

Is a Revolutionary Rupture with Capitalism Possible?

July 6, 2019



For too long, the radical left has framed debates about reform and revolution in terms bequeathed to us from an era very unlike our own. At the expense of soberly and concretely analyzing the conditions socialists face today in advanced capitalist societies like the United States, a great many Marxists have stressed the importance of defending the “revolutionary tradition” and of attempting to emulate the success of the Bolsheviks in 1917.

It’s important to note that such a backward-looking posture would have been anathema to the Bolsheviks themselves. To their credit, they insisted on concreteness and steadfastly refused to believe that abstract formulae could be clung to in dynamic moments of crisis and uncertainty.

With this said, I want to deliberately turn away from history and focus on the present. In particular, by examining the conditions on the ground today, I want to address the question of whether the idea of a “revolutionary rupture” with capitalism still has any merit. I will defend the idea of a rupture, but I want to make the case in a way that it is seldom made these days: by eschewing historical experience and focusing solely on capitalism as we know it today. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, I try to show why reformism is unworkable on its own terms. This implies that capitalism cannot be fixed, that it must be replaced root and branch. Second, I present a case for a revolutionary rupture with the capitalist mode of production and defend this account from a series of criticisms leveled against it by Vivek Chibber.¹ Finally, I try to draw some provisional ideas about organizational forms and strategy from the foregoing arguments.

I.

I’ll begin by distinguishing revolutionary from reformist appraisals of capitalism. To be a revolutionary, as I understand it here, is to believe that the capitalist mode of production cannot be fixed, that it must be replaced with a qualitatively different, socialist mode of production. To be a reformist, on the other hand, is to hold that the capitalist mode of production can be fixed from within, that reforms within the framework of capitalism can successfully mitigate its worst aspects.²

For the revolutionary, the long-run interests of workers and the planet are simply incompatible with

the continued existence of capitalism. For the reformist, on the other hand, the ideal system would combine progressive reforms—such as redistributive tax and transfer schemes, policies that strengthen trade unions, decommodification of health and education, and so forth—with an economy based on private ownership of the means of production by profit-seeking capitalists.

I believe there are at least two decisive arguments against the reformist position. First, reformism underestimates the scale and depth of injustice under capitalism. Insofar as relations of exploitation and domination are constitutive of capitalism as a mode of production, no amount of reform can substitute for abolishing the social relations of exploitation and domination themselves.³

A potentially more damning argument against reformism, however, is that it is practically unworkable *on its own terms*. Reformism relies on the capitalist economy for the tax revenue it needs to fund the welfare state. It also relies on capitalism to provide employment, income, goods and services, and so forth. But capitalism is an inherently crisis-prone system. It inevitably goes through boom-and-bust cycles that temporarily plunge the economy into crises wherein investment grinds to a halt, unemployment soars, and chaos ensues.

Crises are endemic to the capitalist mode of production rather than the unfortunate result of poor business decisions or bad state policy, and so there is no way to rely on capitalism without figuring out a way to cope with crises when they arise.⁴ When they do inevitably arise, however, reformists in control of the state will face an immensely difficult choice. They will be under enormous pressure to do whatever it takes to restart the capitalist economic engine by reestablishing the conditions for profitable accumulation—and this will mean weakening or repealing bread-and-butter social democratic reforms. But if state officials refuse this option and fail to restore capitalist profitability, then tax revenues will drop and there will be no money to fund the welfare state. Either way, it seems, progressive reforms will have to give way.

We must also stress here that economic crises also entail other forms of misery for workers: When unemployment soars, it becomes difficult for workers to support themselves and their dependents. This, too, will put reformist leaders under enormous pressure to do whatever it takes to reignite capitalist profitability.

But reigniting capitalist profitability will require policies that are detrimental to the interests of workers and the oppressed.⁵ This is because reliance on capitalism as an engine of growth means reliance on private investment by the capitalist class. Capitalists, however, only invest on the condition that they can earn sufficient levels of profit on their investment. If this is not forthcoming, they're obliged to simply hoard their capital and wait. So, restoring growth under capitalism means restoring confidence to ruling-class investors—and this, in turn, requires creating a "good business climate" with favorable conditions for profitable investment. This means social democrats will be obliged to impose austerity on workers.

Here's why: From the perspective of capitalists, favorable investment conditions require that labor is plentiful, cheap, and easily exploitable; that taxes are sufficiently low to permit accumulation and reinvestment of profits; and that state regulations and controls on business activity are minimal so as to give capitalists the leeway to achieve optimal levels of profit. If, for example, workers are organized into strong unions that can resist attempts to drive down wages, capitalists will correctly regard this as an obstacle to restoring profitability. They will therefore demand ways of driving down wages. If capitalists are required to pay heavy tax bills to fund the welfare state, this will also (especially in the context of a crisis) obstruct their willingness to invest. In the context of an economic downturn, capitalists will clamor for cheaper labor and lower tax burdens, both of which will have to come at the expense of workers.

