

“Socialism”: The Provocative Equivocation

The socialists are back, but is it a big deal? It's tempting to say that it's purely rhetorical. Modern socialists don't want to emulate the Soviet Union. To them, socialism just means “Sweden,” right? Even if their admiration for Sweden is unjustified, we've long known that the Western world contains millions of people who want their countries to be like Sweden. Why should we care if Sweden-fans rebrand themselves as “socialists”?

My instinctive objection is that even using the term “socialism” is an affront to the many millions of living victims of Soviet-style totalitarian regimes. Talking about “socialism” understandably horrifies them. Since there are plenty of palatable synonyms for Swedish-type policies (starting even “Swedenism”!), selecting this particular label seems a breach of civility.

If this seems paranoid, what would you say about a new movement of self-styled “national socialists”? Even if their policy positions were moderate, this brand needlessly terrifies lots of folks who have already suffered enough.

On reflection, however, this is a weak objection. Yes, if a label's connotations are – like “national socialism” – almost entirely horrible, then loudly embracing the label is uncivil. “Socialism,” however, has *long* had a wide range of meanings. Even during the height of Stalinism, plenty of self-styled “socialists” were avowedly anti-Communist. The upshot: Even if you were a victim of Soviet oppression, assuming the worst when you hear the word “socialism” is hypersensitive. And hypersensitivity is bad.

Yet there's a much stronger reason to object to the socialist revival. Namely: It's far from clear that the latter-day socialists *do* mean Sweden. While some (like John Marsh) plainly say so, others (like Elizabeth Bruenig) are coy indeed. Which raises deeply troubling questions, starting with:

1. Are latter-day socialists unaware of the history of the totalitarian movement that shares their name? Given widespread historical ignorance and the youth of the new socialists, we can hardly rule this out. A troubling thought; isn't it negligent to champion a radical idea without investigating its history first?
2. Are latter-day socialists *ambivalent* about the totalitarian movement that shares their name? Do they look on the Soviet Union as a noble experiment with unfortunate shortcomings? How about Chavez's Venezuela?
3. Do latter-day socialists think of Sweden as a starting point, and something more radical as the ultimate goal? Are there outright crypto-communists among them? If so, do their comrades know? Care?

4. Do latter-day socialists realize that being coy raises the preceding concerns? Do they care? Or is the raising of these concerns a “feature, not a bug”? I.e., they *enjoy* making people wonder if they’re secret Leninists?

What’s the truth? While I don’t personally know any latter-day socialists well, I do read a lot of articles in *The Nation*, which publishes a wide range of modern socialists. So here are my best guesses about the preceding possibilities.

1. Older socialists (age 50+) know a *lot* about the actual history of socialism. The younger ones (age 40 and under), however, know little and care less. They’re negligent romantics.

2. Most historically-literate socialists are indeed ambivalent about the totalitarian movement that shares their name. Very few will defend Stalin, but they just can’t stay mad at Lenin, Castro, or Ho Chi Minh. Even the historically-naïve socialists feel pretty good about Cuba today and Venezuela in 2015.

3. Yes, most avowed socialists have a more radical ultimate goal than Sweden. In our Capitalism-Socialism debate, even the reasonable John Marsh mused about a future that realized radical socialist dreams without degenerating into a typical socialist nightmare. How extreme, then, are ultimate goals of the *unreasonable* socialists? While I really don’t know, videos like this make me strongly suspect that Bernie Sanders is literally a crypto-communist. Even if I’m wrong, how many latter-day socialists would care if Sanders was a crypto-communist?

4. Latter-day socialists really do *enjoy* making people wonder about their ultimate agenda. When you read *The Nation*, for example, authors almost never specify exactly what policy should be. Instead, they focus on radical movement in a desired direction, with minimal discussion of their ultimate objective. In particular, they almost never say what would be “too far.” Of course, this describes most political movements; they want to rally the troops, not provide blueprints of an ideal world. But when you cultivate a “radical” image but withhold specifics, you should expect critics’ minds to go to dark places. Rather than try to calm the critics, the latter-day socialists court their disapproval. In fact, most seem to positively enjoy the imagined intellectual trauma they’re inflicting on the unbeliever.

On reflection, then, the return of the self-styled socialist is indeed a travesty. The reason, though, is not that the word is offensive, but that it is *deliberately* confusing. If you really thought Sweden was a model society, you would just praise Sweden. The “socialist” label, in contrast, is a *provocative equivocation*. Latter-day socialists adopt it because they would rather insinuate their possible support for totalitarian horrors than earnestly promote an intellectually defensible position.

To what end? In modern parlance, the latter-day socialists could just be trolling. This is bad enough, but *some* socialists probably sincerely believe what they’re insinuating. Or

worse. If all you want is Swedish social democracy, making common cause with such socialists is a grave mistake.