

The Spirit of Democratic Socialism

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“Democratic socialism” is all the rage nowadays. It is framed as a new smiley-faced “socialism.” Those who support it hasten to add that they are “*democratic* socialists,” as if that sounds or feels better. And yet, groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, the home of democratic socialism in America today—whose members include the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—refer to itself on its website as “the largest *socialist* organization in the United States.”

Even then, with the rise in the attractiveness of “democratic socialism” has come a subsequent rise in the appeal of socialism generally. For a solid decade now, younger Americans in particular have been telling pollsters they favor socialism over capitalism.

The surge in interest has been steadily growing, particularly since the Obama era. In retrospect, a turning point came in 2011, when a major study by Pew Research Center found that 49% of Americans aged 18-29 have a positive view of socialism, exceeding the 46% with a positive view of capitalism.¹ In 2014, a survey by *Reason Magazine* and the Rupe Foundation did a deeper dive. It found that 53% of those aged 18-29 view socialism favorably.² Not long after that survey, Gallup turned up a gem, learning that 69% of Millennials said they would be

¹ “Little change in public response to ‘capitalism, ‘socialism,’” Pew Research Center, December 28, 2011, posted at <https://www.people-press.org/2011/12/28/little-change-in-publics-response-to-capitalism-socialism/>.

² See: Emily Ekins, “Millennials Don’t Know What ‘Socialism’ Means,” *Reason Magazine*, July 16, 2014, posted at <http://reason.com/poll/2014/07/16/millennials-dont-know-what-socialism-means>; Emily Ekins and Joy Pullmann, “Why so many millennials are socialist,” *The Federalist*, February 15, 2016, posted at <http://thefederalist.com/2016/02/15/why-so-many-millennials-are-socialists/>; and Emily Ekins, “Millennials like socialism—until they get jobs,” *Washington Post*, March 24, 2016, posted at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/03/24/millennials-like-socialism-until-they-get-jobs/?utm_term=.c2b608327058.

willing to vote for a socialist as president of the United States of America—a country founded on the antithesis of socialist principles; the country that won the Cold War.³

Surely that 69% was just blowing hot air? Not at all.

In 2016, millions of first-time voters cast ballots for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party presidential primary. Sanders, a lifelong socialist, received 13 million votes in the Democratic primary. To give you a sense of how significant that number was, Donald Trump got 14 million votes in the Republican primary.

We cannot say that these young folks voted for Bernie because he was some cool Capitol Hill hipster. The stodgy old white guy was not exactly Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—a fellow socialist, elected to Congress in November 2018 as a 28-year-old. They voted for Bernie because they voted for his socialism. Just as they told pollsters they would.

The survey data continue to remain consistent and extend well beyond Millennials. A striking poll by Gallup in May 2019 revealed that four in 10 Americans generally “embrace some form of socialism,” with 43% saying that they believe socialism would be a “good thing” for America.⁴ Those numbers rise still higher (remarkably so) among registered Democrats, with 57% viewing socialism positively. Gallup notes a significant fact: a majority of Democrats have said they view socialism positively in Gallup polling since 2010.

Clearly, some form of socialist wind, a spirit of democratic socialism, is blowing. It would not be overstating things to say it is sweeping many Millennials and registered Democrats.

³ See: Ekins, “Millennials like socialism—until they get jobs;” and Aubree Poole, “Gallup: 69% of millennials ready for a socialist president,” Red Alert Politics, July 5, 2016, posted at <http://redalertpolitics.com/2016/07/05/gallup-69-millennials-ready-socialist-president/>.

⁴ “Four in 10 Americans embrace some form of socialism,” Gallup, May 20, 2019, posted at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/257639/four-americans-embrace-form-socialism.aspx>.

And yet, while these advocates latch on to words like “democratic” and “socialist,” they display alarming ignorance of the history of this very language. In this paper, I will explore how Americans today are seeing and understanding those words versus how they were seen and understood by the actual pioneers of socialism and communism—by the likes of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Mussolini, and founders of the American socialist and communist parties, such as the likes of William Z. Foster, Bertram Wolfe, and Ben Gitlow, among others. I will also show a fuller history of how the likes of Bernie Sanders have used this language. Modern-day “democratic socialists” do not know this history and should be taken aback as they learn it.

What is “Socialism?”

First off, what is this spirit of democratic socialism inspiring so many today? Why are young Americans pulling the lever for socialism?

For one, this is what they are learning. They have been taught that socialism is fair and compassionate. The Reason-Rupe survey found that Millennials describe the ideology as one of “people being kind” or “being together.” They view socialism as a merry “social safety net” where a benevolent government “pays for our own needs”—“free” college, “free” healthcare, “free” daycare, “free” pre-daycare, etc.

Of course, the reality heaped atop reality is that nothing is actually “free.” There is no field of money trees growing on Capitol Hill. The federal government does not have a flying money fairy. The cash must be produced and collected. The more the services, the higher the taxation. The outrageous myth that socialism somehow magically creates “free” stuff is based on a complete lack of understanding of how things work.

So, alas, what is socialism? What is *democratic socialism*? What is communism? How are they different?

Many of those rallying to the socialist flag have had the same questions. In 2015, the word “socialism” was the most looked-up word at Merriam-Webster.com.⁵ That reflects the growing interest, but it also reflects the enduring confusion over what the word means.

As a starting point to try to get a handle on this, think about the two poles at the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum—the so-called “far left” and “far right.” The far left is easy to identify, indisputably reserved for communist totalitarians such as Stalin, Lenin, Mao, or, in more modern times, Pol Pot, North Korea’s crazy Kims, the Castro brothers. The far “right” is always more problematic. If one is charting economic freedom, then libertarians and anarchists sit at the far right, given that they believe in the smallest amount of government, and even as few observers would (or should) categorize a libertarian or anarchist as “far right.” Typically, “far right” is a term commonly reserved not for categorizing economic liberty but for labeling fascists such as a Hitler or Mussolini or some other ultra-nationalist or racist.

Still, that likewise is messy. Benito Mussolini, after all, was a proud socialist and a Marxist as well as a fascist and a nationalist. Mussolini lovingly referred to grandpa Marx as “the father and teacher” and “the magnificent philosopher of working-class violence.” As for Joseph Stalin, he and his communist totalitarians established a “Union of Soviet *Socialist* Republics.” Vladimir Lenin changed the name of his and Stalin’s party from the Russian Social Democratic Party to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; they were social democrats before they were Bolsheviks.⁶

Here in the United States, leading communists of the day, such as William Z. Foster and Ben Gitlow and Bertram Wolfe, to name just three, were leaders in the American Socialist Party

⁵ Alex Adrianson, “Socialism Can Never Work,” *The Insider* (Heritage Foundation), Spring 2016, 2.

⁶ The name change came in 1903 when these Russian socialists split into two factions, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. See, among others: Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (NY: The Modern Library, 2001), ix-x.

in the first decade of the 20th century before they helped launch the American Communist Party in the second decade. They were among the socialist leading lights who turned the American Socialist Party into the American Communist Party.

