

Notes On Electoralism

A consistent logic dictates that one's approach to electoral politics is dependent on exactly what their aims are. Understanding the connection between your aims and your tools is absolutely vital to effectively mobilizing. Depending on this factor, participation in electoral politics could prove essential, a net positive, inconsequential, or outright counter-intuitive.

However, the purpose of this piece will not be questioning whether or not electoralism is "useful", as that's a rather moot question with no one single answer. There are plenty of anti-electoralist arguments that I could make which would be completely meaningless to a non-communist, that's just the nature of the topic. The purpose of this piece is to look at movements *which have something to gain* from electoral politics, and conduct an investigation into the implications for said movements.

For the purpose of making a coherent argument, I will be arguing from a possibilist lens, suspending my usual stances to make observations from a more relevant position. This thought experiment should hopefully dissect the logic underpinning gradualist left-wing movements, and also explain why certain ones are more successful than others. This will also help explain the reasons underpinning conflicts within progressive/center-left circles, and help those on each side of the rift understand the other.

Social Democracy

Social democracy (or more accurately, social liberalism) is the left-wing movement most commonly associated with electoral politics. To define it succinctly, social democracy promotes the utilization of political institutions to keep market forces in check.

Neither hoping for capitalism's demise nor worshipping the market uncritically, [social democrats] argued that the market's anarchic and destructive powers could and should be fettered at the same time that its ability to produce unprecedented material bounty was exploited. They thus came to champion a real "third way" between laissez-faire liberalism and Soviet communism based on a belief that political forces must be able to triumph over economic ones. (Berman 2005, 12)

The definition alone should give you an idea of the central role parliaments play for social democrats, but let us elaborate further on exactly what this looks like.

To do this, we're going to defer to Kenneth Galbraith, an economist who has written extensively on the dynamic between market power and political power.

The first question is: what problems do market forces pose?

If there are only a handful of firms in the typical industry, and if they recognize their interdependence, as they must both for profit and for survival, then privately exercised economic power is less the exception than the rule in the economy. It is also of a piece with the power anciently associated with monopoly. This was the clear conclusion of the new ideas. And the fact of such power, once identified by the theory, could readily be verified by observation.

The executives of the United States Steel Corporation, the longtime price leaders in the steel industry, do have authority to raise and lower the prices they charge for their own steel. When they exercise that power the rest of the industry normally follows. The same executives make decisions on where to build new plants and how much plant to build, what to pay in dividends and, subject to a periodic trial of strength with the union, what wages to pay. They have latitude on all of these matters; they are not the automatons of market forces. These decisions also affect the wealth and income of hundreds of thousands of people. As with steel so with the great core of American industry. The new theory suggested the existence of such power; the eye confirmed it. (Galbraith 50-51)

The second question: what can be done to counter said market forces?

Galbraith points to the democratic state as a venue for those without economic power to stand their ground, using what he calls "countervailing power":

In fact, the support of countervailing power has become in modern times perhaps the major domestic peacetime function of the federal government. Labor sought and received it in the protection and assistance which the Wagner Act provided to union organization. Farmers sought and received it in the form of federal price supports to their markets — a direct subsidy of market power. Unorganized workers have sought and received it in the form of minimum wage legislation. The bituminous-coal mines sought and received it in the Bituminous Coal Conservation Act of 1935 and the National Bituminous Coal Act of 1937. These measures, all designed to give a group a market power it did not have before, comprised the most important legislative acts of the New Deal.

All of these examples were acts of concrete acts of legislation which could have only been realized due to civic participation. Union leaders had to lobby, citizens had to vote, and politicians had to draft up bills their peers would be willing to vote in favor of.

Galbraith's market is one based on *agonism*, not *antagonism*. Yes, there is competition between groups over control of policy, but the competition is underlined by a mutual understanding of the necessity of coexistence. Each group seeks to make "make capitalism work for them", but still presumes capitalism as a given.

To the social democrat, every action taken within the parliamentary sphere provides an opportunity to get the upper hand in negotiations. And to an extent, this is objectively true. As seen with the above examples cited by Galbraith, collective bargaining is a centerpiece of modern liberalism. Cutting deals and compromising is the name of the game, and it's all underlined by a **conciliatory approach** to politics. They mesh well with parliaments because

they're willing to participate in good faith and trust other actors to do the same.

