

What's Different About the New Left

SEASON 2
episode fifteen

Nicholas Lemann

Hello Underreported listeners, I'm Nicholas Lemann. Thanks for joining our show. This week we are welcoming John B. Judis, whose upcoming book is *The Socialist Awakening: What's Different Now About the Left*.

Only five years ago, most of us still believed what we had been taught in school about socialism, that it had peaked in popularity in the 1912 presidential election and was no longer a factor in American politics. Then came Bernie Sanders' two presidential campaigns, along with socialist surges in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe, and the emergence of significant organizations and younger political stars like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. It turns out that socialism has a mass following.

John Judis, himself a veteran of socialist movements, has brought out a book with Columbia Global Reports during each of the last three national political seasons: *The Populist Explosion* in 2016, *The Nationalist Revival* in 2018, and now *The Socialist Awakening*. Together, these books chart the rise during the second decade of the 20th century of a new and unexpected political mood produced by widespread dissatisfaction with the results of the free-market policies that emerged in the late 20th century, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Today's socialism, Judis argues, is best understood not as a program for government ownership of business enterprises, but as a broader youth-based movement that is impatient with the mainstream politics of recent decades and willing to experiment with a lot of ambitious new policies: Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, free college, and many more. It has already succeeded in pushing Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential nominee, further to the left than he has ever been and his long career.

All over the country, the streets are full of protesters in unprecedented numbers. John's new book, *The Socialist Awakening*, is an indispensable guide to this political moment. John, thank you for joining us on Zoom today. How are you and where are you calling from?

John Judis

I'm in Silver Spring, Maryland, and as I've done for 40 years, I'm working at home, but I'm feeling completely trapped.

Nicholas Lemann

Still playing tennis, though?

John Judis

Yeah, four times a week. But that's it. That's about all my socializing outdoors.

Nicholas Lemann

And I want to congratulate you on being our first third-time author at Columbia Global Reports. We have published one author twice, all of our other authors once, and you three times. So that's...

John Judis

My pleasure. You know, you've done better by me than the so-called commercial publishers did. So.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. Well, thanks. So I know that you, from an early age, would have called yourself a socialist. I don't know if you ever – if you still do, we'll get into that – but this will be in the range of truth, and you can correct me. You have been to many, many socialist meetings in your day and belong to many socialist organizations and have written for socialist publications in your day. And of all of them, the maximum audience would have been 5,000 or something. So suddenly there's this explosion and everybody's a socialist. What happened?

John Judis

Well, I actually left the socialist, organized socialist left in about late 1976 to become a writer, journalist, observer. Partly because I thought at the time that the kind of socialism I believed in, which was an orthodox Marxist idea of government planning, of industry takeover, no, really no private industry, very little role for markets, it just didn't make sense. I couldn't picture what the United States would be like.

So there was a long period where I was, I would have called myself sort of a Herbert Croly progressive, but I worked with The New Republic, so that was appropriate, he was the founder.

But in the nineties, after the fall of the Soviet Union, I began to rethink things, partly under the influence of some other people, and to think of socialism not as a separate

stage in history that was going to come after capitalism, but as something that was occurring within capitalism itself. As public institutions that bore the stamp of the public interest rather than private interest took root, as the government itself assumed more responsibility for the economy.

So I began to rethink things. And I, you know, I wrote some theoretical essays and things like that along the line, but it was really Bernie Sanders' campaign – and I think this is true for a lot of older socialists – that made me think for the first time that it could be a practical politics. That people could call themselves a democratic socialist and not speak to an audience of, you know, not even 5,000, but we're talking maybe 500, or in the case of some of these groups, 50 people.

So that was really for me, and I think for a lot of older socialists, an awakening, a feeling that something was possible that hadn't been possible before. But for the kids, even before Sanders, the younger generation that wasn't brought up during the Cold War era, and didn't identify socialism with the Soviet Union, started to think – and I think what the key thing was, they started to be skeptical of capitalism. And the Great Recession did that, climate change. And once skeptical of that, what's the alternative?

And so they began to think of socialism. But it wasn't the socialism of the Soviet Union or even the socialism I had thought of in the sixties, a kind of orthodox Marxism. It was much more maybe even a throwback to the 19th century, stressing cooperation, democracy, yes, public control, but not necessarily complete public control of all industry, there would still be markets. So, you know, Medicare for all, free education, transportation, things like that would become much more under public control.

So, again, I think that for them, you begin to see even, you know, 2010 with Occupy Wall Street, the germs of a new kind of socialism. But for all the older people like me, you know, it starts to be, you know, we revive, but we revive with, especially with the Sanders campaign.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's talk for a minute, just conceptually, where is the border between what you're calling socialism for purposes of this book and this conversation, and sort of conventional Democratic Party liberalism?

John Judis

I think that there is no clear border, and that that's part of the trick. I mean, in America, we have really not had a viable public socialism since 1917 or so, and the rise of the Communist Party, and the identification of socialism with the Soviet Union.