Foster became a household name, the first public face and chairman of what became known as (and remains to this day) Communist Party USA. Holding that spot from 1929-34, prior to which he had been with the Socialist Party of America, Foster would be succeeded as chair by the equally famous (or infamous) Earl Browder. (Incidentally, Foster was also an early board member of the ACLU, whose founder, Roger Baldwin, in 1929 published a book called *Liberty Under the Soviets*.) Chairman Foster, twice Communist Party candidate for president of the United States, openly advocated a “Soviet American Republic” as part of a “world Soviet Union.”⁷ Foster spoke candidly of American communists’ goal of creating a “Soviet America.” In fact, such was the title of his 1932 book, *Toward Soviet America*.⁸

Wolfe and Gitlow became founding delegates of the American Communist Party to the Soviet Comintern in Moscow. Wolfe (like Gitlow) was expelled after a break with Stalin and the Comintern in 1929. Wolfe himself (correctly) said of Lenin and social democrats: “Lenin began his career as a Social Democrat.”⁹

Gitlow, too, was a major Communist Party USA figure. In fact, he had risen higher than almost anyone next to Earl Browder and William Z. Foster. He twice ran as the party’s candidate for vice president of the United States (1924 and 1928) and served on the Executive Committee of the Soviet Comintern. On several occasions, he traveled to the Soviet Motherland for instruction and to represent and liaison between the Comintern and CPUSA.

⁷ William Z. Foster, *Toward Soviet America* (NY: International Publishers, 1932), 272-3.

⁸ Foster, *Toward Soviet America*, 272-3.

⁹ See Bertram D. Wolfe, “A Party of a New Type,” in Milorad M. Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch, eds., *The Comintern: Historical Highlights—Essays, Recollections, Documents* (New York: Praeger), xi and 20.

Like Foster, Gitlow became a household name—though in Gitlow’s case because of his well-known public break from the Communist Party. After a long silence upon leaving the party in 1929, Gitlow emerged to testify before Congress (first in 1939) and to write two major books, *I Confess* (1940), and *The Whole of Their Lives* (1948),¹⁰ where he laid out a litany of disturbing facts on CPUSA’s relationship with Moscow, from its members’ “fanatical zeal” to the Soviet Motherland and “its ultimate victory over the capitalist world,”¹¹ to espionage and Soviet funding of the American Communist Party.

Much more could be said here about these three men and their extraordinary stories, but the point is that they were socialists and they were communists, with the former directly leading to the latter. They saw the two as inseparable. And these figures should not be dismissed. They were, after all, founders of those parties in the United States, to the level of running for president of the United States on those tickets. They were leaders and even theoreticians. They knew their stuff—far better than people today who blithely cling to these labels and define them as they please. Foster and Gitlow and Wolfe would have run intellectual circles around today’s newfangled “socialists.” They would have laughed them out of the room.

Equally important, amid their ideological paths from the 1900s into the 1920s, Foster, Gitlow, and Wolfe took the natural step in the Marxist evolutionary process, moving up from socialism to communism. When asked to define the difference between socialism and communism, Marion Smith, director of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, likes to say that Christians go to heaven, whereas socialists go to communism. That is indeed the

¹⁰ Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940); and Benjamin Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives* (New York: Scribner’s, 1948).

¹¹ Gitlow wrote, “Not only does the Communist Party member give every moment of his time to the cause but every dollar he can spare as well, often giving much more than he can afford.” Gitlow, *I Confess*, 289.

transitory process, and Smith's language is apt, given that communists view full communism in a utopian way—a sort of New Jerusalem. (I will return to that in moment.)

Moving beyond the borders of America in the 1930s, look at Hitler and his cabal of fascist totalitarians in Germany: he and his goose-steppers were Nazis. The word “Nazi” is actually an acronym for National *Socialist* German Workers' Party.

Of course, self-identified “socialists” in America or Western Europe rightly recoil at any suggested similarity or sympathy to Soviet or Nazi socialism. They indeed bear no comparison to the violence orchestrated by these tyrants. And yet, socialists generally, in America and the wider West, do share in common with the Soviets and the Nazis the general goal of government ownership of the means of production in some form. Socialists all share that objective. The famous Clause IV of the 1918 British Labour Party manifesto/platform (repudiated in 1995 by Labour Party leader Tony Blair) called for “the most equitable distribution” based on “the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange.” That is a central tenet of socialist thought. When curious seekers Google the word and land at Merriam-Webster.com, they will discover precisely that standard definition:

“Socialism,” states Merriam-Webster, is “government ownership of the means of production.”

That, alas, is the one universal definition of socialism that every true socialist should agree upon. Socialism demands state ownership of the means of production.

Let's Ask the Socialists

Sometimes the best approach to try to define a term is to go directly to the source. Thus, here are definitions of socialism taken straight from the various socialist horses' mouths (and websites).

The World Socialist Party of the United States declares its overriding “object” as this: “The establishment of a system of society based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of society as a whole.” That is a standard definition. WSP sees this object as part of a global movement. “The WSP forms part of the world socialist movement,” states the group’s mission statement. “Our only goal is to educate people to the urgent need we all have of eliminating wage-labor and capital now in favor of communist-based free access and self-determination of needs. We call this ‘common ownership,’ but other terms we regard as synonymous are communism and socialism.”

This comes right from WSP’s website and literature. The group’s logo depicts the globe wrapped in a banner that declares “UNITE FOR SOCIALISM!” under the famous Marxist phrase “WORKERS OF THE WORLD” and above the Marxist phrase “YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR CHAINS.”

Here we see that these current-day socialists are current-day communists, as they themselves concede. The World Socialist Party regards the two as synonymous. It is not alone in that respect, and never has been. It sees socialism as the crucial step to communism.

Another such example is the New York City district branch of the International Socialist Organization, which points to Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet-Bolshevik communist state, as its guiding star: “We stand in the tradition of one of the pre-eminent political strategists in world history. Lenin contributed enormously to our understanding of how we can best organize ourselves to both build working class movements, and at the same time a socialist cadre

capable of helping to lead in struggle. Many of these ideas helped shape the Bolshevik party, the only group in the history of the world to lead a successful revolution from below.”¹²

Here, too, these socialists consider themselves communists.

Perhaps the most valuable source for insights into today’s socialism, particularly so-called “democratic socialism,” is the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), given that it is the fastest growing and largest socialist organization in America. The DSA website states: “We believe that the workers and consumers who are affected by economic institutions should own and control them.”

This is merely another way of expressing the objective of common ownership of the means of production, albeit stated more palatably by the DSA.

In actual practice, this has meant that the state owns and controls economic institutions—factories, farms, coal mines, steel mills, railways, car companies, oil companies, phone companies, industries ranging from transportation to communications to healthcare, etc.—given that no single worker or consumer, nor group of them, is actually permitted to own and control economic institutions. The Soviet leaders said the same. When Soviet communists proclaimed that “the workers” were in charge, it merely meant that the state was in charge. The “workers,” like the phrase “the masses,” was merely a nebulous, wide-ranging label for a mass collective that the centralized authority was in charge of orchestrating.

