

What is democratic socialism, and where is it headed?

The complex history—and promising future—of a movement

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue



Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Bernie Sanders. Photo licensed under Creative Commons.

Democratic socialism is an idea with a rich manifold history in Europe and a slight electoral history in the United States—until recently. A new generation of American voters, one that does not remember the Cold War but is steeped in the severe inequalities of neoliberal capitalism, has brushed aside the assumption that democratic socialism is impossibly un-American. Many young Americans flatly demand the same universal health care, free higher education, and solidarity wages that are commonplace in Europe.

“Democratic socialism” has become the favored shorthand for what is missing in the United States: the recognition that all citizens have rights to not just liberty but also economic well-being and a healthy ecosystem. This concept of democratic socialism

is long-standing; it is also one among others. Its resurgence has brought up old questions about what democratic socialism should be.

Bernie Sanders spent decades calling for economic justice which he referred to as democratic socialism. Then his 2016 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination played an outsized role in renewing democratic socialism as a political option. But what is Sanders's particular understanding of democratic socialism? Mainstream journalists have been oddly incurious about this question. They routinely recycle a 2015 statement in which he named Denmark, an advanced welfare state with a mixed economy, as his model of a democratic socialist society—and clarified that he doesn't believe in government ownership. Often this reference gets buttressed with a quote from Paul Krugman, Noam Chomsky, or another expert or pundit to the effect that Sanders is therefore a good social democrat but not really a democratic socialist.

While this approach to covering Sanders is commendable for eschewing Red-baiting, it rests too easily on simplistic assumptions about what democratic socialism involves. Centralized government ownership of the means of production is only one model of socialism, and it is regarded by most democratic socialists as the least desirable option. Yet Sanders got through the entire 2015–16 election cycle without once being asked about cooperative worker ownership, decentralized forms of public ownership, or mixed models of worker and public ownership—ideas that have centrally defined democratic socialism for the past 70 years both within and outside European social democracy. To date he still hasn't been asked.

Socialism has a complex and variegated history. Its earliest and most enduring traditions conceived of it as cooperative worker ownership or worker guild networks. In the 1820s, Charles Fourier (in France) and Robert Owen (in England) sought to achieve the unrealized demands of the French Revolution, which never reached the working class. A cooperative mode of production and exchange would allow workers to work for each other, instead of pitting them against each other. Socialism was an attempt to organize society as a cooperative community.

The early Christian socialists of the late 1840s were cooperative socialists; to them, socialism was the cooperative movement. John Ludlow, a British lawyer who grew up in France, absorbed cooperative French socialism and converted Anglican moral theologian Frederick Denison Maurice to it. Maurice was the first great theologian of Christian socialism. He taught that cooperation is the law of an existing divine moral

order and that the church is supposed to be comprehensive and unifying, reflecting the beauty and goodness of the divine order. While French socialism was radical, antigovernment, antipolitical, and usually antireligious, the Anglicans reasoned that England should be more hospitable to Christian socialism—though they splintered over the politics of cooperative guilds. Should the state finance producer cooperatives? Are consumer cooperatives just as important? Socialists had bruising debates over these questions—while taking for granted that socialism is about building cooperative enterprises from below, not about the government taking over the economy.

The idea that socialism is about centralized public ownership arose in 19th-century Germany, explicitly through Ferdinand Lassalle and ironically through Karl Marx. Lassalle was a democratic state socialist who wedded socialism to the Prussian desire for a united German state and who founded Germany's first Social Democratic Party. Marx was a far more complicated case. He taught that the structure of economic ownership determines the character of an entire society and that socialism is the collective ownership of the means of production—a sufficient condition for fulfilling the essential aspirations of human beings. Once a socialist revolution succeeded, Marx claimed, the state would wither away, for the real function of the modern state is to protect capitalism. This utopian expectation shielded Marxian socialists from their own statism; they saw “state socialism” as an absurdity that had nothing to do with them. Marx blasted the Lassalle tradition on this account. In the 1880s the British Fabian movement cast aside all such pretensions, straightforwardly identifying socialism with centralized government collectivism. Thus the two most consequential traditions of 19th-century socialism both espoused state socialism: Marxism did so without admitting it, while Fabian collectivism did so with bureaucratic enthusiasm.

