



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on February 18, 2016

The Lure of Socialism

Many people of mature years are amazed at how many young people have voted for Senator Bernie Sanders, and are enthusiastic about the socialism he preaches.

Many of those older people have lived long enough to have seen socialism fail, time and again, in countries around the world. Venezuela, with all its rich oil resources, is currently on the verge of economic collapse, after its heady fling with socialism.



But, most of the young have missed all that, and their dumbed-down education is far more likely to present the inspiring rhetoric of socialism than to present its dismal track record.

Socialism is in fact a wonderful vision — a world of the imagination far better than any place anywhere in the real world, at any time over the thousands of years of recorded history. Even many conservatives would probably prefer to live in such a world, if they thought it was possible.

Who would not want to live in a world where college was free, along with many other things, and where government protected us from the shocks of life and guaranteed our happiness? It would be Disneyland for adults!

Free college of course has an appeal to the young, especially those who have never studied economics. But college cannot possibly be free. It would not be free even if there was no such thing as money.

Consider the costs of just one professor teaching just one course. He or she has probably spent more than 20 years being educated, from kindergarten to the Ph.D., before ending up standing in front of a class and trying to convey some of the knowledge picked up in all those years. That means being fed, clothed and housed all those years, along with other expenses.

All the people who grew the food, manufactured the clothing and built the housing used by this one professor, for at least two decades, had to be compensated for their efforts, or those efforts would not continue. And of course someone has to produce food, clothing and shelter for all the students in this one course, as well as books, computers and other requirements or amenities.

Add up all these costs — and multiply by a hundred or so — and you have a rough idea of what's going to college costs. Whether these costs are paid by using money in a capitalist economy or by some other mechanism in a feudal economy, a socialist economy, or whatever, there are heavy costs to pay.

Moreover, under any economic system, those costs are either going to be paid or there are not going to be any colleges. Money is just an artificial device for getting real things done.

Those young people who understand this, whether clearly or vaguely, are not likely to be deterred from wanting socialism. Because what they really want is for somebody else to pay for their decision to go to college.

A market economy is one in which whoever makes a decision is the one who pays for that decision. It forces people to be sure that what they want to do is really worth what it is going to cost.



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Even the existing subsidies of college have led many people to go to college who have very little interest in, or benefit from, going to college, except for enjoying the social scene while postponing adult responsibilities for a few years.

Whether judging by test results, by number of hours per week devoted to studying or by on-campus interviews, it is clear that today's college students learn a lot less than college students once did. If college becomes "free," even more people can attend college without bothering to become educated and without acquiring any economically meaningful skills.

More fundamentally, making all sorts of other things "free" means more of those things being wasted as well. Even worse, it means putting more and more of the decisions that shape our lives into the hands of politicians and bureaucrats who control the purse strings.

Obamacare has given us a foretaste of what that means in reality, despite how wonderful it may sound in political rhetoric.

Worst of all, government giveaways polarize society into segments, each trying to get what it wants at somebody else's expense, creating mutual bitterness that can tear a society apart. Some seem to blithely assume that "the rich" can be taxed to pay for what they want — as if "the rich" don't see what is coming and take their wealth elsewhere.

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