

# Nygaard Notes

## *Independent Periodic News and Analysis*

Number 648

November 29, 2019

---

### Fighting Socialism

People who know me know that I love the Minnesota State Fair. When I go to the Fair, I try to look at everything, which is of course impossible. But I do usually manage to see a lot. I was tempted this year to pay twenty dollars to get “My Name on a Grain of Rice.” But I didn’t (and, no, I don’t know how they do it). Maybe next year.

Instead, at the 2019 Fair I went out of my way to visit the booth of the Minnesota Republican Party. I did not have my photo taken with a life-sized cardboard cutout of President Trump, but I did find the results of a survey that they were conducting to determine the “Top Causes” on the minds of fair-goers this year. The top “cause”, not surprisingly, was “Immigration and Border Security.” Also no surprise was cause #2: The Economy. But I was intrigued by the third most pressing cause in this admittedly unscientific survey: “Fighting Socialism.”

It shouldn’t have surprised me. President Trump highlighted this “cause” in the last State of the Union speech in January, when he declared that “Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country.” The essence of socialism, in his words, is “government coercion, domination and control.”

Shortly thereafter, on Valentine’s Day, the Republican National Committee published a piece headlined “The Democrat’s Burgeoning Love Affair With Socialism.” They called it a “research” piece.

The business website MarketWatch reported in September that “Trump campaign manager Brad Parscale last week tweeted out “Socialism SUCKS.” (What would we do without Twitter?)

The National Republican Congressional Committee is a committee which works to elect Republicans to the United States House of Representatives. Right now the NRCC is chaired (I’m sorry to say) by a member of my own state’s Congressional delegation, 6<sup>th</sup> District Congressman Tom Emmer. CNN reported in July that Emmer “urged reporters at a breakfast roundtable event to ask where vulnerable members [of Congress] stand on ‘socialized medicine.’ He dropped the words ‘socialism’ or ‘socialist’ six times in one minute. And he nicknamed House Democrats the ‘Red Army.’ It was another sign that Republican leaders in Congress have adopted the style of President Donald Trump, attempting to brand all Democrats as socialists.”

It’s hard to prove a negative, but I’m relatively certain that no major candidate has said anything positive—or anything at all—about socialized medicine. It’s a rare person who even knows what differentiates a socialized medical system from a single-payer system. Most people likely think that a single-payer system IS socialized medicine. It’s not.

Despite all that, it’s a good bet that we’ll be hearing about socialism more in the next year than we have since Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy dominated the headlines in the early 1950s with his accusations of Communists burrowed into every nook and cranny of the U.S. government.

So this issue of Nygaard Notes, and the following one or two issues, will take a brief look at socialism. We’ll consider what people seem to think about socialism, and what people want from our political system and what it has to do with socialism. Then I hope to go beyond that and look at the philosophical basis of the polarizing struggle that is ever-so-much more important (and interesting) than the “Democrat vs Republican” story that dominates our public discussion. Sounds kind of ambitious, even to me! But, since I haven’t explored this territory in these pages since at least 2005, I think it’s time to revisit. Speaking of Joseph McCarthy, let’s take a quick look at the 2019 model of red-baiting. ♦

Greetings,

This issue of Nygaard Notes takes a look at socialism. Why talk about socialism right now? Well, it's being talked about more these days (in establishment circles) than at any time that I can recall over the past several decades. That's mostly to the good, but at the same time many powerful people have chosen to reduce the word to a scary symbol and then use it as a weapon. Since there's little agreement on what the word means, how can it be a weapon? I wondered...

So, in this issue I hope to get you thinking about your OWN ideas about socialism. This will prepare you for the next issue, in which I plan to discuss the deep philosophical divide that a heated pseudo-debate about a scary symbol is meant to obscure.

I do appreciate your emails and letters. Keep 'em coming!

Mysteriously yours,

Nygaard

## Branding the Democrats

The primary strategy of the Trumpist forces leading up to the 2020 elections is to engage in a massive drive in which they attempt to “brand” the Democratic Party as “socialist.” It was nearly 14 years ago (NN #315, December 23, 2005) that I published a piece with a brief explanation of the practice known as “Branding.” That’s a long time ago, so I think we could use a very brief refresher course.

