Left Politics and Posturing in the Presidential Race

written by Michael Hirsch | May 27, 2010

The November election poses a dilemma for leftists. Both major parties embrace the agenda of corporate America. Neither challenges the assumptions of American empire, and politics as usual will be followed by a Washington regime that will be at best agnostic toward the needs of progressive social movements if not hostile to it. Against this, Ralph Nader is again launching a crusade against both parties. But the Republican administration of George Bush is seen by many as a seismic step to the right, leading even such an inveterate radical critic as Noam Chomsky to declare his support for the Democratic candidate. Three editors of New Politics *— Stephen Shalom, Thomas Harrison, and Michael Hirsch — offer three perspectives on the difficult choices faced by the left. Readers are invited to respond.*

VOTING IS A DRAG. John Kerry will get my vote in the November elections, and I'll give it with the same grudging, wintry discontent that I did in the last two presidential elections, when I backed Ralph Nader. In those races, I made statements. Now I want to beat Bush.

But that's not what this piece is about. It's not why a vote for Kerry is inevitable in a year when Bush is vulnerable. It's also not about renouncing my left-wing apostasy or embracing sobering lessons learned in Florida in 2000. Because Nader did not singularly cost Gore the election. It was Gore's inept campaign in Ohio, New Hampshire, Nevada and states other than Florida that cost Democrats the election, too.

It's about how liberals and leftists on both sides of the Kerry-Nader divide can get rabidly exercised about other people's campaign choices, when they both know that power does not come out of an election booth. It comes out of the economic and social movements poised to hold officeholders accountable. It's about never forgetting that the left — the only hope for humanity (and do I exaggerate?) — is not built by electoral struggle but by building the social movements, before, during and after elections.

It is the weakness of those social movements that forces poor choices on us. Beyond the facility of corporate Democrats to co-opt movement leaders into precinct captains or the fecklessness of radicals to form lasting electoral and structural alternatives, a centrist Democrat is sadly our last best shot for ending the White House occupation because no social movements are strong enough to move the country left.

That simple fact hasn't stopped sides from forming up for intramural color war, with the loudest drumming from the punditry. When Nader announced his third run, the usually measured Michael Tomasky, for one, called his supporters "left-wing lions of ideological chastity" and counseled the Democrat primary contenders, to a man, to "attack Nader right now, and with Lupine ferocity." He

told *American Prospect* readers how Nader was "a megalomaniac whose tenuous purchase on present-day reality threatens to cancel out every good thing he's done in his life," which, if true, would be a cancellation on the order of the original *Star Trek*.

There was more passion on view in Tomasky's tough love for Nader than in his eight years of covering New York's pug-ugly Mayor Rudy Giuliani, the race-baiting, city-service privatizing, real-estate creature and poster boy for megalomania whom Tomasky characterized in *New York* magazine as someone who ran for office "to the right of how he ruled."

In the same vein, David Corn, writing in the *Nation*, puts the best possible face on Kerry by stripping away the issues. He argues that despite any identifiable lesions, the career of Kerry the man shows "key moments when he displayed guts and took tough actions" and where he has "shown courage, devotion to justice and commitment to honesty, open government and principle- over-politics. There are few senators of whom that can be said." Few indeed. But except for his biographers and handlers, why should this observation matter?

Making the case for Kerry is no slam-dunk. Problems with the Washington fixture are palpable; they can be lined up and bowled over like candlepins.[1] But even if Kerry is every bit the political bastard his left detractors say he is, he is — as FDR said of the senior Somoza — our bastard, at least until Nov. 3. Until then, the anti-Bush effort is well-worth building in its own right, if only as realpolitik. It needn't be dressed up by pounding the iron necessity of beating Bush into a tin- plated virtue. Kerry supporters don't have to say the ridiculous or the indefensible on his behalf.

