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Democratic Socialists Want to Fight for Minority Rights, Not Suppress Them

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BY
SHAWN GUDE / MICHAEL A. MCCARTHY

Defenders of capitalism say that socialism will squelch minority rights. But the only minority groups we seek to unseat are those who trample the rights of others.



The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963. Library of Congress

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Jeremy Corbyn, the democratic socialist leader of Britain’s Labour Party, sums up his political vision by saying Labour is “for the many, not the few.” Bernie Sanders, the democratic socialist senator from Vermont, says he’s fighting for a society that works for everyone, “not just the billionaire class.”

These are potent slogans. They place democratic socialists on the side of a majority that lacks power and resources. And they identify a clear target: the small slice of the population that benefits from the undemocratic status quo.

But to hear some tell it, this is dangerous stuff.

The *Atlantic’s* Conor Friedersdorf has been on an anti-socialist kick of late. His persistence is to be admired, if nothing else. After accusing democratic socialists [earlier this month](#) of supporting Soviet despotism, Friedersdorf recently [cast](#) democratic socialism as a danger to minorities.

According to Friedersdorf, democratic socialists “fail to grasp all that minorities would lose if democracy were radically less constrained by the political and economic system under which we currently live.” In his view, nothing protects victims of bigotry better than free markets, where they can pursue their desires apart from the tyranny of democratic will.

So what are democratic socialists’ views on minority rights? And should anyone but oligarchs feel threatened?

Friedersdorf Against Democracy

Friedersdorf’s chief concern is with the goal of “[broadening out](#)” democracy from the political to the economic and social spheres, a central part of the democratic-socialist vision.

Like other [libertarians](#), Friedersdorf believes that for democracy to be viable, it needs liberal capitalism. Property rights and capitalist markets act as a check on state power, safeguarding the interests of minority groups in society. If democracy is allowed to trample property rights, Friedersdorf argues, we will end up in one of two places: bureaucratic authoritarianism, as in the Soviet Union, or a “tyranny of the majority,” where the mob rules at the expense of the few.

Instead of individual capitalists deciding what to produce in their endlessly varied, constantly competing private businesses, “without any democratic input from the rest of society,” control over industry and decisions about what to produce would reside in state planning agencies. And imagine their decisions perfectly, if improbably, reflect the actual democratic will of workers, whether in the nation; or a state, like Ohio or Utah; or a metropolitan area, like Maricopa County or Oklahoma City.

Popular control is finally realized! So: How popular is Islam? How many Muslim prayer rugs would the democratic majority of workers vote to produce? How many Korans? How many head scarves? How much halal meat would be slaughtered? What share of construction materials would a majority of workers apportion to new mosques? . . .

So, young leftists: Would you prefer a socialist society in which birth control is available if, and only if, a majority of workers exercising their democratic control assents? Or would you prefer a society in which private businesses can produce birth control, per their preference, in part because individuals possess economic rights as producers and consumers, the preferences of a majority of people around them be damned?

Friedersdorf's opposition to tyranny is admirable. We don't like tyranny either. But if he is so concerned with freedom, why does he ignore the fact that most people *already* spend the majority of their lives subject to tyranny? How else could we describe the way large private firms are currently organized? When socialists call for worker co-ops and greater say on the job, we do so because capitalist workplaces quench the rights of individuals.

And what of the economic rights of minorities? Minority groups have rarely won rights through markets or because some enlightened elite decreed it. Women's suffrage, union representation, civil rights legislation, gay marriage, Social Security — all were triumphs of movements from below that made demands for more democracy and rights. In other words, the very rights that Friedersdorf claims to be concerned with were victories of mass action, which Friedersdorf is terrified of.

What is more, many of the gains and rights that minority groups have won came as a result of a direct challenge to property rights — the abolition of slavery being the most obvious example. Friedersdorf explicitly defends the property rights over corporations that define modern liberal capitalism as democracy enabling. But he couldn't be more wrong.

Property and Democracy

In the realm of property rights, a private-public tension exists in all democratic societies. Friedersdorf doesn't want the public much involved in the economy or private property rights. "Socialist faith in what more democracy would bring is so often a romantic fantasy," he writes.

