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Sanders, Warren and the DSA

For the past few months, dating back at least to Bhaskar Sunkara's October 23rd Guardian op-ed piece titled "Think Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are the same? They aren't", the "democratic socialist" wing of the Democratic Party has mounted an ideological offensive against the Senator from Massachusetts, laying the groundwork for Sanders's 2020 presidential campaign. Though likely almost as happy to get behind a Warren candidacy, it faults her for backing "Accountable Capitalism" rather than the Scandinavian-style socialism Sanders embraces. From the perspective of the Republican Party, and likely the Biden/Clinton wing of the Democratic Party, there's not much difference between the two Senators. The "The Opportunity Costs of Socialism", issued by Trump's Council of Economic Advisers in the same month as Sunkara's op-ed, had this take on the two:

The Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who cited Marxism as the model for his country, described "the ruthless economic exploitation and political oppression of the peasants by the landlord class" (Cotterell 2011, chap. 6). Expressing similar concerns, current American senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have stated that "large corporations . . . exploit human misery and insecurity, and turn them into huge profits" and "giant corporations . . . exploit workers just to boost their own profits."⁶

Can you guess which Senator's quote was which? Take 5 minutes to decide but no cheating, please. Okay, the answer is that Sanders's quote came first. But wouldn't any DSA'er be nearly as happy to see Warren become President in light of her belief that "giant corporations . . . exploit workers just to boost their own profits"? It is worth noting

that some on the left—including Boris Kagarlitsky and Diana Johnstone—took Trump’s populist rhetoric to heart, so maybe something more than words have to be taken into account.

Sunkara warns that with Warren getting support from prominent Democratic Party policy wonks like Matt Yglesias, the co-founder and editor of Vox, there’s reason enough to downgrade her. Maybe Sunkara forgot that Vox was a major booster of Jacobin, calling attention to how it was winning the war of ideas on the left. And who doesn’t love a winner?

Vox followed up with another article helping to bolster Jacobin’s cred. After Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s primary victory, DSA member and Jacobin editor Meagan Day wrote a piece titled “Democratic socialism, explained by a democratic socialist” that warned against confusing her comrades with namby-pamby “New Deal liberals”. Unlike FDR, the democratic socialists are for “overthrowing capitalism”. This is apparently Sanders’s idea as well, according to Sunkara’s op-ed.

To understate things, Sanders’ background is unusual. He was trained in the dying remnants of the Socialist party and cut his political teeth in trade union and civil rights organizing. His lifelong lesson? The rich were not morally confused but rather have a vested interest in the exploitation of others. Power would have to be taken from them by force.

The best-known leader of the Socialist Party referred to above was Michael Harrington, who would be startled to learn that he advocated taking power by force. Perhaps Sunkara got Harrington confused with Lenin, given both men’s baldpate. In 2013, when Sunkara was beginning to become a household name at least in Park Slope, he wrote an article for In These Times paying respects to the Socialist Party leader who understood—apparently like his 24-year old acolyte—that socialism needed liberalism and vice versa. He concludes his article with a call for what amounts to a Popular Front:

The only way back to political relevance for socialists lies through realistic engagement with politics as it exists today. And that involves messiness and compromise—reaching out to liberals as friends and allies—while not losing sight of the need to decisively transform a political framework built on a self-destructive and morally intolerable mode of production.

Unlike Sunkara, there were some leftists who had a direct and unpleasant experience with Harrington and as such were less inclined to see him as a role model. In a rebuttal to Sunkara, ISO’er Joe Allen faulted Harrington for red-baiting the Port Huron Statement (a

rather mild call for reform by the nascent SDS) and backing LBJ's war in Vietnam. Sunkara defended Harrington once again with a highly revealing admission about what socialism means to Jacobin and the DSA:

WHAT'S MORE, his [Joe Allen] labeling of Harrington as a "social democrat" is either a polemical device or reflects a frightening lack of clarity. Through his life, Harrington advocated not just for socialism within capitalism, but for socialism after capitalism—a break with class society and the bourgeois state.

What does it mean to be "for socialism after capitalism"? Is this similar to changes in the natural world, like a pupa turning into a butterfly or summer following spring? As Sunkara put it in his lip-service to revolution, state power from the capitalists will have to be taken by force. If there is anything that is crystal-clear, it is that Jacobin/DSA has no perspective of building a movement with such designs based on a July 2018 article titled "What is Democratic Socialism". The author was Neal Meyer, who is on the NY chapter's Citywide Leadership Committee and bent on differentiating democratic socialists from those brontosaurus still taking the Communist Manifesto seriously:

It's one thing to know what democratic socialists fight for, and another to lay out a convincing path to realizing it. This is where democratic socialists truly differ with some of our friends on the socialist left. We reject strategies that transplant paths from Russia in 1917 or Cuba in 1959 to the United States today, as if we could win socialism by storming the White House and tossing Donald Trump out on the front lawn.

