BOOKS IN BRIEF


Prominent contemporary economists have been recently calling for urgent measures to remedy massive global poverty, inequality, and distribution of wealth. Given the turbulent conditions of developing countries worldwide, especially during the 2020 Pandemic, this second edition of *Socialism: A Very Short Introduction* couldn’t have come at a more auspicious time. The confusion and conflation of socialism with communism, Stalinism, and Leninism is rampant in the private and public domains. The very short introduction from the Oxford series clarifies the major features of socialist critique of capitalism rather than ideology. This brief review will summarize the gist of socialism and present the two case studies of Sweden and Cuba.

*Socialism* by Michael Newman is in five chapters, with an introduction, a list of illustrations, and references. Socialism, like capitalism and liberalism, is a modern, secular, and diverse phenomenon that arose in early 19th-century Europe. Europe had witnessed the rapid development of the industrial revolution and urbanization, which broke down the traditional system. The ramifications were devastating for all sectors of workers, who suffered inequality, low wages, poverty, and exploitation. Liberals and socialists in Britain, France, and Germany stepped in to offer solutions. While the former underlined capitalism, favoring individualism, freedom, and progress, the latter opted for “community, cooperation, and association,” advocating for the establishment of an egalitarian society (p. 6). This society rests on four features: property ownership for all; a system based on solidarity and cooperation; a belief that humans can cooperate together; and a conviction that human agency can bring about change (p. 3). Socialist ideas gave rise to the formation of social democratic parties across Europe, especially in the Nordic countries. *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels was published in 1848. Not only have Marxist ideology and its practical adaptations dominated major political systems in Russia, China, North Korea, and Vietnam, but related experiments have been attempted in many parts of the world, including the Middle East.

Chapter 1 explains the main arguments of Marxist socialism. Marx and Engels went on to publish many works that generated controversies and interpretations. Marxist socialism, the “most significant theory in the history of socialism” (p. 21),
will ultimately replace the capitalist system, predicted Marx; hence *Socialism*’s focus on the socialist critique of capitalism. Newman perceives economics as the basic political, social, and cultural structure in all stages of human development (p. 23), resulting in tensions and conflict. Newman’s discussion of the conflict between the two major social classes in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) and the proletariat (working class), clarifies Marx’s major argument and terminology in accessible language. The chapter concludes with the historic success of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, whose party claimed to represent authentic Marxist socialism, though that claim continues to be controversial. The name Bolshevik was changed to Communist, which shifted the leadership of the international communist movement to Moscow (p. 33).

The rift between European social democrats and communists after 1917 is the subject of chapter 2. Social democratic parties in Western Europe struggled with self-definition and their relationship with Communist Russia. While the former synthesized capitalist economy with socialist benefits to the working class (p. 45), the latter eliminated capitalism altogether. To explicate their differences, Newman juxtaposes Sweden with Cuba as case studies, noting their differences. The Swedish successful model rests on being inclusive and home-grown in its conception of society and state responsibility. Incorporating trade unionism, especially the blue-collar federation, Sweden, at its peak, had the highest GDP with education and health, among other programs (p. 49). Some problems regarding the environment and gender inequality have risen in recent years, however.

In Cuba, Marxist communism was adopted after the 1959 revolution. Because of the historical legacy of colonialism, Cuba faced major problems in all domains. Progress was hampered due to two issues: one was Cuba’s dependence on the Soviet Union, and the other was Castro’s centralized authoritarian style of governance. Focusing on the needs of the poor, nonetheless, the revolutionary government made big strides in various areas, such as land redistribution, property ownership, literacy rate, and agriculture know-how. By the early 1980s, Cuba’s progress in many fields was remarkable: in gender equality; free education and literacy rate; reduction of poverty; universal healthcare coverage; and racial and class equality. But the late 1980s and 1990s proved problematic, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the US embargo on Cuba. Newman tells how the Cuban model has been in jeopardy from the 1990s until the present.

After the death of Fidel Castro in 2006, reform was attempted. The government began to encourage the privatization of business, rejuvenation of tourism, and updating the economy, all of which were hard to sustain, though some indicators were positive in comparison with the rest of the region. The early decades of the 21st century demonstrate the challenges to renew and maintain the communist system, given the changes in the global market. The major question facing the
country now is: How can Cuba find a way to sustain a cohesive communist system in the future? Newton concludes this chapter by comparing and contrasting the accomplishments and fault lines of these two case studies with a final note that both systems continue to be dynamic rather than static.

This edition of Socialism: A Very Short Introduction is informative and accessible. It will benefit both graduate and undergraduate students in all disciplines, and it would be useful for the Core programs and the general reader.

Nicola Pratt, Embodying Geopolitics: Generations of Women’s Activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon.
Paperback $29.95.

Embodying Geopolitics is an outstanding comparative study about women’s activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Covering five decades from post-independence through the Arab Spring, Nicola Pratt theorizes women’s activism as embodied geopolitics. Theorization is combined with personal interviews with more than 100 women, conducted between 2013 and 2014. Feminist geopolitics focuses on the “embodied dimensions of geopolitical processes, writing the experiences and agency of ordinary women (and men) into international politics,” integrating the personal, the private, and the everyday resistance to power into the domain of international politics (p. 3). Women’s activism, Pratt argues, is more than simple acts of resistance and transgression. It is pluralistic. This brief review will highlight the major findings of the book.

The book comprises seven chapters, with an introduction, a conclusion, and two lists of interviewees and organizations. The introduction lays out Pratt’s theoretical framework. Edward Said’s focus on the relationship between geography and power is Pratt’s point of entry into the theory of geopolitics. He says that the complete struggle over geography / territory / space is not only military, but it is also cultural; colonialism, Empire, and neocolonialism are also about ideas, forms, images, and imaginings (p. 3). The introduction also describes the book’s organizational plan and the chapters’ specific topics. Chapters 1-3 deal with women’s activism from decolonization till the end of the Cold War. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the first two decades after the end of the Cold War; the period after the Uprisings of 2010 onward is explored in chapters 6 and 7. Women’s activism and diverse responses to the contradictory norms constructed by the governments are fleshed out throughout.

Under colonialism, state formation in the colony was not based on the European Westphalian model but on racial difference. All genders—men and women—were