

This Time It's Different (???)

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Every four years, we are subjected to the sorry spectacle of what passes for politics in this country. A cohort of wealthy charlatans, stooges, thieves, and liars performs for us in an attempt to convince us to vote for them, to send them money, to organize for them, and to trust them with the leadership of the United States, the most powerful country in the world. An integral part of this circus are the efforts of various people to convince leftists to support, work for, and vote for the latest liberal running either in the Democratic primary campaign or in the contest for the presidency itself.

My earliest, although somewhat vague, memory of this phenomenon goes back to 1956; a clearer one to 1960, with my father taking on several gatherings of current and former Communist Party members and sympathizers who insisted that “progressives” had to support ___ (fill in the blank: Adlai Stevenson, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson), because the Republican alternative ___ (fill in the blank: Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater) was going to bring us ____ (fill in the blank: fascism and/or thermonuclear war). To his credit, and winning my undying respect, my dad, a kind of a left-wing Stalinist/Maoist with real sympathy for lower class people, insisted (rather intemperately – which I especially admired) that the Democrats were just as much a party of the capitalists as the Republicans, that all the politicians were hostile to working people as well as being a bunch of phonies and sellouts, and that voting for, let alone actually working for, any of them was a complete waste of time, energy, and money. I haven’t forgotten this lesson (although when discussing the issue, I try not to raise my voice).

There is a regular pattern to this. During each election campaign, we are urged to support the Democrat, whoever she/he may be. He/she says a lot of things we on the left want to hear and promises that, if elected, he/she will do all sorts of things we’d like to see done. Many people get excited, work on the campaign, contribute money, vote, etc. Then, there is the let-down. Either way, those who supported the candidate are disappointed, sometimes very disappointed. If the Democrat gets elected, he/she does not do very many of the progressive things he/she promised and does do a lot of things that are not very progressive at all. If the Democrat is defeated, people blame him/her for running a poor campaign and/or blame the American people for being stupid, ignorant, and apathetic. And despite this happening over and over again, during each presidential election cycle, the same thing occurs: there are always people telling us that this time, things will be different, because, this time, unlike in the past, there is a REAL progressive running whom we should support. (Those of us who have learned something from this experience sit on the sidelines and try to enjoy the show and the sense of being superior. A long-time comrade of mine describes the charade as “infinitely entertaining.” It’s either that or infinitely depressing, or both).

We have now entered the latest presidential election cycle, and it’s all happening once again. This time, we are told, it really is a different story, because this time, there IS a real leftist running for the Democratic Party nomination – Bernie Sanders, who even calls himself a “democratic socialist” – whom we should all support, organize for, and vote for. One of the latest of these efforts is a piece by William Kaufman that originally appeared in Counterpunch and was posted on the Truthdig website of September 19. His main argument is three-fold: (1) Bernie Sanders is different from other Democratic Party candidates; (2) he is doing yeoman work in educating the public about the burning issues of the day, particularly economic inequality and human-induced global warming; and (3) those leftists who are refusing to support Sanders for whatever our usual ultra-left sectarian reasons (he goes through the arguments) should get off our high horses

and support Sanders' campaign as a tactic, as the first step in raising the consciousness of the politically ignorant and generally benumbed and befuddled American people.

I found it a repellant screed, so let me explain why I am not supporting Bernie Sanders' campaign, will not vote for him in the Democratic primary, and will not vote for him or any other Democratic candidate (let alone a Republican) who winds up running for president.

As a matter of fact, I never have voted and intend never to vote or otherwise to participate in any way in the conventional political process. This is an expression of my anarchist convictions. However, in writing this, I do not mean to urge anyone to do anything, one way or another, either to support Sanders' campaign or not to support it. Everybody can, everybody ought to, and everybody probably will — do whatever he/she wants. This piece is just an expression of my personal views directed to whomever may find it edifying, amusing, or merely interesting.

Here are my reasons for not supporting the Sanders campaign.

Reason #1. Sanders is miseducating people about the political process in this country.

