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Book Review by William Voegeli

A KINDER, GENTLER GULAG

The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality, by Bhaskar Sunkara.
Basic Books, 288 pages, \$28



IS SOCIALISM “BACK IN FASHION,” AS THE *Economist* recently observed? Senator Bernie Sanders, who has called himself a socialist throughout a long political career, is a leading contender for next year’s Democratic presidential nomination after his surprisingly strong challenge to Hillary Clinton in 2016. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a rock star, the most famous first-year member of the House of Representatives in living memory. The biggest socialist organization, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), now has 60,000 members, more than six times as many as in 2016. DSA has endorsed Sanders’s 2020 presidential campaign, and Ocasio-Cortez is a member.

Jacobin magazine’s founding editor Bhaskar Sunkara is also a DSA member and, like Ocasio-Cortez, was born in 1989. Undaunted by that year’s most famous event, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Sunkara wants to supplant the “vanquished Left” whose “commitment to

a better world” was “bound up with illusions about the Soviet Union.” To that end, he has written *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*. Its goal is to present “what a different social system could look like and how we can get there.”

THERE IS, HOWEVER, THE PERENNIAL difficulty of defining socialism. Sunkara starts by parsing the difference between “social democracy” and “democratic socialism.” Social democracy, as he uses the term, refers to generous, comprehensive welfare states, such as those in Scandinavia, made possible by aggressive income redistribution. Sunkara is an admirer: “Sweden in the 1970s,” he writes, was “the most livable society in history.” We could do far worse...and, he laments, we have. Like leftists of all stripes, he deplores the “neoliberal” rehabilitation of markets that began with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald

Reagan in the 1970s and ’80s, extending even to Nordic countries’ policies that gave greater scope to private enterprise.

The necessary and possible way to improve on social democracy, then, is democratic socialism. For Sunkara, the latter term is redundant: socialism *is* democracy, the realization of “the world’s first truly democratic society,” where “democracy has been radically extended to the social and economic realms.” Social democracy, for all its virtues, turned out to be nothing better than “the more humane face of neoliberalism,” a “tool to suppress class conflict in favor of tripartite arrangements among business, labor, and the state.”

Socialism has two advantages over social democracy. First, rather than rely on technocratic expertise, the hallmark of modern welfare and regulatory states, it requires “mass struggle from below and messy disruptions to bring about a more durable and radical sort of change.” Socialism *engages*, promising not just



benefits but agency, the belief that “ordinary people can shape the systems that shape their lives.”

Second, the sort of engagement that secures socialism will also define its practice. It is not for intellectuals to say that life under socialism necessarily entails this or that policy. Intellectuals should inspire rather than instruct, in order to “win people over to the idea that things can be different, even if we can’t precisely say what future generations will decide to construct.” Sunkara envisions a socialist America that decides, democratically, that enterprises selling goods and services compete with one another, as under capitalism, and the ones that do a bad job of it disappear. But the firms would be owned and managed by the people who work in them, determining compensation and making decisions about new products and business practices. If they wanted to expand their enterprise, they would turn to regional public investment banks (private ones having been nationalized) that judge investment applicants “on the basis of profitability, job creation, and other criteria including environmental impact.”

Even in the abstract, the inspiration on offer here is highly dubious. An “endless meeting” may have been the New Left’s idea of freedom, but strikes most people as a convincing description of hell. Imposing more democracy on people than they’d prefer is, among other drawbacks, undemocratic.

THE BIGGER PROBLEM IS THAT 20TH-century socialism happened, even if Sunkara is too young to remember it. He calls socialism in the past century a “false start,” which hardly suffices to establish that it now deserves a fresh start. Socialists, beginning with Karl Marx, have *always* told uplifting stories about ordinary people shaping the systems that shape their lives. Sunkara’s new promise of socialist life is indistinguishable from the old promise of socialist life.

