

## US: Toward a new Marxist left?

Friday 26 June 2020, by [Louis Proyect](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2020).

**The handwriting is on the wall. The Sandernista/Jacobin/DSA project is now exhausted. While the USA is poised on the edge of cataclysmic economic decline against the backdrop of the most dangerous plague in a hundred years and powerful protests against killer-cops, the Sandernista left is mired in electoral routinism.**

One wonders if there is even the slightest degree of soul-searching in these circles as everybody else seems to grasp that we are in a new period. On June 9<sup>th</sup>, the NY Times had an article titled “Bernie Sanders Predicted Revolution, Just Not This One” that showed how irrelevant he and his cheerleaders have become:

Yet amid a national movement for racial justice that took hold after high-profile killings of black men and women, there is also an acknowledgment among some progressives that their discussion of racism, including from their standard-bearer, did not seem to meet or anticipate the forcefulness of these protests.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, the legal scholar who pioneered the concept of intersectionality to describe how various forms of discrimination can overlap, said that Mr. Sanders struggled with the reality that talking forcefully about racial injustice has traditionally alienated white voters — especially the working-class white voters he was aiming to win over. But that is where thinking of class as a “colorblind experience” limits white progressives. “Class cannot help you see the specific contours of race disparity,” she said.

With Bhaskar Sunkara giving a fawning interview to Adolph Reed Jr., it is doubtful that the Sandernista left can make a turn toward new realities. “Intersectionality”, an academic term that I would never use myself, is a dirty word in their lexicon. It is one thing to believe that a “social democratic” program based on Medicare for All is what the country needs but that’s only the start. The left must recognize that today’s racism is based on hundreds of years of slavery, Jim Crow and de facto segregation that requires an anti-racist socialist movement, not warmed over Bayard Rustin.

New York Magazine, best known for its restaurant reviews and celebrity puff pieces, is even more attuned to new realities than the Sandernista left. In a piece titled “[6 Teens Organized a Protest. 10,000 People Showed Up](#)”, it sounds out what young activists in the BLM protests think about electoral routinism. This stuck out:

New York Magazine: Have you faced any backlash since the protest? And what does it mean to you three to be doing this work in the South?

Kennedy: I was actually surprised that we had a lot of support, because we do live in the South, and I’ve encountered various types of racism from people in the South. We did get backlash from a lot of people saying we’re brainwashed or that we’re being paid to

do this or that we're secret people the Democrats are using to win.

Emma Rose: We're not even Democrats.

Kennedy: I'm not even a Democrat. I'm a radical.

If you look at the last sixty years of the left in the USA, you'll see the broad contours of a movement trying to keep up with shifting social and economic changes. Between 1970 and 1990, the "Leninist" left was a pole of attraction for young people, including me. It was based on the notion that the sixties radicalization was the opening salvo in a march toward proletarian revolution. Since the whole idea was a repeat of 1917, the left adopted a mechanical understanding of Lenin's party that led to sectarianism and ultimately collapse. The ISO was the last hurrah of this trend that ironically got started after such experiments were way past their shelf life.

Starting in 1999 with the Seattle anti-WTO protest, the left abandoned Leninist illusions and unfortunately adopted a new set of illusions based on half-baked anarchist theories. These included the idea that busting Starbucks windows was a litmus test for a successful protest. It also fetishized occupations such as those that occurred around the Occupy movement as a result of "prefigurative" fantasies. As if camping out in Zuccotti Park was the embryonic form of a future classless society.

Although the George Floyd protests started off with a mixture of anarchist adventurism and mass actions, within a week or so, the tide had turned. Young people, like those interviewed by New York Magazine, decided that political power rested in the masses, not in "bold" tactics.

In 1968, the novelist and art historian John Berger wrote an article titled "[The Nature of Mass Demonstrations](#)" that these young activists seem to understand instinctively. He wrote:

The demonstration, an irregular event created by the demonstrators, nevertheless takes place near the city centre, intended for very different uses. The demonstrators interrupt the regular life of the streets they march through or of the open spaces they fill. They 'cut off these areas, and, not yet having the power to occupy them permanently, they transform them into a temporary stage on which they dramatise the power they still lack.

The demonstrators' view of the city surrounding their stage also changes. By demonstrating, they manifest a greater freedom and independence – a greater creativity, even although the product is only symbolic – than they can ever achieve individually or collectively when pursuing their regular lives. In their regular pursuits they only modify circumstances; by demonstrating they symbolically oppose their very existence to circumstances.

