

The Best Answer to Participatory Socialism is Benevolent Capitalism

The current prophet of socialism is French philosopher Thomas Piketty. His views were very influential in the recent electoral victory of the socialists in Chile. They could also hold sway in South Africa's 2024 elections, because neo-socialism is clearly on the rise. The term "populism" should not be confused with Piketty's term "participatory socialism".

Embedded in that term is an admission of guilt. Piketti confesses that the "scientific socialism" brought to you by the Soviet Union had two cardinal sins. These led to its demise. In short, these were over-centralization and the elimination of private property. Neo-socialists like Piketti want governance to be participatory and they want the value of private property to be factored into all fiscal calculations.

Of course they also want ownership to be shared at least 50 percent with the employees of every enterprise, trying to escape the trap of the rising number of billionaires while the poor get poorer. In fact, this is a very different kind of socialism which can fit into contexts like the USA where Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Left espouse such views.

In South Africa, we are very aware of the rise of neo-socialism for example the Economic Freedom Fighters. They may speak the language of Marxism or its African variation of Fanonism, but the truth is that global trending is leaning towards "participatory socialism". This is because of rising inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient. Unemployment is getting worse as enterprises replace workers with robots. Capital is being concentrated into the hands of billionaires who become oligarchs. This is diminishing Democracy. Davos has identified inequality and polarization as two of the three main problems in the world.

In classic economic terms there is the on-going Great Debate between Adam Smith and Karl Marx. In recent decades, these two poles have been championed by Milton Friedman and Thomas Piketti respectively. Alt-Right conservatives versus RET socialists. While the liberals - who were once regarded as the radicals - are now sitting between these two extremes on what we call the centre. They still champion individual rights so they won't float to the Left wing which favours the collective. But they see the need for reform and intervention by government into the hands-off laissez-faire of "Friedmanomics".

The prophet that best articulated this via media was American pastor and philosopher Henry George. His book Progress and Poverty out-sold both Charles Darwin and Karl Marx in the nineteenth century, when they were all written. He influenced leaders like Leo Tolstoy in Russia, Franklin Roosevelt in the USA and Tommy Douglas in Canada.

The rising attraction of neo-socialism should not be underestimated. Just look at how well the EFF has done since its inception in 2013. The answer to offset this radical trending lies in Benevolent Capitalism. Like Piketti has done for socialism, capitalists should also confess their mistakes. Why has inequality risen to such proportions? Why is unemployment

raging? What can be done to redistribute wealth without confiscating private property, nationalizing industries and centralizing power in a planned economy?

When I think back to the end of the East Bloc, I remember that it was brought about by both political leaders and religious leaders together. It was joint action in favour of Freedom and Faith. People tend to remember the political arena - first glasnost then perestroika. Then came the end of the Soviet Union, thirty years ago this week.

Do not underestimate the force that Catholicism played in Poland, and of the Polish Pope who emerged - John Paul II. His influence was huge in this change process. Also, the prayer meeting in a Lutheran church in East Berlin, where people gathered in increasing numbers every week until it overflowed into a crowd that went and toppled the Berlin Wall. Not only was there "rot" in the political structures, but there was a huge need for moral regeneration as well. The same is true of South Africa today.

Let us not forget the critical role that the church's Kyros Document played in bringing down apartheid. That theological challenge led to apartheid being declared as a heresy by the World Council of Churches at its conference in Ottawa in 1982. By 1989 De Klerk had replaced Botha and before long, political prisoners were released, including Nelson Mandela. Names like Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naude and Alan Boesak link the church to reform.

Yes there is corruption and malpractice. Yes there are opportunists who preach the collective good while looking out for themselves first and foremost. This is pure hypocrisy. In leadership, it breeds cheating and patronage. So there is a spiritual dimension to our malaise, which is unlikely to come out in Judge Zondo's report. He will point the way to correcting the externals. We need spiritual diagnostics as well - to deal with the internals.

In short, we need to confess our need for moral regeneration - for nothing less than revival. Mogoeng Mogoeng came close to the mark when he said that South Africans are bewitched. Did Eve act alone when she shared the apple with Adam? Or had she been deceived?

History is repeating itself. One of the essential ingredients of capitalism is greed. It is a core attitude that drives this predominant economic system. We need to soften that greed with heavy doses of contentment, to start closing the inequality gap. This does not require a political revolution but it will take a holy spirit of generosity to bring about benevolent redistribution from the haves to the have-nots. How refreshing it is to see this taking shape in initiatives like Move One Million here in South Africa, and Ms MacKenzie Scott in global philanthropy. She is making the Giving Pledge seem stingy!

God help us to see that if we do not man up to this reality, then neo-socialists will probably win future elections and impose the necessary changes on our society.