

# Bernie Sanders and #BLM: A Response to Dan La Botz

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In a recent *New Politics* essay, Dan La Botz argues that “the debate between” Democratic Party presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement is “one of the most important discussions of our time.” It is “a great debate about the priorities and the program of the American people” that “could lead to the construction of a new analysis and lay the basis for a new and broad social movement” that helps us “find a new way forward against both capitalism and racism” – “a new movement that combines the fight for greater economic equality with demand for racial justice, perhaps a movement for socialism.”

As the old saying goes, if something looks too good to be true, it probably is. I’m all for the analysis and movement that La Botz want to see. (I’ve been working to advance both for years). In and of itself, however, the Sanders-#BLM ruckus does not strike me as a particularly productive sparkplug for the desired developments. At the same time, I think tough and radical criticism of the Sanders campaign, major party electoralism, the #BLM’s tactics, and the Sanders-#BLM affair could provide a valuable educational moment on the path to the analysis and movement we seek. In what follows I will advance such criticisms in a spirit of solidarity with La Botz and with all others who are waging the good fights for a socialist and non-racist, non-imperialist (and non-eco-cial and non-sexist) America.

## Circling the Democratic Black Hole

What do the confrontations that have occurred between #BLM activists and the Sanders campaign (and the Hillary Clinton and Martin OMalley campaigns) really amount to at the end of the day? There is nothing particularly progressive about Black (or white, Latino, or Asian) activists coming without specific or radical demands to petition Democratic Party (or Republican) presidential candidates for policy ideas and (supposedly) heartfelt statements of concern for social and racial justice. The Democratic Party, LaBotz notes, “represents the American corporations and the capitalist system.” It is, he writes, “a party that can never resolve the issues of economic inequality, racism, militarism, and imperialism.” Indeed. That would seem to make its leading presidential hopefuls poor candidates for a useful discussion about how to develop a path “beyond both capitalism and racism.”

Certainly, the #BLM interventions at Sanders, Clinton, and OMalley’s campaign events are nothing to write home about when it comes to advancing anti-capitalism and anti-racism. The activists’ tactic of beseeching white Democratic politicians for their thoughts and feelings about and against racism suggests that (for all their “revolutionary” imagery) they have failed to grasp one of the fundamental historical lessons of U.S. social movement and Black history: the Democratic Party and the broader U.S. major party electoral system are graveyards of grassroots struggle and radical

aspirations. In a recent harsh reflection published by the indispensable Black radical zine *Black Agenda Report*, the incisive commentator and veteran Black activist Glen Ford puts things very well:

“The greatest asset of the [longstanding elite movement to coopt independent Black politics and struggle] is the Democratic Party,...an institution that thoroughly dominates Black politics at every level...Two generations after the disbanding of the Black grassroots movement and the independent politics that grew out of that movement [in the 1950s and 1960s], the Democratic Party permeates political discourse in Black America. And the Democratic Party is where progressive movements go to die...If the emerging movement allows itself to be sucked into Democratic Party politics, it is doomed. Yet, the #BlackLivesMatter organization...is now circling the event-horizon of the Democratic Black Hole. ...#BlackLivesMatter activists may convince themselves that they are confronting the ruling class electoral duopoly by disrupting presidential candidates’ speeches, but the tactic leads straight to cooptation. What is the purpose? If #BLM’s goal is to push the candidates to adopt better positions on criminal justice reform, what happens afterwards? The logic of the tactic leads to either a direct or indirect, implicit endorsement of the more responsive candidate(s). Otherwise, why should #BLM - or the candidates - go through the exercise?”

