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## **Imagining Socialism**

**David Thorstad**

*Imagine: Living in a Socialist USA*

Edited by Frances Goldin, Debby Smith, and Michael Steven Smith

HarperPerennial, 304 pp., \$15.99

The need for socialism became clear to me more than fifty years ago when I was working as an orderly in the University of Minnesota Hospitals. One of the patients I was working with in Internal Medicine had advanced syphilis and was indigent. He owed the hospital a huge bill he'd never be able to pay off. They made him an offer he couldn't refuse: if he agreed to undergo an experimental treatment, they would forgive his bill. What made it all the more poignant was that his wife was hospitalized in a different wing at that very moment, and they were not able to consult or communicate. Meanwhile, another patient, well-to-do, underwent cardiac arrest, and the nurses began attempts to resuscitate her by chest compressions. The head nurse rushed to stop them, saying that the woman had requested that no special efforts to keep her alive be made if she reached that point. This lesson in health care and class turned me into a vocal advocate for socialized medicine.

Yet now, decades later, after several years of actual public discussion about the failures of the American health system, and "reform" of it by the president himself (giving a huge handout to the insurance industry and Wall Street, but keeping any mention of single-payer health care, let alone the S-word, "off the table"), Americans are still stuck with a lousy system. All the more surprising, then, is the elephant in the room: socialized medicine already exists in the United States in the form of the Veterans Health Administration, which owns its hospitals and whose doctors are its employees. Despite its shortcomings, I have yet to meet a veteran who wasn't relieved to be covered by the VA.

If the need for socialized medicine, and the fact that it works (unlike the American ripoff system), are clear, why haven't the American people risen up to demand it? This is a conundrum for socialists. Mere reason and rational argument won't take us very far in bridging the gap between the obvious and mass apathy. The

capitalists have perfected a system whereby the masses continue to support what is not in their own interests (*pace* Adam Smith).

This welcome book, *Imagine: Living in a Socialist USA*, is an important and unique attempt to bridge that gap. As an argument for socialism, presented from multiple angles in short essays by some thirty contributors, it is persuasive, passionate, and at times eloquent. If it helps motivate socialists to advocate more loudly, it will have done its job. Their task is certainly not more difficult now than it was before Occupy Wall Street (with its pithy slogan about the 99 percent versus the 1 percent). Besides, there are some polls showing that for young people fear of the S-word has diminished

The editors wisely chose to avoid the pitfalls and complications of sectarian politics, instead focusing on showing how socialism would be a superior system to capitalism. They don't get bogged down on issues of history (utopian socialism, anarchism, social democracy, communism, Stalinism, and many other -isms), how to get from here to there (e.g., the role, if any, of a vanguard party), the role of elections under capitalism and socialism, how the masses might achieve the revolutionary consciousness necessary to dump one system for another, the failures and achievements of actually existing socialism (which has nearly vanished with the implosion of the Soviet bloc), the role of religion under socialism, the potential (or downside) of social media and social change, old age and singles under socialism (e.g., the role of community support organizations), robotics, and many other pertinent subjects. These are all important questions, but they lie outside the scope of a book that seeks to be accessible to the ordinary person, as opposed to the theorist or wonk. That makes it highly readable.

One reason it's impossible to be specific about all facets of a future socialist society is that nobody has a crystal ball. Many details would have to be worked out in practice, rather than being prescribed by a how-to holy book. One essential aspect, however, would be the removal of profit from the economy and the replacement of a system rigged to favor the rich with one of genuine democracy from below. It cannot come about unless and until the masses rise up and take control over all aspects of their lives, rather than placing their hopes in politicians or waiting for pie in the sky by and by when they die.

The book has three sections: "What's Wrong with Capitalism?," "Imagining Socialism," and "Getting There: How to Make a Socialist America." It provides biographies of contributors, and an index, but, in keeping with its nonacademic approach, no notes.

A list of some of the contributors points to the wide scope and variety of topics the book covers: Paul Street, Joel Kovel, Rick Wolff, Mumia Abu-Jamal and Angela Davis, Ajamu Baraka, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Frances Fox Piven, William Ayers, Clifford D. Conner, Michael Ratner, Paul Le Blanc . . .

Inevitably, with so many contributors, the essays are uneven. I found some especially compelling, including “Personal, Emotional, and Sexual Life Without Capitalism” (Harriet Fraad and Tess Fraad-Wolff), “Law in a Socialist USA” (Michael Steven Smith), “The Capitalist Road: From Chinese Sweatshops to Detroit’s Decay” (Dianne Feeley), and “The Third American Revolution: How Socialism Can Come to the United States” (Paul Le Blanc). A more jarring note was struck by inclusion of liberal Democrat Michael Moore (“Where Does Occupy Wall Street Go from Here? A Proposal”). There’s nothing particularly socialist in the list of proposals he makes in this speech to Occupy, even though there’s nothing wrong with them either.

