

The US Election and the Perils of Lesser Evilism

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In 2015, in the UK, Ed Miliband (Labour candidate) lost in a General Election to David Cameron (Conservative). Miliband's politics were a form of rehashed centrism with the odd slightly more radical policy thrown in but he was very much a candidate of the establishment (in as much as he was prepared to continue the economic policies of austerity). In the weeks and months before the election, the majority of the people on the left used the lesser evil stratagem - that is to say, they argued that, despite his flaws, Miliband was better than Cameron (certainly true) and if we voted him into power we might be able to pull him more to the left (debatable). In the event Miliband lost because of his lukewarm politics, because he simply couldn't provide any kind of credible or definitive alternative to the politics of the status-quo.

But in the wake of that defeat, the space was opened up for something which broke with the political consensus and austerity economics. The Corbyn movement. In his early days, Jeremy Corbyn was everything that Miliband was not. Miliband had been an awkward speaker, a distinctive nasal honk married to the type of glib soundbite which was enough to make you cringe. Corbyn, on the other hand, was slower and more deliberate, but his words carried the weight of raw feeling, rather than the sense of having been crafted by the mechanics of a Public Relations team.

And Corbyn could speak with pathos and authenticity, precisely because what he was bringing to light were genuine social truths; it was true that the bankers had ravaged the economy in wolfish and predatory fashion, and it was also true that the poorest and most vulnerable - the immigrants, the disabled, public-sector workers and those who eked out a living in the precarious economy - had been demonized and decimated, sacrificed at the altar of high-finance and the power of privilege. Corbyn for the first time, and on the back of a growing social movement, articulated a different political vision; one which was about recognizing the essential labor which was provided by those at the bottom, the importance of immigration both economically and culturally, and finally a sense that perhaps the real parasites were not those claiming benefits at the bottom, but those looting the economy at the top via the billions and billions which were being syphoned through tax-havens.

Corbyn's movement was closed down, in ways which were both brutal and insidious. But I think that

had Miliband attained victory in 2015, had the 'lesser evil' tactic had succeeded - then the Corbyn movement would have never have been born in the first place. Instead the left would have mounted their energies getting behind a center-ground candidate, and their radicalism would have been absorbed by the parliamentary machine, rather than being able to pose a significant challenge to business as usual. Would they have succeeded in pulling the Milliband administration radically to the left? If the five years of Milliband's stewardship of the Labour Party were anything to go by, it seems unlikely to say the least.

And this brings us to the question of the upcoming US election. The argument against voting for Biden, against voting for 'the lesser evil' is not simply an argument in which the political differences between Trump and Biden are absolved, whereby one simply says that they are both establishment figures and therefore just as bad as each other. For what it's worth, I think Trump is considerably worse than Biden - most significantly in as much as his presidency has helped mobilize far right groups across the US, groups such as the KKK and other fringe elements whose activities have spilled over into murderous violence on repeated occasions. But the argument against 'lesser evilism' does not depend on affirming some kind of moral equivalence between Trump and Biden. Rather it depends on showing that if we, on the left, push to channel our forces and our support into the Biden campaign, we simultaneously end up narrowing the horizons of the future; that is to say, we end up closing the space in which new forms of campaigning and political mobilizations can be created. We end up reducing the possibility of the type of genuine political alternative which might really challenge the Trumps of this world.

Of course, there is a sense in which the Democratic Party has always functioned this way. By situating itself as the only possible alternative to the worst corruptions of establishment power as represented by the Republican Party - it also became a conduit through which building social and political pressure in society at large could be diffused and the established order can be more effectively maintained. In the words of Malcolm X, this ostensible opposition between the two major parties allowed the ruling classes to show the voter a 'growling wolf' precisely so that 'he flees into the open jaws of the smiling fox'.

