

Independent Politics Doesn't Start With Walling Off the Democrats

February 7, 2018

I first met Kim Moody some 50 years ago. He was then organizing chapters of the California-based Peace and Freedom Party as an alternative to the Democratic war machine. If memory serves, he came to Park Slope, Brooklyn, then a predominantly Irish and Italian working-class neighborhood—not the gentrified picture from *House Beautiful* it has since morphed into—but also inhabited by a smattering of déclassé radicals. Moody wanted to interest a few of us in taking up the electoral mantle. We young activists didn't bite, preferring to organize a collective that would be involved in community and workplace organizing irrespective of parties and election cycles. We even then called it "base building"—without regard to electoral politics. Nothing came of our efforts. Not much came of his, either.

I don't fault Moody for sticking to roughly the same independent politics game plan over the years; Emerson's injunction in *Self Reliance* that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines" is not an advert for inconsistency or political schizophrenia dependent on the season. And when you consider that most of Moody's subsequent writing—what I regard as his main contribution to working-class discourse—has been his exhaustive examinations of labor in modern industrial societies and the drive for a socialism from below, his views on political action are within a rich and informed context that I share.

Neither do I challenge his view that the Democratic Party is irredeemably controlled from the top; it is indeed bought and paid for. Systemic political reform, based as it must be on a mass revolutionary opposition to capital, is unlikely to be accomplished by the left as presently constituted even if the left plays precinct captain. Permanent and accountable grass-roots organization within the Democratic Party is likely to be eclipsed, just as Moody says.

What I do want to challenge is a certain ahistoricism lurking in his political analysis, as though an electoral false consciousness pervades the left and confuses the American working class. (Just as an aside, that lack of historical sense is overt and unabashed in other treatments, most recently by the Green Party's Howie Hawkins in the *International Socialist Review* (Winter 2018), whose paean to third-party efforts is overshadowed by the dour results of his own recent run for mayor of Syracuse, New York. His effort was projected as a model by the state's Green Party—he was a battle-hardened insurgent with roots in the area who was no lone and unknown parachutist. But Hawkins garnered just 4.1 percent of the vote, an outcome that barely registered as a protest vote, let alone an endorsement for independent politics.)

Moody also resists the pornographic effort to label Bernie Sanders a "shepherd," or the idea that Sanders, an alleged Judas goat if you will, purposefully or not rerouted the left train onto the dead-end tracks of the Democrats. Any objective look at the Sanders campaign suggests that it emboldened activists and broadened the left, doing for revolutionary possibilities what Donald Trump did in legitimizing the white nationalists and proto-Nazis who make up the core of the alt-right—the latter phenomenon ably demonstrated by David Neiwert in his *Alt-America* (Verso, 2017). Moody at least recognizes that "Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party drew in thousands of these activists and further legitimized the 'S' word." No small praise.

Where Moody errs is in writing that the Democrats have been THE problem, that "this party/complex/milieu has absorbed the leaders and activists of social and political movements from

the Populist Party of the 1890s, to the industrial unions of the 1930s, to the civil rights, Latino, women's, and LGBT movements of the last century and today." Wrong! The Democrats have not been the problem, only a convenient watering hole for the parched and exhausted, a retirement village sans amenities for the dying. It's the movements and their internal contradictions that have been the problem. The Populists did not go into the Democratic Party to die; they were on death's door as an independent force at a time that the Democrats offered some form of respite, if only de minimus. Labor's embrace of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was in retrospect unfortunate. But did the unions really have a choice? Was John L. Lewis a traitor or something sadly unimaginative but far less insidious. Were even the sit-downs, in form a challenge to management's right to manage, capable of transitioning into a challenge to the entire capitalist class and its political enablers? Was the civil rights movement ever an undisputed force for systemic change? Was the women's movement, even at its core, proletarian enough to demand that workplace issues be a concern for all women workers, be their income high or low? Today's LGBT activists are riven over the role of transgender females. Think these movements can develop a common, radical view of political action in the short term? And historically, even 50 years is short-term.