For example, only “proletarian democracy,” and only “methods of persuasion,” as opposed to coercion, “can make it possible to unite the working class, to stimulate its independent activity.” These were the words of Joseph Stalin in 1921, quoted in another new book, *Socialism: The Failed Idea that Never Dies*, by Kristian Niemietz of the Institute of Economic Affairs, a libertarian British think tank. “A ‘soviet,’ Niemietz points out, “was originally simply a democratically elected workers’ council based at a factory, and a Soviet Republic was originally meant to be a semi-direct grassroots democracy, in which these workers’ councils would form the main building blocks.”

A shortage of inspiring visions of the future cannot, then, qualify as socialism’s most serious need. There are more urgent and fundamental difficulties. The 20th century demonstrated that socialism has an economic problem—it is more conducive to stagnation and shortages than it is to growth and efficiency—and a political one—it is more conducive to oppression than it is to freedom. Accordingly, the highest duty of leftist intellectuals is not to inspire us to believe that a socialist future will be different from the capitalist present, but to argue convincingly that it can and will be very different from the socialist past. On these crucial points, however, Sunkara’s manifesto will persuade only those already convinced of socialism’s nobility and feasibility.

START WITH THE ECONOMIC PROBLEM, the most daunting account of which comes not from The Heritage Foundation but from philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007), one of the 20th century’s most influential leftist thinkers. In *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Rorty described New Leftists and their progeny as highly enthused and confident about “participatory democracy and the end of capitalism.” His description of their vision shows that there’s nothing fresh about Sunkara’s: “economic decisions will be made by stakeholders rather than by shareholders, and...entrepreneurship and markets will cease to play their present role. When they do, capitalism as we know it will have ended, and something new will have taken its place.”

The attendant problem could not be more basic: “But what this new thing will be, nobody knows.” Specifically, no one has convincingly explained how, after capitalism has been supplanted by a more pervasive democracy, the new economic system will equip stakeholders “to reach a consensus about when to remodel a factory rather than build a new one, what prices to pay for raw materials, and the like.” And this failure or refusal to explain “what, in the absence of markets, will set prices and regulate distribution,” has given people good reason to fear socialism. “The public, sensibly, has no interest in getting rid of capitalism until it is offered details about the alternatives.”

On this point, Sunkara goes so far as to allow that “the appeal of capitalism is in large part that there appears to be no viable alternative to it.” Yet he does not seem to realize that this is a major concession. The pro-market case has never been that capitalism is the best set of arrangements *conceivable*, only that it is the best *available*. Being the best existing option is not a small virtue, nor one diminished by idealists who implore us to let our imagina-

tions soar as we dream of better, more fulfilling futures.

Can social and economic life really be democratized in a way that abolishes hierarchy, so that no one has the clout to say, “Do X,” as opposed to all stakeholders being empowered to say, “Perhaps it would be good if X were done”? Maybe, says Niemietz, but only in “small, homogeneous, voluntary communities with simple economies,” the paradigm of which is the Israeli kibbutz. Even these, he notes, turned out to be equivocal successes and have proven impossible to scale up much beyond 1,000 members.

SUNKARA IMAGINES COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP and management working splendidly in a specialty pasta sauce company with a few dozen employees. The stakeholders decide, for example, that the highest-paid worker will receive no more than four times as much as the lowest-paid. Even if one stipulates the premise, there’s no reason to think that stakeholder democracy can function in enterprises that manufacture extraordinarily sophisticated, complex products. (IBM has 366,000 employees.) Or ones that provide services requiring vast networks, enormous economies of scale, and intricate logistics. (FedEx employs 357,000.) Nor is it possible to imagine how, for the sake of making collective ownership feasible, such enterprises could be scaled down to the size of a kibbutz while still delivering the goods and services they sell.

Sunkara’s economic analysis is otherwise dim or disingenuous. He argues at one point that the reason social democracy fell short of its potential was that it proved vulnerable to “capital strikes—businesses choosing to withhold investment until more ‘favorable conditions’ prevail, blackmailing left-voting workers in the process.” Yet he immediately concedes (in an endnote) that such business decisions are “perfectly rational in conditions of reduced profitability or high uncertainty.” In other words, *not* blackmail but exactly the sort of choices that will still have to be made when we’re all conscientious stakeholders of our collectively managed enterprises. Whether we’re making pasta sauce or are in a mega-kibbutz that builds container ships, unfavorable or uncertain business conditions—making more products than we’re selling, or fears that reducing prices will mean not covering costs—may require scaling back production or postponing plans for new capital investments.

