

Socialist Scholars Conference

Every year, prominent socialist scholars gather in New York for a weekend of debate, dialogue, and solidarity. It has become the Left's most important and stimulating event, an indispensable venue for activists seeking to explore their differences as well as share common ground. Some of the conference participants spoke with us about socialism's past, present and future.

[Download PDF](#) (Requires [Adobe Acrobat](#))

LEO PANITCH INTERVIEW

Leo Panitch is a Political Science Professor at York University in Canada. He is the co-editor of *The Socialist Register*, and author of *Renewing Socialism: Democracy, Strategy and Imagination* and *The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour*.

Describe the socialist movement's past – its successes and why it failed - and what the challenge is now for the social democrats in carrying out a socialist agenda.

If we think about socialism as a political movement and the organizations that were formed to advance socialists projects, the socialist movement had many successes: some of them revolutionary, some of them reformist through labor parties or social democratic parties or trade unions that won real reforms for working people and in other places actually made revolutions in the name of socialism. But by the end of the twentieth century - as was perhaps to be expected given the power and dynamic nature of capitalism as a system - those original parties and unions ran their course in terms of their successes. They couldn't generate the institutional means of continuing their successes. By the 1960s...one could see that the communist parties and the labor parties and the social democratic parties and unions like the AFL-CIO, had lost the ability to [institutionally] carry forward the socialist project.

So the challenge has been now for over a quarter of a century to try to build new institutions that learn from the limits and failures of the old ones - the old communist parties, the old labor parties - and build new ones that would go beyond those limitations. That's happened in some places. It's happened with the South Korean labor movement. It's happened with the Brazilian workers party. They explicitly conceived themselves as learning from the limits and mistakes of the old [parties], above all in terms of trying to be more participatory, more democratic, and having a conception of socialism as developing working people's capacities to run their own lives and to participate in changing the world... Whether they'll continue to see it through...history will prove. But that has been their project. Look at the worker's party in Brazil. Who would have imagined the party that was just started twenty years ago, explicitly designed to go beyond and better what communism had done or what social democracy had

done, would be elected in one of the world's biggest states twenty years later. If the young people think about that accomplishment it gives them within their own lifetime something very practical to do that doesn't involve just voting in the next election—"Do I vote for Nader or don't I vote for Nader?"—but [instead] actually beginning to build new political institutions that can put a better socialism on the political agenda.

Discuss the ideals of socialism and the institutions to realize those ideals.

Socialism remains both a set of goals and a set of political institutions that are trying to realize those goals. And the two are discontinuous. In most countries of the world today the ideals remain; I think they remain strong. There remains a vision of another world [which] is possible: a more egalitarian world, a world in which...decisions about what's invested, where it's invested, how it's invested are made [democratically] rather than made privately by big powerful social forces like the corporations. The ideals are there. What hasn't been built in most places are the new political institutions, successive to communism and social democracy, that would learn from their mistakes and try to realize those ideals in a new way.

What remains the primary obstacle to socialism?

The major Achilles heal [of socialism] is the power of capitalism and what it does to ordinary people: it stunts their development. And therefore, when you're trying to help people whose development has been stunted, whose capacities have been stunted...the difficulty is enormous because people don't have the confidence, don't have the ability to run the world right now... So that's the greatest difficulty. And it hasn't been one that socialist parties for the most part have overcome. They have managed to win reforms, they have managed sometimes to make revolutions, but they haven't managed for the most part to develop popular capacities, to build a genuine democratic socialism. And that can only be done if you develop people's capacities in the course of making reforms or in the course of making a revolution.

What would a socialist world look like today? How would it be achieved?

There's [been] more talk among socialists about what a socialist world would look like the last fifteen or twenty years than there ever has been in the history of socialism. There have been more books written on...how we would organize a socialist society: some of it around socialist markets, some around participatory institutions and the economy at the community level, at the level of the state. More of that has been done than ever. The great problem has been how do you get from there to there? And without the institutions having been built it seems utopian in the bad sense, right? And that's the problem. In order to be able to make those visionary plans viable in people's minds they have to feel that there are political organizations around today that could come to state office and then try to do these things once they were in state office. And those institutions haven't been built in many places.

