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Why Socialism Doesn't "Suck"

By JOHN MADIGAN
STAFF WRITER

Campus conservatives often spout the phrase "socialism sucks." But it's almost never explained. If you are lucky, you will hear these pundits mention economic efficiency or freedom, but they hardly examine the root causes of why younger people increasingly support socialism. Organizations that peddle such trite slogans as "socialism sucks" usually slap those words on a t-shirt and sell it for \$30 to bright-eyed conservatives looking to challenge the predominantly liberal discourse on their college campuses. It's not much better outside of the campus bubble. While those on the religious right point to a God-shaped hole in the hearts of younger generations, mainstream Republicans obsess over Cuba and Venezuela rather than look

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at the countries actually idealized by American socialists (such as Norway and France) or analyze why the young are enamored with socialism.

Simply put, younger people are trending socialist because America is and likely will be worse for them than it has been for their parents. Suicide, drug overdoses, and housing prices are all rising while life expectancy, mental health, and real wages are declining. These issues disproportionately affect the generations that must over-leverage themselves in order to have the same material quality of life as the previous generation. Never mind that people in this new generation will have fewer friends, suffer heightened racial tensions, and feel the looming threat of climate change hovering over them. Frankly, socialism may provide a better solution than the nebulous, often unrewarding principles of market equilibrium and classical growth that the free-market conservatives espouse. Instead of merely hoping that housing prices will

return to equilibrium without zoning laws, the socialist wants to create green, mixed-use neighborhoods with ample public transportation.

If you saw someone overdosed, homeless, and alone beside a perfectly clean corporate office, who would you empathize with? It is impossible to walk around a modern city without witnessing obscene human degradation. As the socialist sees it, this scene is an implicit threat to the working class: if you do not have your entry-level job that requires three years of experience manipulating pointless spreadsheets and meticulously constructing PowerPoints, that could be you. The socialists reject economic efficiency in their pursuit of equality. They do not care that their envisioned system doesn't reach market equilibrium, because they see the market equilibrium as unequal and therefore unjust. The younger generations strive to enact the economic policies that they see in almost every European country, and why should they not? With innovation on the decline and social strife rising, our political system must adapt to an economic paradigm of low growth. We can either attempt to reboot our economy or accept our stagnant future and support those who are left behind.

After acknowledging that the youth are indeed likely to be worse

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off than their parents, we can see why they may be drawn to socialism rather than capitalism. They also harbor substantial resentment toward the older generations that valued short-term growth and enjoyment, leaving us with an untenable economic ponzi scheme and an environment on the brink of collapse.

These emotions are channeled into ideas like heavily taxing the rich

Recommended Reading

By DAVID FRISK
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

One way to spend discretionary reading time – which you have, during vacations – is with our specialties. Or we can just seek entertainment. But I like to read slightly outside of my usual focus. Knowing what our intellectual neighbors have written is a healthy corrective to preoccupation with our intellectual families. May I suggest that students, in the social sciences and history especially, consider the following books?

The Righteous Mind by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt is brilliant and often fun. Although fairly long, it could have gone even deeper and still held readers' interest. Its subtitle, *Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, has a non-academic tone but makes a measurable claim. Does the author succeed in showing us "why"? Largely, yes. In conversational yet careful prose, he makes a seemingly major addition to our understanding of the Red-Blue divide. Haidt—an active defender of intellectual diversity who has since co-founded worthy projects called Heterodox Academy and OpenMind Platform—made his widespread reputation in political psychology with this 2012 book, which draws partly upon his own research on the differing "moral foundations" people have.

Haidt says our political convictions are rooted in emotion far more than reason, but that emotion results from natural evolution and is ultimately functional, not dysfunctional. And that we can, realistically, commit ourselves somewhat more to reason than we normally do. The convictions associated with the Left and the Right are based to a great extent on differing moral foundations in our minds. Liberals, i.e. "progressives," focus very largely on Care or preventing Harm (in the term's basic humanitarian meaning) and on maintaining or establishing Fairness or Equality.

Libertarians, Haidt shows, are quite another breed than Conservatives because they have their own moral foundation, obviously Liberty, that greatly overshadows all other foundations despite some concern

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and agendas like the Green New Deal. Regardless of whether you think those ideas will better society or not, their motivation stems from real problems that the opposing side too often ignores in favor of abstract principles. When the system is not working for you, you want it to change -- and corporate capitalism is not working for the younger generations, now that the economic pie is not growing. Although a utopian solution is impossible, any step that alleviates the increasingly harsh aspects of modern life will seem like a step in the right direction.

