

A Christian View of Socialism and Communism in Latin America

Though the Bible does not endorse any particular economic system, it nevertheless addresses certain principles when these have a bearing on the value of human beings. The way we treat one another is often based on financial considerations.

Communist resurgence in Latin America

The capitalism in England and Russia in the late 18th century, when Marx wrote **DAS KAPITAL**, was unrestrained and brutal. It provided fertile ground for revolutions, leading to decades of communist oppression.

Unfortunately, similar conditions exist in certain Latin American countries, which explains the current resurgence of communism in the region. At the root is a corrupt relationship between capitalist enterprises and the governments hosting them, permitting the same exploitative practices of the past. Under such conditions, the poor truly become poorer and the rich grow richer until it becomes intolerable.

Political leaders in these countries use the less inflammatory term "socialism" when they are in fact promoting communism.

The Encarta Encyclopedia defines socialism as “a political theory or system in which the means of production and distribution are controlled by the people and operated according to equity and fairness rather than market principles.”

Communism is an extreme form of socialism defined as “the political theory or system in which all property and wealth is owned in a classless society by all the members of a community.”

Humanist roots

All socialism is humanism at its roots, including communism. Humanism is the assumption that man is basically good, or at least morally neutral. By providing the right environment and education, we can make humans good. From this viewpoint stems the idea that a utopian society is possible. Produce a generation of upright humans, and a utopia will be inevitable.

The first error is obvious to any Christian. It blatantly denies original sin and the Adamic nature, which are antithetical to God and inherently selfish. It underestimates the power of human corruption.

Humanism and its socialist derivatives deny the need for regeneration to make a person good and overcome innate corruption. Socialism is antithetical to the gospel because the gospel is not humanist.

The right of personal property

A fundamental principle of communism is the denial of personal property rights, especially the right to more possessions than one's neighbor. Communism claims to be egalitarian, with everyone receiving an equal share. The Bible, however, clearly affirms the right of personal property and even suggests that prosperity may be a blessing from God.

The Ten Commandments reads, *You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

This command assumes the right of personal property. We cannot covet unless someone possesses something. Nor can it be taken as relative to the times and culture in which it was written, because the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament and intended for all peoples in all ages.

I would argue that the concept of personal property is inherent in human nature as the image of God. When God created Adam, he turned over to him a garden to tend. This garden belonged to Adam.

Ananias and Sapphira

Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?” Acts 5:3

By the words, *belong to you*, Peter acknowledged the right of Ananias to own property. This took place during the Pentecost festival, a time when *they had all things in common*. Even though the delegates to that festival lived for a time in a communal situation, the apostles never denied the right of private ownership.

The right to a profit

The law of sowing and reaping clearly supposes the right to a profit from investment.

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously...8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 Cor 9:6, 8

Parable of the talents, Matthew 25

Jesus describes how a master put money into the hands of servants to invest for gain. It is the one who did not make a profit that got punished.

While this parable is a lesson in faithfulness, not economics, it nevertheless shows that prospering through investment is not inherently evil. If it were, Christ would have avoided such an illustration.

Reward for suffering for Christ: Mark 10:29-30

In this text, Christ provides a promise to those who may be forced to abandon belongings for the sake of the gospel due to persecution. He promises remuneration. Some of this is figurative, of course, but inherent in the promise is the recognition of the right of personal possessions.

Free enterprise versus exploitive capitalism

A difficulty in discussing socialism in any form is that the socialists will always compare the worst possible kind of capitalism with the best of socialism. This is like comparing a completely rotten apple to a mediocre one. At least the latter is palatable, especially if a person has never experienced anything but rotten apples.

Socialists, especially communists, make the term "capitalism" sound like a dirty word and those who practice it like villains. Other forms exist, however, that are not the abusive kind in some parts of Latin America.

Modern developed democracies practice a form of capitalism called free enterprise. The idea is to pit one capitalist against another in competition. This forces price control and product improvement. The customer is king.

Capitalists often resort to corrupt and abusive practices without certain legal restraints, such as the following:

- **Anti-monopoly laws:** A monopoly is a company with complete control over a single market and minimal competition. For example, in the USA, we had a company called AT&T that controlled the entire telephone system. Smaller companies tried to form to compete with them, and AT&T squashed them. The small companies sued. Result: The government ordered AT&T to break up into smaller competing companies. This resulted in the cell phone industry, better service, and competing rates.

