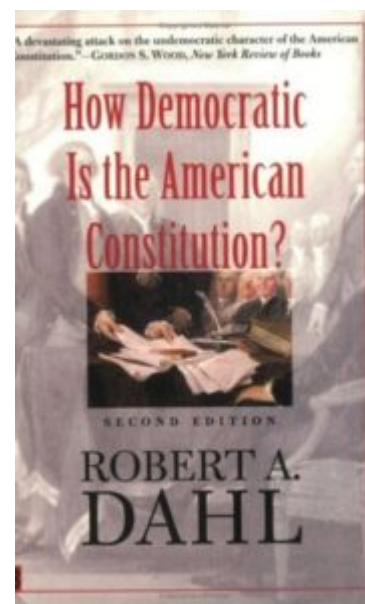


Marxism, the Democratic Republic, and the Undemocratic U.S. Constitution

The debate over socialist strategy that kicked off with Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign has now been going on for almost four years. Over that time parties to this debate have delved deeper into the history of socialism and Marxism in search of analogies and justifications to support their positions. Earlier this year there was an important discussion concerning the political legacy of Karl Kautsky on *Jacobin* involving James Muldoon,^[1] Charlie Post,^[2] and Eric Blanc;^[3] and now Dan La Botz's

recent review^[4] of Bhaskar Sunkara's *The Socialist Manifesto* has been added to the mix. Like all of these writers, I think it is useful to search through the history of Marxism for clues that might be helpful in understanding the political challenges we face in our own day, but the first requirement of such comparisons is that we get the history right. I think these writers get that history wrong in important ways. I'll start with La Botz because he starts with Marx.

La Botz's central historical and theoretical claim is that Marx changed his views on the nature of the capitalist state and the necessity of revolution after witnessing the Paris Commune of 1871. La Botz writes that before the Commune Marx initially held the view that socialists "might either through elections or a political revolution conquer the capitalist state and use it for their own purposes," but that after the



Commune Marx changed his mind and “came to believe that a revolution would be necessary to ‘smash the state’ and that a new temporary socialist state would have to be created on the road to communism.” La Botz uses this characterization of Marx’s views on the state and revolution to argue against Sunkara’s nonrevolutionary road to socialism.

The first part of La Botz’s claim is that after 1871 Marx no longer believed that a peaceful transition to socialism was possible; but in his *La Liberté* speech in 1872 after the last Congress of the International Workingmen’s Association and in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx still granted that a peaceful transition to socialism might be possible in some countries, as did Engels in his *Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic [Erfurt] Program of 1891*. Peaceful, however, did not mean directly through elections. No country in Europe in the nineteenth century was a democracy with universal and equal suffrage by which a workers’ government could be voted into office with the power to make laws. That is why Marx said in the *Communist Manifesto* that the first step in the revolution by the working class was to win the battle for democracy, and both Marx in *Gotha* and Engels in *Erfurt* repeated that the democratic republic (which they both equated with the dictatorship of the proletariat and which the Commune exemplified) was the form of the state through which the working class would come to power and rule until the dissolution of the state in communist society. For Marx and Engels, revolution in the broad sense meant the conquest of political power, whether by peaceful or violent means, and only in a separate narrower sense did it refer to the tactics of violent insurrection. La Botz just gets Marx’s and Engels’ thinking on these matters wrong. La Botz further misinterprets who Marx was arguing against when he said that the workers had to “smash the state.” La Botz suggests that Marx was critiquing his own previously held theory of the state, but the fact is that Marx first used the phrase “break the state” in 1852 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis*

