

Socialism: Playing With Fire

Imagine you're a socialist. You read Kristian Niemietz's *Socialism: The Failure Idea That Never Dies* and declare him most unfair: "Sure, the *typical* socialist defended totalitarian regimes during their 'honeymoon periods.' The *best* socialists, however, spoke out at once. And it's the best socialists who speak for socialism."

A reasonable position. I don't want my views judged by the quality of the typical person who shares my label, either.

Still, this raises a weighty question: How should the best socialists react when they discover that a new socialist experiment is *about to start*? "With dread" is the only sensible answer. After all, the best socialists don't merely know the horrifying history of the Soviet Union and Maoist China. The best socialists also know the psychotic sociology of the typical socialist, who savors the revolutionary "honeymoon" until the horror becomes too blatant to deny.

If dread is the sensible reaction to the latest socialist experiment, then how should the best socialists react to any earnest *proposal* for a new socialist experiment? It's complicated. The proposal stage is the perfect time to avoid the errors of the past - to finally do socialism right. Yet this hope must still be heavily laced with dread. After all, socialists have repeatedly tried to learn from the disasters of earlier socialist regimes. When they gained power, disaster still followed.

At this point, it's tempting to shift blame to the non-socialist world. Without American-led ostracism, perhaps Cuba would be a fine country today. Or consider Chomsky's view that the U.S. really won the Vietnam War:

The United States went to war in Vietnam for a very good reason. They were afraid Vietnam would be a successful model of independent development and that would have a virus effect-infect others who might try to follow the same course. There was a very simple war aim-destroy Vietnam. And they did it.

If Chomsky is right about U.S. foreign policy, however, the best socialists should feel even less hope and even more dread. Even if the next generation of socialists finally manages to durably build socialism with a human face, the U.S. will probably strangle it.

Personally, I'm the furthest thing from a socialist. If I were a socialist, though, I would be

the world's most cautious socialist. Socialist experiments don't merely have a bad track record; socialist self-criticism has a bad track record. That's why it took years for the failures and horrors of each experiment to come to light. And even if you blame these failures and horrors on the enemies of socialism, how does that change the pessimistic forecast? All wishful thinking aside, anyone who builds socialism is playing with fire. If you really care about the people you want to help, you'll keep that in mind.