

Editorial | *The War of Ideas*

I am fascinated by the ebb and flow of ideas in the course of human history. Although ideas naturally take on new guise with every appearance—they must, after all, be articulated and applied within particular cultures (languages, religions, technologies)—they remain fundamentally recognizable throughout history. In a given time and place one idea may seem to be ascendant and its rival decisively beaten; but it is just a matter of time before the vanquished idea returns, like Napoleon out of exile, and enjoys its own, more or less ephemeral, triumph.

The repetitive character that such interplay lends to the past has led many philosophers to posit one variation or another of a cyclical theory of history. The author of *Ecclesiastes*—a text so ably and provocatively unpacked in this issue by J. Daryl Charles—made a similar observation in what is likely the book’s best-known line: “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). G. W. F. Hegel offered a sophisticated version of cycle theory in his thesis/antithesis/synthesis model and it remains influential among philosophers of history to the present.

Karl Marx famously “turned Hegel on his head” in his creation of dialectical materialism.¹ Marx’s economics was a pure form of socialism and it is the fortunes of that idea in particular that inspires this meditation. To boil down the economic history of the last two hundred years to a battle between socialism and capitalism would be simplistic, but the basic ideological divide is real and understanding it does illuminate the contours of the recent past.

Considering the volatility of the conflict between socialist and capitalist visions that characterized the latter half of the twentieth century, it came as a shock to most when socialism exited the scene in 1989 with a whimper rather

than a bang. The apparent triumph of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism led some to believe that we had reached “the end of history.”² As socialism reached its nadir in the 1990s, even political programs and economic policies that fell short of complete public ownership of the means of production became tainted by association. The story, persuasively told by Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw in *Commanding Heights* (1998) was that the once-celebrated John Maynard Keynes, robust government intervention, and central planning had been discredited; the once-maligned Friedrich Hayek, free markets, and limited government had won the day.³ We had steered off of the road to serfdom: Lesson learned.

That story looks increasingly dated, as most stories do once the pendulum has swung back the other way. Fukuyama, Yergin, and Stanislaw wrote before “Latin America’s Left Turn,” inaugurated by the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998.⁴ They wrote before Great Britain had pivoted decisively away from the policies of the Thatcher era, and before the rise of Bernie Sanders and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez as forces to be reckoned with in the Democratic Party in the United States.

This turn is plausible because, of course, the idea of socialism was never really vanquished. It lived on in places such as Cuba, China, North Korea, and university faculties everywhere. Many of the tenets that had made it attractive, moreover—a commitment to economic equality and an exaltation of the common good over individual rights—retained their appeal even as the economic system with which they were associated lost credibility.

It is plausible also because every narrative must simplify history in order to make it intelligible and the socialist-capitalist narrative was no exception. The combatants in the conflict between socialism and capitalism were not always easily identifiable, the lessons of its battles not easily apprehended. Critical questions remain unanswered, or at least hotly debated. Was the New Deal a step down the road to serfdom or a necessary and salutary adaptation that saved and strengthened capitalism? Was it China’s uniquely successful brand of socialism or its market-oriented reforms that fostered rapid economic development and the lifting of millions out of poverty? Is the socioeconomic life of the Scandinavian nations superior to that of the United States? If so, is it because they are more socialist, or because they are more market-friendly?⁵

For the Christian believer, there is a theological layer to such historical narratives. The “task set to mankind in the cultural commandment of creation,” averred the Reformed theologian Herman Dooyeweerd, “should be fulfilled in a continuous contest with the historical development of the power of sin, a contest to be waged through the spiritual power of the Redeemer.”⁶ Granting the truth of this fundamentally spiritual view of history, the Christian’s job to discern the

best way forward in the realm of political economy—if perhaps in some respects made “easier” by grace—remains a challenging one. To narrow it to a single question, using the aforementioned terms: Is the appellation *Christian socialism* an oxymoron, a tautology, or something in between?

The vocation of this journal is to contribute to this ongoing task of discernment by permitting and encouraging the kind of interdisciplinary dialogue that issues from and reinforces recognition of the ultimate coherence of creation and the unity of truth. Thus, to take but three examples from the present volume: Robert Black weaves together business history, economics, and ethics to illustrate the importance of sound accounting practice for a well-functioning society; Philippe Jacquinet and Arnaud Pellissier-Tanon apply the moral theology of Catholic social teaching to business management in their analysis of whistleblowing; and Jonathan Pidluzny and Murray Bessette engage political history, political economy, and political philosophy in their examination of the American Founders’ views on vice and virtue in the political order.

This process of discernment often progresses through disagreement, and debate among people of good will on matters of public import is anathema neither to a Christian worldview nor to the editorial policy of this journal. James Bruce and Aeon Skoble provide a model of such debate in their pointed-yet-charitable jousting over the merits of academic tenure in this issue’s Controversy feature.

Valiant battle in the arena of ideas is no substitute for “the spiritual power of the Redeemer,” for, apart from God, “all is vanity and a chasing after the wind” (Eccl. 1:14). Yet we strive to apprehend and disseminate what is true even so, for “wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.” (Eccl. 2:13).

—Kevin Schmiesing, Executive Editor

Notes

1. Although that is the more popular phrase, Marx's own formulation was that he found Hegel's dialectic "standing on its head" and that Marx turned it "right side up again" by replacing Hegel's conflict of ideas with what Marx viewed as the real conflict of material economic forces. Karl Marx, "Afterword to the Second German Edition," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971 [1873]), 20. I thank Dylan Pahman for pointing out this detail.
2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
3. Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998). The book was adapted as a PBS documentary in 2002 and the book was revised and updated in the same year.
4. Jorge G. Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2006), <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/politics/left.htm>. As I write, it appears that the region is in the midst of yet another course correction: See, for example, Devon Haynie, "Latin America's Right Turn," *USNews.com*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-01-09/the-consequences-of-latin-americas-move-to-the-right>.
5. For dueling views see, among many others, George Lakey, "Here's Why Viking Economics Are Superior," *AlterNet*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.alternet.org/2016/07/heres-why-viking-economics-are-superior/>; and Kelly McDonald, "Scandinavia Isn't a Socialist Paradise?" *The Federalist*, August 11, 2015, <http://thefederalist.com/2015/08/11/scandinavia-isnt-a-socialist-paradise/>.
6. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, trans. David H. Freeman and H. de Jongste (1936; repr., Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 2:262; quoted in Eduardo J. Echeverria, *Slitting the Sycamore: Christ and Culture in the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2008), 22.