THE CHALLENGE OF LEFT REFORMISM

In the recent period the influence of various forms of revolutionary Marxism seem to be on the decline whilst the popularity of the left reformism of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn have become important and politically significant. Hence it has become a major question about what attitude the revolutionary Left should adopt towards this left reformist phenomena. At the present moment in time the Marxist groups seem to have accepted the approach of either sectarian mistrust of the forces of left reformism or alternatively adapted to this political current in terms of uncritical support. It seems that it has not been possible to develop a position that is neither opportunist nor sectarian. But there is a more profound issue that has to be tackled in relation to these developments, which is the important question as to whether the contemporary working class is still capable of being the most effective agency of social change. The point being made is that the forces of the revolutionary Left do not seem able to outline a perspective of the transformation of society in the era of the development of automation and globalisation. Instead they are still content with dogmatic certainties formed in the past, or alternatively uncritically support the various pressure groups that have emerged in the recent period. The contrast is between sectarian abstention from struggles or alternatively a glorification of the activist. This apparent limitation of the revolutionary Marxists is an expression of the inability to be able to outline an understanding of social reality that would still be able in a satisfactory manner to indicate the possibilities of revolutionary change. Instead of a satisfactory theory of revolution what seems to have become more important is the glorification of the role of the activist, as in the approach of the British Socialist Workers party. In this manner the importance of a strategy of revolutionary change seems to have become antiquated and the role of the development of class consciousness is replaced by the practical role of various and diverse agencies of social change. In this manner the importance of Marxism as a theory of revolutionary transformation seems to have become superfluous. Instead the most important expression of the possibility of change is the role of the network generation who are mobilised by the internet to the locations of specific locations of struggle at any given moment of time. But this dynamic means that the aim of socialism becomes replaced with the various ad hoc aspirations of the activist who tries to impose pressure on the establishment to implement the priorities of the given struggles such as advancing ecological transformation or the aims of democracy. The result of this situation is that socialism is no longer on the agenda and the forces of revolutionary Marxism seem powerless to influence these developments. This situation seems to occur alongside the increasing powerlessness of the working class which is often likely to adopt right wing attitudes as in relation to the referendum concerning the membership of the EU which was held in the UK. Thus, the disorientation of the working class seems to indicate that the possibility of progressive change is with the activists and middle-class liberals. In this context it would seem that the most that can be expected is the progressive modification of capitalism and the aim of socialism has become unrealistic and not likely to be realised. The result of this situation is the continued decline of the forces of Marxism. In this context it would seem that the most effective expression of some form of aspiration for socialism is with the various left reformist organisations. This means that it is necessary to evaluate whether they express the potential to advance the realisation of the aim of socialism. This issue will be analysed in terms of an evaluation of the views of an American democratic socialist, Bhaskar Sunkara who has written the book: ‘The Socialist Manifesto’ (Verso, London 2019)

The author is aware of the limitations of capitalism and is in favour of a society in which people have the democratic ability to be able to realise a situation of the control and organisation of the economy for the overall benefit of society instead of the interests of the capitalist employers. But the issue that has to be tackled is how the producers are to develop the awareness and capacity to be able to challenge the situation of the domination of capitalism. The problem with this introduction of the aim of socialism is that this standpoint is presented as a good idea that can provide a satisfactory alternative to capitalism, and so it is assumed that it will be both rational and feasible to develop support for this aim. The possible problems in this approach do not seem to be addressed. Instead the assumption is being made that the alternative to the limitations of capitalism is defined by the aim of socialism which is defined in a vague manner as being the only system that is able to overcome the limitations of capitalism. The author is able to outline the apparent inability of capitalism to be able to provide a satisfactory standard of material benefits and as a result this provides the major reason that an alternative that is able to express this possibility is a feasible alternative. But the question remains as to how support for this aim of socialism is to be created, and what is the strategy by which it will be realised? The point is that it is not sufficient to establish what we are against, which is the exploitative character of capitalism because of the importance of the domination of capital by labour. This means that the issue becomes how is it possible to create the basis of belief in an alternative to capitalism that is based on mass support. Sunkara is aware of the importance of this issue because he is aware that people presently understand capitalism to be the most viable economic and political system despite the fact that it is based on the role of exploitation. He outlines that a system like that of Sweden has advantages because of the welfare state system and the ability of strong trade unions to obtain concessions from the employers, but he still indicates that this situation is not ideal because the people are not yet able to establish genuine control over their conditions of work and so as a result are still subject the limitations of the domination of capital. This means that socialism must be something that is better than even the most progressive welfare state that is based on a situation of compromise between the forces of capital and labour. The author suggests that even the most improved form of capitalism in which there is aspects of social reform and the participation of the workers in the organisation of production will not be sufficient because of the continued lack of the complete ability of working people to be able to define the character of their economic and social activity. So the result of an improved and more progressive capitalism will be the generation of the impetus to try and realise