This is as grotesque a caricature as anything that appeared in the White House's report on "The Opportunity Costs of Socialism". To start with, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was a result of the democratic will of the people, reflected through the soviets, to withdraw from WWI and to provide land to the tillers. Essentially, Meyer is describing the Bolshevik seizure of power as a coup, a well-worn trope of the Sovietologists. As for Cuba, Fidel Castro exhausted all peaceful possibilities by running in elections until concluding that Batista would not make the changes necessary to provide a decent life for all its citizens. He resorted to guerrilla warfare but never could have taken power without massive support from the cities, including the student movement, the intellectuals, and the trade unions as documented in a new book by Steve Cushion titled "A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerrillas' Victory".

Clearly, there are vast differences between Russia in 1917 and Cuba in 1959 on one side and the USA today on the other. The USA is the world's leading capitalist power and the kind of misery, especially in the countryside, that existed in such backward societies can

only be found in communities that have been traditionally marginalized. In a place like my own New York City, there is homelessness and hunger but only suffered by those in the lowest economic rungs. Ironically, Michael Harrington's main contribution as a writer was "The Other America" that revealed the chronic poverty in places like West Virginia as a way of spurring Washington to mitigate the suffering. Despite Harrington's eloquence, West Virginia is as economically depressed as it was in the 1960s, a function of deep-pit coal mining giving way to mountaintop removal that puts an emphasis on machinery rather than labor. Piling one injury on top of another, the unemployed coal-miners had to deal now with undrinkable water, a result of toxic waste from strip-mining seeping into the state's rivers.

Can a 25-year old college graduate forced by the job market to work as barista or a Banana Republic salesperson ever reach the level of despair necessary to join a revolutionary movement? When Frederick Engels wrote "The Conditions of the Working Class in England", wage workers were universally downtrodden:

On the occasion of an inquest held Nov. 16th, 1843, by Mr. Carter, coroner for Surrey, upon the body of Ann Galway, aged 45 years, the newspapers related the following particulars concerning the deceased: She had lived at No. 5 White Lion Court, Bermondsey Street, London, with her husband and a nineteen- year-old son in a little room, in which neither a bedstead nor any other furniture was to be seen. She lay dead beside her son upon a heap of feathers which were scattered over her almost naked body, there being neither sheet nor coverlet. The feathers stuck so fast over the whole body that the physician could not examine the corpse until it was cleansed, and then found it starved and scarred from the bites of vermin. Part of the floor of the room was torn up, and the hole used by the family as a privy.

As miserable as this family was, Marx and Engels would eventually write off the English working class as spoiled by its relative comfortable position. In a letter to Marx, dated October 7, 1858, Engels wrote: "...The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat alongside the bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is of course to a certain extent justifiable."

It is understandable why DSA might have diminished expectations and a willingness to compromise. Without a revolutionary subject, what is the point of revolutionary goals? Ever since the end of the 60s radicalization, there have been movements that challenge the

status quo but none have the almost apocalyptic urgency of the Maoist or Trotskyist movements of my youth. In a very real sense, the moderation of the DSA simply reflects the tenor of the times.

The problem, however, is that revolutionary change is still necessary but on a different basis today. In the 1960s, most of us who organized antiwar demonstrations saw the Vietnam War as being repeated on a continuous basis given the USA's determination to act as the policeman of the world. This would lead to proletarian revolutions demanding peace. However, the "Vietnam syndrome" soon set barriers to new boots on the ground. Except for Iraq and Afghanistan, which resulted in a hollow victory and likely an impending defeat respectively, imperialism prefers proxy forces and drones for imposing its will.

In addition, our generation saw blue collar resistance in places like the Lordstown GM plant as the wave of the future. A revitalized trade union movement would provide the working-class muscle necessary to topple the capitalist state, probably no later than 1990 or so. (Sigh.) This year, GM has announced that 14,000 workers would be fired, including those in the Lordstown plant. None of us fifty years ago could have anticipated the collapse of manufacturing in the USA, especially when China was still solidly run on Maoist principles. US imperialism proved to be one step ahead of us, attaching wings to American jobs that then flew to China.

So where does that leave us today? Has capitalism resolved its contradictions? Ironically, the contradictions have deepened but on a different basis. We are in a period when the conditions for capitalism being able to create the basis for its own reproduction have begun to collapse. Climate change, species extinction, epidemics tied to ecological despoliation, water shortages, unbreathable air in mega-cities, and a host of other ills not directly tied to commodity production are reaching the point that commodity production itself will eventually be undermined.

Furthermore, even if the cosmopolitan centers in advanced capitalist countries will go on as if nothing has changed, the underdeveloped nations will continue to exist as if they belonged in Engels's portrait of the English working class. With many of these nations having a majority Muslim population, tendencies for sectarian and atavistic militancy will increase. When ISIS, or something like ISIS, gets its hands on a portable nuclear weapon, all bets are off.

There is a cognitive dissonance between the meliorism of DSA leaders and the tasks that humanity faces. Since the USA is the hub of the world capitalist machine that is

systematically destroying the planet, it will take a resolute political force here and starting now to wage a struggle capable of replacing that machine with one that serves humanity and the planet. It is a daunting task but one that must be undertaken. As Rosa Luxemburg once said but attributed to Engels: “Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism.” In actuality, the words were Karl Kautsky’s according to ecosocialist Ian Angus but whatever the origins of this oft-cited phrase, we can be assured that with Donald Trump in the White House, we are getting a good taste of that barbarism now.