

Socialism from below

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Dan Swain discusses the contested ambitions and leaderships within our movements. This article was originally published in the Summer 2015 issue of the *rs21* magazine.

Throughout the history of socialist movements and ideas, the fundamental divide is between Socialism-from-Above and Socialism-from-Below

So argues Hal Draper's 1966 pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism*. In it, he distinguishes two different broad trends in the socialist movement. Socialism from above had dominated – and would continue to dominate – the 20th century, in the form of Stalinism in the East and social democracy in the West. Both of these, despite their apparent differences, shared a belief that socialism could be handed down by the right kind of government, without the active participation of those who live under it. To these Draper added, perhaps somewhat unfairly, the anarchist movements, influential on US campuses at the time, who were committed to a kind of insurrectionary politics in which a small, well-organised group could bring about change through militant direct action.

Against all of these, Draper defended socialism from below, a commitment, traced back to Marx, that “socialism can be realised only through the self-emancipation of activised masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands mobilised from below in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history.”

But what does this mean today, in the 21st century? Draper's pamphlet begins with the claim that “for the first time in the history of the world, very likely the majority of its people label themselves ‘socialist’ in one sense or another”. This is painfully untrue today. Stalinism has largely disappeared, and social democracy has abandoned the idea of socialism as any sort of goal. The most that historic social democratic parties offer now is a managed capitalism. Moreover, it might be argued that the ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ distinction seems increasingly unable to capture the complexities of contemporary politics – social movements from below in Spain, Greece and Scotland, feed directly into political parties that promise reforms ‘from above’. What's the point, in these circumstances, of banging on about socialism from below?

I want to suggest three contexts in which it is still possible and valuable to talk about socialism from below as a way of doing politics. I stress this is a way of doing politics, rather than a set of hard and fast principles. It won't give you all the answers in any situation, but it can help to guide actions. It also helps identify what its opposite is. Politics ‘from above’ is how we are encouraged to think of politics. It is politics primarily understood as the administration and management of people – well-meaning management perhaps, but still management. It is part of how we are encouraged to think of our social world – as something so complex it can only be understood and managed by a set of experts (as I write, the Guardian website carries a banner advert saying “Dear Bill Gates, will you lead us in the fight against climate change”). Because of this, it is a default, it is easy. By contrast, socialism from below is difficult. It is a cluster of problems and challenges, which stem from the belief that if socialism is to be anything, if it is to be a world worth living in, it has to be the product

of the collective, participative struggles of large numbers. This is so much harder than politics as usual.

Democracy

The first arena where socialism from below matters is the question of democracy. There has historically been, and to a certain extent there still is, a way of talking about socialism as being concerned first and foremost with material comfort and a more equal distribution of wealth and resources. To the extent that democracy fits into this it is often as an optional extra, a 'good thing', but not strictly part of the picture. Socialism from below rejects this, and re-asserts democracy as an integral part of socialism. Socialism from below follows from a commitment to democracy in socialism in the following way: If your goal is just material comfort, or a better distribution of resources, you don't need mass participation. You don't need to involve, engage and mobilise a movement. Or rather, you do, but only temporarily, only in order to back up demands and policies, put pressure on those in power. If, on the other hand, your goal is a society in which the overwhelming majority are capable of participating in the running of society, you have to be concerned with empowering them to do so, and this empowerment requires a level of democracy.

Democracy is thus not merely a vital part of the goal of socialism, it is also a vital part of the means of getting there. Socialism from below means being concerned with those forms of activity and organisation that empower people, which allow them to develop the confidence, ideas and skills which might allow them to actively participate in the democratic management of society. This is not to say that we have to 'be the change we want to see', or that the rules for democratic management of production ought to be implemented in your *Capital* reading group or housing campaign. But if social movements and political organisations give no space for participants to even glimpse what democratic self-organisation might involve, they are unlikely to contribute to socialism.

The state

The second dimension is the state. In Draper's account, one characteristic feature of socialism from above is a naïve approach to the state, a belief that if only the state can be captured, state power can be wielded to achieve socialism. It is probably this approach that has done most to devalue the idea of socialism in the minds of contemporary anti-capitalists. Many believe this focus on the state has led to betrayals or tyranny, and instead we should seek to avoid it, hold it at arm's length and build independent spaces in capitalism's 'gaps'.

