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by ANDREW LEVINE

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Behold, Socialism!

The news is out: “millennials” hold socialism in high regard.

The Sanders campaign seems to have brought the idea, or at least the word, back in from the margins and made it appealing. Two years on, with midterm elections looming, others have picked up the ball and are running with it.

This is good news, even if it is far from clear what today’s newly minted “democratic socialists” have in mind — beyond opposition to capitalism or perhaps only to prevailing forms of capitalism. Because “socialism” can mean all kinds of things or nothing very specific at all, there are a lot of possibilities.

This has been the case ever since Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) brought the word into common usage. With self-identified socialists missing from mainstream American politics for many generations, the ambiguities and imprecisions that have clustered around the notion from Day One are especially severe nowadays.

Contestation over what socialism is has given rise to problems in the past, and will likely do so again. For here and now, though, it may actually be best just to let the word in and see what comes out.

We mustn’t wait too long, however. What is going on now may be salutary, but there are limits; there can be too much of a good thing.

What there is plenty of now is creative enthusiasm. It should be encouraged and nurtured, not stifled by calls for more precision than circumstances warrant or by efforts to bring disparate views into line.

If all goes well, clarity will follow, and a workable consensus will emerge. Meanwhile, Job Number One is to fan the flames.

In his first run for the White House, Barack Obama, got political juices flowing – to a degree not seen in any subsequent election until now. “Socialism,” the word, had nothing to do with any of it; neither did the ideas that the word normally denotes.

Obama, the candidate, was like a Rorschach inkblot; people saw what they wanted to see – they saw their own hopes for change. What many of them saw was far ahead of anything Obama was likely to offer.

Anyone who had been paying attention knew that corporate America had vetted him closely, and that he had passed all their tests with flying colors. Not much “hope” or “change” there!

But in a country riddled with the legacies of slavery and segregation about to elect its first African American president, and with passions running high, most “progressives” didn’t mind.

Once Obama was in office, reality set in and Obamamania diminished; a year later it had become a distant memory. However the longings it expressed survived; Occupy Wall Street and the kindred movements it inspired demonstrate that.

Not surprisingly, the pillars of the political class would have none of it.

Had Hillary Clinton been president instead of Obama, the Forces of Order would, in all likelihood, have been let loose. The unhinged frenzy of the Clintonites who are now ratcheting up long dormant Cold War animosities, would have been unleashed sooner against peaceful demonstrators in Zuccotti Park.

Obama, however, is cut from a different cloth. His political stance was no better than Clinton’s, but he was wise enough to wait Occupy out, and then repress it gently. The 2012 electoral circus then followed, and the flame expired.

Before it did, when hope and change still seemed in the offing, talk of a world beyond capitalism was no less rare than it had been for decades. The only exceptions were *alte bebitzers* like the ones Woody Allen described in “Annie Hall”: old guys “with saliva dribbling out of their mouths, who would wander into cafeterias with shopping bags screaming about socialism.”

Outside tiny sectarian circles where nothing changes, the last time anyone younger than a million took socialism seriously was in the late sixties and early seventies.

Even so, socialism was not foremost on peoples' minds in the large, militant, overwhelmingly white student movement that arose in opposition to the Vietnam War. The idea had not gone missing, but it was a secondary concern.

Thanks to the draft and the "counterculture," the student movement drew in non-student youth too – from less privileged sectors of the working class and from the military. It had allies over thirty as well.

Peace, justice, and solidarity with imperialism's victims in Vietnam and throughout the Third World were the main concerns, but socialism mattered too. It was not just that "socialist" countries were, in their own feeble ways, aiding the Vietnamese. More importantly, as the war dragged on, an anti-imperialist, and therefore implicitly anti-capitalist, consciousness took hold.

Also, plenty of young, and not so young, people became increasingly averse to prevailing bourgeois norms; many of them became anti-capitalists on those grounds as well.

The (mainly) student movement of the time was allied with, but distinct from, a contemporaneous black power movement and from similar ventures undertaken by other "minority" groups.

Much like the (mainly white) student movement of the early sixties, black power emerged out of the struggles of African Americans for civil rights – for equal citizenship in the existing socio-economic order. By the late sixties and early seventies, both movements had sharply radicalized.

African Americans, Hispanics, and persons "of color," as we now would say, saw themselves as part of the anti-colonial struggles then raging in Asia, Africa, and Latin America; not just as allies, but as actual participants from within "the belly of the monster." As such, they too held "socialism" in high regard.

