

Dialogue

Social Democracy and Stalinism

(Editor's note: The dialogue below began over a discussion of a *New York Times* article, *The Disastrous Decline of the European Center-Left* <https://nyti.ms/2yDHu6v>)

October 2

Rod,

I believe most people in the DSA see themselves as being to the left of classical social democracy. There was an article recently that bemoaned the fact that many of the founders of DSA have left the organization because they feel that it has become to left wing, particularly on the question of Israel/Palestine.

Ron

October 2

Ron,

But wasn't there also a big article recently on the extent to which DSA wanted to become relevant and powerful within the Democratic Party? (Following the Sanders' model.)

Rod

October 2

Rod,

Yes there was such an article, but that is not in contradiction to what I said, which is that most people in the DSA see themselves as being more radical than classical Social Democracy. They identify more with Jeremy Corbyn and Syriza (and Podemos in Spain), whom the author criticizes for having an inconsistent mish-mash of a program, among other things, being too hostile to capitalism (at least rhetorically). A recent article in *The Jacobin* magazine indicated considerable respect for, and a desire to emulate, the Communist Party, USA in the 1930s. Their only criticisms seem to be three: the failure of the Communists to openly identify

themselves, the CP's support for the Non-Aggression Pact, and the CP's support for the no-strike pledge during WWII. There was no mention of the CP's support for the Soviet Union, including defending Forced Collectivization, and the Purge Trials. And they agree with the CP's strategy, which was to support the New Deal. As I've stressed, today social democracy and Stalinism have fused; Bernie Sanders and his followers are reformist Stalinists. They want to take over (or split) the Democratic Party and turn it (or a piece of it) into a left populist (that is, a reformist Stalinist) party.

Ron

October 2

Ron,

It seems to me we are having two conversations, though I expect you will see them as one.

The original issue, posed by you, was: "I believe most people in the DSA see themselves as being to the left of classical social democracy." In response, I questioned whether the DSA, if it claimed that it 'wanted to become relevant and powerful within the Democratic Party,' was really to the left of classical social democracy.

In response, you supported your view that 'most people in the DSA see themselves as being to the left of classical social democracy' by arguing that they identify more with the Corbyn wing of the Labour Party and others, 'who the author (of the original article I cited) criticizes.'

The author, though he focused more on the social democratic left than the center, was lamenting the lack of a viable 'center-left' party/trend in today's 'democracies.' In that context, it's no surprise that he would disparage what he sees as the 'left fringes' of this center-left alignment. But that doesn't speak to whether 'most people in the DSA see themselves to the left of classical social democracy.' For starters, what puts Corbyn's Labour Party outside of classical social democracy?

You go on to state that elements of the DSA (a majority?) 'admire the CPUSA of the 1930s,' and wrap up the argument by saying that

'social democracy and Stalinism have fused.' Though you don't spell out the reasons, I assume it is because they are both statist and reformist. While I agree with this (it is the second conversation that I say you have mixed in) I have trouble seeing how a 'next step to the left of the Democratic Party' puts anyone significantly to the left of classical social democracy. Isn't this in fact what classical social democracy is--a supposedly socialist (via reform and the ballot box) alternative to explicitly capitalist parties? Your argument only makes sense to me if you see the Democratic Party as it exists as classical social democracy. I don't.

Rod

October 3
Rod,

I was taking the author's position, bemoaning the decline of the "center-left" parties (the reference being to the German Social Democracy and the French Socialist Party), as a starting point. There is today, internationally, another current, which includes Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and I believe the Jeremy Corbyn wing of the Labour Party, which sees itself as being more radical than the German Social Democracy and the French Socialist Party. They are hooked up with an intellectual center that claims Rosa Luxemburg as their origin, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (I think it's called). While from our point of view, both trends are social democratic, there are differences between them. Among them are different rhetorical stances towards capitalism and "socialism." The former, as the author of the article discusses, openly supports capitalism and does not call for "socialism"; they are for capitalism with some social welfare programs. The second claims to be anti-capitalist and advocates "socialism"; they support Cuba and Maduro, and looking back in history, defend the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union, and China as "socialist," although, of course, they criticize the "excesses" of these regimes. In the US, the Obama/Clinton wing of the Democratic Party plays the same role the German SPD and the French SP do in Europe, while the Sanders people, including and in particular the DSA people, see themselves as way to the left of this, choosing to fight in the Democratic Party only as a "tactic." (This is why Clinton called Sanders "disloyal" to the party). The Sanders trend represents the long-time politics of my mother and her Stalinist friends, and as I

