

Why ‘Young Hearts’ Tend Toward Socialism

The common clichés about “kid socialists” are now well-embedded in the American imagination. The path is well-worn: young person attends college, reads Karl Marx in Sociology 101, buys Che Guevara t-shirt, attends progressive protests, [supports socialistic candidates](#), and, eventually, *grows up*.

That’s a bit of an oversimplification, of course. But it’s also [a bit of a thing](#). Why?

What is it about our youth that makes socialism so attractive, and what is it about age or life experience that makes it so likely to fade in our personal affections?

In a [recent essay](#), economist Deirdre McCloskey – herself a former socialist – tries to understand the phenomenon. “Tens of thousands have all gone the same way, from wanting to ‘try socialism’ to realizing that it has been tried and tried and tried, and failed,” she writes. “...People come in adolescence to hate the bourgeoisie or to detest free markets or to believe passionately in the welfare and regulatory state. It becomes part of a cherished identity.”

The more typical, predictable explanation goes something like this: young people are hopeful and innocent; therefore, they are drawn to philosophies that embody their wishful thinking and elevate utopias over harsh realism. With age, they tend to wise up.

McCloskey reminds us of the popular joke: “Anyone who is not a socialist at age 16 has no heart but that anyone who is still a socialist at 26 has no brain.”

Surely there’s some truth to this. Yet even if we set aside the glaring economic problems and grim historical track

record, socialism's "romantic ideals" are pretty flimsy on their own. "They promise a freedom from work that nonetheless makes us rich, a central plan without tyranny, and individual liberties strictly subordinated to a general will," McCloskey writes.

Indeed, the [fundamental problem with socialism](#) isn't so much that its aims are unreasonable and unrealistic (though they most certainly are), but rather, that its basic ideals reduce men and women to mechanical cogs in a societal machine. We are mere pawns amid a Marxian "crisis of history," servile to the whims of either business owners or bureaucrats. As a young person, myself, such a notion always seemed far more dim and dystopian than imaginative and hopeful, never mind the practical implications.

Thus, in an attempt to dig deeper, McCloskey offers two other explanations. I've attempted to distill each in my own words below, followed by excerpts of McCloskey.

Reason #1: We are (rightly) attracted to the "small socialism" of the family.

For one thing, we all grow up in families, which of course are little socialist communities, from each according to her ability, to each according to his need. Friends are that way, too. Erasmus of Rotterdam started every edition of his compilation of thousands of proverbs with "Among friends, all goods are common." That's right. If you buy a pizza for the party but then declare, "I paid for it, so I get to eat it all," you won't get invited again.

Yet such arrangements fail to scale in socialistic societies.

New hierarchies are bound to form, albeit without the checks and balances and/or escape door of *freedom*:

Therefore, when an adolescent in a free society discovers

that there are poor people, her generous impulse is to bring everyone into a family of 330 million members. She would not have this impulse if raised in an unfree society, whether aristocratic or totalitarian, in which hierarchy has been naturalized. Aristotle, the tutor of aristocrats, said that some people are slaves by nature. And Napoleon the commissar/pig said, All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others. The literary critic Tzvetan Todorov reports that Margarete Buber-Neumann (Martin Buber's daughter-in-law), "a sharp-eyed observer of Soviet realities in the 1930s, was astonished to discover that the holiday resorts for ministry employees were divided into no less than five different levels of 'luxury' for the different ranks of the [Communist] bureaucratic hierarchy. A few years later she found such social stratification reproduced in her prison camp."

Reason #2: In our modern context, we (understandably) struggle to see the fruits of our labor and to properly understand value and its creation.

For another, as the economist Laurence Iannaccone argues, the more complex an economy becomes, and the further people are, down astonishingly long supply chains, from working with direct fruits, the less obvious are the rewards of their labor. To a person embedded in a large company, and still more to someone in a government office, nothing seems really to matter. Consult the comic strip Dilbert. By contrast, a person, even an 18-year-old person, who works on a subsistence farm has no trouble seeing the connection between effort and reward. Saint Paul of Tarsus had no trouble seeing it in the little economy of Thessalonian Christians: "If any would not work, neither should he eat." Such rules are the only way in anything but a highly disciplined or greatly loving small group to get a large pizza made.

In both instances, McCloskey doesn't place the blame with having a "youthful heart." The greater challenge, it seems, is confronting our comforts as modern peoples in a modern age and exposing the various blind spots that have arisen, oddly enough, thanks to capitalism.

"Both reasons for youthful socialism seem to have culminated about now in Bernie [Sanders] and Alexandria [Ocasio-Cortez]," McCloskey observes. "We have more and more adolescents without work experience, not living on farms, not living in a slave economy or an actually existing socialist economy, and coming still from little societies of family or friends."

If McCloskey is correct, our task looks a bit different than simply shunning "idealism" and scolding young people into learning their history. Instead, we ought to guide and redirect those idealistic impulses, connecting them with the moral answers they actually deserve.

We can point to numbers and basic economic realities, but in doing so, we ought not neglect the connections between freedom (properly understood) and all the rest: virtue, community, generosity, and human relationship. We can praise the material abundance of our modern, capitalistic world, but in doing so, we ought to be able to articulate a moral framework for free enterprise and a moral response to the challenges posed by technology, disruption, free trade, and so on.

We can expose the twisted idealism of socialism, but more importantly, let's revive a proper idealism of capitalism in its place.

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