In the Marxist view, the existing bourgeois form of political democracy was a fraud that perpetrated the rule of the capitalist class; true democracy would emerge only after a proletarian revolution. To promote democracy as the road to socialism would be ridiculous. Marxists believed that true democracy would come about only after the revolution made the state irrelevant. Marxists and anarchists clashed with each other over the difference between believing that the state would wither away (Marxism) or that the state had to be destroyed (anarchism).

The phrase “democratic socialism” emerged in 19th-century continental Marxism, where democracy was controversial. Most British socialists, despite being

democratic socialists, did not call themselves by this name because democracy was not controversial or divisive for them. Britain lacked strong Marxist and anarchist traditions; most British socialists belonged to one of the cooperative, ethical, Christian or Fabian socialist traditions. Self-named “democratic socialism” arose in Germany, as a critique of orthodox Marxism. Democratic socialists refused to subordinate democracy and its reform causes to what Marx disastrously called “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” They maintained that socialists had to be resolutely democratic on their way to achieving socialism, and not merely on tactical grounds. Any suggestion of left-wing dictatorship had to be repudiated—two decades before Communists established a left-wing dictatorship in Russia.

Democratic socialism is the idea of a fully realized social, political, and economic democracy in which no group dominates any other. This idea is more radical than the policies that democratic socialists advance when they run for office and gain power, policies that came to be called “social democracy.” In 1898, Eduard Bernstein of the German Social Democratic Party made the classic case for democratic socialism, rocking the SPD and establishing democratic socialism as one flank within it. In 1928 the Swedish Social Democrats adopted Bernstein’s approach and built a powerhouse model of European social democracy, featuring a mixed economy and government policies to prevent inequality.

In the 1930s and ’40s American socialist leader Norman Thomas espoused an ethical democratic socialism, radiating his background in Christian socialism and his aversion to Marxism; it was customarily called “Norman Thomas Socialism” to distinguish it from Marxist and Communist versions. In 1951 the Socialist International explicitly adopted the social democratic approach in its Frankfurt Declaration—playing down the rhetoric of class struggle and giving equal emphasis to individual freedom and economic well-being. In the early 1950s, British Labour Party leaders Hugh Gaitskell and C. A. R. Crosland replaced Fabian orthodoxy with a pluralistic and decentralized conception of socialism—focused on expanding the cooperative sector, developing cooperative-public partnerships, establishing solidarity wage policies, and upholding economic rights.

These events and figures played watershed roles in revising the democratic socialist idea along social democratic lines, identifying socialism with the mission to achieve universal social, political, and economic rights. In 1989 the Socialist International meeting in Stockholm replaced the Frankfurt Declaration with a new statement of its aims and mission. It carried on for 55 paragraphs about democratic socialist values

before it said anything about ownership models. Then it called for worker and public ownership “within the framework of a mixed economy,” advocating a “continuing process of social and economic democratization.”

American socialist Michael Harrington coauthored the Stockholm declaration, which he laced with his signature tropes: state ownership does not guarantee economic efficiency or social justice; equality is the condition of the development of individual personality; equality and personal freedom are indivisible. Harrington advocated a gradual reformist approach to achieving decentralized economic democracy that mixes worker and community ownership. In his later career he moved from believing in old-style economic planning to a social democratic concept of economic plans operating within capitalist markets: solidarity wages, worker codetermination, an expanded cooperative sector, and public banks.

Bernie Sanders is in the tradition of Harrington and Thomas, but he doesn't cite them when he discusses democratic socialism. On occasion he offers an appreciative word for American socialist founder Eugene Debs, which is ironic and telling. Debs was a brilliant orator who connected emotionally with vast working-class audiences; Sanders identifies with him more than with the intellectual Harrington and the former pastor Thomas. But Debs conceived socialism in Marxian terms, as wholesale collective ownership that would solve all social problems. Thomas and Harrington held no such belief in magical socialism, and neither does Sanders.