What's more, capitalists will not be reduced to begging state officials for these austerity measures. Insofar as they own and control the commanding heights of the economy, they will have the power to discipline state officials by threatening an investment strike. This they already do: Capitalists regularly threaten that if they don't get their demands met, they'll enact massive layoffs, or close down production, or otherwise make decisions that starve the state and squeeze workers. Succinctly put, the existence of a capitalist class means they can always use their class power to sabotage the economy and make things worse for the masses of the population.

And this is only what will happen if the capitalists "play nice," which we should never expect them to do. In addition to being economically dominant, capitalists will have every incentive to invest some of their hoard of wealth in attempts to purchase political influence and sway elections in their favor. If the reformists are associated with a labor or social democratic party, for example, the capitalists will fund this party's opponents and, at the same time, try to buy off and co-opt officials *within* the reformist camp. They will use their wealth to influence mass media, popular culture, religious institutions, university scholarship, and so forth. They will do their best to produce an anti-reformist "common sense" among the masses that can be used as a bulwark against the reformist program.

So, too, will they find it in their interest to try to curry favor with the repressive apparatus of the state (the police and the military). Indeed, because capitalism will have already been in effect for quite some time, they won't have to try very hard to win over cops and military brass—we can basically assume that these layers will be hostile to the left, committed to existing social hierarchies, and generally supportive of a harsh, disciplinary, "law and order" approach to social movements. Moreover, capitalists will lobby hard for foreign policies and military adventures abroad that maximize their profits and protect their investments. Thus, workers in any given country will rarely have the luxury of only needing to defeat their "own" national ruling class—they'll be up against a capitalist class whose interests and sphere of influence traverse national borders.

So, too, will capitalists do their best to ensure that unruly workers and disruptive strike waves can be quickly repressed so that capitalist production can resume smoothly. This they can accomplish through a combination of legislative action, investment in the repressive apparatus, judicial injunctions issued by anti-labor judges, and so forth. And if the situation really heats up, capitalists can be relied upon to sponsor invasions, coups, and military dictatorships to discipline workers and smash the left and the movements.

Imagine it happens like this: A reformist government wins in a landslide and comes to power promising to enact a series of welfare-state reforms that benefit working people. They enact these policies and things look relatively good for a time—until a recession hits. The government resists austerity as long as it can, but at some point it caves and decides it must restore capitalist profitability or face economic collapse and defeat at the polls. When the government betrays its working-class base, workers strike against the bosses and the reformists in an attempt to defend their living standards and the reforms they recently won.

What then? Strikes are economically disruptive and profoundly damage the material interests of the capitalist class. That's the point of them, in fact. So long as the reformists remain committed to the capitalist mode of production, they have only one choice here: to use the repressive apparatus of the state to break the strike with violence and force workers to return to work. This they must do both because of the disruption caused by the strike and because the aim of the strike was to block austerity, which the reformists already judged was regrettably necessary to get the capitalist economy growing once again.

I note that the somewhat simplified portrait I paint above brackets questions of imperialism, national chauvinism, and racial oppression, among other things.⁶ Once we acknowledge that these toxic

ingredients are already baked into the basic institutions of actually existing capitalism, the problems of reformism become even more difficult to overcome.

From the perspective of revolutionaries, the problems discussed above are central to their belief that capitalist social relations must be replaced entirely. But there's more to the case for a revolutionary break with capitalism than the unworkability of reformism in practice. Capitalist property relations are inherently exploitative: They empower a nonlaboring owning class to accumulate massive amounts of wealth on the backs of a nonowning laboring class. Capitalists also dominate workers in the workplace and in politics more generally. To dominate another person is to lord over them, command them, and punish them when they fail to comply.⁷ Insofar as we're committed to freedom, democracy, and equal rights, these problems are intolerable.

II.

So to be a revolutionary is to believe that capitalism must be replaced. But how is this momentous task to be accomplished? The classic Marxist position is that a break with capitalism must occur via a rupture in which the masses of workers rise up, smash the machinery of the existing state, and found society anew. This position has come under intense scrutiny recently. In a widely discussed piece in *Jacobin*, Vivek Chibber makes the case that such a rupture is not what revolutionaries should fight for today.⁸ As he puts it,

"Today, the state has infinitely greater legitimacy with the population than European states did a century ago. Further, its coercive power, its power of surveillance, and the ruling class's internal cohesiveness give the social order a stability that is orders of magnitude greater than it had in 1917. What that means is, while we can allow for and perhaps hope for the emergence of revolutionary conditions where state breakdown is really in the cards, we can't build a political strategy around it as an expectation—we can't take it as the left's fundamental strategic perspective. Today, the political stability of the state is a reality that the left has to acknowledge. ... If this is so, then the lessons that the Russian experience has to offer—as a model of socialist transition—are limited. Our strategic perspective has to downplay the centrality of a revolutionary rupture and navigate a more gradualist approach. For the foreseeable future, left strategy has to revolve around building a movement to pressure the state, gain power within it, change the institutional structure of capitalism, and erode the structural power of capital—rather than vaulting over it."

