

IN *Socialism and America** author Irving Howe, a socialist, wonders why socialism has not been more appealing to Americans. In a recent lecture, Dr. Robert Hessen of Stanford University, an anti-socialist, wonders the opposite, and titled his talk, "The Paradox of Socialism's Continued Popularity."

This often happens with polarized ideologies; each side thinks the other is dominating (cf. religious fundamentalists and secular humanists). In addition, in this case, each side is vague on what socialism is.

Hessen admits that Americans dislike the word "socialism" but that they want much of what socialism proposes. What he means is that Americans want a good deal of the "welfare state", and for purposes of discussion a distinction should be made.

The Scandinavian countries, loosely called "socialist", are really welfare states, with most commerce and industry in private hands. Americans, for the most part, also want industry in private hands and not in government hands. They do, however, want the cushions provided by the welfare state – unemployment insurance, medical assistance, social security, etc. As for Howe, he has written a whole book about socialism without defining it.

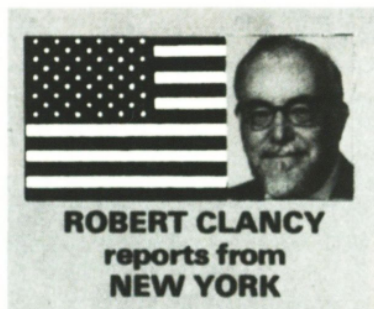
THE polarization may not be as extreme as it once was. Hessen's "new" libertarianism rejects the Social Darwinism of the 19th century with its law of the jungle. Howe wants more private initiative than socialism formerly tolerated. But contrasting programs are still there.

Hessen wants "capitalism" and the market to take care of everything, but with "rights" respected. Howe wants a planned economy, but democratically managed, not from the top. Hessen challenges the idealism of socialism, contending that its "brotherhood" requires coercion. Howe challenges the ability of capitalism to create the good society and says the "cooperative commonwealth" is a true ideal.

The libertarians are strong when it comes to the advantages of a free market over a planned economy, but weak when it comes to monopoly – especially land monopoly – and the victims of today's society: the unemployed, the homeless, the poor. All they can say is that government interference doesn't work. The socialists take cognizance of the economically distressed and the continual struggle for a living wage. But they are weak on incentives to produce and on enlarging the "pie" to be distributed.

An example of the weakness of socialism was seen in France. President Mitterand extended extra benefits to workers and reduced working hours – but had

MISSING THE POINT!



no plan to increase productivity.

The weakness of the libertarian argument is seen in the U.S. after more than four years of conservative economic policies. Poverty has increased, unemployment is up, the number of homeless people continues to grow.

HOWE admits that a new socialist program must avoid the dangers and inefficiencies of centralized control and instead advocates democratic management of industry. Sounds nice, but in fact there are already many examples in the U.S. where workers have taken over failing firms.

Some of these labour-owned enterprises work, some do not.

The point is missed in proposing "industrial democracy". Many workers do not want the responsibility but just want to do the job, get paid and go home. The important thing is free choice – and the more freedom there is, the more choice there is.

Hessen does not very well explain why Americans want the welfare state. He follows the inadequate argument that some naughty professors enamoured of

socialism spread its teachings and make it popular. This argument ignores the fact that, although governments pretty much followed a policy of non-interference in the economy for well over a century, there were periods of deep economic distress as well as chronic poverty. Is this not a better explanation of why people today demand the buffers of the welfare state?

SO SOCIALISTS and anti-socialists make their points by ignoring vast chunks of economic reality. Each side has a bit of the truth that they pass off as the whole truth. Their paradoxes are illuminated as soon as we study the question of *economic opportunity*. The basic economic opportunity is access to land on which and from which all people must live and which must be settled on equitable terms. This is missed by both camps.

It is true that the free market offers results immensely better than a planned economy – but it must be a truly free market with opportunities open to all.

The economic truths by-passed by both camps are the ones taught by Henry George. To attain the truly good society and the truly free society, we need to attend to the opening up of access to natural opportunities, to freeing the land from monopoly by his "simple and sovereign remedy" of fully taxing land values and allowing the free market to function properly. Amazingly, socialism and anti-socialism are almost reconciled in this way.

*Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985