

Sanders and Black Lives Matter: The Great Debate of Our Time

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For the first time in decades a great debate about the priorities and the program of the American people is taking place not among small groups of leftists but in society at large. The debate between Sanders and Black Lives Matter—on social media, on TV and radio, in the newspapers, and on the street—is one of the most important discussions of our time and could if it is deepened help us all to find a way forward against both capitalism and racism. What appears to some only as conflict could lead to the construction of a new analysis and lay the basis for a new and broader social movement. We should all become involved in this debate and help to further it toward the common goal of a society of equality, democracy, and solidarity.

While many people on the left—both Sanders supporters and BLM activists—have sometimes seen this confrontation of opinions as conflict alone, it is in reality a progressive development, even if also sometimes painful experience, out of which could come a common understanding of a need for both economic and racial justice in America. The debate is only beginning and we have a long way to go, but how we interpret and approach this most important discussion could well influence its outcome. We should view this new national discussion as a positive development. We should support Black Lives Matter in pressing Sanders, while at the same time embracing the Sanders' supporters who oppose economic inequality. And the debate remains incomplete until Sanders supporters also decide challenge him to change his position on the U.S. military, U.S. foreign policy, and Israel. We should work to bring this critique into the debate.

Remember Where We Were Five Years Ago

What has happened already is really remarkable. Think where we were five years ago when the Tea Party dominated the political conversation until Occupy Wall Street drove it off the scene, turning our national discussion. Then Bernie Sanders, for years the independent and self-styled socialist from Vermont, decided to run for president as a Democrat on a program aimed to fight economic inequality and the role of money in politics. He also addressed the environmental catastrophe and the status of women in America. His demand for higher wages, for free public education, and for universal health care represent a challenge to the Republicans and to the Democrats who have spent the last few decades shredding social programs and subsidizing the corporations and demanding austerity. Hundreds of thousands of people around the country responded to Sanders' campaign turning out in massive numbers for rallies and house meetings and providing in small, individual donations, millions of dollars to finance his campaign.

But at first he had little to say to African Americans, though the Black Lives Matter movement, a

phenomenon much like Occupy, had begun only a few months before. The Black Lives Matter movement as we all remember began about a year ago after the police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The pain and anger of those and several other police killings fueled a powerful new Black liberation movement. Black Lives Matter set out to challenge America's institutional racism, particularly in the legal system, the courts and the police. But Black Lives Matter activists also spoke out against institutional racism in housing, education, and health care.

When Sanders launched his campaign, Black Lives Matter began to challenge him because his political program had virtually nothing to say about racism in American society. Black Lives Matter disrupted Sanders' rallies on two occasions, insisting that he and his supporters recognize the significance of racism in American society and speak to it. Sanders, who had been a member of CORE and SNCC and who had one of the most progressive voting records on civil rights issues, responded positively to the challenge of Black Lives Matter by publishing a racial justice platform that speaks to the issues raised by Black Lives Matter.

The Sanders campaign and Black Lives Matter are now engaged in one of the most important debates about political movements and social program in modern American history. There has been nothing like this either in terms of the national scope or the depth of the discussion since the early 1970s. We have had social movements, but no really significant discussion about the future of our country for over 50 years. Neither Sanders nor Black Lives Matter has so far produced a political program for the American people, but now in their debate—which is taking place among millions of working class Americans of all races—this clash of ideas could begin create a program for all of us: economic equality, gender equality, and racial justice.

The confrontations have sometimes been painful for both sides as Black Lives Matter activists felt that they had to shout to be heard, even by the left, and some Sanders supporters went on the defensive while others felt that their candidate should move more quickly to recognize his problem in dealing with the new civil rights movement and deal with it. Some, apparently including Sanders, would like to shutdown the Black Lives Matter interruptions of his rallies, as indicated by the Sanders' campaign's development of a new chant to drown out protestors. Hillary Clinton's security guards kept Black Lives Matter activists from interrupting one her rallies, though afterwards she shrewdly attempted to charm a group of the Black activists in a private meeting. These attempts to stop or to attenuate the debate will surely fail. The debate will continue until not only the candidates and their parties but most American people recognize our society's racist character—which is to say the debate will go on until we sweep this social system away.

This debate is limited by the fact that it is taking place around Sanders' primary campaign in the Democratic Party, a party that represents the American corporations and the capitalist system, a party that can never resolve the issues of economic inequality, racism, militarism and imperialism. We have to say that to Sanders too, demanding that he break his promise to support the Democratic Party nominee, most likely Hillary Clinton, if and when he loses in the primary. We will only ultimately make progress when we fight free of the Democratic Party. Still, this debate presents, the movements for social justice and the American people at large a wonderful opportunity to think through the program needed by our society and particularly by its working people, women, African Americans and Latinos, and other people who suffer discrimination.

Interestingly, while Sanders is a Democratic candidate, this debate is *not* taking place principally within the Democratic Party (though it is having some impact there) but rather among leftists, among social movement activists, among rank-and-file union members, and in the American public at large. The other Democratic Party candidates will be forced to take up both the economic and racial issues—though we should have no hope that they will actually do much about them, certainly not while there is no mass movement pressuring them. Our job should be to take this discussion into our

workplaces, social meeting places, schools and colleges, and places of worship. We want all Americans involved in this debate.

Division or the Struggle for Unity

Arun Gupta has argued that the Sanders campaign is leading to divisions in the movement, and drawing people toward the elite and away from the movement. Gupta apparently sees only division and no possibility of reconciliation and eventual unity between those who have emphasized economic programs and those who have prioritized the fight against racism. Yet, we could be witnessing the beginnings of a synthesis of these different points of view and of the movements they have historically represented—labor and the Black and Latino movements principally.

Once has, of course, to be realistic about this. The debate between Sanders and Black Lives Matter will not be able in several months to overcome hundreds of years of both institutional racism and widespread racist attitudes and behavior. Overcoming the long, exploitive and violent history of racism in America will require a powerful social movement, new social policies, and radical, fundamental change in American society. The Sanders campaign in the corporate-dominated Democratic Party is not the ideal interlocutor in this debate. And the young Black Lives Matter movement has yet to cohere into a national organization with its own recognized leadership and program that might put forward a more systematic analysis and program. Nevertheless, both sides have put forward clear enough positions and the debate as we have it represents a tremendous step up in American politics.

We should be contributing to the debate to push it forward. As many of the left have suggested, this is still not sufficient. Sanders need to take a position against U.S. militarism and imperialism and to break with support of Israel. Most important, we should approach this debate positively. We may be at the beginning of building a new movement that combines the fight for greater economic equality with the demand for racial justice, perhaps a movement for socialism.