

Why Socialism Is the Failed Idea That Never Dies

Kristian Niemietz, [*Socialism: The Failed Idea That Never Dies*](#).
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What would you say to an amateur chef who baked a cake following a certain recipe only for everyone who ate a slice to fall ill quickly afterward? Being such an enthusiastic baker, they bake the same cake a second time just a few weeks later, again following the same recipe, but this time with one or two slight adjustments. Unfortunately, the result is the same – everyone who eats the cake soon ends up feeling sick.

The cake baker repeats this more than two dozen times, always modifying the recipe a little, but the basic ingredients remain more or less the same despite the fact that their guests throw up every time. Of course, there's no way such a thing would happen. The cake baker would soon realize that there is a major problem with the recipe and throw it away.

More Than Two Dozen Failed Experiments

Yet this is exactly what socialists have done:

Over the past hundred years, there have been more than two dozen attempts to build a socialist society. It has been tried in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Albania, Poland, Vietnam, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, North Korea, Hungary, China, East Germany, Cuba, Tanzania, Benin, Laos, Algeria, South Yemen, Somalia, the Congo, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Nicaragua and Venezuela, among others. All of these attempts have ended in varying degrees of failure. How can an idea, which has failed so many times, in

so many different variants and so many radically different settings, still be so popular? (p. 21)

This is the central question asked by this extremely important book from economist Kristian Niemietz, who works at the London Institute for Economic Affairs. He manages to provide the answer to his question in one sentence:

It is because socialists have successfully managed to distance themselves from those examples. (p. 55)

As soon as you confront socialists with examples of failed experiments, they always offer the following response: “These examples don’t prove anything at all! In fact, none of these are true socialist models.” During the “heyday” of most of these socialist experiments, however, intellectuals held quite a different view, as Niemietz illustrates with many examples.

Venezuela – “Socialism of the 21st Century”

The latest example of socialism’s failings is Venezuela, which just a few years ago was being hailed by leading intellectuals and left-wing politicians as a model for “Socialism of the 21st Century.” At a demonstration in commemoration of Hugo Chávez in London in March 2013, for example, current British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn said:

Chávez... showed us that there is a different, and a better way of doing things. It’s called socialism... In his death, we will march on, to that better, just, peaceful and hopeful world. (p. 239)

And even as late as June 2015, when the failure of the socialist experiment in Venezuela was already evident, Corbyn repeated:

When we celebrate – and it is a cause for celebration – the achievements of Venezuela, in jobs, in housing, in health, in education, but above all, its role in the whole world as a completely different place, then we do that because we recognize what they have achieved, and how they’re trying to achieve it. (p. 246)

Just a few weeks later, he enthusiastically declared that “the Bolivarian revolution is in full swing and is providing inspiration across a whole continent.” Venezuela was praised as a successful counter-model to “neo-liberal policies.” (p. 247)

Praises of Stalin

Niemietz shows that even mass murderers such as Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong were enthusiastically celebrated by leading intellectuals of their time. These intellectuals were not outsiders but renowned writers and scholars, as Niemietz demonstrates with numerous examples. Even the concentration camps in the Soviet Union, the Gulags, were admired:

They were presented as places of rehabilitation, not punishment, where inmates were given a chance to engage in useful activities, while reflecting upon their mistakes.

A then-well-known American writer explained:

The labor camps have won high reputation throughout the Soviet Union as places where tens of thousands of men have been reclaimed. (p. 72)

Even journalists and intellectuals who didn’t completely turn a blind eye to the regime’s crimes found arguments to justify what was happening:

But – to put it brutally – you can’t make an omelet without

breaking eggs and the Bolshevik leaders are just as indifferent to the casualties that may be involved in their drive toward socialization as any General during the World War who ordered a costly attack. (p. 80)

These sentences were written by *The New York Times'* Moscow correspondent, who was head of the newspaper's office in the Russian capital from 1922 to 1936.

Niemietz concedes that some socialist intellectuals did criticize the Soviet Union. But for many, their antipathy was the result of using utopian standards as a yardstick for judging real-world systems – utopian fantasies that no system in the world would have been able to live up to.

