

# Bernie Sanders and the Socialism Question

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Rob Urie

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[dropcap]W[/dropcap]herever Bernie Sanders' campaign goes from here, the left critique of establishment politics is getting empirical backing through popular support for his candidacy. The establishment's response— incredulity that the little people have the temerity to question their betters, is combined with a posture of victimhood, that blameless elites are being demonized by neo-collectivist malcontents who are too stupid to appreciate the blessing that four decades of neoliberalism has bestowed on them.

With all of the social finesse of Mitt Romney claiming that poverty can be solved by getting poor children to borrow money from their parents (to start a business), the establishment's cluelessness regarding how most citizens live is matched by certainty that the virtue of its opinions, as opposed to its factual malgovernance, will be its true legacy. In fact, people describe different realities because they are living different realities. Outside of oligarch and PMC (Professional Managerial Class) ghettos, the people want a better world.

Ironic— sort of, is the fear on the part of establishment Cold Warriors that Mr. Sanders is a real socialist versus the charge by the older left that he is an FDR-style savior of capitalist imperialism. Left unaddressed in both views is that environmental crises in multiple realms— climate, species loss and oceanic decline, point to a planet-sized hole in both right and left theories of capitalist development. As the accumulating evidence has it, capitalist exploitation is fundamentally incompatible with continued human existence.



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What has changed is that whoever is elected president will govern within a trajectory of environmental decline that will make itself felt in inverse proportion to efforts to ignore it. Moreover, given its global dimension, an era of international cooperation— along with the wholesale abandonment of consumption-based political satiation, will either ensue or something like the American-led race to the bottom will spell our end. Absent a full-scale rebellion to support the left program, the latter is the most likely outcome.

For those who don't yet see this, Bernie Sanders' proposal for a Green New Deal with a job guarantee is 1) the only way to avoid environmental calamity, 2) a tool to transfer power down the class structure, and as such 3) a way to counter the power of the oligarchs. The history of environmental regulation is of regulatory efforts being successfully countered by capitalists firing millions of workers. With the new reality that dirty capitalist production must be ended, generous use of the public purse is the only politically viable way to get from where we are to where we need to be.

Through the implied establishment worldview, culpability for environmental destruction and responsibility for resolving it aren't as self-evident as current politics suggest. Environmental ills began accumulating in the aftermath of WWII as the American industrial model was distributed around the world. The cause of environmental ills was / is industrial production, not political maladministration per se. With representative democracy premised on constituent service, the relevant political question is: which constituents get served? Several decades of Supreme Court decisions equating wealth with political speech have answered this question

unequivocally.

Without something akin to class analysis, resulting social divisions are inexplicable, hence the centrist canard that billionaires are people too. Under liberal theories of the state, elected officials have a duty to protect citizens from grievous harm, but not necessarily when those harms are caused by the ordinary business of other citizens and the state. This is the long held view that busted unions for bosses, launched wars for arms merchants, undertook foreign coups for business interests and negotiated environmental agreements that leave polluters in charge of Western political economy.

The question of what socialism might look like in this political moment more likely than not means looking forward to where we must go, not back to the struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By broadening the concept of capitalist exploitation to include the natural world, the oligarchs and the PMC can be understood to be a murder-suicide cult determined to trade the future of humanity for a thirteenth flat-screen television and a ninth vacation home. Who, precisely, is victimizing the rich with environmental calamity?

Lest this be less than evident, this is still a history of the bosses— of the oligarchs and their professional managers. Most of the human beings caught up in this process have lived as scientific subjects, inputs into industrial processes to be optimized. The gig economy is the answer to the optimization problem: how does capital get workers to work more for less pay? Surveillance is the quest for total control. It provides the data needed for micro-optimization, exploitation down to the number of breaths per minute and heartbeats per hour to be allotted.

The New Deal represented a tradeoff between (selective) internal economic security and the business of global capitalist exploitation. While the internal civic

righteousness of the Civil Rights movement was being brought to fruition, the CIA was ousting democratically elected leaders for American business interests abroad. FDR's post-WWII military Keynesianism produced nuclear weapons and the machinery of death and destruction along with (temporary) employment security. In theory, this tradeoff was incidental, while in fact, it wasn't.

The older questions of revolution versus a takeover of the state, the collective ownership of productive resources versus private ownership, and even the role of nation-states in delimiting political realms, are now confronted by a corporate internationalism. With environmental crisis underway, what power does the state have over the environmental practices of multinational corporations? How this has played out environmentally is that a large part of American liberal 'success' in reducing greenhouse gas emissions has come through outsourcing dirty production to China.

Multinational corporations, NGOs and stateless elites have long used national borders as realms of political control. As both fact and metaphor, environmental calamity has followed wherever these have gone. Since NAFTA was passed, Investor-State Dispute Settlement clauses in trade agreements have transferred sovereign power over environmental issues to supra-national tribunals of corporate lawyers. Without looking past the rhetoric to see how actual political power is being exercised, effectively addressing environmental decline simply isn't possible.

The Chinese political model, like the American of the last half-century, is state-capitalism with political quiescence bought with dismal employment paid in consumer goods. If anything, the American model is more intrusive, more insistent, and more likely than not, will be more difficult to dislodge. Current media chatter about the authoritarian government of China depends on the distinction between public and private authoritarian control. American corporations are

authoritarian by design. This authoritarianism is expressed through control of workers, control of media and use of the surveillance state to manage political dissent.