Socialism in Marxist Theory

¹² See: “Lenin’s Political Thought,” posted at the website of the International Socialist Organization’s New York City chapter, <http://nycsocialist.org/2014/01/lenins-political-thought-book-club/>, retrieved June 13, 2016. Also see: Spyridon Mitsotakis, “Inside the Leftist Religion That Worships Murder and Mayhem,” *Conservative Review*, May 29, 2016.

If you remain somewhat confused by this, well, you are not alone. Much of socialist thought, like liberal or progressive thought generally, is relativistic and constantly changes, shifts, “evolves.”

In strict Marxist theory, however, socialism has a very specific definition; it is a way-station along the path to a full communist *utopia*. History, according to Marxist-dialectic thought, would pass through a series of planes or stages, from feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism. Each successive plane or stage would be a higher step in the evolutionary process toward a “workers’ paradise” or glorious “classless society.”

Why such an economic goal was ever perceived by any group as the pinnacle of human development is a darned good question. To most people, economics and class simply are not that monumentally important. Sure, a roof over one’s head and food and financial security are obviously important, especially for those lacking basic necessities; no one denies that. Still, for most individuals, economics is not the centerpiece of existence. To communists and many socialists, however, this is the alpha and omega. They speak as if man truly does live by bread alone; if society resolves, say, “economic inequality,” or pegs incomes all at that same dollar number, or more fully redistributes wealth, then something closer to heaven on earth can follow. As noted by Pope John Paul II, who lived and suffered under communism in Poland, the fatal flaw of communists and socialists is that they have their anthropology wrong. They did not adequately understand man. As Augustine said, we have a *God-shaped* vacuum that God alone can fill. It is not a dollar-signed vacuum. We crave the divine manna of heaven.

It is so ironic that communists and socialists blast the wealthy for being allegedly obsessed with money and material things when, in fact, communists and socialists are completely obsessed with money and material things. But as most rich people learn, money does

not buy happiness. Humans desire more. How profound that Jesus told Satan that man does not live on bread alone. As the two debated, the Living Bread told the tempter that man lives by every word from the mouth of God. Karl Marx took not the side of Christ on that one. Of course, Marx rejected Christ in total. Communists are atheists. “Communism begins where atheism begins,” said Marx, who dubbed religion the “opiate of the masses.”

Communists are also, curiously, utopians—*secular* utopians. They sought a heaven on earth; for them, an earth without religion. They did so without realizing that utopia is not only elusive but that such a self-contradiction does not exist. The Greek roots of the word are *ou topos*, or *no place*. In other words, there is no utopia, at least not in this world and realm. And yet, communists would pursue this *no place* with religious-like zeal.

Atheist communists and socialists have always mistakenly felt that the answers to man’s misery are found not in God (the existence of which they deny) but in economic materialism. There lay the solution to history.

In his classic, *Private Property and Communism* (1844), Marx grandiosely exclaimed that “Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.”¹³ Few ideologies, or ideologues, have been so self-boastful. In his *German Ideology* (1845), Marx fantasized: “In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.”¹⁴

That is a utopian vision.

¹³ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm#44CC4>.

¹⁴ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a4>.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 as the official programmatic statement of the Communist Party outlining exactly what communists believed and planned to pursue.

Marx envisioned an apocalyptic revolution leading to the overthrow of capitalism by the impoverished working class, the common people, the masses—the so-called “proletariat.” The stage in the revolutionary process immediately following this overthrow would be that of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. That “dictatorship” would be a necessary waystation on the road to the ultimate utopian goal of a “classless society.” The state in the process would be abolished; actually, it would die out; it would “wither away.” With a classless society, class antagonisms would hence disappear, as would conflict (including armed conflict), as would economic inequality, as would social inequality, and peace and harmony would follow.

Moreover, this wondrous socialism would need to sweep the planet in order to work. It had to be worldwide. “Workers of the world, unite!” was Marx and Engels’ closing call to arms in their manifesto. The communists had a “world to win.” For Marx and Engels and their minions, this was no less than the call of “history.” This was the march of history. This class struggle was the call. As Marx said to Engels, “*all*” (his emphasis) of history was “the history of class struggles.”¹⁵

That was the plan, and that is no small thing. But Marx and Engels, and then Lenin and Stalin and a train of others following to this day, felt it could happen.

No doubt, many modern socialists will object that they do not support communism, but it is worth looking carefully at Marx and Engel’s 10-point plan in the *Manifesto* to see how

¹⁵ See: Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, (1877). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch01.htm#084>.

strikingly similar the early communist goals are to the planks of not only today's socialists specifically but progressives generally. Marx and Engels called for:

- “1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
3. Abolition of all right of inheritance.
4. Confiscation of all property of emigrants and rebels.
5. Centralization of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with state capital and an exclusive monopoly.
6. Centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state.
7. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the state; the bringing into cultivation of waste lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
8. Equal obligation of all to work....
9. ... gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equitable distribution of the population over the country.
10. Free education for all children in public schools....”

Point number one was crucial, and echoed what Marx and Engels stated emphatically in the *Manifesto*: “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.” Marx and Engels demanded that such a 10-point program be implemented not merely in one nation but throughout all nations of the world. Many subsequent socialists worked from that blueprint.

An obvious question upon even cursory examination of these goals is this: If this program is not a ready-made recipe for coercion, then what is? Indeed, Marx and Engels willingly

conceded that this program would require despotism. They stated of their 10 points: “Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads.”

Of course. Human beings would not give up such fundamental liberties without resistance. Seizing property alone would require a terrible fight, prompting implementers to use their guns and gulags. This is a vision that demands prison camps.

Would such men as Marx and Engels and their followers even dare talk of “democracy” amid these socialist thoughts? Absolutely they would.

“Democracy” in Marxist-Leninist Theory

Some will be surprised to see so much talk about “democracy” by Marxists and communists (many of them totalitarian despots) who do not fit our Western conceptions or assumptions of a democrat.

We see in the writings of Marx and Engels and Lenin, and particularly Lenin’s reading of Marx, that the advancement and development of communism would progress through stages of economic, social, and political maturity—namely, from feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism. During this process, particularly from capitalism to socialism to full communism, institutions such as property, the family, religion, the state, money, and even democracy, would “wither away.”

Such is what communists laid out, as seen most notably in Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* and in Lenin’s critically important treatise *The State and Revolution*. Amid this process, institutions such as “democracy” had their role, and could be spoken of with some degree of favor by Marxist theorists and advocates, who to this day speak of it favorably. Nonetheless, the word is deceiving to the unwary. When Marxists and classic socialists (in the Marxist tradition) speak of “democracy,” they do not mean it the same way the typical modern

American means it. For these communists and socialists, democracy is a mere transitional phase from capitalism to socialism to communism that will be abolished in the process.

