

Resurrection of Leftism and Scents of Revolution: How Bernie Sanders' USA is swinging to Marxist Ideals

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Abstract

Though recently withdrawn from the 2020 US presidential race, Bernie Sanders has shaped the face of the new American left, within a decade. Unfortunate candidate for the Democratic Party's inner caucuses (2016-2020), he left a striking impact on American youth and visible minorities. Sanders capitalized on anti-conservative ideologies that emerged after the Subprime Mortgage Crisis (2008), Occupy Wall Street (2011) and all the upcoming protests that reject the economic and political establishment. In this paper, we purport to analyze the origin of the popularity of Bernie Sanders in resurrecting a quasi-Trotskyite political and economic discourse – unthinkable in a country that debases Communism and depreciates its representatives. Hence, through a crossed historical account of Bernie's ascension and the study of his public speeches, we will attempt to understand the scope of his impact and extrapolate the findings into prognostics on the future of leftism in the USA

Keywords:

Bernie Sander; New American Left; Occupy Wall Street; Anti-Establishment, Anarchism.

I want to dedicate this book to the younger generation. You are, in many ways, the most progressive generation in the history of our country. You have opposed racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and oligarchy. You understand that greed and the grotesque level of income and wealth inequality that we experience is not what the United States is supposed to be about. (...) What this book is about is converting that idealism and generosity of spirit into political activity. And when you do that, I have no doubt but that you and others like you will create a lot better world than the one my generation left you.

Bernie Sanders, Dedication P.VI
Bernie Sanders Guide to Political Revolution

1. INTRODUCTION

History is written by the winners. The certainty about the validity of this statement is highly questionable, as many defeated challengers have left indelible traces of their actions. The case of Bernie Sanders (twice defeated in the Democrats' Primaries) is a significant instance. The USA has always been reticent to the socialist ideals: from the liberal theories of Adam Smith to McCarthyism, the dominant doctrine was steadily allergic to communism, socialism, and collectivism. Leftist political figures pained to emerge. One of the rare instances of an audible left wing politician is Huey Long (1893 - 1935). Known as 'Kingfish', the Louisiana Governor was spotted as a left wing populist during the Great Depression. Long challenged Franklyn D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" in a constant contention of his political decisions. Long did not succeed to win office but marked history with unusual political standpoints; especially in a time when communist values were despised. Though largely accepted as a valid economic model, the Keynesian Theories were not adopted, and the USA opted for open liberalism, free-market, and Darwinian capitalism. In this paper, we will review the origin of the first economic crisis of the 21st Century, and how it has impacted the American society – giving birth to notorious figures of radical left. Bernie Sanders et al have carried the claims of the outcasts, the leftovers, and the poor.

1. A Chronicle of the Crisis

The Lehman Bros. Bankruptcy (2008), the Bernard Madoff scandal (2008) and Occupy Wall Street (2011) ended the protracted doctrine of the undisputed rule of financial capitalism. The unexpected annihilation of the American economic system was due to its foundations on finance instead of actual economy. This culminated in the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007 and the economic crash of 2008. The effect was devastating on the frail classes who were encouraged to contract high risks loans and, further, ensured that reimbursement could be flexible and secure. The birth of the 'New Left' was subsequent to the damages of the crisis on the middle classes and their inevitable pauperization. The names of Bernie Sanders, Bill de Blasio, and Elizabeth Warren incarnated a population's will to change, and anchor radical socialism in the American values.

There are analogies between the 1929 crisis and the millennial one. Excessive speculations and weak financial regulations could be the most noticeable ones. The Obama Administration – already stuck in the defence of Obama Care – faced a new wave of precariousness which was even more delicate to handle. Hundred thousands of Americans lost their savings and the situation has deteriorated between the banks and the citizens; and resulted in a loss of confidence in the whole system. Although the crisis provoked the re-nationalization of some banks, the Democrats, in power, were fiercely criticized for their gentry and abandonment of the poor people – though historians attribute the causes of the crisis to the Federal Bank's doctrine under Clinton, W. Bush, and the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's financial policy.

2. Occupy Wall Street: the shockwave

The movement Occupy (Wall Street) began on September 17th, 2011. It was the protest of a thousand persons in Wall Street, NYC, against the drifts of financial capitalism. "We are the 99%" was the slogan constantly voiced by the protestors. The stigmata of the subprime mortgage crisis and the

2008 economic crises fuelled the wrath of standard savers. By the end of 2011, the movement spread all over the country, and each city had its ‘Occupy’ subgroup.

Kumkar (2018) notes that the relative calm after the 2007/2007 crisis biased political observers into a false perception of the end of recession:

In 2011, just as the economic indicators seemed to suggest that the crisis was over, a group of young, left-wing activists, inspired by the uprisings around the Mediterranean, began a symbolic encampment in the heart of the financial district of New York City. After a short incubation period, Occupy Wall Street spread to cities all over the USA and many other countries, voicing sharp criticism of rising inequalities. In 2015, observers of the primaries of the two large US-American parties began to register signs of anomaly: In the Democratic Party, the social democrat and self-proclaimed socialist Bernie Sanders managed to win important primary elections against Hillary Clinton, who had already been considered the *de facto* crowned (P.01)

In fact, the shockwave extended beyond society and affected the inherent structures of political parties. Furthermore, activism turned into a symbolically violent desire to annihilate the totems of financial capitalism.

