

**The Socialist Challenge Today, By Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin
(2018) London: Merlin Press, 102 pages. ISBN: 978-08503-674-09.**

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than conformity and control, two factors that drive modern elites support, innovation is created by dispersed knowledge. If we accept this, our future may be limitless. However, it violates much of the orthodoxy pervading in politics and big business.

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The Socialist Challenge Today

By Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2018)

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The truth has a habit of being relentless: those who seek it through critical analysis even more so. In general, the socialist instinct is a mix of optimism and a concerted realism that seeks to both be pragmatic—accepting where the limitations and opportunities of a given society are—and programmatic—having a realistic sense of where humanity could be in the future. Above all socialists understand that human beings determine their own history with all the down stream caveats that statement requires. In this short book of six tightly written chapters, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin continue their long collaboration on questions concerning the possibility of a socialist project.

This book was published in the summer of 2018 and that may seem like a generation ago to some. This is not to fetishize our current moment. Rather, it is to note that some two short years after the book's publication it can seem as though "now" is a world apart from what were probably optimistic times for socialists and like-minded progressives in the summer of 2018.

Since the summer of 2018, observers have been witness to the continued economic grinding of Greece; watched the British Labour Party fall into an internecine struggle calumniating in a stinging electoral defeat and the resignation of Corbyn; and subsequently, watched Sanders' second bid to become the Democratic nominee fail

through a series of disparate missteps and structural calamities in the COVID laden early summer of 2020.

Yet for all this, the book's sub-title: *Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn* does not date the book. Far from it, as Panitch and Gindin observed in their concluding chapter with respect to the challenge in front of Labour *even if Corbyn had succeeded*:

It is important to appreciate the very limited extent to which socialist commitment has, so far actually taken shape as socialist strategy inside the Labour Party. At best it might be said that socialists in the leadership and at the base may be seen as engaged in trying to shift the balance of forces inside the party, and outside it in relation to the unions and social movements... so as to bring the party to the point that a serious socialist strategy might be developed (p. 82).

A similar such observation *could* have been made about the Democratic Party in the context of a Sanders win of the nomination. Electoral victories are one thing and the realities of the political context both within and outside of political parties is quite another. It is to those pragmatic realities and strategies for organizing around those challenges where this book makes its largest contribution.

In the above regard, Greece is perhaps the sharpest of instructive cases. Within liberal democratic systems socialist parties, when elected, are in a position that "bourgeois" parties are not. They must simultaneously maintain order and continuity in the short to medium term, while at the same time pressing forward with strategies that have as their goal *a transformation from a capitalist to a socialist economy*: they are thus faced with a dual mandate. Quite apart from what one thinks of socialism as a viable economic system, it is evident that this dual mandate is fraught with dangers. This is a point worth stressing because it

helps political analysts appreciate that for any political party with what may be termed a radical project, they must cooperate with the present to change the future: a delicate political dance indeed.

In the case of *Syriza*, the situation was not simply one of cooperating with, in the short term, the agents and institutions of Greek capital, but also those of European capitalism. This was a tall order and, as Panitch and Gindin point out, Greece is not a large country, has limited natural resources including oil and unlike what might be the analogous case of Cuba does not enjoy a strategic geopolitical location in the context of a Cold War with a ready and willing patron.

Outside of these large economic obstacles, Gindin and Panitch make the argument that *Syriza* did not manage to significantly mobilize like minded social movements and incorporate them in a meaningful sense within state structures. Again, this is an important point: when democratic socialists win elections, they more often than not inherit state structures that are imbricated by capital: particularly with respect to portfolios such as finance, the treasury, transport and communications. There is no such analogue for popular social movements. In order to build the relationships of trust necessary to both coordinate and sustain the temporal challenges of a radical project, state structures need to be democratized to the furthest extent possible. Beyond issues of trust, democratization strategies can also augment the ability of social movements to build their own capacities and gain technical competence in the running and managing of the state and the economy. Again, unlike bourgeois parties, democratic socialist parties tend not to have a very “deep bench” when it comes to the human resources necessary to run and manage the economy. To say at the very least, this puts them in an awkward position when attempting to transform the economy in the face of recalcitrant sections

of the professional managerial/bureaucratic class.

