

Marxism's Secret Appeal

Marxism is back with a vengeance, just quarter of a century after scholars and pundits proclaimed it dead and buried. The new form this resurrected Marxism takes is democratic socialism. Yet democratic socialism is merely Marxism with a qualifying adjective—Marxism that seeks popular or democratic approval. Yet Marx himself expected his ideology to win popular support.

He recognized that in certain countries Marxism might have to come to power through violent insurrection. He also recognized that it might be necessary, in the short term, to rule by force. Yet Marxists termed this force “dictatorship of the proletariat,” i.e. dictatorship through the rule of the masses.

The issue with democratic socialism—today's form of Marxism in America—is not whether it is a new form of Marxism; it is not. Rather, it is how democratic socialism might come to power in a country that Marx himself considered the capitalist society par excellence. What, in other words, is the secret appeal of Marxism in the twenty-first century?

Democratic socialists are, all around us, running for election and winning elections. We know about stalwarts like Elizabeth Warren, Senator from Massachusetts, and Bernie Sanders, Senator from Vermont. We also know about AOC in New York and Rashida Tlaib in Michigan. This was the first wave of twenty-first century socialism, building on Obama who was himself a socialist in his formative years.

But now there is also Zohran Mamdani, mayor of New York. Also in New York, Claire Valdez and Darializa Avila Chevalier are running as democratic socialists. Janice Lewis George, the likely new mayor of Washington DC is a socialist. In Los Angeles, the Marxist Nithya Raman is challenging another

quasi-Marxist, the incumbent mayor Karen Bass. The socialist Melat Kiros won the Democratic nomination in a Colorado congressional district. The list goes on. Historically, the socialist and Marxist program has never found a strong footing in America. Even in the Great Depression, when Marxism and socialism had their best chance at popular success, the American people said no. Most people recognize the truth of Milton Friedman's slogan, "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

So what has changed in our time? Why is Marxism appealing now while it was unappealing—it was in fact a dirty word, a frightening prospect—in the past? Marxism is indeed un-American, but how did this un-American ideology gain so many followers in America? And how do we, as patriotic and conservative Americans, fight it? A few years ago, when I was researching my book *The Big Lie*—one of my favorite books, by the way; check it out if you haven't read it—I was somewhat astonished to discover the idealistic appeal of early fascism. Did I say idealistic? Yes, I did. Fascism was an ideal, and that's why it won support not only in Italy and Germany but also in England, in France, in Belgium.

What attracted people to fascism in its formative stage? The first source of fascism's appeal is that it built on patriotism or nationalism. England and France were very old nations, and had traditional sources and symbols of patriotism. But new nations also came into existence in the nineteenth century, notably Italy and Germany. Both Italy and Germany were previously broken up into independent kingdoms or independent city-states. In the late nineteenth century, they became unified nations formed through a great sweep of nationalistic feeling. So the first ingredient of modern fascism was nationalism.

It's not hard to understand the appeal of that. Think about the recent World Cup. People from many countries, some of them middle class and working class people, came here at great

expense to watch their countries play. They became elated if their countries won, and downright dejected if they lost.

In the early twentieth century, nationalistic affiliation was obvious in that Frenchmen fought for France, Italians for Italy, and Germans for Germany. This same patriotic sentiment is the root of the attraction we feel now for America, and for "America First."



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There was also a second ingredient. Think about the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, which produced huge gains but also created horrific working conditions in which men worked 10-12 hours a day, children labored in factories, there was pollution, virtually no safety standards, a chasm between the bosses and the workers. Socialism arose out of these conditions, and promised a solution to the problem of the Industrial Revolution. Leave aside the merits of the solution; let's just focus on the fact that socialism was able to tap into the collective feeling of workers that they were being exploited—their lives were being sucked out, not just individually, one by one, but as a group.

