

After Bern

An Open Letter to the Newly Disheartened

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Several years ago, I worked as an after school program teacher. In the 3-4 hours I spent with kids before their parents arrived, instead of playing outside or relaxing after a long day at school, I helped administer tests, monitored performance, oversaw homework, and handed out worksheets. The school I worked at didn't have much money; neither did the kids or the people who worked there, and due to low test scores we were threatened with being taken over by the state. Administrators wanted to get these scores up and looked to the after school program to raise performance. The kids of course, *had other ideas*.

The kids wanted to do anything but be in another 3-4 hours of school. Once, we did an activity where they made posters about how they would change the school for the better if they had the power to do so. Almost every kid in the classroom of about 20 drew the school on fire. The natives, as they say, were restless.

When I did attempt to implement instruction the kids would goof off, talk back, or sometimes exploded by flipping over their desks or walking out of the room. The stress of almost 10 hours of schooling was too much for many of them, who also had to go home to blue-collar families that were often struggling.

In order to better manage this chaotic and stressful situation, bosses and specialists gave us a set of tools which by all accounts were completely, 'democratic.' We would start by "making agreements" with the kids and creating "buy in" for activities and completed work. In order to further create an environment of law and order, I often would appoint student helpers from the class that worked as an auxiliary police force in exchange for special privileges or candy.

In many ways, this classroom environment mirrored the creation of the United States. A powerful elite helped to manage and shape a unruly population of indentured servants, slaves, and indigenous people. But to do so, it needed a police force. In order to get there, it gave privileges to some (what became white people) while curtailing them for others (everyone else).

The colonial powers used anti-Blackness and white supremacy, I used Skittles and extra hall passes.

But government is much more than carrots and sticks, *politics* involves overall the *spectacle* and *myth* of democracy. For instance, in our training sessions we were told, "Get them to create a set of agreements around rules and behavior in the classroom, but make sure you shape and guide these rules. Obviously, don't let them get out of hand." Meaning, we were to help give the *appearance* of the students shaping the guidelines for their behavior, however at all times we (who were ruled over by the administration and themselves by the US government) in *actuality* were there to create the physical framework. But moreover, we existed to guard against school and thus government authority being attacked by the unwashed young masses hell bent on doing zero work and collectively singing J-Lo songs.

Lastly, in the eyes of the school powers that be, the ultimate goal of such a project was that the kids would essentially grow to govern themselves, but always how we wanted them to be governed. To keep them from agreeing to *actually* set the school on fire, we had to make them think that they were the ones organizing their day to day activities which they hated so bitterly. In short, we had to make them appear as the chief architects in their own immiseration.

But what about those that resisted? It wasn't long before acts of revolt broke out. A tag on the board here, a mean drawing of myself there. Even a cough could spread like wildfire into a chorus of rebellion. Before my eyes, a hoard of Sponge Bob backpacks became a sea of little Nat Turners. "Stop it, stop it! Quiet!" I cried out. "What are you, the old white guy from the *Hunger Games*?" they would ask. Disgraced, I knew the answer. Yes.

Everything in the classroom that I helped create exists in the wider American political landscape. From the growing policing of everyday life, to the widening pool of those within a given population that are “put in time out.” But just as in my class, in the grown up world technology and statecraft have evolved to make politics appear as this participatory activity that is alive in the hands of the population. *Nothing could be further from the truth.*

It was in helping kids create and shape their own governance that I came to understand the real nature of how democracy works. When I would need kids to do an activity, I would start out by “making agreements.” These rules if broken, this would then mean that the students were breaking agreements they had made “with themselves.” “Oh you’re not doing your work Timmy? But you agreed to it! Go sit in time out!”

There is an immense system of violence and domination in place over us that keeps the wheels of this system running. While it appears we have a hand in shaping our lives, in reality there are clear systems of control and management in place to make sure that the overall structure of this society is not threatened. No matter who is elected, no matter what political party you join, the appearance of popular control, of *democracy*, is a total illusion. No where has this illusion been greater in recent memory than in the campaign of Bernie Sanders.

“The Game Is Rigged”

Years later, many things in my life have changed but much remains the same. I no longer have a part time job that pays me enough to live in a poverty stricken county. I took a different unionized position in a major industry where wages, working standards, and benefits have fallen while the rate of work has increased. The amount of money that I pay for rent has gone up over the last four years. I currently work up to 60 hours a week while my partner makes minimum wage in a nearby wealthy downtown area in the service industry. I live in a rapidly gentrifying working-class town outside of a major metropolitan area. Every year things become more expensive, hotter, more polluted, and resources more scarce. Food stamps are cut, more people are made homeless, and everything from rent control to library hours are attacked.

Ironically, I represent the target audience of both the Sanders *and* the Trump campaign. Both as a worker that is attacked by Wall-Street and corporate capitalism and as a white male which has historically been pandered to along the lines of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and xenophobia. Funny thing is, I’m not buying any of it.

