

Heaven on earth rise and fall of socialism history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Muravchik's book *Heaven on Earth: Rise and Fall of Socialism* is the best "narrative history" book I've ever read. Muravchik does a phenomenal job and literally explaining the rise and fall of Socialism and tracks it through its 200+ year existence; from the authors of its policy, to the countries who actually made attempts followed by their downfall or failures. He presents various short biographies of the most influential leaders of the socialist movement. Since the book covers so much material (literally the whole history of socialism) I will review a couple of sections from each category in which Muravchik separates his book, which are the Beginnings, Triumphs, and the Collapse; and will engage in analysis throughout the paper focusing primarily on the development of Economic ideas.

Beginnings

The first accounts of socialism talked about in the book date back to the late 17th century. In the French Revolution, first accounts of totalitarian democracy are noted. A man behind the push of "equality" during the revolution and responsible for the various atrocities that followed was François-Noël Babeuf or as he liked to call himself Gracchus. Gracchus forced people into his so-called utopia by means of an organization calling its self "Conspiracy of Equals". Muravchik describes Gracchus goals as "may have resembled those of the philosophies or earlier utopians, none of them had ever organized to seize power as Babeuf had done through an underground organization" (Muravchik, 11). Under Babeuf, people were forced into utopia by widespread terror as means of control. He believed that in order to successfully move to utopia they would have to start early indoctrination of children therefore it would keep people silent and prevent rejection.

<https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

Babeuf's early reigns begins by destroying the past. It ranged from various forms of art to literature. Babeuf believed that his cause was noble and justified and in order to be carried out successfully it had to be complete destruction. Shortly after gaining control and power, he starts a reign of terror that extends to people he believed were opponents and even potential opponents. He was forcing bankers to provide bread for free distributions, and any did oblige then they were subject to execution. Even though a National Assembly would be elected, the "insurrectionary committee" would remain permanently in charge. This would be important to keep the indoctrination of the people, under the idea that liberty would have to be sacrificed in order to achieve equality.

Another important idea presented by Babeuf's regime was that of Egalitarianism which would be achieved through social status. It would seek to destroy all material and social incentives which was achieved by the aim of his Conspiracy of Equals that pushed to "remove from every individual the hope of every becoming richer, or more powerful". This could only be attainable if only the ruling group had all of the power (similar to Plato's ruling class). Egalitarianism would be achieved by controlling people's thoughts by making sure the government took possession of every individual by birth. All of the people would be gathered into communes in which each worker would have a job "they understand". The people would be incentivized by constant propaganda through ceremonies and games.

The other aspect of Babeuf's revolutionary group explained by Muravchik is their economic concept. They believed that it was a zero sum game and that if some people had more than others it would have to be taken away from <https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

them. Although the French revolution gave Babeuf a chance, ultimately the feudal civil society was overthrown in their effort to achieve “ equal” results for all. Although Babeuf ultimately failed in taking the French Revolution all the way to abolition of property rights and the establishment of his economic system, in the opinion of Marx and Engels he “ distinguished himself from utopians at an early voice of proletarian struggle” (Muravchik, 30).

Babeuf was the first attempt at Socialism described by Muravchik, which started with an implementation of a terrorizing system that anticipated its main theme on the ‘ class war” and ends getting overthrown (like most that attempt). Babeuf was the first example of a terror aimed coupe, and then followed by an example of a more peaceful approach by Robert Owen, which was looking to demonstrate how the existing selfish system could be replaced by a united “ social system” calling it “ socialism”. Owen is described to be as one of the most respected Utopians because of his very clear views of his socialism. His firm advocacy of democracy and collective ownership made him popular with some of the American government’s leaders. His first success at fame came about early in the 19th century by how he treated his workers at his factory in Scotland. His workers experienced higher salaries and improved living conditions in a factory owned town that stressed cleanliness and high moral standards.

From the very beginning Owens program emphasized education of the young starting at the age of 1 by providing an education that was more moral and academic. Owen believed that man was shaped by his circumstances and that there was no free will. Muravchik explains by “ is futile to call individuals to account for their behavior. Instead, society should recognize its power to <https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

shape each of its members into a person of high character”, more or less meaning that man is malleable and can be molded by suitably crafted circumstances (Muravchik, 37) . This idea basically underlies Owen’s first pillar of his philosophy in that no human “ is responsible for his will and his own actions”.

