

Bernie Sanders is a thoroughbred—why call him a stalking horse?

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Voltaire wrote that “the best is the enemy of the good,” but he cited it as a foible and not a redeeming practice. Within hours of Bernie Sanders announcing his candidacy for the Democratic Party presidential nod on April 30th, in some warrens of the radical left, the long corrective knives were already out for the only socialist in Congress. Why? Because Bernie is just not good enough, they said. Criticism ranged from his being a faux socialist, a stalking horse for Hillary Clinton whose backing by the left would be a practical waste of a year that could be better spent building a movement. Politicking for a candidate who can’t win the nomination and who would be destroyed by corporate America and an avalanche of corporate funding if somehow he did was seen as a mug’s game.

They would be wrong.

Take this example: in his incisive report on the recent Future of the Left/Independent Politics Conference in Chicago, Dan La Botz cites remarks made by Bruce Dixon of the Georgia Green Party to the effect that “Sanders is a sheep dog whose job is like that of the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Congressman Dennis Kucinich in earlier elections, to round up folks who had strayed to the left in response to the Democratic Party’s retrograde domestic and foreign policies and to bring them back to the Party.” At least Dixon didn’t say Judas goat, leading lambs to the slaughter, but it’s still early in the campaign, and the cat-scratch phase hasn’t kicked in yet.

Others, including those who think a socialist run is worth it for educational and propagandistic reasons alone, fault him for not rigorously attacking U.S. imperial interests and the glut of military spending, for sitting shtum on the spate of police massacres of people of color in Missouri, New York, Baltimore and elsewhere, or his refusal to support the highly justified boycott, divest and sanction campaign of Israel, let alone embrace the Palestinian national liberation fight. He might not even attack Hillary—he’s said he won’t run a negative campaign—so much as run a parallel, issues-based campaign.

All true. All regrettable. All beside the point. Because this is the moment socialism unadulterated can get a broad public hearing. Sanders has argued that the country deserves a real debate about policy issues, suggesting that such a conversation won’t happen without a contested nomination process. It might not happen with a contested process, either, but it’s worth the time and effort.

Writing in *Jacobin*, Ashley Smith thinks it’s not. He ends his laundry-list of Bernie Sanders’ sins where the piece should elaborate. He writes, “We need to win the new left born out of Occupy, public-sector union struggles, and the Black Lives Matter movement to break with the Democratic Party and build an electoral alternative as a complement to struggle from below. Sanders’s campaign inside the Democratic Party is an obstacle to that project.” It’s that last sentence, with its

one-dimensional bravura and disconnect from the actual Sanders effort that makes we wonder if Smith is any more grounded in politics than the type of uncritical and star-struck Sanders supporters I've encountered at meet-ups and on-line. They're Bernie's Amen Corner. Their strengths stop at well-meaning.

Writing in countercurrents.org, David Swanson agrees that Sanders and movement-making are at loggerheads; one cancels the other. Instead of working for Bernie, Swanson counsels, why not

"join the movement that's in the streets of Baltimore opposing police murder, that's in the halls of the United Nations pushing to abolish nukes, that's blocking mountaintop removal, divesting from Israel, advancing renewable energy, and struggling to create fair elections through steps like automatic registration in Oregon, and pushing legislation to provide free media, match small donors, give each voter a tax credit to contribute, or take the power to establish plutocracy away from the Supreme Court."

A good agenda as far as it goes. Is there nothing in labor-law reform, in ending voter suppression—itself a fraud—in upending election laws that privilege the main parties, in anything (beyond his tax credit initiative) that would *actually take political action* to achieve? That, a Sanders race could help catalyze. And even if Swanson eschews political action, how would the Bernie campaign detract from movements such as Black Lives Matter or the Fight for \$15? How would these fights do anything but benefit from an articulate national figure banging away on racism, a militarized state and rampant inequality, adding his strident voice to help build those movements?

Swanson also thinks the money it would take to make the Sanders effort threaten the coronation of Hillary and the GOP juggernaut in the general election—he estimates hundreds of millions of dollars—would be better spent in

"creat(ing) a television network dedicated to peace and justice and democracy from here on out. Or we could open a counter-recruiting office next-door to every military recruitment office in the United States. Or we could organize and bus people in for the largest and longest march on Washington against racism, militarism, extreme materialism, and the corruption of our elections ever seen, complete with food supplies and bail funds for as long as it takes. Instead of a march for nothing, how about an occupation for no more Bushes or Clintons or anyone like them?"

More good things from Swanson to do. But he misses the point. With money like that, the left would also have the corresponding number of bodies to do that work. We don't have it now. The advantage of a Bernie campaign is to radically alter the political discourse, just as Occupy did, but without Occupy's reluctance to name names or advocate the overhauls Swanson would want to see.