I do not believe significant social change occurs through conventional politics. The political process is an essential part of what I believe to be a rotten, corrupt, and brutal social system (capitalism) which I would like to see overthrown and replaced with an anarchist society, or what might also be describe as a very democratic, decentralized socialism. The political process serves several interrelated purposes: (1) to allow ordinary people to express their views; (2) to fool us into believing that we have some real say-so over what happens in this country; (3) to coopt politically talented individuals; (4) to marginalize extreme views; (5) to channel less extreme views and movements toward the center; and (6) to preserve the rule of the elite, the small group of extremely wealthy and extraordinarily powerful people who actually run the nation. Real change occurs when mass movements, utilizing tactics of direct action — strikes, picket lines, civil disobedience, building and factory occupations, mass marches, and riots -develop outside the political process or threaten to go outside the political process. A look at the 1930s and the 1960s confirms this. When such a movement emerges, this is ultimately reflected within mainstream politics, as various politicians and political organizations act to coopt the movement, that is, to keep it within the bounds of the system, to defang it, and ultimately to smother it. (They also attempt to take credit for its achievements.) This is one of the things that need to be learned if we are seriously to address the problems of the country (and the world).

It is also worth realizing that even if Sanders were actually to win both the Democratic Party nomination and the presidential election, he is not likely to be able to get his program, or even a significant part of it, enacted against all the forces (including moderate and conservative Democrats, let alone Republicans) likely to be arrayed against it. This is because of a number of factors, but most important, the fact that the US constitution was consciously designed to limit the ability of any "faction," and particularly one led by a populist "demagogue," to carry out its aims. This is what "checks and balances" really means.

Thus, to support Sanders' campaign, which is explicitly and consciously focused within the capitalist political process, is to promote the illusion and raise the hope that substantial, radical change is possible through the electoral system. And to the extent that Sanders is engaged in,

and trying to get even more people engaged in, this process, he is, in my opinion, miseducating people, not educating them.

Reason #2. Sanders is miseducating people about the nature and political role of the Democratic Party.

I do not believe the Democratic Party is a viable vehicle through which to effect change in this country. Aside from the fact that it is an essential element in the political process, as discussed above, the Democratic Party is controlled by the more liberal leaning members of the ruling elite, who dominate the party individually and control its purse strings. Although the Democrats try to pretend otherwise, the Democratic Party is as much a party of the very rich — what some, like economist Paul Krugman, call the “plutocrats,” and others, like Bernie Sanders, call the “billionaire class” — as the Republican. The Democratic Party serves to corral and denature mass movements of the left, just as the Republican Party does to movements on the right. In sum, the Democratic Party is the graveyard of mass leftwing movements, not their incubator. To the degree that Sanders is running in the Democratic Party and trying to get even more people involved in it, he is actively misleading people, not educating them.

Moreover, Sanders, seemingly an honest man, is not forthright about his relationship to the party. Although he calls himself an “independent,” he caucuses with the Democrats in the Senate, is running in the Democratic primaries, advocates a program that is merely a somewhat more radical version of what other Democrats are raising, and has explicitly pledged his loyalty to the party. This, in at least two ways: (1) by announcing that if he does not win the nomination, he will not run as an independent and thus steal votes from the Democratic candidate (as Ralph Nader did in 2000, supposedly helping George W. Bush beat Al Gore); and (2) by insisting, during his appearance before the Democratic National Committee, that what he is doing is showing the party how it can regularly defeat the Republicans, specifically, by running on and promoting an economic populist platform. In other words, Sanders was explicit that the main purpose of his campaign is to help the Democrats corral those liberals and radicals who are dissatisfied with the party’s current stance, particularly as embodied in the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, into supporting it. Thus, contrary to his claims, Sanders is not an independent at all; he’s a Democrat.

Sanders is also less than honest when it comes to denouncing the role of money in American politics. Here, too, he reveals his loyalty to the Democratic Party. He always directs his attacks against the conservative capitalists who fund the Super-PACs that back Republicans, that is, people like the Koch brothers and casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, but never against those liberal capitalists, such as George Soros and Tom Steyer, who fund the Super-PACs that support Democrats. If one is really concerned to draw attention to the elite’s control of the political process, shouldn’t one expose the liberal capitalists, too?

Reason #3. Sanders is miseducating people about American imperialism, particularly its role in the Middle East.

In his campaign, Sanders hardly mentions foreign policy, so it is difficult to know precisely where he stands. But it is possible to make an intelligent guess. For starters, we know that he is a

militant supporter of Israel. He made this crystal clear when, in the summer of 2014, the Israelis were pounding the Palestinians in Gaza, killing over 2,000 people, including many women and children. Sanders and every other prominent Democrat (including Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, and, of course, Barack Obama) rushed to announce their firm support of the Zionist state. To me, this is no minor matter. What the Zionists have done to the Palestinians – dispossessing them of their historic homeland (and continuing to expel, brutalize and humiliate them, both in Israel and in the West Bank) while making them, the real victims, look like the aggressors and in the same league as the Nazis – is one of the most horrendous crimes of our era. (It is particularly distressing to me as a Jew, insofar as the Zionists committed this outrage in the name of the Jewish people as a whole.) Sanders’ support of the state of Israel, even and especially when it is the process of slaughtering Palestinians, suggests to me that he is a committed supporter of US imperialism throughout the entire region, including Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and that he will promote and defend a foreign policy consistent with this support. (And, I suspect, he will use whatever power he possesses to attack and delegitimize the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction movement that aims to treat Israel as it deserves, as a pariah state, like the old apartheid regime in South Africa.)

