Democratic Socialism in the USA: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory

The recent surge of support for socialism—while global inequality widens, the planet warms, and the wealthy continue to profit—can only be seen as logical to members of DSA in 2022. But as Gary Dorrien explains in his recent book American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory the democratic socialist tradition has deep roots in the United States.

The following piece by Dorrien, which abridges the main arguments of his book, gives a thorough overview of socialist action in the US from the nineteenth century to today. Dorrien explains how the US ideals of liberty and democracy were logically compatible with democratic socialist ideals, how craft unionism pervaded American labor, and how religious and secular socialism intertwined to bring new organizers and activists into movements for social change. As Dorrien writes, "Democratic socialists founded the first industrial unions, pulled the Progressive movement to the Left, played leading roles in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded the first Black trade union, proposed every plank of what became the New Deal, and led the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s."

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The convention that democratic socialism is hopelessly un-American has become unsettled. A significant portion of the US American electorate no longer tolerates extreme inequality and is committed to holding off the eco-apocalypse bearing down upon us. In Europe, Social Democracy has created mixed-economy welfare states in which the government pays for everyone's healthcare, higher education is free, elections are publicly financed, solidarity wage policies restrain economic inequality, and ecological health is a high political priority. These achievements have been difficult to imagine, until recently, in the USA. If democratic socialism is about providing universal healthcare, rectifying economic inequality, abolishing structures of racist, sexist, and cultural denigration, and building a peaceable and ecological society, it sounds pretty good to many who have never known anything but neoliberalism and a burgeoning white nationalism.

In a recent book, *Social Democracy in the Making: Political and Religious Roots of European Socialism*, I argued that two very different traditions of nineteenth-century democratic socialism in England and Germany morphed into remarkably similar traditions of Social Democratic reformism after World War II. More recently, in *American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory*, I argue that the USA, for all its predatory history of slavery, conqueror-extermination, and capitalism, also has a history of extraordinary movements for social justice.

Americans have long debated two contrasting visions of what kind of country they want to have. Both are ideal types linked to mainstream forms of conservative and progressive politics. The first is the vision of a society that provides unrestricted liberty to acquire wealth, lifts the right to property above the right to self-government, and limits the federal government to military might and safeguarding the power of elites. The logic of this ideal is Right-libertarian or white-nationalist, legitimizing the dominance of the wealthy, the aggressive, the corporations, and aggrieved white people in the name of individual freedom. The second is the vision of a realized democracy in which the people control the government and economy, self-government is superior to property, and no group dominates any other. The logic of this ideal is democratic socialist or Left-progressive, extending the rights of political democracy into the social and economic spheres.

Right-libertarianism is powerful in US life despite being impossible, setting freedom against democratic equality. Today, white nationalism is the reigning ideology of the Republican Right, fueled by fear and loathing of being replaced. Democratic socialism is supposedly so un-American

that it must be called by other names. But it has a rich history in the USA, even by its right name. *American Democratic Socialism* interprets the intellectual and political history of American socialism from 1829 to 2020, arguing that the USA has the richest cultural history of democratic socialism in the world and a substantial, interesting, and complex intellectual and political history. It contends that Christian socialism has been more important in American democratic socialism than scholarship on this subject conveys, and that the craft-basis of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was a fatal problem for the Socialist Party it never overcame.

The Classical Era

The USA did not have a real labor movement. It just had unions, most of them racist, sexist, nativist craft unions that divided workers from each other, fatally truncating the kind of socialism that was possible. In the 1930s, the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) briefly raised the possibility of a socialist breakthrough, but that was forestalled by Franklin Roosevelt, World War II, and a postwar Congress that outlawed nearly every tool that built the unions. To democratic socialists of my generation, the answer to the labor problem was to treat the Democratic Party as a labor party in disguise, or at least the hope of one. Meanwhile the socialist Left cratered everywhere except one place, the academy, where the Left developed rich new conceptions of social justice emphasizing race, gender, and sexuality as sites of oppression. For thirty years the Left was completely overrun by neoliberal globalization. In 2011, Occupy Wall Street, a spectacular eruption, signaled that many people were fed up with severe inequality and being humiliated. Today, democratic socialist activism is surging as a protest that global capitalism works only for a minority and is driving the planet to eco-apocalypse.

Democratic socialists founded the first industrial unions, pulled the Progressive movement to the Left, played leading roles in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded the first Black trade union, proposed every plank of what became the New Deal, and led the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The best traditions of socialism, I believe, are like the original socialist movement in being predominantly cooperative and decentralized. Nationalization is only one form of socialization and usually not the best one. I believe in expanding the cooperative sector and building bottom-up economic democracy wherever possible, but I also recognize that public ownership at the local, regional, and national levels is sometimes the best option. The convention that democratic socialism is too idealistic to be a viable alternative must be challenged. There had damned well better be an alternative to neoliberalism and destroying the planet.