a system in which working people have become dominant. He outlines in a perceptive manner that capitalism seems to be a superior system because it is able to establish the ability to provide an incentive for efficient production via the role of the profit motive and the importance of market exchange. What is the alternatives that socialism could provide that would make it a superior system in this context? The perspective that is being argued is that the ability to establish genuine workers control of the economy enables the role of technology to be utilised to the benefit of labour so that the process of production becomes less alienating and is more rewarding. The result is that people will be motivated to support and uphold this system in relation to the continued role of democratic elections. But this approach does not tackle the issue of how it will be possible to overcome the influence of the view that the present capitalist system is eternal and so cannot be challenged because it is considered to be an integral aspect of the activity of human beings. Why is it that the forces of socialism receive little support, or else are forced to compromise if they do manage to gain political power? The apparent answer of the author is to outline the alternatives in terms of the apparent feasibility of alternatives. He comments that: “There is an ideological motivation for a more radical socialism, the moral idea that the exploitation of people by other people is a problem in desperate need of a solution. Capitalism both creates the preconditions for human flourishing and prevents its ultimate fulfilment.”(p27) But this comment is only able to indicate the actuality of discontent within society, but it is not able to establish the possibility and plausibility for its transcendence by the role of effective and mass political action. Instead it is quite possible that a situation of discontent will continue because the system is not effectively challenged by the alternative of the organisation of the people. Indeed, it is quite possible that the present system is able to create a situation of demoralisation but that the capacity to create the political conditions for change do not occur. Hence the issue that has to be addressed is how will it become possible to establish the basis for support of a programme of radical political change? The author seems to recognise the importance of this issue, but his introduction seems to deny the complexity of the challenges involved in the process of the realisation of revolutionary change.

In other words the problem is that the credibility of the moral argument for socialism is not able to provide an alternative to the apparent fact that capitalism is the most efficient and productive system and so able to generate the material levels of wealth that are able to provide for the needs of society. If for any reason the system enters into a situation of depression and so is less able to sustain the economic requirements of the people, it would seem that the answer is provided by the introduction of measures that enable the ability to motivate the creation of profits. Hence the problems of an adverse situation seem to be resolved by the regeneration of socialism rather than the introduction of the apparently uncertain alternative of socialism. The only answer of the author to this objection is to suggest that the exploitative character of capitalism is morally not acceptable, but this standpoint would seem to be flimsy when compared to the apparent overall ability of capitalism to improve the overall material conditions of society in a consistent manner. Thus, it would appear that capitalism is able to overcome the limitations caused by its economic system by the ability to create profits that in an overall manner enable the interests of society to be realised. Indeed, even in the present period of austerity this is accepted because it is generally considered that the perspective of the restoration of the profits of companies has to be the most important priority of society, and as a result expenditure on the welfare state has to be reduced. This unsatisfactory situation is accepted because of the influence of the view that there is no alternative to the continuation of the capitalist system despite its limitations. Indeed, this aspect is connected to the apparent scepticism about the alternative of socialism because of its perceived inefficiency. The problem is that the apparent failure of the history of socialism has resulted in the influence of the view that capitalism has to be accepted despite its limitations. In this context it is not possible for the author to establish the arguments for socialism in terms of an apparent contrast with the exploitative character of capitalism. People know that capitalism is exploitative, but they accept the continuation of the system because of the apparent limitations of the alternative. The point being made is that people accommodate themselves to the continuation of capitalism because of the influence of the view that there is no genuine alternative to the system. The attempt by Sunkara to outline the credibility of socialism because of the exploitative limitations of capitalism is problematical because this aspect is not sufficient to indicate the necessity of struggle to realise an alternative. Instead it is necessary to try and develop the most effective conception of the reasons for an alternative to capitalism, or a perspective that is serious about trying to tackle the various objections to the realisation of the aim of socialism. But the problem is that Sunkara does not sufficiently appreciate this point because he considers that the morally questionable character of capitalism means that socialism is inherently superior, and so he seems to assume that people will accept the credibility of this perspective. Instead of this assumption we have to genuinely accept that people will not automatically support this viewpoint and instead try to develop more convincing reasons for socialism. This means that the various objections to socialism have to be studied in more precise detail, and as a result it will be possible to outline a more credible theoretical basis for this perspective. What this involves is the most convincing argument that it is possible to realise a democratic form of socialism. A type of democracy that is participatory and pluralistic and based on the role of a genuine electoral decision-making process. Instead of recognition of the importance of the development of these types of arguments, Sunkara seems to assume that people will accept that socialism is more democratic than capitalism. But the problem is that the history of the USSR seems to imply that this conclusion is dogmatic and so actual political experience would seem to suggest that only capitalism is able to overcome the issue of authoritarianism. Instead Sunkara assumes that there is a form of genuine socialism that is based on the realisation of the interests of the people. This point may be true but it has to be argued in the most effective manner, and it is questionable whether Sunkara has achieved this task.

