

A “socialism” for the New York Times: Jacobin founder Bhaskar Sunkara’s interview with Ross Douthat

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On July 16, the *New York Times* published an interview conducted by its columnist Ross Douthat with Bhaskar Sunkara, founding editor of *Jacobin*, president of the *Nation*, and for two decades a leading member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The episode of Douthat’s “Interesting Times” podcast ran under the headline “A Vision of a ‘Society Without Capitalism,’” followed by the telling subhead: “Can democratic socialism redeem the left without destroying capitalism?”

The question answers itself. The *Times*, the authoritative voice of the Democratic Party establishment, does not devote 29 pages to movements that threaten the social order. It devotes them to movements it is seeking to promote.

That Douthat was chosen for the assignment is itself significant. He is a right-wing Catholic conservative, a longtime intellectual voice of the Republican right. In the weeks since the interview with Sunkara was posted on the *Times* website, Douthat has been hired by Bari Weiss, the right-wing editor-in-chief of CBS News installed by pro-Trump billionaire David Ellison. Sunkara was given a lucrative post as a correspondent for “60 Minutes” after most of the staff had been purged.

The Douthat-Sunkara conversation was friendly to the point of coziness. Douthat opened by addressing Sunkara as “comrade” and the two discovered “common ground” on various issues. The tone throughout was that of individuals who agreed on far more than they differed.

Thirteen days before the interview appeared, President Donald Trump stood at Mount Rushmore and declared, in a speech marking the country’s 250th anniversary, “you can be loyal to Karl Marx or you can be loyal to America. You cannot be both.” He called communism a “cancer.”

The following day he promoted a video calling for “hardcore communist bastards” to be deported, including New York’s Democratic mayor and DSA member Zohran Mamdani.

Under these conditions, one of the DSA’s most prominent voices sat down with a conservative columnist of the *New York Times* to deliver a systematic, point-by-point assurance that the DSA was loyal to American capitalism, hostile to revolution, committed to the Democratic Party and a safe steward for the ruling class.

“Perfectly comfortable to sit by and wait”

What was perhaps most striking about the interview as a whole was the utter complacency that pervaded every word Sunkara uttered. The interview was conducted under conditions of an escalating campaign for dictatorship, an expanding global imperialist war and the extreme

concentration of wealth in the hands of a capitalist oligarchy.

Not one of these issues was addressed in 29 pages of conversation about the prospects for socialism. Fascism was not mentioned. Nor was Iran. The Trump administration itself was referenced to in passing. The life-and-death questions confronting the working class were simply not present, nor were the mass protests that have erupted in the United States, or the developing strike movement.

In their place was a mood of self-satisfaction. Adopting the persona of Voltaire’s Pangloss, Sunkara stated, “We are not living in the worst of all possible worlds.” Things, in Sunkara’s vision, are really not that bad.

Sunkara should speak for himself. In fact, he does, and for a privileged social layer of which he is a representative. The supporters of the recently elected “socialist” candidates, as he understands it, are “not necessarily the most oppressed.” In many cases, “they’re earning raises at higher than the level of inflation, but they still feel like they’re being squeezed.”

This is a candid self-portrait of the social milieu to which Sunkara directs himself: a fairly complacent upper-middle class. What this layer seeks is not the abolition of class society, but a more favorable distribution of wealth within the richest 10 percent, and a political voice that dignifies this aspiration with the name of socialism.

But Sunkara’s account of those voting for DSA candidates is warped by his own outlook. He looks at the masses of people who have turned out for these campaigns and sees his own reflection: comfortable individuals who merely “feel squeezed,” whose perception of their lives, he suggests, is “a little bit different than the reality.”

In reality, millions are voting for candidates who call themselves socialists because they are looking for a way to fight capitalism. Among them are broad sections of young people and workers, including many who once considered themselves securely middle class but have been profoundly radicalized by the genocide in Gaza, the buildup of dictatorship in the US and the obscene concentration of wealth.

Sunkara paints them all with his own complacent brush. This complacency found its most finished expression at the close of the interview. “My vision of a good society,” Sunkara declared, “might take centuries to enact, and I’m perfectly comfortable to sit by and wait in my hyperbolic [is this a joke, or a mistake for ‘hyperbaric’?] chamber.”

Within the living memory of people now alive, capitalism produced two world wars, fascism and the Holocaust. It is producing now a genocide broadcast by the media in real time, a global rearmament, an accelerating climate catastrophe and, in the United States, the open preparation of dictatorship.

