Once More (and Patience Please), Why No American Socialism?

by Samuel Hux (November 2015)

Irving Kristol wrote in his *Reflections of a Neoconservative* the most elegant tribute a conservative ever paid socialism, even as he announced its demise, "Socialism: An Obituary for an Idea." "The most important political event of the twentieth century is not the crisis of capitalism but the death of socialism. . . . It is nothing short of a tragedy that anticapitalist dissent should now be liberated from a socialist tradition which—one sees it clearly in perspective—had the function of civilizing dissent, a function it was able to perform because it implicitly shared so many crucial values with the liberal capitalism it opposed." It should be clear immediately that Kristol was not referring to intellectual and moral savageries like Stalinism, but to what we might call respectable socialisms. While one might argue that reports of the *idea*'s death are vastly exaggerated, I would like to wonder out loud why there has not been much of a socialist *movement* in the United States "alive enough," as Thomas Hardy said of a lady's smile, "to have strength to die."

I am fully aware that as I write a self-proclaimed "socialist" is running a serious campaign to be the Democratic Party's 2016 candidate for president. I am also aware that Bernie Sanders' relative success, at this point, has nothing to do with a socialist movement, and does not even mean a serious hunger in the electorate for a socialist polity. He may draw fantastic crowds on college campuses, turning on both students and faculty "Marxists" who couldn't to save their lives define *surplus value*, having forgotten their Cliff Notes *Das Kapital*—but try to imagine him exciting a group of Teamsters. I can't imagine it either. Sanders—or "Bernie!"—endears himself to Democrats because there is nothing endearing or even respect-worthy about the ethically debased Hilary Clinton whose possible success is probably depressing even to her supporters.

I am also aware that the twice-elected Barack Obama is thought by conservatives to be a socialist (and we are right), but his kind treatment by the American

electorate has to do principally with his being “historic” (I refer of course to his race, not to his being the first anti-Israeli in the White House), and further has to do with the fact that few people really believed that he wanted to change the fundamental nature of the United States, most assuming that was mere campaign sloganizing as meaningful as “Change you can believe in.” In any case Obama ran, as Sanders runs, on the Democratic Party line. If one wishes to argue that the Democratic Party’s loyalty to Obama’s agenda proves it is a socialist party, I would counsel one to consider the following.

Democratic Party loyalists are not motivated by a socialist vision; that is, they are not ideologues. They are motivated by a desire for elections and re-elections of Democrats because they think the Democratic Party has a right to govern: after all, it is the party of light and justice and all good things. Their puzzled ill will and compulsive Bush-bashing (ignoring the fact that Bush never thought that Austrians spoke a language called “Austrian,” nor that there were 57 states, nor that military medics were called “corpesmen”) revealed a petulant and childish disbelief that anyone could deserve to govern who was not one of the liberal elect: “How *could* this have happened?!?” It is not some European social democratic idea that compels the Democratic establishment. It is the certainty that if you create dependency upon government-supplied goodies you will be rewarded by your dependents, be they the chronically unemployed, illegal immigrants, affirmative action beneficiaries, or what-have-you. When conservatives say that the Democratic Party—as opposed to some members—is a socialist organization they are unintentionally complimenting it by ascribing to it an idealistic motive foreign to its nature. So, let us be real.

Of course it’s an old question, as the German sociologist Werner Sombart put it about a century ago in his *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* It’s significant that we’re not compelled to ask “why is there no (or has been no) broad and popular fascist party in the U.S.?” (A description that does not fit the native Nazis.) The absence of a socialist party of consequence in the States was noted, after all, only in contrast to the presence of such parties in Europe. Well, there have been fascist parties of consequence in Europe, from the obvious German, Italian, and Spanish ones, to the lesser Hungarian Arrow Cross, Romanian Iron Guard, Belgian Rexists, and the French Faisceau, Action Française, Parti Populaire Français, and Rassemblement National Populaire. There has been

no American fascist movement even of the limited consequentiality of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, and it doesn't seem to strike us as at all odd. Of course it could be that one doesn't question the absence of a monstrosity (why look history's gift-horse in the mouth?); but that implies that our awareness of the absent socialism is a kind of apology: something is not quite right, not quite as it should be, so must be explained. That's not the attitude of the broad public, but something like it prevails among the lesser public that considers historical questions.