Sanders takes for granted that invoking former American socialists will not help him on the campaign trail. Instead he invokes Franklin Roosevelt's 1944 call for a Second Bill of Rights and sometimes observes that Martin Luther King Jr. was a democratic socialist. Sanders defines democratic socialism as the conviction that a living wage, quality health care, a complete education, affordable housing, a clean environment, and a secure retirement are economic rights.

Defining democratic socialism as the achievement of these economic rights is in line with the mainstream social democratic movement of the past 70 years. Yet there is an irony in the convention that Sanders is merely a “good social democrat” and not a democratic socialist: Sanders is much more radical than most European socialists, even though he lays off any mention of worker ownership and decentralized public ownership.

Sanders has revived the language of the class struggle, protesting vehemently that the one percent thrives at the expense of everyone else. He is a throwback to what social democrats sounded like before they built the European welfare states. Sanders appreciates that European social democrats have much to defend; his agenda consists mostly of things they achieved a half-century ago. But Sanders fights for economic justice with a stubborn militancy that social democrats could use, because they have lost ground throughout the neoliberal era. Forty years of allowing the one percent to do whatever it wants has yielded a seismic rebellion personified by, ironically, an American politician.

This rebellion will surge long past Sanders's latest presidential campaign. For many years the only politically savvy option for American left-wing progressives was to avoid all mention of the S-word. Every reader over 35 will know what I mean; many have trouble believing the political landscape has changed so much. But today we have a full-scale, generational, many-sided rebellion against the world that neoliberalism made. It includes broadly left-wing populist and right-wing populist versions that have nothing else in common. The center-left of the Democratic Party has in Joe Biden a weak front-runner presidential candidate whose following consists mostly of older voters. The center-right of the Republican Party has been reduced to a few television pundits. Elizabeth Warren has, I believe, the best prospect of marshaling the progressive forces inside and outside the Democratic Party, if she can break through to African American voters; she is a quintessential progressive with integrity who does not sing, like Sanders, in one key only. But Sanders represents the desire for a deeper structural change that will not pass away.

In the 1980s, Sanders made a shrewder choice than he realized when he let himself be tagged as a democratic socialist. He played down the label during his early years as mayor of Burlington, Vermont, but people called him a socialist anyway, and he was too honest to deny it. "Democratic socialist" conveyed all the things he cared about. It meant economic justice, anti-imperialism, antiracism, feminism, and environmentalism all rolled together. It was a label that cut deeper than "progressive" or "radical democrat" long before Sanders had any idea that he would live to see "democratic socialist" lose its scare-word status outside Vermont.

Democratic socialism will likely continue to surge. But where will it land politically? Sanders, an independent senator who caucuses with the Democrats, symbolizes the complexity of this question. In his heart he is still the independent democratic socialist who believes that the struggle for economic democracy begins in local

grassroots contexts of labor and community organizing; when this struggle goes political, it should try to build a third-party alternative. Sanders co-founded the Vermont Progressive Party. But he was willing to run for president as a Democrat because no other party could put him in the White House—and his conception of democratic socialism as government support of economic rights is consistent with running for president, even as a Democrat.

This agenda is currently a topic of strenuous debate on the democratic left. Some argue that running for office must be a high priority; some support third-party campaigns and want nothing to do with Democrats. Some believe that different rules should apply to national campaigns than to local and state campaigns. Some want to build cadre organizations featuring an ideological line, ideological discipline, and tithing dues. Some have resurrected the anarcho-syndicalist objection that running for office of any kind is distracting and pointless. Some contend that running for office should be a midrange priority—important, but not a top priority.

The democratic left has not vigorously debated these issues since the 1960s; it's pointless to do so within marginalized groups lacking any access to mass movements. Democratic Socialists of America, which Harrington cofounded in 1982, customarily conferred endorsements on progressive candidates and loaned them volunteers. The goal was to elect as many progressives as possible, and the connecting link between DSA and the candidate was always weak at best. Candidate accountability was pretty much nonexistent, and DSA settled for mere access.

The Sanders campaign and the election of Donald Trump changed this picture. DSA has skyrocketed to 60,000 members, including many of the best political organizers out there. Since 2016, more than 100 DSA candidates have been elected to local, state, and federal office. Two DSA congressional victors of 2018 are renowned: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who unseated ten-term incumbent Democrat Joseph Crowley in New York City, and Rashida Harbi Tlaib, who won in a district covering the western half of Detroit and several suburbs.

