



Trouble Brewing

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The number of young people supporting or advocating for socialism has risen alarmingly in recent years. Groups such as Socialist Alternative, Stand Up For Socialism and other variations on that theme regularly flood Australian university campuses with material linking capitalism with poverty, homophobia, and other kinds of inequality. Recruits are entrapped with catch-cries of social justice, yet those who propagate the message of socialism for the 21st century are, in actuality, unaware of the meaning of the word, let alone its tragically murderous history. In 2019, polling by YouGov revealed less than 30 per cent of young Australians could define socialism correctly. So, why do so many young Australians find socialism so alluring, despite completely lacking an understanding of their newfound cause?

As economists Robert Lawson and Benjamin Powell show in their wide-ranging and lively survey, [Socialism Sucks: Two Economists Drink Their Way Through The Unfree World](#), widespread ignorance among young people in comparatively free societies stems from three sources: first, a tendency among academics and popular press to



glamourise socialism and its leaders while sweeping humanitarian disasters under the rug; second, a breed of socialist activism more than willing to present a revisionist history of the world to university students by claiming past failed attempts at socialism were, in fact, not socialism at all; and finally, a generation of bleeding-heart millennials whose misguided (if well-intended) passion for social justice leads them to envisage a false dichotomy of fairness vs injustice in the world (with capitalism as the source of all injustice).

The methodology of *Socialism Sucks* is simple. Two economists travel through unfree countries, sampling the beer available in each country they visit, and recording their findings in a short, engaging, and easily digestible volume which is an easy read even for those who have no prior knowledge of, or interest in, economics or history. Lawson and Powell—having written and edited countless books, policy reports, and academic articles—come excellently qualified to expound socialism’s failures to a young audience. Sardonicism and dark humour riddle the book, alleviating what otherwise would perhaps be too depressing a volume to hold the attention of a readership uninterested in the grimmest points of socialism’s economic and humanitarian tragedies.

Lawson and Powell, reflecting on their work’s title, ask, “*Do we have to say it again?*”, and declare “apparently we do”, because today, millions of people, young and old, are flocking to the banner of socialism and rallying to the cry of “What do we want? Socialism—the economic system that has impoverished people everywhere and resulted in the deaths of tens of millions! And when do we want it? Now!”

Of course, many volumes by economists and historians have over the years made similar points, calling out the sheer idiocy of modern socialists, but few have managed to present their arguments in such an engaging manner. Additionally, Lawson and Powell actually travelled to Sweden, Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, China, Russia, Ukraine and Georgia before passing judgment on the current socialist craze sweeping the US and other nations.

Before the authors commence their (slightly inebriated) travels, they begin with a sobering foreword reminding us that in 2013, Venezuela was seen as the poster child for socialism, with fashionable opinion singing the praises of Hugo Chavez. David Sirota wrote for *Salon* that this sort of society was one which America should envy: Chavez’s “full-throated advocacy of socialism”, said he, had “racked up an economic record that... American president[s] could only dream of achieving”. Meanwhile, Sean Penn, Danny Glover, Oliver Stone and Michael Moore extolled the virtues of life under socialism. By 2017, however, with inflation at 18,000 per cent and rising, and drastic food shortages meaning Venezuelans lost an average of 24 pounds, it became clear the nation’s socialist policies were starving its citizens. When our intrepid economists arrive in the country, they find people struggling to survive, closed stores, and ominously quiet streets in which the paucity of commerce starkly contrasts the busy hubbub of trade across the border.



And still, the Hollywood left ignored the obvious. On the occasion of Chavez’s death in 2013, Sean Penn wrote: “Today the people of the United States lost a friend it never knew it had. And poor people around the world lost a champion.” Oliver Stone took this sentiment a step further, writing: “I mourn a great hero to the majority of his people and those who struggle throughout the world for a place.” Even the United Nations chose to ignore the suffering of the Venezuelan people under socialism, with the nation led by Nicolás Maduro appointed last October to its so-called Human Rights Council—as was Mauritania, home to a thriving modern-day slave trade.



Continuing their travels in Cuba, Lawson and Powell are greeted by broken windows and mould-infested bathrooms in derelict, hulking towers which resemble Soviet housing projects. They learn of beer shortages akin to Venezuela’s and visit a hellish grocery store which brings to mind the wastelands which were supermarkets in the USSR, stocking only one variety of each product.

