

Originally delivered before the University Club in New York, April 18, 1950. First printed by *Commerical and Financial Chronicle*, May 4, 1950.

Included as a chapter in *Planning for Freedom and Sixteen Other Essays and Addresses*, and published by Libertarian Press, 1952.

Reprinted in 2018 by the Mises Institute and published under the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Mises Institute
518 West Magnolia Avenue
Auburn, Alabama 36832
mises.org

THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD LEADS TO SOCIALISM

by Ludwig von Mises

THE FUNDAMENTAL DOGMA OF ALL BRANDS OF SOCIALISM and communism is that the market economy or capitalism is a system that hurts the vital interests of the immense majority of people for the sole benefit of a small minority of rugged individualists. It condemns the masses to progressing impoverishment. It brings about misery, slavery, oppression, degradation and exploitation of the working men, while it enriches a class of idle and useless parasites.

This doctrine was not the work of Karl Marx. It had been developed long before Marx entered the scene. Its most successful propagators were not the Marxian authors, but such men as Carlyle and Ruskin, the British Fabians, the German professors, and the American Institutionalists. And it is a very significant fact that the correctness of this dogma was contested only by a few economists who were very soon silenced and barred from access to the universities, the press, the leadership of political parties and, first of all, public office. Public opinion by and large accepted the condemnation of capitalism without any reservation.

1. Socialism

But, of course, the practical political conclusions which people drew from this dogma were not uniform. One group declared that there is but one way to wipe out these evils, namely to abolish capitalism entirely. They advocate the substitution of public control of the means of production for private control. They aim at the establishment of what is called socialism, communism, planning, or state capitalism. All these terms signify the same thing. No longer should the consumers, by their buying and abstention from buying, determine what should be produced, in what quantity and of what quality. Henceforth a central authority alone should direct all production activities.

2. Interventionism, Allegedly a Middle-of-the-Road Policy

A second group seems to be less radical. They reject socialism no less than capitalism. They recommend a third system, which, as they say, is as far from capitalism as it is from socialism, which as a third system of society's economic organization, stands midway between the two other systems, and while retaining the advantages of both, avoids the disadvantages inherent in each. This third system is known as the system of interventionism. In the terminology of American politics it is often referred to as the middle-of-the-road policy.

What makes this third system popular with many people is the particular way they choose to look upon the problems involved. As they see it, two classes, the capitalists and entrepreneurs on the one hand and the wage earners on the other hand, are arguing about the distribution of the yield of capital and entrepreneurial activities. Both parties are claiming the whole cake for themselves. Now, suggest these mediators, let us make peace by splitting the disputed

value equally between the two classes. The State as an impartial arbiter should interfere, and should curb the greed of the capitalists and assign a part of the profits to the working classes. Thus it will be possible to dethrone the moloch capitalism without enthroning the moloch of totalitarian socialism.

Yet this mode of judging the issue is entirely fallacious. The antagonism between capitalism and socialism is not a dispute about the distribution of booty. It is a controversy about which two schemes for society's economic organization, capitalism or socialism, is conducive to the better attainment of those ends which all people consider as the ultimate aim of activities commonly called economic, viz., the best possible supply of useful commodities and services. Capitalism wants to attain these ends by private enterprise and initiative, subject to the supremacy of the public's buying and abstention from buying on the market. The socialists want to substitute the unique plan of a central authority for the plans of the various individuals. They want to put in place of what Marx called the "anarchy of production" the exclusive monopoly of the government. The antagonism does not refer to the mode of distributing a fixed amount of amenities. It refers to the mode of producing all those goods which people want to enjoy.

The conflict of the two principles is irreconcilable and does not allow for any compromise. Control is indivisible. Either the consumers' demand as manifested on the market decides for what purposes and how the factors of production should be employed, or the government takes care of these matters. There is nothing that could mitigate the opposition between these two contradictory principles. They preclude each other. Interventionism is not a golden mean between capitalism and socialism. It is the design of a third system of society's economic organization and must be appreciated as such.

3. *How Interventionism Works*

It is not the task of today's discussion to raise any questions about the merits either of capitalism or of socialism. I am dealing today with interventionism alone. And I do not intend to enter into an arbitrary evaluation of interventionism from any preconceived point of view. My only concern is to show how interventionism works and whether or not it can be considered as a pattern of a permanent system for society's economic organization.

