The Socialist Manifesto of Bhaskar Sunkara of Jacobin: Socialism without Revolution

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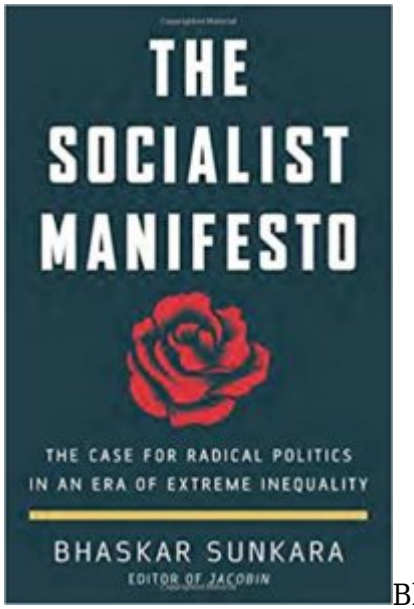

Bhaskar Sunkara, the young, left, entrepreneurial genius who founded and publishes *Jacobin*, has written a book, *The Socialist Manifesto,* in which he puts himself forward as the spokesperson for his generation's socialist movement in America. He is certainly in a credible position to do so. His magazine *Jacobin* has the largest circulation both in print and online of any left publication in many decades, and for those who want something deeper he also publishes *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy*. And if you don't have time to read, there is also *Jacobin* radio. He is an important figure, though not an elected officer, in the Democratic Socialists of America or DSA, a group that now has more than 60,000 members, the largest left organization since the Communist Party of the 1940s. Bhaskar's publications can claim credit for attracting and educating many of them. He is a public figure profiled in and writes opinion pieces for *The New York Times* and interviewed in its podcasts. And his pieces appear in *The Guardian* as well. During the last several years, Bhaskar had become American socialism's public face.

Since the death of Michael Harrington in 1989—the same year Bhaskar was born—there has until now been no public intellectual capable of playing the role of spokesperson for socialism in America. Harrington, a longtime socialist activist, speaker, and writer, achieved national stature with the publication in 1962 of his book *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, which opened doors for him to leading figures in the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations. During the Vietnam War, Harrington led a group out of the old Socialist Party and created a new group, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), which later became DSA.

In his book *Socialism,* published in 1972, Harrington did something very much like what Bhaskar

attempts in in his *Manifesto,* that is, he explained (though in a lengthier tome) socialism's fundamental ideas, traced its history, and put forward a vision and a strategy for bringing socialism to America. His strategy was an alliance between the progressive labor unions, the civil rights movement, and the anti-war movement to drive the southern racists and corrupt big city machines out of the Democratic Party and take it over. His strategy failed and for a variety of reasons soon became irrelevant. Now we have a new person putting himself forward as the socialist spokesperson and advocating a somewhat different strategy.

Reviewing a Friend's Book

I should note that in writing about this book, it's hard for me to talk about the author as one usually does by his last name. Since I moved to New York City about five years ago, I have gotten to know Bhaskar some, and while I can't say that we're close friends, we're certainly friendly. So naturally, since I know him, when I read his book I couldn't help but hear his voice and I couldn't help but think how like him the book is. The book speaks to the reader in a straightforward, down-to-earth fashion, beginning with an amusing story about industrial workers in the fictional Jon Bon Jovi pasta sauce bottling plant in New Jersey and about another workplace in Sweden, describing the conditions workers face, their union, their government, and what would be necessary to improve the lives of "the pasta sauce proletarians."

Soon one enters into the body of the book, Bhaskar's overview of the history of socialism: European Social Democracy and the Socialist Party of America, the Russian Communists and the Third World liberation movements. One is struck by how ecumenical and sympathetic to earlier socialists Bhaskar is, how much he wants to find something good to say about almost every socialist experiment, though ultimately, and not surprisingly, he cannot find much of anything good to say about Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union or Mao Tse-tung's China. Nor would I, since they have nothing to do with the notion of democratic socialism as working people in power.

