

Rethinking Socialism From Below in the Age of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter

June 30, 2020



On April 9, the day after Bernie Sanders announced he would suspend his campaign for the U.S. presidency, the newly formed Greater Lafayette Indiana chapter of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) held its biweekly Zoom meeting. The chapter had come to life in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, made up of long-time local radicals and activists, and an upstart contingent of college students who had built a vital and dynamic YDSA (Young DSA) on the local college campus. The Zoom call that night was dedicated mainly to figuring out how to raise money to buy plastic bottles for an environmentally safe hand sanitizer created by one of the members. The plan was to distribute the bottles in public places to raise consciousness and public health standards during the pandemic. No one on the call talked at all about Sanders' withdrawal, except to note that the local student group backing Sanders had decided in the wake of his campaign suspension to cast its support for the new YDSA group.

Fast forward to June 6, the day of a second Black Lives Matter protests in Lafayette, Indiana. About 300 local people turned out at the local courthouse to agitate and demand for police abolition and defunding. More than 30 members of the same local DSA contingent were present, almost all of them white. They had come to march, and had brought water bottles, medical supplies, surplus masks and snacks to distribute to a teeming crowd on a sweltering summer afternoon.

We begin with these two anecdotes because they complicate and challenge recent discursive analysis on the U.S. left about the shape of class-conscious politics in our time. Facebook hot takes and articles written for publications like *Left Voice* have floated a tenuous thesis that DSA as an organization has been hijacked by Berniecrats and "class reductionists," narrowing the group's political perspective in dangerous ways. Similarly, arguments have been floated that DSA, especially its sometimes mouthpiece *Jacobin*, have class-first politics that have kept the organization from full-throated support for the massive rebellions against racist police violence that have energized and thrilled so many of us. We are not interested here in defending DSA as an organization, or *Jacobin* as a publication from these criticisms. Yet we are interested in how they emblemize a running problem, or challenge, to members of the U.S. revolutionary Left. That challenge is both to make peace with, and make sense of, something of far more political significance than the plight of DSA or

Jacobin: namely, the messy and unruly shape of socialism in our time as a political theory and lived practice.

Our thesis, simply put, is that conventional assessments of what constitutes socialism and socialism from below in the U.S. in this historical moment need to begin with participatory observation of how in fact socialism is being conceived of, thought of, debated, and most importantly *practiced* by a new, radicalized generation. As evident from our opening anecdotes, careful attention to the granular detail of political practice in the U.S. on the broad socialist Left indicates a vast variety of creative, exuberant political meaning-making that has exceeded easy explanatory frameworks of how anti-capitalist and anti-racist politics work. Indeed, if we have learned anything from the past few months, it is that political consciousness is, as Walter Benjamin reminded us, quite capable of self-actualizing “leaps” that both synthesize our experience of capitalist history, and rupture our “concept” of what that history can mean.

This brings us to our second, fundamental thesis on the urgency of the task before us: namely, that since 2011, the major revolutionary socialist groups in the global north—a vast swath of human political activism—have splintered and fragmented into a near state of institutional insignificance (or disappearance) just as socialism *as an idea* has enjoyed the greatest fluorescence of the past 100 years for working-class people, people of color, LGBTQ, trans, immigrant and other people. Put another way, revolutionary socialist organizations—especially those in the tradition coming down to us from the International Socialist Tendency—have sped down one train track of history, while radical history has gone in a different direction altogether.

Here we wish to think more on why this is so, and how, in the name of a stronger, more vital and more expansive revolutionary socialism, we can help converge these moments. We think doing so begins with an appreciation of where this new revolutionary consciousness of which we speak comes from, and where it does not. We will pose this difference, for the sake of argument, as a difference between an *idealized* theory and version of socialism and socialism from below, and one rooted in a materialist account of how the current moment of socialism in the U.S. has arrived.