The interventionists emphasize that they plan to retain private ownership of the means of production, entrepreneurship and market exchange. But, they go on to say, it is peremptory to prevent these capitalist institutions from spreading havoc and unfairly exploiting the majority of people. It is the duty of government to restrain, by orders and prohibitions, the greed of the propertied classes lest their acquisitiveness harm the poorer classes. Unhampered or *laissez-faire* capitalism is an evil. But in order to eliminate its evils, there is no need to abolish capitalism entirely. It is possible to improve the capitalist system by government interference with the actions of the capitalists and entrepreneurs. Such government regulation and regimentation of business is the only method to keep off totalitarian socialism and to salvage those features of capitalism which are worth preserving. On the ground of this philosophy, the interventionists advocate a galaxy of various measures. Let us pick out one of them, the very popular scheme of price control.

4. *How Price Control Leads to Socialism*

The government believes that the price of a definite commodity, e.g., milk, is too high. It wants to make it possible for the poor to give their children more milk. Thus it resorts to a price ceiling

and fixes the price of milk at a lower rate than that prevailing on the free market. The result is that the marginal producers of milk, those producing at the highest cost, now incur losses. As no individual farmer or businessman can go on producing at a loss, these marginal producers stop producing and selling milk on the market. They will use their cows and their skill for other more profitable purposes. They will, for example, produce butter, cheese or meat. There will be less milk available for the consumers, not more. This, of course, is contrary to the intentions of the government. It wanted to make it easier for some people to buy more milk. But, as an outcome of its interference, the supply available drops. The measure proves abortive from the very point of view of the government and the groups it was eager to favor. It brings about a state of affairs, which — again from the point of view of the government — is even less desirable than the previous state of affairs which it was designed to improve.

Now, the government is faced with an alternative. It can abrogate its decree and refrain from any further endeavors to control the price of milk. But if it insists upon its intention to keep the price of milk below the rate the unhampered market would have determined and wants nonetheless to avoid a drop in the supply of milk, it must try to eliminate the causes that render the marginal producers' business unremunerative. It must add to the first decree concerning only the price of milk a second decree fixing the prices of the factors of production necessary for the production of milk at such a low rate that the marginal producers of milk will no longer suffer losses and will therefore abstain from restricting output. But then the same story repeats itself on a remoter plane. The supply of the factors of production required for the production of milk drops, and again the government is back where it started. If it does not want to admit defeat

and to abstain from any meddling with prices, it must push further and fix the prices of those factors of production which are needed for the production of the factors necessary for the production of milk. Thus the government is forced to go further and further, fixing step by step the prices of all consumers' goods and of all factors of production — both human, i.e., labor, and material — and to order every entrepreneur and every worker to continue work at these prices and wages. No branch of industry can be omitted from this all-around fixing of prices and wages and from this obligation to produce those quantities which the government wants to see produced. If some branches were to be left free out of regard for the fact that they produce only goods qualified as non-vital or even as luxuries, capital and labor would tend to flow into them and the result would be a drop in the supply of those goods, the prices of which government has fixed precisely because it considers them as indispensable for the satisfaction of the needs of the masses.

But when this state of all-around control of business is attained, there can no longer be any question of a market economy. No longer do the citizens by their buying and abstention from buying determine what should be produced and how. The power to decide these matters has devolved upon the government. This is no longer capitalism; it is all-around planning by the government, it is socialism.

5. The Zwangswirtschaft Type of Socialism

It is, of course, true that this type of socialism preserves some of the labels and the outward appearance of capitalism. It maintains, seemingly and nominally, private ownership of the means of production, prices, wages, interest rates and profits. In fact, however, nothing counts but the government's unrestricted autocracy.

The government tells the entrepreneurs and capitalists what to produce and in what quantity and quality, at what prices to buy and from whom, at what prices to sell and to whom. It decrees at what wages and where the workers must work. Market exchange is but a sham. All the prices, wages, and interest rates are determined by the authority. They are prices, wages, and interest rates in appearance only; in fact they are merely quantity relations in the government's orders. The government, not the consumers, directs production. The government determines each citizen's income, it assigns to everybody the position in which he has to work. This is socialism in the outward guise of capitalism. It is the *Zwangswirtschaft* of Hitler's German Reich and the planned economy of Great Britain.