Is the quest for utopia still alive?

Absolutely. Very, very much so. I think [the quest for utopia] is around especially in the younger generation. In some of the best ways.

The real vision of socialism is to overcome the division of labor: the division between me as a professor and the secretary that I depend on, who at the university is not given a chance to take courses; the division between the manager and the worker, as though the worker has no brains and is just arms and the manager is all brains. And it's that that socialism wants and needs to overcome and it needs to overcome it in the state.

We have a conception of democracy as whereby we elect a group of competing political leaders who will then go in after we elect them every four years and make all the decisions. That has to be overcome in politics so that there isn't this division between a political class...and the rest of the population that simply chooses which one little group of them is going to be in for the next four years and make all of the political decisions. So the division of labors [has to] be broken down at every level, and that's really what socialism is about and why its image is fundamentally democratic. It wants to overcome classes and patriarchy and racism precisely in the sense that there's a division of labor built around those that excludes...most people from participating in genuine democracy at every level of their lives and reserves it [for] those who are educated, who are wealthy, who have control...of the means of production and communication and exchange and commerce.

How do you achieve utopia?

Socialists very much operate with a notion of utopia - of a concrete, better world built on equality and democracy that overcomes the division of labor - and they all operate with some conception, some model, of how that could be done. In recent years there's been all kinds of stuff written that tries to concretize that model. The task facing socialists today is to build institutions as they did in the past: working-class political parties, popular political parties that are developing people's capacities to realize that utopia.

Is Socialism Dead?

I say that socialism is not dead; it can't be dead in so far as there's inequality in the world, in so far as there's capitalism of an exploitative nature around the world. People will constantly reach for ideas that represent the socialist utopian vision. Whether they call it socialist or not doesn't matter that much. But the notion that people don't look to altruism and egalitarianism in the face of the enormous oppressions and inequalities around today is simply not right. What perhaps has been discredited is a notion of socialism that reflects the failures of the old parties. [But] the idea and the values, far from being discredited, are more around today in the anti-globalization movement, in the antiwar movement, in the feminist movement, in the antiracist movement, than they've ever been.

Does the failure of past socialist parties and regimes mean the failure of socialism in general?

It's a mistake to equate the failure of particular socialist parties and regimes with the failure of socialism or the end of socialist values or vision. On the contrary, people are learning from the mistakes of the past to reassert those values.

Why did the past socialist parties fail?

Socialist parties were products of their own time and place. They're a reflection in the fact that they were trying to build these institutions at a certain point in time in a certain part of the world. It was to be expected, given the dynamism and power of capitalism as a system, that the first attempts to build institutions to overthrow it would not be the perfect ones. I'm sure that we'll see over the course of the next century loads of attempts to build new ones - new parties, new unions, new movements - that will be socialist in their fundamental essence; that will learn from the mistakes of the past.

How soon can a socialist utopia be realized?

The key is a slow, gradual process. We have to burrow away like the earthworm. But what's better to do? How can one make a better contribution in [the] short time that we're here than try to lay a fertile soil...for the eventual? It's going to take a very long time, realization of these utopian visions.

ROBIN BLACKBURN INTERVIEW

Tell us about yourself.

Robin Blackburn, and I'm linked to the magazine New Left Review. I'm one of the editors and I teach at the New School University here in New York.

Discuss socialism as an alternative to capitalism.

People are still looking at alternatives to capitalism. I think we all agree we live in a capitalist society, even people who greatly support our present social arrangements. They say this is a capitalist society and how marvelous it is. Others of us look at it and say, "Well, look at the poverty, look at the inequality, look at the problems of joblessness, look at the problems of the crisis of social expenditure," and also we look at the aggrandizement of the corporations and the chief executive officers. And really an alternative is needed to this form of society, something that's more socially just and equitable, kinder to the planet, gives people more opportunities to develop themselves, express themselves. I think here at the conference you can see there are still hundreds, a few thousand, people still thinking about this issue.

Is there any indication that socialism will rise in the near future?