The USA had vibrant radical democratic traditions before and after Europeans invented socialism. New York disciples of British socialist Robert Owen founded the world's first labor party in 1829, recruiting radical democrats to the view that industries and land should belong to everyone. European socialists poured into the USA after the liberal revolutions of 1848 were put down and socialists had to flee. German-American Social Democrats founded the Socialist Labor Party in 1877 along with a smattering of native-born anarchists and Marxists. Christian socialism sprawled across the nation in the 1880s and 1890s, often taking a Populist form. Populists railed against banks and monopoly trusts, calling for silver dollars, founding powerful organizations, seeping into the Democratic Party, and often converting to socialism or Christian socialism.

Very soon after the Socialist Party was founded in 1901 it was a wondrous stew of radical democrats, neo-abolitionists, Marxists, Christians, Populists, feminists, trade unionists, industrial unionists, Single Taxers, anarcho-syndicalists, and Fabians both American-born and coming from every European nation and Russia. German trade unionists created a powerful Socialist tradition in Milwaukee, where Social Democracy was a culture, not merely a cause. Jewish garment workers from Russia and Russian Poland created similar organizations in New York, espousing a universalistic creed in Yiddish. Rebellious tenant farmers in Oklahoma, red populists in Texas, syndicalist miners in Colorado and California, and populist Socialists across the Midwest and West built a sprawling

network of periodicals, summer camps, and state parties.

The leading Socialist periodical, *Appeal to Reason,* was published in Kansas and topped 900,000 subscribers in its heyday. *The National Ripsaw* morphed out of *Appeal to Reason* and reached a similar audience of farmers, Populists, Christian socialists, and rebels. *The Jewish Daily Forward* was the Bible of New York Jewish socialism, averaging 150,000 subscribers for decades. Scores of Socialist weeklies had upwards of 30,000 subscribers, showing that socialism had no trouble speaking American. One of them, the *Texas Rebel,* fairly raged to its 28,000 readers that if you really believe in government of the people, by the people, and for the people you have to be a democratic socialist; in fact, you are one.

The early Socialist Party was remarkably successful at politics, despite its labor problem, and had little trouble speaking US American, despite its Marxian cast. The first great US socialist leader, Eugene Debs, was a thoroughly American lover of working-class people who adopted a magical idea of socialist deliverance. The first great hope of radical industrial unionism, the Knights of Labor, was founded by Christian socialists. It got pulled into more strikes than it could handle, and learned bitterly that state governments stood ready to smash them. In the USA, unionism mostly meant craft unionism, which organizes the workers of a specific skilled job. The overwhelmingly craft basis of the AFL fatally truncated the labor movement and the kind of socialism that was possible, thwarting socialists from scaling up and from creating a labor party.

The American tradition of simple-majority representation in single-member districts put immense lesser-evil pressure on voters not to waste their vote, turning the nation into a two-party fiefdom that thwarted third party challenges. There are almost no exceptions in the world to the rule that a simple majority single-ballot system creates two-party fiefdoms. Many have argued that US socialists would have floundered anyway under a system of proportional representation because socialism was no match for America's open borders, prosperity, and upward mobility. Many US workers feared that socialism would prevent them from getting ahead. But the USA had more than enough suffering and exploitation to create a surging socialist movement. The number one problem for US socialists was that divide-and-conquer worked in the USA.

Workers were turned against each other, pitting native-born workers in the craft unions against unskilled immigrant workers. The AFL bought into capitalism and excluded the mostly immigrant industrial workers. The Socialist wing of the AFL, consisting mostly of five industrial unions in the mining, brewery, and garment industries, plateaued at 38 percent of the AFL. That yielded a labor movement unlike any in Europe, a crushing difference for US socialists. No factor outranked this one. US unions were founded separately from leftwing political parties. They protected their independence from all political parties, becoming part of the system of political control represented by the two-party system, and defeated the Socialist union leaders who stumped for a labor party. Karl Marx perceived that this exceptional characteristic would be very difficult to overcome. Then Debs condemned the Socialist comrades who tried to win the AFL to socialism, spurning them as reformist sellouts. Debs played a role in sealing the greatest failure of the socialist movement by charging, justly and vehemently, that the business unionism of the AFL made it beholden to the interests, worldview, and agenda of the ruling class.

The Socialist Party peaked at 118,000 members in 1912, which sounded impressive only in the USA; that year the British Labour Party boasted 1.9 million members. There were never enough unionists in the Socialist Party or industrial unionists in the AFL to sustain socialism. Craft unionism so dominated the AFL that craft racism and sexism were impregnable and political independence was orthodoxy.

Debs would not have become a socialist had he been able to tolerate remaining in a craft union. His fling with industrial union leadership was stormy and brief, after which he converted to a millenarian kind of socialism, the cure for all social problems not to be sullied by reform movements or

mediocre trade unions.

