

Beyond Social Democracy - On its nature and record in advanced capitalist countries

Friday 13 July 2018, by [LIEBMAN Marcel](#), [MILIBAND Ralph](#) (Date first published: 1985).

It is precisely social democracy's history that shows why we need a more radical socialist politics today.

Introduction

These days, as austerity sweeps the advanced capitalist world and welfare states lie in tatters, it's easy to romanticize post-World War II social democracy. The epoch of strong unions, regulated markets, and rising wages seems like a golden age compared to our current era of plutocratic capitalism.

Yet the sepia tones can distort our vision. The European social-democratic parties were populated with leaders who had reconciled themselves to capitalism and a US-dominated global order. When business mobilized against their reform agenda, they quickly scampered back to safe ground, unable to call in a rank-and-file they'd long since sworn off. Their congenital unwillingness to pursue policies that would threaten "business confidence" ultimately prepared the ground for neoliberalism's rise.

Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman were keen observers of these dynamics. Writing in 1985, when the Reaganite and Thatcherite projects were still unfinished, the socialist scholars chronicled social democracy's history of deficiencies for a landmark edition of *Socialist Register* [1]. Without denigrating the reforms social-democratic parties had been able to win — or downplaying the challenges any left politics faces — the two made the case instead for a "revolutionary reformism."

While portions of "Beyond Social Democracy" are unavoidably outdated, their essay, reprinted in full below, is a corrective to blinkered memories of social democracy — and a sketch of the kind of socialist politics we need today.

Jacobin

Beyond Social Democracy

In this essay, we seek to answer two closely related questions: first, why socialists in advanced capitalist countries should want to move beyond social democracy; and secondly, what are the requirements and implications of such a move. Until not so long ago, the first of these questions would have seemed rather indecent: *of course* all serious socialists wanted to move beyond social

democracy. Today, no such intention or desire can be taken for granted. For even where there is sharp criticism of the limitations and derelictions of social democracy, there is also an implicit acceptance of it, based upon a despairing uncertainty about what else is possible. So both questions do need to be probed.

An answer to the first of them — why socialists should want to move beyond social democracy — requires a brief recapitulation of its nature and record. An initial distinction needs to be made for this purpose between social democracy before 1914 [2], and social democracy after World War I and particularly since 1945.

In its earlier formative phase, social democracy unambiguously stood for the wholesale transformation of the social order, from capitalism to socialism, on the basis of the social appropriation of the main means of production, distribution, and exchange, a far-reaching democratization of the political system, and a drastic leveling out of social inequality. This was to be achieved by way of a long series of economic, social, and political reforms, to be brought about by way of a parliamentary majority reflecting a preponderance of electoral and popular support.

There were many differences between socialists as to the precise nature of the reforms to be realized, and the strategy to be employed in their advancement, and there were also revolutionary socialists in the ranks of social democracy, of whom Rosa Luxemburg was the most notable representative, who proposed a strategy of mass struggle far removed from the electoralism and parliamentarism of the predominant current. Still, “reformists” could still very plausibly argue that they too were fully committed to the socialist project. As Jean Jaurès once said about the French Socialist Party, “precisely because it is a party of revolution . . . the Socialist Party is the most actively reformist.”

What gave “reformism” [3] its pejorative connotations and made it all but synonymous with class collaboration and betrayal was not its reliance on gradual reforms as a path to socialist transformation, but the support for the war by the leaders of the Second International in August 1914 (and after) and their fierce opposition to left internationalists, of whom Lenin was of course the most conspicuous figure. With the triumph of the Bolsheviks in Russia in October 1917, Lenin’s strictures against the “reformist traitors” acquired a unique global authority and resonance.

This has greatly affected the debate on the Left on the question of what strategy is most likely to advance matters, in socialist terms, in advanced capitalist countries with capitalist-democratic regimes. The debate has in fact often been conducted by the revolutionary left in rather simplistic terms: on the one hand, reformism equals socialist betrayal; on the other, revolution equals socialist rectitude. But the questions that need to be raised in regard to the appropriate socialist strategy for these countries cannot be resolved in these terms [4].

