

That Bastion of American Socialism

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11 January 2009

Over the past few months the American mainstream chatter has experienced a sudden spike in the gratuitous use of the term "Socialist." It was prompted by the attempts of the federal government to resuscitate insolvent financial institutions. These attempts included offers of guarantees to their clients, injections of large sums of borrowed public money, and granting them access to almost-free credit that was magically summoned ex nihilo by the Federal Reserve. To some observers, these attempts looked like an emergency nationalization of the finance sector was underway, prompting them to cry "Socialism!"

Their cries were not as strident as one would expect, bereft of the usual disdain that normally accompanies the use of this term. Rather, it was proffered with a wan smile, because the commentators could find nothing better to say -- nothing that would actually make sense of the situation.

Not a single comment on this matter could be heard from any of the numerous socialist parties, either opposition or government, from around the globe, who correctly surmised that this had nothing to do with their political discipline, because in the US "socialism" is commonly used as a pejorative term, with willful ignorance and breathtaking inaccuracy, to foolishly dismiss any number of alternative notions of how society might be organized. What this new, untraditional use of the term lacks in venom, it more than makes up for in malapropism, for there is nothing remotely socialist to Henry Paulson's "no banker left behind" bail-out strategy, or to Ben Bernanke's "buy one -- get one free" deal on the US Dollar (offered only to well-connected friends) or to any of the other measures, either attempted or considered, to slow the collapse of the US economy.

A nationalization of the private sector can indeed be called socialist, but only when it is carried out by a socialist government. In absence of this key ingredient, a perfect melding of government and private business is, in fact, the gold standard of fascism. But nobody is crying "Fascism!" over what has been happening in the US. Not only would this seem ridiculously theatrical, but, the trouble is, we here in the US have traditionally liked fascists. We had liked Mussolini well enough, until he allied with Hitler, whom we only eventually grew to dislike once he started hindering transatlantic trade. We liked Spain's Franco well enough too. We liked Chile's Pinochet after having a hand in bumping off his Socialist predecessor Allende (on September 11, 1973; on the same date some years later, I was very briefly seized with the odd notion that the Chileans had finally exacted their revenge). In general, a business-friendly fascist generalissimo or president-for-life with no ties to Hitler is someone we could almost always work with. So much for political honesty.

As a practical matter, failing at capitalism does not automatically make you socialist, no more than failing at marriage automatically make you gay. Even if desperation makes you randy for anything that is warm-blooded and doesn't bite, the happily gay lifestyle is not automatically there for the taking. There are the matters of grooming, and manners, and interior decoration to consider, and these take work, just like anything else. Speaking of work, building socialism certainly takes a great deal of work, a lot of which tends to be unpaid, voluntary labor, and so desperation certainly helps to inspire the effort, but it cannot be the only ingredient. It also takes intelligence, because, as Douglas Adams once astutely observed, "people are a problem." In due course, they will learn to thwart any system, no matter how well-designed it might be, be it capitalist, socialist, anarchist, Ayn Randian, or one based on a strictly literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation. However, here a distinction can be drawn: systems that attempt to do good seem far more corruptible than ones that have no such pretensions. Thus, a socialist system, inspired by the noblest of impulses to help one's fellow man, quickly develops social inequalities that it was designed to eradicate, breeding cynicism, while a capitalist system, inspired by the impulse to help oneself through greed and fear, starts out from the position of perfect cynicism, and is therefore immune to such effects, making it more robust, as long as it does not become resource-constrained. It seems to be a superior system if your goal is to keep the planet burning brightly, but when the fuel starts to run low, it is quickly torn apart by the very impulses that motivated its previous successes: greed turns to profiteering, draining the life blood out of the economy, while fear causes capital to seek safe havens, causing the wheels of commerce to grind to a halt. It could be said that an intelligently designed, well-regulated capitalist system could be made to avoid such pitfalls and persevere in the face of resource constraints, but the US seems laughably far from achieving this goal.