Debs was the apostle of a true way that found strength in its evangelical purity. His socialism was a Protestant redemption strategy soaked in the idioms and assumptions of American revivalism. Being a romanticAmerican individualist reinforced his millenarian socialism and his evangelical concept of his mission, making him an incomparable platform performer. He loved the workers and they loved him back, but he made it hard for them to join his party, and he spurned the strategy that worked in England—forming a coalition party of the democratic Left.

From Debs to Thomas

This wondrous Debsian socialism was destroyed in 1917 and 1919. The Socialist Party bravely opposed World War I and paid a horrific price for it, viciously persecuted by the government. Then the meteor of world Communism crashed into the Socialist Party and blew it apart. The Debsian heyday ended in shattered despair, yielding the dismal run-up to "Norman Thomas Socialism," as it was called. Norman Thomas, a Presbyterian minister who graduated from Union Theological Seminary, joined the Socialist Party in 1917 because it opposed US intervention in World War I and the Presbyterian Church did not. He quickly rose to the top of the party because most of the party's native-born intellectuals fled to Woodrow Wilson and Thomas offered a noble contrast to patriotic gore. Norman Thomas Socialism was a three-sided struggle to renew the democratic socialist idea, hold off the Communist Party, and get a farmer-labor-socialist-progressive party off the ground.

The industrial unions played the leading role in pushing to create a labor party. In 1920 they struck out on their own, founding the Farmer-Labor Party. The ascending British Labour Party inspired them and the Communist breakup of the Socialist Party repelled them. The first national Farmer-Labor party made a dismal beginning, but four years later the forces that needed to come together briefly did so, for one election, running Wisconsin Progressive US Senator Robert La Follette for president. It helped that the AFL came aboard to punish the Democrats and Republicans, but the AFL had not changed; backing La Follette was a one-off affair. The dream of a labor party stayed out of reach, condemning the Socialists to years of irrelevance kept afloat by garment union money.

The farmer-labor-socialist-progressive coalition was never hard to imagine. It haunted the Left because every election produced political victors who did not represent vast sectors of the population. W. E. B. Du Bois, Reinhold Niebuhr, John Dewey and other intellectuals in Thomas's orbit shared his dream that the disparate Left would pull together. In 1935, Thomas dragged the Socialist Party into solidarity work with the fledgling Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in Tennessee. The union grew rapidly and adopted a Black Church hymn, "We Shall Not Be Moved." Thomas risked his life by speaking to terrorized sharecroppers in Arkansas. He pleaded for a meeting with Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace, who refused to see him. Thomas despised Wallace for the rest of his life, which was fateful in the mid-1940s when Wallace became a leading anti-anti-Communist and Thomas spurned him for that reason too.

For a while the Great Depression rewrote the script on what might be possible. Union activism rebounded dramatically, Congress passed the Wagner Act of 1935, and Communists and Socialists organized the CIO. The Wagner Act threw the weight of government behind union organizers, forcing employers to allow their plants to be unionized. Franklin Roosevelt endorsed it shortly before it passed, co-opting a tide of leftwing and rightwing populist forces—Norman Thomas Socialists, Farmer-Labor organizers, Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" movement, Republican progressives, and Communists. He did it with wily brilliance, putting Leftist leaders on his payroll, favoring select third-party candidates over Democrats, telling them he was on their side—determined to transform the Democrats into a progressive party. The New Deal enacted a substantial portion of the Socialist platform; to a considerable degree, the New Deal was a form of socialist deliverance. The only Socialist play was to pull FDR to the left by working with him and demanding more from him. But the Socialists opposed him, clinging to socialism-is-the-answer,

which made them look irrelevant.

Thomas was eloquent, personable, astute, courageous, and not cut out to be a party leader. He symbolized the shift of the Socialist Party from being primarily working class to being primarily a vehicle of middle-class idealism. The New York garment unions were the financial rock of the party until 1937, when Thomas and the left wing drove them out. Afterward there was no financial rock. For 40 years, Thomas and Black socialist union leader A. Philip Randolph stood together at the center of democratic socialism. The party's united front activism mostly backfired and the party dwindled, surpassed even by a Communist Party that was shrewd enough to support Roosevelt. Thomas and the Socialists allowed into the party a band of Trotskyists who sabotaged the party and stole its youth section. Another exodus ensued when Thomas and the Socialists held out too long against World War II. Afterward Thomas adamantly opposed Soviet domination of East Europe and pro-Soviet American Leftism, supporting the purge of Communists from CIO leadership positions.

