

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

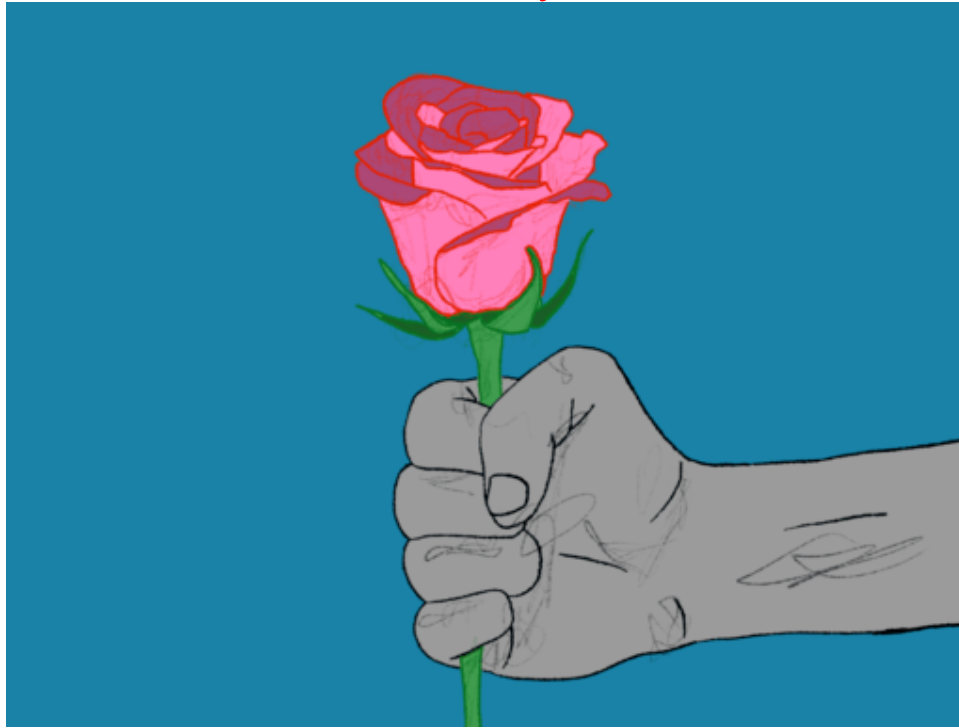
afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

by ANDREW LEVINE
30.03.2019

Democratic (Party) Socialism



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

No sooner had last November's midterm election concluded than the next round in the electoral circus, focused on choosing the Democratic Party's nominee for president in 2020, got underway. After having worked triple overtime for nearly two seemingly endless years (since even before Trump's Inauguration), by New Year's Day, the nation's junk mailboxes were full of it again, gathering in candidates' pleas for money full throttle, along with the usual never-ending spam.

In the political culture of the United States, electoral politics is like an invasive weed that crowds out everything else. Indeed, to many Americans, all politics is electoral; politics and electoral politics are one and the same.

This is obviously false. Nevertheless, there are quite a few Americans — labor and community organizers, polemicists, agitators and others — who are as politically engaged as can be, and who therefore ought to know better, but somehow don't.

Presidential elections are especially invasive; they even crowd out interest in other elections — for lesser federal, state, and local offices. They suck up so much political oxygen that it is hard even to get militants interested in activities, like party building, that affect electoral outcomes in ways that are not immediately obvious.

This is one of many reasons why, unlike in most other liberal democracies and very much to our detriment, “third party” and independent electoral ventures are, for all practical purposes, non-starters.

Before Trump, the duopoly party system was functioning in the way it seemingly always had — with two odious, ideologically like-minded, semi-established political parties, Democrats and Republicans, hawking their candidates the way that the Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola companies peddle their brands of soda pop.

To be sure, there have been times over the years when the candidates that Democrats and Republicans fielded differed from each other more than Coke and Pepsi do. In these cases, almost without exception, Republicans were the more odious of the two. This has long been the case in general as well.

Even today, with de-Trumpification an urgent political task ahead, a good chunk of the Democratic Party is devoted to remaining a condition for Trumpism’s possibility. They call this “moderation.” Hillary Clinton called it “pragmatic progressivism.”

