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In Defense of Revolutionary Socialism: The Implications of Bhaskar Sunkara's "The Socialist Manifesto"

Abstract

This review of Bhaskar Sunkara's *The Socialist Manifesto* locates the book within socialist debates about revolutionary praxis and the limits of reform versus revolution. The reviewer argues that the book has been accused, both fairly and unfairly, as "socialism without revolution," an argument that can only be understood by delving more deeply into the positions advocated by the author. While Sunkara does in fact advance a "revolutionary socialism" in terms of concrete policy proposals, it is fair to ask critical questions about whether or not his limited interrogation of capitalist power is compatible with his self-professed goals.

Keywords

Bhaskar Sunkara, Revolutionary Socialism, The Socialist Manifesto

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Shortly after its publication, Sunkara's "The Socialist Manifesto" has been greeted with a range of critical reaction on the left, from fulsome praise to qualified endorsement to critical rejection. Some on the left argue that Sunkara's book is less about socialism and more about an extension of the Scandinavian ideal of social democracy. These critics accuse Sunkara of abandoning a serious engagement with the revolutionary socialist tradition in favor of prioritizing the achievements of capitalist social democracies. They conclude that Sunkara prefers the reformist strategies of parliamentary maneuvering designed to mitigate the excesses of capitalism over an anti-capitalist revolutionary politics.¹

A related critique is the extent to which Sunkara advocates working within the Democratic Party in the U.S. as part of a more broad-based effort to advance what Sunkara called a "class struggle" agenda. The contemporary manifestation of this position is Sunkara's editorship of *Jacobin* magazine and his long-time membership in the Democratic Socialists of America, which has developed an "inside-outside" orientation toward the Democratic Party. That strategy has led the DSA to endorse the candidacy of Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party primary campaign for the 2020 U.S. Presidential race. Sanders epitomizes what Sunkara, and the DSA, consider to be "class struggle" Democrats, who occupy the left-wing of the Democratic Party and who support a mass movement orientation toward political, economic and social change that privileges working class fights for "radical reforms" that would theoretically put workers in a better position to challenge capitalist power. The counterargument from those that advocate a clean break from the Democratic Party is that efforts to fight for radical reforms within a corporate party are likely to be doomed to failure or coopted beyond recognition in service to a capitalist "lesser evilism" that preserves the corporate domination of the U.S. and the rest of the world.

This critique rests on whether one believes that the DSA is so close to the Democratic Party that it has effectively abandoned efforts to create an independent socialist organization capable of making more profound challenges to capitalism. Despite the fact that the DSA support for Sanders is "conditional" and "critical," and is made through an independent expenditure campaign that allows DSA to craft its own message (and not necessarily the Sanders' message), the very tactic of supporting Sanders is a waste of resources, according to some critics. Whether a socialist organization should endorse candidates that run under the banner of a capitalist political party is often the key to understanding critiques of the DSA from the left. Leftists outside of the DSA that label themselves "revolutionary socialists" accuse the organization of diverting resources to a reformist political project, emphasizing elections, which in the end will paralyze efforts to develop an independent socialist mass movement.

Here I am going to make a case that these types of left critiques of the Sunkara book, and the political orientation of the DSA, ignore how Sunkara and the DSA frame their own

¹ Reviews of the book include Dan La Botz, "The Socialist Manifesto of Bhaskar Sunkara of Jacobin: Socialism Without Revolution," *New Politics*, July 3, 2019; Kristen R. Ghodsee, "How a New Generation of Socialists Can Win Power (While Avoiding the Mistakes of the Past)," *In These Times*, April 25, 2019; Nathaniel Flakin, "Bhaskar Sunkara's Socialist Manifesto: Dreaming of Sweden," *Left Voice*, May 29, 2019; Daniel Taylor, "Review: Bhaskar Sunkara's The Socialist Manifesto," *Marxist Left Review*, Winter 2019, No. 19. Louis Proyect, "Bhaskar Sunkara 'The Socialist Manifesto': A Review," *The Unrepentant Marxist*, August 7, 2019.

understanding of their politics. Rather than start from a serious engagement with what Sunkara writes, or from what the DSA advocates, left critics caricature both Sunkara and the DSA in a way that simplifies the debate between those that advocate “reform” versus those that advocate “revolution.” The distinction between reform and revolution is a crucial one for the left, and of course has been subject to debates among socialists from the late 19th Century to the present. What complicates this discussion is the extent to which the fight for radical reforms within capitalism can provide a bridge to greater “revolutionary consciousness” that helps lead to socialist transformation of capitalism. Within this orientation to socialism, the “class struggle” agenda, as defined by Sunkara and by the DSA, is the process by which socialist class consciousness is formed. If this is the starting point for understanding both Sunkara and the DSA, then the fight for social democratic reforms under capitalism is not the end-goal of the “Socialist Manifesto”, but instead part of the larger process of revolutionary socialist transformation of capitalism.

