

Socialism in One Page

Definitively, socialism is a political ideology that advocates the social ownership and management of resources (particularly those core resources that concern the means of life and living). In addition, socialism has been described, by Karl Marx and others, as a transitional phase in history between capitalism and pure communism. However, not all socialists consider the Marxist definition as relevant or meaningful.

To confuse matters even further, there is a colloquial use of the word socialist to describe any political policy that advocates the needs of people as communities. Not all socialist policies of this type necessarily arise from socialist parties.

Socialism arose out of a struggle between hierarchical societies, and the trend towards communal self-management. Its origins can be seen in the Reformation, where Christians rebelled against the intellectual and spiritual monopolies of the Catholic Church, endeavouring to place redemption in the hands of the faithful instead of the priesthood. This encouraged similar social and economic reforms, eventually leading to the overthrow of monarchy in the English Civil War.

In the post-Marx world of the 20th Century, many political movements came into being to advocate for better social services, free health, old age pensions, etc. These foundations seem commonplace today, but at the time were revolutionary in their aspirations. In the UK, many of the key features of life (power, water, rail and air travel, postal services, etc.) were also nationalised: that is to say, they were taken into government ownership in the name of the population as a whole. The intention was to prevent the exploitative use of such essentials for private gain, and maintain them for the public good. However, much criticism was levelled at the efficiency of such a government role.

Post the Oil Crises of 1973 and 1979, socialist ideals came under heavy fire as standards of living dropped. Neo-liberal thought, which had previously been a minority persuasion, crept into mainstream politics across the world, led predominantly by the Thatcherite and Reaganite 'revolutions'. The period of the 1980s saw the retreat of socialism, and growth of free-market economic policies, imposed by direct confrontation with traditional socialist forces (often deemed regressive or out-of-date). This is the continuing position we are in at present, as all governments tend to managerialism: sustaining the status quo of post-1980s society at the expense of any radical change.