But how involved is too involved? How much democracy is too much? Does he believe that private employers should be able to discriminate against people for being Muslim? Can a worker be fired by their boss for having a Koran or wearing a headscarf? Should a cake maker be allowed to refuse to sell confections to a gay couple? He claims his opposition to socialism is rooted in a concern for such minorities. Yet according to Friedersdorf's libertarian view of private property, businesses should be able to do whatever they want with things that are "theirs."

Defenders of free markets think they have a convincing answer to this problem. They say that even if capitalists should be free to allocate their resources in discriminatory ways, they probably won't because of market competition.

This view can be traced back to Chicago school economist Gary Becker, who argued in his 1957 book *The Economics of Discrimination* that markets will punish racist companies because in the long term, the firms will suffer negative economic consequences. If companies discriminate, the argument goes, the discriminated group probably won't buy their goods and the labor pool available to them will shrink — both of which put the racist company at a competitive disadvantage relative to non-discriminatory firms. Free markets, therefore, should be the means to minority uplift.

But the opposite of what Becker predicted has occurred.

Since markets were increasingly released from democratic constraints (i.e. regulations) in the 1970s and 1980s and 1990s, racial inequalities along economic lines have grown significantly in the United States. And over the same deregulatory period, the relevant research shows that there has been persistent discrimination in employment, housing, credit markets, and consumer interactions with sellers.

Free markets deepen the inequalities that are often tied to minority status by giving employers and service providers free rein to discriminate and charge higher prices and rents.

So given that capitalist markets don't solve the key social problems confronting oppressed minority groups, what range of issues should be subject to collective decision-making and which should be left to private choices? There is no easy answer to this question.

That Friedersdorf offers us up a simple model of the world where there is democracy in the state but free markets and private property in the economy is naive. It is false on its own terms. It is as unimaginable for the state to be uninvolved in the economy as it is for business to be uninvolved in the state.

Here's what democratic socialists think: in the realm of property, we simply don't believe that the ownership of society's productive assets should enrich the wealthy few rather than the many.

The disproportionate share of control over society's resources and the wealth those resources produce run counter to an ethics that values individual autonomy and freedom. The values that Friedersdorf is most keen to defend are the same ones that capitalism undermines.

Democracy and Majority Rule

Another related oversight, as others have pointed out, is Friedersdorf's conflation of majority rule with democracy.

Democratic socialists understand democracy as a social relationship that places people on equal footing and ensures that they have the capacity to shape the decisions that affect their lives. "The democratic egalitarian principle of political justice," Erik Olin Wright explains, "is that all people should have equal access to the powers needed to make choices over their own lives and to participate in collective choices that affect them because of the society in which they live."

This requires rights (freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc.), economic means (so the ability to participate is more than merely formal), and the chance for people to have a say in decisions of real import (not just who ends up in elected office). "Democracy is on the march" when relationships of domination are undone and people are able to author their individual and collective destinies, free from the chains of subordination.

Friedersdorf's definition is more limited, which leads to some head-scratching statements.

For instance, he notes that a healthy majority of Americans still retain "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in law enforcement, even after the rise of Black Lives Matter. Because the movement hasn't convinced more Americans to view police officers skeptically, Friedersdorf sees this as a case where democracy needs to be hemmed in — otherwise the state will be free to brutalize with impunity. "In the United States," he writes, "*antidemocratic* protections in the Constitution and *antidemocratic* methods like lawsuits and consent decrees are vital tools that diminish the ability of law-enforcement officers to abuse people."

This is a curious argument. It's true that on some level minority groups have to persuade or cajole the majority into accepting their enfranchisement. But it's quite a leap to then say that that majority has a greater claim to the term "democratic" than those fighting for its rudiments — that movements struggling against unaccountable power aren't the true carriers of democracy.

In May 1961, a majority of Americans told Gallup that they opposed the actions of the Freedom Riders. Two years later, on the eve of the now-universally celebrated March on Washington, 60 percent of respondents said they held an unfavorable opinion of the proposed rally. A month after the Civil Rights Act went into effect, barely a majority supported the law.

