

# What is Socialism?

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World Constitution and Parliament Association  
India Chapter

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# What is Socialism?

The basic ideas of socialism go back to the roots of the great world religions and to the conceptions of justice and community envisioned by many ancient thinkers and religious texts. These basic ideas did not come from the critiques of capitalism that emerged with the works of Karl Marx and other thinkers critical of capitalism in the 19th century. For socialism means, most basically, social justice, human moral decency, institutions and social practices based on love and compassion.

In *An Interpretation of Religion*, scholar of religions John Hick characterizes the rise of all the post-Axial religions as concerned with “progressively freeing us from ego-concern and for love and compassion for others” (2004, 26). He quotes the ancient texts to confirm this generalization (*ibid.* Chap. 18):

*He has compassion toward all creatures and no greed. (Bhagavad Gita)*

*As a mother cares for her son, all her days, so toward all living things a man's mind should be all-embracing. (Gautama Buddha, Sutta Nipata)*

*It is affirmed that universal mutual love throughout the country will lead to its happy order, and that mutual hatred leads to confusion. (Neo-Confucian: Mo Tzu: Universal Love; in Sterba, 1998, p. 356)*

*You shall not enter Paradise until you believe; and you shall not believe till you love one another.*

*(Islam: Al-Hadis of Miskat-ul-Masibih, I:226)*

*Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees...to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor. (Judaism: Isaiah 10:1-2)*

*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Jesus the Christ: Matthew 22:39)*

Fourth century Christian thinker, St. John Chrysostom, wrote: "The rich are in possession of the goods of the poor, even if they have acquired them honestly or inherited them legally." Twelfth century Christian thinker St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: "Do not say, 'I am using what belongs to me.' You are using what belongs to others. All the wealth of the world belongs to you and to the others in common, as the sun, air, earth, and all the rest" (in Cort 1988, 45).

The very first fundamental principle of socialism, therefore, is the principle that all human beings are one family who inherit our precious Earth in common, and that we should be living in such a way that we share with one another in love and justice. In the modern world, however, the understanding of this principle has expanded due to what Hick calls our emerging “sociological consciousness.” Today we understand that human institutions, not simply individuals, can be just or unjust:

*In its social analysis this movement has drawn attention to the structural, as distinguished from the purely individual, evils of the world: the capitalist system.... Liberation has come to mean the freeing of whole populations from these large-scale and long-lived structural forms of oppression.... Structural evil is a recent development in the history of human consciousness.... The modern world has produced a growing number of political saints whose agape/karuna is directed to changing the structures of human life” (2004, 304-5).*

In the modern world, “socialism” has become the self-aware understanding that there are vast institutions of injustice and exploitation that alienate us from our true mission of human brotherhood, love, justice, and peace with one

another. The second fundamental principle of socialism is that the traditional moral principles of love and justice should inform human institutions just as much as personal relationships. This is why socialism in the modern world has developed in opposition to capitalism. Capitalism claims to be a neutral set of economic principles that operate independently of human moral concerns. It claims to be based on the private “rational self-interest” of individuals and businesses competing for goods and services within a “free market” that is not designed on any moral principles but is simply an institution for economic exchange.

The resulting global economic institutions have become a worldwide “structural genocide,” according to Garry Leech in his book on capitalism. He quotes Marx who wrote: “It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth. An accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time an accumulation of misery, the torment of labor, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole” (2012, 41). He also quotes Istvan Mészáros: “Structurally enforced inequality is the all-important defining characteristic of the capitalist system” (Ibid.).

Capitalism is a system of wealth production that proports to be value free. It is money not simply for purposes of exchange, but money used for purposes of accumulation. It is entirely independent of moral value and contains only the function of a perpetually increasing economic value. Marx writes:

*Thus, growing wealthy is an end in itself.... Fixed as wealth, as the general form of wealth, as value which counts as value, it is therefore the constant drive to go beyond its quantitative limit: an endless process. Its own animation consists exclusively in that: it preserves itself as a self-validated exchange value distinct from a use-value only by constantly multiplying itself. (1973, 270).*

The fundamental moral principle coming from ancient sources is equality through love and justice: love thy neighbor as thyself. The defining characteristic of capitalism is inequality: institutionalized through private property rights and legally enforced by militarized sovereign nation-states. This contradicts the fundamental moral principle, which is equality and dignity. As 20th century philosopher Leonard Nelson affirms: “We have already learned that the moral law commands us to respect the dignity

of the person; now we can define that law more closely as the command of justice, or as the law that commands us to safeguard the equality of persons. The command of justice may be formulated as follows: Each person per se has equal dignity with every other person” (1956, 98, 110).

