



# Our Socialist Future?

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After the May 25, 2020, death of George Floyd while in custody of officers of the Minneapolis Police Department, protesters demanded the fair prosecution of those responsible. Yet quickly the demonstrations devolved into a veritable cultural revolution, spearheaded by two groups, Antifa and Black Lives Matter, both with strong socialist origins and agendas. Within two weeks, there were widespread protests making various demands, including the abolition of urban police forces, multitrillion-dollar reparations, relaxed grading for African American students, and an end to incarceration as a penalty for most crimes. A common denominator in these demands was a socialist theme: those who had more should not have had more and were obligated to give much of it back to those from whom it was taken.<sup>1</sup>

In the current affluent age of globalization, such popular socialism would seem to have little future, given its long dismal past and history of failure in governance. Early Greek Pythagorean cult communities, for instance, were based on shared property and resources, but they never became the political basis for city-states. Such philosophical and religious communes were instead often persecuted and driven out of their Italian and Greek enclaves.

The Greek colonizing era of the eighth to the fifth centuries BC sought to divide up new lands along a grid system, allotting equal-sized parcels to colonist farmers. But political philosophers like Aristotle and Plato assumed that, given differences in innate talent, luck, and happenstance, such farms could never stay equal for long. So they conceded that some unpleasant means of coercion would be necessary if such egalitarian ends were to last in perpetuity.

Even ancient socialist regimens such as the collective barracks, dining halls, and shunning of coinage at Sparta, or the efforts to limit property aggrandizement and the pushing of massive redistributive entitlements at Athens, never quite did away with private property or, in the classical age, consensual government. And few of the redistributive premises of either Sparta or Athens survived into the Hellenistic and Roman age—other than the cynical “bread and circuses” distributions to the urban poor of free food and entertainment among the major cities of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup>

The French Revolution and especially the stirrings of industrial mass production revived formally the idea of socialism, now a definable political concept, most prominently articulated by the French aristocrat and revolutionary Henri de Saint-Simon. Yet Jacobin socialism earned a warranted violent

reaction, and Napoleon squared the French revolutionary circle by claiming his self-serving and bloody autocracy was the only way to preserve the ideals of the revolution. As we saw in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution and civil war (1917–1923) and China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), today’s revolutionary is tomorrow’s sellout, as socialism seems a starting point that is quickly overtaken by its cousins communism, anarchy, and nihilism.

Europe today claims it is a democratic socialist continent, in the sense that voters, not dictators, have imposed redistributive policies on themselves. Indeed, if defined by its meager defense budget, high taxes, generous entitlements, and loud egalitarian rhetoric, the European Union is socialist. And increasingly the Union must remain nondemocratic, given that any nation that dares to express a desire to leave its utopia will find such an exit difficult.

But more importantly, aside from proclamations of brotherhood, European nations in extremis have acted in expectedly self-interested fashion. Germany certainly did not wish to share much of its wealth after the 2008 financial meltdown with poorer Mediterranean nations. Eastern Europe did not assume open borders were wise. Indeed, they considered suicidal the idea of welcoming impoverished illegal aliens from the Middle East and North Africa and bestowing upon them de facto legal residence and citizenship.

The United Kingdom became terrified of the idea that the socialism of Brussels would soon trump the hallowed laws of England. The United States is even more weary of its NATO partners who either cannot or will not live up to their promised military contributions to the alliance. Socialist Germany does not appear to its ideologically kindred satellites in the European Union to be very socialist but, rather, devilishly self-centered in recalibrating the EU to allow Germany pan-European power to implement its continental ambitions in a way that proved impossible after 1870, 1914, and 1939. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been every European nation for itself rather than a shared European brotherhood.<sup>3</sup>

Such are the supposed benign manifestations of radical socialism that create ennui among the population and paradoxes and hypocrisies among its elite. But most socialist regimes are not so benign, at least if we review the litany of the twentieth-century dead. Josef Stalin liquidated 20 million people to create the collective basis for the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward cost China 45 million dead. Pol Pot’s back-to-the-land experiment murdered well over one

million in Cambodia. Various disasters in Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe turned once prosperous states into murderous, impoverished socialist dictatorships.<sup>4</sup>

Other than a few failed small-scale flirtations with socialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, America never seriously embraced collectivism, despite an array of New Deal resuscitative policies that mostly prolonged the Great Depression and were aimed at diluting more radical competing socialist agendas, popular during the Industrial Revolution and Depression and mostly advanced by Samuel Gompers, Huey Long, and Eugene Debs.<sup>5</sup>

Antiwar socialists in the 1960s and “green” socialists in the twenty-first century have all failed to assume power. And given long-held and traditional American suspicions of an all-powerful, redistributive state, what then explains the flirtation with socialism by the current generations of American youth?