We think that the current socialist radicalization has roots in places underappreciated by the revolutionary Left. The first is the 2007-2008 financial meltdown. That generational event disrupted and displaced the lives of many young people born just before or around the turn of the 21st century who now constitute a wide swath of those in the American streets and in groups like DSA. For the sake of argument and convenience, let’s call them Generation TV (*Teen Vogue*). They are, like the generation that experienced 2007-2008, multiracial and multi-gendered, but welded together as a political *class* partly by the experience of permanent downward mobility, and a profoundly lowered ceiling and horizon of expectations. Note that this generation has been crucial to both the swelling of the Occupy Movement in 2011-2012 (about which more in a moment), to the Black Lives Matter movement of 2014-2016, and to the surge of DSA membership from 2016-2018.

We argue for this generation as fundamental to the current uprisings because the uprising itself shares the political shape, even tactics, of all of those prior movements and moments. The vast, spontaneous scope of the George Floyd protests across big and small-town America, for example, looks a lot more like the shape of Occupy protests from 2011, than the BLM protests of 2014. Put another way, the geographical scope (and racial diversity) of these recent protests represents a kind of fusion of the politics of Occupy and Black Lives Matter: fundamentally “horizontal,” but deeply informed by a simultaneous appreciation of the conjuncture of anti-racist with anti-capitalist politics. It’s as if the recent abolitionist movement has helped give full shape and totality to the political consciousness of both of those earlier moments.

Significantly, too, socialists of a wide stripe have participated in both of these movements, and been

made by them. They have in turn made the protests more radical, more racially diverse, and most importantly more *confident* about their prospects. Thus, to stigmatize or scold this generation or its prospects as either too beholden or not beholden enough to anti-racism, or to *Jacobin*, is to miss the more important political point: consciousness is shaping itself in and through historical experience into a new, massive, radicalized class force.

The centrality of Black Lives Matter leadership to the current wider radicalization cannot be underestimated and should be contextualized with the current remaking of socialist consciousness. An entire generation of Black political activists and leaders has been trained in this country since 2014. Their “sudden” reappearance in the minutes and moments after the George Floyd killing in Minneapolis is the proof in this pudding. Much like Rosa Parks’s Highlander training inspired her “spontaneous” sit-down strike in Montgomery, BLM activists were already prepared for a history in waiting that appeared in the shape of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd’s murders. Here, to return to Benjamin, the concept of history is not linear, but citational: images of a radical past—from the Tulsa race riots of 1921, to the Rodney King riots of 1992, to the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown riots of 2014-2015—were seeds of history coming to full flower in an instant of historical cognition prepared by history itself. That Black leadership so rapidly *pulled* millions in its wake speaks to the altered consciousness described in the preceding paragraph by events like Occupy.

Yet two interpretations of the BLM leadership tendered by some quarters of the Left on the current moment will not suffice, we think: either that it is a moment of independent Black self-determination politics as described by thinkers like C.L.R. James, or it is within the socialist Left still a “belated” moment of recognition or appreciation. Both the size, diversity and scope of these protests—and the massive presence of socialists within them—challenge these analyses. Rather, the conjuncture is a synthesis at a higher level of two mutual but mutually-informing lines of dissent in the post-2000 political generation: both anti-racist and anti-capitalist. Put another way, the conjuncture reveals that consciousness has shaped itself through recent struggle into a stronger, tempered and tested fighting tool. While publications such as *Left Voice* and *Jacobin* have a role to play, they cannot alone capture, or contain, the complexity of this consciousness.

Indeed, we think that some of the restrictive thinking about contemporary political consciousness owes to normative ways contemporary socialists sometimes understand “class” as an organizational principle, as something static and abstract, as a “noun and not an adjective” as one Marxist thinker put it. As socialists, we have a class focus in the broadest sense: we recognize that capitalism is unequal and violent, and that inequality and violence stems from, is in a complex relationship with, the fact that most are forced to sell their labor to survive in such a system. Yet, as New Left theorist Louis Althusser argued against the tendencies of economism and determinism, moments of upsurge are constituted by a “fusion” of “overdetermined contradictions.” Despite a common experience working for wages, the end of the 20th century has witnessed a crisis of capitalism along multiple, intersecting fronts: the biosphere, the racialized state, the national border, the predatory logic of financialized capitalism, and sexual violence.

