

Sanders and the Democrats: a Reply to Jason Schulman

March 21, 2016



There is much to admire and learn from in Jason Schulman's article "Bernie Sanders and the Dilemma of the Democratic 'Party,'" not least of which is Jason's implicit insistence that the base of any future American left is composed of people who are currently in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, and in its best elements represented by the Sanders' insurgency. Obvious as this might be to readers of *New Politics*, this is still a disputed opinion on the radical left in America. We - Jason and I - both look forward to that movement developing a breakaway consciousness as it confronts an implacable Democratic establishment proudly wedded to the status quo.

And we both understand that, even if we are only now witnessing the uncertain beginnings of that consciousness, any independent party or tendency that later emerges is most likely to carry all the baggage and limitations of liberalism as it currently exists. It will, in its initial stages, be a more consistently liberal party in program and worldview, probably still with substantial illusions about the "free market," and consequently an inability to fashion a truly democratic foreign policy. Neither of us would consider this disqualifying. For as a real party, a party controlled by its membership, any mass liberal breakaway, no matter how modest in its political perspective, would present a propitious opening for the left.

But I fear that Jason misses the larger institutional context of the DP that helps us understand why, despite it not being a party in the traditional sense, it is still driven by the capitalist state rather than the neutral vessel he describes. And I think some of our differences, as well as our overlapping understanding, reside in this issue, and color our respective views concerning the urgency of raising the issue of breaking from the Democratic Party. The "neutral vessel" approach, while different from the old Shachtman-Harrington realignment strategy - a strategy rooted in treating the DP as a traditional party that could be dominated by a labor coalition - is still based on a misunderstanding of the real nature of the DP.

I think it's long been the contention of Marxists that American democracy is more reactionary and less responsive to the will of the masses than most other democratic capitalist societies. And not by accident but by historical design and evolution. When bourgeois politicians insist that American democracy is the envy of the world, they mean of aspiring as well as established world elites. And for good reason.

No other bourgeois democracy has a system so efficiently designed to thwart the aspirations of the people: with its states' rights, its winner take all elections, its gerrymandered districts, its division into a bicameral legislative body whose upper house magnifies the influence of backward sparsely

populated rural states, its enormously bureaucratized executive with unprecedented latitude to amass power, its appointed federal judiciary, its electoral college, its immensely complex and undemocratic system of amending its constitution, its broken field system of staggered elections for president, Congress and Senate and its anachronistic haggling over functionally meaningless debt ceilings. At the national level, the Senate and House are themselves millionaires' clubs with an ingrained class bias and a revolving door relationship with the corporate and financial sectors. This network of democratic encumbrances exists with the media in an interlocking directorate that works to shape public opinion to the near exclusion of radically dissenting voices. The combination of these ingredients creates a seemingly endless, costly and exhaustive network of speed bumps and potholes that generally succeed in fracturing and frustrating movements for change and resistance.

And lurking behind this, as behind every bourgeois state, is, not least, the permanent apparatus of repression – the police and the dark state of capitalist and capitalist-minded bureaucrats: the FBI, NSA, CIA, Department of Homeland Security all growing in power and arrogance, and with a deep history of being imbued with a scrupulously cultivated contempt for all but the surface formalities of democracy.

But the icing on this “democratic” turd, a system so structurally driven to subvert democratic progress and fragment resistance, is the two-party system itself. And here, despite a multitude of things upon which Jason and I concur, lies the crux of our disagreement. Unlike other bourgeois democracies – although this is increasingly being marketed abroad as an attractive alternative (the Blairites being an outstanding example) – our party system is fully integrated as the sturdiest frontline buffer against democratic insurgencies.

We both recognize that the main parties are not parties in the traditional sense. They are not membership organizations. There is no institutional accountability, there are no mass meetings, no party newspapers, no internal democratic life, no way of crafting a binding platform, no way of making voices heard. They are public utilities of the capitalist system, financed and regulated from on high and protected from outside competition by a dense thicket of legal obstacles against market entry and competition from upstart parties.

The two parties are designed to function as first line dampers muffling the response of political institutions to mobilized groups and mass action from below. They perform this function by demobilizing the public and reorganizing it into political consumers to be surveyed through the test marketing (the primary system) of prospective products (candidates) typically handpicked by various stockowner factions on high, and ratified in the last instance by consumers (voters). And should the selection process get off course, the super-delegate system of DP functionaries and bureaucrats casts its meaty thumb on the scale to do the ratifying for its base.

The parties rely not on membership fees but on external sources of funding. This drives them to fawn over Wall Street, to curry favor with the tech industry, Big Pharma, the telecoms, and the well-heeled professionals who toil in such places. And those same tentacles reach out further to most human rights groups such as the NAACP, the Human Rights Campaign and Planned Parenthood etc., whose leaders and networks are reliable sources of DP funding and who are equally and reciprocally as dependent on supplemental corporate contributions, as is the DP itself. These networks lend credibility to the DP and mobilize their bases to vote in accordance with this partnership. This effectively places them into receivership, as subsidiary satellite companies – as semi-independent mass organizations – in thrall to the broad DP holding company. Breaking from the DP means effectively losing sources of financing, both corporate and public, that the maintenance of that relationship otherwise engenders. Reliance breeds a self-reinforcing dependency loop.