The serious question posed by the present crisis is whether capitalist civilization can survive another 15 years. A man who surveys this landscape and pronounces himself “perfectly comfortable” to wait for centuries is disclosing a class position.

A program to the right of the Great Society

The content of Sunkara's program is calibrated to this social layer. He described it as "doses of socialism within capitalism," the "decommodification of certain goods," an expanded welfare state "not unlike Norway," and "selective nationalization, particularly of natural monopolies"—"even things like rail." He conceded at once that this "could be true of a lot of social democrats."

That is, he gestures toward certain social reforms. However, the paucity of his "socialism" becomes the more glaring the more he descends into specifics. His housing policy is "very heavily built around upzoning and making it easier for developers to build." His own illustrative proposal is a bargain with the real estate industry: "We're going to clear the way. We're going to allow you to create this big housing development. We're going to fight against the interests of local homeowners, and you build your big piece of housing." In exchange, Sunkara asks only for "some degree of rent stabilization" arriving only "after 30 years, after you have a reasonable return on investment."

His proposed fiscal program could have been written by the Brookings Institution or some other Democratic Party think tank: "taxes will have to go up on middle-class people," combined with the search for "efficiency in the existing American welfare state." This is the vocabulary of every austerity government of the past four decades. And the whole is governed by a general law that Sunkara states as: "any form of social democracy is grow-give. There needs to be a motor for economic investment. There needs to be profitability in order to have something to redistribute."

Asked what mechanism would compel corporations to invest productively, Sunkara offered "stronger unions and forms of sectoral and centralized bargaining," whose function he described as follows: a higher wage floor "will take the weakest companies in the field, it'll probably make them collapse," allow mid-field companies to "innovate," and leave the strongest with "excess profits that they could then invest to maintain their market share."

In Sunkara's utopian vision, the working class serves as a midwife for helping large companies "innovate" and ensure the continuation of the "excess profits" and "market share" of the gigantic corporations, while untold thousands of jobs are wiped out by the collapse of the "weakest companies," that is, small businesses.

Douthat asked the question, "Is democratic socialism compatible with capitalism?" Sunkara's reply: "In the long term, no. We're anticapitalist... But in the short term, while we're within a capitalist economy, of course, we need firms that are profitable, that are providing employment, that are providing taxation. So I think to govern in the short term as social democrats, we need profitable firms."

The "long term," as we have seen, is measured in centuries. For every timescale that matters to a living human being, the program is the administration of capitalism on the basis of its profitability.

It is worth measuring this "socialism" against the actual record of American capitalist politics. In 1965, Lyndon Johnson signed into law Medicare, Medicaid, federal aid to education and the food stamp program, alongside a major expansion of public housing and the civil rights acts, while the top marginal income tax rate stood at 70 percent and the corporate rate at 48 percent.

Johnson was a ruthless bourgeois politician and imperialist, then escalating the war against Vietnam. The Great Society itself was wrecked within half a decade on the contradiction between social reform at home and the global war-mongering of American imperialism.

However, the baseline program of the Democratic Party at the height of

the postwar boom, enacted by an imperialist president as a matter of routine capitalist statecraft, stands well to the left of what the founding editor of *Jacobin* now presents to the *New York Times* as the fighting program of "democratic socialism."

Nor does the comparison improve if one reaches further back. Norman Thomas's Socialist Party campaigned in 1932 on the nationalization of basic industry and the banks. John Dewey, a liberal philosopher and no Marxist, spent the same decade insisting that working people could achieve nothing without breaking from both capitalist parties.

Going back further, the People's Party (Populists) adopted their founding program in Omaha on July 4, 1892. It included government ownership of the railroads, the telegraph and the telephone; a graduated income tax; postal savings banks to break the grip of private bankers; and the reclamation of all land held by railroads and corporations "in excess of their actual needs." This was the program not of Marxists, but of ruined farmers and small proprietors, a movement of the middle classes being ground up by finance capital.

All of this is far to the left of anything proposed by Sunkara, who confines even his tepid suggestions of worker-owned businesses and public banks to the safety of "centuries" in the future.

A faction of the Democratic Party

The political purpose of the interview runs through every exchange. Sunkara is making an argument, addressed through Douthat, to the *New York Times* and the Democratic Party establishment: The DSA is no threat. It is respectable, it is moderate, and it can be relied upon.

