



Socialism is becoming a thing in America. Now what?

Tim Morris

April 22, 2019

The early frontrunner for the 2020 Democratic Party presidential nomination is a self-described democratic socialist.

The Democratic Party's 21 declared (so far) candidates are running on platforms that include Medicare for all, universal health care, free college tuition and a universal basic income of \$1,000 per month for all Americans funded by the government.

The Democratic Socialists of America, an organization founded in 1982, saw two of its members — Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib — elected to the U.S. House of Representatives last year.

We have come a long way since German sociologist Werner Sombart was compelled to ask in his famous 1906 essay: "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?"

Sombart was trying to understand why strong left-wing political movements had sprung up in European countries but not in the United States.

He concluded that the relative affluence of American workers in a capitalist system had stymied the more radical movements of socialism and fascism here.

"On the shoals of roast beef and apple pie," he wrote, "socialist utopias are sent to their doom."

The rise of U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders as the possible Democratic Party standard-bearer next year, the early influence that Ocasio-Cortez is having on public debate and the ambitious agendas of its presidential candidates might prompt Sombart to revisit his thesis.

It also means that Americans should understand how capitalism and socialism, the world's two primary economic systems, actually work and how they differ. But that discussion must come in an environment that makes rational political conversation almost impossible.

"We have entered an exceptionally polarized form of political debate in which people don't listen to each other," Tom G. Palmer says. "If you disagree with me, I conclude you're a bad person. And if you're a bad person why would I want to listen to you?"

Palmer, the executive vice president for International Programs at the Atlas Network, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and director of Cato University, says he thinks it's important that we overcome that. He speaks out strongly for free markets and capitalism but notes that the inflammatory rhetoric comes from both sides.

“The kind of anger on the Democratic left that is propelling socialist candidates to the forefront is fueled by the mirror anger on the right,” he says. “And this has been propelled by the Trump phenomenon, his willingness to demonize people. And then it has generated a corresponding response, which means people are not willing to listen to each other but fundamentally not even willing to live with each other in the same country.”

To have “a serious conversation,” Palmer says we should start with some basic definitions about “which social institutions, which political, economic, legal institutions produce which outcomes rather than arguing about whether someone is a good person or not.”

He will address some of those issues as part of the Free Market Speaker Series sponsored by Metairie Park Country Day School and Isidore Newman School. His talk at 6 p.m. Tuesday (April 23) at Newman’s Henson Auditorium is free and open to the public.

While his goal is a rational discussion, Palmer doesn't downplay the urgency of the debate.

"I think we are approaching a kind of a crisis ... that many people have lost confidence that the institutions of constitutionally limited government are superior to dictatorship.

"I mean this is one of the things that's so shocking in public opinion polls is the increasing percentage, especially of young people, who agree with statements that democracy isn't a good thing and dictatorship might be preferable. And I find that very, very worrisome. And it is connected to the rise in public support, especially among very young people, of socialism."

A Gallup poll, for example, showed that in 2010, 68 percent of people 18- to 29-years old said they approved of capitalism, while 51 percent said they approved of socialism. In August 2018, that same age group backed socialism over capitalism, 51 percent to 45 percent.

Palmer says the reversal is particularly surprising when the news brings daily reports of the how a socialist dictatorship has dragged Venezuela from "the highest per capita income country in Latin America" to widespread starvation.

Political decisions about economic, legal and governmental systems require an informed public.

Socialism has sailed past the “shoals of roast beef and apple pie” to plant its flag in America. It’s time to have the conversation.