



# REWRITING HISTORY

**There have been many socialist experiments – and all of them have failed.**

**However, after their failure, history seems to get re-written and the popularity of socialism lives on, says**

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**S**ocialism is popular in Britain. More popular than capitalism, at any rate.

In a recent YouGov survey, 36 per cent of respondents expressed a favourable opinion of socialism and only 32 per cent an unfavourable opinion.

Capitalism, meanwhile, was viewed favourably by only 33 per cent, and unfavourably by 39 per cent.<sup>1</sup> How can an economic system that has been tried so many times, and that has always ended in failure, still be so popular?

Part of the reason has to be that socialists have long been very good at distancing themselves from real-world examples of socialism.

Mention the failure of the Soviet Union or a similar historical example, and self-described socialists will invariably answer something like: “But that wasn’t *real* socialism! That was a perverted version. Real socialism has never been tried.”

This claim would have more credibility if it had been applied consistently over time. But it hard to find any example of a socialist experiment which has not, at some point, been praised by Western intellectuals.

Socialist revolutions have often been followed by a brief honeymoon period, during which they had (or seemed to have) some initial success. At that stage, almost nobody claims that they are not *really* socialist.

It is only once the failures have become obvious that Western intellectuals disown the experiment, and they

always disown it retroactively. They claim that the country in question has never been socialist in the first place.

To be clear, when we talk about socialism here, we have in mind systems of state ownership and planning such as those used in Cuba, the Soviet Union and twenty-first century Venezuela – not social democracies such as Sweden where there is a large space in which a free economy operates, albeit with significant redistribution of income.

## SOCIALISTS HAVE LONG BEEN VERY GOOD AT DISTANCING THEMSELVES FROM REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF SOCIALISM

### Western intellectual support for the Soviet Union and Mao

In the 1930s, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, co-founders of the Fabian Society, travelled to the Soviet Union, and subsequently wrote several books and pamphlets marvelling at it. In *‘Is Soviet communism a new civilisation?’*<sup>2</sup>, they described Stalin’s empire as an earthly paradise, a society characterised by perfect harmony:

“[T]here is no longer any conflict of interests in production. Whether between enterprises or between grades or kinds of workers or producers, [...]

no person’s gain is rooted in another person’s loss. [...] There is a universal and continuous incentive to every producer [...] to improve his qualifications, and to render the utmost service [...] Each [enterprise] becomes eager to help every other enterprise”.

Alexander Wicksteed, a British writer who spent some time in Moscow, also argued:

“[F]or the first time in history the common man feels that the country belongs to him and not the privileged class that are his masters.



[...] [T]he Marxian ideal of a classless society [...] has been realized to an extent that is wonderfully refreshing to any Englishman of democratic aspirations”.<sup>3</sup>

Testimonies like these abound. It was only in the 1950s that Western intellectuals fell out of love with Soviet socialism.

But a new utopia soon replaced it: Mao’s China. Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, an Italian journalist, and later an MEP, went on a pilgrimage there, and reported:

“[A] people is marching with a light step and with fervour toward the future. This people may be the incarnation of

<sup>1</sup> YouGov (2016a) Socialism and capitalism. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/opi/surveys/results#/survey/94978480-d625-11e5-a405-005056900127/question/a3ee8500-d625-11e5-a405-005056900127/toplines>

<sup>2</sup> Webb and Webb (1936) *Is Soviet communism a new civilisation?* Left Review pamphlet. London: Left Review. Available at <http://webbs.library.lse.ac.uk/438/>

<sup>3</sup> Hollander, P. (1990) *Political Pilgrims. Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba*. Lanham: University Press of America, p. 115.

the new civilization of the world. China has made an unprecedented leap into history".<sup>4</sup>

Hewlett Johnson, an English priest of the Church of England reported:

## IT WAS ONLY IN THE 1950s THAT WESTERN INTELLECTUALS FELL OUT OF LOVE WITH SOVIET SOCIALISM

"It was not hard [...] to understand the deep affection men feel for this man [...] All men – intellectuals, peasants, merchants – regard Mao as the symbol of their deliverance, the man who [...] raised their burdens. The peasant looks at the land he tills: Mao's gift. The factory worker thinks of a wage of 100 lb. rice instead of 10: Mao's gift".<sup>5</sup>

### Plus ça change

The same thing then happened all over again in Cuba, Albania, Nicaragua, Angola, Mozambique – name a socialist experiment, and I guarantee you can find prominent Western thinkers who backed it enthusiastically at some point.

The latest example is Venezuela. Until about three years ago, when the country (which sits on the world's largest proven oil reserves)

was benefiting from an oil price boom, *Chavismo* – or 'Socialism of the 21st Century', as those 'in the know' would call it – was all the rage. In 2009, Noam Chomsky said:



"[W]hat's so exciting about at last visiting Venezuela is that I can see how a better world is being created [...] The transformations that Venezuela is making toward the creation of another socio-economic model could have a global impact".<sup>6</sup>

In 2012, Owen Jones went on a pilgrimage to Venezuela as well, and reported:

"Venezuela is an inspiration to the world, it really does show that there is an alternative. I met so many people who told me how their lives had changed since the election of President Chávez."<sup>7</sup>

And the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn commented when Chavez died: "Thanks Hugo for showing that wealth can be shared. He made massive contributions to Venezuela and a very wide world".

The truth is that insofar as these successes were real, they were built on sand, or

more precisely, on abnormally high oil prices.

Since oil prices have returned to a more normal level, the Venezuelan economy has contracted by about a quarter. Shortages of basic goods, especially food and medicines, were already an issue even during the oil price boom, but they have become a lot more severe since then. Over 80 per cent of the country live in poverty.

As was the case with every previous socialist experiment, Western intellectuals are now U-turning.

Noam Chomsky now claims: "I never described Chavez's state capitalist government as 'socialist' [...] It was quite remote from socialism. Private capitalism remained [...] Capitalists were free to undermine the economy in all sorts of ways, like massive export of capital."<sup>8</sup>

### And socialists will keep experimenting on the people

So, once again, Venezuela was not 'real' socialism, 'real' socialism has never been tried, and all that.

But what really happens is that whenever an experiment that self-described socialists have once endorsed as the real thing turns sour, they retroactively define it as 'unreal'.

Venezuela is only the most recent example. It will not be the last ●

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 278

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 328

<sup>6</sup> 'Noam Chomsky Meets with Chavez in Venezuela', *Venezuela Analysis*, 27 August 2009. Available at <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/4748>

<sup>7</sup> *Venezuela Solidarity Campaign* (2012) *Viva Venezuela! Magazine* 2(2). Available at [https://issuu.com/venezuelasolidaritycampaign/docs/viva\\_venezuela\\_volume\\_2\\_issue\\_2](https://issuu.com/venezuelasolidaritycampaign/docs/viva_venezuela_volume_2_issue_2)

<sup>8</sup> Stossel, J. 'Chomsky's Venezuela lesson', 31 May 2017. Available at <https://www.creators.com/read/john-stossel/05/17/chomskys-venezuela-lesson>