

This is "Ideologies and Isms", chapter 3 from the book [A Primer on Politics](#) (v. 0.0). For details on it (including licensing), [click here](#).

For more information on the source of this book, or why it is available for free, please see [the project's home page](#). You can browse or download additional books there. You may also download a PDF copy of [this book](#) (831 KB) or [just this chapter](#) (106 KB), suitable for printing or most e-readers, or a [.zip file](#) containing this book's HTML files (for use in a web browser offline).

Has this book helped you? Consider passing it on:



Help Creative Commons

Creative Commons supports free culture from music to education. Their licenses helped make this book available to you.



Help a Public School

DonorsChoose.org helps people like you help teachers fund their classroom projects, from art supplies to books to calculators.

[← Previous Chapter](#)

[↑ Table of Contents](#)

[Next Chapter →](#)

Chapter 3

Ideologies and Isms

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

People sometimes develop a set of beliefs about how the world is and how it ought to be. This is called an **ideology**. Ideology often aims to be both descriptive—what the world actually looks like—and prescriptive—how it should ideally be.

The political world is full of lots of ideologies, each with its own logic and set of beliefs. A lot of them end in "ism," and while we hear these terms, we may not know precisely what they mean. For example, people in the United States may label anything they don't like "socialism," which, in fact, has a particular meaning. Obviously, "isms" isn't really a word, but it gives us a simple way to temporarily lump together different types of ideologies, many of which end with the suffix "ism."

The term "ideology" itself is sometimes used in a negative way, as a narrow way of thinking about things. At its best, ideology gives us tools for understanding things, and perhaps a way to change them. At its worst, it closes our minds to other possibilities, and leaves us too focused on one way of doing things. In short, it's a kind of faith, and carries with it all the costs and benefits of any kind of faith.

There's usually some truth in most ideologies, but also some assumptions that we might at least question. At their best, ideologies give us a framework for understanding how things work, and how they might work better. At their worst, however, they give people an excuse to substitute faith for thinking. Faith can have a positive role in one's life, but an unbridled faith in business or in government can lead us to ignore evidence that suggests something isn't working as well as we might hope.

Because ideology tends to substitute belief for understanding, it is not the same thing as a social science, which seeks to understand. Social science understands imperfectly, because everybody on earth has an ideology. I can tell you what I believe, but that doesn't make it right. On the other hand, one can take that idea too far as well. Some scholars talk about "the social construction of reality," which is often used to suggest that everything we do is just what we've collectively invented for ourselves. Take that to its logical conclusion, and nothing is real or true, just invented by people. But if that was true, then the very idea of the social construction of reality also would be socially constructed, and therefore also untrue.

Ideology mobilizes and organizes people; if citizens believe in something, they will support it and work for it. Ideology prescribes specific actions and behaviors, be it chaining yourself to a tree or voting for a pro-business candidate. Ideology justifies these actions as serving a higher calling, a greater good. This "greater good" may or may not be true. Ideology also tends to talk smack about alternative ways of looking at things. At its best, ideology gives us a set of beliefs and behaviors that help us navigate political life. At its worst, it makes excuses for the damage that we do to others.

Let's survey some isms, and try to focus on understanding them before we judge them.

3.1 Liberalism

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will learn:

1. What liberalism is.
2. The different types of liberalism.
3. The difference between American liberalism and American conservatism.

Classical Liberalism

Liberalism can be a confusing term because it can mean more than one thing. **Classical liberalism** describes a major direction in western politics, of which American liberalism is a subset. Despite some wild-eyed conservatives accusing President Obama of being a socialist (because that's still dirty word in American politics), both Democrats and Republicans in the United States fall under the umbrella of classical liberalism. In the big picture, U.S. politics are fairly homogenous.

Classical liberalism has two prominent features:

1. A reliance on markets for economic decision making.
2. A reliance on democratic institutions for political decision making.

A reliance on markets means that people get to vote with their dollars, pounds, rupees or euros on what they want to buy and how much they're willing to pay for it. A market is all

the producers, sellers and buyers of any product or service, such as the market for smart phones. In classical liberalism, we tend to try to leave markets alone to function as consumers and businesses see fit. So instead of the state deciding what gets produced and how much it will cost, the market decides through millions of individual transactions. Individuals can own and invest in businesses; businesses have some ability to choose what to make and what to charge for it. We call this economic system **capitalism** (a term first used, perhaps, by the English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray in 1852, although the term “capitalist” appears to be older).

Capitalism aims to promote maximum wealth by letting people try, fail and succeed in business. The Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (who didn't call it capitalism) described this in his work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. Smith (1723-1790) noted that just letting people do what they wanted to do produced more wealth, more efficiently, than did the prevailing economic theory of the time, mercantilism.

Mercantilism was a very Euro-centric theory (though it has since been applied elsewhere). It argued that the nation with the most gold was the best off. It also argued that nations should maximize imports and minimize exports, while maintaining overseas colonies to serve as sources of raw materials and markets for finished goods. This was the kind of policy that helped spur the American revolution, by limiting the British American colonists' ability to make what they wanted and trade with whom they wanted to. Ironically, perhaps, it is the very strategy that allowed the “Asian tigers”—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore—to grow so much in the post-World War II era—limit imports, maximize exports, and build up domestic industries so they can compete effectively on world markets.

