

Some Thoughts about Socialism

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“History is littered with post-crisis regulations. If there are undue restrictions on the operations of businesses, they may view it to be their job to get around them, and you sow the seeds of the next crisis.” – Liz Ann Sonders, chief investment analyst, CharlesSchwab & Co., a leading US provider of investment services.¹

And so it goes. Corporations, whether financial or not, strive to maximize profit as inevitably as water seeks its own level. We’ve been trying to “regulate” them since the 19th century. Or is it the 18th? Nothing helps for long. You close one loophole and the slime oozes out of another hole. Wall Street has not only an army of lawyers and accountants, but a horde of mathematicians with advanced degrees searching for the perfect equations to separate people from their money. After all the stimulus money has come and gone, after all the speeches by our leaders condemning greed and swearing to reforms, after the last congressional hearing deploring the corporate executives to their faces, the boys of Wall Street, shrugging off a few bruises, will resume churning out their assortment of financial entities, documents, and packages that go by names like hedge funds, derivatives, collateralized debt obligations, index funds, credit default swaps, structured investment vehicles, subprime mortgages, and many other pieces of paper with exotic names, for which, it must be kept in mind, there had been no public need or strident demand. Speculation, bonuses, and scotch will flow again, and the boys will be all the wiser, perhaps shaken a bit that they’re so reviled, but knowing better now what to flaunt and what to disguise.

This is another reminder that communism or socialism have almost always been given just one chance to work, if that much, while capitalism has been given numerous chances to do so following its perennial fiascos. Ralph Nader has observed: “Capitalism will never fail because socialism will always be there to bail it out.”

In the West, one of the most unfortunate results of the Cold War was that 70 years of anti-communist education and media stamped in people’s minds a lasting association between socialism and what the Soviet Union called communism. Socialism meant a dictatorship, it meant Stalinist repression, a suffocating “command economy”, no freedom of enterprise, no freedom to change jobs, few avenues for personal expression, and other similar truths and untruths. This is a set of beliefs clung to even amongst many Americans opposed to US foreign policy. No matter how bad the economy is, Americans think, the only alternative available is something called “communism”, and they know how awful that is.

Adding to the purposeful confusion, the conservatives in England, for 30 years following the

end of World War 2, filled the minds of the public with the idea that the Labour Party was socialist, and when recession hit (as it does regularly in capitalist countries) the public was then told, and believed, that “socialism had failed”.

Yet, ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, polls taken in Russia have shown a nostalgia for the old system. In the latest example, “Russia Now”, a Moscow publication that appears as a supplement in the Washington Post, asked Russians: “What socio-economic system do you favor?” The results were: “State planning and distribution”: 58% ... “Based on private property and market relations”: 28% ... “Hard to say”: 14%.²

In 1994, Mark Brzezinski (son of Zbigniew) was a Fulbright Scholar teaching in Warsaw. He has written: “I asked my students to define democracy. Expecting a discussion on individual liberties and authentically elected institutions, I was surprised to hear my students respond that to them, democracy means a government obligation to maintain a certain standard of living and to provide health care, education and housing for all. In other words, socialism.”³

Many Americans cannot go along with the notion of a planned, centralized society. To some extent it’s the terminology that bothers them because they were raised to equate a planned society with the worst excesses of Stalinism. Okay, let’s forget the scary labels; let’s describe it as people sitting down to discuss a particular serious societal problem, what the available options there are to solve the problem, and what institutions and forces in the society have the best access, experience, and assets to deliver those options. So, the idea is to prepare these institutions and forces to deal with the problem in a highly organized, rational manner without having to worry about which corporation’s profits might be adversely affected, without relying on “the magic of the marketplace”. Now it happens that all this is usually called “planning” and if the organization and planning stem from a government body it can be called “centralized”. There’s no reason to assume that this has to result in some kind of very authoritarian regime. All of us over a certain age —individually and collectively — have learned a lot about such things from the past. We know the warning signs; that’s why the Bush administration’s authoritarianism was so early and so strongly condemned.

The overwhelming majority of people in the United States work for a salary. They don’t need to be motivated by the quest for profit. It’s not in our genes. Virtually everybody, if given the choice, would prefer to work at jobs where the main motivations are to produce goods and services that improve the quality of life of the society, to help others, and to provide themselves with meaningful and satisfying work. It’s not natural to be primarily motivated by trying to win or steal “customers” from other people, no holds barred, survival of the fittest or the most ruthless.

