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## What is the Democratic Party Good For? Absolutely Nothing

By Andrew Levine  
April 29, 2016

Think of Republicans and despair for the human race. Even the ones who otherwise seem morally and intellectually sound champion political views straight out of Morons R'Us.

However, Democrats are worse — not morally or intellectually, of course; and neither are their views worse. But within the matrix of our semi-established two party system, Democrats do the most harm.

The Democratic Party is, by default, the political voice of organized labor and of social movements that fight for racial and gender equality, environmental sanity, and other worthy causes. Democrats can therefore do what Republicans cannot: integrate the victims of the status quo into a political consensus that serves and protects those who benefit most from it – the “one percent,” the “billionaire class.” They are good at this.

The generally accepted name for the socially atomizing, inequality-generating, environmentally reckless version of late capitalism practiced and promoted in developed countries over the past four decades is “neoliberalism.” For most Americans, as for most people around the world, neoliberalism has become Enemy Number One.

Republicans support neoliberal policies and practices more fervently than Democrats do. But, for putting them into practice, Democrats leave Republicans standing in the dust.

The American version of neoliberal theory and practice was concocted by Republicans and others who flocked into the Reagan administration decades ago; call them “Reaganites.”

The villainous old Gipper, Ronald Reagan, had little to do with it himself; he was never much of a thinker or visionary or policy wonk. But, in the United States, the name has stuck. It applies not only to neoliberals of the Reagan era, but to their successors as well.

Reaganites showed the way. However, “Clintonites,” the Clintons themselves and other “new” Democrats, put the Reaganite vision into practice.

In America these days, Reaganites think of it, Clintonites do it. Rank and file Republicans, insofar as they think at all, believe in it; rank and file Democrats don’t like it, but let it happen.

By now, though, nearly everyone who does not benefit egregiously from the neoliberal world order is fed up with its consequences. In public opinion, the Reaganite-Clintonite era has run its course.

Were the United States more of a (small-d) democracy, that would be the end of the story – and of the Clintons. But there is almost nothing democratic about American politics. It therefore looks like the neoliberal era will be hanging on for a while longer, an unloved encumbrance to human progress and wellbeing.

And, as the global hegemon goes, so go the countries it dominates. For the time being, the change so many yearn for is not quite at hand.

Even so, there are reasons to hope: American politics is changing – in ways that could, before long, cause the neoliberal world order to fall.

The Republican Party is destroying itself. This has been in the works for a long time, but the Trump phenomenon has pushed the process along, and changed its nature.

A facetious later-day Hegelian might say of this that the Cunning of Reason is at work.

Hegel thought that History becomes increasingly rational and therefore intelligible through the deeds of world historical figures, great men (always men) acting out their passions and interests. He insisted, however, that this only becomes apparent in retrospect. In this case, Reason’s cunning is on display even as events unfold.

Thanks to Trump, there is another wrinkle to add onto the Hegelian story: that Reason has a sense of humor. Hegel had men like Julius Caesar and Napoleon in mind. But the latest world historical figure, the Donald, is the very antithesis of figures like that: he is an over the top real estate tycoon, reality TV star, and all-around buffoon.

Hegel thought that opposites are integrally related. Democrats and Republicans certainly are. It is hardly surprising, therefore that the Democratic Party may also be on the brink of becoming undone or, failing that, of changing beyond recognition.

This might seem unlikely now that Hillary Clinton's victory over Bernie Sanders is practically assured. But the Sanders campaign, whatever becomes of it, introduced a destabilizing element into American politics. The Democratic Party may not yet be on the brink of destruction, but there is no telling what Reason has in store.

Were the Democratic Party to vanish from the face of the earth, it would certainly not be missed, except by deluded liberals who think, for example, that Hillary is one of the good guys, and that her "experience" – as an official wife, a feckless Senator, and the worst Secretary of State in modern times – has taught her how to get worthwhile things done.

Even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there are people who believe that, alarmingly many of them. Democrats buy snake oil at Morons R'Us too.

### **Enter Bernie**

At first, Elizabeth Warren was the Great Progressive Hope. She had one obvious advantage over Bernie: Team Hillary couldn't play the gender card against her. But she said she wouldn't run, and she meant it.

Sanders therefore came to occupy the space that might otherwise have been hers.

It was plain to progressives of nearly all stripes, from Day One, that, if nothing else, Sanders' candidacy would help reintroduce "socialism" — the word, if not the idea – back into the American lexicon. This couldn't hurt, and might actually do some good. A Warren candidacy would not have had the same effect.

Otherwise, between Warren and Sanders, it was, as far as anyone could tell, a wash.

