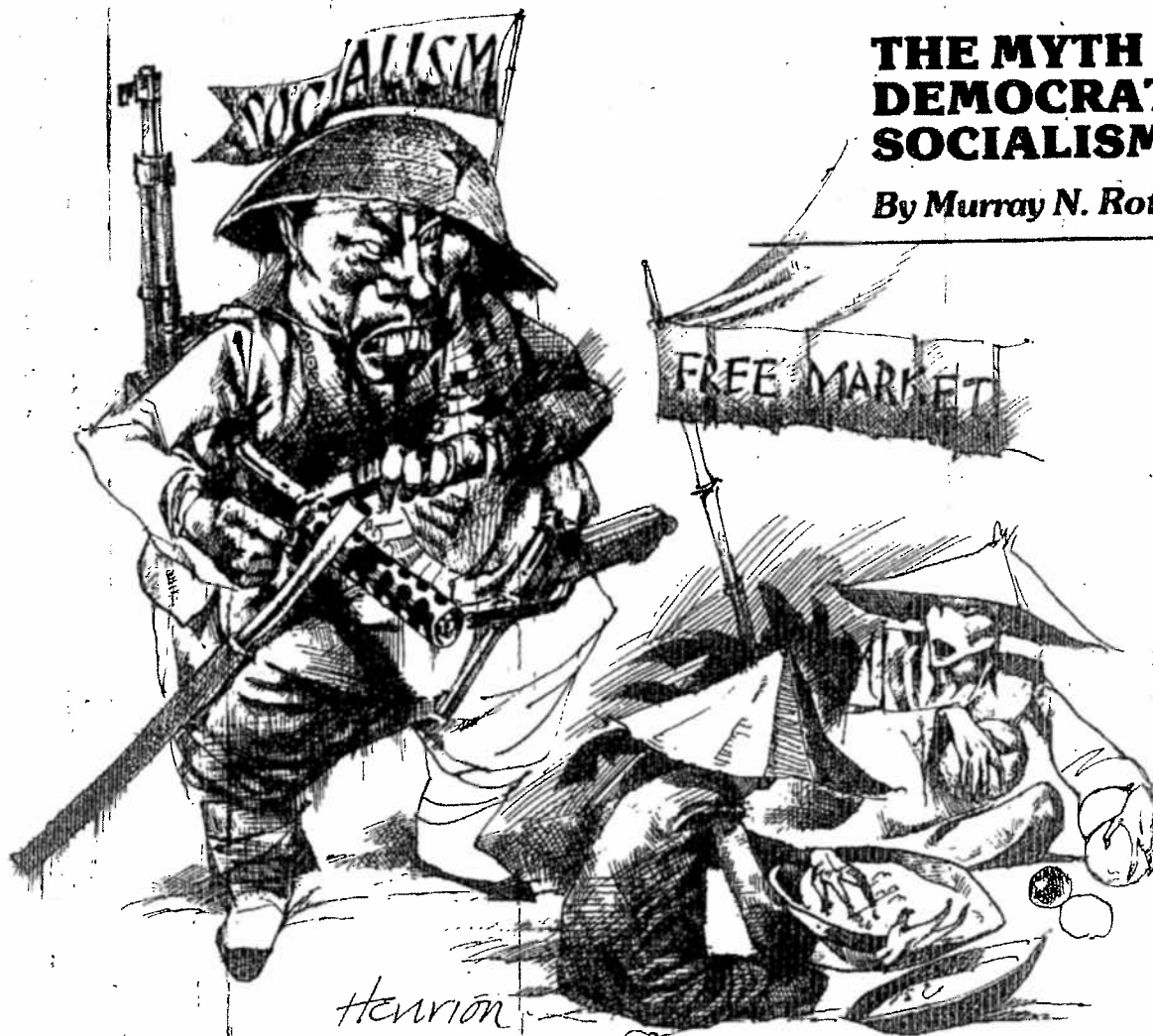


# THE MYTH OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM

By Murray N. Rothbard



Drawing by Ed Henton

**I**n any debate between a socialist and a free-market capitalist, all too often the socialist quickly puts the free-market advocate on the defensive, and the entire time is consumed by the free-market person fending off attacks on the ability of the market to prevent inequality, or business cycles, or even the ravages of affluence and "materialism." Being on the offensive, socialism emerges spotless and unbesmirched, and it is implicitly assumed on all sides that the market economy must prove its worthiness to be in the same moral and ideological ballpark as socialism. In fact, the morality of socialism is rarely questioned in these discussions, the critic confining himself to doubts about socialism's practicality or workability.

Yet, in truth, socialism is neither workable nor moral; both in theory and in practice, it is a system unsurpassed in brutality, despotism, mass murder and exploitation. It deserves no solemn respect or moral salute.

Before turning to socialism, the morality as well as efficacy of the contrasting system of the free market can be established very quickly. The free market is a vast network of two-person exchanges, conducted voluntarily at each step of the way by each participant because each believes he will benefit from the exchange. Since the exchanges and choices are free and voluntary, the free market economy is harmonious and cooperative, while allowing fullest room for the free play of individual choice. And the economy works splendidly, because the free price system and the profit-and-loss incentives arising from that market bring efficiency and order out of the "anarchistic," seemingly chaotic interplay of free and voluntary choices. Yet it is an order arising spontaneously out of freely adopted choices, rather than one imposed by violence and coercion. Such a free market, in its pure form, does not exist anywhere in the world today.

Let us contrast the system of socialism. What is

socialism? It is the ownership or control by the State of the means of production in society. In short, it is total control by the State apparatus over the means of accomplishing virtually any goals that individuals might pursue in society. Since the State has a monopoly over the instruments of violence, and is distinguished from all other organizations or social institutions by the continuing use of violence to achieve its ends, this means that socialism is a system of total coercive violence over all citizens to be wielded by the rulers and managers of the State apparatus. If we briefly contrast socialism to the free market, we can see immediately that socialism implies the coercive outlawry by the State of the myriad of voluntary and mutually beneficial exchanges that make up the free society. For voluntary exchange and mutual benefit, socialism substitutes the rule of maximal coercion, violence and compulsory command. Socialism has been aptly labelled the "command economy."