Whatever else we say about Chibber's argument in this passage, it's clear that he favors a gradualist approach, more rooted in the tradition of Nordic social democracy, over a revolutionary approach rooted in the tradition of Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Lenin. The details, however, are far less clear—in particular it's unclear whether Chibber is arguing that revolution is practically unrealistic, undesirable as an end in itself, or both. It's also unclear whether Chibber means to say revolution should be off the radical left's agenda in the short run (next 4 years), in the medium term (5-10 years on), in the long run (10-15 years or more in the future), or in all of the above.

These details matter. If a goal is simply not worth pursuing, then it's hardly worth debating which strategies might best enable us to achieve it. Likewise, if a goal—however desirable it might be in itself—is impossible to achieve, or at any rate so far-fetched as to be totally unrealistic even in the long run, it's unworthy of serious consideration now or in the future. But, on the other hand, if a goal is desirable *and* feasible in the long run, but impossible to achieve in the short run, it seems extremely unwise to push it to the side and dismiss it as irrelevant to those organizing in the here and now. I want to argue that the prospects for a revolutionary rupture with capitalism are desirable and feasible in the medium to long run. Thus, I concede that Chibber is correct to say that our tactics and strategy in the coming years should not be based on the expectation of a break in the

short run—indeed, he is quite right to describe such a position as “entirely hallucinatory.” Nonetheless, contra Chibber, our strategies in the short run still ought to be informed by the necessity of an eventual rupture.

I begin by showing that the medium- to long-run prospects for a revolutionary rupture are not as dim as Chibber suggests. As I say, however, Chibber is correct that it is unrealistic to think that a revolutionary rupture in advanced capitalist states like the United States is likely in the next five years.

Chibber bases his case for the practical infeasibility of rupture on observations about a number of institutional features of contemporary advanced capitalism that didn’t obtain in earlier periods:

- Modern capitalist states enjoy more legitimacy among the population than they did (at least in Europe) in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Modern states have a more highly developed, self-conscious, coherent, entrenched, technologically sophisticated, and stubbornly determined repressive apparatus than they did in the past.
- The capitalist class today is more coherent and organized and is better able to respond quickly to thwart a revolution than were past ruling classes.

To these I would add a few other salient differences:

- Modern capitalist states also have more experience coping with working-class revolt and have greater means at their disposal to co-opt and demobilize rebellion from below.
- The expansion of the welfare state, however underfunded and incomplete it might be, gives workers a safety net that they wouldn’t have enjoyed in the early half of the twentieth century.
- Mass culture in capitalist society has created a “pro-capitalist common sense” that is deeply entrenched, partly constitutive of people’s identities, and intricately interwoven with consumption and everyday commercial activity.

These are formidable obstacles that earlier socialists never had to confront, and Chibber is correct to say that these facts must inform our tactical and strategic decisions in the short run. Chibber is wrong, however, to think that these facts entail that revolutionary rupture is no longer possible in the medium or long term. For the sake of specificity I will limit my remarks in what follows to the situation in the United States.

III.

Let us begin with the legitimacy of the state. Chibber is right to point out that the current crisis is *primarily* one of neoliberal capitalism, not of the capitalist system itself. But it would be a grave mistake to assume that this crisis, in its totality, is simply and neatly confined to neoliberalism. It is not. Though still a small minority of the population, there are millions of people in the United States who are beginning to question not simply this or that version of capitalism, but the system itself. This is partly reflected in the polling data showing younger people to favor socialism over capitalism by a significant margin. Of course, the majority of those who say they favor “socialism” probably have in mind something like classical social democracy (free medical care, education, a robust safety net, and so on). But it’s significant that people identify with the word “socialism” in a country that has relentlessly branded any alternative to capitalism as taboo at best and evil at worst. This implies a serious breakdown in the legitimacy of the regime in place, though that breakdown is fraught with fissures, contradictions, and unevenness. To swiftly conclude that the unevenness implies that the profit system has lost nothing in fundamental legitimacy would be absurd.

And, even for the much larger number of people who say they favor “socialism” because they favor social democratic reform, there is still reason for anti-capitalists to be very optimistic. After all, one of the key arguments for the revolutionary perspective proceeds by way of an *internal* critique of the social democratic reformist positions: Reformism doesn’t work on its own terms and must be supplemented by a break with capitalism to safeguard its own stated objectives. Thus, the social democrats of today could well turn out to be the revolutionaries of tomorrow. Moreover, there is an anti-capitalist logic to many of these social democratic reforms insofar as they propose decommodification, removing certain basic features of social and economic life from the profit-driven machinations of markets altogether. So, even the mere popularization of social democratic reforms to the system bodes well for the anti-capitalist revolutionary.