Social Democracy versus Democratic Socialism

Bhaskar draws the conclusion from his panorama of socialism that we have the most to learn from European social democracy, lessons both negative and positive. For Bhaskar and for some of the new young leaders of DSA, social democracy refers to the European experiments in creating post-war social welfare states in Britain, Scandinavia, and France and to a much more limited extent it includes the Democratic Party in the United States. The social democratic governments managed capitalism during the post-war period of economic expansion and succeeded through Keynesian programs such as public housing, health care, and education in both raising the standard of living for millions and keeping the economy humming. What Bhaskar does not note was the significant role of military Keynesianism; that is, the vast expenditures on arms, what was called the permanent arms economy. Ultimately, however, as capitalism went into crisis, the various socialist governing

parties moved to the right, imposed the neoliberal regime and implemented austerity, undoing much of the welfare system they had created. That is why DSA at its National Convention in 2017 voted to leave the Socialist International.

The political heart of the *Socialist Manifesto* is to be found in Part II, the last fifty pages, where the author lays out his political strategy for today. Bhaskar contrasts social democracy to what he sees as the alternative: democratic socialism. By democratic socialism, he means a more militant, class-struggle movement that through labor union organization, winning increasing political power in state legislatures and Congress, as well as through social protests, and political strikes will bring about a transformational change. Bhaskar recognizes that social democracy failed, but he believes that today the struggles of the left must take place principally within the old social democratic parties. Or in some cases the democratic socialists can work in new broad left parties such as Podemos in Spain. As he writes in an interesting and problematic formulation, "Class struggle social democracy, then, isn't a foe of democratic socialism—the road to the latter runs through the former."

For Bhaskar, Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders represent what he calls the contemporary class-struggle current within the larger formerly social democratic parties, in this case, Labour and the Democrats. Bhaskar believes that working in these currents we can build the democratic socialist organization that will one day take power. He praises Bernie for his class struggle approach that has challenged the 1% and called for a "political revolution" against the "billionaire class." Sanders, Bhaskar argues, is quite different than the wonky Elizabeth Warren who focuses not on social struggle but on reforming liberal institutions.

The appearance of this class-struggle current, says Bhaskar, raises the possibility of what Seth Ackerman calls "the electoral equivalent of guerrilla insurgency." Developing that idea, Bhaskar goes on to put forward the key element of his political strategy for the United States today:

What we need is to create the first traditional mass-membership party in the United States, an organization based on the delegate model of representation. Imagine a workers' party created outside the Democratic Party that runs hundreds if not thousands of candidates and that is composed of various factions that debate one another and put together a democratically decided-on program. In the short term, it might run some candidates as independents, others as Democrats….The immediate goal would be to create an independent ideological and political profile for democratic socialism.

And of course this political organization—presumably DSA today—would be coordinated with inclusive social and labor movements. That combination of legislation, union power, and mass social protest, Bhaskar suggests, will carry us forward to socialism. Sometimes at DSA meetings people chant, "I believe that we will win." Clearly so does Bhaskar, or at least he believes we have a fighting chance.

Unlike his predecessor Michael Harrington, Bhaskar does not believe that the left can simply enter and take over the Democratic Party. He thinks the left will need its own organization working outside so that it can at some point can take over the Democratic Party's base, pull the party apart and create a new party. And, like Harrington, Bhaskar has come to the conclusion that socialism will be achieved primarily through an electoral party and labor movements, *not c*ome about through revolution that destroys the old state.

What About the State and Revolution?

While he contemplates opposition from the bourgeoisie, for example through capital strikes

(withdrawal from investment), giving as an example the experience Léon Blum's Popular Front government in France in the 1930s, still Bhaskar believes that working class using mass political strikes will be able to counter the capitalists and to push through to socialism. While he concedes that there will be capitalist resistance, the style and tone of his book, his narrative of socialist history, and his optimism toward the future all tend to suggest that the rise of socialism with be a gradual process made up of the accumulation of union members and legislators and accompanied by what are described as mass strikes but, it appears, with little violence. We get no sense of the actual nature of capitalism as a system that not only produces ordinary exploitation, oppression, and inequality, but that also generates economic and political crises, depressions and wars, authoritarian dictators and fascism.

Future struggles for socialism are quite unlikely to look like the rise of social democracy in postwar Sweden and France. Early attempts at democratic socialist striving for power in other countries—take Spain in the 1930s for example—took place amidst attempts at socialist revolution, counter-revolution, and civil war. We can see today in Europe and we have the first examples in the United States of what right-wing populist movements and the right in power look like when they control the state, and one can see that electoral alternatives and mass strikes, while important, will not ultimately be adequate to deal with the problems.

