

True Confession: I've Lost that Bernie Feeling

May 5, 2016



I'm not feeling the Bern anymore. The Bern has gone away. The Bern has turned to heartburn, if not yet reflux.

And it's not because our favorite son is so woefully behind in the delegate count leading up to this summer's Democratic National Convention. It's not because of his campaign themes; anyone who says on the electoral stump that the US has a "rigged economy" and points to the Walton family's fortune comprising more than the combined wealth of the nation's poorest 40 percent is a truth-teller worth backing. And it's not because of what some left fantasists write, who, in their latest popgun-burst contribution to the internecine war of the sects, opine how

Bernie Sanders is shifting into the next phase of his mission on behalf of the American ruling elite, seeking to corral the millions of youth and workers who responded to his campaign and direct them behind the war criminal and Wall Street stooge Hillary Clinton. In parallel, the various pseudo-left organizations that have promoted Sanders are seeking to adjust their tactics to better perform their assigned task of blocking the development of a genuinely socialist movement of the working class.

Even such measured, saner Sanders critics as the International Socialist Organization don't explain it. Writing in *Socialist Worker* (May 2) Paul D'Amato acknowledges that Sanders is indeed

...giving voice to discontent and creating unprecedented interest in radical, socialist ideas—though these ideas were already percolating before the election cycle began, as various opinion polls during and after Occupy show. But Sanders is also corralling that discontent, and he will, to the best of his ability, try to convince his supporters to help him "revitalize" the Democratic Party...Our task as revolutionaries is to see both sides of this contradictory process and act accordingly. We are excited by the Sanders phenomenon regarding the door it has opened regarding socialism. Which is all the more reason why we must also take on the other side of the contradiction—where this enthusiasm is being channeled.

Channeling the enthusiasm! But away from what? A left party-building of the mind? The laying down of prodigious tools for recruiting to one's own *de minimis* mass party? My response to D'Amato's concern that supporting Sanders risks radical ruin is this: relax. Let Sanders try to redirect this generation of *enrages*. He can't. At the risk of stretching the point, I'm reminded of the Petrograd police spy Father Gapon, who is barely remembered as a Tsarist double agent but as the irreplaceable activist whose work sparked the 1905 Russian Revolution. So if revolutionary history and Comrade Lenin can give the shadowy Russian Orthodox cleric a pass, we can forgive Bernie for the Hillary shilling he will likely be doing soon enough.

Bernie helped ignite a generation, just as did Occupy, tapping into a rebellious, justified and long gestating radical *Geist*. You could even argue that our debt to Sanders is greater than to Occupy; at least he put forward a challenge to the State, something the anarchists who monopolized Occupy media outreach squelched for fear of validating government by acknowledging government's legitimacy to even meet radical demands. And Bernie's remarks, which I heard attending mass meetings in Northampton, Massachusetts and Richmond, California before he announced his presidential candidacy, were masterful in drawing the connections between social problems, corporate causes and the need to build popular movements and electoral networks that outlast any campaign.

He's also running for the nomination against Hillary Clinton, whose negatives are so high that even Indiana Democrats rejected her. Sanders can say what Fiorello LaGuardia is often credited with coining, that "I can run on a laundry ticket and beat these political bums any time." Certainly *this* political bum, and in states with open primaries and holding simultaneous contests in both parties, as in Indiana.

So with Sanders doing more to promote socialism and solidarity than any American figure since Eugene Debs, what's my beef with Bernie? It comes after Sanders couldn't deliver the substantive coup de grace to Clinton at any of the debates watched by millions of voters. Battle fatigue on his part? More like poor generalship, if we are honest, as Bernie stoked a fire under millions of Americans but couldn't muster campaign 2.0 beyond a fund-raising bonanza (no small thing) and promises of a confection of free stuff courtesy of the state, yet with too little attention to Hillary's and Bill Clinton's role as abettors of the very corporate oligarchy he so despises and has otherwise sketched so well. It's that he muffed the ample nationally televised debate opportunities he had to demolish HRC as someone who could deliver nothing but misery, when his programs properly advocated and elaborated were not only desirable but defensible and necessary.

