Wading Through Contradictions

written by Andrew Sernatinger | May 6, 2020



The Bernie Sanders campaign is over – now what? For a socialist left that has largely orbited Sanders since 2015, figuring out life without a rallying figure might be harder than we think. In their piece, "Facing Reality: The Socialist Left, the Sanders Campaign and Our Future," Charlie Post and Ashley Smith argue that if we're going to find a way forward, we need to start with a sober assessment of the Sanders campaign.

"Facing Reality" takes no prisoners in its evaluations: "…we need to face the fact that Sanders was more decisively defeated this time than in 2016." In objective terms, Sanders *did worse* in 2020 than in 2016: he took a smaller share of the votes in the 2020 primaries than when he faced off against Clinton in 2016; turnout was lower in general, but in South Carolina where turnout was higher those votes benefited Sanders's opponents (namely Biden) rather than boost his early lead. "Facing Reality" offers these assessments without trying to sand the edges about what the subjective benefits of the Sanders' campaign could have been, and in that way its both valuable and brutal.

Post and Smith offer some insightful explanations about *why* this happened – if we evaluate the campaign over two elections and see its lower returns the second time around, why did it turn out this way and why did we expect a better performance in 2020? The major takeaways here is that in 2016, the Democratic Primary was presented more as a coronation for Hillary Clinton, and Sanders emerged as the alternative to the status quo.

The socialist left ascribed meaning onto Sanders, believing that votes for Sanders implied an *affirmation* of Sanders' democratic socialist politics, but in fact "Sanders benefited from the widespread hatred of Hillary Clinton's record of right-wing neoliberal policies, especially in the rust belt, as well as from the fact that he was the only serious candidate running against her." In either/or contests, its difficult to make heads or tails of the situation, and "Facing Reality" suggests that in the enthusiasm that the form a political challenger took (Sanders) many missed the more basic point that in 2016 Sanders was the meeting point of anger at Clinton and the Obama years, rejection of neoliberalism, and, yes, aspirational social democratic politics.

Importantly, they cite Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism" to explain why it is that even as polls show people prefer the political program of a Sanders or a Corbyn, these insurgent figures have been defeated in essentially every one of these contests: "The bulk of workers and oppressed

people were convinced that however much they liked Sanders' program, it was "unrealistic"– and that the tepid neo-liberalism of Biden is the only alternative to Trumpism…Sanders was unable to mobilize new young and working-class voters." Without a higher level of class struggle that gives the *experience* of fighting and winning, the general sense is that even though we agree that these are better policies we do not have confidence that it can be achieved.

When You Come to a Fork in the Road

It's at this point that "Facing Reality" takes a turn to a more generalized discussion about electoral politics and the Democratic Party. This comes in two waves: the first is a counterattack against figures from the *Jacobin* milieu like Dustin Guastella, Seth Ackerman, Eric Blanc, Connor Kilpatrick, Paul Heideman, and so on. The second is when "Facing Reality" uses this crew of writers to argue that any attempt to interact with the Democratic Party inevitably leads to co-optation and the result is policing anyone to their left questioning the strategy. Their takeaway is to trot out the tired old warhorse of building a third-party alternative in the here and now.

This is where "*Facing Reality*" starts to break down. The thing is, Post and Smith aren't *wrong* per se – the Democratic Party *is* a capitalist party, *it cannot be reformed*, and we do need a new party. But that understanding alone does not help us to navigate the troubled waters of politics in the United States.

There is a guiding tension for the new socialist movement that "Facing Reality" misses entirely – many who have come into the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) or are interested in figures like Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) actually agree that the Democratic Party is a garbage institution that needs to be replaced. I would argue that the tendencies among many new socialists is this:

- Elections matter, we know this because bad things keep happening whenever some new Republican comes into power
- Democrats are shitty, and continually disappoint, but that seems to be the only option
- There should be an alternative, but third parties don't seem to work

This is the starting point for understanding the *electoral* objectives of new socialists – how do we manage this contradiction? What Ackerman and his co-thinkers were able to do was present a third way: maybe we *could* run on the Democratic Party ballot line *and* use that to build something new. It seemingly gave theoretical voice to the activity of 'insurgent' Democrats, acknowledging the reality of third-party barriers and offering a way to present a left electoral front. This was encapsulated in the concept of a dirty break, that you build a party within the party and when your forces are capable you "break off" into your own independent formation.

That perspective became hegemonic among new socialists. How else could it be when you see Bernie Sanders and AOC able to reach so many people while running as a Democrat? Even on the revolutionary left, for whom it had been drilled that Democratic Party is the "the graveyard of social movements" and, besides, the Party would never allow a *real* challenger, the example of the Sanders campaign had incredible sway and pulled many into this electoral facing.

This presents new contradictions: to the degree you're successful in winning campaigns in the Democratic Party, aren't you in fact legitimizing the capitalist party, raising the expectation of what the Party is able to do? If electoral success becomes an important measure, how far can you take your radical politics before you start to see them as an obstacle to "winning"? These kinds of questions were seemingly suppressed in the heat of the Sanders moment, and gave way to an electoral primacy.

