

Supplemental reading for Inquiring Minds – 29 March 2019

Five myths about socialism

[washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-socialism/2019/03/01/692e1d84-3b73-11e9-b786-d6abcbed212a_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-socialism/2019/03/01/692e1d84-3b73-11e9-b786-d6abcbed212a_story.html)

Socialism in the United States is prominent in a way it hasn't been in decades. High-profile left-leaning politicians like Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) hold up socialist policies as solutions to the ills facing the nation, from the growing political influence of the “top 1 percent” to the lack of universal health care. Meanwhile, critics, including President Trump, say socialism leads inexorably to [tyranny](#) and poverty. But the important debate is clouded by many misconceptions.

Myth No. 1

Socialism is a single coherent ideology.

Yet socialism has multiple meanings and interpretations, which have to be disentangled before a discussion about its merits can begin. One distinction centers on whether socialism is a system that must supplant capitalism or one that can harness the market's immense productive capacity for progressive ends. Karl Marx, who predicted that historical forces would inevitably lead to capitalism's demise and to government control of industry, was the most famous proponent of the first type of socialism. An impatient Vladimir Lenin argued instead that rather than waiting for history to run its course, a revolutionary vanguard should destroy capitalism.

Other socialists, however, did not accept the violent, undemocratic nature of that course, although they agreed that capitalism was unjust and unstable. The left's role, in the view of these “democratic socialists” — the Czech-Austrian theorist [Karl Kautsky](#), for instance — was to remind citizens of capitalism's defects and rally popular support for an alternative economic system that would end private ownership and assert popular control over the means of production.

Although Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez embrace the term “democratic socialist,” the policies they advocate place them much closer to yet another socialist tradition: social democracy. Social democrats say it is possible and desirable to reform capitalism. This tradition dominated the post-World War II European left and influenced the American Democratic Party, most notably during the Progressive era and the New Deal, inspiring Social Security, unemployment insurance and the eight-hour workday.

Myth No. 2

Socialism and democracy are incompatible.

Communists reject democracy, of course, but other socialists have strongly supported it. In many parts of the world, including Europe, they were the most consistent advocates of democratization. [Eduard Bernstein](#), for example, one of the fathers of social democracy, described democracy as “both a means and an end. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism and it is the form in which socialism will be realized.” Conservatives, on the other hand, thought of democracy as “[despotism of the multitude](#),” in Edmund Burke's phrase, and liberals like Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill were resistant to expanding the franchise as well, because giving workers too much power would threaten the economic elites necessary for social stability. Only organizing and pressure from parties of the left broke liberal and conservative resistance to democracy in Europe.

After the Russian Revolution, a commitment to democracy became a key distinction dividing socialists from communists. The Bolsheviks split off from the Socialist International in 1919 because socialists would not to commit to overthrowing capitalism by “all available means, including armed force.” And after World War II, socialist and social democratic parties became mainstays of democratic systems in Europe.

Myth No. 3

All socialists want to abolish markets and private property.

Cass Sunstein, a liberal law professor, [writes](#) that once voters realize socialism means government ownership of “the nation’s airlines, hospitals, restaurants and department stores,” they will sour on it. Socialism leads to the “seizure of private property, and the dictating of individual behavior,” [asserts](#) Charlie Kirk, founder and executive director of Turning Point USA.

But on this question, too, the traditions vary. Communists, when in power, have done away with markets and private property. [Democratic socialists](#) say that in principle they hope capitalism will [disappear over the long run](#), but in the meantime they advocate piecemeal changes in the ownership and control of economic resources — [bank nationalization, for instance](#). (Democratic socialists have never fully held power anywhere, so their programs remain largely theoretical.) And social democrats have focused on redistributing the fruits of markets and private enterprise rather than abolishing them. Most of the policies advocated by politicians like Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) — including universal health care, free college education, and higher wealth and income taxes — are clearly achievable within a capitalist system.

Myth No. 4

When socialism is tried, it collapses.

“Socialism . . . will always fail,” [wrote Mark J. Perry](#), a professor of economics at the University of Michigan at Flint and a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, in March 2016. The Hoover Institution’s Paul R. Gregory offered a primer on [“Why Socialism Fails”](#) in January 2018.

Communism certainly failed, but social democracy has arguably been the single most successful modern ideology or political movement. Stable European democracies arose after World War II because a social consensus married relatively free markets and private ownership of the means of production with expanded welfare states, progressive taxation and other forms of government intervention in the economy and society. Without the impressive economic results generated by the market, the [huge improvements in living standards](#) in the West after the war would not have been possible; the 30 years after 1945 were Europe’s fastest period of economic growth [ever](#). But without the welfare state, the benefits of growth would not have been distributed so widely: Inequality [declined](#) dramatically during the postwar decades.

Myth No. 5

Socialism offers a ready-made solution to numerous current problems.