Swanson also thinks that the Bernie effort would "take a year away from policy-based principled activism" to wage a doomed campaign in which "the media monopolies that Clinton's husband facilitated have demonstrably grown more powerful than ever, and elections have grown more corrupted by money—just ask Hillary who pretends to oppose it." He closes with "The real question is not whether the next President will be a walking disaster [he's generously not talking about Bernie here for once], but what sort of popular movement will have been developed to resist it."

Whatever we think of Bernie's pedigree as a socialist or deftness as a political leader, nothing of his use in making "socialism" a viable watchword for the growing disenchantment with capital justifies saying his campaign is an obstacle or counterposed to movement building.

When Bernie says "I believe we should break up the big Wall Street banks. If they're too big to fail,

they're too big to exist," that's something Hillary won't or can't say. Bernie does in every whistle-stop. It's not co-optable. Nor can she match his staunch opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal and fast-track authority. And if the trio of themes he says he'll pursue—campaign finance reform, climate change and income inequality—are done with the vigor and intelligence he brings to most issues, well, to me, it's win-win.

The Huffington Post sums him up this way: "In the Senate, Sanders has focused on a range of issues, from reforming health care for veterans to addressing the threat posed by climate change. He has also been a strong advocate for a universal, single-payer health care plan nationwide..." though to be fair he missed the boat on advocating Medicare for all, the genuinely socialist alternative. Today, when Bernie speaks on socialism, he speaks for millions. And if he sticks to that script, it will be worth the effort. But when he speaks about supporting the eventual primary winner, he speaks for himself. He may not be Eugene Debs, but neither is he the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Or a stooge for the corporate-funded Democrats.

It may very well be that Hillary Clinton needs a goad from the left to appeal to the Democratic base, but is there any evidence that Bernie is playing her useful idiot let alone part of a conscious effort to fool the public, as Smith implies without quite using the word "pawn"?

Does the Sanders campaign by nature compromise the ages-old radical dream of a militant, rank and file movement creating durable counter-institutions of dual power? Is principle throttled in pursuit of publicity? Nothing so dire, or romantic. People compromise on tactics, as Smith should have learned from his own comrades who wisely didn't break with the Chicago Teachers Union's Karen Lewis after she announced what for health reasons soon became aborted plans to challenge the incumbent Clintonista leg-breaker mayor as a Democrat. Even the exemplary Welsh class warrior Nye Bevan broke with his own left parliamentary caucus in 1957 by stepping away from endorsing the growing disarmament movement. As Owen Heatherly writes in *The London Review of Books*, he opposed disarmament "in what is usually put down to a compromise incumbent on him as shadow foreign secretary."

Sounds shabby at first reading, but this is the same militant miners' leader and founder of Britain's National Health Service who could say "It is an axiom, enforced by all the experience of the ages, that they who rule industrially will rule politically." Even Bevan wasn't above trimming his sails, though on this one I'll go with the all-sails-unfurled Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Bertrand Russell.

My point: the principle of democratic socialism from below can't be an absolute prohibition on an anti-corporate election campaign that could reach tens of millions and attract them to a radical movement, even if it's in the ostensibly wrong party.

Yes, even tactically it's not all brainpower perfectly attuned to willpower in the Sanders initiative. Before even announcing Sanders was quoted as saying "I'm not running to attack Hillary Clinton. I'm running to talk about the issues that impact the working class of this country and the middle class." Decrying "vicious personal attacks on candidates" that "the American people are sick and tired of," Sanders boasted "I've never run a negative ad in my life. I've been in many campaigns, and if you ask the people of Vermont, they would tell you Bernie Sanders has never run a negative ad."

He added, "I believe that, in a democracy, what elections are about are serious debates on serious issues."

But no attacks on Hillary is problematic, bordering on the daft. Giving Hillary a free pass is a peculiar thing for a veteran politician to do and bizarre in extremis. Hillary is his likely opponent;

his traction lies not just in raising class issues but in faulting her for representing the wrong class. And given that she will drop any pledge she makes in the primary to hug the middle ground in the general election, what does Bernie lose by daring her to radically push the envelope? He said as much on MSNBC's *The Ed Show*, that "There's so much to be discussed, Ed, and we're not in this country about anointing anybody for a nomination." That's a point that could be made by radicals inside the campaign where it has salience and where his liberal supporters would never raise.

Arun Gupta, yet another critic, has it exactly backwards when he writes "When a Democrat is president, it spurs left opposition to the whole system. When a Republican sits in the Oval Office, it results in a partisan movement that splits the left and liberals." In fact, when a Democrat is in the White House or campaigning to be, the movements—Occupy being the exception in more ways than one and United for Peace and Justice the saddest example—historically and needlessly avoid confrontations with the state. Compare the timid response of the broad peace movement to every Clinton administration adventure with its strident reactions to Bush 1 and Bush 2's homicidal assaults on Iraq or UFPJ's tent folding during the Kerry campaign.

