



August 16, 2015

## PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN GLASS HOUSES . . .

In recent days, Democratic National Committee Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) has been all over the news and the Internet. The reason? She's been asked – not once, but twice – to explain the difference between a Democrat and a Socialist. Her non-response, first to "Hard 'Ball's" Chris Matthews and then to "Meet the Press's" Chuck Todd, was boilerplate – neither illuminating nor on point:



**Chris Matthews:** *Will Sanders speak at the Democrat convention, win or lose? Do you want to have him up there as a Socialist representing the Democratic Party?... You want him up there? You want him on the floor of the convention?*

**Debbie Wasserman Schultz:** *Bernie Sanders has been a good Democrat. He caucuses with the Democrats.*

**Matthews:** *Should he speak? Speak at prime-time?*

**Wasserman Schultz:** *Of course he should speak.*

**Matthews:** *In prime-time with everybody watching? (laughing)*

**Wasserman Schultz:** *Of course Bernie Sanders should speak...*

**Matthews:** *What's the difference between the Democratic Party and Socialist?*

**Wasserman Schultz:** *(Pauses, laughs nervously . . .)*

**Matthews:** *I used to think there's a big difference. What do you think it is?*

**Wasserman Schultz:** *Wuh... The difference between...*

**Matthews:** *Like Democrat Hillary Clinton and Socialist Bernie Sanders?... Well what's the big difference between the Democrat Party and Socialist? You're chairman of the Democratic Party. Tell me the difference between you and a Socialist?...*

**Wasserman Schultz:** *The relevant debate we will be having over the course of this campaign is what's the difference between a Democrat and a Republican.*

Predictably, conservative websites like [Townhall.com](http://Townhall.com), [National Review](http://NationalReview.com), [Breitbart](http://Breitbart.com) and [Freedom Outpost](http://FreedomOutpost.com) gleefully reported that Wasserman Schultz was either unable to answer the question due to ignorance, unwilling to be truthful for fear of offending Senator Bernie Sanders supporters . . . or the fact that there is no difference between Democrats and Socialists. Predictably, reader comments of various conservative and Tea Party-oriented blogs consisted largely of either *ad hominem* attacks on Rep. Wasserman Schultz or grossly simplified bits of misinformation:

First a couple of representative *ad hominem* comments:

- *Gawd that woman is Ugly! Or should I say stupid and UGLY! You would think SOMEONE would teach her how to use makeup.*
- *She is a perfect example of the mindless robots that make up the democrat party. She can't tell the difference between a democrat and a socialist because there is no difference.*
- *Please keep this ugly stupid woman off the airwaves, besides being a nazi she doesn't have the intelligence to respond to simple yet important questions.*

Next, a brief representative sampling of grossly simplified misinformation:

- *Registered Democrat=Registered Communist=Registered Democrat.*
- *There is NO DIFFERENCE between a Democrat and a Socialist (a Socialist is a watered down word for COMMUNIST, by the way).*
- *A Democrat is a Socialist who doesn't want to admit it. . . . Democrat, Socialist, Communist, and Progressive all mean the same and describe the same philosophy.*

Besides attacking Debbie Wasserman Schultz on a personal level or robotically asserting that there is virtually no difference between Democrats and Socialists -- not to mention Communists or Fascists -- most responders showed little if any knowledge of what socialism (or *capital S* Socialism) is. They blithely use the term

in much the same way Senator McCarthy used the label "Red" -- a catch--all monolithic term for anything and everything he was against. But truth to tell, Socialism, like Communism, is far from monolithic.

So what, in the Hell, *is* Socialism? And why couldn't Rep. Wasserman Schultz explain the difference between a Socialist and a Democrat? Certainly any response she might have given within the time constraint of a 3 minute time slot would have been facile to the max and barely even scratching the surface. Then too, perhaps she -- like all those who made comments on various blogs -- doesn't really know. And that's OK, because she's a practicing politician, not necessarily a student of political philosophy.

Let's get one thing straight at the outset: Socialism -- like Christianity, Judaism, Islam or virtually *any* body of tenets and beliefs -- is neither monolithic nor unitary; it is fractionated. Just as there are various "branches" or "approaches" to the three major Western religions, there are also many, many "branches" or "approaches" to Socialism. Or, as one Henry Griffin noted in a letter to the *New York Times* published on [March 6, 1906](#), "*There are said to be as many kinds of socialism as there are brands of pickles.*"

Without wishing to turn this piece into a "Poli-Sci 101" lecture, let's spend a few sentences getting down and serious.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *socialism* (lower-case "s") as "*A theory or policy of social organisation which aims at or advocates the ownership and control of the means of production, capital, land, property, etc., by the community as a whole, and their administration or distribution in the interests of all people.*" In the main, orthodox socialists hold that capitalism tends to concentrate both power and wealth among a small segment of society; that this "small segment" controls capital and tends to derive its wealth through exploitation, which in turn creates gross inequality in society. If this sounds like what Senator Sanders, Secretary Clinton and others are speaking about when they refer to "Income Inequality," you're on the right track. Of course one doesn't have to be a socialist to see how much wealth is in the hands of the top one-tenth-of-one-percent of the population.

