Vivek Chibber’s "Road to Power" Is Not

written by Dan La Botz | January 10, 2018

Vivek Chibber’s “Our Road to Power” published recently in *Jacobin*—oddly enough written as a commemoration of the Russian Revolution of October 1917—codifies a strategy for what is one of the dominant tendencies in the American left today: social democracy. The principal argument of “Our Road to Power” (a title chosen by *Jacobin’s* editors, perhaps alluding to German Social Democrat Karl Kautsky’s *The Road to Power*) is that a “ruptural strategy” is off the agenda. By “ruptural strategy” Chibber means one that is predicated upon a crisis of the economic and political system leading to the breakdown or to the overthrow of the state. Chibber believes that since the power of the state is so great today—because of its legitimacy, its coercive power, and its power of surveillance—a revolutionary strategy is ruled out. It would be, he says, “hallucinatory” to think otherwise.

Since the power of the state is so great and we can expect no fundamental crisis of the capitalist system, then what we are dealing with today is not a crisis of capitalism itself, but rather a crisis of neoliberalism, says Chibber. Our task then, he suggests, is to organize to bring about social democratic reforms such as those achieved by the Nordic social democracies in the 1970s. This will be done by building strong labor unions, constructing a mass socialist party, and participating in elections. The strategy will be one of “non-reformist reforms, revolutionary reforms,” but “whatever you call it,” it will be “gradual.” The end goal of such a struggle will not be the revolutionary left’s historic objective of a democratically planned economy, but some sort of market socialism. So, Chibber writes, “precisely because a ruptural strategy isn’t on the table, we must start down the road to social democracy and then to market socialism.”

We have arrived it seems at classical social democracy. Or if we haven’t, then what does Chibber actually have in mind? What differentiates his position from social democracy? Nothing in this article would suggest that there is any difference.

The Marxist Strategy

The Marxist strategy of the road to power is altogether different. It is based on the notion that economic and political crises, sudden changes in present conditions, lead working people to take action, perhaps at first in small numbers but then on a mass scale, and that the experience of struggle—usually at first a struggle for reforms—changes their consciousness. Working people become class conscious. When that happens, things can change very rapidly, even suddenly. The classic example of such behavior is, of course, the mass strike about which Rosa Luxemburg wrote so eloquently. The development of class-consciousness facilitates the adoption of socialist objectives and ideals; and that in turn leads to broader mass action, which may become political and even revolutionary. But, in any case, such action always tends to overflow the narrow channels of labor union contract negotiations and parliamentary elections, escaping the control of bourgeois *and* of

social democratic politics that are predicated upon the gradual pursuit of reforms.

Such a vision of the relationship between crises, action, and consciousness as well as their dynamic interaction is completely at odds with a social democratic strategy such Chibber advocates. In fact, the strategy that Chibber outlines has historically led labor union bureaucracies, socialist parties, and other political institutions to attempt to control and oven repress such radical movements from below because they threaten the gradual, peaceful, legal march to reform and socialism.

Classical Social Democracy and Its Contradictions

The positions that Chibber asserts are those of classical social democracy. They are based on the notion that capitalism can resolve its economic crises, or at least regulate and soften them, and that it can maintain the prosperity that forms the basis for reformism. These views have been put forth often before: in the 1890s by the German Social Democratic revisionists, such as Eduard Bernstein; again in the 1930s by the Stalinist Communist International in the period of the Popular Front; and later by both the Socialists and the Eurocommunists in the 1980s.

While the analysis was somewhat different in each case, they all had the commonality of accepting and acquiescing to the strength and stability—the virtual permanence—of the capitalist economy and the liberal state, and the conclusions were much the same: a rejection of revolutionary possibilities and a turn toward gradual reform to be achieved through labor unions and electoral politics. Each of these social democratic projects was, however, disrupted by the experience of economic and political crises of capitalism.

Influenced by British Fabianism, Bernstein foresaw the end of capitalist crises and an evolutionary path to socialism—his utopian dream was interrupted by the crisis of the First World War that led to the overthrow Kaisers, Tsars, and Sultans and the fall not just of states but of entire empires. In the 1940s, the American Communist leader Earl Browder, whose slogan was “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism,” foresaw American capitalist prosperity and democracy and working hand-in-hand with the Soviet Union bringing about world peace and eventually socialism, until his dream was interrupted by the outbreak first of the Cold War and then of the Korean War.

