

Don't blame the socialists

A RESPONSE TO SHERI BERMAN

JOANNE BARKAN

Sheri Berman has written an exhortation to the “present day” democratic socialist Left in the “Western world” to get over “the loss of its vision of a postcapitalist society,” to stop denigrating efforts to reform capitalism, and to begin agitating for social democratic policies, such as affordable health care, government-supported job retraining, and investment in education (“Unheralded Battle: The Left, Social Democracy, and Democratic Socialism,” *Dissent*, Winter 2009). For Berman, the Left will go on failing to respond to political challenges unless democratic socialists start to act like social democrats.

My jaw drops. Didn't democratic socialists begin doing that decades ago? In the United States, haven't they by now provided many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of troops and leaders to the labor movement, health care reform, and public education? When is the last time a democratic socialist said, “I won't support public day care because it will delay the collapse of capitalism”? The question sounds absurd. Reform work and speculation about democratic socialism—Irving Howe called them “the near and the far”—have coexisted comfortably for more than a political generation. So who in the Western world is Berman writing about?

Berman's lack of specificity is a major problem. She uses “the left” and “the West” as generics that never need to be broken into their constituent elements; she uses “social democrat” and “democratic socialist” as if they've referred to identical politics everywhere for the last 110 years. But a lack of specificity doesn't account for this essay's greatest shortcoming: Berman has the post-sixties history of the democratic Left in the United States (and probably in many Western European countries as well) completely wrong.

I'll begin where she does.

Berman devotes the first 40 percent of her article to the “backstory” of the conflict between democratic socialists and social democrats from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s—a conflict, she argues, that has shaped the contemporary Left in the West. Her concise version of this early history is very good. Yet she would have done better to bill it as an account of the genesis and development of the conflict in Europe: it doesn't apply to the Western world in general, as she proposes. For example, it doesn't apply well to the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, when the central intra-left struggle was between the Leninists and the democratic Left. In the abstract, I don't object to

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Berman's isolating the story of socialists vs. social democrats from the larger saga of the Left even though non-democratic groups (especially the communist parties of the Third International) played a pivotal role. Pulling out one strand of the Left's tangled history can be useful, especially when the strand chosen by Berman is the more honorable. But to do this successfully would have required much more attention to the specific features of individual countries. Ignoring the United States in this early part of her article doesn't work because she suddenly makes it the focus of the next part.

Berman uses the first four paragraphs of her second section, "The Postwar World," to describe the remarkable (but imperfect) successes of social democratic governance. These paragraphs, too, best describe Western Europe. Then she abruptly shifts to the writings of American socialist leader Michael Harrington and uses him as her case in point (she mentions no one else): democratic socialists are still leading part of the Left astray. She quotes from several of Harrington's books (published between 1968 and 1986) on the inability of capitalism to meet people's needs and the system's inevitable demise. Berman cites Harrington correctly and concludes this:

The problem with such statements and the larger worldview that lay behind them is not merely that they were wrong, but also that they were counterproductive. Convinced that a better world had to await capitalism's demise, Harrington devoted much of his intellectual and political energy to convincing his readers that capitalism's apparent triumphs were fictional and that the system was really on its way out. And he sought to persuade the left that its chief task was not to reform and humanize capitalism but rather to press for its passing....

... By insisting that true justice could come only with capitalism's elimination, democratic socialists implicitly (and often explicitly) denigrated efforts at taming it—thus limiting the left's cohesiveness and appeal and its ability to offer practical benefits to suffering populations in the short and mid term.

Is this Michael Harrington the labor union stalwart, the organizer who focused on uniting the Left's disparate movements—minorities,

unionists, feminists, and environmentalists—into a coalition for social democratic reforms? Is this the indefatigable deviser of short- and mid-term programs? Mr. "Left Wing of the Possible"? Berman claims that he spent much of his energy on convincing his readers not to bother with reforms. In my estimation, he spent most of his energy on convincing leftists to become reform activists. As a leader in Norman Thomas's Socialist Party in the 1960s, he supported the realignment strategy of working within the Democratic Party—a strategy for socialists who knew the value of reforming capitalism. In the 1970s and in the 1980s until he died, he devoted himself to building a new organization geared to reformist activism (first called the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, then the Democratic Socialists of America). His leftist detractors considered him too thoroughly social democratic; they also thought he was too great an admirer of Sweden (Berman's touchstone for successful social democracy—and mine).

