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A Closet Capitalist Confesses

By Michael Novak

THE DAY I HEARD Michael Harrington say that most liberals are "closet socialists," I knew by my revulsion that I had to face an ugly truth about myself. For years, I had tried to hide, even from myself, my unconscious convictions. In the intellectual circles I frequent, persons with inclinations like my own are mocked, considered to be compromised, held at arm's length as security risks. We are easily intimidated.

The truth is there are probably millions of us. Who knows? Your brother or sister may be one of us. The fellow teaching in the class next to yours; the columnist for the rival paper; even the famous liberated poetess—our kind, hiding their convictions out of fear of retribution, lurk everywhere. Even now we may be corrupting your children.

We are the closet capitalists. Now, at last, our time has come. The whole world is going socialist. Nearly 118 out of 142 nations of the world are socialist tyrannies. A bare 24 are free-economy democracies. We are the world's newest, least understood and little loved minority. It is time for us to begin, everywhere, organizing cells of the Capitalist Liberation Front.

I first realized I was a capitalist when all my friends began publicly declaring that they were socialists, Harrington and John Kenneth Gailbraith having called the signal. How I wished I could be as left as they: Night after night I tried to persuade myself of the coherence of their logic; I did my best to go straight. I held up in the privacy of my room pictures of every socialist land known to me: North Korea, Albania, Czechoslovakia (land of my grandparents) and even Sweden. Nothing worked.

When I quizzed my socialist intellectual friends, I found they didn't like socialist countries, either. They all said to me: "We want socialism, but not like Eastern Europe." I said: "Cuba?" No suggestion won their assent. They didn't want to be identified with China (except that the streets seemed clean). Nor with Tanzania. They loved the *idea* of socialism.

"But what is it about this particular idea you like?" I asked. "Government control? Will we have a Pentagon of heavy industry?" Not exactly. Nor did they think my suggestion witty, that under socialism everything would function like the Post Office. When they began to speak of "planning," I asked, who would police the planners? They had enormous faith in politicians, bureaucrats and experts. Especially in experts.

"Will Mayor Daley have 'clout' over the planners?" I asked, seeking a little comfort. "Or congressmen from Mississippi?" My friends thought liberal-minded persons would make the key decisions. Knowing the nation, I can't feel so sure. Knowing the liberal-minded, I'm not so comforted.

Since they have argued that oil companies are now too large, I couldn't see how an HEW that included Oil would be smaller. My modest proposal was that they encourage monopoly in every industry and then make each surviving corporation head a cabinet officer.