If one's idea of socialism demands the immediate abolition of the police, the army, the court system, the prison system, etc., if it requires people to voluntarily give up money, private property, exchange, etc., and if one does not accept any compromises, halfway measures or phase-in periods, then yes, such a person would not have been seduced by Leninism. But this is simply because they would have set the bar impossibly high. A lot of early socialist critics of the Soviet Union fall into this category. (p. 98)

Adulation for Mao

Many Western intellectuals were enthusiastic in their support for Mao Zedong and his cultural revolution despite the 45 million lives lost during socialism's greatest experiment – the Great Leap Forward – at the end of the 1950s alone. After Mao's death, when Deng Xiaoping's reform policies liberated hundreds of millions of Chinese from bitter poverty, these same intellectuals were nowhere near as enthusiastic about China as they had been in Mao's day.

Just as ironically, the enthusiasm of Western intellectuals

for China began to fade when the most murderous period was over... Western intellectuals had lavishly heaped praise on China when millions of Chinese people were starving or worked to death in forced labour camps. But when a programme of relative liberalisation lifted millions of people out of poverty, those intellectuals were conspicuous by their silence. Market-based reform programmes, no matter how successful, will never inspire pilgrimages. (p. 110-111)

Even the North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung and the murderous Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia found admirers among Western intellectuals, as Niemietz demonstrates in two chapters of his book. And that's not to mention Cuba and Che Guevara, who became a pop icon in the West.

When the Experiment Fails: "That Was Never True Socialism"

In his thorough historical analysis, Niemietz shows every socialist experiment to date has gone through three phases.

During the first phase, the honeymoon period (p. 56), intellectuals around the world are enthusiastic about the system and praise it to the heavens. This enthusiasm is always followed by a second phase, disillusionment, or as Niemietz calls it, "the excuses-and-whataboutery period." (p. 57) During this phase, intellectuals still defend the system and its "achievements" but withdraw their uncritical support and begin to admit deficiencies, although these are often presented as the result of capitalist saboteurs, foreign forces, or boycotts by US imperialists.

Finally, the third phase sees intellectuals deny that it was ever truly a form of socialism, the not-real-socialism stage. (p. 57) This is the stage at which intellectuals line up to state that the country in question – for example, the Soviet

Union, China, or Venezuela – was never really a socialist country. According to Niemietz, however, this line of argumentation is rarely presented during the first phase of a new socialist experiment and becomes the dominant view only after the socialist experiment has failed.

Nowadays, Western socialists do not even attempt to oppose real-world capitalism with historical examples of socialism. Instead, they put forward arguments based on the vague utopia of a “just” society. Sometimes, they cite “Nordic socialism” – i.e. the variant of socialism that emerged in countries like Sweden – as an example, although they completely forget that the Nordic countries, having learned from their failed socialist experiments of the 1970s, have long since abandoned the socialist path. Today – despite having higher taxes – they are no less capitalist than, for example, the United States.

In the author’s place, I would have dealt explicitly with “democratic socialism,” which has also always failed miserably. After all, the policies pursued by socialists in Great Britain and some high-profile members of the Democratic Party in the United States, namely very high taxation on the rich and a high level of state regulation of the economy, has certainly also been seen before in democratic countries, including Sweden and Great Britain in the 1970s. But even these experiments, despite not ending in totalitarian rule or even mass murder, were catastrophic for the economy and led to stubborn declines in prosperity.

Socialists who criticize Stalinism and other forms of real-world, historical socialism always fail to analyze the economic reasons for the failures of these systems. (p. 28) Their analyses attack the paucity of democratic rights and freedoms in these systems, but the alternatives they formulate are based on a vague vision of all-encompassing “democratization of the economy” or “worker control.” Niemietz shows that these are the exact same principles that initially

underpinned the failed socialist systems in the Soviet Union and other countries.

When contemporary socialists talk about a non-autocratic, non-authoritarian, participatory and humanitarian version of socialism, they are not as original as they think they are. That was always the idea. This is what socialists have always said. It is not for a lack of trying that it has never turned out that way. (p. 42)

This is an incredible book and should be compulsory reading at schools and universities, where today the song sung by anti-capitalists reigns supreme. Nietzsche argues with intellectual authority as he weighs, differentiates, and marshals a wealth of historical evidence in support of his thesis. No other author has so far managed to so convincingly explain why socialism has nevertheless continued to remain so attractive to this day despite the sharp lessons of bitter historical experience.

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the German philosopher Hegel observed,

But what experience and history teach is this, – that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.

It could well be that Hegel's verdict is too harsh. Nevertheless, it does seem that the majority of people are unable to abstract and draw general conclusions from historical experience. Despite the numerous examples of capitalist economic policies leading to greater prosperity – and the failure of every single variant of socialism that has ever been tested under real-world conditions – many people still seem incapable of learning the most obvious lessons.

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