One argument against Bernie was that his campaign would redound ultimately to the benefit of Hillary's because it would keep progressive voters on board long enough for them to be coopted into the Clintonized Democratic Party's mainstream. Another was that, on all but economic matters, his views were standard Democratic Party fare. The same arguments would likely have been deployed against Warren, had she decided to run.

I, for one, didn't much care. It was enough for me that the twenty-first century versions of New Deal-Great Society liberalism that the two of them had in mind is better by far than anything we Americans, with our bought and paid for pro-business political parties and our servile corporate media, had any right to expect.

My beef with Bernie was just that he was too Clinton-friendly. No doubt, Warren is as well.

Nevertheless, I decided long ago that, if Bernie was still in the running by the time I had a chance to vote in the primaries, that I would vote for him – if only because a vote for Bernie would be a reasonably principled and effective way to protest the coronation of Clintonism’s (neoliberalism’s) reigning Queen.

Earlier this week, I made good on that decision. My state, Maryland, disgraced itself more fulsomely than the others voting that day — except Rhode Island. But even before last Tuesday, a Sanders victory was very nearly a mathematical impossibility.

For a few months, though, it did seem that a vote for Bernie could be more than just a protest vote; that he could win the nomination and therefore the presidency.

And it still seems that the “huge” crowds coming to Bernie’s rallies and feeling the Bern are part of something a lot bigger. The differences from the Occupy movements of 2011 are significant, but the vibe is much the same.

Oddly, leftists were less skeptical of Occupy Wall Street and its clones than of the Sanders campaign, especially at first. I certainly was.

This was odd because Occupy lacked a political focus – electoral or otherwise. One didn’t have to be a committed Leninist to understand that this made it more than usually difficult for Occupy militants to figure out what to do next.

It was also plain that, without a more defined political orientation, the Occupy movements would be easily swept aside when the Forces of Order decided that the time to repress them had come, and when the campaign to reelect Barack Obama started sucking up all the air.

And so it was that Occupy burned out shortly after it got started.

Even so, it seemed, at the time, that Occupy’s bottom up structure and disregard of electoral politics was its strength. Also, the movement awakened a long dormant spirit of resistance — in much the way that Black Lives Matter now does.

Therefore, it wasn’t so strange, after all, that Occupy’s flaws didn’t seem quite as objectionable as the shortcomings of the Sanders campaign did in the days before it became clear that Bernie was on to something.

Unlike Occupy Wall Street, the Sanders campaign does have a focus and a structure; it is, and could only be, a top-down electoral campaign of the familiar kind. This is its weakness, of course. But it is also what has enabled it to reach more people and to change consciousness more profoundly than the Occupy movements ever could.

Much the same could be said for Sanders’ decision to run as a Democrat. Technically, he had always been an Independent. He was, however, an Independent who caucused with the Democrats in the House and Senate, and who generally voted the way a Democrat would. His change in party affiliation was therefore of little substantive consequence.

However, it was consequential strategically. Had Bernie run as an Independent, he would not have been included in debates, and he would be even more ignored by corporate media than he has been. Also, he would have had to waste money, time and effort just gaining ballot access.

Running as an Independent, he would almost certainly end up doing even less well than Ralph Nader did, running on the Green Party ticket sixteen years ago. Nader won a whopping 2.74% of the popular vote.

On the down side, though, by running as a Democrat, Sanders is strengthening the Democratic Party. And were he actually to win the nomination, he would have no choice but to cede at least some power over his campaign to that wretched party's leaders. They would also demand a role in his administration.

Sanders' decision to run as a Democrat may not quite rise to the level of a Faustian bargain; he has not had to sell his soul – not yet, anyway. But it comes close.

At the same time, by running as a Democrat, Sanders has done a lot of good. He has shown that it is possible to finance a Presidential campaign without relying on “the billionaire class” or Super PACs, or nefarious lobbyists. And he has moved the center of gravity in the Democratic Party to the left.

Thanks to the Sanders campaign, even Hillary is now talking the talk. Of course, in her case, it is only talk; when there is no longer anything in it for her, she will revert back to form. But, in politics, even insincere and opportunistic words can have beneficial consequences in both the short and long term.

Pundits used to say that the Sanders campaign was doomed to fail; now that it has very nearly done so, they are saying it again. This seems right; the institutional Democratic Party and the corporate media that supports it defeated Sanders, just as everyone expected they would.

But failure was not inevitable. Were it not for New York State's election rules, which disenfranchised large numbers of potential Sanders voters, and for the Democratic Party machines that the Clintons concocted or took over during the past decade and a half, Sanders might have been able to sustain the momentum he brought into the New York primary by winning there. He would then have been well positioned to give the Clinton juggernaut a run for its money in the “Acela primaries” and in the others to come.

Hillary was never the inevitable nominee, just the most likely one. Unfortunately, this time, the facts bore the probabilities out.