François Mitterand, elected by a Socialist and Eurocommunist coalition in 1981, pursued social democratic policies until trapped by the contradiction between pro-labor policies and pressures to adopt austerity in the emerging neoliberalism of the mid-1980s. While Mitterand survived in office until 1995, he and his Socialist Party found themselves administering neoliberal programs and imposing austerity. Bernstein, the Popular Front Communists, and the Socialists and Eurocommunists of the 1970s and 1980s all held views similar to Chibber’s. Chibber’s project would face the same difficulties, for crises and ruptures will occur, and capitalists will take action to block the peaceful socialist march to power.

Crisis and Collapse Off the Agenda

Why does Chibber argue for this social democratic strategy? Chibber writes that revolution has been off the agenda since the 1950s, when the state began to become legitimate, grew stronger, and developed greater powers of surveillance. Though of course in the 1950s we had the Bolivian and Cuban revolutions, and since then we have seen a series of economic and political crises that led to revolutions and brought down states in societies as different as Iran and Nicaragua, as well as overturning governments in Portugal, Spain, and the Soviet Union. And throughout the last half of the twentieth century we had the decolonization movement, driven by mass movements from below, that contributed to the breakup of empires and led to the creation of dozens of new independent states in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.

Not all of these—in fact very few of these—had progressive upshots. But they did demonstrate the continuing importance of economic and political crisis and the fact that states do sometimes collapse or can in the right circumstances be overthrown. And we saw as well a whole series of political crises and nearly revolutionary working class upheavals in France in May-June 1968, in Italy in 1970-71, Portugal in 1974-5, in Poland in 1980, demonstrating the continuing significance of crises, the vulnerability of states, and the power of movements from below, even if those movements failed. And though it is true that they failed, they were not defeated by strong states using their repressive power but rather by Communist and Socialist parties pursuing social democratic strategies, parties that protected the existing states and the capitalist system while working to break the momentum of the radical movements from below. The Communists and Socialists did so because genuine democratic and socialist movements from below threatened their road to power sharing in a capitalist government.

To assert today, the strength of the capitalist system and the stability of capitalist states after the economic crisis of 2008, given the current menace of nuclear warfare with Korea, and in the face of the threatening planetary environmental disaster seems incredibly naïve or, perhaps, well, hallucinatory. We live in an unstable era that constantly produces crises. We have experienced in the last few years the movement of the plazas in Spain; Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring; Syntagma Square and the Greek movement. All sprang up as reactions to economic and political crises, escaping the hold of traditional party politics. All of these shook the state, if they did not shatter it. The movements in Europe led to the emergence of new political parties such as Syriza and Podemos, but insofar as those attempted to become new, reformist social democratic parties, they tended to undermine the struggle.

The Legitimacy of the State

Chibber's claim that the contemporary state is more legitimate is astonishing given experiences like the Arab Spring, the growth of rightwing populism in Hungary, Poland, Germany, and France, as well as in Turkey and India too, and the current rightwing upheavals in Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil, not to mention the demands for autonomy among the Kurds of Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, and among the Catalans in the Spanish state. Look at Iran at this very moment where mass movements from below are challenging the theocratic state. And didn't Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders recently demonstrate just how little sense of legitimacy not only the Republican and Democratic Parties, but also the capitalist state has for millions in America? The modern state, whether in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, or the Americas enjoys little legitimacy among tens or even hundreds of millions, and in many place it is reviled. As well it should be.

But, for the sake of argument, let's accept the proposition that the modern state is as strong as Chibber says. If that were the case, then how could the social democratic strategy ever be successful? As the labor and socialist movements grew and began to make political inroads, challenging the power of the banks and corporations and of the politicians and the military, the powers-that-be would begin to use the powerful modern state to resist and if necessary to crush movement. Or perhaps a fascist movement would prove capable of taking control of the state and institute a reign of terror. When push comes to shove, as it must, any attempt at building reform movements that aims to bring about social democracy or genuine socialism, can expect to come into conflict with the state. All roads to socialism seem to inevitably lead to a rupture. All lead to a revolutionary situation, which requires a revolutionary strategy.