Under the rubric of 'moderation', the Democratic Party was able to achieve the grisly honor of being the first political regime in history to have unleashed nuclear holocaust, bombing Japanese cities and annihilating the lives of hundreds of thousands. In that period too, the party was also responsible for organizing concentration camps to intern Japanese-US citizens on US soil. In addition, the same 'moderate' organization was responsible for escalating the conflict in Vietnam to a shrieking apex, while war in the time of Obama encompassed Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Lydia, Afghanistan and Iraq as the dronemeister extraordinaire brought smooth, automated death to thousands of men, women and children, courtesy of the latest sleek, gleaming military technology purring through the skies. When I talk to ardent Democrats who consider themselves progressives, who locate themselves to the left on the political spectrum, I am often tempted to ask them if there is any atrocity the Party could commit which might in some way stymie their loyalty to it. Based on its foreign policy record thus far, it is hard to imagine.

Somehow, then, the party has managed to maintain the façade of progressivism, and it is this - one feels - which allows it to absorb and annul the possibilities of developing more radical political alternatives. The Party is 'radical' enough to allow the presence of an AOC or a Bernie Sanders in its ranks, i.e. someone with a somewhat more progressive agenda - but at the same time, the grinding internal mechanics of the party bureaucracy means that if such a candidate gets close to the leadership of the party they will automatically be closed down from above - by the superdelegates at the top who have the ability to nominate candidates irrespective of the way voting patterns on the ground dictate. In practice, such an elite layer is naturally calibrated to secure the interests of the elite candidate over and against the political outsider; in 2016, for example, 'many superdelegates

came out early in support of Hillary Clinton, a fact that caused Sanders to claim that the Democratic Party powers-that-be were manipulating the system... Sanders and his supporters thought her early endorsements from so many superdelegates might have swayed primary voters.'

But it is not just the radicalism of individuals which the mechanics of the party machine have evolved to quash. In the depression era, the US Communist Party - no doubts driven by the same lesser evil stratagem - worked to weld the support of the most militant workers to the Democratic Party, and in so doing thwarted the development of an independent labor party which could have emerged on a mass basis and with genuine social roots in the working classes. A generation before, at the end of the nineteenth century, a radical party had indeed emerged (the Populist Party) with a left-wing agrarian program which clamored for a more democratic political system in and through the direct election of senators, restrictions on the railway barons through federal regulation, aid to small farmers and laborers along with legal measures to protect them from rapacious corporate interests. Ultimately, however, the growth of the party was stunted, first by its support for the Democratic nominee William Jennings Bryan in the election of 1896, and then by its assimilation into the Democratic Party more broadly; a fusion which extinguished the radical flame of the party, and left its more militant members beached in terms of an isolated rump.

But there is yet another way in which the 'lesser evilism' argument in favor of a vote for the Democrats is problematic. It posits a rather mechanical opposition between the Biden-led Democratic Party and Trump's Republicans - the only expedient and realistic way to defeat the latter is to back the former. But in so doing, such an argument fails to stress the symbiotic connection which exists between the two political parties. Trump did not win in 2016 because he came to power on the back of a broad right-wing social movement which was then translated into a vast hike in the number of votes in the electoral ballot. In actual fact, in as much as Trump 'won' at all (he didn't, let us remember, gain the greatest amount of votes) he did only marginally better than McCain - the Republican nominee - had done almost a decade before. Trump won 46.1% percent of the popular vote, while McCain, for his part, had won 45.7% in 2008. The real difference was on the side of the Democrats themselves: in 2008 Obama had won 52.9% of the popular vote, while in 2016 Clinton only managed to procure 48.2%. In other words, the Democrat's vote share had fallen by almost four million votes (and that is before we take into account the increase in population between 2008 and 2016).

