

The History of Socialism and Social Democracy. SYRIZA's Betrayal of Greece Is a Spectre Haunting the Left

By [Max Parry](#)

Global Research, March 09, 2020

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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'Super Tuesday' in the 2020 presidential election season is over and Senator Bernie Sanders's time as the unlikely frontrunner for the Democratic nomination may have stopped just as quick as it began. Despite an unprecedented smear campaign coordinated by the party leadership and corporate media against him, the self-described "democratic socialist" not only managed to single-handedly de-stigmatize the latter as a dirty word in U.S. politics but at one point seemed like he had improbably overtaken former Vice President Joe Biden as the favorite to be the party nominee.

Suddenly, the scenario of a brokered convention with a repeat of the 'superdelegate' scheme determining the outcome seems more likely. Regardless of whether he beats the odds, no one can deny the significance of Sanders's movement in taking the relatively progressive first step of returning "socialism" from exile to everyday U.S. politics which was once an inconceivable prospect. Unfortunately, a consequence is that now his idea of an 'alternative' to capitalism has been made synonymous with the word in the minds of Americans, regardless of its qualifications.

So far, Bernie has purposefully avoided discussing socialism in broader conceptual terms or as a social philosophy while persistently narrowing the discussion to issues of economic disparity, free higher education or a national healthcare system. In fact, Sanders's own supporters are the ones who often push the acceptable parameters of the dialogue to bigger questions and take his movement to places he is unwilling, likely because his candidacy filled the void of the political space left vacant following the suppression of the Occupy Wall Street phenomena. For example, some of his devotees may define socialism as the 'equal distribution of wealth' or even the 'collective ownership of the means of production.' However, Bernie and his followers both equally avoid providing any philosophical basis to their ideas and usually reduce it to abstractions of moral principles or human rights.

The most vigorous elucidation of socialism and its historical development from material conditions rather than ideals can be found in Karl Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, a letter written in 1875 by the German philosopher to the early incarnation of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in which he scathingly attacked the SPD for drafting a more moderate platform at its congress. Just four years earlier, the short-lived Paris Commune in France had been brutally repressed and the German counterparts of the Communards appeared to be making concessions in the wake of its failure. In the address, Marx contends that socialism is a *transitional* phase between capitalism and communism where vestigial elements of the free market are mixed with state ownership of the

productive forces. According to Marx, socialism does not develop on its own but “*emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.*”

While socialism might be an improvement, it still bears the stigma of capitalism because it is based on the idea that people will receive equal compensation determined by their individual contribution to the economy. Marx argues that even though profiting from the exploitation of the labor of others through private ownership of the means of production may decline, the exchange of labor itself as a commodity replicates the logic of the free market in that it still leaves workers under the dominion of what they produce if their earnings are equivalent to their labor. Since workers inherently have varying degrees of mental and physical ability, the primary source of economic inequality is left in place. Hence, Marx’s conclusion that human liberation can only be achieved once labor is transformed from a means of subsistence to freedom from necessity in a communist society, or “*from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.*” In the same [document](#), it is made clear what role the state must play in this post-revolutionary but intermediary stage:

“Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. There corresponds to this also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Many on the left today, particularly social democrats, try to separate Marx’s words about the role of the state from the Bolsheviks who later expanded upon the working class seizure of power by revolutionary means and put it into practice in the Russian Revolution of 1917. However, Marx did consider the United States one of a handful of countries where a peaceful transition to socialism was a remote possibility, at least during his own lifetime.

The same SPD that Marx convinced to abandon its reformist platform for a more radical line would turn their backs on the working class decades later when it endorsed the imperialist carnage of World War I and collaborated with proto-fascists. In 1912, the SPD rose to prominence after it was elected to the majority of seats in the Reichstag, but once in power its duplicitous leadership voted to support the war effort despite the Second International’s vehement opposition to militarism and imperialism.

Those within the SPD who protested the party’s pro-war stance were expelled which brought an end to the Second International, most notably Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg who would go on to found the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). After the war’s conclusion which resulted in a German defeat and the abolition of its imperial monarchy, mass social unrest and general strikes led to the Spartacist Uprising in the unsuccessful German Revolution of 1918–1919 which was violently crushed by the right-wing Freikorps paramilitary units under orders from SPD leader and German President, Friedrich Ebert. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were summarily executed in the crackdown and became forever revered martyrs in the international socialist movement.

The SPD would once again betray the German people during the Weimar Republic in the lead-up to the Second World War, rebuffing the KPD’s efforts to organize a coalition against fascism which sealed Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, as Michael Parenti [described](#) in *Blackshirts*

and Reds:

“True to form, the Social Democrat leaders refused the Communist party’s proposal to form an eleventh-hour coalition against Nazism. As in many other countries past and present, so in Germany, the Social Democrats would sooner ally themselves with the reactionary Right than make common cause with the Reds. Meanwhile, a number of right-wing parties coalesced behind the Nazis and in January 1933, just weeks after the election, Hindenburg invited Hitler to become chancellor.”