“I do not shy away from considering what went wrong in the Soviet experience,” Sunkara declares. But considering a subject isn’t the

same as understanding it. The lessons he takes away from 20th-century socialism, as practiced, include “the difficulties of central planning,” the dangers of “authoritarian collectivism,” and the need to avoid “crippling bureaucratization.” But after the scales have fallen from his eyes, the entirety of the enlightenment Sunkara draws on these points is that planning, collectivism, and bureaucratization can be done badly, so future socialists should try really hard to do them well.

THE POSSIBILITY THAT SUCH PROBLEMS are inherent in the socialist enterprise does not occur to him. They do to Nietzsche, who argues that the Eastern Bloc experience shows that workers will manage their enterprise for its benefit and theirs, but not for that of the economy as a whole. This would prove to be an enormous problem for central planning agencies if they had to contend with a complex but static reality. But when all the individual elements of the economic equation are also dynamic—as consumer preferences, technologies, and the availability of raw materials change constantly—coordinating all this activity is overwhelming, and the temptation to start commanding and controlling people becomes irresistible for even the most humane socialist official. “One cannot plan an economy when the factors of production have a will of their own and move around all the time,” Nietzsche argues. “Planners need to be able to allocate factors of production, including labour, and those factors then have to stay where they have been allocated to.”

The Socialist Manifesto’s title shows more respect for *The Communist Manifesto* than do the two pages it devotes to Marx’s most famous work. Sunkara calls it a “short document” written to “popularize a political program,” but one that badly misread its historical moment. Despite unrest experienced in many nations, the specter haunting the world in 1848 turned out to be not Communism but republicanism, in particular the demand for universal suffrage.

Sunkara’s reading of his moment is no less shaky, however. What, exactly, is the problem for which socialism is the solution? Do we inhabit “a world filled with excruciating misery”? Or is the 21st century “the best time in human history to be alive”? *The Socialist Manifesto* makes both assertions. The concept of the immiseration of the proletariat, once central to leftist thinking, held that the inexorable logic of capitalist competition will force wages down and down until workers are barely able to stay alive. But Sunkara acknowledges that China’s turn from collectivism toward economic liberalization is directly responsible for

lifting 500 million people out of dire poverty over the past 30 years. We may be living in an era of “extreme inequality,” as Sunkara’s subtitle asserts, but also in one of steadily rising living standards. Those realities recommend keeping and improving capitalism more forcefully than they do supplanting it with a system that has never succeeded anywhere and no one has intelligibly described.

Similarly, there is only one brief, dismissive allusion to the dialectic of history in *The Socialist Manifesto*. The attention Sunkara does pay to the idea shows that he considers it both dubious and dangerous. “The teleological streak in Marxism,” he writes, “its belief in laws of history—that through conscious political activity humanity could be pushed toward a new, more advanced stage of civilization—surely made Stalin and Mao feel justified in their cruelties.”

THOUGH HE MAY DEVIATE FROM CERTAIN Marxist dogmas, Sunkara is a fiercely doctrinaire Platonist. Real socialism is the socialist ideal that exists only in speech and inchoate longings. By contrast, the socialism manifested in the various countries that have called themselves socialist at one time or another over the past century is not real and has nothing to tell us about the socialism that *is* real, though the latter exists only in theories and aspirations. This Platonism hardly sets Sunkara apart. Nietzsche shows that Sunkara is only one of several modern defenders of socialism who vindicate it solely “in terms of abstract outcomes rather than tangible institutional characteristics.”

Sunkara’s Platonism is especially pronounced with respect to socialism’s political problem, its demonstrated propensity to culminate in oppression and, frequently, mass murder. “Any ideology built around a notion of destiny,” he posits, “runs the risk of calamity.” Happily, “The solution is a banal one: valuing and protecting rights and liberties, while ensuring that ordinary people are not only consulted through rallies and speeches but actually have democratic avenues to make choices and hold their leaders accountable.” Whatever wicked things were formerly done in the name of socialism have little connection with real socialism, and can be detached from any future socialism simply through willpower, astute consciousness of the dangers, and a warm-hearted commitment to democracy. Or, as Nietzsche writes, “The only lesson from the Gulags is that we should not build Gulags, the only lesson from the show trials is that we should not have show trials, the only lesson from the Berlin Wall is that we should not build walls through Berlin.”

