

Myth versus Ideology: Why Free Market Thinking Is Nonideological



by Michael Rectenwald

I'll begin with a provocative thesis: socialism is ideological and free market thinking, while involving myth, is nonideological. I will show why socialism is ideological and why free market thinking involves myth but is nonideological by defining the terms myth and ideology and distinguishing them from each other.

The term “myth” has several connotations. The most common connotation today is that myth represents false belief. Thus, we see many uses of the term myth in which some myth or other is figured as something to be debunked. We can point to

hundreds of titles in which the word myth signifies a belief that is mistaken and which the article or book aims to overthrow with evidence and reasoning. When entering “the myth of” into the search field on Amazon.com, for example, titles beginning with the phrase are suggested, including *The Myth of Normal*, by Gabor Mate; *The Myth of American Inequality*, by Phil Gramm, Robert Ekelund et al.; *The Myth of Closure*, by Pauline Boss, and so on. Running the same search in an internet search engine yields similar results but includes articles on the myth of this or that, including a recent article by American Pravda (the *New York Times*), entitled “They Legitimized the Myth of a Stolen Election—and Reaped the Rewards,” referring to the Congresspersons who sought to block the supposedly legitimate results of the 2020 election.

But one will also find, in both searches, titles like *The Myth of Sisyphus*, by Albert Camus; *The Myth of Eternal Return*, by Mircea Eliade; *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic*, by Douglas Frame; and others. Or in a search engine one finds discussions of various Greek myths in encyclopedias and on YouTube. Clearly, these latter uses of the term myth are different from the usage in the debunking books and articles. Myth in this other sense draws on a different meaning. *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus is not an argument against the myth itself. Rather, myth in this sense connotes a kind of tale that conveys a truth, an aspiration, or a means of making sense of experience. It is a structuring device for seeing order, patterns, possibilities, probable outcomes, and so on. Myth in this sense also includes lessons to be learned and kept in mind when crafting a life or life mission. The myth of Icarus is a tale about human hubris, for example. The story of the Garden of Eden is generally understood in such terms—as a myth about seeking to be like God. The sinking of the Titanic has been seen in terms of such Greek myths as Icarus and other tales of human hubris.

It is this latter sense of myth that I use here—of myth as a

means by which we structure experience, find meaning, and craft the trajectories of our lives.

I distinguish this sense of myth from ideology. Whereas myth provides general outlines for making sense of experience and provides guides for behavior, ideology—to draw on a myth for describing it—forces the world into a procrustean bed. While all ideology is myth, not all myth is ideology. Ideology works by reducing the structure of the social and material worlds into a simplified image of reality and obscures or eliminates elements of human existence that contradict it. This is not true of all myth. Some myths are more capacious than ideologies. They allow varying interpretations and applications, and do not constrain the possibilities for action in response to them.

Thus, I am using the Marxist sense of ideology here. I refer to ideology in terms of how Marx defined it, as false consciousness. Ideology, as Marx [suggested](#), presents an image of the world as seen through a camera obscura: upside-down and inverted.

Ironically, it is Marxism, and not free market thinking, that is ideological, in Marx's own sense of the term. Under a Marxist state, the credulous subject lives under ideology. Told that the working class owns and controls the means of production and runs society, the fact of the matter is quite the opposite. Rather than leading to a stateless society of cooperation among free producers, each of whom, as Marx [claimed](#), could "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner," socialism leads inevitably to the same result every time it's tried: cultural, economic, political, and social monopoly under a singular state system controlling all areas of life. Rather than allowing a choice of multiple employments, the socialist state becomes the sole employer and determines the worker's exclusive sphere of activity. Rather than withering away as Marx suggested, state power is expanded to enforce cultural,

economic, and social monopoly. Rather than politics disappearing as alleged, an official socialist-communist party monopolizes state power so that the system is unchallenged in other spheres. Instead of disappearing, the state remains necessary for enforcing socialist monopolies and it uses all the means necessary to do so, including terror. Terror is not optional, but rather, as even Marx himself admitted, inevitable. And, far from being limited to Stalin's reign, the terror began under Lenin soon after the revolution and continued with every subsequent communist leader, including Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Castro. Thus, the image of the world as presented by Marxist ideology is precisely upside-down and inverted. And no one is subjected to ideology more than the subject living under socialism-communism.

In terms of its view of the capitalist order, Marxist ideology simplifies the world into two major classes, the working class and the bourgeoisie, or laborers and the owners of capital. Members of these respective groups supposedly share, or in the case of the workers, *should* share identical interests and ideological outlooks. This simplified worldview represents a reduction and obscuration of the multiplicities of individual circumstances, social locations, and desiderata. At the very least, we can say that Marxist ideology lacks granularity in its figuration of the social order. The social order is reduced to a cartoon version of reality, with the members of cardboard cutout classes acting in unison. This unified action is deemed to be really the case for the capitalist class and ideally the case for the working class. Thus, Marxism presents a mental image of the world that is easily grasped. This is, in part, why it is supremely ideological in character.

Free market thinking is quite otherwise. Because the free market involves individuals acting in their own interests and having multiple forms of property, including themselves as the primary property, it is impossible to reduce ideas of the free market to a simplified mental image. You can't represent the

system of capitalism as seen through the eyes of the free market thinker in terms of simplified class antagonism—unless, of course, you include the state and recognize that the state is its opponent and the primary exploiter. But as for individuals under an entirely free market system (without state opposition), the activity is impossible to figure as a singular entity. This impossibility of reducing the actions of individuals to a singular block is why free market thinking eludes ideological figuration.

On the other hand, because a truly free market is always approached asymptotically and is never reached, free market thinking always involves myth. That is, so long as the free market remains an ideal and not a reality, free market thinking remains myth.

“Myths,” as Vladimir Tismaneanu writes in [*Fantasies of Salvation*](#), “propose another reality, beyond history, and their success depends on their plausibility. If they make sense for those supposed to believe in them, myths succeed in their most important task: to endow the individual with a sense of identity and an orientation in the disjointed world.” Free market thinking involves myth because the free market under the state remains aspirational. But it eludes ideology because it does not aim to introduce constraints on individuals, other than their acknowledgement of property rights.

Another point of difference distinguishes free market aspirations from ideology. The myth of the free market is not utopian. It does not suggest the possibility of a perfect world but rather acknowledges scarcity as a starting point and always existing condition. Socialism, on the other hand, imagines endless bounty and suggests that the only barrier to achieving it is the capitalist order. Marxism is likewise religious and utopian in character.

Thus, both socialism and free market thinking involve myth, but of the two, only socialism is ideological.