Comforted by the Arab Spring and the Spanish “*Movimiento de Indignados*” (also known as *Movimiento 15-M* or *Indignados Movement*), the movement gained large support all over the world – in resonance to the incendiary speeches of Hugo Chavez (Venezuela), the rise of Podemos and Syriza (in Spain and Greece, respectively), and various anarchist movements such as Anonymous. ‘Occupy’ was largely supported by artists, intellectuals and more importantly the middle class.

On the other side of the political exchequer, the Tea Party, as observed by Kumkar (2018) was the reactionary answer to the same crisis:

There is something the public debate was avoiding to confront and which threatened to resurface in these moments of shock. And however fleeting their appearance and disappearance might have

seemed, the protests of the Tea Party (TP) and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) offer a window into the social processing of the hard subjective and objective reality that subterraneously connects the Great Recession and the election of Donald Trump—and even points beyond it. (P.02)

The two movements are united in the belief that the current social-economic model has reached its edge and that a revolution is at the gates.

The claims of ‘Occupy’ consisted in an utter rejection of current economic / financial model: a call to fairer wealth redistribution and the concretization of social justice. The tenants of this movement blame the government for the undeserved support of banks and the politics of escapism. The movement turned into regular confrontations with the police and chaotic riots in some cities. In the midst of this political turmoil, a new American Left emerged: Bernie Sanders, Jessie Jackson, Bill de Blasio, and Elizabeth Warren, to name a few. These figures, closer to the radical left than to classical Democrat positioning, embodied the aspirations of millions of Americans. The most intriguing character is probably Bernie Sanders.

3. Bernie Sanders: A Turn to the Left

OWS revealed Bernie Sanders as an anarchist guru, unashamed socialist, or a serious reformist according to political observers:

“The Occupy Wall Street protests are shining a national spotlight on the most powerful, dangerous and secretive economic and political force in America . . . More than three years ago, Congress rewarded Wall Street with the biggest taxpayer bailout in the history of the world . . . The financial crisis and the jobs crisis have demonstrated to the American people that we now have a government that is of the 1 percent, by the 1 percent and for the 1 percent . . . The rest of the 99 percent are, more or less, on their own . . . Now that Occupy Wall Street is shining a spotlight on Wall Street greed and the enormous inequalities that exist in America, the question then becomes, how

do we change the political, economic and financial system to work for all Americans, not just the top 1 percent?”¹

Though extinct, ‘Occupy’ and all the progressive forces formed a nebulous mass that ineluctably appealed to a layer of society that refused to vote. Rare were the politicians that succeeded to galvanize young people. Sanders understood the language of youth and how to relate to their concerns (see the Dedication of his *Guide to Political Revolution*). Bernard “Bernie” Sanders (1941-) was the surprise candidate of the 2016 US race to the presidential election. Labelled as independent and non-affiliated to the Democrats, the Vermont Senator drained an unprecedented support of the youth and the working class. Though unable to access the 2016 and the 2020 Democrat primaries’ candidacy, Sanders revived all the latent progressive tendencies that the Democratic Party failed to federate. The period was certainly favourable to the resurrection of Neo-Marxist ideologies, in a world where The Reagan / Thatcher doctrines of economic liberalism and shameless capitalism had dominated the social-economic model from the 1980s to the present day.

In his most ferocious speeches, Sanders capitalized on the fragments of Neo-Marxist discourse held by the conjectural support of the radical / populist left in Brazil, Venezuela, Spain, and Greece. In his autobiography *Outsider in the White House*, Sanders delivers a testament about his progressive agenda to the country and its youth.

In the opening of his book, Sanders makes a storytelling statement about his family background, education and anchorage:

Why did I go? I really don’t know. I had been active in radical politics at the University of Chicago, where I was involved in the civil rights and peace movements, and had worked very briefly for a labor union. I grew up in a lower-middle-class home in Brooklyn,

¹ Sen. Bernie Sanders, Contributor Wall Street Protests In Huffington Post, 10/08/2011 03:05 pm ET Updated Dec 07, 2011, accessed on December 1st, 2020.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/wall-street-protests_b_1000642

New York, and knew what it was like to be in a family where lack of money was a constant source of tension and unhappiness. (P.30)

Though notoriously billionaire, now, Sanders shows a clear concern about money shortage and its incidences on the welfare of any given family. He has always been a firm believer in fair wealth redistribution and a universal social security system:“ Health care reform in America will not come without radical political change and the growth of a strong progressive movement”. (P.176).