Adam Smith's book is long enough, and few enough people have read it, that it gets used to justify almost any sort of behavior. To our eyes, he didn't understand so much about how prices are set, particularly rents on property (he wrote, more or less, that it was about costs). But he did seem to grasp some ideas that are still with us today. In perhaps his most famous (and in some ways, most unfortunate) phrase, Smith wrote that if people simply tried to take care of themselves (make money), they would in fact make others better off (as if, he wrote, guided by “an invisible hand”—a verbal construction that makes it seem as if economics was some mystical science. It isn't). What Smith was really saying was that by working hard, saving, investing and consuming, people in a market economy generate more wealth, which means they are able to take care of themselves and their families, in the process of which they spend some of that wealth which generates more economic activity elsewhere in society. What is sometimes overlooked in Smith's work is that he understood, explicitly, that people are often trying to rig the market to limit competition, raise prices, and increase profits. Smith reserved special scorn for the East India Company, the government-sponsored monopoly that was in the process of robbing and conquering India and the Indians. In particular, Smith criticizes the company for how bad it was treating the Indians, who were in the process of being excluded from meaningful participation in the economic and political life of their country. Despite (and perhaps because of) its monopoly status—it had no legal competitors for British trade with India—it was a terribly inefficient business, so much so that the British government had to repeatedly bail it out. This led the Brits to dump tea on the North American market, which led to the Boston Tea Party and the American revolution.

The British economy of the time still featured a lot of medieval laws restricting trade and the movement of workers, both of which kept prices high, supply down and the wages of

most people lower than they would be otherwise. Smith understood that capitalism would generate more wealth for more people, as long as markets could be kept free of restraints.

The other half of the classical liberal prescription is a reliance on democratic institutions: In classical liberalism, political decisions are made in some way by people casting votes. States decide who is a qualified citizen, and those people get to vote in free elections. The state may set rules on who can run for office, such as a minimum age requirement, but if you reach that age, the state cannot decide that you can't run. Candidates don't have to be approved by the government before they can seek office. In most if not all instances, citizens elect people who make decisions on their behalf. This kind of government is called a republic.

As with every approach to government and the economy, classical liberalism has its share of strengths and weaknesses. By allowing people to spend and invest as they wish, and by depending on open elections, it provides a higher degree of individual liberty than do some alternatives. It creates opportunity for participating in the economic and political life of a country. By relying on markets to make economic decisions, it tends to produce more wealth, more efficiently (at lower cost). Because it depends upon elections for political decision making, it gives citizens an outlet for their discontent, and allows them to make changes to law and policy.

On the other hand, while classical liberalism tends to produce more wealth, it may distribute that wealth unevenly. An uneven distribution of wealth can lead to wealthy people dominating the political system. They have more money to contribute to election campaigns, and more resources with which to lobby the government. The U.S. Senate is pretty much a millionaires' club now, for example, and while it's not impossible for a very wealthy person to understand the concerns of someone who is poor, it may also be harder for them to understand the concerns of the less wealthy. Because the creation of wealth often gets tied to the broader concept of liberty, the system may have a difficult time dealing with problems generated by market activity, such as pollution. State controls on pollution, because they cost money, lower profits, and, under this equation, loss of profits gets portrayed as a loss of liberty.

Conversely, if the specific political system is more inclusive—gives everybody a real voice—it may not be very efficient in decision making, and may in fact be slow to respond to people's needs. So, for example, in the United States, the financing of the Medicare system faces problems down the road. Although it's a train wreck that everybody can see coming, the political system has so far been unable to deal with it because, in part, because of pressure from so many interest groups. Nobody wants to pay higher taxes to pay for the system, but nobody wants to reduce benefits in any way. While the political system may eventually deal with this, it might be better to deal with it sooner rather than later.

The form of the republic is not terribly important in considering how liberal it is. So it doesn't matter if the republic is a constitutional monarchy, a parliamentary democracy, or has an American-style division of power between president and the Congress. What matters is the availability of free and fair elections. Scholars classify some republics as "illiberal democracies," because although there are elections, they don't appear to be completely free and fair, such as in Russia. They may have either a parliamentary or a president/legislative government, but the system does not always work as advertised. Singapore is sometimes called an illiberal state, because of the dominance of a single

party and restrictions on civil liberties. Mexico was an illiberal democracy for much of the 20th century, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party won every national election, regardless of the actual vote count.

American Liberalism

Classical liberalism isn't what many people in the United States mean when they say "liberal," however. **American liberalism** is a particular flavor of classical liberalism. Originally, it was a political philosophy that argued that government had a positive role to play in society. This movement and its cousin, **progressivism**, grew out of the reaction to the excesses of late 19th and early 20th century capitalism—no protections for workers such as a 40-hour week and mandatory overtime, child workers chained to factory floors, and very few health, safety and environmental laws.

Progressives (which some liberals have begun to call themselves, after American conservatives managed to turn "liberal" into a dirty word) saw a world that was dominated by big business and by big city political machines. Big business limited competition and raised prices through the creation of trusts, conglomerations of firms in the same market so that one really big company dominated the entire market. Big city political machines dominated urban politics for much of the first half of the 20th century, uniting blocks of immigrant voters behind regimes that controlled much of what happened in large cities. While they empowered the powerless, who had been excluded from the political spoils of city life by business interests, they tended to exclude all the people who didn't agree with them. So the Progressives pushed for electoral reforms such as non-partisan elections (in which candidates don't run on the basis of party), open primary elections (previously dominated by party organizations, who thus controlled which candidates got on the ballot), and a stronger role for government in economic management (such as breaking up the trusts).

