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A Time to Be Bold

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BY
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Socialism is having a moment in the sun. It's a chance to push a bold, transformative vision of what a society for the many rather than the few can look like.



A pedestrian traffic light with Karl Marx pictured on the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth in Trier, Germany. Thomas Lohnes / Getty Images

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A spate of recent candidates running against establishment politicians, from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Cynthia Nixon, has breathed new life into an old idea, democratic socialism. But when someone proclaims themselves to be a democratic socialist, what do they mean? What *should* they mean? And once armed with an alternative vision to capitalism, what should they do?

As socialists run for office or consider endorsing progressives, they face potential pitfalls — most importantly that as electoral work deepens, the vision of socialism risks being watered down or even falling from view. Electoral work is important, but our political independence *as socialists* depends on our fidelity to this vision.

Capitalism Against Socialism

To talk about why, we need to first talk about what's wrong with capitalism — and what a socialist alternative would look like.

Capitalism is the chief source of human suffering today and a system that promotes the worst of human behaviors. Socialists believe that when a society's main resources are produced and distributed by private business, exploitation, inequalities in opportunity, and egoistic behavior result.

First, exploitative relations between workers and employers are the core feature of capitalism. Because a small number of people own the productive assets of society, most people have to seek out these businesses for work. The wealth produced from this work flows to the owners of capital even though workers produced it. This is true of every employer-employee relation, even those with union representation and nice benefit packages.

Second, within capitalism, how well people do in life is hugely impacted by birth. Children born into wealthy families have a leg up on staying wealthy as adults. Children born working class and poor have a steeper hill to climb and are much more likely to be working class and poor later in life.

In other words, capitalism is a system that is built on inequalities of opportunities. And these inequalities are its life blood.

A huge number of people that need to be hired by the wealthy are reproduced every generation. Without them, firms would have nobody to exploit. While some employees might be able to climb job ladders, to become a manager, or maybe one day run their own business, as a whole the working class can't ever achieve collective mobility under capitalism. Workers are collectively and permanently unfree within capitalism.

Finally, capitalism produces conflict rather than cooperation, competition rather than solidarity. We compete over jobs. We compete at work for promotions, and those of us that are best rewarded are the ones that are concerned above all with ourselves. We compete with workers in faraway countries and workers desperate to get into ours. And we compete as classes, as races, and

as genders.

This conflict plays out on a totally unequal playing field; those that win rarely do so because of merit. That people continue to find solidarity in their communities, their relationships, their families, and their associations speaks more to people's basic decency than anything about capitalism.

The Socialist Horizon

What is our alternative? Neal Meyer recently defined democratic socialism succinctly in a recent piece for *Jacobin*, saying “we want to build a world where everyone has a right to food, healthcare, a good home, an enriching education, and a union job that pays well. We think this kind of economic security is necessary for people to live rich and creative lives — and to be truly free.”

This definition echoes one recently given by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on *The Late Show*:

What [democratic socialism] means to me is health care as a human right, it means that every child no matter where you are born should have access to a college or trade-school education if they so choose it. I think that no person should be homeless if we have public structures or public policy to allow for people to have homes and food and lead a dignified life in the United States.

While these reforms are crucial to countering the misery we face under capitalism, it runs the risk of equating socialism with welfare liberalism or social democracy. But these things are not the same.

To get a better sense of what socialism is, we need to consider two separate questions. First, what are the principles and values that any good society should promote? And second, what are the kinds of institutions and social arrangements that are best suited for the promotion of those values?

First is the principle of equality of opportunity. Chances in life and the ability to flourish should be equally available to everyone. Within capitalism circumstances of birth, luck, or some other inborn quality tends to determine how well people do in life — not one's sole efforts. The distribution of most things — even the most basic necessities like food, shelter, health, and old-age security — is dependent on people's ability to pay.

But socialists believe that everyone, regardless of those circumstances, deserves to flourish. Goods should be distributed on the basis of need, not ability to pay.

Second, the principle of solidarity. Socialists believe that people should care about and care for each other. Capitalist markets, on the other hand, divide. We think the principle of solidarity should be at the core of any good society. A socialist vision of emancipation is one where our institutions help us care about and for each other.

These are the basic principles that should guide society more broadly — people should have an equal shot in realizing their goals and dreams, and we should care for each other. In this sense, socialism is about outcomes. Capitalism not only fails to produce these outcomes — it is their chief barrier.