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- Anti-trust laws: One trick some companies have tried is to agree secretly among themselves on pricing so as to avoid competing. This way they could make more profit than if they were in competition. Executives who are caught doing so go to jail.
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- Minimum wage control: Though minimum wage laws are enacted in most countries, some of the poorer ones still do not require a decent living wage because of corruption between the companies and the government.
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Controlled free enterprise encourages inventiveness, initiative, and taking risks. It is not inherently exploitative, though it may become so without adequate restraints.

The village well

A Reader's Digest article once used an illustration that stuck with me:

Imagine a small village in which every family earns about ten dollars per day. The village is near a river. It takes two hours of work each day for each family to get water.

A villager decides to dig a well on his property, put in a pump, and sell water to the other villagers for one dollar per day. He agrees to give them the same amount of water they would otherwise carry from the river. Fifty villagers agree to the deal.

The villagers save two hours of time per day, which they can invest in other things. Some decide to spend the two hours making textiles to sell in the town and make much more than one dollar per day.

The well owner, in the meantime, is earning much more than ten dollars per day and prospering more than any other villager. Yet he has done this without exploiting anyone.

In fact, he may even hire a worker at fifteen dollars per day to run the business for him while he goes to other villages to set up a similar business. The villagers are delighted because they have gained two hours per day to invest in other things. The worker is happy because he is earning more than the average villager. The owner is happy because he is earning money from the well and does not even do most of the work.

The well owner is richly rewarded for his initiative and investments. Who is exploited? Who is deprived? Who is robbed? No one.

What if the well owner knew beforehand the government that would take over his well and make it communal property? Would he have bothered with the project?

That is what happens in communism when everything belongs to the government. Initiative is destroyed. Inventiveness dies.

Socialists assume that if one person has more than another, the former must have taken it from someone else by devious means. The poor and uneducated often fall for this simplistic thinking.

Re-distribution of wealth

The idea of redistributing the wealth is fine, as long as it can be shown that the wealth was earned as a result of unfair competition, fraud, or other immoral conduct. Otherwise, redistribution is government-controlled thievery. The mere presence of wealth alone is not sufficient evidence to prove exploitation.

The false offer of equality

Communism's offer of equality falls short of the real world. In communism, as well as other forms of socialism, the political leaders replace the wealthy ruling class. Is this a real change?

Paranoia

If everyone is to share equally in the work and the benefits, then everyone must agree with the philosophy behind it. Not only must the people *act* in unison, but they must *think* alike as well. Unity is threatened otherwise.

How does everyone come to an agreement? The only answer is government coercion. The government, therefore, must control not only the means of production but also the thoughts of the workers as well. Dissension cannot be allowed, and freedom flies out the window.

This is plainly dehumanizing. Ironically, the humanism behind the movement leads inevitably to the loss of what it means to be human. The image of God descends to the level of a creature to be manipulated and controlled.

Historically, socialist governments indulge in plans to “educate” the public, starting with the youth. Only one view is presented as the “right” view.

From such practices is born a noticeable paranoia on the part of communist governments. They become fearful of ideas spreading among the population that may contradict government policy. This is noticeable to tourists. Communist countries question tourists thoroughly and scrutinize their luggage.

A seminary professor visiting a communist country said customs officials interrogated him for an hour and a half. They examined carefully the books he was bringing, obviously to make sure he was not doing something “subversive.”

A communist government fears new ideas. In a free society, people welcome new ideas because they might lead to a profit.

Loss of freedom

The most glaring fault of communism is the loss of freedoms. This is an inevitable product of the attempt to produce a classless society. It is equally true in the milder form of socialism in which the government controls production and discourages competition.

Since the government wants everyone to think alike, then it must control how they speak. Freedom of speech is no longer respected. Fear enters in because people become afraid to say something that will get them in trouble.

From this stem further losses of freedom, such as liberty to travel, freedom of assembly, and government control of religion. Artistic expression suffers as well.

Scapegoat

Since socialism does not work, the party needs a scapegoat to blame for its failures. For the Nazis, it was the Jews. For communists, capitalism in the West is the main issue.

Currently, it is popular in Latin America to blame the USA. This is, of course, the line Cuba takes. According to Castro, the U.S. causes all the problems in Cuba. Apparently communism is too weak to overcome the obstacles the U.S. generates, although it is unclear what those obstacles are. We are now hearing the same propaganda from Venezuela and other places.

