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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

AUGUST 3, 2018

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06.08.2018

Young Marxist Intellectuals and the Democratic Party

The “democratic socialist” movement spawned by Bernie Sanders’s 2016 campaign has led to an interesting development. Highly educated and self-described socialists in the academy have written erudite articles making the Marxist case for voting Democratic. Even if they are wrong, I am impressed with the scholarly prowess deployed on behalf of obvious casuistry.

These articles often appear in Jacobin, which has managed to repackage arguments made by Irving Howe a half-century ago in the snazziest of graphics. In 2016, for example, Seth Ackerman, a Jacobin editor and dissertation student at the highly prestigious Cornell University, wrote “[A Blueprint for a New Party](#)” that advanced “new electoral strategies for an independent left-wing party rooted in the working class” but in fine print recommended running in Democratic Party primaries. Jacobin followed up with another such article by Eric Blanc but couched in terms of a “[dirty break](#)” from the Democratic Party as opposed to the “clean break” advocated by Marxist dinosaurs like me. Such a “dirty break” was adopted by the Nonpartisan League in the early 20th century, when it ran candidates in both the Democratic and Republican parties (a case can be made that the Republicans were the lesser evil at the time). Blanc, who is a dissertation student at NYU, is even more steeped in Marxist lore than Ackerman. One supposes that this is a prerequisite for convincing congenitally radical young people to work for Democratic Party candidates when disgust with the party is at an all-time high.

The most recent occurrence of this special pleading can be found in the 2018 Socialist Register. Adam Hilton, a visiting lecturer at Mount Holyoke, takes up 31 pages in consideration of “Organized for Democracy? Left Challenges Inside the Democratic Party” that is based on his 2016 dissertation “Party Reform and Political Realignment: The New Politics Movement in the Democratic Party”. Essentially, Hilton points to the “New Politics” movement of the late 60s and early 70s as an experiment that might have produced a European style Social Democracy if George McGovern hadn’t gotten clobbered by Nixon. For an unrepentant Marxist like me, the nostalgia is over 1917 Bolshevism rather than 1972 left-liberalism. For that I make no apologies.

Hilton has defended pretty much the same thesis in six different scholarly journals and another four more easily accessible magazines, including two for Jacobin. One gathers that there is a booming market now for “democratic socialism” in both high and low venues. Since most of you don’t have access to the paywalled Socialist Register, my advice is to read one of the Jacobin articles, with this one best for understanding my critique.

My interest was piqued by Socialist Register publishing an article defending work in the Democratic Party since the editorial board virtually constitutes the high priesthood of Marxism, with York University’s Leo Panitch earning pride of place as a long-time advocate of class politics, resistance to bourgeois parties and all sorts of other good things. Maybe he included an article defending voting for Democrats as a courtesy to Hilton, who was his dissertation student. Let’s hope so since the Democratic Party would be the last party in the world I’d expect Panitch to promote.

For me, this pandering to the oldest, still-functioning, capitalist party in the world by smart young things is a novel experience. Ever since I got into Marxist politics in 1967, the only people on the far reaches of the left who advocated voting Democratic were in the Communist Party. You were not likely to find references to the Nonpartisan League running in Democratic primaries a century ago in their party press. Instead, it was more like vote for Hubert Humphrey or else we get WWII.

If Hilton has a scholarly grasp of what was going on in the Democratic Party in 1972, he seems a lot less knowledgeable about the broader dimensions of a debate that has been going on since the 1930s when for the first time in history the Communist left in the USA supported the Democratic Party under the ideological umbrella of Georgi Dimitrov’s Popular Front.

In the second paragraph of his article, he states that “amidst the Great Depression, the Democratic Party under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal successfully integrated insurgent

farmer and labour groups, after which independent third-party vote shares in US elections declined and never recovered.” Declined and never recovered? This almost makes it sound organic, like a zinnia dying after the first frost in autumn.