Labor and the Democratic Party

The labor movement increasingly exists for the DP not as the primary source of funds, or even as vote fodder but as a staffing – get out the vote – service. This service buys influence. It gives labor a seat at the table, along side capital. To be sure, unions do not accept corporate funding, do not place corporate representatives in advisory roles and are not dependent on the DP in the same way as many human rights groups are for public funding. But they are no less boxed in, forced to leverage their influence in the DP by creating both ad hoc and working coalitions with other liberal mass movements who are dependent on the corporate donor class.

Consider the difference between how unions and the Democratic Party make decisions. A mass movement cannot operate democratically on an independent basis within a broader unaccountable institutional framework. That is why bottling the labor movement within the DP necessitates the political demobilization of its membership by its bureaucracy. A labor movement that fully debates, deliberates and votes on its own political platform has, at a bare minimum, every right to insist that the political vehicle it endorses makes itself available for mass democratic intervention from below on the same basis. It has every right, moreover, to demand full membership privileges, to insist on the exclusion of prospective members with hostile political and social beliefs and to limit funding sources on a class basis. All of this is precisely what the institutional framework of the DP expressly precludes.

All unions eventually have to compromise with the bosses. But when a strike or other action is initiated and before it is ended and a contract agreed to, the membership should have a say. The process of eliciting consent is rarely a paradigm of democratic virtue. But without mass consent, contracts can rarely be ratified, much less enforced. Without propagating a degree of rank-and-file militancy a strike cannot be won. Members who are neither mobilized nor consulted walk away from their unions.

The political compromises made with capital within the DP take place on a far different, wholly anti-democratic footing, through the deliberate exclusion of mass participation and approval. It is the very antithesis in spirit and process from that needed to come to a working agreement with employers during an industrial dispute. That is why participation in the DP, generally a bureaucratic affair on the part of the AFL-CIO higher ups and its local functionaries, is a breeding ground for political cynicism and indifference on the part of labor's rank and file. It internalizes and reflects the empty top-down political life of the DP and, in so doing, reduces labor to a weaker and weaker pressure group. Concentrating, for instance as it did not long ago, on electoral means to stop Wisconsin's anti-labor governor, the union leadership leveraged a winning mass mobilization strategy of paralyzing the state through wildcat strikes, occupation of the capitol building, and street actions, into an electoral debacle. What was rejected was not the labor movement, but the Democratic Party. However working people paid the consequences, and the DP "learned" – what it always conveniently learns — to further dampen its liberal agenda, particularly its pro-working class planks.

The labor movement surrenders its political independence by functioning as an adjunct of the DP. It is politically "independent" in much the same way that Jason believes candidates running on a DP line can also be independent, if they only so choose. They, like Bernie, can opt to reject corporate consultants, and decline to place millionaires in key positions. They might only accept nonbusiness donations. On paper DP candidates can be their "own" man or woman. It's "just" a voting line, according to Jason. But even this is not entirely true. In many localities, state, county or city committees have to anoint candidates.

This quibble aside, Jason's analysis ends, precisely where it needs to be developed.

The assertion of neutrality would be true if the DP had no means of forcing independents within its

ranks to toe its pro-business line. But it has a myriad of ways that Jason fails to explore. The DP funds local elections. This is not a problem for candidates in safe districts, where fundraising is not a pressing concern. But where candidates, such as Dennis Kucinich, demonstrate an unacceptable degree of unruliness, the party redistricted him out of existence by creating a gerrymandered electoral amalgam where, for lack of funding, he was no longer competitively viable. Or, the DP can simply sit on its hands, withhold resources, sacrifice an election and wait for a better day.

But these are extreme measures. More commonly, the party has somewhat gentler means of coercion. It makes clear to officeholders that funding for local projects requires of them that they behave as team players with the DP's broader corporate and financial perspective. Failure comes at the cost of political viability. Progressive legislation is horse traded against other corporate sponsored bills, one being conditional on the other. Or they are directly fused: a step forward on one front, balanced by a step back on another. All social problems are addressed – as they must in this way – by half measures, balancing class against class, polluters against environmentalists, the anti-war movement against the war machine, black lives against the prison industrial complex, down the line with a clear, ever present bias towards the elites.

The ability to rise in the DP ranks and stay at the top – to acquire senior positions on committees that are important to DP independents – is contingent on one's matured and properly seasoned political "realism." The unwavering support accorded to Hillary by the Black Caucus is the most blatant and shameful example of this process in play. Even among the 69 members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, cofounded by Sanders himself in 1991 before he was a Senator, exactly two have endorsed him. Careers are in the balance and that balance is tipped decisively in a pro-corporate direction.

