



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on July 14, 2021

There's Only ONE Thing That Can Stave Off Socialism: Morality

"The only thing that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history," remarked German philosopher Georg Hegel. This comes to mind when considering polls showing that young people are increasingly taking a dim view of "capitalism" and that socialism has gained popularity. It's a trend that may augur a dystopian socialist future for the United States unless, avers one writer, economic freedom's apologists go beyond materialist appeals and make a *moral* case for their beliefs.



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Writing at *National Review*, Samuel Gregg cites a new Axios/Momentive poll showing that slightly fewer Americans view capitalism positively today than they did two years ago, with the positive-negative number changing from 61 percent/36 percent in 2019 to 57-36 now. More significantly, however, is that the real driver of "topline change" the past two years has been "young adults' perceptions of capitalism," [reports](#) SurveyMonkey.com. The site continues:

Today, 18-34 year-olds are almost evenly split between those who view capitalism positively and those who view it negatively (49% vs. 46%). Two years ago, that margin was a gaping 20 points (58% vs. 38%). By contrast, views among adults ages 35 and older haven't budged, with wide margins of 35-64 year-olds and 65+ saying they view capitalism in a positive light.

Among adults in Gen Z (ages 18-24), perceptions of capitalism are truly underwater: 42% have a positive view and 54% have a negative view.

And more specifically, young Republicans have seen real movement in the past two years: in 2019, 81% of Republicans and GOP leaners age 18-34 had a positive view of capitalism; today, that number has fallen to 66%. Among Republicans 35 and older, views haven't shifted as substantially.

While perceptions of capitalism have changed rapidly among young adults, perceptions of socialism have changed more incrementally among all age groups. Slightly fewer young adults now than in 2019 say they have a positive view of socialism (51% now vs. 55% in 2019). But that dip is offset by slight increases in the number of adults ages 35-64 and 65+ who say they have a favorable view of socialism.

Socialism is still viewed negatively overall; 52 percent of Americans give it a thumbs-down while 41 percent reckon the ideology positively. Yet this is striking in a nation that, decades ago, rightly reacted to socialism as a vampire does to a cross.

(Unsaid: Part of this is driven by immigration-fired demographic change, with an ever increasing percentage of our population having origins in socialism-favoring countries — e.g., south-of-the-border



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nations.)

Also note that people in general, and young Americans in particular, often don't know what socialism is; the word sure *sounds* good, however (hey, it sounds "social"!). This brings us to an often ignored point: Much of this is *marketing* — and conservatives' marketing is, frankly, awful.

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Surveys have shown that many people dislike the *term* "capitalism." Don't be surprised because this isn't a bug but a feature; the word, after all, was *originated by socialists* — and, rest assured, they weren't thinking about flattering the system with the label.

Thus should we instead use the term "economic freedom"; replace "capitalism" with it in surveys, and "Voila!" the system will assuredly poll far better.

Despite this reality, I received intense pushback from conservatives when suggesting the above years ago. That's how married to the term they were. (Do you now know why conservatives never saw a culture war they couldn't lose?)

Yet going beyond labels brings us to Gregg's arguments. He [points out](#) that while young people rightly perceive that the "economy is rigged in favor of the privileged and well-connected," they don't grasp that this has nothing to do with economic freedom and everything to do with cronyism. This is only exacerbated by socialism, too, because the "bigger the government, the more likely cronyism will prevail," Gregg correctly points out.

Gregg further states that it isn't sufficient to tell the young how socialism's track record pales in comparison to economic freedom's, as they also want a "just" economy. He then reminds us that renowned figures "such as Adam Smith, Wilhelm Röpke, F. A. Hayek, and Michael Novak ... didn't hesitate to defend markets on economic and moral grounds." We should, too.

Yet one stumbling block is that, in accordance with our age's relativism, I've found that even many conservatives (especially those libertarianism-oriented) can be rather cynical about "morality." They often associate it with Church Lady types or a narrow sliver of issues — i.e., sexual matters. In reality, however, everything we argue about involves morality; were it otherwise, we *wouldn't be arguing about it*.

We battle over matters of Truth, not taste. Some may, for example, argue that there should be "sin taxes" on soda because health problems "cost society money" (not the government's business, actually), and underlying this assertion is that it's *wrong* to cost society money. It would be insane to say, "_____ isn't wrong, but I want to take action against it, anyway." No one argues, however, about whether it's better to drink one flavor or another; this is readily understood to be mere taste.

Now, Gregg points out that many young people are concerned about "income inequality." The proper response to this is that equality tells you nothing about quality, as I explained in-depth [here](#).

As for the socialism/economic freedom debate in general, Gregg mentions that in June and under Heritage Foundation auspices, he had the opportunity to instruct a group of diverse young people on the morality and economics of markets. He said that while many of them accepted that markets were more efficient than planned economies, they were poorly schooled in economic scholarship. Then Gregg wrote, getting down to the matter's crux:

Among other things, understanding these arguments involves explaining that self-interest,



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as understood by Adam Smith, is not the same as greed, and showing that socialism could only work if governments were capable of knowing everything going on in the economy at any moment in time all the time. But perhaps the most decisive argument for markets that resonated with the students was what I'll call a morally realist understanding of human nature.

Say, for example, you view humans as beings with reason and free will, who alone among all the Earth's species possess the gift of creativity, who are simultaneously individual and social, who are driven to a considerable degree by self-interest, who are capable of moral greatness but also prone to error, and who can't know everything. If you believe these things, you will surely arrive at very different economic conclusions than someone who doesn't, deep down, believe that humans are free, creative, capable of knowing and choosing the truth, but also self-interested and fallible.

"Therein lies the recipe for explaining to younger Americans why markets work and socialism fails," Gregg then states. "Socialism is grounded upon a conception of human beings which is, in a word, false."

This is true. If people were "good enough" for a socialist government to work — if they'd be industrious and noble merely in deference to their fellow man's welfare — we wouldn't need government in the first place. But they're not (and the people who rise to power under a socialist government are the worst of all).

Much more could be said, but I'll conclude by pointing out that there's an aspect of the morality-socialism issue Gregg doesn't address: *personal* morality — or virtue. As explained in "[Written in the Eternal Constitution](#)," if a people descends into vice and becomes characteristically greedy, covetous, and envious, no amount of logic will sway its citizenry from socialist appeals. The head cannot compete with a twisted heart, for misguided emotion is like darkness: The more there is, the less you can see.



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