



Government

On March 22, 2019, Veronique de Rugy, senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, published an article on the American Institute for Economic Research website titled “France Is the Socialist Future We Should Dread.”¹ In her article, de Rugy contrasts the French model of socialism with that of Cuba and Sweden and says the following regarding the detrimental realities of harboring a paternalistic view of the role of government in society:

France was once a role model for what big government can do for its people. But it has become an embarrassing example since “The Gilets Jaunes” (French for “yellow vests”) took to the streets to demonstrate against the insane amount of taxes they pay. These guys aren’t upper class. They are the people who have until now supported the policies that are inevitable when you have the government providing so many services and involved so deeply in so much of the economy.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released its annual Revenue Statistics report this week,

¹ Veronique de Rugy, “France Is the Socialist Future We Should Dread,” American Institute for Economic Research, March 22, 2019, <https://www.aier.org/article/france-is-the-socialist-future-we-should-dread>.

and France topped the charts, with a tax take equal to 46.2% of GDP in 2017. That's more than Denmark (46%), Sweden (44%) and Germany (37.5%), and far more than the OECD average (34.2%) or the U.S. (27.1%, which includes all levels of government).

France doesn't collect that revenue in the ways you might think.

Despite the stereotype of heavy European income taxes on the rich, Paris relies disproportionately on social-insurance, payroll and property taxes. Social taxes account for 37% of French revenue; the OECD average is 26%. Payroll and property taxes contribute 3% and 9%, compared to the OECD averages of 1% and 6%.

As a reminder, the payroll tax is very regressive; it consumes a larger share of low- and middle-class earners than rich people. In addition: then Europe adds a regressive consumption tax, the value-added tax. In France, VAT and other consumption taxes make up 24% of revenue, and that's on the low side compared to an OECD average of 33%. Consumption taxes often fall hardest on the poor and middle class, who devote a greater proportion of their income to consumption.

To be sure, the spending is also more regressive in France in that the biggest share goes to the middle and low-income earners. But it is a stupid system in which you tax one group to redistribute to that same group.

Add one more increase to an already high (and regressive) gas tax in France to the existing 214 taxes and duties and the people went nuts. They have been protesting continuously since November 17th, 2018. I don't condone the violence, but I understand why the protestors are so furious.

What Veronique de Rugy has to say is critical to helping us understand the truth about what a socialist government looks like. What is happening in France as its citizens embrace a socialist model of government is beginning to happen in America as well, particularly among the vast numbers of young people who are lining up to support political candidates who hold the same vision of regressive and redistributive government.

Not only is that vision of the role of government being embraced to an increasing degree in America *as a nation* (as evidenced, for example, by the fact that in the 2020 presidential election, at least one candidate was described as a “Democratic Socialist”²), it is also being embraced within certain elements of the evangelical church.

An Evangelical Issue

A case in point is what is known as the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. The campaign is led by the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, one of the leading evangelical social justicians in protestant evangelicalism today.³

In April 2018, the Poor People’s Campaign produced a white paper titled “The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years after the Poor People’s Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, the War Economy/Militarism, and Our National Morality.” This report contains three “mission statements,” the first of which was originally put forth in 1968 by an organization known as the Committee of 100 and titled “Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor”:

We come to you as representatives of Black, Indian, Mexican-American, Puerto-Rican, and white-Americans who are the too long forgotten, hungry and jobless outcasts in this land of plenty. We come because poor fathers and mothers want a house to live in that will protect their children against the bitter winter cold, the searing heat of summer and the rain that now too often comes in through the cracks in our roofs and walls. We have come here to say to you that we don’t think it’s too much to ask for a decent place to live in at reasonable prices in a country with a gross national product of 800 billion dollars. We don’t think it’s too radical to want to help choose the type of housing and the location. We don’t think it’s asking for pie in the sky to want to live in neighborhoods where our families can live and grow up

2 Adrian Carrasquillo, “Democratic Socialists Will Have a Presidential Candidate in November,” *Newsweek*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/democratic-socialists-will-have-presidential-candidate-november-1513117>.

3 “Social justicians” is our designation for those who are proponents of the modern “social justice” movement.

with dignity, surrounded by the kind of facilities and services that other Americans take for granted.⁴

It is critical to note the antecedent of the pronoun “you” that appears in the very first sentence of that mission statement. The “you” to whom the above entreaty is directed is the United States government. In fact, when you stop and reflect on the wording of the statement from the Committee of 100, it sounds a lot like a prayer. Three times in the statement the phrase “we come to you” (or “we have come to you”) is used as an introduction to the petitions the writers are adjuring the federal government to answer. But the way the statement is written, it is almost as if they were addressing their petitions to God.

