

STUDY GUIDE

We Own the Future: Democratic Socialism—American Style

PART I: IS ANOTHER AMERICA POSSIBLE

Introduction

Aronoff, Dreier, and Kazin point to the recent surge in socialist activism, a rise in DSA membership, and recent political successes as signs that “socialism is on the American horizon” (1). Do you agree? Why or why not?

Where do you see the most potential for democratic socialism to achieve its goals (e.g. health care, jobs, education, racism, climate change)? Where do you see the fight being the toughest?

When you envision “a kinder, more humane, and altogether freer society” (11), what comes to mind? Using sensory words, how would you describe daily life in this society?

How Socialists Changed America

Dreier and Kazin offer a brief history of influential socialists and socialist organizations from the 1800s to the present-day. What does this history reveal about the state of democratic socialism in the U.S. today?

Organized labor was a large part of the beginning of socialism in the U.S. Today, we are seeing another rise in union organizing and worker solidarity among media professionals, educators, fast food workers, and more. Do you believe this rise in organized labor constitutes a resurgence of democratic socialism? Why or why not?

Which politicians, journalists, activists, thinkers, etc. are leading the conversation on socialism for you/your community today? Whose platforms or histories might they be modeling? Whose platforms or histories might they be speaking against?

Toward a Third Reconstruction

Flynn, Holmberg, Warren, and Wong name voting rights, the criminal justice reforms, jobs programs, wealth-building, and constitutional change as crucial elements of a Third Reconstruction to combat the injustices of racial capitalism. Is there anything that was not represented which you would add, and why?

The authors urge for race-conscious policy. Are race and racism explicit in your area of advocacy, activism, and/or learning? Why or why not?

A Three-Legged Stool for Racial and Economic Justice

Hamilton proposes that a federal jobs guarantee, baby bonds program, and reparations would constitute the necessary “three-legged stool for racial economic justice” (66). How might you and/or

your community organize to push for these programs? Which are most promising, most urgent, and most feasible? Who can you talk to push this forward?

Democratic Socialism for a Climate-Changed Century

Klein argues that the Green New Deal--an “economy-wide mobilization” for addressing climate change (79)—can stand as a much-needed corrective to the “extractivist” and authoritarian socialist regimes of the past (85). Why is this an important point to make?

If you are a part of a union: has your union endorsed the Green New Deal? What might you and your members do to increase the support of organized labor in the coming year?

Klein concludes that the Green New Deal “is a potential lifeline that we all have a sacred and moral responsibility to reach for” (90). What in your life grounds you in the sacred or moral? How might it feed your activism?

PART II: EXPANDING DEMOCRACY

Governing Socialism

Fletcher argues that as socialists win seats in political office their “governing power” (94) will be challenged by both internal and external forces, be it corruption from within the left or a concerted backlash from the right, providing historical examples. What might some contemporary signs of internal or external opposition to left/progressive governing power be?

Fletcher calls for “left-led governing coalition” (97) that prioritizes expanding its base of support to include the diversity and contradictions within the left, winning over those in the political middle, and creating new means beyond voting by which an organized mass base can participate in democracy. Do you feel these are important or effective strategies? Why or why not?

Fletcher points not just to ideological battles, but also warns that left/progressives with national governing power may encounter “a blockade by capital” (102) of businesses and industries opting out of a new economic administration. Do you agree? Why or why not?

We the People: Voting Rights, Campaign Finance, and Election Reform

Cha calls for the removal of moneyed interests in politics, an end to gerrymandering, the restoration of voting rights for incarcerated people, and compulsory voting as among the necessary reforms to protect the future of democracy in the U.S. But more immediate reforms could be implemented in the meantime (120). What are some barriers to these immediate reforms? In what ways could you see voting become more accessible in your own community?

Confronting Corporate Power

Kuttner challenges readers to embrace public options, and not just regulation and taxation, as the path forward to a more just political economy (133). Pointing to the rapid deregulation begun in the 1970s and 80s in response to prominent civil rights victories (126) and later tax policies favoring corporate interests (130), Kuttner argues that because reform will always be met with “relentless resistance” (134) a more revolutionary approach to finance, communications, healthcare, and housing must be sought. This proposal might be contrasted with Meyerson’s at the end of Part III (290). While Kuttner proposes public options, Meyerson notes that most people’s definition of socialism in the U.S. is not focused on state takeover over private enterprise, implying this may not be the path to success for socialist progress. Do you agree with one author more than the other, and why?

Building the People’s Banks

Dayen argues we already possess the ideas, capacity, and people power to make banking democratic and public-oriented—but the political will is missing key. How might you or your group incite political excitement and commitments to finance reform?