Of course, some critics of the Democratic candidate do offer a real-world model for Tomasky's ravening beasts. John Pilger's *New Statesman* screed, widely distributed over the Internet and on web sites, including ZNet, came illustrated in the original London version with a split screen of Bush and Kerry melded into one face, sharing a lipless sneer. Same man and same agenda. Pilger says pointing to any substantive differences between Bush and Kerry is "a big lie," that distinctions between the two do not "go beyond the use of euphemisms," and that the real objection to Bush by Democrats is to his outspokenness, to his administration's "crude honesty," and not to any policy differences. "The Democratic Party has left a longer trail of blood, theft and subjugation than the Republicans [which] is heresy to the liberal crusaders, whose murderous history always requires, it seems, a noble mantle," Pilger writes. But who doubts that the trail was blazed in a fit of bipartisanship, along with opposition throughout every sector of society, including within the two parties?

What does any of Pilger's biliousness tell us about politics and political choices? Nothing. It's catharsis. Much of the same runs in *Counterpunch,* where Alex Cockburn and friends equate their Kerry bashing with political comment, or in one small left-wing paper that urges readers to "get off the Democratic Party train now," in order to "fight for a new political party," presumably one devoid of those pesky misleaders who seem to muck things up. This without explaining how a second Bush administration could possibly bring that goal of better trains and better leaders nearer.

Counterpuncher Phil Gasper lands a solid jab when he notes how "whoever wins in November, we'll need the biggest and most militant social movements on the ground to fight their policies," but then brings his knee up for a groin shot by saying that "whenever activists get sucked into support for Democrats the movements are weakened and sometimes destroyed." He calls noting differences between the two major party candidates "a mug's game."

At least the Greens bring some humor to the table, as when St. Louis Green Party organizer Don Fitz turns the question around, asking "Should the Democrats run a candidate for president in 2004?" and says, with some justification, "If the Democrats were against the Bush program, why would they

wait for the election to fight it?"

LET'S SHOVEL AWAY the accumulated sludge. Nader's take on corporate power is on target, as far at it goes. *Crashing the Party*, his account of the 2000 race, is a good statement of first principles as well as a fair treatment of how hard it is to raise political issues in a national campaign, especially absent a social movement running interference for you.

Nader also has every right to run for president, and those who know that defeating Bush is all-important have every right to say "Ralph. Don't run." But they have no right to chant, "unclean; unclean" or vilify his supporters.

Case in point: in 1985, then New York City Clerk David Dinkins, whose reputation then was as an attractive if unremarkable stalwart of the Harlem Democratic Party machine, announced plans to run for Manhattan Borough President. Now more ceremonial, the post was then a powerful one, not yet circumscribed by term limits and still with a big say in city budget and land use decisions, which constitute the bulging piñata of city politics. But Jerry Nadler, then a progressive Assemblyman from Manhattan's West Side and now its Congress member, wanted the job, too. He was roundly denounced by the progressive folk as a racist for running for what was widely regarded as a "black seat." Dinkins went on to be a better mayor than his critics expected, though a far worse one than the electoral left had hoped. Still, it was wrong to say "Don't run," to Nadler then or to Nader now.

The problem I have with Nader's run is not bad faith by the candidate or a belief in "the worse, the better" on the part of his supporters. Neither has to be true. It's how his brand of anti-corporatism doesn't mesh with a political campaign. While he can run a brilliant position-paper operation spotlighting big business domination of political and economic life, don't expect him to target the real dissatisfaction voters have with the Iraq occupation, even its corporate analog, or offer voters an alternative.

Everything Nader says will resonate as a critique of a bought and paid-for two party system, not a bash at Bush or even a synthetic look at what got bought. If he were instead to frame Bush as an acknowledged corporate tool, he'd play a hero's role in bringing Bush down. But that would detract from building a third party, his acknowledged goal.

Now I want a left-of-center political party, too, one that can harness and represent working class politics in a way the Democratic Party in its big tent, corporate-dominated incarnation cannot. But the time and place to build that isn't a handful of months from November and on the national level, especially when you don't have 50-state ballot access or even a Green Party skeletal apparatus with which to run.