More will be said about this later, but the point that needs to be made here is that so far as social democracy after 1914 is concerned, the “reformist” label has been of ever-decreasing relevance to its actual purposes, and is in fact quite misleading. For the purpose of social democracy, as expressed in practice by labor movements and parties everywhere since World War I has not been a “reformist” socialist project in the classical sense at all. From that time onwards, and more and more definitely, it has in essence been a project of moderate reform within the framework of capitalism, a striving, at best, to achieve a better deal for organized labor and the “lower income groups” inside capitalist society; and this has been linked to the wish to see the state make a more effective contribution to the management of capitalism.

Social democracy became more and more attuned to the requirements of capitalism; and where these requirements clashed with reform, it was reform that was more often than not sacrificed on

the altar of the “national interest,” “pragmatism” and “realism,” or whatever else might serve to cover up compromise and retreat. The “reformist,” transformative project has remained part of the occasional rhetoric of social-democratic leaders, to be brought out on suitable occasions such as party conferences; but the rhetoric has been consistently belied by the actual practice of social democracy. The most it has ever striven to achieve is capitalism with a more human face: the record is consistent across time and countries and continents — from Attlee to Wilson and Callaghan in Britain, from Leon Blum to Guy Mollet to Mitterrand in France, from Ebert to Brandt to Schmidt in Germany, etc.

Certainly, it would be quite wrong to ignore or undervalue the reforms which social democracy has helped to achieve in capitalist societies over the years, or the important role which its presence and pressure have played in forcing issues and policies on the political agenda which otherwise would have been ignored or differently handled. But acknowledging this and giving it its full weight should not obscure the deeply negative aspects of the record.

For one thing, social democracy has consistently sought to limit the scope and substance of the reforms which it has itself proposed and implemented, in an endeavor to pacify and accommodate capitalist forces, and to demonstrate how much these forces could count on the “moderation” and “reasonableness” of their social-democratic opponents; and also because social-democratic leaders in office have always readily endorsed conservative economic policies and submitted equally readily to the constraints this has imposed upon them.

As a result, social-democratic reforms, however useful, have tended to have a limited character and impact, and have been very vulnerable to conservative attack. Even when circumstances were most favorable, for instance in the years after World War II in such countries as Britain and France, when popular readiness and support for radical change was very high, it was timidity rather than boldness, submission to convention rather than innovative zeal which characterized social-democratic reforming measures.

Secondly, social democracy has generally been deeply concerned to narrow the scope of political activity, to confine it as far as possible to carefully controlled party and parliamentary channels, to restrict and stifle grassroots activism except in the service of the party’s electoral interests. Much of the energy of social-democratic leaders has been devoted to the containment and channelling of the energies of their rank and file, and to the control of that rank and file by the party apparatus; and much the same concern has been evident among trade union leaders as well.

Thirdly and relatedly, social-democratic leaders have always reserved their most energetic attacks for left activists in the labor movement. Social-democratic hostility to the Left was already fierce and pervasive long before the Bolshevik Revolution and the coming into being of Communist parties. But the establishment of Soviet Russia and of Communist parties gave a new dynamic and legitimation to the struggle against anyone who demanded more radical policies and actions than social-democratic leaders were themselves prepared to endorse, and provided these leaders with a convenient bogey to use against their opponents on the left, whatever their particular brand of socialism might be. Social-democratic leaders, in parties and trade unions, thus turned themselves into very effective watchdogs against the spread of socialist ideas and influence in the labor movement: no conservative politician could hope to have anything like the same impact in this respect. The effect of these endeavors has been of immense importance in the history of labor movements everywhere.

Fourthly, social-democratic opposition to anything to the left of social democracy played a major role after 1945 in mobilizing labor movements, or those parts of labor movements under their control, behind the global counter-revolutionary crusade which capitalist governments have been waging since World War II under the leadership of the United States. Again and again, it is the social-

democratic leaders of Western European labor movements who have proved the most faithful and dedicated supporters and allies of the United States in this global enterprise, with the excuse that what was at stake was the defense of the West, freedom, democracy, and the rest, against the dire threat of Soviet expansionism and aggression.

It would have been perfectly possible for social-democratic leaders to oppose the installation after World War II of Soviet-type regimes on countries contiguous to the Soviet Union without lending their authority to what has undoubtedly been one of the great myths of the second half of the twentieth century, namely the myth of Soviet expansionism [5]. Social-democratic leaders did not choose that option, and thus made a major contribution to the granting of respectability to that myth. In the same context, these same leaders played a major part in supporting and defending the defense policies of the United States, notwithstanding the fact that these policies have been dominated by American determination to maintain a preponderance in nuclear weaponry: at no point have social-democratic leaders made a serious contribution to the curbing of the arms race.

