

Basics of Socialist Theory

From the *Cycle News Hour*, you're listening to *Power Play*. *Music cue* In this segment, we'll be learning all about political theory, explicating and demystifying this seemingly inscrutable science. Today, a spectre is haunting KDVS—the spectre *cue Russian anthem* of socialism. *Let music play*

Wait—wait, no! *Record scratch* Sorry, sorry—we're not talking Russia, actually. Trust me, I would genuinely love to talk about the Russian Revolution and the evolving politics of the USSR for the next five hours, but socialist history precedes the Soviet Union by a long time. When we think of socialism, your thinking probably goes one of two ways: either toward Nordic welfare states or toward states like the USSR and China. I would probably bet that none of you thought of Vietnam, which is also a Marxist-Leninist state, but it's not scary so people tend to forget about it.

But I digress. Our conceptions of socialism are so bound up in statehood that we tend to overlook the theories themselves. On one level, that's fine: it's important to judge a state based on its actions as much as or even more than its intentions. On another level, though, this thinking excludes all socialist groups which exist but have never held government power; it excludes socialist groups which reject government power; and it therefore excludes a great deal of the socialist body of thought.

There's...a lot to cover here and we aren't going to be able to do it all in a single episode. So today, we're not actually going to talk about any theory in-depth. Instead, we're going to address some common misconceptions about socialism and learn about the political compass, which is an alternative to the traditional left-right axis of understanding politics. In essence, we're going to be building the political vocabulary that we'll use to talk about socialist theory in the coming weeks. So when I use terms like 'marxist-leninist' or 'anarcho-communist' or whatever, don't worry too much about the theory itself. We'll get to that in good time, but focus on the discussion itself for now.

I imagine that everyone listening to this is already tensing up, arguments forming in mind—but just humor me and really approach these theories on their own ground. If you want to understand political theory, you can't just stop when you're intellectually uncomfortable; in fact, that's kind of the point, constantly testing your own assumptions against good-faith understandings of other points of view. I'm Cameron Lallana, and thank you for tuning in. *Cue the Internationale*

Before we get into our discussion proper of the political compass, there are two things I want to address:

First, you may be wondering why I haven't yet used the word 'communism.' A popular idea in the US, one that I was actually raised with, is that communism is a theory of violent revolution, of no private property, and centralized government control. Socialism, on the other hand, is perceived as a melding of free-market capitalism and some government control, less rigid, still respects private property, etc. Often states like China are called communist while states like Sweden and Denmark are called socialist. These conceptualizations, to be frank, have absolutely no basis in actual theory. What they are is pop political science, essentially: catchy, easy to understand, seems to make sense based on what we can easily observe in the world around us. The problem is that these conceptualizations are attempting to explain theory based not in the literature but basic observations about non-wholly free market systems of China and Nordic countries. I could go on for a long time about the issues here. But the most foundational problem is that these ideas aren't...useful. It lacks a world of nuance. It would put Marxist-Leninists and Trotskyites in the same room and, trust me, you do *not* want to do that. It's just not useful.

And why is it not useful? Because socialism and communism—they aren't coherent ideologies. They're umbrella terms, essentially. Every ideology contained within them has some consistent characteristics, but those characteristics aren't enough to form a theory alone. Socialism is the broader of the two, encompassing all anti-capitalist ideologies. Communism is a more specific group of thought, often associated with Karl Marx and theories derived from Marxism. But communist thought has also been claimed by thinkers like Pyotr Kropotkin, an anarchist who rejected Marx's ideas of political economy entirely. So you can throw various ideologies underneath the banner of communism, although some of them might directly contradict each other, such as anarchist communism and Marxist Leninism. In the Russian revolution, anarchist communists seized the factories in Kronstadt, an island outside of St. Petersburg, to protest working conditions and political arrests; Leon Trotsky, then the Bolshevik Army's Commissar of War, ordered the Red Army to crush the striking workers.

So all communist theories are socialist. Not all socialist theories are communist.

This does come with the caveat that *within* socialist theory circles, Communism is often used interchangeably with Marxism and Marxist-derived theories. When people self-identify as a socialist politically, they sometimes also use communist to mean the same thing. Yeah, I know, I'm sorry—it would be really nice if terms could all be nice and clean but how people actually use

words in the non-academic and real world contexts often adds meaning. Unfortunately, when theory and life intersect, we have to live with a certain amount of linguistic mess.

