

Teaching Close Reading

Analysis and Clarity

Following are two news media articles each claiming to explain socialism. Each take a different approach to the task.

Read the articles carefully and tentatively identify which of the two is, based upon your first impression, most successful in fulfilling its task. Share your conclusions with your group and discuss.

As a group undertake a detailed analysis of each article paying attention to the following:

1. What genre of argument is this? How do conventions of that genre help determine the depth, complexity, and even appearance of the argument?
2. Who is the author? What are the author's credentials and what is his or her investment in the issue?
3. What audience is he or she writing for?
4. What motivating occasion prompted the writing? The motivating occasion could be a current event, a crisis, pending legislation, a recently published alternative view, or another ongoing problem.
5. What is the author's purpose? The purpose could range from strong advocacy to inquiring truth seeker.
6. What information about the publication or source (magazine, newspaper, advocacy web site) helps explain the the writer's perspective or the structure and style of the argument.
7. What is the writer's angle of vision? Angle of vision can be understood as the "filter lens" or "selective seeing" through which the author is approaching the issue. What is left out of the argument? What does the author not see?

Consider once again which of the two articles, if either, is more successful in fulfilling its task. As a group prepare a 10-minute presentation defending your claim.

What kind of socialist is Bernie Sanders?

By Joseph Betz

http://articles.philly.com/2016-02-24/news/70877687_1_human-rights-civil-and-political-rights-universal-declaration

The correct way to understand Bernie Sanders' socialism is to relate it to the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A human right is a justified claim of all people to what they need not only to live but to flourish and develop their unique potential. The first 21 articles of the declaration list civil and political rights, including rights to life, property, and equality under law. Such rights are basic to democracy, requiring some governmental protection but also governmental noninterference in our lives.

However, to flourish, a person also needs rights in which the government goes beyond not interfering to helping. These social and economic human rights — Articles 22 to 27 — include food, clothing, housing, a job, medical care, a living wage, the ability join a union, and free but compulsory basic education.

Politically speaking, a government that guarantees civil and political rights is democratic; the opposite sort is autocratic.

Economically speaking, a government that guarantees social and economic rights is socialist; its opposite is capitalist. The latter counts on the free market to provide the opportunity to compete for a job and medical care to those who buy it. Thus capitalism does not violate social and economic human rights, but it doesn't guarantee them.

In this context, socialism does not mean Karl Marx's government ownership of the means of production. It simply means that even in a capitalist economy, if the free market cannot provide jobs, housing, education, and medical care for all, the government will. It can do all this democratically, for example by taxing free-market transactions.

We have, then, four types of government, based on the rights that each guarantees:

- Democratic socialism, the best kind because it safeguards both civil and political rights, as well as social and economic ones. Scandinavian governments are an example.
- Democratic capitalism, which guarantees civil and political rights and allows the taxation of the free market to provide a safety net to ensure a certain level of social and economic rights for all. This is the United States.
- Autocratic socialism, also known as communism, in which an authoritarian government denies the civil and political rights, but claims, often insincerely because it can't be democratically examined, to guarantee social and economic rights. This is the Soviet Union.
- Autocratic capitalism violates civil and political rights, and doesn't guarantee social and economic rights, but tends to have only crony capitalism. This was pre-Castro Cuba.

Bernie Sanders is a democratic socialist because that system is the best guarantor of both political and economic rights. This form of government is widely realized in Europe, especially in countries like Sweden and Denmark.

Social-democratic parties, which are usually the governments instituting democratic socialism, tend to coexist with socialist and communist parties to the left of them. However, the socialism of these parties is not the Marxist version, in which the government owns all the factors of production. This socialism is simply achieved through legislation that democratically regulates and taxes capitalist free markets.

European democratic socialism is really only capitalism in a welfare state. This would look like, first, capitalism for everyone, with socialism only for those failing in the free market. Social-democratic parties are not communist because they are democratic and open in their socialist controls.

Michael Moore's new movie, *Where to Invade Next*, is a tour of capitalist countries where democratic socialism has done wonderful things — France, Italy, Germany, Finland, Portugal, and Tunisia.

Sanders' socialism is just an extension of what his favorite president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, did to preserve capitalism after it caused the Great Depression. Roosevelt's New Deal was aimed at relief, recovery, and reform. He began the march to the full guarantee of social and economic rights by strengthening unions, creating jobs, providing pensions through Social Security, and ensuring a minimum wage, welfare, rural electrification, and assistance to farmers.

Left unrealized by the New Deal are proposals now advocated by Sanders: free public college education, free universal health care, free child care for working parents, a minimum wage that is a living wage, increased taxes on the rich, and financial bailouts of those who lost homes in the 2008 mortgage crisis, rather than of the Wall Street firms that caused the catastrophe (which, incidentally, is an example of socialism for the rich).

So Sanders is not a communist or a Marxist socialist. He is not undemocratic nor a threat to a capitalism regulated to achieve the common good.

Jeanne Kirkpatrick, President Ronald Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations, once called the Declaration of Human Rights a mere "letter to Santa Claus." But during the same Reagan presidency, the Catholic bishops of the United States offered a contradictory opinion in "Economic Justice for All," and it is roughly the opinion today of Pope Francis.