Here’s the equation I published in 2005: Emotions + Symbols + Association = Branding. The process is most often associated with corporate marketing, but the practice of Branding has permeated the larger culture. USAmerican elections are giant branding fests, with millions of dollars spend attempting to positively brand one’s own candidate and negatively brand one’s opponent.

Staff writer Hendrik Hertzberg, writing in the New Yorker Magazine ‘way back in 2006, noted that Republicans had a habit of referring to the Democratic Party as the “Democrat Party.” Wrote Hertzberg, “There’s no great mystery about the motives behind this deliberate misnaming. ‘Democrat Party’ is a slur, or intended to be—a handy way to express contempt.”

That’s Branding.

Here is the inimitable Edward L. Bernays, the “Father of Public Relations,” writing in his 1928 book “Propaganda.” Speaking of World War I, he said that “...the manipulators of patriotic opinion made use of the mental clichés and the emotional habits of the public to produce mass reactions against the alleged atrocities, the

terror, and the tyranny of the enemy.”

Speaking of mass reactions, here is an excerpt from a December 2018 piece published by the “conservative” Heritage Foundation called “What Americans Must Know About Socialism”:

*Here are the realities of socialism and its grandmaster, Karl Marx:*

1. *Socialism has never worked anywhere.*
2. *The founding father of socialism is the messianic Karl Marx.*
3. *Socialism forbids the age-old right of private property.*
4. *Socialism insists that human nature is malleable, not constant.*
5. *Socialism depends upon dictatorship to attain and remain in power.*
6. *Socialism is responsible for the deaths of more than 100 million victims.”*

Here’s one of the “Key Takeaways” from this 18-page horror story: “This is the reality of socialism — a pseudo-religion grounded in pseudo-science and enforced by political tyranny.”

More branding.

Tyranny, dictatorship, whatever. You get the idea: whatever it takes to “produce mass reactions” of fear and loathing toward the “brand” known as the “Democrat Party”, in the lead-up to the 2020 elections.



→→ Edward L. Bernays again: “Business realizes that its relationship to the public is not confined to the manufacture and sale of a given product, but includes at the same time *the selling of itself and of all those things for which it stands in the public mind.*” [Emphasis added by Nygaard.] The current branding campaign includes an attempt to assure that, in the public mind, “socialism” stands for everything bad. See the Heritage Foundation list above.

The converse is equally true: creating an almost Pavlovian aversion response to a political opponent—“and all those things for which it stands in the public mind”—is simply what might be called “negative branding.” If it works, lots of voters will either vote for the “not Democrat” or they’ll stay home on Election Day. It’s a win either way for those doing the branding.

The process, in summary, works like this:

Words are symbols that normally have a cognitive function. That is, they have a meaning that can be understood by thinking about it. In the Branding process,

the cognitive function is stripped away, leaving only *an emotion-laden symbol* (in this case, Democrat) that is then *associated* with something terrible (in this case, Socialism). The goal is to “produce mass reactions” when presented to a public that really knows little about the literal underlying meaning of either symbol or word.

The actual nature of Socialism matters not, nor does it matter how many, if any, Democrats actually promote Socialism in thought, word, or deed. That’s all in the realm of facts, which have no value in the branding process.

Consider again the equation: Emotions + Symbols + Association = Branding. Now add an ingredient: Emotions + THINKING + Symbols + Association. The moment we add this ingredient is the moment we have started to build a resistance to “branding.” It’s not hard to do. It just takes a little time and practice.

So let’s take a little time to think about the meaning of Socialism. ♦

---

## What IS Socialism?

The History.com website warns that “The wide range of interpretations and definitions of socialism across the political spectrum, and the lack of a common understanding of what socialism is or how it looks in practice reflects its complicated evolution.”

I won’t go into that complicated evolution here. I just begin with those words from History.com so you’ll understand when I don’t even attempt to offer a general definition of socialism. It would only be my interpretation, which isn’t what I think would be most useful in helping you to examine your OWN ideas about the nature of this economic/social/cultural/political/sociological concept. And now is the time to examine your ideas about socialism, as it will help you to keep your bearings as an anti-socialism propaganda storm engulfs us all in the buildup to the 2020 elections.

What follows is a collection of comments about socialism that I hope will leave you with a sense of how wide the range of interpretations really is.

