

SHERI BERMAN INTERVIEW

In this interview, Sheri Berman discusses Bernstein, Marx, Engles, and Mussonli, and their contribution to the history of Socialism.

Why did so many people see Bernstein as the heir apparent to the legacy of Marx and Engels? How influential was he?

When Bernstein goes to England he becomes acquainted with Marx and Engels, [who] become very enamored of him and they appoint him to a number of influential positions. In particular, Bernstein becomes the editor of the very important journal for the German Social Democratic Movement. The journal is called the *Social Democrat*. And from there on he grows to fall into their confidences and they give him a number of different kinds of tasks. After Marx dies, Engels asks Bernstein if he will put together from Marx' notes a fourth volume *Capital*. And when Engels dies, he also is asked to be [one of] the executors of Engels' will. So he clearly has strong relationships with Marx and Engels, which, after both die, carry over to making him seem as one of their kind of inheritors.

What was Bernstein's influence within the movement at the time he was in London? How important was he? How influential was he?

Bernstein was a very important social democrat. While he was in London he edited one of the German Social Democratic movement's most important newspapers, called *The Social Democrat*. He was very friendly with both Marx and Engels, who entrusted him with a whole range of tasks and gave him a whole range of responsibilities in the international socialist movement. He was also tasked with putting together from Marx's notes the *Fourth Volume of Capital*. After Engels' death, Bernstein was also named one of the executors of Engels' will. So he was clearly very closely tied to Marx and Engels and seen in the period after their death as one of the most important socialists.

What did Bernstein see while he was exiled in London that made him begin to question some of the central premises of Marxism?

Bernstein learned from Marx and Engels a couple of things that are of critical importance. The first and most important was that capitalism was working towards its own demise; alongside of this would be a class struggle that grew ever sharper and ever more simplified. When Bernstein spent all this time in England he began to think that perhaps neither one of these things was true. First, he saw a capitalism that was flourishing, that was creating wealth, and that was not impoverishing workers along the lines that Marx and Engels had predicted. He also saw a class struggle that did not look at all like Marx and Engels said. He saw classes that did not have the kind of conflicts that Marx and Engels predicted, and more importantly seemed to be able to work out many of their differences by using the political system.

Of course, the English political system was much more advanced than the German [system] of that day, and [it] gave workers in England opportunities that their German counterparts simply did not have. And so Bernstein began to think, well, maybe if things work this way in England, it's just a question of time until they can work that way in places like Germany as well.

What did Bernstein suggest about Marxism that was considered so blasphemous by many socialists?

Bernstein's blasphemy began by questioning these two basic premises of Marxism. The first was this idea of historical materialism, basically that economic forces were pushing capitalism towards its inevitable decline. The second basic premise was that of the class struggle, that the force of this historical movement would be this conflict between classes that would push the system towards its final collapse. Bernstein questioned both of these things. And in fact, ultimately in his writings [he] rejected them both. Of course, without either historical materialism or the class struggle there wasn't very much of Marxism left at all.

As a person with strong historical ties to the movement and in particular to its two founding fathers, it was difficult even for Bernstein to admit that what he was doing was basically kicking away the pillars of Marxism. But his sort of counterparts within the movement, people like Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemborg, understood very clearly that if Bernstein was right then Marxism simply had very little left of it. This was why [Bernstein] was such an important figure in the international socialists movement in this period around the turn of the last century - the end of the 19th, early 20th Century.

How was what Bernstein was saying a problem for socialism?

What Bernstein was saying was, first of all, that capitalism, at least in the short to medium term future, was not going to collapse and that this created a lot of problems for socialists. Because if their whole movement, that is to say the final goal of socialism, was going to depend on the collapse of capitalism, which is something that maybe would not ever happen, then they really needed to rethink both what their function and their goal actually was. So [Bernstein] was in a sense really questioning the entire premise upon which socialists' parties had been built.

What was Bernstein's view of Orthodox Marxists?

Bernstein called [orthodox Marxists] "Calvinists without God" because they had this incredible belief in sort of predetermination and predestination. They of course didn't believe in God, but the god for them was the conviction that their ultimate outcome, socialism, would come about regardless of what they did, regardless of what their opponents did. It was predestined in the course of history to actually happen. And so they resembled Calvinists; although, of course, they themselves were anti-religious and didn't believe in religion at all. But Bernstein felt that they actually had very much a similar kind of personality and a very similar worldview.

How is Bernstein a major transitional figure in the history of socialism?