Everybody knows what happened next. With the end of the draft and the winding down of the war, the student movement subsided and eventually disappeared. Thanks to a lot of repression and a little cooptation, the black power movement met a similar fate.

Rhetorically, if not always substantively, the "new social movements," as they were called at the time – second wave feminism, gay rights, and so on – straddled the civil rights/liberationist divide.

As time went by, the "moderates" fell into the mainstream liberal fold, while many of the radicals became practitioners of one or another form of "identity politics." In both cases, affinities with the universalistic and internationalist perspectives of the historical Left

frayed, causing support for socialism to wane. Before long, even “socialist feminists” stopped talking about it.

In academic precincts, interest in socialists, Marx especially, lingered on, but not so much in socialism itself. Without real socialist movements about, socialism came to be of antiquarian interest only.

In the *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx famously declared that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, ... the point is to change it.” Deploying Marxian methods and ideas for help in interpreting the world was briefly the rage in the aftermath of the sixties, and it is still more acceptable in academic circles than it had been before. But the academy is as useless as it ever was for changing the world in ways informed by those interpretations.

Moreover, as memories of those glory days fade and erstwhile militants advance towards dotage, even academic Marxism is in decline. Only the obscurantists and bullshit artists who populate those parts of universities where soft-headedness is a virtue continue to thrive.

Or so it has been for some time. Between now and November it should become clearer how much, if at all, this has changed.

At this point, it seems as likely as not that socialism may have a future, after all; and not just in universities. It just might be that, defying expectations formed before Trump upended the world, the pendulum is finally swinging back.

When socialism was still very much on the agenda, a lot of the interest in it was fueled by longstanding conflicts between orthodox Communists, Maoists, Trotskyists, and militants from other leftwing tendencies.

For more than seven decades, they all defined their respective political orientations by their relation to the Bolshevik Revolution and its issue, the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union expired, the revolution that established it was over too. At great human cost, it had accomplished miracles: defeating Nazi Germany, and transforming one of the most backward redoubts in Europe into a global superpower. But it ended in defeat.

As a result, political tendencies that had defined themselves in relation to it no longer served as poles of attraction. This was not enough to cause a few diehard sectarians to rethink their positions, but it was enough to cause everybody else to mark paid to a chapter of world history that had marked leftwing politics for as long as anyone could remember.

Political tendencies on the way to becoming extinct were not the only factors connecting militants in the sixties and seventies to socialism.

The student movement of fifty years ago shared a view that was then still dominant in the larger intellectual culture, that accorded greater prestige, in matters bearing on politics and reflections on politics, to European thinkers than to the homegrown variety. This was especially the case with students who were, or aspired to be, Marxists.

There was a problem, though: many of the European imports that leftwing insurgents in the English-speaking world found appealing went against the grain of the prevailing intellectual culture, and were therefore difficult to absorb.

There were exceptions of course; Herbert Marcuse made the Frankfurt School popular in student milieus; and several French figures –among others, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault – attracted considerable attention. But hardly any of it mattered. What propelled the movement along was opposition to the Vietnam War, not highfalutin philosophical blather.

Thus most of the theorizing that went on had little, if any, practical import – not in the broader culture, and not even within the student movement.

Moreover, none of it did much, if anything, to bring notions of socialism in from the margins. That was a job for Trotskyists, Maoists and others who focused less on “theory,” and more on real world revolutionary politics.

But, in our time and place, there is no conceivable leftwing radicalism that is not, implicitly committed to moving the economy and the larger society beyond capitalism’s grip. Therefore, even if socialism was far from Topic A, the idea of it remained present and accounted for as long as the radical movements of that period survived.

There was also a strain of New Left thinking in the United States that directly called on homegrown socialist history. Britain and other Anglophone countries had variations on this theme as well.

In the years before World War I, there was a flourishing socialist movement in the United States – comprised mainly of European immigrants, native-born farmers, industrial workers, and intellectuals in the American vein. Events in Europe – the Great War, the Russian Revolution, and then the repression that followed — weakened that movement to such an extent that it has never fully recovered.

There is an enormous literature on the subject but despite the best efforts of many superb historians, general awareness of American socialism is slight at best.

This is not just par for the course in the United States of Amnesia. It is a consequence of deliberate efforts undertaken by American governments over the course of many years.

The anti-Communist hysteria that followed the Second World War had especially devastating consequences for American understandings of socialism because the propaganda system of the time identified socialism with Communism, villanized Communism to a degree that makes current treatment of Putin's Russia seem almost benign, and was relentless.