The examples follow one after another. When Douthat raised the association of DSA candidates with abolishing the police, Sunkara pointed to the record: "Zohran Mamdani right now is administering a Police Department with over 30,000 armed men and women, and he's administering it, by many accounts, well." He drew the general lesson himself: "I think in practice, the experience of governance, of competing in elections is a moderating force on a lot of these issues."

The proof of the DSA's fitness for office, offered to a conservative columnist, is that its most prominent elected official is running the largest police force in the country to the satisfaction of the ruling class.

On artificial intelligence, Sunkara's one firm principle is to protect the competitive position of American capitalism: "It doesn't make sense to tank certain US companies if there's going to be other companies creating the same disruption that are coming from other parts of the world." He endorsed the proposal for government equity stakes in AI companies, "touted by figures as varied as Bernie Sanders and Steve Bannon," a coming together of the "socialist" senator and the fascist ideologue, which he offered without comment.

On immigration, Sunkara presented himself as "a very orthodox leftist" who wanted to "abolish ICE." The demand was qualified in the same breath: "Obviously, we still need some sort of border enforcement and customs, but at least go back to the norm before ICE."

Having registered what he called "that radical demand," he devoted most of his answer to praising Dan Osborn, the Senate candidate in Nebraska, whose opening line before audiences of Trump voters, is, as Sunkara put it: "I agree with Donald Trump. We need a strong border." Sunkara suggested that of the two—he and the right-wing, pro-war Democrat Osborn—Osborn was the more "progressive."

On the Biden administration, Sunkara declared, "I hate to defend Biden," and then proceeded to do so. Biden's industrial policy during the height of the pandemic created "hundreds of thousands of new manufacturing jobs" while the rest of the capitalist world shed them. This

when Biden was implementing what Trump began—namely, the removal of all restraints on the spread of Covid. “Biden, I think, did it right,” Sunkara proclaimed. “I think his failures were fundamentally the failure to communicate.” Trump himself received credit for “bringing up the specter of industrial policy and tariffs in 2016.”

The economic nationalism of the two administrations, which is the preparation of the American economy for war, was endorsed wholesale. What Biden lacked, in this account, was not a different policy, but a better salesman, and when Douthat suggested that Mamdani supplied the salesmanship that “an aging, decrepit Joe Biden couldn’t,” Sunkara agreed: “I would say that’s at least part of it.”

That brought the interview to the question that concerns the Democratic Party above all others: war. Here what Sunkara said matters less than what he did not.

On Gaza, he did not use the word genocide. “Tens of thousands of people have just been killed in Gaza,” he said, a fraction of the actual toll. Nowhere did he mention that the bombs were American, supplied by a Democratic administration. What he explained instead is the use to which the issue is put: “it’s being used to separate Democrats who are committed to an old political establishment, including the foreign policy establishment, and Democrats who are better.”

Douthat translated: a pro-Palestinian stance marked a candidate as “a reliable vote for restructuring the Democratic Party overall.” Sunkara agreed. The revulsion of an entire generation against the extermination of a people was presented as a sorting device in Democratic primaries.

More significant still were the silences. In 29 pages, Iran was never mentioned. The war against Russia was never mentioned, nor was Ukraine, nor NATO, nor the preparations for war with China, nor the trillion-dollar Pentagon budget.

For the ruling class, no question stands higher than war. A “socialist” tendency that maintains total silence on the war plans of American imperialism, while reducing US-Israeli genocide to an instrument of Democratic Party factionalism, is communicating something the *Times* understands perfectly: on the decisive question, the DSA will not be a problem.

The DSA, Harrington and the “reconciliation of liberalism and socialism”

The socialism Sunkara presented to the *Times* has no relationship to the working class or the class struggle. Workers appeared in the interview as voters, taxpayers and consumers of social programs, never as a class in conflict with capital, never as the social force on which the socialist movement rests. What Sunkara outlined was not a program for the overthrow of capitalism, but the program of the DSA in power: the administration of the capitalist state, its police, its budgets and its wars, under a “socialist” label.

He stated the theoretical formula near the top of the interview: “American socialists are way more liberal than they themselves think... There’s been a sort of reconciliation of liberalism and socialism.”

An entire century of struggle between Marxism and liberalism—over the state, over war, over whether the working class required its own party—was dissolved into a “sort of reconciliation.” Those voting for DSA candidates believe they are voting for socialists. Their publicist assured the *New York Times* they are mistaken. It would be difficult to state the DSA’s function more precisely.