The sensational victory by Ocasio-Cortez created an instant star in the Democratic Party just after DSA announced it was adopting a new model of political activism. Instead of loaning out its organizers to liberal Democrats, DSA resolved to run its own candidates, preferably not in the Democratic Party. DSA vowed in 2018 that its local chapters will build their own field and canvassing operations, maintain their own data, formulate their own messaging, develop their own research capacity, and

run their own campaigns—acquiring the full range of electoral skills and capacities. In 2019 it voted to work for Sanders in the Democratic primaries but to endorse no one else if Sanders fails to win the nomination.

DSA's new ambition is to become a working-class power independent of the Democratic Party. This goal is not impossibly far-fetched. The Democratic and Republican Parties are drastically hollowed out, wielding power primarily through the ability of state party functionaries to control the means of electioneering. DSA takes no position on how its local chapters should deal with the ballot line issue; every locality is a different situation. What matters to DSA is to break away from the patronage networks that control Democratic politics. The Vermont Progressive Party, Richmond Progressive Alliance (California), New Haven Rising (Connecticut), and Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (Jackson, Mississippi) offer models of this. All are progressive community-based organizations devoted to building grassroots power. Another working-class organization, LeftRoots, focuses on communities of color nationwide, offering a hub for organizers.

DSA determined in 2018 to become more like the Richmond Progressive Alliance than like Democracy for America, Progressive Democrats of America, MoveOn, or Organizing for America, which try to keep voters engaged as activists but spend most of their time raising funds. In 2017 Sanders launched a similar organization, Our Revolution. That year nearly 40 percent of DSA's national convention delegates voted not to work with Our Revolution. The majority had to plead that Sanders was not like MoveOn. Democratic socialism has made such a dramatic comeback that its long-forgotten debates about how radical it should be have been revived.

Meanwhile the grassroots politics of creating new forms of decentralized economic democracy have not changed. This is a unifying concern bridging every school of democratic socialist organizing today. Economic democracy and ecological survival are linked by the necessity of creating alternatives to a system that treats labor and nature as commodities and assumes a fantasy of unlimited growth.

Economic democracy begins by expanding the cooperative sector. Producer cooperatives take labor out of the market by removing corporate shares from the stock market and maintaining local worker ownership. Community land trusts take land out of the market and place it under local democratic control to serve the needs of communities. Community finance corporations assume democratic control over capital to finance cooperative firms and make investments in areas of social need.

Social fund strategies create hybrid forms of cooperative enterprises linked to public banks or specialized holding companies funded by taxing excess profits or Wall Street transactions—or by socializing failed banks. These strategies reclaim the principles that the economy should serve the common good and that democratic ownership is a factor in building a just society.

Two campaign stories from 2018 portend contrasting possible futures for the democratic socialist upsurge. In May 2018 two DSA-endorsed candidates for the Pennsylvania state legislature, Summer Lee and Sara Innamorato, made headlines by defeating incumbent Pittsburgh legislators in the Democratic primary. Both incumbents came from prominent Democratic families, and DSA got glowing coverage in the *New Yorker* for its “democratic socialist landslide.” The following month Pittsburgh DSA elected new leaders who spurned electoral work. The chapter turned inward and fractious, driving away Lee, Innamorato, and many DSA campaign workers.

In April 2019 six DSA members won seats on Chicago’s 50-seat city council. Here there were no recriminations about electoral politics, since all the winners ran as democratic socialists and Democratic Party activism is deeply rooted in Chicago DSA. In Chicago there were only earnest meetings about how to keep the six new city council members accountable to democratic socialist values and politics.

To many, Sanders is the symbol of American democratic socialism and it has no future apart from him. I think the latter part is wrong. The next generation of democratic socialists is too big and too outraged to melt away. The future of democratic socialism, despite what it owes to Sanders, is further down the ballot in locales across the country. This coming movement is not like the older generations of democratic socialists, for whom socialist activism was secondary to other activist priorities even as they touted its interconnectedness to everything else. That is changing. The young people joining the democratic socialist movement today expect it to be their top priority. The question is whether they will find enough in it to sustain them.

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