A major war can be the supreme test of a nation, a time when it’s put under the greatest stress. In World War 2, the US government commandeered the auto manufacturers to make tanks and jeeps instead of private cars. When a pressing need for an atom bomb was seen, Washington did not ask for bids from the private sector; it created the Manhattan Project to do it itself, with no concern for balance sheets or profit and loss statements. Women and blacks were given skilled factory jobs they had been traditionally denied. Hollywood was enlisted to make propaganda films. Indeed, much of the nation’s activities, including farming, manufacturing, mining, communications, labor, education, and cultural undertakings were in some fashion brought under new and significant government control, with the war effort coming before private profit. In peacetime, we can think of socialism as putting people before profit, with all the basics guaranteed — health care, all education,

decent housing, food, jobs. Those who swear by free enterprise argue that the “socialism” of World War 2 was instituted only because of the exigencies of the war. That’s true, but it doesn’t alter the key point that it had been immediately recognized by the government that the wasteful and inefficient capitalist system, always in need of proper financial care and feeding, was no way to run a country trying to win a war.

It’s also no way to run a society of human beings with human needs. Most Americans agree with this but are not consciously aware that they hold such a belief. In 1987, nearly half of 1,004 Americans surveyed by the Hearst press believed Karl Marx’s aphorism: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need” was to be found in the US Constitution.⁴

Along these lines, I’ve written an essay entitled: “The United States invades, bombs, and kills for it, but do Americans really believe in free enterprise?”⁵

I cannot describe in detail what every nut and bolt of my socialist system would look like. That might appear rather pretentious on my part; most of it would evolve through trial and error anyway; the important thing is that the foundation — the crucial factors in making the important decisions — would rest on people’s welfare and the common good coming before profit. Humankind’s desperate need to halt environmental degradation regularly runs smack into the profit motive, as does the American health-care system. It’s more than a matter of ideology; it’s a matter of the quality of life, sustainability, and survival.

“Omission is the most powerful form of lie.” - George Orwell

I am asked occasionally why I am so critical of the mainstream media when I quote from them repeatedly in my writings. The answer is simple. The American media’s gravest shortcoming is much more their errors of omission than their errors of commission. It’s what they leave out that distorts the news more than any factual errors or out-and-out lies. So I can make good use of the facts they report, which a large, rich organization can easier provide than the alternative media.

In early March, the Washington Post ran an article about Iran which stated that “Iranian leaders ... reiterated that the Holocaust was ‘a lie’.” The article then went on to add that Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “repeated his assertion that the Holocaust is a ‘big lie’.”⁶ That’s all we’re told. What is the poor reader to conclude but that some Iranian leaders must be amongst that much vilified and ridiculed group called “Holocaust deniers”?

What the article fails to mention is that these Iranian leaders use the word “lie” to refer to only particular features of the Holocaust. There is no report of any of them simply, clearly, unambiguously, and unequivocally asserting that what we know as the Holocaust never took place. Ahmadinejad, for example, has instead commented about the peculiarity and injustice of a Holocaust which took place in Europe resulting in a state for the Jews in the Middle East instead of in Europe. Why are the Palestinians paying a price for a German crime? he asks. And he wonders about the accuracy of the number of Jews — six million — allegedly killed in the Holocaust, as have many other people of all political stripes and nationalities, including the noted Italian author Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor. Even Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority — Israel and Washington’s favorite Palestinian because of his opposition to Hamas, their least favored Palestinians — wrote in his doctoral dissertation: “The truth of the matter is that no one can verify this

number, or completely deny it. In other words, the number of Jewish victims might be 6 million and might be much smaller — even less than 1 million.”⁷

It is also worth noting that at the end of the Post article we learn that “a senior Israeli official in Washington, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not cleared to discuss such matters publicly” has asserted that “Iran would be unlikely to use its missiles in an attack [against Israel] because of the certainty of retaliation.” Really? That’s what I and others have been saying for years. It should have been the story’s headline, not the very last sentence, literally. Yet, we can be certain that Israeli and American officials and their disciples will continue to warn the world of the danger of Iranian missile attacks. So will the Washington Post, engaging in future omissions of its own news story.

What actually has long worried Israeli and US officials about possible Iranian nuclear weapons is not that Iran might attack anyone, but that Israel’s beloved security blanket — being the only nuclear power in the Middle East — would at risk, as might be Washington’s dominance of the area.

Later in March, the Los Angeles Times ran an obituary of Janet Jagan, the former president of Guyana and widow of Cheddi Jagan who had earlier also been president. The obituary says not a word about the fact that for 11 years, 1953-64, two of the oldest democracies in the world, Great Britain and the United States, went to great lengths in their repeated attempts to prevent the democratically elected Cheddi Jagan from occupying his office.⁸

I’ve selected these examples of omission virtually at random. If I wanted to report on each media omission concerning significant US foreign policy matters I could fill this newsletter each month with nothing else.

