

# Letters from an American

## February 23, 2020

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Ukraine journalist Marko Suprun and Russian-born foreign policy journalist Julia Ioffe said something interesting this morning on CNN. They were pointing out that observers often make the mistake of thinking that Russian disinformation is designed to pit the American left against the American right to sow chaos. But, in fact, they pointed out, Russian disinformation is designed to pit the American left and the American right against the American center, because it is in the great American center that democracy lives.

It is, in fact, true that, despite the many stories out there about how divided we are as a country, there is a vast American center in which most people agree about most things, including hot button issues like abortion, gun control, and immigration. In August 2019, for example, only 12% of Americans believed that abortion should be outlawed entirely, and 59% of Americans worry that it is becoming too difficult, rather than too easy, to obtain an abortion. Sixty percent of Americans want stricter gun laws, with 77% wanting stricter red flag laws, taking a gun from someone deemed to be dangerous, if a family member indicates concern and 70% if a police officer does. In June 2019, 76% of Americans said immigration is a good thing for the country.

Most Americans also agree on what we think government should do. Traditionally, we like capitalism, which is an economic system in which individuals themselves can accumulate money to own raw materials and factories, and the systems they can use to make a profit, that they can then pocket to do whatever they wish. We like the idea that a regular person can have a good idea and work hard to turn that idea into a successful business. Americans generally think that capitalism promotes innovation and progress. But at the same time, we don't believe that successful businessmen should be able to cheat or injure their workers, pollute our fields and waters, and use our roads and airports for free just to make as much money as they possibly can.

We like capitalism, but we generally believe it needs to be regulated. If it isn't, our history tells us that rich men take over society, and use their power to guarantee that poorer people and their children can't rise. Our push and pull over how to shape that regulation and policies to promote equal access to opportunity are a key part of our democracy.

Disinformation attacks this consensus. It warns us that the Democrats are ushering in "socialism" to America, but this warning is a throwback to Reconstruction, when black men began to vote just as the government instituted national taxes. Racist opponents began to argue that African Americans were voting to redistribute the wealth of hardworking white taxpayers into their own pockets through government projects. In this telling, giving men of color civil rights and a voice in their own government meant a redistribution of wealth. In 1871, opponents of black voting began to call this "socialism."

This historical term, peculiar to America, has nothing to do with actual twentieth-century century socialism. That system of government was hypothesized by Karl Marx, a German political philosopher and historian in the mid-nineteenth century, who argued that history had six phases, defined by who owned the means of production. Capitalism was the fourth stage, in which wealthy industrialists took over the government and exploited workers. At the end of this stage, workers would realize they were being exploited, become politically aware, and rise up and overthrow the government.

Marx's fifth stage was socialism: workers would take over the government, and through it, own the tools and the raw materials and the factories: the means of production. They would redistribute the wealth society produced to everyone, according to need. This is why socialist governments talk about "the people's" stuff, held in trust by the state, which "the people" now owned. Theoretically.

Marx's sixth state was communism, in which there was no money and no government, and in which everyone joined together for the common good. (This stage fascinates me. Marx was a correspondent for the New York Daily Tribune during the Civil War. I cannot fathom how he could envision a world without war. Maybe after the Civil War he simply needed to believe that humans could create a future that would never again suffer similar carnage. Anyway....)

Socialism, then, is state ownership of the means of production, and since in that system the state is owned by the workers, it will take the wealth of the elite oppressors and use it for the good of all.

This is not on the table in modern America. It has never really been on the table. The best socialists ever did in America in a national election was in 1912, when socialist candidate for president Eugene V. Debs won slightly more than 900,000 votes out of more than 15 million cast, about 6% of the vote.

The "socialists" the Republicans are warning about-- the Democrats-- are not trying to take over the means of production by a worker-owned state. Much like black men after the Civil War, they simply want to regulate capitalism to make sure that men of wealth do not abuse their power, and to use government to give ordinary people access to resources and opportunity to enable them to rise if they work hard. Those interested in government regulation are concerned that in modern America, power has shifted too much toward those at the top of the economy, and that they are using their wealth to control politics, skewing our laws in their favor to the detriment of ordinary Americans.

The impulse to regulate capitalism in order to protect American freedom and equality is very much in keeping with our history: Republican Theodore Roosevelt embraced it at the national level in the early 1900s, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt followed suit in the 1930s, and presidents of both parties continued the practice after World War II, understanding that the economic concentration of the modern era meant that the government must protect the interests of individual Americans.

Cries of “socialism” from the right have been part of the attack on America’s center by making it sound like the popular regulation of capitalism belongs to the far left. People in the center can—and should—disagree about what, exactly, the government should do to guarantee that all Americans have equality of opportunity in the twenty-first century economy, but talking about that sort of regulation is well within the boundaries of American centrism.

A candidate talking about funding healthcare is not advocating socialism. A candidate talking about the government owning the hospitals and medical industries is advocating socialism. A candidate talking about regulating business? Not socialism. A candidate talking about nationalizing all industries? Socialism.

Recognizing how disinformation campaigns use words to turn us against each other will help us to pull their fangs.

Notes:

Suprun and Ioffe: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/business/2020/02/23/the-hill-releases-long-awaited-review-of-journalist-who-spread-ukraine-conspiracy.cnn>

Statistics: <https://www.people-press.org/2019/08/29/u-s-public-continues-to-favor-legal-abortion-oppose-overturning-roe-v-wade/>

<https://www.npr.org/2019/10/20/771278167/poll-number-of-americans-who-favor-stricter-gun-laws-continues-to-grow>

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/259103/new-high-say-immigration-important-problem.aspx>

1912 vote: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/1912>

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