In capitalism, economic power appears separated from political power. The economic power derived from owning productive assets allows capitalists to get rich while keeping workers' wages as low as possible, decide what is produced without any democratic input from the rest of society, hide harmful aspects of their products, and foist the harmful costs of doing business (“negative externalities”) onto the rest of us. Capitalists say all of this is justified because it's “their property.”

Socialism aims to socialize that power. Capitalists shouldn't be able to hold all that power and impact all of society — it's undemocratic and unjust.

But socialists don't just want to replace private ownership with state ownership. In the same way we don't believe that capitalists should be able to have disproportionate control over economic resources, we don't think unaccountable state officials and bureaucrats should have the power to control investment and production through “socialism from above.” In some cases, like the former Soviet Union, the failings of such a system are as clear as those of capitalism itself.

The core aim of socialism is not just the state gaining control of industry, but empowering the broad masses of people — in their workplaces, in their communities, in their homes, in their schools, in their politics — to be in the driver's seat of society.

Even in the Nordic countries, where high levels of state ownership are combined with political democracy and a high standard of living, socialism is a long ways off. Making people's lives materially better isn't enough. Neither is it enough to install union representation for workers. These changes would be welcome, but socialism moves well beyond them.

What Is Socialism, Then?

So if social-democratic countries like Norway aren't socialist, what *is* socialism?

Moving towards socialism involves subordinating the economic power of capitalists to the social power of the people. But fully realizing it does away with capitalists entirely. Only when the private decisions that have massive public implications are subjected to popular control will we have a democratic society.

This democratization could be achieved through a number of concrete institutions: grassroots state planning agencies, workers' cooperatives, participatory boards. But what is essential is that the people have real, not just formal, democratic control over society's wealth.

Our vision of socialism has no room for the following: production for the purpose of accumulating profit, private ownership of the main productive assets, markets for labor where most people need to sell their work to survive, and states that are unresponsive to the will of the people.

Only under these conditions can we begin to construct the concrete socialist institutions that will promote and reproduce equality of opportunity and solidarity.

To Be a Socialist

The socialist perspective is defined by this long-term vision. But how should this vision relate to the practical demands of politics? How should it inform our practice?

We are in a moment of new opportunity, but being a socialist requires walking a fine line between being too opportunistic and forgetting our principles, and being so rigid that we don't let experience open new paths.

A crude rendering of socialist history divides the movement into reformist and revolutionary tendencies. Whereas reformists supposedly advocated revising socialist doctrine to better fit the day-to-day practice of politics, revolutionaries pushed socialist practice to line up with its radical alternative vision to capitalism, refusing to water down socialist theory and practice.

But the democratic socialist tradition has always rejected this dualism. Reform and revolution go hand in hand.

Socialist leadership in popular fights like Medicare for All can transform people's consciousness and change perceptions of what's politically possible, eventually leading to support for socialist goals. Moreover, reforms can build the working class's fighting capacity, expose the limits of capitalism's ability to satisfy our sense of justice, equality, and solidarity, and pave the way for more radical demands. Reforms can do more than just improve people's lives — they can lead to revolution.

The fight for socialism requires both contesting elections and building a mass movement. Electing socialists will popularize socialist ideas, push a pro-worker legislative agenda, and provide invaluable experience for socialist governance. But a grassroots movement is also necessary, both to hold socialist politicians accountable and to mobilize against capitalist reaction to even the most modest reform agenda.

A refusal to engage with electoral politics condemns socialists to marginality. But neglecting grassroots mobilization has often meant that socialist governments were powerless to overcome anti-democratic capitalist subversion. Democratic socialists today, as in the past, have to avoid both pitfalls — of becoming revolutionaries without revolution and reformists without reforms.

In pursuing reforms and in electoral efforts, socialists will work in broad alliance with other progressive forces. But it is one thing to recognize the need for such alliances and another to consider the particular form that socialist participation within them should take. At issue is how we think about our place within the broader resurgence of progressive politics since 2016.

Socialists, and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in particular, have not been the only players in this resurgence. Organizations like Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, and Brand New Congress have capitalized on the energy of the Sanders campaign to push the Democratic Party to the left. Indeed, though she is a member of DSA, Ocasio-Cortez recently gave more credit to Justice Democrats and Brand New Congress for her success, as they were the first groups to seriously encourage her to run.

Socialists should welcome the vital role that these organizations have played in a left electoral revival. But what distinguishes socialists from other forces on the progressive left?