The Oxford English Dictionary says that socialism is “A political and economic theory of social organization which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole.”

The Daily Kos re-published (when, I don’t know) a 2012 blog post entitled “75 Ways Socialism Has Improved America.” That author claimed that “Socialism is taxpayer funds being used collectively to benefit society as a whole, despite income, contribution, or ability.”

The Black Socialists of America say that socialism is “A range of social and economic systems characterized by social ownership of the means of production,” and adding that “It can also mean the transitional stage between Capitalism and Communism, sometimes referred to as the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’”

I’ve often advocated for a social insurance approach to various problems, and when I do I often quote from a think tank called the National Academy of Social Insurance, or NASI. Concerned about being branded “socialistic,” NASI this past May published a piece called “Socialism or Social Insurance?” in which they said this:

“Antagonists of social insurance often impede a meaningful conversation by conflating the concept of collective action with that of collective ownership of the means of producing goods and services, which is the original definition of socialism. The former, not the latter, is a key basis of social insurance.”

**Socialism** *from page 3*

The Merriam Webster Dictionary people offer a “Usage Guide” called “Socialism vs. Social Democracy” that I found interesting:

“In the many years since [the word] socialism entered English around 1830, it has acquired several different meanings. It refers to a system of social organization in which private property and the distribution of income are subject to social control, but the conception of that control has varied, and the term has been interpreted in widely diverging ways, ranging from statist to libertarian, from Marxist to liberal. In the modern era, ‘pure’ socialism has been seen only rarely and usually briefly in a few Communist regimes. Far more common are systems of social democracy, now often referred to as democratic socialism, in which extensive state regulation, with limited state ownership, has been employed by democratically elected governments (as in Sweden and Denmark) in the belief that it produces a fair distribution of income without impairing economic growth.”

A couple of months ago, the website Common Dreams published a piece by Robert Freeman entitled “Teaching Democrats to Talk About Socialism”, in which he talked about socialist policies, saying, “Well, let’s be clear about what socialism is. Socialism is when people come together in an economy to solve common problems that none of us could solve on our own. Does that sound radical? Let’s test it. Anybody here ever driven on an Interstate highway? That’s socialism. It was everybody in the economy solving a really

important problem—how to move about the country efficiently—that none of us could have solved on our own. It was the creation of Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Republican president.”

The Socialist magazine/website Jacobin, in their 2016 publication *The ABCs of Socialism*, take issue with Freeman and the many who make the argument that public funding = socialism:

“For all of Bernie Sanders’s virtues, his campaign for president has only thickened the fog of ideological confusion. At one campaign stop last year, he endorsed the thinking behind the most simplistic of these memes: ‘When you go to your public library, when you call your fire department or the police department, what do you think you’re calling? These are socialist institutions.’ By that logic any sort of collective project funded by tax dollars and accomplished through government action is socialism.”

What’s missing here, says Jacobin, is democracy: “The bitter experiences of the twentieth century have taught us that socialism won’t further the cause of human freedom if the political and administrative structures of government aren’t thoroughly democratized... Only under these conditions would government activity be synonymous with democratic socialism. Instead of posing an abstract concept of ‘government’ against the forces of capital, we should begin the hard work of conceiving and building new institutions that can make government of the people, by the people, and for the people a reality.” ♦

*In the next Nygaard Notes: Public opinion and socialism; Individualism; Competition; Cooperation; and Solidarity.*

---

### “Quote” of the Week: “*The Old Rules Are Changing Fast*”

“Generation Z (age 24 and younger) has a more positive view of the word ‘socialism’ than previous generations, and—along with millennials [age 25-39]—are more likely to embrace socialistic policies and principles than past generations, according to a new Harris Poll...”

“The word ‘socialism’ does not carry the same stigma it did in the past, now that it has been resurrected by celebrity politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Young people’s political views often change as they grow older, but their support for socialistic policies is a sign that the old rules of politics are changing fast.” (Editor’s note: “Celebrity politicians”!)

That’s from a Harris Poll conducted last February for the news site Axios.

**Nygaard Notes****P.O. Box 6103****Minneapolis, MN 55406****E-mail: [nygaard@nygaardnotes.org](mailto:nygaard@nygaardnotes.org)****Web: [www.nygaardnotes.org](http://www.nygaardnotes.org)**