Few laid this out as emphatically or caustically as Lenin, the self-appointed keeper of the flame of Marxism. Vladimir Lenin believed that Marx and Engels held the key to paradise, and he judged himself gatekeeper. In *The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State & the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*, written in August-September 1917, Lenin zeroed in on what Marx and Engels meant by the “withering of the state.” Lenin rightly understood that this “withering” was an integral aspect of the Marx-Engels paradigm for what would happen to the state under socialism/communism. He quoted Engels: “The proletariat seizes from state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, and abolishes also the state as state.” In turn, claimed Engels, “State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies down of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not ‘abolished.’ It withers away.”¹⁶

To repeat: “The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things.”

This, of course, is pure sophistry. And yet, Lenin was greatly impressed, and would take it literally deadly seriously. The very next line from Lenin after quoting this passage from Engels is this: “It is safe to say that of this argument of Engels’, which is so remarkably rich in ideas, only one point has become an integral part of socialist thought among modern socialist parties, namely, that according to Marx that state ‘withers away’—as distinct from the anarchist doctrine of the ‘abolition’ of the state.”

¹⁶ See (among others) the introductory notes provided to *The State and Revolution* at www.marxists.org. The quotations from the document that I am using here are taken from the version published at that site.

Remarkably rich? One begs to differ. Lenin, however, was taken completely. Usual a man of towering cynicism, he became a mere kitten, smitten with the words of Marx and Engels. He focused very carefully on this “withering away” business. We must as well, because it was and remains a central tenet of Marxist-Leninist teaching on the state and revolution and socialism and democracy. Lenin averred:

According to Engels, the bourgeois state does not “wither away,” but is “abolished” by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after this revolution is the proletarian state or semistate.

In speaking of the state “withering away,” and the even more graphic and colorful “dying down of itself,” Engels refers quite clearly and definitely to the period after “the state has taken possession of the means of production in the name of the whole of society,” that is, after the socialist revolution. We all know that the political form of the “state” at that time is the *most complete democracy* [emphasis added]. But it never enters the head of any of the opportunists, who shamelessly distort Marxism, that Engels is consequently speaking here of democracy “dying down of itself,” or “withering away.” This seems very strange at first sight. But it is “incomprehensible” only to those who have not thought about democracy also being a state and, consequently, also disappearing when the state disappears. Revolution alone can “abolish” the bourgeois state. The state in general, i.e., the most complete democracy, can only “wither away”....

Note Lenin’s words on “democracy” being part of the transitional process.

Lenin returned again and again to the “withering away” of the state, an essential element in the utopianism of the ideology. He had to keep returning to it, given the never-ending need to try to achieve some clarity as to what the withering away (and thus the state) would look like and how it would unfold. Akin to Jesus Christ telling his Disciples that they cannot know the date and hour of the Kingdom to come on earth, Lenin said that “there can be no question of specifying the moment of the future ‘withering way.’” He assured only that “it will obviously be a lengthy process.”

Well, how long? Some leftists of Lenin’s era, such as Fabian socialists in Britain and radical “progressives” in the United States, were more at peace with a lengthy process. They

believed in evolution rather than revolution. But not Lenin and Trotsky and Stalin and Bukharin and the boys. The Russian people and the world would quickly learn that Lenin and his cronies had little patience for the “lengthy process.” They rapidly resorted to immediate totalitarian dictatorship to try to make the long wait not a wait at all. There was no “democracy” (at least as normal people understand it) in their path to complete state seizure of the “means or production” and virtually every property right or basic civil liberty.

In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin next offered a chapter on “The Transition from Capitalism to Communism.” He began it with a quote from Marx, who vaguely told us: “Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Now there is a matter for pause. That was no small thing. And what is *that* “state” of things all about? More pointedly, as Lenin asked next, what, then, is the relationship between this dictatorship and democracy? How do the proletariat and the classes and the masses know what they and their withering or evolving or existing or ending or transforming or revolving or exploding or imploding “state” or non-state is supposed to do next? Invoking Marx, Lenin attempted to explain:

Only in communist society, when the resistance of the capitalists have disappeared, when there are no classes (i.e., when there is no distinction between the members of society as regards their relation to the social means of production), only then “the state ... ceases to exist,” and “it becomes possible to speak of freedom.” Only then will a truly complete democracy become possible and be realized, a democracy without any exceptions whatever. And only then will democracy begin to wither away, owing to the simple fact that, freed from capitalist slavery, from the untold horrors, savagery, absurdities, and infamies of capitalist exploitation, people will gradually become accustomed to observing the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years in all copybook maxims.

Obviously, all of this constitutes a big black box of unknowns. A million “but-what-about ...?” questions pop to mind. Thousands of unanswerables and unconsiderables. But Lenin, nonetheless, found it brilliant.

Said Lenin in the next line: “The expression ‘the state withers away’ is very well-chosen, for it indicates both the gradual and the spontaneous nature of the process.” Lenin continued, acknowledging that the state at this process was nothing less than a special apparatus for suppression:

Furthermore, during the transition from capitalism to communism suppression is still necessary, but it is now the suppression of the exploiting minority by the exploited majority. A special apparatus, a special machine for suppression, the “state,” is still necessary, but this is now a transitional state. It is no longer a state in the proper sense of the word....

What of this special apparatus/machine for suppression? The masses, the people, surely would have liked to know. It presumably would be affecting them. The answer: It would be spelled “Cheka.” Or “Gulag.” Lenin would create just that.

Lenin on socialism vs. communism

And what about further distinctions between a socialist and a communist? Vladimir Lenin himself offered some clarity:

And this brings us to the question of the scientific distinction between socialism and communism...

But the scientific distinction between socialism and communism is clear. What is usually called socialism was termed by Marx the “first,” or lower, phase of communist society. Insofar as the means of production becomes common property, the word “communism” is also applicable here, providing we do not forget that this is not complete communism. The great significance of Marx's explanations is that here, too, he consistently applies materialist dialectics, the theory of development, and regards communism as something which develops out of capitalism. Instead of scholastically invented, “concocted”

definitions and fruitless disputes over words (What is socialism? What is communism?), Marx gives an analysis of what might be called the stages of the economic maturity of communism.

In its first phase, or first stage, communism cannot as yet be fully mature economically and entirely free from traditions or vestiges of capitalism....

Here Lenin provided something very useful, especially for modern “socialists” to ponder. As Lenin noted, Marx judged “socialism” a first step on the road to communism. Socialism was a prior stage to communism, a necessary but only temporary stage on the way to complete communism. Whatever and whenever that might be.

Writing a century later, Richard Pipes, the longtime professor emeritus of Russian history at Harvard, in his indispensable short book on the history of communism for the Modern Library, rightly objected that “no clear distinction” can be drawn between “socialism” and “communism”—such has been the lingering confusion. Pipes noted, though, that Marx distinguished between two phases of progress toward full communism. First there would be a “transitional phase” under which the old inequalities would survive even while their foundations were being destroyed. This would be followed by a second, higher phase in which the principle “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” would replace the principle of “equal pay, equal work.”

