



## Notes on the Revolution / Column #69



Notes on the Revolution / Column #69

February 12, 2020

Trump and the State of the Union, Part Three

By Charles McKelvey

In our last two episodes of Notes on the Revolution, we have looked at Donald Trump's State of the Union address. We have found that he correctly identifies unregulated international migration as a problem to which governments ought to attend, but his approach does not seek to identify and respond to the sources of the problem. And we have found that his trade deal with China may be on the right track, inasmuch as it contributes to the reduction of the double deficit; however, his approach to corporate taxes and government regulation is so removed from specific production goals, that it presents the image of an ideological pretext to justify more wealth for the wealthy.

Today we look at his comments in the State of the Union Address with respect to socialism. Whereas we to this point have been seeing some positive aspects to his discourse, with respect to his comments on socialism, we can only say that the speech displays an appalling ignorance.

Trump casts the United States as the essence of freedom and characterizes socialism as government coercion, domination, and control. He declared, "Here in the United States, we are



---

alarmed by the new calls to adopt socialism in our country. America was founded on liberty and independence, and not government coercion, domination, and control. We are born free and we will stay free.”

This framing of the issue reflects a post-World War II, Cold War ideological construction of socialism; it is not based on actual observation of nations that are attempting to construct socialism. The Cold War ideology had a political intention: it was designed to cast the Soviet Union as an ominous threat in order to justify a permanent war economy. This was in accordance with the interests of U.S. corporations, which during the course of World War II had become integrally connected to the manufacturing of arms. The two world wars had demonstrated that war is good for business, so businessmen were in favor of making war permanent; they created a political image that served this economic interest.

But the Cold War portrayal was a distortion of reality. It cast the Soviet Union as expansionist, when in reality Soviet foreign policy sought to protect its western frontier and to attain “peaceful coexistence” with the capitalist powers. And the ideology cast the Soviet Union as totalitarian, giving exaggerated emphasis to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, and ignoring Khrushchev’s reforms of the 1950s, and ignoring as well the significant economic and social gains of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it paid scant attention to the actual construction of socialism in other nations, such as China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and Yugoslavia.

Let us leave ideology aside and ask, what are the actual characteristics of nations that are attempting to construct socialism? On the political plane, they have sought to put political power in the hands of delegates and deputies of the people, rather than representatives of the capitalist class. They have developed structures to this end, including popular assemblies as well as the election of deputies by elected delegates of the people. In addition, they have concentrated power in the legislative branch, giving it authority over the executive. Moreover, they have developed mass organizations that play an integral role in the political process. And they have placed the mass media under the direction of the structures of people’s power. Furthermore, they have developed vanguard political parties, which have limited decision-making authority, but which are assigned the role of educating the people and of guiding the direction of the socialist revolution.

These alternative political structures are different from representative democracy. Among other virtues, they eliminate the need for electoral campaigns that require exorbitant financing and that place elected officeholder in the debt of large contributors, which has the noxious effect of turning politics into the art of pretending to represent the interests of the people while in fact representing the interests of wealthy and corporate campaign contributors.

On the economic plane, socialism has evolved during the past 100 years. The fundamental principle of a socialist economy is that it is directed by the state, which, as has been noted, is conceived as controlled by the delegates and deputies of the people. And a second fundamental principle is that state-owned enterprises constitute the major component of the economy. From the beginning, socialist economies have been characterized by a degree of flexibility and concessions to practical necessity, such that they have permitted some space for private capital. With accumulating experience, the socialist revolutions arrived increasingly to appreciate the productive contribution of private enterprise to the economy. On the one hand, the revolutions observed that a considerable sector of the people demonstrates a persistent interest in self-employment and in the formation of small-scale private enterprises. On the other hand, they discerned that medium scale and even large-scale private property, both domestic and foreign, could play, in some situations, a contributing productive role in the national economy.



The vanguard political parties in socialist nations have an interest in satisfying the material needs of the people; it is the people who are the first and the last line of defense against the powerful global enemies that socialist revolutions create. Driven by this interest, and observing the evolving dynamics of their economies, the vanguard parties have increasingly recommended space for different forms of private capital, in the context of a state-directed economy in which state-owned enterprises are in the majority.

Whereas socialist economies are state directed, capitalist economies are ruled by the market. From 1930 to 1980, making political concessions to the needs of the people, capitalist economies were characterized by humanist constraints on the market. However, since 1980, capitalism has returned to its original ideology of rule by the market, with the role of the state kept to the minimum.

Socialism, then, is characterized by structures of popular democracy that give control of the state to the deputies of the people; by a vanguard political party that educates and guides, and whose survival mandates its connection to the people; and by state-directed economies, which are mixed economies that have state owned enterprises as well as various forms private capital.

Does socialist approach work? Many factors drive the data for particular nations with respect to the growth of GDP, unemployment, the poverty rate, illiteracy, the infant mortality rate, and life expectancy. By and large, however, socialist states like the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador have had very strong social and economic indicators, while states in Eastern Europe and Latin America that turned to the neoliberal model of a limited state role in the economy experienced sharp decline with respect to such indicators.

Trump appears to have little curiosity with respect to the socio-economic data for the socialist projects or the evolving characteristics of the political-economic systems of nations that are constructing socialism. His comments appear to draw from an ideology that was created to justify the militarization of the U.S. economy seven decades ago, and that lost its political efficacy with the collapse of the Soviet Union. He seems to be resurrecting the ideology in order to justify a new and aggressive form of imperialism with respect to Latin America, which we will discuss in our next episode of Notes on the Revolution.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the unfolding global popular socialist revolution forged by our peoples in defense of humanity.