The third fundamental principle of socialism is the equality and dignity of all persons. There have been many different institutional systems proposed for achieving this, from nationalization of the means of production (as in the Soviet Union), to state run capitalism (as in China today), to Israeli Kibbutzim, to cooperatives at the grass-roots level (as in today’s Venezuela), to alternative communities like Auroville in India or Damanhur in Italy, to systems of worker-based ownership (as advocated today by economist Richard D. Wolff: 2012), to various forms of market-socialism (advocated by Michael Harrington: 1989). Some, but not all, of these proposed systems have turned out to be undemocratic in practice.

It should be clear that socialism is not identical with any of these proposed institutional systems. Its most basic meaning is that human relationships and institutions should be based on moral principles, not on power, greed, violence,



or exploitation. Scholars have pointed out that Karl Marx's entire critique was morally based (Miranda 1986). Other scholars have agreed that his work was focused on freedom (Brenkert 1983). Twentieth century political philosopher Robert A. Dahl argues that capitalism embodies a "freedom" that is necessary to democracy, but at the same time, he declares, with capitalism "the moral foundation of democracy, political equality among citizens, is seriously violated" (2015, 178). However, true freedom embraces moral principles. The so-called "freedom" of unlimited accumulation, with its power to exploit and dominate others, is a perversion of true freedom.

Similarly, socialist thinkers like economist R.H. Tawney in 1920 affirmed that a decent society must be based on moral purposes (which presuppose freedom), not on property and private profit as ends in themselves. Today, social scientists Boswell and Chase-Dunn sum up socialism as follows:

*Our definition of socialism is a theory and a practice of progress toward the goals of steadily raising the living standards, and ensuring the basic needs of the working class, expanding the public sphere and community life, and eliminating all forms of oppression and exploitation. Global democracy assumes a democratic and collective*

*rationality that promotes greater equality between as well as within countries, greater international cooperation and an end to war, and a more sustainable relationship to the biosphere.... Undemocratic socialism is simply not socialism regardless of the good intentions of its creators. (2000, 6).*

Notice that their definition does not specify any specific types of ownership or institutions as “socialist.” Their definition sees socialism as all encompassing and holistic, as raising living standards for ordinary people, as enhancing community life, ending exploitation, ending war, and protecting the biosphere. This is a correct definition because if institutions are based on the moral principles of dignity and equality, holistically realized, all these consequences follow.

Their definition also points out that socialism is equivalent to democracy. The French Revolution of 1789 broadly defined democracy as the quest for “equality, liberty, and fraternity.” This is exactly what socialism is about—equality, liberty, and community for all people (not just for the rich and powerful). These social scientists also point out that it must be a global democratic-socialist revolution: “Basic needs, sustainable development, social justice,

and peace are the goals. Global democracy is both a means and goal” (ibid., 8). It cannot be rich nations protecting their wealth and power against poor nations. It cannot be militarized sovereign nations. The only viable democratic socialism requires world-wide institutions based on the moral principles of love, justice, equality, and dignity.

The fourth fundamental principle of socialism is holism. Socialism means that love, justice, equality, and dignity holistically permeate all aspects of human life and human institutions. Just as democracy is a way of life that is intrinsic to all humanity (arising from what Marx called our species-being) so socialism means that we have actualized the deeper oneness of our common humanity in a transformed world order (Martin 2018). It means that growth and accumulation are no longer the determinants of human behavior but rather the quality of our lives and relationships becomes fundamental. Holism also means that we integrate our economic system into the ecologically integrated holism of the biosphere, that economics, like human moral values, becomes kosmocentric in harmony with the holism of the universe and nature. Philosopher Joel Kovel writes that our socialism must therefore be called “ecosocialism”:

*As alienation and exploitation are overcome, therefore, we would not expect human life to expand, but rather to develop ever more subtle, interrelated, mutually recognizing, beautiful, and spiritually fulfilled ways of being. We should not seek to become larger within socialism, but more realized.... So it would be expected for an ecocentric society, where the ideal of growth as such simply needs to be scrapped. Sufficiency makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lacks healthcare or succor in old age. This can be done at a fraction of the current world output, and would create the ground for ecological realization. (2007, 228)*