Involvement with the Democrats has not "prevented these movements from developing independent organizations or ideologies which, in turn, has undermined their power," as Moody writes. The Democrats are the repositories of these movements' failures to constitute themselves as class movements. You don't go to a graveyard to die, to borrow Moody's metaphor for these movements' expirations within the Democratic Party. Only the dead are interred.

I make no claims that a face toward the Democrats is a way forward for the left. I do argue that defining independent political action as anything independent of the two dominant parties raises too many questions. First, what role do insurgents play in everyday reforms? Clearly building a local base, either workplace- or community-oriented, is key. But what then? Are elected officials who are not self-identified as socialists to be treated as three-headed alien invaders? Many local elected officials play an ombudsman's role—some might call it at its worst a *padrone* system; they're at best the political equivalent of a compliant complaint department. Careerists the officials may be, but they aspire to be re-elected, if not advanced. They need to be lobbied hard. How many leftists know how to do that? How many *New Politics* readers even know how to get a politician to take up a popular grievance under fear of a primary race if they don't accede? Yes, lobbying a politician is far from storming the Winter Palace, but it needs doing, especially by parents of school-age children, the physically impaired, retirees, and other constituent groups who of necessity require government oversight of services. The payoff needn't be absorption into an officeholders' machine, only the reality that citizen lobbyists can take retribution against an incumbent who blows them off.

Union activists have to get their unions at a minimum to stop the routine endorsement of incumbents. My own experience in three decades of union work, whether as a rank and filer or staff member, is that unions endorse all incumbents with the exception of those who actively and publicly screwed them. In many cases, the endorsement is pro forma. Better unions endorse a handful of exemplary candidates, mobilizing on-the-ground support for them, and keeping their election effort organized postelection.

Lastly (and this list is hardly exhaustive), form a tight connect between election activities and year-round base organizing. A fault of the old Socialist Party of America—unlike its successors among the Communists and Trotskyists—was that it barely existed as an organization between election cycles. Political action ought to be an expression of year-round agitation and not dependent on the election clock. Hal Draper's appropriate fear that "the self-organization of the masses" would be thwarted by reliance on permeating the highest councils of the Democratic Party would be obviated—certainly challenged—by an engaged and politically cognizant base of activists whose mandate far exceeds electoral activity.*

Ideologically, Moody is convinced that the Democratic Party demands fealty from even the most militant activists. Probably true. But then, how sacrosanct is an independent party? Short of its being a mass party at its formation, one that can generate the kind of internal dues-paying funding that can keep it independent of capital's wiles, it will succumb to the same malaise infecting the Democrats and the many staff-run progressive organizations such as MoveOn.org that Moody rightly upbraids. There is ample evidence from the decline of European social democratic parties that despite a nominal independence from bourgeois parties, their deal-cutting happens after the election, in the form of vote-sharing in the formation of thoroughly pro-capitalist governments. At this writing, the wonder in Germany is that the SPD is not supporting a coalition regime with the Christian Democrats and the center-right, a first in decades.

Further, there's little of any practical help in Moody's commentary. It's as if its subtext begins and ends with the warning, "There be dragons here." The young DSAers who are committed to electoral politics ought not be told to avoid the Democrats on principle, but rather that the difficulty with electoral work only begins with the election of insurgents. How to keep candidates true to their base—more to the point, how to keep electorally oriented socialists true to their base, which operates in a range of areas often untouched by elections—ought to be the question of the moment. Sadly, for Moody it's not.

The logic of Moody's point of view isn't independent politics. Frozen as it is in a ritualized propaganda stance, its outcome is more likely no politics. To me, the question is less what route to take electorally and more whether the political apparatus that the left fashions owes its fealty and its *raison d'être* to its base among the movements and the voters.

Footnotes

*I elaborate this point in *Democratic Left*, June 28, 2017.