Sanders for President?

written by Michael Hirsch | January 20, 2015

[This article is a reply to David Goodner's "Why Bernie Sanders Needs to Run for President—As an Independent."]

Dear David,

You want the excellent Bernie Sanders to run as an independent in the 2016 presidential. So do I!

To my mind Sanders ought to run both as a Democrat and as an independent, and there's no reason to think Bernie at the end of a primary campaign would embrace the neoliberal winner—he's at the twilight of a prodigious career; what can the party toffs do to him now? So the two electoral strategies you envision don't cancel each other out, as Illinois Republican John Anderson showed in his 1980 run both in the GOP primaries and then again in the fall general election as an independent against both Reagan and Carter. Anderson did so well in marketing himself as the real independent choice that he blew the far-more deserving Barry Commoner and the Citizen's Party effort—the effort I was involved in and the real choice for voters—out of the sky. Commoner did barely as well on the national level as the Greens did handily this year in New York State.

Saying that, I'm less interested in arguing the wisdom of running as an independent, as a Democrat, or as both. I think we ought to be talking about the difficulties of doing any national effort at all—difficulties you don't even hint at.

Why did Commoner, an excellent stump speaker and then the key informed voice denouncing environmental degradation, lose so badly? Because even had Anderson stayed out of the race, the campaign would have been virtually cut off from the media. We were on the ballot in less than half of the states. Our funding was a joke; we ran one radio ad. And worst of all, we had our calculation backwards. You don't run a candidate—not on the presidential level—to build a movement; you build a movement that represents actual struggles and that can mount a campaign the press can't ignore, the debates must include, and that has the capacity to either move the mainstream parties left or make them step back to die.

That was never the status of the left circa 1980, which was in many ways stronger than today's. It had more radicals concentrated in strategic workplaces; it boasted an environmental movement that was bigger even than Occupy. It had Marxism much more established and accepted in universities and even in economics faculties than it is now. The corporate offensive was not yet the full-court press it became post-PATCO. The Citizens Party even had the advantage of running against a failed president and a GOP that had not yet descended into unalloyed barbarism, so that the "lesser evil" defense of Carter should not have worked. It did, as did a drop in voter turnout.

So I don't see how a Sanders run has any advantage over Commoner's. Not in its candidate, its gravitas, or its ability to harness the left around a single campaign. Is a Sanders race worth doing?

Yes, and mostly to get the left out of talking to itself and into talking to a wider public with which we otherwise have little connection. But that decent effort won't run the table, and we ought to be frank about why.

None of this is to disparage either Occupy or the new antiracist movement, which you rightly prize, only to suggest that the leap from protest to politics, (from protest to radical politics, and not the house-broken variety Bayard Rustin and Michael Harrington mistakenly sold) is enormous. You make it sound like a day's stroll at a pristine beach and not the thousand mile trek across a carcass-strewn desert, which a left campaign either in the primary, in the general election, or both would of necessity be. I know that you fight with the army you have, not the army you want, but the army you have shouldn't be misled into thinking the moment is ripe for seizing.

If I have to narrow my criticism of your piece to one objection—a piece my heart loved even as my head got a migraine—it's that you oversell your argument. Parts read like a 4 a.m. television advert for the all-purpose ShamWow. What you don't do is assay the downside. Sure, that's what advertisers never do unless compelled by law, which is why Big Pharma has to—and in excruciating detail—list the downsides of its alleged new wonder drugs. But we're supposed to be better than that.

Some particulars.

The Hawkins-Jones Green Party gubernatorial effort in New York State, which I supported with brio, dollars, and shoe leather, too, was anomalous, and not an indicator of things to come. That election pitted a thuggish, corporate-hugging centrist (the lesser Cuomo) who was a sure winner against a GOP joke candidate. The Greens ran credible people who became not just a reservoir for protest votes, but an opportunity for the protest vote to register as necessary among those who would otherwise think the lesser evil equates with the good.

It took a full-out effort by the ballot-obsessed Working Families Party elders, mostly because of threats from key union leaders more afraid of Cuomo than anything else, to cut into that protest vote. They beat out the Greens narrowly in the city by mobilizing to say that a vote for Cuomo WAS counterintuitively (and preposterously) a protest vote in that it would save the WFP's precious ballot line. And the Greens statewide still outpolled the WFP handily, doing best upstate, including in Albany and Ithaca (huge in Ithaca) where state politics IS local politics and state problems are omnipresent. The Greens outdid the WFP, sure, and I was thrilled, but its trouncing of the WFP doesn't in itself indicate viability in any other context. That viability depends on what the Greens do post-election in beginning to make themselves part of the everyday neighborhood landscape, and that's a tenuous work in progress, not a sure thing.

As to Kshama Sawant's City Council win in Seattle as a harbinger: no! Hers was a discrete situation and in no way generalizable. She was an outspoken and prominent activist in Occupy who deserved and generated press attention, then ran in a nonpartisan election in a progressive city district whose incumbent council member was increasingly unpopular and past his sell-by date. Both the Greens' strong run in New York and Sawant's in Seattle happened in the context of a perfect storm. What would be Bernie's. Or ours?

