



## Where Are the Omelettes?

by Lawrence W. Reed

*“On ne saurait faire une omelette sans casser des oeufs.”* Translation: “One cannot expect to make an omelette without breaking eggs.”

### Summary

Advocates of the centrally planned society often write off the many failures of socialism as anomalies that can be avoided if the “right” people run things. But the bloody history of communism, Nazism, fascism, and other forms of central planning are proof positive that freedom is the only workable—and moral—way to achieve human happiness and prosperity.

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With those words in 1790, Maximilian Robespierre welcomed the horrific French Revolution that had begun the year before. A firm believer in using government to plan the lives of others, he would become the architect of the Revolution’s bloodiest phase—“The Reign of Terror” of 1793-94. Robespierre and his guillotine broke “eggs” by the thousands in a vain effort to impose a centrally planned, utopian, “omelette” society.

But, alas, Robespierre never made a single omelette. Nor did any of the other thugs who held power in the decade after 1789. They left France in moral, political, and economic ruin, and ripe for the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte.

The French experience is one example in a disturbingly familiar pattern. Call them what you will—utopian socialists, radical interventionists, collectivists, or statists—history is littered with their presumptuous plans for rearranging society to fit their vision of “the common good,” plans that always fail as they kill or impoverish other people in the process. If socialism ever earns a final epitaph, it will be this: “Here lies a contrivance engineered by know-it-alls and busybodies who broke eggs with abandon but never, *ever*, created an omelette.”

***History is littered with presumptuous plans for rearranging society to fit a misguided vision of “the common good,” plans that always fail as they kill or impoverish people in the process.***

Every collectivist experiment of the twentieth century was heralded by socialists as the Promised Land. “I have seen the future and it works,” the intellectual Lincoln Steffens said after a visit to Stalin’s Soviet Union. In *The New Yorker* in 1984, John Kenneth Galbraith argued that the Soviet Union was making great economic progress in part because the socialist system made “full use” of its manpower, in contrast to the less efficient, capitalist West. But an 846-page authoritative study published in 1997, *The Black Book of Communism*, estimated that the communist ideology claimed 20 million lives in the “workers’ paradise.” Millions more died in places like China, Cambodia, and North Korea.

Additionally, all of those murderous regimes were economic basketcases; they squandered resources on the police and military, built vast and incompetent bureaucracies, and produced almost nothing for

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which there was a market beyond their borders. They did not make “full use” of anything except police power. In every single communist country the world over, the story has been the same: lots of broken eggs, no omelettes. No exceptions.

For a time, socialist intellectuals embraced “the Swedish way” as a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic alternative to the harsh brutality of the communist state. Then Sweden, after exhausting the incentives and resources of the creative class through redistributive welfarism, fell prey to high rates of brain drain, unemployment, inflation, and suicide. Once again, lots of broken eggs but no Swedish omelette. Nobody today thinks Sweden produced much of a model for anyone to emulate.

“Yugoslavian worker socialism” had its day in the sun as well. Planners everywhere thought Tito had found the Promised Land through a kind of decentralized central planning. But then it too fell apart like the “Yugo,” the celebrated lemon on wheels that Tito’s factories dumped in Western markets. A Yugoslavian omelette has yet to appear on the menu of nations and recent events suggest it never will.

The list is endless: Canadian health care, European welfarism, Argentine Peronism, African post-colonial socialism, Cuban communism, and so on. Nowhere in the world has the socialist impulse produced an omelette. Everywhere, it yields the same: eggs beaten, fried, and scrambled. People worse off than before, impoverished and looking elsewhere for answers and escape. Economies ruined. Freedoms extinguished. Lives taken.

Socialists have no successful model to point to, no omelette they can present as the pièce de résistance of their cuisine. Not so for those of us who believe in freedom and free markets. Indeed, economists James Gwartney, Robert Lawson and Walter Block in their survey, *Economic Freedom of the World: 1975-1995*, conclude that “No country with a persistently high economic freedom rating during the two decades failed to achieve a high level of income. In contrast, no country with a persistently low rating was able to achieve even middle income status. . . . The countries with the largest increases in economic freedom during the period achieved impressive growth rates.”

Freedom works. Socialism does not. It is as simple as that. What a tragedy that so many people have had to lose their lives or fortunes to prove what ought to be taught as common sense in every fifth-grade classroom.

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