Finally, social democracy played a notable — and utterly dishonorable — role in the postwar decades in waging war, or in supporting the waging of war, against independence movements in the colonial territories of their countries. French social democracy was at the very center of the murderous struggle waged against the independence movements in Indochina and Algeria, with names like Robert Lacoste and Guy Mollet forever inscribed in annals of shame, and British social democracy was similarly involved in the struggles of the 1940s and 1950s in British colonial territories — in Malaya and Kenya, in Cyprus and Aden. Nowhere and at no time in those years did social-democratic leaders anywhere in imperialist countries show any sign that they took the notion of socialist internationalism seriously.

In short, the record shows quite conclusively that social democracy has never posed any real threat to the structure of domination and exploitation of capitalist societies. Throughout, its leaders have clearly demonstrated that they have been concerned with the management of capitalism, not its supercession; and in the field of defense and foreign affairs, they have always been much more the colleagues of conservative politicians than their opponents.

In practice, there has existed a very high degree of consensus on the broad lines of policy, based upon the acceptance by social-democratic leaders of the policies of conservative governments: occasional disagreements on specific issues, however sharp, have not fundamentally disturbed this consensus. The point is particularly applicable to defense and foreign policy; but it is hardly less relevant in other fields as well.

There have always been many socialists in the ranks of social-democratic parties who have opposed their leaders and sought to push them and their parties in more radical directions. They have on occasion had some successes, and their efforts have no doubt also prevented their leaders from moving even further in the direction of compromise and retreat.

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However, it must be noted that this socialist opposition inside social-democratic parties has never managed to “capture” these parties for the Left and given them a decisively different orientation and sets of programs and policies. Social-democratic leaders of the center and the right have remained in command of their parties, and have continued to determine their policies and actions, notwithstanding the concessions they have occasionally had to make to their critics.

Nor does there seem to be any very good reason for thinking that matters are likely to be very different in the future. It is of course possible — indeed likely — that socialists will continue to extract occasional concessions from their leaders, in programmatic and even in practical terms; and it is equally possible that the pressure of events will compel these leaders to adopt different policies, even somewhat more radical ones — that they will, for instance, be compelled to take a greater distance from American defense and foreign policies and seek to act as a more “restraining” influence on the United States than has been the case in the past. To a limited extent, some such shift in these areas has already occurred in the years of the Reagan presidency.

Anything of this sort must of course be welcome from a socialist point of view. But it should on no account obscure the fact that any such variation in program or action occurs within a social-democratic framework which is very set and solid. What socialists confront here — or ought to confront — is an ideological, political, even psychological, construct of great strength, which is open, flexible, loose on its right, but which is very unwilling, even unable, to yield much on its left. In other words, social-democratic leaders find it much easier to compromise and consort with their conservative adversaries on the right than with their socialist critics on the left.

In seeking to explain the reasons for their opposition to the policies advocated by the Left, social-democratic leaders themselves have often advanced the view that whatever the merits of these policies might be, extreme caution must be exercised in proposing anything which “the electorate” could find “extreme” and therefore unacceptable. On this view, the reluctance of social-democratic leaders to endorse, let alone initiate, radical policies, is not due to their own predilections, but to their realism, and to their understanding of the fact that to move too far ahead of “public opinion” and advocate policies for which “the public” is not ready is to court electoral disaster and political paralysis.

This raises some very large and important points. It is undoubtedly true that “the electorate” in the capitalist-democratic regimes of advanced capitalist countries does not support parties which advocate, or which appear to stand for, the revolutionary overthrow of the political system; and “the electorate” here includes the overwhelming mass of the working class as well as other classes. This rejection by the working class and “lower income groups” in general of parties committed or seemingly committed to the overthrow of the political and social order is a fact of major political importance, to say the least.

However, this does not at all mean that organized labor, the working class, and the subordinate population of advanced capitalist countries (which constitutes the vast majority of their population) is also opposed to far-reaching changes and radical reforms. Social-democratic parties have themselves been driven on many occasions to proclaim their transformative ambitions in their electoral manifestos, and to speak of their firm determination to create “a new social order”; and have nevertheless scored remarkable electoral victories with such programs. Popular commitment to radical transformative purposes may not, generally speaking, be very deep; but there has at any rate been very little evidence of popular revulsion from such purposes.

