Paving the Road to a Socialist Future

The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality
By Bhaskar Sunkara
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Just one day after Bernie Sanders confirmed his first presidential candidacy in spring 2015, Jacobin posted an essay by its founding editor, Bhaskar Sunkara, who imagined what the Sanders campaign could mean for socialist politics in the United States. Sunkara acknowledged that outsider electoral runs sometimes had the effect of weakening leftist political capacities. With cautious optimism, however, he proposed that if Sanders gained steam, it might present a “sign”: the constant squeeze of the post-recession economy and a steady stream of tepid centrist politicians had, perhaps, created possibilities for a new politics to emerge from the American masses. Electoral victory was unlikely, but Sanders’ run was an opportunity for socialists to “regroup” and articulate a political vision that spoke to the working-class majority. Just as important, Sunkara wrote, the campaign might “begin to legitimate the word ‘socialist’, and spark a conversation around it, even if Sanders’ welfare-state socialism doesn’t go far enough.”

Bernie Sanders has indeed helped to revive socialist ideas in mainstream politics, and Jacobin has supported this development every step of the way. Since its founding in 2010, the magazine has become an important hub for leftist writing. The breadth and pace of the digital production is striking; there are sometimes three, sometimes five posts a day, covering topics ranging from electoral politics to history to movies and literature. Sunkara has been central to this growth and, in the process, has established himself as an entrepreneur for the left and a key voice in the campaign to establish socialism in mainstream Anglo-American politics. In addition to launching Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy in 2017 and purchasing the U.K.-based Tribune in 2018, he has participated in public debates with an array of capitalism’s professional ideologues, from right-wing intellectuals such as Yaron Brook to centrist-liberal pundits like Jonathan Chait. In front of a packed room at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, Sunkara faced off against the libertarian economist Gene Epstein, an affiliate of the Ludwig von Mises Institute, to make the case that capitalists’ ownership of private property generates unfree conditions for the majority of people living today. Sunkara has now channeled these eclectic experiences into his latest book, The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality, which aspires to make a more sustained case for socialism than a Jacobin editorial would allow.

The Socialist Manifesto pursues this goal unevenly across three distinct sections, which are linked thematically by a particular vision of socialist politics. The shortest and most unique is the first chapter, which stands on its own as a fictional rendering of “A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen.” This “day in the life” actually covers many years, all told through the perspective of a worker at the fictional Bongiovi pasta firm in New Jersey. After detailing the exploitation experienced by this “pasta sauce proletarian” under capitalism, Sunkara...
describes how life transforms as a socialist coalition is voted into power and gradually ushers a transition to socialism. Banks are nationalized, workers gain control of their firms, and owners are expropriated with a pro-rated compensation. Capitalists who cooperate are rewarded. Some protest peacefully, and they are free to do so. Yet sheer exhaustion and the widespread popularity of the emergent system dampens the forces of reaction, pushing many of them into the fold of the social democrats. For the pasta sauce proletarian, in contrast, “work gets better, but it doesn’t feel as if something monumental has happened.”

The focus of the book shifts thereafter, but this fictional vignette captures well Sunkara’s vision of political change: through a gradual process, combining legislative reform and mass organizing, socialism develops without bloodshed over the course of a generation. Sunkara does not entertain the possibility of reactionary repression, nor does he explore the state of the climate crisis after this period of incremental reform. He nevertheless deserves credit for plotting out a socialist future rather than simply making “the case against capitalism.” It’s not difficult these days—thanks in part to Jacobin—to find such critiques of capitalism’s horrors. One might expect a new socialist manifesto to present an analysis of capitalism in its current form, but that is not Sunkara’s project.

Notwithstanding this initial exercise in postcapitalist imagining, the majority of the book looks backward, presenting a six-chapter history of socialism that supports Sunkara’s vision of change. The history is intended for readers unfamiliar with socialist projects of the twentieth century and historical debates about reform and revolution. Sunkara moves from the capitalist transformation of the British countryside and development of Marxist analysis to the history of Germany’s Social Democratic Party, the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, social democracy in Western Europe, revolutions in the Third World (primarily China), and finally to socialist struggles and their failures in the United States. The story covers key historical figures, from Rosa Luxembourg to Eugene Debs, but it is of course as much about the present as the past.

Not incidentally, given his affiliations with the Democratic Socialists of America and Jacobin, Sunkara’s narrative foregrounds party leaders and radical intellectuals to explain the rise and fall of socialism in the twentieth century, offering a strong indictment of revolutionary-turned-authoritarian regimes in the Soviet Union and China. Reiterating arguments made in dialogue with liberal figures like Chait, Sunkara reclaims the “radical promise of the Enlightenment” for the left, describing the history of communist revolution as one that failed to fulfill that promise of democracy. In those underdeveloped nations, Sunkara writes, there was “no material basis” to build socialism on the necessary scale. Communist architects instead hitched their futures to ill-fated political programs, hoping that international communist revolution or modernization from above would offset unpromising structural conditions. At times, they had mass support, but those regimes ultimately ruled “over” the people, not “through them.”