The second pillar in Owen’s philosophy was his fierce opposition to religion. It was important to disparage religion because its concept of sin implied free will which is something that Owen rejected. His notion that religion was based on some absurd imagination made Owen believe that it would turn man into ‘ a weak, imbecile animal; a furious bigot and fanatic; or a miserable hypocrite” (Muravchik, 37). Owen planned for successful implementation of his doctrine in the creation of cooperative communities. He believed that his communities would provide education in an environment which would produce men and women of a new race that would surpass physically, morally and intellectually any beings yet known to live on the earth. Ultimately he sold his idea by claiming that his form of socialism would provide material goods and brotherly harmony amongst the young, and that its end result would be one that transformed man into either gods or supermen.

His idea later followed him to America where he decided to create a town named “ New Harmony”. In his town, his first order was to exclude people of Color claiming that the country wouldn’t be ready for racial integration. From the beginning, his ideas demonstrated flaws that would result in the collapse of the village. Because there were very few people with commercial skill, the workshops quickly lost productive momentum. There were lacking incentives

<https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

for production which lead to little work being done and an increase in bickering amongst the people on who were the laggards. As explained by Muravchik “ the prevailing inefficiency at New harmony extended to its distribution system” this was due to a lack in skilled workmen and the presence of lots of bureaucrats (Muravchik, 43). With the village heading down the road of collapse, Owen made attempts at reviving. He began by implementing a system of watchdogs that would record the daily character of each person attached to their occupation. In the beginning Owen experienced slight success with his new dictatorship and things started to look more like communism than socialism. He also proceeded to remove the children from the parents in attempts to indoctrinate them, but saw little success in steering away people from marriage and religion.

Owen proceeded to leave to England in 1927 with the belief that his experimental village was a success. After returning 10 months later his village collapsed and Owens blamed it on its members and their faulty character. “ In short, Owen’s argument was circular. Socialism, he said, would produce a new man. Until then, all people were necessarily products of the old system. If it required people reared under socialism to create socialism, then how could you get there from here?”(Muravchik, 50). In contrast, his son presented a more “ honest” attempt at explaining New Harmony’s collapse, “” All cooperative schemes which provide equal remuneration to the skilled and industrious and the ignorant and the idle, must work their own downfall, for by this unjust plan of remuneration they must of necessity eliminate the valuable members — who find their services reaped by the indigent — and retain only the improvident, unskilled, and

vicious members” (Muravchik, 51). As we can see his son’s explanation was different from that of his father’s but ultimately they both pointed out the same underlying questions: was socialism suited to men as they were? To conclude on Owen, Muravchik contrasts socialist efforts with the practical approach of the Founding Fathers in the new nation. The latter constructed a system of checks and balances precisely because - as Madison noted - “men are not angels...if men were angels then an economy might succeed without selfish incentives, but if men were angles it would not matter whether the economy succeeded since they would have no material needs” (Muravchik, 5). They tailored institutions to human nature as they found it - and the system thrived. As mentioned earlier, Owen when acknowledging failure blamed the downfall of his village on character flaws of his members saying that they were “too undeveloped at that period for the practice of a full true and social life”. Although New Harmony failed, Muravchik points out that the failures of New Harmony and the other colonies had not proved discouraging. He explains that these colonies or villages assisted in directing socialist into the direction of political action. Ultimately what Socialism learned from this particular experience was that Socialism could not be constructed in isolation from the surrounding communities but rather it would have to be achieved by transforming society as a whole.

The following chapters after Owen and before the Triumphs section of Muravchik book trace a more scientific part of socialism. For simplicity sake I will briefly summarize the main topics and ideas and briefly cover some outcomes. Muravchik dives into the background of Engels, focusing on his religion and his atheist beliefs. Engels writes out some of the first aspects of

communism under what was known as a propaganda myth. By creating a propaganda myth that it's all happening anyway, communists justify elimination of private property, morality, nations, and human ties. They justify the treatment of people as commodities and slaves.