Quick and easy dismissals of the question—"American common sense, stupid!"—avoid an interesting historical anomaly, and fail to achieve the intellectual depth and grace of Kristol's essay, and ought themselves to be avoided. Why? Because they are forms of easy self-congratulation, and I suspect that one gets closer to the truth by giving oneself as little credit as possible; I think my own answer to the question has the virtue of avoiding pats to the back. Before turning to it, however, we need to examine three traditional answers.

There is the notion (1) that socialism was made anathema to the vast majority of the population by the excesses of the Bolshevik revolution which tarred the name *socialist* just when American socialism was on the rise. But, in fact, the Socialist Party of America was already on the decline by that time, Eugene Victor Debs's near 900,000 votes in 1912 having fallen to less than 600,000 for Allen Benson in 1916 out of a larger total vote than cast in '12.

There is the notion (2) that the particular hopefulness of a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to justice rendered a socialist movement superfluous. You find it, for instance, in Seymour Martin Lipset's sociological classic *The First Nation.* But I have never found this theme convincing, too many questions begged. I certainly do not think that "Americanism is a political ideology with much the same value content as socialism" nor that it "endorses the progress toward more equal distribution of privileges that socialism demands." We have wage and income differentials larger than any other in the West, outstripping by far those in capitalist rivals, Japan for instance. We seem to prefer things this way. I find this thesis bizarre.

There is the notion (3) that since the historical base for a socialist party, the labor union movement, chose the practical strategy of rewarding friends (Democratic or Republican) and punishing enemies (Republican or Democratic) then

big labor must have recognized that a socialist party was not needed. But one could counter-argue that labor recognized early on and adjusted to a structural obstacle in the American political system which the history of third parties reveals with signal clarity:

Populist Party, Socialist Labor Party, Socialist Party, Progressive Party I (Theodore Roosevelt), Communist Party, Progressive Party II (Robert LaFollette), Socialist Workers Party, Progressive Party III (Henry Wallace), etc. Only the first achieved any real (but passing) electoral success at all before the principle of two parties was carved in stone. Third parties (I focus only on those of the Left appropriate for this context) like New York's Liberal Party (a break-away in the 1940s of anti-communists within the American Labor Party), the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, and the Wisconsin Progressives were responses to the particularities of state politics, and only the first two survived: as sometime pressure group, sometime collation partner (Liberal Party), or as formal union (Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party).

In a presidential-congressional system the third party will be at best an electoral spoiler, with precious little hope of gaining enough representatives to be even a swing vote. Who doesn't know that? Should we assume labor didn't know it even in the hopeful days of Debs? When it is *theoretically* possible for Party A to gain 51 percent and Party B 49 percent of the vote and, because of regional or state voting patterns, Party B gain zero percent of representation in the legislature; and when it is theoretically possible for Party A to gain 35 percent, Party B 33 percent, and Party C 32 percent, and, because of regional or state voting patterns, Parties B and C gain zero percent of representation; then what practical encouragement is there for Party C, which couldn't realistically predict 32 percent in the first place? The extreme numerical values are only to dramatize the point. Fact: only in a party-slate electoral system has a third party any chance of affecting national policy in a ministerial-parliamentary politics (as the British Labour Party bypassed the Liberals almost a hundred years ago); in a presidential-congressional politics it has no chance at all.