Bernstein is the most important critic of this version of Marxism - a Marxism based on historical materialism and class struggle. He begins the process whereby socialists begin to question the basic premises of Marxism. So what you have at the end of the 19th and the early 20th Century is a growing number of socialists questioning Marxists doctrine.

As time goes on what happens is socialists build upon these critiques of positive programs, so they move from the negative critique of Marxism to the building of a sort of positive vision of socialism that is no longer based on these premises, that is to say of economic determinism and class struggle. So he's very important in breaking down this kind of orthodoxy and setting the stage for people to build socialism on another kinds of basis.

Would you call Bernstein one of the fathers of social democracy?

Bernstein is the father of social democracy; the single most important figure in international socialism in the formation of a social democratic alternative to Marxism.

What are the key aspects of Bernstein's social democratic alternative to Marxism? How is the emphasis different?

The social democratic alternative is based on a rejection of these two premises, of economic determinism and class struggle. And in replacing them, Bernstein comes up with a number of ideas that are then taken up by future social democrats.

Instead of economic determinism he believes in a political path to socialism. He believes that you can use democratic systems to begin to change capitalism from within. He rejects the class struggle and puts in its place an idea that classes can cooperate, that there're a whole range of citizens who do not benefit from unfettered markets and from capitalism, and that these groups can come together again to use the democratic system to change the way the economy functions. So [Bernstein] replaces economic determinism with a kind of political path to socialism, and class struggle with the idea of class cooperation. These are the premises upon which social democracy is built.

After World War II, what sort of intellectual relationship did Bernstein have with social democrats?

The social democrats of the Post War years often didn't recognize what social democrats like Bernstein had done, but they [were] very familiar with the kinds of critiques and ideas that he and then those after him came up with. In particular it's these two main ideas of a political, or rather democratic, path to socialism and the idea of class cooperation as the force that can bring about this change. Bernstein, as I mentioned, is the most important early figure coming up with these ideas. But the Post War social democrats really accept [these ideas] in mass and build the Post War order in Europe on the basis of these two beliefs. That is to say that politics can trump economics and be the way towards a better future, and that classes can and will cooperate in the creation of this future. It is

to the original critique penned by Bernstein that they owe these ideas, and so in that sense there is a direct intellectual trajectory.

Is it proper to classify social democrats as political heirs to Bernstein?

The social democrats after the Second World War were the political heirs of Bernstein in that they took the ideas that he came up with fifty years before of a political path to socialism and of classes cooperating to bring about a better future.

How did Lenin differ from Bernstein, especially in personality, motivations, and the way in which he sought to accomplish his goals?

Bernstein and Lenin both are struck by the same recognition [at] very similar times. Namely, that if they waited around for economic developments to deliver them the desired socialist outcome that they may very well be waiting forever. Bernstein's answer to this problem was to use democratic political systems and the idea of class cooperation to bring about a better future. He had faith in the ability of people, masses of people, to work together through a democratic system to create this socialist future.

Lenin, because he lived in Russia, didn't either have these options nor [because of] his personality was he really interested in them. But he also put forward a political answer to this question, [that] you can push history forward through the use of politics. But Lenin's politics were the politics of a Vanguard party and violence.

So where Bernstein wanted to use masses of people in the democratic system, Lenin decided that elites and a Vanguard party could be the force that pushes history forward. So they were both reacting to the same problem in Marxism but they came up with political solutions that were very different.

What were some of the themes that Engels began developing in writings in Manchester in the early 1840's?

Engels comes to England and becomes incredibly interested in a number of things, one of the most influential of which is his study of the English working class. He goes into the slums and the ghettos of England and he does an incredible study of what actual workers' lives were like in England. This was incredibly important, [and] not just in sort of laying the documentation upon which the theories of Marx and Engels would later be built. But this is also one of the first and - still today - very influential studies of how workers in early phases of capitalism lived, what their lives were like, how the new economic forces that were buffeting them actually changed the societies and the communities that they lived in. Engels' work was incredibly important both in helping Marx and Engels think about capitalism but also in setting the stage for later studies of sort of how workers in this economic system lived.

In Engels' early writings, what was the picture he painted of the working class?

It was a very grim picture. Workers in the 1840's in England, which was again at this point one of the most advanced countries economically in the world, lived miserable lives. They lived in squalid conditions. They worked sixteen, eighteen hours a day. Child labor, female labor was incredibly common. Disease was rampant. The living standards were just below probably what we would even expect in many underdeveloped countries. It was a miserable, miserable time.

Describe the intellectual relationship that developed between Marx and Engels. What role did each one play?