After praising our Founding Fathers for their successful "experiment in the protection of civil and political rights," the bishops continued: "We believe the time has come for a similar experiment in securing economic rights ... for every person."

Bernie Sanders now offers to lead us in designing this experiment.

Joseph Betz is a professor emeritus of philosophy at Villanova University. joseph.betz@villanova.edu

What is socialism?

Broadly, it's a political and economic system under which the means of production are owned by the community as a whole, with government ensuring the equitable distribution of wealth. But socialism has taken many forms. "Socialism' is an exceedingly fuzzy term used to label an extraordinarily wide array of political and economic beliefs," says scholar Paul Brians. Socialism has morphed into Soviet-style communism and spawned Latin American dictatorships, while in Europe, many countries combine socialistic principles with capitalism and democracy. In the U.S., programs that opponents once condemned as socialism, such as Social Security and Medicare, are now deeply embedded in our society. Still, socialism has largely dwelled on the margins of American politics, until it was revived by the campaign of Democratic presidential contender Bernie Sanders.

What is Sanders' preferred form of socialism?

A self-described "democratic socialist," Sanders believes government should aggressively use taxes and social programs to limit income inequality and provide health care, day care, and a college education to all without charge. But he doesn't spurn private enterprise. "I don't believe government should own the means of production," the Vermont senator says. "I do believe the middle class and the working families who produce the wealth deserve a fair deal." Sanders' model social democracy is Denmark, which tops polls of the world's happiest countries—but also has one of the world's highest tax rates, averaging about 60 percent.

When did socialism arise?

It began as a response to the dire poverty and inhumane working conditions in industrialized Europe in the early 19th century. One of the first thinkers called a "socialist" was Robert Owen, an idealistic Welsh mill owner who in the 1820s created a number of short-lived "utopian" communities—basically, collectives—in Britain and the American Midwest. But socialism really took off in midcentury, spurred by the writings of German philosopher Karl Marx and the rise of labor unions. "Socialists rejected the argument that the wealthy deserve their wealth because they created it," Brians says, "instead believing that wealth is created by the working class and wrongfully appropriated by the rich."

How did it spread to the U.S.?

Mainly via Marxist German immigrants, who spearheaded the establishment of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) in 1876. The first socialist to hold public office in the U.S. was Fred Haack, a shoe-store owner elected to the Sheboygan, Wis., city council in 1897. Four years later, ex-SLP members and others formed the Socialist Party of America, which over the next two decades elected two U.S. congressmen, dozens of state legislators, and more than 100 mayors. "They pushed for public ownership of utilities and transportation facilities," says political scientist Peter Dreier, as well as expanded parks, libraries, and playgrounds "and a living wage for workers." The face of the party was Eugene V. Debs (see box), a fiery railroad-union leader who ran for president five times. But by the 1920s, U.S. socialism had fallen far out of favor.

What happened?

The Socialist Party opposed America's entry into World War I, and was widely condemned as unpatriotic. In 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act, making it a crime to speak out against the war or oppose the draft. Thousands of socialists, including Debs, were subsequently arrested. At the same time, Russia's Bolshevik Revolution caused a "red scare" in the U.S.—a panicky fear that a similar worker revolt might occur here. Suspected radicals were rounded up and jailed, and nativists demanded an end to immigration from Italy and Eastern Europe, which they saw as hotbeds of communist sentiment.

Is socialism the same as communism?

No. Marx envisioned communism as a higher and purer form of socialism, in which all private property would become obsolete, class distinctions would dissolve, and goods and services would flow freely, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." In the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and other communist countries, Marx's idealistic vision produced a grim reality, with economic growth stalling and an authoritarian ruling class appropriating much of the meager wealth for itself while murderously suppressing all dissent. During the Cold War, "socialist" and "communist" were often used interchangeably in the U.S., in what political scientist Lawrence Quill calls "shorthand for all things un-American."

Is socialism un-American?

Many Americans have conflicted attitudes about socialism, best illustrated by the Tea Party activists who demanded that "government get its hands off my Medicare." But when a Gallup poll asked Americans last year whether they would consider voting for 11 categories of presidential candidate, "socialist" ranked last, garnering 47 percent, behind "Muslim" and "atheist." Among 18- to 29-year-olds, however, 69 percent had no problem voting for a socialist. Why the huge disparity? People in their 20s have no memory of the Soviet Union or the Cold War, but did come of age during and after the 2008 financial crisis. To young people feeling great economic insecurity, sharing the wealth sounds less like a threat than like a promise.

Sanders' socialist hero

Eugene V. Debs received 919,799 votes in the 1920 presidential election—while serving a 10-year sentence for his passionate opposition to America's entry into World War I. "The working class, who freely shed their blood and furnish the corpses, have never yet had a voice in either declaring war or making peace," Debs had said. A rousing speaker, he made four other White House bids, garnering 6 percent of the vote in 1912. Debs embraced the Russian Revolution, but was appalled by the Soviets' violent suppression of dissent; pardoned by President Warren G. Harding in 1921, he remained a vociferous anti-communist until his death in 1926. Many of Debs' ideas—such as banning child labor, social security for retired workers, and unemployment insurance—were later co-opted by the major parties. He was the subject of an admiring 1979 documentary—*Eugene Debs: Trade Unionist, Socialist, Revolutionary*—produced and narrated by his political descendant, Bernie Sanders.