AN INTERVIEW WITH Bhaskar Sunkara

MARGINS: OK, so the first question is:
How did you become involved in leftist politics? What’s the story behind that?

SUNKARA: Well, I became interested in socialist politics in 6th or 7th grade. I read Animal Farm, 1984, and the rest of those anti-communist works they distribute in middle school, but I drew maybe different conclusions from them. I was attracted to the figure of Leon Trotsky; I read the Isaac Deutscher-Trotsky trilogy, and a bunch of Trotsky’s other works from there. And then I was also involved in basic anti-war activism and other more liberal-ish, broader fronts, but I combined that with a theoretical interest in the history of the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, a lot of those other people. I started to learn auto-didactically about them. And by the time I was maybe seventeen or so, I joined the local Democratic Socialists of America. I wasn’t terribly active, but I put in occasional work and went to their meetings for a year or so. Then I went to college and was involved in a progressive student union and other campus-based, broadly Left groups. But generally I found that the terrains of those
Campuses were a mix of people who were essentially liberals engaging in pretty good struggles. There was a drive to unionize the Sodexo [a multinational food services corporation] workers on campus, and other things like that. And then also people who were born into the ultra-leftist scene, especially in DC, because they have the IMF and the World Bank there, so there were a lot of people whose only engagements in politics were the semi-annual ritual of protesting the IMF and World Bank, which is perfectly good in itself, but there wasn’t a lot of room for radical thought. I thought socialist ideas were still the best way to marry not only radical opposition to the status quo but also a sense of transition, a sense of how do you organize in the long term and build those forms of coalition that achieve something actual. So I thought it was a way to neither compromise a radical position nor have it pushed off to the distant future. Basically, I started *Jacobin* in 2010, as an online publication at first, and I started a print edition at the end of 2010 that drew from this premise that there was still real room and there would be a lot of interest in socialist ideas and there just needs to be some form to articulate them, especially to a new generation, because we had a lot of publications that already existed, but they were born out of the ’50s and ’60s really, and there was a generational gap where in the ’80s and ’90s you didn’t really see the emergence of many explicitly socialist publications or publications from a Marxist background at all. I thought there was room for a publication that would embody the best of the old Left.

*MARGINS: A question that arises from that is, you mentioned Animal Farm and some other books that got you thinking about socialism, but are there any books in particular that have been touchstones for you in terms of socialist politics and thinking about the world?*

*SUNKARA: To start with, I politicized myself in the tradition that was intellectually rooted in Trotsky and Trotskyism without ever becoming a Trotskyist, so I would say that the real touchstones were Leon Trotsky’s *The Russian Revolution*, the Isaac Deutscher trilogy, and then of course I was also interested in other periods and movements as well. Lucio Magri, who was the editor of *Il Manifesto*, was definitely an early influence; also Ralph Miliband, who was the editor, for a long time, of the *Socialist Register*—I think he articulated a politics that was very much still radical and socialist and revolutionary in a way but was not classically Leninist. I think that describes a lot of the outlook of *Jacobin*, which is very favorable to the political heritage of Lenin and the Bolsheviks without being Leninist, thinking about what’s useful in the tradition and what’s not, and what’s relevant in the twenty-first century in capitalist countries and what’s not. And I think he handled that very well. And of course Michael Harrington, who was a long-time leader of Democratic Socialists of America, was someone who—we have a lot of political differences. For example, he was very much oriented towards taking the existing people in leadership and just pushing them to go left on certain things, also working with the left wing of the Democratic Party to try to realign the Democratic Party, on a different basis, as a more traditional European-style socialist democratic party, structured similar to the labor movement. Whereas we think a lot of that project is kind of dead, and maybe didn’t even make sense at the time, so we have more critiques of that in favor of the old idea that we need to build towards a more independent political action outside the Democratic Party even if, practically, it doesn’t make sense, because let’s say—you know, in my opinion, something like the Bernie Sanders campaign—but also the more vital issue I think for the moment is this idea of sparking or supporting rank-and-file activity within the labor movement, as opposed to having a strategy that orients yourself towards just electing different leaderships that don’t actually structurally change anything in the political movement. So that’s two things where we break politically with Harrington, but he was a very underrated popularizer and sensitizer of Marx’s ideas. And he’s a great, great stylist too. So those are some of the influences.*
MARGINS: This is maybe a difficult question, but do you have a personal definition of socialism, and what is it in particular about socialist ideas that attracts you? What do you think the ultimate goal of socialism is?