Consider the government-targeted supplications of the Committee of 100 with what the Word of God says about our needs and how they are supplied—and by whom:

- “And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).
- “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:30–33).
- “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8).
- “The young lions do without and suffer hunger; but they who seek the LORD will not lack any good thing” (Psalm 34:10).

4 Sarah Anderson et al., “The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years after the Poor People’s Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, the War Economy/ Militarism, and Our National Morality,” The Poor People’s Campaign (Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies, 2018), <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/PPC-Audit-Full-410835a.pdf>, 2.

- “For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD gives grace and glory; He withholds no good thing from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11).
- “I will raise my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to slip; He who watches over you will not slumber. Behold, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your protector; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun will not beat down on you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul. The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever” (Psalm 121).

These wonderful promises of God do not negate a governmental role in society. Not at all. The question we’re dealing with is this: What is the proper or, more accurately, the *biblical* role of government in society?

The French Example

We began this chapter by referencing Veronique de Rugy’s analysis of French socialism. The history of that movement forms an important background to a discussion of the biblical role of government.

In 1789, the National Constituency Assembly of France adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. This document was originally drafted by Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, better known as the Marquis de Lafayette.

One of the interesting things about the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen is that it was closely modeled after the United States’ Declaration of Independence. The close adherence to the American document was no accident. It was none other than Thomas Jefferson himself, the chief architect of the Declaration of Independence, who helped Lafayette construct the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

In *Heaven on Earth: The Rise, Fall, and Afterlife of Socialism*, author Joshua Muravchik helps put into context the broader conversation of the role of government and the importance of Christians' developing and applying a biblical worldview of that role, particularly as that biblical worldview is contrasted against a socialist paradigm of government. Muravchik writes,

The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen tracked the U.S. Declaration of Independence in proclaiming that the reason for government was to secure men's rights. And its designation of those rights—"liberty, property, security"—resembled the American triad of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

However, as the [French] Revolution unfolded and new constitutions were written, the French added a fourth substantive right: equality. To be sure, the Americans had proclaimed that men were "created equal," but this was not a statement of policy; it was a postulate about the nature of man and his relation to God. The French innovation was to include "equality" among the essential purposes of government.

The impetus behind this was not hard to understand. Whereas the core issue for the Americans in 1776 was political legitimacy, for the French in 1789 it was social status. . . . It was only in the dying days of the Revolution that someone came forward to argue there was a contradiction within the revolutionary agenda—that fulfilling the promise of equality would require not merely the abolition of feudal titles and privileges, but the institution of a new way of economic life in which individual ownership would be abolished and each citizen would be furnished with an identical portion of nature's bounty.⁵

What Muravchik is articulating is that what France did with its Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen is take a universal truth—and by "universal," we mean a principle or rule that applies impartially to every image-bearer of God—and genuflect to it in such a way as to turn an objective truth into a subjective one.

5 Joshua Muravchik, *Heaven on Earth : The Rise, Fall, and Afterlife of Socialism* (New York: Encounter, 2019), 4.

Muravchik outlined what many people, including many professing Christians, fail to understand: that there is a fundamental difference between being *created equal* and being guaranteed *equality*. The former idea is *objectively* true (Genesis 1:27; 5:2), whereas the latter concept, that each person, as stated in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, should be furnished by the government an “identical portion of nature’s bounty,” is fundamentally unbiblical.

This philosophical shift from viewing individuals as “created equal” to guaranteeing “equality” changed the societal landscape for France as it introduced to its citizens a man-centered concept of the role of government that was wholly antithetical to its God-ordained role (see Romans 13). Consequently, today, more than 230 years after the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, France is regarded by many as a socialist country.

The French Connection

We mentioned previously that there were three mission statements presented in the white paper published by the Poor People’s Campaign. The first, put forth by the Committee of 100 in 1968, was a plea to the government to meet people’s material needs. The second of the two statements was authored in 2018 by the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II:

With the realities of systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy and the often false moral narrative of Christian nationalism, we are in a moment in time which we need a deeply moral, deeply constitutional, anti-racist, anti-poverty, pro-labor, transformative fusion coalition where people of all different races, colors, and creeds come together and work together to engage in moral direct action, massive voter mobilization, and power building from the bottom up, state by state and even in the U.S. Capitol. We need this to change the narrative and insist that we will no longer engage in attention violence against the poor and other interlocking injustices that connect to poverty.⁶

6 Anderson et al., “The Souls of Poor Folk,” 3.