

# Socialism

**I**n recent years, a number of American commentators have proclaimed that socialism is dead as an ideal. I wish they were right, but their obituary is premature. Socialism as an ideal is actually thriving.

It would be a mistake to judge the appeal of socialism by the number of votes cast for socialist candidates. By that standard, of course, socialism is nearly dead, at least as compared to the times earlier in this century when eloquent, charismatic leaders like Eugene V. Debs or Norman Thomas won enough votes to make the Socialists the third-largest party in America.

If you want to locate the citadels of socialism today, you must look elsewhere—specifically to the college campuses, where self-styled socialists are increasingly visible and vocal. Unlike the situation of two or three decades ago, when socialist teachers were embattled outcasts, today they are magnets who attract large enrollments for their courses. They are held in high esteem by their colleagues, and when they write textbooks, the leading publishers compete for the opportunity to publish them.

Admittedly, socialist teachers are still only a minority. But their strength is clustered in the fields of economics, sociology, history, political science, law, and philosophy, thereby giving them the greatest opportunity to shape the viewpoint of future teachers, journalists, politicians, and opinion-makers. The academic socialists are under no illusion that their struggle to transform America into their ideal society can be won overnight. Instead, quite realistically, they concentrate their energies on a long-range goal: persuading young people that socialism offers a noble blueprint for America's future.

It may astonish you that socialism remains a vital and dynamic ideology, given its track

## Reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

record—namely, that in every country where socialism has been tried, it has produced economic stagnation, and usually political tyranny as well. That is the paradox I propose to examine here: how a doctrine that has failed everywhere can still manage to attract new advocates.

**S**ocialism, a term coined in the 1820s, originated as a reaction to individualism. The earliest socialist writers, men like August Comte and Charles Fourier, took individualism to mean three things: that individuals possess inalienable rights, that society should not restrain individuals from pursuing their own happiness, and that economic activity should not be regulated by government. In place of individualism, these writers proclaimed an organic conception of society, stressing ideals such as brotherhood, community, and social solidarity. They also set forth highly detailed blueprints for model utopian societies in which collectivist or socialist values would be institutionalized.