American liberalism can find its roots in the Progressive movement, but it really took flower after the Great Depression. Private charity was completely overwhelmed by the high level of unemployment, and so American politics turned heavily toward an active role for government in economic and eventually personal affairs. Liberals fought for more protections for workers and unions, a broader social safety net for the poor and unemployed, and health, safety and environmental regulations. As always, this approach to government has both costs and benefits—fewer people starving to death (which sometimes happened before welfare and unemployment compensation), versus higher taxes and higher costs for businesses and consumers, driven in part by complying with more regulations.

American Conservatism

American conservatism, like American liberalism, is a subset of classical liberalism, though perhaps a tiny bit closer to the ideal. American conservatives have tended to argue for less government involvement in the economy, a movement that also grew out of the Great Depression. As the size and scope of U.S. government grew in the post-World War II era, conservatives began to argue that taxes and regulation were hampering economic growth and actually lowering people's standards of living. Conservatives argue that people should be able to make their own choices about where to spend their money, pointing out that taxes to support government programs effectively make those choices for you. They also argue that too wide a social safety net discourages people from working and taking care of themselves.

Traditional American conservatives tend to favor lower taxes, a balanced federal budget and less regulation of the economic system. In more recent years, however, a subset of American conservatives have become more concerned about issue such as abortion rights and gay marriage, topics that traditional conservatives might have avoided. For some conservatives, less government means less government. Others, including some who might call themselves Christian conservatives because of their faith, support social legislation to ban some kinds of behavior and encourage others. Conversely, so while American liberals have usually tended to advocate more government involvement in economic life, they now tend to favor less government involvement in private life. Religious conservatives tend to favor less government involvement in economic life, but more government involvement in private life. And liberals and religious conservatives sometimes find common ground over environmental issues. As the American writer Charles Dudley Warner said in the 1800s, "Politics makes strange bedfellows."

Realistically, we shouldn't be surprised that people hold opinions (more government in some areas, less in others) that don't always appear to be logically consistent. When we consider the liberal/conservative dichotomy, it's difficult to draw a clean line. Many of us have issues on which we are conservative, and others on which we may be liberal. For example, conservatives are for less government involvement in the economy, and yet southern conservative members of Congress consistently vote for subsidies for tobacco farmers.

Populism

While we're on the subject of American political isms, we shouldn't forget **populism**. Populism is not so much an ideology as an approach to politics. At its best, populism displays a genuine concern for citizens whose rights and needs have not been considered. At its worst, populists can be as oppressive as the people they replaced. A lot of the time, populism often displays a sort of talk-radio level of understanding of complicated issues (which is to say, not very much. Talk radio hosts on the left and on the right often seem to oversimplify complex topics, without always grasping the difficult choices behind them).

Generally speaking, populists make an appeal to the common person, and claim to represent their interests, as opposed to the interests of the rich and powerful. American political figures such Huey Long, Ralph Nader, Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan were or are populists. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who claims to represent the common people of his country but who has also enriched his family while in office, is a populist. Populism is a common theme in American politics; most American political candidates attempt to paint themselves as ordinary folks just like you and me. A movie such as *Dave*, a 1993 film starring Kevin Kline, plays on the American attraction to populism. Kline plays an average, well-meaning guy who's a dead-ringer for the president. When called upon to fill in for the incapacitated (and not very nice) president, Dave, among other things, manages to balance the federal budget with the help of his accountant over sandwiches one night. (Seriously, if it were that easy, wouldn't it have happened by now?) But the theme is common throughout American politics—if only honest, hard-working people of good moral standing could make it into office, all of our problems would go away.

Populists are fond of bashing big business, and/or big government; of promising to stand up for the little guy; and of vowing to save the nation from its certain doom. The problem with populists is that in those rare occasions where they get elected to major office, they

tend to run things in the very way they have criticized the establish order about—high-handed, unresponsive, with surprisingly little real concern for what might best serve the state as a whole. When Huey Long became governor of Louisiana in 1928, he raised taxes on oil companies, got free textbooks for school children, and got roads and bridges built for a state that desperately needed them. However, he also forced state employees to donate 10 percent of their wages to his re-election fund, doled out highway contracts based on who kicked back the most money, harshly punished political opponents, and, by the time he was assassinated in 1935, had become the virtual dictator of the state. So while populists, like most people in politics, mean well, they don't always perform well.

Libertarianism

Libertarians believe in the least amount of government possible—national defense, police and fire, and not much else. (I'm over-simplifying here, but not by much). True libertarians are not at all concerned with social issues, as they don't see that as government's job. Hard-core American libertarians tend to oppose a global role for the U.S. beyond trade and commerce, leaving most decisions about everything up to private citizens.

Libertarianism grew out of the reaction to Soviet-style communism in the post-World War II era. Soviet-style communism was not noted for its commitment to liberty of any kind, and a number of writers, such as the novelist Ayn Rand, and economists such as Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman pushed for hands-off approach for the state.

Libertarianism offers considerable freedom of choice on a range of issues, and this is its chief virtue. By not encumbering the economy with higher taxes and regulations, it may promote economic growth. And the idea of maximum personal freedom is often very appealing. But to argue that if less government is better, then nearly no government is ideal is a difficult assertion. For one thing, the government of the United States (and parts of Europe) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was very much like the libertarian prescription. Government was incapable of dealing with economic downturns, and people suffered as a result. Workplace, food and transportation safety issues were not addressed, and the concentration of economic power tended to prod government to favor the wealthy even more. The first anti-trust laws, passed to break up business monopolies, were used instead to prevent workers from forming unions. You might think that's a good idea or a bad one, but if businesses can organize, why not workers? (You will, as always, have to make up your own mind on questions such as this.)