The last hope of a Labor Party was lost in the whiplash reactions of 1946-1948. The CIO struck hard for postwar wage gains and Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act over Harry Truman's veto. Taft-Hartley abolished or curtailed almost every tool that built the unions, outlawing jurisdictional strikes, wildcat strikes, solidarity strikes, secondary boycotts, secondary and mass picketing, closed shops, and union contributions to federal political campaigns. It gave state legislatures a green light to enact Orwellian right-to-work laws having nothing to do with the right to work. The unions had grown from 3 million AFL members in 1935 to 14 million AFL and CIO members in 1945. Taft-Hartley was about making them weak and insecure again. The last hope of a Labor Party died with Truman's feisty comeback victory of 1948. Now the defanged labor movement belonged wholly to the Democratic Party, an outcome facilitated by the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955.

The Underappreciated Influence of Christian Socialism

Thomas's pilgrimage from social gospel socialism to the leadership of the Socialist Party exemplified a Christian socialist tradition that has never gotten its due in the literature on U.S. American socialism. The lack of interest by scholars in Christian socialism has yielded accounts that do not explain how African Americans and feminists came into the movement through religious socialism. Two classic histories of democratic socialism published in 1952 dominated this field for a generation, summarizing opposite traditions of assessment yielding a similar verdict.

Political scientist Ira Kipnis, in *The American Socialist Movement*, argued that the Socialist Party was doomed from the beginning by its accommodating social democratic reformism. Kipnis said the right wing of the party led by Milwaukee journalist-politician Victor Berger was consumed with winning elections and the mainstream of the party led by New York journalist-politician Morris Hillquit was only slightly less opportunistic. The party debated immediate demands and true Marxism at its founding, but adopted the wrong answer. It got a second chance at correcting its course in 1905 when the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded, but Debs did not stick with the IWW and most socialists loathed its anarcho-syndicalism and violence. The party lost its last chance of becoming important when it censured its left flank of IWW members in 1912 and expelled IWW leader Bill Haywood from the Executive Committee the following year. Kipnis contributed mightily to the legend that theWobblies were the real thing and the Hillquit-Berger socialists were sellouts. The real thing, in his view, was anarchist in hating government and syndicalist in contending that worker syndicates should run the country. True leftism versus opportunism explained the failure of the Socialist Party, culminating in the Haywood drama.

Sociologist Daniel Bell, in *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, agreed from an opposite standpoint that the party was hopelessly futile from the beginning, contending that every Socialist leader espoused a utopian vision of social transformation that made the party alien to American society and marginal in it. According to Bell, AFL leader Samuel Gompers was the wise hero who figured out how to make social democratic gains in capitalist America, whereas Debs, Hillquit, and Berger clung to an un-American fantasy. Subsequently the Socialist Party crawled onward at the

national level only because it had a compelling figurehead, Thomas. Just as Kipnis looked down on his subject from the superior vantage point of pro-Communist radicalism, Bell looked down as a Cold War liberal, having recently outgrown his youthful attachment to Norman Thomas Socialism. The socialists, Bell said, were ideologues in a pluralistic and technocratic society that eventually put an end to ideology itself.

These rival books cast a long shadow over scholarship on the American Left. The fact that they drove to the same conclusion about the futility of democratic socialism solidified this verdict as a convention. Kipnis and Bell summarily dismissed the Christian socialists who spoke to broader middle-class audiences than the Socialist parties, demanded to be included in socialist politics, and built significant organizations. Kipnis wrote them off in three quick strokes, noting that George Herron was briefly famous, something called the Christian Socialist Fellowship existed, and all Christian socialists, being religious, were of course opportunists. Christian socialism itself he dispatched with a single sentence: "Since the Christian Socialists based their analysis on the brotherhood of man rather than on the class struggle, they aligned themselves with the opportunist rather than the revolutionary wing of the party." The party's many Christian socialist leaders and authors, whoever they were, could not have mattered, since they were religious.

Bell similarly pushed aside the Christian socialists, without employing "opportunist" as a broad-brush epithet. He devoted a footnote to the Christian Commonwealth colony at Commonwealth, Georgia, noted that Edward Bellamy's Fabian utopian fable *Looking Backward* (1888) won most of its fame through Christian socialist clergy, and observed that a cleric named George Herron was "one of the leading figures of the party." That was it. Even a bit of following up on Herron would have vastly enriched Bell's picture of US American socialism, but he wasn't interested. It could not be that these people mattered. The struggles for racial justice and feminism had no role in Bell's story, so the Christians in them didn't matter either. Bell's insistence that socialism itself is essentially religious—that is, eschatological—exempted him, he thought, from paying attention to any actual religious socialists, whether or not they were indebted to Marx.