The German Civil War

What Bhaskar does not discuss at all, is the question of the capitalist state, that is the ruling class core of government and in particular the highest levels of the bureaucracy, the military and the police with which government ultimately enforces its rule. His otherwise impressive short history of socialism does not deal with the most important cases where in modern democratic societies socialists attempted to fight for socialism but failed, not only failed, but were crushed. While he spends a good deal of time discussing a half century of the history of German Social Democracy, Bhaskar, with an appropriate gesture of respect toward Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, passes over the violent struggles that took place in Germany's Weimar Republic from 1918 to 1924.

When after World War I the Social Democrats in alliance with the German military took power in 1918, they overthrew the monarchy and established a liberal democracy, but they opposed any movement toward socialism. When the Communist Party organized and began to grow, the governing Social Democrats collaborated with the capitalist class to frustrate any attempt at socialist revolution. The German army, the Reichswehr, colluded with a vigilante movement of former officers and soldiers, known as the Frei Korps, and organized them into the paramilitary Black Reichswehr to smash the left. The army and the vigilantes moved into various German states and cities murdering leftist and labor leaders and sometimes massacring large numbers of working class people. Hundreds, perhaps thousands were killed. The Social Democratic Party, the ruling party of the Weimar Republic, collaborated with the Reichswehr, while the Communist prepared for and then backed out of a revolution 1923. Later many of those right-wing forces gravitated to Adolph Hitler's Nazi Party.

While this was an utterly different era than the one we live in, this experience was the most significant attempt at establishing socialism in a modern, democratic European country. But it is not discussed in the *Socialist Manifesto*. While that era was unique, we can expect to see new periods of economic and political crisis in the future, and perhaps just as violent. One has to ask Bhaskar: why didn't he take this up? And, how would democratic socialists respond to such a situation? What would Bhaskar advocate we do in the United States in a period of such intense class conflict? There are no easy answers to these questions, but one wants to know what he thinks.

The Chilean Experience

Then too, there is the more contemporary case of Chile, another modern democratic nation, at the time one of the more developed nations of Latin America. In 1970 Salvador Allende, a self-proclaimed Marxist and the candidate of the Socialist-Communist coalition called Popular Unity (UP), was elected president of Chile by a plurality. The UP carried out the nationalization of major industries, which encouraged the working class to strike and seize other property. Employers responded not only with capital strikes, but some also closed their plants while independent truckers went on strike against the government. At the same time the working class formed its own organizations, such as the coordinating committees that united striking workers. The economic and political crisis made the society ripe for socialist revolution, but Allende, the democratic socialist, did not prepare for one.

Allende trusted the military to defend his government, even praised the professionalism and loyalty of the military, and was shocked when it turned against him. The Chilean ruling class, its right-wing politicians and the military chiefs, working with the U.S. President Richard Nixon, the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the ITT corporation, organized a coup on September 11, 1973 that murdered Allende, overthrew the UP government, and imposed a military dictatorship headed by General Augusto Pinochet. The military junta killed some 3,000 leftists, leaders of political parties, labor unions, and peasant organizations. While the U.S. supported the coup, it was Chile's ruling class using the state it controlled who carried it out. The junta then brought in University of Chicago economists, the "Chicago boys," who used Chile as their pilot program for creating what came to be called the neoliberal economic model.

Surely "the Chilean road to socialism," as it was called, is practically the scenario that Bhaskar envisions, a socialist government in power supported by a mass working class movement aiming to achieve a socialist society. Since it is such an obvious case, one wonders why Bhaskar failed to raise it and discuss it. And the reader wonders: what he would say about it?

The French Model

The contemporary experience that looks most like what Bhaskar seems to be proposing is the François Mitterand government of 1981-1995, the longest in the country's history. The Mitterand government came to power as a result of the economic crisis of the 1970s that had led to a decline in employment and wages. Mitterand led a Popular Front type government, that is, an alliance of the Socialist and Communist parties, very like Léon Blum's in the 1930s. While Mitterand led a Socialist Party, it talked like and initially behaved like the radical democratic socialist movement that Bhaskar advocates. Mitterand began by nationalizing 39 banks, several large industrial corporations, including electronics and computers as well as pharmaceuticals and chemicals. But the government, which attempted to maintain a strong currency, had no economic plan, and the labor union movement, while granted new rights and powers, did not engage in mass mobilization in support of the government.

The French capitalist class became extremely hostile to the government and the capitalists exported billions of dollars, declining to invest in what threatened to become some sort of socialist society. The crisis of the 1970s had not been overcome and the Mitterand government had failed to establish a new economic model. So by June 1982, as one historian has written, Mitterand "made a U-turn." He returned much of industry to private hands and he launched France's international initiative, that is, a neoliberal globalization model. Later governments, whether right or left, pursued more or less the same strategy up until the collapse of the French party system and the rise of populism in the last elections.