I have no idea what Bernie Sanders thinks about America's socialist tradition; I do know that he never went out of his way to call it to voters' attention. He did famously have good words to say about Swedish social democracy. No shame in that, but good words for Eugene V. Debs could have done more good.

Unlike their counterparts a half-century ago, millennial generation socialists have so far not had much to say about the history of American socialism either. Perhaps they will, as the movement they are building evolves.

As that process unfolds, there is a fundamental distinction that ought to be born in mind, but that nowadays seldom is: the distinction between left alternatives within capitalism and alternatives to capitalism itself.

Sanders talked more about the former than the latter; indeed, without quite drawing attention to the fact, he didn't talk about the latter at all. The policy innovations that he promoted – Medicare for all, free public higher education, raising the minimum wage, and so on – can all happen within a capitalist economic structure.

There are, and long have been, states in capitalist societies that pursue policies such as the ones Sanders favors in more radical versions than Sanders has talked about; and had the Democratic Party's sixties and early seventies domestic agenda not been derailed by corporate Democrats, his ostensibly radical positions on these and other matters would likely be mainstream Democratic Party positions today.

By calling his politics "democratic socialist," Sanders muddied the waters. To be sure, the harm done by that, such as it was, is more than outweighed by the good Sanders did in rehabilitating "socialism," the word. But the time to go from words to concepts is coming.

Notwithstanding more than a century's worth of derision, it is understandable, at a time when increasingly savage inequalities are on the rise, generating levels of discontent that are almost palpable in ways that intersect with issues of class, gender, race, and age, that interest in socialism would rise.

But things are what they are. Although connections between the two are longstanding and deeply entrenched, socialism and equality are not the same thing.

In capitalist societies, private ownership of means of production, the distinguishing feature of capitalist economic systems, is the main cause of rising inequality; it is therefore understandable that egalitarians would be socialists, that they would favor deprivatization of productive capacities.

However, it is possible, in both theory and practice, to distribute income and wealth equally, or very nearly equally, within a capitalist framework – through progressive taxation and redistributive government policies.

This is what the Scandinavian countries Sanders praises did in their heyday. By increasing levels of public (non-market) provision, but without relying substantially on state or other forms of public ownership, they achieved remarkable levels of income and wealth equality.

In principle, it would even be possible, in a capitalist economy, to levy a one hundred percent tax, say, on income, and then go on to redistribute the revenue raised equally.

Even the most radical Social democrats never went quite that far for fear of an obstacle that all egalitarian projects in countries with labor markets confront in varying degrees – that taxing away earnings differentials would dis-incentivize productive contributions.

It is worth noting, though, that before the scourge of neoliberal globalization set in, there were efforts in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries not just to implement the liberal value of equal pay for equal work, but to demand equal pay for work period, regardless what the work is. Needless to say, this never happened at the societal level.

It is useful, following the lead of Marx and others who are in no way Marx's followers, to think of ownership as a bundle of rights – rights to control assets, and rights to benefit from their deployment.

In pre-capitalist societies, individuals can have property rights in other individuals – slaves, serfs, and peasants of various kinds. Capitalism deprivatizes property rights in other persons.

In predominantly capitalist societies, systems of ownership of other persons can nevertheless exist. Thus in the American South before the Civil War, chattel slavery existed in what was, in some respects, already a capitalist society. Two different economic regimes were essentially coexisting in relations of domination and subordination.

This was an inherently unstable situation – “a house divided,” as Lincoln called it — because even highly attenuated forms of ownership of other persons goes against the spirit and letter of capitalist social relations. But it could and did exist for many years.

Classical liberals – John Locke, for example, and many others as well — believed in self-ownership, ownership of one’s own body and powers. This notion still has some appeal, even to self-identified socialists.

The idea is not that bodies and powers cannot be owned. It is that no one can rightfully own anyone’s but their own or, in other words, that individuals’ rights to control and benefit from their bodies and powers cannot rightfully be “alienated” – exchanged, given away, or transferred through force or fraud.

It is different, under capitalism, with productive assets that are external to oneself. The defining characteristic of the capitalist mode of production is private ownership of alienable means of production.

For Marx and many non-Marxist socialists, capitalism can and someday will end. How this will come about has always been a contentious issue, but that it will happen was generally assumed.

This was not so much a matter of blind faith or utopian longing, but of hard, cold reason. If private ownership no longer serves any socially useful purpose, it is bound eventually to disappear for want of a sufficient reason.

Marx, along with many others, thought that capitalism would break down under the weight of its own internal contradictions.

However, in *The Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere, he and Engels also advanced views that underwrite an understanding of capitalism’s future that does not depend on dubious or demonstrably false accounts of its inability to avoid collapse.