Taking intelligence itself as an example, if having more of it is a good thing, then a bit of socialism could have helped a lot. Let us start with the observation that intelligence, and the ability to benefit from higher education, occur more or less randomly within a human population. The genetic and environmental variation is such that it is not even conceivable to breed people for high intellectual abilities, although, as a look at any number of aristocratic lineages will tell you, it is most certainly possible to breed blue-blooded imbeciles. Thus, offering higher education to those whose parents can afford it

is a way to squander resources on a great lot of pampered nincompoops while denying education to working class minds that might actually soak it up and benefit from it. A case in point: why exactly was it a good idea to send George W. Bush to Yale, and then to Harvard Business School? A wanton misallocation of resources, wouldn't you agree? At this point, I doubt that I would get an argument even from his own parents. Perhaps in retrospect they would have been happier to let someone more qualified decide whether young George should have grown up to incompetently send men into battle or to competently polish hub caps down on the corner.

Many countries, upon achieving a certain level of collective intelligence, or upon finding themselves blessed with a sufficiently intelligent benevolent dictator, followed a similar line of reasoning, and organized a system of public education that meted out educational opportunities based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. In countries where such reforms were successful, society benefited from the far more efficient allocation of resources, becoming more egalitarian, better-educated, and more stable and prosperous. The United States is one such country, where, following World War II, the GI Bill did much to mitigate against the oppressive social stratification of American society during the Great Depression, giving it a new lease on life. In a politically honest country, this achievement would have been touted as a great socialist victory. Here, instead of building on this success, it was allowed to ebb away, until now fewer and fewer qualified candidates can shoulder the high cost of higher education, and even these have to forgo education proper in favor of vocational training, in order to be in a position to pay back student loans.

Other traditional socialist victories include securing the right to housing, child care, health care, and retirement. In the context of US public policy, many people will point to Roosevelt's New Society "middle-class entitlements" as examples of such victories, Social Security and Medicare being the big ones. As they point, they should also laugh. What pitiable excuse for public housing are these "projects" in which many of the poor are forced to live? Are inner-city public schools "education," or are they, as many of the teachers who work in them would agree, jails for young people? Is free medical care such a great achievement if you have to survive to retirement age, either as a wage slave, or without access to health care, in order to qualify for it? To add insult to injury, there is a limitless supply of pundits and experts, who can always get free air time to claim that even these feeble attempts at an equitable society are fiscally unsustainable and therefore must be curtailed. Poor embargoed Cuba can afford to provide such luxuries, but the United States is too poor to do the same? Pardon me while I attempt to knit my brows into an incredulous frown while simultaneously twisting my lips into a disdainful sneer! Might there perhaps be another reason? Could it be that the lack of socialist education policies has allowed our collective intelligence to drop to a level where the bulb glows too dimly for us to see what is being done to us? No, these are not victories, and they are certainly not socialist.

You might think that an argument could be made that this is all irrelevant, because the flip side of a socialist defeat is a capitalist victory. You might think that all of this talk of social rights causes erosion of respect for money and property, followed by other kinds of moral decay. You might also think that it is unfettered free enterprise that has made mainstream American society the economically stratified, downwardly mobile and economically insecure place that it is, which is just as it should be. Alas, that argument is no longer plausible: the flip side of a socialist defeat is a capitalist defeat. No matter what your political persuasion might be, there is simply no way that an economically insecure, badly educated, badly treated population can be made to thrive, and this sets the stage for some very bad economic performance. As the economy collapses and economic losses mount, social and political instability become inevitable.

Luckily, the converse of case is not inevitable: a capitalist defeat does not automatically mean a socialist defeat. While an economy that has lost its ability to grow signals the onset of terminal illness for any capitalist system, socialist institutions can operate at a loss virtually ad infinitum, delivering worse and worse results, but distributing them equitably, so that no one has more cause to complain or to rebel than anyone else. In an age of dwindling resources – be they mineral, ecological or financial – a socialist system stands a better chance of holding together than a capitalist one.

To further elucidate this fine point, let us consider two different environments: the cruise ship and the life boat. Aboard the cruise ship we find Bill Gates, Larry Ellison, George Soros and Warren Buffet, along with their assorted henchmen, fellow-travelers and capitalist stool pigeons. While they are aboard the cruise ship, these four worthies try to outdo each other in their outlandish spending behavior, and all rejoice in their orgy of conspicuous consumption. But now the cruise ship hits an iceberg and starts to go down, and the four capitalist luminaries take to the lifeboat, along with the passengers and the crew. While leaping aboard, Warren Buffet falls overboard and sinks like a rock because of all the gold bullion sewn into his belt, leaving three worthies to contend for the meager supply of biscuits and fresh water. They hold an auction, and Gates wins all of the biscuits. But before he manages to wolf down a single biscuit, he is compelled,