In contrast, social democratic regimes like that of Sweden offered, according to Sunkara, the most promising possibility for a socialist future in the twentieth century. That future was undermined when the Swedish Social Democratic Party abandoned the most politically difficult challenge: the nationalization of industry. While it improved the lives of many, social democracy remained dependent on sustained private profits and class compromise, which preserved capitalists’ power to withhold investment and renege on the deal. These contradictions continued to deepen, ultimately eroding the regime itself.

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Through this history, Sunkara extracts two key lessons. The first is that socialists can’t count on their leaders to voluntarily honor democratic principles and civil liberties. They must, rather, institutionalize mechanisms for the working class to exercise real political power and hold leaders to account. Second, Sunkara concludes that radical struggles must move first through social democracy, a structurally unstable but apparently necessary stage on the path to socialism.
These lessons form the basis of a fifteen-point program, spelled out in the final section of the book, to build “class-struggle social democracy” in the United States. It instructs socialists to embed themselves in working-class struggles, engage strategically with electoral politics and the Democratic Party, and gradually build on those efforts to form an autonomous socialist party, grounded in a universalist politics. In the fifteenth and final point Sunkara ties the book’s sections together, concluding, in the end, that “history matters”: without understanding their place in history and the traditions on which they draw, the new generation of socialists risks, as Sunkara puts it, atomization and alienation. Socialists must therefore “learn from those who marched and organized and dreamed before us.”

Toward that worthy goal, The Socialist Manifesto links our current moment to a longer tradition of struggle, laying out the broad contours of a history that, “for both good and ill,” is socialists’ to reckon with. In addition to inspiring, this may help to inoculate against red-baiting tropes, something Sunkara has confronted with particular grace in public settings. Yet while Sunkara makes the case that history contains concrete lessons for socialists today, his approach to writing history yields fewer lessons about analyzing contingent political conditions using a historical materialist analysis—despite the fact that Sunkara identifies this type of analysis as a crucial task for socialists today. “Better than others,” he writes, “we can perceive class relations and how they offer common avenues of struggle.” How, exactly, radicals of the past attempted to “perceive” those historically specific relations, how they developed radical political visions and strategies based on those particular understandings, is often not explicit in The Socialist Manifesto.

To be sure, such a brief history can’t be exhaustive, and the point is not to split hairs about historical details. It is rather to say that how one writes the story yields its own lessons about the forces driving change and the benefits of history as “a way of learning,” as revisionist historian William Appleman Williams once put it. The chapter on the Russian Revolution, for example, is a very good primer, but does not invite readers to grapple with the bottom-up political pressures confronting Bolshevik leaders. Although the chapter recognizes the crucial role played by workers and peasants in the revolution, it mostly obscures the content of their politics, giving the impression that the masses followed party leaders in an unfortunate rejection of the liberal-aligned Provisional Government. Yet when tens of thousands of workers and soldiers organized themselves, demanding to overthrow the Provisional Government—a government that had continued to prosecute an unpopular war—they took many Bolsheviks by surprise, pushing them to commit to a more immediate revolutionary course or risk betraying a crucial political base. Communist strategists such as Lenin thus worked to navigate a rapidly changing balance of forces and conflicts between different levels of political activity. Sunkara covers these political challenges so fleetingly that they’re easily missed, making it difficult to understand why the revolution advanced in 1917. The result is a history that condemns authoritarianism, yielding abstract lessons about the difficulties of revolution, but which does not allow readers to see how radicals have continuously attempted, amidst unpredictable circumstances, to perform a crucial political function: to understand the shifting organization of classes, their politics, and myriad relationships, and, given those specific constraints, to imagine new kinds of political organization and the possible forms that socialism might take. Thus, while The Socialist Manifesto is effective at describing different models of regimes past, especially the “structural dilemma of social democracy,” it is less attentive to the contingent political processes through which those regimes emerged. This has implications for the questions that Sunkara raises for socialists today. Rather than analyzing contemporary structures of capitalism to evaluate what radical political forms might best suit our historical moment, Sunkara implies that today’s challenges are not so different from those facing social democrats in the early and mid-twentieth century in different parts of the world. “Though the working class has changed,” for example, “the shifts are overstated,” and workers remain “as different and divided as ever.” According to this logic, the best course of action is to create in the United States a social democracy akin to what existed in Sweden,
and then push past this unstable formation through continued struggle and incremental legislative changes, targeting both capital and the anti-democratic character of the state. To put it more bluntly, socialists need to repeat history but do it better. This can be done, according to Sunkara, by learning from the structural limits of social democracy, by rejecting compromises that undermine socialist principles, and by maintaining a commitment to class confrontation rather than the amelioration of social conflict, particularly when new crises come.

