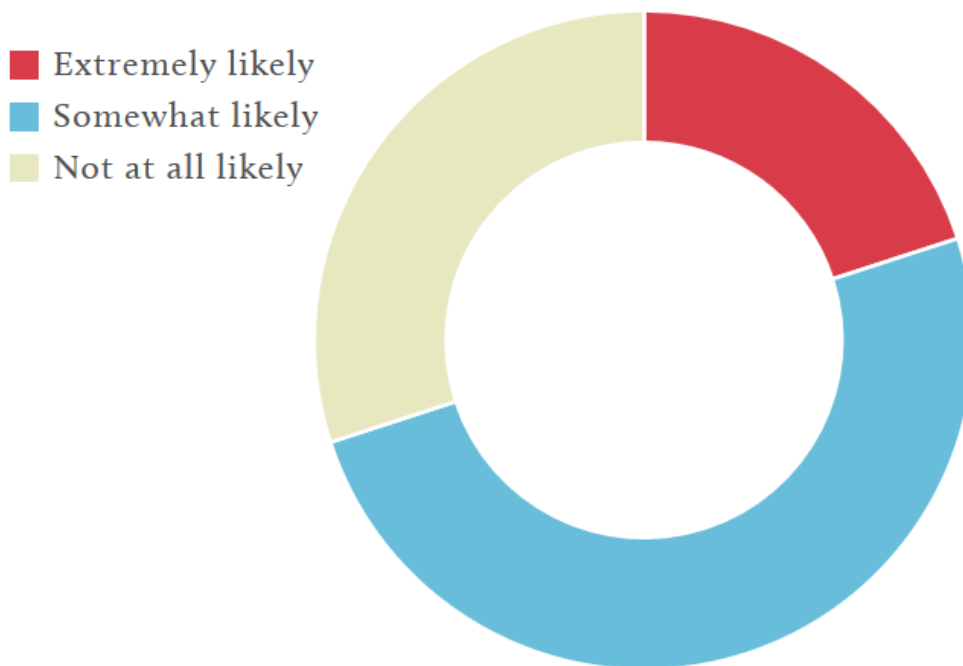
But it was the times when Chambers and his family broke free from the city that he seems to have had more clarity of thought. In particular, this occurred in the mid-1930s when they rented a little stone house near an apple orchard:

In retrospect, it is clear that our life in the stone house had influences on us which, at the time, and even much later, we did not realize. I suspect that in that simple, beautiful and tranquil haven... a subtle chemistry began its work, which if it were possible to trace it, would be found to have played an invisible part in my break with Communism.

Seeing the similarities between Chambers and Sandburg, I asked the tour guide if the latter had changed his political opinions later in life as he spent more time on the farm. Although unsure, the tour guide did note that Sandburg became less of an activist in later years.

I find this intriguing because many young people today are following in the steps of young Chambers and Sandburg. As a [recent poll](#) notes, 70 percent of millennials are very open to voting for a socialist candidate.

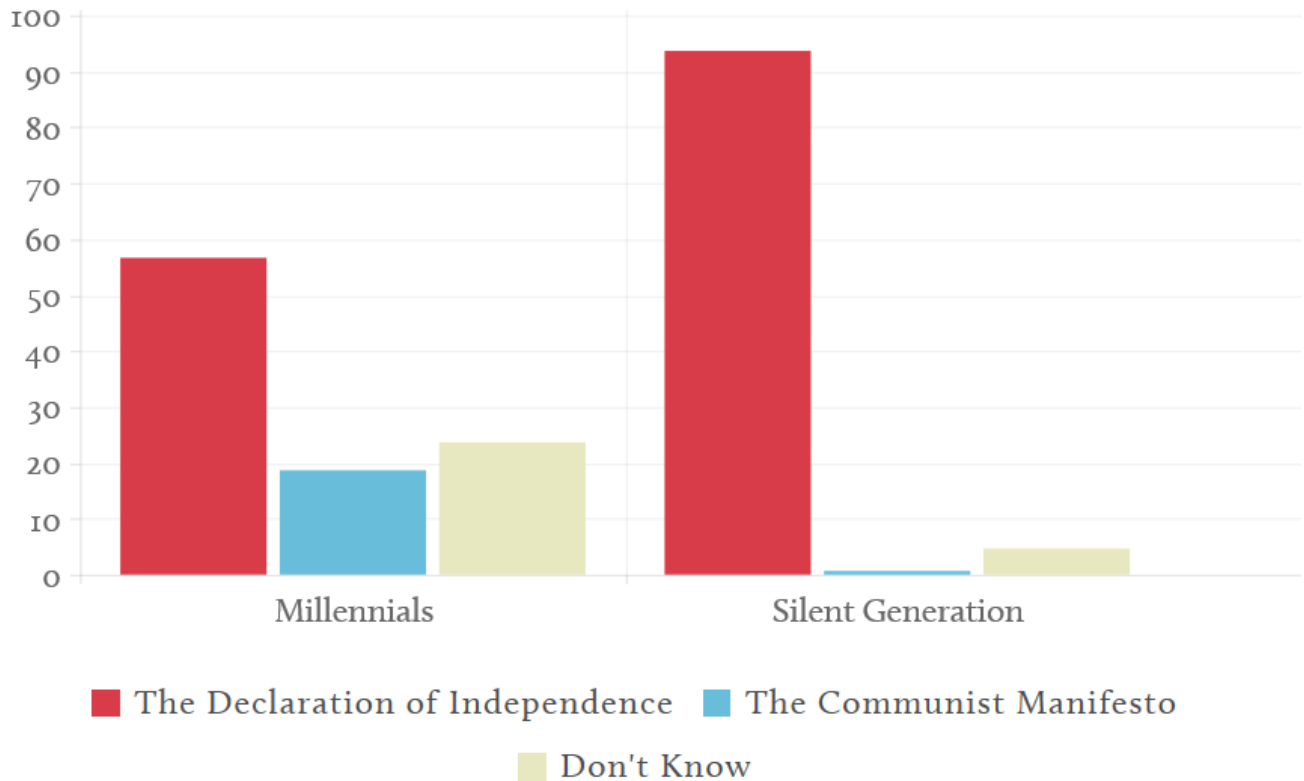
70% of Millennials say they are likely to vote socialist.



The percentage of Millennials who say they are "extremely likely" to vote for a socialist candidate has doubled from 2018 to 2019 (20% vs. 10%).

Furthermore, it appears that millennials are willing to take the Democratic Socialism of Sandburg to the next level, given their embrace of the Communist Manifesto:

Only 57% of Millennials believe the Declaration of Independence better "guarantees freedom and equality" over Communist Manifesto.



Only 57% of Millennials, compared to 94% of the Silent Generation, think the Declaration of Independence better guarantees freedom and inequality over the Communist Manifesto.

There are many things which could be driving the acceptance of these related political philosophies. Could the millennial [attraction to city life](#) be one contributor? Have we so removed our young people from the wonder, beauty, and solitude of the country that they no longer have space in which to think freely about the values they hold, and the direction their lives are going? And in doing so, have we made it all the easier for them to become adherents of “a faith of the cities”?

[Image Credit: Pxhere]