



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 6, 2020

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## Is Bernie Sanders a Socialist or a Communist?

It is almost certain that Vermont's Senator Bernie Sanders has never joined the U.S. Communist Party. But despite his protestations that his socialism is *democratic* socialism, his repeated praise for communist dictators around the world has justifiably raised the question as to whether Sanders is actually a communist in his heart.

First, while Sanders is campaigning to win the nomination of the *Democratic* Party, he has never joined that party, either.



Sanders' recent remarks on CBS' *60 Minutes* program have certainly raised eyebrows. Appearing on that program in late February, Sanders conceded that Communist Cuba was of an "authoritarian nature" but, "When [communist dictator] Fidel Castro came into office, you know what he did? He had a massive literacy program. Is that a bad thing? Even though Fidel Castro did it?"

Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) quipped in a tweet, "It really makes a difference when those you murder at the firing squad can read and write." Cruz's father, Rafael Cruz, is one of hundreds of thousands of former Cuban citizens now residing in the United States who despise the communist regime that Castro brought to power in the late 1950s. Others have died trying to escape communism in Cuba, such as a woman who died in the waters of the Caribbean in 2000. Her six-year-old son, Elián Gonzalez, survived by floating on an inner tube until rescued by a fisherman off the Florida coast. Unfortunately for little Elián, President Bill Clinton's administration ruthlessly turned the boy back over to Cuba — consigning him to a life under communist tyranny.

But Sanders' most recent comment praising Castro is really nothing new. While he insists that he is a "democratic socialist," rather than a communist like Castro, Sanders has a long history of praising outright communist dictatorships, such as those found in Cuba, the old Soviet Union, and Nicaragua under the Ortega brothers in the 1980s.

In a speech at the University of Vermont in 1986, Sanders praised the socialist policies of Castro's Cuba, and even condemned the efforts of both Democrats and Republicans who opposed the spread of communism throughout Latin America by the Castro regime. He said that in the 1960 presidential debates when then-Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy criticized the Eisenhower administration for not doing enough to stop Castro, it made him want to "puke."

While Sanders rightly characterized the rule of communist Fidel Castro as "authoritarian," the facts are that it was much more than that. It was, and continues to be, *totalitarian*. *Authoritarian* dictatorships do not allow the general public any substantive voice in the personnel and policies of the government, but otherwise leave the people alone to run their lives and their businesses. *Totalitarian* regimes, on the other hand, likewise do not allow the people any voice in the running of the government, but also attempt to run the total lives of their people.

The Cuban people felt the full weight of life under a brutal communist dictatorship. Soon after coming



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to power, Castro announced the need for gun registration, ostensibly to fight gangsterism. Nine months later, he simply rounded up the guns (using the registration lists), asserting that there was no longer any need for an individual citizen to own a gun.

Amando Lago, a Harvard-trained economist, has estimated that almost 78,000 people may have died trying to flee Cuba since the imposition of communism there. Lago, writing in *The Black Book of Communism*, was able to document nearly 100,000 killed by the Castro regime, either by firing squads, assassinations, deaths in prisons, or by attempts to flee the island through the treacherous waters between Cuba and Florida, 90 miles away.

Of course, the exact numbers of Castro's killings cannot be known with certainty, but it's a lot. And Sanders praises this totalitarian country for a literacy program?

Then, of course, there is the reduction in living standards under the command economy of communism. Before Castro, the Cuban economy was ranked the second-highest in Latin America. The World Economic Database of the International Monetary Fund does not presently rank Cuba, as no data is available.

