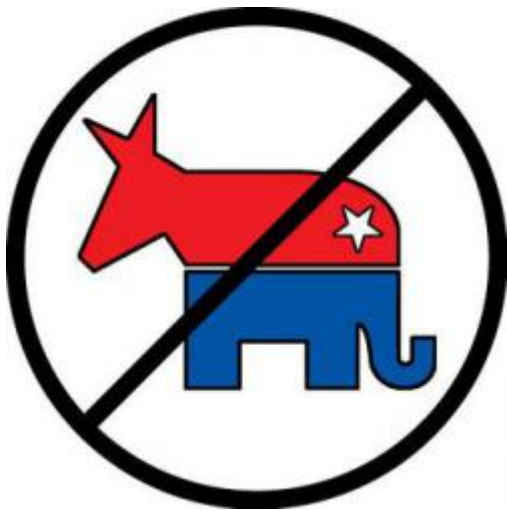


Protest Vote or Independent Political Action?

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A bumper sticker displayed with increasing resonance these days reads: “2020, any responsible adult.” This is undoubtedly the mood of Democratic Party voters as was made abundantly clear by the abrupt collapse of the Sanders momentum. The U.S. is in free fall under a regime that represents an exceptional threat not only to democratic life but to human life itself. The need for an American socialist answer has rarely been so urgent. Yet, as an electoral force, we are simply a non-factor. Why?

Michael Hirsch’s recent article disappoints for rehashing first principles — updating much of *New Politics’* past approach, or at least one strand of that approach, to electoral politics, without charting any new course and without any fresh political self-assessment. It’s as if we are satisfied with our critique of electoral politics, with only the need to dust it off and double down in light of current realities and haul it out anew. And what’s worse, the analysis he offers is blind to the self-contradictory nature of his inside-outside perspective: vote for the socialist where it won’t affect the national outcome — even a clairvoyant cannot predict — vote for the DP where it will.

To unravel this requires a deeper dive back into how the quest for independent politics was reshaped primarily by the anti-war campus experience that revived the New Left, and which went on to seize a national audience around that cause and from that platform.

Its residue today is a modern American socialist movement no longer embedded in the working class. Crucially, it is as university centered today as it has been since it was first resurrected in the 1960s. That is both a curse and an opportunity. It can forge its radicalism without the social drag that arises from interaction and accountability with working-class conservatism, both Black and white. But it is also cloistered in the airy free-range coop of upper middle-class intellectuals, notorious for their short attention spans, and the trendy campus intersectionality movements that they have parented. These movements are often attracted to highly volatile, even apocalyptic, forms of radicalism.

This middle class radicalism combines genuine idealism and lofty vision with the status discontents — as C. Wright Mills pointed out — of an intellectual stratum that enjoys a privileged economic position, but no real political power. For some, it's a boutique bourgeois affectation. But even the more serious minded, those who are in it for the long haul, cannot, try as they may, constitute themselves as the basis of a truly independent socialist electoral vehicle. Middle-class radicalism, of which American socialism is a subset, can articulate grievances, but they do not have the social heft around which to reorganize society in answer to those grievances. They can be a necessary and vital element of a movement for a workers' party. But they are equally prey to the allure of other class formations, bourgeois and bureaucratic collectivist, that can empower them as future power brokers.

All of which is to say that the American socialist movement as it is presently composed can be a force for inspiration and a force for disruption, but not for cohesion and continuity. Because of this, middle class radicalism cannot truly be expected to cut its umbilical cord with the Democratic Party, a party grounded in the class realities of American capitalism, until an emboldened working-class movement offers them a focused alternative prospect.

The Independent Socialists of Hal Draper's time acknowledged the futility of projecting the Peace and Freedom Party as a real third party based on labor, radical intellectuals, and minorities. But they insisted, nevertheless, that P & F could become a conditioning experience for those who were drawn into it, educating them to the bankruptcy of Democratic Party politics, radicalizing them, and stimulating in them an appreciation for the necessity for independent political action. That is, they saw protest politics as the antechamber of independent politics.

But, in retrospect, their hopes for the P & F party were based on an illusion. What they failed to factor in was that the allure of P & F was purely and simply as a protest vehicle; fundamentally motivated by despair that LBJ could not be replaced. This common thread of despair with the Democrats characterized not only the Stalinist-dominated Wallace New Dealers of the late 1940s that preceded P & F, but also of Barry Commoner's Citizens Party of the 1980s that succeeded it. It is the draw, if there even is such a draw, of today's Greens in the face of a neo-liberal Biden candidacy.

Protest politics signals to the Democratic Party that this is a trial separation, an ultimatum perhaps, but not a divorce decree. Once the McCarthy and Kennedy movements offered hope for a DP alternative to LBJ, P & F was effectively de-fanged, the DP was no longer seen as irredeemable and socialist hopes for independent politics once again evaporated.

The significance of what Draper's comrades missed then is exactly what we continue to miss today: a failure to see the disjunction between protest politics and independent political action. Protest politics, and the movements that gravitate to protest politics, are not halfway formations along a continuum between the DP and independent action; they are the de facto "external faction" of the Democratic Party. Today they may vote for the Greens, but would have been even happier to vote for Sanders, and will bide their time tomorrow until they are welcomed back into the fold by means of a well placed concession or two.