6. German and British Experience

For the scheme of social transformation which I have depicted is not merely a theoretical construction. It is a realistic portrayal of the succession of events that brought about socialism in Germany, in Great Britain, and in some other countries.

The Germans, in the First World War, began with price ceilings for a small group of consumers' goods considered as vital necessities. It was the inevitable failure of these measures that impelled them to go further and further until, in the second period of the war, they designed the *Hindenburg plan*. In the context of the *Hindenburg plan* no room whatever was left for a free choice on the part of the consumers and for initiative action on the part of business. All economic activities were unconditionally subordinated to the exclusive jurisdiction of the authorities. The total defeat of the Kaiser swept the whole imperial apparatus of administration away and with it went also the grandiose plan. But when in 1931 Chancellor Brüning embarked anew on a policy of price control

and his successors, first of all Hitler, obstinately clung to it, the same story repeated itself.

Great Britain and all the other countries which in the First World War adopted measures of price control, had to experience the same failure. They too were pushed further and further in their attempts to make the initial decrees work. But they were still at a rudimentary stage of this development when the victory and the opposition of the public brushed away all schemes for controlling prices.

It was different in the Second World War. Then Great Britain again resorted to price ceilings for a few vital commodities and had to run the whole gamut proceeding further and further until it had substituted all-around planning of the country's whole economy for economic freedom. When the war came to an end, Great Britain was a socialist commonwealth.

It is noteworthy to remember that British socialism was not an achievement of Mr. Attlee's Labor Government, but of the war cabinet of Mr. Winston Churchill. What the Labor Party did was not the establishment of socialism in a free country, but retaining socialism as it had developed during the war and in the post-war period. The fact has been obscured by the great sensation made about the nationalization of the Bank of England, the coal mines, and other branches of business. However, Great Britain is to be called a socialist country not because certain enterprises have been formally expropriated and nationalized, but because all the economic activities of all citizens are subject to full control of the government and its agencies. The authorities direct the allocation of capital and of manpower to the various branches of business. They determine what should be produced. Supremacy in all business activities is exclusively vested in the government. The people are reduced to the status of wards, unconditionally bound to obey orders. To the businessmen, the former entrepreneurs, merely

ancillary functions are left. All that they are free to do is to carry into effect, within a nearly circumscribed narrow field, the decisions of the government departments.

What we have to realize is that price ceilings affecting only a few commodities fail to attain the ends sought. On the contrary. They produce effects which from the point of view of the government are even worse than the previous state of affairs which the government wanted to alter. If the government, in order to eliminate these inevitable but unwelcome consequences, pursues its course further and further, it finally transforms the system of capitalism and free enterprise into socialism of the Hindenburg pattern.

7. Crises and Unemployment

The same is true of all other types of meddling with the market phenomena. Minimum wage rates, whether decreed and enforced by the government or by labor union pressure and violence, result in mass unemployment prolonged year after year as soon as they try to raise wage rates above the height of the unhampered market. The attempts to lower interest rates by credit expansion generate, it is true, a period of booming business. But the prosperity thus created is only an artificial hot-house product and must inexorably lead to the slump and to the depression. People must pay heavily for the easy-money orgy of a few years of credit expansion and inflation.

The recurrence of periods of depression and mass unemployment has discredited capitalism in the opinion of injudicious people. Yet these events are not the outcome of the operation of the free market. They are on the contrary the result of well-intentioned but ill-advised government interference with the market.

There are no means by which the height of wage rates and the general standard of living can be raised other than by accelerating the increase of capital as compared with population. The only means to raise wage rates permanently for all those seeking jobs and eager to earn wages is to raise the productivity of the industrial effort by increasing the per-head quota of capital invested. What makes American wage rates by far exceed the wage rates of Europe and Asia is the fact that the American worker's toil and trouble is aided by more and better tools. All that good government can do to improve the material well-being of the people is to establish and to preserve an institutional order in which there are no obstacles to the progressing accumulation of new capital required for the improvement of technological methods of production. This is what capitalism did achieve in the past and will achieve in the future too if not sabotaged by a bad policy.

