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Slave Masters, Company Town Bosses, and 21st Century U.S. Politics

By Thomas Castillo
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A very interesting moment occurs during Bernie Sanders' speeches. We have all heard echoes of it. It pertains to the "political revolution" and the need for courage. He argues that democracy is a radical idea paraphrasing the Gettysburg address: of the people, by the people, for the people. Of course, this framing occurs after juxtaposing the corporate funding of other candidates and the \$27 average for each individual contribution to his campaign. The light he pours on the status quo attempts to demonstrate, as much as a stump speech can, how the current power structure pitches austerity despite the pervasive human suffering, inequities, and vast economic and wealth inequalities.

It is easy to contrast that with the paternalistic, condescending political garble of Hillary Clinton's "I feel your pain" rhetoric and over-aggressive (grip your crouch) machismo emanating

from the Republican stump. Both blow hot air as they pitch how the rich have learned their lesson: we just need a nicer free market focused on good old patriotism. The terms of power will not be challenged. The slave masters will kill a few more hogs at Christmas time and the bosses will throw a few more picnics. Meanwhile, the plantation and company town ministers preach subservience and fatalism: this is the best of all possible worlds and your time will come (at some point).

Hyperbole? Unfortunately, this is likely an understatement. The other characters in my analogies are oppressed slaves and workers. To what extent is the boot on the throat of the oppressed and to what extent is the hegemonic power in control of their minds and hearts? I would argue that it is a combination of both dynamics that prevent many Clinton followers and others to not cast their vote for Sanders. I suspect that Sanders' discourse causes a serious dissonance that disrupts their sense of order but it doesn't mean that this discomfort cannot be overcome. It can with a little faith and knowledge of past struggles.

To be absolutely clear, I am not talking about all the dotting endorsers, especially individuals within the Democratic Party machine who fear the power of Clintons' tentacles or who hope for a future return in their investment. Nor am I interested in the feminists whose pessimism about leftist politics has numbed their better instincts and has justified a Faustian deal with the status quo for the benefit of the symbolism of a "tolerable" female presidential candidate. These contingents have drawn their line and are not interested in engaging in any thinking and have given up on hope and imagination.

Their staid realism boils down to the perspective that incremental change is the best one can ask from a corrupt system. You know.... the view that inspired the Suffragists, Civil Rights Activists, and others who fought and suffered countless indignities for human rights and decency. Thanks but no thanks for your heartless apparent maturity. Courage has a higher standard. To these voices I would strongly recommend Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham" as a useful reminder that taking courageous and moral stances is absolutely necessary.

In his criticism of white moderates and their inaction and acceptance of the status quo, MLK argued the time for change was now. He wrote, "The time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy." This amazing letter is ever so relevant today. Mainstream Democrats should remind themselves of its critical insights and avoid being archdefenders of the status quo sanctioning "things as they are." Sanders' lifetime commitment to courageous stances and actions make his use of the word courage truthful, consistent to MLK's spirit, and adverse to the cautious path advocated by the mainstream.

Well, enough of that. I am interested in the common citizenry, my Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, and White brothers and sisters throwing support to Hillary Clinton. To quote Spike Lee, Wake Up!

Slave owners and company town bosses had much in common. As the ruling class directing labor, it was in their interest to instill fear and get those they ruled to accept their condition. The ingenious and inhuman ways that fear was fostered, through shrewd repression or the threat of

physical and legal punishment, has been documented quite extensively. More confusing and unclear is how the oppressed accepted their economic and political condition without daily constant rebellion.

The effectiveness of the tools of fear helps explain the apparent lack of will in terms of surviving in a horrible situation; however, also key were the small tokens of benefits, and promises of social harmony and future heavenly peace, that was central to buoying the ideology shaping their worlds. Central to both strategies was the necessity to keep expectations low and preach resignation to the social order—that is, respectable behavior and deference to authority were the time tested lessons of the day. Sadly, these dynamics remain a part of us today.

Conservatives love to point out the low labor union numbers while cheering for the “right to work”; neoliberal Democrats shed crocodile tears for the weakening worker movement while holding on to nostalgic memories of the 1930s blue collar struggles. Both embrace the programs of flexible production and insecure work and the principle of managerial prerogative and hierarchy. There will always be servants, right?

Decades of continuous and persistent antiunionism is best understood as ruling class self-awareness that maintaining a docile and disciplined labor force serves their best interests. Hillary Clinton and Republicans agree on this point. They seek to protect finance capital and the wheels that make this kind of economy turn. Reality TV pyrotechnics defines the Republican campaign. Distortion, misrepresentation, and faux emotion describes the Clinton machine. And the mainstream media covering the horserace are the cheerful accomplices helping to rob America a chance at changing the austerity regime.

The pundits (especially the political operatives) like to instill doubt in the would-be supporters of Bernie Sanders by equating him to Trump. This false and demeaning equivalency seeks only to marginalize Sanders’ powerful political message. The mainstream media’s coverage of Bernie Sanders amounts to a cruel shell game denying the working class and middle class a real alternative. The current political outrage, we should remind these cynics, stems from deeper reasons not irrationality. The economic and political system is rigged and the people know it, despite what these moderates preach. They are doing their best to keep Sanders message hidden whether by underrepresentation or misrepresentation.

Sanders has had the courage to challenge the farce of the U.S. political stage. That is why his call for political revolution has resonated. He is seeking to start a movement to undermine the lingering paternalism blocking real democracy. Now that’s a pretty courageous, radical idea something that surely would have caused slave masters nightmares and the blood pressure of company bosses to rise.