The earliest socialist writers drew their

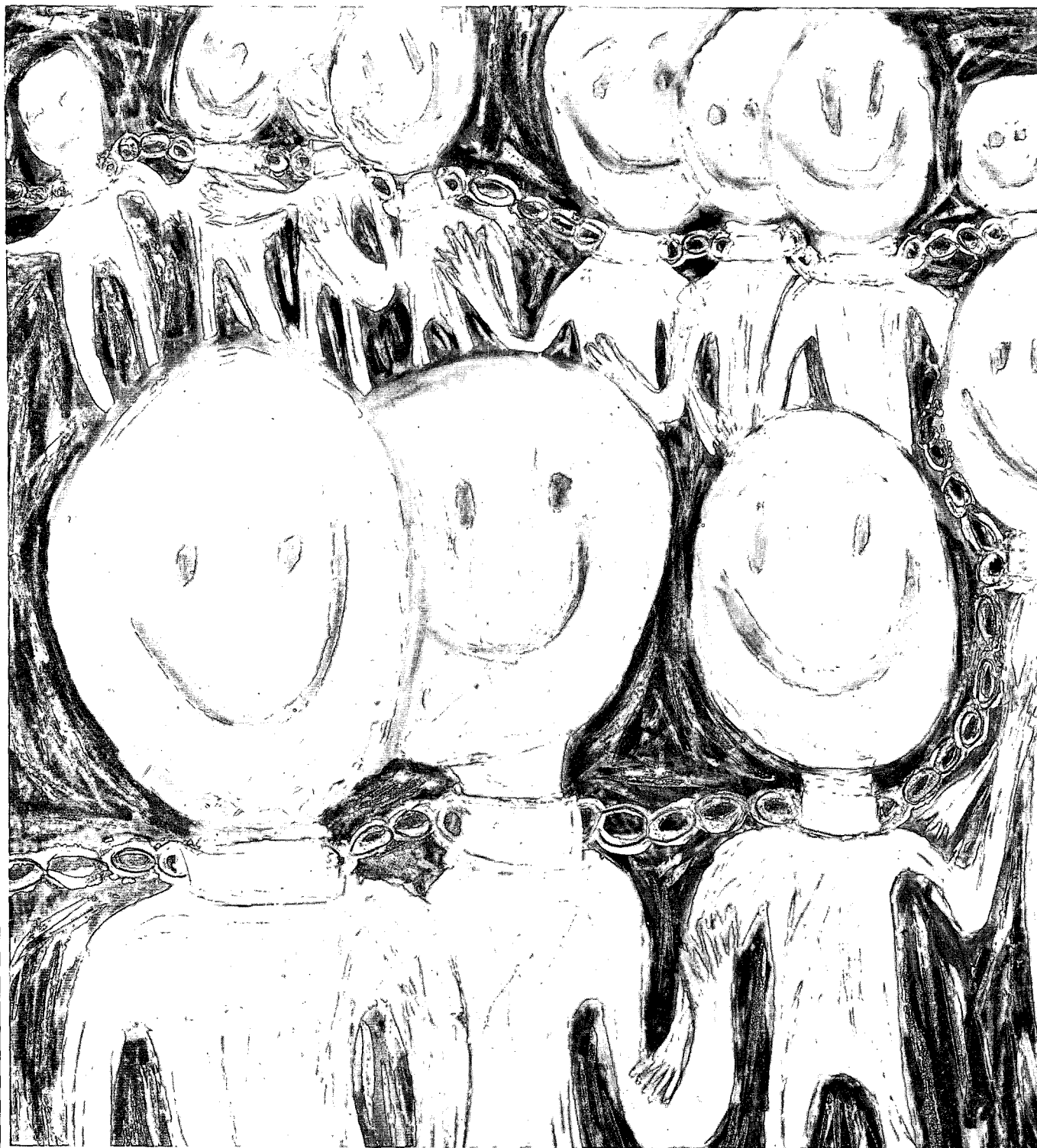
by **Robert Hessen**

inspiration from Jean Jacques Rousseau's 1762 treatise, *The Social Contract*, a work that serves as an inspiration for collectivist writers to this day. Their blueprints for utopia aimed to embody the ideals set forth by Rousseau, specifically that human egotism or self-interest would be eradicated and human nature changed so that individuals no longer would pursue personal happiness as their highest goal. Instead, Rousseau sought a social system that would train men to "bear with docility the yoke of public happiness" (that is, the well-being of society or the community as a whole).

Utopian socialism was eclipsed when Karl Marx began to attack the movement. He did not oppose the moral ideals the utopians had proclaimed, but he thought they were dangerous because their approach might not result in the overthrow of bourgeois society. The utopians' mistake, according to Marx, was that they were merely urging people to reject capitalist or individualist values and to embrace socialist or collectivist values. But if this approach was too successful, the result might be a premature revolution to topple bourgeois society, and the revolution might be crushed.

Marx, instead, created a second species of socialism. He called it "scientific socialism" and claimed to have discovered the laws of history. Socialism, he announced, was the next stage of history, and its arrival was inevitable.

Why inevitable? Because under capitalism, according to Marx, workers are condemned to perpetual poverty; they are never paid more than the barest minimum required to stay alive and breed children. But the worker cannot even count on obtaining bare subsistence, because a "law of increasing misery" operates under capitalism. As workers saw their wages reduced below the subsistence level, and as they faced the



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specter of death by starvation, they would rise up and overthrow the capitalist system—and replace it with socialism, by which Marx meant a system wherein the means of production, distribution, and exchange have been nationalized and the state operates a centrally planned economy that produces prosperity for everyone.