Even back in what already seem like “the good old days,” Democrats, for all their many faults, were almost without exception the less odious of the two parties. They were, however, plenty odious in their own right. And, more often than not, their differences from Republicans were minimal.

Voters’ choices therefore had more to do with brand loyalties and candidates’ personalities, than with ideologies or material interests. The main exceptions were the party paymasters who seldom look beyond their own bottom lines.

The fact that our elections are basically apolitical is one important reason why our politics is, and long has been, so inane.

To be sure, the Democratic and Republican Parties draw the majority of their supporters from different segments of the population. Therefore, in many parts of the country, most Democrats have little in common with most Republicans. Nevertheless, both parties are cut from the same cloth. They both exist to serve the prevailing capitalist order and, above all, to make the world safe for the one percent.

Trump’s entry into the 2016 election did not cause that. However, it did change the political landscape somewhat by making the Democratic and Republican Parties less interchangeable than they used to be.

By 2016, a significant number of Americans wanted nothing so much as to stick it to the bipartisan power structure. Severe economic dislocations, cultural resentments, the inegalitarian ravages of neoliberal economic policies are among the reasons why.

A Democratic response was the Sanders campaign, potentially the most constructive initiative undertaken in American politics in living memory. There was much that was wrong with it in 2016 — much of that having to do with the campaign’s willful blindness towards goings on beyond the water’s edge — but at least it was not another exercise in Democratic lesser evilism. It was better than that.

In contrast, Republicans, standing on the shoulders of Tea Party Neanderthals and giving their darker angels free rein, built a cult around one of the most noxious, incompetent, corrupt, and self-serving comen on the world stage today.

The fact that Trump is vulgar, immoral, incompetent, lazy and ignorant of things world leaders ought to know was a mark in his favor. A vote for him is a vote against everything and everyone America’s twenty-first century Know Nothings are eager to act out against.

And fearing primary challenges from Trump and his Know Nothing friends, even Republican patricians, casting integrity aside, have taken to outdoing themselves being servile and abject. Therefore, all the vying for market share going on right now is taking place within the ranks of the Democratic Party.

Indeed, Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi notwithstanding, something remarkable is happening there – on the fringes only so far, but that is where the action is, and perhaps therefore, if all goes well, where the future lies.

Remarkable as it cannot fail to seem to anyone who was politically aware more than three years ago, “socialism” is back in mainstream public discourse.

It started when Bernie Sanders vied for the Democratic Party’s nomination for president in 2016. Sanders calls himself a “democratic socialist.”

Had the nomination process not been rigged against him, he could well have defeated Hillary Clinton, and then gone on to defeat Donald Trump. That didn’t happen, of course, but he did succeed in launching a campaign that became too big to fall back into the ether, leaving no trace at all. The revival of “socialism,” the word and perhaps more as well, is among its many legacies.

This led, in due course, to a revival of debates about what socialism is and about its merits and shortcomings. It has also helped make socialism a point of attraction for a new generation. The impetus had been there for a long time, but the Sanders campaign gave it a name and, on the surface at least, a history. Thus ideas that the word has designated since roughly the early nineteenth century have come returned from oblivion – in the form of policy proposals and aspirations.

Many of the most progressive Democrats elected in 2018 call themselves “socialists,” and organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) are flourishing. So are more radical groups like Socialist Alternative (SA), the national organization with which Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant is affiliated.

Meanwhile, all Republicans and most Democrats, fearful of losing their grip on riches and power are fighting back.

With their enemies wrapped in socialist garb, it is only natural for them to resort to tried-and-true anti-socialist countermeasures, like redbaiting. However, it is hard to red bait Sanders-style socialists – because there isn’t much red about them, and because the times are such in these United States of Amnesia, as Gore Vidal called it, that, for example, “red state” and “Republican state” are practically synonymous.

Nevertheless, there are evidently still circles in which the word “socialism” is useful for disparaging someone or something.