Sunkara rooted this politics in a tradition. He was politicized, he said, “in the library books, reading books by people like Irving Howe, by Michael Harrington.” Harrington, he told Douthat, “was part of the

organic establishment, to the left of social democracy, people who just wanted to make capitalism a little bit more humane—but also, you could say, to the right of a certain Leninism.”

Harrington was the central figure of a tendency, descended from Max Shachtman’s 1940 break with Trotskyism, that spent the postwar decades moving steadily to the right, into the anticommunist apparatus of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the orbit of the State Department. Its strategic doctrine was “realignment”: the dissolution of independent socialist politics into the Democratic Party, summarized in Harrington’s formula of seeking the “left wing of the possible.” The “possible” being defined at every point by what the Democratic Party, the trade union apparatus and the ruling class would permit.

When the test came over Vietnam, deference to George Meany’s pro-war AFL-CIO prevailed. Harrington opposed the demand for withdrawal for years and helped organize Negotiations Now, a front group whose principal function was to denounce the antiwar movement as “objectively pro-Communist.” The DSA, founded in 1982, carried this politics forward intact.

As for the “certain Leninism,” Douthat supplied the translation: “Stalin. To the right of Joseph Stalin.” Sunkara’s answer: “Of course, as we should all aspire to be.” So he pledged to be “to the right” of the man responsible for the greatest slaughter of revolutionaries in history.

The amalgam of Leninism with Stalinism is the foundational lie shared by Stalinist and imperialist historiography alike. It is refuted by the entire history of the Trotskyist Left Opposition and Fourth International, whose cadre were exterminated by Stalin precisely because they embodied the continuity of Leninism, that is, revolutionary internationalism.

Sunkara, who slanders Leninism as Stalinism, in fact shares a great deal with Stalinism. In the United States, the cardinal service of the Communist Party to American capitalism was the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party under the banner of the popular front. In his book *The Socialist Manifesto*, Sunkara upholds precisely this policy of the CP in the 1930s as a model, counterposing it favorably to the Socialist Party of the day, which still ran candidates independently of and against Roosevelt.

Sunkara’s objection to Stalinism is not that it became an openly counter-revolutionary force, exterminated the Bolshevik leadership, culminating in the assassination of Trotsky in 1940, but that it remained associated, however fraudulently, with the Russian Revolution. What he retains from it is what the American ruling class always found most useful: the channeling of every movement of workers and youth back into the Democratic Party.

A brief to the ruling class

Read as a whole, the interview is a brief, submitted to the ruling class through its principal newspaper, at a moment when sections of that class are debating what to do about the DSA. Trump’s answer is to criminalize it, deport it, “cut it out.” The *Times*’ answer, embodied in Douthat’s courteous curiosity, is to examine it, domesticate it, employ it.

But the two answers are not fixed antipodes. The one can shift into the other with extraordinary speed. The Democratic Party is no less hostile to socialism than Trump, and there is no section of the ruling class that will tolerate the slightest inroads into its wealth and power. The candidates of the DSA, useful today for channeling popular anger back into the Democratic Party, can be swept aside and criminalized tomorrow if their radical rhetoric is judged too dangerous under conditions of mass political radicalization among workers and youth.

The entire history of the 20th century testifies to how quickly the ruling

class discards its “left” auxiliaries once they have served their purpose, or once the movement they were meant to contain escapes their control. For such a turn, figures like Sunkara, who respond to the threats of dictatorship by pledging their reliability to the state, are completely unprepared and are preparing no one.

Millions of workers and young people are beginning to draw revolutionary conclusions from a social order that offers them war, dictatorship and extreme inequality. The votes for candidates who call themselves socialists are an initial expression of this radicalization, but the DSA, as a faction of the Democratic Party, is organically incapable of addressing the objective crisis that is driving it. Its program of minor social reforms within the framework of the capitalist system—without touching the wealth of the oligarchy, without the class struggle, without any challenge to the state—is historically and politically bankrupt.

Genuine socialism is not a redistributive preference on the part of those already comfortable, but the revolutionary movement of the international working class against the capitalist system. Its first condition is the political independence of the working class from the Democratic Party and every party of the ruling class. Against dictatorship and war it advances not the better administration of the capitalist state, but its abolition and the reorganization of economic life on socialist foundations by the working class itself.

The task is not to “redeem the left without destroying capitalism.” It is to build in the working class a revolutionary leadership that treats socialism not as a centuries-distant aspiration, but as the practical program of our time.



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