

## Sanders, socialism, social democracy—What does it all mean?

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***In defining his idea of "democratic socialism," Sen. Bernie Sanders recalled the President Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s. | Photos: AP / Illustration: PW***

The word socialism is on everyone's lips these days. On the far right, President Donald Trump, worried about the threat of higher marginal tax rates and health care for all, roars that "[America will never be a socialist country!](#)"

Bernie Sanders, meanwhile, outlines his vision of "[democratic socialism](#)" as the fulfillment of President Franklin Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal. For him, socialism is a society that will "guarantee a decent economic standard of living for all of our people." He rails against the oligarch Trump, who blends "corporatist economics with xenophobia and authoritarianism."

Others in the anti-Trump column, however, are just as eager as the president to distance themselves from Sanders-style socialism. Liberal economist Joseph Stiglitz dismissively says, "[Socialism is when the state owns the means of production.](#)" He despondently implores Democrats to embrace the label of "progressive capitalism" instead, since, he reasons, that's what Bernie and the rest of them are all really talking about anyway.

And then, on the sectarian left, equally opposed to Bernie and his FDR redux are some who argue Sanders is just another "[bourgeois candidate](#)" and "[an obstacle](#)" to real socialism.

Everyone's talking about socialism, but nobody seems to be on the same page. There's so much confusion over terms. What *is* socialism? What's different about "democratic" socialism? Are they the same thing? Does it matter?

Among many long-time self-identified socialists, there's a concern that the true meaning of the concept is getting lost. This is especially so for Marxists, who see social and historical development as rather [scientific matters](#). In the Marxist framework, socialism is understood as a particular stage of society. Winning it is dependent upon organized action and a commitment to theoretical foundations like [materialist philosophy, political economy, and class struggle](#).

By those standards, what Sanders calls "democratic socialism" wouldn't quite meet the definition. Instead, he seems to be talking about something closer to what has historically been called social democracy. His policies—single-payer health care, free college education, higher taxes on the wealthy, robust social welfare programs—are standard fare in nations where social democratic parties have exercised influence.

*Everyone's talking about socialism, but what does it mean? Check out the [People's World Series on Socialism](#).*

Sheri Berman, a professor of political science at Barnard College who literally [wrote the book on social democracy](#), evaluates Sanders' agenda pretty much like any Marxist would: "His practical program...would be pretty comfortable within the confines of any European country." She told the [New York Times](#), "the policies he's advocating...are probably better viewed as social democratic—that's what they would be in another place in which there are more left options."

As for the "democratic socialist" label, she argues that in the U.S. "the only way to indicate you want to go further than the Democratic Party—that you are more critical of capitalism than the Democratic Party—has been to identify yourself as a democratic socialist."

Being more critical of capitalism doesn't necessarily imply the necessity of its replacement, though. I'm reminded of the description Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King once made of the social democrats in his country when he called them "liberals in a hurry."

Ideologically, there is indeed a difference between the long-term visions of social democracy and "scientific socialism" as understood in the tradition of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Essentially, it could be argued that one doesn't have a long-term vision and the other one does. Given the transformative nature of the reforms proposed by Sanders, though, that kind of black and white assessment is perhaps a bit too simplistic. To be more precise, the fundamental distinction, of course, revolves around the old dispute over [reform vs. revolution](#).

The reform/revolution debate is a somewhat tired one that has, at times, done more to hinder the understanding of events and people than to help. It's still a helpful conceptualization, though, if understood flexibly and not in a rigid way.

For social democracy as it came to develop in the 20th century, improving the social, economic, and political system so that it's fairer for working people was the purpose of political action. Essentially, as long as things were getting better, then that's what really mattered. More equality is good; more democracy is good. The [final destination isn't all that important](#) to debate or think about.

Marxists—practical and non-sectarian ones, anyway—don't denigrate reforms, but they do think about them in a different way. Reforms under capitalism help alter the relationship of forces, shifting the balance more and more in favor of the working class, raising class and political consciousness, and ultimately paving the way for revolutionary change.

From the Marxist viewpoint, struggles for day-to-day improvements—whether for wages, better jobs, against racism, to protect voting rights—are akin to basic training for the long-term journey toward working-class political power.

What distinguishes this perspective is that it sees a destination on the horizon that these reforms should prepare for: socialism. Marxism holds that a different kind of society is necessary—not just a vaguely fairer one, but one where every aspect of life is democratized. Its analysis of history and human development—[historical materialism](#)—argues that long-term social advance requires (and will produce) a society where the many take political and economic power away from the few.

The path to that future is through the determined and widening struggle for ever-more progressive and radical measures, always focused on increasing the power of the working class and oppressed peoples to determine the course of development. The crowning achievement of that democratic struggle for a better life is socialism—an actual goal, not just a description of one's philosophical outlook or political identity.

This outlook, most often associated with the Communist Party, is qualitatively different than the Bernie Sanders agenda. But should that really be a problem when it comes to building alliances among the ever-widening variety of people who are interested in socialism, however they might understand the word?

The capitalist crisis that exploded with the 2008-09 financial meltdown destabilized the neoliberal economic model that dominated since the 1980s. A whole new generation has entered the workforce burdened with dead-end jobs, low wages, and mountains of student debt. A reactionary and racist offensive has arisen in almost every developed country. And Trump and his extreme right-wing supporters in Congress and state governments are racing to reverse as many past social gains as they can.



*The flags of the Democratic Socialists of America and the Communist Party USA fly at demonstrations.*

In such circumstances, anyone who is ready to question the capitalist system and get involved in practical and progressive movements to do something about it is an ally to be embraced—no matter what kind of socialist they might see themselves as, or even if they don't think of themselves as one at all.

At a time when masses of people are moving left, challenging corporate power, and viewing the concept of socialism more favorably than we've seen in decades—or perhaps ever—there would be no greater mistake than to expend unnecessary effort critiquing people for not being left enough or not socialist enough. This is especially so in a country with a history of red-baiting as intense as the United States.

In the process of building the coalitions needed to beat Trump and move society forward, we certainly still need to discuss and debate what socialism means. Marxists have to put forward their concept of a future socialist society and what they think it will take to get there. That includes distinguishing it from Sanders' New Deal 2.0, but doing so in a manner that doesn't denigrate the transformations he proposes.

The case for socialism has to be made in a way that fosters more cooperation and unity around shared goals and draws ever more people into the fold.

Whatever differences they might have with Sanders' definition, socialists of all stripes owe him a debt of gratitude. He's done more than anyone at the level of national politics to get everyone talking about socialism and imagining what it might mean. Thanks, Bernie.

## CONTRIBUTOR

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