I'd almost predict that there will be nothing called socialism that will soon develop. But I think if they're looking at the facts rather than at the word, it's interesting to see [that] people are resisting capitalism as it now exists. An area

I've been studying and paying a great attention to is the crisis of pension provision. You have pension funds, which own nearly a third of the American economy, but they've not been representing the interests of their members, the people contributing the money. That money's been spirited away from them, it's been invested in locales completely strange to them, it's not helped to nourish and nurture their own communities, and I think the idea is developed. You're getting big funds like the Californian public employee retirement system, CALPERS, which says perhaps we should let the beneficiaries, the plan members, have a say. Perhaps we should explore socially responsible investment. Now that's a bit of a mouthful, but I suspect... we'll actually be exploring something like socialism - or what people hoped for with socialism in the old days - but we're going to call it something different. Maybe it will be this empowerment of communities and programs and socially responsible investment.

How has the economic ownership aspect of socialism changed?

The common ownership...was linked to the idea of a state-owned economy, or state-ified economy. That, I think, has died the death, and now we have the idea of a socially-owned economy or social self-management: communities controlling funds, which, you know, they would invest in ways they feel meet local needs. I think that idea has still a lot of kick left in it. Whether this is utopia - I would say myself it's more a theme of sort of real utopias; of starting off where we are with the problems of communities, the problems of workers in their factories and other workplaces, the problems of trying to...negotiate the problems of an aging society, of trying to accumulate enough funds so that we can finance a decent retirement.... I see that...as sort of practical utopia, if you like.

Is socialism dead? What issues should socialism address today?

I think [socialism] is dead as a concept of what it means...Is there sort of some magical formula there that's going to solve all our problems? No, I don't think that that's the case. I think we've got to work a bit harder... It's a question of starting off from where we are with...social problems in the world, ecological problems, and seeing the way that we can meet those problems by empowering people and making them more in command. And [making] communities more in command with their destiny and of the funds which are still actually held in their name.... I suppose I could put it in a nutshell and say, "Wall Street has fallen down grotesquely on that job of taking care of those funds." So I think now communities should have the chance to have a go and see if they could do better. I'm sure they could.

FRANCIS FOX PIVEN INTERVIEW

What does socialism mean to you? What is its future?

Socialism is a broad tradition and it has many meanings. So if you were to ask me, “What are the core values in that tradition?” “The values of equality and fraternity and democracy”, I would say... That tradition has a future; it’s the only future that’s possible.

At this particular moment in time I think that those values are fired up by a great social movement that has spread across the globe. Nobody expected it, it’s taking everyone by surprise, and it is probably the largest social movement in recorded history. The whole world is rising up to say “No” to war, and they’re saying “No” to war because of their convictions that war means imperialism; war means the United States becoming a new Roman Empire and settling down on the Middle East...war means that the fundamental things that all human creatures want, which is enough to eat and a place to sleep and a community and a voice, that those fundamental values will be denied.

Do you believe that socialism must be brought about by a revolution?

I don’t believe in a revolutionary transformation. But I have another set of beliefs which I think many people share, which is that each step forward, each step to reduce the cruelty and the punitiveness that contemporary elites are imposing on other people takes enormous struggle. But each step is worth that struggle because we make our communities a little bit more humane and because we also, through those struggles, learn that it’s our world, too, and we can contribute to its future shape.

STEPHEN ERIC BRONNER INTERVIEW

Tell us about yourself.

My name is Stephen Eric Bronner, and I’m a Professor of Political Science and Comparative Literature at Rutgers University.

What are the major goals of socialism?

I would have said internationalism if you had asked me a year ago. But now it seems there’s actually a catch-up in terms of internationalism. Because there were three basic moments as I see it to the socialist project: one is the quest for economic reform and social justice, the second is the commitment to political democracy and republicanism, and the third is to internationalism and fostering a cosmopolitan sensibility. I think that in the current war there has been a new set of commitments, a new forum of international solidarity that’s been achieved in the great marches that have already taken place against the war in Iraq.

What are the obstacles in the way of a rise in socialism?