In the end, though, her victory may be a blessing in disguise. For reasons I will mention presently, the Democratic nominee this year has always been sure to prevail against Donald Trump or Ted Cruz. But, barring a successful and profound “political revolution,” he or she would then have as hard a time governing as Obama has had.

In Obama's case, racism made the problem worse. But Republican obstinacy will not go away just because the color of the Democrat in the White House next year will be white.

Republicans went after Obama mainly on domestic matters; they were fine with his drones and "targeted killings," his deportations, his war on whistle-blowers and his assaults on privacy rights.

We can expect Republicans to thwart Hillary at every turn too, except perhaps when she warmongers and otherwise promotes Obama-style murder and mayhem. Even more than was the case under Obama, we should be grateful that she will seldom get her way: being clueless and inept, she has a knack for making everything she works on worse.

Indeed, before long, even Obama will be looking good. Expect too that, as the consequences of Hillary's blundering unfold, many current Hillary supporters will wise up and turn on her in much the way that LBJ's supporters turned on him half a century ago.

We will never know for sure how a President Sanders would fare. On the one hand, the man is a straight shooter; even Republicans can respect him for that. But capitalists who feel their power and privileges threatened fight back viciously. Because they own almost the entire political class, a "democratic socialist" who means what he says would not be likely to be cut much slack.

Sanders is faulted for being an "idealist" and a "dreamer." This is nonsense; what he proposes — retrieving and then building upon progress made in the middle decades of the last century — is eminently doable, provided there is the political will. Countries less wealthy than ours do similar things all the time.

But finding the political will would not be easy. Republicans would be an obstacle, of course; but Democrats would be a problem too.

Even if his candidacy would generate enough excitement and voter turnout for Democrats to win control of the Senate and the House, as happened when Obama ran in 2008, Congress would still be in the hands of base and servile flunkies who toe the line for their corporate paymasters. The Democratic Congress Obama contended with during his first two years in office is a case in point.

Let Hillary deal with problems like that. Bernie can serve the people better in other ways.

### **Who's Afraid of Donald Trump?**

High on the list of nonsensical things that foolish liberals believe is the idea that because Hillary is a "centrist," she is more electable than anyone further to her left.

This belief is like the old notion that after a heart attack or major surgery, patients should have complete bed rest as they recover. This seems commonsensical, but the idea is demonstrably false.

In this case, though, it is clear as can be that Hillary is going to shellac Trump (or Cruz) in November. Sanders would do the same – in all likelihood by a larger margin.

Even a people capable of venerating Ronald Reagan and reelecting George W. Bush in 2004, after it had become plain to anyone with half a brain how devastating his war against Iraq already was, would not put their country – and its nuclear weapons – in Trump’s (tiny) hands. The Donald cannot win – no way.

To be sure, there is a fair chance that Trump is not nearly the racist, nativist and Islamophobe that he pretends to be. He played that part on TV, though; and he won’t be able to live it down.

America is not yet a majority-minority nation — but it is getting there, demographically and in spirit. Therefore anyone nowadays whose public persona resembles that of, say, George Wallace *circa* 1971 cannot win an election that is not confined, as Republican primaries mostly are, to out of sorts white people.

Moreover, if Trump is the Republican nominee, he will not only have to contend with the Clintons and their hapless minions; he will have the Republican Party, what’s left of it, against him as well.

The swords are already drawn. The Old Guard is mobilized against Trump because he threatens their hold over their Grand Old Party. Libertarians, theocrats and other self-described “conservatives” are against him too — because they realize that, despite his bluster, he is emphatically not one of them.

It is likely, in fact, that Trump would run to Hillary’s left on most issues – trade, foreign affairs, infrastructure development, jobs programs, holding Wall Street banksters and other corporate criminals accountable, and so on.

Nevertheless, liberals say that, like her or not, Hillary is the lesser evil; and conclude, on that account, that she merits their support.

There is no point now in going back over the case against lesser evil voting, except to note that one of the timeworn arguments – that it is not always clear who the lesser evil is — is especially relevant in a Clinton vs. Trump matchup.

But, in this instance, lesser evil considerations are moot: Trump cannot win in November, period, full stop.

There is polling data that suggests that Bernie would have done a lot better than he did in recent primaries were voters more confident that a Democrat, any Democrat, would trounce Trump (or Cruz).

In the years to come, as the horror that is Hillary becomes apparent even to those who are now somehow able to enthuse over her candidacy, we will all have cause to regret that debilitating imperviousness to evidence that afflicts Republicans and Democrats alike.

## **Whither Bernie?**

Jesse Jackson folded the Rainbow Coalition into the Democratic Party after the 1988 primary season. Because he wanted to be a player, he squandered an enormous opportunity.

