

Correspondence

Possibilities of a Reluctant Socialism

To the Editors: In his praise of democratic capitalism in the July/August issue of *Worldview* Michael Novak underestimates the possibilities of a reluctant socialism that is every whit as unromantic, antiutopian, and realistic about the innate and irremediable depravity of human nature as he is. It is not impossible, as I can testify from my own experience, to be disenchanted with *Dissent* and generally persuaded by *Commentary*, *Public Interest*, and Daniel Bell and yet sometimes wonder whether democratic socialism might not be a lesser evil than the kind of capitalism favored by our present phase of technological and organizational development.

That capitalism seems increasingly remote from the picture Novak sketches. It is, as our socialist friends like to say, "monopolistic." Fewer and fewer enterprises pre-empt a larger and larger share of the economy, with the result that the freedom of the market suffers and opportunities for the individuality, initiative, and creativity Novak prizes are imperiled. What is worse, injustice, and not merely inequality, seems to be growing, at least in contrast to the recent past. Our system seems to be structurally committed to producing an ever-larger underclass of permanently unemployable *Lumpenproletariat*.

If Mr. Novak has suggestions for how to overcome these problems without moving in socialist directions, I for one would be grateful. Attempts to construct a democratic socialist order (as in Britain or Sweden, for example) are not appealing. Yet, if we must choose between these attempts and what American capitalism is now becoming, perhaps socialist options are preferable. It might be better to have our lives run by the HEW bureaucrats whom Novak derides than by corporate executives such as Charles Wilson or McNamara. Above all, to repeat, there is the question of justice. If a greater measure of democratic socialism, however dreary, is the price we must pay in order to put

blacks and poor whites to work, then those who stand in the biblical tradition may well be forced to side with the Left, even if reluctantly. *Beatus qui cogitat de egeno et paupere* (Psalm 41).

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Michael Novak Replies:

Professor Lindbeck expresses well both the values and the doubts that lie behind my article. Conventionally, intellectuals dissatisfied with our system turn toward socialism. Is there no other possibility? The ideals of democratic capitalism also offer a vantage point from which to criticize the status quo. Lindbeck suggests as much in noting that the ideals expressed in my article are not now well observed in practice.

The system in which we live lacks a theory that accurately expresses its character. Conventional capitalist and Socialist theories fall far short of it. (When Michael Harrington discovered "the true Marx" in *Socialism* he found that the ideals of Marx to a surprising extent have also animated America.) Our political institutions are both different from and better than our theories about them, and so are our economic institutions. Better precisely in terms of justice, and even more so in terms of liberty. So there are two tasks: (1) to describe more exactly what we have; and (2) to articulate its inner practical ideals. These two tasks accomplished, we will have at least some criteria for combatting those injustices that persist. (Injustice will, no doubt, assume new forms in future generations.)

Before yielding reluctantly to "dreary socialism," Professor Lindbeck might explore democratic capitalist solutions to the problems he cites. The black economist Walter Williams, for example, suggests that a high minimum wage makes it "uneconomical for firms to hire (and hence train) the most low skilled individuals. The law produces a racial effect because minorities are disproportionately represented about the low skilled.... As late as 1948, black youths had a lower unemployment rate than white youths." This is heresy. It might also be true. Bringing the "underclass" into the system, in any case, is a central issue to focus upon.

WORLDVIEW

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