under murky and tumultuous circumstances, to swallow a great quantity of seawater, bringing on hallucinations, renal failure, and death. Larry Ellison then announces that he has just gone on a diet, while George Soros looks around in confusion and says "Don't worry everyone, I am buying." The captain of the sunken cruise ship then asserts his authority, and, with everyone's vocal consent, confiscates all money and all provisions, and institutes biscuit and water rations. Luckily, it is the monsoon season, and the plentiful rain allows everyone to drink their fill by catching water in their hats, but the biscuits soon run out, and it becomes necessary to eat someone. They draw lots, and Ellison gets the short straw. Before he gets done explaining how many millions he is willing to spare in exchange for them sparing his life, a member of the crew drives a boat hook through his eye socket, and he is promptly eaten. By a strange and suspicious coincidence, Soros is eaten next. But then, after a month adrift, the castaways are finally rescued by a passing freighter. No charges are brought against any of them, because the acts of murder and cannibalism were deemed necessary to survival, and were performed fairly, by the drawing of lots, in accordance with the ancient custom of the sea. If their rescue were delayed, they could have eaten each other down to one final ancient mariner, who would then starve to death, all fair and square and above board.

But how, you might reasonably want to rejoin, might the sinking cruise ship of the United States conceivably effect a transition from a highly-capitalized, highly-leveraged system of for-profit private enterprise to a more socialist-minded lifeboat model? What institutions can aide with the transition? Would the whole thing need to be scrapped and rebuilt from the ground up? Now, these are very serious questions indeed.

Currently, a great many people are filled with hope that the incoming Obama administration will bring much-needed change. Unfortunately, Mr. Obama inherits an office much tainted by his predecessor, whose attempt at securing his legacy included a clandestine trip to Baghdad where, when he attempted to speak of victory, someone threw shoes at him and called him a filthy dog, all on international television. The US presidency is now a carnival side show: "Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, and toss your shoes at Mr. President, for a chance to win an all-expense-paid stay at our luxurious Abu Ghraib suite!" Alas, Obama inherits an imperial mantle that has been trampled in the mud. Due to a certain quirk of the national character, most Americans have trouble understanding that honor is something you lose exactly once. (As H. L. Mencken pointed out, in America honor is used only in reference to members of Congress and the physical integrity of women.) This quirk may not be significant in domestic politics, but the US crucially depends on the rest of the world for every kind of support. There are countries, in the Muslim part of the world especially, where honor is of paramount importance, and having the highest office in the land turned into a laughing-stock is not conducive to securing their support.

And then there are the additional problems of poor advice and lack of authority. To build support for his plans, Mr. Obama must rely on the consensus advice of mainstream American economists. These astrologers to the wealthy, with their fancy astrolabes they call "models," may be popular during flush times, in spite of the feeble predictive abilities of their "science," but they start to seem downright foolish and feckless once the economy starts to implode. Still, these pseudo-scientists, with their pseudo-Nobel prizes and their tenured faculty positions, are quite entrenched, and will be difficult to dismiss, because the fiction they spin is so much more cheerful than the physical reality it is designed to obscure.

Add to this the fact that the financial and economic levers of control that are available to Mr. Obama are no longer connected to anything real. Mr. Obama's plans at economic stimulus may succeed in filling our pockets with newly printed money, but that money will promptly turn out to be worth its weight in kindling as soon as people try spending it, because there is no longer any faith or credit to back it up, and no growing economy in which to invest it. Should these money-printing initiatives succeed in stimulating a quarter or two of the usual anemic growth, the economy will again run into the same set of resource constraints, cause the next spike in commodity prices, another round of demand destruction, and economic collapse will resume apace.

What is needed, of course, is a concerted effort to build a new, vastly different economy, not squander remaining resources on attempts to resuscitate the current, moribund one. But politicians are never willing to dismantle the system that got them into power, and, like Gorbachev before him, Obama will do all he can to restart the current economy instead of letting it shut down and concentrating on planting the seeds of a new one.

