

Communist Comedy

By Christopher McDaniel

For several years now, observers have been telling us that virtually no one behind the Iron Curtain takes socialism seriously anymore. There will always be a few true believers—sad cases for students of pathology—but among politicians, the ideals of Marxism-Leninism are simply exploited as a matter of form, and among the general population socialism is just a bad joke. In East Germany, as in other totalitarian states, the jokes cannot be told on the local equivalent of *The Tonight Show*; instead they constitute a sort of low-brow *samizdat*, an oral underground literature that serves the “dissident-in-the-street.”

Konrad Seyfferth was born and educated (that is, propagandized) in East Germany. In 1961 he fled to the West, but in the past twenty years he has visited the “Democratic Republic” often, and on each trip he has heard the latest jokes making the rounds. Now he has published a collection: *Wer meckert, sitzt: Lachen im realen Sozialismus* (Freiburg: Herderbucherei).

The jokes are concrete evidence of the sometimes bitter, occasionally hilarious, always perceptive criticism of the reality of life in a “workers’ paradise” from the point of view of the workers themselves. The absurdity of life under socialism lends itself to joking—or else madness—for as Seyfferth points out in his introduction, “socialism is the triumph of an idea over common sense” (here and throughout, my translation).

The first bad jokes are questions:

What is that country whose name itself is a lie?

The German Democratic Republic.

And, in this wonderland of freedom,
What do you get for a good idea?
About five years.

And then there's the story of the man who went to heaven and was astounded to see the nations of the earth represented by clocks showing various times. He asked St. Peter for an explanation.

“When a crime against human rights is committed in any country, the hands on



the clock representing that country move forward one hour.”

“That's very interesting, but I don't see a clock for East Germany.”

“Yes, well, we hung that one in the kitchen, as a ventilator.”

As for distinguishing West and East, there's this:

What's the difference between a democracy and a people's democracy?

The same as between a jacket and a straight-jacket.

Only through the most grotesque perversion of language, of course, can countries like East Germany claim to be democracies:

On election day, each voter is given a sealed envelope and told to drop it in the ballot box. When an elderly lady tried to open her envelope, she was challenged by a poll-watcher.

“I just want to see what's in it,” she said.

“But you can't,” said the official. “After all, it's a secret ballot.”

When first-among-equals Honecker [Communist Party First Secretary] gives one of his optimistic speeches, he says, “Comrades, prosperity and happiness for all socialist peoples lie just on the horizon.”

A representative of the people asks, “Comrade Honecker, what does ‘horizon’ mean?”

“Look it up.”

According to the dictionary, the horizon is a boundary between heaven and earth; it recedes as you approach it.

Of course,

Adam and Eve were the first communists: they had no clothes, little to eat, no real shelter, and yet they believed they lived in paradise.

Socialist idealists apparently are not supposed to be concerned about petty material comforts—like necessities of life. But after a while shortages can become irritating:

When a party functionary gave a speech about the principles of the planned economy, one of the assembled workers kept shouting, “What about toilet paper?”

The functionary ignored him as long as he could and then, losing his temper, shouted, “Lick my ass!”

“That's fine, Comrade,” replied the worker, “but that's only a temporary solution.”

Another functionary pledges: “Comrades, after this five-year plan every citizen will have a motorcycle, after the next one a car, and after the next one an airplane.”

Someone asks, “But why would we need airplanes?”

“Stupid question: Just think—you live in Rostock and you hear that toilet paper is available in Eisenach. You simply hop in your airplane, fly to Eisenach, and two hours later you're home again, without having to stand in line.”

The shortages can confuse sexual relations as well:

A woman goes to a garage and asks to have her car fixed.

“Of course,” says the mechanic—“but only if you give me a night in return.”

The woman reluctantly agrees.

“Fine, then get in line down at the

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Robert Chappell is a self-made success story. He has founded and served as president of two insurance companies and is a recognized expert in legal tax avoidance. Mr. Chappell has resided in many foreign tax haven jurisdictions, is well versed in tax law, and has been the successor in many battles with the I.R.S. He possesses an unusual knowledge of tax matters, from both practical experience and training.

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grocery store—they've got onions! I'll relieve you in the morning."

Housing is also in short supply:

A man tells his friend about a book he's been reading. "A man flirts with a woman."

"Is it a novel?"

"They fall in love."

"A romance?"

"They get married and move into an apartment."

"I see—a fairy tale."

Yet housing isn't all that's in short supply:

In Leipzig, a man goes into a shoe store to buy some socks, but the saleslady says, "I'm sorry, you've come to the wrong place. Here we have no shoes—it's next door that they have no socks."

The people of East Germany have the Soviet Union to thank for their standard of living so, as you can imagine, there is a soft spot in their hearts for their benefactors in Moscow:

What are the three perversions of love?

