



Socialism: The Slouching Beast on our Campuses

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Socialism has come a long way since 1917. Socialist regimes ruled half the world—at a terrible cost—during the Cold War. Then, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, socialism fell like a rocket crashing back to earth. Yes, China, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, and other countries were still ruled by socialists, but, in general, socialism appeared to be a dying ideology.

To be sure, there were different degrees of socialism. The totalitarian socialism of Mao and the Soviet Union killed people, ruined economies, and snuffed out freedoms critical to both political and personal life. The democratic socialism common in the West, softer and therefore less destructive, merely specialized in overregulating the private economy and extreme redistribution of wealth.

But even in the West, socialism manifestly failed. The democratic socialism of Great Britain reduced that country from a leading economic power to the “sick man of Europe,” and was firmly rejected by British voters during the Thatcher years.

Unfortunately, socialism has come slouching back onto our college campuses, settling itself comfortably among the students. A 2015 Reason-Rupe poll showed that 58 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds viewed socialism favorably. By contrast, only 28 percent of seniors ages 65 and above were favorable toward socialism. Several other polls say the same thing: A majority of young adults support socialism, and in fact prefer it to capitalism.

To older adults, this fact probably seems disturbing and inexplicable. How could anyone support a philosophy that has spawned evils ranging from economic stagnation to mass killing? Speaking as a 21-year-old college student, I believe that the explanation boils down to two things—discontent and ignorance. Most of today's college students grew up during the Great Recession. They are graduating with large debts and, for many, bleak prospects for employment. They feel cheated, and believe that something is deeply wrong with our current system. Since that system is capitalist, they see socialism as an alternative.

At the same time, however, most young adults misunderstand socialism. In one study only 16 percent of millennials could define socialism as a government-managed economy. And who can blame them for their ignorance, considering what they've learned—or haven't learned—in the classroom? In my experience, professors may not espouse socialism, but they seldom challenge its tenets. Most of my history classes in college have focused on the many ways America has victimized the poor and downtrodden. Professors equated capitalism with imperialism while failing to even mention the evils committed by totalitarian socialist countries or the economic destructiveness of democratic socialism. One of my professors dismissed the atrocities committed under Mao Zedong's regime by saying, "While there were certainly many failures with Mao's reign, during his rule China's literacy rate went up, as did migration to cities."

"Failures"—that is how my professor referred to the 45 million who starved to death under Mao.

I believe this same indifference to truth is what turned so many college students into enthusiastic supporters of Bernie Sanders during the last presidential campaign, giving him more youth votes in the primary than Clinton and Trump combined. While Sanders is no totalitarian, he certainly supports the same democratic socialism that emaciated Britain in the postwar years. Students loved the promises he made (free college, free healthcare, and forgiveness of debt) and were perfectly willing to believe that big and benevolent government could make almost anything "free" simply by raising taxes on the very rich.

It should be said that this support for socialism isn't necessarily permanent. Studies find that support for socialism drops after college and goes down as people earn higher salaries. Young people aren't stupid; they are just young, and some economic truths cannot be truly appreciated until experienced.

Of course, some college students don't make it easier for themselves. Many refuse to listen to conservative voices and cannot stand correction—or argument. Nothing strengthens a lie quite like an echo chamber, so the lie of socialism has grown into a powerful force on campus that threatens competing (and worthier) ideas. Yes, most students are just young and will outgrow their revolutionary fervor. But right now, students are being cheated out of the best opportunity most will ever have to test competing political and economic ideas against one another. And until our colleges have the courage to break through the echo chamber, students will get—at best—only half the education they're paying for.

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Christine Talent attended Washington University for two years and will attend Hillsdale College starting in the fall.

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