SUNKARA: I think that should be a very easy question for any socialist to answer. I would say that socialism is the extension of democracy — the deepening of democracy from just the political realm where it exists now, and the extension of it into the social and economic ones as well. So we envision a society in which huge chunks of the economy are de-commodified. In other words, things that now are bought and sold on the market — things like housing, education, and so on would belong to people as social rights. But even more than that, we imagine a great amount of worker participation in the economy in the form of social ownership of factories and workplaces and a democratic say over the processes that seem so big and control our lives, but in effect are essentially just all the result of human activity and labor. So we want to put as much of that as possible under conscious human control for the benefit of the vast majority. So for me, the old classic socialist conception in the twentieth century that socialism is the abolition of exploitation, person by person; I think that still very much is my conception of what a socialist society would look like. There wouldn’t be an owning capitalist class, there would just be producers running society for themselves and their own interest, and we would still have lots of political, complex decisions that would need to be made, so we would still need a state, we would still need various mechanisms to mediate differences, because obviously, differences aren’t just class differences. Like, if we’re trying to figure out how to cross the Hudson River, I want to build a tunnel, you want to build a bridge, there’s various interests at play, to decide which one is preferable, we would still need a state to mediate. So I’m not particularly certain that the state can ever fully wither away, like full communism. But Corey Robin’s formula, which I kind of like, is that socialism is turning all the excruciating hardship and misery that exists on the planet into just ordinary unhappiness. That’s kind of how I envision it; there will still be lots of alienation, and things wrong with the world and heartache and anger, but it will be a society where human needs are met and there will be traditions of abundance and prosperity and peace — people can actually reach their full potential.

MARGINS: Well put. Switching gears a little bit, I’d like to talk about what it’s been like running Jacobin for you. I’m wondering, what’s your typical day like? Is there a typical day? And if so, what’s the routine?

SUNKARA: I normally get up around 7 or 7:30, check my email, we prep one piece in the morning at 9 A.M., so depending on if Shawn Gude, our associate editor is sleeping in, I’m in charge of the morning. I’ll do that; if he’s up and working early, then I can only take a back seat and just help him come up with the headline or whatever. So our first piece we have to release at 9, and then normally after that, I head to the office. It’s a mix of days; some days I’m doing work on the same stuff, some days more editorial, some days I have meetings, but generally it’s pretty much like — maybe in total, because I’m responding to emails almost every waking hour when I’m out with friends, I’d say it’s like maybe 11 hours a day on the weekdays, and then maybe 4 – 5 on the weekends. So it’s a lot of stuff, but it’s a variety of tasks and also I get to generally prioritize what I want to do at any
particular moment. It’s pretty good; I feel like I’m on the path toward something every day.

MARGINS: Is there a favorite part of your job? Is there a particular activity that you enjoy the most?

SUNKARA: I like thinking about the business side and development as opposed to just editorial stuff, partially because I think there’s a lot of people who are capable of writing pieces and researching them and taking time to spin ideas, and of course, I am as well, and I often do that—but I don’t think there’s a lot of people, especially on the Left, that pay a lot of attention to long-term ideas, making sure the numbers add up and you’re not losing money, and also thinking about the long-term plans to develop and grow something. I guess that’s the stuff that I seem to enjoy—figuring out problems which can often be solved by just new ideas about how to bring in revenue, thinking about how to use a finite amount of resources to get as many pieces as possible; right now, we’re putting out like 15 to 20 pieces a week, which is pretty incredible, given how small our staff is. We’re punching above our weight, and figuring out how to do that is, to me, the best part.

MARGINS: Has it been relatively easy getting funding? Or has it been pretty difficult to make sure that you get enough revenue coming in?

SUNKARA: Basically, we’re funded almost entirely by subscriptions. So it’s always a challenge, but we’re at the point where we have over ten thousand [subscribers], so we have a stable stream of money—over $250,000 coming in per year from just subscription revenue. And then we can get maybe another $40,000 to $50,000 from donations. Obviously, it’s a grind, but the main thing is that, in pursuit of more subscribers, what we do is put out more pieces and cover more topics and build a larger and larger readership. So what we’re doing to get more subscribers is the mission of the magazine, and this is different from if we were chasing donations and grants primarily. Because in that case, writing a grant or trying to woo some donor isn’t the mission of the publication, and time spent doing that is time that could be spent in other directions, if that makes sense. So I think that approach of just being driven by subscriptions and putting out lots of online pieces to get those subscribers is very much in sync with what we’re trying to do as a publication. And there are many ways to avoid relying on big donors. I think we found one, but, you know, Stalin used to rob banks with the Bolsheviks—that’s another one. We haven’t yet contrived that strategy, but maybe we will in the future. [laughs]

MARGINS: Have there been any surprises as you’ve been getting the magazine up and running? Was there something that you didn’t anticipate going in when you were founding it that you discovered along the way?

SUNKARA: Yeah, I think our growth has actually been a little bit faster than I expected. I actually thought there was a need for the publication, that it would do well, but the fact that this most recent publication should be getting two million page views, which translates to 600,000,
700,000 plus unique visitors every month is surprising to me. But I think it shows people’s comfort with socialist ideas now, and this discourse and language; even if they’re not likely to subscribe to it or if they still are cynical about its political prospects in the future, they think it’s valuable enough to engage with. So there’s people on the liberal Left that through Jacobin have been exposed to the idea of socialism for the first time. And that’s entirely our goal. And at the same time, we still have our core base of support, many of them who are on the existing socialist Left. So it’s interesting, for me, the way we have been able to both reach out and start bringing in these people who are on the liberal Left but otherwise pretty unpoliticized, while still being of value to people who have been having these debates for a long time. I think our coverage of the situation is a good example of coverage that now is being picked up in places like the Financial Times, while at the same time facilitating an important debate not only among the American Left on these issues, but on the Greek Left itself. We have leading members of the Left and others debating leadership figures in the publication. So it’s nice to see that there haven’t been too many tradeoffs in that direction.