Like the utopian socialists, Marx ap-

pealed to moral ideals. He promised that socialism, by abolishing classes, would abolish class warfare and that an everlasting era of harmony, cooperation, and equality would result. But while the utopians were merely preaching socialism, Marx was predicting its inevitable triumph with the same certainty that an astronomer can predict the next eclipse of the sun or the moon. And

while the utopians offered detailed blueprints for future model communities based on socialist ideals, Marx offered no details at all about how a future socialist society would be structured or how it would operate.

Marx's vagueness about the features of socialism was not unique. Other 19th-century socialist theorists also failed to provide any details about their ideal society. For

example, Ludwig Feuerbach observed that "the future life is nothing else than the present life freed from that which appears as a limitation or an evil," and Pierre Proudhon defined socialism as "every aspiration towards the amelioration of our society." Like the Christian theologians who explain that heaven will not be like anything known on earth, socialist theoreticians simply asserted that socialism would be the opposite of capitalism—and then left it up to everyone's imagination to fill in the details.

This analogy to Christianity and to heaven is not accidental: a movement in England and America called "Christian socialism"

planned economy. But it remained an untested concept or ideal.

Soon, though, Marx's intellectual heirs obtained an opportunity to put his theories to the test, beginning in the Soviet Union after 1918. Soviet Russia was to be a socialist showcase, proving that a centrally planned economy could produce a workers' paradise by eliminating poverty and unemployment and by creating unprecedented conditions for every individual to employ his talents to the fullest in the service of society.

It soon became clear, however, that the

boomed, and products which had been unavailable or rationed in wartime were available again, often in cheaper and improved forms.

This development provoked some socialists to launch an attack on capitalism from a new perspective. Formerly, following Marx's lead, they had condemned capitalism because it allegedly dooms workers to perpetual poverty. Now, they argued, the real evil of capitalism is that it leads to *prosperity*. They began to attack the legitimacy of consumer demand. They claimed that goods that have to be advertised in order to sell could not be serving any authentic human needs. They charged that consumers are brainwashed by Madison Avenue and reduced to the status of robots who mindlessly crave whatever the giant corporations choose to produce and advertise.

Perhaps the classic expression of this approach was the exhortation made by Professor Herbert Marcuse to young socialists. He urged them to persuade working men and women that they don't need washing machines, dishwashers, television sets, or automobiles, because these goods are really tools of oppression and enslavement. They make workers complacent or content, thereby robbing them of the revolutionary fervor necessary to topple capitalism and establish a socialist society.

Socialist writers offered assurances that in a socialist society, only "authentic" needs would be fulfilled, and consumers would not be confused by too many choices. Not surprisingly, very few American workers showed any enthusiasm for socialism when given a choice between being proletarian revolutionaries and owning a home or an automobile. The socialists, both in England and America, were out of step with the working class in whose name they claimed to be speaking.

Facing the prospect of talking only to themselves, socialist theoreticians began reformulating their program. The most daring and influential blueprint was offered by C. A. R. Crosland, a British writer, in his 1956 book, *The Future of Socialism*. He wrote that the most urgent task confronting socialists was to begin treating Karl Marx's ideas with "judicious irreverence."

Crosland proposed that the nationalization of industry should no longer be the essential goal of socialism. He reviewed a large body of socialist writings and discovered that their common theme was a concern with moral values—compassion for the needy and helpless, a belief in equality and a classless society, and a protest against the alleged inefficiencies of capitalism, especially mass unemployment.

The common theme, he wrote, is that

### ***It is forced labor, involuntary servitude that socialists are offering as a humane, compassionate alternative to capitalism!***

held, in essence, that socialism is the embodiment of Christian ethical ideals. These writers and preachers pointed out that the Bible and the early Christian fathers had rejected private property, the pursuit of wealth, and the ethics of self-interest. For example, British poet and critic Matthew Arnold declared that "the Bible enjoins endless self-sacrifice all round." And George D. Herron, an American clergyman, achieved prominence with his 1890 sermon "The Message of Jesus to Men of Wealth." In it he declared: "Strictly speaking, a rich Christian is a contradiction of terms."