Bonaparte. In regard to the Commune in 1871, Marx's admonition that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes" was directed not at his own previously held views but at those of Auguste Blanqui and his followers who had long envisioned seizing the state in a coup and imposing a Jacobin-style dictatorship. Marx also later directed the same criticism at the Lassaleans in Germany who did think they could bring about socialism by peaceful, electoral means in cooperation with the Prussian monarchy. In short, La Botz wants to cast Marx's political thinking as a binary choice between the tactics of peaceful electoral reform and violent revolution, which he says was resolved in Marx's mind by the example of the Paris Commune. Marx and Engels saw things differently. They were never advocates of a direct electoral road to socialism for the simple reason that no system of electoral democracy existed in Europe while they were alive. The primary political problem they faced was how to get democracy when you don't have it. Until the end of their days, they were advocates for the democratic republic, which they thought might be achieved relatively peacefully in some countries but most likely would involve violent conflict in the rigid autocracies of Germany and Eastern Europe. Whether peaceful or violent, they thought that winning the battle for democracy was the primary political goal of the working class and the precondition for the advance into socialism.

The parallel I now want to draw between Marx's and Engels' writings on the democratic republic and our situation here in the U.S. is that we don't have a democracy either. La Botz doesn't seem to be interested in this problem, but Sunkara is. In his list of travel tips on the road to a democratic socialist society, Sunkara rightly emphasizes that "We need to democratize our political institutions." (p. 233) He cites the absurdly disproportionate system of representation in the Senate, Trump's victory in the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote, the near impossibility of amending

the Constitution, and the desirability of replacing winner-take-all elections with proportional representation. However, despite these sensible observations, in other places he continues to refer to the U.S. as a "capitalist democracy" (p. 231) and proposes that "socialists must secure decisive majorities" in what he acknowledges are severely malapportioned legislatures. (p. 222) Sunkara muddles the meaning of democracy here, is too vague about what elections in an undemocratic political system are capable of accomplishing, and is silent on how exactly to go about making the political system truly democratic; and this vagueness pervades his entire survey of the history of socialism. The Kautsky debate at *Jacobin* gets a little more specific about these problems.

James Muldoon started off the Kautsky controversy with a defense of Kautsky's proposal for a "democratic road to socialism" that outlined a course midway between the liberalism of the post-WWI Social Democratic Party leadership and the Spartacist support for workers' councils. The problem with Muldoon's recommendation is that it is utterly disconnected from any sense of historical reality. By the time Kautsky wrote his "Guidelines for a Socialist Action Program" in late 1918 he was already an inconsequential political figure, and the "liberal" leaders of the Social Democratic Party to whom he was offering his program were already preparing to crush the workers' movement and the Spartacists with the aid of the Freikorps. Kautsky had already missed his chance to help build a mass movement for democracy and socialism in 1910 when he opposed Rosa Luxemburg's support of strikes and demonstrations demanding reform of the undemocratic Prussian voting system. Muldoon says that Kautsky supported a strategy that combined "contesting elections *and* building a strong workers' movement," but in practice Kautsky sided with the conservative leaders of the Social Democratic Party and favored winning elections in an undemocratic political system *over* building a

strong workers' movement demanding real democracy.

These same criticisms of Kautsky can be found in Charlie Post's response to Muldoon, but there is one important historical point that Post does not develop fully. Post does mention that Luxemburg supported the mass demonstrations and strikes for electoral reform that had broken out in Prussia and advocated raising these scattered protests to the level of a general political strike. He also mentions that Kautsky opposed these tactics as "premature," rejected Luxemburg's submissions to *Die Neue Zeit*, and sided with the Party leadership's tactic of focusing all its energy on the upcoming 1912 election. However, Post does not mention that this Prussian voting rights struggle did not stay confined to "reforms." Although the struggle began as a protest against the egregiously unequal Prussian system of political representation within the Prusso-German monarchical state, the conflict eventually escalated into a demand for the complete abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a democratic republic, a demand prohibited under the German censorship laws. This demand was considered revolutionary at the time because all Marxists, including Luxemburg and Lenin, still followed Marx and Engels' thinking that the democratic republic was the form of the state through which the workers would come to power and then rule. Post leaves out this part of the story. As he makes clear, Post, like La Botz, considers revolution to mean only one thing: insurrection against the capitalist state and the establishment of a system of workers' councils. Of course, Post is free to believe what he wants about current political conditions and revolutionary strategy, but he has left a hole in his historical account of what revolution meant to Marxists prior to the establishment of Bolshevik power and the invention of the new theory of a state comprised of workers' soviets.