Were William F. Buckley and Bull Connor on the side of democracy because they could summon local and sometimes national majorities for the segregationist cause? Were the participants of the Civil Rights Movement wrong in thinking that African Americans' incorporation into the American polity would advance democracy?

Just asking the questions reveals their inanity. The entire black freedom struggle has been a struggle to make American democracy more than a farce. Yet Friedersdorf somehow confuses these

movements' victories — basic protections for African Americans — with the dilution of democracy.

Black socialists have long framed their fight in very different terms. In his account of Reconstruction, W. E. B. Du Bois called the organized push to break the bonds of slavery “the abolition democracy” and subtitled his book “An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America.” After being charged with breaking a Jim Crow bus law in the 1940s, Bayard Rustin argued that “America cannot maintain its leadership in the struggle for world democracy as long as the conditions exist which caused our arrest and conviction.” Ella Baker’s biographer described her decades of civil rights work as a testament to her “radical democratic vision.”

According to Friedersdorf, there’s a “disconnect between the *theory* of democratic socialists and how democracy actually works.” But it seems socialists just have a better grasp of the nuances of democratic politics and the history of bottom-up struggles for minority rights.

Democratic socialism requires protected rights. We believe that individual rights are intrinsic to democracy itself. Without freedom of assembly, freedom to communicate and express one’s own opinions, freedom to form associations and groups, we would not have a democracy. Such rights have to be safeguarded regardless of the majority view. The issue is that these freedoms are far too curtailed, particularly in the economic sphere.

Workers are not free to vocalize their own opinions at work, they are not free to forms of union representation, they are not, in many ways, even free to have autonomy over their own bodies — as the case of workers being barred from taking restroom breaks so obviously shows.

Friedersdorf worries about the production of hair products for African Americans under democratic socialism. Yet some workplaces today actively ban dreadlocks. And to the extent that they don’t, we largely have anti-discrimination laws — a product of the Civil Rights Movement — to thank.

Capitalism and Individual Rights

W | hat should and shouldn’t be a protected personal right?

Democratic socialists believe that one’s individual rights should not encroach on the rights and autonomy of others. That’s why we find capitalism so objectionable — the propertyless-ness of workers forces them to submit to the directives of those who own productive assets and yield a portion of what they produce to those owners. The private ownership of society’s main productive assets (i.e. capitalist firms), which Friedersdorf cheerfully lauds as the great problem solver in the distribution of goods, impinges upon the very minority rights that appear to have motivated his response in the first place.

And this isn’t just true in the realm of production. If minority and oppressed groups face exploitation as workers, they also struggle to get their needs and wants met as consumers.

Consider how goods are allocated in capitalist markets. Capitalist firms do not produce and distribute goods as a response to either needs or demands. Capitalism isn’t just one big supply and demand curve. Instead firms produce and distribute goods on the basis of people’s demands and their *ability to pay* for them.

There is certainly a demand for new medicines to treat Ebola outbreaks, but Ebola is an unprofitable disease — so medical companies don’t allocate much research and development money toward it. Much like those that have contracted malaria, this demand is not effective in capitalist markets, because many of those who have it lack the ability to pay. It is a poor people’s ailment.

So when Friedersdorf writes that “the mere existence of buyers reliably gives rise to suppliers,” he is ignoring reality: many minorities under capitalism are already unable to get the things they want and need to live. Working-class and poor people struggle to pay for food, medical bills, and retirement. Do homeless people lack shelter because they prefer sleeping in the cold? The same minorities that he thinks capitalism helps are the ones that often lack effective demand to get their needs met, because of the deep inequalities and poverty that capitalism generates.

In challenging the private power of individuals to control how we allocate goods — for profit rather than need — democratic socialists argue that we should extend minority rights, not further curtail them. For example, we see health care as a democratic right, regardless if one has the ability to pay. Because of huge resource inequalities that persist in our society, even the pure libertarian fantasy market that Friedersdorf seems to be working off of allows capitalists to discriminate against minorities — even if under the seemingly neutral justification that “they can’t afford our health care plan.”

The Meaning of Minorities

T | oday, because a minority of our population has an effective demand for yachts, mansions, and personal jets, they get those wants met. Should they? According to Friedersdorf, the answer is yes — the mere existence of their extravagant demands gave rise to personal jet suppliers.

