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The rebirth of socialism

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Thanks to Bernie Sanders, socialism is no longer a term of abuse in the United States for the first time in history

Opinion: as socialism once again becomes a global force to be reckoned with, it's time to assess just what socialism is - and also what it's not

When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, socialism was proclaimed dead and the triumph of capitalism was hailed as the end of history. Today, though, things are much different. Socialism in the 21st century has never been in a better state of health.

In the UK, the socialist rhetoric of Jeremy Corbyn is attracting a generation of young voters who until recently felt alienated by the political system. This pales in comparison to what is going on in the United States where, largely thanks to the tireless efforts of Bernie Sanders, socialism is no longer a profanity or a term of abuse there for the first time in history. In fact, if the Democratic Party had had the courage to dream, a different president could well be sitting in the White House today.



06:18

Socialism is once again a global force to be taken seriously. But it is regrettable that on this issue, Irish politics is behind the curve, with the same two dominant political parties representing mildly different versions of the same market-obsessed neo-liberal ideology.

For socialists, the current state of affairs in Ireland is dire. While the Labour Party is fighting for its own survival, the Left is fragmented between opportunistic small parties and movements (independent socialists, Solidarity, People Before Profit etc) just when unity is called for. As for Sinn Fein, it's brand of socialism offers an unique cocktail of nationalism and populism, which makes it idiosyncratic to say the least.

But what is socialism? Let's start with what socialism is not. Socialism is not the annihilation of individual freedom where personal autonomy is crushed under the diktat of impersonal, centralised, State institutions. It would be absurd to blame Jesus for the Spanish Inquisition and, similarly it is disingenuous, and perhaps even dishonest, to discredit socialism for the perversion of this ideology in the hands of a Stalin, Castro or Chávez.

In fact, socialism is not even against the market system, notwithstanding the recognition that markets have the potential to unleash devastating manifestations of exploitation and social injustice. The unacceptable global levels of misery and homelessness today are a daily reminder of this distortion. And finally, socialism is not driven by the violent spectacle of a vengeful revolution, instead it is committed to democratic, gradualist, reformist policies.

> *Embracing this socialist model for the 21st century could have many radical and far-reaching implications*

The late English political philosopher Brian Barry astutely captured the essence of socialism when he said that socialism is above all a theory of citizenship. According to this committed Fabian and long-time professor at the London School of Economics and Columbia University, a socialist society is one in which the citizens of that society are able to control the major features of the society by acting together and therefore to overcome the undesirable consequences of individual actions. Understood in those terms, socialism does not stand for the rejection of the market system. Instead in its economic aspect, the core of socialism is captured by the constraint and modification of the market to accommodate the interests of people as workers, consumers, and above all citizens.

The market system has many virtues, but also some destructive vices. What humanity has witnessed in the last 100 years, as copiously documented by French economist Thomas Piketty in his best-seller Capital in the 21st Century (2014), is that the market system, if left unchecked, without proper and robust regulations, will inevitably generate ever-growing inequality. Where there is disparity, there is also despair.



29:05

In the last analysis, socialism stands for "no one being left behind". Inequality breeds domination and domination is the true enemy of freedom. It is the perils of inequality that defines a socialist agenda. Markets thrive on the exploitations of the vulnerable, but in a socialist society, vulnerability should not preclude anyone from making a contribution to society, via collective action, for the improvement of the social order, and not only in the form of cheap, expendable labour. It is in this sense that socialism,

as Barry says, is a theory of citizenship.

Contrary to what some people think, socialism is not synonymous with strict equality, and certainly not with coerced uniformity, but it stands against excessive inequality. Socialism today points to a radical reinterpretation of the traditional principles of equality and community. The principle of socialist equality is inclusive of liberal preoccupations with individual liberty, autonomy and responsibility, while the principle of socialist community is no longer defined as the antithesis of individualism. The result is a burgeoning model of socialism that is liberal, democratic and market oriented, but never market dictated.

Embracing this socialist model for the 21st century could have many radical and far-reaching implications. Above all, it means that socialists must rethink the role of the state within socialist society. To some extent, this process is already under way, as socialists have begun to look with a critical eye at some of the sacred bastions of the socialist tradition. Even the welfare state has come under serious scrutiny, with some radical alternatives to the welfare state being discussed, as the expanding literature on the idea of an unconditional basic income testifies.

The Irish economy is once again going strong, which means that inequality is once more rampant and rising. This emerges in the shape of such familiar but persistent social issues as homelessness, marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation. This suggests that socialism is not only still relevant, but a much-needed dynamic voice in what is turning into a monotonous, unimaginative political debate.

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