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## Socialist Realities

**The flaws of socialism are somewhat hidden in countries that enacted socialism after they were wealthy, but in countries that instituted it when they were poor, the trends are clear.**



With much of the world adopting socialism in some form, it can be difficult to generalize about what socialism actually is. Socialist countries such as Sweden, Sri Lanka, and North Korea are worlds apart, featuring very different climates, cultures, and standards of living. The reason for this illusion of diversity is that the starting point for socialism is so different from one country to the next. Some countries adopt socialism after having amassed a lot of wealth via the free market, while others adopt socialism in the hopes that it will somehow lift them out of longstanding poverty and degraded standards of living. For some, socialism is imposed suddenly and violently, as with Soviet Russia and Communist China. For others, it makes its appearance incrementally, over several generations, corroding wealth and social mores so gradually that many fail to notice its encroachments. Finally, its effects are harder to sort out in countries, such as China, where the culture is predisposed toward collectivism.

Generalizations invite criticism based on the odd exception that humanity, with its endless inventiveness, can always provide. For example, it is widely claimed that socialism, practiced judiciously, can lead to the same standard of living enjoyed by certain northern European countries, such as Sweden and Denmark. But northwestern European countries enjoy an advantage not shared by other parts of the world, namely, that they amassed large amounts of wealth and attained great prosperity as a result of several centuries of comparative liberty and the economic and technological growth that it spurred. And socialism is just as costly in Denmark as in Laos, but the difference is that — for now — Danes have the assets to pay the massive tax rates needed to sustain all of the “free” benefits of socialism.

This author has lived in a number of socialist countries, ranging from democratic socialism in Spain and Peronist socialism in Argentina, to Third World socialism in India and Sri Lanka, and even the communist dictatorship of the People’s Republic of China. Some of these countries have found ways to offset some of the ravages of socialism: Spain enjoys membership in the EU and, like other “Club Med” countries, has received considerable largess from more prosperous countries elsewhere in the bloc, especially Germany. China has encouraged massive foreign investment, has loosened the reins considerably on domestic entrepreneurship, and has learned how to manipulate supplies of foreign currency and balances of trade to gain competitive advantage, all of which have resulted in spectacular



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growth in recent years. But in all of these cases, the realities of socialism become apparent eventually to those who actually live in such countries.

Overall, the following conditions (among many others) may be found wherever socialism has existed for a significant interval:

## **Everything breaks easily:**

Few of us truly appreciate the benefits of a free society, including marketplace competition, until we experience its absence. Every item manufactured and sold in the modern world is the product of literally thousands of hands and minds contributing to its production in many seen and unseen ways. In a free market economy, most producers strive to improve quality and reliability — lest the competition do it instead. In most modern socialist countries, you can buy the same types of items in stores that Americans take for granted — household appliances, plastic bags, toilet paper, paint, plaster and other building materials, and so on. But newcomers to socialist economies are always startled at how fragile and perishable everything seems to be, compared to American products. Paint flakes off walls within a few months of being applied, book and notebook bindings fall apart after scant use, wall fixtures such as clothing racks and hooks fall out of walls as a result of disintegrating plaster, household appliances often fail within a few weeks or months after purchase, and plastic — compared to that used in America — is brittle and unreliable.

Much of this is a consequence of inferior materials research and quality control, and these in turn are a result of the absence or near-absence of competition to spur innovation. In China, most plastic garbage bags are tiny and nearly impossible to use, since any object with an edge (including a piece of discarded paper) will easily gash the bag and cause trash to cascade onto the floor. It turns out that, in countries where Hefty Bags neither exist nor are permitted to contrast their “heftiness” with the “wimpiness” of the competition for the benefit of the discerning consumer, no one takes much thought to produce trash bags with any capacity.

The same is true for many other consumer items. Under socialism, adhesives do not adhere, binders don't bind, locks don't lock (for long), and switches don't switch — because the metal, plastic, glue, and other products used in their manufacture are all of inferior quality. Socialism is the ultimate anti-progress mindset because it denies any benefit for competition based on enlightened self-interest. The result is the de-modernizing of the modern world, one failed plastic bag at a time.