Socialism therefore arises from the integrated wholeness of human beings, the planetary biosphere, and the cosmos. True socialism embraces culture, politics, and economics, all of which must manifest love and justice, based on human equality and dignity, that must become holistically embodied in our human institutions and relationships. It is the self-actualization of our higher human potential. Twentieth century Indian sage Sri Aurobindo declared that we embody the Oneness at the heart of cosmos, which “creates in itself a self-conscious concentration of the ALL through which it can aspire” (1973, 49). Philosopher of Science Errol E. Harris affirmed: “holism should be the dominating concept in all our thinking” (2000, 90).

This is why the Constitution for the Federation of Earth is a democratic-socialist document. It sets up a holistic world system based on the legally recognized equality and dignity for every person on Earth. Its two bills of human rights (Articles 12 and 13) list a multitude of rights that are “inalienable” for all persons as well as explicit goals for the Earth Federation government to enhance and protect. These goals include ecological harmony with the biosphere of our planet. The Constitution designs a democratic system based on fundamental ecological and moral principles. It directs the World Parliament to further elaborate social and economic institutions that holistically embody these principles.

The “broad functions” of the Earth Federation government specified in Article 1 include ending war and disarming the nations, protecting universal human rights, diminishing social differences (inequality), and protecting the “ecological fabric of life.” As in the definition of socialism (and democracy) above, all these consequences and functions derive from the fact that the Earth Constitution is based on the holistic moral principles that should be foundational in human institutions: love, justice, equality, freedom, and dignity. All

these concepts demand increased quality, not quantity. They demand realization for the whole of humanity, including our relationship with nature.

This is why socialism is universal and can only legitimately be global. It is not something that some countries can choose while other countries choose capitalism, for the capitalist system (based on power and greed, not on moral principles) will always imperialistically destroy attempts to establish socialism in individual countries, just as it is doing today against Venezuela and Cuba. The capitalist system dominates our planet and is not separate from the imperialism of the system of so-called “sovereign nations.” Christopher Chase-Dunn writes:

*The state and the interstate system are not separate from capitalism, but rather are the main institutional supports of capitalist production relations. The system of unequally powerful and competing nation states is part of the competitive struggle of capitalism, and thus wars and geopolitics are a systematic part of capitalist dynamics, not exogenous forces. (1998, 61)*

The Constitution for the Federation of Earth does not contain the words “socialism” or “capitalism.” It makes “private property” a

right and encourages “free trade.” However, like all systems of democratic law, the World Parliament will legislate laws defining “private property.” There are many ways it can be defined, regulated, and limited so as to prove beneficial to human beings and ecological systems, whereas as currently defined, it is largely destructive of both. The same applies to “free trade.” All trade requires regulation of some sort, even under capitalism. But real free trade will not exploit, nor corrupt with bribes and monopolies, nor destroy the environment. Real free trade will be fair trade, holistically seeking to benefit all concerned and to integrate with the Earth’s ecosystems. Only enforceable democratic world law can make this happen.

In 2005, I published a book called *World Revolution through World Law*. The title is appropriate to our effort to ratify the Earth Constitution. We need fundamental change in our global capitalist and sovereign state institutions. But that change can only come about through the force of morally based democratic laws that include holistic and morally based definitions of “private property” and “free trade.” Real democracy, like real socialism, is revolutionary and must be embodied in our planetary institutions.

The World Constitution and Parliament Association (WCPA) is not a power-based institution. It is based on the holistic moral principles of love, justice, equality, and dignity. Our tools are love and persuasion along with emerging governmental authority under the Provisional World Parliament. We must get the people of Earth to see that a decent world system respecting their equality and dignity can only happen if they ratify the Earth Constitution under the democratic criteria specified in its Article 17.

We do not command armies or capitalist power-blocks. But we do draw from the power of holistic universal moral principles that come to us from all the ancient scriptures as well as from our intrinsic human rationality. This law of love and justice is objective and real and has the authority to awaken human beings to their true destiny. Our true destiny is to live sustainably, peacefully, and justly, without war or exploitation, in harmony with our beautiful planet Earth. Our true destiny is to ratify the Constitution for the Federation of Earth.



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