see it now, the vast majority of today's left movement is converging on this point; they are entering, in whole or part, the DSA to wage the fight inside the Democratic Party either to take over the DP and turn it into a left populist party or to split the DP and use their piece to build such a party. They do not see themselves as, and do not call themselves, "Democrats." As we discussed at length in the past, these people are both reformist and Stalinist, as the CPUSA has been since the inception of the Popular Front. This is why the vice chair of the DSA defended the CPUSA's line in the 1930s (with the mild criticisms I mentioned); they clearly want to play the same role today. This is where I think the vast majority of the left is heading. This is the only point I am trying to make, whatever we choose to call the emerging movement/trend.

Ron

October 3
Ron and Rod,

One important consideration: SYRIZA has been the governing party in Greece for nearly three years. Prior to being voted in, they said that they would take a hard line against the Troika (EU, IMF, World Bank). But in office, they folded and became the executors of the austerity demanded by the Troika (led by the Germans). Tsipras, the SYRIZA leader, went from hero to goat to the international left, and the SYRIZA left evacuated from the party. I think that SYRIZA is now in a position analogous to that of the SPD following WWI. Not fully -- they didn't murder the Greek Luxembourg and Liebknecht. But I think that the analogy holds.

I think that Podemos, should they be voted in, will fail at least as badly. Corbyn as well -- although he *might* get thrown out of office by his own party first.

Jack

October 3
Jack,

Yes, I agree. At bottom, the left social democrats support capitalism and will cave in to it, one way or another. It would be interesting to see what would happen if Sanders got elected president and had to

take responsibility for the system, both domestically and internationally. The current is only viable playing the role of opposition.

Ron

October 3

Ron,

Thanks for your informative email. I agree with you on your main points.

I think we were talking past each other because I (who am old, and perhaps stuck in the past) interpreted your phrase 'classical social democracy' as a reference to, broadly speaking, the 2nd International. These parties were distinctly to the 'left' of the US Democratic Party, since they were avowedly socialist, anti-capitalist, internationalist, etc., etc. (What they proved to be in practice is well known to both of us.) I didn't (don't) see the DSA as to the left of this; in fact, I see it as slightly to the right of this (though slicing it this finely may not be worthwhile).

That said, I understand why your reference point for classical social democracy was the post-1945 social democratic/socialist parties (given the author's discussion), with the German and French parties certainly being the best examples. (Some other S-D parties, at brief moments and in small ways, moved to the left of these parties, and even the French party had to be more sensitive to its left flank, due to the CGT/French CP.) I have no disagreement with you that most in the DSA see themselves as being to the left of these parties, since these parties are as close to what has morphed into neo-liberalism as you can get. The Democratic Party, at least its more liberal wing is largely comparable to this version of social democracy, and I agree that Sanders (Warren?) on left, including the DSA, want to create a DP that, in their minds, is to the left of this. A different way of saying this is that they do not think they are looking for, as the author of the article we began discussing is, a 'center-left' coalition. (I would bet that a very large portion of them would, if they had the opportunity, form just such a coalition, arguing that it is the practical 'next step.)

I also agree that there is the difference you describe in terms of the 'first' group' and the 'second.' Again, the 'second' represented 'classical social democracy' as I was defining it. Do you agree with this, or do you think you are describing something to the left of the 1880-1914 German, French, British, Italian, and et. al. socialist/social democratic parties?

I agree that all these people are reformist (we never disagreed on this). I accept that they are Stalinist in the sense that I have come to understand you mean. By this I mean that you would cite the CPUSA in its Popular Front garb as 'Stalinist, and then make that the equation. I would tend to describe the Bolsheviks, Mao, Castro, Hoxha, Tito, as Stalinists, and this group has, in my mind, certain distinct differences with the CPUSA, your mother, Sanders and many in the DSA.

Rod

October 3

Rod,

I am not sure whether we agree or disagree, but I believe that if we do disagree, the disagreement is minor.