My unequal distribution of commentary suggests, rightly, that I take the intractability of two-party politics the most seriously—which is not to say I think it the exclusive explanation. I can hardly take the first and second notions seriously at all. I suspect that Americans did not dismiss socialism because it was tarred by association with Bolshevism; rather, they excoriated

Bolshevism because they thought it socialism. And if I'm right about that there is something ironically disoriented about notion *two.* For to argue that "Americanism" rendered socialism superfluous by providing the essentials of what socialism demanded is to argue, albeit unintentionally, that socialism, with some other name, was the *real* name of American desire. For if that had been the case—it wasn't—then the two-party system would not have been a hindrance to socialism: one of the two parties would have been, under some other name perhaps, a socialist party; and the Democratic Party, some of my ideological friends to the contrary, has never been that. (Even Obama thugs have not been able to capture the party entire.) It is ironic that so many celebrants of American exceptionalism pay socialism such an unintended compliment. It is a compelling intellectual habit to locate the truth in paradox; but in this case, in service of truth, it is best to resist the temptation.

For rather than "superfluous," socialism (in substance, not just in name) was *unthinkable*. By which I don't mean that no American could think it, for clearly many have. *Unthinkable* carries the tone of *impossible.* So a distinction is needed. We can approximate swimming (make the athletic motions) on concrete, but it's impossible to swim *in* concrete. That's a very uninteresting kind of impossibility. A people doesn't seem able to do or think certain things; they're impossible for them. That's a more interesting sort of "impossibility"—not least because we immediately wonder if it's true, judge it isn't *necessarily* so, weigh the force of cultural conditioning that makes it more than merely *probably* so. We thereby preserve respect for both human freedom and the burden of history, and know that in human affairs when we say *impossible* we mean something more than *unlikely* if less than *certainly not.* It would have been "impossible" for the Russians, for instance, to have achieved laissez-faire capitalism near a century ago even had they not achieved communism: czarism was not merely a governing happenstance, it was an answer to a national mental disposition for which some things were unthinkable.

I cannot document what follows. Thoughts, and unarticulated assumptions, are notoriously difficult to footnote. But *I take the liberty of the essayist not to close an argument (There! That's that! Who could not agree?), but to invite a distant conversation*. I hope the reader remembers this even when I come off cock-sure.

We Americans are used to thinking of ourselves as a young nation, or younger

than young, two hundred years and change being practically nothing. Or add a century and a half or so of colonial experience: still young. But more important than the years are the extraordinary conditions under which the extreme youth has been spent.

Most national cultures have institutions, political or social, whose origins seem lost to view somewhere in the misty past, and seem to carry all the more authority for that. Not authority as in "So I must obey," but that authority which authenticates some experiences and provides a sort of resistance to others. And not simply or merely institutions—suggesting something you might touch, at least metaphorically—but ideas that seem all the stronger for not appearing very original, collective memories of a time and order of life quite different from what the culture now lives, traditions which are more than the fabricated rationale for whatever at present obtains. These phenomena do not provide a culture with utopian bliss, but rather with a kind of alternate and complicating vision of things, so that "progress"—however defined, and whether one likes it or not—must confront these phenomena. Again, a sort of resistance.

Let's imagine a nation, *not the U.S.*, whose present economic policy (its "whatever at present obtains") is capitalist, whether laissez-faire or planned in largest degree. No way around it, the psychological character of capitalism is *individualistic*, its motive power (as Adam Smith could have put it) "What can I do for me?" People might write essays or blurbs on the social consciousness of the capitalist, insisting on what's not at all obvious, the unexpected and exceptional occasional altruism; but they would never bother to point out with urgency the individualistic drive any more than one would explain with passion that one plus zero is one. And capitalism is also essentially *optimistic*. Adam Smith may have been proven wrong by now in some minor particulars, but one reason *Wealth of Nations* justly remains a classic is that the tone of it is so exactly right. Capitalism is optimistic in its expressed faith that trust not to interfere overly much and things will work out on their own—the reassuring faith in the market.

