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On Western Democracy

Or, Why I'm Not Feeling The Bern

Kyle Tussing

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This is a response to the recent and well articulated Jettison article I was mentioned in, "Socialists on Sanders" by Marc Blanc.

During the American Revolution, white Virginians serving in militias and the Continental Army were pissed. While poor whites were conscripted into the revolutionary army, rich white slaveholders were able to exempt themselves from service using their wealth. Petitioners in the Charlotte County militia said the slaveholders benefitted twice over by avoiding fighting in the war while getting rich off of their slaves while the war continued. (1) A strict Marxian view may suggest that the poor whites would ally themselves with black slaves against the wealthy Virginians. This did not happen. Instead, to curb anger, new enlistment rules stipulated that new recruits would be given a "healthy sound negro" between the ages of ten and thirty, gold or silver, and three hundred acres of land at the end of the war. Class conflict in white society was mitigated with the further oppression of a colonized group.

Various black nationalist personalities describe the United States as a colonial-settler empire. Europeans moved from their

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homeland to a new land, wiped out the indigenous population, and then imported a population to produce a surplus for white society to live off of. This imported African population was colonized. Settler society revolved around slavery and all settlers benefited from it. Whether it was the lumberjack whose wood built slave ships or the fisherman whose “refuse fish” was sold as slave meals, revolutionary nationalist J. Sakai writes, “all sections of white settler society- even the artisan, worker, and farmer- were totally dependent upon Afrikan slave labor.”(2)

While the forms may have changed, this general relationship has persisted. Today, the United States throws a higher percentage of its black population behind bars than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. (3) Once in prison, these individuals are paid between \$0.20 to \$1.20 an hour while generating \$14.54 an hour. (4) This surplus, also generated from the colonized world in sweatshops and other labor camps, flows to the powerful and then back onto the greater white society to lessen any conflict. Cheap products at Walmart are cheap for a reason. “Made in Vietnam.” “Made in Thailand.” Obama’s white rule with a black mask is neocolonialism, taking a figure from the colonized and having this figure retain white rule.

White leftism has tended to protect settler colonialism. In the early 1900s, on the west coast, Japanese immigrants were working in agriculture, railroads, and timber. The white left’s favorite Eugene Debs and his Socialist Party, supported and stirred up mob violence against these immigrants so white workers could steal their jobs and benefit from the infrastructure laid down by the immigrants. (5) This time a settlement in white society based on colonization wasn’t offered as a peace deal by elites, but violently established by white people on their own initiative with the support of their “radical” organizations. As Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton write, “The whites react in a united group to protect interests they perceive to be theirs.” (6)

tion. Real change is not socialist, anarchist, communist, or any other “ist” that can be attached to someone’s identity like a tumor. Real change organizes communities to provide for themselves without the supplies of corporations and governments. Real change will never be voted into an office.

1. McDonnell, Michael A. “Virginia’s Wartime Mobilization Leads to Class Struggles.” In *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, edited by Richard D. Brown and Benjamin L. Carp, Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2014, p. 199-200.

2. Sakai, J. *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat From Mayflower To Modern*. Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2014, p. 15.

3. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2011, p. 6.

4. Dyer, Joel. *The Perpetual Prisoner Machine: How America Profits from Crime*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000, p. 19.

5. Sakai, J. *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat From Mayflower To Modern*. Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2014, p. 161.

6. Ture, Kwame, and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, p. 7.

7. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. “On the Social Contract.” In *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, edited by Michael L. Morgan, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011, p. 887.

8. Ibid, p. 888.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was an enlightenment thinker influential to American and French revolutionaries in the 1700s. The men who forged the new American nation took special care to read his work. In *On the Social Contract*, which is perhaps Rousseau’s most iconic work, he takes time to describe how a stable government would operate. In chapter 6 he lays this out: the reliance on neutrality within a territory. The strategy is to collect enough force that simply is not active resistance and direct all these actively loyal and neutral social channels into a “single moving power ... made to act in concert.” (7) In the past, loyalty oaths to the ruling order were demanded, with the threat of death. Now, if you don’t say the Pledge of Allegiance, you are socially chastised.