To validate this viewpoint, the Christian socialists quoted St. Luke's account of the apostles: "Not a man among them claimed any of his possessions as his own, but everything was held in common." They quoted from St. Mark that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they invoked St. Ambrose: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his."

The Christian socialists held that Christianity and socialism are natural allies: that Christianity is the theory of socialism and socialism the practice of Christianity. This viewpoint never dominated the socialist movement because most socialists were secularists and many were agnostics or atheists. Nonetheless, this view continues to be expounded in the leading divinity schools and shapes the attitudes of future clergy.

Both utopian socialism and Christian socialism were rather limited in their appeal compared to Marx's scientific socialism. At the end of the 19th century, *socialism* essentially meant Marx's vague blueprint: nationalization of the means of production, distribution, and exchange and a centrally

Soviet experiment was a failure. A persistent pattern of crop failures and shortfalls in industrial production began to emerge—and when these occurrences were so regular that they could no longer be denied, Western socialists were hard-pressed to explain them away.

It was even harder for Western socialists to evade or excuse the Soviet Union's use of terror, repression, censorship, and forced labor—but some of them managed to do so, dismissing the steadily mounting evidence as lies and slanders created by the Western capitalist press. Other socialists tried to salvage their faith by announcing that the system in the Soviet Union really was not socialism; rather it was "state capitalism." A much smaller group actively denounced and publicized the evils and failures of the Soviet system. People like Emma Goldman, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey reaffirmed their dedication to democracy and their loathing of dictatorship and urged that the verdict on socialism be postponed until socialism was adopted in a democratic society.

An opportunity for such an experiment arose in Great Britain after World War II. From 1946 to 1949, a socialist government, headed by Clement Attlee, held the reins of power. But the nationalized industries of England proved to be colossally inefficient; it was obvious that Marx's vague notion of central planning had left socialist planners with no tools or guidance. Socialism had suffered another seemingly fatal blow.

Simultaneously, at the end of World War II, the American economy was undergoing a dramatic revival and resurgence. The Great Depression was past and the wartime mobilization was over. The postwar depression that the socialists had confidently predicted did not occur; instead, the economy

socialism stresses a collective responsibility for the relief of social distress or misfortune. But, he noted, the goal of relieving distress and promoting equality does not necessarily require government ownership of industry; these same objectives can be pursued equally well by means of higher taxation, limitations on dividends, and appropriate inheritance taxes.

If you ask how Crosland's blueprint differentiates a socialist from a liberal democrat, your question is right on target. Crosland's redefinition of socialism blurred the formerly distinct line that separated socialists from modern liberals. Once the socialists were willing to accept private ownership of industry, they could no longer be ostracized as radicals or revolutionaries; instead, the new approach made them seem flexible, tolerant, and open-minded.

The new-style socialists called themselves social democrats and democratic socialists. Their approach was not acceptable to all socialists. Some—chiefly younger and less interested in improving the immediate political appeal of socialism—regarded the new formulation as sheer pragmatic expediency, a retreat from principle, and a shameless compromise with the inherent evils of capitalism.

In light of the historical record of socialist regimes, however, it would have been hard for anyone to demand a return to central planning and nationalization. Instead, another new version of socialism was created, one that turned away from Marx and back to Rousseau and the utopian socialists.

The new approach, a creation of the 1970s, is called "economic democracy," a name designed to create the impression that socialists are the intellectual heirs of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Their goal, they say, is to complete the work of the Founding Fathers, by extending democracy beyond politics, into the realm of production.

Exactly what alternative do the advocates of economic democracy offer in place of traditional central planning? They propose a system of small, self-sufficient communities in which each enterprise would be operated as a cooperative owned by local consumers. They want all large corporations to be dismantled and their individual plants and factories converted into locally owned cooperatives. Central planning will be implemented at the local level: all decisions about investment and production will be made collectively by the community.

A more accurate name for their blueprint would be "communitarian socialism." Each person will receive one vote, and the decision of the majority will be binding on everyone.