What Gupta could have said is that a failed Democrat in the White House has the potential to expose the contradictions in the system better than a GOP sabre rattler who evokes criticisms of policy. But which one offers better opportunities for a fight-back is a wash, unless class-conscious radicals are committed socialists and already leaders of that movement.

Even here, a democratic socialist like Sanders running for office even as a Democrat has the potential to expose the corporate links that make the two parties bipartisan on class issues, so why not encourage Sanders to, as veteran Third Party campaigner Ted Glick writes, "Run Bernie, Run."

But when Gupta writes that "In the general election, the Democrats need the left to be silent about how bankrupt and corrupt the party is so it can gloss its rush to the right in a veneer of progressive rhetoric," he's of course right. That's why the test for me will be getting Sanders post-primary or post-convention not to shake hands with the "liberal" nominee but shake fists at her and her corporate backers. Again, you gain that influence on Sanders by being visible in his primary race, not by acting Hamlet or Menckel or the sideline spit-ball king.

To restate: what's common to Bernie's radical critics is the assumption that Hillary's feints left in response to Sanders is a shadow play that won't survive past the August 2016 coronation, all the while that the Bernie effort hoovers up support that would be better used elsewhere. Well, it is a short-lived shadow play. While it makes sense for him to attack the Democratic frontrunner, it makes little sense for her (or him) to attack Bernie as it did for Michael Dukakis in 1988, when his campaign team allowed Jesse Jackson his say, featuring him on prime-time at the Democratic national convention, then let him fade away. But is it likely that the sheer numbers of Sanders volunteers would be used elsewhere, as in movement building? Those backing Bernie would not in the main be doing something else except working in local campaigns. I'd like them to be year-round ubiquitous activists, too. It won't happen by blasting Sanders or analogizing him to a sheepdog. Why? Because he has no radical sheep to shepherd. As Jason Schulman observed in a letter to me and similarly on line responding to Dixon, "If there was already a quasi-mass movement for a left third party then, yes, Sanders' campaign in the Democratic primary would be wrong. But there isn't, so he isn't."

It is also troubling how anyone would ipso facto assume that founding a new class-conscious party and orchestrating a socialist push in the Democratic presidential primary are zero sum gains. La Botz notes how Sanders sent a congratulatory note to the conference, but that

"even those who opposed endorsing Sanders suggested that advocates of independent

political action should maintain a friendly attitude to Sanders supporters. When the seemingly inevitable nomination of Hillary Clinton occurs, it may be possible to win over many of these people to an independent, left, third party perspective.”

Good trick! How will they do that by alleging that Sanders is a stalking horse for Hillary and the Democratic Party elite?

It’s one thing to say, as did *Salon* commentator Bill Curry, a former Bill Clinton White House counselor, that “Clinton loyalists welcome Sanders’ entry because they know she needs a contest, or at least a tune-up” and that “Some call him a perfect foil; a lesser threat than Warren, yet enough of one to provide progressives with some catharsis while bestowing Clinton with the legitimacy that comes only from competition. “

I’m sure that is Hillary war-room thinking. It doesn’t merit labeling it a conspiracy and justify we lefties positing Bernie as either a naïf or a witting tool of neoliberalism’s primo candidate.

Bernie may indeed be playing the monkey to Hillary’s organ grinding, but the act is something we Reds benefit from. The social movements need representation in elected office and officials need a movement not only to keep them honest, but to see that demands in the base are reflected in policy. Sure, a huge extra-parliamentary opposition would in itself put pressure on governments to act, or at least to freeze governments from doing harm. It also appeals to my syndicalist DNA—a movement in the streets can’t help but batter the two-party neoliberal consensus—but if that movement isn’t reflected in a party or a coalition of parties in an electoral front, it won’t have the tactical flexibility to deal with changing circumstances. Simply put, ruling out any electoral opposition leaves the ruling class as the sole players in a critical political field.

In the meantime, our clever thinkers cum Bernie critics will have alienated the left from doing what little it can do—propagandize for socialism at the point when the base of Democratic voters is paying attention. These voters are in fact to the left of mainstream politicians—the low-turnout of Democrats in 2012 on its own attests to that—but Sanders at least has the capacity to move discourse and energize voters who won’t abandon the only choice they have on 2016, but gin up support for local electoral insurgencies. We don’t have the luxury to reject the good and insist on the better—and so far criticisms of Bernie strike me as fastidious and bookish if not faith-based to a fault.