Sunkara provides a useful introduction to the ideas of Marx and Engels and their understanding of the possibility of socialism emerging from capitalism. But this summary is not connected to an elaboration of the possible limitations in the approach of Marxism. Instead it is assumed that the ideas of Marx and Engels provide an adequate basis for the development of a programme of action for the realisation of socialism. However, in the appraisal of the ideas of Marx, Sunkara does provide a useful basis for the challenges that have been generated by the complexity of class struggle: “More improviser than prophet, what Marx left us wasn’t scripture but a method of looking at the world and a set of concerns to animate us. Over the years, he revised and constantly questioned his own thought, but remained consistent as a democrat and a believer that the majority had an interest in its own self- emancipation. If we can fault him for anything, it’s for how unqualified that faith was and for underestimating how capitalism could find ways to mitigate, if not solve its contradictions.”(p49) But the point is that it is the task of Marxists after Marx to try and grapple with the issues of the contemporary world in the most thoughtful and serious manner. One of these issues is the failure to achieve the success of the possibility for proletarian revolution. This is because capitalism has proved to be a resilient system and the forces of Social Democracy and Stalinism have often acted to oppose any development of the possibility for the revolutionary transformation of society. The result of this situation has been a profound and regressive effect on consciousness that means that the hope that change can occur has often been undermined in a serious manner. In this context the aims of Marxism have become marginalised and considered to have become irrelevant. This situation has been exacerbated by the inability of the various Marxist groups in any particular country to unite in a single revolutionary party, and so the appeal of Marxism has been undermined in this manner. The result of these developments is that whilst there has often been discontent within society it has not led to support for the conscious aim of opposition to capitalism and the aim of revolutionary change. Instead the result is that unrest has only increased support for the forces of reactionary types of ideologies. In many countries the parties of the bourgeoisie are able to obtain support for their standpoints and the situation of spontaneous unrest with the system has not led to progressive change. The complexity of this situation has led the forces of the Marxist Left to often support the aims and objectives of the various activist groups. But the problem is that these groups do not aim for socialism and instead aspire to realise the particular objectives of their aspirations such as the improvement of the environment. In this context the role of the Marxist organisation is reduced to that of an adjunct of the various activist movements, and so the aim of socialism becomes to be considered as of secondary importance. The result of this situation is that it seems that the objectives of Marxism have effectively become secondary and irrelevant and so the very reason for the role of Marxism becomes undermined by the very opportunist actions of its adherents. In this context it seems that the most progressive action that can be taken is to support the left reformist movements of Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders. But this development also seems to imply that the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society can be replaced by the perspective of modification of capitalism in a progressive manner. However, this standpoint actually seems to suggest that the Marxist aim of the end of the present system and its replacement by socialism has become modified by the influence of mass movements that have more limited objectives. Sunkara seems to accept this development when he comments in a vague manner that: “Marx’s sprawling ideas were meant to be taken and made useful for future struggles – vulgarized, necessarily perhaps, but still true to their radically democratic essence.”(p50) This ambiguous formulation is an acceptance of the activist interpretation of Marx that ignores the primary importance of the necessity to develop a conscious struggle for socialism and communism. The point is that Marxism is a critique of capitalism because it is based on the understanding that its theory is based on an emphasis of the necessity of conscious struggle for a socialist alternative. Instead Sunkara uses formulations that seem to accommodate to the activist interpretation of Marxism that emphasises the role of struggle at the expense of the importance of its historical aims and objectives.

