

What Is Democratic Socialism?

Editors ■ November 14, 2015



Bernie Sanders speaking at a rally in Portland, Oregon, August 9, 2015 (Benjamin Kerensa / Flickr)

Recently, there has been a lot of discussion—and debate—over what democratic socialism is. During the first Democratic primary debate of the 2016 election season, Bernie Sanders became the first major presidential candidate in decades to openly defend it, if in limited terms. Democratic socialism, Sanders said, “is about saying that it is immoral and wrong that the top one-tenth of 1 percent in this country own almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. . . . I think we should look to countries like Denmark, like Sweden and Norway, and learn from what they have accomplished for their working people.”

Sanders’s prime-time defense of democratic socialism was refreshing for many leftists in a country where the “S word” has too long been associated with tyranny. Yet his deferral to Scandinavian social democracy brushed aside a rich tradition of American democratic socialist thought.

Since our founding in 1954, Dissent has played an important role in defining this tradition. Here, we present a selection of key essays on democratic socialism from our archives.

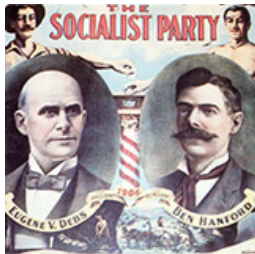
Lewis Coser and Irving Howe, “Images of Socialism” (1954)

“At so late and unhappy a moment, can one still specify what the vision of socialism means or should mean? Is the idea of utopia itself still a tolerable one?”

When we live in the shadow of defeat, to retain, to will the image of socialism is a constant struggle for definition, almost an act of pain. But it is the kind of pain that makes creation possible.”

Michael Harrington, “What Socialists Would Do in America –If They Could” (1978)

“What would happen in America if we were able to make it come to pass? How would we move beyond the welfare state? What measures would be taken on the far side of liberal reform, yet well short of utopia?” Michael Harrington offers a program for American socialists.



Robert L. Heilbroner, “What is Socialism?” (with responses from Lewis Coser, Bogdan Denitch, Michael Harrington, and Michael Walzer, 1981)

Robert Heilbroner: “What is important, in trying to think about socialism, is to resist the delusion that history is so soft and indeterminate that we can have a socialist cake with bourgeois icing.”

From Lewis Coser’s response: “The society of which Tawney dreamed, and of which I dream, does not force people to be good, it simply removes some of the impediments that previously did not permit them to be good. It provides incentives for autonomous individuals, no longer driven by the

compulsions of an acquisitive society, to choose paths of self-realization that do not conflict with the collective well-being. Solidarity and fraternity do not contradict the need for self-realization; they make it possible.”

From Bogdan Denitch’s response: “Can socialism be democratic? Yes; otherwise, of course, it will not be worth its name or worth supporting. But more to the point, yes—provided socialists do not permit their imaginations to be crippled by the limits of liberal democracy under capitalism.”

From Michael Walzer’s response: “Extensive participation is . . . the core of socialism. The moral culture of socialism is rooted in a shared citizenship, the fellowship of the forum. We seek a remedy for passivity and privatization in a radical democracy, opening new opportunities for collective decision-making, so that the beliefs of ordinary citizens become important.”

Anne Phillips, “Sexual Equality and Socialism” (1997)

What has socialism to do with sexual equality? Can equality be achieved simply through recognition of the equal worth of all individuals, regardless of their sex? Or is socialism—and if so, what kind of socialism—a necessary condition for true equality between the sexes? Differences and inequalities must be detached from the accident of being born male or female. And while the liberal tradition first gave voice to this ideal, Anne Phillips argues that only socialism can make it reality.

Michael Walzer, “Which Socialism?” (2010)

“The work is steady, the benefits come mostly in spurts. But the goodness is in the work as much as in the benefits—so it doesn’t matter if the work goes on and on, as it does. It is important and worthwhile work because of its mutuality, because of the talents and capacities it calls forth, and because of the moral value it embodies. That work is socialism-in-the-making, and that is the only socialism we will ever know.

“No theory of the end of history fits our political experience. The idea of historical determinism, like the idea of divine predestination, is lost on us. We have no certainty about the

future. Instead, we have learned the wisdom of Kafka's comment on the biblical story of the death of Moses: 'Not because his life was too short does Moses not reach [the promised land], but because it was a human life.'