To move beyond the “socialism sucks” paradigm, conservatives need to adopt a message of principled action rather than pure principles. Instead of adhering to the dogma of Ronald Reagan, worshiping free-market principles and posing a now-amorphous communism as our enemy, we need to embrace actionable ideas. We must resist the urge to bask in America’s former glory and seeming security, and focus instead on the future. If we want American manufacturing to come back, we must create a tariff system, provide subsidies, and encourage research and development rather than focus on

lowering taxes for firms that are already using sophisticated tax-avoidance strategies. If we want our cities to be clean and free of crime, we need to enforce the law, but also address the underlying problems that cause social decay. The power of the state, which is not diminishing anytime soon, should be used to move toward and maintain a society that is more moral, more beautiful, and better acknowledges human dignity, rather than a structure that seems to have failed when Gross Domestic Product increases by only 2 instead of 3 percent.

RECOMMENDED READING . . . cont.

among them for Fairness/Equality. Conservatives have by far the broadest range of seriously felt moral foundations. To concerns about harm and fairness, they add strong attachments to Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity (which need not be religious in the usual sense). Far from dismissing these distinctive features of conservative public morality, Haidt is quite respectful of them from his own slightly left-of-center perspective.

[*Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*](#) by Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon could, perhaps, be read with special profit in conjunction with *The Righteous Mind*. Published a full generation ago in 1991, it shows, from what might be called a compassionate-conservative

can be read as a counterpart to an even more recent book, [*The Lost Soul of the American Presidency*](#). The latter’s author, Stephen Knott, a professor of national security affairs, tries to show that the office has sunk into demagoguery during our republic’s odyssey and how it might be healthily renewed. The problem, he preaches, is “not . . . the ‘imperial presidency’ but the populist presidency.” Historian Jeremi Suri is troubled by popular pressures on the presidency too, and he can’t stand Donald Trump either. But *The Impossible Presidency* follows in the non-philosophical tradition of political scientist Richard Neustadt, who argued plausibly in 1960 that the presidency is a fundamentally “weak” office —

of creativity. One of the better ones is Poet at War, for Lincoln. The book also analyzes the National Healer (Franklin Roosevelt), the Frustrated Frontiersmen (Kennedy and Johnson), the Leading Actor (Reagan), and the Magicians of Possibility (Clinton and Obama).

Finally, I recommend a tome published in 2013 by political scientist and historian Ira Katznelson. [*Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*](#) is commendable, first of all, for its theme: the New Deal plus World War II plus the early Cold War — periods that Katznelson plausibly insists should be viewed as a single era, defined by a series of radically new, disorienting challenges and thus by fear.

Katznelson is thought-provokingly

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perspective, that the concept of absolute or nearly absolute rights can be a cold and sickly thing. Glendon argues effectively, with a good range of examples, that its long-growing dominance tends to impoverish our communication with others, including empathy for their inconvenient concerns—thus, too, inhibiting and flattening deliberation in government about the public good.

Sadly, the excessive “rights talk” and the closely-associated aggrandizement of legalism—relying on the law for everything—have resulted, she says, in a “law-saturated society.” They have become simplistic, selfish substitutes for moral reasoning in our public life. Truer words were never spoken, and they’re even truer today.

[*The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America’s Highest Office*](#) (2017)

strong only, or sometimes strong, when a president assiduously exercises the complicated skills needed to make it so.

Suri differs most significantly from Neustadt in stressing not the limits our system puts on our chief executive, and the virtually limitless modern demands on the office, but what he considers our presidents’ runaway agendas and their unproductive compulsion to deal with crises as extensively as they do. *The Impossible Presidency* can, among other things, help explain to people who vehemently oppose Trump why they needn’t have been so fearful of him—and, to his staunch supporters, why they shouldn’t have expected so much.

The ten presidents whom Suri discusses, concisely but not superficially in this notably well-written book, are given chapter titles with varying degrees

critical of the New Deal enactments and America’s rise to superpower status. But he views them as a success story, and indeed a democratic success story, while stressing their moral complications and compromises — including, prominently, certain New Deal compromises with racism. Although it’s heavy reading, *Fear Itself* is very intelligent, excellently researched by a truly independent mind, and a good investment of time.

David Frisk is a resident fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization and the author of If Not Us, Who? William Rusher, National Review, and the Conservative Movement (ISI Books, 2012). A longer version of this piece was published at the Law & Liberty website last year.

ENQUIRY

Vol. IX
A publication of the AHI Undergraduate Fellows

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