

Dear Reader

This issue of the Newsletter is on a topic that has been recently discussed more than usual: socialism. The Republican slogan for the election that was announced at CIPAC in February was to be: “America vs. Socialism.” But there is doubt now whether that is the best slogan for this year.

Certainly, in the history of the United States it has always been a good bet to attack socialism. The word has had a negative meaning ever since its arrival in the mid-nineteenth century. In no other country does the term carry such terrible connotations. The motto of “America vs. Socialism” is a contemporary variation of the 1950’s “America vs. Godless Communism.”

There were several ideas and movements that surfaced in the nineteenth century under the heading of socialism. Karl Marx dismissed most of these experiments as utopian, a word meaning “no place.” Marx called his theory “scientific socialism.” Marxist or state socialism was seen to be a direct assault on the capitalist system of the United States.

Recent issues of this Newsletter have examined liberalism and conservatism as the opposite approaches to politics and economics in this country. Socialism is usually taken to be at the furthest extreme on the left. But socialism is not really on that spectrum. It is a theory of personal and communal relations that has political and economic implications.

Bernie Sanders attracted followers from the far right as well as the far left. Both groups are fed up with the government as it is and want to have a different kind of country. According to polls, 60% of people between 18 and 24 years old in the U.S. have a favorable attitude to socialism. A little history of “social” and the meanings of socialism might be helpful at this point.

THE “SOCIAL” IN HISTORY

By Gabriel Moran

It is puzzling that the term socialism has such a negative meaning in the United States while “social” is a very popular term. For understanding ideological words, such as socialism, it is helpful to examine the word to which “-ism” has been added. Sometimes there is a single moment when the term was coined. In this case, the term social has too long a history and no obvious beginning. However, it is significant, as in this case, when a Latin word has no Greek equivalent. Something new began with the Romans.

For the Romans, the social was a common word referring to the household; the word was adapted to describe small groups called “societies” that were organized for specific purposes. These social groups were often suspect. The Emperor Trajan refused to allow a group to be formed for fighting fires because “these social groups quickly become a political club.” What makes “social” important in history is that the early Christian church was seen to be one of those societies. The church was sometimes mistaken for a burial society.

The church saw itself as a society based on a commitment to a set of beliefs. The gospels did not provide any organizational plan, A church was a small group of people who met weekly to remember the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They were also known as a group that cared for the needy. These many “social groups” were strung together in a movement that aspired to be catholic or universal. The tireless missionary, Paul of Tarsus, travelled East and then around the Mediterranean to oversee the many churches, but no one person could continue that role.

In each of the churches three jobs or roles had names. The job of “servant” or deacon was obvious; someone had to make sure there was food on the table and the house was cleaned. The second role of “elder” sounds more like a job that was not assigned but was aged into; it was important as a source of experience and perhaps wisdom. The most interesting job was “overseer” (*episkopoi*). Even groups dedicated to spiritual values need some regulating. By the second century these overseers – bishops – were in charge of a group of churches called a diocese. Bishops were elected by the people.

The church had no constitution or rule book for how the many churches were to form a unity. In the first two centuries it was assumed that the world

was about to end so that organizational questions were unimportant. At the end of the second century, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon was influential in drawing up a “canon” of writings that constituted “orthodoxy.” The bishops assumed a power to oversee adherence to orthodox beliefs because they claimed a direct line via the apostles to the words of Jesus. This orthodoxy was an important element for uniting the churches, but it was not enough to create an organizational structure.

It was obvious when Origen, Augustine and later writers borrowed philosophy for the church from the secular world. It was not so obvious when organization was also borrowed in the early centuries. The church tried to be nonpolitical, if not anti-political, but it is doubtful that any group larger than a dozen people can succeed at that. The overseers as head of a diocese tended to take on the role of a monarch; that tendency accelerated under Constantine. At first, the bishop’s role was one of “service,” a spiritual deacon of the soul. Eventually, bishops adopted the word jurisdiction which indicated an office of power over people’s lives and control of money.

Throughout its history, the Christian church has struggled to be a social not a political group. The monastic movement was the first big reform in which a group of Christians tried to live in a community dedicated to the ideals of the gospel while not distracted by politics which involves wealth, power and sex. The lives of monks inspired the rest of the church but over time a monastery could not entirely escape politics. Monasteries need to deal in money for survival, sometimes they developed their own industries and even acquired great wealth. Another source of corruption was the ordination of monks beyond the liturgical needs of the community; that move created a class structure among the brothers. As for sex, the rejection of marriage was clear; but that meant these churches could not reproduce themselves.

