

# Socialism Summary

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**1-Sentence-Summary:** *Socialism by Michael Newman outlines the history of the governmental theory that everything should be owned and controlled by the community as a whole, including how this idea has impacted the world in the last 200 years, how its original aims have been lost, and ways we might use it in the future.*

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



In recent years, we've seen a revival of the term "socialism." Just a few decades ago, mentioning socialism would evoke images of oppression and dictatorship. But recent events like the Great Recession and the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders have brought the discussion of socialism back into the public arena, leaving many to wonder: What is socialism, *really*?

Is it just a way to oppress people? Or can good things come out of it? Where did it come from?

In *Socialism: A Very Short Introduction* by Michael Newman, we learn the answer to all of the burning questions you might have about socialism and more. He explains the use of the term throughout history and how it has evolved from what it originally was. Using examples from history, he explores how the term can be used for good or bad and how it might help us in the future.

Let's see how much we can discover in just 3 lessons

1. There might not be a single, simple definition of socialism, but the different forms it's had over the years share common characteristics.

2. Nineteenth-century capitalism paved the way for socialism, and from there, it divided into two different schools of thought.
3. If we learn from the mistakes of the past, socialism can actually bring a promising future.

Let's dig right in and get learning!

## **Lesson 1: Socialism is a complex term that can look different in certain forms, but all types share common characteristics.**

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When I say “socialism,” what comes to mind? Is it Joseph Stalin and the USSR? Fortunately, that is just one of the forms of socialism. And history has seen many others since it came to be in the nineteenth century.

Two other more current examples include Cuba and Sweden. Cuba is a communist single-party state, while Sweden is a parliamentary social democracy. Both have governments built around socialist ideals, but both look drastically different.

So what makes them both socialist? There are a few overarching principles that come with all forms of socialism. The first is the goal to create an egalitarian society. Where different governments disagree is on how to achieve this.

**However, they can agree that all of the inequalities in society are because of capitalism.** This is why to varying degrees, all socialists try to remove the barriers that come with capitalism— especially the small group of elite that control virtually all the capital— so everyone can be equal.

Socialists believe that this is possible because they believe that humans are cooperative rather than competitive by nature. They believe people will join in solidarity to make it work. So, they have to find a way to get people to want this change, which is where things can get tricky.

## **Lesson 2: Capitalism led the way to the beginning of socialism, and from there came two different schools of thought.**

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In the early nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution changed everything about the way people worked and lived. Booming new factories and industries brought people into crowded and poorly planned cities— a far cry from the cooperative rural communities they left behind. People lived and worked in horrible conditions. Moreover, the measly wages forced them to compete with each other.

Many people were angry about the new inequity and poverty. It was these people that branded themselves “socialists.” Soon two socialists, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels banded together socialists, and it grew exponentially.

Marx believed that capitalism divided people into two classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. The bourgeoisie owned the factories and all the capital, but they relied on the labor of the proletariat to run their business. Marx said the only way the bourgeoisie made a profit was by exploiting the proletariat.

Both were locked in a constant struggle because the bourgeoisie wanted to maximize profit by making proletariats work long hours to more than make up their paycheck. And the proletariat was always petitioning for higher wages. He believed their struggle would lead to a fall of capitalism.

**After Marx was gone, socialists agreed with what he said, except for one vital thing: how to implement socialism.** He left that question open. So soon, two main answers emerged.

The first was that you could bring it about by reforming capitalism with democratic means. Basically, socialist parties could win control in elections and use that power to help the proletariat. These are known as social democrats.

The second answer was that revolution can bring it about. Russian dictator Vladimir Lenin famously championed this method. He believed leaders would need to inspire a revolution in the proletariat, who would overthrow the bourgeoisie. This became known as communism.

### **Lesson 3: Socialism could have a promising future if people learn from the mistakes from the past.**

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Over the span of the last 30 years, neoliberalism— a type of capitalism that calls for the deregulation of markets and privatization— has been rising.

What is behind the neoliberalist movement? In the years following World War II, social democracy boomed because of strong economic growth. But around the '70s, the economy's growth started to slow down, and people started to turn against social democracy.

This is where neoliberalism entered the arena. Politicians like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan promoted neoliberalism and suddenly made these policies mainstream. With that came a change in peoples' attitudes surrounding welfare and public spending. Many people started to think that people should be free of excessive taxes and they should be able to take care of themselves.

The repercussions of this are undeniable. Inequality in Western nations increased rapidly from the 1970s to the 1990s. In the 1990s, the UN reported that the average income in 54 countries had declined. By 2005, when the book was published, 1 percent of people held as much wealth as 57 percent of the world's poorest. We know the gap has only increased since then.

So what can a socialist do to fight back against this capitalist current? One of the most important things the author thinks we can do is look at the mistakes of past socialist experiments and learn from them.

**One of the most obvious lessons we can learn from the past is that a socialist society has to be democratic at every level.** The authoritarian rule of past socialist experiments can't be an option.

While it's clear there are unanswered questions when it comes to socialism, we can be certain on one thing— capitalism won't fix the issues it creates. This is why socialism will stay relevant.

## Socialism Review

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Well, that was a really interesting and eye-opening read! Socialism taught me a lot about this government theory that I didn't know. I think this political system gets a bad rap when really, it began as something much more benevolent than people think.

## Who would I recommend the Socialism summary to?

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The 19-year-old political science student, the 56-year-old conspiracy theorist who can hardly stand someone even uttering the word “socialism,” and anyone that's curious to know about the merits of this way of government.