

Why Democratic Socialists Flunk Logic 101

Consider the following facts:

Venezuela is a country with vast natural resources. Once it was one of the wealthiest countries in South America. Venezuela nationalized many vital industries such as oil. Price controls were instituted, and hyperinflation destroyed savings. Supermarket shelves emptied, and some even killed zoo animals for food.

Malnutrition, even starvation, is common. Essential medicines, such as antibiotics, are unavailable. The ruthless despot who runs the country has stolen billions. He gives long speeches filled with socialist slogans and claims American interference, not socialism, has caused the failures of his regime.

Which alternative is most likely?

1. Venezuela is a failed socialist regime.
2. Venezuela is a failed socialist regime, and the US caused its failure.

No matter how you feel about U.S. foreign policy, this is a question in pure logic. The question I posed is a variation on Nobel laureate in economics Daniel Kahneman's famous *Linda problem*. Despite what many think, it is impossible for a conjunction of two events to be more likely than one event alone.

The Linda Problem in Venezuela

[Democratic socialist-leaning](#) Congresswoman Ilhan Omar (D-MN) is sure that if Venezuela has failed, it is not the fault of socialism. Appearing on the television show *Democracy Now*,

Omar [reassured viewers](#) that socialism has not caused catastrophic human suffering:

A lot of the policies that we have put in place has kind of helped lead the devastation in Venezuela, and we have sort of set the stage for where we are arriving today.

In other words, in Omar's eyes, Venezuelan socialism hasn't failed; the U.S. has failed socialism.

[Juan Guaido has been harshly attacked](#) by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA tell us their goal is to "make the world safe for democracy and socialism" and "help the Venezuelan people defend the gains made during Hugo Chávez's presidency."

Omar's more widely known democratic socialist colleague Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is [waiting for her talking points](#). When asked if Maduro's government is legitimate, she offers that she'll "defer to caucus leadership on how we navigate this." And as for Bernie Sanders, his [support for Venezuelan socialism](#) is well known. Sanders can't even bring himself [to call Maduro a dictator](#).

The Linda Problem

In his book [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#), Daniel Kahneman explains the *Linda problem* he and his long-time research collaborator Amos Tversky created. They described "Linda" to a large number of students:

Linda is thirty-one years old, single, outspoken, and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social justice, and also participated in antinuclear demonstrations.

Then Kahneman asked, "Which alternative is more probable?":

1. "Linda is a bank teller."
2. "Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement."

Kahneman was shocked by the large numbers of students who choose option 2, contrary to the rules of logic:

About 85% to 90% of undergraduates at several major universities chose the second option, contrary to logic. Remarkably, the sinners seemed to have no shame. When I asked my large undergraduate class in some indignation, "Do you realize that you have violated an elementary logical rule?" someone in the back row shouted, "So what?" and a graduate student who made the same error explained herself by saying, "I thought you just asked for my opinion."

Given a more complex set of options, even 85 percent of "doctoral students in the decision-science program of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, all of whom had taken several advanced courses in probability, statistics, and decision theory," shockingly "ranked 'feminist bank teller' as more likely than 'bank teller.'"

No wonder those like Congresswoman Omar find true believers in their eager audiences. Democratic socialists obfuscate cause and effect. To absolve socialism of any errors, they conflate facts with conjecture and then claim their conjectures prove socialism didn't fail.

If a democratic socialist is living in a rotting home, do they point to the neighbor's barking dog as the cause of their trouble?

As Kahneman puts it,

When you specify a possible event in greater detail you can only lower its probability.

Going Past Our Pre-Existing Narratives

Congresswoman Omar and the democratic socialists are human. As humans, we all look to confirm our biases. The logical fallacy that most fall victim to in the Linda problem, Kahneman observes, “remains attractive even when you recognize it for what it is.”

Kahneman and Tversky call this phenomenon the *conjunction fallacy*. As Kahneman points out, we get sucked into the conjunction fallacy when our biases make the least likely outcome seem like a “better story.”

If you ask, “Which alternative is more probable? Jane is a teacher. Jane is a teacher and walks to work,” responders don’t fall for the conjunction fallacy. Why not? The Jane problem, Kahneman writes, has “the same logical structure as the Linda problem, but [it causes] no fallacy, because the more detailed outcome is only more detailed—it is not more plausible, or more coherent, or a better story.”

Congresswoman Omar’s whole political career depends upon never reminding others of socialism’s failures. She won’t be changing her story soon. Let’s forget Congresswoman Omar for a moment and learn from Omar’s absurd mistake. How do we overcome our need to make our story cohere with our preexisting biases?

In his book [*The Black Swan*](#), Nassim Taleb introduced the idea of a *narrative fallacy* to explain how our flawed causal stories of the past shape our views. For the true believers, socialism can’t be flawed; some external agent such as the US must have caused its failures.

No amount of abstract theory or concrete evidence will change the mind of someone immersed in a narrative fallacy. On a personal level, people can continually rehearse stories that

tidily explain their past and provide a bridge to a future devoid of opportunities to develop their potential.

Which is more likely? 1. My past five relationships have ended in failure. 2. My past five relationships have ended in failure, and I will never find a partner.

For a person who has a tidy story about their personal failures and/or being screwed by life, the conjunction fallacy might kick in; they may think alternative two is more likely.

When you are ready to break your narrative, Kelly Boys in her book [The Blind Spot Effect](#) suggests asking these questions: "Is there anything about this thought that I'm believing because it's an easy, coherent story? Is there more to the story than this?"

Our own tendencies to jump into an easy story only impact our lives and those we encounter. We will all be affected by the inability of politicians to rise above their easy but flawed stories about socialism.

Politicians feed off our own flawed narratives. And a flawed story about the efficacy of socialism can only be changed by the individuals holding them. Yet, today, more and more individuals are being miseducated by professors as [left-wing bias among professors accelerates](#).

An individual immersed in faulty ideas may work on personal and professional development. A politician immersed in erroneous beliefs about socialism dreams not of learning but of applying coercive force to implement their destructive plans to control the lives of others.

—

This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).

Dear Readers,

Big Tech is suppressing our reach, refusing to let us advertise and squelching our ability to serve up a steady diet of truth and ideas. Help us fight back by [becoming a member](#) for just \$5 a month and then join the discussion on Parler [@CharlemagneInstitute](#) and Gab [@CharlemagneInstitute](#)!

Image Credit:

Unsplash-Zachary Staines, Public Domain