By making everything a subject for the

political agenda, communitarian socialism would suffocate free choice and individual liberty. Although the blueprint gives each individual a vote and therefore, seemingly, the power of choice and informed consent, there would be no private spheres of action. The community will be able to stifle every able and ambitious person simply by voting against any plans or goals he wants to set for himself.

Advocates of communitarian socialism present their ideas as democratic, not totalitarian. They don't advertise the coercive aspects of their blueprint but instead stress the moral ideal that underlies their viewpoint: the ideal of equality. They hold that no one deserves to own or to earn more than anyone else and that all forms of inequality are unjust. (The only exception is if the community collectively decides that someone has greater needs than others and therefore deserves a larger allotment.)

**O**f course, the reign of equality will not be left up to individual choice. The socialist blueprint sets up conditions for enforced equality. But if enforced equality is to exist, then individuals must be forced to surrender their independence. Now the biggest source of independence is private property, which allows individuals an asset they can use or trade for their own benefit.

And private property doesn't refer only to money, land, shops, or factories. Central planning also must harness human labor, because labor is a central component of production. This means that human labor must be socialized—in other words, that *self-ownership must be abolished*. Otherwise, individuals might withhold their labor and thus frustrate the workings of the master plan.

I realize that this point may seem startling, so let me quote a leading socialist writer, Robert Heilbroner: "The creation of socialism requires the curtailment of the central economic freedom of bourgeois society, namely the right of individuals to own, and therefore to withhold if they wish, the means of production, including their own labor."

And why, according to Heilbroner, must individuals forfeit the right to control their own labor? He answers: "The full preservation of this bourgeois freedom would place the attainment of socialism at the mercy of property owners who could threaten to deny their services to society—and again I refer to their labor, not just to material resources—if their terms were not met." What is another way to describe "curtailing" an individual's right to own his own labor? It is forced labor, involuntary servitude—and that is what the socialists are offering as a

humane, compassionate alternative to capitalism!

Forthright statements like Heilbroner's are rare and should be publicized by those who oppose socialism. Usually socialists evade the whole issue of forced labor by claiming that it won't be necessary to coerce anyone. They assume that unanimity will exist in a socialist society, that everyone will voluntarily put others' goals ahead of their own and that altruistic behavior will be the hallmark of "socialist man." They decline to discuss the fate of those who won't fall into place, and they neglect to consider the transitional period before the new species of automatic altruists comes into existence. The mistake of the anti-socialists has been to allow the socialists to get away with this evasive tactic.

Not only are free-market commentators wrong to proclaim that socialism is dead as an ideal; the antisocialists are the ones chiefly to blame for its long life. For they never attack the moral ideals proclaimed by the socialists, allowing those ideals to stand virtually unchallenged.

It was common for many years, for example, for opponents to dismiss socialists as "misguided idealists." Instead of challenging the ideals—instead of showing that enforced equality requires continuous coercion—free-market advocates merely noted that socialist ideals are impractical or that they run contrary to human nature.

But there is nothing in this approach that discomforts or discredits the socialists, because their moral idealism is never challenged. It does not injure the socialists to call them utopians; quite the contrary, utopianism has been the primary basis of their appeal to idealistic young people. Professor F. A. Hayek was correct when he wrote that "socialist thought owes its appeal to the young largely to its visionary character." Obviously, the only way to undermine the appeal of their utopian ideals is to expose them to critical scrutiny—to show that they are incompatible with human liberty and are necessarily coercive and repressive.

**B**ut what have the defenders of capitalism been doing instead? Conservative economist Carl Snyder once declared flatly, "Everyone is greedy," proposing this fact as an obstacle to socialism because it applies to socialists too. They will exercise extraordinary power within the new system. Instead of being faceless humanitarians or anonymous Good Samaritans, they will enjoy their positions of power and prestige and so are as morally tainted as everyone else. This view, in essence, is the core of the "new class" label that many conservatives have tried to pin on the communitarian socialists.

