Hasan Piker: The Return of Socialism in the United States?

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Richard Wolff (RW): Welcome, friends, to another edition of Economic Update, a weekly programme devoted to the economic dimensions of our lives and those of our children. I'm your host, Richard Wolff. Today we have a special programme, a little bit different from what we normally do. The entire half hour will be devoted to a conversation I had very recently with Hasan Piker, known online as Hasan Abi. He is a Turkish-American political commentator, a live streamer who has become a prominent socialist voice in digital media. He was born in New Jersey and raised in Turkey. He began his media career at the Young Turks, where he worked as a host and producer. He began streaming on Twitch in 2018 and left the network in 2020 to pursue streaming full-time. His broadcasts combine political analysis, international news, cultural commentary, and gaming, introducing younger audiences to debates about capitalism, inequality, and political power. Beyond his broadcasting work, Piker has supported the Democratic Socialists of America, DSA, and he has helped bring attention to socialist and progressive electoral campaigns, especially in Michigan and New York, connecting his online audience with the organisation's work and its elected representatives.

Well, I want to get right down to it with you. Take advantage of your spending some time with us. And obviously, in a way, given the moment, give me an idea of how you react, as we all are, to these midterm elections and the results of them. I have particular questions, but first your overall sense in this country at this time. What does this mean?

Hasan Piker (HP): I have an interesting perspective on this as a socialist. I feel like liberal bourgeois electoralism is not supposed to cause significant impediments to a fascist coalition that's building in America. And it certainly has been building with the Trump movement, with Trumpism broadly as an international movement. But we have actually seen elections genuinely push back against authoritarian formations all around the world with Victor Orban, with Flávio Bolsonaro's defeat by the Lula movement and now with this spectacular rebuke

against Trumpism here in America with what people are branding a bluenami, a blue tsunami, in the midterms. It kind of feels like there is a real popular mandate that the people gave to the opposition forces in this country. So I'm a little bit surprised, but pleasantly surprised about the results of November 3rd.

RW: Let me pick up on one thing that just fascinates me, because of our difference, you know, I'm an older guy, you're a younger guy, and you're starting out into this shift of the view, I come into the story at a different point, and I want to ask you about that: When I get interested in socialism, the first thing I remember is I can't speak about it. I'm here in America, I'm a young person going to high school and going to college, you can't say that word. You can't talk about it. You can talk about capitalism. Anyone who talks like that is already suspect even before you get to it. It's so different now. It seems so different that you are part of a movement and a generation that is just over all of that and is not going to tolerate that constraint. You're going to explore it. The Gallup polls are showing it. So I want to draw you out about younger people these days, people 35 and younger who are looking at all of this in a new and different way. Is this election a result of that? Is this election a first step in something further that's underway? How do you cope with this generational difference?

HP: Yeah, um, one of the exit polls that I found fascinating was the fact that for the 18 to 30 demographic that were polled of all voters, they were three times more likely to say that they were socialists than MAGA. And MAGA is the Republican party, right? That's what the Republican party becomes. But socialism, on the other hand, is simply a branch that is desperately fighting for ballot access and fighting for recognition and political legitimacy in this country. It's no secret that there has been this massive resurgence of American socialism. I'm currently in the process of reading the new Eugene Debs book by Shawn Gude and one of the things that is very clear about the initial American socialist movement was that they had far more elected representatives and far more political representation a hundred years ago than we have right now. So it's still in its infancy phase, right? Socialism, I mean, the new American socialist resurgence is. So I wouldn't say that the electoral victories were directly in the hands of socialists or because of socialism, but I will say that we made our mark this time around with numerous incumbents that we unseated. And with self avowed socialists alongside the democratic socialists of America. So that was a huge victory. There were so many conversations that were had about the Tea Party movement back in 2010, I believe. The Tea Party movement is astroturfed. It was backed by the Koch brothers. It was completely concocted as an anti-tax, anti-government movement, it kind of captivated the rest of the party and one could say it led to Trump's victory as well. First with defeat with Sarah Palin on the ticket, that Tea Party style candidacy and then with Donald Trump, it obviously transformed the Republican Party. They unseated two incumbents, I believe, at the time and it was talked about endlessly as this massive movement that was here. We unseated more than five. And we didn't do that with billionaire banking. We did that with people backing. So I think in the intra-party affair that's taking place in the Democratic Party, there are definitely some factional battles going on for a real fight for representational politics in the Democratic Party, because people have tremendous appetite for change. And we socialists are here to deliver that change. So from that perspective, it's been a phenomenal success, but I wouldn't

read too much into this broad blue wave. I don't think these were doctrinaire Marxist deciding to participate in parliamentarian democracy or anything like that, it was more so a lot of self-avowed socialists organising in counties all across the country and seeing a tremendous amount of success because they had established themselves as the people who were fighting back against Trumpism when the establishment of the Democratic Party was seen as feckless.