Part of the problem is how we define things. Are we referring to formal programs or are we talking about something else? Although the DSA, because of its orientation to the Democratic Party, might be described as being to the right of the pre-1917 Social Democracy, it has a spirit, an élan, a naïve belief in socialism (as they understand it) that, as far as I've read, the Social Democracy never had. There is an incident in the history of the SPD that I believe reveals the reality. In the early 1890s (1891?), an SPD deputy in the Reichstag declared that the party was not interested in establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat. When younger members of the party, based in Berlin, objected to this at the next party congress, the whole group of them were expelled from the party (with the approval of Engels). Also, the party leadership was always hostile to the idea of a general strike; they had a saying, "general strike, general nonsense." Thus, in my view, Bernstein was substantially right in the way he described the de facto, rather than the formal, program of the party. In contrast, the DSA today has the character of a movement; its spirit is more

militant, more hopeful, and more enthusiastic than the old Social Democracy ever was, even before 1917. Therefore, I see it as being to the left of the pre-1917 Social Democracy, not to mention the post-WWII version. Beyond this, the DSA now embraces the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and Nicaragua (with appropriate criticisms of excesses, insufficient democracy, etc.).

I am using the term "Stalinist" to refer to people who believe that socialism equals total (or almost total) state ownership and control of the economy, and hence, of all society, however they seek to arrive at that goal. In my view, there is a spectrum that ranges from Sanders/DSA all the way through to the various Marxist-Leninist organizations, the CP, Workers World, the SWP, the Spartacist League, the RCP, the CLP, PLP, et. al. To me, they are all "Stalinists." In the United States and increasingly around the world, the revolutionary vs. reformist distinction is losing its relevance.

Ron

October 4
Ron,

I do think we are in substantial agreement, with differences being explorations and nuances.

For example, what I've read and watched in documentaries about 1919-1920, 'biennio rosso,' in Italy, showed a movement, both in the cities and countryside full of passion and spirit. I think the PSI was very influential, but other forces may have contributed to or altered the character. I am sure there are many other examples that, perhaps, distinguish rank and file from leadership, with spirit, élan and a sincere belief in socialism.

I also wonder whether DSA'ers, despite their admiration with criticisms of the RR, etc., would say they stand for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Rod

October 4
Rod and Ron,

I am very hesitant to generalize about DSA. From what I know, it varies considerably from place to place. I am not sure that Baskhar Sunkara represents the dominant tendency in DSA (but maybe he does.) I don't think that it's much like the Italian SP of 1918-19. And yes, I understand that the analogy was raised to comment on the spirit of some in DSA. I think that a better comparison might be with SLID as it birthed SDS.

Jack

October 4
Rod and Jack,

My memory of the Italian events leads me to think that they were more a spontaneous movement looking for leadership (I believe Malatesta and/or his followers were active in the rural uprisings) than something to be credited to the PSI. After all, there were the German uprisings in late 1918-early 1919, and I don't think they should be credited to the SPD.

Re DSA. I have read that some of its early members, perhaps founders, have quit because they see the organization as having moved too far to the left, especially on foreign policy, e.g., Israel/Palestine and for Boycott-Divest-Sanction. Also, isn't Sunkara a vice chair of DSA? I doubt he would have his post and write his stuff if he didn't have a lot of support in the organization. As a result, I think the SLID/SDS analogy is more useful. I suspect that if the Democratic Party had developed an anti-Vietnam War faction earlier than it did, say, in 1965, much of the radicalization that we saw (and participated in) wouldn't have happened. Then SDS would have looked a lot more like DSA today. After all, in 1964, SDS had a "Part of the Way With LBJ" position on the election.

I don't see how one can seriously deny the "Stalinist" label to the Communist Parties in the US, Great Britain, France, Italy, etc., in the 1930s and onward.

Ron

October 4
Ron and Jack,

I think I was wrong to suggest that the 1930s CPs were not Stalinist--I agree that they were. The question becomes, why? We would agree on the following, I think: 1) They called themselves Communist; 2) They had their roots in the Bolshevik Revolution and SD/Bolshevik/CP split; 3) They were part of Communist International; 4) They were significantly controlled by Stalin/Moscow (though had some independence in some places); 5) Their political outlook was based on the worst of Lenin and Trotsky, combined with Socialism in One Country, Red Terror, etc., etc.; 6) They were undemocratic, bureaucratic organizations; 7) Lying and manipulating was 'good politics.' I could go on, and I expect we would continue to agree.