### **Seeking Truth From Power**

To be sure, Marissa Johnson, one of the Seattle #BLM militants who disrupted Sanders explained later that “I don't have faith in politicians. I don't have faith in the electoral process. It's well documented that that doesn't work for us...So my gaze is not toward politicians and getting them to do something in particular.” Still, it seems that for a larger number of #BLM activists, solicitation of reform proposals from the two reigning state-capitalist-racist-imperialist parties “constitutes a kind of demand. The group,” Ford notes, “doesn’t even require that candidates endorse #BLM’s own posed reformist demands.” This isn’t even “speaking truth to power” - a futile and counterproductive endeavor and slogan for egalitarians, as Noam Chomsky reminded us long ago. It’s more like seeking truth from power.

The feckless futility of this approach was laid graphically bare after #BLM activists attempted to disrupt Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire. As Ford comments, the video of #BLM’s subsequent closed-door meeting with Mrs. Clinton should be used in “future political education classes” as “a model of what happens when would-be movement leaders enter the lion’s den unarmed with political demands: they are humiliated and eaten alive.” The conservative Wall Street Democrat Clinton ended up lecturing the “radical” activists on the need to formulate concrete demands.

After being hit by #BLM in Phoenix, Martin OMalley brought forth a “comprehensive” proposal for criminal justice reform. How seriously are we supposed to take such a plan from a white former Baltimore Mayor and Maryland governor who undertook the mass arrest and incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Black citizens/ex-citizens during his years in office?

And how seriously are we supposed to take the anti-racist revolutionary posing of #BLM activists who have yet to undertake significant protests against the reactionary, white-pleasing Obama administration? Obama has offered no real presidential counterweight to the deepening of the nation’ savage racial disparities or to the “New Jim Crow” system of racist mass arrest, incarceration, and felony marking that exists to enforce and deepen the nation’s still separate and unequal system of racial disparity and apartheid. “Under the Obama administration,” the left writer and activist John Halle recently reminded me, “aggregate African American wealth suffered its largest drop in history. Can you imagine how this would be interpreted if it had occurred under a Republican administration? It would be understood, correctly, as an expression of vicious, unreconstructed racism. Why do [‘left’ activists] apply a different standard to the current

administration?" The main answer to Halle's question is pure and simple racial identity politics, which encourages #BLM activists to protest white presidential candidates but not a deeply conservative commander-in-chief who happens to be Black. (One of #BLM's most high profile agitators, DeRay McKesson, is a former Obama field organizer and Teach for America volunteer who likes to post Obama family vacation pictures). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would not be impressed. Neither, of course, would Malcolm X or the Black Panthers.

"The Democratic Party, like its Republican duopoly cousin," Ford notes, "is a criminal enterprise, polluting the politics of Black America. Any sustained Black movement must, of necessity, be in opposition to the Democratic Party and its civil society annexes [that is, the NAACP, the National Urban League, most politically active Black churches, fraternities and sororities]. They are the enemies within, the people who have facilitated the Black mass incarceration regime for two generations."

### **Great White Hope or Great White Hype?**

What about the racial justice record of the nominal socialist and longstanding *de facto* Democrat Bernie Sanders? "What's wrong with those people," a young liberal white campus town (Iowa City) woman - a big environmentalist - said to me two months ago. "Don't they know that Bernie is their best hope?" It was a chilling statement - all too typical of the smug, racially insensitive liberalism one hears from white urban and university- and college-town progressives across the country.

By "those people," the young lady meant Black people, who she had recently read were not showing a lot of support (in polls) for Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. This was well before the recent incident in Seattle, where a Sanders speech was interrupted by #BLM activists. It was also prior to a similar disruption of Sanders by #BLM activist at the NetRoots conference in Phoenix.

