

Socialism: The Failed Idea That Never Dies

I've easily read a hundred books on the evils of socialism. I was quite surprised, then, by how much I learned from Kristian Niemietz's *Socialism: The Failed Idea That Never Dies*, available for free download. Yes, I already knew that socialist regimes go through a popularity sequence, starting at "This socialist regime is a model for the world" and ending with "That's not real socialism." Niemietz, however, describes this sequence with great precision and eloquence:

1. The honeymoon period

The first stage is a honeymoon period, during which the experiment has, or at least seems to have, some initial success in some areas. During this period, its international standing is relatively high. Even anti-socialists concede, grudgingly, that the country in question has something to show for it.

During the honeymoon period, very few dispute the experiment's socialist character; almost nobody claims that the country is not 'really' socialist. On the contrary: during the honeymoon period, large numbers of Western intellectuals enthusiastically embrace the experiment. Self-declared socialists claim ownership of it, and parade it as an example of their ideas in action.

2. The excuses-and-whataboutery period

But the honeymoon period never lasts forever. The country's luck either comes to an end, or its already existing failures become more widely known in the West. As a result, its international standing deteriorates. It ceases to be an example that socialists hold against their opponents, and becomes an example that their opponents hold against them.

During this period, Western intellectuals still support the experiment, but their tone becomes angry and defensive. The focus changes from

the experiment's supposed achievements to the supposed ulterior motives of its critics. There is a frantic search for excuses, with the blame usually placed on imaginary 'saboteurs' and unspecified attempts to 'undermine' it. There is plenty of whataboutery.

3. The not-real-socialism stage

Eventually, there always comes a point when the experiment has been widely discredited, and is seen as a failure by most of the general public. The experiment becomes a liability for the socialist cause, and an embarrassment for Western socialists.

This is the stage when intellectuals begin to dispute the experiment's socialist credentials, and, crucially, they do so with retroactive effect. They argue that the country was never socialist in the first place, and that its leaders never even tried to implement socialism. This is the deeper meaning behind the old adage that 'real' socialism has never been tried: socialism gets retroactively redefined as 'unreal' whenever it fails. So it has never been tried, in the same way in which, in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-four, the government of Oceania has always been at war with East Asia.

This is not a conscious process, let alone a purposefully orchestrated one. There is no equivalent of an industrial standards body, which awards a 'real socialism' certificate of authenticity, and then withdraws it again with retroactive effect. Socialists do not hold clandestine conferences in secret hideouts; they do not deliberately cover up their former support for the regime in question. They simply fall silent on the issue, and move on to the next cause.

At some point, the claim that the country in question was never 'really' socialist becomes the conventional wisdom. Since it is only the opponents of socialism who still refer to that example, while socialists themselves no longer do, it is easy to gain the impression that it must

be a straw man argument. This book will show that these alleged 'straw men' were all once very much alive. They are not straw men at all. They are the failed utopias of yesteryear.

In short:

The not-real-socialism defence is only ever invoked retrospectively, namely, when a socialist experiment has already been widely discredited. As long as a socialist experiment is in its prime, almost nobody disputes its socialist credentials. On the contrary: practically all socialist regimes have gone through honeymoon periods, during which they were enthusiastically praised and held up as role models by plenty of prominent Western intellectuals. It is only after the event (i.e. once they have become an embarrassment for the socialist cause) that their version of socialism is retroactively redefined as 'unreal'.

Niemietz then provides long list of case studies of self-labelled socialist regimes. The two biggest examples – Soviet Union and Maoist China – fit his sequence to a tee. So do North Korea, Cambodia, Albania, and Venezuela. The chapter on the latter was especially eye-opening for me. Choice passages:

Chávez defined his version of socialism explicitly in opposition to previous models. This was not empty rhetoric. Under Chavismo, there were genuine attempts to create alternative models of collective ownership and democratic participation in economic life. In particular, the formation of worker cooperatives and various forms of social enterprises was heavily promoted. Exact figures are hard to come by, but, according to Piñeiro Harnecker (2009: 309), the number of worker-run cooperatives increased from fewer than 1,000 when Chávez was first elected to well over 30,000 in less than a decade. By the end of Chávez's second term, cooperatives accounted for about 8

per cent of Venezuela's GDP and 14 per cent of its workforce (ibid.).

Venezuelan socialism would later show many of the negative features associated with earlier forms of socialism, but it was never government policy to replicate any of those earlier models. When Western Chavistas insisted that the Venezuelan government was trying to create a different model of socialism, they were not deluding themselves.

At that point, the tone among Western Chavistas changed noticeably. Pro-Venezuela articles, which had so far tended to be hopeful and optimistic, became angry and defensive. The emphasis shifted from the supposed achievements of Chavismo to whataboutery, and to questioning the motives of Chavismo's critics both in Venezuela and internationally.

In 2014, Owen Jones wrote an article for the Independent entitled 'Socialism's critics look at Venezuela and say, "We told you so". But they are wrong'. Jones acknowledges the existence of 'recent economic troubles', but the emphasis of the article is on the problems of the pre-Chávez era ('let's have some context'), and on the violence committed by parts of the opposition. It culminated in the claim that '[t]hose who relish using Venezuela's troubles for political point-scoring have no interest in the truth'.

Since this is a high-quality book, Niemiets searches for counter-examples to his own thesis, and identifies two. Cuba doesn't fit because after decades of tyranny, many socialists still admire it. East Germany doesn't fit because it never had much of a honeymoon period. Overall, though, these are minor deviations. The socialist big picture is at once bizarre and horrifying, especially as so many young people negligently convert to this once-dying creed.

P.S. This spring I'll once again be debating "Capitalism vs. Socialism," this time at the University of Wisconsin versus Brian Leiter of the University of Chicago.