The disagreement comes from my attempts to attach revolution/putsch/coup to the meaning of Stalinist vs. social democratic. Although I haven't entirely given up on this, I can see from my definition above that I can't square that circle. The best I can do is to say that, for the most part, they 'claimed' to be for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat; this was largely untrue of social democracy. But I will have to continue to think about this.

Thanks for the discussion.

Rod

October 4
Rod,

The solution is to recognize that, with the Soviet Union gone, the Cold War over, China embracing capitalism, the traditional Social Democratic parties in decline, etc., etc., Stalinism and social democracy are merging: e.g., in the US, the CP, the DSA, and Sanders. As I see it, the key is the question of statism. Beyond the question of support to the Soviet Union, the Comintern, the Bolshevik Revolution, etc., the main difference between the Stalinist movement and the old Social Democratic movement was over the extent of state ownership, the Stalinists wanting it to be complete or nearly so, the Social Democrats, certainly after 1914, wanting it

only as an adjunct to a traditional capitalist economy. Today, the "new" social democracy (in the US, DSA, Sanders) is much more enthusiastic about "socialism" (meaning, extensive state ownership and control) than the old Social Democracy. The bridge, for the DSA-types, was Cuba, an apparently benign form of state capitalism. Programmatically, the new social democracy and Stalinism are converging toward Kautsky's position, which was also Allende's, that is, "socialism" (complete state capitalism) with a parliament/congress, to be established via the "democratic process."

Ron

October 4

Ron,

Thanks. Again, I largely agree and appreciate the analysis, including the historical convergence.

Two 'sticking points': 1) You cite the extent of state ownership as the main difference between Stalinism and SD. But doesn't this rest, ultimately, on the consequences of overthrowing the capitalist state (I'll call this 'classical Stalinism) and reforming the capitalist state (I'll call this classical SD)? 2) I think the argument that Bernie Sanders is 'more enthusiastic' about socialism than the 'old Social Democracy' is wanting on both ends of the equation.

Rod

Rod,

If you think about it, classical Social Democracy stopped talking about "socialism" (state capitalism) a long time ago. I think they stopped believing in it, became convinced that to advocate it would only help the Communists, or decided that it was better not to advocate it lest they be seen as Communists. The Stalinists still advocate "socialism." Sanders splits the difference: he doesn't explicitly advocate "socialism" but only speaks well of it, while describing himself as a "democratic socialist", thus legitimizing it. It's part of his overall dishonesty: he isn't a Democrat but caucuses

with them; he fights Hillary Clinton but ultimately endorses her for president; he opposes US imperialism but defends the US's "legitimate foreign interests." What I believe he is really for, what he really believes in, what he really gets enthusiastic about, is "socialism", that is, state capitalism. Therefore, as I see it, he's a Stalinist. To me, today the question of statification overrides that of reform or revolution.

There are different ways to "overthrow the capitalist state." I believe Allende in Chile was attempting to create Cuban-style "socialism" through the "democratic process." In Spain, I don't think Stalin was trying to preserve the republic as a true bourgeois-democratic capitalist state. I believe his aim there was to create a "people's democracy," like those in Eastern Europe, that is, a state that could make a claim to be bourgeois-democratic but which was, in fact, completely controlled by the Stalinists, that is, state capitalism with a bourgeois-democratic front.

Ron

October 5
Ron and Rod,

It isn't clear to me what, if any, differences there are, or what the main substantive issues are. So I'm going to post something that may be overly general, in hopes that it hits on some relevant areas.

