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Who You Calling Socialist?

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By Harold Meyerson
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"We are all socialists now," [proclaims](#) Newsweek. We are creating "socialist republics" in the United States, [says](#) Mike Huckabee, adding, on reflection, that "Lenin and Stalin would love this stuff." We are witnessing the Obama-era phenomenon of "European socialism transplanted to Washington," says Newt Gingrich.

Well! Even as we all turn red, I've still encountered just two avowed democratic socialists in my daily rounds through the nation's capital: Vermont's Sen. Bernie Sanders . . . and the guy I see in the mirror when I shave. Bernie is quite capable of speaking for himself, so what follows is a report on the state of actual existing socialism from the other half of the D.C. Senators and Columnists Soviet.

First, as we survey the political landscape, what's striking is the absence of advocates of socialism, at least as the term was understood by those who carried that banner during the capitalist crisis of the 1930s. Then, socialists and communists both spoke of nationalizing all major industries and abolishing private markets and the wage system. Today, it's impossible to find a left-leaning party anywhere that has such demands or entertains such fantasies. (Not even Hugo Chávez -- more an authoritarian populist than any kind of socialist -- says such things.)

Within the confines of socialist history, this means that the perspective of Eduard Bernstein -- the fin de siecle German socialist who argued that the immediate struggle to humanize capitalism through the instruments of democratic government was everything, and that the goal of supplanting capitalism altogether was meaningless -- has definitively prevailed. Within the confines of American history, this means that when New York's garment unions left the Socialist Party to endorse Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, they were charting the paradigmatic course for American socialists: into the Democratic Party to support not the abolition of capitalism but its regulation and democratization, and the creation of some areas of public life where the market does not rule.

But in the United States, conservatives have never bashed socialism because its specter was actually stalking America. Rather, they've wielded the cudgel against such progressive reforms as free universal education, the minimum wage or tighter financial regulations. Their signal success is to have kept the United States free from the taint of universal health care. The result: We have the world's highest health-care costs, borne by businesses and employees that cannot afford them; nearly 50 million Americans have no coverage; infant mortality rates are higher than those in 41 nations -- but at least (phew!) we don't have socialized medicine.

Give conservatives credit for their consistency: They attacked Roosevelt as a socialist as they are now attacking Obama, when in fact Obama, like Roosevelt before him, is engaged not in creating socialism but in rebooting a crashed capitalist system. The spending in Obama's stimulus plan isn't a socialist takeover. It's the only way to inject money into a system in which private-sector investment, consumption and exports -- the other three possible engines of growth -- are locked down. Investing

more tax dollars in education and research and development is a way to use public funds to create a more competitive private sector. Keeping our banks from speculating madly with our money is a way to keep banking alive.

If Obama realizes his agenda, what emerges will be a more social, sustainable, competitive capitalism. His more intellectually honest and sentient conservative critics don't accuse him of Leninism but of making our form of capitalism more like Europe's. In fact, over the past quarter-century, Europe's capitalism became less regulated and more like ours, one reason Europe is tanking along with everyone else.

Take it from a democratic socialist: Laissez-faire American capitalism is about to be supplanted not by socialism but by a more regulated, viable capitalism. And the reason isn't that the woods are full of secret socialists who are only now outing themselves.

Judging by the failures of the great Wall Street investment houses and the worldwide crisis of commercial banks; the collapse of East Asian, German and American exports; the death rattle of the U.S. auto industry; the plunge of stock markets everywhere; the sickening rise in global joblessness; and the growing shakiness of governments in fledgling democracies that opened themselves to the world market -- judging by all these, a more social capitalism is on the horizon because the deregulated capitalism of the past 30 years has blown itself up, taking much of the known world with it.

So, for conservatives searching for the culprits behind this transformation of capitalism: Despite our best efforts, it wasn't Bernie and it wasn't me. It was your own damn system.

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