ACAREFUL EXAMINATION OF SUNKARA’S argument shows that despite expressing support for rights, liberties, and democracy, even his version of socialism’s Platonic ideal is proto-tyrannical. His book’s most dishonest passage attempts to denigrate America’s merely political democracy as woefully inadequate when compared to the radically, fully democratic lives we’ll lead under socialism. The “subversion of democracy was the explicit intent of the Constitution’s framers,” Sunkara asserts. “For James Madison, writing in Federalist No. 10, ‘Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention,’ incompatible with the rights of property owners.”

It’s easy, however, to score debating points about others’ “explicit” intent when you selectively truncate and misrepresent their words to prove your own thesis. A complete quotation of the passage will, with emphasis added, show Madison’s meaning and Sunkara’s bad faith:

From this view of the subject it may be concluded that a *pure democracy*, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction.... Hence it is that *such democracies* have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found *incompatible with personal security or the rights of property*; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.

Philosophers merely interpret the world, Marx complained, when the point is to change it. That Sunkara mangles an 18th-century text is a much smaller problem than the changes he wants to effect in 21st-century life. Madison argued that democracy’s greatest danger is “majority faction”—the ability of a majority durably united by a common interest or passion to oppress its opponents *democratically*. Those in the minority, who lose vote after vote, end up with no protection for their rights other than the majority’s self-restraint. The danger of majority faction cannot be eliminated from any experiment in self-government but can be reduced. Madison called for: governmental architecture that impedes majority factions when they are present; an “extended republic” that makes them unlikely to form in the first place, because majorities are constantly shifting coalitions of numerous small interests; and a commitment to the spirit of reciprocity that sustains self-government. As Abraham Lincoln said in his First Inaugu-

A RADICAL ANALYSIS

Discrimination and Disparities is a radical book, in the fundamental sense of going to the root of an issue. It challenges the very foundation of assumptions on which the prevailing “social justice” vision of our time is based. The first two chapters of *Discrimination and Disparities* present a new framework of analysis, and back it up with empirical evidence from around the world, before proceeding to demonstrate why and how so much of the “social justice” vision is a house of cards.



Some readers may find it surprising to discover what elementary fallacies provide the basis for many often-repeated assertions about the “top 10 percent,” “top one percent” or the “top 400” highest income recipients. The numbers behind such assertions may be valid *as of a given moment*, but most people’s lives last longer than a moment.

At some time during their lives, just over half of all Americans are in the “top 10 percent” in income. Internal Revenue Service data show that, over a 23-year period, there were 4,584 people in the “top 400”— and most of them were in that bracket just one year out of more than two decades. In many contexts, turnover is the ignored elephant in the room. *Discrimination and Disparities* points out many other elephants that have been ignored for far too long.

The fact that life has never been even approximately “fair,” in the sense of presenting equal chances for achievement to all individuals, groups or nations is undeniable. But that tells us nothing about the causes of particular skewed outcomes. Nor does it mean that we can reduce the causes to whatever fits a particular social vision, without putting that vision to the test of empirical evidence.

The alternative analysis and evidence offered in *Discrimination and Disparities* suggest that skewed distributions of outcomes are by no means improbable or unusual, whether among human beings or in natural phenomena beyond human control, such as tornadoes or earthquakes. This does not mean fatalistic acceptance of economic and social disparities. But it does suggest that much of what is said and done in the name of “social justice” is an impediment to creating greater opportunities for all.

Teachers who want their students to see more than one side of an issue may find *Discrimination and Disparities* especially appropriate for that role.

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Human Consequences
Chapter 7: Facts, Assumptions and Goals



ral Address, “A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people.”