8. *Two Roads to Socialism*

Interventionism cannot be considered as an economic system destined to stay. It is a method for the transformation of capitalism into socialism by a series of successive steps. It is as such different from the endeavors of the communists to bring about socialism at one stroke. The difference does not refer to the ultimate end of the political movement; it refers mainly to the tactics to be resorted to for the attainment of an end that both groups are aiming at.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels recommended successively each of these two ways for the realization of socialism. In 1848, in the *Communist Manifesto*, they outlined a plan for the step-by-step transformation of capitalism into socialism. The proletariat should be raised to the position of the ruling class and use its political supremacy "to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie." This, they declare, "cannot be effected except by means of

despotic inroads on the rights of property and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which in the course of the movement outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionizing the mode of production.” In this vein they enumerate by way of example ten measures.

In later years Marx and Engels changed their minds. In his main treatise, *Das Capital*, first published in 1867, Marx saw things in a different way. Socialism is bound to come “with the inexorability of a law of nature.” But it cannot appear before capitalism has reached its full maturity. There is but *one* road to the collapse of capitalism, namely the progressive evolution of capitalism itself. Then only will the great final revolt of the working class give it the finishing stroke and inaugurate the everlasting age of abundance.

From the point of view of this later doctrine Marx and the school of orthodox Marxism reject all policies that pretend to restrain, to regulate and to improve capitalism. Such policies, they declare, are not only futile, but outright harmful. For they rather delay the coming of age of capitalism, its maturity, and thereby also its collapse. They are therefore not progressive, but reactionary. It was this idea that led the German Social Democratic party to vote against Bismarck’s social security legislation and to frustrate Bismarck’s plan to nationalize the German tobacco industry. From the point of view of the same doctrine, the communists branded the American New Deal as a reactionary plot extremely detrimental to the true interests of the working people.

What we must realize is that the antagonism between the interventionists and the communists is a manifestation of the conflict between the two doctrines of the early Marxism and of

the late Marxism. It is the conflict between the Marx of 1848, the author of the *Communist Manifesto*, and the Marx of 1867, the author of *Das Capital*. And it is paradoxical indeed that the document in which Marx endorsed the policies of the present-day self-styled anti-communists is called the *Communist Manifesto*.

There are two methods available for the transformation of capitalism into socialism. One is to expropriate all farms, plants, and shops and to operate them by a bureaucratic apparatus as departments of the government. The whole of society, says Lenin, becomes “one office and one factory, with equal work and equal pay,”¹ the whole economy will be organized “like the postal system.”² The second method is the method of the Hindenburg plan, the originally German pattern of the welfare state and of planning. It forces every firm and every individual to comply strictly with the orders issued by the government’s central board of production management. Such was the intention of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 which the resistance of business frustrated and the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional. Such is the idea implied in the endeavors to substitute planning for private enterprise.

9. Foreign Exchange Control

The foremost vehicle for the realization of this second type of socialism in industrial countries like Germany and Great Britain is foreign exchange control. These countries cannot feed and clothe their people out of domestic resources. They must import large quantities of food and raw materials. In order to

¹Cf. V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (Little Lenin Library No. 14, New York, 1932), p. 84.

²Ibid., p. 44.

pay for these badly needed imports, they must export manufactures, most of them produced out of imported raw material. In such countries almost every business transaction directly or indirectly is conditioned either by exporting or importing or by both exporting and importing. Hence the government's monopoly of buying and selling foreign exchange makes every kind of business activity depend on the discretion of the agency entrusted with foreign exchange control. In this country matters are different. The volume of foreign trade is rather small when compared with the total volume of the nation's trade. Foreign exchange control would only slightly affect the much greater part of American business. This is the reason why in the schemes of our planners there is hardly any question of foreign exchange control. Their pursuits are directed toward the control of prices, wages, and interest rates, toward the control of investment and the limitation of profits and incomes.

10. Progressive Taxation

Looking backward on the evolution of income tax rates from the beginning of the Federal income tax in 1913 until the present day, one can hardly expect that the tax will not one day absorb 100 percent of all surplus above the income of the average voter. It is this that Marx and Engels had in mind when in the *Communist Manifesto* they recommended "a heavy progressive or graduated income tax."

Another of the suggestions of the *Communist Manifesto* was "abolition of all right of inheritance." Now, neither in Great Britain nor in this country have the laws gone up to this point. But again, looking backward upon the past history of the estate taxes, we have to realize that they more and more have approached the goal set by Marx. Estate taxes of the height they have already

attained for the upper brackets are no longer to be qualified as taxes. They are measures of expropriation.

