

Book Review: It's OK To Be Angry About Capitalism

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Bernie Sanders. *It's OK to Be Angry About Capitalism*. With John Nichols (New York: Crown, 2023).

Sanders' book centers on two tasks facing the American people. He states them at the outset. First:

These Americans [the predominantly younger voters who supported Sanders' candidacy] understand that proposals that tinker around the edges are an insufficient response to the enormous crises we face. For them, there is a rapidly growing recognition that this country has deep systemic problems and that it is not good enough to deal only with symptoms of the problem. We have got to get to the root causes. We have got to confront the destructiveness of modern-day uber-capitalism.

But this is complicated by the need to fight a second enemy at the same time:

Now is the time when, with all our energy, we must also oppose the reactionary and neo-fascist forces in this country that are undermining American democracy and moving us toward authoritarianism and violence as they scapegoat minorities and attempt to divide us based on our race, our gender, our sexual orientation, or our ethnicity.

As Sanders states, "Trump was not a normal political figure and these were not normal elections."

I'm totally on board with him on both counts.

There's probably little in this book that will be new to anyone who followed the 2020 Democratic primaries closely or is familiar with Sanders' political positions and rhetoric. However, he does analyze issues and states his positions in greater detail in the topical chapters than he's ever had time for in a political speech. In the first part of the book, he reminisces on the primary

campaign, the general election, and his role in implementing Biden's agenda in the Senate. The second part is organized chapter by chapter, according to political issues and his policy proposals for dealing with them.

His policy discussions, in particular, will sound familiar to anyone who's either a Sanders supporter or follows national political news.

The premise of the chapter "Billionaires Should Not Exist" is as straightforward as its title and entirely correct. It's a standard progressive indictment of wealth concentration and corporate power. However — as I'll discuss below — there are serious problems with the framing. He also has chapters on the profit-driven corporate healthcare system, labor policy and the future of automation, education reform, and corporate control of the media.

Sanders' framing still largely ignores the role of the state in capitalism. For example, the chapter "Billionaires Should Not Exist" repeatedly uses the cliched expression "unfettered capitalism" and focuses largely on wealth taxation as the actual means for ensuring billionaires do not, in fact, exist.

Now, so long as capitalism exists, I'll take the New Deal or Social Democratic version of state capitalism over the Reagan-Thatcher version of state capitalism any day of the week. But simply taxing billionaire wealth is by no means to use Sanders' own language at the beginning of the book, dealing with "systemic problems" or "root causes"; it's a slightly more ambitious way to "tinker around the edges."

There's no such thing as "unfettered capitalism," and never was — any more than there was "unfettered feudalism" or an "unfettered latifundist slave economy." The overwhelming majority of billionaire wealth and large corporate profits results either from direct government subsidies or from economic rents on artificial property rights, artificial scarcity, and entry barriers enforced by the state.

So the very phrase "rethink our adherence to the system of unfettered capitalism" amounts to a set of self-imposed blinders that limits us to the kind of incrementalism Sanders claims to oppose. By its very terms, it misleads us into believing that concentrated wealth and corporate power are spontaneous phenomena that occur in a "laissez-faire" environment if the state doesn't actively prevent them, and misdirects us into limiting ourselves entirely to redistributionist policies after the fact.

Since billionaire wealth is unearned, a system in which billionaire wealth exists to be taxed in the first place has already failed. Instead of taxing billionaire wealth after the fact, we should systematically dismantle all the structures that facilitate such income levels in the first place.

We should be radically scaling back and then eliminating intellectual property — particularly patents, the primary legal tool by which international trade and outsourced production are enclosed within corporate walls. We should be breaking the power of landlords and absentee owners of natural resources and replacing them with community land trusts and Ostromite resource commons. We should eliminate the legal monopolies by which owners of stockpiled wealth are enabled to monopolize the credit and investment functions. And we should eliminate the massive subsidies to long-distance transportation and energy extraction, which facilitate supply chains and scales of production far beyond what would be the point of negative returns if all costs were internalized.

And all these things should be accompanied by direct actions from below, like squats taking over landlord property, workers taking over ownership and control of workplaces, file-sharing

sites, and hardware hackers making intellectual property unenforceable, etc., rather than merely relying on state policy.

Imagine someone making grand pronouncements about the need to address the basic structural problems of feudalism and get to the root of the problem — and then proposing that feudal rents be taxed or peasants' work days on the lord's domain be limited, rather than simply abolish feudal land titles and give the land to the peasants. I suppose peasants would be better off after than before; but it would still be a Rube Goldberg approach, tinkering around to regulate landlords' abuses of powers that were given to them in the first place rather than just taking away the powers.

His approach to healthcare reform shows a similar lack of vision. His focus is almost entirely on healthcare finance, i.e., Medicare for All, at the expense of delivery of service (especially governance issues). Mandating safe staffing ratios, negotiating drug prices, etc., are all ways of imposing limits to abuse from above and outside a system, after you've already given away the game by accepting internal governance by for-profit corporate hierarchies.

Shifting healthcare finance from private insurance to a single-payer system would certainly be a relief for those burdened by the premiums at the individual level. But it would do little to address the system's actual costs, as opposed to shifting them. Health insurance profits and overhead are far less important than the costs of the service delivery system itself — the bloated administrative and overhead costs, senior management compensation, embedded intellectual property, and other monopoly rents, etc.