Them's the Breaks

"Facing Reality" focuses its fire on those who have seemed to slide at an alarming pace from break to realignment – namely Guastella and Heideman. Post and Smith are correct in their criticisms, but they quickly jump from identifying the accommodation their opponents make to dismissing the dirty break question entirely; for them, the dirty break must and will always end in opportunism and corrupt the aims of the movement.

There are numerous problems with this approach. It rejects the central question many new socialists have about how to relate to elections. If we take the movement seriously, we understand that the calculation happening here is that based off perceptions of the experiments with third parties in the last forty years, and they do not appear to present a viable alternative. "*Facing Reality*" offers nothing here.

Any serious discussion about forming a third party needs to have a structural understanding of the way parties function in the US electoral system and contain an evaluation of the very poor performance of third parties. The Green Party peaked with Nader and has not proved capable of posing a viable alternative; Kshama Sawant was able to win a City Council seat in Seattle, but that experiment has not been reproducible and it has taken the support of the entirety of Socialist Alternative to maintain; local third-party formations like Progressive Dane here in Wisconsin (itself a retreat from the end of the Labor-Farmer Party) only function in nonpartisan races, and with limited success.

If we don't engage with this, we actually cede that ground to the kinds of arguments "Facing Reality" is so concerned with debunking. The irony is that in counterposing mass struggles to elections as the alternative, Post and Smith actually play into the hands of their opponents by "bolding" the line between elections and organizing, rather than reincorporating electoral activity as a *tool* for movements.

This brings me to my last point, which is that neither the *Jacobin* crowd nor "Facing Reality" recognize that Bernie Sanders and most of the democratic socialist electeds are not "movement candidates" – they don't arise from social movements and they aren't part of organizations that then present them as our candidate in an election; they have no real accountability to anyone. Sanders is a professional politician (much the same as Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France), and other socialist candidates put forward their own initiative as individuals.

What tends to happen is that these candidates come forward, mirroring the language of movements, and we hitch our wagon to their star. But movements are not driving – this has consequences when Sanders chooses to drop out and endorse Biden, or AOC campaigns for a centrist Democrat. The stature of these professional politicians and the effect they've had in promoting *similar* perspectives has meant that we've kept a discussion of our relationship fairly muted, but in reality, we are not advancing the same project.

In these cases, most of these politicians are ideologically committed to realignment, if they have an ideology at all. There hasn't been any "party within a party" infrastructure built, no fusion voting, no candidates brought up from the ranks, and no collective sense of how we want to relate to an election. Negotiations happen in all kinds of ways, but the Sanders campaign cannot meaningfully be used as evidence of the insufficiency of a dirty break. Otherwise all we're doing is grafting Sanders onto a strategy he never promoted and certainly never followed to say it doesn't work.

Back to the Beginning

This takes us back to the question that animated socialists in 2015: can the Democratic Party be used by the Left to build a new working-class party? Post and Smith say "no," and their opponents slither away from the question. I can't help but feel like there's something left to be desired here.

Let's position ourselves clearly: the Democrats are a capitalist party, the machinery of that party (both formally and through its complex of media and interest groups) is designed to serve corporate interests, and while there may be a degree to which the Democratic Party is "permeable" (as part of its function of mediating interests within its own class bloc) this is limited and ultimately an independent party of the working class and the oppressed is necessary for building socialism. This should capture the reality of the situation and our current experiences and situate us for the tasks ahead.

With that in mind, can we formulate some rules of engagement so that we are not sucked into the black hole of the Democratic Party? A local comrade Joe Evica, writing in 2018 for *Socialist Worker,* put out a particularly useful guide, in what he called the "clean dirty break":

"1. The candidate calls themselves a socialist and openly says they aren't a Democrat

2. The candidate is explicit about using the Democratic Party ballot line because of barriers to third party entry. They use their electoral platform (and position, if they win) to make third party entry more possible.
3. The candidate argues that the Democratic Party is a capitalist party and the working class needs its own party.
4. If the candidate loses the primary, they agree not to endorse the Democrat against the Republican and are willing to run in the general election as an independent, in direct opposition to the argument they are "spoiling" the race.
5. The candidate agrees not to accept electoral funds from corporations, super PACs or other Democratic Party mechanisms.
6. The candidate doesn't endorse candidates using the Democratic Party ballot line which don't meet the same criteria in points one through five."

Obviously, there is much more to say about how this might work, but this is a useful starting point to guide on how to serve the dual purpose of presenting a viable left candidate while also preparing the ground for a new formation. What Evica presents here is the idea that you *can* engage in independent politics while tactically using the Democratic Party ballot line, but only if there is a commitment from both the candidate and the movement to pursuing this strategy. This is a somewhat uniquely American problem, and something that I think that Ackerman and Heideman originally offered some insight into, and Evica astutely picks up what's of use, drops what isn't, and tries to take it to a logical conclusion. "Facing Reality" gets it right on so many of the descriptive elements but misses the thrust of the political problem we face.