What of the legitimacy of the state proper, however? Chibber is correct to say that the U.S. state enjoys a basic legitimacy that is more deeply felt and more widely shared than was true of any capitalist state in Europe in the early twentieth century. But this “basic legitimacy” is hardly a ringing, enthusiastic endorsement on the part of the masses—it largely takes the form of an assumption that our existing state institutions are “natural” or “inevitable” because they are rarely challenged or even questioned.

To be sure, there is a broad consensus among center-left and center-right figures in media, politics, universities, and so on who happily drink the American exceptionalist Kool-Aid and buy the hype about the United States being the “greatest country on earth.” But there is also a massive layer of people—overwhelmingly poor and working-class—who rarely vote or participate in the electoral system, who are deeply alienated from formal politics, who are deeply distrustful of the officials who administer the state. And, even among those who do vote regularly, a variety of polls surveying support for Congress or the two dominant parties register deep dissatisfaction. Now, it’s true that dissatisfaction and apathy aren’t necessarily energies destined to buoy the radical left. But, all things considered, the variety of factors surveyed hardly constitute an unbreachable firewall against revolution rooted in a deep, widely shared belief in the legitimacy of the existing order.

What of the more highly developed repressive and surveillance apparatuses of modern states? Here Chibber is on firmer ground. The realities of modern military technology mean that the question of violence arises in a form quite unlike the way it confronted earlier generations of revolutionaries. The classical position still strikes me as the correct starting point: Social revolutions from below are not necessarily violent, that is, their *sine qua non* is not the resort to armed struggle but mass resistance to the status quo on the part of the vast majority of the population. The essence of revolution, as Trotsky once put it, is the “forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership of their own destiny.”⁹ A revolution is a mass uprising in which the vast majority of the working population shatters the illusion that the status quo is inescapable, casts aside the institutions and representatives of the old order, and intransigently demands new, radically democratic ways of proceeding.

Still, the question of violence remains. The classic position would have been that if violence should be required, it largely will only be needed as a means of self-defense from counter-revolutionary forces. This is a useful starting point. But the real difficulty concerns what to do if the old ruling class attempts to use state violence to repress the revolutionary movement. The assumption of earlier revolutionaries was that the police would cling tenaciously to the old order no matter what—they simply could not be turned in favor of the revolution and must be delegitimized, disarmed, and disbanded. But the hope remained that large sections of rank and file soldiers could be won over to the revolutionary movement. In a revolutionary situation, soldiers will, at some point, be forced to choose sides and determine whether they’ll repress the mass movement or refuse their orders and oppose the old order. Thus, the success or failure of the movement will depend to a large extent on which way the rank and file of the military breaks.

The prospect of a mass socialist current within the armed forces might strike many readers as unrealistic. Does this rule out a rupture in the long run? Here I'd like to emphasize the dynamic, educational force of mass struggles for reform under the current system. From where we're sitting today, the might of the military-industrial complex seems so powerful as to be practically invincible. But after significant reductions in military spending, an end to war and occupation abroad, and a profound shift in the political consciousness of ordinary working people toward a broadly socialist worldview, the military machine looks a lot less daunting. So, too, does it look less invincible once we consider the full history of self-organization and resistance by rank and file soldiers in the U.S. military. What's more, I agree with Chibber that the power of capital and the state must be loosened up and weakened in the short run by legislation and reform.

But it's worth noting that even relatively mild-mannered reformist governments of the left have been met with armed right-wing resistance or have faced coups—so, in this respect, revolutionaries aren't alone in needing to cope with the problem of state coercion or paramilitary right-wing violence. The revolutionary wager, however, must be based on a mass movement with enough popular participation, self-confidence, and disruptive potential to carry the struggle through to completion. And so, too, must the movement transcend the framework of the nation-state and frame its task in international terms. An isolated uprising will be condemned to failure so long as it doesn't spread and draw on the solidarity of uprisings elsewhere. The key question here, however, is not one of military strategy per se: It is whether revolutionary movements can garner enough popular support and generate adequate levels of mass participation in strikes, demonstrations, spontaneous forms of bottom-up democracy like workers councils, and so on.

But the ruling class has many weapons at its disposal besides violence and coercion. As Chibber notes, the ruling class is better organized and has a much more dynamic capacity to respond to threats from below than it did a century ago. However, although it is true that the ruling class's means of responding to threats is more sophisticated, its capacity to quell revolt through co-optation and pro-worker concessions is also quite limited, for two reasons. First, the world economy entered a period of profound crisis in 2007 that was "fixed" through massive state intervention to save ruling-class financial institutions that exchanged toxic private debt for public debt. Though the freefall came to an end, healthy and sustained economic growth has not returned.¹⁰ This means the next crisis will be one in which the previous "solution" of massive state spending to prop up profits will not be an option in the way it was last time around. Thus, we can expect even more severe austerity in response to another recession.

