

## [Marinaleda, the new new socialist utopia](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Monday 21 October 2013



Hope springs eternal that there's some method of socialism that will actually work and the latest example, something which is in the words of the author here a beacon of hope to the world, is called Marinaleda. A large village of just under 3,000 souls in southern Spain where they farm the fields in common. Parts of it [sound awful](#) [3]:

The town co-operative does not distribute profits: any surplus is reinvested to create more jobs. Everyone in the co-op earns the same salary, €47 (£40) a day for six and a half hours of work: it may not sound like a lot, but it's more than double the Spanish minimum wage....(...)...

All work in the Marinaleda co-operative in shifts, depending on what needs harvesting, and how much of it there is. If there's enough work for your group, then you will be told in advance, through the loudspeaker on the van that circles the village in the evenings. It's a strange, quasi-Soviet experience, sitting at home and hearing the van drive past announcing: "Work in the fields tomorrow for group B".

Well, yes, quasi-Soviet it does sound like. And it sounds awful to me because I'm a city boy. It would be terribly, terribly, easy to sneer at all of this. All those Islingtonistas clinging to the hope that there's an alternative to capitalism even if they'd never actually join in it themselves. And as we can see there is an absolutely and entirely viable alternative to that capitalist ownership of land even if the Islingtonistas are never going to work in the fields for £45 a day. We might even point out that the reason they don't need the capitalists is because they simply stole the land that they're farming which does tend to cut down on capital costs.

However, rather than sneering we should point out the interesting parts:

In addition to the ubiquitous olives and the oil-processing factory, they planted peppers of various kinds, artichokes, fava beans, green beans, broccoli: crops that could be processed, canned, and jarred, to justify the creation of a processing factory that provided a secondary industry back in the village, and thus more employment.

More on that employment part in a moment but note what they actually do with these packed and preserved veggies: they sell them. They may well be a workers' cooperative and good for them if that's what they want to do. But they are still plugged into the market system and as I've often pointed out, it's markets that are much more important than the capitalism part of our economic system. That there is the division and specialisation of labour along with trade in the resultant production is far more important to

rising living standards than the relatively minor question of who owns the productive assets.

But there is still one thing they've got badly wrong:

"Our aim was not to create profit, but jobs," Sánchez Gordillo explained to me. This philosophy runs directly counter to the late-capitalist emphasis on "efficiency" ? a word that has been elevated to almost holy status in the neoliberal lexicon, but in reality has become a shameful euphemism for the sacrifice of human dignity at the altar of share prices.

Efficiency has nothing to do with capitalism, neoliberalism or share prices: or nothing to do with them that it doesn't also have with any other method of economic organisation. You still want to have the maximum output for the inputs you have available. That's how you maximise what can be consumed of course. And this village is relatively land poor (1,200 hectares) and labour rich (2,700 people) so of course they should be using a labour intensive form of agriculture. That would be true under any economic system, assuming that the entire village is going to try to live off the land. Given the constraints they're working with any economic system would lead to the same strategy (and do note, their constraints include there not wanting to depopulate the village to move into industry elsewhere).

What we've really got here is a workers' cooperative plugged directly into the market system. And good on them and let's hope they all enjoy it. What we don't have here is some radical vision of a different society. For as we well know, the liberal order both allows and encourage different forms of organisation as the customer coops of the Building Societies and the Co Op, the workers' cooperative of John Lewis and Waitrose and the shareholder owned parts of the economy show us. Marinaleda is simply another experiment and as always happens in market based societies, those experiments that work will spread, those that don't won't. Given that most people don't want to live as 14 th century villeins I doubt this will spread: even though that won't stop some people trying to impose it on us all.

The bit that we have to be very careful about is to make sure that this socialist fantasy doesn't get refigured as it moves from reality into that pantheon of possible utopias. They've not abolished the market, they really are simply a workers' coop. But such is the British left's disdain for markets (so close to "trade"!) that when it gets over here they're going to be calling for the abolition of markets and that's just not what makes this village work at all.

[blog comments powered by Disqus](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/economics/marinaleda-the-new-new-socialist-utopia>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/economics/marinaleda-the-new-new-socialist-utopia>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5778>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/20/marinaleda-spanish-communist-village-utopia>

[4] [http://disqus.com/?ref\\_noscript](http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript)

[5] <http://disqus.com>