Can Bernie Sanders Overcome His Movement's Greatest Weakness

The often quoted words of Canadian Scholar, Roland Wright, have a much deeper meaning than the many who quote them realize. In “Short History of Progress,” Wright quipped: “Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.” This, of course, pointed to the widespread belief in “rags to riches” Horatio Alger stories, and the idea that the US free-market system creates endless opportunities to become wealthy, available to anyone if they work hard enough.

In 2020, as socialism is becoming more popular and as a self-described “Democratic Socialist” is the front-runner in the Democratic Party’s Presidential primary, these deep-seated beliefs among the population have not really changed. Socialism, to most Bernie Sanders’ supporters and millennials, simply means “the government providing more services” while capitalism still means “working hard to get ahead.” Socialism is becoming more popular because the American dream is in decline.

A generation of young people, facing lifelong assignments of short-term service sector jobs, crippled by student debt, gripped with depression and hopelessness, and heavily medicated, believe that asking the government for more social services is not unreasonable. Since the 1950s, the rhetoric of Neoliberalism has declared that programs like cash assistance, student financial assistance, minimum wage laws, workplace protections, food assistance, and other mechanisms for aiding the downtrodden are “socialism.” The Neoclassical economics taught in American universities proliferates this deception.

Americans who think they are knowledgeable about economics will recite about how in “real capitalism” the government steps aside, and free competition produces the optimal outcome. The postal service, the paved roads, and social security for the elderly are found to be contrary to the sacred American free market, and an example of “socialism.”

Due to the fact that the debate has been relentlessly framed in these distorted terms, “Socialism” has become more popular. Millennials feel as if the American dream is dead. The ideal suburban home has been foreclosed. The well-paying factory job has been replaced by a short-term, part-time gig at Starbucks. The dignity of adulthood has been stripped away, with millions of young people living at home, working under the burden of student debt. The younger generation is looking ahead to a declining standard of living and feeling that some form of economic relief must be provided. This generation says “Ok, fine! I guess we are socialists.”

A Different Socialism Throughout US History

But if one goes back to the days prior to the Cold War and McCarthyism, when Socialism was widespread and popular in the United States, it was not rooted in pessimism and a belief that the American dream was dead. On the contrary, the implementation of a centrally planned economy was said to be the ultimate fulfillment of the American dream.

Communist Party General Secretary, Earl Browder, who ran for President in 1936 and 1940, and presided over an organization of hundreds of thousands of people who were key in the Roosevelt Coalition, and helped coin his slogan: “Communism is 20th Century Americanism.”

William Z. Foster, the Communist Party Chairman who ran for President in 1932, composed a booklet entitled “Toward Soviet America” to describe his vision of a post-capitalist society. Foster’s text spoke of mobilizing the
population relentlessly to increase social wealth, and praising Stalin’s five-year plans. The vision of the US Communist Party was one of transforming the USA into a high tech utopia of unlimited abundance by eliminating the senselessness of greed.

Though he disowned the label of socialism, the most powerful figure with anti-capitalist ideas during the 1930s was Louisiana governor, senator and political boss, Huey Long. Long’s “Share Our Wealth” movement employed the slogan “Every Man A King,” used by earlier American populists like William Jennings Bryan. Long proclaimed: “We say to America’s 125 million, none shall be too big, and none shall be too poor. None shall work too much, and none should be idle. No luxurious mansions empty, none walking the streets... In this land bless by the smile of the creator, with everything to be eaten, to be worn, to be consumed, America will become a land, sharing the fruits of the land; not for the favored few, not to satisfy greed, but that all may live in the land by which the Lord has provided an abundance sufficient for the luxury and convenience of the people.”

Prior to his assassination, Long heavily taxed the Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company. Long’s administration used the money to wipe out illiteracy in Louisiana to pave new roads and build new bridges across the state enabling rural farmers to sell their crops. With the tax revenue acquired at the expense of Standard Oil, Long created a vast business, financial and media apparatus in Louisiana that was centered around the state. Much like the private sector in contemporary Venezuela and China does not function according to the laws of the market, depending on subsidies and being compelled to obey central planners, Louisiana experienced huge amounts of growth and poverty alleviation with Huey Long and his mass movement of supporters controlling the economy.