It's popular among intellectuals, but not, you know, no politician, except maybe in a few boroughs of New York, would call themselves a socialist and hope to get elected to anything. But we still have people who, in the terms I'm describing, espouse kinds of socialist politics.

And, you know, Bernie Sanders cites Roosevelt's second Bill of Rights. Everybody should have a job, health care for all. Again, I think that that's, you see there again, the germs of an American socialism are rising within capitalism.

And if you look at politicians now, if you look at the House Progressive Caucus, which has, you know, 90 plus members. You look at Sherrod Brown, and Elizabeth Warren. They're – and in my book I call them shadow socialists, because again, there isn't a hell of a lot of difference between them and, let's say Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, but they don't call themselves socialist. So there is a fuzzy line.

Nicholas Lemann

So, I assume, like everybody else, you were surprised by Bernie Sanders' success and influence, right?

John Judis

In 2016, I was beyond surprised.

Nicholas Lemann

So as you look back, is it just the factors you stated, or what made that happen?

John Judis

Well, again, I think if you look at the vote, at Bernie Sanders' vote, he gets in 2016 more votes among 18 to 29-year-olds than Trump and Hillary Clinton combined in the primaries. That's an amazing figure.

So, again, I think I did not realize this was happening among young people in America. And that was a key thing, that he appealed to the free college stuff, the student debt, climate change, Medicare for all.

Because, again, these are kids who don't necessarily have these kind of lifetime jobs that they can look forward to. It's not like the America of the 1950s anymore. And they feel a kind of an insecurity and anxiety that we didn't feel even in the sixties, we weren't worried about jobs.

I mean, we were worried about the war or racial injustice or things like that. So, again, I think that he struck a chord with that younger generation in a way that other Democrats like Hillary Clinton, who was talking more about again, identity politics, very complicated, you know, in some cases very commendable economic programs, but just was talking past that whole generation.

Nicholas Lemann

So this year, right now, as your book is coming out, you know, some of this may be speculation, some of it may not be, but it is felt that Biden made peace with Bernie in 2020 much more effectively than Hillary made peace with Bernie in 2016.

I don't know any of the details of that, but Bernie seems more supportive. And then, you know, there was an announcement some time ago that I'm sure you saw where Biden said, "I'm announcing my key policy advisers." And he said publicly, "These are the ones I'm putting on the team and these are the ones Bernie put on the team." So it seemed like they cut some kind of deal like that.

And then on many of the issues you mentioned Biden, to me, it reads as further to the left than any Democratic nominee in my adult lifetime. And to the left of where he used to be. What do you think of all of the above? Am I stating the situation correctly?

John Judis

I'm not sure. I'm not as optimistic. I think one of the reasons, again, that I think Sanders is supporting Biden enthusiastically this year in a way that he did not support Hillary Clinton, is that we really recognize now how dangerous Trump is.

I mean, we're not, you know, I thought myself that after Trump would get elected, he'd sort of sand off the rough edges. The bigotry, the Mexican judges and, you know, the rapists, all that stuff, and he would be more presidential. But he's been a

nightmare for the country, and I think Sanders recognizes that. And that's the key reason.

Biden, you know, he had these working groups and he had Sanders' people and his people and they were co-chairs of it, and they had proposals. And I agree that his program is somewhat to the left, especially on environmental stuff, of where Democrats have been.

But if you look at things like the health care and the public option, he's very skittish about it. He did not mention the public option, for instance, in his acceptance speech. I thought that that was a conspicuous omission. And I know that he's under pressure from the health care industry, one of his biggest donors during the primary, not to support that.

So we have to see really what's going to happen if he's elected. But, you know, again, God help us if he's not.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah. And some of this will also depend on how the House and Senate races go.

John Judis

Exactly. Exactly. And they will be to the left, I would say as well.

Nicholas Lemann

So you're not confident in predicting what kind of program Biden will propose and whether, you know, how seriously should we take this rhetoric of this is going to be like 1933 when FDR took office in terms of the level of change and direction of change?

John Judis

I think what Biden will do is he will reinsert the importance of science. He'll get rid of a lot of those clowns out of the agencies, and he will present an equitable and as well as ambitious approach to getting rid of the virus. That's all important, and I think that he'll do that for sure.

Nicholas Lemann

He won't be the first socialist president.

John Judis

No, no no. I don't think so. And, you know, again, on the environment, you'll get back the regulations. Foreign policy, you'll go back to the Iran deal. So, again, improvements. The part, again, of Trump that I think that was potentially positive, but that gets completely mired in his own corruption and equivocation, is the economic patriotism. The idea that we should make a lot of things here that we don't make.

And Biden has endorsed that. He gave a speech in Warren, Michigan, that was very strong on those issues. That he was going to encourage companies to stay here, he wasn't giving any more kinds of incentives for companies to produce abroad. And that's important for rebuilding a lot of the country. I think he might do that stuff.

I think, and again, I think on that stuff, I think Trump has largely been a fake. And you can look at the TikTok deal today. I don't know whether he's going to approve it, but it's a completely phony deal. The Chinese basically still have control of the company.