This is indeed correct. Marx himself stated in his 1875 work, *Critique of the Gotha Program*: “In a higher phase of communist society ... only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: *From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!*” He added: “Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the

other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.”¹⁷

As Pipes figured it, Lenin defined Marx’s first phase as “socialism” and the second phase as “communism.” Moreover, noted Pipes, shortly after Lenin seized power in Russia, he changed the name of his party from “Social Democratic” to “Communist.”¹⁸

So much more could be said about this. Stepping away from Lenin’s *The State and the Revolution* to his other writings for a moment, consider just a few more helpful statements that illuminate Lenin’s thinking on socialism vs. communism.

Lenin provided an explicit definition of communism in his famous 1920 speech to the Third All-Russia Congress of the Russian Young Communist League, published in *Pravda* in October 1920:

We call ourselves Communists. What is a Communist? Communism is a Latin word. *Communis* is the Latin for “common.” Communist society is a society in which all things—the land, the factories—are owned in common and the people work in common. That is communism.¹⁹

That is also the long-accepted textbook definition of socialism. That is not a surprise, as the goal of socialism is, according to Marxist-Leninist theory, communism.

Again, so many more readings from Lenin would suffice to illustrate the point. For anyone up to the task, all 45 volumes of Lenin’s “Collected Works” are now digitized at Marxists.org,²⁰ as well as hundreds more of Lenin’s added works on the site. There one can find

¹⁷ Available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>.

¹⁸ Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (NY: The Modern Library, 2001), ix-x.

¹⁹ The Third All-Russia Congress of the Russian Young Communist League took place in Moscow from October 2-10, 1920 and was attended by an estimated 600 delegates. Lenin addressed the first session the evening of October 2. The transcript was published in *Pravda* on October 5, 6, and 7, 1920. It also appears in Lenin’s *Collected Works*, volume 31. See posting at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/oct/02.htm>.

²⁰ See specifically: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/index.htm>.

statements like this from Vol. 32, “The aim of socialism is to abolish classes,” or this Lenin maxim from Vol. 39: “the aim of socialism is socialisation of the means of production.”

Likewise telling is this assessment from Vol. 42, which is crucial because of Lenin’s clarification that common ownership does not actually mean ownership by the people. It means ownership by the state:

The aim of socialism is to turn all the means of production into the property of the whole people, and that does not at all mean that the ships become the property of the ship workers or the banks the property of the bank clerks. If people take such paltry things seriously, then we must do away with nationalisation, because the whole thing is preposterous. The task, the aim of socialism, as we see it, is to convert the land and the industrial enterprises into the property of the Soviet Republic.

This is a very important admission from Lenin. Anti-communists have always insisted than anyone who thinks that the notion that “the workers” or “the masses” actually own the factories and farms after they are taken from the owners needs to have his or her head examined. The state takes it over and the state owns it, period. That would be the communist state, the Bolshevik state, the totalitarian state, the socialist state.

Lastly, here is one more from Lenin’s *Collected Works* (Vol. 23), a good transition point from the discussion on socialism to democracy: “For socialism is impossible without democracy because: (1) the proletariat cannot perform the socialist revolution unless it prepares for it by the struggle for democracy; (2) victorious socialism cannot consolidate its victory and bring humanity to the withering away of the state without implementing full democracy.”

As we see here, Lenin, the communist, the Marxist, the despot, the half namesake of Marxism-Leninism, actually supported “democracy.” Surprised? Not once one understands what he and fellow communists and socialists meant by “democracy.”

Lenin and Marx and Engels on “democracy”

That brings us to a vital concept worth trying to cull from the mind of Lenin—namely, his understanding of what Marx and friends meant by “democracy.”

Marx and Engels summed up in their *Communist Manifesto*: “We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class to win the battle for democracy.” But democracy was merely part of the process, a transitional stage. Marx explained: “In a true democracy the political state disappears.”²¹

Engels said much the same, and then some. He explained the “value” of democracy as a means and tool to be used against private property. Engels wrote in *The Principles of Communism*: “Democracy would be wholly valueless to the proletariat if it were not immediately used as a means for putting through measures directed against private property and ensuring the livelihood of the proletariat.” Engels even considered the American experience. He added that, “In America, where a democratic constitution has already been established, the communists must make common cause with the [Communist] party which will turn this constitution against the bourgeoisie and use it in the interests of the proletariat.”²² The very freedom provided by the U.S. Constitution would be tapped and turned against itself.

²¹ See: Marx, “Notes for a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” located at www.marxists.org.

²² See Engels, *The Principles of Communism*, link posted at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/prin-com.htm>.

Engels, like Marx, and especially like Lenin, saw democracy as a cudgel, a vehicle, to ensure communism. It would be a mere temporary tool to be preached, hailed, but ultimately exploited and abolished.

Lenin, in fact, tossed around the word much the same way that leftists and secular “progressives” fling it around today in the United States. He used it as a vague metaphor for “equality,” which, in his case, was a form of class-based economic-wealth equality, of equality of physical property and money, whereas American leftists, liberals, progressives, socialists, and communists today sling the term with reckless abandon to all sorts of newly birthed “rights” and forms of “equality” they seek to impose on society: income equality, sexual equality, bisexual equality, gender equality, transgender equality, climate equality, “marriage equality,” *equality* equality, and whatever other social-cultural projects they pursue in order to transform the culture.

Those particular modern forces aside, Lenin wrote plainly: “Democracy means equality.... But democracy is by no means a boundary not to be overstepped; it is only one of the stages on the road from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to communism.”

“Democracy” is thus not an end in itself. It is not sacrosanct. It is a means to be exploited. Very similarly, when leftists in the United States today invoke the necessity of free speech (while also demanding “speech codes” against speech they disagree with) and extol words like “diversity” and “tolerance” (while intolerantly not tolerating diverse opinions they reject), they are acting in the spirit of how Lenin saw “democracy” as a tool to wield or even weaponize, and then cast aside when no longer handy. Lenin’s own understanding of democracy was that it was temporary at best. It was a mere stepping-stone to something else—something that, in Lenin’s state, would be not only not democratic but would degenerate into a full-blown totalitarian dictatorship.

And again, to that end, Lenin and his cronies were not patiently waiting around for the withering process. They wanted revolution now, with violence now. They were itching and aching to overthrow. “Given these economic preconditions, it is quite possible, after the overthrow of the capitalists and the bureaucrats, to proceed immediately, overnight, to replace them in the control over production and distribution,” concluded Lenin in *The State and Revolution*. “Then the door will be thrown wide open for the transition from the first phase of communist society to its higher phase, and with it to the complete withering away of the state.”

Nothing like a little gasoline and box of matches to advance the withering.

Within the first 10 weeks after the launching of their revolution in Russia in late October 1917, the Bolsheviks were already abolishing all sorts of private property, from fur coats to bank credit, from free speech and free assembly to newspapers, from religious education to religious practices, and much, much more. Lenin did this through a series of about a dozen extraordinary decrees mandated from November through the end of December 1917, which ranged from eliminating ownership of factories and farms to bank accounts, dividends, and interest.²³ By the end of 1917, a fury of nationalization, centralization, collectivization, mass monopoly on communication, terror, and abolition of property and the most basic human rights was well underway. Lenin and the boys who sang the praises of “democracy” now enacted their totalitarian dictatorship.