On the stump, campaigning against class-based injustices, Sanders was nonpareil. Not in the debates, though. In boxing lingo, facing what by elementary logic and evidence was his social and political enemy, he never laid a glove on his party primary opponent. Poor debating style? Poor staff preparation? Fear of overstepping? Of charges of sexism? Concern with aiding and abetting the GOP come November? Whatever: Sanders stumbled in front of millions of viewers nationwide against a deeply reactionary and properly maligned neoliberal. We lost, too.

He also mistakenly shifted his discourse (at least in widely reported appearances leading up to the May 3 Indiana primary), thinking that key to his success was not so much ratcheting up and filling in his anti-corporate language but tactically "flipping" the formally unpledged super delegates away from HRC. It wasn't missed by the media that the chief public trasher *du jour* of the political oligarchy was pinning his hopes on playing footsie with the elite's enablers.

When could his opposition research have been better brought into play? Doug Henwood's explosive *My Turn* (O/R Books, 2015), the definitive exposé of the Clintons, alone offered enough information to demolish Clinton's claims as a liberal pragmatist. Henwood showed her as neither

liberal nor pragmatic, at least in the sense of delivering for working people and not the Clinton Foundation, which she did with brio as secretary of state. Was there no staffer available to write an executive summary for the candidate?

Why couldn't Sanders speak meaningfully about race at a time when police murders and vigilante violence are rife? Why was his initial take on Black Lives Matter (something he was quick to correct) so indecisive? Why so phlegmatic in his criticisms of the far-right, homicidal Israeli coalition government, esp. after Clinton's hair-shirt prostration in front of AIPAC? Compared to the three wise monkeys approach to Israeli policy every other major Democrat takes, Sanders—to his immense credit—also discussed the rights of the Palestinians and the “disproportionate” response by Israel in Gaza. As one *New Politics* editor rightly wrote me, “it was courageous in the context of a Democratic Party debate and it was a welcome opening up of discussion. I recognize the bar on this is pretty low, but I think Bernie took an important step.”

True that! And his refusal to appear before AIPAC was smart, esp. after they spurned his offer to teleconference in.

But why not take it further still? Why not use the debates to articulate a democratic and non-imperialist foreign policy as central to his solid critique of the U.S. oligarchy, rather than pose militarism as an unneeded excess to be reined in? Or now offering more than taking “the fight” to the convention's platform and rules committees, at best a consolation prize if not just a self-gratifying exercise some Bernie supporters on the Left actually advocate. *The Nation's* John Nichols (May 3) cites Working Families Party grandee Dan Cantor approvingly that “the [Democratic] party has to take a big-vision stand.” It does, but the big vision—if the next big thing is looking toward a convention pie-fight over a platform few read and candidates shun, or rules that don't take effect for years, or nibbling away at super delegates—will likely be a squint. Unless his delegates win every reform needed—and they can't—opting for success in a Clinton-dominated convention is nothing to celebrate; it's like agreeing to and heralding a harsh plea bargain.

Bernie suffered from another flaw, committing the sin that's more deadly than being wrong, at least in politics. With each debate he got more boring. His mantra of free public university education, Medicare for All and campaign funding overhaul—all necessary policy and just the beginning of wisdom—seemed with repetition to channel Michael Dukakis's 1988 paeon to “Good Jobs at Good Wages.” These may be great slogans to start a campaign. By election time they are stale. Not just unbelievable when so barely elaborated by Dukakis, but boring. Even the Republican Party's 1928 slogan promoting a vote for Herbert Hoover as ensuring “A Chicken in Every Pot, A Car in Every Garage,” had a certain pre-Depression cachet. Consistency aside—and Samuel Johnson's warning about “a foolish consistency” still holds—Sanders' call for “free stuff” absent pointing to why health care and schooling and jobs are so severally rationed (and by whom) has a short shelf life.

True, those of us supporting Bernie were not hobbled by the campaign from independently raising vital issues, from cop killings, the salience of Black Lives Matter, and justice for Palestinians, to a full elaboration of Medicare for All, as understood by Physicians for a National Health Program and others. We were free to make a bold critique of union leaders who, with some notable exceptions such as the Communications Workers' Chris Shelton and Larry Cohen, took the business-unionist route and backed Clinton redux. But even as Sanders was bushwhacked in New York by the state's peculiarly restrictive voting laws, all he could muster was his being “really concerned about the conduct of the voting process [in the state] and I hope that process will change in the future.” Forget rage. Where was the anger at palpable voting fraud?

