

Politics Marx Is Dead; Marxism—Not so Much

Figure 2.2.



The leaders of three Latin American democracies (shaded here) have expressed Marxist ideas and adopted anticapitalist rhetoric and policies. Cuba (also shaded) has been a nondemocratic Marxist state since the late 1950s.

In contrast to what happened in many European democracies, Marxism has never gained a toehold in the United States. Yet, in many other parts of the world, Marxist parties have flourished at one time or another. In Castro's Cuba, most of Asia, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, communist or socialist parties long dominated the political scene, and "national wars of liberation" were often spearheaded by self-avowed Marxists.

In many other countries, most notably in Western Europe, nonruling communist parties achieved democratic respectability. The communist

parties of France and Italy, to cite two important examples, are legally recognized parties that regularly participate in national elections.

Socialist parties are mainstream political parties throughout Europe. In the 1970s, communist party leaders in Italy and Spain led a movement called Eurocommunism. They renounced violent revolution and sought to change society from within by winning elections.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Marxist parties have declined but by no means disappeared. After the “Plural Left” coalition won the French parliamentary elections in May 1997, three communists were appointed to the cabinet of Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. In recent years, the elected leaders of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua have all expressed sympathy with Marxist ideas and have embraced socialist policies. And China, now boasting the world’s second largest economy, is still a communist one-party state. In addition, four other countries continue to be communist-ruled: Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

Between 1928 and 1944 Norman Thomas was the Socialist Party’s perennial candidate for president of the United States. In 1932, in the throes of the Great Depression, he garnered 884,885 votes. Thomas famously predicted: “The American people will never knowingly adopt socialism. But under the name of Liberalism, they will adopt every fragment of the socialist program until one day America will be a socialist nation without knowing how it happened.” To what extent—if any—has this prediction come true? Why do conservatives and liberals often answer this question very differently? Think about it.

(Hint: Often the best way to win a televised debate or political argument, unfortunately, is to be highly selective—and inventive—in citing “facts” to underscore whatever strengthens the case you are making while ignoring or discrediting what doesn’t.)

Democratic Socialism, the other main branch of socialist ideology, embraces collectivist ends but is committed to democratic means. Unlike orthodox Marxists, democratic socialists believe in **gradualism**, or reform, rather than revolution, but they hold to the view that social justice cannot be achieved without substantial economic equality. They also tend to favor a greatly expanded role for government and a tightly

regulated economy. Socialist parties typically advocate nationalization of key parts of the economy—transportation, communications, public utilities, banking and finance, insurance, and such basic industries as automobile manufacturing, iron and steel processing, mining, and energy. The modern-day **welfare state**, wherein government assumes broad responsibility for the health, education, and welfare of its citizens, is the brainchild of European social democracy.

The goal of the welfare state is to alleviate poverty and inequality through large-scale income redistribution. Essentially a cradle-to-grave system, the welfare state model features free or subsidized university education and medical care, generous public assistance (family allowances), pension plans, and a variety of other social services. To finance these programs and services, socialists advocate high taxes