In the last year, I watched the Sanders campaign grow in size but still, I knew this day of disappointment was coming. On Monday, it arrived as before voters had even taken to the polls or the ballots had been mailed in and counted, Hillary Clinton, the much hated multi-millionaire, proponent of neo-liberalism and US imperial intervention, attacker of the poor and working-class, proponent of “Super Predator” anti-Blackness, and much hated Democratic Party front runner declared victory. While Hillary would go on to receive more votes than Bernie Sanders, Clinton declared victory based on the amounts of ‘Super Delegates’ that were pledged to her from DNC Party insiders and faithful. Thus, even if Sanders would have won by a landslide, he would have lost due to mechanics of the political apparatus. But the authoritarian inner workings of American democracy go much deeper than simply the electoral college.

“Those Who Own the Country Ought to Govern It”

America is a settler nation created out of colonies managed by imperial powers. Originally, only wealthy white men were allowed to vote. As one of our founding fathers, John Jay put it, “The people who own the country ought to govern it.” Since the founding of the US, it took bitter struggle to extend the vote to non-whites, to women, to the poor, and even to people under 21. Since the civil rights movement, voting rights in many states have been attacked and those in both major corporate parties have passed a variety of laws (such as voter ID checking) to ensure that namely African-American voters are kept away from polling stations. Further, many former and current prisoners, the majority of them poor and of color, are barred from voting. For a country that describes itself first and foremost as a democracy, it has a horrible track record of defending universal suffrage and openly works to block it for some and celebrate it for others.

But even if everyone in the US could simply walk into a polling station and cast a ballot without hassle, would it still make a difference? No, it wouldn't. The candidates are decided by the electoral college and the political parties themselves, not the voters. This current election shows this to be true more than ever. The election, just like the debates and all the TV interviews and shared internet articles, is part of a show; a pageant of democracy.

But the electoral college is just one part of an over all picture. There's also the Supreme Court which is appointed by the President and the ability by the President and Congress to override the decisions of voters. But these are just the things that people recognize and admit to themselves as out of our control regularly. We don't get to vote on wars or if we fight and die in them. We don't get to decide if “our” government is allowed to conduct surveillance and attack social movements from Occupy to Black Lives Matter. We don't have control of if it destroys the environment. There is no vote that can stop the police from killing thousands of people per year or incarcerating millions more. In all of these situations and in a millions more, our government is a instrument of both class rule *and* racial apartheid that exists for the benefit of the rich and powerful at the expense of the rest of us.

But even if we could vote on all of these things, to create a totally *directly* democratic society or perhaps even vote for a politician that says that they would either not do these things or do away with them, we still are left with the rest of the world that government exists to manage in the first place: *capitalism*.

There is No Vote Against Capitalism

Even if Bernie got elected, even if we had the ability to vote on everything that our government does, that still wouldn't change the fact that we live in a capitalist society; and it's that fact that impacts everything around us.

Almost everyone reading this doesn't own the place where they work; we don't control the our means of survival. Instead we are forced to sell our labor for a wage. Some of us might try and go to school to get a better job where we can do this for more money, but often that just leaves us in even more debt. *Debt*: for our cars, for our homes, for our educations, for our credit cards which keep the heat on or provide day care for our children. More and more, we are in debt, or *indentured* to someone else. For food, for shelter, even for a job itself.

But someone is getting rich, it just sure isn't us. Since the economic crisis of 2008, the richest 1% has gotten richer while the rest of us have gotten poorer. In the meantime, most of us are working more than ever, with every second at work making someone else more wealthy. Neo-liberalism, outsourcing, and attacks on labor unions have led to a decimation of jobs in rural areas while in metropolitan ones, work and capital is re-organized, as cities become gentrified, workers are pushed out, and rent and home prices explode. Whole generations of working people are now growing up with a grim future ahead of them. Their lives look bleaker than their parents did as economic, ecological, and social crisis lie around every corner and world war lies on the horizon.

Despite the claims of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party to address these problems, they have only helped facilitate the fattening of the 1%. The wealth gap between black, brown, and white families has only gotten larger in the last 8 years as black net worth has shrunk more than at any time in history since the great depression.

While fascists like Trump contend that this is due to free trade deals like NAFTA and the FTAA, which is true in part, at the same time they promote an economic nationalism that simply seeks to further drive down wages by attacking unions, the environment, social programs, and immigrant workers. None of these things will actually help American workers, only further concentrate wealth in the hands of the few just as they have done in the last several decades. One of the things it *will* do is divide the working class; keeping it looking at those around and below it, instead of those running the show and directing their misery, above.

