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## Cultural Commentary: Since Senators Socialize, Does that Make Them Socialists?

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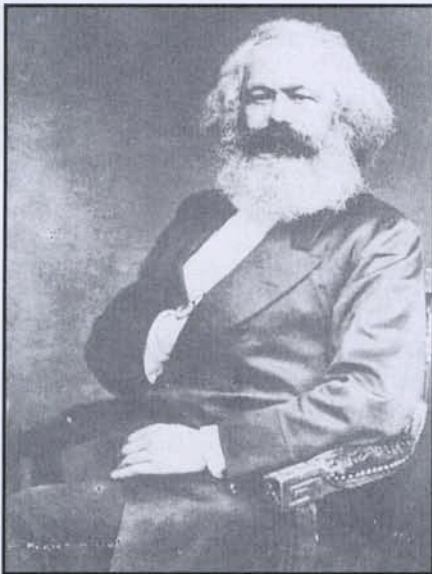
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## CULTURAL COMMENTARY

### Since Senators Socialize, Does That Make Them Socialists?

*William C. Levin*



Karl Marx

I have enjoyed the Senate and House debates about health care as much as anyone. After all, the acting is surprisingly good. Any elected official can express emotions like rage more forcefully and convincingly than Sylvester Stallone ever has. Besides, the televised debates have a quality that even the best theater lacks; they are about real events. No matter what emerges, we are going to spend and redistribute billions of health care dollars. So I have spent many hours watching, and a few yelling at the screen.

I know I should not yell at the television. It is, after all, the great unseeing eye. It is stuck on send, and cannot respond. But I could not help myself, especially when certain members of congress talked about how we don't want government dictating our health choices and how we are on the brink of socialized medicine and a socialist America. As a sociologist I take it personally that some senators feel they can sink a program by describing it with a "soc" word. Beware those socialist, socialized, social workers and sociologists. It reminded me of the time that Archie Bunker concluded that "People who live on communes are commune-ists."

All this talk about socialism drove me nuts not because I thought it would sink the various health care proposals. I actually didn't like any of them very much. (Though I did dislike some more than others.) What got me acting like Alphonse D'Amato in ideological heat was the fractured misuse of perfectly honorable language for political purposes. If we keep using these "soc" terms as if they were roughly equivalent pejoratives, we will never be able to act responsibly in our collective interests. It seems to me that we ought to face up to the fact that we are all "socialists" in a way. In fact, the very act of taking part in social life is based on the same things that senators who yell about socialism want us to fear. Let me explain, and in the explaining, I hope

it will become clear why slinging around "soc" words as if they were bullets is like accusing humans of being damned air-breathers. I'll begin with the basics of membership, which is where the "soc" words are rooted.

Sociologists are in the business of understanding what allows humans to deal with one another in everyday life. Physicists want to discover the forces that govern the operations of the physical universe (gravity seems to be one), biologists want to understand the forces that govern the operation of living beings (immune systems seem to be important) and sociologists are interested in discovering the forces that regulate our interactions. We are bound as friends, marriage partners, business associates, contractual partners, enemies, professional colleagues, tennis opponents, neighbors, classmates, cousins and Americans. The list of such relationships goes on, essentially without end. Each has its rules for interaction and responsibility to one another. Why and how do these relationships develop? Is there some force at the root of all relationships that makes them understandable?

Consider a human in total isolation. This person who lives, let's say, in an isolated cave in Alaska, has total free will. Within the limits of the physical world she can do whatever she wants. But she is also at the mercy of the elements. She can freeze, starve, or perish of boredom. The advantages of interaction with other people are obvious. Forming groups allows for the distribution of risk. We can, in short, take care of one another better than we can of ourselves. But the formation of groups requires that each member give up some of the free will they would have in isolation. Think of the group as a collection of the free will of its members, each of whom gives up some portion of their independence in order to benefit from association with others. All social groups are made this



way. Here are a few examples that cover the range of possibilities.