The philosophy underlying the system of progressive taxation is that the income and the wealth of the well-to-do classes can be freely tapped. What the advocates of these tax rates fail to realize is that the greater part of the income taxed away would not have been consumed but saved and invested. In fact, this fiscal policy does not only prevent the further accumulation of new capital. It brings about capital decumulation. This is certainly today the state of affairs in Great Britain.

11. The Trend Toward Socialism

The course of events in the past thirty years shows a continuous, although sometimes interrupted progress toward the establishment in this country of socialism of the British and German pattern. The United States embarked later than these two other countries upon this decline and is today still farther away from its end. But if the trend of this policy will not change, the final result will only in accidental and negligible points differ from what happened in the England of Attlee and in the Germany of Hitler. The middle-of-the-road policy is not an economic system that can last. It is a method for the realization of socialism by installments.

12. Loopholes Capitalism

Many people object. They stress the fact that most of the laws which aim at planning or at expropriation by means of progressive taxation have left some loopholes which offer to private enterprise a margin within which it can go on. That such loopholes still exist and that thanks to them this country is still a free country is certainly true. But this "loopholes capitalism" is not a lasting system.

It is a respite. Powerful forces are at work to close these loopholes. From day to day the field in which private enterprise is free to operate is narrowed down.

13. The Coming of Socialism is Not Inevitable

Of course, this outcome is not inevitable. The trend can be reversed as was the case with many other trends in history. The Marxian dogma according to which socialism is bound to come “with the inexorability of a law of nature” is just an arbitrary surmise devoid of any proof.

But the prestige which this vain prognostic enjoys not only with the Marxians, but with many self-styled non-Marxians, is the main instrument of the progress of socialism. It spreads defeatism among those who otherwise would gallantly fight the socialist menace. The most powerful ally of Soviet Russia is the doctrine that the “wave of the future” carries us toward socialism and that it is therefore “progressive” to sympathize with all measures that restrict more and more the operation of the market economy.

Even in this country which owes to a century of “rugged individualism” the highest standard of living ever attained by any nation, public opinion condemns *laissez-faire*. In the last fifty years, thousands of books have been published to indict capitalism and to advocate radical interventionism, the welfare state, and socialism. The few books which tried to explain adequately the working of the free-market economy were hardly noticed by the public. Their authors remained obscure, while such authors as Veblen, Commons, John Dewey, and Laski were exuberantly praised. It is a well-known fact that the legitimate stage as well as the Hollywood industry are no less radically critical of free enterprise than are many novels. There are in this country many

periodicals which in every issue furiously attack economic freedom. There is hardly any magazine of opinion that would plead for the system that supplied the immense majority of the people with good food and shelter, with cars, refrigerators, radio sets, and other things which the subjects of other countries call luxuries.

The impact of this state of affairs is that practically very little is done to preserve the system of private enterprise. There are only middle-of-the-roaders who think they have been successful when they have delayed for some time an especially ruinous measure. They are always in retreat. They put up today with measures which only ten or twenty years ago they would have considered as undiscussable. They will in a few years acquiesce in other measures which they today consider as simply out of the question. What can prevent the coming of totalitarian socialism is only a thorough change in ideologies.

What we need is neither anti-socialism nor anti-communism but an open positive endorsement of that system to which we owe all the wealth that distinguishes our age from the comparatively straitened conditions of ages gone by. ►

THE MISES INSTITUTE, founded in 1982, is a teaching and research center for the study of Austrian economics, libertarian and classical liberal political theory, and peaceful international relations. In support of the school of thought represented by Ludwig von Mises, Murray N. Rothbard, Henry Hazlitt, and F.A. Hayek, we publish books and journals, sponsor student and professional conferences, and provide online education. Mises.org is a vast resource of free material for anyone in the world interested in these ideas. For we seek a radical shift in the intellectual climate, away from statism and toward a private property order.

For more information, see mises.org, write us at contact@mises.org, or phone us at 1.800.OF.MISES.

Mises Institute
518 West Magnolia Avenue
Auburn, Alabama 36832

MISES INSTITUTE

Ludwig von Mises Institute
518 W. Magnolia Ave., Auburn, Ala. 36832