

A Blueprint for a Party of an Old Type

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“Blueprint for a New Party” recently published in Jacobin Magazine advocates a model of building a new left electoral party – but author Scott Jay argues it is strategy that leads to campaigning for Democrats and expanding the focus on electoralism rather than a path to strengthening social movements.

These are desperate times. The victory of Donald Trump promises a rightward turn in US policy as well as an emboldened far-right in the streets. Immigrants will be among the first attacked by Trump’s promise to expel them en masse, but they and others will also continue to see an increase in daily harassment, racist attacks and organized vigilante violence.

In response to these horrors, Jacobin Magazine, which enthusiastically promoted Bernie Sanders as a route to rebuilding the Left, has published an article by Seth Ackerman which provides what he calls “A Blueprint for a New Party.” Having put all their eggs in the Sanders basket for the past year, Jacobin and Ackerman now lay out the possible next steps for what the Sanders campaign supposedly promised all along—a newly formed independent third party to the left of the Democrats. Ackerman describes this, at the end of the article, as a “Party of a New Type.”

What Ackerman provides is a lengthy history and analysis of attempts to build third parties, in particular the US Labor Party, and challenges to attaining and keeping access to the ballot. What he does not provide is much of a picture of how this Party of a New Type is going to be built, or by whom, or why anybody would want anything to do with it. It is not even clear what sort of politics it would have or what—if anything—it would do besides run candidates, although it may not even run candidates, apparently. How it would even build the membership and resources to eventually run candidates is left as an exercise for the reader, as they say in a graduate seminar.

Before we proceed, imagine for a moment that instead of the Left enthusing over Bernie Sanders for the past year they had focused on organizing among working people and oppressed people in defending themselves from the daily onslaught of capitalism. Imagine what a stronger position we would all be in now, as the newly empowered far-right seeks to assault the lives and dignities of immigrants, women, African-Americans, the LGBTQ community, and others. Instead of talking abstractly about the possibilities of a New Party, we would be talking about how to stop deportations, racist attacks and sexual assaults. There are people around the US who have been doing just that, who do not call themselves Leftists or read socialist periodicals, who have been working on protecting their family members and neighbors from being deported or being beaten by the police.

Ackerman’s proposal seems less interested in these problems and instead focuses on the question of whether or not an electoral party should seek its own ballot line, to which he boldly answers: “Sometimes.”

What About the Workers?

The problem with these “Parties of a New Type” is they appeal not so much to the working people who they are supposed to represent but to other Leftists who love talking about blueprints and grand strategies and united fronts. Nobody needs these parties-in-waiting more than left-wing intellectuals looking to project their ideas. Nobody needs them less than people actually

fighting the daily grind of capitalism—they are left building their own communities and organizations. They are building their own blueprints from daily experience, developing new tactics that could in fact develop eventually into larger national organizations and networks. If such a thing actually happened, the role of the working class and social struggles would be central and not an afterthought, as it is with Ackerman.

Ackerman might object to describing his blueprint as one where the working class is an afterthought, but there is hardly anything in his blueprint to suggest otherwise. The working-class and class struggle are almost nowhere to be found in this blueprint. Are local branches and chapters supposed to be rooted in workplaces, or in schools, or neighborhoods? Are they supposed to represent practical efforts to fight austerity locally or are they supposed to recruit like-minded, politically engaged people? If the former, how exactly how is it supposed to do that?

This may seem to belabor the point—of course this is how the party would be built, Ackerman might say—but it is precisely the inability of the Left to make practical contributions to local struggles and to build itself primarily among the most affected and most militant people in those struggles that has challenged the Left for decades. The Left has not simply failed to put into practice a successful blueprint for a national organization. Rather, it has typically failed to put in practice a blueprint for an organization of twenty people in a single workplace or neighborhood who can resist layoffs or evictions, probably because such a project is not nearly so sexy as grand strategizing and electoral campaigns. They may not provide much of a basis for building social movements, but they do allow their participants to feel like that is what they are doing, which is usually enough.

Along these lines, Ackerman focuses not on building power from below but on the legal obstacles to electoral campaigns and how to maneuver around them. He sums up the blueprint as follows:

The following is a proposal for such a model: a national political organization that would have chapters at the state and local levels, a binding program, a leadership accountable to its members, and electoral candidates nominated at all levels throughout the country.

As a nationwide organization, it would have a national educational apparatus, recognized leaders and spokespeople at the national level, and its candidates and other activities would come under a single, nationally recognized label. And, of course, all candidates would be required to adhere to the national platform.

But it would avoid the ballot-line trap. Decisions about how individual candidates appear on the ballot would be made on a case-by-case basis and on pragmatic grounds, depending on the election laws and partisan coloration of the state or district in question. In any given race, the organization could choose to run in major- or minor-party primaries, as nonpartisan independents, or even, theoretically, on the organization's own ballot line.

The ballot line would thus be regarded as a secondary issue. The organization would base its legal right to exist not on the repressive ballot laws, but on the fundamental rights of freedom of association.

Essentially what he is describing is the US Green Party, although with a “pragmatic” approach to how it may or may not appear on the ballot. What is this pragmatic approach? He describes

elsewhere that such a party should avoid a “suicidal frontal assault” on the existing parties, ie the Democratic Party. He even notes that, “The Labor Party [US] always assumed that a genuinely independent labor party must have a separate party ballot line. That assumption was a mistake.” He does not say this explicitly, but it sure sounds like he is advocating his party supporting Democratic Party candidates, at the very least in the primaries, and we can imagine beyond that as well.