A capital strike is the practice where business suddenly withdraws capital, employment and / or needed goods in order to leverage political goals. After Richard Nixon created the EPA in 1970, Ronald Reagan used the manufactured recession of the early 1980s to render environmental regulation politically untenable. Mr. Reagan used the sudden withdrawal of employment caused by the recession to successfully portray a tradeoff between jobs and environmental regulation. Establishment politicians intent on 'proving' that environmental resolution isn't politically tenable need only end some dirty production without a safety net for displaced workers.

With recent UN environmental committee reports in hand ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), there is no configuration of circumstances under which 'green growth'— the most politically expedient resolution to environmental ills, will solve them. Liberal proposals for a Green New Deal depend mostly or entirely on green growth, even though there is [no evidence](#) to support it as a solution. And even the UN committee solutions depend on untested and [wildly speculative technologies](#) to meet their environmental goals. These programs may be worse than doing nothing because they emerge from a logic of subtraction through more of the same.

Readers are encouraged to read the links in full. What is brought to the fore is that almost all of the proposals coming from Western officialdom and political hopefuls are based on ignorance of the scope and scale of environmental ills mixed with wishful thinking. Until recently, these were politically viable because the consequences of being wrong lay in an abstract future. But no longer. Not only has the American political leadership been negligent regarding environmental matters since the 1980s, but through this negligence problems have grown to the point where only radical economic

reorganization offers real solutions.

Most of the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates pay lip service to environmental crisis. They propose to re-sign on to the Paris Climate Accord, a non-binding agreement that the Obama administration did what it could [to undermine](#) before exploiting it as a feel-good political talking point. As the best estimates of the UN committees and environmental scientists have had it for some time now, this type of misdirection may serve short term political goals, but at the cost of making real resolution of environmental ills that much more costly in terms of social disruption and the amount of resources needed later.

The Paris Climate Accord illustrates a problem with narrow and targeted responses. Since it was negotiated, UN committees have identified species loss and the drastic decline of oceans as being causally related to climate change through industrial practices. Industrial methods carry with them the logic of economic exploitation. For example, trawl-net fishing uses only half or less of the marine animals it kills. Industrial agriculture likewise kills entire ecosystems to grow monoculture crops. As evidence of cognitive capture, monoculture planting ([BECCs](#)) of what remains of the earth's surface is proposed as the path to meeting UN goals.

As the cliché goes, when we find ourselves in a deep hole, the only surefire strategy to not make the problem worse is to stop digging. The oligarchs and PMC who claim that the left is using environmental decline to push a wish-list of programs are promoting the fiction that the causes of social and environmental decline are unrelated to one another. NAFTA featured a framework and incentives to outsource labor and an ISDS clause to undermine environmental regulation. Both of these were brought to full fruition after China joined the WTO (World Trade Organization).

As long as national environmental accounts can be gamed by

outsourcing dirty production to other countries, the politicians doing so are acting as functionaries for capital, not solving environmental woes. Additionally, the political value of the nation-state framework to capital is brought to the fore. Strategies to counter the power of multinational corporations require both admitting that it exists and building alternatives to it. Here the liberal political frame that 'we are all in this together' works in only one direction, to preclude the building of alternative centers of power.

The transition from capitalist to non-exploitative political economy fits the conception of either evolutionary or revolutionary political change. The bird-in-the-hand is an electoral choice (Bernie Sanders) who understands the conundrum well enough to put together complex programs that address both the problems in direct need of resolution and the political process that will most plausibly facilitate it. Without sidelining capitalism and the political power it wields, there is no path to environmental resolution. And without creating a countervailing power, there is no politically feasible path to sidelining it.

Any thought that Bernie Sanders could assume the power to affect the reorganization of capitalist political economy through electoral politics alone is delusional. The question isn't: can we elect someone to enact the political programs to fix what ails us? The question is: how do we redistribute political power to make such reorganization possible? Without millions of people in the streets and the plausible threat that the best path forward for all involved is to sideline capitalist interests to make room for left programs, there is no chance of political success.

What is odd about this political moment – and a non-sequitur in political terms, is the sense of continuity emanating from the political establishment. 'McGovern 1972' already happened, with neoliberal warmonger Hillary Clinton losing to Donald



Trump in 2016. The New Cold War finds credence with those who saw the old Cold War as an ideological endeavor— rather than the commercial enterprise that it was. The conception of socialism that perceives simulacra in young, self-described socialists, will have trouble broadening Marx's theory of exploitation to account for the factual circumstances of environmental decline.

To quote Bob Marley, 'social living is the best.' Socialism, as it is being put forward in 2020, is a statement of social purpose in contrast to the alleged 'pragmatic' capitalism of neoliberalism. With no apparent sense of irony, this pragmatism is everywhere and always expressed as support for the rich. When George W. Bush declared that his fraudulent war against Iraq was 'good for the economy,' he meant that it was good for his economy— that of his rich patrons. When Barack Obama sold the commitment of \$20 trillion in public largesse to bail out Wall Street to 'save the economy,' he meant the economy of Wall Street. Neoliberalism is an ethos of the rich that was sold the same way that trickle-down economics was— as a tide that lifts all boats.

In contrast, neoliberals were given four decades of virtually unfettered control over Western political economy. It benefitted a few beyond their wildest dreams of avarice, while lowering wages, raising economic insecurity, hollowing out public institutions, motivating murderous wars and greatly exacerbating environmental decline. The establishment grifters who suddenly see the possibility of being on the wrong side of power should have considered the possibility when they were cheerleading the creation of a winner-take-all society. Lucky for them, that isn't the socialist vision. But you wouldn't know it from hearing them squeal.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rob Urie** is an artist and political economist. His book [Zen Economics](#) is published by CounterPunch Books.



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