## Old-time Marxist

Sanders' love affair with totalitarian communist dictatorships goes back to his childhood. During his speech at the University of Vermont in 1986, Sanders said, "I remember, for some reason or another, being very excited when Fidel Castro made the revolution in Cuba. I was a kid ... and it just seemed right and appropriate that poor people were rising up against rather ugly rich people." Perhaps the reason was, in Sanders' mind, that the Cubans felt they had "nothing to lose but their chains," as Karl Marx put it in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Rather than moderate his effusive praise for Cuban Communism because of its atrocities, Sanders opted to include Communist China as a place he admired, saying, "The facts are clear, that they have taken more people out of extreme poverty than any country in history." Actually, the Communist Chinese destroyed the Chinese economy under Mao Tse-tung. For decades, while Chinese who had escaped to Taiwan prospered, Chinese people on the mainland often starved due to the policies of the Communist Party. China only finally prospered because it allowed some capitalism in that country and invited in Western businesses, promising them access to the world's largest population. Then, China stole Western technology as Western elites implemented policies giving trade advantages to China. As a rule, countries prosper to the extent that they protect property rights and allow free market activity. While it is true that millions of Chinese have been lifted from deep poverty in recent years — a poverty greatly contributed to by communist ideology — many others have been killed or imprisoned. It is not a point of contention that the Chinese Communists have essentially murdered millions of their own people since taking over by brute force in 1949. Even today, it is estimated that around one million Chinese citizens languish in re-education camps.

In the 1980s, Sanders traveled to Central America and was a featured speaker at a celebration of the Marxist Sandinista government in Nicaragua. One might recall that Nicaragua was hardly a northern European "democratic socialist" country. Daniel Ortega, the dictator there, promised that Nicaragua's revolution was "without frontiers" and that he would make every effort to foment revolution in neighboring El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. In his speech to his fellow socialists, Sanders



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praised the Marxist dictatorship of Nicaragua and encouraged them to keep fighting for victory.

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One cannot recall Denmark making any effort to spread its governmental and economic system to its neighbors.

In his college days, Sanders was a member of the Young People's Socialist League, and later, while mayor of Burlington, Vermont, he got married. He and his new bride (who shares his leftist views) opted to honeymoon not in Hawaii, London, the Virgin Islands, Niagara Falls, or some other such spot, but instead in the Cold War Soviet Union of the 1980s!

While there, the newlyweds joined several others in a sauna, in which all the participants were naked. After exiting the sauna, Sanders and his Russian friends sat around a table, still naked (but with towels), drank vodka, and joined in singing some Russian folk songs. Sanders and the other Americans responded with their own American folk song, "This Land Is Your Land," written by Woody Guthrie. Even Guthrie's sympathetic biographer, Joe Klein, said that Guthrie wrote the song in an angry and Marxist response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America."

An early version of Guthrie's 1940 song contained two additional verses not ordinarily sung today. One verse specifically attacked the very concept of private property. The omitted verse went, "Was a big high wall there that tried to stop me, A sign was painted said: Private Property, But on the back side, it didn't say nothing — this land was made for you and me."

A few years ago, the Smithsonian Institution honored Guthrie, and in its exhibit wrote, "The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) attracted those disaffected citizens with its egalitarian platform. For Woody the Communists could be related to the Robin Hood outlaws he had been singing about for over a decade."

Sanders' choice of a Guthrie song to sing inside the Soviet Union was probably no accident. When the Soviet Union invaded Poland in 1939, Guthrie wrote in one of his many columns for an official Communist Party newspaper that Stalin had only acted to help Polish workers and farmers. Guthrie even carried around a pocket-sized "Constitution of the Soviet Union," and said that the "best thing" he had ever done was "to sign up with the Communist Party."

Interestingly, as radio commentator Mark Levin said recently, Sanders' platform looks like it was pulled from Joseph Stalin's "Bill of Rights," found in the 1936 Soviet Constitution.

After returning from the Soviet Union, Sanders told Burlington reporters that housing was cheaper in the Soviet Union. The next year, he traveled to Cuba, and upon his return told the *Burlington Free-Press*, "Under Castro, enormous progress has been made in improving the lives of poor people.... I did not see a hungry child. I did not see any homeless people." He was particularly impressed by the "free health care."

It is quite obvious that self-proclaimed "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders has high regard for communist dictatorships. But is he a communist?