Love between men, love between women, and love for the Soviet Union.

A worker says: "For the Russians I would toil night and day."

"That's what I call real socialist spirit!

What is your job?"

"Gravedigger."

In a school in Gera the teacher asks, "What is our relationship with the Soviet Union?"

"The Soviet Union is our brother."

"Why do you say brother instead of friend?"

"You can choose your friends."

And, speaking of schools:

A woman who wanted to learn to make her family's clothes enrolled in sewing class. After two months her husband asked if she was ready to darn a few socks and sew on some buttons. "Are you kidding?" she said. "We're just getting around to the Glorious October Revolution."

But seriously, folks—is it killing you? Do your sides ache? Well, perhaps a little rueful laughter helps to make life less stark, if only just beyond the Wall. Many would like to cross the border, but since 1961 that has become a dangerous undertaking. The West German government has spent billions buying freedom for citizens of the "Democratic

Republic." The practice is a boon to the East German economy; indeed, it's the key to every five-year plan. Perhaps with detente, entente, Finlandization, and whatnot, conditions will improve—but don't hold your breath. Meanwhile, the jokes continue:

What is a quartet?

An East German symphony orchestra after a tour of West Germany.

There's no shortage of jokes about the Berlin Wall:

Why would the people of East Germany climb trees if the Wall were opened?

To avoid being trampled to death.

And don't forget this one:

A beautiful international film star visits East Germany and meets her biggest fan, Erich Honecker.

"I'd be willing to do anything for you," he says, "because I admire you so much. Is there a wish I can grant you?"

"Yes, you can open the Wall."

"Oh, you rascal! You just want to be alone with me!"

And would the last one out please switch off the lights?

Christopher McDaniel teaches German at St. Leo College in St. Leo, Florida.

Let's Hear It for the Fashion Police

By Stephen G. Barone

Government carefully controls so many other aspects of our lives that I find it hard to believe it still allows us to dress any old way we might fancy. This notion crossed my mind as I was walking down a city street recently. Many of the people I passed had little in the way of fashion sense, as it were. There were punkers who were much too old to be punky. There were rock 'n' rollers whose rocks had years ago rolled to places south. There were fat people with horizontal stripes. There were skinny people with vertical stripes. There were young women with shoes so sensible, haircuts so severe, and suits so plain, that they resembled the social workers who were forever trying to take Shirley Temple away from Mr. Bojangles.

Surely the same logic that engenders "social legislation" could be brought to bear against this national disgrace. Consider: Communities routinely pass zoning laws that are based solely on the aesthetic tastes and values of the powers-that-be within them. Hedges have to be this high and no taller. Houses have to be that big and no smaller. Frontage has to be so many feet. Only one or another style of architecture is permissible.

I ask you, what good are such ordinances and regulations if we allow the denizens of these communities or their guests to dress in discord with the understated tastefulness that select alderpersons have so wisely legislated into place? Of what use is a beautifully regulated house, with its beautifully regulated landscape nestled into a beautifully regulated hill, in a beautifully reg-

ulated community, if all that beautifully regulated eye appeal might be so easily and capriciously set awry by careless and unregulated pedestrians who have little if any sense of fashion?

All is not woe. Recently, I read about a progressive community in New Jersey, a

Of what use is a beautifully regulated house in a beautifully regulated community when all that beautifully regulated eye appeal might be so easily set awry by unregulated pedestrians who have little sense of fashion?

state that is more or less regarded as a national treasure when it comes to good taste and ecology. The city fathers passed a strict ordinance about what types of vehicles may and may not be left out on the streets and driveways of the neighborhoods.

It seems that a lot of the locals are working types who have their own service-oriented businesses. You know the type of uncultured scum of whom I

life & liberty

speak: These are plumbers and electricians, rug cleaners and furnace repairmen. Taxpayers all, but it seems a lot of them had the nasty habit of parking their pickup trucks and vans—often with unsightly lettering on their sides—overnight, right on the streets and driveways in front of their houses!

As you might guess, this did not sit well with the white wine, Gucci, and sushi set, and in the best traditions of their philosophical underpinnings they resorted to *force*. Now it's against the law to park one's pickup truck or van in one's driveway. And the local police are empowered to write tickets that carry fines for scofflaws who actually consider their driveways to be private property.

This, I think, is a step in the right direction. But this is an era of specialization. So I am not sure that such aesthetic codes ought to be left to local governments to legislate. Nor do I think that the enforcement of such codes ought to be the work of the local police.

Right here and now, I want to be the first to propose a new cabinet-level bureau, *The Department of National Fashion and Aesthetics*. Its mission would be the development and enforcement of the *Statement of National Taste*—a sane, egalitarian document that would define and direct the needs, goals, and desires of the entire nation in matters of decoration and ornamentation.