Socialism’s [advocates today promote it](#) as a near-panacea. It’s a possible [“answer to the climate catastrophe,”](#) [writes](#) a commentator in the Guardian. It “would remedy the systemic deprivation of people of color,” [says](#) Connie M. Razza, director of policy and research at the think tank Demos. It would go far beyond political reform to reshape the “basic structures that disempower people and keep them in wage slavery,” [says](#) Julia Salazar, a New York state senator and democratic socialist.

But many of today’s democratic socialists lack clear plans for what they want to put in capitalism’s place and how this new economic order would generate the growth, efficiency and innovation necessary to achieve redistribution and raise living standards. Nor is it clear that democratic socialists have realistic plans for dealing with other vexing social controversies, such as anxieties over immigration. Some argue that many current problems can be solved by new versions of policies that worked during the mid- to late 20th century, like a [Green New Deal](#); more government spending on health care, education and infrastructure; and [higher taxes](#).

Republicans insist that these initiatives would [destroy growth](#) and turn the United States into a tyrannical economic basket case like Venezuela. True, conservatives made [similar claims in the past](#) about major government initiatives [like Social Security and Medicare](#). But it is surely legitimate to press advocates of increased government spending on how they would pay for these programs. The economist Paul Krugman, for example, who is sympathetic to many social democratic policies, [has criticized](#) those on the left who argue that

these programs can be subsidized by simply printing or borrowing money.

What distinguished the postwar era was the *combination* of rising growth and equality. If socialists want to convince Americans, Europeans and others that they have the best solutions to contemporary problems, they need to show that their policies can generate substantial wealth and resources as well as, simultaneously, a more equitable distribution.

To ponder:

Capitalism works if government would just get out of the way

COMMENTS?

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A seemingly accelerating trend with many Americans is to look with skepticism and a jaundiced perspective at business, capitalism, and the profit motive. In spite of efforts by some to rewrite history, those of us who are students of history recognize that capitalism made America the



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economic superpower that it is. And the more we allow government to interfere in our economy, the more we move toward a fascistic system where government controls the means of production.

Business and the profit motive have turned us from an agrarian to a high-tech producing and consuming nation. All of us are dependent upon business and the profit motive for everything we do every day. From the manufacturer of the bed we arise from and the alarm clock we wake up to, to the toothpaste, shampoo, and comb we use in the morning. The beverage we imbibe to give us a kick-start in the morning and the vehicle we drive to work are prod-

ucts of once small businesses that have grown sometimes to global proportions. If any of those products or services we depend on get too expensive, we start shopping for cheaper alternatives. That's capitalism in a nutshell.

Most of us even work for a small business driven by the profit motive. Those firms, created and managed by entrepreneurs, market and sell products, provide advice and services, and fill the needs of people from all walks of life. They pay us to fill a specific function within the company to help them service their customers more efficiently and cost-effectively.

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Capitalism and Free Enterprise

What makes Capitalism Work

- **Markets-** Markets connect different sectors of the economy
 - **Consumer Sovereignty-** Used to describe the consumer as the "king," or ruler, of the market, the one who determines what product to produce.
- **Economic Freedom-** Freedom to make our own economic decision.
 - choose the type of occupation
 - choose the products we want
 - produce the products we want
 - consequences of our choices



Paul Harvey's warning: <https://youtu.be/0SAjwF3F-4k>

How many of our "socialist" programs should we discontinue:

SOCIALIST PROGRAMS IN THE U.S.

THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, AMBER ALERTS, AMTRAK, PUBLIC BEACHES, PUBLIC BUSING SERVICES, BUSINESS SUBSIDIES, THE CENSUS BUREAU, THE CIA, FEDERAL STUDENT LOANS, THE COURT SYSTEM, DAMS, PUBLIC DEFENDERS, DISABILITY INSURANCE, THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY, THE EPA, FARM SUBSIDIES, THE FBI, THE FCC, THE FDA, FEMA, FIRE DEPARTMENTS, FOOD STAMPS, GARBAGE COLLECTION, HEALTH CARE, PUBLIC HOUSING, THE IRS, PUBLIC LANDFILLS, PUBLIC LIBRARIES, MEDICARE, MEDICAID, THE MILITARY, STATE & NATIONAL MONUMENTS, PUBLIC MUSEUMS, NASA, THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE, NPR, PUBLIC PARKS, PBS, THE PEACE CORPS, POLICE DEPARTMENTS, PRISONS & JAILS, PUBLIC SCHOOLS, SECRET SERVICE, SEWER SYSTEMS, SNOW REMOVAL SERVICES, SOCIAL SECURITY, PUBLIC STREET LIGHTING, THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (HIGHWAYS, ROADS, BRIDGES), USPS, VACCINES, VETERAN HEALTH CARE, WELFARE, THE WHITE HOUSE, THE WIC PROGRAM, STATE ZOOS