

5. Explore the differences and similarities between revolutionary and evolutionary varieties of socialism

Socialism is a prominent political ideology, ubiquitous in modern discourse. Like all other ideologies, it is defined by a set of core ideals and approaches to various debates such as the benefit of wealth redistribution and the importance of equality and co-operation. However, within socialism, there are schisms between those that take different stances on how to execute their socialist agenda – with some taking a ‘revolutionary’ approach and some taking a more ‘evolutionary’ approach. This essay will compare and contrast these two branches of socialism and show how they individually approach certain ideological issues.

Socialism can be defined by “its opposition to capitalism and the attempt to provide a more humane and socially worthwhile alternative” (Heywood, 2012, p97). Capitalism is seen as a malevolent force in society, whereby the rich ‘bourgeoisie’ control the working class ‘proletariat’. Socialism seeks to create an equal society, with a belief in human nature’s desire to co-operate towards common aims. This equality “is the determining moral force on which other elements of the ideology rest” (Goodwin, 2007, p107). In order to bring this equality to society, socialists believe in some redistribution of wealth to help solve the poverty gap, with which socialists are extremely concerned according to Goodwin. It is this extra step beyond “equality of opportunity” that particularly separates socialism from liberalism.

The central difference between those that identify as socialists is the way in which they go about achieving their goals for society. Revolutionary socialists believe strongly that the state and its capitalist system are an obstacle in the path of progress and must be abolished. Evolutionary socialists agree that changes need to be made to society, but believe in more ‘gradualist’ methods of realising socialism through existing political institutions. Further differences can be found in the opinions of how a socialist economy should be run and to what extent redistribution of wealth should take place. Although redistribution is a key theme of both socialisms, evolutionary socialists would take a more understated approach such as taxation, rather than by controlling wealth on the whole like a revolutionary, for example.

Revolutionary socialism, particularly defined by Karl Marx, believes that the capitalist state cannot change society sufficiently because of its structure, and that creating a new socialist regime is the only way to make an equal society. Marx believed normatively in a “classless society”, where people are sociable, co-operative and absolutely equal.

In conjunction with the desire for a “classless society”, revolutionary socialism is extremely critical of capitalism. It believes that capitalism is exploitative of the common man, who is often forced to work long hours for little personal gain. This makes workers ‘alienated from their labour’, which in a Marxian sense means “the

estrangement of life-activity...from the self; and the control of the estranged life-activity by another agent for the relative benefit of that agent” (O’Manique, 1994, p288). This system creates class divisions in society and destroys the “natural” way of living, where people are collaborative and equal. Therefore, a state ownership system for industry is advocated, to provide a fairer deal to the people by ensuring that everyone benefits from it, instead of only the wealthy ‘bourgeoisie’. This requires, in most cases, a radical change to the way in which a society is run by means of a revolution.

Such revolutions have meant that strong socialism has been installed in some governments around the world since its inception, but only notably in a specific form: communism.

Communism as we know it from its use in the USSR, Eastern Europe, Cuba, North Korea etc. is a twisted version of Marx’s vision. These states made their communist parties more powerful than the people, which was not intended by Marx. Both Cuba and North Korea have been ruled by dictatorships, which was seen by Marx as only an intermediary stage in the transformation into communism, where there would be “the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” (Marx, 1969, p25-31) with strong state intervention to ease the transition in society. Andrew Heywood notes that because of the “strong leadership and strict discipline” of those coming into power via these revolutions and the “rooting out...of the old order” that these “totalitarian dictatorships” were inevitable. (Heywood, 2012, p111) These societies fell because they undermined the will of the people for so long that they eventually revolted themselves.

There are only a few countries worldwide where revolutionary socialism is practiced by the government in the modern day, and none in the communist way that Marx described.

Evolutionary socialism, or social democracy as it is also known, seeks to use current political processes to bring about an acceptance of socialist values, by reforming rather than restructuring the state entirely. Eduard Bernstein, an early advocate of evolutionary socialism, considered Marx’s call for revolution unnecessary and believed that “success lies in a steady advance than in the possibilities offered by a catastrophic crash” (Bernstein, 1909, Preface)

Rather than enforcing absolute equality, as Marxism would have with proletariat rule, social democrats would believe more strongly in the pursuit of equality and equality of opportunity. This is done by giving people the ability to ‘level up’ and ‘level down’ within society, but not going as far as to make everyone entirely equal. This is to the benefit of the people, “because levelling down affects no-one for the better” and leads to a state that is worse off, although equal. (Holtug, 1998, p167) The state’s role is to provide this opportunity for people, with additional policies such as welfare programs to help those in society that are not as wealthy and healthcare provision

for those that cannot afford it. However, evolutionary socialists would believe in far less comprehensive policies in these areas compared to revolutionary socialists, who would believe in providing these services universally to anyone on the basis of need.

Evolutionary socialists believe in progressive taxation as a way of earning the resources to fund such programmes, as a way of redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor. Revolutionary socialists would outright remove the opportunity to earn such wealth, with their replacement of capitalism with state-run industry.

Social democrats do not agree with communists in believing that capitalism is inherently bad for society. With a position that “capitalism as an economic system seems to have won... as organisation of economic activity is concerned” (Buchholz, p115), social democrats believe that combining their belief in equality with a capitalist system to form a “mixed economy” is the best way of ensuring growth. This means that evolutionaries believe in a more laissez-faire approach to the state’s role in the economy compared to revolutionaries. Evolutionary socialism does advocate some state authority over industry through “economic...intervention”, though – because as socialists, they still believe that capitalism is a “morally defective means of distributing wealth”. (Heywood, 2012, p128) This means that regulation of industry is still important; to preserve the rights of workers and to ensure that the capitalist system is working for the benefit of the people rather than the bourgeoisie.

This form of socialism is far more commonly found in governments worldwide compared to its more radical counterpart. The Democratic Party in Italy is social democratic and forms part of the country’s government. The Canadian New Democratic Party has similar political positions and is the opposition in the Canadian parliament. The Labour Party in the UK is often considered to be social democratic, although some have argued that it has “struggled to establish its identity”, in this regard. (Sheldrick, 2012, p149). The success of evolutionary socialism when compared to revolutionary socialism is due to its more moderate stance on societal shift, which are more appealing to voters than the seismic changes that revolutionary socialists propose.

Both socialisms are heavily related, although it can be argued that “the only common characteristic of socialist doctrines is their ethical content.” (Giddens, 1998, p71) Like many other ideologies, the more ‘modern’ version, the evolutionary model, makes compromises on some of its traditional values to ensure that progress towards others is made. Both socialisms strive for economic redistribution, but evolutionaries look to do this through taxation whilst maintaining capitalism rather than reinventing the entire economy around socialism. Evolutionary socialism believes it is a more “moral critique of capitalism” compared to Marx’s “scientific” approach, and therefore more successful in introducing “social justice” through capitalism rather than destroying it outright. (Heywood, 2012, p129) It is this more measured approach that has seen social democracy remain as a strong political

ideology in the twenty-first century whilst Marxism has fallen along with the end of the Cold War.

Socialism, even whilst considering the two distinct subdivisions, is an ideology based on the common desire for equality. However, evolutionary and revolutionary socialists will disagree upon how you define equality.

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