



Silly Things We Hear: “Communism Works on Paper”

Not surprisingly, this earned Goldberg some criticism. Yet, to be fair, her sentiment is a common one. It’s that supposedly enlightened, nuanced opinion stating that communism works great in theory — it’s just the practical application that’s problematic. And while Goldberg seems to accept that man’s nature will always ensure communism’s unworkability, others entertain a corollary of the above opinion: that the ideology *could* work if only the right people were at the helm.



The first thing we need to debunk is the on-paper-validity myth. Could you imagine a scientist, after observing a theory consistently fail when applied over decades, insist that it works on paper? Unless he was a climate-change warmist, he’d be laughed out of his field.

So the first truth here is a simple one: If a theory doesn’t work in practice, it doesn’t work on paper.

And if it seems to, it only means that our understanding of the theory is flawed.

In that case, the proper response is to do what a good scientist would: deepen our understanding by re-examining the theory and trying to discover where its holes lie.

In communism’s case, this isn’t difficult. The problem with the ideology is that it fails to consider the realities of man’s nature. In saying this, I don’t imply only what Goldberg does, that those at the reins of a “communist” state will always be too corrupt — or corruptible — to properly orchestrate the system. No, when the matter is a “communist” government, it is important to ask where we’ll find the angelic leaders. But an even better question is, “Where will we find the angelic followers?”

We should first note why I have the word communist in quotation marks above. Under classical Marxism, there is *no such thing* as a communist government; rather, communism is the culmination of the socialist revolution, the stage at which the state has just melted away and people live harmoniously and voluntarily in a utopia of economic equality. Of course, for people to co-exist peacefully without any governing institutions and for them to voluntarily abide by the principle “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” would require a wholesale change in man’s nature.

But what of the type of government we typically call communist, the behemoth that controls the means of production and ensures, at least among the commoners, the equal sharing of wealth (or misery)? Well, on a small scale, this had been tried long before Karl Marx penned his manifesto.

In 1826, Welsh social reformer Robert Owen instituted a commune in New Harmony, Indiana. This was nothing unusual, as there were literally hundreds of communes in early America. A few examples would be the Ephrata Commune, founded in Pennsylvania in 1732; the Shaker Community, founded in New



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on January 12, 2012

York in 1787; the Oneida Colony, also founded in New York, in 1848; and the Amana communes, founded in Iowa in 1854. Yet there was a difference: While the other communes were religious, Owen — who was sometimes called “The Father of English Socialism” — started a secular commune. Another difference was that New Harmony wasn’t very harmonious: It started disintegrating within a year.

In contrast, the Christian communes demonstrated great staying power. For example, the Oneida Colony endured 80 years, until 1930; and the Shakers reached their high-water mark 50 years after their inception and remained fairly numerous until approximately 1890 — despite a strict celibacy rule that made procreation impossible! (And there are still a few Shakers around even now.)

When considering socialist Owen’s failure, I’m reminded of G.K. Chesterton’s observation that today we have “Christian values floating around detached from one another.” Like the religious communes, Owen was patterning himself (at least loosely) after the first Christians, who, the Bible tells us, “held all things in common.” Like the religious communes, he dispensed with the profit motive. Unlike them, however, he did not have the “God motive.”

You see, the Christian communitarians believed that they were doing God’s will. For example, as was common among Christians, the Shakers actually considered productive labor a religious calling. And, to put it simply, whether you’re driven by a conviction that you’re participating in a divine plan or that you’re earning eternal salvation, it amounts to the same thing: a pretty darn strong motivation.

In other words, communism involves an absence of not only the material incentive, but also the spiritual one; it is thus completely bereft of incentive. And it is silly to draw any equivalence between Christian communes — which were *based around* that spiritual incentive — and communism, which is *explicitly hostile* to it. There is no incentive to be productive for mammon; there is no incentive to be productive for God. And, ultimately, there is no incentive to be productive for the greater good (i.e., your fellow man or the state) because, absent God and His moral law, “good” is reduced to a matter of perspective, to taste. In a communist system, there not only is no meaning, no reason to soldier on, there isn’t even much for the Hedonist, such as the hope of greater wealth and the worldly pleasures it can bring. In a nutshell, providing incentive to do only the bare minimum for survival, communism inspires little productivity.

This is why it’s a grave mistake to call, as many do, America’s early Christian communes “experiments in communism.” It’s not just that these religionists never called themselves communist; it’s not just that the early ones couldn’t even have done so because the word “communist” wasn’t originated until 1841. It’s not just semantics. It’s that the suffix “ism” denotes a doctrine or theory; thus, when you combine “commune” with “ism,” you’ve changed what is merely a label for a place and lifestyle model into a label for an ideology.

And, again, inherent in that ideology is the absence of both financial and spiritual incentive.

Thus, in just the way that it isn’t communism if the profit motive exists, it isn’t so if the God motive does.

And as motive decreases, action decreases in exact proportion.

This has, by the way, nothing to do with whether you believe God exists — only with whether you believe human nature exists. People will work for money, or for God, or for both.

They won’t work for nothing.

And no amount of wishing by utopian dreamers can change man’s nature.



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This is why, as Catholic monk Thomas Merton ultimately concluded, communal living only works in small, voluntarily associating, monastery-like groups. And it's why *communism* doesn't work at all.

Not in practice.

Not on paper.

Not in a million years.



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