The notion that very large parts of “the electorate,” and notably the working class, are bound to reject radical programs is a convenient alibi, but little else. The real point, which is crucial, is that such programs and policies need to be defended and propagated with the utmost determination and vigor by leaders totally convinced of the justice of their cause. It is this which is always lacking: infirmity of purpose and the fear of radical measures lies not with the working class but with the social-democratic leaders themselves.

The same point must be made about social-democratic governments. Such governments have never been disavowed by the working class because they were too “extreme” or radical or overzealous in

pressing forward with reform: on the contrary, they have been disavowed precisely because they have regularly retreated from the promises enshrined in their manifestos, because they have adopted policies that ran counter to these promises, because they disillusioned and demoralized their supporters, and because they gave every indication that there was little to expect from their continuance in office. It is in this connection very odd that the lamentations which are so often heard on the Left about the decline of working-class support for social-democratic parties do not take greater account of the record of social-democratic governments: the wonder is not the decline, but the resilience of support which, despite everything, endures for such parties in the working class and beyond.

It is also an important part of the picture that social-democratic retreats and derelictions have disastrous repercussions on the labor movement. As social-democratic governments retreat, so division and strife inside social-democratic parties grow. The Left protests and attacks the leadership and seeks to deflect it from its courses; and the leadership turns on the Left and accuses it of disloyalty. Conservative forces rejoice; and the working class, or a large part of it, remains alienated or is further alienated from a divided and warring party.

We are therefore driven back to the leadership of social-democratic parties. Again and again, social-democratic governments have been elected with substantial, sometimes sweeping, parliamentary and popular majorities, on programs of extensive reform and renewal, in a climate of genuine enthusiasm and support, and have very soon flagged and dissipated that enthusiasm and support, and retreated into the positions and policies just described.

It is of course true that even very “moderate” and compromising social-democratic governments confront very serious economic and financial constraints; that such governments operate in a generally unsympathetic or frankly hostile administrative context, in which other parts of the state tend to view social-democratic ministers as interlopers; that they are subject to constant and often virulent attacks from an overwhelmingly conservative press; and that all conservative forces want to see the “experiment” brought to an end as soon as possible, and do what they can to hasten the day.

All this must indeed be taken into account. It is perfectly reasonable — indeed essential — to appreciate the determination of this opposition even to social democracy. The point, however, is that most social-democratic politicians are very ill-adapted to the politics of confrontation and struggle, at least with their conservative opponents — it is otherwise with their own activists on the Left.

This is not a matter of character but of ideological dispositions. Those who get to leadership positions in social-democratic parties are generally “safe” people, who can be relied on to pursue “moderate,” “reasonable,” “sensible” courses. A process of cooptation, sifting, and selection is at work on the way up, so that people who are deemed to be ideologically and politically “unsound” can be kept at arm’s length, and pushed back to the periphery of the party. The apparatus itself is under the control of “moderate” men and women, and is used quite ruthlessly to ensure that the right people are brought in and the wrong people kept out. Where left socialists do nevertheless break through and cannot easily or safely be prevented from obtaining ministerial office, they are at least kept out of strategic offices such as finance, home affairs, foreign affairs, and defense.

For most social-democratic politicians, capitalist society (insofar as the existence of capitalism is acknowledged at all) is not a battlefield on which opposed classes are engaged in a permanent conflict, now more acute, now less, and in which they are firmly on one side, but a community, no doubt quarrelsome, but a community nonetheless, in which various groups — be they employers, workers, public employees, etc. — make selfish and damaging demands, which it is the task of government to resist for the good of all; and it is a community in which help must naturally be extended to the weakest members.

On this view, what is required of government, and what a social-democratic government is peculiarly well able to provide, is good will, understanding, fairness, compassion, so that specific problems may be tackled and resolved; and it also follows that social-democratic leaders, in practice as distinct from rhetoric or even sentiment, are by no means separated from their conservative opponents by an unbridgeable gulf. On the contrary, there are many channels of communication, understanding, and even agreement between them. The business of social-democratic leaders is conciliation and compromise. Their concern may be to advance reform, but also to contain the pressure for it. Gramsci spoke of intellectuals as “managers of consent”: the formulation is even more applicable to social-democratic politicians. As such, they play a major role in the stabilization of the politics of capitalist-democratic societies.

