

KATE WAGNER —

Socialism, Simply

Every day, I wake up in Chicago, Illinois, and am reminded that the society I live in is unequal. In winter, it starts the second I step out to let the dog into the yard and see the roads perfectly cleared of snow in order to facilitate the movement of commerce like Amazon and FedEx, while the sidewalks remain icy and untraversable. It continues when I go to get coffee and cross the perilous intersection of Washtenaw and Fullerton, where as a pedestrian my life is at risk before I'm even fully awake. On my way to the coffee shop, I am confronted by signs advertising new-build houses in the neighborhood selling for over half a million dollars, while I live in fear of the rent going up or my landlord deciding not to lease to us again, which would trigger the third move in as many years as we have lived in this city. When I take the train, it is late and the platforms are rusted—two of many temporal and visible symbols of the public good being defunded and left to rot in favor of private gain. Downtown I am confronted with homelessness and scarcity in the gaps between shop windows selling \$500 Balenciaga shoes. Chicago is an apartheid city, with Black and White folks segregated between the north and south sides, the east and the west. Cops troll every corner, harassing people of color for simply existing in public. And despite billions of dollars spent on policing there is still crime in Chicago because the police do not exist to protect citizens; instead, they exist to protect property.

At home in my office, Amazon trucks pass the house every fifteen minutes while the mail lady comes so late in the evening she has to wear a headlamp. All across the city, people of average means like me are replaced by yuppies in Salesforce polos walking their labradoodles. The cost of basic goods has skyrocketed due to inflation. It's impossible to go out for even a basic non-fast-food dinner for two for under \$40. Faces and houses disappear on a month-to-month basis, the victims of displacement and tear-downs that eliminate apartments in favor of giant single-family houses.[1] Local landlords are replaced by megacorporations. These reminders of our capitalist society come at all timescales: in minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. At age twenty-nine, I have all but given up on the possibility of ever retiring or owning a house, two things my parents, who made less than my husband and I do, were able to achieve. I fantasize about moving to a country with public healthcare while the visa system is stacked against those trying to both leave and enter the US. A casual scroll of Twitter is a trip through all these layers of doom. A small apocalypse happens every day. Crypto scams implode, layoffs thrust folks into scarcity, another incident of racist police brutality surfaces. There is, put simply, no escaping this reality: the reality of capitalism.

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[1] Ian Spula, "Teardowns Are Rising in Chicago," *Chicago*, February 11, 2015, [link](#).

Even though I have been a socialist for most of my adult life, in this society I find it increasingly difficult to picture a better life than the one I live now, given the total and constant opposition, in all spheres, to the idea of the commons. Perhaps nothing has exacerbated this sense of doom like the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people have been left to die by the state and the healthcare system, all while pharmaceutical companies rack up billions in profits developing vaccines they refuse to export to the global south, thus ensuring the continued suffering of millions of distant others. I don't think ordinary people are equipped to process so much trauma and suffering, from the minor to the global. Imagining a world different from this one feels less like a political project and more like escapism.



Socialist Reconstruction: A Better Future for the United States [San Francisco: Liberation Media, 2022].

When I got the call to review the book *Socialist Reconstruction: A Better Future for the United States*, published last year by editors from the Party for Socialism and Liberation, a socialist organization of which I am not a member, I have to admit, I rolled my eyes a little. I did not understand the purpose of a book imagining what socialism would look like in the United States, in the heart of capitalist hegemony, without detailing, well, how to get there. Indeed, so many works of socialist writing deal with two parts of the equation: analyzing the problems of society from a socialist perspective and arguing about how we get to socialism. How we might most effectively seize power from the ruling class and redistribute it to the working class? Is revolution required? Can this transfer of the means of production take place even marginally within our current political systems? These debates take diverse forms, stretching from

Lenin—who believed that the bourgeois state would not simply “wither away” but could only be ended by violent revolution[2]—to the *Jacobin* contingent who insist that the road to socialism lies first in the parliamentary election of a workers’ party to an existing government.[3] These are the central and important debates that separate all socialist organizations from one another. (I am not currently affiliated with any particular organization, though I spent five years in the Democratic Socialists of America.)

For practical reasons, in terms of length, and perhaps to circumvent the hot spots of sectarian debate altogether, the book largely skips over this debate. Instead, it chooses as its framing a historical analogy, that of the US’s incomplete Reconstruction after the Civil War—a set of policies that sought to end racial apartheid (still in full force in contemporary politics) and redistribute land and resources to formerly enslaved people—policies that never materialized due to the weaponization of economic control by White Southern capitalists and landowners who were not expelled from political life. The book asks: Assuming a similarly transformative disruption takes place and the left is able to effectively seize power, what potentialities could then be acted upon to right what are in essence past wrongs? *Socialist Reconstruction* assumes that some kind of revolution occurs: it states the contradictions and tensions of our existing status quo (racism, inequality, the horrors of climate change, and the pandemic) and then shifts into the future tense, keeping the revolutionary details as vague as possible—because nobody really knows or can claim to know what exactly a revolution would look like in the US. “Faced with a ruling class unable to continue in the old way, a significant part of the population enters into active politics. The intervention of the people leads to sudden shifts in mass consciousness... State sponsored repression fails to break them.” It then concedes: “We can’t predict which series of events will become the tipping point... What we do know is what might seem unlikely—and to some impossible—will appear inevitable.”[4]