Kaufman insists that this is a side issue that leftists ought to overlook in the interests of promoting the greater cause. (How glibly he tries to sweep aside the issue, ignore monstrous crimes, and write off the historic claims of an entire people.) He also tries to reassure us by explaining that Sanders supports a two-state solution to the “conflict” in Palestine. But this means absolutely nothing. A large majority Zionists, both in Israel and abroad, including Likud Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu himself, all claim to support a two-state solution, as a way to “solve” the “Palestinian Question” – that is, to cram the Palestinians into a pathetic Bantustan controlled in every way by the Israelis and thus to legitimize the Zionist conquest of the area and the atrocities that this has always entailed. Personally, I support the dismantling of the Zionist state and, short of an anarchist revolution, the creation of democratic secular state in all of historic Palestine, including the right of return (and monetary compensation) to all Palestinians.

Sanders’ militant pro-Israel position also suggests that he is a militant supporter of US imperialism throughout world, not just in the Middle East, and a promoter of all that this entails, including US intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, generous “defense” budgets, the “War on Terrorism,” and drone strikes.

In contrast to Sanders, I am a firm opponent of US imperialism around the world and support people’s struggles to free themselves from US domination everywhere.

Sanders’ position on the question of Palestine and his support for US imperialism more generally reveal to me the kind of politician Bernie Sanders really is and what kind of policy he will promote if he were elected and will continue to support if he is not. This issue alone would be enough to prevent me from ever supporting Sanders’ campaign no matter how effective his “educational efforts” in other areas may be.

Reason #4. Bernie Sanders is miseducating people about the relationship between the government and the private economy.

Sanders’ platform consists of a lot of wonderful-sounding things: among them, expansion of Social Security, augmentation of Medi-Care and its transformation into a national “single-payer”

health insurance plan, free tuition for higher education at all state institutions, a \$15 minimum wage for all workers. Whatever one may think of these proposals taken individually, taken together, they entail the drastic expansion of the power of the state and its role in our society. In two senses:

One sense is, in a manner of speaking, physical. Sanders's proposals would mean a huge increase in the sheer size of the government, especially the federal government, and a dramatic extension of its involvement in our lives. This is the same state that Sanders, along with many other political figures, attacks as being dysfunctional and as being controlled by the "billionaire class" that he excoriates. It is also the state which, through its intelligence agencies and "justice" department, spies on us, gathers voluminous data about us, holds people in indefinite detention merely on suspicion of being terrorists, incarcerates millions of us, and carries out, without due process targeted assassinations of US citizens. Are we sure we want to give this government a lot more power than it already has?

The other sense is financial. Sanders' proposals will cost a lot of money. As they are now, Social Security and Medicare are running deficits and are projected to run out of money at some point in the not-too-distant future. This is not just right-wing propaganda, but mostly the result of demographics: the retirement and aging of the very large post-World War II "baby boom" generation, whose Social Security and Medicare benefits are currently being financed by smaller cohorts of people. (This, by the way, is a good reason to encourage immigration and to grant citizenship to the 11 million undocumented people currently in the country.) Just to patch up these two systems would require substantial changes, either a decrease in benefits or an increase in taxes, or some combination of both. A tremendous expansion of these programs, as Sanders proposes, would be exorbitantly expensive and would require a massive increase in revenues. Sanders argues that these revenues can be raised by raising taxes on the rich, but it is highly unlikely that even steep increases in taxes on the wealthy can cover the costs of the size of the expansion of Social Security and Medicare that Sanders is calling for, let alone all the other programs he advocates. Much more likely, Sanders' proposals will involve a substantial increase in taxes for all of us. The result will be a considerable decrease in our discretionary income and a comparable increase on the amount of money being cycled through the government. As even Sanders admits, this is likely to have a negative, and perhaps a significantly negative, impact on economic growth. Is this what we want? Is this the right way to fight poverty and economic inequality? So, unless Sanders is suggesting that we actually expropriate the rich, overthrow the capitalist system, and set up a new one (which if he is, he ought to say so explicitly), his programs are likely to lead not to prosperity but to a stagnating and state- and bureaucratdominated economy. (Greece anyone?) This brings me to:

Reason #5. Sanders is miseducating people about what socialism is and how it can be achieved.