Black Americans with time and inclination to follow the inside baseball of U.S. legislative history can be forgiven for not seeing Sanders as their great white hope. As a member of the US House of Representatives, Sanders voted for Bill Clinton's deeply racist 1994 "three strikes" crime bill. The legislation imposed tougher sentences, put thousands of more police on the streets and helped fund the building of extra prisons. It was known for its sadistic "three strikes" provision, which consigned "violent offenders" to lifetime imprisonment for a third criminal conviction, including for minor parole violations and drug addiction. Backed by congressional Republicans, the bill helped to dramatically expand the nation's globally unmatched and wildly race-disparate mass incarceration system - this while crime was falling. As a Senator, moreover, Sanders voted for a measure that has advanced urban school privatization, deepened educational race disparities, and strengthened the hold of deadening standardized testing pedagogy over minority students: the No Child Left Behind Act. He has been a supporter of the state and federal Common Core States Initiative, another key part of the neoliberal-racist schools agenda.

As a White House contender presidential candidate boasting his Civil Rights past (literally half a century ago) and launching a campaign in the wake of a significant Black struggle against an epidemic of racist white police shootings, Sanders has been slow to put racial justice anywhere near the center of his campaign. He has upped his rhetoric against racial inequality and institutional racism in recent weeks, under pressure from #BLM activists, it is true, but he has done so in a way that underestimates both the depth and degree of racial oppression in the contemporary US and the necessity of undertaking specifically anti-racist struggles against distinctively racist institutions and ideologies. He has exaggerated the extent to which contemporary US racial inequality and oppression can be addressed and overcome with color-blind economic populism. He has not turned against Washington's racist and imperialist Pentagon System, which eats up 54 percent of the

United States' federal discretionary spending and accounts for nearly half of all military spending on the planet. He hasn't called for that system's dismantling and the use of the funds released to launch a domestic Marshall Plan to overcome the massive and crushing poverty that plagues Black America thanks to two and half centuries of slavery, a century plus of Jim Crow, a century of urban ghettoization, decades of liberal social policies that actually deepened racial inequality (see below), and four decades of racist mass incarceration. He has not apologized for his terrible "Three Strikes" vote (even Bill Clinton himself now calls the draconian and racist 1994 crime bill a "mistake") or renounced his attachment to the miserable, Dickensian, racially problematic NCLB. He has not denounced or even noticed the intimate and toxic relationship between the United States' racist global empire and the militarization of the local U.S. police departments that regularly harass and even gun-down unarmed Black Americans while gathering up vast swaths of those Americans people to function as the critical, multiply disenfranchised raw material for the nation's globally unmatched and racially hyper-disparate mass incarceration and felony-marking system. And one really has to question the sincerity of his claims to be anti-racist when he has repeatedly made excuses for the vicious apartheid state of Israel's terrible racist murders of Palestinian children in Gaza.

There is no doubt that Sanders' progressive domestic economic policy agenda - including single-payer national health insurance and major federal green jobs and infrastructure programs - would likely bring significant benefits to poor and working and middle-class Black Americans. Cornel West is certainly right to tell CNN recently that Sanders is the best major party presidential candidate in the race so far for Black America. But so what? The same was true for Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards at this time in 2007. The Democratic Party (history's second most enthusiastic capitalist and imperialist party) is no less of a toxic force in Black America (and indeed the U.S. and the world today) than it was then and Sanders is a considerably bigger longshot to attain the Democratic Party's presidential nomination (the expert election prognosticator Nate Silver give Sanders an at best 5 percent chance) than was Edwards in the late summer of 2007 (months before his campaign imploded in a sex scandal). Glassy-eyed progressive Democrats who now regularly make electability analogies between Barack Obama in the summer of 2007 and Bernie Sanders in the summer of 2015 betray shocking ignorance of key differences between the former and fake-progressive non-Hillary candidate (Obama) and the latter and actually progressive non-Hillary candidate (Sanders). Obama 2007-2008 enjoyed remarkable corporate media approval. He began accumulating what would be a record setting Wall Street-funded campaign war chest more than five years prior to the 2008 presidential election). And he wore the deceptive but popular (with the Democratic primary base) mantle of being the "antiwar candidate." Sanders is far less favorably situated, to say the least.