But trying to discredit socialism by calling its advocates a "new class" is obviously doomed to failure. It doesn't challenge socialist *ideals*, but only the psychological motives of the socialists, which really are irrelevant.

Another approach taken by conservatives is to argue that the selfish behavior embodied in capitalism can be sanctified by its altruistic consequences. Here's how conservative economic journalist Herbert E. Meyer recently tried to defend capitalism. "An entrepreneur," he writes, "will start a new business only when he wants to make more money. Admittedly, this rather selfish motive is not one to uplift the spirits. However, it does uplift the incomes of an awful lot of ordinary people by creating jobs for them that otherwise would not exist."

Such a statement makes business innovators seem like moral lepers. They are the carriers of social disease—selfishness—that society should tolerate only because

and learn to live with the ineradicable selfishness of human nature.

Does that seem like an effective rebuttal to socialism, an argument that would discomfort a socialist adversary? Hardly so.

Perhaps the weakest rebuttal appeared in *The Coercive Utopians*, by neoconservatives Rael Jean Isaac and Erich Isaac. They argue that the real evil of the socialists is that they proclaim ideals at all, because ideals are inherent weapons of tyranny. Whoever holds any ideals will want the power to impose them on everyone else. Therefore, they say, the antidote to the poison of socialism is to abandon ideals of every sort; their alternative to idealism is "balky pragmatism."

Along the same lines, a religious conservative, writing in *The Freeman*, condemned any ideology that holds out the prospect of improving living conditions here on earth. He ascribed the massacre at Jonestown to the fact that the followers of

moral, and they thereby win the hearts and minds of idealistic young people.

The socialists, from the first utopian theorists more than 150 years ago to their descendents today, keep invoking soul-stirring concepts. They talk about solidarity, brotherhood, cooperation, community, consensus, participation, fraternity, and, above all, justice and equality. I was unable to reject the appeal of socialism until I learned to translate the slogans of socialism—to see how they actually would operate in everyday life. As long as they are left at the level of noble abstractions, without being translated into concrete terms, they will continue to attract the young and idealistic.

The socialist ideal of equality must be confronted head-on, not evaded. The point to be stressed by defenders of capitalism is that equality will never arise spontaneously and can only be sustained by coercion. Individuals are obviously different from each other—different in ability, ambition, intelligence, ingenuity, and inventiveness; different too in their willingness to expend effort, to run the risk of failure, and to take on new challenges. Some who succeed decide to rest on their laurels; some who fail decide not to risk failure again. But others who succeed take each new success as a stimulus to new effort, and some who have failed are resilient—and they persevere until they do succeed.

These undeniable differences of character and personality are the source, in large measure, of the economic inequalities that exist within the same country or region and even within the same family. Those who propose to eliminate them can only succeed by suppressing inventiveness, ability, and creativity or by stripping individuals of the material consequences that flow from these characteristics, such as wealth, prestige, and influence. Human differences can be eradicated, and equality of income achieved, only in a totalitarian society.

Most young people don't realize that when they are attracted to the ideals of socialism. The challenge confronting the defenders of capitalism today is to persuade idealistic young people to reject every variety of socialism. For those who favor a system that respects and protects individual liberty, that fosters independence and freedom of choice, that rewards exceptional effort and ability, that tolerates diversity and dissent, and that recognizes that the fundamental form of private property is self-ownership, there is only one choice possible in the marketplace of ideas: capitalism. □

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## ***Differences can be eradicated, and equality of income achieved, only in a totalitarian society.***

someone else benefits from their activities.

Another conservative writer, George Gilder, has tried to sanctify business by claiming, not that capitalism has altruistic consequences but that capitalists really are altruists. Gilder's book *Wealth and Poverty* was hailed as a long-overdue moral defense of capitalism. Briefly, he claimed that businessmen are not motivated by self-interest or selfishness, despite what their socialist-critics claim. In the process of investing and producing, they bestow definite and specific benefits on others—products for consumers and wages for workers—but they have no guarantees of receiving any specific benefit in return. And, says Gilder, such giving without a guaranteed return is the essence of altruism. This approach so openly accepts the premises of socialist morality that it obviously cannot serve to undermine the appeal of socialism.

