

Socialism and anti-socialism

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I [asked recently](#) what term might replace neoliberalism as a descriptor of the economic ideas that many readers here find acceptable.

The contrast I was seeking was something that might be the opposite of the politics of care, which I often talk about.

Some suggestions stood out. Mammonism was good. So too was the economics of extraction. Most, however, seemed to me to require too much explanation to be of value: if something makes no sense on first hearing, it is unlikely to work at all. I might be wrong about that, but I have an inkling that's true, which is why I have always tried to find or work with terms that resonate instantly as to what they mean. Tax justice did. So did the term Green New Deal. Funding the Future does. In its day, Tax Research did. I think the politics of care does.

What is agreed here is that neoliberalism does not work in that way. And nor can I get that excited by any alternative so far, barring one, which is anti-socialism.

We all know what being anti-social is.

As the Resolution of Congress [I have noted today](#), passed this last week, shows, anti-socialists are also what our opponents clearly think themselves to be.

And there is a massive advantage to using a term that forces the debate to use the term you want, and to use its obvious opposite when explaining just what the other side is, especially when the term used appears both pejorative and yet accurate when describing their behaviour. And since they are anti-socialists, they are most definitely proponents of anti-socialism.

That, however, requires embracing a term - socialist - that I have often resisted, because it is very often portrayed in materialistic terms, and life is about much more than that, in my opinion.

So let me offer two definitions here and see how they work. They are of socialism and anti-socialism.

Socialism

Socialism is a system of economic organisation in which the purpose of economic activity is the promotion of the well-being of people and the stability of the society they form, rather than the accumulation of private wealth.

It begins from the premise that the essential foundations of life, such as health, education, care, housing security, energy, water, and the monetary system itself, are too important to be left to markets whose priorities are profit, scarcity, and exclusion.

It then builds from this idea to create a broad range of ideas and approaches that typically include:

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Collective responsibility for essential services which are provided as public goods — universal, state-funded, and free at the point of use — because a decent society cannot function without them.

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Democratic control over key economic issues, requiring that policy on and major decisions about essential services, investment, energy, infrastructure, and money creation are made through accountable public bodies or cooperative structures, and not by unregulated private actors.

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Limits on extraction and rent-seeking. Socialism aims to reduce the power of those who live off the returns of ownership rather than on sums earned by contributing, shifting rewards as a result away from rent, speculation, and monopoly profit extraction towards labour, care, and productive activity.

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A commitment to equality. Socialism requires that the distribution of income and wealth in a society reflect social priorities rather than market accidents. It uses taxation, labour rights enforced by law, and public ownership and market regulation to achieve this outcome.

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Plural forms of ownership. Public, cooperative, mutual, municipal, and small-scale private ownership can all co-exist within a socialist society and economy. What matters is that ownership structures serve a social purpose rather than impose private power.

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A rejection of the idea that markets represent freedom. Socialism argues that real freedom requires security, education, health, time, and agency, all of which are things that markets alone cannot guarantee.

These approaches do require a caveat to prevent misinterpretation. Socialism does not abolish markets. Nor does it imagine an all-powerful state. Rather, it defines the appropriate roles of each.

The result is that socialism treats markets as tools, not masters, recognising that markets can work well for non-essential goods, most especially when abundance, competition, and choice genuinely exist, but markets are unreliable, and often harmful, when applied to life-critical systems such as health, care, housing, education, core infrastructure, pensions, energy, and the monetary foundations of the economy.

Because of this, in a socialist system:

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Markets operate within clearly defined boundaries, and only where they generate genuine social benefit.

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They are regulated to prevent monopoly power, labour exploitation, ecological damage, and financial instability.

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A diverse ecology of ownership, including small private firms, cooperatives, municipal companies, community enterprises and even larger corporate entities - so long as they are genuinely accountable and appropriately governed - can operate inside regulated markets, so long as none accumulates the power to impose outcomes on society.

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In sectors where markets fail by design, including the provision of public goods, universal services, long-term investment, and environmental security, democratic planning and public provision necessarily take precedence.

Socialism also sees the state as the institutional expression of society's collective will, and not an intruder into economic life. A socialist state is neither authoritarian nor omnipresent; it is an enabling and coordinating structure through which people make shared decisions.

The state's role is:

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Protective, ensuring basic security and universal access to essential services.

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Enabling, providing infrastructure, investment, and long-term planning that markets avoid.

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Disciplinary, preventing the concentration of private power and curbing rent extraction.

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Democratising, extending shared ownership and public accountability where essential services or core economic infrastructure are concerned.

Put together, these principles define socialism as a mixed, democratic economic order utilising markets where appropriate and public provision where necessary within a state organised to secure social purpose rather than private privilege.

Anti-socialism

Anti-socialism (sometimes described as neoliberalism) is a set of beliefs and political projects that reject the idea that the economy should be organised around collective well-being, democratic control, or obligations to one another. It places private property, market allocation, and the interests of financial capital at the centre of economic and political life.

Its defining feature is a view of markets and the state in which each is reshaped to protect private power.

Anti-socialism treats markets as both natural and superior. They are the ultimate test of value, the proper method of allocating resources, and the primary source of discipline for individuals and governments alike. This belief persists even when markets routinely fail by generating inequality, excluding the vulnerable, mispricing environmental damage, undermining democracy, and rewarding speculation over productive activity.

From this position, follow the four core anti-social commitments:

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Markets should be present in all domains, including those where they clearly cause harm, such as care, health, housing, education, pensions, energy, and essential infrastructure.

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Inequality is treated not as a problem but as an indicator of merit.

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Redistribution and collective provision are seen as distortions that weaken market discipline.

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Regulation is framed as an impediment to efficiency, even when its absence leads directly to crisis.

Critically, anti-socialism does not diminish the state: it repurposes it. The state becomes in anti-socialism:

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An enforcer of market rules, labour discipline, and investor rights.

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A guardian of property, contract, and capital mobility, often stronger in these functions than any socialist state.

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A shield against democratic demands that threaten private interests, using fiscal rules, central bank independence, or constitutional devices to place economic power beyond public reach.

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A hollowed-out provider, withdrawing from universal services and leaving individuals to bear private risks that society could collectively manage more efficiently and more humanely.

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A collaborator with corporate power through outsourcing, privatisation, and regulatory capture.

In this configuration, the state becomes something quite different from the democratic institution envisioned by socialism: it becomes a mechanism for embedding private hierarchies into the structures of public life.

Anti-socialism, therefore, combines market dogma with state reengineering. It

constructs a political order in which society is compelled to adjust to the demands of markets, and where markets, in turn, are shaped to serve those already wealthy and powerful.

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