Increasingly, people will be "voting with their feet" because the Democratic Party has become so hostile to change. With the Jacobin/DSA left pirouetting around the question of its support for a Biden vote, the radicals, including the young woman cited above, will have no other option except to reach out to like-minded young people, working class, black and immigrants, in search of a national organization that can be used to coordinate their struggles. Ultimately, this is what Lenin was up to when he wrote "What is to be Done", even if he admitted that it was obsolete only five years after he wrote it.

Despite its size (70,000 members), the DSA will eventually be bypassed by a new movement that corresponds to the urgency of the tasks we face. When I joined the SWP in 1967, SDS had 100,000

members and it was easy to cower before it as if our “old left” notions were somehow woefully behind the times. Within 3 years, SDS had collapsed and the SWP had become the most powerful group on the left and the largest after the CPUSA. Like SDS, the SWP collapsed because it failed to adjust to the realities of post-1975 America.

There is considerable intellectual and theoretical ferment to the left of the DSA. Despite my reservations about their old-school Leninism, I consider the people who write for [Left Voice](#) to be among the most astute analysts of the current state of the capitalist system and how to challenge it. I also appreciate the group blog [The International Socialism Project](#) that is the voice of some of the former ISO leaders that were ousted by a new group that obviously intended to dissolve the ISO and take as many people into the DSA as possible. Unfortunately, a cover-up of a rape discredited the old leadership to the point that it was vulnerable to a Sandernista leveraged buyout. In thinking through these incidents that have wreaked havoc with both the ISO and the British SWP, I sometimes wonder that the only thing that makes sense is for female (or male) members to go straight to the police when a sexual assault takes place. Trying to adjudicate these crimes within a left group tends to be self-defeating.

Finally, there is Cosmonaut. The people who write for this online magazine are among the sharpest I’ve seen in the newly emerging Marxist left. I have it bookmarked and make sure to read and crosspost every article that appears there. The latest article, titled “[Structuring the Party: The Case of the DSA](#)” and written by Diego AM, “explores the organization conundrums of the modern left, looking at the Democratic Socialists of America and the alternatives proposed by base-builders and Maoists.”

He begins by identifying two organizational forms. One is made up of “centralizing” groups like the SWP and the ISO that have a leadership with “a stronghold on the party, and can barely be challenged.” Been there, done that. The other approach is “horizontalism”, which obviously describes the anarchist milieu. Although they never lead to the kind of stultifying internal life of the Leninist left, “they cannot hope to significantly challenge the established order with their numbers and the organization.”

This leads to an examination of the DSA that has allowed people to join on their own terms. This, plus the strong identification with the Bernie Sanders campaign, has led to its explosive growth. Although the DSA is a welcome alternative to the sect form, its loosey-goosey organizational norms make it ineffective when presented by the challenges we face today:

[The] DSA in effect functions more like a horizontal collective than a socialist party. This comes with all the problems known as the tyranny of structurelessness: the lack of structure on paper just means that there is an unacknowledged structure and unacknowledged channels for leveraging influence in the shape of passing resolutions or directing chapter money towards certain projects. And while anarchist affinity groups almost never exceed dozens of people, DSA members are faced with this problem in an organization that operates at a very different scale, in the tens of thousands of members nationally, and within chapters which are composed of thousands of members.

Of course, DSA has a national organization that provides vertical integration through dues, newspapers, national mailing lists and even a forum. But this is not what is important. To understand how the center operates, we must answer the question: if DSA is multi-tendency and in practice functions closer to a horizontal quasi-anarchist collective than a socialist party, why does it seem so wrapped up in electoral and reformist approaches? Why is it seen from the outside as a platform for progressive Democrats to be elected, even if the actual work on the ground is much broader? The

answer to this question is that the most important of the vertical integrators are the electoral campaigns, especially those at the national level. This is what determines how the organization as a whole is seen from the outside, regardless of the work done at the local level.

In a section titled “Fighting for a socialist center: The Maoist and the base-building critiques”, Diego points to an alternative. Although I am not sure what Maoist groups he is referring to, it sounds to me like he has the comrades of the Marxist Center in mind. As a long-time supporter of the Philly Socialists, which was a prime mover of the Marxist Center, his endorsement was most welcome:

[It] is worth taking seriously the base-building critique. In my interpretation, this critique says that the left needs to consciously change its composition by choosing work that will bring in the dispossessed. This will help change its character by making it more tied to day-to-day struggles, and at the same time provide us with worker power which can actually stop the capitalist gears.

Concretely, this has meant organizing classes in English for immigrants in Philadelphia, action to block evictions, etc. I think these types of activities are essential but, to some extent, they are susceptible to the “horizontalism” that prevents groups affiliated with the Marxist Center to act in a coordinated and disciplined nation-wide fashion.