But while Trump uses racism to gain votes, much as George Wallace or Barry Goldwater did before him, this electoral strategy is based on a very real foundation of anti-Blackness and white supremacy that is key building block of the American system. Racism is the glue that binds this society together and keeps poor and working people from linking up against it. This is why the police kill so many people every year and millions are locked away in jail. Despite all the voting and reforms since 1776, not much has changed about this aspect of the country, if anything, there is simply now more than ever a myth that democracy can overcome this oppression.

But capitalism is more than a constant cycle of boom and bust that always affects the poor and working class negatively, and is based upon white supremacy and anti-Blackness to ensure social control. It is also a system of resource extraction and industrial production that always needs to grow and expand. But it is this growth and expansion that is hurdling all of humanity closer and closer to the brink of climate chaos, a new world war, endemic drought and food shortages, and the creation of millions of refugees. Trump represents the fascist strong man that denies all of this, but the alternative of Sanders is no more idiotic: the belief that capitalism can be reformed and that government can do it.

But in thinking about the need to abolish capitalism, both as a means of industrial production and as a way of life based around selling our lives for wages and endless consumption, we come up against a very clear reality: we can't do this through voting, through the State, or through a politician.

Just as the students in my classroom weren't allowed to burn down the school, so too are we not allowed to burn down capitalism through a system designed to protect it. This isn't allowed by those in power no matter how much we want it and it certainly isn't on the ballot. And, if you even start to think about it, there are plenty of armies, police, and government agencies in place to make sure you don't even get close. This is why most people just sit at home, "They game is rigged. What can we do?" We then return to the same sense of powerlessness, isolation, and despair that exist across all areas of daily life.

The world can't be changed through politics in a meaningful way because government is a system of management that ensures that the power, wealth, and privilege of a few is protected against the rest of us. That hierarchies and systems of oppression and domination based upon racism, sexism, and economic exploitation are kept in place, not done away with. But moreover, democracy acts as a smokescreen for this dictatorship. It is the system of "agreements" and "buy ins" that keep us thinking that we can have a say in an apparatus that dominates us.

It can't. It never has. And it never will.

For many Americans this is the hardest thing to understand and to come to grips with. That in order to actually create anything resembling a "democratic society" we would have to employ largely undemocratic means. If we don't want to be poor, we must take over the means of existence from the rich. If we don't want the environment to be destroyed, we must destroy the capitalist economy. If we don't want a police state, we must confront and abolish the courts, police, and prisons in every aspect of our lives. None of this can be done through the vote or through sitting down at the table of politics with the rich and powerful.

We have to build something much different than just support for a candidate. We have to build something that can make a real revolution. That can create a different way of life. We have to breathe into existence a movement that exists outside of the framework of politics as we know it.

Building the Force that We Need to Survive

Across the United States, the Sanders campaign has raised over \$207 million dollars. People knocked on doors, they put up stickers, they organized rallies, and they made phone calls. Many people felt that a change was coming. But moreover, they felt that things were different this time and that finally the system would work the way it was supposed to. After all, isn't participating in the democratic process one of the most American things one can do? Weren't all those people doing exactly what we were told since we were little kids we should have been doing to make this country better *all along*?

But as Clinton announced her victory, or more realistically, the loyalty of the Democratic Party faithful 'Super Delegates,' for many, memories came back. Nader in 99, Kerry in 04, Obama in 08...

What if we had put all of that time, energy, and organization in building something that wasn't based around electing a politician? What if we put that time, energy, organization, and hundreds of millions of dollars into building organizations that can fight, win, and seize land?

For all the rhetoric of the Sanders campaign, his use of language of Occupy and Black Lives Matter, both movements that the Democrats helped to crush under their own heels, there was not a "political revolution." Nothing was taken over. No buildings were occupied. No armies or police forces confronted. The prisoners were left squarely in their cells. The streets weren't ripped up for gardens and the oil pumps turned off. Politics worked just as it always did. The powerful stayed in power and the rich will only get richer. The millions of people pulled into the Sanders campaign will now go home and go to bed. In another four years, a new generation will be called upon to elect someone just like him and again be let down. But moreover, those energized by Sanders are now free to be led directly into the Democratic Party machine...

If we are to move into the future, we have to come to first understand what we are up against. We are up against a system of government that is based around violent force and we are fighting to *destroy* a way of life that is organized around industrial capitalism. For humanity to survive, not just survive in the sense of less people in prison, a higher minimum wage, and no student debt, but survive in the sense of continued life on this planet, a revolution must be carried out that sweeps away industrial capitalism and the governments that manage it – into the dust bin of history.

The sooner we get to building such a movement, the sooner we can get towards making this reality. For everyone recovering from their 3rd degree burns, we ask plainly: *what side are you on?* The game is rigged. Your candidate lost. It's not that the system is broken, it's that it is working just the way it was always supposed to.

Isn't it time we had a real revolution? Or will we continue to buy into our own destruction?

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