So a lot of this stuff with Trump has just been smoke and mirrors. But again, I think Biden – I think that was also the influence of Warren – has been very strong on that idea. And I think that he'll be, again, I think on unions, Biden will be good. But where it's competing really with private industry and health care and stuff, financial regulation, I'm just not sure. Those people are very important to his donor class.

Nicholas Lemann

The movement itself, where do you think it will go? I mean, presumably Bernie Sanders will not run for president again in 2024. Although, he could. But let's say he doesn't. And let's say Biden is elected, and nobody has really accused Kamala Harris of being a socialist. So does it all dissipate or does it get carried on by AOC or what do you foresee

John Judis

I wish I had a good answer for that. I don't. I think it will chug along. And again, I look for the most progress, not from explicit socialists, but from these kind of shadow socialists in Congress and around the country.

The self-identifiers are mostly strong in the big metro areas, in college towns. And there is, as you know, we're going to have a new socialist from New York. Jamaal Bowman is going to join AOC in the socialist caucus of three or four. So that's

where I would really expect the growth to go.

And then among the young, you have this continuing interest in socialism. You know, the Democratic Socialists of America again, you know, an organization that could grow over the years. But we'll have to see. I really don't know.

We have a two-party system in this country, so. If we had a multi-party system, you might have a socialist party now emerging within the AOC-Sanders wing of the party, you know, with maybe 15 or 20% of the vote and a part of a coalition.

But we don't have that. So in America, it really almost takes a crises for a politics like that to crystallize and get a new name. So we're again, I'm in a, I can't, I can't predict.

Nicholas Lemann

You spoke earlier about identity politics. I happen to know a few young people and most of the ones I know, or many of the ones I know, if you ask them, "Are you a socialist?" they'd say, "Absolutely, yes." And then you say, "Why socialists?" and they'd say, "Because I believe in transgender rights."

That is, in my lived experience, younger generation socialists, it's very hard to disaggregate identity politics and socialism, even as they identify with socialism. Do those things naturally go together? Are they two separate things? Are they the same thing? How does that work out?

John Judis

Well, I think again, it appeals to our deeper ideas of equality among people. And I think that that's the, that's the link that between transgender rights, racial justice, all these issues, again, and justice for immigrants who come to the country, and if they come illegally. I think that that's the thing that brings them together, that there's a basic feeling about equality that the socialists respect and the capitalists don't.

Anyway, I think that that's the, I think that's why a lot of these kids would identify immediately with socialism, with something like transgender rights or racial justice. And you see that kind of too, in the protest. I see these people wearing t-shirts against the system. In other words, they're protesting Floyd or, you know, the killing of somebody in Atlanta, but they have shirts that say they're against the system.

And again, the system is something broader. It's not just, it's not just racism. So there is a connection. But the problem we've had on the American left is that when

there isn't a kind of comprehensive leadership, an at all leadership that tries to bring it together, each of the separate identity groups tends to radicalize in the absence of a greater radicalism.

So you get not just reform the police, but, you know, with the democratic socialists want to abolish the police, a demand that might make sense in four zip codes of the country, and actually very rich areas, but which for a lot of areas just raises immense fears of public safety.

And, you know, again, with gender rights, I think you get the same kind of thing, that it just freaks people out when kids start talking about "Well we're not going to, we're going to eliminate gender designations altogether. There isn't really any such thing as a man or a woman". So when they're taken to extremes, then you get into problems.

Nicholas Lemann

Can you talk a little about what you see happening in Britain and Europe and the rise of socialism there if it's happening?

John Judis

Well, in Britain, Britain in many ways is similar to the United States because the Corbyn movement within the Labour party – there was a group called Momentum that became the spearhead of Corbyn's leadership and the party, was strongly based in big metro areas, London in particular, and in university towns.

And it was estranged to some extent from the older Labour working class voters. And that became reflected in the split over Brexit, and that eventually, I think, led to the Labour having its worst vote since 1935.

Because by rejecting Brexit, they in effect rejected a lot of their old constituencies. And while those constituencies didn't percentagewise make up a large part of the party, they made up about two-thirds of the seats that the Labour party controlled.

So, you know, they ceded those to the Tories. Part of it, I mean, part of it involved, again, I think something that you see in the United States, which is a rejection of patriotism and nationalism, a lack of pride in country.

When I went to the Labour party conference in Brighton last fall, I was amazed to hear people denounce their own country. I mean, blame Britain for climate change,

because it was the first country to have an industrial revolution. It just left me sort of scratching my head. And that's the kind of appeal that has, you know, maybe 10, 15% of the population can support.

But for a lot of people, it's just, and especially for Labour's older constituency, it completely alienated them. So I think that they had similar, they had similar problems the Democrats had in 2016 with that with the Clinton campaign.

Nicholas Lemann

I'm going to break here and save my other questions for part two. We'll be back with part two next Monday. So be sure to keep an eye out on your feed. I'm Nick Lemann, and thank you for listening.