

# United States: The Two Souls of Democratic Socialism - The DSA and the heritage of that which came before

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Some *New Politics* readers will recognize the title of this article as a paraphrase of Hal Draper's "Two Souls of Socialism," which appeared in *New Politics* in 1966. The first version, however, appeared in the socialist student magazine *Anvil* in 1960, just as a new generation of youthful activists was emerging, inspired to a large extent by the civil rights movement. Draper's two souls were the various forms of elite socialism, from British middle-class Fabianism to Stalinism, versus the revolutionary socialism from below that Draper championed—the socialism of Marx. Draper's hope was to move the radicals of what became the New Left to revolutionary democratic socialism.

The recent explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), from about 7,000 members before the 2016 elections to 25,000 or more today, illustrates that a new generation of activists has not only emerged from mostly under-the-radar social-movement organizing, but also has moved rapidly toward socialism. This development is also evident in the large circulation of *Jacobin* magazine, and in various polls that show the surprising popularity of the idea of socialism, particularly among younger people. This is a trend that no socialist can ignore or fail to take heart in. In size and speed of development, DSA's growth outstrips the growth of the Young Peoples Socialist League, Students for a Democratic Society, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and other radical groups in the early 1960s. The recent DSA convention made it clear that this is a growing milieu that is both rooted in local organizing and moving to the left. There is also no doubt that Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party nomination drew in thousands of these activists and further legitimized the "S" word.

Annoying as it is, however, all new left and social movements inevitably confront the heritage of that which came before. For the movement that began to emerge in the early 1960s it was the lingering heritage of the "Old Left." Much of that was embodied in Stalinism, the world's largest (illegitimate) claimant to the traditions of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, and so on, as well as in its newer, more attractive form in the Cuban revolution. Another side of Old Left inertia was the obsessive anti-Communism and efforts to influence high-ranking liberal and labor leaders that was practiced by some in the Socialist Party. It was both these sides of Old Left heritage that Draper addressed.

For the activists of DSA it is a different set of left luggage in a very different era. The 700 or so delegates to the DSA convention did a good deal of jettisoning old baggage: disaffiliating from the

very un-socialist Socialist International, a sign that many reject a direction of failed social democracy for DSA, and adopting the Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions campaign in support of Palestinian rights, which would have been anathema to much of the DSA old guard.

## **A Specter of Politics Past Haunts DSA**

The specter of the past that haunts DSA, however, remains the Democratic Party. It isn't the ghost of Michael Harrington and realignment. Realignment happened. The Dixiecrats became Republicans, the urban machines withered away, African Americans in the South joined the Democratic electoral coalition, and the "liberals" were left in charge—for a while. But the outcome was not what was expected. Not too long after the economic crises of 1974-1975, and after the early 1980s hit and the old Keynesian basis of liberalism was discredited, the Third Way triangulators and neoliberal marketeers gained hegemony. The party shot-up on addictive corporate and rich people's money, distanced itself from organized labor, relied increasingly on purchased forms of voter turnout and campaigning, and reorganized its national, state, and legislative committees to be even more remote from voters. The progressives eventually circled the wagons into caucuses that wrote up alternative budgets, drafted passably liberal platforms, and clung to a withered Keynesianism, nevertheless submitting to the party's legislative discipline more often than not.

By the time Sanders decided to challenge the party establishment, the party's twin pillars of money and incumbency had been joined by super PACs, dark money, and a proliferating constellation of unaccountable, staff-based 501(c)4 outfits like ActBlue, MoveOn.org, and after the election, the Bernie Sanders-inspired Our Revolution. Staff-run digital mobilization, as opposed to permanent grass-roots organization of any kind, became the norm. Crowdfunding, initially seen as a counterweight to corporate money, soon became a tool for neoliberals, mainstreamers, and progressives alike, adding to the growing mass of money that continued to corrupt an already dirty political process, as the cash nexus became even more entrenched at the heart of American politics. Liberal, neoliberal, Blue Dog, plain-old mainstream, or "progressive": It's all top-down, staff-run, and unaccountable. That is the Democratic Party that socialists confront today.

The August 2017 DSA convention didn't lay this specter to rest, much less provide an alternative. Motions critical of corporate Democrats and "progressives," and looking to a more limited engagement with the Democratic Party, were defeated. As Dan La Botz points out in his New Politics blog report on the convention, the two motions that attempted to do this got an encouraging 40 percent of the delegate vote. The other side of the coin, of course, is that a considerable majority voted against these and by implication to continue to see the Democratic Party as the main vehicle for socialist electoral politics and opposition to Trump.