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Yet, the historical conjuncture that produced the social democratic class compromise—which was contingent on the existence of the Soviet Union (and thus the politics of the Cold War), and on economic growth, the consumption of fossil fuels, and particular relations between the capitalist core and periphery—has in fact changed. Sunkara does not explore the meanings of those differences, but he does suggest why social democracy may prove even more unstable in the twenty-first century. Given today’s slower rates of growth, he writes, social democracy’s crisis will be imminent. “We probably don’t have thirty years to make reforms the way social democrats did in the postwar period,” he concludes. In that admission Sunkara shows the value of a materialist analysis that is more sensitive to our particular conditions. He also misses an opportunity to incorporate a distinguishing problem of our time, the climate crisis, into the political program. Leftists may disagree about whether capitalism itself has changed meaningfully in the last hundred years, or whether those changes have important strategic implications in the United States. But most agree that capitalism poses a fundamental threat to our planet, a political challenge that went unrecognized by many midcentury social democrats. If Sunkara’s program succeeds at reproducing social democracy in the United States, the climate crisis will only deepen its contradictions, making his argument about the pace of transformation even more critical.

Of course, the climate crisis, like capitalism itself, is global in scale. In contrast, Sunkara’s political program maintains a decidedly nationalist perspective. There are certainly practical reasons for this, as well as possible strategic ones. Sunkara is himself American and, as authors Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos have written in A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal, the United States has long presented “the single greatest obstacle to global climate action.” Its highly militarized state has also posed the greatest threat to anti-capitalist struggles around the world, advancing reactionary coups and neoliberal reforms for decades. Instead of laying out strategic points about struggling within the United States, Sunkara’s chapter on the failures of Third World revolutions vaguely implies that the Global North should lead the struggle for socialism today. If that is in fact Sunkara’s argument, it is not an especially satisfying one. Even if one agrees, as Sunkara argues, that those revolutions failed in the twentieth century because their domestic productive forces were insufficiently developed, material conditions have changed over the last forty years. Global capitalist restructuring has generated, in the words of Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch in The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire, a “transformation in the international division of labor,” yielding “a massive expansion of the global proletariat” in regions formerly known as the Third World. This global proletariat, it is worth noting, will continue to experience the effects of climate change regardless of how evenly it is currently integrated into capitalist social relations. How these twenty-first-century patterns might shape a socialist politics in the United States is not entirely clear, save for a brief reference to “foreign aid and internationalism” in the Global North.3

The Socialist Manifesto does not, therefore, consider what might distinguish a social democracy of the twenty-first century, given recent transformations in structures of political economy. It instead looks backward to describe
stages on the way to a socialist future. Yet history is unpredictable, and stage-based models may not encourage new ways of thinking about a politics of the present. Nevertheless, for a thoughtful, succinct introduction to socialism’s history, which situates a growing political tendency in the United States, *The Socialist Manifesto* is an invaluable contribution, one that takes seriously the possibilities and the limits of social reform in capitalist society.

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**Notes**

1. Bhaskar Sunkara, “Bernie for President,” *Jacobin*, 1 May 2015, [https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/bernie-sanders-president-vermont-socialist](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/bernie-sanders-president-vermont-socialist).
2. William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (repr., New York: Verso, 2011), 17–23.
3. Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (New York: Verso, 2019), 9–10; Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2012), 212.

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**A Mon Valley Memoir: How Steelworkers in Homestead Went Down Fighting in the 1980s**

*Homestead Steel Mill—The Final Ten Years: USWA Local 1397 and the Fight for Union Democracy*

By Mike Stout

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Younger radicals in the United States are today considering how to relate, personally and collectively, to the labor movement. Should they try to become agents of workplace change? Will serving on the payroll of local or national unions be supportive of such efforts?

Or should they organize “on the shop floor”—as teachers, nurses, or social workers—and then seek elected, rather than appointed, union leadership roles? Members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) discussed this “rank-and-file strategy” at their convention this past summer, narrowly passing a resolution in support of it.

Other progressives, further down the rank-and-file road, are debating how to best support newly elected union reformers—and how to hold them accountable to the members who backed their insurgent campaigns. In some big city and statewide affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers or the National Education Association, left-led reform caucuses have continued to function, even after an electoral shift from old to new leadership.

Fifty years ago, activists who came of age in the 1960s grappled with the same questions during their initial challenges to the labor bureaucracy. Some had the foresight to transition from campus and community organizing to labor activism in education, health care, and service sectors, where college backgrounds were useful and job security good.

Other former student radicals—under the (not-always-helpful) guidance of left-wing parties and sects—opted to become rank-and-file in steel mills, coal mines, and auto plants; the trucking and telephone industries; or other blue-collar fields. Unfortunately, in the 1970s