Bernie Sanders calls himself a "democratic socialist," but he has never, to my knowledge, explicitly laid out what he means by the term "socialism." All I have heard is that he points to such countries as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland as examples of what he means. But his inference is false and, in fact, very misleading. The economic systems in these nations are not socialist at all, but capitalist, with very large and, for the most part, vibrant private sectors. What

these countries do have are social programs that are somewhat more extensive than what exists in the United States, such as national health services and more generous welfare benefits. This is not “socialism,” it is New Deal, or “welfare-state” capitalism.

Sanders also implies that the existence of these social programs is the main reason, or one of the main reasons, why these nations are as prosperous as they are. But the prosperity of these countries long predated the existence of these programs and was and is based on a variety of historical and cultural factors, including limited immigration and a resultant ethnic and cultural uniformity (that is, no or very small racially/ethnically oppressed underclasses). Moreover, the relative global socio-economic standings of these countries, as measured by a variety of indices, are not as high as Sanders implies. (And, for whatever it’s worth, income inequality, according to some measures, is even higher in these countries than it is in the United States, while personal indebtedness is much higher.) In addition, these nations’ rankings on these indices began to decline after the introduction of the extensive social welfare programs after World War II, which decline continued until such expenditures were cut back. It is also worth noting that much of Norway’s recent prosperity has been based on its pumping of North Sea oil, while Finland recently experienced a mass strike in opposition to an austerity program being imposed by the government. Thus, paradise is not as Edenic as Sanders implies.

(On a more pedantic note, Sanders refers to all these nations as “Scandinavian.” This is not quite true. All four of them are considered to be “Nordic,” but only Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, are “Scandinavian.”)

Beyond referring to the Nordic countries as “socialist,” Sanders never explains what, to him, socialism concretely means. In others words, he never tells us what kind of social system he envisages.

But here too, as in the case of Sanders’ position on foreign policy, it is possible to discern a position. I base my conjectures on three pieces of evidence (one of which, I admit, is circumstantial):

1. Sanders’ implication that the Nordic countries, with their extensive social programs, are “socialist” or at least “socialistic.”

2. Sanders’ specific proposals for solving the economic and social problems of the United States, which, as I discussed above, would involve the tremendous expansion of the size of the state and its role in our society.

3. Sanders’ implied support, in the past, for such countries as Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, each of which he visited. (He actually took his honeymoon in the Soviet Union.) This is consistent with his political history. Like many of us, Sanders came of age during the 1960s, and his politics then, and by implication now, paralleled those of many, if not most, of our political generation, that is, support (often uncritical) for the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, et. al., and the view that these countries were “socialist.” To many of the radical generation of the 1960s, like the previous radical generation of the 1930s, socialism consisted primarily of what they thought of as “social control” of the means of production, but which was nothing more than state ownership and direction of the economy. To them, and I believe to Sanders today, socialism meant/means state ownership and control of the economy, with the state controlled by self-proclaimed “Communist” or “Socialist” parties.

But to me, this is not socialism at all. It is state capitalism, government control of the economy (and of society as a whole). This is the opposite of what I advocate. To me, socialism means real social control of the economy and society, which can only occur on a decentralized basis,

that is, the direct, democratic, and cooperative control of workplaces, schools, and communities by the people who work in them, attend them, and live in them, through councils, committees, unions, and other associations. This means the ELIMINATION of the state/government, or at least its substantial reduction, not its drastic expansion, as Sanders and other “democratic socialists” propose.

Moreover, unlike Sanders, who implies that socialism can be brought about gradually, through the capitalist political process, I contend that the kind of socialism I advocate – a truly democratic socialism – can only be created outside of the political process and through the destruction of that process, in a drastic social transformation, or revolution, actively carried out by the vast majority of the people.