Socialism, in short, places the lives, the fortunes, and the sacred honor of every citizen under the total command of the State and its ruling elite. In the name of maximizing human freedom, in the name of eliminating class rule and the exploitation of man by man, in the name even of the "withering away of the State," socialism gives all power to the State, and therefore to its ruling class; in this way, socialism brings about a class rule and a system of despotism and exploitation of man by man to put all previous systems into the shade. But what else could we expect from a system that places all power into the hands of the State—the State, the biggest mass murderer, exploiter, parasite, robber, and enslaver in all of human history?

At the turn of the twentieth century, such consequences of the seemingly exciting new system of socialism could have been predicted. But now, with almost a century of hindsight, it is all too clear that socialist practice has confirmed our analysis. For this century has seen a great number of socialist regimes spanning much of the globe: Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Castro, and on and on. And what has socialism wrought in this century but mass murder, despair, concentration camps, mass enslavement, shortages and famine?

Unfortunately, in discussions of socialism in the United States, socialists have usually been allowed to get off the hook with a general disclaimer: that it is terribly unfair to tar them with the brush of Hitler, Stalin and Mao. For that is not the kind of "socialism" they want and advocate; in fact, they don't consider these regimes to be "socialist" at all—despite the fact that these regimes precisely fit the general linguistic definition of socialism that we have mentioned above. For their socialism would be peopled by "good guys," not by those terrible people who have staffed the actual socialist regimes of this century.

But these disclaimers are simply not good enough. The essence of socialism is not the specific people that the individual socialist would like to see in power. The essence of socialism is the system itself: total State power over the

means of production. And if the result of all the socialisms so far has been grisly and monstrous, and if no "humanist" nice guys have yet come to the fore, then perhaps, as the Marxists would say, "this is no accident," but a result imbedded within the system itself. And that is our contention: that Hitler, Stalin, Mao, et al are inherent systematic tendencies within socialism itself.