Given this, it is easy to understand why social-democratic politicians, with the partial exception of Salvador Allende in Chile, have never sought to probe the limits of “reformism,” and have always retreated long before they faced a serious confrontation with conservative forces. To have done so would have required them to assume the leadership of a mass movement from which their whole view of the world led them to recoil. It is simply not realistic to expect such people to provide the inspiration and the leadership required to bring about a transformation of capitalist society in socialist directions: the task demands, at the very least, a set of ideological commitments which they do not possess.

There have over the years been a good many different answers to this question. One of the main ones, of Leninist inspiration, proposes the building and nurturing of a “vanguard” party, tightly organized on “democratic centralist” lines, involved in a daily class struggle at the point of production and at all other points of tension in capitalist society, with the expectation that capitalist crisis must ultimately reach a point at which it will become unmanageable, as a result of which it will no longer be possible to contain popular anger within the confines of the political system. At that point, a revolutionary situation will have come to exist, which will make it possible for the “vanguard” party to seize the moment and lead the working class towards a seizure of power. The bourgeois state will be smashed, and replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat, on the basis of proletarian power, workers’ councils, and other authentically democratic forms.

Those who propose this strategy are well aware that in no advanced capitalist country has this “scenario” come anywhere near to being realized. But they are of course able to argue that the realization of the “scenario” is only a matter of time, that the crisis is not yet far enough advanced but is developing, that the working class is still in the grip of social-democratic “reformist” illusions, but that it is bound to acquire greater class consciousness under the impact of events, and so forth. Some such beliefs have for many years — in fact since 1917 — sustained a core of dedicated militants and revolutionaries in all advanced capitalist countries, and indeed in all other countries as well.

However, it needs to be said, that this revolutionary “scenario,” even with a marked aggravation of capitalist crisis, is very unlikely to be realized in advanced capitalist countries. If or when a revolutionary situation does arise in one or other such country, the chances are that it will play itself out very differently from what is envisaged in this “scenario.”

This, however, is speculation of a fairly futile kind. For a very long time to come, what socialists will confront is crisis and conflict, but quite emphatically not a revolutionary situation; and all experience very strongly suggests that parties and groupings which base their intervention in political life on the lines just indicated condemn themselves to marginality and ineffectiveness. Their problem is not that they are unable to attract any serious measure of popular support: the real problem is that they have generally proved unable to attract any serious measure of activist and socialist support.

There are a number of reasons for this. One of them is that the notion of a tightly organized, democratic-centralist organization has proved to be a very good recipe for top-down and manipulative leadership, for undemocratic centralism and the stifling of genuine debate, sharp divisions and resort to expulsions, and a turnover of members so high as to make the organization a transit camp from innocence and enthusiasm to disillusionment and bitterness. Only the leadership remains permanently entrenched, presiding year after year over a constantly renewed membership, and virtually irremovable save by internal upheavals, splits, and excommunications.

Parties and groupings such as this have shown very little capacity to think through the problems which the socialist project presents, and have tended instead to resort to incantation and sloganeering as a substitute. They have often included some very talented individuals, who have made important contributions to socialist thinking. But the groupings themselves have generated remarkably little that was fresh and innovative: the ardor and dedication of their members have more often than not been doomed to ineffectiveness because of the shortcomings of the organizations of which they were members and the distrust which these shortcomings engendered among socialist activists in the labor movement whom they needed to attract.

Secondly, the very notion of a “vanguard” party has acquired an arrogant and “imperialistic” ring, quite unacceptable in labor movements with a long history and with many different and contradictory or at least disparate tendencies. Vanguard parties are by definition unique and dominant: there cannot be two or more such parties. But it is only by compulsion and coercion that one party can impose itself as the “vanguard” or “leading” party. In the circumstances of advanced capitalist societies, with a high density of different organizations, interests, purposes, tendencies, and aspirations, a socialist party can only expect to be one element in a comradely alliance between different formations. It may hope, by virtue of its conduct, clear-sightedness, and support, to become a major reference point in that alliance, even a senior partner in it, but without any pretension to an arbitrary and stifling predominance.

This is not only a matter of strategy in struggle. It raises larger issues concerning the political system appropriate to a socialist society. All the available evidence suggests that the concept of “the leading party” (in effect the monopolistic party) tends to produce authoritarianism and the suppression of dissent — indeed the construal of all dissent as counter-revolutionary and therefore unacceptable.