The point being made is that the emphasis on the importance of activism has an important limitation in that it undermines the significance of the role of theory and so the result is an accommodation to the politics of what will generate the most immediate results. This must mean that the objectives of reform replace those that are more revolutionary, and this process is expressed by an accommodation to the objectives of single issue campaigns and the acceptance of the role of what are popular left wing organisations that have effectively rejected the objective of revolutionary change. In this manner the very principled distinctiveness of Marxism becomes undermined and compromised. Sunkara has provided his own formulation of this type of approach in terms of the reconciliation of Marxism with the role of the left wing of the American Democratic party. This criticism is not meant as a justification of sectarianism but is instead meant to uphold the importance of the distinctive role of Marxism which is to contribute to the development of a perspective of genuine revolutionary change. In this context there is a constant tendency to accommodate to what is the most popular form of left-wing opinion and as a result to effectively reject the importance of revolutionary objectives. Instead of this dilution of a principled perspective of Marxism it is necessary to carry out the process of theoretical creativity and organisational flexibility in the manner of the elaboration of the aim of socialism. In this context it is not principled to adopt the views of Corbyn or Sanders as being Marxist because this standpoint means to justify the denial of the continued importance of revolutionary change in order to realise socialism. This point is not an expression of dogmatism because it is the conscious aim of the defenders of capitalism to deny any possibility of change to socialism in terms of the role of constitutional change. For this very reason the validity of a revolutionary perspective remains relevant and it has not become antiquated because of developments within society. This is also why Marxist organisations remain valid because they have to provide the most effective arguments as to why the process of revolutionary change remains relevant, and this is one of the most important reasons why these groups remain relevant. But this aspect could be seriously undermined if we dilute the perspective of Marxism to being merely an expression of support for the forces of left reformism in the USA and UK. Instead it is necessary to uphold the role of a critical expression of how left reformism can be a genuine development in relation to the possibility of transition to socialism. In a theoretical context Sunkara might not disagree with this point, but he upholds his standpoint in terms of trying to deny the differences between left reformism and revolutionary politics. There is a theory/practice contradiction in his standpoint because the most obvious aspect of his perspective becomes about how to obtain the political power of left reformist governments. This objective means that the importance of the transformation of class consciousness becomes effectively denied, and instead what becomes apparent is the aspect of how to obtain the realisation of the political power of what is still a left-wing elite. What becomes rejected is the genuine perspective of class struggle, or the role of a programme of revolutionary practice. It could be argued that this approach of the promotion of revolutionary change is unrealistic, or even problematical, but the only credible alternative is change by the role of a progressive elite, and this perspective has been shown to be problematical or unrealistic. Therefore, even if we accept that a principled approach is difficult to realise there is no alternative that is more credible. Hence the task remains that we need to promote a type of programme that can inspire and motivate the mass of the people to generate the possibility of change. Sunkara is trying to reconcile a reformist and a revolutionary approach. To some extent this standpoint is feasible because support and enthusiasm for a left reformist policy can inspire and create the dynamic of revolutionary change. But this development would still mean that at a certain moment the forces of genuine Marxism would have to indicate the limitations and inadequacy of the reformist standpoint. But the conflation of reformism and revolutionary Marxism by Sunkara means that he may be reluctant to carry out this necessary theoretical and political task.

Sunkara seems to uphold the revolutionary standpoint of Marxism in terms of his criticism of the reformist views of Bernstein and support of the stance of Luxemburg. Sunkara outlines the process of the opportunist degermation of German Social Democracy which led it to support the role of Germany in the first world war. But he does not outline what should have been the position of the principled Marxists in this situation. Hence, he does not outline the possibility for the Marxists to adopt a position of support for a democratic peace without annexations, and nor does he uphold the revolutionary defeatism of Lenin. Instead he is only able to outline the opportunist limitations of the leadership of German Social Democracy whilst not being explicit about what should have been the perspective of the principled Marxists in this situation. The point is that it was possible in this situation to unite the forces of the centre and the left around a policy of peace and socialism. But Sunkara does not outline his standpoint on these issues because he is instead content to be a commentator and is not concerned to outline the aspects of tactics and strategy. The point is that the international working class could have been united against the first world war in terms of support of a policy of a peace without annexations. Only the actions of the working class could have realised this type of peace, and the success of this aim would have created the political conditions to make international advances towards socialism. Instead Sunkara emphasises the pro-imperialist position of the right wing of German Social Democracy and so he does not outline the more important aspect of what should have been the strategy for socialism of the revolutionary forces. This inability to outline the aspects of a strategy is a common limitation of Sunkara who is instead content to be a commentator on political events of the history of class struggle. But the point is that we know the limitations of the forces of opportunism and so the important issue is about how to develop the class struggle in what were difficult circumstances. But Sunkara does not tackle this task because he is not primarily interested in it and is instead more concerned to consider the role of the followers of Luxemburg as the valiant but ultimately futile supporters of a principled form of revolutionary socialism. Therefore, he comments: “During the German revolution that followed the nations defeat in the first world war, the Spartacists faced a question: “Bourgeois democracy or socialist democracy’. They were unable to force their preferred answer.”(p79) But this generalisation ignores the fact that Luxemburg was aware that the situation had not matured for the attempt to realise a revolutionary process of change and that instead it was necessary to consolidate the forces of the Marxists. Unfortunately, her wise views were overruled by a premature attempt to seize power. What the impetuous forces of the Spartacists had not realised was that the situation was still maturing in relation to the development of a pre-revolutionary situation. In 1918-19 the task was still to build the influence of the revolutionary forces in order to aspire to the seizure of power at a more favourable moment. But this cautious position of Luxemburg was overruled and so the Spartacists embarked on an adventurist attempt to seize power and the result was terrible defeat. The result of this situation meant that the experienced leadership of Luxemburg was ended and instead the German Communist party became the instrument of Stalin and the result was tragic. This development meant that periods for the possibility of the ascent of the working class to power were not realised. The result was the consolidation of Stalinism and the distortion of the principles of what had been revolutionary Marxism.

