

A Response to A Defense of Moderate, American Socialism

This essay is a short response to the great recent [analysis](#) on Socialism in America by my colleague on this website, Adrian Bonenberger. I was looking for ways I could critique his points but it is hard on the merits, I guess because we share more political opinions than I might have thought. Here are a few of my comments that variously qualify as minor quibbles, or just my own comments expounding on what he has written.

We agree that Bernie Sanders is the best candidate for President, and without enumerating all the specific reasons why, it is enough to realize that he offers the best policies on basically every pressing issue as well as the most consistently honest and incorruptible character—a rare mix in politicians today or at any time. As a proudly self-identified Democratic Socialist, we can place him in the company of such men as Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela (not to mention other Very Intelligent People such as Pablo Picasso, Bertrand Russell, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Helen Keller, Marie Curie, Jean-Paul Sartre, Noam Chomsky, Charlie Chaplin, John Lennon, and many others—much better overall company than J.P. [Morgan](#) or Donald Trump, in my opinion). We also agree that Socialism has long been a highly pejorative word in America, especially since the first Red Scare in 1918, rising in popularity during the Great Depression, and being finally blacklisted and virtually outlawed for good during the Red Scare after WWII for the next six decades. The time has finally come when Socialism is no longer a dirty word, but is increasingly becoming accepted as a positive and possibly essential solution to many of America's biggest problems.

On Education, I agree that it is more important that education is universally available than who supplies it. I am not

against private school, and I actually work at one. I believe, though, that public school should not only be available but free for everyone. In an America where even education and our great university system has been corporatized and privatized, this is an important point. Schools and universities produce our future citizen-voters, our innovative ideas, and our culture. Contra your point, I do not know of any philosophers who have seriously claimed that ignorance is better than knowledge. Ignorance very truly does lead to either dictatorship or, something only slightly less malign, a system of plutocratic control by a tiny fraction of the richest citizens. The great John Dewey, perhaps the most influential American philosopher in the fields of education and democracy, argued that that a working democracy could not exist without an educated populace.

On Regulation, I think you hit the nail on the head. One of the biggest complaints, and weaknesses, of Libertarians is that Government restricts freedom with too many burdensome regulations. Obviously no government is perfect or without corruption, but as you say, the regulations in large part exist because the status quo ante gave us things like child labor, poisoned food (see Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*), poisoned air (compare pictures of 1970's L.A. to 2016 Beijing), poisoned water (look up Cuyahoga River fire), wage slavery, even *real* slavery. Socialism fought for and delivered solutions to some of these problems (and some other more minor ones like weekends and public holidays), but many more remain.

On Taxation, I would just like to add that while our tax dollars are often misspent, they also buy things like highways, trains, space exploration, the Internet, a working postal system, a strong military that has kept foreign countries from our soil for 200 years, national parks, and many other things I can't think of off the top of my head. The thing I've never been able to understand is that most people who can afford to pay taxes to support their society do

everything they can to avoid paying taxes to help their society. This is due to pure greed and selfishness. It is well-known that the top tax rate during America's most prosperous decades ever was above 90%, and the economy and the middle-class grew together. As the top tax rate declined to a low point of 28% (with an effective rate much lower for the rich, a large part of whose wealth is not taxable), the middle-class has shrunk and the economy has become unstable. There are different conclusions to be drawn about tax data, which can always be skewed in any direction you want it to go really. The point is that taxes are necessary to guarantee a working society for everyone, so if you accidentally pay a tiny fraction of someone else's school tuition or hospital bill by mistake then you have to live with that gross unfairness. If you don't like it, move to a tax-free country like Somalia and see if you like it better. I do not think that raising taxes on the rich is a panacea, but it is a great first step.

On the Free Handouts and Lazy Freeloaders point, I would like to add that this is probably the most pernicious and also most difficult to dispel myth, and the one that keeps many misinformed people voting against their economic interests. It is in the interest of the rich to appeal to people's innate prejudice or racism in order to pit the middle class against the poor instead of themselves. We all know the myth of the lazy black people, which has caused ignorant white people to blame supposed "welfare queens" and policies such as affirmative action for all their problems. If it weren't black people, it would be immigrants. There is always someone else to blame rather than the real culprits, even while working-class whites, now deprived of union protections that made the country more prosperous now are increasingly depending on welfare. The fact is that the biggest freeloaders and welfare queens in America for the last 40 years have been Oil companies like Exxon and Shell, Arms producers like Raytheon, Wall Street banks like Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan,

multinational corporations like Walmart, Chemical and Agricultural giants like Dow and Monsanto, Airline producers like Boeing, and many other fabulously profitable and destructive companies that enrich shareholders while robbing the people and denuding the planet.

On Socialism as Totalitarianism, I would just like to add a small point about the nature of socialism. It helps to imagine it not as a monolithic idea, but, like Capitalism, a gradable ideology that can become as moderate or as extreme as it is allowed by the political situation. To those who say that it is an unworkable and naive system, it already works well in many countries around the world, including the United States. "Socialist" Norway, for example spends 20% of government revenue on social projects while in the USA its 18%. For the total economy, somewhere around 35% is socialized in the USA while its somewhere around 45% in "Socialist" France. I can tell you, by the way, that life in Norway and France is good, as it is in "Socialist" Italy where I live. Not perfect, but good. Socialism in America today is so appealing especially because we have drifted so far into unregulated and predatory capitalism that socialism becomes a moderate ideology which can bring "balance to the force", as it were. Life is not "good" for a huge growing number of working poor in America who are being exploited by a capitalist system which cares nothing for them, and where income inequality has grown so extremely out of control that literally the richest 62 individuals in America are worth as much as the bottom 50% (that's 160 million people, by the way). Socialism in the Soviet Union or China was really not socialism at all, but an extreme totalitarian oligarchy that simply continued the ancient traditions of despotism in those countries after overturning the old regime. Left to its own largely deregulated devices, Capitalism in America and the world has evolved into an extreme neoliberal oligarchy that aspires for even more power and money than the planet's resources can supply. Like a deadly virus, it must be stopped before killing

the host. Whether that happens with relatively mild socializing reforms and limits, or with a more traumatic revolutionary overthrow of the current system, modern capitalism will be brought down. I hope it is something closer to the former, only because the latter brings with it a much higher probability of violence, anarchy, and a worse system than before.