If Bernie follows suit, it will nullify much of the good his campaign has done.

Sanders seems less cooptable than Jackson. Nevertheless, every indication so far is that he will follow Jackson's lead.

That it could come to this has been the great fear all along, and the main reason for faulting Sanders for running as a Democrat. Containing progressive uprisings is what Democrats do.

In principle, what got going under the aegis of the Sanders campaign could survive and even flourish without him. There is no denying, though, that, in the short run, it will help mightily if Bernie stays on board.

For that to happen, he will have to become more like Donald Trump. Liberal pundits and *faux* progressives are already busily telling one and all that this would not please them one bit. No surprise there!

When Republican grandees treat the Donald badly, as they have been doing relentlessly from the moment that it became clear that his campaign was more than just a joke, he has fought back with verbal retorts designed to cut them down — supplemented with barely concealed calls for violence.

Behind his words, however, there is, as everybody knows, the threat of exit. Trump could bolt, taking large swathes of the Republican base with him.

The institutional Democratic Party has treated Sanders badly too, notwithstanding their fear that, if they go too far, his supporters will also bolt, regardless what Sanders tells them or what he himself chooses to do.

They want to keep as many Sanders backers on board as they can, not because they are afraid that Trump will win in November — that isn't going to happen — but for the sake of down ticket Democrats. To have any chance of taking over the Senate, the House and vulnerable State Houses, they know that they will need to keep the people feeling the Bern active and enthused.

Their thoroughly justifiable fear is that, without Bernie, most of them will just sit the election out.

There is no obvious way to prevent this. With Hillary at the head of the ticket, the temptations of quiescence are too strong not to prevail.

But all is not lost; not by any means. It may be impossible now for Americans opposed to neoliberalism to elect a President who is not part of the problem; but, thanks to the Sanders

campaign, there has never been a more propitious moment for doing something even more worthwhile – changing the face of American politics by building a genuinely leftwing political party.

This is why the first order of business now must be to convince Bernie to join with those of us who would swim through vomit before voting for any Clintonite, much less the exceptionally inept and very dangerous “Madam Secretary.”

This won’t be easy. Bernie is too nice. It doesn’t help either that liberal pundits back the Democratic Party, as we know it, a thousand percent.

Even so, many Sanders supporters are sure to find their way to the Greens — voting, as I probably will yet again, for Jill Stein.

On economic matters and other domestic issues, Stein offers essentially what Sanders does; on foreign affairs, she offers a lot of what anti-imperialists don’t like about Sanders’ views.

With these considerations in mind – and with a Democratic victory in the Presidential contest assured – a vote for Stein ought to be a no brainer for the vast majority of Sandersnistas, especially those who live in the forty or so states whose electoral votes might as well have been assigned four years ago.

But the Greens have been going nowhere for as long as anyone can remember, and they are not even good for drawing protest votes. In 2012, when I would tell people, including some who follow election news closely, that I voted for Jill Stein, the response I would often get is: “Jill who?” This year is looking no different.

Nevertheless, thanks to decades of perseverance, the Greens do have ballot status in more states than any other “third party.” It is theoretically possible for them to assemble enough Electoral College votes actually to elect a President.

But their candidates are frozen out of media coverage. The media’s malign neglect of Sanders turned out to be not quite fatal, because, by challenging Clinton so successfully, his campaign was undeniably newsworthy; and because, running as a Democrat, he couldn’t be entirely ignored. Stein can and will be ignored; diluting the value even of the protest votes she receives.

However, were she and Bernie to join together, neither would stand a chance of being elected President, but the Greens would become a force to be reckoned with. This idea is one of many being floated (**link:** <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/04/21/the-undemocratic-primary-why-we-need-a-new-party-of-the-99/>). It is far from clear, though, that Bernie has the will, or that the Greens have the means, to make it happen.

Now is therefore a time to be thinking hard and fast about what is to be done.

It is also a time to be thinking about how a genuinely leftwing party could win over Democratic politicians whose hearts are in the right place, but who, for the time being, have no choice but to

make common cause with Clintonites. There are only a few brave souls like that at the national level; at the state and local levels, there are many more.

Predictably, though, calls for party unity are already become deafening. They should be rebutted whenever possible, and otherwise ignored.

If the party the Clintons did so much to move to the right is harmed by defections, so much the better.

There are Democrats who do good work at the local and even the state level; at the national level, the good ones could probably all fit, as they say, in one taxi, with room left over for luggage.

Arguably, the rest do some good just by being there — keeping Republicans at bay. That consideration aside, today's Democratic Party is good for nothing at all — at the national level and, with a few exceptions, further down the line.

The GOP is a wreck. This is outstanding news. A similarly damaged Democratic Party would be an enormously salutary development too, an achievement of truly historic importance.