

IN THE SHADOW OF DEBS

Bernie Sanders and the 2016 Presidential Election

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Eugene V. Debs¹, an outspoken Socialist Party leader of the early 20th century, casts a shadow over the 2016 presidential election. A recording of a documentary that Bernie Sanders made in 1979 has made its rounds among pundits and politicians. If you haven't listened to the documentary, it is worthwhile if for no other reason than Sanders cast himself as the voice of Debs. On the one hand, right-wing pundits have played up Sanders' "hero worship" of Debs, using it to stress the extent of the threat that Sanders poses to the status quo. On the other, left-wing pundits have downplayed it, emphasizing the chasm between Sanders' progressive but reformist agenda and Debs' truly revolutionary one. Sanders, as we will see, is no Debs.

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It's refreshing to see an American politician unabashedly embrace the word socialism—yes, the "S" word, whose name like Voldemort could not for a long time be uttered for fear of dire consequences. Yet, as Sanders' campaign team has noted, they have had a harder time getting media attention than the other candidates, thus limiting the extent to which socialism is the central issue of this election cycle, at least thus far [February, 2016]. If Sanders gains momentum following early caucus victories, this will certainly change. Indeed, the close contest between Hillary Clinton and Sanders in Iowa has made winning over the hearts and minds of the party's progressives a campaign priority for Clinton. She is now trying to sell herself as an economic populist.

The "S" word is coming out of the shadows. Sanders said in his autobiography *Outsider in the White House*, "[Debs] remains a hero of mine.... A plaque commemorating him hangs on the wall in my Washington office."² Sanders doesn't hedge on this potentially controversial admission. Nor does Sanders try to explain away his admiration for Debs in the revised edition of the autobiography. As even his political opponents recognize, Sanders is a man of great conviction.

For conservatives, red baiting Sanders has become a kind of national pastime. Donald Trump, with his usual bluntness, recently told listeners of Michael Savage's radio show, a Sanders victory will "destroy the fabric of what we are."³ Rush Limbaugh is also quick to red bait Sanders, but sees his threat to the established order as minimal. "He's a nice old codger, and he's an honest but

insignificant little socialist from Vermont.... He's wrong about everything, but he's harmless."⁴ Ann Coulter argues that Sanders has a better shot at winning the White House than Clinton in the general election, and if that happens it will usher in a liberal-leftist apocalypse. Trump is her antidote to this end-of-days prophecy.

In an October 2015 article published in the *National Review*, Ethics and Public Policy Center fellow Stanley Kurtz argues that everything you need to know about Sanders can be learned from his documentary on Debs:

Given that Sanders holds out Debs as a hero in this documentary, given the complete harmony between the documentary's point of view and Debs' own point of view, given Sanders' failure to create any distance between the documentary itself and Debs' most controversial statements and actions, and given Sanders' proud invocation of the documentary and his admitted hero-worship of Debs twenty years after the film was made, it seems fair to say that this documentary offers an important window onto Bernie Sanders' socialism.⁵

Kurtz highlights Debs' support for the Bolshevik Revolution as being particularly prescient of Sanders' America. Sanders, he continues, seems to relish repeating Debs' most inflammatory lines such as:

"[W]hile there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

“Why should working people support the Socialist Party? Because it is the only party unequivocally committed to their economic interests, to the abolition of the wage system, and the freedom of the workers from exploitation and every other species of servitude.”

“I am not a capitalist soldier. I am a proletariat revolutionist.”⁶

For Kurtz, Sanders is Debs incarnate.

However, Sanders’ rhetoric sounds downright tame compared to Debs’. If conservatives like Kurtz knew Debs’ writings better, they would link Sanders to the Socialist Party leader’s most incendiary statements. None were more inflammatory than his articles written in response to the 1906 extradition and arrest of Industrial Workers of the World founder William “Big Bill” Haywood for his alleged role in the murder of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg. The article “Arouse, ye Slaves!” culminates with the threat that if Haywood and his co-defendants are murdered, then “a million revolutionists, at least, will meet them [the murderers] with guns.” He continues:

They have done their best and their worst to crush and enslave us. Their politicians have betrayed us, their courts have thrown us into jail without trial and their soldiers have shot our comrades dead in their tracks. ...Let them dare to execute their devilish plot and every state in this union will resound with the tramp of revolution.⁷

Even as Sanders talks tough about Wall Street, his rhetoric does not come near the axis-of-evil, fire-and-brimstone view that Debs presented. Sanders focuses on raising the minimum wage whereas Debs focused on overthrowing the entire wage system. Debs would have derided the wage adjustment strategy as a palliative that did little to deal with the root cause of inequality and poverty. Evolution, not revolution.

