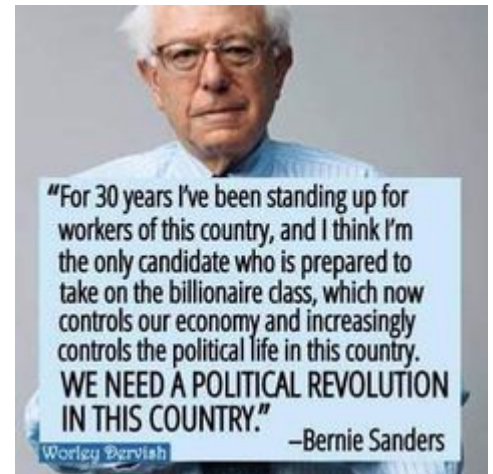


Resisting the Marginalization of Democracy and the Fetishization of “the Candidate”

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In the United States, even more so since the advent of twenty-four hour news channels, there is a consistent fetishization of political candidates. Who is viable? Who is trust-worthy? Whose ideas best fit with the prevailing public opinion polls on certain issues at a given time? Who has the most attractive haircut or family? Who has the right skin color, gender, or business experience to win over key demographics?

Though few of us are under any illusions that this country is or has ever been a genuine democracy, it seems that even those people who are not convinced by the patriotic rhetoric of the purity of American democracy too often acquiesce to the “all of our hopes rest in a single individual or political party” approach to politics. If socialism means anything beyond mass resistance to capitalism, it should be resistance to this mindset. When we fetishize the candidate we marginalize true democracy, the cornerstone of socialism.

Sanders, “the Candidate”

The media is as much to blame as we are. Nearly every political article published by mainstream Right, Center, or Progressive “Left” outlets is hyper-focused on candidates. We are conditioned daily—or hourly now—to believe that politics is inherently channeled through a small coterie of elites in suits (whether of the pant or three-piece variety). It is precisely this glorification of “the candidate” that undermines socialism from below—and this can be especially problematic when we are deciding whether to support the ostensibly democratic socialist platform of Bernie Sanders.

Bernie Sanders may or may not be a genuine democratic socialist. His economic and social platform calls for a more comprehensive welfare state where higher education and health care are fundamental rights. He wants to pay for these programs through greater taxation on the rich, especially the super-rich. Sanders has compared his vision of “socialism” to the social democracies of northern Europe. Regardless of the tenuous association these social democracies have with a more egalitarian and participatory version of socialism, what is enduringly important is the political message Sanders is spreading.

Sanders’ pragmatic decision to run as a Democrat will certainly hamper his radical potential, as there could be few things more status-quo oriented than organizing a campaign through one of the

two major parties in the US. That notwithstanding, what Sanders seems to be calling for is much more than popular support for a conventional political campaign as we saw with Barack Obama in 2008.

We see this message in Sanders' many replies to questions about how he is different from other more mainstream candidates. He repeats the similar refrain: "We need a genuine political revolution in this country; one that extends beyond the campaign. We need a political revolution by millions of people becoming active and speaking out, that is carried out through the governing process" (the wording varies somewhat, but this is the consistent message).

Whether Sanders can accomplish this is entirely the wrong question (though we can still be skeptical as to whether his rhetoric is not itself a ploy to garner electoral support). The question is whether the people, whether we, will ensure that these words become a reality. If they do, who Sanders is and what he believes in becomes irrelevant. What he is calling for could become a Presidency where the executive is merely a managerial place-holder for the voices of the people, for the voices of on-going popular movements—as opposed to the current version where the Presidency seems to function as an empty shell populated by the interests of corporations and imperialist war-hawks.

A Revolutionary Message?

In this country there has rarely been any significant or consistent democratic control over political institutions or public policy, never mind over its economic capacities. Sanders might not be a theoretically consistent socialist, but he is certainly a champion of democracy, and in the United States, that might just be a genuinely revolutionary position.

There have been vital popular movements in our history, whether this was the labor movement in the early twentieth century, the anti-war and civil rights movements in the 60s, or the women's rights and environmental movements of the 70s and 80s. These movements have had a lasting effect on our political system, but they all fell short of radically reorganizing our politics. When we fetishize or hyper-focus on particular candidates or leaders, to the point where other dimensions of politics seems secondary or even irrelevant, there is little hope in maintaining a democratic movement from below.