Sanders' view of the capital is simultaneously Keynesian (on national expenses) and anti- Keynesian (on the management of national debt). (See table below)

Table 1: Pettinger's Keynesian vs. Monetarist Views (2016)

	Keynesian view	Monetarist view
Fiscal policy	In recession, expansionary fiscal policy can stimulate economic activity	Fiscal policy causes no long-term increase in real output
Wage rigidity	Wages can be sticky downwards causing unemployment	In absence of min wages/ trade unions wages flexible.
Unemployment	Demand-deficient unemployment big causes	Tend to emphasis supply-side unemployment (natural rate)
Phillips Curve	There is a trade off between unemployment and inflation	Only a trade-off in the short-term.
Government borrowing	In recession, governments should borrow more to offset fall in private spending	Government should seek to run balanced budget
Crowding out	No crowding out in recession	Government borrowing causes more crowding out

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In periods of recession, Sanders believes that radical decisions need to be taken regarding the national debt and the protection of low-income workers:

Won't all of this cost money? Yes. Isn't it foolish to spend money rebuilding our infrastructure when we have a huge national debt? No. Because there is one final way to build and expand the middle class: we must make radical changes in our national priorities. (P.226)

Bernie Sanders blames Wall Street for the frenetic accelerations and decelerations that destabilized the country's economy, and by extension society. As observed by his co-authors John Nichols and Huck Gutman, Sanders has sustained the Occupy Wall Street Movement:

When the Occupy Wall Street movement began in New York City's Zuccotti Park and quickly went national, Sanders embraced the language and the spirit of the protests. "We have the crooks on Wall Street, and I use that word advisedly —don't misquote me, the word is 'crooks'— whose greed, whose recklessness, whose illegal behavior caused this terrible recession with so much suffering. (P. 249)

Sanders' press-on-itis' posture is found in his *Our Revolution* (2016) Co-authored with Mark Ruffalo and *Bernie Sanders' Guide to Political Revolution* (2017). He does not belong to what Goldberg (2008) names 'liberal fascists' but rather to those who want a 'politics of meaning'. To explain the positive effect he has on young people one may note the socialist backbone ideals: free universal health care and education. Bernie Sanders is a fervent defender of free university tuition. He is notably progressive on societal issues : LGBTQ+ rights, Pro-choice in abortion, Marijuana decriminalization, and overall massive immigrants' regularization. On the international level, Sanders received harsh criticism for his pro-Palestinian positions. This earned him (like Noam Chomsky and Jeremy Corbin) anti-Semitism accusations.

Exaggeratedly criticized for his excessively utopian mindset and not having been able to federate the left wing of the Democratic Party, his basic ideals are echoes in the views of his rivals of the radical left: Sanders had the perfect momentum; he came to fill a political gap in a country where radical left is underrated and underrepresented in the political spectrum. He simultaneously fused and incarnated all the progressive values.

4. The Bernie Sanders Legacy

On the left of the Democrats, a considerable number of serious pretenders to the Oval emerged. Many political observers believe that both the Party’s Primaries and the Presidential Election represent a Glass Ceiling for the Radical Left. Yet, the civil society includes a bunch of associations and radical movements that vote for the Democrats or opt for abstention: Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), Act Up, Green Peace, GLAAD, and more recently Me Too #.

The fragmented voices of the radical left have been seldom agreed on a common candidate to the Oval. In most cases consensual candidates run as independents. The advent of the Bernie Sanders’ generation urged the emergence of charismatic spokesmen, who despite their disagreements with some of the positions of the Vermont’s Senator, share leftist optics for the future of the Democrats. Jessie Jackson, Bill de Blasio, and Elizabeth Warren become audible since the 2016 Elections. (See Table Below).

Table 2: Radical Left Figures and Optics

Scope	Positioning	Target Audience
Jessie Jackson’s Equality	Racialized	Afro-Americans
Bill de Blasio’s Equality	Gendered	LGBTQ+
Elizabeth Warren’s Equality	Feminist	Women

Reverend Jessie Jackson is the only figure that holds religious positions. De Blasio and Warren express more secular standpoints. It is evident that Sanders' ideals, audiences, and scope incorporate the three above-mentioned political figures. He has probably achieved the ideal synthesis of the claims of the radical left.

Though located in the centre-to-the-right- wing of the Democrat, President Elect Joe Biden seems conscious about the urge of a leftist compromise. The disappointed electors of Donald Trump constitute another electoral mass that the radical left can satisfy, minus societal issues. Joe Biden will have to account for a double reservoir of the discontented: the extreme left-wing and extreme right-wing.

5. CONCLUSION

A brief overview of the first millennial economic crisis suggested that post Reagan years enacted the resurgence of Marxist left in USA. The unexpected collapse of the American and World economy resuscitated latent progressive and conservative forces. Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party constituted two manifestation of public wrath against financial institutions and the country's management, as well.

Bernie Sanders embodied the leftist aspirations and anticipated the hopes of youth. His charisma and full-frontal rhetoric operated positively on young voters, the middle classes and visible minorities. Despite his double defeat in the 2016 and 2020 Primaries, the Vermont Senator has demystified socialism and radical leftism in a country that loathes communism, Marxism and collectivism.

The Sanders' legacy is found in the future potential Democrat candidates: Jessie Jackson, Bill de Blasio, and Elizabeth Warren. The panic resulting from the growth of radical left constitutes a glass ceiling that hinders this left from accessing actual power in the White House.

Nevertheless, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 demonstrated that the country may swing to radical values.

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