Herron was a lecture circuit spellbinder and Congregational cleric who befriended Debs, showed him how to translate ethical idealism and populism into sermon-style socialist evangelism, and electrified the social gospel movement by calling America to repent of its capitalist, racist, sexist, and imperialist sins. W. D. P. Bliss was a tireless organizer and Episcopal cleric who tried to unite the reform movements and failed to persuade the Socialist Party that uniting the reform movements was its mission. George Woodbey was a brilliant Black Baptist cleric who spoke for the Socialist Party and the IWW, was beaten and jailed for doing so, and tried to improve how the party and the Wobblies talked about racial justice. W. E. B. Du Bois had one foot in the Black church, joined socialists Mary White Ovington and William English Walling in willing the NAACP into existence, and provided intellectual leadership for Reverdy Ransom, Robert Bagnall, George Slater, George Frazier Miller, and other Black social gospel socialists. Walter Rauschenbusch was the leading social gospel socialist of his time, who never quite joined the Socialist Party because he recoiled at its atheist officials. Kate O'Hare was a brilliant prairie socialist writer and speaker who reflected the racism of her milieu and attracted a following exceeded only by Debs. Vida Scudder was a prolific organizer, writer, Episcopal laywoman, feminist, and lesbian who worked with Bliss and tried to drag Rauschenbusch into the Socialist Party.

These apostles of Christian socialism absorbed more Marxist theory than they usually found it prudent to cite. Bliss and Herron were like Debs in coming to socialism through the Populist movement and its outraged moral sensibility. Bliss, Herron, Scudder and Rauschenbusch struggled with the paradoxes of their ethical Christian idealism for socialist activism, but like Debs, they believed that the class struggle and the limits of middle-class idealism compelled them to be socialists. They said so eloquently a generation before Reinhold Niebuhr became famous for saying it. Marxian social democracy and Populism were the two main highways into American socialism. Christian socialism was the third, and much of the Populist movement *was* Christian socialist. The Niebuhr generation of Christian socialists included Mordecai Johnson, Walter Muelder, Kirby Page,

Sherwood Eddy, J. Pius Barbour, and Benjamin E. Mays. They took for granted that the best forms of Christian theology and ethics are Christian socialist, passing this conviction to Martin Luther King Jr.

Enter the Shachtmanites

In 1958 Thomas reluctantly admitted a group of former Trotskyists into the Socialist Party, fearing they would take it over, which they promptly did. These were the Shachtmanites, disciples of Max Shachtman, a former associate of Bolshevik hero Leon Trotsky. The Shachtmanites were brainy, cunning, scholastic, aggressively parasitic, fiercely ideological, and consumed with the right kind of anti-Communism, which they called anti-Stalinism. They were still Leninists when they broke from Trotsky in 1939 and were more Leninist than they claimed when they morphed in the mid-1950s toward democratic socialism. They found Thomas boring and Shachtman exhilarating. Michael Harrington was their youthful star. Brilliant, energetic, and charming, he befriended Black socialist-pacifist organizer Bayard Rustin and brought Shachtmanites into the civil rights movement.

For most of its history, the Socialist Party took a decent position on racial justice and did little about it, falling short of the Communist Party. Randolph, Rustin, Harrington, James Farmer, Ella Baker, and former Communists Stanley Levison and Jack O'Dell changed this picture, helping King unite the established civil rights movement based in New York City with the new, youthful, church-based movement of the South. Rustin and Harrington organized key civil rights demonstrations of the late 1950s and early 1960s, while Rustin joined the Shachtmanites. In 1960, Harrington and Rustin helped the Shachtmanites take over the Socialist Party. Both were dedicated to keeping secret that King's social gospel was socialist. Harrington was anointed the successor to Debs and Thomas, a title he didn't deserve until he broke from the Shachtmanites in 1972 and broke up the Socialist Party.

Old Left, Meet New Left

The Shachtmanites had a vision of a realigned Democratic Party that enacted the agenda of the AFL-CIO, supported the civil rights movement, and drove out the party's Dixiecrat flank. They were done with the warhorse doctrine that socialists should never ally with bourgeois parties. The Democratic Party, they claimed, was becoming a labor party in disguise. Shortly after the Shachtmanites swung the Socialist Party behind this strategy, a group of ambitious college students based in Ann Arbor, Michigan proclaimed that a "New Left" was needed. The leaders of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) lumped together all the competing groups and ideologies of what they derisively called the "Old Left." Thomas got a pass, as did Harrington at first, but SDS said it took no interest in Old Left fights over Marxian ideology, Communism, unions, and the working class. Anti-Stalinist social democrats were surely better than pro-Soviet Communists, but only by degree. To SDS, the Old Leftists sounded too much alike, not fathoming what it was like to be a college student in 1962.

The New Left was born in a fractious relationship with the Socialist Party while depending on funding from trade unions in the party. The so-called Old Left, being cast as old and bygone, denied that privileged college students who never learned their Marxism had anything to teach them. The socialist drama of the early 1960s pitted hardened survivors of the 1930s against gently raised youth of the 1950s. It built to a spectacular crash as SDS self-imploded, leaving the Old Left socialists to say I-told-you-so. The Black New Left struggled with the role models it inherited from the 1950s while the white New Left was too alienated to find any; social critic C. Wright Mills came the closest to being a half-exception. The New Left wrongly spurned the hard-won wisdom of the Old Left about Communist tyranny, but it gave birth to liberation movements that enriched how socialists conceived social justice and battled for it. Harrington blew his chance to be a bridge figure between the Old Left and New Left–until the 1970s.