Libertarianism doesn't seem designed to deal with environmental issues in particular, as markets by themselves aren't always very good at dealing with problems such as over-fishing and air and water pollution. Libertarians would argue that such questions really are a matter of property rights, as in if what you do impacts the value of my property, then I have a valid complaint. However, that presumes that not much that happens on my property will impact your property, a notion that some ecological scientists would probably take issue with.

Libertarianism appeals to some people in current American politics, perhaps because when government does not seem to be performing well, the idea of less government sounds like a potential improvement. Many Americans are sympathetic to the notion of keeping the government from telling people how they should live. We might call that small "l" libertarianism, as opposed to those who belong to or support the Libertarian

Party, which seeks to win elections to put their principles into practice. Some citizens probably also find appeal in the notion of a smaller government in hopes that would mean lower taxes.

It's an open question whether libertarianism could be made to work better than it did in the 1800s. Some people would tell you that it worked just fine; others point to the problems of the era as evidence that it didn't work all that well. A lot of services that government provides would go away, and how much infrastructure investment—roads, bridges, port facilities, public education—would happen under a libertarian government is not clear. Obviously, I'm skeptical of this ideology, though you may not be (and that's OK). Libertarian students will sometimes respond to my criticisms of libertarianism by saying "But Any Rand said..." to which I reply, "For an economist, Ayn Rand was a helluva novelist." Suffice it to say that libertarianism, like most ideologies, has its strengths and weaknesses.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Classical liberalism is currently the dominant political and economic philosophy in the world.
- Classical liberalism and its variants all have strengths and weaknesses.

EXERCISES

1. What seems to be different between American conservatives and liberals at present? In what ways would you say you are conservative or liberal in your political beliefs?
2. If Libertarians were to win enough elections to take charge of a government, what changes would happen? How would people respond to the changing mix of public services and taxes? How would this work?

3.2 Alternatives to Liberalism

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will learn:

1. What the difference is between socialism and communism.
2. What the difference is between fascism and nazism.
3. What anarchism is, and how it views people and politics differently from many other philosophies.

Classical liberalism is perhaps the dominant ideology of our time. Since World War II, and particularly since the end of the Cold War, more countries have moved from authoritarian governments to liberal ones. Economies have turned away from planning and toward markets for decision making, and people have pushed for more democratization in

government. While this movement has been uneven both in timing and results, completely undemocratic states have declined in number. So in only a relative handful of states is either one or a small group of people in charge. But classical liberalism isn't the only way to run a society.

Socialism

Socialism is purely an economic system, and one that gets thrown around a lot in American political discourse (with reference to scary things Americans may not like). What it really means is public ownership of productive resources. Instead of private firms such as Ford, GM and Chrysler, you might have the Department of Automotive Transportation. This would be a state agency, charged with producing automobiles for society and with employing people to do that. Whereas capitalism is more concerned with generating wealth and efficiency, socialism is more concerned with equality of outcome. Socialists point to decades of growing inequality under capitalism and argue that it just doesn't work.

And right there is where we find the strengths and weaknesses of socialism. A private corporation such as Ford has shareholders—investors who own the company—who want to see the company be profitable and be paid back for their investment (through dividend payments and a higher share price). So Ford's management has to pay attention to costs as well as sales, so in theory it won't employ any more people than it has to. The automotive department also has to try to produce cars with reasonable efficiency, but it also is supposed to employ people so they all have jobs. More to the point, it is less likely to lay people off when sales are down. That adds costs and will make the organization less efficient. It will probably generate less wealth, although it may spread that wealth around more evenly. So, at a minimum, there's a trade-off there between efficiency and equity. In effect, more people will get benefits, but the average benefit level may be lower.

From a consumer standpoint, there's also a cost. Government managers historically cannot predict what people will want in terms of consumer goods, so that high-demand items tend to be in short supply while low-demand items tend to be oversupplied. And the goods tend to be of substandard quality. In a market-oriented system, firms that make bad goods go out of business. In a managed system, the organization making the bad goods is unlikely to be punished for making bad goods; it will be rewarded for putting more people to work. A market system also will make many of the same mistakes, but they are corrected more quickly.

An example of the challenge of socialism could be found in Poland before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Poland was then ruled by the Communist Party, and under the thumb of the Soviets. But what matters to us in this example is that the economic system involved socialism. In many parts of the world, bread is a basic foodstuff. In order to make bread available for everyone, state-run bakeries were limited in what they could charge for bread. As the bakeries could not thereby increase production (added ingredients cost extra money which, in a market economy, often means higher prices in the short term). So production was limited, and bread, perhaps because of the artificially low price, was always in short supply. The price of cake was not limited, however, and the bakeries always had plenty of cake. Marie Antoinette may not have said, "Let them eat cake," but socialist Poland's economic managers effectively did.

So socialism tends to offer a higher floor and a lower ceiling. Wealth is more evenly

distributed and people tend to get the minimum of what they need—food, clothing, housing and health care. On the other hand, there's just less of everything to go around, and consumers tend to see less quality and less choice. Overall standards of living may be lower. And while a socialist state could be democratic in terms of open elections, the lack of a meaningful private sector at least calls into question whether there will be political interests who are able to oppose the power of the state.