That doesn't mean that a majority of newer DSA members want to proceed in the old ways. Many reject the corporate money, expensive "air wars," and presumably the more recent forms of top-down digital voter targeting conducted by private outfits like DSPolitical that characterize Democratic campaigns, as well as the neoliberals, Corporate Democrats, and weak-kneed practice of much of the party's "progressive" wing. Nevertheless, some still say supporting progressive Democrats is OK. The "pick and mix" position that says support some progressive Dems, socialists running as Dems, and maybe even a Green now and then, however, does not provide an alternative. The fact is that DSA, as the largest socialist organization in the United States, has not embraced an alternative to the old practice of relying on the Democratic Party for electoral action. The thousands of new activist members represent one soul of this organization, its presence in many movements, its energy, its growth, and aggressiveness. Yet, clinging to the age-old orientation to the Democratic Party, even if in new ways, represents another, older, contradictory soul.

As La Botz pointed out in his article criticizing a proposal by DSA leaders Joseph Schwartz and Bhaskar Sunkara to re-create the Communist Party's New Deal-popular front strategy of the 1930s, "the Democratic Party has been a problem of the left forever" and by no means simply for DSA and its predecessors. This party/complex/milieu has absorbed the leaders and activists of social and political movements from the Populist Party of the 1890s, to the industrial unions of the 1930s, to the civil rights, Latino, women's, and LGBT movements of the last century and today. This has prevented these movements from developing independent political organizations or ideologies, which, in turn, has undermined their power. The political co-optation of the industrial union leadership in the 1930s and 1940s played a significant part in the development of bureaucratic business unionism, which then undermined the power of organized labor in the United States. As we used to say in the political (socialism-from-below) tendency that La Botz and I share, the Democratic Party has been the graveyard of social movements.

This co-optation has been accomplished precisely by drawing movement leaders and activists into the party's periphery, into local and county organizations, primaries, internal caucuses, and even into its formal inner sanctums. Look at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) of recent years, and alongside the state chairs you will see unions and all of the social movements of the last half-century or more represented in accordance with the liberal norms of "diversity." Yet, these representatives have little or no power over how the party actually conducts its business at various levels; who its candidates are; what its actual local, state, or national legislative agendas contain; where it gets its money or how it spends it; or what social forces and classes it bows to. The DNC is not meant to be a democratic leadership organization. For the most part, the DNC is simply a conduit for corporate and wealthy donors' money. Despite the fact that the DNC raised nearly \$400 million in the 2016 election cycle, new DNC Chair Tom Perez can complain of the committee's meager operating budget. The fact is, most corporate-raised money passes through to state parties and favored candidates. It is one of several living links between capital, lower party structures, and candidates.

The Democrats can ignore the members of its supposedly leading body because the actual powers-that-be in the party—such as political office holders, party "notables," corporate funders, industry lobbyists, wealthy individuals, legislative committee members, party apparatchiks, and high-level government officials—have a multitude of well-greased informal and social channels through which to make the real decisions and raise money. The "smoke-filled rooms" may be gone, but for the privileged, the back channels are open for business. To put it another way, the party bigwigs have direct contact with the sections of the capitalist class and their hangers-on that support the party apparatus and fund its candidates, both directly and through the various campaign committees, all of which are awash in corporate money. These same capitalist elements supply the "experts" and lobbyists who write much of Democrats' legislation and press for multiple compromises. Remember the "public option" in the Affordable Care Act?

On the other hand, the party maintains the loyalty of many labor- and social-movement leaders and opinion-makers as well as millions of liberal-minded or progressive voters, in part by convincing them that there is no other alternative to the Republicans, the growing right in general, and now the even more dangerous Trump administration. And, for now, there is no mass electoral alternative because three or four generations of labor- and social-movement leaders and, yes, socialists of various tendencies and organizations over the years, chose not to take the difficult path of constructing one. That is the specter that still haunts DSA (and the socialist left generally)—its other "from above" soul.