Splits and Mergers

The 1970s was a lost decade in US American politics that absorbed the turbulent legacy of the 1960s and the daunting transformation of the world economy. The economic boom of the post-World War II era ran out, yielding a structural economic shift and its miserable combination of stagnation and

inflation. Stagflation defied Keynesian correction, confounding the social democratic Left. The bitter ideological divides in the Socialist Party blew it apart in 1973, ending the party of Debs and Thomas. The Shachtmanites bridled at the anti-Vietnam War movement, Black Power, and radical feminism, founding Social Democrats USA. Harrington led a faction of progressive social democrats into a new organization called the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), building a vehicle for Old Left social democrats, select veterans of the New Left, and youthful newcomers from George McGovern's Democratic presidential campaign. Meanwhile Harrington argued that the rightward trajectory of the Shachtmanites represented something too important not to name. He called it neoconservatism, a tag that stuck. The Shachtmanites and Cold War liberals he named went on to become the most consequential intellectual-political movement of their time, winning high positions in three Republican administrations and mocking Harrington for befriending feminists and anti-anti-Communists.

The idea of DSOC was to create a multi-tendency organization uniting the generations of the progressive democratic Left. DSOC was more Old Left than New Left, wearing its anti-Communism proudly. Yet DSOC achieved the Communist Party dream of the Popular Front periods of 1935-'39 and 1941-'45, creating a united front organization, this time without Stalinism. DSOC won the battle against the neoconservatives for influence in the Democratic Party only to get blown away by the next great turn in US politics. Harrington and DSOC sought to ride into power in 1980 when their ally, Edward Kennedy, challenged Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination. Instead Kennedy failed to unseat Carter and the neocons rode into power under Ronald Reagan. DSOC was too deflated by defeat and disdainful of Carter to rally for him against Reagan. Many blamed the hapless and unlucky Carter for the alarming triumph of the Reagan Right, but Harrington stressed that Reagan became powerful by offering clear, bad, popular answers to complex problems. The Left needed new answers calibrated to the new realities of global capitalism.

In 1982, DSOC merged with a New Left organization, the New American Movement, to form Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). There was no mistaking the symbolism of DSA—it was founded to heal the leftover rift between the Old Left and New Left. DSA debated the fiscal crisis of the state and two academic cottage industries called "market socialism" and "analytical Marxism," but these were sideshows compared to the rise of a cultural Left that emphasized race, gender, and sexual identity as sites of oppression. Not coincidentally, a long-departed Italian Communist leader, Antonio Gramsci, won a tremendous vogue for contending that the Left wrongly cedes the entire cultural realm to the Right.

Gramsci died in a Fascist prison cell in 1937. He argued that capitalism exercises "hegemony" over the lives of people where they live in schools, civic organizations, religious communities, newspapers, media, and political parties. Hegemony is the cultural process by which a ruling class makes its domination appear natural. Gramsci contended that if the Left had any serious intention of winning power, it had to contest the Right on the cultural level. This argument swept much of the socialist Left in the 1980s, providing socialists with a sort-of Marxian basis for appropriating the cultural leftism of identity politics, difference feminism, and other forms of cultural liberation.

Retreat to Academe

The academy had never played an important role in the socialist Left until socialists from my generation embarked on academic careers. I was a holdout from the surge into the academy, having worked as a solidarity activist in democratic socialist and anti-imperialist organizations before I became an academic at the age of 35, in 1987. By the time that I entered the academy, I was well behind the career trajectory of my academic friends, and still surprised to be there. The socialist Left cratered everywhere except the academy, where some on the cultural Left lifted recognition claims above economic justice, some old-style social democrats inveighed against the rise of cultural Leftism, and Cornel West, bell hooks, Iris Marion Young, and Nancy Fraser differently made seminal arguments for fusing redistributionist and recognition politics.

West combined Black liberationist, Council Marxist, pragmatic, and Christian socialist perspectives, developing a formative socialist theory of racism and surpassing all others of his generation as a Gramscian public intellectual. hooks was a pioneer of Black socialist feminism and the Black feminist tradition of intersectional analysis, conceiving race, gender, sexuality, and class as interlocking variables not reducible to hierarchical ordering. Young contended that the Left needed a concept of justice that emerged from listening to liberationist movements, not from applying abstract principles of justice to society. She developed a fivefold concept of oppression as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, stressing that distribution is always at issue in these forms of harm and that none is reducible to distribution. Oppression happens to entities that no theory of justice has ever conceptualized—social groups, which are socially prior to individuals without existing apart from individuals. Equal treatment, the gold standard of fairness theories of justice, suppresses differences in ways that reinforce oppression.

