

The Prospects and Problems of 21st Century Socialism in the US

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Socialism is by no means dead, except in the minds of much of what passes for the Left in the West. Socialists are struggling to overcome capitalist relations of power in various places around the world. “Radicals would benefit much from studying the cooperative economic and political structures of the Bolivarian process.”

After over two decades since the destabilization of the socialist bloc, the debate brought on by Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” proclamation has taken a turn left. “The end of history” argument was the bourgeoisie’s claim to victory over socialism. Capitalism and imperialism have indeed expanded, ravaging the people of the world with poverty, war, racism, and instability in every corner of the planet. Yet, Fukuyama’s implied conclusion of socialism’s defeat was, and still is, dead wrong. The world is far from a “post-ideological” order. Although not the only example of a still existing and developing challenge to global capitalism, Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution in particular has inspired a left movement in Latin America called 21st Century Socialism. What can revolutionaries and radicals in the US learn from this movement as we rebuild our forces in the US imperial center?

The fact that socialism is becoming more “popular” in the US is reason enough to examine the idea of 21st Century Socialism further. A Pew Research Center Poll in 2011 found that nearly half of young people in the US find socialism favorable over capitalism. However, socialism’s definition is unclear in the study. Arguably, the meaning of socialism is unclear for most left-leaning folk in the US whose primary source of information is the corporate media and capitalist education. 21st Century socialism has the potential to provide renewed clarity for progressive and radical forces in the US desperately seeking a model of resistance against US imperialism.

In Venezuela, 21st century socialism represents a break from US-sponsored imperialism and neo-liberalism. From the power and organization of the nation’s working class and poor, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has implemented vast political and economic changes to Venezuelan society. Social welfare programs, called “Missions,” have greatly reduced poverty, homelessness, and unequal access to healthcare and education. Politically, the electoral process has been transformed from a two-party competition between the wealthy national elite into a practice of direct-democracy. Neighborhood “Bolivarian circles” and a revised Constitution ensure popular participation in all branches of government. These reforms have caught the attention of imperialist instruments. The UN heralded Venezuela for reducing poverty in the region more than any other Latin American country in 2012. Former US president Jimmy Carter called Venezuela’s election process “the best in the world.”

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Revolutionaries in the US have much to learn from the Bolivarian process. While Venezuelans are building infrastructure for universal healthcare, education, and housing, the US government is privatizing these human necessities. The leadership of the Bolivarian government has taken defiant positions against US imperialism in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, while some who pose as left “leadership” in the US has been caught cheering US imperial invasions from Libya to Syria. Organizing efforts like Jackson Rising in Mississippi remain anomalies in the US. Radicals would benefit much from studying the cooperative economic and political structures of the Bolivarian process. Such structures have allowed Venezuela’s revolutionary leadership and masses to defend the gains of the revolution from imperialist subversion and deepen the revolutionary process despite the untimely death of Hugo Chavez in 2013.

It is important that radicals in the US avoid romanticizing the Bolivarian Revolution and 21st Century socialism, but do so with solidarity and internationalism in mind. The US’s racist and capitalist roots have been a centuries-long roadblock to socialist construction. This has been true since European colonialism bloodily uprooted communal and collective indigenous societies in the Americas five centuries ago. When the US took the reigns as top imperial power halfway through the 20th century, anti-communism and racism were combined into a comprehensive domestic and international strategy for capitalist domination over the growing influence of the socialist Soviet Union and China in world affairs. US intelligence (COINTELPRO) neutralized communists and socialists in the US at the same time that the US military apparatus was conducting imperialist invasions of Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and many other nations around the world that were breaking free from imperialist rule. 21st Century socialism in Venezuela overlooks this history in a balancing act with current global political conditions. The Bolivarian revolution is building its political and economic infrastructure in the midst of US imperialist attack, and US radicals would do well to understand the affect of these concrete conditions on the political direction of this movement.

The Bolivarian revolutionary movement for 21st century socialism has positioned itself as a “third way” to distinguish the movement from the racist “Cold War” rhetoric that painted capitalism as “benevolent” and communism and socialism as “evil.” Although Venezuela’s socialist movement has taken firm positions in defense of nations under imperialist attack, 21st century socialism’s “third way” politics present future problems for implementation in the US imperialist center. A revived and rejuvenated US radicalism needs to build a clear internationalist framework that defends and learns from all nations *currently* struggling against imperialism, not just Venezuela. This means fighting the racism and mythology surrounding nations like Cuba and North Korea, two socialist countries that have transformed their societies to better meet the needs of workers and peasants despite a decades-long struggle against US imperialism. It also means revisiting the conflict between the Soviet Union and the US, a period of history that needs desperate revision after nearly a century-long disinformation campaign waged by US imperialism. Simply put, US radicals and revolutionaries need to take a firm position on the self-determination of all nations and peoples to their own political and economic destinies, something 21st Century socialism leaves open to debate within its “third way” non-communist but yet non-capitalist framing.

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US radicals and revolutionaries cannot emulate the creation of “one...two...many Vietnams” that Che Guevara had in mind for the anti-imperialist struggle of the Third-World when it comes to building a “21st Century” socialist movement in the US imperial center. It is impossible to fathom an alternative model of economic development existing in the US alongside the imperialist state. Venezuela is currently under threat of US sanctions and has been struggling for years against US-coup attempts and proxy violence. Many of Venezuela’s continued problems with inflation and instability derive from the intentional obstruction of and hostility to working class power from Venezuela’s oligarchy. Radicals and revolutionaries in the US have more than a few tasks ahead of them, one of them being the obligation to stand in solidarity with sovereign nations against imperialism. Another critical task is to begin defining and promoting socialism as the transfer of property, wealth, and production out of the private grips of the capitalist class and into the collective hands of the workers, oppressed, and exploited everywhere. This is the definition of socialism that needs to endure into the 21st century and beyond.

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