Debs minced no words when it came to reformers posing as socialists, “They are ‘Socialists’ for no other purpose than to emasculate Socialism.”⁸ Debs often butted heads with Milwaukee socialist Victor Berger, the first socialist elected to the U.S. Congress in 1910. Sanders, like Berger, believes in a step-at-a-time approach to socialism. The transformation would occur gradually within the framework of a mixed economy, part capitalist, part socialist. Debs described this kind of approach as “sewer socialism,” and risked being co-opted and undermined by those in the corridors of power.

There is a significant point upon which Debs and Sanders agree. Both place class above race and gender as the central axis of political action, claiming that class equality will bring racial and gender equality. They embody the “coalition-building” approach to politics with class serving as the unifying issue that brings everyone together. As Sanders puts it:

It’s refreshing to see an American politician unabashedly embrace the word ‘socialism.’

Imagine. Black and white, Hispanic and Asian, straight and gay, middle class and low income, native and immigrant coming together to create an economy that worked well for the majority, not just the rich; a health care system that guaranteed health care for all, not huge profits for insurance and pharmaceutical companies; federal funding for education, not B-2 bombers; a tax system that favored workers, not the wealthy and multinational corporations. People coming together for the common good.⁹

In both their minds, plutocrats (Debs’ favorite term) and oligarchs (Sanders’) pose the greatest danger to democracy. Even at his angriest, Sanders’ rhetoric does not reach the emotional fury of Debs’. Nonetheless, Sanders’ frustration and anger with the system are unambiguous:

“Today, America is in danger of becoming an oligarchy. ... It seems clear that a smaller and smaller number of citizens are determining our nation’s future. The poor are disenfranchised, not by law, but in fact. The young think that voting has little to do with them or their prospects. Ordinary citizens have decided the political process is likely to fail them, and so they vote in ever smaller numbers.”¹⁰

The first stage of Sanders’ political revolution is actually quite modest. It is to get out the vote. Like a character from a feel-good Frank Capra film, he believes that the future of democracy is too important to squander by failing to vote on Election Day. For him, increased voter participation, especially among working and lower middle-class voters, is the make-it-or-break-it factor in his campaign for the Democratic nomination and the future of progressive politics in the United States.

Debs, unlike Sanders, did not get bogged down by policy discussions. He was a dreamer who believed that when the best impulses of the human spirit were unleashed, cooperation would replace competition, equality would replace exploitation, and yes, the “S” word would replace capitalism. Debs shared William Morris’ goal of socialism, that it should seek the “completest physical, moral, and intellectual development of every human being as the highest form of social state, as the best and truest happiness for every individual and for every class, where, as none need overwork, so none shall be able to force others to work for their profit.”¹¹

Sanders is, by contrast, a pragmatist. He has an idealistic vision of the future to be sure, but he also understands the frustrating realities of Washington politics. He knows that ending corporate welfare, creating a single-payer health care system, breaking media monopolies, and offering free higher education are not easily implemented in a divided government such as we have today. But it is possible for change to occur—slowly perhaps—but possible.

Marxian socialists are just as quick to reject Sanders’ links

II

to the Debsian tradition as conservatives are to link them together. The Democratic Party is too much a part of the established order to become the political arm of the American Left, so the gist of the Marxian argument goes. Only independent political action via a third party will ensure that the interests of the people themselves prevail. Sanders, by contrast, will not radicalize the Democratic Party. Instead, the Democratic Party will serve as a moderating force on him. Activist Howie Hawkins in the *Socialist Worker* writes that, “Sanders has now gone into coalition with the billionaire class he professes to oppose and that finances the Democratic Party.” The Debsian socialist tradition is one of independent political action, Hawkins continues, where voters’ full discontent with the status quo can be registered.¹²

