

Theory and Strategy / Economic Democracy

The Socialist Republic

by **Tom O'Shea (@DrTomOShea)** on March 15, 2020

Many of us are still steeped in post-election melancholia. Was the electoralist turn of the British radical left a mistake? Were we naïve to hope that the master's tools could dismantle the master's house? The Labour Leadership contest is providing little comfort, with Rebecca Long-Bailey trailing behind the stolid Keir Starmer, whose supposed “**authority and gravitas**” will do him no more favours than the same qualities did for Gordon Brown. Until a few weeks ago, we could at least take heart from Bernie Sanders' leading position in the Democratic Primaries. But the consolidation of the centrist candidates behind Joe Biden after his commanding wins in South Carolina and then the Super Tuesday states looks to have extinguished most reasonable expectations that Sanders will take the nomination.

These disappointments shouldn't lead us to underestimate how far the left has come over the past five years. It was always a risky strategy for socialists on the both sides of the Atlantic to devote so much energy to mainstream party politics – not only in terms of lost opportunities to build extra-parliamentary power, but because Labour and the Democrats threatened to reshape us more than we would reshape them. Yet, there have been real gains. Take the enormous agenda-setting influence of a confident left unafraid to voice its belief in democratic ownership, universal basic services, and the radical transformation of the economy needed to mitigate catastrophic climate change. Certainly, we'd have heard very little about socialised healthcare in America in the past few years if not for the movement behind Sanders. So too, it has been democratic socialists like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who have popularised the Green New Deal. While older generations have shown little willingness to loosen their death grip on property and wealth, it's clear that many of **the young** are being won round to a resurgent socialism – which, thanks to these new movements, often takes a more ecological and less statist form than was common in years past.

How Socialist Is Democratic Socialism?

The probable decline of the Sanders campaign is an opportunity to reflect on some of the goals and strategies of the democratic socialist tradition in the United States. What should it stand for? When Sanders wanted to explain his economic programme without frightening the horses, he liked to invoke **Franklin D. Roosevelt**. That was a smart move. By associating bold government action to reshape the economy with a popular American presidency, then it no longer seemed alien or impractical. It'd been done there once, so why not again?

Democratic socialists could be forgiven for **feeling uneasy** about the association though. Despite talk of a Green New Deal, the ultimate horizon of democratic socialism isn't New Deal liberalism – even in an idealised form, shorn of the nationalist, securitising, and petrochemical dimensions **some** have identified in its original manifestations. Instead, a more profound transformation of economic and social life is sought by democratic socialists – one that democratises the economy, shuts down imperialism, and dismantles racial and gender hierarchies. Where else, then, can these socialists look for inspiration, ideas, and idioms cut from the cloth of American history? And what can we – on the other side of the Atlantic – learn from an earlier moment of socialist radicalism in the United States?

Gazing down from the walls of his office in Washington is a portrait of another figure crucial to Sanders' political development: **Eugene Victor Debs**. Of course, Debs is well-known on the left as an organiser, orator, and prisoner of conscience, who proselytised for unions and socialism at the turn of the nineteenth century, running as the Socialist Party's candidate for president himself many times. But only rarely has he been taken seriously as a political thinker. Even among the radical left, Debs has been a victim of that “enormous condescension of posterity” so famously diagnosed by E.P. Thompson. Idealised and sentimentalised as a firebrand preacher with a heart of gold, few have bothered to look beyond his biography to the **details** of his powerful indictment of economic servitude under capitalism or the “Socialist Republic” he fought to put in its place. With the current phase of active electoralist expansion looking like it's coming to an end in both America and Britain, it's worth returning to Debs for insights which can guide democratic socialists into the future.

Republican Citizenship

Debs took republican government seriously. For him, the mark of a republic is that sovereignty lies with citizens, and to be what he calls a “sovereign citizen” is to have the

status of neither a subject nor a slave. So, he can be found supporting suffrage irrespective of gender, race, or property, and eulogising the abolitionists of previous generations. But this isn't the only place where Debs' radicalism lies.

