

# Social studies

## American history has forgotten that many of its heroes were socialists



*"It is not only radical or currently unfashionable ideas that the texts leave out - it is all ideas, including those of their heroes."*  
- Frances FitzGerald

In America, "socialism" is almost an obscene word. In the minds of most Americans, the word calls to mind images of the Berlin Wall and a tyrannical government; it is a virtual synonym for "communism."

When Hillary Clinton floated around her national health care plan a few years back, Republican leaders on Capitol Hill were quick to denounce it as "socialistic."

Socialism is seen as a threat to the American way of life - this tremendous freedom we're supposed to have to make ourselves into anything we want to be. Because socialism holds that not every citizen has this opportunity because of economic inequality, it is seen as a threat to "family values."

Pat Robertson once said, "The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women ... It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians." (Hill & Cheadle, 1996)

So Robertson puts an attack on capitalism in the same list of evils as child-murder and witchcraft; it's hard to tell which he thinks is the worst.

The ironic thing is that many of our nation's most cherished heroes were socialists.

In history textbooks, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. is glorified as the leading black civil rights leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This is arguably true, but besides ignoring the often fierce resentment King provoked in other black leaders, the textbooks almost uniformly ignore the fact that King was a self-proclaimed socialist. He knew that the overwhelming poverty suffered by blacks could not be caused solely by racism.

In 1967, just a year before he was assassinated, King said, "... One day we must ask the question, 'Why are there 40 million poor people in America?' And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader redistribution

of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy." (103 Harv. L. Rev. 1039)

Another example of historical tunnel vision is Helen Keller. She's remembered as the determined and courageous woman who learned to speak and write while blind and deaf and went on to be an advocate for the disabled. Her life is lauded to such an extent that she becomes almost a cartoon figure. Keller is held out as the embodiment of the belief that through hard work, anything is possible.

What the textbooks don't say, however, is that Keller was a radical socialist. She joined a socialist political group in her early twenties and remained a socialist until her death at the age of 88.

Keller spent most of her life writing and speaking on socialist causes. At the time she became a socialist, however, she was idolized worldwide; the shift in her political views caused a fickle public to react angrily and newspapers, once full of praise, became full of disdain.

Keller spoke about one of these critics, an editor at the Brooklyn Eagle: "The compliments that he [once] paid me were so generous that I blush to remember them. But now that I have come out for socialism, he reminds me and the public that I am blind and deaf and especially

liable to error. I must have shrunk in intelligence during the years since I met him." (Loewen, 1995)

History has immortalized the first two decades of Keller's life. It has forgotten the last six decades of her life that she spent fighting for economic justice under the banner of socialism.

We've all heard of the famous novel "The Jungle" by Upton Sinclair. When I talk to people about it, all they can remember (with justified horror) are the disgusting practices of the meat-packing industry detailed within. When the book first came out, it horrified society to such an extent that it led to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, one of the most extensive food safety regulations the country had ever seen.

Focusing on this small portion of the book, however, completely ignores the main thrust of it. "The Jungle" is a call to arms for socialists. It was written as a wake-up call for the poor to unite and protect themselves from economic exploitation.

Much of Sinclair's life was devoted to socialism. History chooses to remember him generically as a "reformer" or a "progressive."

Glossing over these national heroes' socialist beliefs is common. The New America Desk Encyclopedia (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) for example,

does not use the word "socialist" once in any of the entries for King, Keller or Sinclair. History has pulled out a piece of their lives and ignored the rest, distorting what they were really like.

Understanding King's desire for racial equality cannot be complete without understanding his desire for economic equality. Keller's drive to help the disabled is inseparably intertwined with her drive to help the poor. Sinclair's passion for "muckraking" is inexplicable without understanding the socialist beliefs on which it was based.

Just as the influence of socialism on these individuals has been forgotten, so has the influence of socialism on America. Many of today's government policies, such as minimum wage laws, Social Security benefits and Medicaid, were espoused by socialist parties long before they were adopted by Democrats or Republicans.

As Michael Harrington, one of the leading American socialists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, said, "One of the main consequences of the socialist movement has not been socialism, but a more humane, rational and intelligent capitalism, usually in spite of the capitalists."

Even if the textbooks are ignorant of the contribution of socialism to our nation and its heroes, we shouldn't be.

Jeremy Patrick is a first-year law student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

# Goodbye boob tube

Take a break from your television set and you might learn something



Many of us seem to have become the dupes of the marketing and mass media industries. We buy what they tell us to buy and look how they tell us to look. We accept their ideas of freedom, which largely consist of the freedom to buy their products.

According to the Nielsen Corporation, our television sets faithfully flicker with their nonsense an average of seven hours and 12 minutes each day. We need to stop the madness, disconnect our cable and turn off our televisions.

Last week, noted author Jean Kilbourne gave a lecture in the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater. The main thrust of her talk dealt with reasons women should reject the popular, media-driven image of beauty, but we should go a step further and remove media almost entirely from our lives. News and weather are useful, but what did "South Park" add to our society?

According to Kilbourne, the average American is accosted by 3,000 advertisements each day. Our capitalist society is infested with labels, logos and limitless advertisements. Don't we have better things to do than look, listen and feel who is selling what?

I admit, some ad campaigns are amusing. My roommate says, "whaz-zuupp" to me at least three times a day. And I laugh every time I hear the word Prozac.

The American College Dictionary defines "prosaic" as "lacking in imagination; dull" and "Prozac" as a "popular mood-altering drug." Irony is a beautiful thing, but these few little gems of marketing genius do not make up for what TV costs us.

Poor people are three times more likely to watch four or more hours of

television per day when compared to the wealthy. Content is another important issue. By age 18, the average person has witnessed 16,000 depictions of homicide. And by age 65, on average, we've spent nine years watching television.

Many organizations, including TV Free America, have raised objections to the growing concentration of media power into a few hands. Media outlets are increasingly held by fewer and fewer corporations. According to Ad Busters, an organization that attempts to police images in advertising, "Right now, television is controlled by seven megacorporations in the U.S. and is strongly dominated by three world-wide."

One question we must ask ourselves is, who benefits from the system of media ownership we have allowed to spawn? Our best interest is not served by offering our attention to the media giants.

One feasible solution is offered by TV Turnoff Week. On April 24-30, while the hard-working students of UNL will be experiencing dead week, TV Free America humbly suggests we take a week-long respite from the tube. So, when you wake up on April 24, unplug your television and don't plug it in again for a week. Read a book, go see a play or just study for your finals.

If you're a marketing or journalism major, you may not be able to avoid the media altogether but limiting your exposure for a week won't kill you. And avoiding television will certainly add hours to your day, hours you can use more productively than memorizing reruns of "Friends."

In America, the greatest risk to our freedom is our own poor decisions. We can decide to educate ourselves in reference to our current governmental and social challenges or we can be happy with what others have decided we should think about.

In truth, the television is not the whole problem. Television content is a great disgrace, but we each choose to sit down and gaze. It's a lot easier to follow the old, easy patterns of mind-

less entertainment than it is to create a new hobby or interest. The human mind loves patterns. New patterns are tough to create and old ones are hard to break - but it's worth a try.



Neal Obermeyer/DN

Michael Donley is a senior sociology major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.