

Socialism: Origins, Expansion, Decline, and the Attempted Revival in the United States

Phillip J. Bryson

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Economist Bryson argues that, although socialism may have a black eye, it's not going anywhere soon, making this an always timely read.

Phillip J. Bryson's *Socialism* works to explain the birth, popularization, decline, and revitalization of socialism in the United States in just one volume. At well over nine hundred pages, this well-researched and highly detailed account of the politico-economic philosophy of socialism is a huge undertaking for most readers. However, Bryson, a professor of economics at Brigham Young University, presents his material in bite-sized chunks that concern specific aspects of socialism's relationship to U.S. and world history.

At the beginning of *Socialism*, Bryson fundamentally lays out his argument as one pertaining to economics, his chosen field. Specifically, Bryson articulates that "First, the origins and ideas of socialism represent, more or less, a history of economic thought." As such, Bryson not only devotes chapters to expanding upon common knowledge about Soviet-style central planning or the adaptability of Karl Marx's notions about the inevitable class war between capitalists and workers, but he also performs several in-depth examinations that explain the particulars of Fabian socialism and the social welfare state in India, among other things.

Bryson argues that ancient Greek thought (as evidenced by Plato in his classic work of political philosophy, *The Republic*) viewed the process of "using money to make more money" with suspicion. The early Christians retained this skepticism, and the key fathers of the Roman Catholic Church (Bryson singles out Thomas Aquinas for special mention) used anti-usury laws as a way to weaken the burgeoning power of urban merchants.

Surprisingly for a work entitled *Socialism*, the true hero of Bryson's piece is Adam Smith. As one of the key philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment and the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, which is rightly regarded as an early and influential defense of capitalist markets, Smith is far from being a socialist. However, Bryson highlights Smith's importance by labeling the book's first part as "Before the Age of Adam Smith."

Capitalism ultimately comes out as the intellectual, moral, and economic winner in the book. Every planned economy or centrally controlled state fails to get the better of global markets; thus, socialism succumbs to the call of capitalism.

While general audiences might be wary of this text because of its length and subject matter, *Socialism* is a grand, sweeping narrative that is written in a clean, linear style. Bryson's sentences rarely if ever descend to the level of overly technical jargon so favored by many academics.

Socialism offers not only a primer on one of the most controversial ideas still in the American public sphere, but it also offers insight into how socialism, like its enemy, capitalism, has managed to shift and contort itself over the years in the form of technocratic governments and the various welfare states of the world.

As Bryson makes clear, although socialism may have a black eye, it's not going anywhere soon. Therefore, *Socialism* will always be a timely read.

BENJAMIN WELTON (February 13, 2017)

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