To say the same - Trump won because the Democrats ended up hemorrhaging votes. And the reason for this is little difficult to surmise. The eight years of Democrat administration which preceded the Trump victory were the years in which Obama's abstract and facile exhortations toward 'hope' and 'change' were extinguished in the fiery wastelands of the battle-scarred Middle East, while at home Obama had time and time again confirmed himself as Wall Street's man and a fervent friend to big business - whether it meant shoring up the commitment to bail out the banks, or a very public PR stunt in which he took a sip from a (filtered) glass of Flint water in an attempt to advertise the benevolence of the private company that had been poisoning Flint's water supply through the lead contamination which was leaking out of substandard piping. The sheer, sleek corporate quality to Obama's neoliberalism and its utter indifference to the lives of the poor now left a bitter taste in the mouth, the type of which Flint's population were all too familiar with.

More broadly speaking, however, the political system itself has narrowed down; the ability of the party in opposition to offer up a genuine economic alternative to the economics of neoliberalism is almost non-existent, such has the Democratic political machine been saturated by the campaign donations of big business. Indeed Biden himself, at the halfway point of 2020, boasted 106 billionaire donors to Trump's 93. As absurd as it is, Trump is able to advertise himself as a political outsider, as an anti-establishment figure for precisely this reason - precisely because the Democrats are more and more seen to have been bought and paid for by Wall Street. Trump's own rapacious brand of

neoliberalism is packaged in a right-wing authoritarianism promoting the politics of the 'strong leader' and a state which draws upon the more antiquated and organic values of a religious nationalism which nostalgically looks back to the spirit of a 'founding people' (read white Protestants). This, in turn, acts as a dog-whistle to mobilize the more rabid and racist sections of the lower-middle classes along with considerable sections of the financial elite who appreciate the more prosaic economic motivations of Trumpism in terms of tax relief for the most wealthy. In the words of the philosopher Katie Terezakis, Trumpism represents a form of 'romantic anti-capitalist ideology' which, in reality, 'only further privileges the capitalist elite it degrades in oratory alone.'

A similar trajectory has been achieved elsewhere; the most infamous examples being Bolsonaro in Brazil and Orbán in Hungary. In these cases too, we are made witness to a creeping authoritarianism which is registered in and through the appeal to a religious-nationalism with a pronounced racial inflection, one which privileges white skin at the expense of the 'outsider'. And in these cases too, the right wing administration has come into power - not on the back of a powerful far-right social movement which developed along fascist lines (despite ideological pretensions to the contrary) - but rather by having stepped into the void left by the previous administration, the so called 'left' or 'alternative' major party in the Democrat mold which had nevertheless signed up to years of neoliberal, austerity economics.

What has been termed the 'mounting tide of authoritarian neoliberalism', then, is only conceivable in as much as the mainstream parties of 'the left' or 'center-ground' - the alternative which parliamentary democracy has come to pose - have rendered themselves almost completely defunct in terms of providing any kind of political or economic program which helps facilitate the interests of the poor majority. When one insists on a voting tactic which consistently privileges the 'lesser evil' at a time when liberal democracy on a world scale appears to be entering into a terminal crisis - one fails to go to the root of the matter; i.e. to understand that the rise of a figure like Trump is symbiotically connected to the failure of the Democrats to provide any type of credible opposition in the context of the crisis of parliamentary democracy which has played out against the backdrop of a global neoliberalism.

Or to put it in another way - trying to get the left to marshal its forces behind the Democrats and Biden, not only narrows the prospects of developing genuinely left forms of political organization - moreover, such a strategy actively works to create the perfect conditions in which Trumpism itself can metastasize. Yes, Biden can prevent Trump from gaining a second term, but in so doing he merely prepares the ground for next time - another Trump, Trump mark II, a more effective, younger model. Ultimately, there is little to be gained for the left in encouraging the vote for the late-Joe Biden and his zombified brand of corporate politics, his stale empty slogans, the stench of blood and oil wafting in from distant, decimated lands. You needn't attach yourself to these kinds of politics and policies - however indirectly, however much you are holding your nose. To paraphrase a great revolutionist, isn't it time we let the dead bury the dead?