

Jacobin editor Bhaskar Sunkara makes a fool of himself

Joseph Kishore
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The *New York Times* posted on Wednesday an interview and discussion involving *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara and *Times* columnists Michelle Goldberg, Ross Douthat and David Leonhardt, published under the headline “The United States of Socialism?” Sunkara is a leading figure in the Democratic Socialists of America, with which *Jacobin* is affiliated. Goldberg and Leonhardt are both Democrats, while Douthat is a conservative Republican.

Anyone under the impression that Sunkara as an individual, *Jacobin* as a publication or the DSA as an organization have anything to do with socialism, Marxism, or, God forbid, revolution should listen carefully to the exchange, which featured a discussion between Sunkara and Goldberg followed by a review involving the three columnists.

Trotsky once spoke of Socialist Party leader Morris Hillquit as “the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists.” Trotsky, the revolutionist, had delivered a well-aimed and unforgettable blow to Hillquit’s reputation. But to be entirely fair to Morris Hillquit (1869-1933), he was a major figure in the early years of pre-World War I American socialism, who reflected a significant, though reformist, political tendency. He possessed an extensive knowledge of the history of the workers’ movement and was not indifferent to Marxist theory. He opposed the entry of the United States into World War I and defended anti-war militants persecuted by the Wilson administration.

Sunkara resembles Hillquit only as a caricature, without any of the intellectually and politically serious qualities of the old social reformist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sunkara – joking and giggling his way through the interview – comes across as the “ideal socialist leader” for liberal investors, well-paid tenured academics, and other layers of the upper-middle class affluencia who sincerely believe that some of the money sloshing around at the apex of capitalist society should be distributed more equitably among those who fall within the 90 to 99 percent income bracket. And, yes, for those who would like that something should be done to ameliorate social conditions in

the United States, without, however, inflicting irreparable harm to the capitalist system.

There is not a trace in Sunkara’s remarks of a theoretically and historically informed critique of capitalism and contemporary society. His views are an eclectic mixture of impressions and opinions. Promoted for the past few years by the *New York Times* as a major intellectual force on the left, Sunkara’s remarks expose his superficiality. To the extent that he attempts to posture as a socialist strategist, he makes a fool of himself.

Politically, the most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the interview is that Sunkara is little more than a moderate Democrat. For this he receives the praise of the Democratic and Republican commentators.

While proclaiming his support for the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders, Sunkara also declares that he will back Elizabeth Warren if she beats out Sanders and Joe Biden if he is eventually the Democratic Party nominee. “I think the mentality has to be to call for people to vote for Joe Biden, especially in swing states,” he states. It is necessary “to avoid a third-party candidacy”—that is, any break from the Democratic Party—on the basis of the “strategic knowledge and commitment to getting rid of Trump.”

Sunkara adds, “Even a Biden presidency would be great” because there “will be plenty of room for socialists to be opposition.” There are, in other words, positions to be acquired.

Goldberg, a prominent backer of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 elections, says in the discussion between the *Times* columnists that “the great thing about the new wave of socialists is that they are so practical, they are so pragmatic... They understand how power works and are interested in amassing it through the channels that our system allows.” She adds that “socialists” like Sunkara “are finally doing what liberals like me have wanted people on the left to do for decades and decades... in building power for the Democratic Party.”

Sunkara’s conformist, Democratic Party politics are buttressed by an analysis of history and contemporary

capitalism that is characterized above all by its unseriousness and gross ignorance.

First, Sunkara declares that the arrival of “socialism” will be the product of a return to and extension of social reformism as it was advanced by social democratic parties and organizations in the period following the Second World War.

The task today, he declares, is to return to the failed efforts of the 20th century but “figure out a way to socialize production so capital doesn’t have the same ability to say, ‘This isn’t working for us anymore.’” Sunkara sums up this banal theory with a suitably banal sports analogy: “We wanted to score a touchdown, but we ended up just outside of field goal range. I want to march us up the field just like social democracy did and go a little further.”

Why is it that the social reforms of the post-war period have everywhere been eliminated or are in the process of being eliminated, generally through the actions of the social democratic parties themselves? How were these gains related to the great revolutionary class battles of the 20th century? What was the role of social democracy as well as Stalinism in blocking or forcibly suppressing the efforts of the working class to abolish capitalism? How did the globalization of capitalist production undermine the national reformist perspective of the social democratic parties?

On such questions, Sunkara has absolutely nothing to say, aside from the declaration that if provided with the opportunity he and the DSA—and, presumably, Bernie Sanders—will “go all the way.”

Second, Sunkara’s utopian vision of a return to the supposed glory days of social democracy is bound up with his own thoroughly nationalist outlook. Sunkara has nothing to say about the realities of global capitalism, in which every political phenomenon has an international character. The rise of the far-right internationally, the global economic crisis, the reemergence of trade war, the increasingly sharp geopolitical conflicts between the major capitalist powers—all of this goes unmentioned.

Sunkara’s “socialism” is devoid of internationalism and anti-militarism. Neither in his interview with the *Times* nor in his book does he mention the unending wars of American imperialism, the “war on terror,” the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Nor does he mention the plight of Julian Assange, which has likewise been ignored in *Jacobin*. This is organically connected to his support for the Democratic Party.

Third, nothing in Sunkara’s politics makes any genuine appeal to the working class and social anger. The class struggle is, for him, nothing more than an empty phrase, devoid of real material conflict. His concept of what constitutes a labor movement does not differ in the slightest

from that of the average AFL-CIO bureaucrat. Sunkara exudes complacency from every pore. “Now is the best time in human history to be alive,” he writes in his book, summing up his general outlook. The reality of social life for the vast majority of the population, the devastating impact of capitalist counter-revolution, the millions of people killed or turned into refugees by American imperialism—all of this is outside the vision of Bhaskar Sunkara. The growth of the class struggle is referred, if at all, only in the abstract—and entirely from the standpoint of promoting the pro-capitalist trade unions.

That Sunkara’s “socialism” resolves into support for the Democratic Party can come as a surprise only if one believes that the DSA represents some sort of alternative. In fact, it is and has always been a faction of the Democratic Party, which, with or without the involvement of Sunkara, is moving sharply to the right.

That the main role of the DSA is to contain growing social opposition within channels acceptable to the ruling class is openly stated by the *Times* columnists in their discussion following the interview. “This new new left, or new new new left, or whatever you want to call it,” says the Republican Douthat, “is much more politically sensible and realistic than certain versions that flowered in the late 60s and early 70s.”

All the columnists express their “worry about certain versions of radicalism, certain unwillingness to compromise,” in the words of Leonhardt. And all agree that Sunkara and the DSA do not belong to this category. “The leaders of this nascent socialist movement are trying to channel people away from that,” says Goldberg. “People in the DSA, Bhaskar, they’re very responsible in not encouraging that sort of thing.”

The growth of the class struggle will blow apart such organizations as the DSA and their international counterparts. Anyone drawn to them because of a mistaken view that they offer a path toward the socialist transformation of society will be disabused of this notion, sooner rather than later.

The revival of genuine socialism will be based on an assimilation of the great experiences of the 20th century and above all the history of the Trotskyist movement, represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party.



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