One of central strengths Gindin and Panitch saw in the movement around Sanders was in the very fact that it was not “class-rooted” in the generally exhausted institutions of the American labour movement. Rather, the movement is “class focussed” which allows for the adoption of new strategies and the creation of new institutions. They argue that the challenge for the movement built up around Sanders is to build a new politics rooted in:

...turning union branches into centers of working class life, leading the fight for collective public services, breaking down the oligarchic relationship between the leaders and the led, contributing to building the broadest member capacities, emphasizing the importance of expressing clearer class sensibility, and even becoming ambitious enough to introduce socialist ideas (p. 44).

In short, the socialist project requires not only that class solidarities be constructed, but also that through those collective institutions, class capacities be developed in an ever-greater degree and range of competencies.

The above points to why this book is an instructive read even for those who do not share a socialist vision. If one wants to develop a sophisticated understanding of the politics of the left in the United States or elsewhere, it is incumbent upon the analyst to have a solid sense of the different projects and strategies animating the left beyond the mainstream analytical nostrums of “more state/less state,” and “individualism/collectivism.” It also allows analysts to track the distinct differences between revolutionary socialist and social democratic traditions. Moreover, the book goes some way to allowing the reader to evaluate the success and failures of the various socialist challenges from São Paulo and Caracas to London and Athens.

Epilogue

Leo Panitch passed away on December 19th 2020. He has been eulogized widely. I do not have much to add to these reflections and tributes save for that he was a mentor to me in many respects during my time at York University. He was a top-notch intellect capable of incisive analysis and pointed debate, charismatic of course, but most importantly a warm and generous human being. I miss his deep voice and I can still hear his laugh.

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Evil Geniuses: The Unmaking of America: A Recent History

By Kurt Andersen (2020) New York: Random House, 464 pages. ISBN: 978-1984-801-340.

Kurt Andersen's book *Evil Geniuses* is a flawed, highly partisan and ideological book. Andersen is a gifted, talented writer, with the skills to make difficult topics understandable for the average person. Befitting Andersen's skills as a novelist, the book is an easy read. Furthermore, the book has several strengths. One, it is evocative of a larger intellectual trend: the radicalization of moderates. Two, the book is so well done that those people who support Andersen's thesis will enjoy reading it. However, the book suffers from several defects. The thesis of the book is that the American economic picture has declined noticeably since the 1970s given the increase in economic inequality. While this is a sustainable thesis, as free market economics is a popular target, the book, nevertheless falls flat. Andersen has written a book on economics that does not mention stagflation in the index and receives only a passing mention. Accordingly, the book is difficult to take seriously because it is so one sided in its argumentation.

Andersen's thesis is that the American economy was doing great after 1945:

alas, John Maynard Keynes and Franklin Roosevelt solved the issue of the economy. Now everyone was middle class. Big Business looked out for the little guy, and everyone was happy. Then the Vietnam War happened, and an evil man named Milton Friedman wrote an article in the *New York Times* attacking corporate social responsibility and, then, a cabal of evil men changed the culture, dooming the New Deal and unmaking the American dream.

The 1970s were a bad decade. There is no arguing this point. Andersen's argument that America's peak of economic equality occurred during this time is ridiculous; he concedes that inflation was out of control. This occurred because the mainstream economic policy tools at the time were not able to deal with the issues that arose in the 1970s. When my parents purchased their home in 1977, the interest rate was 13 percent. The collapse of the New Order could not have occurred without stagflation. This is like writing a play without the villain appearing on stage.

This book contains several logical, factual and conceptual errors. So much so that there are too many to list here. The book contains little sense of the existing literature in business, economics, history, or politics. Some illustrative examples are warranted. Andersen compares Reagan's two presidential victories and notes they pale in comparison with the success of the Democratic Party in the 1930s. However, Andersen fails to note that the Congresses elected during Reagan's time were *conservative in nature*, not Republican—part of the reason is incumbency. Given the structure of modern politics, it is rare for incumbents to lose. When older Democrats retired, especially in the South, they were replaced by Republicans. In addition, an ideology like conservatism is not attached to any one party. For example, the New Deal ended around 1938 as a vibrant political force due to a bipartisan conservative coalition. One can argue that the New