

What Is Socialism?

[This is a letter I sent to my friend Bob Weil on Dec. 20, 2013. I'm very saddened to report that Bob died in March 2014. This brought to a sudden end the many valuable political conversations I had with Bob over the years. We did not always agree, but we certainly helped each other think through many issues more deeply. I will really miss those conversations. The letter below is my response to one of these conversations we had the day before it was sent. Although I'm sure that Bob intended to respond to this letter in one way or another, unfortunately he never got the chance to do so. However, I am posting this letter anyway, because I think it raises some issues of interest to many other people as well. Several links to the [Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism](#) have also been added as an aid to readers who may not be familiar with other Marxist terms and events. —Scott H.]

Hi Bob,

In our conversation yesterday you made some criticisms of me with regard to my use and conception of the word 'socialism', and specifically pointed to what you considered to be an inconsistency in my previously having said that the Soviet Union during the Stalin era was socialist while at the same time claiming that Cuba is not socialist. As usual in my verbal discussions I didn't do a very good job in defending my position; so I'll try to do a better job now.

If I were setting out to write an essay on this topic I would begin by first emphasizing and elaborating on a couple points that are not widely or sufficiently appreciated:

- 1) The great importance of definitions in science (and the fact that elaborating scientific theory in part means specifying the meaning of various key technical terms).
- 2) The fact that as sciences develop, the definitions of these technical terms often need to be refined or change along with the scientific theory as a whole.

These things are true in social science too. For example the term 'morpheme' in linguistics was originally defined as the "smallest element of meaning", but is now (despite what it still says in dictionaries) defined in a more complex way about the occurrence of distinguishable phoneme clusters, etc.

I'm going to assume we fully agree on these two points, but if we don't then we can get into those matters further. I am also assuming that we view Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as being a science and are striving to use scientific methods in its elaboration and employment. If we don't fully agree on that, then we need to explore that issue a lot more too.

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Obviously, it depends on what we *mean* by the word ‘socialism’ whether it is correct to say that Stalin’s USSR or Cuba were (or are) socialist countries. And, in conversations among our fellow revolutionary Marxists I think it is reasonable to assume that the definition or conception that we need to employ is *the Marxist one*.

Thus the fact that many people use the term ‘socialism’ in very different ways is totally irrelevant, just as is the fact that many non-scientists use the term ‘mass’ differently than it is used in physics. (As we joked yesterday, some people consider America under Obama to be “socialist”!) Similarly, European welfare states, established by “Social Democratic” parties, have commonly been called “socialist”. But this is NOT what is meant by socialism in Marxist theory.

It seems to me that there are three central principles in what we Marxists mean, or should mean, by socialism (all explicit in Marx, Lenin & Mao, and each of which can be considerably elaborated on):

1) The economic aspect: I.e., a society in which the basic economic principle is “From each according to their ability, to each according to their work.” [This is of course opposed to not only capitalist society, but is also different from a future communist society where the basic economic principle is “From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.”] Note that even this economic aspect of socialism should NOT be considered as just “state ownership” of the means of production. However, ownership by a proletarian state and the existence of socialist planning are generally important *parts* of the economic aspect of socialism.

2) The political aspect: I.e., actual political power and rule by the proletariat and its genuine representatives, in the genuine interests of the proletariat and broader masses.

3) The transformational aspect: The fact that we view socialism as a dynamic (and unstable!) transitional stage between capitalism and communism.

Although all these points are already in Marx’s own writings, the special emphasis on this third point is today most characteristic of those of us who call ourselves Maoists.

There are of course many other things which can reasonably be said to characterize socialism. One such is the central concern about both the short-term and long-term interests and welfare of the people. I would consider that to be a corollary of the political aspect of socialism (principle #2), and perhaps to some degree a corollary of principle #1 as well. Similarly, socialism can and should be viewed as an era when the capitalist law of value is ever more restricted. I would consider that to be a corollary of principle #3.