Let us briefly examine the reasons for our contention that he who says Socialism must ineluctably also say Auschwitz and Gulag.

First, there is "Rothbard's Law," namely that he who is given power will use it. If the State is given total power over everyone else in society, it will doubtless use it, both to achieve an increase in wealth and to exercise power and control for other purposes, ranging from power for its own sake to grandiose schemes of social reconstruction. Hence, Auschwitz, Gulag, et al.

Second, there is Hayek's great insight in the famous chapter of his *Road to Serfdom*, "Why the Worst Get on Top." Briefly, the insight holds that for any activity in society, the people who will tend to rise to the top in that activity will be those best suited for it, either in ability, temperament, or enthusiasm. The free market selects for its leading positions those people who are most able to innovate, to satisfy the desires of the mass of consumers better and more efficiently than anyone else. Socialism, on the contrary, selects for its leading positions those people most adept at the functions they perform: namely, bureaucrats schooled in elaborating red tape and Byzantine court intrigue, at bootlicking superiors and lording over inferiors; and despots and thugs adept at the wielding of force and violence. The market, in short, selects for Thomas Edison, while socialism selects for concentration camp commandants and secret police torturers.

Third, since socialism means central planning, any possible scope for "democratic" revisions or checks and balances will be virtually non-existent. For, since the plan is central, this means that no one will be permitted to interfere with the plan once the State and its technocratic "experts" have made their decision. For who are the public or even a legislature to dare to throw monkey wrenches into the State's carefully chosen plans? The role of the voters, whether at large or in a parliament, will be strictly plebiscitary: they will only be able to vote Ja, to ratify the plan chosen by the central planners.

Fourth, another chimera of social democrats is that socialism will be able to allow civil liberties, freedom of speech, press, and assembly, while maintaining a command-and-obedience system in the purely economic sphere. These spheres, however, cannot be separated. Stalin murdered millions of Soviet peasants, not because they were political dissenters, but because they resisted being expropriated and nationalized by the Soviet central planners.

Fifth, as a corollary, civil liberties cannot be maintained under socialism for the simple reason that the government, as the owner and manager of all the means of production, of all resources, has the power to allocate these resources to those people and those uses which it favors. There can be no genuine freedom of speech, press, or assembly if a single coercive agency, the government, has the sole power to allocate all newsprint, paper, assembly halls, etc., to uses which it prefers.

Consider, for example, a Socialist Planning Board, which, with all the good will in the world, has the task of allocating precious, scarce newsprint, assembly halls, presses and so forth. Can anyone visualize such a Board actually turning over any of these resources to an anti-socialist periodical? Indeed, from their point of view, why should they? As a result, resources will tend to be allocated to those individuals or groups who do bask in the favor of the regime. Hence, the usual vices of bureaucracy: favoritism, cronyism, and logrolling will proliferate under socialism unhampered by the profit-and-loss checks to which they are subjected on the free market.

Hence, the only freedom to criticize under a socialist regime will be, as in Russia and China, a freedom to criticize petty bureaucrats on the lower level—especially those who are out of favor with the ruling elite. But no criticism whatever will be permitted of the fundamentals of the system: of the ruling class, or of the socialist system itself.

Our discussion of an anti-socialist group trying to obtain an allocation of newsprint and presses from the Planning Board should illuminate the true meaning of the famous case of the Soviet Planning Board's refusing to allocate resources for the production of matzohs. The important point here is *not* that the Soviet Union is anti-Jewish, which was the attitude of the Western press. The important point is that it is absurd even to expect that a socialist government committed to atheism would allocate much of its scarce resources to a minority religious group. This problem is inherent in socialism itself.