RW: That's exactly the point I had wanted to ask you about. So let me continue that. If you look at the history of socialism and communism in Europe, the irony or the dialectic, if you like, is that the horrible fascist period, Hitler, Mussolini and all of that, plunged Europe into a fascistic moment or period and that the communist party and the socialist were the stalwarts who fought against it. So that when the defeat came in 1945 at the end of World War II there was a massive shift to the left politically and socialism the socialist parties of every country in Europe became if not the government then the contesting opposition. Is something like this what you're talking about? Is there a reaction now to ten years of Trumpism interrupted by Biden, but nonetheless ten years of that movement to the right, and we've now established the new game being the ones who fought the hardest against it? Am I reading you right?

HP: Yes and no, because I feel like there's much to be excited about. But our job is not done, it's only the beginning. And I would say that this new democratic party will still do everything in its power to subsume the populist revolt that's taking place or to reshape it. And they're working tirelessly to do this right now. I mean, it's not a secret that Bernie's run in 2016, this insurgent run in 2016 that failed, and one could say he lost the battle, but he ultimately won the war, it turned into this blossoming massive movement. The Democratic Socialists of America now have more than 120,000 dues paying members. It's the largest active socialist organisation in American history at this point. And now we are putting out selected representatives all across the country. Some of our major cities, almost all of our major cities are now run by self-identifying democratic socialists. Some of them are cadre candidates like Zohran Mamdani of Nithya Raman in Los Angeles, who just defeated Karen Bass, another incumbent. And DSA aligned mayors as well, like Brandon Johnson in Chicago, D.C., Providence, Rhode Island, Ramirez. So it's happening all around the country. People clearly are, especially when it comes to the most personal form of local governance, they're looking to socialists for answers in these executive roles. However, once again, Bernie's rhetoric echoes throughout the entire National Democratic Party. You had people like Adam Hamilton clearly attacking billionaires and corporations and corporate corruption. People like Jon Ossoff. These are more centrist, centre-right candidates in places like Georgia that were still actively making the case that we have to do something about the corporate oligopoly, the corporate oligarchy, right? That's vulgar Bernieism of the 2016 era being echoed through every single Democratic Party elected representative. However, now that Democrats have won, now that we have established these major majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, what the party does is going to matter a lot. And from what I have seen, Adam Hamilton of Kansas, he went on the Sunday shows and immediately said, we can't have Medicare for all. I didn't run and win so that we could knock people off of their private health insurance. So they're already up to their tricks. These are some of the new stars of the party. So for every Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan, there's a guy like Adam Hamilton,

who very clearly is simply keeping the left populist rhetoric, but also is still serving, you know, Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, numerous corporate interests, because there's no other reason to try to thwart the advocacy and the populist momentum behind Medicare for all in favour of another more moderate policy, like expanding to the public option.

RW: We've come to the middle of our programme. I want to thank you for being with us. We're gonna be coming back in a very short number of seconds for the second half of today's interview with Hasan Piker. Before we jump into the second half of today's show, I wanted to thank you for your very generous response to our fundraising efforts this year, and in particular, in the last couple of months. And in part responding to that, we are extending the availability of our limited edition, linen-covered, hardcover version of *Understanding Capitalism*, the book I wrote and that we have been making available now for quite a while. If you are interested, I will be signing copies of that hardcover and they will be available to you, as they have been over the last few weeks. Just simply send an email to us at info@democracyatwork.info and put in the subject line: limited edition. We will send you all the information you need to order and receive your signed copy of *Understanding Capitalism* in its hardback. And thank you again for your kind attention to the fundraising dimension of what we do.