In a very real sense, this was the reason Lenin wrote “What is to be Done”: to unite a scattered left into a powerful force that could topple the Czarist system. For Lenin, a newspaper was essential. It was a way for local workers circles to coordinate their activities. Under “Leninist” organizational norms, the newspaper became fetishized to the point of becoming an obstacle to future growth. Its “line” served as a litmus test to see if you were capable of joining the purified ranks of the future vanguard party. Lenin had a different idea entirely. The newspaper was a place where socialists could exchange ideas and even debate with each other. The Left Voice comrades rightfully [give credit to Lenin](#) for conceiving of a newspaper as something far less of a “brand” than most sectarians associate with the party press:

Revolutionary press plays a different role from bourgeois press. It is the most suitable means to influence events and organize the militant and revolutionary base of a workers’ party.

Lenin’s political intransigence would not keep him from discussing with the great leaders of the international social democratic movement. Lenin invited Rosa Luxemburg and Kautsky, among others, to write in Iskra (despite their political differences) in order to fuel debate and critical spirit. This was central in his idea of journalism, debunking historical falsifications that portray Lenin as an “authoritarian leader.”

Frankly, I have not been keeping up with the Marxist Center in the past three years or so. I had high hopes that it could have tapped into the growing ferment of the BLM protests today and maybe even become part of the support network for Howie Hawkins campaign. This would require an adjustment to their customary practices that might go against the grain. In any case, what they had been doing was of great value even if it falls short of catalyzing the kind of mass revolutionary party that is so badly needed.

The last section of Diego’s article is titled “Where to go from here?”, which obviously evokes Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet. He is to be congratulated for striking such a note since it is so appropriate for the period we are entering. With so many on the left burdened by old habits, it is necessary for smart

young people such as those writing for Cosmonaut to speak out forcefully.

He has exactly the right idea about the need for a program but not in the same sense of the Leninist sects that see it in the same way that Catholics see a catechism:

For the first, I would propose a unifying center of programmatic cohesion rather than commitment to this or that branch of revolutionary Marxism. A program should be understood in the sense of something you can accept for the basic conditions under which you would take power. This is different from historical or theoretical agreement, or a current strategy such as “get union jobs” or “support Bernie Sanders for president”. Accepting the program means you may disagree with some or many points but are willing to put yourself behind it as the overall expression of the movement’s aims. A program should direct the elemental energy of the masses, recently seen in the protests around the killing of George Floyd, into a purpose. Otherwise, this energy is dissipated like steam, failing to turn the engine of revolution.

I tried to make the same points in a 2011 article titled “[Rethinking the question of a revolutionary program](#)”:

It should be clear what I am leading up to. I believe that a new left movement or party has to return to these roots. It is a big mistake to think in terms of program as the accretion of doctrinal statements made by a particular aspiring “nucleus of a vanguard party”.

Socialism, or anti-capitalism, has to be reconstituted on a much broader basis. Without a doubt, a program similar in spirit could be reconstituted from all of the points that the myriad of sects in the U.S. agrees on. I doubt that you will find the ISO and the Workers World fighting over, for example, the need to provide free medical care or the need to ban “fracking”. But in their fight to the finish line—the proletarian revolution of the distant future—they seek to protect their intellectual property, the sum total of all the resolutions voted on at all their conventions and all the newspaper articles, books and pamphlets churned out by their party press.

Diego ostensibly makes recommendations to the DSA even though he is “unsure whether the DSA with its current form and class composition would be able to provide an adequate minimum/maximum communist program in the Macnairist model.” The Manairist model is a reference to the writings of Mike Macnair, a leader of the CPGB in England who is best known for defending Karl Kautsky’s party-building precepts but understood much differently than the Jacobin intellectuals who find Kautsky’s writings amenable to supporting DP candidates.

In any case, his article ends on a very good note:

These prescriptions are very general and open to debate. The organizational ones will require constant evaluation to check if they are solving the problems designed to solve. But I believe that they point in the direction of what is needed to construct a proper vehicle for fighting. The final idea I believe must be digested is an understanding that we are comrades and not friends. We have responsibilities to each other because we committed to a larger movement, not because we like each other. It is fine to disagree on the details, and this should not be taken personally. We stand together because we accept the broader goals of the movement. We do not have to share hobbies or feel affinity towards each other. We have to trust each other and know that we play on the

same team. In that spirit, I provide this piece as a good faith attempt to solve some of the problems I see around me.

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## **Louis Proyect**

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## **P.S.**

Louis Proyect: The Unrepentant Marxist

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