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As religion recedes, politics takes its place. As confidence fades, political movements grow radical.



Abdel El-Sayed, the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in Michigan. ANDREW ROTH/ ZUMA PRESS



DECLARATIONS

Socialism Is Here—and It's Serious

Socialism is not a passing thing but an arriving thing. It must be taken seriously as a factor in our politics and the Democratic Party. A CNN/SSRS poll issued this week reported 34% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning adults identify as "democratic socialists." That number won't be depressed by the success of Abdul El-Sayed, who won the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in Michigan on Tuesday by racking up huge margins in progressive enclaves and university towns.

Socialism's opponents imagine there is safety in its poor track record, which is obvious to everyone. No it isn't. Many of its proponents wouldn't know the history and many wouldn't care: Our version will be better.

Here is some of what that version involves, from an interview two weeks ago by Shannon Bream of "Fox News Sunday" with Megan Romer, national co-chairman of the Democratic Socialists of America. Normally socialists are evasive or euphemistic regarding their policy goals. Ms. Romer wasn't.

Bream: "Just give me sort of a true or false on these. Abolish the Senate?"

Romer: "True." Bream: "Replace the presidency and Supreme Court as we now know them?"

Romer: "Yep." Bream: "Abolish ICE?" Romer: "Absolutely."

Bream: "Abolish borders and give amnesty to anyone currently in the United States illegally?"

Romer: "As a long-term plan, yep."

Bream: "Defund the Pentagon?" Romer: "Absolutely." Bream: "Abolish prisons, at least in large part?"

Romer: "Yeah—again as part of a long-term program, yeah."

Bream: "Government or public ownership of most large corporations?"

Romer: "Yeah, absolutely."

Socialism's most enthusiastic promoters are quick and clever— comparatively well-educated, very online. Their talent lies primarily in media, having been immersed in it from birth—the internet, its apps, its entertainment and information flow. They know all about how people get and absorb a feeling, an impression; they know how to produce a sensation, as opposed to a thought. One of the great tricks in life is to have a talent suited to your times, and they do.

I am sorry to say they never strike me with their warmth, as, say, your great-uncle Billy was warm when he spoke about the Industrial Workers of the World. Today's socialists strike me as colder, less human, fiercer and occasionally sociopathic. In general, they appear to have an idea of history rather than attachments to existing people and institutions. Most strike me not as people who love America and wish to make it better, but people ready to exploit its freedoms to build a movement that if successful would transform America's fundamental nature. It will no longer be the freedom place but something else, and more common.

This isn't happening in our politics only because people "hate the status quo" and "want change." Americans always hate the status quo and want change. I believe what we're seeing traces back to these factors: A voter who is 25 was in grade school during the 2008 economic crash, and saw everything—frightened parents, lost jobs. In the years after, he saw bailouts and no one on Wall Street paying a price. It lessened his allegiance to the freemarket economic system.

A voter who is 25 also sees AI rising, and wonders if the economy as it exists today has a place for him. Will he be able to afford a house someday? Widespread home ownership brings a feeling of investment, of stability and satisfaction. What does its absence bring?

The Cold War has receded as a living memory. The enforced communism and socialism of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact was a disaster— shortages, drabness, economic lifelessness. Censorship, secret police, all the bad things big unaccountable governments bring. That was long ago.

"Socialism" now is a dream of Scandinavia—national healthcare, generous benefits, equal enjoyment of resources.

As religion recedes, politics takes its place. The young have been educated within a general framework of assumptions and language of the left—structures of power, oppressor groups, critical theory, intersectionality.

When confidence in Congress, the media, the university, churches and courts declines, as it has, reform movements grow more radical, in part because they no longer assume existing institutions can be repaired. They no longer think those institutions can check them.

And of course social media rewards ideological intensity on left and right. If radical views get you a following, why not? Online inducements aren't toward moderation.

It's our view here that free-market capitalism is organic and flows upward from the human person—man wants to build, trade, invent, provide for and rise, and he erects laws and a way of economic being that allows the realization of those desires. Economic freedom works with human nature. The rules and regulations it produces, the economic framework it creates, are like what Churchill said of democracy: the worst system except for all the others. Socialism is a more abstract and ideological vision of justice that doesn't flow up but must be imposed from the top down. It isn't based on the natural, or on man as he is; it's a construct that involves coercion.

Capitalism can be brutal, unjust in its own ways, and it can produce painful outcomes. Thus the modern welfare state, erected more or less over the past century, to save those who might fall too far, to stop their descent, to see if it can be reversed. This mixed economy is a mess—imperfect and costly, always in need of reform, always capable of being made better and, in terms of history, maybe as good as it gets.

No economic system can eliminate suffering, or injustice, which the socialists if they win will find out.

I've been reading André Malraux this summer. He was a brilliant, compelling and tricky fellow, a novelist and political philosopher who disentangled himself from early communism and became culture minister to Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s. In the biography "Malraux: A Life," by the journalist Olivier Todd, Malraux criticizes the economic thinking of the Left as "excessively precise"—this class is abused in this way and will triumph when this thing is done.

At a Gaullist campaign rally in 1968, Malraux put his finger on a weakness of conservative economic thought. "'Capitalism' does not carry us in its heart," he said. By inference, it's also hard to carry capitalism in your heart. It isn't a great belief, only an economic system. Socialism is a belief, and it summons feeling. Capitalism is a thing of reason, a disadvantage in an age of sensation.

In a fiery speech against de Gaulle's leftist critics during the latter's final presidential campaign, Malraux accused them of not being constructive but destructive. He calls the Socialist Francois Mitterand "a man who has never liberated anything," as de Gaulle had, and has "dreamed up the

left.” What does Mitterand symbolize? “A combination of touching aspiration and predictable demagoguery implicit in an attitude of eternal intention.”

That kind of passion from the pulpit will have a place in the coming debate. Our current socialists have never created or “liberated” anything. They are dreaming it up as they go along—ban prisons, ban prisoners, ban crime. And yes, they live in an attitude of eternal intention. So far they’ve never proved a thing—except that they can win elections. And thus carry the future. Which is rather a lot.

By Peggy Noonan

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