

# The socialism delusion ensures the survival of a toxic ideology

**S**OCIALISM was declared dead after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc states in the early 1990s. Now, it is experiencing a renaissance in many western countries.

Jeremy Corbyn proudly describes himself as a socialist. John McDonnell embraces Marxism as being, as he put it at a 200th birthday celebration for Karl Marx last year, a “force for change today”. In 2006, when he was asked to name his major influences, he said: “Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, basically”.

In Germany, Karl Marx’s 200th birthday was also celebrated enthusiastically, and a larger-than-life monument to the Communist mastermind was erected in his native town of Trier.

In his recently published book, *Socialism: The failed idea that never dies*, the economist Kristian Niemietz from the Institute of Economic Affairs in London asks why socialism is still so attractive to so many people, despite having failed completely in more than two dozen experiments over the past century.

In his historical analysis, he shows that every socialist experiment the world has ever seen has gone through the same three phases.

First, intellectuals around the world proclaim their enthusiasm and praise the system to the heavens. This even applies to brutal socialist experiments under mass murderers, such as Stalin and Mao. As Niemietz demonstrates, leading writers and thinkers showered fervent praise on the Soviet dictator, Mao Zedong, and other communist rulers.

The unbridled enthusiasm of the first phase is followed by a second phase: disillusionment. During this

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phase, commentators still defend the system and its “achievements”, but no longer offer their unreserved and uncritical support. Concessions to reality are made and deficiencies are admitted, but these are frequently presented as the result of capitalist saboteurs, foreign forces, or boycotts by “US imperialists”.

The third phase is denial, when intellectuals deny that the experiment ever actually involved socialism at all. They claim that the country in question was never really socialist.

Venezuela has been the most recent scene of these phases. It began with the election of Hugo Chavez in 1999, an event that was enthusiastically hailed by leading intellectuals and left-wing politicians around the world. They passionately cheered Venezuela’s Bolivarian revolution, christening it “socialism for the 21st century”.

After socialism collapsed in the Soviet Union, and with the Chinese on

the path from socialism to capitalism, the left needed a new socialist utopia to inspire their dreams, so they turned to Chavez to fill the gap.

But once it was clear that Venezuela’s socialist experiment had failed, the very same socialists who had so enthusiastically celebrated his revolutionary policies did a disappearing act, retreating into absolute silence. Then they claimed it was the US trade embargo that drove Venezuela to collapse.

Now, they are again resorting to their tried-and-tested line that Venezuela was never really a socialist country at all, which means that its failure cannot be used as an argument against socialism.

Thus, the world is left with the fiction that socialism is a good idea that has simply been poorly implemented so far. The greatest trick ever pulled by its supporters was making sure that real-world capitalism is never actually compared with real-world socialism, but with the vague utopian concept of a “just” anti-capitalist society.

This is about as fair as judging your own warts-and-all marriage against an overly romanticised relationship in the kind of unrealistic love stories you find in airport bookstores.

Every real-world system – even such a massively successful one as capitalism, which has liberated more than a billion people from bitter poverty – will come off badly in comparison to idealised fantasies of a perfect world.

And thus the delusion of socialism continues, with the hope that “next time, everything will be better”.

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