They held that capitalism’s historic mission was to develop productive forces to a point where the chronic scarcity that has always afflicted humankind is overcome.

In a world in which most of humanity’s fundamental needs could be satisfied without burdensome toil – in which the things people need are as abundant as, say, air (under normal environmental conditions) – rational persons would cease to be moved by the kinds of incentives that exist when alienable productive capacities are privately owned.

It would be a case of “mission accomplished”; private ownership – and therefore capitalism — would no longer serve any socially useful purpose. Indeed, it would become a “fetter” not so much on further economic development, but on the rational deployment of productive forces.

Thus, for Marx and the others, in just the way that increasing levels of development led to the deprivatization of ownership of other persons, yet more development will lead to the deprivatization of ownership of external things.

Where does this leave “socialism”?

For Marx and his closest followers, socialism was post-capitalism in its earliest stages. For them, a socialist society is a society in transition from capitalism to (small-c) communism. For socialists who were not also communists, socialism would just be post-capitalism – or at least those varieties of post-capitalism that institutionalize socialist values like solidarity, freedom and equality.

These values are not uniquely socialist, but within the socialist tradition that came into being in the aftermath of the French Revolution and in tandem with the rise of the industrial era, they did take on distinctive socialist inflections.

The “democratic socialism” that we have been hearing so much about lately – thanks as much to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as to Bernie Sanders – still means pretty much what people want it to mean. For Sanders, it seems to mean nothing more than capitalism with a human face.

For anyone older than thirty-nine, Jack Benny’s eternal age, the first thing adding “democratic” to “socialism” does is indicate opposition to Soviet-style (or “Red” Chinese –style) Communism. This was surely a matter of concern to Sanders; to Ocasio-Cortez and others of her generation, it would have to be of less consequence.

Even Clintonite Democrats intent on reviving Cold War animosities seem to realize this. If they didn’t, they and their flacks at MSNBC and CNN would now be putting in overtime redbaiting the DSA and the other socialist groups into which millennials are flocking in such numbers that even *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* have taken notice.

It is telling that they are not redbaiting, at least not now. What they are doing instead is updating the line they dredge out every election season: that a vote for anybody but one of them is a vote for some greater evil – in this case, for Donald Trump, a very great evil indeed.

The kind of “democratic socialism” worth supporting unambivalently is the kind that takes (small-d) democracy seriously; that aims at establishing an economic and political order in which the workers themselves, the direct producers, control productive forces, and in

which productive forces are used to benefit the larger public under the guidance of democratically controlled bureaucracies.

Unlike anarchists, socialists believe that, like states, bureaucracies are necessary evils – for now and the foreseeable future. But they need not be the kinds of bureaucracies that did Soviet-style Communism in.

Perhaps the most pressing problem democratic socialists in power would face would be to concoct bureaucratic institutions that are no stronger than need be, and that are as much under popular control as circumstances allow.

But now is not the time to dwell on these problems, or even to insist that self-declared democratic socialists really be full-fledged (small-d) democrats or genuine socialists. As I said at the outset, unclarity at this point about what people coming to socialism in 2018 want may actually be a good thing.

However, in the not too distant future, if all goes well, the nightmare will be over, Trump will be gone, and anti-Trump forces will be back at each others' throats. Then it will become necessary for people who still think that “a better world is possible” to wrap their heads around the feasible alternatives, and to figure out what to do about them.

I would say, with apologies to our brothers and sisters in Iran, a country now in Israel's and therefore Donald Trump's crosshairs, that once Trump, the Great Satan, is vanquished – thanks perhaps to Democrats, but more likely to cholesterol and lack of exercise – that the time will come to go after whatever remains of the GOP and, just as urgently, the Little Satan, the mainstream Democratic Party.

In that process, it may become necessary to draw what Lenin called “lines of demarcation” between competing socialist projects and between socialism and varieties of capitalism that try to promote core socialist values.

And if, as seems likely, undifferentiated radicalism is not enough to prevail in a political culture deformed by a semi-established duopoly party system comprised of sclerotic, neoliberal Democrats and Republicans, and degraded by Trump and his minions, it may become necessary to rethink things through from the beginning.

Reinventing the wheel, even in limited ways, is an arduous task. But it is either that or be stuck in a political sewer, a “swamp,” that generates Trump-Clinton choices.

We have nothing to lose but a debilitating status quo that puts our planet and civilization itself in jeopardy. And, according to two bona fide “democratic socialists” some seventeen decades ago, there is a world to win.