

What is Socialism?

What is Communism?

[A friend of mine, Kirby, was participating in an Internet discussion with other folks and the question of what socialism is came up. He forwarded this question to me for my opinion. Besides replying to Kirby, and contrasting socialism with communism, I also forwarded my reply to some other friends. One them, Larry, criticized my description of communism, and I responded to that. Here is the whole string of emails, in sequence. –S.H.]

[From someone named Ernie S., sent on or before May 22, 2010:]

...

Besides: a “socialist” is a person who is social, in other words, pro-society, interested not only in the fate of the very rich, but also of the poor.

...

[From Cynthia K., May 22, 2010:]

The word “socialist” does NOT mean “someone who is social!” Nor does it mean “pro-society” nor “someone interested in both rich and poor”!

It means someone who advocates socialism. Socialism is the economic system in which the means of production and their distribution are owned/controlled by the controllers of the society. It is also the base for communism under the dictatorship of the proletariat in Marxist-Leninist theory.

Cynthia
BA Degree with major in Economics

[From Kirby W. to Scott H. (forwarding the above items), on May 22, 2010:]

This is from someone on our atheist forum....it doesn't sound right....using her definition I could argue that we are socialist today, since big money capitalists control the means of production, distribution, AND society (in so far that they control who gets elected and therefore what laws get passed). She has a degree in Economics but she seems confused to me. Comments?

[From Scott H. to Kirby W. (and others), on May 22, 2010:]

Hi Kirby,

Yes, Cynthia's brief comments are rather superficial and somewhat confused! But sort of on the right track.

Of course the word 'socialism' is used very differently by different people, and much of the time these days it is used to refer to capitalist welfare states (such as those now being further dismantled in Europe and elsewhere). Thus some people think you're a socialist if you favor government unemployment insurance, health insurance, welfare aid to the very poor, and so forth, even though you are a firm supporter of the continued existence of capitalism!

However, according to Marx there are two stages of "socialism":

Stage 1: The guiding economic principle is "From each according to their ability, to each according to their *work*."

Stage 2: The guiding economic principle is "From each according to their ability, to each according to their *needs*."

Both stages presuppose the political control of society by the working class and the suppression of the capitalists, and stage 1 is a transition period from capitalism to stage 2 of "socialism".

Since Lenin's day we revolutionary Marxists have changed the terminology a bit. We now use the term 'communism' for what Marx called the second stage of socialism, and we reserve the word 'socialism' for the transition period between capitalism and communism. (This change in terminology occurred in part because of the corruption of the word 'socialism' by the phony "socialists" of the Second International.)

So looking at Cynthia's comments from this Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective:

She says: A socialist is someone who advocates socialism.

We say: A *communist* is someone who advocates socialism *as a transition period* and *then communism*. Those who today call themselves only "socialists" (and not communists) do not in general view socialism as a transition period to communism, but rather as some sort of final end in itself. But even genuine socialism is highly unstable, and will inevitably revert to capitalism unless it is completely transformed into communism. (Transition stages are like that!)

She says: "Socialism is the economic system in which the means of production and their distribution are owned/controlled by the controllers of the society."

We say: First of all, that sounds like a tautology. It appears she meant to say that under socialism

the means of production and the distribution of what is produced are owned/controlled *by the workers* who create it all. If we make that adjustment, then her definition is broad enough to include *both* what we call socialism and what we call communism. In other words, it appears she intends to talk about which class politically controls the economy and society. She doesn't get into the precise differences in the distribution system that differentiate socialism and communism.

But she adds: Socialism "is also the base for communism under the dictatorship of the proletariat in Marxist-Leninist theory."

It appears she is recognizing here that communism is a further development from socialism, but doesn't spell the essential difference between the two.

Scott

[From Larry L. to Scott H., on May 22, 2010:]

Scott,

Your end stage of communism after the socialist conversion to "each according to their needs" smacks of a beehive gone wrong. I used to keep bees (up to 120 hives). A healthy colony has mostly workers and a few lazy drones. If you had no drones, you could not replicate the system. The drones are tolerated until frost comes and then almost all of the drones are kicked out of the hive to preserve honey stores for the long winter.

In an unhealthy hive where the queen has died or has become infertile, the drones multiply very rapidly since the workers lay unfertilized eggs. The whole hive rarely makes it to winter.

A human society that tolerates members who do not work may exist for awhile but revolution is bound to happen. That revolution can throw out the elite class who are representative of drones as well as those who have voted themselves endless welfare benefits without a work requirement.

I don't see your end stage communism working anywhere in the world. It is always in a transition to or from. Camelot is a figment of the imagination.

Larry

[From Scott H. to Larry L. (and others), on May 22, 2010:]

Hi Larry,

Well I think we've been over similar ground before and we know we can't convince each other.