Marx was the prophet. His personality and his nature made him a flamboyant and charismatic figure. Engels was very willing to defer to that. Although they were both incredibly important intellectual contributors to what would later become known as Marxism, it was Marx who really ends up embodying this doctrine, not only because of his critical intellectual contribution but because his personality made him the obvious leader. And Engels, because of his personality, was very willing to let Marx take that role. And so today we know the doctrine primarily by the name Marxism, but Marx and Engels were, according to many scholars, equal contributors to what we now see as this doctrine.

How important was Engels' early work to Marxism?

It was incredibly important. Engels' early work and early research really provides much of the foundation upon which Marxism is later built. And Engels of course also supports Marx, not only through his research but financially and psychologically. And so without Engels, in any number of ways, Marxism would never have come to be.

What was the most important idea behind the *Communist Manifesto*?

The most important idea behind the *Communist Manifesto* is, again, this idea of historical materialism. The idea that history is inevitably working towards this outcome, that history was on the side of the workers, and that their struggle was destined to give them the victory that they had so long desired. It gave this incredible confidence to this young movement, this movement that was just beginning, because what Marx and Engels was telling them was, don't worry; what ever happens to you, no matter how miserable your lives are, no matter how desperate your political struggle seems, history's working its way towards this outcome. That's what gives Marxism its incredible force. This kind of sense that history is on your side, that with the power of science we can now see the way the forces are working, and they're working to free you and to create this socialist future.

What was it that Marx was trying to do with *Capital* to build upon what he had started with the *Manifesto*?

Marx's *Capital* was supposed to be the kind of summation, the final say on Marx's view of history and obviously his dissection of capitalism. But it was not

at all as successful as the *Communist Manifesto* because, [even though *Capital*] ended up being a many volume study that is incredibly dense and incredibly difficult to get through, very few workers ever read it. And very few theoreticians who read it actually understood what it was saying. In contrast, the *Communist Manifesto* remains to this day one of the great pieces of political rhetoric. It's simple, it's easy to understand, it's incredibly well written, and its message is straightforward and powerful. *Capital* is the exact opposite, although Marx himself saw *Capital* as the kind of summation of his life's work.

Why did Marx never complete *Capital*?

Many scholars have different views as to why Marx ultimately didn't finish *Capital*. Many feel that it's because in the course of doing this many volume study there were so many things that he ran up against that he simply could not explain. And so one reason may be that capitalism just proved to be too tricky of a knot for him to untie. Of course, he also was one of these people who had just an incredible amount of notes, an incredible amount of research, and like so many people just got lost in that. Engels of course tries to finish the work after Marx dies, and then tries to give Bernstein the task of doing what was supposed to be the fourth and final volume, which of course never really comes to pass.

By the end of the 19th Century, Marx's work is gaining a huge significance. It becomes more than just a political theory; it becomes a way of looking at history and the world. What is Engels' role in making that happen?

Marxism becomes an incredibly powerful force in the last third of the 19th Century, based partially upon its ability to deliver to its adherence this very simple, very powerful, and very optimistic view of history. If you tell people who see themselves as the losers of the current system that history is on their side, that capitalism [is] working towards its inevitable demise, and that the future is yours, that's obviously incredibly attractive.

Engels plays a great part in bringing this vision to the socialist movement [and] to labor movements across Europe by sort of digesting Marx's often very difficult prose and very lengthy works into shorter pamphlets and brochures that are designed precisely to popularize and simplify what were often somewhat complex thoughts. So it's really to Engels and to the period after Marx's death that the doctrine that we know as Marxism comes into being.

Is there a scientific aspect to Marxism?

Marx saw himself as a scientist. He was very much in tune with the kind of emphasis on science, the glorification of science that was characteristic of the late 19th Century. Unlike socialists who had come before him who had based their socialism on ideals, on beliefs in justice, on beliefs of [a] sort of greater equality, Marx really bases his vision on socialism in what he thinks is a kind of scientific diagnosis of the dynamics of capitalism. So Marx's socialism is really of a very different nature than the socialisms that came before him. He very much saw himself as a social scientist like Darwin and really dismissed those who wanted to base socialism just on ideals or senses of a world that could be better.

He based his socialism on what he believed was an absolutely clear analytical assessment of what the nature of history and of the capitalist system was.

Give us a sense of the consequences of Marxism becoming a way of analyzing the world.