The story of the Christian church’s struggle to replace the political with the social is important background for the rise of “socialism” in the nineteenth century. The early church was the explicit or implicit model for early socialism. These utopian communities rejected the economic-political system that had emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. To be against the surrounding world can be a powerful bond but it is not enough to sustain a social group. The most successful groups, those that lasted for at least a few generations, have been religiously inspired.

Utopian groups soon find that they cannot escape politics. When people in great numbers abstain from politics, it leaves political power in the hands of the greedy and autocratic. From its beginning, the United States has been a country skeptical of government and politics. The result is a country vulnerable to control by the rich and by con artists.

The economic system in the United States, Britain and much of Europe was highly productive of goods in the nineteenth century, but the system was in the hands of the politically and economically powerful. The only organization that offered a possible counterforce to private greed was the government. European socialism turned to the government for help but not so in the United States. Not until the end of the nineteenth century when big corporations emerged did it become obvious to many people that the corporation not the government was the main threat to workers and vulnerable individuals. Although government can be dangerous, if it is not restricted by the citizens, government was the only force that could restrain corporations.

In place of socialism in the United States there was a “progressive” movement which had little success until the beginning of the twentieth century. Its small victories to protect vulnerable groups were resisted at every step. Not until Franklin Roosevelt’s dramatic actions when capitalism was in worldwide free fall did progressive policies get their opportunity. Probably the greatest piece of legislation ever passed in U.S. history, the Social Security Act, was of course denounced as socialistic.

What FDR’s pragmatic approach showed in a nation that had widespread hunger, high unemployment, and lack of housing was that “capitalism” and “socialism” are abstractions that can be manipulated in various ways by different leaders. The United States will probably always be capitalist. But capitalism as described in textbooks would eventually kill the poor and destroy itself. Restraints on a capitalist system need not be called socialism. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was not the only model of socialism if it even deserved the name at all.

What exactly Bernie Sanders has had in mind as a national government in an international system is not clear from his speeches. It is clear that he thinks the rich are obscenely rich to which 99% of the population might agree. But there remains a division about whether government can be on the side of the poor and the vulnerable. This fundamental question has finally been made

clear by the present administration: Can government be a positive service to people or should government be as small as possible while doing only a few necessary tasks.

Socialists, starting with the early church, have often been unrealistic in not seeing the need for a larger organization of politics. But socialists, starting with the early church, have been right in believing that nothing else matters unless we care for one another and hate no one.

The Christian church against all odds survived. It did so not because of monarchical bishops but because there were enough Christians who cared for the very young, the elders, the sick, the poor and all who were vulnerable. In the plagues that devastated Rome in the second and third centuries the Christians were the ones who stayed and nursed the sick and dying. Other religions in Rome did not have a founder who had taught his followers to be “merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.”

The church and other religious bodies cannot manage all the works of mercy that need to be done today. The “social” concern needs to be central to government activity, service that requires a large, complex organization and competent, caring, and dedicated people.

WHAT IS SOCIALISM

By Samuel Arnold

The capitalist/socialist dispute does not concern the desirability of private property in items unrelated to production. The issue between socialists and capitalists is not whether individuals should be able to own “personal property” such as toothbrushes, houses, clothing, and other articles of everyday use but whether they should be able to own “productive property”: stores, factories, raw materials, and other productive assets.

But what does it mean to own something? Usually, to own something is to enjoy a bundle of legally enforceable rights and powers over that thing. These rights and powers include the right to *use*, to *control*, to *transfer*, to *alter*, and to *generate income from* the thing owned, as well as the right to *exclude* non-owners from interacting with the owned thing in these ways. Because these rights admit of gradations, so too does ownership and rights

over that object. Ownership may be narrowed and restricted without ceasing to be ownership. *Limited* ownership is not an oxymoron.

To understand socialism, one must distinguish between three forms of ownership. Under *private* ownership, individuals, or groups of individuals, e.g. corporations, are the primary agents of ownership; it is they who enjoy the various rights of use, control, transfer, and income generation. Under *state* ownership, the state retains for itself these rights, and is thus the primary agent of ownership. Both of these forms of ownership should be familiar to anyone who has frequented a business or driven on an interstate highway.