It happens that in late March the Washington Post also provided us with the less common out-and-out lie. In an editorial about the leftist former guerillas in El Salvador, the FMLN, winning the presidential election with their candidate Mauricio Funes, the Post said: “If Mr. Funes as well as the election’s losers now respect the rule of law, the result could be the consolidation of the political system the United States was aiming for when it intervened in El Salvador’s civil war during the 1980s. At the time, the goal of a successful Salvadoran democracy was dismissed as a mission impossible, just as some now say democracy is unattainable in Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁹

The idea that the US intervention in the Salvadoran civil war stemmed from a desire to bring democracy to the country is so breathtaking in its audacity that it’s conceivable the Post editorial writer is suffering from early-stage Alzheimer’s; it’s wholly comparable to saying that the Apartheid regime of South Africa strove to increase harmony and equality between blacks and whites. In the process of supporting a Salvadoran government of remarkable tyranny, brutality and human-rights violations, the United States provided the country’s armed forces with a never-ending supply of funds, weapons and training that brought continual destruction and suffering to the people of El Salvador. The Post’s “disclosure” will not send historians scurrying to rewrite their books. Nor can it serve to conceal the fact that the United States is not fighting for “democracy” in Iraq and Afghanistan any more than it did in El Salvador.

The ideology of Barack Obama

In the past two months:

- US Vice President Joe Biden was asked by reporters at a summit in Chile if Washington plans to put an end to the near-50-year-old economic embargo against Cuba. He replied “No.”¹⁰
- Israeli authorities broke up a series of Palestinian cultural events in Jerusalem, disrupting a children’s march and bursting balloons at a schoolyard celebration.¹¹ There has not been, nor will there be, any embargo of any kind by the United States against Israel. Nor will President Obama make any comment about what he really feels about invading a children’s party and bursting their balloons.
- The White House and the Pentagon appear to be having a competition over who can announce the most troops being sent to Afghanistan. Is anyone keeping a body count?
- US drones continue to drop bombs on people’s homes and wedding parties in Pakistan. No one in Washington publicly admits to this or comments in any way about the legality or morality of it all.
- Bolivia and Ecuador have expelled American diplomats for what their hosts saw as conspiring to undermine the government.

Any number of other examples can be given of how alike the foreign policies of the Bush and Obama administrations are, how little, if any, change has occurred; certainly nothing of any significance. Yet, my saying such a thing is precisely what most often bothers Obama supporters who read or hear my comments. They’re in love with the man with the toothpaste-advertisement smile, who’s “smart” (whatever that means), who plays basketball, and is not George W. Bush, and his wife who puts her arm around the queen of England.

Obama’s popularity around the world is enhanced, to an important extent, by the fact that he has endeavored to conceal or obscure his real ideology. As an example, in early March, in an interview with the New York Times, he was asked: “Is there a one word name for your philosophy? If you’re not a socialist, are you a liberal? Are you progressive? One word?”

“No, I’m not going to engage in that,” replied the president.¹²

The next day he called the Times reporter, telling him: “It was hard for me to believe that you were entirely serious about that socialist question”. Obama then gave the reporter several examples of why his policies show that he isn’t a socialist.¹³

He didn’t have to convince me. Obama’s centrist bent is clear to anyone who bothers to look. But after the Times incident — which apparently bothered him — he may have felt the need to be more clear about his ideological leanings to avoid any further silly “socialist” episodes. The next day, meeting at the White House with members of the New Democrat Coalition, a group of centrist Democratic members of the House, Obama said at one point: “I am a New Democrat.”¹⁴

Most conservatives will probably continue to see him as a dangerous leftist. They should be happy that Obama is the president and not any kind of real progressive or socialist or even a

genuine liberal, but the right wing is greedy.

Notes

1. *Washington Post*, March 29, 2009 [↵](#)
2. "Russia Now", in *Washington Post*, March 25, 2009 [↵](#)
3. *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1994 [↵](#)
4. Frank Bernack, Jr., Hearst Corp. President, address to the American Bar Association, early 1987, reported in *In These Times* magazine (Chicago), June 24 - July 7, 1987 [↵](#)
5. William Blum, "Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower", chapter 26 [↵](#)
6. *Washington Post*, March 5, 2009 [↵](#)
7. The Middle East Media Research Institute, "Inquiry and Analysis", No. 95, May 30, 2002; also see Wikipedia, [entry for Mahmoud Abbas, "Doctoral Dissertation" section.](#) [↵](#)
8. *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 2009. See William Blum, "Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II", chapter 16 for what was left out. [↵](#)
9. *Washington Post*, March 21, 2009 [↵](#)
10. *Miami Herald*, March 28, 2009 [↵](#)
11. *Washington Post*, March 22, 2009 [↵](#)
12. *New York Times*, March 7, 2009 [↵](#)
13. *New York Times*, March 8 2009 [↵](#)
14. [Politico magazine](#), online, March 10, 2009 [↵](#)

William Blum is the author of:

- *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War 2*
- *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*
- *West-Bloc Dissident: A Cold War Memoir*
- *Freeing the World to Death: Essays on the American Empire*

Portions of the books can be read, and signed copies purchased, at www.killinghope.org

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