Debs takes it that the citizen is and ought to be free. Yet, narrow political emancipation is insufficient: the right to vote and stand for office is not enough when tyranny reigns elsewhere in social and economic life. As early as 1887, Debs **declares** that the work of abolition has gone unfinished, while decrying “wrongs which take on some of the forms of slavery, wrongs which work the degradation of men, which sap the foundations of citizenship”. Where can these wrongs be found? Debs answers: between “the man who works and the man who pays”. In short, the problem is your employer.

Capitalism makes a mockery of the claim to equal citizenship:

“ The working class are dependent upon the capitalist class, who own machines and other means of production; and the latter class, by virtue of their economic mastery, are the ruling class of the nation, and it is idle under such conditions to claim that men [*sic throughout*] are equal and that all are sovereign citizens.

Moreover, freedom is absent too:

“ No man is free in any just sense who has to rely upon the arbitrary will of another for the opportunity to work. Such a man works, and therefore lives, by permission, and this is the present economic relation of the working class to the capitalist class.

We find **here** language drawn from an older ‘**civic republican**’ political tradition – not simply in the focus on citizenship but in the opposition set out between freedom and dependency, living by permission, and subjection to the arbitrary will of others. What is significant is that Debs is using this vocabulary to condemn the **inordinate power of bosses** and the capitalist system which secures it.

Socialist Republicanism

If the vote doesn't make you a free and equal citizen, then what does? Debs was all too aware of the threat posed by the legal apparatus to labour organisers like himself – **railing against** the use of injunctions that saw him imprisoned by a judge without a jury trial, as a “helpless victim of autocratic whim or caprice”, he **concludes** that in “the

imprisonment of one man in defiance of all constitutional guarantees, the liberties of all are invaded and placed in peril.” Again, the freedom of the citizen is undermined by arbitrary power: the subjection to the discretionary authority of another without accountability or democratic oversight. Legal freedom, in the old republican slogan, requires that the empire of law is not displaced by an empire of men.

It is economic relationships, however, that loom largest for Debs. His **aim** is “economic freedom for every human being on earth”, with “no man compelled to depend on the arbitrary will of another for the right or opportunity to create enough to supply his material wants.” The means to reach that goal is a “**working class republic**, the first real republic the world has ever known” – or what he also calls, “**the Socialist Republic**”. Why a *socialist* republic? Debs **replies**:

“ Socialism is merely an extension of the ideal of democracy into the economic field. [...] Socialism proposes to put industry in control of the people so that they may no longer be dependents on others for a job, so that they may be freed from the tribute of profit, and so that they may manage industry in their own way, as seems best to them.

The foundation of economic freedom, then, is control over our workplaces and our wider economic conditions.

Reclaiming Economic Freedom

This vision of economic freedom is a world away from that pushed by conservative and libertarian thinktanks. The **Fraser Institute** would have us believe,

“ Individuals are economically free when they are permitted to choose for themselves and engage in voluntary transactions as long as they do not harm the person or property of others.

This echoes the understanding of freedom popular among contemporaries of Debs, such as William Graham Sumner, who proclaimed that “society based on contract is a society of free and independent men, who form ties without favor or obligation, and cooperate without cringing or intrigue”. The upshot of such views is that minimum wages, maximum hours, and income and wealth taxes will all deprive us of economic freedom by restricting our ability to contract how we choose. Conversely, zero-hours contracts, fire-at-will clauses, and underfunded public services are no check upon a citizen’s

economic liberty.

If we want to push back against this poisonous understanding of economic freedom, then we would do well to recuperate Debs' **radical republican** critique of capitalism. It directs us not to limits on the contracts we can enter but rather to uncontrolled power over others. We should be less concerned about the threat of the taxman and the regulator than the manager, owner, oligarch, or unaccountable judge. The conceptual logic of Debsian socialism can be pushed further still beyond Debs' own explicit conclusions. It is not simply the economic freedom of the precarious worker, but the economically dependent domestic partner, recipient of highly conditional state benefits, or undocumented migrant – whose ability to meet their basic needs hinges on the continued goodwill of others – which is in greater peril than that of the businessman complaining of overregulation or high corporate taxation. Economic unfreedom is not, therefore, confined to the workplace: it stains domestic spaces, the bureaucratic state, and our wider social world.