RW: Let me ask you to project a moment forward, again using Europe as an example. I have been asked repeatedly over the last few days, as you might imagine, by European socialists, what to make of what has just happened here. Very important for them, because the United States looms important in their local politics much more than whatever happens in Europe plays a role here. And they want to know the answer basically to this question: What is the meaning of the fact that socialists in America seem to them to be so focused on elections but not be drawing people into the streets a la the yellow vests or all the other forms of that kind of action? Where is the direct democratic politics in the United States in the socialist resurgence?

HP: I would say that there's definitely a revolt in the streets as well. It's nowhere near as large or as vast as some of the demonstrations that we've seen in Europe, whether it be the general strikes against shipping weapons to Israel – this was a major week of mobilisation by the Italian dock workers and labour unions broadly against the Italian government, and it was largely successful, at least as far as putting together a big demonstration. We've seen the student protests in France. There have been similar large movements and mobilizations in the country, but unfortunately, some of them have taken on a more liberal veneer. The no kings protests and protests of that sort, I think. And I've participated in these protests, I've gone to these protests. Actually, it is very encouraging to see some of these older people, lifelong liberals, actually take issue with the leadership of the party. Because that's one of the things that you really see at these protests is not a lot of young people, but a lot of older people, college educated white people that are billed as more conservative voters within the party. They're not. They are with Bernie almost all the way and their attitude has shifted dramatically. So there's something there, but unfortunately this is a very liberal protest

movement overall, and it doesn't make tangible demands for real discernible changes that socialists are expecting, right?

HP: Having said that, real mobilizations, some more decentralised movements, for example, like the anti-ICE mobilizations that have taken place all across the country have been largely effective and very large and very well organised. I was at the a-single-day strike, if you want to call it that, it was a general strike that took place in Minneapolis, and I would say that the Minneapolis mobilisation effectively destroyed the Trump administration's agenda of utilising ICE as an occupying force on American cities. The backlash to that forced the administration to retreat. So there have been real mobilizations. They're issue specific. Oftentimes it's related to domestic affairs, but it's true that there hasn't been large mobilizations against the Iran war, for example, as we have seen with the Iraq war initially. And I think there are a couple of reasons for that. There's a lot of apathy. American foreign policy is purposely separated from the domestic so that people take an antiwar position without recognising that their votes are still going to to endless warfare and endless extraction in the third world. And I think that that separation is part of the reason why people don't realise that they should be mobilising against the Iran war. And then last, but not least, of course, there's a lot of fear under a democratic administration, 3,500 college students and professors were arrested or mobilising the genocide in Gaza. And I think, that level of surveillance and punishment from these institutions like college campuses that were tasked with protecting these students, but just outright were hostile to them for applying what they were learning in the classroom to the real world, right?, that I think caused a lot of frustration, a lot of apathy, and it's part of the reason why we haven't seen as much movement in terms of developing an anti-war protest movement.

RW: The people who communicated to me pointed out, as you did, the Minneapolis, that was understood, at least in many parts of Europe, as exactly what they were wondering. Why wasn't that happening more? That was so successful in just the way you described, but also as an opportunity for many different communities, the labour community, students, and immigrant communities to get together and led them then to ask me how was it possible, even when the Gallup polls and the other polls indicated majority opposition to the war in Iran, that the Schumer, Jeffries-led Democratic Party never did anything that anyone knew about to suggest public action against a war where you knew the majority of the people were with you anyway. Let me put it this way — are they still powerful enough in that way to block the socialists within the Democratic Party?

HP: Absolutely. Oh, absolutely. And they will. And it's not even just the socialists, it is the popular will that they oppose in general. Because I would say that most Americans that even self identify as socialists don't have the appropriate political education yet. Hopefully that will change, but broadly speaking, I think a lot of American socialists now, they like Bernie Sanders, they like Zohran and these representatives, these politicians, what are they pushing for? They're pushing for nominal social democracy, right? An expansion of the welfare state and an expansion of social safety and better governance overall, which is fine at this stage, in the interim this is appropriate given the material realities, given how mass politics works in