But it should be noted that collective bargaining is still bargaining; one can only get anything out of it if their demands are *by definition* negotiable. The process undeniably exists, but one has to have a use for it to take advantage of it. For the social democrats, this is no problem; the principle of countervailance holds that each legislative milestone marks a victory in and of itself. But, as we're going to see, this isn't always the case.

Democratic Socialism

On the other side of the coin we have democratic socialism. "Democratic socialism" has become a buzzword of sorts, but for the purpose of this, we're going to use the term to refer to gradualist socialism.

One of the earliest and most influential examples of a gradualist movement was the Fabian Society, who defined their task as such:

In every field the characteristic Fabian policy has been that of permeation. In accordance with their doctrine of continuity the Fabians set out to develop existing institutions by permeating with this or that element of their doctrine those who had power to influence policy, e.g. the civil service, the political parties, the professions, the administration of business, and local government. It was part of their creed that no sharp line could be drawn between socialists and non-socialists and that many who would not call themselves socialists could be persuaded to help with particular reforms making for socialism. (Cole 1932)

The purpose of parliamentary action within this context would be to establish the preconditions of socialism. Democratic socialists view parliamentary action as a vehicle for accomplishing this by exploiting the democratic nature of said parliaments.

In Germany at present, Social Democracy's most effective means of asserting its demands, apart from propaganda by voice and pen, is the Reichstag (legislative) franchise. The influence of this franchise is so great that it has extended even to those bodies from which the working class is excluded by a property qualification or a system of class franchise; for even here the parties must pay attention to the Reichstag electors. If the Reichstag franchise were immune from attack, there might be some justification for treating the question of the franchise for the other bodies as relatively unimportant, though even then it would be a mistake to make light of it. But the Reichstag franchise is not secure at all Governments and government parties will certainly not take the decision to change it lightly, for they will be aware that such a step would inevitably cause hatred and bitterness amongst the mass of German workers, which they would show in a very uncomfortable way on suitable occasions. The socialist movement is too strong, and the political self-consciousness of the German workers is too highly developed, to be dealt with in a cavalier fashion. (Bernstein 1899, 184)

Expanding on this logic, Bernstein drafts three short-term goals for the socialist movement (176):

1. Expanding democracy and providing resistance to reactionary institutions/movements
2. Establishing immediate protections for workers
3. Building up workers' cooperatives and other public institutions

What does this look like in practice? That's a question with a more complex answer than one might presume. "All democratic socialists agree on the need for a democratic alternative to capitalism. There is no consensus as yet as to what that alternative should look like." (Schweickart 2007) This lack of a consensus can be attributed to many factors:

- The social democratic project has been completed, the democratic socialist one has not.
- There isn't the same type of unifying theory that Marxism has, leading to a lot of different opinions regarding the specifics.
- The term itself is rather vaguely defined, with a lot of differing movements claiming the mantle.

However, history does provide some precedent which may allow us to piece things together; we've already touched on the work of the Fabians, but that's mostly theoretical. I'd say there's two other places to look, Leninism (dealing with the question of obtaining political power) and market socialism (dealing with the question of utilizing political power).

Leninism might seem like an odd (and a rather objectionable) parallel to draw, but there is a connection to be made regarding how both view parliaments as an instrument for **obtaining political power**:

Criticism—the most keen, ruthless and uncompromising criticism—should be directed, not against parliamentarianism or parliamentary activities, but against those leaders who are unable—and still more against those who are unwilling—to utilise parliamentary elections and the parliamentary rostrum in a revolutionary and communist manner. Only such criticism—combined, of course, with the dismissal of incapable leaders and their replacement by capable ones—will constitute useful and fruitful revolutionary work that will simultaneously train the “leaders” to be worthy of the working class and of all working people, and train the masses to be able properly to understand the political situation and the often very complicated and intricate tasks that spring from that situation. (Lenin 1920)

The Fourth International does not discard the program of the old “minimal” demands to the degree to which these have preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness. Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But it carries on this day-to-day work within the framework of the correct actual, that is, revolutionary perspective. Insofar as the old, partial, “minimal” demands of the masses clash with the destructive and degrading tendencies of decadent capitalism – and this occurs at each step – the Fourth International advances a system of transitional demands, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very bases of the bourgeois regime. The old “minimal program” is superseded by the transitional program, the task of which lies

*in systematic mobilization of the masses for the proletarian revolution.
(Trotsky 1938)*

Leninists held that while electoralism was far from sufficient, it still had its uses in laying the foundation for a revolutionary movement. Each electoral victory marked not a victory for the movement, but rather instead a tactical opportunity.

