

Two new socialist manifestos

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Popular new books by leading figures in the new left media landscape shine a revealing light on the potential – and limits – of the case for socialism in the twenty-first century

Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto*, Verso 2019

Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*, Verso 2019

What is the precise shape of the more just society the left ought to fight for? Should it accept the inequalities intrinsic to capitalist production or pursue a more radically egalitarian settlement that goes beyond social democracy? And what actions ought to be taken in order to move towards such a future? Does extra-parliamentary organising represent a distraction from the real work of electoral politics, or is it a necessary supplement to it? Over the last few years, a number of what commentators have dubbed ‘millennial socialists’ – young left-wing activists who support the policies championed by septuagenarian socialist politicians such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders – have been at the forefront of the debates raging around these questions. Through newspaper columns and television appearances, they have attacked the centrist Third Way consensus that dominated progressive politics prior to 2008, and which still exercises considerable influence. Do millennial socialists possess solutions to the left’s current malaise? The publication of manifestos from two of the most prominent voices among their ranks – Aaron Bastani, co-founder of Novara Media, and Bhaskar Sunkara, founder and editor of *Jacobin* – offers an opportunity to assess this prospect.

Bastani’s *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* aims to update the traditional Marxist vision of a post-capitalist future – where one can hunt in the morning and fish in the afternoon, without ever becoming hunter or fisherman – by aligning it more closely with the technological capabilities of the twenty-first century. The

bulk of the book is taken up with describing a number of soon-to-be realised technological innovations made possible by the information revolution, by means of which an increasingly abundant supply of data is transforming our productive capacities. Bastani argues that gene editing technology will soon revolutionise medicine, making it possible to optimise one's genetic programming to remove the risk of contracting various diseases; the growing ability to harness solar and wind power will transform energy production, making it possible to increase the planet's energy use without relying on fossil fuels; and automation will radically change the production of goods and services, meaning humans are no longer required to perform many logistical, retail and even medical and legal roles. Similarly, asteroid mining will alter the currently dwindling prospects for mineral extraction on earth, allowing humanity to access practically limitless supplies of nickel, zinc and other commodities; and cellular agriculture will upturn traditional means of producing food, making it possible to grow or 'print' meat, eggs, and even champagne.

Bastani's central thesis is that we ought to introduce common ownership of these developing technologies. He largely sidesteps questions about what this might look like in practice – would these technologies be owned by the state, by workers, by communities? – focusing instead on what the benefits of some kind of common ownership would be. We ought to pursue this decommodification of nascent technologies because it enables greater equality and freedom, Bastani claims. The book argues that common ownership would prevent the exacerbation of existing domestic and global inequality that would take place if the technologies remained privately owned – sources of profit for the few, with their use only available to rent for those lucky enough to be able to afford them. The book also argues that a world in which all have access to the goods provided by gene editing, solar and wind capture, labour automation, asteroid mining and cellular agriculture technologies would be a world in which the highest kind of freedom – 'freedom as self-authorship' – would be obtainable by all, rather than just the lucky few. Rather than working to meet their basic needs, individuals would be universally free to become whoever they want to be, to access their full potential and lead rich and fulfilled lives. In other words, we can achieve the liberal aim of universal individual freedom via the socialist strategy of common ownership of the means of production.

There are a number of problems with Bastani's thesis in its current form. To begin with, the basic empirical premise upon which the argument relies regarding these soon-to-be-developed technologies is currently somewhat flimsy and unconvincing. Bastani's ambitious and sweeping claims about how technological barriers in a number of fields are soon to be surmounted are supported mostly by statements from CEOs and billionaire investors and newspaper and magazine articles, rather

than academic articles and books, which surely more accurately reflect the current state of scientific debate. And a far more in-depth engagement with what Bastani sees as the drawbacks of a more anti-growth or de-growth socialist response to the climate crisis would make his accusation that much of the green movement wants ‘to retreat from modernity itself’ appear less uncharitable. At a time when most scientific estimates provide us with ten years to almost halve carbon emissions, should the green argument for reductions in humanity’s use of limited natural resources really be given such short shrift?

But perhaps most significantly, there is a real lack of clarity on what justifies expropriating the owners of these nascent technologies. Even if common ownership would prevent the exacerbation of existing inequality and actively enable equal opportunity to attain a kind of freedom denied to many individuals in present societies, expropriation on this scale would currently be regarded by many as an illegitimate violation of individual property rights. How, then, does the left make a persuasive case that expropriation is in fact desirable? The book seems to acknowledge that it is not the case that ‘anything goes’ in the fight for a more equal society (it describes the Russian Revolution as an ‘anti-liberal coup’); yet it fails to make a convincing argument that a greater egalitarianism in the future satisfactorily trumps entitlements owners might have earned in the present.

