

REVIEWS

Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*

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RED FLAG OVER THE WHITE HOUSE?

Bhaskar Sunkara—editor and, in 2010, while he was still an undergraduate, founder of *Jacobin*, a socialist quarterly which today boasts more than 35,000 subscribers and attracts many more readers to an indispensable website that posts near daily commentary on American and international politics from an ecumenical crew of left authors; former vice-chair of the Democratic Socialists of America, an organization he joined on his eighteenth birthday, the ranks of which have in recent years, as Sunkara notes, multiplied tenfold, to surpass 50,000; occasional columnist for *The New York Times* and *Guardian*, and talking head on the cable news channel MSNBC: in short, the public face, if there be one, of the much-discussed phenomenon of millennial socialism in the US, with a broad friendly smile in his author's photo, and an easygoing and generous or, in other words, nonsectarian manner in his many public appearances—was born in White Plains, New York, in 1989, at perhaps the nadir of the left's historical fortunes. His parents had migrated from Trinidad and Tobago, and in his first book, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*, Sunkara is quick to establish his family's modest class situation: 'My mother worked nights as a telemarketer, my father, a declassified professional, eventually as a civil servant in New York City.'

Socialism was hardly in the air in the suburban US of the late 90s and early 2000s. In Sunkara's characteristically breezy telling, it took a lingering oasis of American social democracy, the local public library, to acquaint him

with socialist literature: ‘By chance, I picked up Leon Trotsky’s *My Life* the summer after seventh grade, didn’t particularly like it (still don’t), but was sufficiently intrigued to read the Isaac Deutscher biographies of Trotsky.’ In a readerly itinerary that tacked between the headings of social democracy and social revolution—a pair of stars that still forms the constellation over Sunkara’s adult career—he soon steered forward in time to Michael Harrington and Ralph Miliband, and backward to ‘the mysterious Karl Marx himself’. The phrase signals friendliness to the neophyte reader to whom *The Socialist Manifesto* is obviously, but not exclusively, addressed.

Sunkara’s foraging for intellectual nourishment in the municipal stacks took place at a time when there was not to be found on the periodicals shelves any publication resembling *Jacobin* or, for that matter, the other little magazines of the left that have sprung up on the American scene over the past fifteen years: journals firm in their radical commitments but addressed to the general reader as opposed to historical-materialist cognoscenti. Back then, the choice was between genuinely radical journals like *Monthly Review* or NLR itself that in their different ways took for granted their readers’ prior theoretical formation or political orientation, and social-democratic outlets such as *The Nation* or *Dissent* that offered meekly progressive takes on current events, with little evident hope and less concept of any ultimate socialist overhaul of US society. It testifies in no small part to Sunkara’s achievement in *Jacobin* that left-curious American teenagers today would no longer find themselves as intellectually lonely as he (and, for what it’s worth, I) once did, and that the broad Marxist tradition no longer looks like such an antiquarian or specialist concern.

Public intellectual, radical editor, socialist politician—at just thirty years old, Sunkara is already the most prominent such figure in American life since Harrington himself, who died the year that Sunkara was born. More than this, the democratic-socialist current which, in the first decades after Harrington and others founded the DSA in 1982, represented no more than a shivering trickle across the desert of the American ideological landscape is, today, a stream that Sunkara can reasonably hope to see swell into one of the main channels of American politics. Democratic socialism in the US, as incarnate in the burgeoning DSA, already threatens the social neoliberalism of the Democratic Party to its right, and, at the same time, to its left, has sped the demise of the country’s most respectable revolutionary socialist outfit, the International Socialist Organization, which dissolved itself in March.

These circumstances alone would confer a certain importance on any book Sunkara might write. And then, too, the printed (or posted) word matters peculiarly for American socialism, as it can’t for as-yet more effective political tendencies: until the advent of socialism in the US is an institutional reality, the phenomenon must exist largely on the page; and, as Sunkara’s

own case illustrates, it's in libraries or bookstores, as much as in workplaces or at demonstrations and meetings, that converts are to be won. What kind of addition, then, to the bookshelves of socialism has this good-natured eminence of the new American left attempted, and what contribution has he made to current left debates?