This perspective of understanding “class struggle” as a necessary wedge for advancing the collective power of workers is firmly within the Marxist tradition and is completely compatible with what Sunkara and the DSA support. Karl Marx advocated for communists to support such “radical reforms” of the late 19th Century such as the eight-hour working day, not as an end in itself, but as part of the working class struggle against capitalists over the terms of labor exploitation. Marx understood that winning such reforms would merely be a short-term victory, and that nothing short of the abolition of capitalism would allow for the emancipation of the working class. At the same time, working class struggle over the distribution of capitalist profits, whether it be shortening the working day, fighting for higher wages and better working conditions, or fighting for worker control of production, would be crucial to building organizations of working class power, and for providing workers with class consciousness necessary for challenging the capitalist system.

Both Sunkara and the DSA support many of the goals of revolutionary socialism. That is apparent in the first chapter of “The Socialist Manifesto” which argues for the abolition of capital markets and labor markets (p. 19). Similarly, the DSA advocates an anti-capitalism that involves “worker control over the economy and society.” These positions clearly place both Sunkara and the DSA to the left of the social democrat Bernie Sanders, whose own views of “socialism” are often articulated as an expansion of the social welfare and economic rights agenda of Democrats such as Franklin Roosevelt. But critics still equate the DSA’s endorsement of Sanders to an endorsement of the capitalist reform model as epitomized by Scandinavian states such as Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Sunkara provides ammunition for this caricature of his own position by spending a good deal of time extolling the virtues of “class struggle” socialists (or social democrats, more accurately) whose fight for “radical reforms” led to the achievements of the Social Democratic welfare states in the period of post-WWII capitalism. But as Sunkara acknowledges, those relatively advanced capitalist welfare states have seen a rollback in their social democratic reforms during the current period of “neoliberal capitalism.”

This lends credence to the contention of revolutionary socialists that an anti-capitalist strategy is essential for workers to achieve political, economic and social emancipation. Anything short of workers control of the economy and of society will mean a perpetuation of capitalist power in the marketplace and in the political system. Therefore, efforts to “reform” the

system by relying on alliances with capitalist parties, even temporarily, runs the risk of ultimately disarming the workers that you claim to be fighting for, as it means leaving the capitalist system intact while attempting to politically redistribute the profits in that system from capitalist to workers. But without directly challenging capitalist control of production, capitalists are free to check reforms, eviscerate redistribution, and maneuver within capitalist markets and bourgeois political systems to stymie even “radical reforms.”

This critique has a lot of inherent power, and too much of Sunkara’s book, and the DSA’s contemporary political strategy, does not deal very coherently with the concentration of capitalist power within the marketplace. There is a real tension between spending a lot of resources on a Sanders campaign when those resources could be used to help build direct working-class power through independent socialist organizations. That being said, the DSA and Sunkara both argue that the goal of the DSA is to build an independent working-class organization and, ultimately, a working-class political party that can fight for revolutionary socialist transformation. The DSA sees the conditional endorsement of Bernie Sanders as compatible with building an independent socialist movement. That is because Sanders has positioned himself well to the left of the rest of the Democratic Party field in tying his campaign directly to the struggles of workers to fight for higher wages, better working conditions and for redistribution of profits from capitalists to workers and the poor.

The redistributionist agenda of Sanders is not socialism in the way the Sunkara defines the term in his first chapter, where he argues quite explicitly that in his version of socialism, “capital markets” and “labor markets” would be eliminated. However, the kinds of class struggles and redistribution that Sanders supports, especially given that it is directly tied to working class and community movements, is seen as part of the process whereby greater transformation of the U.S. capitalist economy can occur. After decades of working-class defeats, weakened unions and a divided working class, the level of class consciousness among U.S. workers is uneven to say the least. The capitalist two-party system has effectively served the capitalist oligarchy in dominating the political, economic and ideological agenda of U.S. politics. However, the inherent tendencies of capitalism, on a global scale, have produced systemic economic and political crises that have fractured the dominant capitalist parties and provided openings for radical reforms and socialist movements capable of challenging the system.