A Crisis of Neoliberalism or of Capitalism

But in fact, the state is not as strong as Chibber argues. The state lacks legitimacy in large part because of capitalism and its crises. Chibber writes at one point, "Today, the political stability of the

state is a reality that the Left has to acknowledge. What is in crisis right now is the neoliberal *model* of capitalism, not *capitalism* itself." Chibber's view, that the crisis today is a crisis of neoliberal capitalism but *not* a crisis of capitalism itself, leaves one pondering. After all, neoliberalism is not some sort of add-on to what might be called basic capitalism. The crisis of laissez-faire capitalism in the 1930s, was not just a crisis of the laissez-fair model, but of the capitalist system itself at that time. Similarly the crisis of New Deal or Social Democratic capitalism in the 1970s was not a simply a crisis of the Keynesian social welfare system, but of capitalism of that day. Today neoliberalism is the contemporary form, the current avatar of capitalism, and, we should be clear, of imperialism as well.

The crisis of neoliberalism then *is* the crisis of capitalism today. The neoliberal system itself developed out of the earlier crisis of profitability that began in the late 1960s and continued into the mid 1970s, leading to economic stagnation and a falling rate of profit. The neoliberal solution to the crisis of profitability—privatization and deregulation, open markets, cuts in social welfare, and an attack on the labor unions—created in turn a crisis for the working classes. This was precisely the crisis of the Socialist Mitterand government, which had imposed neoliberal reforms in order to create economic growth would provide basis for social democratic reforms, neoliberalism quickly becoming austerity and overwhelming social liberalism.

If then we struggle against neoliberalism, we are struggling against the capitalist system; and, if we fight to end neoliberalism, then we are fighting to end capitalism. We may and we must carry out this fight as one for democracy and social reform, even though it is not at all clear what we can win. But at the same time, we are fighting to end capitalism as a system, a system that is not necessarily seen as legitimate, where the state is vulnerable, and in which a revolutionary alternative—a structural rupture—still remains a possibility, even if it is not on the agenda at the moment.

Consequently any road to power requires alternatives. Some, and apparently Chibber among them, think that we can go back to the New Deal or back to Nordic social democracy. But those political-economic compromises, and the social pacts on which they were based, arose out of a particular period of economic prosperity and expansion. They were the political expression of what has come to be called "The Thirty Golden Years." Perhaps we will see another period of economic expansion, but if it happens soon it will be within the structure of neoliberalism or whatever follows it, and so it will be altogether different. And he himself, in one of the many contradictions of his piece, suggests that the social democracy, which he advocates, was "a spent force by the 1980s," and so, even if we could go back there, we wouldn't.

So what are we fighting for then? Chibber suggests that part of our fight is the defense of bourgeois democratic rights. He writes that, "It was a calamitous mistake to denigrate liberal rights as 'bourgeois'…" This view, Chibber argues, made it easier for Lenin and Stalin to extinguish those rights. Those so-called bourgeois democratic rights, Chibber claims were won not by the capitalists but by the working class. And he is right about that. "Any left worth its salt," he writes, "has to protect and deepen those rights, not throw them aside." This is absolutely true—but also completely one-sided.

What leftists should continue to denigrate is the notion that it is possible within a capitalist society, within the constraints of bourgeois democracy and bourgeois rights, to win socialism and to see the complete fulfillment of human potential. Bourgeois democracy not only established rights, it also set *limits to those rights*, even when challenged by working peoples, oppressed racial or ethnic groups, women, and others who pushed those limits. Bourgeois democracy, the liberal state, is the form through which the capitalist class defends it property, profitability and the accumulation of capital—and through which it rules. And while we fight to defend and to expand our rights within the capitalist system and the liberal state, we must also fight to push the limits, to break through, and to

go beyond the bourgeois democratic state, to create a more democratic government that represents working people.

Beyond Capitalism

And what do we fight for that goes beyond the capitalist system and state? Is is Soviet style Communism? No. Chibber suggests, quite correctly, that we have to examine the experience of the Soviet Union asking why its central planning failed. We should. In fact a large body of literature suggests that Communist totalitarian planning failed because the bureaucracy could not get accurate information from technicians, managers, and workers who lied and cheated to protect their department, plant, and industry in order to make their quotas, to protect their positions, and their very lives. But we should certainly continue the autopsy of bureaucratic Communism, though all of the lessons after the early 1920s appear to be not only negative but also actually disastrous, both economically and socially.