So how to account for the quotations that Berman has selected from several of Harrington's sixteen books? He offered, I think, a politics (and an organization) that didn't exclude anyone on the democratic Left, that allowed democratic socialists to hold together their desire for a postcapitalist society and their reform activism during a long post-sixties transition. Strife between democratic socialists and social democrats dissolved during this period because they were doing the same reform work; they shared goals for the foreseeable future. They valued Harrington most for his optimistic energy and his tenacious movement building. Many socialists concluded that the "socialist vision" was becoming increasingly irrelevant to their political lives. When activists found that the "s" word interfered with their organizing, they stopped identifying themselves as socialists and went on with their work. Do some still think of themselves as socialists? Undoubtedly, but that in no way mars their social democratic credentials.

Let me be clear: I am not saying that Michael Harrington thought of himself as providing a way-station politics. He regularly invoked his vision of democratic socialism, and Berman correctly argues that his vision was vague, unconvincing. My point is that it didn't matter: his

theorizing didn't detract from his important practical political work and other writings. Moreover, he died twenty years ago. Although no one knows how his thinking might have evolved, it's not plausible that it would have included crusading against social democracy. It's worth noting that his most enthusiastic admirers (and readers) outside the United States were social democrats in northern Europe, especially Sweden. They were able to reconcile his critique of capitalism with their concept of a good society.

Berman could have found what she needed to know about Harrington in his memoirs, biographies of him, and documents produced by the organizations he worked in. But how did she miss *everything* the democratic Left has been doing for three decades? Disregarding it has given Berman an upside-down interpretation of what's happening now. Consider the two quotations below, which come, respectively, from the beginning and the concluding section of her article:

The left, which until relatively recently had seemed adrift across much of the Western world, lacking in coherent and convincing responses to globalization and neoliberalism, appears once again poised for a comeback, as citizens yearn for stability and security in difficult times....

...American leftists must try to do what the Scandinavians have done: develop a program that pro-

motes growth and social solidarity together, rather than forcing a choice between them.

According to Berman, the opportunity for social democratic reform in the United States has existed in recent decades, but "American leftists" have had nothing positive to offer. I'd argue the opposite. Since, say, Representative Ron Dellums (D-CA and a member of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee) drafted a bill in the U.S. Congress for a national health service some thirty years ago, we have been awash with ideas about building social democracy in this country. *Dissent*, the *American Prospect*, *In These Times*, the *Nation*, and a dozen other left periodicals, along with think tanks like the Economic Policy Institute, have continually produced policy proposals and descriptions of reform efforts; leftists have written scores of books on reforms. But from the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 to the implosion of the financial system last fall, free market ideology ruled. The current economic crisis has created the first significant opening since Lyndon Johnson signed the Medicare bill into law in 1965. If Berman looks around now, she'll see that the democratic Left, *which includes the socialists*—everywhere from labor unions to women's organizations to environmental groups—is mobilized.

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SHERI BERMAN *replies*

Let me begin by thanking Joanne Barkan for her thoughtful comments. On many points we agree, but on several big ones we do not—about the distinctiveness of the social democratic tradition, its superiority to other traditions on the democratic Left, and the requirements for the Left's success today and in the future.

Barkan is bothered by my linkage of Michael Harrington's work, and American politics more generally, to older European political debates. But that was precisely the topic the editors of *Dissent* asked me to address—and it was a chal-

lenge I accepted because I do believe there are striking similarities between the two and that the older stories I tell have contemporary relevance and, in Barkan's words, "apply to the Western world in general." Let me start by reiterating some key points.

As I argued in my original essay (and in my book *The Primacy of Politics*), in the late nineteenth century the democratic Left split into two camps over how to think about capitalism and reform work. On one side stood what we might now call democratic socialists, such as

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Karl Kautsky. Kautsky, like Harrington later on, cared deeply about workers and the underprivileged and supported practical reforms to alleviate their suffering. But neither he nor his followers connected such reforms to the achievement of the Left's ultimate goals. This attitude made it difficult for the German Social Democratic Party to devise a practical strategy for using state power to transform Germany's political economy—and as a result the SPD, along with other similarly burdened parties, dithered during Europe's crises from 1918 to 1933. This dithering, in turn, contributed to the Left's losing out to bolder and cannier political groups that were able to offer voters explanations for and answers to their problems.