It is also necessary to indicate that the Bolsheviks carried out a revolution in which the role of the party was substituted for that of the working class. Sunkara does describe this process in an eloquent manner: “In the merciless environment the party found itself in, socialism became about rationing scarce resources and squeezing labour out of workers and peasants. The socialist sense of history – the fact that the movement was consciously striving for a different world – was a source of many of its triumphs. But in the Russian context it became a way to excuse the terrible human cost of development.”(p82) The reason for this development was a combination of the adverse social conditions combined with the inability of the Bolsheviks to sustain a democratic conception of the realisation of socialism based on Soviet democracy. Instead the party leadership became the most dynamic expression of the role of the Soviets, and the importance of the factory committees was soon undermined by the role of one-man management of the enterprises. In the situation of economic chaos that resulted from the revolution there were no material resources to develop the role of production and instead the factories often closed, and the workers often left the enterprises to become peasants. Lenin rationalised this situation in terms of the equation of the role of the party with the political character of the regime, but the biggest mistake was the introduction of war communism which led to the denial of the ability of the peasants to exchange their products with the cities in an equitable manner. The workers were not allowed to exchange industrial goods for grain, and instead the system was based on the justification of bureaucratic repression. Furthermore, the development of the civil war only intensified the bureaucratic development of the economy and the political system. In this context the ideology of the equation of the role of the party with that of the working class became systematically expressed, and so the importance of the independence of the trade unions became questioned. Sunkara explains these developments in terms of unfavourable national and international balance of class forces that meant that a popular Soviet government was never really formed, and the regime was isolated in international terms. He outlines the importance of democratic reforms but does not elaborate what this meant. But we can suggest that it would be both possible and principled to allow the functioning of all those parties that accepted the rule of the Soviets, and so in that manner it may have been possible to allow the functioning of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. This type of regime would have meant that the principles of political consent would become the basis of the functioning of the government and so in that manner the limitations of one-party rule would have been overcome.

Sunkara hints that Trotsky was wrong to oppose Bukharin whilst accommodating to the regime of Stalin. But the problem was that Trotsky could not recognise what was the major problem which was the ending of the role of the New Economic Policy in order to embark on rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation. Trotsky did not understand that the effective demise of the role of the worker-peasant alliance could only result in the realisation of a systematic coercive regime that would mean the introduction of the exploitation of the people. Hence The actual alliance that should have been formed was that between Trotsky and Bukharin. In a pessimistic manner, Sunkara supports this perspective: “Trotsky saw the real danger not in Stalin’s bureaucratic centrism but in the risk that Bukharin’s programme would accidentally bring about the restoration of capitalism. Bukharin, too, too far too long to see Stalin as a threat. Yet even had they united, Stalin might very well have still won.”(p100) This pessimistic view ignores the political transformation that would have occurred in terms of an alliance of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Bukharin. This would have meant that Stalin would have been isolated by the majority of the major leaders of the party. The situation would have been transformed and the basis for the change of leadership would have been immensely advanced. But such a situation did not occur because Stalin was able to take advantage of the differences between Bukharin and Trotsky. The tragic aspect of the situation was that both Bukharin and Trotsky were committed to the maintenance of the NEP, and so were against the approach that Stalin adopted in 1929. But neither Trotsky nor Bukharin recognised their similarities in internal policy because they were still divided on the issue of socialism in one country. This meant that they did not acknowledge that they were still united by support for the aim of world revolution, and that it was Stalin who was prepared to undermine the perspective of international revolution in the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. Bukharin and Trotsky did not understand that Stalin expressed the interests of a new ruling class and so was the adversary of the aims of the realisation of socialism. Sunkara outlines the repressive nature of the policies of Stalin and the importance of the necessity of the political unity of genuine Marxists against the formation of what was a totalitarian regime. But he does not outline that this would also mean a rejection of the illusory perspective of socialism in one country and the necessity to uphold the aim of world revolution. In actuality, Bukharin was not against this approach, but was concerned to maintain the proletarian-peasant alliance which he believed Trotsky was against. But tragically, Trotsky was for the maintenance of the NEP. Thus, it could have been possible to develop an alliance of the forces of Trotsky and Bukharin against the party dictatorship of Stalin but this possibility was not established because of the common view that Stalin was not the major adversary in this situation. The result was a process of differentiation between the Left and Right Opposition which facilitated the domination of Stalin and led to his possibility to introduce the policy of collectivisation of the peasants. In other words. the disunity of the principled forces of Bolshevism led to the victory of Stalin.