The book’s attitude is positive—it urges readers to have an open mind by driving home the harsh realities of the world we live in: racial and economic inequality, the abject misery of poor public services, the hollow loneliness of individualism, and the farce of US meritocratic myth-making. But when I opened to the part about reframing the US as a participatory democracy requiring a completely new “constitution” (lowercase c), I found myself thinking that, as a project, *Socialist Reconstruction* feels almost naïve. Perhaps this is because it tries to meet people where they are, starting with the government (“Centralism will be combined with a widening and expansive grassroots democracy”) and expanding outward toward issues such as the environment, debt, agriculture, urban studies, healthcare, education, public safety, and war.[5]

But the main question, reiterated throughout, is: What would a socialist US look like? That’s a question I hadn’t really thought about since I first became involved in leftist politics during Bernie Sanders’s first run for president. I’d since closed myself off to hope. Many of the book’s recommendations are obvious: the redistribution of wealth and power to the working class, increased political democracy at all levels, the nationalization of key industries, the abolition of the racist policing system, and indeed the abolition of all remnants of racism that permeate every element of US society.

[2] Vladimir Lenin, “Class Society and the State: The ‘Withering Away’ of the State, and Violent Revolution,” in *The State and Revolution* (1917), [link](#).

[3] Eric Blanc and Charlie Post, *Jacobin*, July 21, 2019, [link](#).

[4] *Socialist Reconstruction: A Better Future for the United States* (San Francisco: Liberation Media, 2022), 22–23.

[5] *Socialist Reconstruction*, 30.

It is in the chapter about transportation and housing that those involved in the architecture professions might best individually begin to picture—through applying the book’s vast policy inventions to everyday life—the potentially changed daily realities on a spatial level. A socialist urbanism eliminates highways and returns resources to public transportation. The trains will run smoothly, the streets will be returned to people and the distribution of goods. A National Housing Agency will create vast social housing and eliminate homeownership as an investment vehicle.

These are big, obvious ideas. But imagine taking the same walks to the same coffee shops without the threat of vehicular bodily harm. Imagine never seeing another homeless person beneath an overpass and understanding that this is because that person is housed and taken care of. Imagine a time when housing is considered a public good, the ability to live without fear of the bank or the landlord, without fear of eviction or rent hikes. Architecture will serve the people—after all, it is people who build and inhabit architecture. *Socialist Reconstruction* makes all these ideas sound so simple. Especially in architecture, we are so used to the minutiae of theory and practice that we forget what architecture is for, who the city is for, namely that both are for people—ordinary people with whom the architect and planner have more in common as workers within their fields than they do the politicians, capitalists, and technocrats to whom our fields almost universally cater.

When I look at big projects in Chicago—Jeanne Gang’s Vista mega-condos, Pelli Clarke Pelli’s mundane curtain-walled Salesforce Tower, the retrofit of the Chicago Tribune building into even more luxury investment assets, or even the teardown currently happening three houses away from me—I am constantly reminded that architecture, the field to which I have dedicated my life, is itself a symbol of life-diminishing inequality. The same could be said for those who work for paltry wages creating the construction drawings used to erect these buildings. Faced with this soul-crushing reality of architectural inequality, there remains something powerful about saying, unequivocally, “Comprehensive housing plans will be developed to ensure the abolition of structural racism. These plans will focus on eliminating segregation, environmental racism, energy and water efficiency, sprawl, the absence of shade trees, parks, and green spaces, and other pressing problems.”^[6] (Imagine!) These ideas are already widely known to be the right ones, ones that many in architecture and planning consider best practice—such as a Red Vienna-style housing system, the eradication of cars in favor of public transit, or the greening of streets. ^[7] Reframing these as socialist contextualizes them in a specific political light and argues that they cannot exist without a change in the very society in which we live. Once architects see themselves as workers and not as temporarily embarrassed technocrats or firm owners, they begin to realize that these struggles—socialist struggles—involve them as well.

[6] *Socialist Reconstruction*, 106.

[7] Veronika Duma and Hanna Lichtenberger, trans Loren Balhorn, “Remembering Red Vienna,” *Jacobin*, February 10, 2017, [link](#).

There is still value in insisting this. However, as I mentioned before, this book takes me back to when I first became involved in left-wing politics, when I began to come to these same conclusions myself. It is nice to be reminded of the stakes and the power these ideas still have. For those of us who have been working within this mindset for a long time, *Socialist Reconstruction* will come off as a little obvious and more than a bit naïve, and in a world rife with cynicism and defeatism maybe this isn’t such a bad thing.

But especially for those taking their first steps into socialist politics, this book will come as a comfort, and as an affirmation of what's possible—perhaps not in our lifetimes, but soon enough that working toward its goals still means quite a lot. Let's just say that after reading it, I thought about my daily walk with more imagination than I did before.