

# Reconnecting Reform and Revolution: Socialists in the Mist

July 26, 2018



If one thing was clear coming out of the New York City Democratic Socialists of America's May 5 convention, it was that most delegates uniformly consider themselves socialists and aspire to build an anti-corporate resistance movement nationwide. So far, so good.

It was also clear a solid majority—including this writer—think some range of electoral activity in support of left-leaning Democratic Party electeds and aspirants is called for, though too few offer even a dollop of sympathy for insurgent independent and third-party efforts, which are no less tactical interventions that should never be proscribed. Yet when it comes to propounding a socialist program, those reds among us who have ever worked in Democratic clubs or in independent electoral efforts rarely if ever push the kinds of demands that challenge the capitalist system at its root. We hesitate at our peril.

Our reticence is explained in part because the range of the permissible is so circumscribed it becomes self-censorship. We want to appear practical and not alienate allies who agree with us on shorter-term issues. We want to avoid being caricatured as dreamers and vocal dilettantes or being called "revolutionary" socialists or worse.

Add to the fact that the leadership of most unions has no perspective beyond the next election cycle—witness their near total prostration in New York state before the vindictive, corporate-bought Andrew Cuomo and the studied indifference toward the excellent Gayle McLaughlin's uphill fight for Golden State lieutenant governor—or even beyond a potential internal union challenge, and swimming against the current comes with a price. In fact, despite our socialist coloration, we lefties add precious little in actual mass work to programmatic arguments that could spur movements and legislation in an anti-capitalist and genuinely "social" direction.

Despite the brave words espoused by two insurgent Democrats addressing the concluding session of the DSA conference, nothing they said was radical in rooting out corporate domination of everyday life. No systemic challenge to property or social relations was even hinted at. The fault was not theirs, in my opinion. They were framing in militant terms the short-term bounds of the electorally possible when not playing to the expectations of the crowd. DSA has a higher purpose, but sadly they and we are not meeting it.

Note that everything does not depend on us. Mass movements often are sparked by rank and file leaders with only the most casual relationships to socialist groups or even theory. The old joke that spontaneity means somebody else did the organizing—a good riposte to stage-managed orthodox Leninist preaching—is true enough, but it doesn't deny the crying need for anti-capitalist theorizing and for political programs whose winning would transcend capitalism. The much vaunted "base building" won't come from electoral activity alone, nor will "activism" writ large without confronting the question of activism for what ends. We can't just be the best builders of the movements, as

worthy a goal as that is. We need a turn toward theory and socialist—read anti-capitalist—program.

Neither is a blanket demand for “democracy” of much utility, even in the age of a demented Trump and a regressive neoliberalism. Of course the mass of people should choose, but choose what? What are the choices? What is the left offering in the way of choice?

A turn toward theory—actually a course correction, and not initially a major one, I believe—points to the necessity of doing what contemporary mass movements miss.

Take the demand for free education from pre-K through college. It’s a good demand—who but a right-wing elitist would oppose it?—but it doesn’t in itself begin a critique of capitalist education, whether in furthering its democratic nature or in challenging curricula. What is gained if business school pedagogy remains unchanged, if economics remains the terrain of free-market ideology, if the social sciences remain compartmentalized, if vocational education is widely available but limited to business’ quotidian needs, and if schooling is largely hermetically sealed from creative work in all but the arts and experimental colleges?

Or take the crisis in housing. Sure, we can rightly abrade electeds for not vigorously supporting rent control, and we can get outraged at the rise of luxury housing treated as a trading commodity that leads to hundreds of thousands of vacant lux apartments in cities waiting for high income buyers even as homelessness swells. But at a mass statewide housing rally in New York in mid-June demanding rent-stabilization and just-cause eviction laws, and lambasting the state’s laggard governor as a witting tool of his real-estate funders, just one speaker made the sage intersectional connection between the housing crisis and related social ills, noting how precarious housing is a health care issue, too.

In New York City, we can and should blast the City Council for limiting its oversight to housing authority headaches after the fact and for favoring land use, zoning, and public-private development schemes as the sharp edges of housing policy, but we leave buried the old socialist chestnut of nationalizing large private holdings. Our housing crisis stems from corporate control. Who if not us will address that programmatically?

Then there are the depredations of the financial sectors. Who among lefties in Democratic Party spheres is raising nationalization of the banks, with or without workers’ control, as a viable, rational, necessary, and winnable program? Who is militating against crimes of the finance, insurance, and real estate sector that will cause the next financial bubble’s bursting? Not yet at least are comrades itching to do Democratic Party electoral work ostensibly as socialists.