These arguments were hotly contested on the Left while the political Right waged its loud attack on the welfare state and Bill Clinton demoralized the Left by carrying out Democratic versions of Republican policies. Communitarian theory flourished during this period. Communitarians ranging from democratic socialists (Benjamin Barber, Robert Bellah, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Philip Selznick, William Sullivan, Michael Walzer), to moderate progressives (Amitai Etzioni, William Galston, Jane J. Mansbridge, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor), to conservatives (William Bennett, Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Nisbet, Christina Hoff Sommers) criticized the egocentrism of US American culture and the liberal devotion to individual rights. They revived the entire field of political theory, retrieving Aristotle's concept of justice as a community bound by a shared understanding of the good and Hegel's emphasis on recognition. But the communitarians made little impact on the Left, where their rhetoric of family-community-nation smacked of conservative piety.

Nancy Fraser made a landmark case for a fusion of socialist redistribution and cultural recognition while sharply rejecting Young's optimism about the complementarity of these orientations. Fraser said it was wrong for the Marxist/social democratic Left and the difference-feminist/multicultural Left to fight over the hierarchy of oppression, a mistaken debate with harmful consequences. The major axes of injustice, she argued, are two-dimensional. Every form of injustice is rooted simultaneously in the political economy and the status order. No struggle for justice can succeed lacking a politics of redistribution *and* a politics of recognition. The hard part comes next, because these two orientations are not complementary. Redistribution strategies silence the most pressing causes of harm for denigrated groups, while recognition strategies mitigate unjust outcomes without changing the economic structures that generate unjust outcomes. Moreover, the distributive justice of the welfare state and its multiculturalist approach to cultural harm are both inadequate. Fraser urged the Left to combine socialist redistribution with difference feminism and cultural deconstruction.5

Cultural accounts of injustice are symbolic, rooting injustice in social patterns of representation and interpretation. Here the defining injustices are disrespect, being rendered invisible, and being judged by cultural norms that are alien to one's culture.

Late capitalism de-centered the importance of class, after which social movements mobilized around cross cutting axes of difference. Fraser stressed that the conflicts between socialist redistribution and cultural liberation stripped the Left of its former coherence. Recognition politics promotes group differentiation by advocating for specific groups, while redistribution politics seeks to abolish group differentiation.

Fraser devised a social spectrum bordered at one end by the redistribution model and at the other end by the recognition model, construing gender and race as hybrid modes in the middle combining features of an exploited class and an oppressed sexuality. Both forms of injustice are primary and co-original. She ended up with a four-celled matrix placing redistribution and recognition at opposite ends of a vertical axis, and affirmation and transformation remedies at opposite ends of a horizontal axis. Affirmation remedies operate within the system; transformation remedies abolish it. Two

combinations came out better than the others. The welfare state meshes with multiculturalism, since both are affirmation strategies. Democratic socialism and cultural deconstruction also go together, since both are transformation strategies. Fraser argued that combining socialism with cultural deconstruction is the only way to do justice to all struggles against injustice. Affirmation strategies assume a zero-sum game and do not promote coalition building. The conflict between redistribution and recognition is especially acute across collectivities, such as gay and working class, or Black and female. Affirmation strategies work additively and conflict with each other. Transformation strategies try to promote synergy, not being zero-sum.

The Fraser debate carried on for over a decade. The second round was grim, chastened, and sometimes despairing. It operated within Fraser's dual framework and took for granted that the chasm on the Left was real and deep. Fraser sharpened her critique of chauvinist elements within recognition movements and blasted Young for idealizing the cultural Left. A third round of debate, commencing in 2002, challenged Fraser's economy-culture model, contending that it left no room for the vital political sphere of law, citizenship, and institutions. The political dimension supersedes redistribution and recognition because it is normatively and conceptually prior to other forms of social participation. Fraser refashioned her theory in response, now treating the problems of political representation as justice concerns. Redistribution and recognition are political in contesting for power and objectives, but politics determines how struggles for justice are structured.

Fraser made an historic contribution to democratic socialist theory. She rightly contended that whatever the organizing frame of global politics is going to be beyond the Westphalian nation state —which nobody knows—it must begin with the socialist principle that all who are affected by a given structure or institution should hold moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it. Today, in my view, there are two fronts of the struggle to achieve the principle of all-affected moral standing. One is the prosaic political struggle to secure the right to vote and attain decent government policies. The other is the global fight led by people of color, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, feminists, and solidarity activists to claim their standing as subjects of justice. There is a right to make a claim of injustice against any power that causes harm. At least, there should be. Meanwhile, I do not accept Fraser's contention that affirmation strategies must be left behind. The Right is out to destroy the welfare state, affirmative action, and multicultural education. I am not for helping it in any way, just as I am not the kind of democratic socialist who looks down on Social Democracy. Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway have high wages, strong unions, free education, free healthcare, monthly stipends to undergraduates, the highest rates of happiness and good health in the world, up to 480 days of paid leave when a child is born or adopted, serious efforts to convert to a green economy, and vibrant economies that are one-fourth publicly owned. Germany has fifty percent worker co-determination on every company supervisory board. I am for as much of that as we can get in the USA.