If Presidential authority is unlikely to do the trick, then what of the US Congress? Even supposing that its members could betray their friends the lobbyists who write much of the legislation they pass without even reading it, as well as their base of well-heeled supporters, what could they do? What they do do is legislate. Perhaps someone might want to argue that there is a critical shortage of legal documents in the United States, and too few lawyers to creatively interpret them. No, if there is anything that is still in sufficient supply, it is tortuous legalese, the minions who toil over it, and the various courts, offices, and jails in which they toil. When it comes to economic collapse and social disintegration, an old and venerable legal codex is no handier than an old and venerable phone book. What is generally needed, to preserve life and order, is to commandeer and redistribute resources, and to compel people to do what needs to be done, legal niceties be damned. There is no time to stand idly by and wait while swarms of lawyers exercise their legal jowls. This calls for men and women of action, not a deliberative body that is accustomed to controlling the purse strings of a purse that they have finally succeeded in emptying. The third and final branch of American government – the judiciary – does not seem capable of the sort of judicial activism the situation calls for, and is entirely unlikely to try to get too far ahead of the legislative curve. So much for civics.

What, then, remains of that elusive American dream of having a country, rather than a country club, that offers something to everyone, and not just its most privileged members, even as the situation becomes progressively more dire? Well, there is just one such institution, but it is huge. I choose to call it, with all due bombast, the Bastion of American Socialism. Not only is it a huge institution in America itself – in fact, it is the largest, – but it is arguably the most powerful institution on the entire planet, at least in its destructive abilities, at least for the moment. It is the United States military. Since it is undeniably a bastion of sorts, I will concentrate on explaining why I think it is a socialist institution.

The various branches of the armed services provide numerous benefits to the enlisted men and women, the officers, and the veterans. These range from free family housing and day care to free medical care to access technical training and to higher education. For many sons and daughters of working class families, the military offers the only path away from the farm, the poor neighborhood or the ghetto, and toward a more prosperous life in the trades and even the professions. The Air Force even provides unlimited free travel and a chance to see the world. It is the single most socially progressive large institution that the United States has. In a bitter twist of irony, it is also its most brutal, designed, as it is, for politically sanctioned mass murder.

Of the working-class elderly, about the only ones who receive adequate medical care are those who have access to the Veterans Administration medical system. True, the services are often rationed, there are waiting lists to see specialists, and proving that you were injured in the line of duty often involves an exhausting paper chase. True, certain popular ailments, such as exposure to Agent Orange and depleted uranium, Gulf War Syndrome and the increasingly popular Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are politicized and judiciously misdiagnosed and ignored. But this is exactly what one generally expects to see in a system of socialized medicine.

I would like to assure everyone that I am definitely not any sort of American military triumphalist. The American military tradition is heir to the British one, and, as H. L. Mencken pointed out, the Anglo-Saxon has never been known to seek out a fair fight. The British military did its best work using rifles against pygmies armed with ripe fruit, and using machine guns to cut down cavalry. A wealth of racist terminology was brought to bear, to dehumanize the enemy, making such massacres palatable: the kaffir, the jap and the gook. They were all brutes, to be exterminated. The Americans have carried this tradition into the nuclear age, and used a nuke or two to subdue the Japanese, who had all the other weapons that were modern during that era. In the other theater of that war, on the Western front, the supposedly good fight was won by sitting it out for as long as possible, then ponderously bombing various hitherto picturesque historical districts of Europe in order to time the entry into Berlin to coincide with the arrival of the Soviet troops, who had a great deal more to lose, and could be relied upon to do all of the heavy lifting and most of the dying. So much for valor.

It is valid to ask whether the US military, aside from its socialist policies for those who serve it, is the least bit useful. Perhaps it is just a colossal, incompetent public money sponge that ruins countless lives and gives the country a bad name. In all the more recent conflicts save one (Reagan's invasion of the island of Grenada) the US military has not come out as the victor. Korea, Viet Nam, Gulf Wars I and II, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Somalia are all fiascos of one sort or another. It can be said that the US military cannot win; it can only blow things up. Now, blowing things up can be great fun, but it cannot be the only element in a winning military strategy. The key element is winning the peace, and here the US military has, time and again, demonstrated outright incompetence, remaining stalemated and waiting for political support to be withdrawn and the troops pulled out and sent home.