It also isn't fundamentally about bad Democrats and good independents any more. In 1966, Hal Draper, a founder of this magazine, could reasonably write that the destruction of Vietnam's civil society at the hands of the liberal-labor backed Lyndon Johnson proved "that you can't fight the victory of the rightmost forces by sacrificing your own independent strength to support elements just the next step away from them." Draper argued that "where the choice is between one capitalist politician and another, the defeat comes in accepting the limitation to this choice." But today the issue is not so easily demarcated as working "inside" or "outside" the Democratic Party," or neatly as "Democratic cooptation" vs. "independent political action." The lines draw around: what constitutes political action, independent or otherwise, and in whose interest is it undertaken. By this test, neither Kerry nor Nader shine.

Any politics has to start from an analysis of social forces. Social movements are weak, but not because their leaders failed to resist the siren call of access to the White House or the governor's mansion. Idle chatter about "the class" or "the youth" or "the labor bureaucracy" and its misleaders only reinforces the left's alienation from its own base because it substitutes assertions for analysis.

If the Democratic Party on the national level is dominated by corporate centrists in the Democratic Leadership Council, for example, why not take them on where they live? Or help those who can. Or at least stop chanting that the only function of a Kucinich is — as several left critics insist — as a shill for the party that eats movements whole. While the "principled" left warms itself around a dying fire, the DLC is making history. Bad history, but history.

It writes policy papers that posit incremental improvements over the free market ravings of the right. But by giving token support for environment causes and backing some progressive social initiatives, the group serves as a lifeboat for aspiring officeholders — especially in the absence of any seaworthy lifeboats from the left from which to cling. It also grooms local candidates, understanding that the care and feeding of ambitious and entrepreneurial pols is a necessity. Its list of the 100 rising "New Democratic Stars" includes a slew of city mayors and county executives. These are people in the public eye who are responsible for producing for voters, and include such likely future Democratic superstars as New York's Eliot Spitzer, Illinois's Barack Obama and California's Phil Angelides — all seeking or expected to seek top state jobs.

The DLC even puts out a 'State and Local Playbook" it describes as "a 'menu' of effective, field-tested policy proposals from which model initiatives can be implemented in states, cities and communities around the country." What is the left putting out — even that left that believes in realigning the Democratic Party? "U.S. Troops Out of Iraq," or "Support Gay Marriages," or "Defend Abortion Rights" are reactive programs that do not get to the heart of the American empire, harm the war makers where they live or deliver a body blow to sexual fundamentalists.

There is no left national agenda to guide any elected officials, though municipalities from Santa Monica and San Francisco to New York are better served and activists clearer about housing, health care, wages and other local needs. The contentious AFL-CIO cannot agree on plastic or paper, though its constituent unions are hauling a lot of ashes for the anti-Bush effort. Without an agenda, labor law reform is the most unionists should expect from a Democratic administration in a new century where union workers compose just eight percent of the total private sector workforce, in large part because unions are hamstrung in organizing. New York's labor-leaning Working Families Party strenuously and regularly denies it is even progressive. Even as delegates passed a decent enough anti-Iraq war resolution at its recent state convention, its leaders were busy scotching efforts to do any less than coronate New York's hawk senator Charles Schumer after endorsing his re-election bid.

Who is pushing for an electoral expression of the need to correct such gross inequities as seeing corporate profits surge 87 percent in two years, according to Commerce Department figures, while wages and salaries grew just 4.5 percent in the same period? If you're not in the market, you didn't benefit.

If the pro-Kerry folk tend to be unreflective or even somnolent about how bad the situation is: that in 2004, amidst war, joblessness and poverty, we soldier on and hopefully elect another centrist Democrat, then the self-styled revolutionary left's sin is to act like lemmings, as though the sea were not instant death and Bush or Kerry do not matter. The candidate of one socialist groupuscule says he is running as "a voice for the international working class in the 2004 U.S. elections." Even bullfrogs don't puff themselves up that much.

Holding to a “socialist politics” without putting any forward means acting like émigrés in your own country, when the truth is there is no socialist politics, principled or otherwise, unless you make it so. Independent political action does not mean independent of politics. Neither does it mean setting up Potemkin villages and calling them political choices. Stanley Aronowitz’s ill- starred Green Party gubernatorial campaign of 2002 may have had legs. Nader’s 2004 run does not. It’s dallying with failure.