Democratic Socialism in the Twenty-First Century

Bernie Sanders inveighed against corporate greed and inequality for decades before mass movements for social justice were possible again. In 1990 he won Vermont's lone seat in the US House of Representatives as an independent democratic socialist. In 2006 he moved up to the US Senate, already forging a career lacking any parallel in Left politics. In December 2010, Sanders held forth on the Senate floor for eight and a half hours. He had no prepared text; he had only scraps of various speeches and a determination to see how long he could last. All were wrapped around a basic storyline. In the 1970s, he observed, the top 1 percent of earners took home 8 percent of all income. In the 1980s they earned 12 percent. By the end of the 1990s they were getting 18 percent. By 2007 they were up to 24 percent. Sanders pleaded, "How much more do they want? When is enough enough? Do they want it all?" Greed is a sickness, he said, much like addiction. The 1 percent is addicted to greed: "I think this is an issue we have to stay on and stay on and stay on."

Sanders has the virtue of relentlessly staying on. In 2016 he challenged Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination for president. He ran the greatest political campaign ever waged by a US

democratic socialist, winning 22 primaries and caucuses. Sanders describes democratic socialism as the belief that a living wage, universal healthcare, a complete education, affordable housing, a clean environment, and a secure retirement are economic rights. He got through the entire campaign without being asked about worker ownership or public ownership, which was fine with him. He was content to fight for economic rights that Social Democrats achieved in Europe a half century ago. But Sanders is more radical than any European social democratic leader of the past generation, because he renewed the language of the class struggle, a language not spoken in Europe or the USA since the 1950s.

His first run for president set off a membership gusher in DSA that was still climbing six years later. DSA had 7,000 members when Sanders first ran for president. Then Donald Trump won the presidency, DSA members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib were elected to Congress in 2018, and Sanders ran again for president in 2020. Now DSA was up to 60,000 members. Sanders terrified the party establishment by tying for first place in Iowa, winning the New Hampshire primary, and crushing the field in the Nevada caucus. The Democratic establishment and corporate media shrieked with sky-is-falling alarm, pleading that regular Democrats and Wall Street Democrats had to consolidate before Sanders ran away with the nomination. South Carolina was next, fortunately for Joe Biden. He had never won a primary in three presidential nomination campaigns, until he vanquished Sanders in South Carolina. The waters parted for Biden as four moderate candidates and one progressive candidate dropped out, clearing his path to the nomination. Fear of Sanders and fear of a Trump reelection drove the field to consolidate with breathtaking speed.

Today, Sanders rues that his thriving campaign was throttled practically overnight. But the causes he cares about are more prominent than ever in US American politics, and a burgeoning DSA—with roughly 100,000 members—is confronted with questions it never had previously about how to leverage its capacities. The rush of new members into DSA includes many post-Trotskyists and semi-anarchists who clash with each other over ideology while agreeing that DSA should disavow its social democratic legacy and reinvent itself as a working-class organization. Others support a renewed focus on working-class organizing without agreeing to break with DSA's social democratic legacy or its usual practice of working in the Democratic Party.

DSA has long said that social movement work and public socialist education are its top priorities, whereas electoral politics is important for some and not for others, it can mean different things, and some are outright against it, so it is number three. That has not changed, but the kind of electoral and labor activism that DSA will support in the future is very much a contested matter. DSA has caucuses that are class-first and caucuses that are fusionist in the varied fashion of West, hooks, Young (who died in 2006), and Fraser. I am in the latter group, believing that the USA's original sin of colonial devastation, slavery, and white supremacy must be addressed as the highest priority no matter how much one may believe in a Marxian perspective.

DSA, across the boundaries of its current debates, is focused on local politics and local labor organizing across the nation, creating chapters that build their own field and canvassing operations, maintain their own data, formulate their own messaging, develop their own research capacity, and even run their own campaigns, acquiring the full range of movement skills and capacities. This contemporary movement is not like the previous generations of DSA activists, for whom socialist activism was secondary to other activist priorities even as they touted its interconnectedness to everything else. The millennials and Generation Z activists who have poured into DSA expect democratic socialism to be their top priority. They expect to find enough in it to sustain them. They include many of the best organizers in the nation. And there are far too many of them to melt away.

The post Democratic Socialism in the USA: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory appeared first on Socialist Forum.