Recently, another conservative economist tried to vindicate capitalism by appealing to genetic determinism. Drawing on the field of sociobiology—which claims to find parallels between the conduct of human beings and insects—this economist defended "selfish behavior." It is ultimately beneficial to the human race, he wrote, if people of ability and ambition pass on their genes to future generations. He added that it would be "ethically ideal if men could live up to the maxim proclaimed by Karl Marx: from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." But our selfish behavior is genetically determined, so let's be practical

the Reverend Jim Jones had succumbed to the lure of "utopia now." Then he added: "But the message of the New Testament is that this life on earth is not a utopia; it is not heaven. In this life we are pilgrims journeying toward something better than anyone has ever known, and Jesus came to show the way. The philosophy of delayed gratification has always been embraced by the people of God." His response to the moral idealism of the socialists is to exhort everyone to suffer silently and await entry into heaven. This is surely not a viewpoint that will keep idealistic young people from being attracted to socialism.

**W**hat will defuse the appeal of socialism? If the defenders of capitalism want to discredit socialism, they will not succeed by claiming that socialism is inefficient or that central planning is not technically feasible. They can only succeed by directly confronting the challenge of socialist moral ideals.

Socialism appeals to young people by proclaiming ideals that seem to be noble. I know this from personal experience, because when I was 17, I was a socialist. The choice, I thought then, was simple: morality versus material comforts. The spokesmen for capitalism kept stressing efficiency and the capability of capitalism to produce bigger bathtubs and better ball bearings. By contrast, the socialists really never deny that capitalism is an extremely productive system, but they claim it is profoundly im-

*by Robert Chapman Wood*

# Wipe

*One tax cut after another  
has been eaten up by the tax  
no one will touch.* **Out!**

I often wonder whether my in-laws are unique. When my father-in-law retired a couple of years ago, my mother-in-law actually refused to apply for Social Security payments.

Mom is the hard-working sort, but she never took many jobs outside the home. She and her husband knew she hadn't paid much into the Social Security system; actually, they had been pleasantly surprised at the size of the check Pop alone received. They thought they could live on Pop's Social Security check plus the tiny pension they would get from an aerospace company where Pop had spent a decade many years ago.

So when friends told them that Mom qualified for Social Security benefits of her own, they were skeptical. "I never worked, so why should I be receiving Social Security?" said Mom.

For a full year, she stayed away from the Social Security office. Finally, she made

the trip. The benefits were just too good to turn down. With amazement in her voice she told me, "We almost do better now after taxes than we did when Dad was working."

I'm proud of Mom and Pop for their reluctance to take government money. And I'm glad they're now well off. But their generation's gain, unfortunately, is their children's loss—especially if their children want to have children of their own.

Real *after-tax* incomes of working people over the last decade and a half have fallen significantly below not just the levels of the 1970s but even the levels of the mid-1960s. And the culprit is the same program that is making Mom and Pop well-to-do.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that working people are poorer today than they used to be. After all, real income per capita continued to increase even after the oil shock of 1973 brought the Vietnam era

boom to an ignominious end.

Unfortunately, however, working folks *are* poorer today than they have been at any time since the 1960s. They face a villain that doesn't affect the retired in quite the same way—that old certainty, taxes. Even after several Reagan-era cuts, taxes remain so much higher than they were in the '60s and early '70s that they've wiped out all the rest of the economy's gain for average working people, especially those with families.

Tax reformers just haven't attacked the main problem. What is killing off economic progress for working people is my mother-in-law's benefactor, the sacred cause for which thousands of government-subsidized "senior center" programs in church basements lobby—Social Security and Medicare.

If you listen to the common wisdom, you may blame defense spending for America's fiscal plight. There is plenty of waste in the Pentagon, but if you look back