They thus justify the destruction of economic and political freedom – capitalism and democracy. Muravchik later points out that without Engels, Marx wouldn't be where he was. He points out that not only did Engels finance Marx's life but also provided many of his ideas and assisted in making sense out of his Marx's work. This was reflected in the various publications of Das Capital. Engels was able to publish a third volume before his death, and thought it was revamped and helped illustrate Marx's ideas a little better, it was still without viable theoretical conclusion. Muravchik describes Das Capital to be full of ignorance and irrationality, " whose only redeeming feature is that its great length and painful rambling deters both adherents and critics from plumbing the full depths of its ignorance and irrationality". Although he does not venture too much into Das Capital, he does mention Marx's unsuccessful effort to dispense with market exchange rates by substituting a concept of labor " use values" set in commodities. A last and one of the most important points that Muravchik writes about Engels is the short pamphlet he published in 1878 that taught most Marxist about their ideology. The message that was carried in the pamphlet and that shaped most of the 20th century was the following;

" Engels presented the basic ideas of ' scientific socialism': historical materialism, class struggle, surplus value, the contradictions of capitalism, the dynamic of the business cycle, the economic impoverishment and

<https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

concomitant political rise of the proletariat, the inevitable revolution, the subsequent dying out of the state, and the ultimate fulfillment of mankind as it ascends from 'the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.' There was even a brief exegesis on 'dialectic,' allegedly a more profound method of reasoning."

Concluding Analysis of the Beginnings

Marx's predictions ended up not coming completely true, instead of the middle class disappearing, rich getting richer (but fewer) and poor workers getting poorer; the opposite occurred in almost half a century after Marx made his predictions. As Moravchik stated "[The] rich were more numerous, as were the middle class, and the poor were better off", this can be seen as coming about from not concentrating capital and seeing the booming of small business. Thus, Moravchik points out, socialism would have to rest on an empiricism and on an extrinsic moral standard. The "historical determinism" of Hegel was dead. Marx was not scientific - he was "a slave to doctrine." People started to quickly see and experience that Marxism did not truly have the solid science grounding that it claimed it had. As we can see that from the very beginning it of socialism and its policies, that it would have a rocky ride. Although it would be quick to gain followers it would also be quick to lose them. I believe that people (working class) were quick to jump on the Socialism bandwagon because of the silly "we can all be equals" blind fold that was put on them. We can see that most of these Socialism leaders were in fact not members of the working class, but in my opinion were interested in seeking and gaining power by creating

propaganda of the evils of capitalism, and convincing the poor that things
<https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

will be worse for them. Since the poor made up most of the population, it would be easy to get movements started whenever there is vast support. At the same time, this support can quickly collapse and spread like a plague once they realize that they are enslaving themselves rather than becoming “equals”. I guess one could say they technically do all become equally miserable. Moving on, I will start to summarize and analyze the Triumphs of Socialism that Muravchik points out.

Triumphs

Well the first form of real socialism comes into creation by the help of Lenin in the country of Russia. The beginning part of the chapter dives into who Lenin was and how his philosophy on Socialism was shaped by Marxism and how he was fueled by recognizing Bernstein as a threat. Lenin was seen as a young revolutionary (also upper class like most of the leaders in socialism) that was agitated with how popular Bernstein was amongst the Russian Socialist. He acknowledged him as an opponent and waged an ideological warfare against all those that agreed with him. Part of Lenin’s ideological warfare is that he contributes a new form of Socialist dogma. If the proletarians were becoming too well off to engage in “proletarian revolution,” the revolution would be conducted for them and forced upon them. Muravchik also tells on how Lenin practiced no law despite being atop of his class. After creating a secret revolutionary party Lenin achieved tremendous success in seizing power and imposing some of history’s most noxious despotisms. This success came about the distribution of a revolutionary news paper published in secret from abroad, similar to the efforts of the German Socialist Party which also succeeded in their attempts.