Apparently, the implied preferred model for millions of Americans recently has become the all-encompassing French Revolution, which sought to implement egalitarianism of result and fraternity at any cost, rather than the American Revolution’s emphases on individual freedom, personal liberty, and protections of private property. For example, in 2016 socialist Bernie Sanders almost won the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination—a milestone that no prior socialist presidential candidate had come close to reaching. And Sanders, for a while, led the primary candidates again in 2020.

Sanders talked often of “revolution,” and his supporters sometimes fancied themselves as French-style Jacobins. In 2011, the journal *Jacobin* introduced itself with the stated common values and sentiments of its contributors—“proponents of modernity and the unfulfilled project of the Enlightenment” and “as asserters of the libertarian quality of the Socialist ideal.” Its motto Reason in Revolt deliberately sought to echo the supposedly rational role of Maximilien Robespierre, the catalyst for the so-called Reign of Terror during the cycles of French revolutionary violence, and the influence of his Jacobins on movements such as the Haitian revolution of 1791–1804, led by Toussaint L’Ouverture.<sup>6</sup>

A fresh celebrity “Squad” of newly elected congresswomen who espoused identity politics either claimed to be socialists or often embraced radical and often illiberal views. The media had turned Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) into icons of a new, more radical generation of reformers pushing socialist agendas. Yet, within nine months of their entering office, three of the four were under criticism for anti-Semitic outbursts and were facing federal or state investigations for campaign-finance violations, with allegations that they had either illegally diverted funds or improperly raised them for their own personal or political benefit.<sup>7</sup>

Almost all the candidates of the Democratic Party during the 2020 primaries at times embraced an array of issues that could only be called socialist. The agendas variously included a 70 to 80 percent income tax rate, a wealth tax on previously taxed capital, reparation payments to African Americans, open borders, Medicare for all, free health care for illegal aliens, and radical changes in the US legal system, such as abolishing the electoral college, packing the Supreme Court, allowing sixteen-year-olds and ex-felons to vote, and transitioning to mail balloting in place of Election Day polling booths. The common denominator to all of these diverse policies was either government-mandated radical redistribution or the weakening of constitutional or long-held American customs and traditions. Such candidates at least felt there were now new socialist constituencies for such issues.

Indeed, a 2019 Gallup Poll suggested that about half of American youths now view socialism as positively as capitalism. And in another poll, seven of ten millennials surveyed said they would like to vote for a socialist. Perhaps given current economic realities, poor education, and the propaganda of the administrative state, it is not hard to see why so many young Americans consider socialist flirtations.<sup>8</sup>

College-educated Americans collectively owe an estimated \$1.5 trillion in unpaid student loans. Many of these student debtors despair of ever paying the huge sums back. The effects of the staggering debt payment are often multiplied by the noncompetitive majors of financially leveraged graduates and generally inadequate educations for which they went into such debt.

A force multiplier of socialist unrest has often been an absence of upward mobility coupled with a superficial sense of being educated. Today’s graduate may feel that while his education has led to few marketable skills, it has at least apprised him of the innate and comic inequalities of American capitalism that explain better than his poor choices why he is degreed but otherwise poor and in debt.

Globalization is another force multiplier of socialism’s attractions. Over the last thirty years a seven-billion-person market has created levels of wealth among the elite never envisioned in the history of civilization—at least for many on the US East and West Coasts in finance, stocks, high-tech, media, law, and insurance, whose client base grew tenfold in the twenty-first century. At the same time, “free” but unfair trade, especially with China, hollowed out assembly and manufacturing plants in the interior of the United States, impoverishing many in the once-solid Midwestern middle class. Warped free-but-unfair trade and Chinese buccaneerism, not free-market capitalism per se, has hurt millions of Americans. At a time when factory and assembly jobs dried up, the unemployed saw an ostentatious elite in a new Gilded Age created through the very outsourcing and offshoring that

had ended their own prior prosperity.