What is increasingly clear to both members of DSA as well as the masses of most young people on the street is how their fates are intertwined. While white people are far, far less likely to face murder at the hands of police, witnessing a capitalist state defund colleges, enforce student debt, violently shut down Occupy Wall Street, let nurses and food service workers die in a pandemic, and do nothing while the planet burns, prepared this new working class to see George Floyd’s life, unemployed, already a survivor of COVID-19, as not reducible to but nonetheless wrapped up in the dispossessions of their own. It would be shockingly dishonest to fail to see that the many white people in the streets to protest Floyd’s murder were there not because they fear death from the police so much as because they had come to see the police as the emblem of a predatory state preying on them, too.

Indeed, one of the problems with the recent discursive critiques of class/race debate within DSA is how narrowly they articulate both. As an example from Chicago DSA: when the newly formed South Side Branch's steering committee after the 2016 explosion in membership, we asked: what is a largely white organization going to do in Chicago, especially on the South Side? We knew that we could not organize on our own without being seen as interlopers, and so we built bridges with two working-class South Side organizations, the Kenwood Oaklawn Community Organization (KOCO) and Pilsen Alliance, by working on their newly launched rent-control campaign. Rent control is at once a working class demand and yet it is also a demand that focuses on the one of the primary engines of a racialized capitalism, real-estate markets, gentrification, and urban segregation. To some socialists that may have appeared as a demand for the working class; to many members of these community organizations, rent control was the front line against gentrification. And it was through these connections, complexly articulated around class and race, that Chicago DSA was able to also to participate in the coalitions that elected six socialist aldermen, who it should be noted, are all but one people of color, with strong ties to their communities. We argue that this is a case of electoral politics in a complex articulation within and without a socialist movement, rather than a political co-optation of a mass movement which is determined to function independently of the former.

The current revolutionary upsurge should cause further reflection on the recent demise of revolutionary organizations. While we do not gloat or wish to dump ashes on the International Socialist Organization, until 2019 the largest revolutionary socialist group in the U.S. (and to which one of the authors here was a ten-year member) we have to acknowledge the organization made a number of egregious misreadings of political history that were in fact idealizations of its own "socialism from below" politics. The most significant one was its dismissal of the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016 and its failure to productively engage with Sanders supporters turning rapidly towards Socialism. The ISO's rigid rejection of electoral politics tethered to the two-party system made it appear increasingly irrelevant and tone deaf to a generation of rising radicals. To return to our example of Chicago above, we have to acknowledge in a moment of crisis, electoral politics both absorbs revolutionary movements and also becomes their expressions simultaneously. A crisis, as Antonio Gramsci notes, occurs when political parties and the people they represent are "detached" from one another, when "the men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognized by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression." While Sanders did not win, he, along with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Kshama Sawant, Ilhan Omar, Lee Carter and the six aldermen elected to the Chicago city council have all widened these rifts and expanded the affective and political horizons of radical politics.

Thus, today's socialism's relative independence from "orthodoxy" (including within DSA) of any kind has emancipated people to jump on the revolutionary bus whenever and wherever they want. This comes with its own problems—comrades have joked that DSA is the first large-scale organization with too *few* reading groups—but it also comes with the surge of creative meaning-making and self-activity described at the start of this piece. In addition, the new radical conjuncture is decidedly *not* led by bureaucratic political elites, or whites, especially white men. Rather, the new movement's politics of identity, if we may put it this way, are as yet unknown to us: constituted by numerous crisscrossing strands of gender non-conformity, multiracialism, anti-imperialism (Palestine solidarity and its rise in the U.S. is yet another coordinate of this new radicalism), reproductive rights feminism, radical queer and trans politics, new proletarianization and new lumpenproletarianization. Rather than fretting over the Leninist thesis on national self-determination struggle or the legacy of Stalinism—now far too far in the rear view mirror of history for Gen TV—this new generation is making socialism anew in its own image. We should be grateful, and show our appreciation by organizing on the ground with and alongside these new social movement theorists.