This would be a living document, one in constant evolutionary flux, as the officers of the department would continually solicit, evaluate, and then integrate the opinions of such national resources as Calvin Klein, Bill Blass, and whoever else might, from time to time, be appointed to *The National Council for Everything Beautiful*. But, best of all, this would be a cabinet-level department with teeth, as it would have its own enforcement arm, *The Fashion Police*, a highly trained group of dedicated professionals charged with enforcing *National Aesthetic Policy*.

The men and women of such a force

would not only be trained in conventional police work such as arrest and apprehension, martial arts, and weaponry. They would also be knowledgeable in such essential areas as mixing and matching, laundering, and dressing for success.

Then we wouldn't have people walking down the streets of our more chic neighborhoods wearing the bottoms of leisure suits rather than pants. We'd eliminate the risk of having our in-laws arrive at our hot tub parties in last week's blue-light special from K-Mart. Maybe some sanity would return to the whole issue of lapels. Our ties would not overnight become overwide. Hemlines would be relatively stable and then, who knows, maybe the stock market.

The potential benefits are endless. We need only abandon the hopeless illusion of aesthetic freedom and replace it with the logical certainty of styling by the state.

Stephen G. Barone is a children's psychologist and fashion plate.

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Getting Transit on the Right Track

By Peter Samuel

Urban Transit: The Private Challenge to Public Transportation, edited by Charles Lave, San Francisco: Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research, and Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 372 pages, \$12.95 paper

In late August the New York newspapers were full of news of the 63rd St. tunnel under the East River. After some 12 troubled years of construction and close to a billion dollars of expenditures on this new four-track subway link between midtown Manhattan and Queens, it was revealed that the never-used under-river tubes have leaky walls that have led to feet-deep water and rusting track and electrical gear. Moreover, the

contractor somehow left out yards of concrete that he was paid to pour. New York subway officials admitted to the tunnel being a major "debacle."



contractor somehow left out yards of concrete that he was paid to pour. New York subway officials admitted to the tunnel being a major "debacle."

In the private sector, such massive managerial negligence would knock many points off the stock price of the corporation concerned, making it more vulnerable to takeover and the removal of its senior officers. There would be some resignations or dismissals. The company might even go broke. And the knowledge of such consequences would serve to discourage such a fiasco in the first place. But at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York in August, it was all just noisy expressions of shock, a "thorough investiga-

tion" instituted, promises of prosecution if the villains can be found, and so on. No resignations or dismissals, no threat to the entrenched incompetents. In the taxpayer-underwritten government, it's usually just a public-relations show of concern to cover up the ongoing waste-as-usual.

You'd think there'd be some passionate indignation about such waste and the institutional arrangements that allow

it to go unpunished and uncorrected. It is extraordinary that such debacles should happen and keep on happening, literally right under the feet of tens of thousands of the world's most brilliant specialists in corporate finance and management, and that the city that is still unrivaled as the capital of world capitalism should just shrug its shoulders fatalistically and say there's nothing really to be done. The subways, they go on saying incorrectly, just have to be misrun by government.

Perhaps books such as *Urban Transit* are part of the reason. It is a major attempt to dissect our transit system and its institutionalization of urban waste, but there's not the tiniest spark of indignation, not the slightest flash of passion for

reform in one of the contributors. Most of the 14 chapters are ever-so-polite to everyone, ever-so-careful not to overstate the case for privatization and reform of transit. But they are so well mannered and inoffensive that there is a danger the volume will slip quite unnoticed into the ocean of public-policy reportage, even though there's some excellent stuff in there that deserves attention.

It has flaws. Kenneth Orski lists Washington, D.C., which I happen to know, as a place where local businesses are sharing the cost of running downtown trolleys. Let him be informed that the only trolleys in downtown D.C. are the ones you push yourself in the supermarket. When I see a howler like that, I start to worry a little about the care with which the great processions of examples in this book have been compiled, but I think I cite an exceptional error. The book has a careful tone about it and is generally well served by displays of data.

Overall, it is a very professional and important handbook presenting the powerful case for a reversal of the tide of bureaucracy and politics that has swamped urban transit as it has been taken over by government in the past three decades or so. The general case is made for policies that move transit back under the influence of market forces through deregulation, to allow more competition and a new choice of services; through privatization; and where this isn't politically possible, through government contracting out of transit operations to businesses.

John Meyer's foreword to the book is a masterful summary of the fundamental economic forces creating trouble for transit managers. The scarcity and high cost of central city land has spawned a decentralization of jobs toward the outskirts of our rapidly expanding metropolitan areas, so the trips people want to make no longer fit the old hub-and-spoke radial pattern that bus and especially rail transit are suited to handling. Moreover, the continuing rise in labor costs and the resulting substitution of capital for labor that we see all around us, in offices and factories and homes, takes the form of the automobile when it comes to transportation. But