Second: as an addendum to the above point, it's incorrect to say that any form of socialism respects private property. If anyone says it does, they're thinking of the Nordic countries which aren't governed by socialist ideologies. Nordic countries mostly closely align with what we would call welfare liberalism—liberalism in the broad ideological sense—which is influenced by socialist thought, but is ultimately incompatible on their conclusions about capitalism. The underlying problem here is semantic one. If you know anything about property law, you know that there isn't one type of property. There's private property, government property, real property, etc. etc. The same is true in socialist theory. The main problem is that it uses the same terminology but with a different meaning. At its most basic, you can reduce property to two types in socialist theory: private property and personal property. Personal property is anything that someone has and uses themselves. So that would mean a home, a bed, a farm, equipment one uses for production, etc. Private property, in short, is absentee ownership. It means having a home that one doesn't live in, but keeps as a vacation house or to rent out; it means owning a factory that other people work in. Basically it means anything someone can make a profit off of with the labor of other people. So when socialists talk about abolishing private property, they mean abolishing that, not that nothing you own would be yours. It's yours if you're using it. The socialist objection to private property is that it allows people to profit from the labor of others. The landlord isn't producing something, but benefits from ownership. The factory owner doesn't make the good, but earns a portion of the good's revenue by owning the machines that others use.

This is a very brief explanation and lots of theories have additional forms of ownership to account for group ownership, state ownership, etc. But this is the basic idea that underlies all the rest. French socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon expressed socialist opposition to property in this famous passage from his 1840 book *What is Property?*:

“If I were asked to answer the following question: *What is slavery?* and I should answer in one word, *It is murder!*, my meaning would be understood at once. No extended argument would be required to show that the power to remove a man's mind, will, and personality, is the power of life and death, and that it makes a man a slave. It is murder. Why, then, to this other question: *What is property?* may I not likewise answer, *It is robbery!*, without the certainty of being misunderstood; the second proposition being no other than a transformation of the first?”

It would be interesting to explore what exactly Proudhon means by calling property robbery, but he's quite long-winded so perhaps that's for another time. It's also worth noting that

this conceptualization of property had its detractors. Among them, actually, was Karl Marx. In an 1865 letter, Marx expressed measured fondness for *What is Property?* before writing, quote, “The deficiency of the book is indicated by its very title. The question is so badly formulated that it cannot be answered properly,” enquote, before going on to argue that property should be understood in a historical sense rather than as a legal one, as Proudhon does.

In proper socialist form, we could talk about this for another thirty minutes, but for the sake of time, I’ll sum up this section with a line from *The Communist Manifesto*. “The theory of the communists may be summed up in the single sentence: abolition of private property.” Endquote.

Third: there another popular misconception that socialism means bigger government. Well, of course, the anarchists wouldn’t agree very much, but they aren’t often considered in this question. This assumption is mostly a failing of our common understanding of politics. I have to imagine that you were probably raised with the left-right spectrum, you know, moderates are in the middle. On the left it’s liberals, then socialists, then finally communists. On the right you have conservatives, libertarians, then fascism. Your version might be a bit different, adding monarchism or anarchism, or maybe moving fascism to follow communism, but I would bet the idea’s basically there. The problem here is that a slider scale implies continuity. So if we were to accept this as the best way to measure politics, we would have to accept that as you go up or down this bar, something is increasing or decreasing. You would also have to accept that successive ideologies build on each other. So...what are we measuring?

Let’s say it measures the involvement of the government. As you go more left, each ideology calls for more government involvement and as you go right, each ideology calls for less government involvement. An obvious problem arises: is fascism is at the extreme of the right, how do we explain the jump from libertarian night watchman state to fascistic totalitarian rule? Okay, well, let’s say that fascism is a leftist ideology. Leave aside that, in practice, fascistic governments arrest and kill socialists in large numbers. In Nazi Germany, so-called “judeo-bolsheviks” were reviled and “cultural bolshevism” was an insult for any sort of art nazis didn’t like. Leaving aside reality, let’s pretend that fascism and communism are on the left side of the spectrum. Perfect, right? Now the logical progression of right-wing small government is conservatism, libertarianism, then anarchism. Except—the anarchists are against private property. Anarchists are pro-union. Some of them are anarchist-communists. They reject the conservatives and the liberals and find closest kinship with the socialists and communists. So...it’s left wing. But then government size can’t be the determiner of the scale. And you could continue with variant examples forever, but I think you get the essential point: the traditional left/right spectrum is

inadequate for actually describing the whole world of politics. Why? Well, the core of the scale—liberals and conservatives are both, ultimately, liberal ideologies with support for a state and capitalism. This is incompatible with socialism. So the scale is, essentially, looking at one particular ideology, albeit the dominant one, and using that as a ruler by which all others are measured.