So I am saying that from a Marxist theoretical point of view deciding whether or not a country (at some particular time) is socialist or not is basically the same as deciding whether or not all three of these principles truly apply.

Of course there will be clear cases in both directions, and some cases which are less clear. (This means there is indeed, as you suggested, a continuum of sorts, but this continuum does NOT

include welfare states, Obama “socialism” and other bourgeois conceptions of socialism.)

Calling the U.S. today “socialist” is indeed laughably false! But *why*, exactly? From the MLM perspective it is because NONE of the three principles above hold *at all* for the U.S. today.

A clear case in the other direction was China in, say, 1975, in which all three principles certainly held. Of course, there were still some weaknesses with those principles even then and there, as there is always going to be in the real world. (Despite reaching the greatest levels so far in human history, the direct democratic control of the people over their collective lives, at work and everywhere else, still had plenty of room to further improve in a major way, for example.)

How about Russia in 1917 immediately following the Bolshevik revolution? Was it socialist? No, strictly speaking it was not yet socialist. Few economic transformations had yet been made. However, Lenin stated that it was proper to call this a socialist revolution, and Russia a socialist country, because of the class and party ruling it, and because of the changes they were definitely going to make.

Similarly, we can't be unreasonably strict about any of the specific three aspects or principles of socialism. When it became necessary to end “war communism” in Russia and establish the NEP, this was in fact a step backward *toward capitalism* and *away from communism*. But it was a temporary retreat, recognized full well by Lenin and (most of) the Bolsheviks as a necessary short-term backward step. But the overall transformation of society in Russia in that era was still in the direction of first fully establishing socialism (socialist planning, etc.) with the genuine goal of transforming that socialism into communism.

So then, how about Stalin's Soviet Union?

From an economic aspect, there was indeed some very substantial transformation of capitalism into socialism in both industry and agriculture. (True, this transformation in the countryside was done horribly incorrectly, without the [mass line](#) and even downright criminally, but it was nevertheless a transformation into cooperative socialist forms and away from capitalism.) So the principle of “... to each according to his work” was pretty much established.

But any further socialist economic transformation then pretty much ceased by the mid-1930s. From that point on Stalin promoted what I call “[socialist economism](#)”, that is, the program of expanding production but without further changes to the [relations of production](#), and with little or no progressive diminution of the [law of value](#). Mao later explicitly criticized Stalin for not developing and implementing any further transformations in the direction of communism. He said that Stalin seemed to be “at a loss” about how to do this.

From the political aspect, the state was in the hands of representatives of the proletariat (the CPSU), certainly to begin with. But the picture here is quite clouded. Stalin ruled from above in a paternalistic manner, as Mao appropriately described it. So in one sense he (and his regime) did represent the interests of the proletariat, but in another sense he didn't. A new bourgeois class developed within the Party, and Stalin even inadvertently promoted this! But as long as Stalin was alive they didn't come to power as a “class for itself”.

So how to sum this all up? I think the most rational summary is that, yes, the Soviet Union became socialist economically in the Stalin era, and should be overall described as socialist in that period despite its very serious shortcomings (which Stalin himself was mostly responsible for) which led to the overthrow of socialism after Stalin's death.

The Soviet Union was no longer socialist when Khrushchev came to power because: 1) A new bourgeoisie within the CPSU had come to power; i.e., politically it was no longer socialism. And 2) Because there was no longer even the possibility that eventually under this regime new social transformations in the direction of communism would be made. It is true that state planning and state ownership of the means of production continued, but given that society was now ruled by a new bourgeoisie in its own interests, this now became not socialism, but rather [state capitalism](#).

To think of the USSR in the revisionist era as “socialist” is to completely reject the concept of socialism as a proletarian ruled society governed by the principle of “... to each according to his work”, and which is a transitional period between capitalism and communism. We Maoists take that idea about socialism being a period of transition toward communism seriously!

What about Cuba?