The very existence of Bernie Sanders within the Democratic Party primary is a direct result of the battle between the corporate masters of the Party and the increasingly left-wing orientation of the Party rank and file, as well as struggles by workers. Neither Sunkara nor the DSA believe that the Democratic Party can be transformed by the “Sanders wing.” This was made clear at the 2019 DSA Convention when there was widespread agreement among delegates that it was only a matter of time before the DSA would have to abandon its “inside” strategy in favor of an outside “dirty break” from endorsing any candidates on the Democratic Party ballot.² The current calculation is that now is not the time to abandon the inside-outside approach.

This is true for several reasons. First, there is an opening for an expansion of socialist organizing in the critical endorsement of Bernie Sanders, which allows for DSA to conditionally support Sanders while criticizing him for not going far enough in advancing an anti-capitalist and

² Eric Blanc, “Democratic Socialists of America Seize the Day,” *The Nation*, August 7, 2019.

anti-imperialist agenda. This is exactly what DSA has been advocating in their local organizing campaigns: a conditional endorsement of Sanders that supports the kind of class struggle reforms he champions, led by Medicare for All, while using the campaign to critique the corporate control of the Democratic Party and its agenda, as well as Sanders own limitations on immigration and U.S. imperialism (the DSA explicitly supports “open borders”, for example).

Second, the DSA is too small right now to make an effective break from its inside-outside strategy. Breaking away from the fight for radical reforms within the Democratic Party would be tantamount to further isolation and a likely recipe for less recruitment to socialist politics, not more. It would also create a vacuum that would allow for even more corporate domination of the Democratic Party at all levels, instead of being able to selectively counter corporate Democrats by strategically endorsing “class struggle” Democrats whose policy preferences are directly connected to those of working class and poor constituencies.

Third, the notion that the DSA should simply create a purely independent socialist organization which operates as a third political party ignores the fact that such parties are completely shut out of any meaningful way to affect change in the U.S., due to a rigged electoral system that privileges the two capitalist parties. It’s a better and smarter strategy, at least in the short-term, to accentuate the crises of the Democratic Party, and to expose its lack of representation. The DSA support for Sanders directly threatens the corporate Democrats that have long dominated the Democratic Party. If Sanders is in fact the tame social democrat that some on the left suggest, why are the members of the dominant capitalist ruling class more opposed to his candidacy than any other Democrat? And, no, contrary to myth, the DSA will not endorse any other Democrat—this was approved as a resolution at the just concluded 2019 DSA Convention.

Finally, a complete break from the “inside-outside” strategy would almost certainly contribute to a Trump re-election. While it is true that both parties are corporate parties, Trump embodies a quasi-fascism that could easily morph into full-blown fascism with the ongoing expansion of concentration camps for immigrants; the aggressive use of racism, xenophobia and homophobia to further divide the working class, the expansion of the prison-industrial complex, and the acceleration and expansion of the privileges secured by corporate cronies that have directed Trump’s policies of deregulation and deconstruction of the social welfare state. All of these policies have enormous costs for the working class, the oppressed and the poor in the U.S. Ignoring the very real threat of a full-blown consolidation of fascism in the U.S. is perilous for the left, whose capacity for mobilizing and organizing would give way to an focus on survival if Trump were elected to a second term in office.

Given this context, the left critique of both Sunkara and the DSA, when fully examined, emerges as sectarian caricature of the actual positions adopted by Sunkara and the DSA. This is also true when it comes to another critique of the Sunkara book, which has also been leveled at *Jacobin* magazine and the DSA: the allegation that they are servants to a U.S. imperialist agenda by not engaging in more robust support for “left” governments that are being undermined, attacked or weakened by U.S. imperial policies. If this critique means that Sunkara, *Jacobin* and/or the DSA has ever favored U.S. imperial intervention, then it can be dismissed quite easily. All of these parties have taken a strong anti-U.S. imperialism and anti-intervention stance, and

