

## Socialism for Skeptics

by Clara Fraser

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**T**he '90s may not be the worst of times, but they're no picnic for radicals in the mega-capitalist countries.

We are playing to pretty tough crowds, where the hardest armor to pierce is a thick shield of cynicism. Disbelief in progress and resigned acceptance of the status quo are the intellectual high fashions that are smothering minds once open to bold visions and grand prospects.

And what with the tatters of Stalinism on one hand and newly resplendent swastikas on the other, it's not easy to persuade people that the promises of socialism can and must be for real.

A typical dialog between a Representative Skeptic (RS) and revolutionary me can last for hours, but here's a condensed version.

*RS:* World socialism? Get outta here. Face facts. Every place that used to be communist is going capitalist.

*Me:* They're going to capitalist hell is where they're going. The long-entrenched imperial countries are writhing with delirium tremens. The big shots "won" the Cold War by starving out, drive-by bombing, and CIA-ing everybody else, but the price of victory is defeat on the home front.

Our cities are dumping grounds for our radioactive problems—poverty, homelessness, joblessness, crime,

illiteracy, ill-health, ecological rape, racism, sexism, homophobia, domestic and random violence, addictions, ad nauseam. There is less of everything for everybody except stress and taxes and fury. Cueball-headed Hitler wannabes menace the innocent, and bourgeois liberals give us spastic colons.

If this is the best that the U.S. Superpower can do, with its Information Highways and smart bombs and self-congratulation, somebody better call Dr. Kevorkian.

RS: But at least we have democracy, freedom of choice—like that sensitive sheriff from *Picket Fences* says in the bank ad. We say what we please, go where we want, and shop 'til we drop. Nobody tells me how to think! Under communism, the state makes the rules and dictates opinion—one size fits all.

Me: Your vaunted free will and open mind are illusions. You too are conditioned and molded, only more subtly.

Your choices run out when your money does. The goodies in the shops may be piled as high as Michael Jordan's slam dunks or as wide as Magic Johnson's field goals, but no cash, no carry.

To the homeless, choice means sleeping under a bridge or over a grate. For poor women, the right to abortion (tenuous for any female) might as well be the right to travel on the Starship Enterprise. And just try to go to Havana or Hanoi or Camp David. Or just try to be openly gay in the military. Just try to be a Marxist and still keep your job, unharassed.

Even for those whose plastic is still good, choice is a farce. *Time* or *Newsweek*. Democans or Republicrats. Letterman or Leno. Stallone or Schwarzenegger. Gimme a break, stop the insanity.

You are relentlessly bombarded with pro-establishment propaganda, images and emotional appeals all your

life on every front. The narrow limits of your freedoms make you as broadly conformist as any drill team.

RS: But socialism has proved it can't compete.

Me: Not so. It's never been tested on a level playing field. The contestants were never evenly matched.

The 1917 Russian Revolution had more stacked against it than a feminist on MTV. The country was impoverished, industrially and culturally backward, and exhausted by World War I. All the major capitalist nations swooped in for the kill, aiding and abetting the homegrown white-guard opposition.

The Soviet people repelled the invaders. But asking socialism to show its stuff in such a situation is like expecting a bullied slum kid to excel in school without breakfast, lunch, warm clothes, notebooks or defenders. The strange thing is not that a totalitarian, bureaucratic gang took over, but that the fledgling Soviet Union survived at all—and then managed to provide basic security for its inhabitants and to give the economic vampires quite a run for their money for over 70 years.

But when we overthrow the super-suits in the super-economies—the U.S., Japan, and Germany—there will be no need for requisitioning, hence no need for warlords to control the dispensing of scarce consumer goods and natural resources. No foreign countries will invade anybody. Our revolution will set everybody free.

RS: Very pretty utopian dreams. Socialism, like the Messiah, will furnish instant peace on earth, goodwill toward all, a patched-up ozone layer and reforestation, safe sex, a two-day work week, a cure for AIDS and breast cancer, and Caribbean cruises featuring caviar and sashimi for the masses!

Me: Cease your snorting and scoffing. If that's what we want, that's what we'll have. And your sights are too low—one work-day a week max.

Leon Trotsky defined socialism as “shared abundance,” like the economic democracy in an affluent family. We’ve got the abundance—we just have to transform the way we distribute it.

That was fun. I like debating. If my skeptical (and other) readers want to pitch more balls to my bat, we’ll do it again.

## More socialism for skeptics

 In my last column, I inaugurated a kind of socialist catechism. A friendly reader transmitted the column via computer network and received some fascinating responses.

A man in Finland requested a *Freedom Socialist* subscription. A woman in California is distributing the column to a group which is producing an “FAQ” (Frequently Asked Questions) paper on socialism. A Missourian posted my words on another computerized bulletin board.

Another man hated it. He professed amazement at hearing from an open socialist—a dying breed, he said—and accused me of stacking the deck with lame questions leading to blah answers. Ouch!

His argument, condensed: “No group can know enough to centrally plan a modern economy. Capitalism isn’t directed by some sinister cabal, but by millions of individual owners. The whole system is coordinated through trade and the money prices that trade generates.”

OK, Mr. Free-Market Champion, let me respond to your critique.

*FMC:* Modern economy is too complex to plan.

*Me:* Stop with the mystifying and mystiquing already! With a little work, study and experience, anyone who can manage their own household economy can supervise the flow of money through a business, an entire industry, a