Sunkara concludes that the domination of Stalinism led to the ascendency of a totalitarian model of socialism that had no aspects of democracy and the participation of the people in its development. But he blames this development on the illusory character of the aim of world revolution: “The Mensheviks faith in Russian liberals to carry out sweeping democratic transformations was misplaced, as were the Bolsheviks hopes for world revolution and a leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.”(p103) But the point is that between 1918-1940 there were many instances of the possibilities to overthrow the domination of capitalism by the forces of the working class, but this potential was increasing undermined by the opportunist politics of the Third International under the leadership of Stalin. In France and Spain, the workers developed forms of mass struggle that led to the possibility of ending the domination of the bourgeoisie, but this prospect was ended by the actions of the forces of Stalinism and Social Democracy. Under a principled leadership that was genuinely attempting to create socialism in the USSR the situation could have been different. The problem was that the reactionary regime of Stalinism in the Soviet Union was also committed to rejecting the aim of world revolution because of its own diplomatic interests. The revolution could have become the beginning of a process of successful change in Europe, but this possibility was undermined by the actions of the Stalinist bureaucracy which considered that any revolutionary success in the more advanced countries of Europe would represent a challenge to its own authority. Instead the Soviet leadership acted to try and create the conditions to strengthen the USSR in terms of various forms of diplomatic strategies, including the Nazi-Soviet pact. In contrast the approach of Trotsky was based on the strategy of permanent revolution which would have aimed to achieve the success of the overthrow of international capitalism. Therefore, if Trotsky had been the leader of the USSR the internal and external policy of the USSR would have been different and more principled. But Sunkara does not outline what should have been a different policy for the leaders of the USSR. Instead he concludes that there was something inherently problematical about Bolshevism: “What is less forgivable is that a model built from errors and excesses, forged in the worst of conditions, came to be synonymous with the socialist ideal itself. Rather than a democratic movement ready to deliver on the promises of the enlightenment, socialism became associated with stifling authoritarianism and an increasingly sclerotic planned economy.”(p104) But the point is that this was development was the outcome of the success of the Stalinist counterrevolution. It could have been possible that an alternative situation was credible if Trotsky had been successful in the inner-party struggle. If this outcome had been realised the policy of forced collectivisation would not have occurred and instead the approach of the worker-peasant alliance and a moderate pace of industrialisation would have been advanced. But it is also necessary to suggest that this outcome would have depended upon the production of industrial goods for the peasants that would have enabled them to produce agricultural goods more efficiently and of higher quality. The success of the economic process of transformation would have required the continuing success of the alliance between the workers and peasants. In this context the ideas of Bukharin had a relevance and they could have become more influential in a situation in which the influence of Stalin had been overcome.