## **Socialism From Below or Permeation?**

In “The Two Souls of Socialism,” Draper counterposed socialism from below to permeation from above. He used “permeationism” to describe the “socialist-from-above” strategy of entering “the Establishment,” or its organizations and the Democratic Party in particular, to gain political influence. The Fabians’ efforts to influence the British Liberal Party before the rise of the Labour Party was a well-known example. The Communist Party’s Popular Front tactic of the 1930s was another. Sometimes this is accompanied, Draper pointed out, by using “movements-from-below” as a pressure tactic for gaining access to the existing centers of political power. The U.S. labor leadership’s relationship with the Democrats is to this day an example of this. Whatever opportunist gains permeation brought these organizations, none of them have been very successful in influencing the direction of the Democratic Party, the majority of its office holders, or its administrations. The CP implemented its Popular Front tactic just as the legislative goals and gains of the New Deal began their decline. The Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee’s Democratic Agenda version reached its apex just as liberalism went into full retreat. In the United States, when he wrote the New Politics version of his article, Draper identified “the policy of supporting the Democratic Party and the lib-lab coalition around the “Johnson Consensus, its predecessors and successors,” as the permeationist tactic of that period. We know where that tactic led.

Whatever its rationale, permeationism is always a top-down tactic or strategy, not because of the desires of those pursuing it or the point of entry they choose, but because it promotes one of “many alternatives to the self-mobilization of masses from below.” For socialism from below, it is precisely “the self-mobilization of the masses,” or to put it another way, the independent organization and self-activity of the working class and its diverse sections and allies, that is the key strategic task of socialists. And that remains the essential point: Without posing the alternative of independent political organization and action outside and opposed to the top-down milieu and reality of the Democratic Party and the bourgeois politics de jure in general, the path of permeation will always appear as the “left wing of the possible.”

## **Permeation From Below?**

There is a lot of motion among political activists in and out of DSA to permeate this milieu in a grass-roots way. Ironically the very dependence on top-down forms of funding and campaigning that are at the center of Democratic Party organization and practice has left much of the old neighborhood, precinct, and county organizations “hollow” or poorly organized. So activists, some encouraged by Bernie Sanders, are becoming precinct captains. Indeed, Our Revolution’s Transform the Party website [\[1\]](#) will tell you how to become a precinct captain in your local Democratic Party. While it does specify that one duty of a precinct captain is “encouraging your neighbors to vote during elections,” it doesn’t mention that they will be expected to turn out the vote for the entire party slate, neoliberals and all, not just favored progressives. That’s what precinct captains and county and state committees do. Some activists have even taken over state party committees, as in Washington State. Many are running or preparing to run in Democratic primaries against incumbent mainstreamers, others for positions in the party structure. The “political revolution” is on. Or is it?

Attempting to take over the Democratic Party at its lowest level is politically no different than other forms of permeationism because it both reinforces the idea for many that this party is the progressive alternative (or conduit to that alternative) and in doing so precludes building a real alternative. While even in its new semi-mass shape DSA cannot itself be that alternative, what its leaders and activists say, and more importantly what they do individually and as an organization, will, by virtue of DSA’s size and dynamism, set the tone and direction for the much broader layer of

movement activists. By leaving the door open to old and new forms of permeation, once more, a genuine alternative will be postponed.

At the same time, since the party establishment will not sit still for a grass-roots invasion from the left, it means the democratic socialists and those they influence or help organize will be thrown into an internal fight that will deflect from the very goals sought by entering this milieu. Nor will such internal fights inspire or organize the much broader working class or social movement base on which any successful strategy depends. On the other hand, the very “success” in winning positions may, once again, be the undoing of some. In addition to the well-known barriers to such an invasion, such as organization, money, and incumbency, the Democratic Party, like any institution, is a social milieu in which group pressure to conform is strong and constant. Thus, this path is likely to eventually burn out some of those activists who throw themselves into the effort to permeate “from below.” Others will simply be absorbed into the norms and culture of this milieu (perhaps protesting all the way), as a loyal opposition following the well-trod path of so many labor- and social-movement leaders, would-be party reformers, and self-proclaimed socialists. More importantly, for all the energy and hopes, no actual alternative mass independent political organizations will have been built or even initiated.

But won't the party's progressive wing come to the aid of the new forces trying to “transform the party”? Perhaps some will, but if their support for Bernie Sanders' run for the nomination is any indication, such support is likely to be marginal and weak. Here's the score card of progressive Democratic support for Sanders in 2016:

- Of 232 Democrats in both houses of Congress, 10 supported Sanders.
- Five of his 75 fellow members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus endorsed him.
- Of the 447 voting members of the DNC, 39 endorsed Sanders.
- Of 3,170 Democratic state legislators, 91 did so.
- Three of the 48 Democrats in New York's City Council backed Sanders, two of them members of the council's 19-person Progressive Caucus, one them the day before the primary.

Not much in the way of support or political fortitude there.