The US government has always represented the class-interests of the bourgeoisie (or the white, male aristocracy in the early years) and thus the maintenance of the capitalist mode of production. A genuine popular movement would certainly disrupt this over two-century-long trend of anti-democratic governance.

Sanders is certainly not a revolutionary in the sense of advocating violent resistance to the existing order of things, but I wonder if, given the Right-wing status-quo in this country, what Sanders is advocating isn't a kind of revolution (regardless of how much we read into the fact that his campaign is selling "HONK for a Political Revolution" bumper stickers).

The goal of socialism from below is to give all people equal social power over and within the relevant political and productive forces that shape their lives. Sanders is not advocating this, but if his radically democratic message is more than just words, what he is calling for—and has thus far been successful in inspiring, based on the record breaking turn-out at his campaign events—could certainly lead to a more thoroughly democratic politics. This kind of authentic, bottom-up politics could then, over-time, appropriate the means of production for rational, egalitarian ends.

Though I am not sanguine about the likelihood of this, the message is important. The messenger is not, but it is true that having a more trustworthy-than-average candidate calling for such a

movement does give it some credence it certainly wouldn't have if say Donald Trump—in-between racial slurs of course— advocated a grassroots political movement.

Sadly it seems socialism is still too radical for the conservative forces of the American electoral mainstream at the moment, though it certainly has more popular support than it has in the past forty years in this country. This is why liberal progressives populating the pages of Salon.com and the airwaves of MSNBC are sparing no energy explaining precisely why Sanders isn't really a socialist. This also precisely why the supporters of socialism from below in the US must be especially cautious of Sanders. He could move further to the Center at any time. We need to focus on the movement—our movement—not the man.

When we rigidly focus on who the candidate is or what their specific views on issues are to the point that nothing else seems relevant to an election or to politics in general, we lose sight of our politics, of our political potential, and of our movement. This is the fetishization of “the candidate.”

The Case for Supporting the Message (and for now, the Candidate)

The mainstream Progressive argument boils down to this: people should support Bernie Sanders precisely because he is firmly within the capitalist paradigm. For democratic socialists, the argument should instead be this: we should support Bernie Sanders because he is calling for a non-candidate centered campaign and of all of the other electorally-viable candidates in both parties are Right wing neo-liberals. Thus Sanders' campaign seems like it is the best hope any semblance of a Left agenda has given this status quo—even though Sanders' campaign platform is rooted in traditional post-WWII welfare-state social democracy, as opposed to something more radical.

If (and this could not be a bigger IF) Sanders keeps his promises and maintains a thoroughly democratic grassroots campaign through and beyond the primaries, through and beyond the general election, into his (our) governing strategy, he should retain the contingent, strategic, and skeptical support of the socialist Left in the United States. This tactical support should never extend to a rigid support for a single candidate nor to the Democratic Party.

We should not support the man because of his views (though they are certainly the best ideas I've heard coming from someone under the Democratic Party banner in my lifetime), but rather we should contingently support his campaign for what he claims to stand for: a genuinely democratic political movement that places everyday people collectively in control of regulating the means of production. While this would still fall short of true socialism if it stopped at mere regulation, the democratic element is worth supporting for its radical potential to become more than just mere regulation.

We need not trust the candidate, but the voice of a single candidate is important in our electoral system—for better or worse (it's certainly for the worse). However important candidates remain in our system, regardless of who the candidate is, what matters above all else is the grassroots movements that compel any candidate, in this case Bernie Sanders, to live up to their promise of fighting to facilitate the reorganization of our politics and institutions in such a way that mass participation results in true popular efficacy in all aspects of our collective lives. The goal is to make genuine democratic power the norm, not the exception.

The fact that Bernie Sanders is bringing this potentially revolutionary message back into the mainstream through the consistently corrupt Democratic Party should make us very hesitant. It will either work or it won't, but our support of him need not be and should not be unconditional. After all, Jill Stein and the Green Party, along with a whole host of other smaller Left parties and organizations like Solidarity, will be there with open arms if Sanders loses to Hillary Clinton or

deviates from his democratic promise.

When you fetishize the candidate, you marginalize democracy. This marginalization of democracy through candidate-centric politics is what we must get away from in order to sustain a practicable radical Left in the United States and beyond.