Sixth, we have stressed that the Socialist government will be the only allocator of resources, of producers' goods. Hence, it will be the only employer, the only source of jobs in the economy. This will mean that everyone in the society will be totally dependent for their livelihood on one source of employment or income: the ruling class of the State apparatus. While any given socialist government may graciously allow employees to change occupations, jobs or places of work, this can only be a grant of permission by the government rather than a human right basic to each employee: for the government always remains the *only employer*. This grisly dependency on a single employer is part and parcel of the socialist system. It is particularly ironic that socialists who complain bitterly about the necessity for Americans to choose among hundreds of thousands of employers, think that this alleged condition of dependence can be remedied

by confining all people in society to the tender mercies of one single, compulsory employer! This is a remedy for "alienation"?!?

Again, civil liberties cannot be secured in such a society. For critics and dissidents can be "sent to Siberia" in the most literal as well as figurative sense. After all, *someone* has to be

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allocated to Siberia, right? So who is it going to be in practice: favored persons or those considered by the regime to be trouble-makers?

And so the essence of socialism is forced labor. Where but under a socialist regime could a Mao decide to "end the contradiction between physical and mental labor" by shipping hundreds of thousands of urban students to live permanently in the frontier province of Sinkiang—and to force them to grow rice in a dry climate for the good of their souls—or, to use a more Mardian term, for the benefit of their "reeducation"?

Seventh, socialism with democracy or civil liberties is a chimera because the socialist government will necessarily have total power over the processes of education; over schools and the media. Possessing that power, the ruling cliques will use it to try to mould a subject population that will be filled with love for their rulers and eager willingness to obey their every command. Call it what you will: "brain-washing," "cultural rehabilitation centers," or whatever, it is inevitable that a ruling elite given total power over education will use it for such "social" purposes, to create an eagerly sought New Socialist Man: a Man who will love and obey his rulers and who will put his rulers' commands above any personal qualms or considerations. Hopefully, human nature is such that the government cannot succeed; but the society is a living Hell while the rulers try their best.

Eighth, just as the worker is treated like dirt under a socialist system, so too is the consumer. In a free market economy, the consumers are wooed and courted by business firms as the sole source of income. All the terms of exchange, from quality of product to price, are made to please the consumers and gain their patronage. But, under socialism, the income of the State and its bureaucracy is decided by themselves rather than by the consumer. Instead of the consumer being wooed and cosseted, he is treated as an annoying source of wasteful depletion of the State's precious scarce resources. Under socialism, the consumer is only grudgingly allowed his meager rations.

The result of all this is a striking contrast in the quality of

life as well as the standard of living between socialist and non-socialist nations. Socialist countries are invariably filled with grey, pallid, dispirited people shuffling to line up for their rations; Western non-socialist countries are filled with lively people and smart shops, with a large variety of consumer goods. For example, the contrast between East and West Germany, or even between market-oriented Yugoslavia and the rest of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe.

Ninth, on top of all this moral and social horror, socialism can't work; that is, lacking a free price system, socialism cannot operate an advanced industrial economy to suit even the goals of the rulers of the State. A socialist industrial economy will suffer grave shortages, poverty, famine, and breakdown, and ultimately the death of a large portion of its population.

We conclude that Hitler, Stalin, Mao, *et al*, were in no sense *betrayers* of socialism; instead, their regimes were socialism's fulfillment. Let us turn, for example, to what is surely one of the most monstrous regimes in the world today—of course, a socialist one: the government of Cambodia. When the socialist regime took over Cambodia, it was faced with a swollen urban population in the capital city of Phnom Penh, a population which had become enlarged by refugees fleeing war, devastation, and American bombs in the countryside. But, being socialist, the new regime decided to depopulate Phnom Penh by coercion: and masses of people were sent to rural areas on a veritable death march, as people were yanked out of hospitals, *even during operations*, and forced to march out of the city. That the logic of socialism is brutality and death has never been more clearly demonstrated.