So...what do we do? Well, there have been a lot of attempts to create revised political spectrums that take these things into account. A really popular one I've seen as of late is horseshoe theory, which essentially takes the traditional left/right spectrum and wraps it in on itself, like a horseshoe. The idea underlying this is that extremist ideologies will eventually end up being functionally the same, totalitarian. The problem here is that the prototypical examples of extremist ideologies in this spectrum, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, actually acted in very different ways. So, again, this conceptualization is not helpful in predicting *how* a state or group will act. Furthermore, it privileges centrism. The thing about moderate politics is that it can only exist if you conceive of politics as a spectrum. As we're about to discuss, though, politics isn't that simple. In practice, being a so-called moderate can mean being one of two things: a) either someone who holds beliefs pulled from *both* mainstream parties; or b) someone who is in favor of the status quo. We'll talk about categorizing the former in a moment and the latter doesn't really deserve the title of moderate. The status quo can be quite extreme. For perhaps the best example of this, let's listen to Martin Luther King Jr. talking about so-called moderates.

Martin Luther King, [Birmingham Jail](#) 24:18-25:57.

It's a lovely idea, moderate politics, but in practice there is no such thing as not taking a stance. The nature of politics is action, and not doing anything is the equivalent of tacit support.

Anyway, what is to be done, then? How can we create a measurement of politics that isn't limited by liberalism? Enter: the political compass.

Think of a graph. It has two axes that intersect in the middle, creating a plus-shape. The x-axis is a measurement of economics, so to speak. At the far right is capitalism and at the far left is socialism. The Y-axis is a measurement of attitude toward centralized state power. At the top is statism and at the bottom is libertarianism. So we have four quadrants: statist socialism, statist capitalism, libertarian socialism, and libertarian capitalism.

This conceptualization allows us to capture much more nuance as we try to order theories in relation to each other. So the aforementioned moderate who crosses party lines—this would give up the opportunity to say, for example—if they believe the state should be strong and have a

heavy hand in market regulation, then we would put their dot, so to speak, in the realm of being a statist capitalist, rating high on statism and low on capitalism.

Let's try to categorize the same ideologies that gave us so much trouble with the left/right slider. First liberalism and conservatism. Both, being contained under broader liberal ideology, are pro-capitalist so we know they're on the right side of the chart. And they're both pro-government in different ways so we can say that they both fall into the statist-capitalist quadrant, albeit at different points. Okay, where does libertarianism fall? Well, mainstream libertarianism is pro-capitalist and calls for a minimal state. And this is where terminology can get a little confusing—libertarianism, in this sense, means the inverse of the statism: no state at all. So American libertarians which still want to night-watchman state don't actually qualify as libertarian in this sense—mainstream libertarianism is nominally statist-capitalist, although it would come much closer to the border of libertarianism.

And fascism? Well, the best way to do this would be to look at particular fascist movements, but a common feature among them all is a strong state. Generally, there is state intervention in the economy, but you still have the presence of private property and an owner class. So let's draw an oval at the furthest reaches of statism that contains a range of beliefs about capitalism. That's fascism.

At this point, you might be seeing a pattern. All of these beliefs fall in statist-capitalism. The reasons for this are complex, but here's the short version: the modern state, which we often erroneously conflate with government, isn't as old as we think. It's very much an invention of European political thinking that developed alongside liberal thought. In political terminology, the modern state is called a "nation-state." There isn't *one* clear definition of what this means, which is problematic, but we can roughly equate the state with a political entity and nation with a cultural entity. So a nation-state brings together a coherent and inter-connected political and cultural identity. Generally, political scientists point to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia as the first coherent articulation of state sovereignty and thus the basis for nation-states. Our modern idea of Germany being that place where Germans live or France being that place where French people live—well, historically, who was in control of what area of land was in much greater flux. There wasn't a central government for people to have loyalty to, only the current conquerors and their neighbors. So prior to the French state, you have ethnically-French people who live along the Rhine River who are more loyal to their ethnic-German neighbors on the other side of the river. Economically, culturally, and linguistically, this French group probably had more in common with the Rhine Germans than with, say, the French of Paris.

So, while the modern nation-state isn't that old, it is the dominant form of governance today. Political legitimacy is often measured by state-hood. Our world is measured in countries. Thus, most mainstream political theories play ball with the nation-state, assuming its existence to be a given. Capitalism is a similarly new and dominant force in the world, so it, too, tends to be assumed in mainstream thought. This is why most theories that you'll encounter will be statist-capitalist ones.