But his argument rests on a false equivalency that he never seems to acknowledge. Simply put, the right to access halal meat and birth control is not the same as the “right” to eat caviar and drink champagne. Not all minority groups are equal. Capitalists and Wall Street financiers that own the productive assets of society make up a very small minority group. Their rights as a minority group to societies’ wealth shouldn’t be protected, because protecting those rights means the systematic trampling of the rights of others.

This is an unjust advantage that is dependent on the lack of democracy in the economic sphere. The purpose of democratic socialism is to move toward a fairer social arrangement. As Albert Einstein put it in 1949, “the real purpose of socialism is precisely to overcome and advance beyond the predatory phase of human development.”

Democratic socialism would not curtail the political rights of the rich as individuals. But it would democratize their private control over the allocation of resources and end their “right” to eat caviar and champagne at every meal.

In subjecting decisions about the production and allocation of resources to a democratic polity in which people have equal capacity to participate and flourish, democratic socialism would be extending the rights of the individual, not curtailing them. More people would have rights and say over the products of their work and the things they consume and have access to. Birth control should be distributed on the basis of need, not on the ability to pay.

It’s somewhat ironic, in fact, when Friedersdorf cites Friedrich Hayek saying, “If we face a monopolist we are at his absolute mercy.” He could easily be describing the conditions that most workers and consumers face in a capitalist society.

Though Friedersdorf speaks of maintaining access to prayer rugs, halal food, sex toys, and birth control, what he is concerned with above all else are the property rights of capitalists. Personal property does not equal control over societies’ productive assets; halal is not the means of production.

Already, all production is planned — it’s just that today, it’s planned on the basis of profitability. One can imagine scenarios in which production would reflect actual demand, not just effective demand. And that’s exactly what democratic socialists have in mind. In any alternative worth the democratic socialist name, those who wanted halal would have it — but they would also have a warm place to sleep.

Fighting for Democracy — and Minority Rights

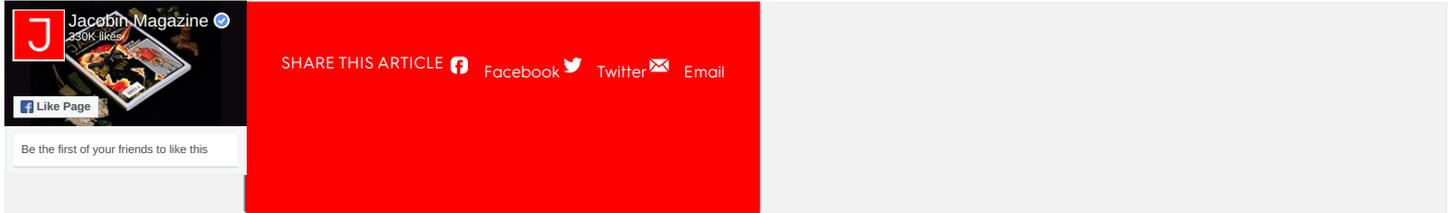
Friedersdorf appears to have jumped into a libertarian wonderworld and never found his way out. He imagines various islands of competing power, one balanced off the other, fending off consolidation. He doesn't think to peer inside those islands to see [how they're organized](#).

The patriarchal husband, for instance, might be seen as a countervailing force to the state — but his power isn't rooted in democratic principles. Democratic socialists prescribe state action to undermine such arrangements. In this case, guaranteeing housing, education, and health care as rights — all of which impinge on capitalists' profitability — help women flee abusive relationships.

The difference between our views, then, is not that Friedersdorf recognizes individual rights and democratic socialists trample on them. The difference lies in what we think should be subject to democratic processes.

Democratic socialists want to subject the private allocation of goods and services for personal profit to political constraints precisely because we don't think it best matches products with demands, even for minority groups. Not only will people have more control over their own lives under democratic socialism, they will also be better off.

In the meantime, it is democratic socialists who are on the front lines of the struggle for minority rights — opposing [police violence](#) and [draconian immigration enforcement](#), [championing prison strikes](#) and [government whistleblowers](#). Our call to extend democracy from the political to the economic and social spheres is animated by the exact same commitment. Watch out, oligarchs.



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