this country and the overall antagonism towards what people historically perceived as socialism and communism, the scary word as a consequence of the Red Scare. So we have our work cut out for us. However, even outside of that, there are a lot of self-identifying liberals who also still want the Democratic Party to fight back against Trumpism, to fight back against the corruption, to fight back against the violence and the chaos that this admin has caused. And yet, in my opinion, continuing along with Chuck Schumer as the majority leader in the Senate, and continuing along with Hakeem Jeffries, who seems to be unshakable at this point, if we're being honest, as the Majority Leader in the House, will teach people a fairly important lesson, once again, that the Democratic Party is not responsive to their demands. There's a change.org petition that came out. 1 million signatures in one day, replace Hakeem Jeffries, replace Chuck Schumer. We need better leadership. Perfectly just demand, perfectly righteous demand. It's one that I've seen championed by people of all different backgrounds, not just young college campuses, progressives and socialists. You know, older Democrats want this, too. The last time I saw something like this was when people were demanding that Joe Biden be replaced. But I don't think Hakeem Jeffries will be replaced, Chuck Schumer, perhaps in a weaker position overall. But I don't think Hakeem Jeffries is going to be replaced despite the fact that he is completely out of step with the demands of the entire base of support of the party.

HP: Israel, for example, is a 90/10 issue. Only 10% want to increase funding to Israel or to maintain the current levels of funding to Isreal. 90% of Democrats say they want to either reduce or outright stop all funding to Israel. And yet Hakeem Jeffries is one of the largest AIPAC recipients in the country. Now, is that because the Israel lobby really loves having a black speaker in the house? No, they're not doing this for political representation. They're not doing this because they think Hakeem Jeffries is a competent leader, or I guess he is a competent leader in the way that AIPAC wants, competent in the sense that he is outright hostile to his left flank. He was groomed by Nancy Pelosi for this position. And he's outright hostile to Medicare for all, one of the most popular domestic policies, not only in the party, but has cross party appeal as well, broadly speaking, independence wants this many Republicans want this as well. Same with the Israel issue, same with the anti-militarism overall. And yet Hakeem Jeffries is not interested in any of this. So I think we are going to go back to a pattern of managed democracy under the leadership of Hakeam Jeffries and perhaps even with Chuck Schumer where people demand better representation from their party and their leadership. They demand a fight, but that fight won't come. And I do worry that this will breed tremendous apathy once again.

RW: Another way of asking you that same question, and I don't want you to repeat yourself, but obviously the overlap exists, how do you react to the comment made that this vote was more about expressing dissatisfaction with the way capitalism in America works than it was a favour of a socialist solution, whatever exactly that might mean? In other words, it's another way of the point you made, we're at an early stage in the development of socialism, a lot more, I think you used the words, political or analytic attention has to be developed to what it is that really distinguishes us otherwise we become a good or a better or a more government kind of proposal, and that would make us very vulnerable given American history.

HP: Yeah, we can't have it be socialism is when the government does stuff and the more the government does stuff, the more socialism we have... Yeah. I mean, that is a real issue. That is a real problem. There are obviously limitations to bourgeois democracy and especially as we've seen with Zohran, if you're in an executive role, it's tremendously difficult to the factional disputes, the different very powerful coalitions that are constantly demanding your attention and demanding their needs be met oftentimes their needs are antagonistic to the needs of the masses that got you elected, right? The real estate developers are not invested in finding a just and equitable solution to the housing crisis. If you were to ask the average person, should we have government housing, free housing?, I think more often than not, they'd say, that seems good to me. Right? They don't have a dog in this fight. Meanwhile, real estate developers will render that conversation null and void. It's not ever going to happen because they're unbelievably powerful and they want to continue limiting the housing availability so that they can make more money. And this is of course, the exact same principle for many different advocacy organisations and think tanks that lobby the government at every level, at the behest of corporate super profits.

HP: As you were saying, it's a difficult job, but I think the solution to that is to consistently agitate and to keep building class consciousness and to philtre some of these people who are responding to the heightened contradictions into organisations, whether they be more radical labour unions that are invested in engaging in labour militancy if necessary, beyond simply striking for better contracts, but even striking in more meaningful ways for political reasons. This is something that our European counterparts do all the time, but it's outright illegal in some states in this country. So that's something that we have to work on because it's like a muscle. You have to keep working out, you have to keep working out and you have to keep building the confidence of the labour movement and the broader socialist movement overall through diligent organising and consistent agitation, which is what I seek to do.

RW: We've come to the end of today's programme, but fortunately, we're gonna continue this in our segment called One Last Point, which you can find at democracyatwork.substack.com. And there, it will be behind the paywall, but it'll be available to you as a further benefit of the conversation we're having with Hasan Piker. And as always, I look forward to speaking with you again next week.

END

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