In my view this was originally an anti-imperialist, nationalist revolution against a comprador puppet dictator. And, as such, it was certainly something to be supported. After seizing power Castro did in fact move to what is commonly called “the left”, i.e. in the direction of state ownership of the means of production and improving the condition of the people. To a considerable degree they also implemented the principle of “... to each according to their work.”

Far more than Stalin, Castro and his associates have operated in a very paternalistic manner. They truly do care about the welfare of the people, about improving mass education and health, etc., and have in fact made great strides in those directions. But this definitely does not mean that the working class itself is running Cuba.

Within a few years of the revolution most of the progressive social transformations in the relations of production also stopped in Cuba. Moreover, while Cuba largely escaped the clutches of U.S. imperialism, it did so by voluntarily coming under the clutches of Soviet [social-imperialism](#)—including ideologically (for the most part).

The reasons these things happened is that Cuba was not ruled by representatives of a revolutionary proletariat, but by a paternalistic national bourgeoisie who happened to favor state capitalism (under the name of “socialism”).

So Cuba is in many ways quite an anomaly, and certainly not a model for revolutions elsewhere.

In my view the primary reason why Cuba is not socialist (and never was) is that it was never ruled by a revolutionary proletariat determined to transform the economy from capitalism to communism. I.e., I'm stressing again the importance of that third aspect (or principle) of what socialism really is, that “Maoist” principle.

Of course objective conditions meant that a complete transformation to communism in Cuba alone was out of the question. (Generally we Marxists believe this *can only be completed* on a worldwide basis.) But many more steps in that direction could certainly have been taken. The opposition of Castro to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China and its siding with and supporting Soviet state capitalism speaks volumes, I'd say.

And all the changes in Cuban society are now back in the direction of Western style monopoly capitalism, never in the direction of communism.

Of course we should continue to oppose U.S. attacks on Cuba, the blockade, etc. It is even fine to admire many of the things that Cuba has done for its people, especially in the areas of health and education. I admire those things myself, which have been accomplished under very difficult circumstances.

But it is very wrong to put Cuba forward as a model for socialist revolution. That's what I most object to. Real socialism is a step toward communism. Cuba is no such step, and has actually been more of an ideological obstacle to promoting real socialist revolution around the world.

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One thing I didn't mention yet is the point [another friend] D. raised: That the conception in the world revolutionary movement of what socialism is has changed quite a bit since the days of Marx. In a way this is strange, since all three main aspects/principles of socialism I mentioned were already clearly in Marx. But there has nevertheless been a very noticeable shift in emphasis over time. And that third "transformational" aspect of socialism has greatly increased in importance in our conception. *It has become central in place of state ownership and planning.*

We would no longer talk in the way Lenin occasionally did about socialism being the nationalization of monopolies that had developed under capitalist-imperialism. We have such things as the experience of Soviet state capitalism, the Labour Party's bailing out of failing British corporations through nationalization (and similar things in the U.S.) and the experience of the struggles against the bourgeoisie in the GPCR to give us a much more sophisticated understanding of socialism now.

At this point, looking back at socialism in the Soviet Union in the Stalin era, we have a *lot* more criticisms than Communists of that era did. We see more clearly the serious weaknesses it had. We have the knowledge of how things later developed as well as the knowledge of democratic method of mass line leadership, for example. We have to be smarter now given our movement's increased experience.

So this is also part of the reason we may seem "harder" on Cuba than we are on Stalin's USSR when it comes to calling one but not the other "socialism". Castro has much less of an "excuse"!

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Well, I know very well that we still don't agree about most of this, Bob. And that's OK! But I

just wanted to explain why I see no contradiction at all in my views about socialism in Stalin's Russia and Castro's Cuba.

I would even admit that these are both somewhat "difficult" cases to decide (in comparison with China in 1975 and the U.S. today, for example!).

But I do insist that we have to have some theoretical principles to guide us in deciding whether a country is socialist or not. And if they are not the three principles I listed, then what are they?

Scott