See CAPITALISM, Page C5

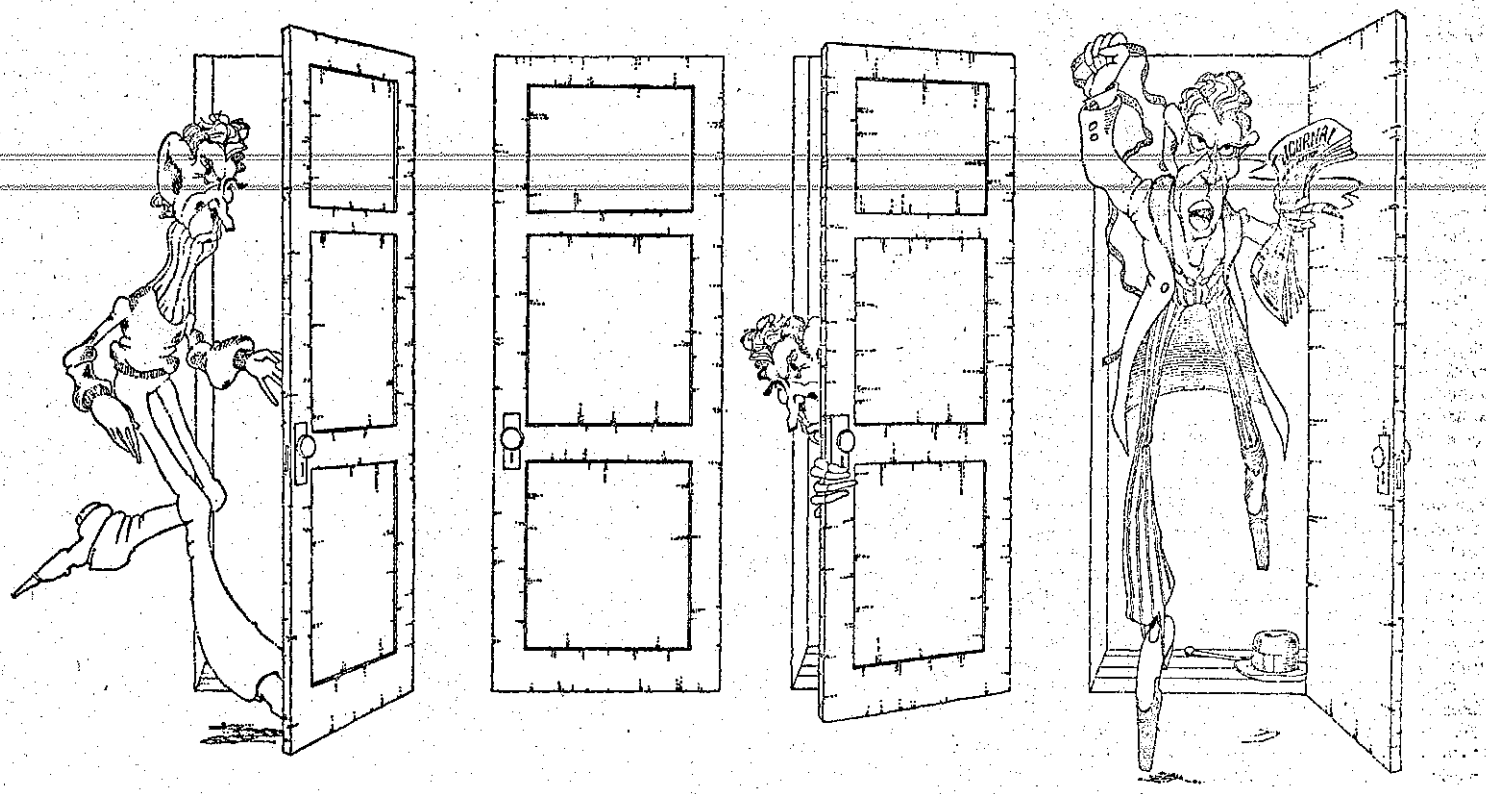
Capitalist Confesses

CAPITALISM, From Page C1

Practical discussions seemed beside the point. Finally, I realized that socialism is not a *political* proposal, not an *economic* plan. Socialism is the residue of Judaeo-Christian faith, without religion. It is a belief in community, the goodness of the human race and paradise on earth.

THAT'S WHEN I discovered I was an incurable and inveterate, as well as secret, sinner. I believe in sin. I'm for capitalism, modified and made intelligent and public-spirited, because it makes the world free for sinners. It allows human beings to do pretty much what they will. Socialism is a system built on belief in human goodness; so it never works. Capitalism is a system built on belief in human selfishness; given checks and balances, it is nearly always a smashing, scandalous success. Check Taiwan, Japan, West Germany, Hong Kong and (one of the newest nations in one of the recently most underdeveloped sectors of the world) these United States. Two hundred years ago, there was a China, and also a Russia. The United States was only a gleam in Patrick Henry's eye.

Wherever you go in the world, sin thrives better under capitalism. It's presumptuous to believe that God is on any human's side. (Actually, if capitalism were godless and socialism were deeply religious, the roles of many spokesmen in America would be reversed in fascinating ways.) But God did make human beings free. Free to sin. God's heart may have been socialist; his design was capitalist as hell. There is an innate tendency in socialism toward authoritarianism. Left to themselves, all human beings won't be good; most must be concerned. Capitalism, accepting human sinfulness, rubs sinner against sinner, making even dry wood yield a spark of grace.



By John Twohey—The Washington Post

Capitalism has given the planet its present impetus for liberation. Everywhere else they are hawking capitalist ideas: growth, liberation, democracy, investments, banking, industry, technology. Millions are alive, and living longer, because of medicine developed under capitalism. Without our enormous psychic energy, productivity and inventions, oil would still be lying under Saudi Arabia, undiscovered, unpumped and useless. Coffee, bananas, tin, sugar and other items of trade would have no markets. Capitalism has made the world rich, inventing riches other populations didn't know they had. And yielding sinful pleasures for the millions.

Six per cent of the world's population consumes, they say, 40 per cent of the world's goods. The same 6 per cent produces more than 50 per cent; far more than it can consume. No other system can make such a statement, even in lands more populous, older and richer than our own. As everybody knows, hedonism requires excess.

Look out, world! The closet capitalists are coming out. You don't have to love us. We don't need your love. If we can help you out, we'll be glad to. A system built on sin is built on very solid ground indeed. The saintliness of socialism will not feed the poor. The United States may be, as many of you say, the worthless and despicable prodigal son among the nations. Just wait and see who gets the fatted calf.