First, comments on what Ron calls "classical Social Democracy." I think that it's instructive to recall the three-way schism in the flagship party of the Second International, the German social Democratic Party (SPD). The right wing was led by Eduard Bernstein who coined the famous slogan, "The movement is everything, the end goal nothing." So by 1900, the right wing of the SPD -- including most of the trade union leadership -- focused exclusively on minimal reforms. The centrist tendency, led by Kautsky, continued to talk about socialism in their pamphlets and Sunday rallies. But when WW I arrived, the right and the center did not oppose Germany's participation in the war. Following the war, the German social democratic leaders -- Scheidemann, Ebert, Noske -- headed the German state government (premier, war minister, etc.) and employed the extreme right wing mercenaries of the Freikorps to crush the rebellion led by the left wing of the SPD

(the Spartacist uprising) and murder Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. So did they stop talking about socialism? Some did; others redefined socialism to be what Bernie Sanders means by "democratic socialism" -- a Keynesian welfare state with government social service programs and a (bureaucratic) regulatory apparatus presiding in a mixed economy with power de facto residing in large domestic and international capital (think Scandinavian social democracy from c. 1930 until c. 1970 -- this was "classical Social Democracy", and it called itself (and was outside of the far left widely considered to be) socialist. As for the centrist tendency in the pre-WWI SPD, as we all know its intellectual leader was Karl Kautsky, who elaborated his theory of what Lenin termed "ultra-imperialism": that capitalism would evolve gradually to "socialism", by which he essentially meant state ownership of industry combined with parliamentary democracy. This view was compatible with -- indeed, was the essence of -- the reformist classical social democratic view described a few sentences ago. In practice, when the reformists were elected to head governments, they acted "responsibly" to discipline the working class (no surprise, as the social democratic union leadership did that routinely every day). SYRIZA acted in just this way when it was elected into leadership in Greece a few years ago: within a few months of taking office, they reneged on their pledge to reject the Troika's austerity demands, and set out to rein in popular opposition. Podemos will do the same or worse, should they be elected. So how does this tendency differ from "classical social democracy"? SYRIZA is now widely seen as not really different -- they do the bidding of the Troika; they collaborate with the Israeli Zionist leaders; they break strikes; they impose austerity in conditions of mass unemployment and poverty. So is there a difference, other than talk?

Briefly on Stalinism: If by Stalinism we mean the ideology of state capitalism -- that is, socialism is congruent to state capitalism (economic and political power centralized in the hands of the state) -- then I think it's almost intuitive that Stalin's goal in Spain was establishing that kind of society (a "people's democracy"). But Stalin was opposed to -- I think terrified of -- militant mass movements from below getting out of control and sweeping against, beyond, and over Stalinist leadership. And he insisted that the policies of the CPs internationally subordinate their domestic revolutions to the needs (as Stalin saw them) of the preservation of

the USSR. So Stalin was for a state capitalist revolution, but only after ensuring his total control, which required the throttling of the anarchist and Trotskyist led mass movement in Spain and the liquidation of their leaders -- which went hand in hand with the insistence on subordinating the movement to Soviet state needs (the national front and the popular front). The split between Stalin and Mao in China started no later than 1931. Mao's version of the popular front, the bloc of four classes, differed from Stalin's in that Mao insisted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to be in command of the front, while Stalin insisted on subordinating the CCP to Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang. Two points here: first, Mao did not have Stalin's fear of mass movements. His MO was mass participation without mass control. That was the basis of the successful anti-imperialist Chinese Revolution of the late 1940s, which did establish a "People's Democracy". (However, in international policy -- most egregiously in Indonesia -- Mao and the CCP leadership advocated not the bloc of four classes but a popular front with the communist party playing a subordinate role (a la Stalin, putting the interests of China first, and resulting in a horrendous bloodbath in Indonesia when the right wing general Suharto took power).

Finally, on DSA. From what I know, DSA varies significantly from area to area. As I said earlier, the rapid growth of DSA and its move to the left reminds me in some ways of SDS emerging from the Student League for Industrial Democracy in the early 1960s. Beyond that, I'm hesitant to generalize. Ron has cited Bashkar Sunkara, the editor of Jacobin who is also Vice Chair of DSA. But I do not know how being Vice Chair translates into support among the membership. How does DSA elect its leaders? At a convention or by ballot? How many members are aware of Sunkara's views, leave aside embrace or even support them? I don't know. I do know that many leftist tendencies (and independent leftists) are entering DSA. It's definitely something that we need to check out, but I wouldn't necessarily generalize what DSA is like in one area to other areas, and I don't know whether what Sunkara writes is representative of the tendency. (I do know that in Oakland, DSA's almost exclusive focus is on proselytizing for Bernie Sanders' single payer health proposal.)

Jack