What then constitutes success? For longtime supporters of *New Politics*, it means less invoking of first principles and more focusing on what makes those principles pertinent. What are the politics involved in continuing to support “the third camp,” which was a historically contingent formulation that opposed rapacious capitalism and blood-soaked Stalinism. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, isn’t it once more “socialism” that is the real manifestation of workers’ power and autonomy? Similarly, why weep for a lost “third party” when “working class-based politics” in whatever form it takes is the real necessity? In Europe, so-called working class parties only serve their base incrementally better, if at all, judging from the German Social Democratic and British New Labour governments.

When Rosa Luxemburg trashed her German socialist opponents at the turn of the last century, she accused them in essence of repudiating politics. It was the evolutionary socialist Eduard Bernstein who she claimed separated “the conquest of political power” from what Luxemburg saw as the equally necessary “improvement of the condition of the working class.” She chided her opponents for saying working people “must not expect to institute socialism as the result of a political and social crisis but by means of the progressive extension of social control and the gradual application of the principle of cooperation.” Luxemburg’s genius, and the genius of modern Marxists who haven’t looked for reasons to abstain from politics, is the understanding that socialists must do both, that one flows from and reinforces the other.

Absent these distinctions, propagandizing for a third party is harmless enough, especially if you valorize consciousness raising and think elections are an opportunity to peddle your wares. But using the election as a chance to establish a franchise or operate a fishing expedition to hook hapless Greens will be criminal if it leads to a Bush suzerainty. Differences like these won’t get resolved by talking or fighting from now until November. Instead of an arctic night of long knives, I’d rather see activists working their own sides of the street.

For those who know Bush must be defeated in November, it means stumping for Kerry. It means insisting that the social movements have a voice and face in the campaign and room to grow. It means running the ground war in media markets where the emphasis by the party pros will be on television saturation in the 17 battleground states. It means focusing on local races, where a few dedicated campaigners can make a difference in swinging control of state houses or Congress.

In New York City, for example, it means working in the long-shot Frank Barbaro campaign in Brooklyn-Staten Island against a hardcore right-winger who holds office in a district that boasts the highest union- household density in the nation. Or it could mean backing independent candidates with a chance of winning and who deserve to win, like Matt Gonzalez in San Francisco last year. Or at least building for the future where such local candidates can win.

After November, leftists are going to need each other, unmaimed. If nothing else, we can at least dial the thermostat down and get to work. Anything else is a real mug’s game.

1. Here’s a short list: Kerry supported NAFTA and the World Trade Organization. He joined Bill Clinton in eviscerating public assistance. He hired Rand Beers, boon companion of Bush critic and one-note anti-terrorism Cassandra Richard Clarke and who worked for Bush’s National Security

Council until last year, as his foreign policy advisor. That might be a clever campaign move, but it's indicative of just how narrow gauged is American foreign policy debate. His stands on the drug war and the Israeli occupation will be only slightly more grounded than Bush's. Nor will he be no less indebted to corporate interests: Kerry's $115 million raised by mid-May pales in comparison to Bush's $200 million money machine. Despite support from Howard Dean, Kerry cannot expect to tap into the breadth of small contributions from the aptly named Deaniacs, though almost a third of Kerry's total has been raised through the Web.

His health care proposals are a fudge — health care transmutes into "health coverage" and back again, on all his literature. If a single-payer health plan emerges, it won't come from a Kerry administration, but because employers resist paying huge health care costs and unions refuse cutbacks, not because Kerry will lead or the corporations will come to their senses and turn on the insurance industry. The only special interests he is likely to stand up to are unions, the poor, and the uninsured.

There also isn't a startling small amount of daylight between Kerry and Bush even on campaign issues. As the *Washington Post* recently noted. both say they would preserve tax breaks while limiting non-military spending. Both prize halving the deficit. Both sell themselves as studiously pro-business and as backers of the Federal Reserve's monetary policies. Cultural issues aside, both are tailoring their campaigns to the centrist voter in the battleground states.