We should understand that in fact most states have what we might call a **mixed economy**, combining elements of both socialism and capitalism. That means that some services and goods will be provided by the private sector, while others may be provided by a public agency. So in the United States, for example, in some parts of the country people buy their water from private water companies. But in other parts, especially in the west, water is often provided by utility districts, which are owned by the people who live in the district and managed by an elected board of commissioners. The same thing is true for a number of utility services, such as sewage treatment and electricity.

People routinely argue both sides of this question, even in an ostensibly capitalist nation such as the United States. Advocates of markets maintain that socialism will limit freedom and lower living standards, while critics of capitalism point to poverty amid the considerable wealth created by market activity. You will have to decide for yourself where you land in that debate.

Communism

Communism is another complicated idea. For the men who coined the term, the 19th century German philosopher and economist Karl Marx, and his partner Friedrich Engels, it meant a state that “withered away,” as people evolved out of the basic greed that makes capitalism possible. For critics of the idea, it tends to mean the economic and political system employed in the Soviet Union (1917-1991) and in China from 1949 until the early 1980s. We can't really know what Marx would have thought of this, as he was somewhat vague on how to get to the workers' paradise he envisioned, and he didn't live to see what a self-professed Marxist state actually looked like. So we should be careful to separate Marx from his several stepchildren. This system is also sometimes called Marxism-Leninism, after Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), founder of the Soviet Union and the person who put Marxism into practice. So while we can't say for sure what real communism might be like, we can talk about what people who said there were communists did.

For lack of a better term, Soviet-style communism meant a high degree of socialism (and hence a low degree of private ownership), coupled with a one-party state. So while there were elections in the Soviet Union, there was usually only one candidate, who had been approved by the Communist Party.

Soviet communism had all the problems of socialism, and then some. While it did mean that people had jobs, homes and health care, consumer goods were often inferior and in short supply. The old joke about the Soviet Union was that it's minus-60 degrees Fahrenheit in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in February and you still can't get a cold Coke (Soviet-made refrigerators being not very good at actually keeping things cold).

For a while, especially after World War II, it looked like the Soviet system might actually work. The Soviet Union enjoyed substantial economic growth in the years after the war, and you had to wonder when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev promised “We will bury

you" in a famous speech to western ambassadors in Poland in 1956.

It didn't last. When much of your economy has been destroyed by war, and you're effectively starting from zero, your initial growth rates will look pretty good. In reality, it simply wasn't a very efficient system. Other than weapons, there were no Soviet-made consumer goods that anybody in the rest of the world wanted to buy. Western travelers to the Soviet Union often reported making money selling denim jeans on the black market to fashion-hungry Russian consumers. And you could always get a better exchange rate on rubles to dollars if you met somebody around the corner.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic echoes continued. When I covered air shows around the world, at which aerospace manufacturers pitched their products to airlines and defense officials, it took some years before Russian aerospace representatives learned to say "we think this product will help our customers make money." Before that, they mostly talked about how much product they could push out the door, not whether it was any good.

I visited a friend of mine in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, in 1993 after the collapse of the Soviet empire. His fax machine didn't work; three employees from the state telephone company came out to tell him that it was broken, and they offered to sell him a new one for \$600 (about \$900 in 2012 prices). The problem was in the phone lines, however; his fax machine worked fine at his neighbor's apartment.

"This is the legacy of 40 years of socialism," said my friend. "These guys just don't want to work."

Later that day, however, we happened across the monument to the victory of the west in the **Cold War**. As we rounded a corner in Bratislava, we came upon on a K-mart with a Pepsi billboard on the side.

"There, you see?" I told my friend. "That's it. We won."

That being said, Soviet citizens, when surveyed, said they didn't mind the system, but they were often unhappy with the government. The one-party state meant there were no avenues for public protest and discontent, and throughout Soviet history people were thrown in jail or even killed for disagreeing with the state. So while the system provided basic standards of living for most people, it tended toward political repression. That's because the system was aimed at creating a broad version of socialism, and because ruthless people were sometimes more likely to take power. The Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin may have killed 6-7 million of his own people; Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-Tung may have killed 30 million.

Chinese communism was different than Soviet communism. In a time of unrest and disunion in China following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty early in the 20th century, Mao led what amounted to a peasant rebellion to take control of the country in 1949. China was a land of millions of landless peasants. Unlike the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-Shek, Mao was not beholden to the landlords and moneyed interests. He insisted that his soldiers treat the peasants with respect, and he offered those peasants hope. Mao redistributed land to the peasants, and agricultural production boomed. He then declared that peasant farmers could form cooperatives to pool their resources, and production rose even more. But then he declared that the farms were to be collectivized—owned by the state—everybody and nobody—and production fell.

So while Chinese communism was never quite the unyielding monolith that Soviet communism became, it increasingly became a function of Chairman Mao's quirky ego. Around 1958, in a quixotic bid to produce more steel than the United Kingdom (and modernize China's economy), Mao pushed the people to create backyard steel furnaces. This led to smelting down lots of useful stuff to make useless steel, and to a famine that killed 20-30 million people (since so much food was diverted from the countryside to the cities). Even the current Chinese government has declared that the Great Helmsman was right only about 70 percent of the time. Later, Mao pushed what became known as the Cultural Revolution (roughly 1966-1969, with echoes until 1976), in which legions of young people led an effort to denounce people who appeared to have backslid away from true communism. This led to widespread destruction of Chinese cultural artifacts, some deaths, and millions of people persecuted for their alleged capitalist beliefs. A Chinese colleague of mine in graduate school said that his parents, schoolteachers, were forced to the school every day to be denounced for their crimes. He said this lasted for two years.