Lots of young people claim to be socialists but are instead simply angry because they were not able to afford a home, buy a new car or nice things, or start a family in their “woke” urban neighborhoods during a decade of muted economic growth (2008–17) and high unemployment. The combination of nonmarketable degrees and skills with burdensome debt altered an entire generation’s customs, habits, and mentalities.

Popular culture and contemporary politics have more or less institutionalized an ascendant model of citizenship quite unlike previous visions based on the autonomous family—at least in terms of the middle-class, college educated. Take a popular political ad of 2010 designed to sell the Affordable Care Act to the general public. The poster boy for such a campaign was not the rural married couple of *American Gothic*, nor the American nuclear family of 1960s television shows. Rather, the iconic advocate became known, due to his appearance in the ad, as “Pajama Boy.” As the Obamacare promoter, a young man in thick retro-rimmed glasses was supposed to win our empathy. He ostensibly appeared confident and self-aware. Yet he was wearing black-and-red plaid children’s-style pajamas. Pajama Boy was sipping from a mug with an all-knowing expression of seasoned certainty on his face. The visual was accompanied by a text urging: “Wear pajamas. Drink hot chocolate. Talk about getting health insurance. #GetTalking.” What a strange mix of puerility and adulthood—a sort of inadvertent confirmation of philosophical warnings about the connection of government subsidies and the creation of perpetual adolescence and dependency.

The new American archetype apparently was to be a single, urban youth. He is presumably well-educated and glib, but dependent on government subsidies and suffering arrested development. He is not shy but feels entitled to lecture others on how to approach government. Of course, ironically, the establishment elite themselves who often advocated such values for others were far more likely than the twenty-something underclass of today to have married, raised children, and have had the income to purchase homes and provide advantages for their own children.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps in a case of life imitating art, Ethan Krupp, employee of the progressive political group Organizing for Action who posed for the ad, offered a confident, and angry self-portrait of himself that confirmed the ad photo’s stereotyped image. Krupp is a self-described “liberal f\*\*k.” And he added: “A liberal f\*\*k is not a Democrat, but rather someone who combines political data and theory, extreme leftist views, and sarcasm to win any argument while making the opponents feel terrible about themselves.”

Two years after introducing Pajama Boy, the Obama reelection campaign of 2012 returned to the theme of a single, dependent,

and childless adult-child—this time focusing on young, unmarried urban women of the same generation and culture as Ethan Krupp’s. It ran an interactive web ad, “The Life of Julia.” The promotion’s narrative was again the attractions of government dependency and a lack of upward mobility through the private sector. But now it was more expansively defined as the liberation of an everywoman blessed with cradle-to-grave government reliance and thus in little need of marriage, religion, or community and family support. So we are told that Julia got through school and college only thanks to Head Start and federally backed student loans—without mention that students were collectively in debt at that time of the ad for well over \$1 trillion and often without marketable college degrees.<sup>10</sup>

In 2012, the Small Business Administration and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, not a booming private sector short on labor, mostly enable Julia to find work, we are additionally advised. Though unmarried, Julia has one child—but no health care worries—thanks to Obamacare efforts to collectivize medicine. There is no mention that the absence of a second parent in the household puts enormous strain on child raising, aside from the child’s development itself. In her retirement years, only Social Security and Medicare allow Julia to find security, comfort, and the time and wherewithal to volunteer for a communal urban garden—apparently a hobby rather than a critical food source. In sum, Julia is proudly and perennially a ward of the state. The subtext is that in today’s economy she is apparently unable to become autonomous and independent without federal help. In other words, the new American model is strangely medieval: Julia is assumed to be a dependent serf who looks to the Washington lord of the manor to sustain her.

The new socialist paradigm has had grave repercussions in terms of national fertility and for the sort of prompts that once aided conservative and traditional thinking. From 1950 to 2019 the average age of first marriage for males soared from about twenty-three years to thirty, and for females from twenty-two to twenty-nine years. The average age for first childbirth for women likewise spiked even more dramatically to nearly twenty-seven years, a radical age increase from the median of about twenty-one of just fifty years ago.<sup>11</sup>

Usually, Americans become more traditional, self-reliant, and suspicious of big government as they age. Reasons for such conservatism have often included early marriage, child raising, a mortgage, and residence in a suburb, small town or rural area.

Yet today’s youth are generally marrying later. Most have few if any children. Twenty- and thirty-somethings are not buying homes as quickly or easily as in the past, not when tuition debt would match mortgage debt.