One essay in the book disappointed me: “Socialized Medicine Means Everyone Gets Care, Regardless of Whether They Have Money” by Dave Lindorff. He doesn’t even mention the VA but oddly, and misleadingly (as anyone who is on Medicare will know), he says: “Ironically, we *already* have a kind of socialized medicine in America: Medicare.” And, again misleadingly, and with understatement: “It’s not a perfect system, and there are holes in its coverage, but it works much the way the socialized health system works in neighboring Canada.” Canada’s system is certainly superior to ours, but it’s far from “socialized,” and is under constant threat of privatization. Moreover, since I went on Medicare, my premiums including the necessary supplement insurance cost more now than they did before I was covered by it. That’s a far cry from socialized medicine.

Leslie Cagan and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz’s “How Queer Life Might Be Different in a Socialist USA” contains within itself both the strengths and weaknesses of the book in which it appears. The essay stands firmly on the ground of identity politics, and is rife with the offensive term “queer” and the faddish “LGBTQ people” (as if there were such a thing). I hope that if socialism ever comes to pass, both terms will be dumped. While well-meaning, I found some of their notions clichéd and oversimple, such as: “The movements of people of color, women, LGBTQ people, youth, seniors, the disabled, and more [workers?] all uncovered layers of oppression and shed new light on the dynamics and hierarchies of power. Only by weaving together the movements that attack abusive power in all of its manifestations will we be strong enough to tackle the monster of capitalism.” I only wish it were so easy. To their credit, they distance themselves from the current bourgeois fad of same-sex marriage, foreseeing no special

privileges attached to being married under socialism. They predict that “the positive power of sexuality would be released and honored.” Sounds good, but what that power is and how it would be released they don’t say.

They also tackle sensibly the issue of intergenerational sex that the mainstream “LGBT” movement has turned into a police/crime issue rather than one related to youth and sexual liberation, and that is condemned even by some “socialist” groups whose moral code mirrors conventional bourgeois morality: “Even complex and sometimes troubling issues such as sex between adults and minors would be discussed without assumptions of guilt or imposition of shame. For instance, would there be an ‘age of consent’ that most people are comfortable with, and if so, what might that be? A relationship between a boy of sixteen or seventeen who is just coming out and a gay man in his thirties or forties might be quite positive and healthy, but it might still bother some people.” I think utopian socialist Charles Fourier’s vision of future sexuality in his *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* is more advanced, nearly two centuries after he wrote it, than anything the modern-day Left has come up with.

How in the world did the editors persuade Harper to publish such a book? That is explained in an interview with Frances Goldin and Michael Smith on *Democracy Now!* in April (<http://m.democracynow.org/stories/14305>). Goldin is nearly ninety, and saw the project as one of her life’s goals. A literary agent—besides being a well-known community activist in New York City for decades—her persistence with the publisher paid off, after it initially turned down the book. All three editors are longtime friends of mine, and Frances was a neighbor on East 11<sup>th</sup> Street on the Lower East Side when we organized our block in 1981 to get a mafia tow-truck company without the proper variance thrown out. It took eight months, but without her it never would have happened. Later, when I was threatened with murder by a low-level mafioso for having black friends, she arranged for us to meet the local don, who, in a scene reminiscent of *The Godfather*, settled the issue in my favor. That too would never have happened without her skills.

In his book *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Dwight Macdonald observed: “If the American working class were ever going to make a revolution, it would have done so, or at least tried to do so, during the 1929–1933 depression. Instead, it voted in Roosevelt, who proceeded to captivate it with ‘sops and lures’ of reform.” Has the outlook improved since the 1930s? To ask is to answer. The working class has lost much of its clout since then and seems as tightly wrapped up in the capitalist system and the Democrat Party as ever. And FDR seems superior in some ways to the mediocrities that have followed him in occupying the White House, including Obama. At least he wasn’t invoking his right to spy on and murder his own citizens. Even some Left groups welcomed Obama’s election, which shows how far much of it has lost its bearings.

Still, without hope, radicals could hardly keep going. But one of the hurdles they face is to convince the masses to stop placing their hopes in a system that is screwing them. Let's hope this book gets read by the many who aren't already convinced of the need for socialism. Those who already are will find much of value in it. Unless millions of atomized citizens wake up and take action to get rid of capitalism and control their own lives, socialism will remain within the realm of imagination.

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