Sunkara elaborates an understanding of the situation in Scandinavia and outlines the successes and failure of the Social Democratic model of the process of transition to socialism. But he also indicates that the various social gains of the post-war period were undermined by the neoliberal offensive that led to mass unemployment and the enhancement of the economic power of capital when compared to that of labour. He does not indicate how this development could have been opposed in terms of trying to establish support for a programme of mobilisation of the trade unions and workers to reject the aims of capital. Instead he emphasises the potential of the movement in favour of the aims of the Bernie Sanders campaign for President and also indicates the potential of the movement based on the role of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party. This perspective implies that we should be perceptive critics of the various movements that have emerged to generate the influence of the role of left-wing Social Democracy. The assumption is that the electoral success of these movements will create the political basis for advance towards the realisation of democratic socialism. But Sunkara is aware of the limitations that undermine these possibilities in the present period: “The task is made even more daunting by the fact that we in the United States lack the three ingredients necessary for almost every socialist advance of the past one hundred and fifty years: mass parties, an activist base, and a mobilised working class. We are not starting from scratch, though. The Bernie Sanders campaign encouraged millions to believe that things can be different. New mass actions, such as the 2018 teacher strikes, have also revealed in our own age the power of working people. What we need now are organisations: working class parties and unions that can unite scattered resistance into a socialist movement.”(p215-216) But this task cannot be differentiated from the vital ideological task to try and convince the sections of the working class that support Trump or the Conservatives and BREXIT party in the UK that populist nationalism is not in their interests and instead they have an interest in supporting the objectives of democratic socialism. The point is that the working class is divided, and this undermines the promotion of the development of a collective and unified expression of the aspirations of the connection of socialism with the interests of the working class. In this context it is vital that convincing arguments are elaborated that can indicate in an effective manner that the populism of Trump and the Conservative party in the UK are not in the interests of working people. But Sunkara seems to be trying to ignore this ideological and political issue, and instead makes the assumption that a dynamic and energetic mass movement can result in the election of a left-wing president in the USA or the realisation of the victory of Corbyn in the UK. This ignores the fact that there is popular prejudice about socialism that can be utilised by the populist right-wing in order to undermine the possibility of the electoral victory of progressive social democratic forces in the UK or USA. Therefore, the emphasis of our programme should be about how we convert the people influenced by reactionary views to become supporters of a left-wing standpoint.

Sunkara outlines a programme based on the following demands. Firstly, the advocacy of class struggle social democracy. He comments: “Sanders and Corbyn don’t represent a social democratic politics that will serve as a moderate alternative to more militant socialist demands. Rather, they offer a radical alternative to a decrepit centre-left. They have introduced a language of class struggle and redistribution to audiences that haven’t even heard demands like these. Class struggle social democracy, then is generating working class strength through electoral campaigns rather than subordinating existing struggles to the gaol of getting a few people elected.”(p217) This view has the illusion that the role of left-wing Social Democracy is to generate the increased activity and influence of a progressive working class. Instead the success of Sanders and Corbyn has not resolved the problem of he continued decline of the militancy and activity of the working class, and the workers of the USA and the UK are still influenced by the perspectives of right-wing populism. This issue has to be tackled if a genuinely united working class is to become an effective agency of social change. We cannot rely on the role of Sanders and Corbyn for resolving the various complex issues of the class struggle. Instead it is necessary to carry out a sustained and effective attempt to convince working people that they can be the agency of social transformation. But Sunkara seems to ignore this important issue.

Sunkara continues to uphold his optimistic view when his second aim is to realise the electoral success of left-wing social democracy. He argues that Sanders is popular with the people of the USA and so could win a presidential election campaign. But this possibility means that the populism of sections of the working class of the USA has been undermined, and in this context Sunkara seems to have little to suggest as to how this task can be successfully completed. He does outline the determination of Trump to oppose the victory of any left-wing Presidential candidate, but this point is not connected to the importance of an ideological struggle to undermine the influence of the views that led to the election of the present President. Sunkara does outline the role of ideological campaigns to discredit Sanders and Corbyn but he does not suggest how this development can be resolved in terms of the promotion of the oppositional stance of a left wing form of radical politics that is able to acquire the support of working people. In a vague manner Sunkara indicates the importance of mass mobilisation in order to enhance the possibility of left-wing election victories, but this prospect has to be connected to the increasing of the influence of a socialist approach that is able to challenge the views of right-wing populism. Such a development has to be connected to the increasing of the belief within people that their actions can contribute to the possibility that they can realise the ability to be able to define the character of society. In this context the electoral victory of left-wing forces has to be connected to the realisation of the ability of people to establish forms of workers control of production and the generation of more effective forms of popular democracy. In a vague manner Sunkara outlines the importance of protests and strikes but these aspects are not connected with a coherent strategy to develop workers control of production and the enhancement of the ability of the people to be able to develop their power within society.