## **Drinking the water is hazardous:**

Water purification technology is generations old, and Americans as long as anyone alive can remember have been able to drink water from a tap or a garden hose, but somehow the socialist world, from Mexico to China, never got the memo. Building pipes that keep wastewater and drinking water separate would not seem too daunting a task, yet hundreds of millions of people worldwide rely on bottled and boiled water for consumption. The reasons are not hard to see. Pipes are as unreliably made as other manufactured products, and frequently rupture, mixing wastewater with clean water. Constructing sewer systems and waste treatment plants is too expensive for cash-strapped socialist governments to do well. In the least-developed parts of the socialist world, such as large swaths of Africa, the technology simply does not exist. In other areas, such as India, water and sewage are conveyed, not through pipes but through ditches and canals with porous sides, ensuring contamination of the



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groundwater.

## **Sewers and drains work poorly, if at all:**

This is a problem familiar to anyone who has traveled in Mexico or Central America. In every public restroom and many hotel bathrooms, signs warn not to throw used toilet paper in the toilet but instead to deposit it in the trash receptacle beside the toilet provided for that purpose. This unsanitary and backward practice is the rule in much of Asia and Africa, in addition to Latin America — which is why most people in such countries prefer to use water to clean their backsides rather than toilet paper. To be sure, toilet paper can be purchased in countries such as India and China — but unlike American-made products, it is typically coarse and heavy-ply and will not break up after a few hours under water. In addition, plumbing is much narrower and more fragile, since manufacturing sturdier, wider pipes through which used toilet paper could actually pass is too expensive. Not only that, drains block up catastrophically and easily, especially when it rains heavily. In China, where this author recently spent nearly a year, sewer gas from partially clogged sewers was a constant issue, even though his place of residence was a luxury villa ostensibly designed for foreigners and well-heeled locals. Moreover, the arrival of the spring rainy season occasioned a sudden and catastrophic backup of every single toilet and urinal in the public men's bathroom in his place of employ. It is ironic that one of the most abundant and essential life-giving compounds, water, is rendered scarce and all-but-unusable by socialism.

## **The economy is largely built around foreign tourism:**

With socialist economies being unable to create adequate wealth, many socialist governments place heavy emphasis on foreign tourism as a means of attracting wealth from outside their borders. This is the reason that relatively poor and undeveloped countries, particularly in the tropical regions, are studded with beach resorts, colorful trekking routes, lush rainforest ecolodges complete with spas and ziplines, scuba diving facilities, wild animal safari parks, and other popular tourist draws. Visitors to the likes of Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and many other destinations are often struck by the extraordinary poverty away from the tourist zones. In such countries, resort and tourist areas bulge with modern hotels and restaurants, modern supermarkets and malls, slick car and tour bus rentals, and stores crammed with travel supplies and artwork. All this, while only blocks away, ordinary locals typically live in squalor and poverty, since jobs in the non-tourist sector are always underpaid. Under such conditions, the temptation for locals to engage not only in lawful commerce with well-heeled foreigners, but also drug trafficking, fraud, and prostitution (including the abomination of child prostitution) is very high. Tourist zones in many such countries, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, are notorious for the worst imaginable types of sex trafficking, incentivized by the one sector in such otherwise destitute economies where there is money to be made.

## **Walls, barbed wire, and broken glass:**

Although the great poet Robert Frost once famously proclaimed that “something there is that doesn't love a wall,” that stricture does not apply to socialist countries. Even a casual visitor to most of the socialist world cannot fail to notice the prevalence of walls, usually topped with barbed or razor wire and jagged pieces of broken glass stuck in the cement. Such walls, which encircle virtually every business and private residence of any worth, are the most noticeable feature of any upper or middle-



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class neighborhood, whether one lives in China, India, Spain, or Mexico. The reason for this pervasive feature of urban geography is that socialist governments generally disarm their citizens, leaving people defenseless against home invaders and other violent criminals. Private security guards are everywhere, but they seldom if ever possess weapons. Criminals are generally well-armed and resourceful, so in addition to high walls, many residences and stores also have barred windows. In socialist dystopia, every man's home of necessity becomes a prison of his own devising, insulating him from violence he is otherwise defenseless against, even as he lives behind bars, locks, and walls that would do credit to any penitentiary.