Sanders may have been **wise** to take the softly-softly approach by appealing to FDR in outlining democratic socialism to a skittish American public. Indeed, Roosevelt's own rhetoric often has some resonance with republican ideas (condemnation of "**economic royalists**" being a case in point), or provides independent grounds for challenging a reductive right-leaning conception of economic freedom (e.g. the invocation of "**freedom from want**"). But if democratic socialists in the U.S. are looking for orientation for the future, then a suitably retooled version of Debs' analysis offers a more compelling conceptual framework than do Roosevelt's attempts to save capitalism from itself. And where more fitting than America to lead an attack on a miasmatic conception of economic liberty which has polluted thinking about human freedom across much of the world?

The Social Republic in Practice

Fine ideas are one thing – action another. To practically achieve something like a socialist republic underpinned by economic freedom and radical democracy, we'll need transitional goals and mechanisms to get us from here to there. Happily, socialists are not shirking the difficult work of spelling out how meaningful economic democratisation could happen. A silver lining to our current cloudy skies is that we are likely to have much more time to perfect and propagandise such measures in the coming years.

One promising model proposed by Keir Milburn and Bertie Russell is the '**public-commons partnership**', which creates governance and capitalisation structures for joint

economic enterprises which bring together state agents, stakeholders from civil society, and members of ‘commons associations’. Public-commons partnerships are designed to decentralise democratic power, while ensuring a share of surplus value created within them is used to support other such partnerships in a “self-expanding circuit”. This offers an alternative to a monocultural socialist economy characterised by either top-down statist control or workerist councils that exclude non-working citizens. Another proposal for incremental socialisation of productive wealth was already adopted by Sanders. This was the **inclusive ownership fund** approach – championed by Commonwealth’s Mathew Lawrence – which compels or strongly incentivises private firms to deposit a share of annual profits, in the form of equity, in worker- or publicly-controlled funds.

The ebbing electoral prospects of socialists and fellow travellers makes it hard to see how such policies could be enacted in the short term, other than in municipal and localist forms. But they give concrete shape to the economic aspirations of democratic socialists, and could act as a staging post to a more radical socialist republicanism. Creative and achievable transitional measures of this kind are needed to populate an attractive socialist programme on both sides of the Atlantic.

Of course, there is a temptation to rush headlong away from parties, policies, and a poisonous mainstream media that seems to debase everything it touches. There’ll be those that conclude that electoralism was always a trap; that change only ever comes from grassroots movements of the oppressed rather than mediated by party politics; that we have wasted years that could have been devoted to the difficult but necessary work of creating space for working class people to exert direct and meaningful control over their own workplaces and their own lives. I’m not yet convinced this is the lesson to learn here – such that we’d be in a better position now having never had supported left electoralism. Nor is it clear that this is a binary choice, with us losing more from to-ing and fro-ing than we would have gained from patiently sticking to **rooted** long-term projects that aren’t subject to the rhythms of national electoral politics. The opportunities for the left within party politics were unprecedented and enormous. They were worth the risk this time, and may well be again, especially with greater organisational nous and strategic foresight. Socialists do not, however, need to put all of their eggs in one particular basket. Few of us were naïve enough to suppose that state power alone could be trusted to deliver.

Jeremy Corbyn called for a ‘period of reflection’ after the British general election. Heartbreakingly, it now looks like such a period will descend on democratic socialists in America too. The sketch of Debsian socialist republicanism I have outlined here is very far indeed from being able to act as our only point of reference in this reflection – not

least for its inadequate grasp of gendered and racialised oppression, as one might expect from a programme formulated over a century ago. But its core goals of economic freedom and true civic equality are worth recuperating and reimagining in the months and years ahead of us.

Socialism's future is as a politics of freedom. It will rise again.

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