Defenders of communism argue that a Marxist state doesn't have to be like that, but too often it was. The Soviet constitution was full of guarantees of human rights, but there was no way to compel the state to enforce those guarantees. Any citizen could join the Communist Party, but that was no guarantee of having any influence. The lack of meaningful political participation both delegitimized the state in the eyes of its citizens, and also failed to provide any kind of check on the power of the state when it went off course.

And that happens, because the communist governing apparatus tends to invite ruthless people to take power. Whoever can threaten or appeal to the vanity of enough people will sometimes get the job, and sometimes can be too often. (It sort of reminds me of a lot of places I've worked—the people who become managers are truly terrible with people, but they said what the bosses above them wanted to hear.) With no check on the power of the state, a bad leader can cause great suffering for a lot of people.

Ironically, the communist state that may have worked the best was also led by a strongman dictator, Yugoslavia under Marshal Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980). Yugoslavia had been cobbled together by the British and French at the end of World War I, ostensibly to make it big enough to defend itself. But in the process, they lumped together a diverse set of people—Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Slovenians, Albanians and Macedonians—who hadn't always gotten along. Tito held it all together for as long as he lived, and Yugoslav communism apparently did feature worker-led enterprises, higher standards of living, and less outright oppression than was common in some other states. (Although when I traveled through it in the 1970s, it still looked pretty bleak compared to the rest of Europe.) Tito was noteworthy also for thumbing his nose at both the Soviets and the Chinese. But after Tito's death, the patchwork nation quickly unraveled, leading to a war that gave us the term "ethnic cleansing" as Serbs fought Croats and Bosnians in a rather nasty conflict. Yugoslavia is now no more, having dissolved into at least seven different states, none of them still communist.

The performance of other communist states, like the states themselves, has been all over the map. China's rulers still call themselves the Communist Party, but they're not very communist, particularly when it comes to economic policy. It's now possible to own a business in China, although the government still plays a big role in the economy. Ditto for Vietnam.

China is an interesting experiment in the long-term survival of a communism party, if not

of communism. Since the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the country has gradually liberalized its economy. Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), “rehabilitated” after falling victim to the Cultural Revolution, became the new leader in 1978. Deng had been a Marxist since his youth, but later uttered the very un-Marxist statement “It doesn’t matter if it’s a black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches a mouse.” As the economy was opened up under this leadership, he followed up his earlier pronouncement with the less ambiguous “It is glorious to be rich.” Farms were de-collectivized, people were allowed to start businesses, and the economy boomed. China is now the second largest economy in the world, after the United States.

However, if we measure the economy on a per-person basis (per capita GDP, or gross domestic product), China ranks 95th (the U.S. slips to 20th), which means there are hundreds of millions of very poor people among China’s estimated population of 1.5 billion. Rising living standards is one of the key ways in which the not-very-Communist Party maintains legitimacy. Western scholars have two theories about how this will all play out: In the hard-landing scenario, China falls apart. The soft-landing scenario, China evolves into something more like a liberal democracy. Chinese officials in different parts of the country have different theories—in the north, they say they will remain “communist,” while in the south I have heard scholars say “we’ll be a democracy in 20 years.” Despite a substantial degree of government control and influence on the economy, the Chinese for the moment have rejected the economic portions of communism.

North Korea remains an economic and political basket case, where the government maintains legitimacy by convincing people that the state is all that stands between the people and sure annihilation by the rest of the world, even as the people literally starve to death. At the other end of the spectrum is Cuba, which has high rates of literacy, housing, employment and good health care, but no political freedom and a fair amount of political repression. Under founding father Fidel Castro’s brother, Raoul, some small economic liberalization has occurred—you can own a restaurant, for example, but only employ family members. This is of small consolation to the Cuban-Americans, exiles, who lost land and businesses when Cuba went communist in 1959. Despite its successes, Cuba has gone from a food exporter to a food importer in 50 years of communism, and its future remains uncertain.

Anarchism

Anarchism is an interesting and challenging school of thought, and perhaps the one that might not actually have been really tried (aside from the occasional experiment). Anarchists, like libertarians, want nearly no government, but unlike libertarians, theirs is a vision driven by localized cooperation rather than by a faith in markets.

The anarchist vision is a little bit like Marx’s workers’ paradise, but anarchists are less likely to call for a dictatorship of the proletariat to get us there. Some thinkers have said that what Marx missed was the idea that it doesn’t matter what kind of state and economic institutions you have, all of them will become tools of oppression. Marx would have disagreed; his vision was that the state would “wither away” as people learned to co-exist and no longer required the overarching management of a formal state. This is, in a way, the “don’t hate the player, hate the game” school of political philosophy. We’re not bad people; it’s the state that makes us that way.

Beyond that, one lumps together the many strains of anarchism at one’s own peril.

Anarchists range from people who think society should be organized collectively (anarcho-communists) to a libertarian strain that believes in private property and free enterprise, just no government (and no big business). Anarcho-syndicalists want to replace capitalism with an economy run by workers for workers, with “production for use, not for profit” and an end to wages.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tze advocated a kind of anarchist approach to life. At one point in his writings he encouraged the good person to move to the country, and live simply with family members (and a few servants). Lao Tze may have been a contemporary of Confucius (551-479 BCE); on the other hand, he did write something, the Tao te Ching, one of those vague works of literature that has since been claimed an influence by elites, the poor, libertarians, and Moslems, as well as anarchists.