Opposed to the democratic socialists stood what I have called early social democrats, such as Eduard Bernstein. Although Bernstein and Kautsky had once worked closely together, they came to differ greatly over the correct path forward for the Left. Bernstein, and those who followed in his footsteps, believed that separating theory and praxis was unwise and impractical. They saw reforms as not merely ameliorative measures, capable of easing suffering while people waited around for the end of capitalism, but rather as the stuff of socialism itself—the means that would be used to transform the existing world.

Sweden's Social Democratic Party (SAP) eventually became the standard-bearer for this camp. The key to the Swedish social democrats' success was in deciding that the future lay *through* capitalism rather than *beyond* it—and that it was the Left's task to figure out how to maximize markets' benefits while limiting their costs. The SAP started thinking seriously along these lines as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. By the time the Great Depression hit, they had at hand a powerful and coherent ideology and set of policies that they could sell to a desperate public. This was the key to their great electoral victory in 1932 and the foundation upon which their future political dominance was built.

So what relevance, if any, does this ancient European history have for the United States today? A lot. The original democratic socialists believed that capitalism was fundamentally evil and that so long as it existed one might be able to improve living conditions somewhat

but could not create a truly better world. This is the tradition that I think Harrington belongs to, and I agree that it has diminished in power and significance over the last several decades (although it continues to live on in parts of the anti-globalization movement and elsewhere).

Barkan agrees that Harrington's vision of post-capitalist democratic socialism was "vague" and "unconvincing," but says this "didn't matter" because "his theorizing didn't detract from his important practical political work and other writings." But this, I think, is terribly wrong and a key difference between Barkan and me. It was precisely such a split between theory and praxis that helped doom the SPD and other parties to oblivion during the interwar years, and it has had a similar (if obviously less dangerous) impact in our own time. During the late twentieth century, the Left stopped thinking practically about long-term strategy and transformation. For some, like Harrington, this was because fundamental transformation required the elimination of capitalism. For others, it was because reforms alone came to be seen as enough. But as the Left dithered, the Right was active, and the mantle of transformation passed from one to the other. Barkan contrasts the rise of "free market ideology" during the 1980s with the "scores of books leftists [wrote] on reforms." Note the contrast: while the Left was agitating for reforms, the right was developing an ideology and associated political movement. I don't want to belittle reform work, which is obviously crucial, but it was precisely the Right's larger vision and strategy for economic, social, and political transformation that helped it shift the world's political economy in a market-fundamentalist direction and put the Left on the defensive during the late twentieth century.

Today the European and American Lefts are again facing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In the midst of an extraordinary economic crisis that has discredited free-market ideology to an extent impossible to imagine even a year ago, a Democratic president has been elected with an explicit mandate to stop the bleeding and make things right. Across the United States, Europe, and much of the rest of the world, people have again begun to recognize that governments should not be merely "night watchmen" and that when markets are left to their own devices the results can be disastrous. This is precisely

the moment that leftists have spent generations waiting for, and a serious social democratic movement would be ready for it with well-considered plans not simply to get the economy going again but to rewrite the rules of capitalist political economies in a progressive spirit. Unfortunately, however, what is available is merely a laundry list of disconnected (if worthy) reforms. And this is at least partly due, I believe, to the Left's loss of appreciation for social democracy's original insights: that capitalism is the only economic game in town; that the Left's energies, both intellectual and practical, should be devoted to taming and restructuring it; and that reforms should not be viewed *merely* as ameliorative or in a piecemeal fashion, but must instead be explicitly integrated into a larger economic and political strategy. This need—for a realistic, coherent, and distinctively left strategy—is not, as Barkan seems to think, unimportant. It is what makes some movements optimistic and dynamic and others defensive and past their prime; it is central to the Left's future as it has been to its past.

Despite the shocking conservatism of its senior economic appointments, the Obama administration may surprise us by using its brief moment in the sun to accomplish many things the Left has long desired. But if the administration does so, it will be thanks largely to the chance appearance and smart choices of a uniquely charismatic and skilled leader, not to the intellectual and political groundwork prepared by the democratic Left in the United States and elsewhere. Any successes, therefore, are less likely to be attributed to the Left or seen as a vindication of the need for a renewed taming of capitalism and restructuring of its relationship to the state, but instead viewed as a vindication that all that was needed was some tinkering and a reigning in of excesses. And for that, despite his many and remarkable virtues, Michael Harrington and the tradition he embodied are partly responsible.

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