The same weakness persists in the righteous demand of Medicare for All, a policy that is itself a vast improvement over single-payer, but only the beginning of wisdom. Of course Medicare for All would be a body blow to the insurance industry and bring accessible, quality care to many more millions. That’s reason enough to support it, not to mention its capacity to engage millions more in a struggle to win it. But in itself it will do nothing to democratize medicine or collapse the insane specializations that plague the disabled and older, retired Americans for whom primary care physicians are only traffic cops on the road to a plethora of specialists. Much of leisure time is barely leisurely for many seniors, who are on a first-name basis with as many as a dozen of their widely scattered healers. Without de-emphasizing the demand of Medicare for All, a vital and winnable reform, socialized medicine and reducing private practices to the bare minimum should be part of our radical credo, too.

Here’s the problem: It’s as if our socialist politics is religiously understood but inapplicable to politics except as the most moderate of ethical reforms. It’s as though we self-described socialists

are Marxists in faith but not so much in fact. At our best we are radicals capable in many admirable cases of critiquing the system sharply enough in thought and on the page but moving against it only hesitantly and under heavy restraint, explained as *realpolitik* and excused in some extreme cases as transactional politics, or what is in reality “too little, too late.”

We say among ourselves—at least those of us honest enough to say it and not afraid of being branding as sectarians—that Bernie Sanders is barely a socialist. We know that although his domestic politics are a breath of fresh air in a fetid clime (though his foreign policy planks are not much removed from the Clintonesque), they are at best rehashed New Deal liberalism, yet some sections of the left are already thinking of how to integrate their work with a possible Bernie boomlet in 2020. That preparatory move may even be tactically wise, facilitating outreach, and so on, but it also abrogates any possibility of these Bernie-entranced boosters acting as articulators of an anti-capitalist point of view, except over coffee. We indeed have things in common with Our Revolution, the staff-dominated Sanders operation, but our many differences can't be submerged.

Note that in my calling for a course correction toward theorizing our politics to develop a rigorous socialist program for the twenty-first century, I'm not advocating taking the exit ramp to terminal program mongering, the disease of small sects. I am suggesting that if we socialists don't look at how a systemic critique of capital can be hammered into a popular political program encompassing what Occupy and Podemos did so well—at least symbolically—as one that offers a real-action critique of the depredations of vampire capitalism and that instrumentally connects reform to revolution—Andre Gorz's radical reform, if you will—then all our work, whether as inside or outside of the Democratic Party or a mix of both—will be just window dressing.

This means putting more of an emphasis on developing program, both to complement organizing work and to spur basic education. I'm talking about an internal education effort by DSA and other left organizations that goes beyond trainings to developing critical theory. A lot of discussion at the aforementioned New York DSA convention seemed to be battling shadows. Some comrades chastised others for being insufficiently Marxist by tamping down class-struggle ideas and mistakenly heralding reform as of prime value in and of itself. Others treated Marxist categories as so much empty rhetoric that got in the way of real organizing and was blind to the needs of reform, something eminently winnable and capable of a mass following.

In a less confrontational moment, I believe comrades would agree—or should agree—that “reform” and “revolution” are not counterpoised, and that the revolutionary pantheon from Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lukacs, Alexandra Kollontai, Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Michael Harrington (at least the young Michael Harrington) would all agree. Like the arc of the universe, the list is long, but it bends toward justice.

We can even learn from the ventures of Britain's Jeremy Corbyn, who, while no revolutionary either in theory or inclination, can be credited with contributing to the objective conditions for a nationwide upsurge by building a mass extra-parliamentary movement as a catalyst for, and an adjunct to, a future left Labour government.

Where to begin? We needn't reinvent the wheel. Reintegrating Rosa Luxemburg's pioneering work is no stretch, either. Her writing is largely in print, and the second volume of her projected multi-volume collected works has just been realized, which is fortuitous, given that January 2019 will mark the hundredth anniversary of her murder by the proto-fascist Freikorps under the direction of the governing right-wing Social Democrats.

The sublime socialist makes clear that the two concepts “reform” and “revolution” are joined at the hip, something all wings of the socialist left tend to forget. The tragedy of social democracy for

Luxemburg was the Second International's disengaging of reform from revolution in practice if not in theory, resulting in the horror of all but three member parties supporting their own national bourgeoisies' murderous land grab efforts in the catastrophic World War I. If "revolution" absent reform is fools' gold, which it is, "reform" absent an anti-capitalist end is species extinction.

As Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*, the outcome of class struggle is "either a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or the common ruin of the contending classes." Pick one!

Luxemburg put it another way: "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism."

True that! We twenty-first century reds must do better.

## **Footnotes**