## **Poor power grid and communications infrastructure:**

In most socialist countries outside of Western Europe, electrical outages are common, especially when they are least convenient, such as during heat waves. This is true to the extent that such countries are electrified at all; large parts of rural India and Africa, for example, still possess little or no electrification, and even in urban areas, electrical service can be so unreliable that all responsible businesses (hotels that cater to foreigners expecting dependable A/C and cable TV, for example) must invest heavily in industrial-grade generators. And in countries such as China, where the electrical grid is on a firmer footing, other features of modern infrastructure dependent on power, such as Internet and cellphone networks, are sketchy at best. In some such countries (China being the most notorious example), government censorship of the Internet and monitoring of cellphone usage is a major contributing factor, but even without these headaches, Internet and cellphone service in most socialist countries is far below modern Western standards. To use the Internet in socialist countries is to struggle constantly to get video to stream properly, to circumvent maddening blocks on foreign news and other websites deemed inappropriate by government censors, and to learn what times of day to do video chats with friends in the United States (usually late at night local time, when few users are online) to avoid constant fluctuations in signal strength that sever fragile connections again and again.

## **Strict currency controls:**

Socialist countries are, in general, happy to welcome foreigners whose pockets bulge with coveted "hard" currencies such as U.S. dollars and euros, but not so willing to allow those same foreigners to depart with any foreign or even local cash in their pockets. Some countries prohibit all but token amounts of local currency to be exported, while others (China is a notable example) make it well-nigh impossible for foreigners living and working in their country to send money abroad by any means. Money wires are strictly controlled and monitored by such governments, despite international agreements that prohibit such restrictions on the more-or-less free flow of money. Thus, to live and work as a foreigner in a socialist country is one thing; to actually move one's earnings outside that country is quite another. Some socialist regimes, such as China, have proven exceptionally adept at accumulating U.S. dollars while managing to keep the supply of their own currency low, thus insulating themselves from many of the effects of inflation endemic to modern economies. But it only works if they prevent too much hard currency from leaving, and avoid printing too much of their own currency. This can only happen if currency is allowed in, but prevented from leaving.



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## **Censorship and propaganda:**

Socialism is not merely an economic program; it is also a blueprint for radically restructuring traditional cultures and social mores. Hence socialism cannot exert its dark charms without heavy doses of censorship and propaganda, the latter to promote its false claims, and the former, to erase from people's minds any awareness or recollection of socialism's alternative, liberty. Such measures take different external forms, depending on the flavor and degree of socialism. In Communist China, for example, red banners extolling the virtues of communism and the need to adhere to its "pure" principles are everywhere to be seen, along with, increasingly, images of China's powerful president, Xi Jinping. China has perhaps the world's most sophisticated censorship via the so-called Great Firewall that prevents Chinese from accessing potentially subversive Western sites such as social media (Facebook in particular), YouTube, Wikipedia, and all Google-related websites and search engines. In more "democratic socialist" countries, political posters and campaigns to eradicate various social ills are omnipresent, ensuring that the government is literally at the center of all human activity.

## **Everyone wants to leave:**

Visitors to most socialist countries from the United States are often asked for help to emigrate, by any means possible. Most people in such countries accept that nothing will ever change, and the more enterprising among them seek to escape to find opportunity elsewhere.

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Overall, socialism has managed to flourish by parasitizing the free world. As long as socialist countries and their ruling oligarchies are able to enrich themselves via foreign aid and investment from capitalist countries, the illusion of socialism will continue to fascinate short-sighted idealists everywhere. But for those forced to endure its day-to-day exactions — whether or not they fully grasp the mechanisms behind its failure — the bloom has long since been off the socialist rose.

*Photo credit: Asergieiev/iStockEditorial/GettyImagesPlus*

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