In spite of these many failures, the US military blunders on undeterred. This immunity to the effects of failure is also a socialist trait: if a company does badly, the government gives it more money and hopes for the best. This trait extends to military contracts. For instance, Raytheon's Patriot missiles, as delivered, would shoot down trees, apartment buildings, each other – anything but the target. This was hushed up, and then Raytheon got more money and told to try again. Another example: the greatest threat to the US Navy is not any enemy, foreign or domestic, but Microsoft's Blue Screen of Death, because their heavily computerized systems run on the notoriously crashy Windows NT. The response is to reward Microsoft's inability to write reliable software with more government contracts.

It is also valid to ask whether the US military, in its current highly mechanized, mobile form, has any sort of future in a world of dwindling oil supplies, much of them controlled by foreign governments. The US military is currently the single largest consumer of oil in the world, maintaining over a thousand military bases on foreign soil, and burning prodigious amounts of fuel in resupplying them, rotating the troops, and maintaining patrols. As fuel supplies dwindle, these bases will have to be abandoned, and the troops repatriated. Luckily, such extreme mobility and global reach will be neither necessary nor desirable once the United States finds its new place in the world as an inward-looking failed former superpower. Once Hawaii is claimed by Japan or China, and Alaska reverts to Russian control, the remaining United States will be a contiguous landmass that can be traversed on foot. Thus, the US military may yet have a bright future, as an infantry equipped with small arms, horses, mules, bicycles and canoes.

Such a downsized military would not be able to project force halfway across the globe on a moment's notice, but it may be able to redeploy to a neighboring county, or even a neighboring state, by sometime next month, provided the weather cooperates. The modest defense services it would be able to provide would certainly be needed: the citizenry of the United States, much more than that of most other countries, needs to be defended from itself at all times. The number of unresolved social conflicts, old grievances and injustices waiting to be avenged, requires a constant police presence to be maintained at all times in most of the thickly settled areas – a presence that will dwindle along with municipal budgets. Add to that the already very high homicide rate, and the huge prison population – largest in the world – that will be released en masse once the municipal and federal funds needed to maintain it can no longer be allocated to the purpose, and you have a recipe for non-stop murder and mayhem. To mitigate against these effects, federal troops can be strategically stationed in some of the more troublesome areas. Local and state troops would be far less effective: it has been known since Roman times that forces brought in from another province are far more effective at quelling unrest than those drawn from the local population.

Beyond maintaining order and preventing unnecessary bloodshed, the military possesses a property almost unique among government agencies: the ability to execute arbitrary orders, not subject to political authority, not limited to job description, and not subject to questioning, because "an order is an order!" Issuing orders is quicker and easier than legislating, because laws are blunt instruments, and are always subject to interpretation. Don't even try telling a lawyer "A law is a law! Shut up!" It just doesn't work. To get things done in an emergency, it is better to bypass lawyers and courts altogether.

One useful order would be: "Grow potatoes!" As the current system of industrial agriculture runs out of the chemicals, fuel and credit needed to fund and run its large-scale operations, many more hands will suddenly be needed to operate hoes, shovels and pitchforks in order to grow enough food to meet even the minimum caloric requirements of the population. Although I am sure that my gentleman-farmer friends will do their patriotic utmost to keep us all fed, bringing to bear all that they are currently busy learning about organic farming methods, permaculture, no-till agriculture and other helpful techniques, having access to an organized, disciplined labor force would help the process immeasurably.

Despite these significant positives, life under what would amount to a military occupation, where the customary civilian rights are routinely disregarded, and where the citizen is constantly faced with arbitrary authority backed up by the threat of force, can hardly be described as pleasant. But here, too, the result may be an improvement of sorts. Since the end of the Civil War, Americans have become accustomed to thinking of war as something that happens elsewhere, to other people. Thus, the news that the US is bombing this or that land, for no adequate reason, killing and maiming numerous civilians, produces in us neither the normal human reaction of revulsion, nausea and disgust, nor the conviction that we must take the fight to our own monstrous leaders, lest we too become monsters. Life under domestic military occupation

might bring home some welcome realizations, and start Americans down the long road of atoning for the sins of their forefathers, who have run roughshod over much of the rest of the planet for far too long. Paradoxically, as the legacy of US militarism fades away, it may leave behind a society that is far more humane, socialist even, than the one that gave rise to it.

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This article first appeared on
ClubOrlov
on January 10, 2009

This article, even better than the indispensable book by Dmitry Reinventing Collapse (New Society Publishers, 2008) is a gift for the new year for us all if we can swallow the sometimes bitter truth of our national failures. - Jan Lundberg, Publisher of Culture Change.

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