Modern policing’s goal is to ensure the stability of the status quo. This status quo is preserved through the neutrality of the majority, the “silent majority.” To maintain neutrality is to engage in policing. Police officers are trained extensively in conflict resolution strategies. For example, in December 2014 a protest I attended in Athens, Ohio over the murder of Eric Garner blocked Court Street in front of the Courthouse, marched to the intersection of Court and East Union, and proceeded to block the intersection. The first thing the police did was to set up orange traffic cones to redirect traffic. This allowed those driving past the initiation of conflict to maintain the identity of “neutral” instead of taking sides, and in the end that meant siding with the police. The protest fizzled after a while, principally because resistance wasn’t strong enough to go further. To be strong enough, more people would have needed to join in the confrontation. Successful policing neutralizes the population and removes them as a factor.

Police are not just uniformed men, but also apparatuses which direct movement into Rousseau’s single moving power. The police are cameras in a stairwell, so people are made to govern themselves. In the architecture of the stairwell the camera is strategically positioned to allow it to see more space

and forcing individuals to move from point A to point B. This single moving power, which has also been called “the general will,” “the public good,” or “The People” is dependent upon citizenry; those who participate in the activities of the body politic. (8) These activities are attached to identities which reproduce daily life: worker and owner, customer and seller, subject of law and police officer, peaceful protesters and proud voters, etc.

Bernie Sanders is not real resistance to Western democracy. Sanders is channelling anger away from forms of direct confrontation into the single moving power of “The People” by turning this anger into something governable, into the reproduction of citizenship, into the passive act of voting and hoping. Western democracies must have a mass of neutral individuals, regardless of their personal opinions, which they have the God-given freedom to express. These individuals will remain undisturbed and, very literally, unmoved. These are citizens, who are unmoved and materially unengaged. One can vote for Bernie in hoping he can build the world they wish to see, but one is barred from actually creating that world or materially confronting this one. Western democracy is the politics of non appearance. Actual resistance is radical presence within space, refusing to be neutralized by police apparatuses.

Bernie Sanders is not real resistance to American empire. Sanders could create a middle class utopia, but it would come by further exploitation of the colonized. Karl Marx was correct to analyze in “Value, Price, and Profit” that wage labor is a paid ratio between how much the capitalist makes and how much the worker makes off of a surplus, but a colonial worker’s wages can be raised by taking more resources from the colonized and conserving the same ratio. Even if higher wages are attained by a reduction of the ratio between the capitalist and the first world worker, the surplus still developed in the colonized world and would not be stable without hyper exploitation. Sanders is jumping on the “raise the wage” band-

wagon, recuperating such demands into the settler-colonial system. Sanders may despise the settler-colonial system, but he as an individual cannot change a social structure from the ground up. As an elected official, his job is to “preserve American democracy.”

In Marc’s article, I was described as viewing Sanders as more than a “Democratic shepherd” because some of his supporters may lose faith in him and participate in radical action against American empire, such as building networks and infrastructure outside of the government so that we can live without it. This is more of an indictment against Sanders than even quasi-support for his campaign. Me voting for Sanders, on condition that he gets the Democratic nomination, is no support for Sanders either. I’m voting purely on the fact that my mother is sick and he would have a better healthcare plan than the Republicans. I’m the uninterested, selfish, single-issue voter news pundits despise.

As for “protest voting,” one wonders how much of a protest against the status quo voting for Jill Stein really is or whether voting can be resistance at all. It seems to be the same logic as a Sanders vote, channelling anger from material confrontation against the power structure as it exists and physically manifests itself in society into a passive act of vocal opposition. Passive acts are the backbone of Western democracy. If such voting is supposed to be a “radical statement,” the statement seems to be vote for X instead of Y and Z, but still nothing more than remaining passive. Protest voters might be better off just staying home on election day.

Real change will physically challenge the domination of space by American empire. Real change ends the neutralization of the population and accentuates lines of loyalty which run through it. Real change destroys “The People” so we finally see each other as people regardless of borders, a self conscious humanity. Real change abolishes citizenship roles. Real change needs active participation and material contribu-