Their use of terms like “democracy” was at best theory and at worst trickery.

American communists understood this. Bella Dodd was one of the best-known ex-communists in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, a former leading organizer for CPUSA, especially on the education front. She later shared the wisdom of Alexander Trachtenberg, one of

²³ For a concise summary, see: Paul Johnson, *Modern Times* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 56-65.

the leaders of the Cominform (the rebranded name for the Comintern after World War II) posted in the United States.²⁴ Trachtenberg was identified by Whittaker Chambers as the “head of GPU” in the United States; that is, the notorious Soviet military police, successor to the Cheka.²⁵ He was a charter member of the American party and also its cultural commissar. He was also chief of International Publishers, which had a monopoly on the publication and distribution of communist and Soviet books and pamphlets. “Trachtenberg once said to me,” recalled Dodd in her memoir, *School of Darkness*, “that when communism came to America it would come under the label of ‘progressive democracy.’ ‘It will come,’ he added, ‘in labels acceptable to the American people.’”²⁶ These were benign labels like progressive, liberal, and democracy.

Bella Dodd repeated this in slightly more detail in a major speech at Fordham University in 1950, where she said that Trachtenberg had told her in New York in 1944: “When we get ready to take the United States, we will not take it under the label of communism; we will not take it under the label of socialism. These labels are unpleasant to the American people and have been speared too much. We will take the United States under labels we have made very lovable; we will take it under liberalism, under progressivism, under democracy. But take it we will.”²⁷

It would come under a nicer name. For some, the name is “democratic socialism.” Sadly, most of those today suddenly interested in or subscribing to such a label do not understand that. They do not know this history, and today would puzzle if not bristle at the very suggestion that the “democratic” part of “democratic socialism” really isn’t very democratic at all—at least not as we understand it in America.

²⁴ Bella Dodd, *School of Darkness*, 214.

²⁵ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Washington: Regnery, 1952), 242 and 264.

²⁶ Bella Dodd, *School of Darkness*, 150.

²⁷ This speech by Bella Dodd can be listened to online. Click the following link and go to the 1:09:35 marker for this particular passage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37HgRWTsGs0>.

Mussolini and Mao on “liberty” and “democracy”

The dubious likes of Lenin and Marx and Engels are not the only ones who could be cited here. All sorts of awful tyrants had curious praise and definitions for terms we have always considered benign.

Benito Mussolini, a socialist, a Marxist, and a fascist, stated quite remarkably: “Fascism is for liberty. It is for the only kind of liberty that is serious—the liberty of the State and of the individual in the State.” How could that be? Mussolini offered a twisted logic of liberty and the state: “Because, for the Fascist, all is comprised in the State and nothing spiritual or human exists—much less has any value—outside the State. In this respect Fascism is a totalizing concept, and the Fascist State—the unification and synthesis of every value—interprets, develops and potentiates the whole life of the people.”²⁸

Not many Americans, or people normally, would equate fascism with liberty. Nonetheless, *Il Duce* did just that.

Mussolini is widely regarded as a thug. And yet, Mussolini killed nowhere near the number of people that Mao Tse-Tung annihilated. Mao was arguably the greatest killer in human history, responsible for more deaths than even Stalin. Nevertheless, Mao likewise mouthed sweet praises for “democracy.” What he pleasantly called “New Democracy.”

In his January 1940 treatise, “On New Democracy,” Mao no less than 57 times spelled out his vision for a “New Democracy” or “new-democratic culture.”²⁹ Like other Marxists, his vision for democracy was not exactly what modern Americans or the Founding Fathers would have envisioned. Mao wrote:

²⁸ Benito Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” from the *Encyclopedia Italiana*, Vol. XIV. See link: <https://archive.org/stream/readingsonfascis14058gut/14058-8.txt>.

²⁹ Published in *The Selected Works of Mao*. See link online: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm.

As for the question of “the system of government,” this is a matter of how political power is organized.... China may now adopt a system of people’s congresses, from the national people’s congress down to the provincial, county, district and township people’s congresses, with all levels electing their respective governmental bodies. But if there is to be a proper representation for each revolutionary class according to its status in the state, a proper expression of the people’s will, a proper direction for revolutionary struggles and a proper manifestation of the spirit of New Democracy, then a system of really universal and equal suffrage, irrespective of sex, creed, property or education, must be introduced.

Sounds great. As I was writing this paper in 2019, however, the 70th anniversary of Mao’s founding of his communist state, the people of China are still awaiting this universal and equal suffrage. What kind of “democracy” did Mao have in mind? Mao explained in the very next line: he was thinking of what he innovatively dubbed “democratic centralism,” which turned out to be about as democratic as Mussolini’s “fascist liberty.” Mao asserted:

Such is the system of democratic centralism. Only a government based on democratic centralism can fully express the will of all the revolutionary people and fight the enemies of the revolution most effectively. There must be a spirit of refusal to be “privately owned by the few” in the government and the army; without a genuinely democratic system this cannot be attained and the system of government and the state system will be out of harmony.

The state system, a joint dictatorship of all the revolutionary classes and the system of government, democratic centralism—these constitute the politics of New Democracy, the republic of New Democracy....

If such a republic is to be established in China, it must be new-democratic not only in its politics but also in its economy.

It will own the big banks and the big industrial and commercial enterprises. Enterprises, such as banks, railways and airlines, whether Chinese-owned or foreign-owned, which are either monopolistic in character or too big for private management, shall be operated and administered by the state, so that private capital cannot dominate the livelihood of the people: this is the main principle of the regulation of capital.... In the new-democratic republic under the leadership of the proletariat, the state enterprises will be of a socialist character and will constitute the leading force in the whole national economy...

The republic will take certain necessary steps to confiscate the land of the landlords and distribute it to those peasants having little or no land...

Such is the economy of New Democracy.

And the politics of New Democracy are the concentrated expression of the economy of New Democracy.

Here again was another communist despot speaking of “democracy” as a tool to do what communism-socialism really seeks to do: own the banks, own industrial and commercial enterprises, own railways, own airlines, regulate capital. Then, alas, things would be more “democratic.” In other words, society and the people would be more economically *equal*. That is what Mao, like Lenin, meant by democracy.

Mao proceeded to take the most populated nation in the world and rammed it into a communist despotism now 70 years old and running, and one responsible for the deaths of at least 65 million people under his leadership alone.³⁰ Such was his “New Democracy.”

Surely no one in the 21st century would be duped by more nonsense about “democracy” and “socialism.” Right?

“21st Century Socialism”

Many of today’s self-identified “socialists” and “democratic socialists” try to separate themselves from the long line of economic disasters and mass poverty and tyranny produced by communist/socialist regimes.

That being the case, what does socialism today look like?

A common tendency among the political left is to coin some nifty new term for what is really the same-old-same-old. We see this again today with one of the latest bastardizations of communism/socialism. This one is called “21st century socialism.” Carrying the flag for it is Venezuela.