Finally, the new socialist movement has for the moment put questions of organizational form secondary to building a movement. This is historically appropriate. The Bolshevik Party, after all, came *after* the idea of Bolshevism. We will not be so bold as to declare the next Comintern is right around the corner, but we should appreciate the fact that the *form* of the new socialist upsurge is for the moment happily secondary to the project of actually tearing the head off of the state.

The new socialist movement is centered in the workplace and on the streets, not the University. This is a good thing, and a sign of its vitality. Too clearly, the revolutionary socialist current that dominated the Anglosphere since 2000 had disproportionate representation, both theoretically and politically, in University settings. This helped to foster the growing gap between theory and practice (or, in terms of this essay, idealism and meaning-making). As it drifted further into self-preservation, the revolutionary Left also drifted away from organizational practice, especially in the labor movement and working-class communities. A form of substitutionism crept into the revolutionary Left's historic role. This moment has been exploded. It is quite clear that Generation TV's revolutionary apparatus, which includes Tik Tok, *Teen Vogue*, K-Pop and hip-hop have become their own theoretical tools of social change. The revolutionary Left should be humbled by this disjuncture, and give mad effort to understanding how to learn from it.

Finally, about the working-class: if self-emancipation of the working-class is its historic task, according to the revolutionary Left, then the latter's task is to study and understand the shifting composition of class and class relations since 2000. This is a manifold project, encompassing rethinking again the decline of union power; the logistics economy; the economic meltdowns of 2007-2008, and the global recession fostered by the global pandemic. It will also require further comprehension of the upsurge in wildcat strikes, teacher walkouts, organizing in the informal sector, the super exploitation of Black, immigrant, and women workers in the care economy; virtually, everything. What *is* clear about this new working-class formation is its sudden new potential for reinvention. The move by the Seattle King City Labor Council to expel a police union; the meaning-making new tactics of labor solidarity around the Dakota Pipeline, Palestine, and BLM; the bold vitality of nurses and teachers not just striking but taking on the far right—all indicate a nascent attempt to build from the ashes of the old labor world a new moment. As important to a sturdy new class analysis on the revolutionary Left is the fate of the sudden new massively displaced unemployed, more than 30 million strong in the U.S. since the pandemic. This group historically is positioned to move either right or left in expressing its social dislocation. Thus far it must be said that Round One goes to our side: it is impossible to quantify how many newly proletarianized and unemployed people were in the streets during and after Minneapolis, but we know that they were many. Harnessing this group into permanent political alliance through campaigns against police violence, but also for expanded social provisioning, for redistributive justice, and for an end to capitalism should be a first step in the revolutionary Left's reconstruction.

Yet what will also be needed first before that step is still more serious reckoning with the question we posed at the start: why and how did the organized revolutionary Left essentially *fail* within the single most incendiary political decade (2010-2020) since the 1960s (or the 1930s) depending on your point of view. We think the answer is more than a victory of "reformism." Reform versus revolution does not adequately capture the dialectics of the current moment, any more than class and race as binary oppositions. Even the Bread and Roses Caucus, the supposed "class reductionist" vanguard of DSA, placed defunding the police as a top campaign demand, and Chicago DSA is currently coordinating with prison and police abolitionist networks to create a program for the city. The hardest thing, as C.L.R. James writes in his *Notes on Dialectics*, is to capture the nature of a thing in motion, in the moment of its change. This is harder than even knowing if a moment is revolutionary or a movement has legs—neither of which we can know. But we do know we are in a moment of transition, and all the old paradigms are falling away.