Second, the long period of neoliberal dominance means that the theory and practice of austerity is deeply ingrained among those in the state and the ruling class. Thus, even if reforms to quell revolt would be tactically useful for maintaining long-run ruling class dominance, the ruling class personnel we actually have are not likely to reach for that option. They are more likely to give us more of the thin gruel of austerity and cutbacks. What welfare-state reform measures we're able to win in the coming years will be solely the result of militant struggles against capital. Indeed, to the extent that there is any current ruling-class support for extremely modest welfare-state expansion, it is because of the growing threat posed by the nascent socialist movement and the ongoing strike wave in the public sector.

Because struggle against the employers will be needed to win any reforms in the near term, we can expect any victories to be confidence-building, not demobilizing or co-opting. Winning Medicare for All, for example, wouldn't demobilize workers but would (in all likelihood) boost militancy and lay the groundwork for even more radical changes in the future.

The suffocating effect of "pro-capitalist common sense" is more troublesome and less easily slayed. But the fact that it is not, even now, so totalizing as to pre-empt any anti-capitalist consciousness is

reason to be hopeful. Indeed, if it were insurmountable we wouldn't be seeing the widespread (and still growing) radicalization that's underway today. The theoretical basis for the incompleteness of pro-capitalist common sense derives, in the first instance, from workers' daily experience of exploitation and subordination on the job. This, in turn, inevitably produces conflict and resistance between workers and capital, which brushes against the grain of the platitudes we're fed about the virtues of "free enterprise" and "market efficiency." Thus, what capitalism produces is not seamless, robotic defenders of the system but a legion marked by mixed and uneven consciousness that contains both pro-capitalist and subversive elements all at once.¹¹

A deeper problem, however, concerns the profound sense in which our identity—our very sense of who we are—under capitalism becomes tied up with consumption habits and market activity. Perry Anderson, in his new preface to *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci* (2018), suggests that this obstacle is perhaps the most troublesome for those who wish to transcend capitalist social relations. Does this rule out a mass revolutionary movement aiming to break with capitalism?

Not necessarily. Anderson overstates the magnitude of the obstacle posed by our love affair with consumption. For starters, the goal of socialism is not (in the first instance) to produce *fewer* goods and services, but to change the social relations of power governing the production and distribution of those goods and services. Thus, the idea that revolutionary socialists must persuade people to "do with less" is largely based on a false premise: Socialism is not opposed to abundance, but aims to make abundance accessible to the masses instead of just the wealthy few. As it is sometimes put, "No luxury is 'too good' for the working class." Marx's vision of socialism was one of shared abundance, democratic self-governance, increased leisure time, and radically decreased toil.¹²

IV.

Here another obstacle to revolution presents itself: If the institutional structure of a post-capitalist society cannot be shown to be both feasible and desirable in advance of a revolutionary rupture, then how could it ever be rational to undertake the considerable burdens and sacrifices necessary to build a revolutionary movement and carry it forward to completion? Worse still: If the institution typically held up as the foundation of post-capitalist societies—economic planning—is fraught with problems or hasn't been sufficiently tried out in practice, then this obstacle becomes all the more difficult to overcome.

According to Chibber, "We have to start with the observation that the expectation of a centrally planned economy simply replacing the market has no empirical foundation. We can want planning to work, but we have no evidence that it can. Every attempt to put it in place for more than short durations has met with failure. The Russian experience is the most elaborate example of that." He continues, "Any discussion has to proceed with a close examination of the Soviet experience, to try to assess if its failure was due to the particular way planning was instituted, or whether the lesson is that a modern industrial economy is just not amenable to planning." For Chibber, this "failure has to be acknowledged, not sidestepped. It won't do to say, as many Marxists do, that 'that wasn't really socialism, so it doesn't count.'"

A full defense of socialist planning is clearly beyond the purview of the present essay.¹³ And I fully agree with Chibber that the burden of proof in debates about post-capitalist economies falls on socialists who defend planning. We need good reason to think that alternatives to the market are both feasible and desirable when compared with the real-world experience we have of market-based economies. The desirability of some state of affairs is moot if it's simply not feasible to bring it about now or in the foreseeable future.

In lieu of trying to give a robust positive case for planning, then, I'll take issue with the way Chibber

interprets the failure of Soviet planning. First, with deference to Chibber, I actually *do* think it's crucial to begin by stressing that the Soviet version of planning "wasn't really socialism," provided of course that we specify exactly what that means. Robert Brenner's take on this question is exemplary so I'll quote from it generously to make my case:

Most observers in the West and ruling groups in the East blame the system's problems [on its] reliance on planning—as opposed to the market—believing that planning per se cannot work except in the most ineffective manner.

