

Red-Baiting and Racism: Socialism as a New Black Bogeyman

Share

Yesterday at 2:42pm

Red-Baiting and Racism: Socialism as the New Black Bogeyman

By Tim Wise

August 10, 2009

Throughout the first six months of his administration, President Obama--perhaps one of the most politically cautious leaders in contemporary history--has been routinely portrayed as a radical by his opponents on the far-right. In particular, persons who have apparently never actually studied Marxism (or if they did, managed to somehow find therein support for such things as bailing out banks and elite corporations) contend that Obama is indeed a socialist. Reducing all government action other than warmaking to part of a larger socialist conspiracy, the right contends that health care reform is socialist, capping greenhouse gas emissions is socialist, even providing incentives for driving fuel efficient cars is socialist. That the right insists upon Obama's radical-left credentials, even as they push an [Obama=Hitler meme](#) (something [they apparently think is fair](#), since, after all the Nazis were National *Socialists*, albeit the kind who routinely murdered the genuine article) only speaks to the special brand of crazy currently in vogue among the nation's reactionary forces.

As real socialists laugh at these clumsily made broadsides, and as scholars of actual socialist theory try and explain the absurdity of the analogies being drawn by conservative commentators, a key point seems to have been missed, and it is this point that best explains what the red-baiting is actually about.

It is not, and please make note of it, about socialism. Or capitalism. Or economics at all, per se. After all, President Bush was among the most profligate government spenders in recent memory, yet few ever referred to him in terms as derisive as those being hurled at Obama. Even when President Clinton proposed health care reform, those who opposed his efforts, though vociferous in their critique, rarely trotted out the dreaded s-word as part of their arsenal. They prattled on about "big government," yes, but not socialism as such. Likewise, when Ronald Reagan helped craft the huge FICA tax hike in 1983, in a bipartisan attempt to save Social Security, few stalwart conservatives thought to call America's cowboy-in-chief a closet communist. And many of the loudest voices at the recent town hall meetings--so many of which have been commandeered by angry minions ginned up by talk radio--are elderly folk whose own health care is government-provided, and whose first homes were purchased several decades ago with FHA and VA loans, underwritten by the government, for that matter. Many of them no doubt reaped the benefits of the GI Bill, either directly or indirectly through their own parents.

It is not, in other words, a simple belief in smaller government or lower taxes that animates the near-hysterical cries from the right about wanting "their country back," from those who have presumably hijacked it: you know, those known lefties like Tim Geithner and Rahm Emanuel. No, what differentiates Obama from any of the other big spenders who have previously occupied the White House is principally one thing--his color. And it is his color that makes the bandying about of the "socialist" label especially effective and dangerous as a linguistic trope. Indeed, I would suggest that at the present moment, socialism is little more than racist code for the longstanding white fear that black folks will steal from them, and covet everything they have. The fact that the fear may now be of a black president, and not just some random black burglar hardly changes the fact that it is fear nonetheless: a deep, abiding suspicion that African American folk can't wait to take whitey's stuff, as payback, as reparations, as a way to balance the historic scales of injustice that have so long tilted in our favor. In short, the current round of red-baiting is based on implicit (and perhaps even explicit) appeals to white racial resentment. It is Mau-Mauing in the truest sense of the term, and especially since Obama's father *was* from the former colonial Kenya! Unless this is understood, left-progressive responses to the tactic will likely fall flat. After all, pointing out the absurdity of calling Obama a socialist, given his real policy agenda, will mean little if the people issuing the charge were never using the term in the literal sense, but rather, as a symbol for something else entirely.

To begin with, and this is something often under-appreciated by the white left, to the right and its leadership (if not necessarily its foot-soldiers), the battle between capitalism and communism/socialism has long been seen as a racialized conflict. First, of course, is the generally non-white hue of those who have raised the socialist or communist banner from a position of national leadership. Most such places and persons have been of color: China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba, assorted places in Latin America from time to time, or the Caribbean, or in Africa. With the exception of the former Soviet Union and its immediate Eastern European satellites--which are understood as having had state socialism foisted upon them, rather than having it freely chosen through their own revolutions from below--Marxism in practice has been a pretty much exclusively non-white venture.

And even the Russians were seen through racialized lenses by some of America's most vociferous cold warriors. To wit, consider what General Edward Rowney, who would become President Reagan's chief arms negotiator with the Soviets, told Manning Marable in the late 1970s, and which Marable then recounted in [his book](#), *The Great Wells of Democracy*:

"One day I asked Rowney about the prospects for peace, and he replied that meaningful negotiations with the Russian Communists were impossible. 'The

Russians,' Rowney explained, never experienced the Renaissance, or took part in Western civilization or culture. I pressed the point, asking whether his real problem with Russia was its adherence to communism. Rowney snapped, 'Communism has nothing to do with it!' He looked thoughtful for a moment and then said simply, 'The real problem with Russians is that they are Asiatics'."