If socialism is just about taking control of the existing state, it is understandable that many are suspicious of it. But socialism from below implies a different approach. It argues that the institutions of the state are structured in a way that denies popular control. Alongside the formally 'democratic' pieces of the state – where those exist – are a series of hierarchically organised bodies, the police, army, judiciary, civil service etc., that limit the space for democracy. These are a block on the possibility of extending democratic control in society. These institutions must be removed and replaced. This is the lesson Marx learnt from the Paris Commune: "the working class cannot simply lay hold of ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." Rather, they must build their own, democratically controlled, institutions to perform the few positive functions of modern states.

But if socialism from below does not believe that the state can be used to deliver socialism, nor does it believe it can be ignored. Firstly, when it comes to organisations like the police and the army, you can ignore these institutions as much as you like, but they will not ignore you. Rather, any movements that challenge the existing order will be brought into conflict with these forces, and needs to be capable of organising to defeat them.

Secondly, socialists must be prepared to support and participate in movements that make demands upon existing states – demands for reforms and improvements in people’s lives. This is not because we believe that these reforms will add up to socialism. Rather, it is because it is through these movements that people are brought into collective action, through which they develop confidence, organisation and experiences that allow them to see the possibility of organising society differently. Demanding and defending reforms, and the conflicts that they lead to, help bring forward Draper’s actors on the stage of history. This may include running elections, but always with the understanding that our goal is to strengthen movements from below.

Leadership

The final question I want to address is leadership. By leadership, I don’t just mean the formal leadership of organisations, but a whole set of relationships within movements and organisations, in which some people ‘lead’ and attempt to get others to ‘follow’. Again, it is worth saying that it is difficult in the same way that the alternative is easy. A socialism from above leader knows best, tells people what to do, gives out the orders. A socialism from below leader is motivated by a desire to empower others, and ultimately make themselves irrelevant.

An important question here is the dynamic between ‘mobilising’ and ‘empowering’ people. Mobilising people to take action is a vital part of any ‘leadership’ and it is just as vital to socialism from above as socialism from below. No mass movement can come into existence if people are not motivated and brought into action. But what best mobilises people in the short term may not be the best for empowering them in the long term. People can be sparked into action by all sorts of methods, but not all of these help empower them to become agents of their own emancipation.

Take a concrete example here: the deal that the Syriza government agreed with the ECB was clearly a defeat. Whether you agree or not that it was the only option, it clearly was a set-back for the Greek people and Syriza as an organisation. It involved going back on key elements of Syriza’s programme, and only marginal improvements on previous deals. Yet Tsipras, and much of the Syriza leadership, declared it a victory. You can understand why they did – they were no doubt terrified of admitting limitations, of demobilising and demoralising their followers. However, calling a defeat a victory, and not acknowledging the way they had been forced to retreat, risks disempowering and alienating their support base, and in the long run makes even short term mobilisation harder.

Trotsky, in a debate on socialist morality (usually interpreted as justifying anything in service of the revolution), recognises this point: “The liberation of the workers can come only through the workers themselves. There is, therefore, no greater crime than deceiving the masses, palming off defeats as victories, friends as enemies, bribing workers’ leaders, fabricating legends, staging false trials... These means can serve only one end: lengthening the domination of a clique already condemned by history. But they cannot serve to liberate the masses.” If the goal is just mobilising people, there are all manner of ways of doing that, including actively deceiving them. On the other hand, if your goal is to empower them to become actors in their own emancipation, deceiving them is a pretty poor start. It may be true that anything goes that serves the revolution, but if the revolution is to be ‘from below’, not everything serves it.

But if lying and deceiving the masses is ruled out, there remain a host of other things that are surely both permissible and necessary. Rhetoric, polemic, encouragement, imagination, all of these can change people’s conceptions of what is possible, and inspire them into activity which can expand horizons still further. But these must be backed up by rigorous attention to what actually empowers people in the long term. What this boils down to is the simple point: the ‘leader’ from below may want to change the world, but they also believe that they can do it only with others (and a great many others), and these others must learn in practice that another world is possible.

If socialism from below is to mean anything today, it is as a guiding thread that runs through our political practice, one that constantly reminds us to ask whether and how what we do empowers people to become agents of their own emancipation. To achieve this truly would be 'doing politics differently' - differently from the capitalist parties, broken social democracy, and, sadly, so many revolutionary groups that have gone before. The devil, as ever, is in the detail; but no one said it was going to be easy.