There are no doubt circumstances of extreme peril where diversity, pluralism, and conflicting tendencies are very difficult to maintain: but failure to maintain them should be seen for what it is, namely a major retreat from socialist principles. What happened to the Bolshevik Party after the banning of “factions” at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921 offers an instructive lesson of what such banning entails for the life of a revolutionary party.

A further reason for the marginalization and relative ineffectiveness of “Marxist-Leninist” revolutionary groupings in advanced capitalist societies has to do with their failure to take seriously the context of capitalist democracy in which they operate. These groupings tend to treat capitalist democracy as a complete sham; and therefore to accord a wholly subordinate place to electoral struggles, a form of activity for which they have great contempt. Whereas social-democratic parties suffer from “parliamentary cretinism,” they tend to suffer from something akin to “anti-parliamentary cretinism.” The fact is, that whatever the limitations of capitalist democracy may be — and they are drastic enough — no party or grouping operating within its context can afford not to seek some degree of electoral support, not least at the local level. This requires a great deal more than a sudden irruption on the scene at election time.

What, then, has been — and should be — the socialist alternative to these groupings? It has already

been argued here that social-democratic parties cannot realistically be taken to be such an alternative. That alternative entails a firm revolutionary commitment, namely the wholesale transformation of capitalist society in socialist directions. But it also involves a “reformist” commitment, insofar as it also seeks all reforms which can be seen to form part of the larger revolutionary purpose.

Such “revolutionary reformism” involves intervention in class struggle at all points of conflict in society, and preeminently at the site of work. It also involves electoral struggles at all levels and conceives these struggles as an intrinsic part of class struggle, without allowing itself to be absorbed into electoralism and parliamentarism; and it also means the permanent striving to strengthen the socialist presence on the political scene and in the political culture.

It should also be said that “revolutionary reformism” does not postulate a smooth and uneventful transition to socialism by way of electoral support and parliamentary majorities. It acknowledges that, in the context of capitalist democracy, such a transition requires a massive degree of popular support and commitment, one of whose expressions (but by no means the only or even the most important one) is electoral strength and parliamentary representation. But “revolutionary reformism” is also bound to be very conscious of the fact that any serious challenge to dominant classes must inevitably evoke resistance, and will be determined to meet that resistance with every weapon that this requires, including of course the mobilization of mass support.

In historical terms, the parties which have embodied this “revolutionary reformism” are the Communist parties of the advanced capitalist countries (and others as well for that matter). To say this may seem paradoxical, since they themselves have always fiercely rejected the “reformist” label, not surprisingly given the pejorative connotations it acquired after 1914. But the labelling is nevertheless wholly justified — it is in fact the “revolutionary” part which may be the more problematic.

The reason for saying it is justified is that after the first years of *Sturm und Drang* following the Bolshevik Revolution and the foundation of these parties, it came to be understood that the overthrow of capitalism was not on the agenda; and Communist parties installed themselves as best they could (and insofar as bourgeois governments allowed them to do so) in the political life of their countries, and became in fact if not in name “reformist” parties with an ultimately revolutionary vocation, a strong engagement in class struggle, taking part in electoral contests, and pressing for immediate as well as long-term gains and reforms.

There were periods when twists in Comintern policy (for instance the “third period,” “class against class,” social democrats are “social fascists” phase between 1929 and 1934) or the twists in Soviet foreign policy (the “imperialist war” phase between 1939 and 1941) forced the parties back into a more “revolutionary” position. But this represented the exception rather than the rule, and that position has not on the whole been taken up since 1945.

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What was fundamentally wrong with these Communist parties was two things: first, their total subservience to Stalin’s policies and purposes; and secondly, closely related to this, their mode of organization. Enough has been said and written about the Stalinism of Communist parties between the late twenties and the early fifties to take this as given here: for present purposes, it is enough to note the degree to which the combination of sectarianism and opportunism which characterized Stalinism, together with sudden changes of policy imposed from Moscow, blighted their politics and blunted their political effectiveness.

As for their mode of organization, the “democratic centralism” to which they subscribed, and which the nature of Stalinism made imperative (how else could total obedience be imposed?), helped to foster all the vices which have been discussed earlier, and which turned these parties into profoundly undemocratic institutions, in which “deviation” was impermissible, and in which the word of the leadership was law, whatever that word might be, and however much the word of the moment contradicted the word that had gone before. Attempts might be made to provide the leaders with a simulacrum of democratic legitimation by the holding of party congresses. But these were manipulated and stunted affairs, which gave no real power or influence to “ordinary” members.