Social democracy’s consistent impediment of the seizure of power by the working class led to its branding as the “moderate wing of fascism” by the Comintern. By the time the Third International and the social democratic Labor and Socialist International (LSI) finally cooperated to form a Popular Front in the Spanish Civil War, it was undermined by the disruptions of Trotskyists and anarchists which cleared the way for Franco’s victory. Today, social democrats who are embarrassed by these unpleasant facts try to sweep their own tainted history under the rug, ironically the same ideologues who are always eager to cite the ‘purges’ of the Stalin era to discredit communism. A 2017 [article](#) exonerating the SPD in Jacobin Magazine, the flagship publication of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), is a perfect example of such lies by omission.

Bernie Sanders is the longest-serving independent in U.S. congressional history, but a significant amount of the grassroots basis for his recent success has come from his backing by the DSA whose own rank-and-file increased by the tens of thousands during his 2016 candidacy and continued following Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton. This culminated in the election of two DSA members to Congress, Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY) and Rashida Tlaib (MI), in the 2018 mid-terms. The DSA has historical roots in the Socialist Party of America (SPA), having been established by former chairman Michael Harrington, best known as the author of the classic 1962 study, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, which is widely credited as an inspiration for the welfare state legislation of the Great Society under the Lyndon B. Johnson administration. However, in stark contrast with the SPA and its founder, Eugene V. Debs—whom Sanders idolizes and even once [made a film](#) about—Harrington advocated for reforming the Democratic Party from within over building a third party.

Sanders might style himself as a “socialist”, but many have noted his actual campaign policies are closer to the New Deal reforms of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression. A more accurate comparison than Eugene Debs would be with the appointed Vice President during Roosevelt’s third term, Henry A. Wallace, who has been written out of history ever since the Southern reactionary wing of the Democratic Party convinced FDR to replace him on the 1944 ticket with Harry S. Truman. The progressive Wallace had been Secretary of Agriculture during Roosevelt’s first two terms and was a big supporter of his domestic program. After his one-term removal, Wallace served as commerce secretary until Truman succeeded Roosevelt and fired him in 1946 for giving a speech advocating peace and cooperation with the Soviet Union which contradicted Truman’s foreign policy that kick-started the Cold War. Wallace ran for president on the Progressive Party ticket in 1948 but his campaign was sunk by red-baiting, reminiscent of the recent bogus claims of “Russian meddling” to assist Sanders’s presidential bid. Yet even Wallace was much further to the left than Bernie is today, particularly on foreign policy. As Congressman of Vermont in 1999, Sanders notably voted to authorize the use of military

force against Serbia, resulting in one of his campaign staffers [quitting in protest](#) and an [end to his friendship with the previously cited Parenti](#).

As for his socialist credentials, all one has to do is look at the model Bernie consistently invokes as an example whenever pressed to define “democratic socialism” in the Nordic model which today scarcely resembles what it once was prior to the [mysterious assassination](#) of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986. Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark may have high taxes on the wealthy and a strong social safety net while a large percentage of the workforce is unionized and employed in the public sector — a more “humane” form of capitalism — but these gains came from *class struggle*, not from the top down.

Similarly in the U.S., the financial regulations and public programs during the Roosevelt administration were not enacted out of the goodness of FDR’s heart but because he was a pragmatic politician and member of the ruling class who understood that it was the only way to save American capitalism from itself and prevent workers, then well organized in a strong coalition of labor unions with socialists and communists, from becoming militant. Reforms such as those under the New Deal were enacted so they could be repealed later, as we see now with Social Security and Medicare increasingly under threat. If Sanders were to be elected but his policies obstructed, it would be because no such alliance behind him yet exists.

On the other hand, recent history shows that not even a united front and mass organization can ensure the democratic wishes of workers as Greece learned in 2015 after the electoral victory of the inappropriately named ‘Coalition of the Radical Left ’—abbreviated SYRIZA—which completely double-crossed its constituency and the Greek working class once in power. When the Great Recession hit in 2008, Greece was impacted more than any other country in the Eurozone during the economic downturn and underwent a decline which exceeded that of the Great Depression in the United States as the longest of any modern capitalist country. However, like all debt run up by capitalist governments, Greece’s bankruptcy was created by the irreconcilable contradiction of the state being torn between its constituents in the masses of people and the rich and corporations who both want to pay as low in taxes as possible, an incompatibility which forces elected political leaders to borrow excessively instead of taxing the former which give them votes or the latter which gives them money.

Like the United States, many European countries saw their productive power slowly outsourced to the developing world in recent decades where bigger profits could be made and labor was cheaper while wages and living standards in the imperial core stagnated, though the process was slower in Europe because of social democracy. For the financial sector and predatory creditors, this made for a whole new market of consumer debt to invest in and a bonanza of speculative trading. That is, until 2008 when the speculations finally crashed after consumer credit reached its limit. On the brink of failure, the so-called leaders of industry and champions of private enterprise in the banking sector begged European governments to save them from collapse. Unfortunately for Greece, it’s small, poor economy was already heavily in debt and unattractive to lenders, therefore unable to borrow without paying high interest rates.

