Chapter 8
Working for the Collective:
A Comparative Analysis of Communist Subbotniks and American Charities

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ABSTRACT

Karl Marx wrote that in the higher phase of Communism, society could inscribe on its banner the phrase, from each according to his ability to each according to his needs. This chapter explores the role of the government and individual in providing for the needs of the collective. It compares and contrasts the voluntary practice of the Communist Subbotnik (voluntary work on Saturdays) in the former Soviet Union, with the voluntary sector practices in the United States. The article posits that the United States, with the reputation as an individualistic, capitalist society, achieves the Marxist ideal of working for the collective through the nonprofit voluntary sector, even more than the Communist practice of Subbotnik. In the United States nonprofit sector, individuals donate time and resources to charitable organizations (each according to his ability), which in turn, provides services and resources to others (according to their needs).

INTRODUCTION

This research explores the role of government and volunteerism that shape a civil society, and offer a comparative view of two models. The role of the Communist government in the former Soviet Union (1917 – 1991), along with the practice of the Subbotnik (a government mandated day of volunteerism) will be compared and contrasted with the Representative Republic form of government in the United States, along with the role of the charitable and voluntary sector contributions.

Karl Marx's writings influenced early Communist leaders such as Vladimir Lenin, who was instrumental in overthrowing Russian authoritarianism in the early 1900s. Marx believed that society should trust the people, and not the state, regardless of how well-intentioned the state may be (Nimtz, 2000). He envisioned a utopian society where there were no class distinctions, and where all things were held in common by the collective. In his vision, no one would own anything, but all people would own everything. He believed that as long as the state existed, there would be no freedom. In his vision, society would be governed by the people, not the elite of society and, in the higher phases of Communism, the philosophy would be, from each according to his ability to each according to his needs. This belief fostered the idea that people would work voluntarily (not for personal gain) to the best of their ability in order to further the greater good of the collective. Vladimir Lenin, a follower of Marx, in order to achieve the higher phase of Communism believed that the first transitional phase was intended to transform citizens into hired employees of the state. According to Lenin in his publication The State and Revolution (1917), all citizens should become employees and workers of a single, nationwide syndicate where they all do their proper share of work (according to their ability) and would get paid equally, regardless of their contribution to society. Lenin's version of the first phase of Communism, in the beginnings of the Soviet Union, was a coercive state that was intended to get citizens to transition towards Marx's utopian version of society. In this model, it was the role of Soviet government to shape the attitudes and practices of the populace in order to mold citizens into the ideals held by the leaders of the country. It was in this early stage of the Soviet Union that Lenin created the practice of Subbotnik, the Soviet mandated voluntary labor participation, which provides the focus of comparison later in this chapter.

Conversely, the United States was founded on the philosophy of limited government. Rather than the government molding the attitudes and practices of Americans, the United States Constitution began with, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union…" The government was established to ensure the

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