

Sacred Cows and Dirty Words

by Bill Herbst

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I'm not generally a big fan (or even a small fan) of "isms." The traditional basket of economic/political/social isms — capitalism, socialism, libertarianism, communism, republicanism, fascism, totalitarianism, conservatism, liberalism, progressivism, etc. — seem to me to be part of some other arcane and abstract universe, and not at all connected to our real lives as humans in civilization.

As ways of approaching commerce or social organization, all of these various systems, whether we call them philosophies, doctrines, or whatever, make wonderful sense on their own. Each has a certain purity, with internal consistency and convincing arguments to justify it. All have elements worthy of recommending them. Applied in reality, however, none of these isms alone works worth a damn.

These days, in the run up to the 2020 Presidential campaign, a war is already underway between emotional reactions to two of these isms: *capitalism* and *socialism*.

In his State of the Union address, President Trump threw down the gauntlet:

Here, in the United States, we are alarmed by new calls to adopt socialism in our country. America was founded on liberty and independence — not government coercion, domination, and control. We are born free, and we will stay free. Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country.

Every Republican in the chamber stood up, clapped, and cheered, along with many Democrats. What Trump didn't say (because he didn't have to), but clearly implied, is that America is a capitalist country.

In America, capitalism is a sacred cow, and socialism is a dirty word. That's a steaming load of crap, of course, but it's been a truism in a society obsessed with knee-jerk labels.

Trump isn't the only one engaging in "Red Scare" tactics. All the major mainstream media networks are also complicit in this propaganda bias. Sure, we expect that from Fox News, but MSNBC is particularly rah-rah for capitalism and

scornful of socialism. This bias is not even hidden as subtext. It's right out front, delivered with glee (for capitalism) and disdain (for socialism) by damn near every host and "expert" panel on MSNBC.

We don't have anything remotely approaching classical or pure capitalism in this country. What we have is a bastardized version of capitalism that includes socialism for business and the wealthy. About the only socialism for the masses are Medicare and Social Security, both of which are programs with overwhelming popular support.

What's come to be called "neoliberalism" is an approach to economics that swept in with Thatcher in England and Reagan in the U.S. during the 1980s. Simply put, neoliberalism is "trickle-down" voodoo economics — the quasi-religious belief that greed is good. Since the "invisible hand" of the market will magically produce the best outcomes, unfettered self-interest is perfectly OK. Business need not concern itself with the greater good.

This politically and economically far-right state of affairs has led over the past half-century to oligarchy (rule by the rich) and our current extreme economic inequality, where the top fifth of the population commands 93% of the money and resources (with the bottom four-fifths having just 7%), and where three individual billionaires (Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffet, and Bill Gates) are richer than half of the country. But you've seen the statistics and know that already.

In the upcoming 2020 election campaign, the Republicans will attempt to tattoo all Democrats as bomb-throwing radical anarchists by smearing them with the epithet "socialism." Hell, they've already begun. Republicans are certain that Americans have been so thoroughly hypnotized by an entire century of sacred-cow-dirty-word labeling that they will react to this slur against progressives by screaming, "*Oh, my God, not **that!***" and voting for Trump and his Republican flying-monkey minions.

I wish I felt that Americans were smarter than that and wouldn't fall for such foul-smelling BS, but I fear that the Republicans are probably correct. For every two Americans who reject such simplistic and overtly manipulative labeling, a third American will believe it. And when it's shouted by politicians and the media over and over and over and over ten thousand times, even more Americans end up believing it. If "everyone" is saying it, it must be true.

Capitalism versus socialism is irrelevant and a classic red herring. It sidesteps the truly fundamental and increasingly critical dichotomy of sanity versus madness. If we are to have even a slim chance of successfully addressing the daunting problems that beset us — climate change, nuclear war, racism, wealth inequality, etc. — by giving up status quo business-as-usual and substantially changing how we live, we'll need all the sanity we can muster in the 2020s — considerably more than we've collectively demonstrated to this point.