The men who imposed the world's first openly communist dictatorship in Russia — Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin — also did not call themselves communists, but rather they were *Bolsheviks*,

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or one faction within Russia's *Social Democratic Party*. Their differences with their fellow socialists within that party — the *Mensheviks* — were not over the goal of a socialist society, but rather the method of achieving that goal. The Mensheviks were good Marxist revolutionaries, as well. But Lenin believed Marx was wrong on one score. Marx had predicted that the communist revolution would be a spontaneous uprising of oppressed workers. Lenin modified Marxism to what is now called Marxism-Leninism, believing that the poor workers and peasants would ever rise up without hard-core leadership from dedicated revolutionaries.

When the Bolsheviks finally did seize power in Russia, they changed the name of the country not to the Union of Soviet *Communist* Republics, but rather to the Union of Soviet *Socialist* Republics. The communists considered themselves socialists, too. For that matter, Adolf Hitler's totalitarian dictatorship was run by the National Socialist German Workers Party.

In his 1932 book *Toward Soviet America*, American Communist Party boss William Z. Foster said that the guiding principle of socialism was, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." These words were once written by Karl Marx himself, but they could be mistaken for part of a Bernie Sanders stump speech.

Said Foster, once capitalism is overthrown, one "cannot simply leap to a complete communist system," but there must be a transition period of socialism. The goal, Foster explained, is a "classless Socialist Society." Socialism is merely the period of re-education before communism is finally established.

Foster, citing Lenin, said that it was necessary to have "a whole series of restrictions on liberty," and various social programs first. For example, Foster said, "To free the woman from the enslavement of the perpetual care of her children is also a major object of *socialism*," and because of that he advocated the establishment of kindergarten and other pre-school systems. (Emphasis added.)

Furthermore, religion had to be opposed by the socialists. Foster complained of those "superstitious dolts who will satisfy themselves with a promise of paradise after death as a substitute for a decent life here on earth." He added that superstition (his name for the Christian religion) and ignorance would vanish in the "realm of science." When President Donald Trump nominated a Christian to a post in the Office of Management and Budget, Senator Sanders was quite blunt that he would not vote for him because of the nominee's religious belief that only believers in Jesus Christ are going to Heaven. (Why Bernie cared is curious because although he is "Jewish," he is only a *secular*, not a religious, Jew and presumably thinks belief in Heaven is just, well, *superstition*.)

A national Department of Health would take over the healthcare industry, and the "people will be taught how to live correctly," with mass instruction on proper diet.

Finally, American communists would work for free trade and world government.

Listening to Bernie Sanders, it is hard to differentiate between his breed of socialism and that of American communists. Sanders has said, "We have a grotesque and immoral distribution of wealth and income." Why? "We have a racist society from top to bottom, impacting health care, housing, criminal justice, education, you name it."

"You name it" pretty much sums up the Sanders platform.

In his book *1984*, George Orwell described a society that began with democratic socialism and degenerated into a totalitarian society. It still called itself socialist — Ingsoc, or English Socialism — in



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fact, but the people had no say in either the policies or the personnel of government. But “socialism” is a word that appeals to many who see it as providing a something-for-nothing society. As W. Cleon Skousen wrote in his classic book *The Naked Communist*, “The economics of communism are primarily for propaganda purposes. The idea of sharing the wealth appeals to the masses.” But in practice, communism has always been about controlling the wealth, not sharing the wealth.

In a free market economy, sellers and buyers make choices. In a socialist economy, one supported by Sanders and others of like mind, those choices no longer exist. Under a “Medicare for All” program, as advocated by Sanders, individuals would no longer choose much of anything, as the government would make all of the choices.

As John Goodman of the Independent Institute wrote, “Under socialism, the government does more than set prices. It determines what will be produced, how it will be produced, where it will be produced and under what circumstances people will be able to consume what is produced. Since prices are not allowed to clear markets, inevitably there is rationing by waiting for food, clothing, housing, medical care and other necessities.”

In short, the biggest difference between a Bernie Sanders in 2020 and a Fidel Castro in 1960 is that, right now, Sanders is not in a position of power to implement his program. We cannot be sure what Sanders would do were he given the opportunity to exercise the reins of power. Given his admiration of totalitarian communist dictators from Mao to Castro to Ortega, it is not a pleasant thought.

Is Sanders a democratic socialist, or would he attempt to follow the path of communist dictators he so clearly admires? Personally, I would prefer not to find out.

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