Socialism tapped into this "class consciousness," as Marx called it, and it sought to build on a shared sense of frustration and bitterness directed not only at the bosses but also at the system that brought about this hardship and suffering. Socialism, it should be noted, preceded Marx. He didn't invent it. But he gave it a new articulation and a powerful expression.

How did we get fascism? Well, fascism is nationalism plus socialism. National Socialism. The word Nazi, as you know, is a compression of this term. The official name of the Nazi Party was the National Socialist German Workers Party. So fascism drew both on the appeal of nationalism or patriotism,

and also on the appeal of worker consciousness or socialism.

Fascism and Nazism represented one type of socialism—socialism integrated with national feeling or patriotic sentiment. But there was another type of socialism, international socialism. Marx preferred international socialism to national socialism. Yet the two types of socialism often came together. Lenin was an international socialist yet his main concern was with his own country, Russia. Stalin originally spoke in the language of international socialism, but once World War 2 broke out, he couldn't stop talking about "Mother Russia." We think of Marxism mainly in economic terms: the proletariat versus the bourgeoisie, the workers versus the bosses, the poor versus the rich. But there is another element to socialism that is often overlooked. Marx stressed it, especially in his early writings, and I believe it is a key to understanding the appeal of Marxism, not only in Marx's day but also in our own.

The Industrial Revolution wasn't merely an economic revolution; it was also a cultural revolution. It destroyed the old way of life in which work and family life were both oriented around a homestead. Men worked in workshops attached to their homes, instead of leaving the home for most of the day. The family as a tight-knit unit, a unit of production and reproduction, was split up and broken up, bringing all kinds of new divisions and tensions that weren't there before. Marx invented a classic term for this rupture. He called it "alienation." Men become alienated from women, fathers become alienated from their children, the home becomes alienated from the workplace. We also become alienated from ourselves. Life itself is now broken up into "roles," which we now play. Previously we were whole persons; now we must separately play the role of husband, father, worker and citizen.

Marx said, we need to do better. In fact, we need an entirely new system that will restore the harmony of the old homestead. This is Communism. Once Communism arrives, work becomes optional. It's not that we don't work; rather, we work at

stuff we like, stuff we want to do. Moreover, everything is accessible to us; we can tap into the results of our work, but also other people's work. Prosperity, in other words, is shared. Finally, we get our lives back; in a memorable image from Marx, we can finally have a life where we work in the morning, nap in the afternoon, and write poetry in the evening.

Here, I think, we have the key to understanding the appeal of the socialism that is gaining converts, especially among young people, in America today. Who wouldn't want this, especially in a tough economy where success is hard, where outsourcing has taken away many good jobs, where AI threatens to take away more, and where everything costs so much, from new homes to basics like groceries and gas? Today's democratic socialists are, without being too specific about it, taking up Marx's slogan, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Their preferred way of putting it is in the language of rights, entitlements and reparations. Everyone has a "right" to this or is "entitled" to that, either because they exist or because they are somehow victims of society or of history.

Here's a partial socialist wish-list for the Marxists in office, or seeking office. Free health care for everyone, usually packaged as "Medicare for all." Rent control in cities like New York. Housing and health subsidies for illegals. Loan forgiveness or "amnesty" for students. Free or nearly-free groceries provided through government-run stores. Free housing for the homeless.

Now it should not be too difficult to see that this is an appealing platform to run on. Basically, you're promising voters a whole bunch of free stuff. Here's how you can get by without working. Here's how you can take loans and not pay them back. Here's how you can get others to bankroll your lifestyle. Here's how you can avoid supporting yourself or your family. Here's how you can live an irresponsible life.

What's not to like? Now the traditional conservative response—the traditional rational response—is that Marxism doesn't work. It has never worked before, and it's not going to work now. It goes against human nature. It gets human motivation wrong. It promises happiness but produces misery. I want to suggest that the democratic socialists—not the voters but the elected officials, the leading candidates, the people at the top—know this. They know, but they don't care. Why not? Because they are up to something quite different. Their project is not only different from ours—they don't care about building a prosperous society—but (and this is a key point) it is also different from that of the people they are appealing to.