The answer, of course, is our vision of socialism.

This vision gives coherence and purpose to socialist strategy. We not only want to introduce a bit of humanity where we can in a cruel and unforgiving world, but also to transform the relations of class power that govern society.

Socialists should be good-faith partners in campaigns for progressive change. But our role is also to push them beyond their limits and make the case for more fundamental social transformation. The question is how we effectively engage in coalitions while maintaining our independent political identity. After all, without this identity and the vision behind it, why bother being a socialist?

Historically, as socialism's political profile grew, so too did the risk of its assimilation into an amorphous "progressivism" over which its influence gradually waned. Socialists should thus beware the temptation to mistake the opportunity presented by the recent leftward political shift for a validation of socialist politics per se. Our primary goal as socialists is not to push this or that progressive reform or candidate, but to build a movement for socialism. What makes us socialists is not just our support for such reforms and candidates. Rather, it is because we are socialists that we support them.

Our strength is therefore not measured by legislative or electoral victories, important as they are, but by our ability to infuse these with a socialist significance by connecting them to our vision of the future. Pushing the political needle to the left is not enough; the point is to use this to forcefully make the case for transcending capitalism.

What's in a Name?

This is why it is crucial for socialists to be frank about what we want and who we are. Our long-term vision is what differentiates us from other progressive forces. We have to participate in movements or campaigns openly as socialists. This is not vanity, but a strategic consideration. If we soft-pedal our political identity out of political expediency, our victories no longer become ours, and we undercut our own purpose.

For this reason, insisting on the "socialist" label and defining what we mean by it is not a trivial matter. The spectacular rehabilitation of socialism as a legitimate position within American politics, particularly among young people, is one of the most significant developments for the socialist movement in decades. So far the capaciousness of the term has been an asset, as it has helped to legitimize our political identity and brought more people into contact with socialist ideas.

As the popularity of socialism grows, we shouldn't define it downward. Liberals will do that for us. Though centrist dead-enders will continue to red-bait socialists, more farsighted liberals will try to capitalize on socialism's popularity.

Especially since Ocasio-Cortez's primary upset, we've seen a wave of liberals hold her up as the future of the Democratic Party while downplaying the specific appeal of socialism and redefining "democratic socialism" in terms that make it virtually indistinguishable from their preferred brand of liberalism. This shows our growing influence, but it also brings the risk of cooptation. As socialists, we shouldn't evacuate socialism of its meaning as we push Democrats left.

The current moment is exciting, but socialists shouldn't pat ourselves too hard on the back. As socialism becomes political common sense, membership counts and poll numbers become less reliable measures of the advancement of socialist ideas. Liberals will try to claim many self-described "socialists" as their own. Socialists thus need to be clear about what distinguishes them from liberals if they are not to cede the initiative.

Whatever people actually mean by "socialism," its newfound popularity is a tremendous opportunity. But the question for democratic socialism remains the same as ever: should we content ourselves with being the advanced wing of liberalism, or can we be something more? Socialist movements have historically become victims of their own success: as our strength grows, so does the temptation to sacrifice long-term vision for short-term gains. As part of building on our momentum, socialists should reckon with what our role is *as socialists* in the broader progressive ecosystem. Are we just the shock troops for various progressive causes? A canvassing army for progressive candidates, even non-socialist ones? Who is organizing whom?

The challenge for socialists has always been to live in the tension between our commitment to total transformation and the exigencies of practical politics. But our identity as socialists ultimately hangs on our long-term vision of socialism. It is what defines us and what sustains our ability to push ever-bolder demands that shift the limits of the possible. Our recent successes have brought new opportunities for growth. As we take advantage of them, we should insist on this vision. After all, what are we without it?

Update: A previous phrase in this piece read: "In some cases, like the former Soviet Union, the failings of such a system are nearly as deep as those of capitalism itself." It has been changed to "In some cases, like the former Soviet Union, the failings of such a system are as clear as those of capitalism itself" to better reflect the views of the authors.

The authors' intention was to point out the failure of authoritarian collectivism to meet the democratic standard of socialism, not to imply a preference for the Soviet Union. As the rest of the essay makes clear, the authors view democracy as essential to any socialism worthy of the name, and as democratic socialists we condemn all economic and social systems that disempower the vast majority of workers. We regret that our original formulation may have contributed to a misunderstanding of our position.



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