The logical fallacy in this case is obvious. If socialism is so workable and wonderful, then it ought to overcome all opposition. Why, if it is so workable, would a trade embargo cause the country to remain in poverty?

Since these dictators are unable to provide concrete details on why their system is failing, they resort to wild, vehement, and crazy-sounding rhetoric.

So the West, particularly the U.S., has done them wrong? Exactly how? What specific product was stolen from them? Did some company fail to pay its bill?

In such twisted thinking, their poverty could not possibly be the fruit of their own work ethic that rewards mediocrity and discourages initiative. Someone from outside the country must have done it to them.

Socialism and communism are parasites

Communism requires poverty to generate itself. When people become desperate enough, they are willing to try anything. The idea that everything belongs to everyone in a classless society is attractive to people who have nothing.

Prosperity is poison to socialism. The moment people begin to prosper and enjoy a few comforts, they become unwilling to share. This is why communist countries are poor. Their governments cannot afford for the people to prosper beyond basic subsistence because this undermines the very idea of a classless, egalitarian society.

I discussed this subject with a Cuban on a plane some years ago, a delegate from Cuba to a conference. He confided he was a communist only when in Cuba. I told him I disagreed with the U.S. embargo on Cuba because if trade were to start with the U.S. and Cubans prospered, communism would not last a year. He disagreed. He said it would not last two months.

It just plain does not work

Why do these Latin American leftists ignore the lessons of history? Have they forgotten the day the president of Russia stood up and said to the parliament, "Let's face it. Communism does not work."

Why do they ignore the Cuban refugees who risk their lives to escape the Cuban utopia? Why do they pursue a system from which others attempt to escape?

The cruel reality is that impoverished countries that go into communism to escape poverty usually end up poorer than they were before.

What should be the reaction of Christians?

At all times the doctrine of man as the image of God must be respected. This doctrine grants to mankind an inherent dignity beyond anything a government could ever

concede. It is because of this doctrine that we “honor all men” and pursue works of charity, regardless of their worth to society as a means of production.

From this it follows that certain freedoms are the natural right of mankind, and no human government has authority to deprive us of them. This includes the right to private property, creative and independent thinking, personal profit, freedom of speech, and the right to live in peace without these rights being threatened.

I do not wish to influence you with what could be construed as a mere North American cultural perspective. Yet I yield here to the temptation to quote something from the United States Declaration of Independence, justifying taking up arms against Britain in 1776. Most of the signers of this declaration were members of Protestant churches. It reflects what I believe is a proper Christian attitude toward oppressive government:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

In essence, we have a God-given right to live in freedom and peace, with our own properly earned belongings, without fear. We have the right to be free from robbery. But when the brigands are the government, threatening our lives, our freedoms, and our property, we have every moral right before God...yes, I would even say a mandate to take up arms against it and overthrow it.

When such a revolt occurs, it is not a violation of Rex Lex, the rule of law. A government that commits the offenses mentioned above is not following the rule of law but the rule of fear and intimidation. Overthrowing it is legitimate.

By this, I do not mean rioting in the street. That is mob rule, not Rex Lex. The armed revolt of Simón Bolívar did not have the character of a mob. The purpose of both revolutions in the American hemisphere was to establish the rule of law, not to overthrow it.

Is communism antithetical to democracy?

I recently read an article claiming it is a mistake to assume socialism or communism is opposed to democracy. The article said that communism is an economic system only and is not necessarily undemocratic.

That seems logical. I've noticed socialists and communists using this line in their propaganda. The question I have is this: Where has there ever been an example of it? Every communist regime that has ever existed has been undemocratic. Though voting is allowed, the votes are only for officials within one party.

On Romans 13

On the basis of Romans 13, some may object to the suggestion that civil disobedience or rebellion may be proper for a Christian. The text reads,

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Romans 13:1

I would argue that the context refutes this. We see Paul's assumption that the government exists to maintain the civil order and punish evildoers. What if the government promotes civil disorder and punishes the innocent while rewarding evil? In such a case, the government has abdicated its God-given role and forfeited the right to exist.

Conclusion

In summary, communism leads to a devaluation of the individual as the image of God with a loss of freedoms. It challenges the right to personal property and profit, thus diminishing personal initiative and leading to further poverty. An atmosphere of fear results. Communism has no moral right to exist.

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