³⁰ See, among others: Stephane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

The Wikipedia entry for this term is worth quoting. Surprisingly, it has remained virtually unchanged for several years now. It states quite accurately:

Socialism of the 21st century (Spanish: *Socialismo del siglo XXI*) is a political term used to describe the interpretation of socialist principles advocated first by Heinz Dieterich in 1996 and later by Latin American leaders like Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil. Socialism of the 21st century argues that both free-market Industrial capitalism and twentieth-century socialism have failed to solve urgent problems of humanity, like poverty, hunger, exploitation, economic oppression, sexism, racism, the destruction of natural resources, and the absence of a truly participative democracy. Therefore, because of the local unique historical conditions, socialism of the 21st century is often contrasted with previous applications of socialism in other countries and aims for a more decentralized and participatory planning process. Socialism of the 21st century has democratic socialist elements, but primarily resembles Marxist revisionism.³¹

This is an excellent definition of 21st century socialism. Perhaps the most telling line is the last: The concept of “Socialism of the 21st century” has “democratic socialist elements, but primarily resembles Marxist revisionism.” It does indeed.

Also correctly identified in the definition is the late Venezuelan “socialist” leader Hugo Chavez, rightly credited with popularizing and attempting to implement the breakthrough model of “21st century socialism.” To that end, the Wikipedia definition continued: “Critics claim that democratic socialism in Latin America acts as a façade for authoritarianism. The charisma of figures like Hugo Chávez and mottoes like ‘Country, Socialism, or Death!’ have drawn comparisons to the Latin American dictators and *caudillos* of the past.”

Chavez, not surprisingly, was a lifelong admirer of Cuba’s communist despot Fidel Castro, to the point that he died near Castro in Cuba. He left behind him in Venezuela a wake of vast destitution and destruction.

And what about 21st century socialism *in America*, as defined by 21st century American socialists?

³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism_of_the_21st_century, retrieved July 6, 2016.

People's World, the flagship publication of the American Communist Party, recently rounded up leading American socialists for a “*People's World* series on socialism,” which attempted to educate people on what is socialism. Among the contributors was '60s radical Carl Davidson, onetime national secretary for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) during its peak.³² Davidson honestly notes that socialism is one of those ideas that has long been “essentially contested” even by its advocates. He refers to the communist countries in the Soviet bloc in the 1980s as “socialist” countries. He says that socialism has again entered a new period of being “essentially contested,” and “in a very big way for several decades to come,” with every old model breaking up and every old dogma and “tried-and-tested truth” up in the air.

Davidson points to Chavez as the new trend-setter with his “21st century socialism.” Chavez, said Davidson, stressed different things at different times, but his core idea was to bring “participatory democracy into socialism in dozens of new ways.” Davidson says that he and other old stalwarts from the '60s New Left immediately grasped the “importance” of what Chavez was touting and “held out high hopes” that it would unfold. But unfortunately, he said, many of his comrades picked up this “21st century socialism” and “colored it anew with their own visions.”

They sure have.

One socialist writer in the *People's World's* series who tried to give a definition is Rick Nagin. Nagin, too, uses the word “socialism” synonymously with communism. In his April 20, 2016 piece, “What does socialism mean? It means working class power,” he stated: “The essence of socialism is the replacement of the capitalist class and private corporate power by the working class and allied forces (family farmers, small businesspeople, self-employed professionals, etc.)

³² Carl Davidson, “21st century socialism: What makes it different?” *People's World*, April 6, 2016.

as the dominant influence in society. When this coalition is the new ruling class, it can then begin to reorganize the economy. Such a reorganization would include social ownership of key industries such as finance, energy, and armaments.”

Nagin wants “the establishment and maintenance of socialism” and the building of “a new socialist society” to directly involve “Communist Parties” and “coalitions of Communists and other progressive forces and parties.” As to what this means for the “class struggle in the United States,” Nagin seeks the “full socialization of the economy, universal abundance, and the emergence of a classless, modern, democratic, and green communist society.” American socialists “must establish a system where the socially-produced wealth is socially distributed. This requires progressive taxation of capitalist wealth and socialization of privately-owned means of production.” And all of this can fully happen, Nagin says, only if “the working people take over the apparatus of government.”

Yet again, do not expect that to imply that the people will be in control. The state will be in control.

“In any case,” Nagin confidently assures, “this transformation is inevitable.” The “socialist genie” is out of the bottle and “cannot be put back.” A fundamental transformation is underway and is inevitable.

The Voices and Faces of Socialism in America Today

This is a good point to circle back to the emergent and leading socialist organization in America, and its most popular face: the Democratic Socialists of America, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

What do they, in their own words, believe?

“I believe that in a modern, moral, and wealthy society, no person in America should be too poor to live,” Ocasio-Cortez told Stephen Colbert. “What that means to me is health care as a human right, it means that every child no matter where you are born should have access to a college or trade-school education if they so choose it.”

That explanation is the closest one gets to an elucidation of democratic socialism in a CBS News post on Ocasio-Cortez’s appearance on Colbert’s show—a post titled, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez explains democratic socialism on ‘Late Show.’”³³

Except that the piece does not explain it. Nor does Ocasio-Cortez, or at least not well. For her and many Millennials, “democratic socialism” is a handy, trendy catchphrase for everything from “free” tuition to a “living wage” to transgender bathrooms.

Nonetheless, Ocasio-Cortez is a rising star of the left, of “democratic socialism,” and of the Democratic Party. Tom Perez, chair of the Democratic National Committee, glows that Ocasio-Cortez represents “the future of our party.” And yet, this Democrat is a Democratic Socialist of America.

The DSA was founded in 1982 by socialist activist and academic Michael Harrington. Started as a merger of two left-wing organizations, the DSA began with about 6,000 members.³⁴ Then it stalled. The Reagan years and collapse of communism were bad years for socialists. By the year 2000, those numbers still had not risen much; to the contrary, they apparently dropped—until the Obama era and with the election of 2016 and the reinvigorated left’s Trump Resistance.

The DSA is now claiming a membership surge. Sources report that DSA’s numbers exploded to over 40,000 by 2018, chalked up to an anti-Trump backlash and the stardom of the

³³ See CBS News post: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-explains-democratic-socialism-on-the-late-show/>.

³⁴ See history at the DSA website: <https://www.dsausa.org/about-us/history/>.

likes of Ocasio-Cortez. “The day after she won the Democratic nomination, the group had 1,152 people join its ranks—35 times more than an average day,” reported *The Hill*.³⁵

DSA has a sophisticated online map charting its exact numbers in each chapter nationwide. It boasts chapters on 217 college campuses.³⁶

As for the socialist label, DSA does not dodge it.

“The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is the largest socialist organization in the United States,” declares the lead statement at DSA’s website. Much like its political candidates, what follows for DSA on its website is not a definition of democratic socialism but a list of campaign issues. Under the banner “Current Campaigns” is a three-legged stool of “Medicare for All,” “Strong Unions,” and, tellingly, “Electoral Power.” Wrapping up that platform is the older face of democratic socialism: Bernie Sanders.