But imagine that that national culture, *not American*, knew prior to the triumph of capitalism a long history of petty entrepreneurialism, mercantilism, cottage industry, and a basically agricultural economy—all of which were much more directly subject to the fortunes of nature then and there than capitalism would ever be with its technology and rationalism and consequent capacity to ride out

a storm, even a protracted one. The petty entrepreneurialism was a totally risky venture, to which guilds were one protective answer. Mercantilism—the theory that a nation's economic health depended upon the possessive accumulation of bullion and materials within its borders—is a kind of collective image of an individual soul stuffing the mattress with what won't fit under the floorboards in anticipation of catastrophe. The cottage industrialist and the agriculturist knew that there were bigger cottages and that surely there will be a drought.

And imagine that that national culture, *not American*, had known, before that history suggested above and overlapping with it, a history and structure of feudalism, which for all its vices and injustices was a manifest image of human beings huddling and clutching in confined space over a long and slow-moving period of time and knowing that there was something treacherous about this life. "Men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss," wrote Kenneth Burke in *Permanence and Change.* If we can assume that the past we have never directly experienced never quite dies, lives on attached to certain institutions, ideas, collective memories (and if we can't, the discipline of history is pointless, and the social philosophy of conservatism an absurdity), then the individualistic drive and the optimism native to capitalism, a somewhat arrogant mix, encounter something like their opposite: a suspicion that human beings seriously need one another quite simply because life is a risky, often brutal, and sometimes tragic matter. There's no bliss here, as I've said, but a kind of depth and resonance.

But. . . little of this is descriptive of *American* national culture. By the last half of the nineteenth century at the latest the capitalist ethos was triumphant among us. And before that there was no long and deeply embedded experience of an alternate and complicating ethos to offer resistance—save an artificial, ramshackle feudalism of sorts in one region, which was clearly too compromised a heritage to be honored by a nation "conceived in liberty" and was in fact a source of shame. That ramshackle feudalism had no anti-individualist correctives to offer in moderation of the reigning ethos of incipient capitalism, no debased even quasi-communalism of sorts, in spite of claims to that effect by George Fitzhugh in *Sociology for the South* (1854) and *Cannibals All!* (1857), and by the charming southern enthusiast Colonel Woodburn in William Dean Howells' too-neglected novel-of-ideas *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890). And the naïve precursors of capitalism—petty entrepreneurialism, etc.—which were a

brake on that imagined national culture *not American*, had a brief time here as history goes, so that in retrospect they appear correctly as short-lived *transitions* and little more.

Of course we were a European nation when we first began to colonize and for decades after—much more so than when we "rediscovered" Europe along with Henry Adams and Henry James and Woodrow Wilson, by which time we were not—but we lost the European quickly enough. "The Atlantic is a Lethean stream," said Henry David Thoreau, although admittedly it took a while for memory to die of the wound of passage. And—a signal fact!—the Europe we left for the colonies was then in *its* transitional stage to the capitalist ethos, so that the foundations of economic perspective we brought with us in those naïve precursors were really transitional, nothing very sturdy to be implanted and grow. We had the mentality for the achieved capitalist fact, the requisite sort of individualistic drive and optimism, before we had the fact.

My point is that as a national culture we grew up with what we have. We have never really known anything else, although we have read occasionally of something else. We got what we have *with no complicating resistances against it.* That's the real nature of "American exceptionalism." And when any resistance cautiously advanced our way by way of Ellis Island, they were not widely welcome. Or perhaps I should say they were "unthinkable."