There are of course strong arguments for common ownership. One line of argument that Bastani gestures towards is that humanity is collectively morally entitled to these innovations and the goods and services they produce (perhaps, in part, because the technologies rely on state investment funded by the general public), and that private ownership of these technologies is often undeserved in the first place. Another is that because the way owners choose to deploy these technologies affects many, even all, members of society (e.g. it determines the kinds of jobs individuals can undertake, where a society’s intellectual energies are likely to be concentrated, humanity’s ability to tackle the climate crisis and so on), all members of a society have a democratic right to influence their control and use. But both these lines of argument remain undeveloped. These aren’t merely abstract questions in moral and political philosophy: the possession of a more comprehensive, persuasive vocabulary than is found in this text regarding the justifications for collective ownership is going to be central to making the case for a communist future on doorsteps and in public forums, and to build sufficient popular support for expropriation.

Sunkara’s *The Socialist Manifesto*, despite its markedly less utopian picture of an egalitarian future (it takes for granted a world of relative scarcity, and sets its sights on market socialism, rather than communist paradise), shares much with Bastani’s manifesto. Sunkara also partly grounds his case for socialism in a moral argument about the importance of individual flourishing for all, and mentions the climate crisis at several stages of his argument. Both writers also distance themselves from

the revolutionary ‘smashing’ of the state (and the quashing of civil liberties which has historically followed it) as the path to socialism, arguing instead that the first step in the process of realising a socialist society is building a mass movement fighting for the implementation of broadly social-democratic reforms. Both authors predict that achieving policies such as higher minimum wages and taxes on the wealthiest, or the nationalisation of key utilities, will embolden those struggling for more radical reforms and create a more durable constituency of support for socialism, and that the process of campaigning for them can politicise the currently apathetic and disinterested. But how this might happen is dealt with only very briefly in Bastani (it is never particularly clear how we might move from the kinds of social-democratic policies described above to fully automated luxury communism); Sunkara, however, offers a much more substantial treatment of the issue.

Over a number of mostly historical chapters, Sunkara draws out what he takes to be a series of tactical lessons for the left today. For Sunkara, the failure of previous attempts at radically egalitarian policy-making – such as in Sweden in the 1970s – demonstrates that workplace strikes and street protests on a huge scale are going to be necessary to pressure parliament into passing socialist reforms, even once a progressive government is elected. This is because beneficiaries of the political and economic status quo will resist the implementation of policies which attack their privilege, by essentially holding the state hostage through capital flight, strike and media pressure. If left governments are going to be successful in the face of this resistance, rather than simply retreating (which is what, as Sunkara points out, is what has happened historically), sufficient counterpower must be built up among the majority of citizens in the advanced capitalist nations that stand to gain from the creation of a more equal society.

The book features many useful, real-world tips about political organising: socialists shouldn’t isolate themselves from broader currents of social change, even if these are currently far from overtly socialist; they should take rank-and-file jobs in growing industries; and they should make democratising the parties and unions to which they belong a real priority. But at least one aspect of this account of socialist transition seems to be underdeveloped. Presumably, the popular mobilisation Sunkara seeks needs to be of a truly unprecedented kind, since the scale and strength of past mobilisations were clearly not sufficient to bring about socialist reforms. Given the current moribund state of many left party memberships, and almost all trade unions, the book is certainly correct to conclude that this is a formidable task. But how exactly do we get to a world in which a really significant chunk of the population is actively engaged in party, union and local community activism? How should socialists go about attempting to foster commitment to the project of social transformation among the as-yet unengaged?

Sunkara does, relatively early on, mention what he calls ‘the problem of collective

action', where workers have 'more than their chains to lose'. Perhaps the goods that one can gain from participation in activism – heightened connection with others, the learning of new skills, and a feeling of ownership over a collective institution like a party or union – can off-set the costs of political engagement sufficiently to sustain political commitment. But the question of how to motivate the initial time sacrifices required to engage in activism in the first place is only really skimmed over. Historians tend to highlight the role played by an alternative left culture – encompassing the press, recreational activities, political education networks and so on – in fostering commitment to political struggle among many citizens in the twentieth century. Sunkara briefly references such strategies, but how can the left replicate or adapt these activities today under radically different political conditions? This preoccupation with the way changes in culture and class composition require novel socialist strategising was a core concern of thinkers of the New Left such as Stuart Hall. But when Sunkara mentions Hall, it is to immediately dismiss his thought for overstating 'neoliberalism's popular appeal and the extent of working-class conservatism' and as representative of a 'turn against class politics' (p208). Such a dismissal, however, would have been much harder to sustain if Sunkara had chosen to engage more extensively with Hall's answers to the difficult questions he broached.

Both books repeat the Communist Manifesto's infamous closing statement that there is 'a world to win'. But these questions – of how activists persuasively justify expropriation and ought to foster political commitment – need to be urgently broached in future work from millennial socialists if this victory is to be even halfway likely. Even with these unanswered questions, however, Sunkara's book should at least enable a new generation of left activists to learn from, and hopefully avoid repeating, the mistakes of socialist actors in the past, and Bastani's can provide its readers with a firmer grasp on the technological and scientific dynamics likely to shape the future. Whether through featuring an inspiring catalogue of activists who struggled and maintained commitment in the face of much more trying circumstances than our own, or through sketching the inspiring outlines of a radically more free and equal future, both can potentially motivate greater engagement in political action and are a welcome antidote to the temptation of left melancholia.

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