Evidently too, it has become harder than it used to be to think lucidly about socialism and capitalism, and about their respective merits. How could it be otherwise with so much of the public relying on Fox News and the like for their political education! Donald Trump is not alone in having been made stupider by mind-numbing, retrograde media outlets.

The general dumbing-down of the ambient political culture is one reason why it is not more widely recognized that on-going discussions within the Democratic Party about socialism are not really about socialism at all – not if the word means anything like what it has meant since the term entered into general usage early in the nineteenth century.

I don’t mean to be pedantic or to hold out for one or another favorite definition. Quite to the contrary, I would readily concede that the word properly designates any of a number of positions that share only highly attenuated historical connections and vague family resemblances.

What they do all hold in common, however, is the idea that “socialism” designates an economic order based on a different form of ownership than the one that prevails in capitalist societies.

Ownership is essentially a bundle of rights — pertaining to the control of productive assets and to the distribution of the revenues those assets generate when used. Under socialism, there is social or public or perhaps ‘state’ ownership of major productive assets; under capitalism, these things are privately owned.

There is a vast body of law governing ownership rights in capitalist societies, and ample scholarship to match. Much is therefore known about what private ownership involves, and therefore about what capitalism is.

Understandings of what socialism is are less developed, largely because there have been so few real world models to base them upon, and also because what there has been fell so far short of the ideal.

Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that to count as socialist, an economic order, and the larger society it undergirds must socialize ownership rights in major productive assets – as distinct from minor assets and, of course, personal property. Period. End of story.

Socialists are almost always egalitarians of one sort or another; and there are other values – like solidarity – that socialists generally uphold. There are some who would also insist that because socialist values build on liberal values, that socialist views about liberty parallel liberal views — except of course insofar as socialists, true to their core principle, would forbid those “capitalist acts between consenting adults” that define private property regimes.

None of the Democratic Party candidates have talked about abolishing private ownership rights in major productive assets or even about significantly curtailing their scope and range.

No doubt they have socialist values – egalitarian ones, especially. But there is no way that they are socialists according to any standard understanding of the term.

What, then, is going on in the capitalism-socialism ‘debate?’ Certainly, not what appears. But something of importance is going on nevertheless; something that would affect how we ought to think about the left most end of the Democratic Party where, again thanks to Sanders, socialism has become part of the conversation.

There is little point in bothering much with the so-called horse race in an election still so far off. Indeed, there is little point ever – because, unless the constraints under which political actors operate change, it doesn’t much matter who is officially calling the shots. Electoral politics is not going to change those constraints by itself; if anything, the causal arrow runs the other way.

Also, there is not much to say except to reiterate a few obvious points that are easily overlooked: for instance, that we would be far better off if there were social movements developed enough to use electoral politics not so much to advance towards victories, but to ratify victories already achieved outside the electoral arena. It goes without saying that between now and November 2020, nothing much will change in that regard.

It is not entirely out of the question, though, that a movement might grow up around a candidate which becomes so powerful and self-assured in its own right that it comes to own the candidate rather than the other way round. In 2016, had Sanders not pulled his punches in the end for Clinton’s sake, he might have caused something like this to come to pass. Insofar as what he misleadingly calls his “political revolution” can still resume what it has lost since Sanders effectively let it go, then that would be a powerful reason to favor him in 2020.

However, Elizabeth Warren has been a more interesting candidate this year – she is churning out first-rate ideas at a pace that no one else is.

She is also equipped with the right kind of private parts to get our politics past the Clintonite “glass ceiling” nonsense that had such a debilitating effect on America’s already burgeoning left two years ago. Since she and Sanders seem to be pretty much on the same place in the

political spectrum, I'd therefore say that if I had to choose here and now, she would get my vote.

But it is pointless to get bogged down defending that preference now because, as noted, unless the background conditions change considerably, it hardly matters who wins – except in a cosmetic sense, by which I mean that it comes down to whose face and voice we will have to live with for the next four or eight years.

On that count, I suppose, running against Trump, that any one of the candidates now running would be OK; though they all come with serious baggage and with past records that raise all kinds of red flags.

The only ones I couldn't abide would be the billionaires who have been testing the waters, the most flagrant “moderates” (and Netanyahu BFFs) in the mix, and anyone even worse (more retrograde, more inept) than Hillary Clinton — in other words, Joe Biden.