that has been unequivocal regardless of the country or region in question. Yet sectarians such as Max Blumenthal nonetheless write articles attacking the 2019 Socialism Conference, sponsored in part by *Jacobin* and by DSA, as a conference funded and enabled by State Department-backed “imperialists” who somehow are accused of advocating for U.S. intervention. That this is a lie on every count is not particularly relevant to Blumenthal, who traffics in misinformation for the sake of elevating his status among a band of followers who seem to revel in a particular brand of Stalinist third worldism. A working definition of this disease, all too prominent among some on the far left, is a knee-jerk willingness to define any government that is anti-U.S. as an anti-imperialist government that by definition the “left” should support and even endorse. This has led such Third Worldists to accuse *Jacobin* of being too critical of the Syrian, Venezuelan, Cuban and even Chinese governments, whose opposition to U.S. policies, combined with statist challenges to the privileges of U.S. capitalists, are apparently enough to suggest that the U.S. is automatically behind any threats that these governments face. Incapable of engaging in class analysis, these critics reduce the world to U.S. imperialism and anti-U.S. imperialism, demonstrating a complete lack of interest in critiquing the power of capitalists outside of the U.S.³

The critique of the Sunkara book is at least in part inspired by this kind of support for Third World leaders that profess to have brought “socialism” to their population. Never mind if many of these so-called socialist projects had nothing to do with working class emancipation, and were instead the ideological tools of a bureaucratic, state capitalist elite that usurped “socialism” as the name for their own power and privilege. The very fact that these regimes exist, and are anti-U.S., is as far as the story goes for many who have a very loose view of what socialism actually entails. To his credit, Sunkara provides a strong critique of the way that self-described “communist” states, including the former Soviet Union, China and Cuba, usurped the use of the term “socialism” to legitimize narrow bureaucratic party rule or “state capitalism” as others have framed it. Within a historical dissection of the rise of communist parties in the developing world, Sunkara makes the legitimate point that there have been plenty of heroic efforts to fight for socialism, but that these have invariably been usurped by self-interested power brokers who have then proceeded to destroy working class organizations and capacity. To the extent that advances were achieved by these “revolutions”, they have been encumbered by the power of imperialist countries, corporations based in the capitalist North, and the steady draining of resources that is a product of global capitalist power structures. This does not mean that Sunkara does not want socialism in the developing world, only that he understands that capitalism is a global system that concentrates resources and power in the Northern capitalist countries. For socialism to take root, it will have to be an international socialism.

It is true that Sunkara does not develop that latter point, which is a serious shortcoming of the book. In fact, there is not enough attention to the urgency of socialists being internationalists in program, action and accountability. At times, Sunkara provides lip service to a kind of watered-down internationalism, but this discussion is far too superficial to be satisfactory for a book claiming to be “The Socialist Manifesto.” With the power of capitalism much more entrenched within structures of global production and with the threat that global climate change

³ For a more clear-eyed view of the relationship between self-professed “socialist” states and capitalism, see this excellent interview, “Mike Davis on the Crimes of Socialism and Capitalism,” *Jacobin*, Oct. 23, 2018.

poses to the entire planet, especially the most vulnerable and poor, the urgency and necessity of an international socialism cannot be overstated.

Another shortcoming of the book is the lack of any serious or sustained attention to the methods that will be necessary to transform the capitalist state to a socialist state. Sunkara provides a sketch of how both electoral and grassroots movements rooted in broad working class alliances are essential for the transition to socialism. However, there is no engagement with the actual history of revolutionary socialist attempts to change the system. Specifically, there is a broad literature on “revolutionary situations” that indicates a widespread pattern of the ruling class, when threatened with class struggle, to use all means necessary to preserve their control and domination of the state, including extensive use of violence. How would Sunkara’s version of a socialist transformation account for a very predictable backlash that would involve economic, political and legal coercion? Is Sunkara, and the DSA, equipped to understand and appreciate the magnitude of such an endeavor?

Despite these shortcomings, Sunkara’s book is a worthwhile advance for a U.S. left that has for too long been in the wilderness politically, economically and socially. The very existence of this book, as well as the tremendous growth of the DSA and *Jacobin* magazine, is on balance a very healthy foundation for a reinvigorated socialism that has the chance to make an impact as a force capable of challenging unbridled capitalist domination in the U.S.