The American writer Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) said that government was an engine of evil, promoting corruption and dishonesty, but he only said one should disobey government when it does wrong. What he preached bordered on anarchism; it was Thoreau (and not Thomas Jefferson) who said “The best government is that which governs least,” following that up with “That government is best which governs not at all.” But Thoreau appeared to be speaking as much metaphorically as he was practically.

The first person to call himself an anarchist was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), a French politician and theorist. Proudhon argued that “property is theft”—in essence, saying that claiming to own something necessarily steals it from someone else. He also characterized anarchism as “order without power,” underscoring anarchists’ general belief that if left alone, most people will do the right thing. Whereas most political philosophers have focused on what people do wrong, anarchist thought does focus more on what people do right.

It’s hard to judge these ideas. This hasn’t been tried on a large scale, and it’s really difficult to imagine a society so decentralized existing amid a world of nations armed to the teeth and a world of businesses bent on profit.

But things that look like anarchism have been tried on a small scale; the history of the 1800s is dotted with town-sized utopian experiments where people tried to live the kind of life anarchists have long preached. Experiments in anarchist-style societies have been short-lived, if only because they were overrun by forces that wanted to be in power themselves. At other times and places, such as Robert Owen’s New Harmony community in Indiana in the 1820s, things fell apart if only because some people worked and some people just didn’t.

Owen (1771-1858) was a British mill-owner (and hence a capitalist) who styled himself a socialist reformer. His mill in Manchester, England, was a model for its time, and he limited his profits to try to take better care of his workers, many of whom were orphan children. This was a time when many millworkers were paid only in company tokens, redeemable only at the company store. Workers were often little better than serfs, bound to the factories where they worked and to the towns in which they lived.

Owen envisioned small, self-governing, self-supporting communities in which people would take care of themselves and provide for their own needs. Owen managed to give this a try, both in Scotland and in Indiana. Both experiments fell apart, as friction developed between people who wanted to work and people who apparently wouldn’t. So while it might be true that most of the time people will do the right thing, just often

enough, they don't. We can't know whether anarchism in any of its forms would work; we do know that it, like every other ideology, it would have its strengths and weaknesses.

One society that looked a bit like anarchy, and worked, was the Tiv of Nigeria. The fourth-largest ethnic group in Nigeria, the Tiv governed themselves by relying on relationships. They all considered themselves descended from the same ancestor (a man named Tiv), and society was broken down into small, extended family groups who lived and worked together. Tiv society, before the British began to try to impose "order," had no courts, no chiefs, no elected councils—just family and relationships. Disputes were settled by bargaining and negotiation, and by the knowledge that relationships are ongoing. You don't want to anger anyone too much, because today's opponent may be tomorrow's ally. And so, with remarkable success, the Tiv worked things out, and long maintained a relatively peaceful, stable society.

How would this work elsewhere? Would it work elsewhere? Again, we can't really know for sure. Clearly, for the Tiv, a sense of kinship and common lineage helped; in fluid societies in the west, people sometimes barely know their neighbors before they move. By multiple accounts, the lack of sense of community makes us less happy, but that seems unlikely to change for the foreseeable future. So the constant introduction of new people means that it could be more difficult for people in many parts Europe, Asia and the Americas to create a system of self-governance based on lineage, kinship and custom.

Clearly, in some ways, government does make people worse off. Wherever human institutions are created, for whatever reasons, some people will sometimes misuse them to exercise power over other people. Human institutions create traditions, which will be both valuable in creating predictability, and damaging because traditions can limit the possibility of needed change.

But even if we concede that human institutions can make people worse, and worse off, that doesn't necessarily say that a lack of institutions—a lack of government—will make them better, or better off. The institutions in which we live—schools, businesses where we work, churches, governments—have an impact on how we develop and behave as people. But we also have an impact on them, and each of us, in some small way, make those institutions what they are.

Nazism and Fascism

We have saved the worst for last. Fascism, and its more racist cousin, nazism, should be the least-appealing ideologies we can find, and yet some people are drawn to them even in this day.

Fascism got its start in Italy in the mind and ideas of Benito Mussolini (1883-1945). The word fascism derives from an Italian word that originally meant a bundle, as in sticks, but later came to mean a group or a league. Mussolini was not the first to use the term that way, but he helped put fascism on the political map in the way that we understand it today.

Mussolini was a bully, a thug, a man who used fear to gain power. He started his political life as a socialist, then invented fascism as a way of gaining power and justifying the use of that power. Much of Europe was in economic and social turmoil after the end of World War I. Mussolini climbed through that window of opportunity. He took power in 1922 by marching on Rome with an army of ruffians. Despite having been defeated at the polls in

previous elections, his threatening behavior led him to be named prime minister.

As Gertrude Stein once said of Oakland, California, “there’s no ‘there’ there.” Stein was certainly wrong about Oakland, but it’s certainly true of fascism. To read anything by a famous fascist such as Hitler or Mussolini is to quickly recognize that this isn’t a theory as much as it is a lot of words without much real meaning. The rationalization of fascism is pretty much, “we’re right; you’re wrong if you’re against us; and we’re right because we say we’re right.” This is an oversimplification, but not much. Fascism glorifies the power of the state, but it’s hard to tell how that makes the majority better off.