But these observers fail to see that the effectiveness of either plan or market can only be assessed in relation to the system of social relations in which each functions. The failure of planning under the bureaucratic system must be understood in terms of its system of social relationships.¹⁴

For Brenner, the system of social relations in the Soviet system was one in which a bureaucratic ruling class dominated and exploited a class of direct producers, the working class. As he puts it, it is this "particular form of antagonism of the working class by the bureaucracy—in the workplace and vis-a-vis the state—that constitutes the central barrier for the system in securing efficient allocation and increasing productivity." To see that this is so, we have only to examine the situation of workers under such a system. "Because they control neither their output (surplus) nor their means of production, working people have no incentive either to improve their labor or to provide the information on their own local production that the planners need to plan and coordinate."

In short, because of the lack of liberty and democracy within the bureaucratic Soviet system, "most workers as well as many bureaucrats and managers find it reasonable to adopt patterns of economic activity that work against the system's efforts to coordinate and develop the productive forces." And it is precisely to the extent that this social system lacked liberty and democracy that it does not deserve to be called socialist. Thus, even though there is much we can learn from the failures (and limited successes) of Soviet planning, it is a serious political error to classify the discontents of the Soviet system as failures *of socialism*.

If this is correct, the viability of planning as an alternative to the market is not simply a technical question but a political one that ultimately hangs on the feasibility of large-scale democratic self-governance. If we are pessimistic about the feasibility of democratic decision-making on social and economic priorities, then democratic planning is not likely to be seen as a serious option. But socialists base their political project on the idea that, all else equal, we should prefer democratic decision-making over alternatives in every sphere of social life. Thus, unless Chibber would like to walk back the confidence socialists have in democratic decision-making in general, it's unclear to me why we should be so skeptical about its prospects with respect to democratic economic planning in particular.

V.

Still, the question remains: How do we get from capitalism to something qualitatively different? No one is in a position to decisively answer this question for certain right now. But this much is clear: We have to find ways to take advantage of every opportunity to increase working-class confidence and organization, no matter how small or partial it might be. Revolutionaries must be deeply involved in day-to-day struggles for reforms, because they make the lives of workers better but also because they teach workers how to fight. And we've got to actually win some of these reforms in the here-and-now in order to convince people that it's worth it to engage in collective action and challenge the bosses. The case for solidaristic strategies for change can only be won by example. What's more, we need to succeed in decommodifying basic social goods in order to prove that alternatives to the market are feasible and worth fighting for.

But, though necessary for revolutionary change, robust fights for reforms are not themselves sufficient. Another ingredient is needed: layers of organized revolutionary workers who can act independently, in a coordinated fashion, to win the masses to the idea that going beyond capitalism is possible and worth fighting for. This layer cannot be a small sect or party outside the class. It must be a collection of respected working-class fighters who've spent a long time winning trust by engaging in the struggle against capital to win reforms. And these fighters must be prepared for and expect that social democracy will reach a crossroads wherein the choice will be to maintain capitalism at all costs or to maintain pro-worker reforms by going beyond capitalism. This crossroads will arise because capitalism inevitably produces crises that, as we've seen, undercut the capitalist profits that serve as the material basis for delivering social democratic reforms. Those unwilling to go beyond capitalism will then be obliged to impose austerity, break strikes, discipline rebellion, and do whatever it takes to reestablish favorable conditions for capitalist profit-making. If nobody prepares for this crossroads, it is highly unlikely that a revolutionary transformation can be achieved.

What is it possible to do, however, to prepare for such a state of affairs? There's no easy answer here, and history, to the extent that it will prove useful at all for revolutionaries today, is mostly a guide to what *not* to do. Rather than Russia in 1917, socialists today would be better served to examine the failure to break with capitalism in Chile in 1973, on the one hand, and in Sweden in 1976, on the other.¹⁵ In Chile in 1973, a government sincerely committed to building socialism via the parliamentary road was violently repressed by an employer-backed (and U.S.-sponsored) coup. Many revolutionaries draw the conclusion that Allende should have "armed the workers," but this is too facile an explanation for the defeat of the left in this case. A deeper problem lay with a flawed conception of the state and a flawed strategy for achieving radical change that leaned too heavily on existing institutions to get the job done. Had workers been better able to act independently in a coordinated fashion to defeat the old ruling class, without illusions that the parliamentary road would be open, it might have been possible to achieve a break and lay the groundwork for building new, genuinely democratic institutions to replace those of the old state machinery.

Though very different of course, the situation in Sweden in the 1970s holds similar lessons. During this period, a leftist government with a serious commitment to going beyond capitalist control of the means of production attempted to move toward a break. For reasons that all socialists should study closely, however, the effort was defeated. In the end, the resistance of the capitalist class was sufficient to defeat those who wished to break with private control of the means of production—but this was hardly inevitable. Indeed, the battle may have ended differently if there had been a bigger, more powerful movement of militants and revolutionaries capable of acting independently of the social democratic party and the trade union federations.