Are you connected with your local college or university’s divestment group, if one exists? How might your role in or outside of universities work together to end making profits from other countries’ debts, like Greece and Puerto Rico (143)?

Dayen points to reforms and proposals (like the Bank of North Dakota, FedAccounts, and postal banking) that already exist as solutions to predatory banking practices. Which of these is most exciting or promising to you? Why? How are they tied to your sense of the future?

Democracy, Equality, and the Future of Workers

Gupta, Lerner, and McCartin debunk the “future of work” scenarios put forth by political and economic elites to argue for “the future of *workers*” (151) instead. They point to the successful and burgeoning coalitions reshaping the landscape of labor organizing—various communities and organizations campaigning together—as the path forward to a democratic socialist future. Do you agree this is the future of labor organizing?

Who Gets to Be Safe? Prisons, Police, and Terror

Stahl offers a power analysis of public safety narratives, outlining who in society benefits from the “manufactured fear” (168) of others and why. Within this analysis, Stahl argues that prison abolition—its ideals and its practices—can be a means and an end to building the ideal world democratic socialists long for. Do you identify as a prison abolitionist? Why or why not? Does a sense of safety factor into your position?

Stahl emphasizes the need “to reframe our locus of concern inward, toward ourselves and our communities” (166) in order to dismantle false narratives of who poses a threat and to address intimate forms of harm like domestic violence (168-9). Why might an abolitionist response to crime

and punishment encourage turning inward to confront a lack of safety and violent harm? What are the possible benefits and potential shortcomings of such an approach?

Building communities of trust, respect, and accountability happens while joining in abolitionist campaigns, Stahl concludes (176). Consider the sense of relationship you have found in your various groups or organizations—what has made it possible for you to trust, respect, and critique the people you're with? How might you take these practices into new spaces or reinvigorate relationships where trust or respect as eroded?

On Immigration: The Socialist Case for Open Borders

Chen calls for the opening of borders as an emancipatory socialist project which would ensure the basic rights and freedoms of transnational migrants. Among these protections would be labor regulations that mutually aid workers both domestic and migrant (182-3). From your perspective, does the current landscape of labor movements embrace this view? How so?

Chen argues that opening borders is a necessary response to the increasing and unavoidable migration of climate refugees (185). Given the urgency of such accommodation, do you believe environmental activists are prioritizing the needs of climate refugees? If so, how might these actions on behalf of refugees be amplified? If not, what avenues might environmental activists pursue to include them?

War from Above, Solidarity from Below—On Foreign Policy

Nagaraja writes that the legacy of left and labor breakthroughs in the U.S. have often compromised or been complicit with war and imperial expansion. That is, “The era that inaugurated a Social Security paradigm built a national security one, too, birthing a pervasive welfare state along with an osmotic warfare state” (192). Ultimately, Nagaraja warns this means that activists and movement builders should “maintain a degree of independence” (193) from progressive and socialist politicians in order to act as legitimate critics on foreign policy. This seems, at least on the surface, to resist Bill Fletcher’s call in “Governing Socialism” for politicians to draw upon an activist base beyond election campaigns (98). Are these two proposals at fundamental odds with one another or are they complementary?

Nagaraja points progressives toward “a new internationalism” (193) in solidarity with grassroots movements building alliances across the lines of war, such as the Right to Heal campaign. Finding new allies around the world will make economic and environmental justice more tangible, Nagaraja writes, as the fight against corporate interests and human rights abuses “against those who are caged in China, sieged in Yemen, bombed in Gaza, or exploited in Zambian mines” (196). In your own circle of organizing, learning, or policymaking, how often are international issues of justice considered? What might Nagaraja’s proposal for a progressive internationalism bring to your arena of work? What pushback might you anticipate?

PART III: THE RIGHT TO THE GOOD LIFE

Livable Cities: Housing, Transportation, and Public Spaces for All

Sugrue argues that “America is now a suburban nation, but suburbia is no longer dominated by white, heteronormative middle- and upper-class families” (208). Rather, suburban sprawl has followed the exile of poor and working-class residents, largely African American, from cities into ailing “secondhand suburbs” (208). Making cities more livable would limit suburban sprawl and lead to a more just society, Sugrue concludes (222). Do you live in an urban, suburban, or rural area? What are the economic and racial demographics? How might more livable cities change your daily life?

Sugrue calls for a reimagining of cities as places where not just local progressive activism flourishes, but where big-scale policy changes from the left can change urban and suburban lives for the better (220). Gaining power in city councils, mayor’s offices, state governments, and Congress are essential to this path (221), Sugrue notes. Do you agree? What might Fletcher’s argument on “Governing Socialism” (93) bring to bear on Sugrue’s proposal?