Forget, too, about the demon of closed primaries—if we had a mass socialist party in the U.S. we'd *want* closed primaries—the fact that the city Board of Elections purged hundreds of thousands of

voters from the rolls (more than 125,00 in Kings County [Brooklyn] alone) calls for more than concern. (A re-canvass was started for Brooklyn and Manhattan on April 27. Results are pending.)

Even the things Bernie was clear about weren't in his debate remarks. HRC's whole attack on him, echoed by the punditry, was that Bernie's economic plans "didn't add up," or read as Pollyannaish. Robert Reich had to take to his own blog (March 2, 2016) to justify the veracity and cogency of Sanders' economic plans. Including how support for a single-payer health system was a twofer that not only would provide health care for all but also serve as a federal expenditure to "permanently improve economic performance. How could it not," Reich said, "when healthcare expenditures constitute almost 18 percent of the U.S. economy."

Why didn't Bernie use that? Or ask pointedly where Hillary stood on Nancy Pelosi and House Democrats' efforts to retard moves to lower pharmaceutical costs. (HuffPost, 4/27/16.)

Could we, the left, have done more? Were we so fascinated by the seemingly spontaneous aligning of millions with Bernie to forget that even a citizens' army needs good generals? Bernie was nothing but clear in saying that "I can't do this by myself" and that the movement had to be bottom-up. Was it?

Jason Schulman, my fellow *NP* editorial board member, in an otherwise smart piece on the tactical wisdom of Sanders running as a Democrat in what sociologist Oliver C. Cox appropriately called one of "two factions of the same party," was that it gave we reds an opportunity to offer constructive and critical support to the first overtly socialist campaign to reach any number of voters since Gene Debs' race in 1912. Looking back, we all acted like roustabouts helping erect a giant carnival tent. The "critical" in critical support was stillborn.

Again, this isn't to demean or minimize what Sanders did accomplish or the hard scut work activists including Labor for Bernie, DSA, and so many others put into the campaign. But the debates were watched intently by people planning to and mostly eligible to vote. Consider Hillary as a pustule ready to pop. Maybe Bernie had an endgame fear of destroying the likely winner and giving the race to the ur-human GOP, or feared ripping up the road between Sanders and the party apparatchiks should he actually win the convention and need at least their acquiescence. Or just poor debate preparation on his part despite HRC's vulnerability on palpable issues. With the exception of Hillary's refusal to release her likely fawning Goldman Sachs private remarks (a stupid error on her part) Bernie could have peeled her faux liberal credentials like skin off a ripe banana. Instead he set himself up for the canard of *New York Times* op-ed contributor Timothy Egan (April 22), who called with some faint justification Sanders' rhetoric as

"shouted shibboleths," naming Sanders 'a sloganeer with authenticity. But a rant, no matter how dead-on,' Egan continued, 'is not a governing blueprint. His answer, on a number of occasions, to complex issues has been 'I haven't thought about it a whole lot. In many areas, he's almost substance-free.'"

To his credit, Egan submits that Clinton has no big ideas at all, calling her "the shrug candidate."

Okay, the *New York Daily News* editorial Egan cites as proof of Sanders' lack of grounding was a caricature of what Bernie actually told its board of editors (the transcript is available [HERE](#)) and Bernie is hardly substance-free. Campaigns writ large don't call for blueprints so much as road signs pointing out general directions, but he certainly came out as thin in the debates, where his direction posts might as well have been jocular Burma Shave roadside poesy. Was his performance really much better and more pointed facing down Hillary than this:

Statistics prove

Near and far

Wall Street honchos

Gambling madly

-Are!

Bernie Shave.

Sadly, no, his wasn't. At least that bit of whimsy wouldn't be boring.

Michael Hirsch is a longtime board member of New Politics, a Portside moderator and a supporter (still and despite the above) of Labor for Bernie.