These questions aren't simple ones. In spite of the bright fragments of autobiography with which *The Socialist Manifesto* opens, it's soon clear that the book belongs to a different and altogether more impersonal genre of writing. (The disappearance after the initial pages of the autobiographical Sunkara—brown-skinned son of working-class immigrants—implicitly rebukes that style of American politics, regnant in the Democratic Party, which would justify and commend one's political commitments principally on the basis of one's racial, sexual and class 'identity'.) Nevertheless, the genre of which the book partakes does not exactly correspond with its title. For this *Manifesto* delivers no manifesto in the classical sense of a document outlining the moral rationale and material aims of a particular political party or tendency; even Sunkara's penultimate chapter, 'How We Win', with its fourteen points of strategic counsel, rests content with generic observations (e.g., point 4: 'They'll do everything to stop us') and abstract injunctions (point 12: 'We must take into account American particularities', but also point 14: 'Our politics must be universalist') as opposed to a specific programme. Marx and Engels in their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* may have essayed an overview of world capitalism, and even a universal theory of history, but did not refrain from ten concrete policy demands.

Nor does Sunkara spend much time making the ethical or moral case, promised by his subtitle, for a radical politics. Only his first chapter—'A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen', imagining the transformation of the US two decades hence—argues as a matter of principle for a democratic socialism that would make good on America's traditional 'rhetoric of democracy and fairness' by eliminating wage labour as 'an unacceptable form of exploitation' and 'empower[ing] people to control their destinies inside and outside the workplace.' Such a US would 'guarantee at least the basics of a good life to all'—presumably, universal access to a high standard of health care and education, as well as the adequate incomes and abundant free time flowing from worker-run enterprises—and thereby enable that 'radical human flourishing' whose preconditions capitalism has, through material plenty, created but withheld from the mass of people. Echoing Trotsky's famous peroration in *Literature and Revolution*, Sunkara invites us to 'imagine our future Einsteins and Leonardo da Vincis liberated from grinding poverty and misery', only to abandon this vista for a humbler prospect: 'Or forget Einstein and Leonardo—better yet, imagine ordinary people, with ordinary abilities, having time after their 28-hour workweek to explore whatever interests or

hobbies strike their fancy.' The resulting flood of 'bad poetry' and inferior art, he proposes, 'will be a sure sign of progress.' (In its cultural politics, the new American socialism is ostentatiously at ease with mediocrity of expression in writing and art, even when it doesn't itself exhibit it—Sunkara's book is, on the whole, an eloquent one—as if to escape the reproach of 'elitism' routinely deployed by the right to discourage any alliance between university-educated professionals and workers with high-school diplomas.) Mainly, however, Sunkara takes for granted the rightness of the socialist cause and foregoes explicit proselytizing, perhaps on the sensible assumption that the viciousness of American capitalism today speaks for itself: if the evidence of one's eyes has not already disclosed a society that flouts any notion of justice in its disbursement of opportunities and income, no mere book is likely to do the trick.

The bulk of the *Manifesto* consists instead of a primer on socialist history, 'not comprehensive but selective', for the sake of furnishing 'lessons, from both the revolutionary and the reformist wings of socialism, for the present day.' Beyond these separate lessons, Sunkara promises a larger teaching: 'We can learn from this history that the road to a socialism beyond capitalism goes through the struggle for reforms and social democracy, that it is not a different path altogether.' The ambitiousness and difficulty of the intended history lesson, promising to square the circle of reform and revolution, are patent in the ambiguous tense of the clause: how can a road that so far *does not* 'go through' from social democracy to full socialism (in the historical present, as grammarians call it, of the past) illustrate that in fact it alone is the road that *does* 'go through' from the former to the latter (in the promissory present tense of the future)? In other words, if in history to date reformist social democracy has not eventuated in socialist revolution, how might this very same history show that, in the future, this is the necessary sequence of events? Bringing off this ambitious and, till now, elusive demonstration is the remit of this deceptively modest work.