Ultimately the system needs to be radically decentralized whenever it is technically feasible. Bureaucratic hierarchies (whether in for-profit chains or community nonprofits) need to be replaced by stakeholder cooperative governance, and the costs of high-priced medical equipment need to be downsized by an order of magnitude or more via the open-source hardware ethos (i.e., what projects like Open Source Ecology have already done for micromanufacturing tools).

Regarding labor policy, Sanders uses language like “radical” and “addressing the root causes” in the immediate context of FDR and the CIO. It's odd to see a self-described democratic socialist so seemingly unaware of leftist analysis of the New Deal labor accord — an analysis which makes it clear that a major function of establishment unions under that accord was to restrain the rank-and-file and safeguard “management's right to manage.” I don't doubt for a minute that card check unionism, and 67% unionization rates and \$20/hr fast food wages like in Denmark, would make capitalism a hell of a lot more tolerable for workers under capitalism; given a choice between the present capitalist model and capitalism with strong unions, I'd take the latter in a heartbeat. But a labor policy that goes only that far, without addressing corporate ownership or governance, is neither democratic nor socialist.

To be fair, Sanders mentions “removing barriers to worker-ownership” and labor representation on corporate boards — but only as an eventual third step, to be pursued after full employment and unionization.

And although he calls for policies that address technological change and allow workers to benefit from the resulting increases in productivity, his “job guarantee” — “full employment at a living wage” — is the direct opposite of the proper way to approach these issues. It's a reversion to mid-20th century, industrial-age workerism.

And again, in fairness, he does eventually get around to things like shortening the work week and promoting workplace democracy; but it's only after a prolonged discussion of “taxing robots” and using the revenue for “job retraining.” The emphasis should be just the opposite: actively

celebrate automation, eliminating as many unnecessary jobs as possible (Graeber’s “bullshit jobs,” subsidized waste production, planned obsolescence, etc.), and then see that what work remains — ideally as little as possible — is evenly distributed and pays enough to live on.

It’s also ironic that he mentions the Sunrise Movement and Green New Deal as examples of ways labor could be put to work on a “green energy transition,” because his jobs guarantee flies in the face of the kind of degrowth we actually need to avoid destroying the planet. Harnessing the productivity benefits of new technology in a way that truly benefits workers, would require the mass liquidation of what David Graeber called “bullshit jobs,” and the elimination of all subsidized waste and planned obsolescence — accompanied by a drastic shortening of the work week with no reduction in pay. Ultimately, it will require decoupling consumption from “jobs.”

Aside from advocacy for employee ownership via ESOP plans and worker representation on corporate boards, and a throwaway line about community land trusts alongside advocacy for more public housing, Sanders’ proposals are almost entirely warmed-over FDR. He comes nowhere near the levels of outside-the-box thinking demonstrated by, among others, Jeremy Corbyn.

Corbyn was a radical departure from the mid-20th century managerialism of the Atlee government, which under the nationalization policies of Herbert Morrison, altered nothing but the ownership of nationalized industry while leaving the hierarchical corporate management model still intact. It was likewise a departure from the old approach to public housing, which left residents as powerless clients of local bureaucratic managers. In virtually every area of public life, he proposed replacing bureaucratic and managerial control with stakeholder governance and democratic self-management.

For all his talk of economic democracy, nowhere does Sanders once mention one of the most important phenomena on the Left in recent years: the new municipalist movements like the outgrowths of M15 in Madrid and Barcelona, Preston in the UK, the Evergreen movement in Cleveland, Cooperation Jackson, and hundreds of similar movements around the world.

There’s also the problem that Sanders focuses excessively on electoralism to the exclusion of everything else. Even when he discusses grassroots organizing and “bottom-up” politics, it’s almost entirely in the context of influencing electoral outcomes.

With rural over-representation in the Senate and massive levels of Republican gerrymandering at the state level, the American political system is deliberately stacked against radical agendas. And in half the country, any local attempts to think outside the box are stymied by reactionary state legislatures (e.g., restrictions on municipal reform in Austin, Texas and Jackson, Mississippi). That’s not to say it isn’t at least plausible that a leftward demographic shift, as Millennials and Zoomers become the voting majority, will reduce the threat of neofascism and make Sanders’ ideas more politically feasible. But until we reach a tipping point where, at the very least, there’s a filibuster-proof majority at the national level and reinvigorated voting rights legislation, an increasingly fascist GOP has locked itself into power in a major portion of the country.

In the meantime, purely electoral efforts must supplement their strength by alliance with the grassroots movements actively engaged in constructing a postcapitalist society from *outside* the state: squats, radical unions, community self-defense, economic counter-institutions, and the like. And electoral efforts would carry a lot more weight against fascist attempts to overturn elections if they actively enlisted the support of those engaged in planning rent, debt, and logistics strikes, and other forms of direct action to disrupt any would-be coup and make it impossible for fascists to hold onto power. The civics book crap, by itself, just isn’t enough to cut it anymore.

Bernie Sanders was head and shoulders above any other major figure contending for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016 and 2020. But for someone who talks so much about new ways of doing things and making radical structural change, he still limits himself to old ways of thinking to a dismaying extent.

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