This is to be expected considering how incredibly influential Lenin was on the theory of left-wing political organization. However, one should not go too far in drawing comparisons. The Leninist programme of old was much more radical in its aims, because it originated in an era where labor unions and parliaments were not as thoroughly integrated into capitalism.

Whereas the Leninists were ultimately interested in the outright abolition of the capitalist mode of production, democratic socialists seem to be more focused on workplace democracy as their demand. This is only natural, considering that the tools available to modern electoral movements are moreso suited to that end, and will attract people interested in such ends. One need only look at the state of remaining Marxist-Leninist parties in western countries to see this.

What connects these two strategies is the attitude, not the content. Democratic socialists may not be interested in communist ends, but they maintain the same militant outlook towards parliamentary institutions. There's still an underlying narrative of class-war (albeit a non-Marxist one) and an essentially **combative approach** to politics. To the democratic socialist, there is an upper class which has interests diametrically and fundamentally opposed to that of the working class; for social democrats this is either not the case or less central to their outlook.

All this gives the class struggle another form. It works today more as a potential than as an active force, more by the knowledge of what it might be than by actual manifestation. Politically as well as economically it is fought by sections or divisions, and often in forms which are the reverse of what they ought to be according to the letter, so that it might appear as if it were not the social classes that contest with one another the control of legislation, but rather the legislators that fight for the satisfaction of the classes. But the class struggle is no less a reality because it has taken the shape of continuous barter and compromise. (Bernstein 1897)

Participation is conditional; cynicism regarding the existing institutions means democratic socialists don't have the same loyalty to the process that social democrats do. If the electoral route appears to be at a standstill, the democratic socialist has a lot less hesitation to give it up and seek other avenues.

Of course, power is useless if you fail to leverage it. Discarding the various theories of Marxism, democratic socialists have to develop an alternative framework to work off of. What we're going to see is that there seems to be a sort of natural affinity between gradualists and market socialism, the latter often giving the former an inspiration on how to **use political power**.

The marriage between these schools of thought is present across all sorts of thinkers both old and new. Cole and the Fabians often toyed with the idea of consumer and producer co-operatives, while modern market socialists such as Schweickart and Cockshott have often shown an affinity towards democratic socialism.

In addition, there's the element of expectation to consider. By definition, a gradualist puts serious stock into the idea of a socialist society that looks different from our own.

This is an *expectation*, so there's a degree of confidence underlying it. Such an expectation isn't as central to social democracy. There might be an optimistic outlook regarding the mixed economy and the expansion of social spending and perhaps some entertaining of a distant vision of socialism, but this is a far cry from an expectation.

Political decisions are made around this expectation (or lack thereof). If one takes the idea of a future co-operative society seriously, immediate victories are interpreted within the context of a larger process. On the other hand, taking said victories at face value means that each one holds more weight, and that there's a larger investment in the present.

- the goal of gradualism is to set up the preconditions for socialism, electoralism gives an opportunity to build structures
 - neo-leninist in a sense, but much less radical due to the changed roles of both unions and political parties in the modern era
 - *Should We Participate in Bourgeois Parliaments?*
 - *Socialism from Below*
- why market socialism often goes hand in hand with democratic socialism
 - *Guild Socialism*
 - *After Capitalism*

The Rift

- Why the rift?
 - the mixed economy coming into place is why we see a split between demsoc and socdem

Addendum: A Rose By Any Other Name

- democracies are inherently bipolar
 - two-party versus coalition systems
- DSA in theory/DSA in practice

- the bernie effect
 - dissonance
- why the independent left cannot work

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Everywhere there is action for reform, action for social progress, action for the victory of democracy. 'They study the details of topical problems and look for ways and means of using them to push the development of society in a social direction.' I wrote this just a year ago, and I know of no facts that might induce me to delete a word of it. (Bernstein 188)