And — remarkably — this is precisely what Hirsch is advocating, in effect if not in words, by his half-in, half-out strategy. By all means, pressure the Democrats from the outside, as long as pressure from the left is strategically wielded not to endanger a Democratic victory in the fall. It embodies the very logic of lesser evil politics but by roundabout means. Don't throw away the key that you may later need to crawl back through the Democratic door.

We can attack McCarthy and Kennedy as sheep-dogging in 1968. But you cannot so effortlessly

corral those who see another credible path. Middle-class radicals, no matter how revolutionary their rhetoric, have no power in social isolation. They instinctively understand their limitations and understand where they can maximize their leverage. The DP offers them a vehicle for a degree of elite influence that the wilderness of independent politics, in the absence of a countervailing independent working-class pole of attraction, does not.

Again, even today, had the Sanders movement prevailed in the Democratic Party, all talk of protest politics would have shriveled and would have done so with the reluctant complicity of many of those with a credible history of devotion to the quest for independent politics.

No such opportunities, illusory or not, can be had about the Hawkins-led Green Party, however. And Hirsch offers none. Hawkins's politics are our politics. He has an enviable record as a class-struggle militant. But our politics are not yet embedded in mass working-class resistance, the indispensable prerequisite for independent politics. Hirsch's perspective is at best a will-o-the-wisp. Worse, it is a risk without an upside.

The Greens, a party that lies dormant between presidential elections, can be a spoiler, but not a significant vehicle for anti-capitalist class education — having no presence in working-class life. Even less, therefore, can it act as a catalyst in key working-class communities hastening a break with capitalist politics.

Socialists have often, perhaps uniquely, voted for such parties as a means of publicly registering “no confidence” in the *system*. Even so pallid a social democrat as Sidney Hook reputedly voted consistently for the De Leonist Socialist Labor Party — the emptiest of empty vessels — until casting his vote for Nixon in 1972. But we should not confuse socialist motivations with the convulsions of third-party enthusiasm that periodically erupt. They are voting for no confidence in the DP *leadership* and we commit an unpardonable mistake if we confuse our motivations with theirs.

There is, in short, no detour around the class question. The 1948 Wallace Democrats, Peace and Freedom, the Citizens Party, the Greens were and are modest vessels that disaffected radical elements of likely Democratic voters periodically inflate, like the Goodyear blimp, to catch the attention of the DP establishment. We make a tragic error when we confuse what these votes are for what we wish them to be.

Does that mean we should concentrate our work in the DP? Of course not. Socialists have a credible case against the Democratic Party as a political instrument for the defense of capitalism and as the ideological and organizational substitute for the socialist movement among the working class, social movements, and radical intellectuals who would otherwise constitute the potential elements of a socialist movement. As such, the DP acts as a barrier to that needed opening to the left, which prepares a more propitious opportunity for the development of a mass socialist movement.

Even today, the never-Trump Republicans are being gleefully courted by the Democratic Party by its capitalist power brokers as a welcome counterbalance to the Bernie-crats.

Still, there is no electoral path at present that can chip away, much less, extract society from its fundamental predicaments and redirect it along a socialist path. As such, there is no reason to agitate for the chimera of independent politics that *protest voting represents*. It outfits a performative act of independence and defiance with a dimension of substance that it simply does not have.

Who we, an infinitesimal substrata of the American electorate, vote for — given the two-party monopoly — is a far different matter and far less important than what we work for. It should not

come as a blinding revelation that the American public is not exactly looking to us for direction in its time of desperation. Democratic Party constituencies will do, despite our exhortations to the contrary, exactly what they habitually do: exert pressure through the existing channels of power to defend their interests. Protest voters will do what they habitually do: pry open a broader path into those existing channels through the threat of defection. Lesser-evilism is not a moral failing, it is reality without an escape valve.

We have a message. We don't have an audience. And until socialists re-establish our credibility with American workers we will not gain a hearing for our perspectives. I am not advocating "industrialization," though neither do I oppose it. What I am suggesting is this. American workers are facing extraordinary challenges: for safe working conditions, for health care, for economic security, for food security, and for housing security against a pending wave of likely evictions. These cannot wait for "legislative fixes." It will necessitate mass confrontation: with employers, landlords, commercial establishments, financial institutions, and state and local governments that will resonate upwards. We need to be active not only in rank-and-file union movements, but also in anticipating the need for unemployed councils and workers' mutual aid societies in an economy that requires prolonged lockdown and is therefore beset by crises.

If we wish to lay the predicate for independent political action, we need to be out and in the thick of things — as socialists, as reliable working-class allies and advocates. There is no shortcut. The road to independent politics is organic. Only a combative socialist movement with real roots in a working class *in motion* can raise the challenge that Draper once issued:

You, who want to work in the Democratic Party: fight at least for what YOU believe in, since you disagree with our Labor Party views: and if you fight for it in the Democratic Party we will see whether you are right and can really get what you want; or whether your fight will merely open up a different and broader road leading to genuine labor politics, a labor party by breaking with this party.

Perhaps, it's time to return to basics.