The lesson of Cuba is encapsulated in this sentence: “Socialism claims to promote equality, but frequently what it delivers is just sameness”—the same mediocre food, ancient hulks of cars, and a lustreless way of life. As in the case of Venezuela, the Western popular press has no problem with ignoring the realities of life under socialism. For example, a HuffPost article, *Cuba’s Health Care System: A Model for the World*, accepted without query the impressive health statistics produced by Cuban officials, praising the low infant mortality rate (4.4 deaths per 1,000 live births) while conveniently making no mention of Cuba having one of the highest abortion rates in the world, with 72 abortions per one hundred births, due to doctors routinely forcing women to abort

high-risk pregnancies so Cuban bureaucrats can brag to an appreciative Western audience of the achievements of their socialised healthcare system. When you learn the full truth, somehow the statistics aren't quite so impressive. The rest of the authors' tour of the unfree world is just as confronting.

In North Korea, glimpses of dilapidated houses and abandoned amusement parks overgrown with brush and trees are emblematic of the wider lack of prosperity in this repressive nation, while the memory of the three million who died in North Korea in the 1990s through starvation, as well as stories of hard labour camps and torture, reminds us that, at its core, socialism is unproductive, oppressive, totalitarian, and fundamentally evil. In China, the array of shops and hotels signalling capitalist comfort are haunted by the millions who lost their lives to Mao's murderous Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and that, for proponents of China's regime at this time, these deaths were excusable. "Now we have a few cases of illness and death: it's nothing!," proclaimed Chen Yi, Mao's Foreign Minister, in 1958.



Ed and Bob, along with fellow economist Brad Hobbs, enjoy some excellent but highly taxed Belgian beer in Sweden.

Lawson and Powell also visit Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia, examining the challenges of recovering from decades of crippling socialist governance. Upon their return to the US, however, they must once again grapple with the question: why do so many young people campaign for socialism today? The authors found one obvious answer at a conference of socialists: these young people associated socialism with progressive issues such as abortion without any understanding of socialism as an ideology of collectivisation. This is more than semantics.

Young people are defining socialism as an amalgam of the progressive causes of the day, not as a deeply flawed political system. Few (if any) of this conference's attendees understand economics, and they are railing against vague and vacuous notions of inequality under capitalism. Inevitably, speakers at the conference decry past and present socialist governments as "not real socialism". One speaker, herself from Venezuela, catalogues the starvation and suffering of Venezuela in recent years to an eager audience before pronouncing the sickening words: "Socialism has not failed in Venezuela, because it has never been tried!"

Some time ago, Michael Moore tweeted: "Most polls now show young adults (18-35) ... across America prefer socialism (fairness) to capitalism (selfishness)"—but socialism simply does not equal fairness. Statements such as Moore's are absurd ploys used by the left to exploit the emotional naivety of young people, and, unfortunately, most of the ardent campus socialists of

today won't look to *Socialism Sucks* to learn of the overwhelming failure of their ideology.

Speaking of Marx, Robert Lawson says, "I bet there's never been a guy who has been so wrong about every major thing he wrote about and who still has so many followers." And he's right. The failure of our schools and universities to educate young people about the atrocities committed under socialist regimes is concerning. While reading *Socialism Sucks*, I was reminded of the words of historian Robert Conquest, who wrote:

... it is obvious that a high level of education in a general sense has often failed to protect twentieth-century minds from homicidal, or suicidal, aberrations. As we have seen, these have often been generated by men of high educational standing. And it has often been in colleges and universities that the bad seeds first bore fruit.

Beneath the humour and the salty language, or perhaps partly because of it, Lawson and Powell are able to elucidate socialism's failures in a succinct and accessible manner.

As they write in *Socialism Sucks*' first chapter, 'Starving Socialism: Venezuela':

Western intellectuals, whom Lenin called "useful idiots," tend to overlook or make excuses for socialist regimes' economic failures and humanitarian atrocities. Today, the idiots are running out of places to admire.

Socialism Sucks is a particularly timely contribution because more and more young people have turned to socialism in recent years. However, the next generation has not entirely succumbed to this dangerous ideology. Many young people are becoming more aware of the dangerous allure of socialism, with some studies suggesting that Gen Z is the most conservative generation in decades. Beyond the content they are force-fed by academic ideologues in the classroom, young people are increasingly seeking truth from alternative sources, to which this book is a worthy addition.