Sanders is a political independent, not, until recently, a registered Democrat (though to a large extent he has functioned as a de facto member of the party, caucusing with them and not advocating building a new, independent national party that can represent the interests of progressive social movement). For the presidential campaign, the power brokers of the DP clearly presented Bernie with a Faustian bargain. Acquiesce and renounce in advance any intention to split the party in the event of a Clinton victory. Proclaim your willingness to repudiate your principles in support of a prospective pro-Wall Street candidate and urge your followers to do the same. In return, you will be allowed to participate in debates against other Democratic presidential candidates, voting lists will be turned over to your campaign, local headquarters will be made available for staging your run, and traditional Democratic venues for mass meetings will be placed at your disposal. You can be viable within the DP sphere of influence, but you must understand the limits to your defiance. And of our tolerance.

Jason's viewpoint is a political step forward from the realignment strategy of the DSOC founders. Harrington would have seen all third party challenges to the Democrats as a dangerous diversion and would have openly advocated against them. And as long as the left insurgency is ascendant in the DP, Jason's inside/outside position retains the patina of legitimacy. Vote for an independent party of the left where competitive; the best DP candidate where that option is closed.

But this is a means of maximizing progressive office holders, not of building an independent party of the left.

And where does that leave him now, when it is all but apparent that the Sanders challenge within the DP has come to its natural conclusion? Sanders has raised essential questions of class: of how self-serving moneyed interests dominate political discourse and why a class struggle program

against entrenched power is an urgent necessity. But it is being defeated by the ingrained habits of subservience to established elites that the two-party system so effectively breeds. Yet the logic of Jason's analysis leads, one would think, to a capitulation before the lesser evil Clinton mainstream where, unfortunately, a most of Sanders' supporters as well as Sanders himself will find themselves.

If, instead, Jason and those who think along similar lines, choose, as I am sure some will, to cast a protest vote for the Greens – who are not immediately competitive because have no practical chance of winning – what then is left of Jason's approach? There is no bridge in his analysis from the mass base of disaffected DP liberalism to independent politics. They exist as two ends of a metronome, a controlled swing from one approach to the other without resolution.

The thunder in American politics now resides largely on the right. Reagan Democrats have soundly rejected the conservative economic pabulum they have long been forced fed: a perpetual, taxpayer-funded bribe to corporations in exchange for the mirage of decent paying jobs that never materialize for most working people. They see in Trump a lone wolf business benefactor, a Henry Ford corporate savior, who will restore the glory days of 1950s American capitalism, where the white working class was the envy of the world. He promises to tighten labor markets by casting out undocumented workers whom he viciously scapegoats for corroding wages and by erecting tariffs and trade walls to rein in the outflow of factories and jobs and the inflow of goods. Where Sanders offered a stripped down class struggle program, Trump offers America-first nationalism.

The long dormant American working class is restive. It's now a controlled burn in the Democratic Party, but a rampaging fire on the right. And it threatens to tear apart the Republican Party. How soon will it be before an overtly pro-Clinton Republican constituency begins to coalesce, if, for no other reason than to undermine that insurgency from without and restore the historic balance between the two parties? Or where the threat of that competes against time with those who would drive out the Trump movement by depriving him of a nomination that is rightfully his, or by withholding resources needed to be competitive in a national election?

Both augur one thing for Clinton. She will tack to the right, secure her hold on Wall Street and offer a safe harbor for traditional Republican elites until the dust settles. And that dust may not settle any time soon. It will be triangulation on a grand scale and the left will be thrown under the bus in the DP's haste to court disaffected Republican voters. It is time, abundantly time, to disabuse those remaining Sanders supporters who still harbor the illusion – an illusion Jason never shared – that their challenge has forced Clinton substantially to the left. The DP promises, now more than ever, to be a political dead end for progressive forces. And the Sanders' movement, if it remains in the DP, will be isolated and neutralized.

We have to face the fact that a new independent progressive party, by splitting the anti-Trump vote, may turn out in one election, to bring about a Republican victory. It is not our goal, but it may be an unavoidable stage in the development of independent politics. But the truth is that Trump's issues are Sanders' issues. And Sanders is a much stronger candidate against Trump than is Clinton. So despite how the media is likely to spin a Republican victory, it would be the perpetuation of the Democratic Party, with its built-in corporate and financial interests, that proved to be the chief obstacle to a Sanders' victory and not the reverse.

The takeaway is that if the left cannot begin to offer a meaningful alternative for hard hit American workers, nationalist demagogues on the right will arise now and in the future to do just that.

The Sanders' campaign has incubated an incipient third party within the existing framework of the DP. His movement has shown that class struggle politics has traction with young people, independents and disaffected white working class voters. Its appeal is beginning to make significant

headway in minority communities. He has created an autonomous political apparatus, an effective ground game and accumulated a massive voters list. He has demonstrated that parties can be self-funding mass membership organizations even in the American context.

He has created the pre-condition of the political revolution he seeks.

What we urgently now need is clarity about the DP; what we urgently need to do is convince the Sanders movement of the immediate imperative to complete their split and chart a new path to independent politics.