In his response to Post, Eric Blanc is silent on the dispute between Luxemburg and Kautsky over the struggle for a

democratic republic. Blanc instead sets up his debate with Post about Kautsky's legacy as a disagreement over "how today's socialists respond to a central strategic question: How can class rule be overcome in a capitalist democracy?" This framing is doubly incongruous because pre-WWI Germany was not a democracy and neither is the U.S. today, as Blanc acknowledges at the end of his article when he refers to the United States' "extremely undemocratic political system." It seems that in his haste to reject the Leninist tactic of insurrection and justify participation in electoral politics, Blanc, like Sunkara, did not take the time to straighten out these inconsistencies. Yes, there are still some socialists who dream of a replay of the Bolshevik Revolution. Yes, they still fulminate against reformism, reject any involvement in the Democratic Party, and call for revolution and workers' councils; but countering just those political stances should give no sense of satisfaction that the job is done. The main problem facing the left in the U.S. today is not how to overcome class rule in a capitalist democracy but how to get democracy in the first place. That is what the dispute between Luxemburg and Kautsky in 1910 was about.

If I remember correctly, in his panel discussion of *The Socialist Manifesto* at the Socialism 2019 Conference, Sunkara said in passing that the recent explosion of interest in socialism was a "quirk." I think what he meant, first of all, is that no one foresaw how popular Bernie Sanders' primary run in 2016 would be or how his self-identification as a democratic socialist would fuel such a meteoric rise in the membership of the Democratic Socialists of America. Another part of this quirk is that Sanders' definition of socialism as a New Deal Economic Bill of Rights is not the traditional definition of socialism as ownership and control of the means of production, hence the ongoing discussions in the DSA, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, and other socialist publications about how to relate to what is undeniably a genuine mass movement within the Democratic Party led by a self-declared socialist

whose policies don't really add up to socialism. But there is also another quirky part to this debate that goes back to the original creation of *Jacobin*. Seth Ackerman's article, "Burn the Constitution," appeared in *Jacobin's* second issue. Since then there have been numerous articles on the undemocratic structure of the U.S. Constitution on the *Jacobin* website, many of them by Daniel Lazare, author of the ground-breaking 1996 book, *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralyzing Democracy*. There have also been many articles recording the unending struggle of workers, socialists, and Marxists for democratic rights and institutions beginning with the Chartists and continuing to the present day. It wouldn't have taken much for Sunkara and Ackerman to put two and two together to arrive at the conclusion that the primary political task in the U.S. is to win the battle for democracy as the precondition for the advance into socialism, as proposed straightforwardly by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* and *Gotha*, by Engels in *Erfurt*, by Luxemburg in *Theory and Practice*, and by all of Lenin (until 1918) as documented by Neil Harding and Lars Lih. Instead they have opted to cobble together a strange hybrid that seeks to combine winning elections in an admittedly undemocratic political system with building mass struggles aimed at defending the legislative gains resulting from those electoral victories. It is not likely that things will work out that way. Long before there will be legislative gains to defend, progressive legislative proposals on the "democratic road to socialism" will be blocked by an undemocratic political structure, throwing the movement back into the realization (which, of course, it already knows) that we don't live in a democracy. The battle to democratize the political system is not just a plank among others in a democratic socialist platform: it is the leading edge of the class political struggle that makes socialism possible. Kautsky and the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party always waffled and temporized on this issue. Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, and the democratic Lenin did not.

- [\[1\]](#) "Reclaiming the Best of Karl Kautsky," *Jacobin*, 1/5/2019
- [\[2\]](#) "The 'Best' of Karl Kautsky Isn't Good Enough," 3/9/2019
- [\[3\]](#) "Kautsky Was Right (and Why You Should Care)," 4/2/2019
- [\[4\]](#) "The Socialist Manifesto of Bhaskar Sunkara of Jacobin: Socialism without Revolution," *New Politics*, 7/3/2019