American citizenship carries with it great rights and responsibilities. As members of this great collective we surrender some economic free will (we must pay taxes to get services) but gain the right to pursue prosperity. We surrender some physical free will (we cannot, for example, go places that belong to others) but gain the privacy in our homes that such restrictions allow. And we surrender some verbal free will (we cannot say whatever we like, especially if it is intended to damage the lives of others) but gain the protection of our lives from such unrestricted speech. American society is a compilation of all these restrictions and benefits, worked out over three centuries and codified in law.

Social organization also works this way at the other end of the spectrum. When I was 15 I desperately wanted to make the high school basketball team. The first step was the freshman team. We had to go to practices in which the coach denied us the right to talk without permission, the right to go to any other activities when practices were scheduled, and even the right to defend ourselves against ridicule for errors we made. The same kids who at home were telling their parents to stay out of our lives, were giving coaches total control over our lives for a few hours a day.

A last example, also at the "micro" end of the scale, is the marriage. It seems like half of television is devoted to the examination of the compromises required by people who agree to spend their lives with one another. You don't have to watch Geraldo, Oprah, Maury or Sally-Jesse to know that the freedoms we had when single are up for negotiation after we begin to live with a significant other. You can't buy whatever you want, eat whatever and whenever, or spend your time doing whatever you wish. If you want the benefits of living with, and loving, another person, you must consider yourself as a member of a "we", a

partnership for mutual benefit in which the loss of some free will is the price of membership.

So, assuming that all this makes sense, you might well ask what the big deal is. So membership limits free will in a number of ways. Why yell at the television about a few senators glomming up the language with a few "soc" words? Well, as I see it the problem is huge. It is not that elected representatives don't understand the nature of collective membership and action. They do. What angers me is that they ruin the quality of the debate when they trot out the word "socialism" in order to tar collective programs they dislike, then laud equally expensive collective programs they favor. In America we pay a great deal in taxes for a military that can defend us against a wide range of threats. Defense is socialized because it would not only be inefficient for us to defend ourselves household-by-household, but given the world in which we live it would be worthless. Are defenders of the defense arm of our society socialists?

In America domestic policing is also socialized because it is more efficient to pay for a professional police force than to count on law enforcement by individuals. It is also a good deal less scary to do so. And we have socialized education in America, and pay for it through property or income taxes, because we have collectively decided that it is in our interests. Yes, there is also a system of private education in addition to our collective system. But it exists independently (mostly) of the public one. Those who wish to pay for it do so in addition to their payments to public schooling. They don't like it, but they do it because they are forced by the rest of the society to do so. There is also some private policing, such as what industry pays for to protect their property. Segments of the society continually debate about the adequacy of our collective institutions for their purposes. Wealthy people, and some re-

ligious people want to be freed of their need to pay for education they think is inadequate for their children. They either want to be freed of the need to pay, or want money from the public pool to pay for their versions of education. This is part of the American system of distributing costs and benefits of membership in the society.

We pay for thousands of activities to be provided by trained and organized service organizations. Our elected representatives know that and agree that it is the necessary core of the society. The yelling starts when decisions are to be made about what kind of free will is to be lost, who will suffer and to what degree. In short, the debate is always about who will pay. In the heated talk about health care in America there is no question about the fact that the costs are already socially distributed. We do not care for ourselves as totally unencumbered individuals. We already belong to a great (meaning huge) health care collective. We go to doctors, nurses and technicians in clinics and hospitals. In collaboration with health care professionals, legislators, and drug companies the insurance industry already limits what care will be covered, and who can belong to the system. And there are already wide variations in the quality of the health care available to Americans and in the amount contributed by Americans to belong. How many times have you been told how good the health care of U.S. Senators is, and how little it costs them?

All I ask is that the debates over our collective efforts in America be conducted in ways that allow us to understand what is being done. If we decide to change the way we distribute burdens and benefits in any area of our lives, let us know what the new terms might be. I think we can deal with complex decisions so long as the terms of the debate are free of poison.

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