I would like to conclude by comparing and contrasting the responses of two "democratic socialists," both fervent opponents of the Vietnam War, to the gross violations of human rights now taking place in varying ways in the socialist countries of Indochina. One is the distinguished French journalist Jean Lacouture, who angrily refers to the new socialist Cambodia as "the most tightly locked up country in the world, where the bloodiest revolution in history is now taking place." Lacouture continues:

Ordinary genocide . . . usually has been carried out against a foreign population or an internal minority. The new masters of Phnom Penh have invented something original, auto-genocide. After Auschwitz and the Gulag, we might have thought this century had produced the ultimate in horror, but we are now seeing the suicide [read: murder] of a people in the name of revolution; worse: in the name of socialism.

Lacouture goes on to describe the situation in Cambodia as one where

a group of modern intellectuals, formed by Western thought, primarily Marxist thought (with heavy admixtures of Rousseau), claim to seek to return to a rustic Golden Age, to an ideal rural and national civilization. And proclaiming these *ideals*, they are

systematically massacring, isolating, and starving city and village populations whose crime was to have been born where they were . . .

Lacouture adds that the subjects of Cambodia's leader, Khieu Samphan,

remain in terror-stricken confinement, one of this regime's more rational decisions: for how could it let the outside world see its burying of a civilization in pre-history, its massacres? When men who talk of Marxism are able to say . . . that only 1.5 or 2 million young Cambodians, out of 6 million, will be enough to build a pure society, one can no longer simply speak of barbarism; what barbarians have ever acted in this way? Here is only madness. [1]

But Lacouture's noble instincts have outrun his intelligence on this question. For, *pace* Thomas Szasz, the new rulers of Cambodia are not "mad." They are, simply, *socialists*, trying to bring about the New Socialist Man of their Marxian-Rousseauian aspirations. Their social system, of course, is no less horrendous for that; quite the contrary.

Contrast this noble if mushy-headed reaction of Lacouture with the reaction of the distinguished Princeton international law professor Richard A. Falk to recent disclosures of the admittedly far less horrendous but still abominable "cultural reeducation" concentration camps being conducted by the new socialist government of Vietnam. When such sincerely civil libertarian and anti-war leaders as

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James Forest and Nat Hentoff called upon the Left to denounce these Vietnamese concentration camps, let us study the shameful Aesopian language of Professor Falk's measured response:

I referred to the special problems faced by Vietnamese leaders committed to building socialism and facing resistance and opposition. Hentoff contends that I believe that anything goes if it is done to build a socialist society, a grotesque view that I ardently oppose. My actual view is that in the Vietnamese setting what has been done to date has not involved systematic or severe abuse of human rights. What has been done is to remove temporarily from the political order some of those who seem obstructive in a period of national economic emergency. Such removal may be the only alternative to renouncing a socialist development program, a renunciation that would violate the dynamics of self-determination embodied in the outcome of the war. [2]

We rest our case; for the moral obscenity of Professor

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Falk's position should not be allowed to obscure the hard-headed consistency of his socialist outlook. If "removing temporarily from the political order" is the Aesopian phrase with which Professor Falk chooses to cloak bloody oppression, he is absolutely correct when he points out that "such removal may be the only alternative to renouncing a socialist development program . . . ."

In short, Professor Falk has stated the choice before mankind correctly: it is socialism, or human freedom. It is one or the other. Humanistic or democratic socialism is a chimera, a contradiction in terms.

1. Jean Lacouture, "The Bloodiest Revolution," *New York Review of Books* (March 31, 1977), pp. 9-10. Lacouture's subsequent "corrections," much crowed over by the American Left, do not affect the substance of his argument. See Lacouture, "Cambodia: Corrections," *New York Review of Books* (May 26, 1977), p. 46. Chomsky and Herman brusquely dismiss such statements of Cambodian officials simply because they appeared in the Thai press. To dismiss any reported statements by government officials themselves merely because they were not authorized and published by the officials is a singular position for authors who presumably applaud the exposures of the Watergate horrors. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, "Distortions at Fourth Hand," *The Nation*, June 25, 1977, pp. 789-794.

2. *The Village Voice*, March 21, 1977, p. 4.