But some comments anyway:

1) Communism (as opposed to socialism) requires many people to be willing to “work for nothing” (i.e., for the good of society; or simply because they enjoy the work they are doing; or because they find their work personally fulfilling; or because this leads to appreciation and commendation by others; or for various other non-pecuniary reasons).

The fact is that there are *some* people, even under the present capitalist system, who already work more for reasons of personal fulfillment than they do for money. There are even many people who donate their time and services to a myriad of worthwhile causes. Sue, for example, does volunteer work for the Cystic Fibrosis campaign. My wife and I have done a lot of volunteer work for anti-war efforts and other political causes. (In fact I spend most of my time doing stuff like this.) I have a friend who is very active in voluntary environmental work, another who volunteers at a branch of the public library, and so forth. Plus, of course, there are many medical doctors who donate lots of hours of their time and effort to free clinics, and even travel overseas (such as to Haiti) to do so.

Why do *some* people, at least, do things like this... “for free” yet?! Well we are social creatures who are concerned about each other (to various degrees, to be sure), and many of us—even in this dog-eat-dog society—have not had that concern for others beaten out of us.

The concern for the welfare of others plus the genuine need that most people have for some sort of fulfilling work leads those who have been raised in the proper social way to do volunteer work for the benefit of others. If *more* people were raised in this social, truly civilized way, then *more* of them would also be willing to work for the good of others. And if society were properly organized, this volunteer work could even generate all the income that people need to survive and flourish. This would free us up from *compulsory* work, and give us a lot *more* time and energy for voluntary work.

But the fact that these sorts of altruistic and beneficial-to-others sorts of behaviors are present *to a major degree* in only a minority of people at present does prove that communism cannot possibly be implemented immediately. There does need to be a transition period (socialism) wherein people are primarily rewarded on the basis of the work they perform (wages for the hours of useful work done). During that transition period several things have to occur, and one of them is the raising of a new generation of more socially concerned people. (“The new man” as it is classically put in Marxist theory.)

That is, *whatever it is* that has generated the relatively few people today who are willing to work for the benefit of others, must be applied to the raising of entire new generations. If a few can be brought up to be more fully human, then all (or at least the great majority) can also be brought up that way. This proves (to my satisfaction) that the “selfish-human-nature” argument against communism is baloney. A characteristic of a selfish capitalist society is being falsely ascribed to humanity in general.

2) Another prerequisite for communism is that virtually all the really obnoxious labor in the world, as well as the great majority of the monotonous and dull work, be eliminated. Fortunately,

technology is rapidly accomplishing this. Ditch digging by hand (which I have done!) is virtually never really necessary anymore, and running a backhoe is actually kind of fun (if you don't have to spend too many hours doing it every day).

There will probably always be some unpleasant and/or dull labor to be performed, but if the time that any individual needs to spend doing these kinds of jobs is kept quite low there will be volunteers willing to take it on. We found this out in practice in our commune in Virginia. (I'll get into that another time!) Similarly, I hated my job as a bus driver in San Francisco, but this was mostly because of the long hours I had to spend doing it. If you only have to drive a few hours a day, and only a few days a week (and if people are more pleasant to you while you're doing it!), then bus driving isn't that bad at all! I would gladly volunteer to do a little of it myself!

3) Under capitalism there is also a tremendous amount of work being done that would not need to be done at all under communism (or even under socialism). Think of the hundreds of thousands of people employed in the health industry in clerical jobs whose only purpose is to try to deny benefits to others, for example! Or all the cops and guards for the rich and their property! Or all the god-damned lawyers!

4) Your concept that what communism amounts to is a lot of hard-working suckers supporting a lot of drones (such as in a malfunctioning bee hive) is totally off base. Even under capitalism there is (and must be!) a certain amount of communism! Children, for example, do not work, nor people in old folks homes, nor the physically or mentally disabled. Who supports them? It is the workers, of course, those who perform all the labor necessary to feed, clothe, house, and provide services for everybody (whether they work or not).

Do we view children, the retired, the sick or disabled, and so forth as "drones"? No, they are simply people who need help and support from those who can provide it.

Another of the reasons why we need a transition period of socialism before communism is possible is so that we can make sure that all those who are capable of performing useful work get used to doing their fair share. "Those who do not work, neither shall they eat!"

Even under communism there will still be pressures on people to do their fair share of work to the extent that they are capable of doing so, but it will be in the form of social pressure and the expectations of family, friends, and all those around them.

In a society where work is not a tremendous burden in life, but rather something that people have come to value and look forward to, your notion of lots of drones sponging on society will become incomprehensible.

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I know none of the above (or any of the much further elaboration that I could get into) is going to convince you! We live in a bourgeois society, and bourgeois conceptions of people and society have been indoctrinated into most of us. A sane, rational, and humane world is almost

unimaginable to many people.

You might also want to check out my brief comments on the ["free rider problem"](#) (which is the essence of your objection to communism).

Scott