What of the classic Leninist argument that an additional ingredient—a revolutionary party of working-class militants forged in struggle and trained in Marxist theory—supplies the key leavening needed to activate the other elements?¹⁶ The case for some such entity must, at this point, be tentative and deliberately vague insofar as we cannot know, in abstraction from experimentation and concrete experience, exactly what sort of organizational forms might be best suited to facilitating a break with capitalism in moments of upheaval. Nonetheless, a number of general propositions can be defended in light of what we've said above.

First, the failure to break with capitalism in the two cases above, and in others, cannot solely be attributed to strategic failures by actors making decisions in good faith. There is a material basis for doubting that the trade union bureaucracy and the professional politicians who lead reformist parties will have the motivation and epistemic framework to grasp what will be necessary to break with capitalism. These two social groups will, given their location in the system, tend—all else equal—to favor action that preserves their social standing and react skeptically toward more risky

courses of action that open up the possibility of losing their position. They will tend to have an undue faith in the effectiveness of the institutions of capitalist democracy. For example, the trade union bureaucracy will tend to favor stable bargaining relationships rather than risky actions that aim to abolish the capitalist property relations on which collective bargaining depends. The professional “politicos” at the helm of social democratic political parties will tend, all else equal, to favor what produces short-run electoral victories and what conduces to their capacity to “govern effectively” within the framework of capitalist democracy. These aren’t iron laws that bind every agent in these social locations against their will. But these institutional contexts do place enormous pressure on these actors that will, all else equal, create a tendency for them to act in a particular way. To the extent that these actors break with this tendency they will be swimming against the stream. Here is where the case for a revolutionary core of working-class activists begins. These activists cannot simply permeate the leadership of the unions and the workers parties and attempt to steer them from above, since they would be subject to the very same pressures as the extant leadership. They must, on the contrary, be rooted in the rank and file of the movements and engaged in the day-to-day struggle of the class—for two reasons. First, this releases them from the conservatizing pressures of officialdom imposed on union bureaucrats and parliamentary politicians. Second, and more importantly, this core of revolutionaries—a “militant minority,” as Charlie Post puts it—must be rooted in, and respected by, a broad layer of working-class activists who are in a position to act independently, when necessary, to push reluctant union leaders and politicians to go further than they’d like to go.¹⁷ This militant minority has to be able to successfully argue for and win broad layers of workers to fighting collectively in the workplaces and the streets to confront the ruling class and thereby force the official leadership of the working-class movement to choose sides between the capitalists and the working masses.

If this crucial militant minority is absent, a number of hurdles for the workers movement are harder to clear. First, the routines of capitalist democracy encourage a certain passivity and deference on the part of the working masses: “Sit back and we, the politicians and union leaders, will fight and deliver reforms for you.” We can expect a certain unevenness and mixed consciousness among workers on this score; on the one hand, this passivity will be part of “common sense,” but on the other hand there will also be a sense of urgency and militancy that is at odds with this perspective. Which tendency will win out? Only struggle can determine that—and for this reason, the radical left has to be persistent in building organic working-class leaders who are rooted in the class and able to win the masses to independent action when necessary. But—and this is crucial—to be effective, this militant minority needs to be aware of the history of attempts to break with capitalism and needs to be freed from illusions about the effectiveness of capitalist democracy to deliver real, lasting change.

VI.

If this defense of revolutionary rupture with capitalism is successful, what are the strategic implications for socialists today? I wouldn’t presume to know what form of organization this militant minority ought to adhere to. We have more examples of what does not work than we do of healthy, democratic revolutionary groupings. Regardless of how they’re organized, this much is clear if the above is correct: Revolutionaries must be totally immersed in the socialist movement and in the trade union movement. Propagandizing from the sidelines is a non-starter. What’s more, revolutionaries must immerse themselves in struggles for reform in the here-and-now. In this sense, revolutionary strategy converges with Chibber’s defense of fighting for “non-reformist reforms.” This must be the priority both because reforms improve workers’ lives and also, more importantly, because they raise consciousness, teach workers how to fight, and lay the groundwork for more ambitious changes in the future.

So, the divide here between revolutionaries committed to rupture and those, like Chibber, who favor a more gradualist approach will not be one that pits those fighting for reforms against purists who

favor “revolution or bust.” There will be some divergence, however, when it comes to which strategies best advance the struggle for reforms. For revolutionaries, the precariousness of reforms under capitalism and the structural pressures on state officials means that a militant, rank and file workers movement is key. Thus, there might be a tendency for gradualists to overemphasize gaining state power in the short run and underemphasize the importance of building a militant minority within the workers movement that is capable of mobilizing masses of workers to engage in disruptive strike actions in order to impose their will on the employers. On the flipside, however, revolutionaries might be prone to adopting an ultra-left position that overemphasizes extraparlimentary organizing and leaves no space for electoral work to advance the class struggle or win reforms.