MARGINS: Looking to the future, do you think the future looks bright for Jacobin and the Left in general in America?

SUNKARA: Well, I think one should separate the two, in that it’s a country of 330 million people and even beyond that, that maybe forty percent or more of our audience is overseas anyway. It’s a big world, and the Internet is a way to make it smaller. So the fact that I think that Jacobin within the next couple years will reach a circulation of well over 25 to 30 thousand doesn’t actually signal much of anything if you think about it, because, like I said, it’s a very large country, and things are still on the levels of niche, not very large for a political journal, especially a new one, especially a socialist one. I don’t think it signifies all too much in itself. I think that people are discontented with the status quo, and that doesn’t necessarily mean that will lead to some sort of alternative to it, much less that that alternative will be a pleasant one. But I do think there’s a political opening for the Left, and I do think it’ll be up to us and also some good fortune whether or not we can exploit it. The rumblings on public sector workers in the last few years have been promising; Black Lives Matter and other social movements have emerged, which, I think, are extremely promising in that you can see the Left proactively engaging with them and organizing with these movements. And all of these things are promising, but overall, the level of social struggle is still small, and rebuilding the Left and these movements will be a long, many, many year struggle. But I’m overall pretty optimistic, although nothing is pre-ordained.

MARGINS: And are there particular issues that you would identify as being most important for the Left to tackle at this historical juncture?

SUNKARA: Yeah, I think Jacobin in particular has been pretty weak on covering the environment. We have several really standout, stellar pieces, but given the scope of the crisis, and also the real inability to get mainstream bourgeois society — governments and leaders — to tackle this crisis, it really is important for the Left to give them an analysis that takes seriously the threat of climate change without adopting catastrophic views that basically sends us the message “everything is lost already,” or on the other extreme that nothing’s wrong, or on the other extreme of that to tell working-class people that they need to deal with the climate change crisis by cutting their own personal consumption, so essentially a green austerity agenda. I think the Left needs to present an alternative that is forward-looking and turns the climate crisis from an apolitical, technocratic issue into a class issue, which is that the exploiting classes are the ones that are really polluting and are not investing in the right types of technologies that can actually get us out of the crisis, and also that there’s not enough political will in those quarters to actually solve things at the moment. So I think that’s something we should cover more, something
In other words, I think that we need to have in our soul a real moral and ethical socialist critique and some conception of socialism but also have some sort of theoretical foundation, and from that standpoint, then we can engage a lot with our thoughts and critique whether we’re right and wrong.

I think the Left should focus on, and something I hope to cover a bit more in future publications. And I think that’s key. Besides that, I think *Jacobin* should be helping to publish a theoretical journal which I’ll hopefully deal with. A lot of the ideas which can be expressed in the publication, for a slightly different audience in much longer form. I think things like that are really necessary—having a combination of media where some of them are going to be very much day-to-day and movement-based and some of them are going to be theoretical. *Jacobin* tries to meld the two forms, but I think there’s really room for lots of different publications, media, more of a concentration of things happening on the Left. That’s maybe my one disappointment about *Jacobin*, that so far we haven’t inspired any real other publications. I hope that in the same way that publications like *Partisan Review* and *New Left Review* inspired a bunch of offshoots at various points, *Jacobin* will one day do that too.

**MARGINS:** Maybe a final question—what advice, if any, do you have for current college students who are trying to get involved with left-wing writing and politics? Is there anything that you would recommend doing?

**SUNKARA:** I would recommend learning very rigorously in the tradition and starting with the basics—read Marx, read Trotsky, read Lenin, read Luxemburg, and then from there, from that strong foundation, I would branch out to more contemporary things. In other words, I think it’s really important that the Left has a strong theoretical and political base, and from that point, becomes non-sectarian out of choice—in other words, not being a non-sectarian because people are ignorant of the history and debates, if that makes sense. I think fundamentally, the Marxist intellectual roots are extremely important because actually having a conception of socialism that is rooted in what’s essentially what all Marxists—all these people I’ve mentioned like Luxemburg and Lenin—believe, which is a moral and ethical critique of capitalism and preaching of a different sort of society. In other words, I think that we need to have in our soul a real moral and ethical socialist critique and some conception of socialism but also have some sort of theoretical foundation, and from that standpoint, then we can engage a lot with our thoughts and critique whether we’re right and wrong. But when people say for example that Marx’s writings are Eurocentric, or various critiques like that, it becomes very difficult to respond if you haven’t actually read Marx. So I would start with that basis and go from there. 

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