After his first chapter, Sunkara divides his book into two parts. The first of these, consisting of six chapters, amounts to a more or less chronological series of case studies. Here is socialism as it arose and failed, from the latter nineteenth century to the stub-end of the twentieth, in half a dozen (inter)national situations, from the foundational visions and frustrations of Marx and Engels in British exile; through the arc of Lassalle's and Kautsky's SPD in Germany between the Gotha Programme and its Weimar debacle; through the Soviet Revolution from its unbaptized birth in 1905 to its triumph in 1917, and its fatal travesty in Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture in 1928 and thereafter; the achievements and atrocities of Communist China between Mao and Deng; the historical acme of social democracy in postwar Sweden, and its arrested leap into the true collective

ownership of the means of production contemplated under the Meidner plan; and—at last—the stillborn socialism of the US, between the ineffectual Debs and the all-but-invisible Harrington. The *Manifesto's* shorter second part (chapters 8–10) trades memory for anticipation, contemplating the chances for socialism in the US of the twenty-first century.

It would be easy to query Sunkara's omissions and assumptions in this brief resumé of 'the long, complex, variously inspiring and dismal history of left politics.' Why, it could be asked, among European countries, is only Germany, during the heyday of the SPD, treated in detail, when the task everywhere else has always been to adapt German-speaking Marxian socialism as a foreign strain to native soil? Similarly, how can the Chinese Revolution stand for 'Third World Revolution', in the chapter bearing this title, when this process was otherwise the exercise of much smaller and weaker countries far more easily subordinated to imperial power? And so on. But Sunkara has already conceded that his history of socialism, both in quest and in exercise of power, is a selective one. And if his set of country studies are more conveniently illustrative than they are ideal-typically representative, this by no means prevents him from serving as a capable and fair-minded popular historian of an impressive diversity of national predicaments. His personal allegiances—to Karl Kautsky, for one example, or, for another, to a politics that emphasizes the injuries of class over those of gender—don't prevent him from observing, respectively, the gap between Kautsky's 'almost apocalyptic vision of capital crisis' and his 'comparatively modest immediate demands', or Swedish social democracy's arguably greater success in emancipating women than workers. Sunkara's brief lives, as it were, of socialism in a handful of national contexts are polemically but never tendentiously related, with an eye for details that compromise as well as corroborate the strategic instruction he would extract from them.

In spite of shadings of complication, what are the traceable outlines of the story he has to tell? The achievement of Marx was in 'laying out definitions of capitalism and communism' ('an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'); but the writings of a figure who, at the dawn of a movement, was necessarily 'more improviser than prophet', later suffered perversion into unerring gospel: 'His favourite motto was "Doubt all things", but under authoritarian regimes, Marxism was turned into a science that allowed no room for doubt.' The finest tribute that Marx—a democrat and a believer that the majority had an interest in its own self-emancipation—received as a democratic socialist was also the soonest, in the form of the German SPD, which considered democracy the precondition for socialism rather than the other way around. Sunkara cites Kautsky: 'It is the task of the Social Democratic Party to shape the struggle of the working class into a conscious and unified

one and to point out the inherent necessity of its goals.' In this concept of the party, Sunkara says, the left 'prepares for but does not make revolution': Kautsky 'thought time was working in social democracy's favour and wanted to postpone the final conflict until victory was certain.' Sunkara's line on Lenin, in Russia, is in essence the Trotskyist one: 'In underdeveloped Russia . . . after the defeat of the exploiting classes, there would be no material basis for large-scale socialist construction. As a result, the revolution's goal would have to be furthered by an international revolutionary process.' When international revolution was not forthcoming—the SPD, in particular, having quailed before its task—the Russian Revolution fell into the depressing path of a socialist bureaucracy, imposing and aggrandizing itself (sadistically so, during Stalin's nightmare premiership) on the basis of an unconsulted working class consisting largely of illiterate peasants. After the war, Sweden—the exemplar to date of social democracy—presented a different and superior approach to the emancipation of the working class: 'social democrats rejected insurrection and accommodated themselves to the democratic republic' and thereby established, for a time, 'the most livable society in history', satisfying 'socialist priorities' by 'shaping the outcomes of capitalist enterprise, rather than through nationalization.'