<https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

One of his philosophies noted by the author is that what was needed was “ a military organization of agents” who were professional revolutionaries. They would be the vanguard of the Russian proletariat which would then be “ the vanguard of the international revolutionary proletariat”. Furthermore, these are some of the qualities that helped Lenin be a leader in the Bolshevik revolution. Over a period of months, Lenin’s disciplined Bolsheviks relentlessly attacked all rivals. But the other left wing intellectuals (the “ useful idiots,” in Lenin’s phrase) were incapable of realizing the threat on their left. Blinded by Marxist dogma, they concentrated on the opposition from the right. The Bolsheviks were the only left wing group to organize their own military force. The power vacuum had become so complete that it took them only five days to seize power. “ It had all been ‘ as easy as picking up a feather,’ Lenin commented later.” According to one commentator, Lenin “[seized] power not in a land ‘ ripe for socialism’ but in a land ripe for the seizing of power.” In my opinion all Lenin wanted to do was to be kept in power, since he began his reign by ruling by terror it would eventually fail. But when it started to fail all Lenin had to do to maintain his power was to resort to capitalist markets shown in his New Economic Policy.

Another triumph marked by Muravchik is that of Mussolini. It is important to note though that although socialism or communism prevailed with these two leaders it was only as a result of being sympathetic of capitalism and engaging in capitalist markets. Mussolini won widespread support by protecting capital and civic order against socialist strikes. He was able to funnel down power by typical Marxist strategies but since he had more popular support he was able to use a lot less actual slaughter Muravchik also

mentions cases of third world socialism and the cases of Africa's Tanganyika, which ultimately became a one party state under Nyerere experiments with socialism. Something that I wish Muravchik would've spent more time analyzing was the involvement of Third World Latin American countries with socialism and how they are slowly leading to reflect the collapse of those policies. The only mention of these countries is in his appendix of communist of socialist countries, but fails to mention several coups and revolutions by socialist ideas of Che Guevara of Argentina or Hugo Chavez of Venezuela which both have been influenced by Phidel Castro of Cuba which is the longest living Communist leader of today. I feel that Muravchik could've talked about these countries flirtation with Communism but how it has quickly collapsed due to lack of economic growth.

Collapse

In this section of the book Muravchik talks about Samuel Gompers as an example of a labor movement that in the past would've been focused on socialist ideals but rather was focused on capitalist principals, he rejected the ideas of communism and socialism. In this era while socialism was failing everywhere, the United States provided a perfect example of what capitalism in a democratic system can do for the proletariat. Gompers showed little sympathy towards socialist goals but also acknowledged that it would not provide immediate improvements in working conditions and wages. Gompers even feared that collective ownership would reduce unions to adjuncts of the socialist movement. Gompers begins to dismantle and have no sympathy for the idea of Socialism by 1903 stating to socialist that “

Economically you are unsound; socially you are wrong; industrially you are
<https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

impossibility". The next leader presented by Muravchik is George Meany. Meany was considered one of the first to take up the mortal fight against communism. He threw himself into battle to save Western Europe from communism by becoming president of the AFL. He rigorously purged communist from AFL ranks helping it become the most powerful organization in the world to have complete opposition to communism. Continuing Meany's fight towards communism was Lane Kirkland. During Kirkland's leadership we can notice another key collapse of communism, During the Solidarity union's first strike in Gdansk, Poland; the AFL-CIO Longshoreman's Union announced a boycott of all cargoes to and from Poland. Suppression of the Polish strike would result in an international labor boycott of all Polish transport. Money was raised to support Polish strikers, and office equipment was provided to Solidarity. As Muravchik points out " Here at last was the international proletarian solidarity that Marx and Engels had dreamt about but failed to achieve — except that its purpose was not to bring about communism, but to abolish it."

In America, socialism held very little appeal and thus another reason for its collapse. There were some workers that had socialist ideas with them but they were the workers that migrated from Europe. A reason for socialism not prevailing in America is that workers understood that the political and economic conditions in the U. S. would permit them to protect their interest and even advance. Muravchik asserts that only the resistance to socialism in the U. S. prevented its victory worldwide. Already, in the 1970s, over 60% of mankind lived under communist, Third World, or social-democratic systems.

Without the example of a thriving alternative in America, even disappointing results under socialist systems would not have led to their abandonment.