## **What Is the Alternative?**

It is hard to imagine a time when the independent organization of the working class and its diverse sections has been weaker. Union membership and strength are at an all-time low. Many of the social-movement organizations of yesteryear are little more than bureaucratic shells, clinging desperately to the Democratic Party or seeking salvation through the internet and social media. So, the “from below” alternative can look discouraging. Yet, there are millions of people in the streets to protest and resist Trump and Trumpism, police brutality and murders of African Americans, anti-immigrant attacks by the right and the government (including Obama's administration), the persistence of gender inequality, and attacks on the recently won rights of LGBT people, while backing the fights for a \$15 minimum wage, Black Lives Matter, single-payer health care, and Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) campaigns. Beneath the surface are spreading “workers centers,” other immigrant worker organizations, rank and file rebellions in many unions, and efforts to organize unions in hospitals, warehouses, hotels, and other workplaces. It is significant that some of these movements, notably among immigrant workers, women, and the low-paid, have turned to

the strike as a political weapon, as I pointed out in the Summer 2017 issue of New Politics. The alternative, in other words, begins in the streets, the workplaces, the embattled urban ghettos and barrios, and the bombed-out Rust Belt mining and mill towns. I suppose most of us agree on that.

Historically, change in the United States has been far less a matter of who's in office than of who and how many are in the streets or mobilized in workplaces. Mass upheaval and social disruption have forced change. No one ever won their rights, economic or social gains, or a place at the table by voting for a Democrat. Rather, the force of the mass movements from below that characterize U.S. history, from the abolitionists, to the unions, to the civil rights, women's, LGBT, or immigrant rights movements, forced change on those in office. That is our starting point. The political direction that socialists advocate while building these movements and actions, however, will be key to the future.

I believe that right now the mass movements in the streets and fights for power on the job and in the unions are by far the most important ways to build the current resistance to both Trump and the broader capitalist offensive against all sections of the working class, as well as to win single-payer, better housing, \$15 minimum wage, unionization in the giant logistics industry that is now the heart of American capitalism, and more. In addition, groups such as Black Lives Matter, BDS and Palestine solidarity groups, and campus-based feminist and queer organizations are providing a new generation of activists. Some of the issues these groups are fighting for are difficult for many progressive Democratic office holders to deal with. For example, the New York City Council's Progressive Caucus voted to oppose BDS, while their platform on "Policing and the Criminal Justice System" doesn't even mention police shootings.

The potential for independent political organization and action is there, and socialists have a key role. Without the grass-roots self-activity and organization of the emerging movements, electoral action will not shift the extreme imbalance of power relations in the United States that underlies both the move to the right and the persistence of neoliberalism in mainstream politics. Unless this political action is independent of and opposed to the whole Democratic milieu and structure, it will not attract independent activists, discontented Democratic voters, and the millions who have simply stopped voting. It will need to become a genuine alternative.

The opportunity is there in U.S. cities large and small. For the most part, the movements, campaigns, political strikes, union strikes, and actions of the next few years will be urban-based and, thus, located at the heart of the Democratic Party's shrinking voter base. In most cities, a Republican presence is marginal and Democrats routinely win city council, state legislative, and even congressional elections with margins of 80 percent or more. This means there is no "spoiler" problem in most of urban America. At the same time, the party's voter base has been shrinking as people increasingly see "politics" as having no positive impact on their declining living and working standards. In New York City, for example, where Democrats get 80 percent or more of the vote, turnout in the 2009 mayoral election that put Bill de Blasio in office, and in the 2014 mid-term congressional and state elections, was 28 percent or less. Los Angeles, Buffalo, and Detroit, all overwhelmingly Democratic cities, had similarly low turnout rates in local, state, and off-year congressional elections.

Furthermore, the Democrats are vulnerable because they have presided over the decay of the cities they govern, the impoverishment of a growing number of their residents, the crisis in housing, the stagnation or reduction of city employees' wages, the gutting of federal funds for cities, and the big local-tax giveaways that severely limit funding for adequate housing and health care while enriching businesses and developers (like Trump). Mayor de Blasio has granted more giveaway "tax expenditures" to developers and condo owners than Bloomberg before him. And for years Democratic officials have tolerated police violence against African Americans and Latinos. As David



Roediger writes in his latest book, *Class, Race and Marxism* (Verso, 2017), “Cities so firmly in the hands of liberal Democrats that they scarcely have an opposition party sign contracts with police ‘unions’” that allow the destruction of records related to complaints of excessive force. Again, the New York City Council Progressive Caucus platform doesn’t even mention police shootings.