Social democratic adoption in 1976 of the plan, by the trade-union economist Rudolf Meidner, for the gentle euthanasia of Swedish capitalism through 'a collectively owned wage-earner fund' that would gradually expropriate the bourgeoisie and at length deliver national enterprise into proletarian hands marks the high-water point of democratic socialism. Meidner's vision foundered on the long downturn of global capitalism—'social democracy was always predicated on economic expansion'—and the intransigence of capitalists who rightly perceived his scheme as 'an existential threat' and cast it before voters 'as an attempt by union bureaucrats to concentrate power.' (Somewhat curiously, Sunkara calls his chapter on the roadblocks barring postwar European social democracy from true socialism 'The God That Failed', after the Cold War epitaph on Soviet Communism: an allusion at once unusually awestruck by social democracy—typically regarded even by its adherents not as a world-creating deity but at best as a demiurge with local powers—and, for Sunkara, slighting of social-democratic accomplishments.)

The role of China in this global story seems to be to bolster the thesis that a socialism worthy of the name can only be established in those countries where capitalism is most, not least, advanced: 'The Third World's experience with socialism vindicates Marx. He argued that a successful socialist economy requires already developed productive forces and that a robust social democracy requires a self-organized working class.' (Alluding to Marx's late letters to his Russian correspondent Vera Zasulich, without explicating

them, Sunkara concedes that Marx ‘later complicated this prediction’: these letters’ apparent ratification of twentieth-century revolution in economically backward countries goes unaddressed.) As Sunkara explains, ‘attempting to make up for hundreds of years in a “few years” made socialism in the Third World prone to domination by small groups trying to carry out modernization from above.’ In China and elsewhere, this constituted ‘a formula for authoritarianism’.

Sunkara’s native US, with its precocious and thoroughgoing capitalism, supplies his final illustration of socialism’s historical career. The American left’s beginnings were promising enough: ‘In the late 1820s, the United States gave birth to the first workers’ parties in the world, in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere.’ Empty—or, rather, emptied—American soil was also fertile ground for the utopian socialism of Robert Owen, who founded his New Harmony colony in Indiana in 1827, and assorted Fourierists, including Hawthorne and Emerson at Brooke Farm. Nevertheless, ‘The Civil War’, Sunkara writes, ‘was the true American Revolution’, expropriating ‘\$3.5 trillion in “private property” in emancipating the South’s four million slaves.’ Although Sunkara notes that the abolition of chattel slavery ‘inspired battles against what was denounced as “wage slavery”’, he ignores the work of the many Marxist historians, Neil Davidson among the latest, who have interpreted the Civil War not as a harbinger of socialist revolution but as a New World variant of the bourgeois revolutions of Europe—in other words, as an event that, by eradicating plantation slavery, consolidated rather than challenged the prevalence of the wage relation.

Sunkara moves on to acknowledge the inspiration that Eugene Debs took from Kautsky, whose writings, Debs testified, ‘were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped, not merely his argument, but also the spirit of his socialist utterance.’ He then leads a brisk tour through the *ignis fatui* of the American left, from Debs’s Socialist Party, through the Wobblies (who amassed immense moral credit and precious few victories in my home region of the Mountain West on those occasions when striking miners and their families were massacred by Pinkerton mercenaries), and the CPUSA, which if nothing else fortified the ranks of the civil-rights movement. Sunkara is right to note that ‘the end of Jim Crow transformed the United States and may be the most important and enduring legacy of the American left.’ He does not pause to dwell on the erosion of this achievement since the 1970s, as manifest in the Gulag-level incidence of black Americans currently incarcerated, or the impairment of the African-American vote since 2013, when the Supreme Court gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act and left the old states of the Confederacy unsupervised in their administration of the franchise. Sunkara is nevertheless too honest to pretend that the left has counted for much more in American history than moral décor: ‘Socialists

have managed to play important roles in struggles to make the United States more democratic and humane, but the inequalities that mark American society today are stark reminders of our failures.'