In my opinion, the pro-rupture position pushes us to avoid both of these mistaken positions. On the one hand, revolutionaries have every reason to participate in electoral political organizing where and when this can win greater numbers to socialism, increase working-class consciousness and combativity, and build the socialist left. This, after all, is the essential work that must be done to even get close to a context in which a genuine rupture might be possible. Nonetheless, the case for rupture cautions us against being naive or over-optimistic about the prospects of abolishing capitalism through parliamentary maneuvering. So, too, does the case for rupture emphasize that electoral work must be seen as a *vehicle* for building mass workers movements capable of taking matters into their own hands. It is not an end in itself nor is it a substitute for that work. It would be ultra-left and empirically baseless to say that political organizing within the capitalist state is in no way an effective tool for advancing this work. It would be a different kind of mistake, however, to say that it is alone sufficient to move beyond capitalism.

Notes

1. Vivek Chibber, “Our Road to Power,” *Jacobin* (Dec. 2017).
2. For more on this distinction, see Robert Brenner, “The Problem of Reformism,” *Against the Current* (March-April 1993).
3. Nicholas Vrousalis has, in a number of recent articles, given the most rigorous and convincing defense of this claim to date. See, e.g., Vrousalis, “Exploitation: A Primer,” *Philosophy Compass* (vol. 13, no. 2, Feb. 2018) and “Exploitation as Domination: A Response to Arneson,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (vol. 54, no. 4, Dec. 2016). That the capitalist mode of production requires domination can be inferred both from the tyrannical authority relations in capitalist workplaces, on the one hand, and from the various ways in which capitalism makes genuine political democracy impossible by systematically privileging the interests of capital at the expense of labor. For a non-Marxist defense of the first claim, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton: 2017). For a defense of the second claim, see Claus Offe and Volker Ronge, “Theses on the Theory of the State,” *New German Critique* (no. 6, Autumn 1975).
4. For a defense of this claim, see Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (Verso: 2006).
5. For detailed defenses of this claim, see Robert Brenner, “The Paradox of Social Democracy,” in Mike Davis et al., eds., *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook, Volume 1* (Schocken: 1985) and Fred Block, “The Ruling Class Doesn’t Rule,” *Socialist Revolution* (May 1977).
6. What I mean is this: The feasibility of reforming U.S. capitalism from within becomes even less plausible once we acknowledge that its basic institutions arose in the context of racialized chattel slavery, indigenous expropriation and genocide, imperial expansion and conquest, etc. I’ve tried to

make the case here in a way that brackets these realities, not to downplay their significance, but in order to make the strongest possible case against capitalism. If a counter-factual, non-racist, non-imperialist capitalism cannot be defended from my critique, *so much the worse* for the actual capitalist system we have that is inescapably bound up with racial oppression and imperialism.

7. For a theoretical defense of this claim, see Christopher McCammon, "Domination: A Re-thinking," *Ethics* (vol. 125, no. 4, July 2015).

8. Chibber, "Our Road to Power."

9. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Haymarket: 2018).

10. Robert Brenner, "What's Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America: The Origins of the Present Crisis" (2009), 11. Chris Harman, "Gramsci, the Prison Notebooks and Philosophy," *International Socialism* (No.114, Spring 2007).

11. Chris Harman, "Gramsci, the Prison Notebooks and Philosophy," *International Socialism* (No.114, Spring 2007).

12. G.A. Cohen's Marxism, for all its faults, is exemplary in steadfastly emphasizing this dimension of socialist thought. His 1985 televised lecture on the BBC, "Against Capitalism," remains an accessible and succinct statement of his views on this matter. For a more detailed version, see his *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: 1978), especially the chapter "Marxian Illustrations."

13. For such a defense, however, see Pat Devine, *Democracy and Economic Planning* (Polity: 2010) and Ernest Mandel, "A Defense of Socialist Planning," *New Left Review* (I/159, Sept.-Oct. 1986). For shorter remarks on the matter, see Tyler Zimmer, "On Democracy and Socialism: A Reply to Seth Ackerman," *Jacobin* (Jan. 20, 2013).

14. Robert Brenner, "The Soviet Union & Eastern Europe, Part I," *Against the Current* (ATC 30, Jan.-Feb. 1991).

15. See Colin Barker, ed., *Revolutionary Rehearsals* (Haymarket: 2007) for a collection of essays that reflect on the failure of a number of revolutionary movements in the second half of the twentieth century. The chapters on May '68 in Paris and Chile in 1973 are especially worth reading. On the failure of the Meidner Plan in Sweden in the 1970s, see Jonas Pontusson, "Radicalization and Retreat in Swedish Social Democracy," *New Left Review*, (I/185, Sept.-Oct. 1987).

16. More so than even Marx himself, Lenin's ideas and writings on this question are the subject of intense misrepresentation on both the left and the right. For a useful corrective, see Norman Geras, "Lenin, Trotsky, and the Party" and "Classical Marxism and Proletarian Representation" in *Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism* (Verso: 1986).

17. Charlie Post, "The New Militant Minority," *Jacobin* (June 5, 2015).