In fact, there was widespread support for a labor party in the 1930s but it was quashed by the same people who told you to vote for Hubert Humphrey in 1968. In 1980, Mike Davis wrote an article in *New Left Review* titled “The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party” that anticipated his classic 1986 book “Prisoners of the American Dream”. Describing the hunger for electoral alternatives even with a friend of labor in the White House, Davis writes:

In ‘feudal’ steel towns, as we have seen, political mobilization for democratic rights was a virtual precondition for union organization. Similarly in auto centers, the sitdown strikes spurred UAW militants to campaign against corporation-dominated local governments. In Lansing and Jackson, Michigan, for example, UAW ‘flying squads’ did double duty on picket lines and ballot counting, while in Flint and Saginaw the union stewards were also organized on a residential basis, creating a powerful ward organization. Local after local of the auto, electrical and garment workers voted support for the concept of a labour party in a groundswell of political independence that discomfited Lewis and Hillman. A Gallup Poll conducted in August, 1937, following the sitdown wave, showed that at least 21% of the population supported the eventual formation of a national farmer-labour party.

What if the Communist Party had thrown its weight behind the formation of a labor party, especially after working-class ire was raised by FDR’s “plague on both your houses” statement during the Little Steel strike? In 1937, Chicago cops opened fire on a Memorial Day parade organized by the steelworkers that left ten dead and hundreds wounded from gunfire or clubs. The mayor who ordered the attack was a Democrat named Edward J. Kelly who had been endorsed by the CP. Afterward, Kelly met with the CP-led steelworkers union and promised to keep the cops on a short leash if it would endorse him once again in 1939. Not only did it agree, a worker who lost an eye in the massacre did a radio spot for him during his re-election campaign.

There was one independent left party in the 1930s and early 40s, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, but the CP succeeded in merging it with the Democratic Party in 1944. While the party was shaky at best, taking a hostile position toward the Trotskyist-led Teamsters Strike in 1934, it was something that could have been made more effective by the presence of an organized and supportive socialist component—in other words, the sort of thing the DSA is up to in the DP. Writing for *CounterPunch* in 2014, [Graeme Anfinson](#) referred to

Stalinist elements within the party, who had been instrumental in bureaucratically shutting down any disagreeing voice from the unions, being at the forefront of the merger.

So, the independent third-party vote did not die of natural causes during the New Deal. It was killed.

Targeting moldy figs who still view the Democratic Party as a bourgeois party, Hilton assures us that it cannot be bourgeois since it has intimate ties with the trade unions. He writes:

Even though, as will be developed below, Democratic Party organs have rarely served as centres of community life, the party apparatus did develop structural links with trade unions in most large industrial states in the 1930s as well as at the national level in the process of presidential nomination and campaigning. In some states, such as Michigan, these institutional linkages of elite brokerage fused into tightly integrated party-union relationships. In other states, through the Congress of Industrial Organizations' political action committee (CIO-PAC) and, later, the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE), organized labour engaged in voter registration, door-to-door canvassing, literature distribution and get-out-the-vote drives for unionists and non-unionists alike.

Seeing my wife go through the ordeal of getting tenure, I understand how dissertation students have to be monomaniacally focused on their topic but surely Hilton must have heard somewhere along the line that there are bourgeois parties everywhere that have such links to trade unions. Christian Democratic trade unions have been around forever in Europe. As a [London School of Economics](#) article points out, they were bigger in the Netherlands than unions connected to the social democracy:

Unlike in the UK, trade unionism in the Netherlands has never been an exclusively left-wing operation. In fact, all current Dutch trade unions have part of their roots in Christian-democratic trade unionism. Until the 1970s there was a Catholic, Protestant and socialist trade union. Their members voted exclusively for the Catholic, Protestant and labour party, and the leadership of these trade unions and parties was strongly intertwined.