The African-American community in particular benefited from Long’s efforts. Long had risen to power by opposing the Ku Klux Klan and aligning with Roman Catholics. Long enabled African-American women to become nurses, and appointed African-American ministers to lead local chapters of his “Share Our Wealth” movement. Huey Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party, was born in Louisiana, and his parents were so supportive of Huey Long, they named their son “Huey” after the great statesman.

The state-controlled economic apparatus Long built was swiftly broken up after his assassination on the steps of the state capitol building on September 10th, 1935.

It should be noted that Long was hated by the US Communist Party and many within the labor movement, despite being a progressive reformer. The reason for this is that Long had come to power by building a movement of smaller business owners and farmers and taxing Standard Oil. The Communists and labor activists, on the other hand, worked within the Roosevelt coalition, seeing the liberal Rockefeller oil dynasty as an ally in a Popular Front against the pro-Fascist National Association of Manufacturers (NAM).

While Communists and Labor backed Roosevelt, Long planned to run against Roosevelt in the 1936 election, and would most likely have received backing from the NAM. The factory owners did not see Long as a threat, as he had no relationship with labor unions and very little manufacturing took place in his state. While Roosevelt and the Communists aligned with the Rockefellers against the factory owners, Long’s power was based on fighting against the Rockefellers and he may have aligned with factory owners in this effort.

**Pessimistic Socialism: A Cold War Creation**

Bernie Sanders’ political career is rooted in the political crisis of the 1960s and 70s. Sanders was a young activist from Brooklyn who opposed the Vietnam War and supported the Civil Rights Movement. At the time, the United States had a booming economy amid the post-war economic expansion.

The activism of the 1960s radical was not rooted in populism or rallying the masses to oppose the greedy oligarchy. Rather, it was rooted in moralistic outrage at racism and war. Young people saw US society as overly authoritarian and overly demanding of conformity. These young people wore long hair, used drugs, listened to rock music, engaged in sexual promiscuity and their individual identity was at odds with society. Sometimes they compared themselves to the free thinkers within Nazi Germany who heroically refused to be “good Germans” and go along with Nazi atrocities, but instead “spoke truth to power” and faced heavy persecution.

Demoralization with US society, and a feeling that the American dream is a totalitarian myth seemed to define the 1960s political left. The Woodstock Festival of 1969 involved Jimmy Hendrix playing the US National Anthem distorted with electronic feedback. Counter-Culture activist, Abbie Hoffman, dressed in an American flag T-shirt. Anti-war activists marched in tattered, ripped up US army uniforms. The message of the 1960s left was “The American dream is a lie. The country has no future. Find inner peace and stop working so hard. Don’t be a sheep and
obey authority. Think for yourself.”

In May of 1970, New York City experienced the infamous “Hard Hat Riots” where union construction workers who supported Richard Nixon attacked anti-war protesters with baseball bats and then proceeded to patrol Greenwich Village looking for any long-haired or counter-cultural individual and attacking them. If the “Hard Hats” had spotted a young Bernie Sanders, he most likely would have been a target, as he fit the profile of a non-conforming, free-thinking anti-war “hippie” that they despised.

On April 22nd, 1970, as celebrations of Lenin’s 100th Birthday took place across the planet, the United States convened its first “Earth Day.” Instead of celebrating the birth of the Communist Revolutionary, leftists and socialists in the United States marched with green flags and spoke of how consumerism, overpopulation, and extravagance was killing “Mother Earth.”

While the Communist Party and various Marxist-Leninist groups opposed the counter-culture, the US government covertly supported it. The Congress for Cultural Freedom, a CIA program, funded entities like the Frankfurt School, the Trotskyist magazine Partisan Review, the art of Jackson Pollock, and other iconic “New Left” thinking of the era.