Fascism argues that some people are just better than others, and they should be in charge. Naturally, the only test of this is whether you agree with the fascists. As a result, fascism appeals to nationalism, that sense of a people that they have unique qualities and a unique destiny. Fascism glorifies the state; the individual exists for the state, not the other way around. Fascism glorified war and poked fun at peace; it was also expressly anti-communist. Fear of communism, in the wake of the Russian revolution, was to be a commonly played card in western politics for decades to come. Despite how the horrors of World War II discredited fascism, it got a boost in the Cold War era (between World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union) because it could claim to be not communist, oppressive though it typically was. This became increasingly awkward for western powers such as the United States, because it meant we were allied with rulers whose politics were antithetical to what Americans say they believe about freedom and democracy. But if they were against communism, we helped prop them up.

Nazism was Adolph Hitler’s version of fascism, and Hitler was an early admirer of Mussolini (who was not so far gone that he didn’t soon realize, after they met, that Hitler was crazy). Nazi was a corruption of “National Socialist,” the name of Hitler’s party. That was an odd name, as the party clearly didn’t believe in socialism. Germany was the only Nazi state, and it lasted barely 12 years. Yet it remains worth considering because of the unparalleled damage it did to people around the world.

As with Mussolini’s writing, Hitler’s meandering diatribes don’t really describe a coherent ideology as much as they justify the use of power for private ends. Nazism, as you probably know, was expressly racist, denigrating everyone who didn’t fall into Hitler’s vision of a perfect Aryan race. (There probably were Aryans, once, and they were most likely from India.) Like Mussolini, Hitler took power through fear and intimidation. Also like Mussolini, he rapidly ended any pretense of electoral government. Unlike Mussolini, whose crimes were serious but much smaller, he proceeded over the next dozen years to horrify the world in ways it could not have previously imagined. An estimated 60 million people died in World War II, and while Hitler wasn’t responsible for all of their deaths, he was the leading cause of the tragedy.

Nazism and fascism could be said to be forms of totalitarianism, a kind of authoritarian government that relies on an arbitrary view of the law (it’s not the same very everybody), and the cult-like status of official leaders. It’s a religion in which the thing to be worshipped is the state, and the state takes human form in the guise of the leader. It becomes, in the end, an extended pep rally, with rather severe penalties for not cheering along.

So there’s not much to say for fascism in any form. The one possible strength of fascism is its ability to make decisions, but the fact they are usually such wrong decisions makes that of no consolation. Mussolini was said to make the Italian trains run on time, but even

that was a myth: The trains didn't run on time during World War I; after that, they got back on schedule.

Under fascism, the lack of meaningful elections provides no check on the power of the state, which can then proceed to systematically oppress unpopular groups. Fascism purports to be capitalist, but as the system rewards friends and punishes enemies, the uneven granting of state favors means markets don't really function efficiently, and people's economic opportunities may be quite limited. This is sometimes called "crony capitalism," and it tends to be a problem in authoritarian regimes in general.

Fascism only ever seems to take hold when someone is able to convince people that their order and security are at risk, even as those agents tend to be contributing to that problem. Mussolini promised a restored Roman empire and Hitler a "thousand-year reich," but together all they got was a decade or two of incredible human suffering. No other ideology can make that claim, and none should. Mussolini was killed by his own people in 1945; they cut off his head and stuck it on a pole near Milan. Not long afterward, Hitler took poison in a bunker in Berlin. He had his henchman burn his body so that his head wouldn't end up the same way.

The longest-surviving fascist state may have been Spain under the rule of Francisco Franco (1892-1975). Franco took power at the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). He ruled until his death in 1975, decreeing that when he was gone, Spain would again become a monarchy. King Juan Carlos, upon taking office, called for elections and Spain became a constitutional monarchy and a liberal democracy, which it remains. Franco probably was able to remain in power because he didn't follow Hitler and Mussolini, who had supported him in the civil war, into World War II. Franco didn't start out as a fascist, and didn't end up as one. He relied on the support of the Spanish fascist Falange party, but after the end of that war, Franco backed away from fascist ideology, although he continued as dictator until his death.


Fascism has never entirely gone away; there are tiny neo-Nazi movements scattered around the U.S. and Europe. Mussolini's granddaughter, Alessandra Mussolini, after a career as a minor film star and pin-up girl, has served in both the European and Italian parliaments. While she hasn't shied away from her grandfather's notorious past, her politics, while generally right wing, have been all over the map. Maybe it's something about Italian politics. Voters there also once elected former porn star Ilona Staller to parliament, but she was a member of the Lista del Sole, the first Italian pro-environment party.


KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Other ideologies outside of classical liberalism and its variants tend to offer greater equality of outcomes but generate less overall wealth.
- Socialism is an economic system that provides greater equality of result but less equality of opportunity.
- Communism combines a socialist economy with a one-party government.
- Anarchism has not been tried on a large scale outside of the Tiv in Nigeria.
- Fascism glorifies the state; individuals are important only as part of the state.
- Nazism glorifies the state, with an expressly racist approach to politics

EXERCISES

1. How would the place where you work be different if it was a government agency? If it's already a public agency, what would be different if it was privatized?
2. Which countries still claim to be communist? What things could cause that to change?

 [Previous Chapter](#)

 [Table of Contents](#)

[Next Chapter](#) 