These national and international trends are the ingredients for a culture that emphasizes the self, blames others for a

sense of personal failure, wants instant social justice—and expects the government to borrow or seize the money from others to grant it.

Our universities neither warn about the dangers of statism and collectivism, nor at least provide the computing, literary, linguistic, and historical skills for graduates to look at the world empirically. Instead, few young activists know the twentieth century history of “socialists” who were actually hardcore communists, or the death tolls of a murderous Fidel, Che, Stalin, or Mao.

Socialist revolutions rarely are sustained by the poor. They do not sprout organically in so-called good times. Instead they are the children of wars, depressions, and natural and man-made upheavals—such as World Wars I and II or the abrupt end of colonial empires. They are facilitated by “never let a crisis go to waste” opportunism—turmoils during which socialist activists transmogrify into supposed illuminators of the decaying free-enterprise and constitutional government systems. Leaders like Fidel Castro or Vladimir Lenin or Leon Trotsky rarely rise from the impoverished classes. They often are degreed or at least attended college or are autodidactic. And they have just enough education to connect their own unhappiness with cosmic forces but not enough to explain their own unhappiness in ways that transcend their own self-obsessions.

During the recent COVID-19 crisis, the nationwide quarantine, and the protests and subsequent rioting over the death of George Floyd, we witnessed an ideal incubator of socialist ideas that in calmer times would have little resonance. Suddenly, the government added \$3 trillion to the national debt, in addition to its existing annual \$1 trillion budget deficit—even as progressive legislators were demanding another \$3 trillion to be redistributed, as the national debt crept toward \$30 trillion, or almost \$100,000 per person. De facto zero interest rates—seen as both stimuli to a locked-down economy and vital to finance the annual federal budgetary cost of such a huge aggregate national debt—represented a vast transference of wealth from the savings accounts of the middle class, which pay out little if any real interest, to the indebted, who see their loans more easily serviced.

Petty county officials, mayors, and governors used the quarantines to enforce often incoherent social-distancing edicts, which eventually seemed designed as much to emphasize their authority as to ameliorate the effects of the coronavirus. Elected officials such as California governor Gavin Newsom and Senator Sanders stated that the general chaos and crisis of the epidemic allowed the implementation of left-wing agendas unimaginable just months earlier. Newsom was particularly candid: “There is opportunity for reimagining a progressive era as it pertains to capitalism. So yes, absolutely we see this [the government response to the virus] as an

opportunity to reshape the way we do business and how we govern.”<sup>12</sup>

As the protests spread in late May and early June 2020, they took on a Jacobin flavor of increasing radicalization. Today’s revolutionary was branded tomorrow’s sellout as progressive mayors in blue cities who had condoned or contextualized the violence often wound up confronting protestors at their own suburban homes, who were furious that their elected officials were proving mere radicals rather than revolutionaries. It was not enough to express understandable outrage over the tragic death of Floyd and demand a near immediate trial of the suspect policemen. Instead, protesters and rioters were soon calling for the banning of particular movies, TV shows, and books; and a complete recalibration of American life altogether. They characterized their movement as a cultural rather than just a political revolution, and so spoke of it as being “holistic” and “systemic.”

A final catalyst for reemerging socialism was the substitution of race for class struggle, on the premise that while income and capital are fluid, one’s race is fixed and the sole determinative of class; thus the struggle against “white privilege” is endless, even if one is an elite like Barack Obama.<sup>13</sup>

Is it no wonder, then, that voices urging a more rapid return to free enterprise, the sanctity of the Bill of Rights, and the need to enlist private enterprise and entrepreneurs in the medical quests for a cure or vaccination against the coronavirus were seen as near traitorous? In other words, a socialist paradigm that had been considered eccentric and an object of paradox as recently as late 2019 was now mainstreamed as near normal. Such is the way destructive socialism inevitably creeps in—more with a parasitic whimper than with a confrontational bang.

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## Endnotes

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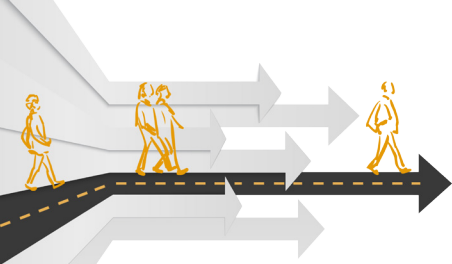
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