Unquestioning subservience to the Soviet Union by Communist parties has, generally speaking, given way to a more flexible stance, though parties differ in the degree to which they allow themselves freedom to criticize Soviet policies and actions. On the other hand, “democratic centralism” endures as a principle of organization, and ensures the perpetuation of the stultifying practices of the past. Old habits die hard, particularly when they are so convenient to a leadership thus rendered irremovable by the party membership.

These are crippling weaknesses; and there is also much else in the mode of operation, the policies, and positions of Communist parties which warrants severe criticism. But they are much less vulnerable to the charge which is usually leveled against them by their “Marxist-Leninist” opponents on the Left, namely their “reformism.” For there is a profound, fundamental sense in which revolutionary parties, in the context of capitalist democracy, do need to engage in a politics which it is very glib to denounce as “reformist.” and therefore as beyond the pale.

The real question is what kind of “reformism” parties which affirm a revolutionary vocation actually do engage in. At one end, there is the “revolutionary reformism” which was discussed earlier. At the other, there is a “reformism” constituted by a practice which tends increasingly towards social democracy and is increasingly oblivious to the larger transformative purposes in which reforms are or ought to be inscribed, which comes to be dominated by electoral calculations to the detriment of principle, is more concerned with the control of class struggle than with its encouragement, and allows policy to be chopped and changed according to the opportunistic maneuvers of party leaders. The French Communist Party provides a very good example of this kind of “reformism.” The Italian Communist Party, on the other hand, mirrors well the struggle between the two kinds of “reformism.”

If it is the case, as has been argued here, that “revolutionary reformism” (or whatever else the position encompassed by the formula may be called) does represent an alternative to social democracy, and points in realistic fashion beyond it, the very large question which this poses is what agencies are to push this forward.

The argument so far developed is clearly intended to suggest that social democracy does not offer any reasonable hope of turning itself into such an agency; that Communist parties carry burdens from the past which make it very difficult for them to undergo the process of transformation which is required for the purpose; and that “Marxist-Leninist” groupings to the left of Communist parties operate in far too narrow an ideological and political framework to make it possible for them to turn themselves from small sects into substantial parties.

How this situation will be resolved is not clear, and will in any case be resolved differently in different countries. In some, Communist parties may come to shed their negative features and form the basis for a socialist realignment on the Left; in others, that realignment will have to come from other left sources. However it comes to pass, the process is likely to be protracted: serious socialist parties cannot suddenly be conjured up out of nothing.

Be that as it may, the point is that the socialist cause needs political articulation, and that this political articulation, though not exclusively provided by parties, does nevertheless require the agency of a party. However useful and effective other elements of pressure in the political system may be — trade unions, movements of women, blacks, ecologists, peace activists, and many others — they cannot and do not for the most part wish to fulfill the main task of socialist parties, which is to inject a “stream of socialist tendency,” by word and action, into the political system and culture of their societies.

Such parties are of course concerned with immediate issues, grievances, and demands, but they are also, beyond this, concerned with the effective dissolution of the structures of power of capitalist society and their replacement by a fundamentally different social order, based upon the social ownership and control of the main means of economic activity, and governed by principles of cooperation, civic freedom, egalitarianism, and democratic arrangements far superior to the narrowly class-bound arrangements of capitalist democracy.

Many parties of the Left have advocated these principles over the years. For reasons given earlier, they have also suffered from great weaknesses, which reduced or nullified their effectiveness. The sooner these weaknesses are faced, and overcome, the better will become the prospects of socialist advance.

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P.S.

* Jacobin, 01.23.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/social-democracy-socialism-ralph-miliband>

Socialist Register vol. 22, 1985/86: Social Democracy and After:

<https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5537>

* Marcel Liebman was a Belgian Marxist.

Ralph Miliband was a prominent Marxist sociologist and the author of numerous books on socialism and politics, including Parliamentary Socialism and The State in Capitalist Society.

Footnotes

[1] <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/issue/view/421#.Wmdew5M-cb0>

[2] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebman/1964/xx/schism.htm>

[3] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebman/1985/xx/ref-sd.htm>

[4] https://books.google.com.ph/books/about/Marxism_and_Politics.html?id=JljuAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y

[5] <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/12/anti-communism-soviet-union-united-states-miliband>