The other alternative of the twentieth century was Social Democracy, the broad outlines of its strategy recapitulated by Chibber. Yet he writes, "but social democracy was a spent force by the 1980s; its parties degenerated into a managerial ethos; their reformist agenda was halted and then reversed; and they have proven to be largely uninterested in revitalizing their own legacy." Absolutely true. Still, Chibber wants to reexamine the Meidner Plan, the Swedish Social Democrats' program for preventing the accumulation and concentration of private capital. Well, yes, everything should be reexamined. It was that ambitious plan, of course, that led the Swedish capitalist class to mobilize quite successfully to defeat the Social Democrats, whose program for a more egalitarian society was reduced to much smaller proportions and modest reforms, until in the 1980s even the Nordic welfare state began to go into crisis and turn neoliberal. As Chibber himself writes, "we also need to see why it was defeated, and why the Social Democratic Party became increasingly conservative in the following years."

Nordic Social Democracy had a lot to recommend it in terms of social policy and democracy. Certainly one would rather have lived in Social Democratic Sweden than in the Soviet Union. But Nordic socialism could only exist as an insular social welfare state—actually a collection of states—within the capitalist world. Its highly educated and skilled workforce kept the Nordic socialist island humming, producing Volvo, Electrolux, and Ericsson products and making a profit by selling them to the capitalist states of Europe and North America. The Nordic island could only exist because Europe and North America controlled the wealth of the world, exploiting their own working classes, and extracting oil, minerals, lumber, and labor from the developing world. Nordic socialism stood firmly on capitalist legs, and capitalism rested on imperialism around the world.

Chibber suggests that given the experience of Communism and disappointments of Nordic social democracy, we should turn to market socialism. Market socialism, of course, is not a so much single concept as an array rival visions that are embraced by everyone from anarchists and left liberals to some socialists. The most important experiment in market socialism, Communist Yugoslavia, proved successful for a time during the post-war period because of the Balkan nation's integration into the capitalist market. It was not so much market socialism that was successful as post-war capitalism. And inside Yugoslavia Communist politicians, factory managers, technicians, and highly skilled workers gradually pushed aside the majority of industrial ad service workers. Meanwhile over a million Yugoslavians went off to Germany as guest workers. The Yugoslav Communist elite, their 1%, ruled the country's market socialist system whose prosperity depended on the post-war economic boom.

The Struggle for Socialism

Chibber dismisses the idea of a centrally planned economy. “We can *want* planning to work, but we have no evidence that it *can*,” he writes. “In other words, we have to seriously consider the possibility that planning as envisioned by Marx might not be a real option.” The Marxist idea, of course, was the notion of a democratically planned economy, and it was not simply one of a long list his favorite thoughts. The idea of the democratically planned national economy stands at the very center of Marx’s concept of socialism. The working class, having through a long struggle become “fit to rule,” destroys the capitalist state and creates a new state where working people and then the people as a whole govern. The working class, democratically, through a system of representation, probably one involving rival parties and programs, takes control of a new kind of state that reorganizes and plans according to the needs and desires—and the votes—of the entire population.

While Marx did not elaborate much on this, we can say that this might be done through the nationalization of industries, through the coordination of cooperatives, and might even involve some private ownership of highly regulated smaller firms. A national economic plan might even permit and require some market mechanisms to strengthen central, democratic planning. But democratic planning of the economy stands at the center of Marxian socialism. The central philosophical notion is that when human beings take conscious control of the entire national economy they can end both alienation and exploitation that characterize capitalism. Democratic planning, the notion that a new more democratic government takes command of the economy for the sake of the people and the planet, is the very definition of socialism.

Fighting for Social Democracy with a “Leninist Party”

Chibber might have called his essay “The American Road to Socialism.” That’s a title taken it from one of the many Communist parties, which in different nations declared in various decades a French or Spanish or Chilean “Road to Socialism.” The various Communist national roads were generally social democratic, though the Communists may have aspired to their transformation into Soviet-style states. I suspect that in fact the Communist model may have had as great an influence on Chibber as the Social Democrats. This is the odd twist in Chibber’s essay, the call for a “Leninist” party to fight for social democracy.