### **"For Anything That Pulls People Further Left"**

Should leftists participate in any and all debates that might contribute to the creation of an analysis and even a movement that links the struggle against class inequality to the fight against racial oppression? Of course. Do the recent Sanders-#BLM incidents and the broader discussion they have sparked potentially contribute to such welcome developments? Perhaps so, to some degree. I think the discussions should include an honest and radical critique of the quadrennial candidate-centered major party "election madness" (Howard Zinn in March of 2008) and its recurrent longstanding negative impact on the rank-and-file-day-to-day social movement politics that have proven far more effective than electoral politics in advancing justice throughout U.S. history. If and when the new class/race analysis, national discussion, and movement that leftists rightly want emerges, my sense is that it will arise from forces and developments that go much deeper and further than Black activists' engagement with the passing Sanders phenomenon.

The new civil rights movement that has emerged in the wake of the police murder of Mike Brown is here to stay for some time. It still enjoys rich potential for learning and further radical development

and sophistication for its diverse membership. “Some people that are involved [in #BLM],” one correspondent recently wrote me, “are objectionable opportunistic Democrats, many are leftists, others still don't hold very coherent political positions at all and are simply expressing legitimate outrage at the institutional racism inherent in our society.” Here's to the possibility that Marissa Johnson's perspective – properly skeptical about the promises of politicians and the utility of electoral politics for advancing racial and broader social justice and equality –gains traction in #BLM.

The nominally socialist Sanders phenomenon, by contrast, is already slated for history's dustbin (along with Gene McCarthy, George McGovern, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Dennis Kucinich, Howard Dean, and even John Edwards) by next spring, consistent with the candidate's advance promise to support Hillary Clinton (or perhaps now Joe Biden) in the general election (with nothing demanded in return). Here we can only hope that a Clinton or Biden victory in November of 2016 will give #BLM activists yet another lesson that the American System continues to be racist as well as capitalist, eco-cidal, patriarchal, and imperialist when the White House is occupied by a Democrat – even a Black or female Democrat – no less than when it is held down by a white male Republican. A Republican presidency always encourages droves of progressives to indulge in the lazy habit of blaming the nation's problems on the terrible right wing GOP rather than on the deeper systemic issues that need to be addressed and that cut across the two dominant parties that function as “two wings of the same bird of prey” (Upton Sinclair, 1904). It's easier for Leftists to argue that the system is the problem when Democrats hold nominal power in elected office. The fact that Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden are unambiguously white may help Black activists act more effectively on the lesson than they have under a technically Black presidency.

In the meantime, as Sanders himself partly suggests on the campaign trail, the essential task for left progressives remains the same before and after the seemingly endless presidential election spectacle, whatever its outcome: to develop popular militant grassroots movements strong enough to move the nation's policy and political culture in a more just and democratic direction. Ultimately, the goal is to overthrow the nation's racist and imperial plutocracy.

“I'm not for any politician,” Ms. Johnson explained in Seattle after interrupting the white Scandinavia-praising candidate that some white progressives think Black Americans should see as their “great hope.” “But I'm definitely for anything that pulls people further left,” Johnson added, “anything that gets people asking more questions, and gets us closer to actually **dismantling the system that has never, ever, ever, ever done anything for black people and never will.** So I'm really trying to see my people get free by any means possible.”

There is of course no doctrinal road map laying out in advance how we get a movement that takes on all of Dr. King's “triple evils that are interrelated”: class inequality, racial oppression, and military imperialism (today we must add to King's great triplet at the very least patriarchy and eco-cide). Get there we must, and soon – thanks to the environmental crisis spawned by “the triple [or quintuple] evils.” If I am shown to be mistaken in my skepticism about the relevance of the Sanders campaign and its recent engagements with #BLM for the sparking of such a movement – and about the electability of Sanders – I will be happy to stand corrected by history. Beggars for revolutionary catalysts can't be choosers in a time when it is becoming clear that it is “socialism or barbarism if we're lucky” (Istvan Meszaros).

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*Democracy* (Paradigm, 2014).