Much less familiar is the key socialist idea of *social* ownership. Social ownership of an asset means that the people have control over the disposition of that asset and its product. Social ownership of *the means of production* obtains to the degree that the people themselves have control over these means: over their use and over the products that result from that use. This is a simple idea, but it can be difficult to grasp its practical implications. How, in concrete terms, could social control over the means of production be realized?

Historically, socialists have struggled to answer this question: it is not at all obvious how meaningful control over something as massive and complex as a modern economy might be shared by tens or hundreds of millions of people. Socialists have identified two main strategies of socialization. The first seeks to socialize the economy by *nationalizing* it. The second seeks the same end by *decentralizing and democratizing economic power*.

First, state ownership functions as a vehicle for socialization only to the extent that the people are in control of the state. Otherwise nationalization amounts to little more than statism, not socialism; it constitutes economic rule by state officials rather than by society as a whole. Any genuinely *socialist* program of nationalization, then, must adhere to a two-part recipe: nationalize the economy, but also democratize the state, thereby putting the people in control of the economy at one remove.

This second step has proven rather elusive in practice. It was not accomplished—indeed, not really attempted—by the “socialist” authoritarianisms of the 20th century such as the Soviet Union and China. Considerable barriers to genuine democratization exist even in countries

with longstanding liberal democratic traditions, such as the United States. These barriers include the awesome influence of special interests and concentrated wealth on the political process, corporate control of the media, voter ignorance, and apathy.

Democracy—popular control over the state—is an ideal easier praised than implemented, even under favorable conditions. However, these considerable *practical* problems aside, there seems to be nothing incoherent *in principle* with the idea of a genuinely socialist and democratic program of nationalization.

Or is there? Many socialists argue that state ownership can never fully realize socialism's promise, no matter how democratic the relationship between the people and the state. Real social ownership involves not only control-at-a-remove, but *active involvement and participation*. On this conception, it is not enough for democratically accountable politicians and bureaucrats to steer the economy in your name; rather, you must do (or at least have the real opportunity to do) some of the steering yourself.

In principle, an economy could be *wholly* capitalist, statist, or socialist. An economy would be wholly capitalist if all its productive assets were privately controlled; wholly statist if all such assets were state-controlled; and wholly socialist if all such assets were socially controlled. While these are coherent theoretical possibilities, they have not been implemented in practice. In reality, all economies are hybrids that blend private, social, and state ownership. It is better, then, to think of capitalism, statism, and socialism not simply as all-or-nothing ideal types of economic structures, but also as variables.

For example, even in the United States—widely seen as a bastion of capitalism—the state since the twentieth century plays a considerable role in controlling economic activity and in distributing the proceeds thereof. Does this mean it is a statist or perhaps even a socialist economy? No. Economies should be individuated with reference to their dominant mode of ownership. Since capitalist ownership dominates the United States' economy—*most* of its productive assets being privately owned—it should be thought of as capitalist, albeit with some non-capitalist aspects. Similarly, an economy within which most productive assets are socially controlled should count as socialist, even if as would almost certainly be the case it also included statist or capitalist elements.

TIME

By Karl Marx

Capitalism transforms our relation to nature, which becomes valued only insofar as it helps accumulate profit and capital. And it transforms the meaning of time, since we become governed by an abstract, quantitative, and invariable time determination over which we have no control. Capital is self-expanding value. It is an endless quest for an infinite magnitude—in a world of limited, finite resources.

In capitalism, the entire process hinges on actual labor time being forced to conform to socially necessary labor time. Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at most, time's carcass. Quality no longer matters. Quantity decides everything, hour for hour, day by day. This distortion of the nature of *time* is the pivot of capitalism, and its negation is integral to the conception of socialism.

There is no capital without labor, and labor, is a special productive activity, exercised with a definite aim. Labor, generically speaking, is a *teleological* activity that has the definite *aim* of shaping and transforming the present on the basis of the future.

Through labor, awareness of the three-dimensionality of time becomes an integral dimension of human existence. "Through work, humanity controls time . . . because the being that can resist immediate satisfaction of its craving and can "actively" harness it. It forms a present as a function of the future, while making use of the past . . . Man surrenders to his (future) fate of a slave or fights for his (future) position as a master only because he chooses his present from the perspective of the future, and thus forms the present and the future on the basis of something that not yet is.

In capitalism, however, time takes on a peculiar, *inverted* character. Humanity ceases to organize or control time; instead, time organizes or controls humanity.

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