Perhaps it is telling that Sanders’ November 2015 speech in which he explains his democratic socialist vision for America does not make mention of Debs. Instead, it invokes President Franklin D. Roosevelt several times, highlighting the ways in which democratic socialism represents the fulfillment of FDR’s New Deal for the American people. Indeed, unlike Debs, the concept of the mixed economy is key to Sanders’ understanding of American development. For Debs, there was capitalism or socialism. For Sanders, capitalism and socialism co-exist in a mixed economy where each shapes aspects of our current system. Sometimes the pendulum swings more in the capitalist direction and at other times more in the socialist. Sanders thinks it is time for the pendulum to swing a little bit to the left of center.

12

Sanders’ speech on democratic socialism asks Americans to think more consciously about how socialist ideas have made positive contributions to our nation’s development. Democratic socialism is not a European import, but part and parcel of the American experience. In this view, a new New Deal represents America’s salvation. Instead of working to dismantle what’s left of it, Sanders argues, the time has come to build on it and better ensure that government is, and remains, responsible and accountable to the people themselves.

Socialism—as manifest in labor legislation, unemployment insurance, and strong business regulations—has, Sanders writes, “...become the fabric of our nation and the foundation of the middle class.”¹³ Wealth redistribution through greater progressive taxation will serve as a corrective to the extreme imbalance between the haves and have-nots, but by no means eradicate it.

Thus, compared to Debs, Sanders’ democratic socialist propositions are transformative—progressive, but not revolutionary. Sanders himself frames his social-democratic vision as building much more on the legacy of Roosevelt than Debs. He is not a leftwing extremist. Yet, in this political climate where centrists are cast as extremists, Sanders becomes the very embodiment of the greatest threat to the so-called American way of life.

In case you’re wondering, so far I’ve donated \$3.00 to the Bernie Sanders campaign. I did so when the campaign was offering copies of *Outsider in the White House* in exchange for donations. With a \$16.95 list price and free shipping, I think I made a deal of which Trump would be proud.

NOTES

- 1 Outspoken leader of the labor movement, Eugene Debs opposed Woodrow Wilson as the Socialist Party candidate in the 1912 Presidential Election. Later, he would continue to rally against Wilson and his decision to take America into war and be jailed for it under the Espionage Act. (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/peoplevents/p_debs.html)
- 2 Bernie Sanders, *Outsider in the White House* (London: Verso Press, 2015), 27.
- 3 Donald Trump, “‘Communist’ Bernie Sanders Will Destroy the Fabric of What We Are,” *Right-Wing Watch*, 27 January 2016, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/donald-trump-communist-bernie-sanders-will-destroy-fabric-what-we-are>.
- 4 Rush Limbaugh, “Bernie Sanders, Phenomenon?,” *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, 11 August 2015, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2015/08/11/bernie_sanders_phenomenon.
- 5 Stanley Kurtz, “Bernie Sanders’ Documentary on Eugene Debs,” *The National Review*, 20 October 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/425839/bernie-sanders-documentary-eugene-debs>.
- 6 Bernie Sanders, “Eugene V. Debs: Trade Unionist, Socialist, Revolutionary, 1855-1926” (New York: Folkways Records, 1979), 2, 5.
- 7 Eugene V. Debs, “Arouse, Ye Slaves,” *Debs: His Life, Writings, and Speeches* (Girard, KS: Appeal to Reason Publishing, 1908), 310-1.
- 8 Debs, “Socialists Who Would Emascuate Socialism,” *Social Democratic Herald*, 3, no. 45 (April 1901):1.
- 9 Sanders, *Outsider in the White House*, 163.
- 10 *Ibid*, 279.
- 11 William Morris and H. M. Hyndman, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (London: Modern Press, 1884), 56.
- 12 Howie Hawkins, “Bernie Sanders Is No Eugene Debs,” *Socialist Worker*, 26 May 2015, <http://socialistworker.org/2015/05/26/bernie-sanders-is-no-eugene-debs>.
- 13 Sanders, “Senator Bernie Sanders on Democratic Socialism in the United States,” *Bernie 2016*, 19 November 2015, <https://berniesanders.com/democratic-socialism-in-the-united-states/>.