However, Sunkara does outline the basis of a possible strategy of change when he indicates that the realisation of important demands that establish an effective welfare state could become the beginning of the process of transition to a democratic socialist society: “But it is possible to achieve socialist goals within capitalism. As we have seen in the history of social democracy, any achievements will be vulnerable to crises and resisted at every step, but they are morally and politically necessary nonetheless.”(p221) This point can be elaborated in terms of the conception of a minimum programme of demands that would enhance the social conditions of the people and also generate the expectation that such gains could only be consolidated in terms of the promotion of the view that the realisation of the minimum programme of reforms can only be strengthened by advance to socialism. This type of approach is outlined by Sunkara: “Democratic socialists must secure decisive majorities in legislatures while wining hegemony in the unions. Then our organisations must be willing to flex their social power in the form of mass mobilisation and political strikes to counter the structural power of capital and ensure that our leaders choose confrontation over accommodation with elites. This is the sole way we’ll not only make our reforms durable but break with capitalism entirely and bring about a world that values people over profit.”(p222-223) But the problem with this approach is that it assumes a dynamic of continuous and protracted change that inherently results in the realisation of socialism. But how is the leadership that is based on the programme of left reformism going to be convinced that it is both necessary and feasible to aspire to realise the objectives of a comprehensive form of socialism? The point is that only if the working class becomes convinced of the importance of the objective of socialism will the political conditions be created that result in the possibility to establish a dynamic in which the limited stage of reforms becomes transformed into a definite and conscious revolutionary process of change. Hence the credibility of the aim of socialism is dependent on the establishment of genuine support of the working class, and it is in relation to this issue that the approach of Sunkara is unsatisfactory. In other words, he outlines a plausible process of change and transition to socialism but does not adequately outline how and why people become convinced to support this aspiration. This criticism does not mean that Sunkara ignores the role of the working class which he accepts has to be the major agency of social change, but the problem is that this understanding is not connected to a convincing strategy of how the process of social transformation by the actions of the workers can be realised. Instead an expression of good intentions is outlined in terms of the following comment: “The socialist premise is clear: at their core people want dignity, respect, and a fair shot at a good life. A democratic class politics is the best way to unite people against our common opponent and win the type of change that will help the most marginalized, all the while engaging in a far longer campaign against oppression rooted in race, gender, sexuality, and more.”(p236) It is difficult to object to these aspirations from a socialist standpoint, but the problem is that the difficulties involved in the process of developing a successful struggle for revolutionary change have not been adequately addressed. Instead there is the vague hope that the continuation of capitalism will generate forms of struggle that can be related to the increasing influence of the role of a principled socialist party. This objective can be supported but it is a perspective that is based on an underestimation of the difficulties involved in trying to realise the success of the objectives of an emancipatory socialism.

In elaborating this criticism, we have to emphasise the fact that Sunkara seems to have ignored the complications for the socialist project that are caused by the ability of the ruing class to divide the forces of the possible opposition to the present system. These divisions have been caused in relation to issues of gender, racial oppression, or even the importance and priority that should be considered in relation to the question of ecology. Primarily the role of forms of prejudice has been utilised by the defenders of the present system in order to undermine the capacity of the discontent of the people to become unified. Instead there are divisions within the forces of the exploited and the oppressed that enable the present system to continue despite discontent with its various limitations. Secondly, Sunkara does not outline a credible strategy for change even though he occasionally hints at its character in terms of the initial role of a struggle for democratic reform that would then be transformed into a struggle for socialism. Therefore it is necessary to elaborate a minimum programme of reforms, such as the regeneration of the welfare state, that could become the basis to change the balance of power in a progressive manner, and in that sense encourage the development of the aspiration to strive to achieve a maximum programme of socialism. The point being made is that the creation of a strong and efficient public sector of the economy would have to be connected to the increased influence of workers control of the economy. This change in the balance of forces between that of capital and labour would provide the impetus for the intensification of struggle to achieve the realisation of the minimum objectives of a socialist programme. Success in this context would create more favourable conditions for the promotion of the aims of the attainment of a socialist system. But such an ambitious programme will not be possible if the standpoint of socialism is not understood in terms of its objective of human liberation. In an unsatisfactory manner Sunkara has outline some brief reasons why genuine socialism will not result in the realisation of Stalinism and the formation of a one-party regime. But it is necessary to elaborate this understanding in terms of a definite commitment to the principles of genuine democracy and the role of regular elections in order to express the opinions of the people. We have to explicitly acknowledge that if the socialist party does not win the majority of votes in an election that it will accept the decision of the people. Only in this manner will it be possible to suggest that socialism is not connected to authoritarianism. This possibility means that it is necessary to develop a profound connection between the people and the socialist party that means that it this relationship is based on shared objectives and so in this manner the aims of socialism have consistent democratic support. Such a possibility requires that the socialist party is able to outline convincing and effective arguments that are able to oppose the influence of bourgeois ideology within the people and so create consistent support for the socialist approach. However, it does not seem that Sunkara has carried out this task. For example, he has not outlined why socialism can be economically and socially superior to capitalism, and nor has be provided sufficient reasons as to why the working class can still act as an agency of change. Instead he has outlined a useful polemic in favour of the aims of socialism, and in that context we can congratulate him for his useful contribution to the ideas of Marxism and the liberation of humanity.