Though we take it up here at the end of our critique, Chibber’s essay actually opens with a discussion of Lenin and his party. Vladimir Lenin’s Bolsheviks, Chibber thinks, may have been more democratic in their earliest days—that’s true—but its successors in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, the “Leninist parties” became authoritarian. That is true too. But, Chibber avers that they provided us with what became the universal model of efficient and successful parties of all sorts: “a mass cadre-based party with a centralized leadership and internal coherence.” He writes, “no other model has come anywhere so close to being politically effective.” Problematic as it is, Chibber writes, “given our experience, we don’t really have a basis to reject our most accomplished model.”

But are they really “our most accomplished model??” Those post-Lenin “Leninist” parties—Stalinist in inspiration, Communist in practice, that is, bureaucratic, authoritarian-centralist organizations—proved to be powerful machines for both taking power and keeping more democratic movements from doing so. They are the kinds of parties that ruled in quite similar ways—i.e. one-party states with nationalized economies—in the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe, in China, Vietnam, and North Korea, as well as Cuba. None of those places were or are examples of either socialism or democracy.

But as Chibber suggests, the “Leninist” parties did became the model for cadre-based mass parties in the modern era, eventually ruling in dozens of nations from Africa and Asia to Latin America. If they were politically effective, as he suggests, it was principally in keeping power, whether they imposed Communism or authoritarian capitalist governments. The record of achievement of the

“Leninist” parties in terms of social well-being is no better than that and perhaps even worse than that of looser social democratic parties such as the British Labour Party and the French Socialist Party. Whatever the party model, they faced the same challenges of capitalist crisis and the same pressures toward neoliberalism and austerity; they also contributed their part to the ecological catastrophe that threatens us today. None of them represents a democratic model that might further a genuinely socialist society.

Another Road

We can agree with Chibber that we need to rebuild the workers’ movement to fight for democratic and social reforms. Chibber is, however, offers no advice two key issues. What should be the left’s attitude toward and involvement with the Democratic Party? And how should it deal with the labor bureaucracy? Would Chibber’s “Leninist” party, like the Communist Party USA, embed itself in the Democratic Party? Or would it like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) today experiment in Democratic and independent campaigns? Or would it support the Green Party? Or would it work to build an independent working peoples’ party? In America, these are central strategic questions.

And, while we agree that we need a stronger labor movement, what is to be done about the labor officialdom, which works in partnership with capital, often fails to organize and to take action, or sometimes inhibits the workers’ movement? Does Chibber urge collaboration with the labor officialdom or the building or rank-and-file movements in the unions to make them more democratic, mlitant, and anti-capitalist? This question too is strategially central.

Conclusion

To conclude, Chibber’s view, as far is it is laid out in this article, doesn’t reflect the reality of the profoundly unstable character of contemporary, crisis-ridden capitalism, which can suddenly open new perspectives. There is in his approach no appreciation of that dynamic interplay of crisis, working class action, and a change in consciousness that forms the basis of a revolutionary movement for socialism from below. And, even when revolution is not immediately on the agenda, of a revolutionary method for fighting for reform. Historically, it has been revolutionaries fighting for socialism whose struggles often produced the most important reforms. Social Democracy in post-war Europe was largely a result of the anti-Nazi Resistance, whose slogan was “From Resistance to Revolution,” and of the left, which led mass strikes and fought for socialism.

A revolutionary understanding means that we fight not only to win reforms but also to prevent the establishment of new social pacts, institutions, and governments that would become a block to the further radicalization of the movement. It is not simply a matter of trying to push the movement one step further, but of trying to build the forces to break the framework of the existing system. Chibber’s strategy, combining what he calls a “Leninist” cadre party with a mass base and a social democratic program, has historically produced governments that not only fail to carry reform as far as the might go, but actually become obstacles—as they have in the past—to more radical reforms and to revolutionary change.

Vivek Chibber has sketched out not a road to power, but a highway to frustration or to defeat. We can certainly join the fight for democracy and for social reforms alongside Chibber. We can work together to build labor unions, join in strikes, support movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements. Yet, looking farther down the road, Chibber seems to see a relatively smooth road that leads through labor unions and electoral action to social democracy and market socialism, and he will turn that way—but it is a mirage. In fact, the road to power is hardly a road at all, it is a path made by walking that passes over the broken terrain of crises and the breakup of illegitimate states, perhaps through a contest with fascism, but in any case involves a massive upheaval from

below, a path that leads to a “rupture” of the system, and eventually leads to revolution. There are no guarantees about the future. Nothing is inevitable. But if we want socialism, *that* is the road to power.