I think the clearest problem [to a rise in socialism] that presents itself is really the power of the elites to basically break down local organizations. That is something that's been an ongoing matter since the election of Ronald Reagan. The attack on labor unions, the attack on community organizations, and also one has to say almost a type of exhaustion with regard to fighting back on this level, that is to say there's a sense that one's not quite sure what the goals are any longer. There's a lack of certainty about what kind of organization is to be employed. There's finally even ambivalence about whether the United Nations is the constituting organ for a new internationalism.

How is socialism relevant today?

The greatness of socialism was not when they proclaimed that they had succeeded in creating a new alternative order, but rather the fight for reforms and the fight for political democracy in a concrete way. People are still - and perhaps more than ever - when they're on the market considered simply a cost of production. They become useless when they used to accumulate capital ends. To me what socialism is about in the first instance, in the economic terms, is to make employers see the workers more than just a cost of production. With regard to political democracy, it seems to me that the possibility of empowering workers and allowing them to organize is still something that's on the agenda. And thirdly, of course, the question of internationalism and developing what I'd like to call a cosmopolitan sensibility is perhaps the crucial concern in dealing with globalization and the wars that ensue.

What is the role of the anti-globalization movement in socialism's future?

The anti-globalization movement is somewhat clear about what it's opposed to but it's not clear about what it supports... It seems to me that globalization's assault on fixed and reactionary traditions - the subordination of women, on religious mysticism, on old organic communities, on a world of the past that has been unfortunately idealized all too often - I see that as a positive element. On the other hand, it's quite clear that globalization has caused enormous havoc; it's created a reaction against it in terms of fundamentalism and...religious and traditionalist-oriented movements. And that's a real set of grievances that have come about from the division of the world between North and South. In my view, this is where the United Nations should begin to step in and foster an assault on these kinds of inequities.

So where does socialism go from here?

Socialism was always best when it was a movement of protest, a movement from below. Not when it was a movement that simply talked about abstract ideals, but when it sought to give the workers dignity, rights, and the ability to organize for themselves against a system which reduces them to numbers and reduces them to being a tool for profit. To that extent, socialism is something that remains on the agenda, because that's not over.

JOANNE LANDY INTERVIEW

Tell us about yourself.

I'm Joanne Landy. I'm on the Editorial Board of New Politics magazine and I'm also co-director of a Campaign for Peace and Democracy.

What effect did communism in the 20th century have on socialism?

As I'm sure you've heard from many other people who came to this conference, probably the greatest single setback to socialism in the twentieth century was the Soviet Union and the communist countries which systematically outlawed anyone except one single party. And those parties were themselves not democratic. You had a totalitarian society from the top down without political freedom or freedom of expression. That's what socialism has come to mean to most people, so of course we're fighting an uphill battle to rescue the idea of democratic socialism, in which there's...a democratic control of the society's wealth. That's what I think remains as a valid idea; it was always a valid idea, but it was besmirched by the communist experience.

Do you believe socialism will make a comeback?

I wouldn't bet the family farm on the future of socialism, but I think...the alternative, as has been said, is barbarism. So I think there's a chance for socialism and I've dedicated most of my adult life to it and will plan to continue doing so the rest of it.

Is a socialist utopia possible?

We're sometimes asked about utopia, and utopia has some different meanings. Some people mean...a society that's essentially impossible. Obviously, a society that's impossible is not possible. But in the sense that a radically different society, organized on humane principles rather than on principles of profit and greed, yes, I think that's possible and that's the vision that I work for.

What are the obstacles in the way of a rebirth of the socialist movement?

I think the biggest obstacle is people's lack of democratic self-confidence. And I think that's worst in our society: the cultural passivity, culture of worship of celebrities, the culture of no political parties that really mean anything... But when we see a movement reborn, as we're seeing right in front of us today with this antiwar movement, it's important above and beyond the war itself; it brings people into social motion where they have a renewed sense of confidence. And I think that's the beginning of the rebirth of a socialist movement, or I hope it is.

Is socialism a thing of the past? Has capitalism won?

