

Dare We Question Capitalism?

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Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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Between 1900 and 2011 there have been 24 recessions in the United States (including the Great Depression), about once every 4.6 years — some decades more, some less — largely from inevitable overproduction and greed.

Yes, capitalism's highly productive and has made many Americans rich and facilitated Washington's global rule. It's also an unstable system responsible for extreme inequality, poverty and stagnant wages at home and aggression abroad to advance U.S. economic interests. And yet, how frequently in the mass media, government or in progressive or liberal circles is the system itself criticized, even given the mess that it is creating today for a majority of Americans?

Until recent years, practically never, but a bit more now. The June 27 issue of *The Nation* was devoted to articles "Reimagining Capitalism," all about reforming the existing system not replacing it, but a step forward. Also in June, the Dalai Lama told 150 Chinese students studying at the University of Minnesota that "I consider myself a Marxist.... But not a Leninist." The current *Time* magazine reports "Marxism has been trending high on Google."

What has made capitalism so sacrosanct in our society? It wasn't always that way. For about 65 years to the start of the Cold War following World War II in 1945 there had been lot of talk about socialism in the U.S. and criticism of capitalism among immigrant and native workers. A number of labor leaders and unions identified as socialist. The great union leader Eugene V. Debs (1855-1920) obtained almost a million write-in votes as the 1920 Socialist Party presidential candidate while in Atlanta Federal Penitentiary for having opposed World War I. The Communist Party is said to have had 100,000 members around 1940.

The major factor in the virtual silence today about the shortcomings of capitalism as a system is that five generations of Americans, starting in the late 1800s and accelerating wildly since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, have been trained by their rulers and institutions throughout their entire lives that socialism is an existential danger to the "American way of life" and to democracy and freedom.

This was accompanied by several periods of red hunts, mass jailing, deportations and severe political repression, culminating in 1945-1960 with the purge of socialists and communists from the trade union movement and political witch hunts, the imprisoning of communist leaders, and firings of teachers, writers, actors, directors, and ordinary workers from tens of thousands of jobs. Workers in millions of occupations had to sign loyalty oaths.

Anti-communism became the watchword throughout America but the actual target always was and remains much wider, including all the many varieties of socialism from Marxism-Leninism to mild democratic socialism, extending even to non-socialist social democracy,

and implicitly to everyday progressivism and liberalism when reforms are contemplated.

The word “progressive” practically dropped out of the language in the 1950s for a couple of decades since it was suggested by Cold War liberals as well as run-of-the-mill reactionaries, politicians and bosses that those so designated were “soft on communism.” The word “liberal” itself began to disappear for about a decade around the 1990s (remember the “L” word?), mainly because Republican name calling and the Democratic Party’s definitive moves away from liberalism.

Both words are back for now, though liberal/progressive influence seems negligible, mainly because of the implosion of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. Of course there are small communist and socialist organizations and left publications in the U.S., but criticism of America’s laissez-faire form of capitalism or capitalism as a system is considered out of bounds in the rest of our society. If this doesn’t change, nothing much is going to change in terms of gross economic inequality and distortions of democracy because anticommunism, in essence, has come to mean pro-capitalism-no-questions-asked.

We think Joel Kovel made a good point, at the very end his important 1994 book “Red Hunting in the Promised Land,” when he wrote: “The capitalist order, with all its brilliant accomplishments, had not succeeded; it has only won [the Cold War]. There can be no future worthy of human beings unless the existing system is challenged. For this, the overcoming of anticommunism is indispensable.”

Americans may live in the richest country in the world, but it is in a society where about 10% of the population possesses nearly 90% of the nation’s assets. In a country of 312 million people the entire ruling class can fit comfortably into Yankee Stadium, with room left over to generously pass out free tickets to thousands of the 46.2 million Americans living below the poverty line.

Democracy can never fulfill its potential under such circumstances, and the vaunted “American dream” is fast fading for the working class/middle class as the U.S. economic system seems headed into a second recession and the weakening of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. Isn’t it time for the American people to directly question what’s wrong with capitalism, or at least inquire, in the words of an old saying: “Where are we going and what are we doing in this hand basket?”

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