FOR SUNKARA, MAJORITY FACTION IS not democracy’s problem but democracy’s *purpose*. The majority, of course, is the workers—the proletariat—whose demands radical democracy will render irresistible. “Democratic socialists must secure decisive majorities in legislatures while winning hegemony in the unions,” he urges. “Then our organizations must be willing to flex their social power in the form of mass mobilizations and political strikes to counter the structural power of capital and ensure that our leaders choose confrontation over accommodation with elites.”

There is no room in *this* democracy for holding the majority in restraint with constitutional checks and limitations, or for waiting on deliberate changes of popular opinion. The point is to change the world, boldly and decisively. “Class-struggle social democracy through the ballot box is exceedingly difficult, because candidates face both incentives to compromise and structural pressure: administering a capitalist state requires maintaining business confidence and corporate profits,” Sunkara writes. “The solution is through creating some pressure of our own. Street protests and strike actions can discipline wayward candidates for not going along with a redistributive agenda and force businesses to make concessions to reformers once they are elected.” America’s early 20th-century Socialist Party, for example, betrayed its mission and constituency when it “denounced law-breaking and sabotage—hallmarks of any worthwhile labor militancy.”

Sunkara’s radical democracy is decidedly radical but tenuously democratic. His account gives rise to two slippery-slope fears. First,

will reminders about the banalities of rights and liberties really dissuade militants, incited to violate property rights, to refrain nevertheless from acts of violence? Protests and strikes can discipline wayward candidates and obdurate capitalists, but beatings and assassinations have an even more pronounced effect. History and psychology both argue that once the spirit of righteous militancy leads zealots to start breaking eggs in order to make omelets, it becomes very difficult to place limits on what measures they’ll employ to advance the cause.

Second, if radical democracy requires lawlessness from below, why should we expect it to result in anything other than lawlessness from above? If aggression is indispensable to the socialist cause when militants are in the streets, there’s no logical reason to hope for fastidiousness about human rights after the same militants start running the police, army, and entire government. Nor, of course, is there any historical reason to expect a humane result from new socialist regimes, given their predecessors’ track record.

EVEN THE PAGES OF SUNKARA’S *JACOBIN* reflect no great urgency about obliging the government to control itself, to borrow Madison’s phrase from *The Federalist*. We learn from the magazine that, “by any standards,” Fidel Castro was “a towering champion of the oppressed.” There is the obligatory Platonic disclaimer: “The socialism that Castro espoused had little resemblance to Marx’s ‘self-emancipation of the working class.’” But there is also no reason for misgivings about the larger historical project of building “a deep and radical democracy” instead of Cuba’s “highly authoritarian interpretation of socialism.”

Similarly, the “pretext” for sanctions imposed on Nicolas Maduro’s Venezuelan government by the administration of that notorious reactionary, Barack Obama, was

“so-called human rights abuses” during street protests in 2014. In reality, the police and national guard “were on the whole incredibly patient with the protesters.” Well, yes, “in some cases” they “responded brutally,” and government opponents died. But bear in mind that “nearly all the protesters were from the middle and upper classes.” In any case, these murky and regrettable incidents should not distract us from the bigger picture: the people of Venezuela “want to live and breathe, and...some dare to demand control over their own lives.”

“The war of Marxism against the ruling principles of Western constitutionalism must never be mistaken for a mere skirmish,” wrote political scientist Joseph Cropsey. Sunkara turns out to be a more conventional Marxist, in particular a more committed historicist, than his minor heresies suggest. If by nature we are all created equal, possess inalienable rights, and secure them by instituting governments that derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, then there is no pretext for committing or justifying the tyrannies, petty or murderous, necessary for radical democracy to displace merely political democracy. But if there is no human nature, only human history—becoming rather than being—then human rights and democratic accountability are merely Nice Things, considerations we should bear in mind as socialism fulfills what Sunkara calls its “revolutionary destiny.” Under those circumstances, some revolutionaries will enthusiastically commit crimes, while others sincerely and cleverly excuse those crimes. Why, Sunkara asks, “would we repeat the disasters of the twentieth century by once again trying to create a socialist system?” *The Socialist Manifesto* did well to pose this crucial question, but is derelict in merely pretending to reckon with it.

William Voegeli is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

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