The remainder of *The Socialist Manifesto* looks forward to a left renaissance in the US, adducing rising inequality as the chief cause for such hopes: 'You might think that a socialist movement would be inevitable in times like these. You'd be right.' In chapter 8, he recapitulates the 2008 financial crisis, the Occupy movement of 2011, and the thwarted Sanders campaign for the Democratic nomination in 2016. Together, these events suggest a constituency for some American form of democratic socialism, and, in chapter 9, Sunkara assembles a list of fourteen points that together indicate for American democratic socialists 'How We Win'. (One is unhappily reminded of Clemenceau's comment, during the Versailles conference of 1919, on President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points for postwar reconstruction: 'God Himself was content with Ten Commandments.')

There is little to object to in Sunkara's fourteen points. Some of them would be controversial to party professionals of the Anglophone centre-left, e.g., point 2: 'Class-struggle social democracy has the potential to win a major national election today'—a proposition that would incite intense opposition among right-wing Labour MPs in the UK, or suburbanite-aligned Democratic Party consultants in the US. But most of his points are left-wing bromides: point 9, 'Socialists must embed themselves in working-class struggles', or point 14, 'History matters.' Missing from the list, in an omission unfortunately typical of DSA politics, is any reckoning with the US's role as armed defender of worldwide capital. The overall proposition of Sunkara's programme is for a retrospectively progressive working-class political project that places the trade union, as an institution, and the working class, as a sociological category, at the centre of a universalist politics of radical but piecemeal change in the direction of democratic socialism.

Both sensible and plausible, this counsel is well-taken and convincing, as far as it goes. But how far is that? Sunkara says that this chapter 'offers a road map based on the history of left politics.' Tellingly, he does not say to what destination his road map leads. It soon emerges that social democracy, not socialism, lies at the far edge of this map. 'But what about the end goal of socialism—extending democracy radically into our communities and workplaces, ending the exploitation of humans by other humans?' Sunkara proposes nothing more than to 'put these more radical questions . . . on the table.' In other words, the project of this volume—to explain how electoral social democracy not only should but, in the US of the twenty-first century, can eventually produce full socialism—is tacitly abandoned at the eleventh hour.

Any book labelled a manifesto by its author seeks to rally readers to some cause. How convincing, then, is Sunkara's brief for democratic socialism? Insofar as his book is pitched to potential recruits rather than accounted enlistees, the question is an awkward one for a reviewer already possessed of like convictions: how to judge the persuasiveness of a 'case' of which one is already persuaded? Other readers will furnish better tests of Sunkara as proselytiser. Nevertheless, the persuasiveness of Sunkara's book can be assessed on socialist grounds.

On the one hand, Sunkara's refusal to conjecture and propose how the US might transform itself from a capitalist country playing host to an incipient socialist movement into a truly socialist nation, moving with all deliberate speed to end the rule of private capital, reflects an admirable humility. Nothing about the future advent of a socialist US can be predicted with assurance except that it's likely to come about in surprising fashion, if at all. And yet the promise of Sunkara's story was to show, or at least suggest, how democratic means could procure the result of socialism, not mere social democracy. If the mechanics of such a transformation cannot be known in advance, the process must still be conceivable—that is, both imaginable and plausible—for an argument, like Sunkara's, that American social democracy would promote and hasten the arrival of socialism rather than prevent or delay it, to convince. The promise remains stillborn.