Democrats can get away with this in part because there is no independent electoral opposition from below other than the rare candidate of the closely allied Working Families Party in a few states or the occasional Green. Democratic office holders and apparatchiks can squabble among themselves in the primaries or in office, and deal with their progressive minority or inside reformers, but they need not fear a real challenge. That needs to change. There are a few local initiatives that move toward this goal, such as the Richmond Progressive Alliance in California or Sanders’ own Vermont Progressive Party. These are worth looking at to begin the process of creating a real alternative at the electoral level.

## **The Reality and Vulnerability of the Democratic Party**

Just as we must have an analysis of capitalism as a system, so we need an analysis of this alleged “party of the people” and its place in the system as a product of the history and development of that system. Some things seem clear. While the Democratic Party is not a membership organization like most parties in other countries, neither is it simply a ballot line waiting to be captured, a set of hollowed-out precinct organizations, nor a collection of individual candidates and operatives. It has a formal structure, a less visible power structure, a constellation of allied service- and policy-providing groups, and the backing and participation of major sections of U.S. capital. The Democratic Party is part and parcel of U.S. class structure, market relations, empire, and defense of the capitalist system. It did not, like the labor and social democratic parties of Europe and elsewhere, come out of the workers movement as an opponent of bourgeois politics, but from the Southern slavocracy and sections of Northern capital committed to a contradictory compromise between slave society in the South, capitalism in the North, and white supremacy everywhere, this last even after the Civil War.

Its eventual and gradual turn to modern liberalism during the first half of the twentieth century was engineered from above, partly in response to various mass social and labor movements, by sections of capital, their agents, and ideological fellow travelers attuned to the need to limit the impact of the system’s recurring crises through government intervention. Even then, the African American population was largely excluded from New Deal and immediate postwar reforms. The Democratic Party’s relation to the rise of working-class movements was to co-opt, limit, and institutionalize them as much as possible through a regulated form of collective bargaining. Check out the opening paragraph of the famous Wagner (National Labor Relations) Act concerning “industrial strife which interferes with the normal flow of commerce” and the provision of “orderly and peaceful procedures” to prevent this. Along with this came the de facto illegalization of political strikes, on the one hand, and a political alliance with sections of capital, on the other. Fortunately, due to the persistence of class conflict above and below the surface, these efforts have never been totally successful.

Forced to make concessions to movements from below in the second half of the twentieth century, Democratic administrations and congressional office holders did their best to co-opt the civil rights, women’s, and gay rights movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by providing limited legislation. They opposed Black Power altogether. In the mid-1970s, the party once again followed the lead of major sections of capital to neoliberalism. This party has long been and remains the major political driver of American imperialism and war. From Wilson, to Roosevelt, to Truman, to Kennedy and Johnson, to Clinton and Obama, all have led the United States into wars aimed at the expansion of

U.S. capital's economic, political, and military power. As a result, the United States now has a military presence in 130 countries, is engaged in several wars, and has economic interests almost everywhere. It would be hard to find a Democratic office holder, party official, or funder who contemplates undoing this vast empire even if they sometimes oppose one or another piece of it.

Furthermore, all this has created a highly militarized state. Indeed, today some 47 percent of the employees of the national state that the Democrats, more than their Republican rivals, have helped to shape, work in one or another "defense" agency or function—not including the FBI, CIA, NSA, DEA, or Department of Homeland Security. The militarization of local and state police by Defense Department grants of equipment was initiated by Clinton. The turn to neoliberalism that began in the late 1970s was promoted by capitalist institutions such as the Business Roundtable, funded by business, and implemented by the party's office holders, first under Carter, with little protest within the party. To be sure, the history of each of these changes can be complex—involving class, social, or internal party conflict and requiring a change in political personnel—but the process has always been rooted in and limited by the needs of capital and its system. The Democratic elites and their business masters are the major initiators and enablers.

The belief that this party of capital can be used in one way or another as a means of building a mass socialist movement in the United States has always been an illusion. Far from a path to a sustainable radical left, this permeationist orientation in all its forms has been a barrier, in a society posing many barriers to be sure, to the emergence of mass independent socialist movement. With new movements from below arising once again, it is time to abandon this piece of a failed past—this other, compromised soul of American socialism.

**Kim Moody**

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**P.S.**

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<http://newpol.org/content/two-souls-democratic-socialism>

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## Footnotes

[1] [www.transformtheparty.com](http://www.transformtheparty.com)