The clash between capitalism and Marxism in our society is a class of elites. The capitalists are inventors, innovators, builders. These are the people who built New York, Denver and Minneapolis, and they got the biggest rewards in society for doing so. Economically, culturally, socially, they went to the top of the heap. But beneath these people is a large class of writers, lawyers, activists, and professors. These people do well under capitalism, but not as well as the entrepreneurs. A typical professor makes \$150,000 a year, not bad, but far less than a guy who never went to college, became a plumber, and then started a plumbing business, now employing 20 other plumbers. That guy makes \$1.8 million a year. And nothing angers the professor more than the realization that this uneducated guy, this unsophisticated goon, this cultural Yahoo, has a better home, a nicer car and lives at a level that the professor can only envy, knowing there is no way for him to get there.

The leading Marxists in our country today—the Bernie's and Elizabeth Warrens and Mamdanis—are waging a ruthless struggle to capture the commanding heights of our economy from the entrepreneurs. This is their mission. It's a struggle over money, and most of all it's a struggle over power.

The Marxists at the top don't care if their project fails. So what if New York deteriorates? It's still New York. It will take a long time to go down. And even when it goes down, it will still be very juicy carcass. There is a lot that can be extracted from a carcass—just ask any termite. And so the Marxists expect to thrive, and quite honestly, they have thrived, even in failing Marxist societies like the Soviet Union in the past and Venezuela now. Look at Cuba—it's a rotted carcass right now, and still the leadership won't let go.

But of course the Marxist leadership knows it cannot win support by articulating its grievances against rival elites. It cannot say, "We professors, lawyers and activists want to have more than the entrepreneurs." So they frame their pitch in entirely different terms. They say, we are doing this for the working families of this country. We are champions of social justice. We want everyone to have their "fair share." Today's Marxist project is a collaboration between people at the top who are waging an elite struggle for power against the entrepreneurial class, and ordinary people who are struggling and are tempted by the illusion of free stuff and an easier life. The leaders don't care about the people, but they tap into the frustration and resentment of the people to win power. Consider Obama or Mamdani. Do they have the slightest interest in returning to the old homestead? Do they want to restore the agrarian society that existed before the Industrial Revolution? Do they want to solve the crisis of the family, and restore its integrity?

Not at all. Their goal is to capture the cities, to seize the great resources of the cities, and then to use the cities as command centers for political control over the states. In this way, they expect at some point to capture the entire country. So the Marxist project is not about social rehabilitation; it's a power grab. So how do we fight this? It's not enough to show that Marxist schemes don't work. The Marxist leadership

is indifferent to that, and struggling people don't worry about what happens in the long run if you offer them short-term relief from the problems they endure now.

Besides, people cannot help but dream of a life that is not a struggle and a roll of the dice—they want assured prosperity and a harmonious life, and it is not hard to convince them that they are entitled to this; indeed, it is the very expression of social justice. So we must expose the Marxist scheme as a program not of human flourishing but rather of human degradation. It is not merely inefficient or unworkable, but also spirit crushing, servile, humiliating, emasculating. In other words, we must stress the cultural and spiritual cost of the idle, entitled, irresponsible life.

We must also unmask the Pied Pipers of Marxism and expose their agenda. If the Marxists have their way, they will get the power and the easy life, and the ability to get around the rules. And what will the people get? The right to sit, obese and idle and miserable, unable to rise up, yet unable to get out of a system to which they are now captive.

So we must show this to the people, so they cut themselves off from the Marxists who are selling them false promises. Again, these leaders are not fools. The problem is not that they misunderstand what they are doing. They understand it all too well. Theirs is a project of destruction and theft, of exploiting people's frustrations and tapping their wishful thinking to produce a result that is good only for them.

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