So, as I see it, Sanders is not only miseducating people about what socialism is, he is also miseducating them about how it can be achieved. This may seem of small import in the current political climate, in which mass movements of any substantial size or power are nowhere to be seen. However, if and when such movements do arise, Sanders’ strategy may well have dire consequences. This can be envisioned if one looks back to Chile in the early 1970s, when the “democratic socialists” of that era attempted to “vote in” socialism via the election of Chilean Socialist Party leader Salvador Allende Gossens in 1970. Allende, who had not won a majority in the election (he won 36.3 % in a three-person race) but had been installed in office by the Chilean congress, attempted to carry out large-scale nationalization and “socialization” of the economy – he nationalized US-owned copper mines and other industrial establishments, took over large agricultural estates, raised wages, froze prices, and printed huge amounts of money – against the explicit opposition of the congress itself and of much of Chilean society. The result was economic and political chaos. While the Socialist and Communist workers who backed Allende were left unarmed and defenseless because they had been led to believe that “socialism” could be established peacefully, the right-wing sectors of Chilean society (the economic elite – capitalists and landowners – the top military officers, and many small business owners, including independent truckers, along with the CIA) panicked at what they thought was an imminent “Communist” revolution. The result was a bloody coup, carried out by the generals of the Chilean army, who overthrew Allende (who committed suicide during the process), tortured and killed many thousands of people, and established a right-wing dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet that lasted for 17 years.

To the degree that Sanders is resurrecting Allende’s “peaceful road to socialism,” he is leading people astray and setting us up for a possible disaster.

Conclusion

Kaufman’s insistence that leftists jettison their principled and considered objections to Sanders’ campaign and jump into it reflects, at least in part, a view of the American people that I do not share. It is worth hearing it in Kaufman’s own words.

Kaufman sees the left’s current task as:

“How to awaken tens of millions of people from the entrapments of mass hypnosis, prostration, and indifference and into the first halting steps toward recognition and selfemancipation?”

“The near-zero collective political IQ of the country urgently needs raising by any means possible and necessary, sooner rather than later.”

This is because of:

“... a woefully detached and undereducated populace... [A]n alarmingly large percentage of Americans spend most of their waking hours either (a) at work; (b) watching the NFL, NASCAR, “reality” TV shows, or cotton-candy dramas and comedies; (c) surfing the Internet (and mostly not for news); or (d) chasing down sales at Wal-Mart or Sam’s Club to try to make ends meet.”

With such a snooty and elitist view, it is no wonder Kaufman feels as desperate as he does (and to the degree that the left agrees with him, it is no wonder it is as small and as isolated as it is). But Kaufman misses a couple of points:

1. Most people in this country are aware of the problem of growing economic inequality, specifically the stagnation of the wages of working people for the last few decades and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the top 1%. Moreover, it is not just Bernie Sanders who has been talking about it; it’s been in the news for the last few years. (Remember Occupy Wall Street, Elizabeth Warren?)

2. A substantial majority of Americans are cognizant of human-induced global warming. This includes nearly half of Republicans (and a small, and growing, caucus of Republicans in congress).

The question is what to do about these and other pressing social issues, and not everybody who is concerned about them believes that the answer is to support the campaign of Bernie Sanders, whose program, if implemented, just might not solve the problems he is concerned with but might actually make them worse.

Contrary to Kaufman, not everybody who disagrees with him (and Sanders) is an ignorant, selfish, and complacent boob. There is certainly a sector of the population that is ignorant and selfish (although not all of them are complacent; some are very aroused indeed); and not all of them are on the right; there are plenty of arrogant and ignorant people on the left, too. But there are also a considerable number of people who are knowledgeable, thoughtful, and broad-minded. So the solution is not merely a question of having the left (with or without Sanders) “raise people’s consciousness,” or “lead the ‘masses’ out of the darkness of ignorance and ideological deception into enlightenment.” Many people have good reasons for having the political views they have and making the political choices they do, and it is not an open-and-shut case that the left’s program – certainly not if it is the state capitalism promoted by Sanders – is the only rational choice.

More specifically, unlike Sanders and his supporters, many people are extremely distrustful of the government and are not anxious to put still more power in its hands. And they are right to feel this way. Government agencies are notoriously inefficient (if not downright abusive and corrupt), as many people who have had to deal with them can attest – just ask veterans trying to navigate the Veterans Administration bureaucracy or people attempting to find an appropriate and affordable insurance plan under ObamaCare. So, it is not obvious that Sanders’ program is the only enlightened one and that all of us who do not support it are “hypnotized,” “prostrate,” or “indifferent.”

At this stage in my life, I am, unlike Kaufman, no longer concerned to “educate” people or “raise their consciousness.” My political goal, insofar as I have one, is to pose, explain, and argue

for one possible alternative to the current situation. Am I certain that it's the right one? Only a fool could think so, but it is what I believe right now. As a result, I am not ready to jettison my objections to Sanders' politics and throw myself into his campaign. My pristine, ultra-left sectarian point of view matters to me, and I do not wish to see it submerged in the platitudes of what constitutes the latest avatar of self-righteous, statist liberalism.

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