What does Health Equity Require? Racism and the Limits of Medicare for All

Medicare for All is an increasingly popular platform for progressive and socialist politicians, especially some in the 2020 presidential primary race for the Democratic nominee. However, Roberts calls the DSA to move beyond this proposal because it fails to address the root racism causing health inequities. Can (or should) the Democratic platform on Medicare for All be changed?

Roberts points to structural transformation as a necessary component of a truly democratic socialist health policy, one that includes the end of mass incarceration and police violence, as well as a robust reproductive justice movement that goes beyond individual choice (232). Further, Roberts calls for medical education to incorporate structural competency so that providers on-the-ground can offer treatment with less racial bias and stigma (234). Drawing on your own experiences and learning, what else would you add to Roberts’ picture of health equity?

The Family of the Future

Tracing the history of so-called “poor laws” (238) on the enforcement of marriage and heteronormative family structures, Leonard rhetorically asks, “What the hell is family for?” (240). How would you answer this question?

Leonard argues that reproductive justice under a socialist framework cannot simply be about protecting individual choice (241), but rather it must be part of a comprehensive bid for universal child care, housing, free abortion on demand, restorative and transformative alternatives to criminalization, and acknowledgement of non-traditional family structures. Given its comprehensiveness, is reproductive justice an apt umbrella under which to organize? Why or why not?

Defending and Improving Public Education

“Public education is the only socialist entitlement in American society that is available to all children” (252), Noguera writes, and it has been slowly eroded by neoliberal reforms. Before reading this essay, what did you already know about public, private, and charter schools? What did you learn?

Calling for progressive federal policy agenda, Noguera points to research-based capacity-building reforms (257), community school models (258), testing as an intervention tool (259), organizing around parent involvement (260), supporting rather than punishing children (261), equitable funding (262), and implementing reforms alongside local community agendas (264) as a democratic socialist way to end inequities in education. Is this agenda sufficient? What would you add? Is there anything you disagree with?

Reclaiming Competition: Sports and Socialism

Zirin digs into the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) for its extraction of free labor from student athletes--disproportionately African American students--as a civil rights injustice in and of itself, as well as part of a larger structural injustices keeping Americans from the enjoyment of leisure and play. Zirin notes, “Sports have always been an area of political struggle and, occasionally, a path breaker for social justice” (278). How might fandoms be organized to advocate for NCAA reforms?

Did you grow up playing organized youth sports? How does it shape the way you view collegiate and professional sports today if at all?

What About a Well-Fed Artist? Imagining Cultural Work in a Democratic Socialist Society

Fiorentini recounts her start as a stand-up comic in Argentina where making a living as an artist was possible (283), noting how difficult and nearly unimaginable this is in the United States today. Fiorentini argues that to change this perception, the U.S. needs to begin “unlearning money worship” and decoupling it from aesthetics (287). Have you recently encountered artwork or entertainment that has successfully done this? What was your experience with this art?

Cultural production in an ideal democratic socialist world, Fiorentini argues, would include greater federal funding for public arts, the break-up of telecommunication giants, stronger entertainment unions, and incentives for local cultural production apart from coastal cities. These changes would be “a revolution of values... from culture up” (283) and necessary to political revolution. As Fiorentini imagined an ideal world, imagine what your own creative work or reception of others’ work would look like in a world where artists’ needs are met. What comes to mind?

How Socialism Surged, And How It Can Go Further

Meyerson anticipates the nature of socialism’s future successes, noting that the popularity of Bernie Sanders’ presidential run in 2016 “didn’t create a new left; it revealed it—both to the nation and to that new left itself” (295). This new left emerged alongside grassroots movements—like Black Lives Matter, Dreamers, Women’s Marches, #MeToo, and the Sunrise movement—and surged most

among young activists. This rising popularity of socialism, Meyerson notes, is also due to a shift in public understanding of socialism not so much as movement to the state to take over all private enterprise, but which focuses on specific progressive reforms (298). Meyerson concludes that socialists must necessarily organize with others to pass progressive reforms, and that this coalition work will determine the political success of democratic socialism in the U.S. more than membership numbers (303). What are the pros of cons and such a strategy?

Afterword: A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen

Walzer, albeit writing in 1968, asks readers to “Imagine a day in the life of a socialist citizen” (304). Recalling the prompt to imagine daily life in a socialist society in the study guide questions to the Introduction, how does Walzer’s brief imagining differ from yours if at all?

Walzer advocates for those who will inevitably choose to skip the political meetings required of a self-governing socialist society—who will instead “Take long walks, play with their children, paint pictures, make love, and watch television” (308)—as vital citizen voices that should be listened to rather than mocked for being late to the political stage (311). Do you agree? Why might it be important to imagine this particular relationship—between political participants and nonparticipants—in imagining a socialist future?