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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# How to Argue With a Young Socialist

So you can't stand Trump. Do you want him to control the universities and run the hospitals?

By Crispin Sartwell

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Trump supporters argue with Trump critics in Hollywood, Aug. 18. PHOTO: MARK RALSTON/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

If you're reading this newspaper, you're probably not flirting with democratic socialism. But many young Trump-resisters are, so you may find yourself in debate with an energetic new democratic socialist, perhaps even around the family dinner table. The socialist-vs.-capitalist debate has a certain 1960s or 1840s flavor, and you may want to bone up on the arguments and find some contemporary clinchers. Here's one: The rise of Donald Trump displays exactly why socialism is a bad idea, in a way that a young leftist can readily understand.

Defining "socialism" is a classic problem and one of dubious usefulness, but start here: If the U.S. were to follow the advocates of democratic socialism, it would involve increasing state control of the economy in many dimensions. The welfare state would become even more pervasive and activist. Perhaps the government would guarantee things like universal employment at a living wage, as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has proposed.

In other words, socialism would dramatically increase the government's power and resources while making Americans more dependent on it for goods and necessities: food, clothing, shelter, education, health care. The socialist argument runs from the basic truth that all people ought to have these things to the apparently almost trivial corollary that the state should

provide them.

Under democratic socialism, these vast powers and resources would be overseen by elected officials. But to say the absolutely obvious, Mr. Trump was elected president in 2016. What would it mean, you can ask your young interlocutor, if the U.S. were a democratic socialist country and all that power fell into his hands? What if the Trump administration controlled the universities and ran the hospitals?

A government that feeds its citizens tells them what and whether to eat. And it is possible that the U.S. might end up someday with a leader that the socialists find even more abhorrent than Mr. Trump. So why, you can ask your young friend, is he so eager to give people he may hate so much more power over his own life?

This is one reason—one of several—that wanting the state to provide everything for everyone is simply a terrible idea. It should be obvious to the sort of people who are putting socialist ideas forward. Those on the left may well believe that the U.S. is a persistently racist country. They may believe that “mass incarceration” is an extension of Jim Crow. By this account, a socialist transition would put an even greater share of the nation’s output—every new welfare program or power—under the control, at least intermittently, of evil racists. Why would people with this view be so eager to create the powers they believe likely to oppress them?

Back in the day, socialism was accompanied by the notion that the whole human species was on a progressive arc, and that government was merely the citizenry acting together. Neither of these claims was ever plausible. Without them, the logic of socialism unravels. If the people who wield state power are no better or more trustworthy than anyone else, then the arc of history is liable to bend toward reaction or fascism or oppression. The more powers placed in the hands of government, the deeper this bend is likely to be.

Americans need to start talking about more realistic ways to provide for each other, and other solutions or at least reforms are possible. But right at this moment, with every Trumpian irruption, it should be clear, above all to the young leftist, that more government power is at least as likely to exacerbate as to ameliorate injustice.

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