This is, broadly speaking, socialism *in theory*. In practice, the individual might subscribe to:

**Democratic Socialism**, which seeks to further socialist ideals within the context of a democratic, capitalist society. Sweden, Finland and Norway are prime examples of a Democratic Socialist country. (This is the brand Senator Sanders has long ascribed to.)

**Christian Socialism**, which seeks to blend socialist ideology with the doctrine of the social gospel. Helen Keller, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Caesar Chavez and Paul Tillich all considered themselves "Christian Socialists."

**Labor Zionism**, which is a grafting of socialist ideology onto Zionist activism. David Ben Gurion, Golda Meier and Albert Einstein are prime examples of this socialist branch.

**Ethnic and Regional Socialism:** one can find differences in socialism as "practiced" in Africa, amongst Muslims, or, say, Irish Republicans.

*(N.B.: The above is by no means meant to be either exhaustive or complete.)*

Now, every Communist is a Socialist. However, only a small percentage of Socialists are Communists. Broadly speaking, Communists—some of whom advocate violence, many of whom do not – seek a classless, stateless, oppression-free society where decisions on what to produce and what policies to pursue are made democratically, with virtually every member of society having equal participation. This is "pure" Communism. It has never existed in practice, although there are those who would argue that an Israeli *kibbutz* comes close.

As with Socialism, there are many different approaches to Communism. Although most Socialists and all Communists consider themselves Marxists, there are different subsets:

**Leninism:** Named for Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, father of the Russian Revolution, this approach stresses the need for a highly disciplined party structure. In practice, this led to great brutality.

**Stalinism:** Named for Lenin's successor, Joseph Stalin. "Stalinism," strictly speaking, refers more to government structure than ideology. It is often referred to pejoratively as "Red Fascism."

**Trotskyism:** Named for Leon Trotsky, Lenin's co-leader. Trotskyites arose in opposition to what they saw as the betrayal of the Russian Revolution's goals. They stand for "Permanent Revolution," internationalism, and a united front against all forms of fascism.

**Maoism:** The Chinese version of Stalinism. Maoists believe that there is such an inherent antagonism between Capitalists and Communists, that even when the proletariat (the working class) takes over the reins of society, the class struggle must continue.

*(N.B.: Once again, the above is by no means an exhaustive list; there are even more approaches to Communism. Don't worry, there's no test at the end of the piece)*

America, like many countries in Western Europe and South America, has blended aspects of Democratic Socialism into an overwhelmingly capitalist system. There is a difference between Democrats and Socialists. Truth to tell, the modern Democratic Party has little to do with anything resembling what one would consider small-s socialism or social democracy. Democrats -- regardless of what conservatives and low-information folks believe -- are a centrist coalition which *does* include some groups that are left of center. Traditional Socialism, on the other hand, is a political-economic system that organizes the economy purely around the needs of the people.

In a recent [a conversation](#) with Vox's Ezra Klein, Senator Sanders described what it means to be a Democratic Socialist:

*What it means is that one takes a hard look at countries around the world who have successful records in fighting and implementing programs for the middle class and working families. When you do that, you automatically go to countries like Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and other countries that have had labor governments or social democratic governments, and what you find is that in virtually all of those countries, health care is a right of all people and their systems are far more cost-effective than ours, college education is virtually free in all of those countries, people retire with better benefits, wages that people receive are often higher, distribution of wealth and income is much fairer, their public education systems are generally stronger than ours.*

According to [John Ahlquist](#), associate professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California at San Diego who has focused on the politics of economic inequality, in Socialism, *"The basic idea is that production decisions and everything else are not organized around the desire to make a profit, they're organized by a cooperative group to produce stuff that people think they need . . . there's no public figure in the Democratic Party who is advocating for social ownership of the means of production, Bernie Sanders included."*

We *do* have programs here in America which have more than a sniff of socialism attached to them: Social Security, Medicare and Unemployment Insurance quickly come to mind. Then too, corporate bailouts are a form of socialism as well . . .

As Mr. Griffin noted in his long-ago letter to the *Times*, *"When you use the word 'socialism,' you should tell what you mean by it."*

Indeed, there *is* a difference between Democrats and Socialists. The fact that Debbie Wasserman Schultz cannot spell out what the difference is in a sentence

or two is no big deal. Most people -- including all those who resort to *ad hominen* arguments -- can't either.

There is an old saying that "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." So too, ideologues who learn political philosophy at the feet of the "professors" of Fox News, would do well to curb their enthusiasm for pointing fingers at those who, like themselves, can't explain why in fact, there *is* a difference between Democrats and Socialists.

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