Bhaskar himself criticizes the Mitterand Social Democratic government for taking the neoliberal course, but the example raises the question of whether or not, as he has argued, "Class struggle

social democracy, then, isn't a foe of democratic socialism—the road to the latter runs through the former." On the contrary, it seems clear from the Mitterand experience that a democratic socialist movement or party will have to challenge, compete with, and defeat social democracy. It will have to run not through it, but run over it.

And in America Today?

One has to ask why Bhaskar and many in the DSA, who consider themselves Marxists, decline to engage the question of revolution. Marx himself initially held the view that socialist might either through elections or a political revolution conquer the capitalist state and use it for their own purposes. But after witnessing the Paris Commune of 1871, Marx 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. Influenced by a variety of socialist modern theorists—such as Nicolas Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband—Bhaskar and others in DSA have drawn the conclusion that a revolution is either impossible or unnecessary in the contemporary world. The modern state, they argue, is no longer what it was in Marx's time. Things, they say, have gotten more complicated.

Bhaskar seems to believe that the social and labor movements and the socialist legislators will eventually be in a position leave or split the Democratic Party and create a labor party. The problem for democratic socialists would then be that such a labor party would become the government and come under all the usual pressures to accommodate to capitalist system. One can foresee, based on historical experience—Blum, Allende, Mitterand—that the tendency would be for the labor party government to begin by compromising and to end by capitulating. Consequently the democratic socialists would have to constantly criticize the government from the left and organize mass movements to press it to carry out its program.

The democratic socialists, fighting against the social democratic labor party, might then themselves become the government—but they would face not just capital strikes but right-wing parties and collusion between the military and fascist forces in society. A socialist party would then have to organize among the rank-and-file soldiers and police officers and turn as many of them as possible against their officers. And the socialists would have to create and arm their own extra-legal police and military forces. The democratic socialists would be forced to become revolutionaries or go down to defeat. These are not simply hypothetical examples; this is the historical experience of the most modern states in Europe and Latin America in the last century.

Why Does It Matter?

One might ask: What does it matter today whether or not we talk about the state and revolution? After all, we have no prospects today or in the near future for revolution in the United States. The Republicans hold the presidency, the Senate, and the Supreme Court and most state governments, while the Democrats are deeply divided, and though there has been a slight uptick in strikes, particularly among teachers, the level of class struggle remains quite low. If there will one day be a revolution, one might reply, it's a long way down the road, so we don't need to think about it today.

I think this is a mistaken attitude. The reason that the questions of the state and revolution are important today is because they are fundamental political principles that will influence a socialist party's form of organization, its day-to-day activities, its policies, and its long-term strategies. The concept of a legal, peaceful, gradual, democratic road to socialism—the Chilean road—affects a political organization's mentality and its culture. A democratic socialist organization focused on elections, labor unions, and work in community organizations—but which does not foresee the need for a revolutionary transformation—will tend over time toward the gradualist and pacifist outlook that Bhaskar's book implies. And then if the opportunity for revolution presents itself, as in Chile,

such a party will not know how to seize day.

A democratic socialist organization will look to advance by small steps, as any socialist organization must, but a revolutionary organization will also be capable of leaping. A revolutionary socialist organization that looks for opportunities for confrontation, for disruption, and for conflict may in fact have a more difficult time winning elections or leading unions for any protracted period of time. But it will create a mentality and a political culture utterly opposed to the existing system, looking to destroy it, root and branch. A revolutionary socialist organization would prepare its members to lead the unions, the movements, and the parties in which they work toward the long-term goal of overthrowing capitalism and the capitalist state.

In one passage of *The Socialist Manifesto* Bhaskar discusses the importance of cadres (meaning a kind of officer corps, though he doesn't use the word). He writes:

We need democratic socialists who are skilled speakers, effective writers, and sharp thinkers—who are humble enough to learn but bold enough to inspire confidence. Our organizations depend upon a disciplined core of such people if we hope to rebuild working class power that can exert an alternative pressure to that of capital. Even though their efforts won't be enough in and of themselves, we can't achieve socialism without them.

While party cadres need all of those things he lists, the thing they need above all is an understanding of the nature of the capitalist state and the need to carry out a working class revolution to overthrow it.