We still owe to Marx, and to Marxism more generally, a kind of economic view of history. That is to say, a view of history that looks first and foremost at the role of economic forces in pushing development forward, and secondarily to the role of classes in sort of shaping that dynamic. This is still something that we owe to Marx. It's a very powerful way of looking both at the capitalist system and at historical development more generally. It's still something that social scientists make great use of. It is to Marx still that we owe this kind of economic view of history.

Most people remember Mussolini as the father of fascism, but many of us forget that he actually has roots on the left. Describe his background and early career as a socialist.

Mussolini starts off in the socialist party and in the years before the First World War becomes an incredibly popular and powerful figure in the socialist party of Italy. But Mussolini is very frustrated with the socialist party in Italy and with the international socialist movement more generally. He sees it as passive, he sees it as not an active force in history and he sees it as having lost its kind of revolutionary fervor.

Originally then [Mussolini] tries to bring back the sense of revolutionary change as the goal of socialists to the socialist movement. But he soon becomes convinced that this is not possible, that the socialist movement no longer has this capacity for revolutionary change in it. And that's when he begins his flirtation with nationalism, which of course eventually brings him from the left of the political spectrum all the way over to the right.

How would you summarize Mussolini's journey from left to right?

Mussolini's journey to the right begins with his dawning recognition that neither socialism as a movement nor workers as a societal force are going to be the sort of revolutionary force that he was looking for. He begins to see in the growing power of nationalism in Italy, and in Europe more generally in the early 20th century, the kind of force that can really make nations into dramatic players, that can really bring about the kinds of changes in society and in the international order that he's really looking for. That's what really instigates his shift right. He begins to see [in] nationalism what he no longer sees in socialism -- a force for revolutionary change.

How did World War I affect Mussolini's views as they related to the socialist movement?

World War I, obviously, has a powerful affect on Mussolini. He starts off actually being opposed to the war and he also starts off being very pro-British. But as the war goes on, he decides that it would be the right thing for Italy to get

involved. [Mussolini wants to get involved] not only to kind of further [Italy's] international aspirations, but also because he sees nationalism, the nationalism that would come with participation in the war, as something that he and others can use to bring about revolutionary change. He sees nationalism as an incredible powerful motivating force. It gets people to do things, it gets people to believe in great causes, and it makes them willing to sacrifice for things that socialism no longer seems to be able to make them willing to sacrifice for. So the First World War really galvanizes Mussolini and makes him even more aware of and appreciative of this incredible power of nationalism. And this is what he really uses after the war to begin to shape this movement that he becomes the head of.

What effect does World War I have on the international socialist movement?

The First World War has a devastating impact on the international socialist movement. It completely breaks this myth of internationalism. It also splits many of the constituent parties of the socialist international. This affects Mussolini not only by furthering his own belief that internationalism just has no future, but also by convincing him that socialism, and the socialist movement more generally, is a force of yesterday and that the power of the future simply no longer belongs to this idea, to this movement, but has to belong to something else - nationalism and fascism.

How would you characterize the fascist party in its nascent stage and its spin on Marxism or socialism?

Fascism doesn't start off as a kind of traditional party of the right. In fact, it has a program and an appeal that has a strong socialist element to it. Socialist in the sense of not only trying to appeal to workers, but promising [a] more equitable [and] just distribution of outcome, promising [land] to those without land, promising a whole range of redistributive measures that one would normally associate with the left rather than the right. But over time many of those components of its program fall away as well as the idea that fascism can work primarily as an urban or workers-based movement. Over time, Mussolini moves away from this early kind of socialist emphasis and more towards an emphasis not just on the nationalist theme but on a anti-left or anti-Marxist kind of appeal.

Why did Mussolini decide to reposition the party from the left to the right? How did he justify this shift theoretically?

Mussolini decides to move his party from the left to the right, so to speak, because he calculates that that's really where the power lies, not only with the growing force of nationalism but with an attempt to appeal to those who feel most threatened by the power of the socialist movement. [Mussolini] understands the Italy of the Post War years, that many people feel very threatened by the workers movement, very many people feel that their livelihoods are at stake if socialists hold power, or continue to hold power in places where they are in power. So he repositions himself on the right, so to speak, because he understands that that's

the way for fascism to increase its power, increase its share of the electorate, and put pressure on the powers that be to let them into government.

Was Mussolini a political opportunist?

Mussolini is a political opportunist in the sense that he wants to come to power and he's willing to change his tactics accordingly. He's not a political opportunist in the sense that he had no ideas that motivated him over time. He clearly has some kind of political vision and that vision remains relatively constant. In that sense he's not a political opportunist. It's the combination of the sort of ability to see where political lies with something of a vision that he wants to create that makes him so dangerous and ultimately such a powerful historical figure.