The following chapter in the book is about Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev were committed communists, but could not hide from themselves the extent of the failures of socialist economics. China's cautious retreat from socialism under Xiaoping began in 1978. Several tactics that he employed during his reign lead to the quick retreat from socialism. It all began with what he called the 'household responsibility system' which initially demonstrated impressive improvements but later, the communal farming killed millions to impose and quickly faded away. Although china considers itself to still be communist, its economic policies are from them and have done very well to reflect the continuing collapse of socialism. These phase out can be seen by the implementation of special economic zones for capitalist enterprise, which has led to the long and ongoing economic growth china has been experiencing. The only reason why the communist party of china still is dominant has been due to the political repression. Various weaknesses by the Chinese system continue to reflect the chinks of the system. There are successful enterprises everywhere but they continue to be small due the constraints of financial capital. As a result we see that china has massive unemployment and underemployment problems. Another problem that is reflected and pointed out by Muravchik is that of maintenance. Due to the lack of property rights people lack the desire for maintenance which lead to dingy and unkempt shops, even public facilities tend to not fare any better. As we have seen china has continued to enjoy growth but as a result of capitalist economic policies and not socialist

ones, but the communist political environment will continue to accumulate massive problems if it continues to avoid liberalization efforts.

Muravchik also talks about Mikhail Gorbachev as another leader in the communist parties, but this leader did not try to oppress people but rather ended the political supremacy of the communist party of the Soviet Union and led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev achieved this by encouraging public opinion and discourse so as to apply increasing amounts of public pressure against the system. The communist parties crumbled throughout Eastern Europe when he subjected party members to a real open election. By the 1990's the central committee voted to end the party's monopoly on power and allowed to permit a multi party system and private property (both reflecting a huge collapse of communism). Unfortunately for Gorbachev that lack of a market system in place and the weakening of the command structure resulted as catastrophic. Whatever economy there was fell apart and Gorbachev found himself without support from the new political world.

Concluding Analysis

Ultimately, Muravchik achieves to account most of Socialisms path through life, how it has influenced and how it has evolved to better control the proletariat. Socialism acted as a religion that provided a compelling faith to those for whom thought religions were no longer adequate. It gained great respect consequently during the time real science was beginning to be greatly respected for providing answers to life's mysteries and Marx capitalized on that by claiming that Socialism held scientific groundings.

<https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-rise-and-fall-of-socialism-history-essay/>

Muravchik couldn't have explained it any better in the following sentence, " Thus, part of the power of Marxism was its ability to feed religious hunger while flattering the sense of being wiser than those who gave themselves over to unearthly faiths. In addition, the structure of rewards proffered by socialism was so much more appealing than in the biblical religions. For one thing, you did not have to die to enjoy them". Socialism has also been noted to be immensely destructive as we were presented with various examples primarily to its lack of moral limitations. It lacked any form of internal code of conduct to limit what believers would do. Various leaders made claims that Socialism would prevail with a moral society but ironically it used no morality in implementing. " Regimes calling themselves socialist have murdered more than one hundred million people since 1917. The toll of the crimes by observant Christians, Moslems, Jews, Buddhists or Hindus pales in comparison."

There several reasons that the author points out on why socialism failed, for example reflected in Napoleons inability to conquer Russia, Socialism also failed to conquer America which ultimately proved as its undoing. Something that Socialists are very good at is that they remain in denial about its reality, seen through history and played out by so many atrocious massacres. Most of socialist ideologues instead of caring about the proletariat they claimed to care about to come into power actually despised the peasants and workers they were determined to save. Through much of its discourse we have seen that instead of middle class disappearing and the poor workers getting poorer the opposite has actually happened. Ultimately, socialism didn't die at the end of the 20th century because of Bernstein or his movement but rather

because the so-called “ great socialist experiment” had been tried throughout the world and throughout various conditions and would always lead to failures resulting in mass suffering of not thousands, not millions but billions of people. Like the Muravchik concludingly points out, the Kibbutz were the only democratic socialist that managed to create socialism, but like everybody else in the world, after they experienced it, they democratically abolished it.