But. . . were there no complicating resistances, sufficiently powerful ones, that is? After all, it is simplistic to think there is nothing between the individualistic ethos of capitalism carrying the danger of social atomization, and the solidaristic ethos of socialism carrying the danger of social homogenization. Conservatives have made much in recent decades of Edmund Burke's "little platoons." Peter Berger and my old friend Father Richard John Neuhaus (*To Empower People*) argued for a public policy which would "protect and foster mediating structures"—neighborhood, family, church, voluntary association—to stand against the "megastructures" of a modernizing society. But this is a far cry from saying that the mediating structures, the "little aggregations," *have served* (as opposed to *should serve*) as the complicating resistances I've been talking about. Robert Nisbet (*The Quest for Community*) called for a "new *laissez-faire*. . . in which the basic unit will be the social group" precisely because the "*old laissez-faire*" of individuals, which "was brought into existence by the planned destruction of old customs, associations, villages, and

other securities," has failed—and failed "because its atomistic propositions were inevitably unavailing against the reality of enlarging masses of insecure individuals."

The larger of the platoons (should we call them regiments?), church and voluntary association, might have offered some resistance to the individualistic ethos, but in America would have offered little resistance to the overwhelming sense of optimism that was almost a patriotic responsibility. The smaller of the platoons—neighborhood, and especially family—are little more than manifest images of individualism expanded slightly to embrace those who are closest to one. Family solidarity is about as meaningful as a resistance to the dangers of social atomization as the individual feeling solidarity with himself. Furthermore, in so far as they offered any resistance to the individualistic ethos, such small resistance could nonetheless be large enough to dilute any felt necessity for broader communal solidarity and, therefore, could co-operate with the individualism against any potential urge toward socialism. And finally, people who like to speculate fondly about the little platoons (I'm one of them) should consider the fact that they are sometimes disruptive and factionalist: as churches are and have been in some cultures, as neighborhoods often mean racial or ethnic divisiveness, as voluntary associations often mean muted class conflict. Nisbet's new laissez-faire of groups is a more attractive vision that the old laissez-faire, but historical experience does not allow one to dismiss out of hand the opinion of the cranky British military historian and social thinker J.F.C. Fuller that "the motive force of democracy is not love of others, it is the hate of all outside the tribe, faction, party."

All in all, no, there were no sufficiently potent complicating resistances.

The "exceptionalist" argument that socialism was rendered superfluous, unneeded, by the facts of American development is wrong on two counts, the first (which I have been talking about for some pages now) a fundamental misreading of the American ethos, the second (*which I will sketch only briefly in this essay*) a fundamental misunderstanding of the essential character, not the utopian claim, of socialism.

On the first count, the notion that "Americanism. . . endorses the progress toward the more equal distribution of privileges that socialism demands" is

false, as I have argued: such an endorsement would have been contradictory to that individualistic ethos that helped make socialism unthinkable. And on the second count:

While the American ethos is clearly a heady optimism, socialism is hardly an optimism at all. . . in spite of the hair-brained rhetoric socialists have often indulged in. While the socialist does (did?) yearn for a future of egalitarian distributions, the true roots of socialism are in those resistances that grow from the recognition that "human beings seriously need one another because life is a risky, often brutal, and sometimes tragic matter," as I put it earlier. There is a gloominess, if you will, in the soul of socialism that ill comports with the optimistic songs the Left idiotically likes to sing. (I suppose I should make clear that to the degree that my remarks about socialism have any positive tinge I have in mind the "Old Left," which had some depth to it, not the unearned pride and childish vindictiveness of the intellectually superficial "New Left.") I think it no accident that socialist movements and parties have thrived in those national cultures where historical memory is longer because the culture has more to remember, where, again, the "individualistic drive and the optimism native to capitalism, a somewhat arrogant mix, encounter something like their opposite." It's that long memory nurturing complicating resistances that has made socialism in parts of the world thinkable. Are my remarks tantamount to saying that socialism is thinkable only for a people who have a developed sense of the tragic? Yes. Am I saying that a sense of the tragic has hardly been a notable characteristic of Americans? Yes.