What aspects of Mussolini's Italy were more reminiscent of the socialist or communist state?

Mussolini creates a very, very powerful state in Italy, a state that has a large degree of control not only over society but eventually also over the economy. In fact, many of the features of the Post War Italian economy, a large nationalized sector, a state with its hand in a variety of industries, are things that originate in the time of Mussolini. They're things that we most often associate with the left or with socialism, but in Italy really stem more from Mussolini's time than anything else.

What aspects of the socialist project, in general, do you think have failed over the last hundred years? What aspects survived?

The parts of socialism that clearly have failed are the parts that gave rise both to the communist movement and the parts that believed in a kind of economic determinist view of history, that capitalism was doomed to collapse and that socialism would come about inevitably as the course of history. These predictions turned out to be completely false.

But the social democratic part of the movement, the movement that was based on a belief that you could use the forces of democracy to change the world in a better way, to create a better society, a more humane society, a more just society, clearly this has just not succeeded but remains to this day the vision that dominates Europe. And in that sense it's not only the most powerful ideology of the Twentieth Century in Europe, but [it's] still one with clearly the greatest appeal.

How are socialist principles still relevant today in a world that is moving more and more towards free markets, which traditionally are thought to be opposed to socialism?

Social democracy has always been characterized by its belief that markets have an important economic function, [but also for] its distaste for [markets'] impact on social and political outcomes. This is what differentiates social democrats from Marxists, from communists, and from liberals, this sense or this desire to use the market to harness the most powerful economic mechanism

available, but to not allow it to kind of determine what happens in the political or socialist field. This is still an idea or a vision that has immense appeal and is still very relevant to the Twenty-First Century.

Will today's free market ideologues fall into the same trap that Marxists fell into?

What Marxists and classical liberals, or free market ideologues, share is this incredible faith in the power of economic forces that you should basically let them run their course and that political forces or government should interfere with them as little as possible. This has proven to be historically very dangerous -- dangerous economically [and], perhaps even more importantly, dangerous politically. Very few people want to live in societies where governments can't control the economy in some way, where governments don't have the ability to set societal goals and determine societal outcomes. Those people who don't recognize this and try to push governments further and further out of this sphere, I think are setting themselves up for immense difficulties and perhaps immense social reactions.

Discuss the differences in the relative power of political and economic forces.

The debate about the relative power and the relative sphere of political and economic forces is incredibly important. In a world of globalization, the fear of many is that their governments and their societies will lose control over determining what happens in their lives. This is something that is very unsatisfying and deeply troubling to people who have ties to local cultures, who have ties to local communities, and who fear capitalism because they see it as a potential threat to these kinds of traditions and their ways of life. What they should see capitalism as [is] a force for good, a force for creating more prosperity, more jobs, and a better life. So we need to kind of separate out people's fears. We need to make [people] see that capitalism can deliver this great new life for them without destroying all of these societal and political things that they also value quite highly.

The democratic socialist movement has given up on the goal of utopia. Without that goal, how is the movement any different than the American Democratic Party?

If we go back and look at the history of social democracy, we understand that at its origin it did have a transformative project. It wasn't a violent one like Lenin's. It wasn't one that was determined by economics like Marx's. But social democrats still wanted to create this great new future, a world that was prosperous and that was filled with all of the economic goodies that capitalism could deliver but that wasn't also characterized by all of the inequalities, all of the dark things that capitalism gave. This was very much, a distinctive and powerful vision. It remains at the core of social democracy to this day, the idea that you can have a market economy, that you can have a capitalism that delivers incredible growth and prosperity but does not at the same time deliver the social

dislocation that we associate with some aspects of capitalism. And this remains, I think, a powerful and attractive vision.

What is the purpose in the democratic socialist movement keeping the “socialist” label?

There’s two reasons for retaining that tie to socialism. First is because [there is] a pride in some of the accomplishments that the socialist movement has historically been behind. Surely the great strides that took place in Europe from the inter-war period forward are largely attributed to those who can call themselves social democrats. So there’s a value in retaining your tie to a movement that you feel strongly about and that you have pride in. There’s also a sense [that] socialism indicates a better future, a belief that people working together can actually transform the societies that they live, not just in a piecemeal or incremental way, but in a way that ultimately does add up to a truly better world. By retaining this socialist label, you indicate that even though you see these things happening gradually, slowly over time, that you have as your end goal a world that is fundamentally different and better than the one that we live in today.