The one exception to the rule, among all the candidates in the running, is Tulsi Gabbard – mainly because her views on foreign policy, as best I can tell, come closest to a genuine non-interventionist, progressive internationalism that calls out to be heard in the national “conversation” that we ought to be having.

Unfortunately, though, she has a long way to go to gain traction – either from the national media or from her fellow Democrats, much less from sources, large and small, capable of funding a national campaign at the presidential level. It is therefore unlikely that she will get anywhere with her campaign and therefore that the conversation her candidacy could launch will ever be joined.

Still, I must say, contrary to my own better judgment about the futility of taking sides in this contest now (or perhaps ever), but in the spirit of, say, fantasy football, that a Warren-Gabbard ticket, though not exactly a dream team, wouldn't be half bad.

Is there any reason why Warren might be a better choice than Sanders other than her age, she is slightly younger than he, and her gender?

Sanders says he is a socialist; Warren says she is not. In truth, neither is; they are both left liberal egalitarians at peace with capitalism.

I wouldn't give her any credit for being what she says she is; a true socialist in the national spotlight now would be worth a dozen hard core left liberals. But we may have to look to Congress and to some State Houses and City Council buildings for that. Meanwhile, Warren's self-awareness and lucidity on this point is perhaps an additional mark in her favor. However, there is a deeper point involved – not so much at the policy level, where I imagine one would be as good or bad as the other, and not quite at the level of appearances either, but somewhere in between. The difference is not especially consequential, but neither is it entirely irrelevant.

Over the past century or more, there have been, as it were, two periods in which, on balance, public policy in the United States became more progressive: the Progressive Era itself, and the period of the New Deal and Great Society.

Neither was in any way socialist either in fact or by intention. Quite to the contrary, the intention behind both, ironically, was to save capitalism, not to destroy it.

The precipitating factor in both cases was accelerating levels of income and wealth inequality, with consequences similar to those that are currently afflicting the vast majority of the public once again. Addressing this problem in the past required recourse to measures that, for good reason, are normally associated with building and maintaining socialist societies. This is the case now as well.

The issues involved are complicated, but it would not be too misleading to say that in principle there are two ways to deal with growing inequality in capitalist societies – by

attacking the problem at its source, and by redistributing the distributions capitalist markets generate.

Socialists do both; they address the problem at its source by deprivatizing ownership of productive assets, the major source of unequal income and wealth distributions in capitalist economies, and they rectify the consequences of inequality by redistributive taxation, transfer payments, and various other forms of welfare state provision.

The issues are complicated and the lines of demarcation are not clear cut, but attacking the problem at its source is associated, historically, with the trust busters of the Progressive Era, while the redistribution of market distributions is more associated with the New Deal.

In terms of this overdrawn schema, Warren is more an old style Progressive and Sanders more of a New Dealer, though, in fairness, both of them fall in the “all of the above” category more plainly than in one or the other.

Still, there is something to the fact that Warren has, even this early on, proposed a wealth tax (on the very rich) and various other regulatory measures that would make market generated distributions less inegalitarian, while Sanders has talked more about welfare state measures such as Medicare for All.

It is therefore not too far-fetched to suggest that Warren is the Teddy Roosevelt of the two, while Bernie is the Franklin Delano.

This is why I say that if she and Gabbard, an anti-imperialist internationalist (very unlike Teddy in that respect), could somehow meld together, or run together as a ticket, Democratic Party socialism would actually be something of which a genuine socialist could be proud.

Warren is not a socialist herself, indeed she unabashedly claims that she is not, but the spirit, if not the letter, of the proposals she advances is closer to genuine socialism than the redistributive (Social Democratic) measures seemingly dearer to Sanders’ heart.

Our chances of ending up with anything like this may be slim, especially with neither of them (or any of the other candidates, except perhaps Sanders) having grassroots constituencies capable of holding them accountable, but, of all the options available to a Democratic Party still led by the likes of Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi, this would seem to be what a post-Trump America most needs.

MARCH 29, 2019