Ackerman takes so little interest in the social base that will carry out his blueprint that he even argues that such a party could take advantage of Citizen’s United, the notorious Supreme Court ruling that allows unlimited donations from corporations and billionaires into political campaigns:

In this model, the national organization would incorporate as a 501(c)4 social welfare organization, permitting it to endorse candidates and engage in explicit campaigning, while accepting unlimited donations and spending unlimited amounts on political education. (It would also, of course, be free to adopt rigorous self-imposed disclosure rules, as it should.)

The speed with which we have gone from celebrating Bernie Sanders’ campaign funded largely on \$27 donations, to seeing Citizen’s United as an opportunity to take advantage of unrestricted political donations, is truly breathtaking. Who exactly is going to make these donations of an unlimited size? No need to worry about that, apparently. How such a party receiving free-flowing political donations will be certain to “adopt rigorous self-imposed disclosure rules” is once again left as an exercise for the reader. Ackerman has created a blueprint but with hardly any details.

Electoralism Leads to Electoralism

We have been told, over and over again, that left-wing electoralism will eventually feed into social movements and vice versa. And yet, this never really seems to happen. Electoral strategies always seem to focus on funding and promoting themselves, with just enough lip service to give them a gloss of social movement relevance, but not much more. Instead of being a launching point for social struggles, electoralism has been a one-trick pony whose only concrete strategies feed directly back into itself and not into something greater. Rather than providing a strategy for propelling social movements, it is almost exclusively a justification for its own continuance. In the context of a country dominated by two parties, this often means at some level feeding back into the Democratic Party, reluctant to harm the only game in town.

For example, high on Ackerman’s mind is the problem of “spoiling” elections – by which he means running candidates against the Democratic Party thus leading to the Democrat losing and a Republican win. This is primarily a problem because so many people (apparently) are terrified of destroying the chances of the Democrats to win that they would never build an alternative unless they had an answer to this problem. This was especially an obstacle, as Ackerman points out, for the US Labor Party, who could not decide if they were going to run candidates or not and eventually lost any sense of purpose because it was unwilling to do what it was supposedly created to do.

Half the population of the United States could not be bothered to vote for Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump or anybody else. Yet it is not they who are the source of concern, rather it is

the sort of activist who most likely is attracted to left-wing electoral politics. They think that there ought to be a way to elect the correct person or pass a law that can just fix things in some limited way. They are also horrified at the idea of hurting a Democrat's chances to win against a Republican. But if you want to build a left-wing electoral project, you have to deal with these people and these sentiments.

On the other hand, there are young people around the country who have risen up in rebellion against the police killing them over the last few years. They probably did not bother to ask themselves whether their actions were going to hurt the Democrats' chances in getting reelected. In fact, the problems that Ackerman pose probably have no relevance whatsoever to these young people. They are living in completely different worlds, one where people fight for their lives against a system trying to destroy them, another where people draw up blueprints for national organizations with no discussion as to who is actually going to build the thing.

These urban rebellions of the past few years have posed real challenges for Democratic Party politicians, especially Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. The youth in the streets have been less concerned about ballot access and more concerned about challenging the system that is trying to kill them.

Beyond the urban rebellions, there is also the resistance at Standing Rock, the increasingly popular self-defense trainings for people likely to be attacked by vigilantes, and the prison strike of tens of thousands. Is there a "Party of a New Type" that is able to empower these constituencies? Consider that many of the people in these groups cannot even vote, due to age, immigration status or felony convictions. Are they supposed to be engaged in the "Party of a New Type" or is the party really for another population entirely? I would argue that the answer is the latter, not because Ackerman and his co-thinkers want it to be this way, but because like many on the Left, they focus primarily on strategies that inspire and excite themselves. Everybody else, it is presumed, will come along because it is obviously such a great idea.

In short, electoral activism feeds into electoral activism. It relies on itself to further itself. It attracts people who are attracted to electoral politics and generally does not attract people engaging in class struggle. It does not need, nor does it feed class struggle, except to the extent that it might be able to take advantage of the sacrifices of militants in order to declare itself a proper representative of a social movement it did not create.

When looking at Ackerman's summary of this "Party of a New Type," it is not clear that there is much new here at all. Most of the description is trivial—a national party with local branches, spokespeople, etc. The only non-trivial part is when he notes that "it would avoid the ballot-line trap" but it is not clear how, other than to support the candidates of existing parties. If the US Labor Party had to ask itself "why have a party?" when they refused to run candidates, Ackerman's party will have to ask the same question when they endorse Democratic Party candidates.

Rather than a blueprint for a new party, Ackerman offers nothing really new, other than new justifications for campaigning for the Democrats.

His is an analysis that looks back on the past year, reflects on the Bernie Sanders experience and looks for validation and a path forward. But to the extent that we look back now, the first lesson should be how wrong-headed the obsession with Sanders was and how valuable it would have been to instead put resources into practical, on the ground organizing. The real blueprint that Ackerman provides is not for a particular party—it is unlikely that we will see anything like this party any time soon—but rather a blueprint for constantly finding solutions from above, abstracted from the daily lives of working class people and their struggles for survival.

There are real blueprints being created as we speak among people actively looking to organize self-defense campaigns against the coming onslaught of Trumpism. Many will fail, some will succeed, not because they are eloquently described in the pages of Jacobin but because they are able to mobilize a constituency of people to fight for them and deploy tactics that are found to be effective. How to encourage and support these efforts is the real task of radicals, not figuring out the best use of a ballot line.

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