At the time of Greece’s debt crisis, European governments were already besieged by their respective banks in the form of bailouts. When the German and French banks turned out to

be the biggest creditors of the Greek government, the prospect of Greece defaulting meant that the German and French governments could not provide financial assistance to their corresponding banks a second time without then-President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, committing political suicide. Therefore, the European Union's political "solution" was to make Greece the whipping boy for the financial crisis by using the pooled collective money of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund— widely referred to as the 'troika'—to make a series of bailout loans to Greece so it could pay off the French and German banks, but which imposed draconian austerity measures and neoliberal 'shock therapy' onto its economy.

The troika's 'structural adjustment programs' resulted in hundreds of thousands of state sector jobs lost and the minimum wage reduced by more than 20% while much of the energy, utilities and transit sectors underwent mass privatization. Greek workers saw their taxes raised just as pensions and benefits were cut, bonuses capped, and salaries frozen at the same time government spending on health and education was slashed. As many economists predicted, the spending reductions during the downturn only worsened the crisis. However, just as we have seen throughout the EU and the U.S. since the global financial meltdown, a silver lining to the crisis in Greece was an expansion of the political spectrum and Overton Window. By 2014, the far right Golden Dawn party suddenly became the third largest group from Greece in the European Parliament, but still far behind the first-place SYRIZA, founded in 2004 as a broad alliance of the country's left-wing parties, sans the Greek Communist Party (KKE).

In the beginning of 2015, SYRIZA rode into office in a snap election, picking up half of the Hellenic Parliament seats on its campaign promise of rejecting austerity. After failing to reach an agreement with the troika, a referendum was held to decide on whether the country should accept the bailout terms and the result was a solid 61% pulling the lever against the country's colonization by the EU and 'reforms' of the international creditors, a vote which also effectively signaled that the Greek people were willing to exit the Eurozone. Despite pledging to let the electorate decide the country's future, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA stabbed the Greek working class in the back and ignored the outcome of the referendum, totally capitulating to the demands of the private banking corporatocracy. Much of the pseudo-left had pinned their naive hopes on SYRIZA, but the truth is that the warning signs were there from the very beginning, starting with Tsipras's questionable decision to appoint economist Yanis Varoufakis as Finance Minister, a figure who had several conflicts of interest with the institutions he was assigned to stand up to.

Varoufakis was tapped to negotiate with the troika in spite of his open ties to the neoliberal Brookings Institute, a D.C. establishment think tank funded by a cabal of billionaires and the Qatari government, as well as his previous work as an advisor to the centre-left PASOK government of George Papandreou which preceded SYRIZA and initially ushered in the austerity. The "rock star economist" jumped ship after less than six months from his ministerial post on the stated reason it was evident the SYRIZA-led government was caving in to the troika, yet Varoufakis himself had already sold Greece down the river when he led the negotiations to extend its loan agreement with the IMF that was due to expire in his first month in office. Varoufakis could have used the prospect of a potential Grexit from the Eurozone as leverage and refused to negotiate, but instead fully surrendered to the troika's bribery. When SYRIZA later fully embraced austerity, it was only a continuation of the process he set in motion while his resignation was motivated by self-interest in maintaining his radical facade.

Allowing the IMF to make a killing off Greece's debt was just the first breach of faith. By the time Tsipras was voted out four years later, the SYRIZA-led government had made [military deals with Israel](#), sold arms to Saudi Arabia during its genocidal war on Yemen, provided NATO with its territory for the use of military bases and naval presence, and paved the way for the latter to accede the renamed North Macedonia as a member state. Meanwhile, Varoufakis has since been busy lending his 'expertise' to left candidates in other countries. After the UK Labour Party's resounding defeat in the 2019 general elections, many rightly faulted Jeremy Corbyn's reversal of his decision to support the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum after he was convinced by the party establishment to change his longtime Euroskepticism. Unsurprisingly, another figure who had advised him to do the same was none other [than the former Greek finance minister](#), who has also since partnered with Bernie Sanders to launch a "Progressive International."

The 2019 UK general election was really a second Brexit referendum, where the electorate justifiably expressed their disgust at the Labour Party's contempt for democracy and neutering of Corbyn. Once upon a time it was Labour who stood against the de-industrialization foisted onto Britain by the neoliberal imperialist EU and the offshoring of its manufacturing jobs to Germany and the global south. Corbyn should have listened to the words of past Labour leaders like Tony Benn who opposed the European project and its unelected bureaucracy as a violation of British sovereignty and democracy, not charlatans like Mr. Varoufakis. Worst of all is that the "left" is now disparaging the entirety of the working class as bigots and reducing the Leave vote to a reaction against the migrant crisis, as if Greece's bailout referendum never occurred. Like the Yellow Vest protests in France, Corbyn's loss was a sign that the opposition to globalization by the working class is still in good condition but has no authentic left to represent it.

If Bernie meets the same fate, a real vanguard should be prepared to take the reins.

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