Implicitly, the logic of Sunkara's argument seems to be that because twentieth-century history exhibits the shortcomings of socialism without democracy, as well as democracy without socialism (not to mention all those cases, still plentiful enough if not ever more numerous, of countries that are neither socialist nor democratic), a truly 'democratic' socialism—'indeed I see the term as synonymous with "socialism"'—must be the destiny of the twenty-first century. Social democracy (in the form of a movement), then, is to be the vehicle, and democratic socialism (in the form of state power) the destination: 'The democratic socialist knows that it will take mass struggle from below and'—vaguely enough—'messy disruptions to bring about a more durable and radical sort of change.'

Two important flaws vitiate this 'case for radical politics'. First, no actual transition to socialism, though hoped for, is envisaged. The *Socialist Manifesto's* opening parable of a worker-run pasta-sauce factory and its concluding list of vague precepts stand in place of any concrete imagining of transition. Second, no emergent historical logic is identified that would permit the establishment of socialism in a wealthy developed country that has heretofore eluded the first-world left. If radical parties and trade unions were not able to bring about socialism in developed countries in the past, when they were far stronger than they are today, what new conditions make

the twenty-first century more propitious for rich-country socialism than was the nineteenth or twentieth? The purpose of what Marxists used to call historical science was to produce useful forecasts of the future; here the project is dropped. Level-headed as Sunkara's book is on the whole, his silence on this question of transition gives it a utopian rather than scientific air, in Engels's terms. Lukács elaborated on the word in his little study of Lenin: 'Revolutionary utopianism is an attempt to pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps, to land with one jump in a completely new world, instead of undertaking . . . the dialectical evolution of the new from the old.' The contemporary left's abandonment of dialectical expression still leaves intact the dialectical task of imagining how the future emerges by a series of steps, not one magical leap.

Sunkara's neglect of this task means avoiding several obvious questions, leaving them unanswered because unasked. Would it be the success of social democracy in America that would most likely lead to socialism, as popular experience of the former instilled desire for the latter, or would it instead be the frustration of social-democratic demands at the hands of capitalist reaction that convinced an effective mass of citizens that revolution was in order? Assume that, in either case, a majority of American voters might one day be prepared to vote in a referendum, Kautsky-style, to install socialism in the US and dismantle capitalism. Is there any prospect of the capitalist class, and its loyalists, retainers and security guards, complying with the general will? (Lenin reproached Kautsky for his naivety in imagining that capitalism could be abolished by national plebiscite.) If not, what do socialists need to do to enlist soldiers and even police officers into their ranks so that, when the hour comes, democracy can prevail through revolution and, in a situation of dual power, enough armed men and women will obey popular sovereignty, instead of a recalcitrant state? Even then, in the event of successful democratic revolution, what if any repressive measures would be necessary to safeguard the achievement against the efforts of its domestic and perhaps international opponents?

The revolutionary left has debated such questions for a long time, positions differing (though perhaps not enough) according to time and place. And the questions do not properly admit of any final or generic answers: they must be met according to local and national circumstance. Even so, it seems coy of Sunkara, in a work of revolutionary strategy, not to pose them at all, or at least to admit that any socialist movement with real aspirations to attaining its object will one day, sooner or later, have to confront them.

Sunkara's failure to convincingly cast social democracy as the midwife of socialist revolution would matter less if it were his alone. The sequence of events that he evidently desires but can't foresee—from attainment of social-democratic hegemony within the liberal-capitalist state to socialist

revolution under the impetus of mass mobilization, and then onward to national consolidation of democratic socialism in an international framework undoubtedly more hostile than friendly to the desperate effort—has not, of course, been convincingly anticipated by anyone else possessed of the same desire. Sunkara in his *Socialist Manifesto* is not able to reconcile the cloudiness of his historical understanding, and the modesty and tentativeness of his political programme, with the extravagance and urgency of his (and our) hopes for a social transformation that, whether with the US leading the way or falling into line behind other states, will, before it's too late, combine deliverance from capitalism with the ecological rescue of civilization. If I knew any better than him how the trick was to be performed, I would not hesitate to tell my comrade and fellow American how the riddle of history is solved.

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