For people who say that socialism is a thing of the past, that socialism isn't with it, isn't with what's really progressive, I just think they're trying to pull the wool

over our eyes. It may be that rampant capitalism and greed are the wave of the future but it doesn't have to be that way. It's not inevitably going to be that way and it's still a struggle and that's what we're here for.

DUNCAN MOENCH INTERVIEW

Tell us about yourself.

It's Duncan Moench. And I'm a writer, researcher, I've also taught high school a little bit so I guess you could basically call me a socialist scholar.

How do you see socialism's relationship with Marxism?

I would really like to see socialism shed some of its Marxist ties...because I think that whether Marx was right about a lot of things or not, most people are not going to be brought into the movement that way. I would really like to see less promotion - and I don't think this is necessarily the case at this conference - but less promotion of dead foreigners as the symbols of socialism. Stop idolizing Trotsky, and Che [Guevara], and Lenin, and general hero-worship, which is, I think, a horrible way to get into the movement because individual leaders are not the answer. What we need to be doing is promoting commonalities and letting people realize that through collective action this is how we can solve problems and that's the key. It's not going to come by some man on a stallion riding in saving the day, and the Bolshevik Revolution may have applied to Russia, but it really doesn't apply to America or the rest of the industrialized world... It would be great to see less attachment to that... If I don't see Trotskyites for a long time I won't be displeased.

What's the big challenge for socialism in the next century?

I think in general leftist programs have a lot of trouble in terms of sectarianism. I think there's this puritan line within the left, where if you're not with us wholesale then you're with us not at all. And that has to stop... I think you've been seeing a lot of that in the anti-globalization movement: people coming together, putting aside their differences and working for common goals, and not worrying about "we don't agree on all points, but maybe we agree on the majority of points...so we're still going to work together." That's great. That's fantastic. We have got to have more of that because we can work together. This is what the Right does. It puts aside their differences to a large extent and gets things done. And I don't [agree with] people who say that if we just emulate the Right that things will start to happen for us, because we're not Right-wingers and we're not going to fall under the same dogma that they are. But at the same time, independent-thinking people can be brought together for collective causes. It just takes a little bit more humility.

Is the anti-globalization movement carrying on socialist ideals?

I think the anti-globalization [movement] has made connections to what other socialist movements in the past haven't - ecology, etc. In the past, trade union

movements - even those connected to socialism - have been for constant growth. I think people have been coming to socialism from ecology, and the other way around, which is a beautiful, beautiful thing. The anti-globalization movement has brought socialism to younger people in a way that nothing else could [for] a long time. And I think you're seeing more people being exposed to socialism and socialism's ideas [by the anti-globalization movement] more so that anything else could have because they're seeing their world destroyed around them and they're seeing that some things don't really make sense. There's some kind of intuitive notion, people kind of understand that things could be so much better than they are. And that gets them thinking, "what other options are out there?" Socialism's obviously hanging right there as the main other option. I actually don't think socialism as a label is all that important, I really don't. I think that's important for the anti-globalization movement because a lot of people when they hear that label they immediately reject it—"oh, socialism, I've been taught that that's wrong." And I don't think that's so common with younger people. I don't necessarily feel the need to use that label. I like the term economic democracy because I think that's a way people can start to think about. We need to start extending democracy to the sphere of economics, that's the key. Right there that fits with our American democratic ideals in a way that many, many people can grasp on to.

What would you like to see the socialist movement focus more attention on?

I would really like to see a lot of people devote more attention to how they would like the future to look in somewhat of a detailed manner. I know that some people think that's somehow inherently imposing an authoritarian order on it, because if you draw up blueprints and people use them then it's not democratic or something. But I don't agree with that. If you don't discuss it now, when are you going to discuss it? You're going to discuss it at that moment. And very little debate will have gone on and so there's a lot more danger. I would like to see people come up with grounded visions that are tied to the present that discuss how we want the future to look. Because human nature is not set in stone, which is the way a lot of people would like to think about it. But it's not whatever we want it to be, either. Human nature is not completely malleable. I think that's something that a lot of socialists need to step back from. Complete cooperation cannot be entirely the basis of a future society. You have to step back and say, we're going to come up with a coherent overlying structure that promotes the values that we want but in a way that's economically feasible.