Bernie Sanders is the name invoked in DSA’s call for Electoral Power: “Bernie Sanders launched a political revolution and we’ve continue to build it, supporting democratic socialist candidates running for local and state office. We’re also grappling with how to build independent political power to hold candidates we elect, and others, accountable to their constituents rather than the donor class. [Click here](#) to go to our electoral website.”

Many are doing precisely that. And by claiming to be not, say, Marxist socialists, or totalitarian socialists, but *democratic* socialists, they are trying to repackage socialism with a pretty pink bow. The “About” section at DSA’s website has a tab titled, “[What is Democratic Socialism?](#)” What follows is this:

Democratic socialists believe that both the economy and society should be run democratically—to meet public needs, not to make profits for a few. To achieve a more

³⁵ “Democratic Socialists of America see membership spike after Ocasio-Cortez win,” *The Hill*, June 28, 2018, posted at <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/394679-democratic-socialists-of-america-see-membership-spike-after>.

³⁶ See <http://dsatlas.org/#/map>.

just society, many structures of our government and economy must be radically transformed through greater economic and social democracy....

Democratic socialists do not want to create an all-powerful government bureaucracy. But we do not want big corporate bureaucracies to control our society either. Rather, we believe that social and economic decisions should be made by those whom they most affect.... We believe that the workers and consumers who are affected by economic institutions should own and control them.

In demanding nothing less than “many structures of our government and economy” be “radically transformed,” we see that the new socialists are little different from the old socialists. They are not moderates, not mere tinkerers, but radical transformers. They are revolutionaries, whether the face is Bernie Sanders (who announced his 2020 presidential bid vowing to “transform the country” and complete “the political revolution”),³⁷ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or, to name two others very prevalent in the news, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, both likewise proud members of the Democratic Socialists of America.

“Democracy” by communists and socialists today

And all along, these new socialists honk the horn of “democracy.” So do today’s communists. Go to their flagship publication, *People’s World*, or the website of Communist Party USA, www.cpusa.org, and you will see the word omnipresent. “We are part of movements to broaden democracy,” insists John Bachtell, general secretary of Communist Party USA, in *People’s World*.³⁸

Bernie Sanders also talks a lot about “democracy.” He always has. Consider a Bernie timeline, which is very revealing of his consistency:

At the University of Chicago, Bernie was a member of the Young People’s Socialist League. In 1963, he moved to Israel and lived on a Stalinist Kibbutz, comprised of pro-Soviet

³⁷ See: Paul Kengor, “Bernie’s Bread Lines and Revolution,” *The American Spectator*, February 27, 2019.

³⁸ John Bachtell, “A Radical Third Party? I Agree!” *People’s World*, January 22, 2015.

members who considered themselves “Marxist-Zionists.”³⁹ In 1980, when typical Americans voted for either Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan for president, Sanders was presidential elector to and campaigned for the militant, revolutionary (Trotskyist) Socialist Workers’ Party, of which he was a formal member.⁴⁰ In the spring of 1988, newly married, he went on what he later conceded was “a very strange honeymoon” to USSR. In a 1989 visit to Cuba, Sanders revealed: “The revolution there is far deeper and more profound than I understood it to be. It really is a revolution in terms of values.”⁴¹ Despite that extraordinarily checkered past, this lifetime socialist received 13 million votes running for president in the 2016 Democratic Primary.

And all along, Sanders trumpeted “democracy.” He did so in a way fully reflective of how socialists and Marxists have long used the language:

In a 1987 interview, Bernie said: “Democracy means public ownership of the means of production.”⁴² Bingo. That is precisely how socialism and Marxism has historically defined democracy. Bernie’s definition is completely consistent with the socialist-Marxist-Leninist definition of democracy.

Fast-forwarding to today, Bernie Sanders told NPR in March 2019 that what he means by democratic socialism is “that I want a vibrant democracy.”⁴³

Still more recent, speaking on the topic of democratic socialism at George Washington University on June 12, 2019, Sanders said: “Economic rights are human rights, and that is what I

³⁹ See, among others: Ronald Radosh, “Bernie’s Adventures on a Stalinist Kibbutz,” *PJ Media*, February 6, 2016 posted at <https://pjmedia.com/ronradosh/2016/02/06/bernies-adventures-on-a-stalinist-kibbutz/>; and Daniel Greenfield, “Bernie Sanders Spent Months at Marxist-Stalinist Kibbutz,” *FrontPageMagazine.com*, February 4, 2016, posted at <http://www.frontpagemag.com/point/261724/bernie-sanders-spent-months-marxist-stalinist-daniel-greenfield>.

⁴⁰ See: Joseph Simonson, “Bernie Sanders campaigned for Marxist party in Reagan era,” *Washington Examiner*, May 30, 2019.

⁴¹ See: Paul Kengor, “Bernie: Bolshevik Party Boy,” *The American Spectator*, January 30, 2019.

⁴² <https://www.democraticunderground.com/1251581267>

⁴³ Madeline Farber, “What is ‘democratic socialism?’ Bernie Sanders’ Political Ideology Explained,” Fox News website.

mean by democratic socialism.” He added a warm-and-fuzzy touch: “It is up to us to reject that path and choose a higher path towards truth, justice, and love. And that is the path I call democratic socialism.” He invoked Martin Luther King Jr.: “As Dr. King said, ‘Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth in this country for all of God’s children.’” In a virtual cut-and-paste from the DSA website, Sanders says that democratic socialism means wanting to “create a government that works for all and not just the few.”⁴⁴

Again, a perfect expression of how a socialist defines democracy—one that should not surprise us, given that Bernie Sanders is a longtime, lifetime socialist. Bernie understands this, even if millions of his supporters do not. So does the Democratic Socialists of America.

In summary, this highly successful current push to marry “democracy” and “socialism” might be modern in its marketing, but not in its historical roots. The slogan “democratic socialism” sounds attractive to the undiscerning, the easily manipulated, and to those ignorant of the deeper history of the ideology they now say they support.

As this paper endeavored to show, however, this is not fruit from a good tree. This tree has very bad roots—rotten roots. Before eating from this tree, modern Americans should be much more vigilant about taking a closer look at the underlying premises. Who planted this tree? Who cultivated it? What were their intentions for the harvest? What did they really mean by words like “democracy” and “socialism?”

⁴⁴ See: Sam Frizell, “Here’s How Bernie Sanders Explained Democratic Socialism,” *Time*, November 19, 2015; and Mark Gruenberg, “Invoking FDR, Sanders lays out his agenda for ‘democratic socialism,’” *People’s World*, June 13, 2019.

The modern mind in today's West and today's America is that of the dictatorship of relativism, where everything can be redefined according to one's whims and fancies, from (to borrow from Justice Anthony Kennedy) one's own conception of life, existence, the universe, and even one's own meaning of meaning itself. Thus, Americans today play footloose and free with words like "democratic socialism," thinking the slick slogan new or fun or cool. In truth, such language has a past, a pretty ugly one with some nasty dictators. It would benefit modern Americans to get to know that past a little better.