

The Revival of Socialism

I am fiercely proud of the fact that I was raised in an anti-communist household in central Kansas in the 1970s and 1980s. Whatever faults my family had (and they were many), my mother made sure that I knew that socialism and fascism were flip sides of the same coin, that Hitler and Stalin had more in common than not, that individualism and Catholicism were utterly opposed to all forms of socialism, and that America stood tallest when it stood for freedom against control. Books by Barry Goldwater and Robert J. Ringer and Milton Friedman littered the house, and John Wayne movies were cultural highs of a fierce republic, not embarrassments of a sagging empire. We thanked God for the Titan II missile fields (even as we had nightmares of a Soviet first strike), and we always prayed for the victims of tyranny abroad. We cried when Reagan was nearly assassinated by John Hinckley, we cheered for the Wolverines when the Soviets invaded in Red Dawn, we read Tom Clancy novels as a sort of gospel, and we believed the insurgents in Nicaragua, Angola, and Afghanistan were noble freedom fighters.

This was, to be sure, a more innocent time. And, to be certain, there was even a time in my high school years – a less jaded time – in which I assumed most Americans were raised in the same manner and believed as I did. President Reagan, Prime Minister Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II were normal leaders of the West, not extraordinary ones. Many of my teachers – clearly the children of the New Left and the 1960s – revealed to me a blatant hypocrisy. While they shouted for love, they behaved as would-be tyrants, hypocrites . . . not all . . . but many.

Somehow, and in a myriad of disturbing ways, my delusions and illusions and wishes and hopes and dreams and subjective realities collapsed over the years. Not that I lost faith in liberty, but I've certainly lost faith that others kept the

faith, if they ever actually had it.

The evidence is more than clear. Communism, socialism, and progressivism have each made huge comebacks, re-entering political discourse blatantly and, just as importantly, very quietly, over the past decades. Even the very words "socialism," "communism," and, especially, "progressivism," have reacquired respect and a semblance of dignity in many circles of public thought and discourse.

For those of us who spent our lives witnessing the horrors of each – in the Soviet gulags, the holocaust camps, and the Cambodian killing fields – and celebrating the demise of each in Eastern Europe and Russia between 1989 and 1991, we can only scratch our heads in wonder and search our souls in guilt. After all, we have and had very clearly failed to convince the world that such terms and such ideas should be remembered as a means of what never to do.

Indeed, a large percentage of young people, especially, have come to think, wrongly, of socialism as humane, of socialism as distinct from fascism (and National Socialism), and of capitalism as purely exploitative. When reminded that all forms of socialism have historically led to the mass grave, its new exponents claim, somewhat stereotypically, that "real socialism has never been tried."

Again, I (and others like me) must ask. What happened? We won in 1989, didn't we? The commies lost, and their fellow travelers and allies went with them. Ideas, it seems, have strange and varied lives, often counter to fact and reality as well as counter to dream and desire.

In his magisterial and pathbreaking 1953 book, *The Quest for Community*, sociologist, historian of ideas, and man of letters Robert A. Nisbet considered what drew so many people to the evils of totalitarianism, despite the evidence so clearly demonstrating its necessary bloodlust and its attendant evils.

The modern nation-state, Nisbet argued, whether totalitarian or democratic, is a new thing under the sun. It resembles the church of old more than the state of old. As such, he claimed, "State and politics have become suffused by qualities formerly inherent only in the family or the church." The Communist party, especially, Nisbet believed, had become a sort of religious cult "that most successfully exploits the craving for moral certainty and communal membership." In reality, though it takes the name party, the Communist party represented something distinctly malicious and perverted. After all, he wrote, "it becomes a moral community of almost religious intensity, a deeply evocative symbol of collective, redemptive purpose, a passion that implicates every element of belief and behavior in the individual's existence."

Further, though, Nisbet pulled no punches. Why does one become a socialist? However morally despicable, just reasons exist. Here is Nisbet, worth quoting at length.

Marxism as a mass movement is no different. If we wish to understand the appeal of Marxism we should do well to pay less attention to its purely intellectual qualities than to the social and moral values that inhere in it. To a large number of human beings Marxism offers status, belonging, membership, and a coherent moral perspective. Of what matter and relevance are the empirical and logical refutations made by a host of critics as against the spiritual properties that Marx offers to millions. Have not all the world's great religious leaders pointed to a truth that is bigger than, and elusive of, all purely rational processes of thought?

To be certain, we all want to belong to something. Clearly, our modern adherents of socialism believe they have been, correctly or not, left behind.

The evidence is strong that the typical convert to Communism is a person for whom the processes of ordinary existence are

morally empty and spiritually insupportable. His own alienation is translated into the perceived alienation of the many. Consciously or unconsciously he is in quest of secure belief and solid membership in an associative order. Of what avail are proofs of the classroom, semantic analyses, and logical exhortations to this kind of human being? So long as he finds belief and membership in his Marxism he will no more be dissuaded by simple adjuration than would the primitive totemist.

And, again, Nisbet goes directly for the cause, excusable or not.

Regardless, in 2020, there's a revival of socialism, communism, and progressivism that will not die anytime soon. Still, we must hold its advocates accountable for the crimes of the past. It will not do to justify support of Cuba, for example, because of supposedly decent literacy programs. What good is literacy if the child is taught nothing but conformity with rebellion of any sort as a type of death sentence.

And, it all comes full circle. Socialism is not only not humane, but it is also downright deadly. It always has been, and it always will be. Now, where did I put that bust of JPII.

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