An exception could be made of the American South, as C. Vann Woodward eloquently argued (*The Burden of Southern History*), and as the fact of writers like William Faulkner and Allen Tate testifies. And the three greatest American artists of the nineteenth century, in my hardly radical estimation, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson, were all essentially tragedians. But the trio were "isolatoes" (Melville's favored word) in a world more congenial to Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and, especially, Ralph Waldo Emerson. And while American colonial and early republican intellectual life outside the South (which meant, truth be told, New England) was dominated by a gloomy Calvinist mentality, which gave birth to America's greatest philosopher before William James, Jonathan Edwards, American Puritanism slowly and ironically evolved—as the great intellectual historian Perry Miller traced—into Emerson's (and

others') smiling Transcendentalism.

And that leaves us with perhaps the greatest irony of modern political thought and reality. Conservatives are supposed, unlike liberals, characteristically to have the capacity to face up to life in all its uncomfortable lumpiness. . . and there is nothing lumpier than irony. I agree with Kristol that socialism "had the function of civilizing dissent," but I am not at all sure that such was "a function it was able to perform because it implicitly shared so many crucial values with the liberal capitalism it opposed." On the other hand, and here the ironies should give one a headache, socialism did implicitly share a value with conservatism. Not an ideological value. But a kind of pre-ideological sentiment and disposition. "It is not usually our ideas that make us optimists or pessimists, but our optimism or pessimism. . . that make our ideas," wrote Miguel de Unamuno in *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, a book I quote because that's the crucial value socialism and conservatism have shared: the tragic sense of life. It means something that Marx read and reread Aeschylus all his adult life; Greek tragedy is not a light read, nothing to relax with after a tiring day at work. Then what does it mean? Aeschylus beat Descartes to the gun: he might have said "We suffer; therefore we are." His great trilogy *The Oresteia* begins in the chaos of generational violence that seems to signify the human condition in a state of nature, and concludes in lawful civilization, the imposition of justice. And conservatives should be big enough to admit that although what we call capitalism is *now* the best thing that ever happened to the poor, what Marx and Engels observed in Britain were indeed "Satanic mills." Whatever socialism became—and it's a sad story—in its origins it was Aeschylean, so to speak.

Perhaps I am just disposed to this way of thinking, having contributed back in October 1987 to the symposium "Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism" in *The New Oxford Review,* in which another contributor, the historian-philosopher John Lukacs, argued that no true conservative could be a capitalist apologist, and to which another contributor was the "Bohemian Tory" Russell Kirk, who always dismissed the notion that conservatism was essentially an economic philosophy. Both knew there was little that's conservative about capitalism, and would have agreed with Michael Novak, the neo-conservative author of *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, that "no system is in fact more radical. Pell-mell it overturns the habits, traditions, and cultures of the past. . . .

Conservative? Inertial? Which capitalist of your acquaintance lives in a world like that of a generation ago? Democratic capitalism undermines all traditions and institutions (even itself).” But let me make it clearer than clear that apologetics is one thing and living another; I no more wish to live under a socialist regime than Lukacs, and if I don’t wish to write hosannas for capitalism, I still want to be its beneficiary. But I am by profession an intellectual historian and by disposition a traditionalist conservative, so I have admit some anomalies, such as:

It is an historical oddity that it has become conservatism’s task to defend and recommend the most “revolutionary” of economic faiths, capitalism. History is the most ironic of disciplines. Of course the conservative has little choice, given the alternatives; and given the fact that capitalism does after all deliver the economic goods, as a fully socialized economy never has. But to the degree that he or she is comfortable with the job, the conservative is intellectually compromised—not least by association with some allies. With Libertarians, I mean, the no-holds-barred enthusiasts who love the job. Traditionalists and Libertarians (right-wing anarchists?) have come to some strained accommodation before, as Kirk and Frank Meyer both sailed as crew on the good ship *National Review,* but Captain William Buckley must have had his hands full. To think there is no necessary tension here is rather like imagining Friedrich von Hayek and Michael Oakeshott as best buddies.

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