In the present day, the only remaining socialists in governance on the planet are of color: in places like Cuba or Venezuela, perhaps China (though to a more truncated extent, given their embrace of the market in recent decades) and, on the lunatic Stalinist fringe, North Korea. These are the last remaining standard-bearers, in leadership positions, who would actually use the term socialist to describe themselves. Given the color-coding of socialism in the 21st century, at the level of governance, to use the label to describe President Obama and his administration, has the effect of tying him to these "other" socialists in power. Although he has nearly nothing in common with them politically or in terms of his policy prescriptions, he is a man of color, so the connection is made, mentally, even if it carries no intellectual or factual truth.

Secondly, and even more to the point, we must remember what "socialism" is, especially in the eyes of its critics: it is, to them, a code for redistribution. Of course, some forms of socialism are more redistributive than others, and even late-stage capitalism tends to engage in some forms of very mild redistribution (as with the income tax code). But if you were to ask most who grow apoplectic at the mere mention of the word "socialism" for the first synonym that came to their mind, redistribution is likely the one they would choose. Surely it would be among their top two or three.

Now, given the almost instinctual connection made between socialism and redistribution, imagine what many white folks would naturally assume when told that this man, this black man, this black man with an African daddy, was a socialist. Even if those using the term didn't intend it to push racial buttons (and that is a decidedly large "if"), the fact remains that for many, it would almost certainly prompt any number of racial fears and insecurities: as in, the black guy is going to take from those who work and give to those who don't. And naturally, we all know (or at least our ill-informed prejudices tell us) who's in the first group and who's in the second one. Thus, the joke [making the rounds](#) on the internet, and likely in your workplace, about Obama planning on taxing aspirin "because it's white and it works." Or the guy with [the sign](#) at the April teabagger rally, which read, Obama's Plan: White Slavery. Or others who have carried overtly racist signs to frame their message: [signs suggesting that](#) Obama hopes to provide care for all brown-skinned illegal immigrants, while simultaneously murdering the white elderly, or that cast the President in [decidedly simian imagery](#), and refer to him, crudely but clearly as a monkey. Or Glenn Beck's [paranoid screed](#) from late July, which sought to link health care reform, and

virtually every single piece of Obama's political agenda to some kind of backdoor reparations scheme. This, coupled with Beck's even more unhinged claim to have discovered a [communist/black nationalist conspiracy](#) in the administration's Green Jobs Initiative. All because the initiative is headed up by author and activist Van Jones: a guy whose recent book explains how to save *capitalism* through eco-friendly efforts at development and job creation. So even there, it isn't about socialism, so much as the fact that Jones is black, and was once (for a couple of months) a nationalist, and has a goatee, and looks determined (read: *mean*) in some of his more contemplative press photos.

Fact is, the longstanding association in white minds between social program spending and racial redistribution has been well-established, by scholars such as [Martin Gilens](#), [Kenneth Neubeck](#), [Noel Cazenave](#), and [Jill Quadagno](#), among others. Indeed, it was only the willingness of past presidents like FDR to all but cut blacks out of income support programs that convinced white lawmakers and the public to sign on to any form of American welfare system in the first place: a willingness that waned as soon as people of color finally gained access to these programs beginning in the 50s and 60s. But even as strong as the social program/black folks association has been in the past, it has, until now, never had a black face to put with the effort. With a man of color in the position of president, it becomes far more convincing to those given to fear black predation already. It isn't just that the government will tax you, white people. It's that the black guy will. And for people like him. At your expense.

Much as the white right blew a gasket at the thought of bailing out homeowners with sub-prime and exploding mortgages a few months back (and if you listened to the rhetoric on the radio it was hard to miss the racial animosity that undergirded much of the conservative hostility to the idea, since they seemed to think only persons of color would be helped by such a plan), they now too often view Obama's moves to more comprehensive health care as simply another way to take from those whites who have "played by the rules" and give to those folks of color who haven't. Even as millions of whites would stand to benefit from health care reform--and all whites, as with people of color would enjoy greater choices with the very public option that has drawn the most fire--the imagery of the recipients has remained black and brown, as with all social programs; and the imagery of the persons who would be taxed for the effort has remained hard-working white folks.

By allowing the right to throw around terms like socialist to describe the President and socialism to describe his incredibly watered-down, generally big business friendly approach to health care, while not recognizing the memetic purpose of such arguments is to ensure that the right will succeed in their demonization campaign. To respond by pointing out how the plan really isn't socialist, or how Obama really isn't a socialist misses the point, which was never,

in the end, about economic systems or philosophies: none of which the folks on the right raising the most hell show any signs of understanding anyway. This noise is about race. It is about "othering" a President who is seen as a symbol of white dispossession: dispossession of white hegemony, white entitlement, white expectation, and white power, unquestioned and unchallenged from the darker skinned other. This is what animates the every move of the angry masses, individual exceptions notwithstanding. Unless the left begins pushing back, and insisting that yes, the old days are gone, white hegemony is dead, and deserved its demise, and that we will all be better off for it, the chorus of white backlash will only grow louder. So too will it grow more effective at dividing and conquering the working people who would benefit--all of them--from a new direction.

Tim Wise is the author of four books on race and racism. His latest is *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age*