The middle class, non-conformist, anti-populist New Left was covertly created by US intelligence agencies. Brzezinski, Soros, and Kissinger effectively unleashed their creation against the Soviet Union and its allies, first at the “Prague Spring” of 1968, and most effectively in the late 1980s, creating the political crisis that toppled the Soviet Union.

Can American Leftism Save Itself?

Anna Louise Strong, the American journalist who expatriated to Moscow and eventually to Beijing, published an autobiography in 1935 entitled “I Change Worlds: The Remaking of American.” Her text described her childhood as the daughter of a Midwestern clergyman, and her desire to be “right in her soul” by going out and making big achievements for humanity. It described how Americans are known around the world for their “motor-mindedness,” and their relentless, creative, pioneer spirit.

Strong described how during the Great Depression and poverty created amid technological achievements and abundance, this American spirit was fading away. However, she said she found this Americanism in Moscow. As Stalin mobilized the entire nation to rapidly raise living standards and become an industrial superpower, the Soviet people were the new “pioneers” and to paraphrase Earl Browder, “Communism was the New Americanism.”

The reality is that the nearly Utopian optimism, the relentless drive to achieve motivated by a desire to be “right in your soul,” along with the entrepreneurial motor-mindedness which Strong described are all still alive in America. The reason the Republican Party maintains so much strength, and social-democracy and the welfare state has always been weak in the United States, is rooted in how widespread these sentiments are. Americans are simply not pessimistic. They are goal-driven. They are relentless, self-sacrificing, and motivated. The invoked reality of the US as a “nation of immigrants” may be deeply insensitive to the descendants of slaves and indigenous populations, but it points to an ideological and psychological strand of thinking that has been inculcated in nearly everyone in the country from birth until death. The American dream may be dead, but the mythology and “work ethic” behind it are not.

Amid a financial meltdown and economic decline, pessimism is certainly rising. Among the younger generation, the suicide rate increases together with drug addiction, form a very harsh reality. While Trump beats his chest boasting of buildings he constructed and promising to “Make America Great Again,” no Bernie Sanders’ rally is complete without massive applause following a line about legalizing marijuana.

“Yes we can!” Without Capitalism

So far, the typical young adherent to Bernie Sanders’ Democratic Socialism seems to say “The economy is rigged by the billionaires. We can’t really get rich and get ahead. The American dream is a big fat lie. This country was founded on racism, the genocide of Native Americans, and slavery. The government helps out the rich people all the time, so why can’t they give me some free stuff for a change!”

Such sentiments are completely justified, but they lack any overall dynamic power. Political movements do not only depend on popular opinion but on the ability to motivate people to bring a vision into reality. If the Sanders movement remains merely an expression of pessimism and relativism, it will not be able to really capture America. The desire for truth and the “work ethic” of rugged individualism and self-sacrifice is too deeply rooted among the
population, and skepticism, cynicism, frustration, and jealousy are not enough to dislodge or counter it. A vision of free healthcare, free college tuition, and legalized drugs is simply not enough to push millions into motion. It is a sensible proposal, but it does not induce fanaticism. In the face of a right-wing whose vision is rooted in entrenched values and a powerful, though fading myth about “what made America great,” it is not strong enough to succeed.

However, if Sanders’ already popular calls for economic justice and rallying of young people around a collectivist vision of “Not Me, Us!” could learn to harness the American “motor-mindedness” it could be exponentially more powerful. If the widespread American desire to fight for a better life were injected into a collective vision for re-forging the entire country and liquidating alienation in a mass effort for economic rebirth and construction, the Sanders movement could become unstoppable.

If Bernie Sanders could learn to sound more like Huey Long, William Z. Foster, or Anna Louise Strong, and less like Abbie Hoffman, his movement could create a political explosion like nothing seen before. As Obama created mass excitement with his “Yes we can” optimism and patriotism, Sanders could take this hopefulness to another level. He could say “Yes we can, without capitalism!”

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