Second, you don't build a national party out of straw, let alone a nation-wide Democratic Socialist Party alternative with the teeth to bite down hard on capital. If the failure of the Peace and Freedom Party effort in 1968 proved anything, it's that even a failing imperialist war and a highly unpopular race-and class-biased draft aren't sufficient to win or even do well absent other factors that contribute to creating a third party movement, let alone mounting a challenge to the business class and its permanent state. So when you write "[A Sanders campaign's] goals should include winning at

least a third of the popular vote, concrete victories in dozens of local, county, statewide, and federal down-ballot races, construction of permanent party infrastructure and close collaboration with social movement actors independent of the Democratic Party," you're telescoping events.

Third, the Occupy Movement was ideologically was so resolutely nonpolitical that it boggles the mind (mine, certainly) that you would see it as making a seamless transition to—or even the presaging of—an electoral upsurge. Its success in changing popular discourse away from the alleged horrors of a budget deficit to the real horror of an exploitative 1 percent was historic, but it never moved beyond brilliantly framing inequality to implementing a substantive politics.

Fourth, Bernie is likely not going to run as an independent; he likely won't even run as a primary candidate-insurgent. Why? Because by his own often-stated standard, he won't run absent a movement dedicated to working electorally 24/7 to make the effort matter and build something that lasts. So as attractive as he is (and he's quite attractive—I saw him in action twice this past year in Massachusetts and California)—at least attractive if the Vermont left ever forgives him for being key to getting the boondoggle F-35 fighter plane built in Vermont—his sagacity in saying he won't run absent a grassroots movement for him and whose local efforts his campaign would reflect nationally is spot-on. At least his standard requires those who think he should take the plunge to confront that reasonable demand. My answer: it's not going to happen, or at least not in enough states to get him on the ballot to run a mostly 50-state campaign.

With those limitations, he could actually do more harm running as a Democratic Party primary candidate attacking the predictable pack of Wall Street flavors-of-the month as they emerge, though the perennial problem of no money=no press attention=no debate time added to the stunted ground war he'll be forced to wage will doom that one, too. Remember too, that the only way the Libertarian Party could run a 50-state campaign in 1980 was with almost unlimited funding courtesy of the Koch brothers, of which David Koch was their vice presidential candidate. Sure, the mantra "they've got the power but we've got the numbers" is true enough, but our numbers are what Marx said about the peasantry; that they were for the most part "sacks of potatoes," held together by the sack, not by solidarity.

BTW, the support I know Sanders is getting from the world of the liberals, i.e., from Progressive Democrats of America mostly and from individuals in Democratic Socialists of America, too, is all based on his running as a Democrat. In fact, many of the electorally minded in DSA (excluding me, thank you) are mostly interested in a primary run, and I blame them (and PDA, which is more to the point) for cutting bait long before they need to. Like you, but coming to different conclusions, they're not much weighing the options either.

Elsewhere on the left (loosely defined) are Democracy for America and MoveOn.org, which are entranced with Elizabeth Warren, mostly as an alternative to Hillary. The warm feeling for Warren is so strong that the groups didn't even consider including Sanders as an option in their presidential poll, then announcing Warren scored 82 percent of all votes cast. Not since the Soviet Union fell was voting that heavily skewed , or the lack of competition clearer. (Though as I write Moveon.Org seems to be having a rethink about Sanders.) When liberals decide an election race is hopeless, who do we have to step in?

Lastly, (at least for now) by the time the GOP finishes grinding bones to make bread in 2016, even Hillary Clinton will start looking good in comparison to whatever creature of the night is the Republican candidate. That's how Obama won both times, and how even John Kerry could be said to shine in comparison to Bush. Now hating the GOP didn't work in the 2014 midterm elections. Think that trope is now a dead parrot? I don't.

In 2000, I worked hard for Nader. Even here in New York State, where Gore was a shoe-in, we got nowhere. And Nader started with more name recognition and more appreciation by the public than does Bernie now. Or Barry Commoner back when.

Bottom line, and to repeat, it would be great for the left organizationally if Bernie runs as an independent, but the rewards are just not what you say. Why? Because they are cultural and (for the left) provide a context for cooperation and recruiting, but those are not a means to build a movement on the scale you envision as a near certainty. Not in time to affect balloting in just 22 months. Which is more than sad, because the American imperium endangers civilization. We know that too well. Undoing its genocidal madness needs sober analysis for a start. I'm all for storming heaven, as Marx said about the Paris Commune, but let us at least be as clear as was Uncle Karl that there is no heaven except what we make of life here. Minimizing the profound difficulties of building a third party in the US—including the structured, first-past-the-post voting system that gives no representation to dissident voters no matter how numerous, which in itself privileges two parties and no more—is setting ourselves up for a fall. Building a national independent effort from the scant resources we have to turn a rebel band into a dominating political player on your timetable—a force with the breadth and depth it would need to survive and grow even in the face of predictable corporate counterattacks—is just as much illusory as thinking a Democrat on a white horse underwritten by Wall Street will save us. And save us from Wall Street.

I never much liked the Situationist slogan, "Be Realistic; Demand the Impossible." Amilcar Cabral's "Tell no lies; claim no easy victories," is the better watchword.

Best,

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