Having said that, let's continue exploring how the old political spectrum can be better articulated with the political compass. The only things that we have left from our initial example are socialism and communism. There are some problems here, of course. As we've mentioned, neither of these are a coherent ideology in and of themselves, and additionally socialism is already a measurement on this chart. So we won't actually be plotting that since it's already half of the graph.

And when most people talk about communism, they're most often referring to either Marxism, Marxist-Leninism or Maoism. I'm a devotee of Russian studies, so let's substitute communism with Marxist-Leninism. Marxist-Leninism, in this case being the primary ideology of the Soviet Union, is anti-private property and therefore anti-capitalist. Although much of the foundation of MLism speaks to a withering away of the state as it becomes necessary in a socialist society, we do see in practice that the state remains an important feature of governance. So let's put Marxist-Leninism in the upper left-hand corner, statist socialism.

Great! So that's all of them. Except—we haven't even touched the libertarian quadrants yet. Well, recall what I've said about the dominance of the nation-state. It's hard to conceive of a world without states, so the majority of political science exists along the statist half of this axis. That's not to say that there aren't *any* libertarian philosophies, just that they tend to be excluded almost entirely from the conversation. Those philosophies?

Anarchism! Black flags, balaclavas, and bomb throwing, oh my! Now—that's not a very fair portrayal of anarchism. In the public imagination, we tend to think of assassins or agents of chaos. In fact, anarchy is commonly used as a synonym for chaos. The reality, though, is that anarchism, like socialism, is not one, coherent ideology, but a group of ideologies with some consistent features. Here's linguistic and political philosopher Noam Chomsky talking about one of the most foundational features of anarchist thought:

[Chomsky on Anarchism](#) *2:17-2:59, 3:18-4:12*

One of the biggest misconceptions about anarchism is it wants disorder—again, chaos. The thing about “no rules” is that it's not an ideology, and it's certainly not anarchism. Anarchism is not

anti-governance, per se, but anti-statist, by which it means this modern nation-state idea we discussed earlier. Books and books and books have been written in an attempt to think out how a society might function by only legitimate authority. What is legitimate authority? Different thinkers have different definitions. We could spend a lot of time on it and probably will in the future. For now, let's focus on our political compass, specifically in the lower right hand corner.

Libertarian-capitalism. This is the black sheep of the anarchist family. Frankly, many libertarian socialists see the idea of anti-capitalism as so fundamental to anarchist thought—here, keep in mind Chomsky's definition of anarchism as a tendency to question systems of power—that pro-capitalist anarchism is a contradiction. Either way, the most notable ideology here still claims the title: anarchist capitalism. A system where there is no state or regulation, just the market. If there is serious academic thought tied to this philosophy, I'm not aware of it.

And finally, we come to what you could call anarchism proper: libertarian-socialism. This is, according to the political compass, the diametric opposite of statist-capitalism. Anarchism as a whole is fascinating because there has been so much work put into trying to create forms of existence that are the total inverse of our own. In good time, we'll come back and try to address these theories more thoroughly. For now, let's talk about a prototypical example, just for the sake of generally understanding libertarian-socialism. Probably one of the most popular theories is anarchist communism. Anarcho-communism's foundational thinker, Pyotr Kropotkin, was actually a member of the Russian aristocracy, a Russian military officer, and a scientist who was imprisoned and exiled for his activist work for Russian peasantry and anarchist communism, based on principles of mutual aid. Although he wrote quite extensively, Kropotkin's most famous work is *The Conquest of Bread*, which is a systematic explanation of and justification for anarchist society.

So that's basically the Political Compass. Although it isn't perfect, and we can address some of its shortcomings and critiques in the future, it's a really helpful tool for understanding political ideologies.

To quickly sum up our discussion: 1) don't get too caught up in general terms like communism or liberalism, because if you don't think rigorously about the exact theories at hand, you're bound to attribute to it some features based in your recollection, rather than fact. 2) all socialism is against private property, which is not the same thing as personal property. And 3) the political compass is both more useful for conceptualizing politics and is also great for making jokes. If we have time, we'll talk about some of those in the future.

For the two of you who are still listening, thank you. I'm Cameron Lallana, you're listening to the Cycle News Hour, and this has been *Power Play*. Next week we'll be continuing our series on socialism and actually dipping our toes into the basics of socialist theory.