For that matter, although I don't have much direct knowledge of European trade unions, I am quite sure that they have many more connections to the grassroots than American unions. Hilton refers to voter registration drives, etc. but working-class disaffection from organized labor is at an all-time high just as it is for the DP. What's missing today is any sense of a *labor movement*. Proof of that was the wildcat teachers' strikes that only took place because the union bureaucracy had left the rank-and-file teacher to his or her own device.

Finally, let me turn to the “New Politics” movement that is the subject of Hilton’s dissertation. I know a bit about this since I was forced to contend with the McGovern campaign in 1972 as a member of the Socialist Workers Party. In 1968 and 1972, the antiwar movement declined because many young people understandably acting on a pragmatic basis hoped that the election of a Eugene McCarthy or a George McGovern would end the war. Indeed, when I was facing the draft in 1966, I was praying that someone like Senator Fulbright would save the day.

The New Politics movement was launched by Fred Harris, who was the head of the Democratic National Committee. He convened a commission led by George McGovern and Minnesota Congressman Donald Fraser that would propose changes to allow greater membership control and officeholder accountability. These reforms were meant to assuage “segments of the civil rights, student, antiwar, and feminist movements, as well as the labour-left”, according to Hilton.

Certainly, there were such segments, most of all people like Sam Brown and David Hawk who set the Vietnam Moratorium in motion. Their intention was to organize protests that would sheepdog people behind “peace candidates” like George McGovern, as Bruce Dixon puts it. Unfortunately for them, the Socialist Workers Party and its radical allies shanghaied the Moratorium and turned into a mass action calling for Out Now.

McGovern promised to withdraw US troops within 90 days of being elected but Nixon’s withdrawal was set for only 90 days longer after being re-elected. Since he was an incumbent and had practically invented the demagogic tricks of Donald Trump, he had no problem beating McGovern. Would McGovern’s election made much difference on the ground? Speaking for myself, I saw the antiwar demonstrations and the Vietnamese resistance as the only guarantee of peace.

On the more fundamental question of whether the New Politics movement could have made much difference resisting the neoliberal turn that arguably began in 1973 with the overthrow of Allende, one has to see the last 45 years as a function of capitalist contradictions rather than the ill-will of party bosses who hated McGovern. It was not the dominance of centrist Democrats like Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton that led to capitalist austerity. Rather it was capitalist austerity that made Carter and Clinton necessary.

Capital has a remarkable instinct for self-preservation. In his 1972 acceptance speech, McGovern stated:

We must also make this a time of justice and jobs for all our people. For more than three and half years we have tolerated stagnation and a rising level of joblessness, with more

than five million of our best workers unemployed at this very moment. Surely, this is the most false and wasteful economics of all.

Our deep need is not for idleness but for new housing and hospitals, for facilities to combat pollution and take us home from work, for better products able to compete on vigorous world markets.

Better products to compete on vigorous world markets? What is that except another way of saying make America great again? In both the Democratic Party left and the Republican Party right, there is this mythology of a return to a Golden Age based on an expanding economy and rising wages. For the past forty years at least, the trend has been toward us returning to a previous era but one resembling the Grover Cleveland administration rather than the New Deal.

Combatting the two-party system is going to require much more than elections. It will require the kind of strikes carried out by teachers, the Black Lives Matter protests, the Occupy Wall Street movement and a thousand other types of resistance to the status quo. For that struggle to move forward, it will require a revolutionary party that can coordinate and defend the mass movements. As it advances, it will eventually run up against the brick wall of resistance that every ruling class mounts when it is pushed back on its heels. When push comes to shove, we will need an American Lenin steeled in struggle to lead the movement toward socialism rather than a Bernie Sanders whose socialism stops short of even making the simple statement that capitalism is the source of all our problems. Based on our traditions, it will certainly be a democratic socialism that no capitalist power would be emboldened to attack it. After all, Cuba's tight controls were a function of the Bay of Pigs more than anything else.

It is doubtful that such an outcome can be gestated out of the Democratic Party. Nay, precluded.