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BERNIE SANDERS' SOCIALIST AMERICA

By Ethan Earle

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I was born in North Carolina, but my parents are from Vermont and I grew up taking long summer road trips up the east coast to visit our family in Burlington, the state's largest city with just over 40,000 people. It was on one of these trips, sometime in the early 1990s, that I first learned about Bernie Sanders and his uniquely American brand of democratic socialism.

Vermont is an odd little place. It is 49th of fifty states with just 626,000 people, the vast majority of whom live in small farming towns dotted around the Green Mountains that run like a spine up its length. Vermonters are characterized by a proud sense of self-reliance mixed with a stubbornly independent and occasionally revolutionary streak. The state was founded by a breakaway militia during the Revolutionary War. It would later become the first state to abolish slavery and play a crucial role in the Underground Railroad, hiding escaped slaves in its sinuous terrain and shepherding them across its northern border to Canada. Growing up I would hear these stories told as proof that Vermonters are engaged citizens who don't take kindly to injustice or political doublespeak.

In 1980 Brooklyn-born Bernie Sanders entered Vermont politics stage left, running for mayor of Burlington as an Independent and self-described democratic socialist. He defeated the five-term incumbent by ten votes and would subsequently be reelected three times. During his period as mayor Bernie became widely known as an outspoken leftist, but also, crucially, as an effective administrator. He opened the city's first women's commission, supported the development of worker cooperatives, and initiated one of the first and most successful state-funded community-trust housing experi-

ments in the country. This last measure has ensured the preservation of low- and middle-income housing and calmed gentrification in the midst of a waterfront revitalization development project that has otherwise transformed the city's downtown. Bernie the Leftist invited Noam Chomsky to speak at city hall and traveled to Nicaragua to meet with Daniel Ortega and establish a Sandinista sister city. Bernie the Administrator balanced the city's budget and oversaw the transformation of Burlington into what is regularly considered one of the nicest and most livable cities in the United States.

In 1990 Bernie ran for the U.S. House of Representatives and became its first Independent member in forty years. He quickly moved to found the Congressional Progressive Congress, to this day one of the few leftist bulwarks on Capitol Hill. He criticized politicians from both parties for being subservient to corrupt Washington logic. He came across as an ever-serious, one-pitch politician, at all times earnest and alarmed about the crises our country is facing. If at times his manner could be gruff, his social graces lacking, there was never any doubting that he cared deeply about his work. He would soon emerge as an important national voice on issues ranging from income inequality and universal healthcare, to campaign finance reform and LGBT rights. He would later become a prominent early critic of the Iraq War and domestic surveillance programs like the PATRIOT Act.

Basically Bernie stayed the course he had set from the start—that of an unabashed progressive who bases his work on principled independence and the stubborn notion of getting stuff done. Back in Vermont, where since 2006 he

has served as senator, Bernie continues to be incredibly popular, winning 71% of the vote in his most recent election and consistently holding among the highest constituent approval ratings of any U.S. politician. His well-known refusal to run attack advertisements, as well as his doggedly old-fashioned commitment to finding common ground with political figures on the other side of the aisle, has only strengthened his reputation. But his greatest achievement, and the secret to much of his success, has been to build a new political consensus in the state of Vermont. Of course he appeals to most dyed-in-the-wool liberals, but he draws his real strength from small-town white working families, not typically known (at least in recent decades) for their democratic-socialist proclivities.

My family is a family of hairdressers, with a couple of nurses and electricians mixed in. We're a family of hunters and Katy Perry fans. We're a family that contemporary American political culture has made to believe its voice doesn't count. And I can tell you with all honesty that Bernie Sanders has made my family think differently. Heading into the upcoming presidential primary, almost every one of them—otherwise liable to go Republican in any given election—will be casting their vote for Bernie Sanders. When I'm up in Vermont we don't usually talk politics, but when we do we talk Bernie. I can hear my aunt say now: "I might not agree with everything he says or does, but I know he means what he says and believe in what he does. I know he'll never sell us out and he'll always give it to us straight."

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Senator Bernie Sanders' increasingly un-qui-otic campaign to become the 45th President of the United States has stirred strange and restless spirits in the American public. He has drawn far larger crowds and generated more enthusiasm than any other candidate in either party. During 2015 his campaign received \$73

million from more than a million individuals and a record 2.5 million total contributions. He is receiving consistent front-page coverage in every major U.S. media and is the subject of vertiginous numbers of tweets, shares, memes, and general Internet chatter. His major challenger and still-frontrunner—former Secretary of State, Senator, Presidential First Lady, and Democratic establishment darling Hillary Clinton—was positioned as the most unstoppable candidate in a generation just six months ago. As of this writing, in mid-January 2016, she clings to a seven point lead nationally and is in a dead heat in the first two primary states, which historically act as bellwethers for the rest of the nation. Even more amazingly, Bernie Sanders is doing this without taking money from corporations or receiving backing from virtually any establishment group, all the while trumpeting the virtues of democratic socialism and telling anybody who will listen that this country needs a political revolution.

Having spent decades working on policy, it should come as no surprise that Bernie's campaign platform is broad and detailed—*wonkish*, one might say. Perhaps wonkish but not muddled: he leaves no doubt that his greatest pre-occupation is the inequality that increasingly defines the U.S. economy. He proposes to raise the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 by 2020. He promises to create millions of jobs through federal infrastructure and youth programs. He says he will expand Social Security, provide free education at all public universities, and extend universal healthcare to all people in the U.S. through a single-payer system. His plan to pay for these programs is simple: raise taxes on wealthy individuals and large corporations, and tax speculative financial transactions.

In the stories Bernie tells of how America became one of the most unequal major countries in the world, he reserves special wrath for the large financial institutions he considers responsible for the 2007-08 financial crisis. He

laments that not a single bank executive went to prison for their role in the crash, contrasting this to a criminal justice system that has imprisoned millions of people for low-level, non-violent offenses. He calls for the implementation of a 21st century Glass-Steagall Act, which prevented commercial banks from engaging with investment banks from 1933 until it was effectively repealed under the watch of President Bill Clinton in 1999. More recently he announced that, if elected, he would break up all “too big to fail” financial institutions during the first year of his administration.

However, his fiery brand of economic populism does not alone explain why millions of people have come to “Feel the Bern,” the viral hashtag that has become a slogan for the campaign. Rather it is that he speaks so directly to a broader moment in our country’s history. Personal debt and economic inequality are at record highs, and the generation now coming of age has been socialized by the Iraq War and Great Recession; raised on myths about the American Dream while being fed the realities of downward mobility for all but the elite and lucky few. In this context, it is his indictment of the system as not just broken but *fixed*—designed to perpetuate control by a small elite comprised of politically entrenched capital interests—that has made his campaign catch fire in such a startling way.

In addition to his economic proposals, the other cornerstone of Bernie’s campaign is a call to get big money out of politics. He advocates vociferously for comprehensive campaign finance reform, including a repeal of the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision and the abolition of “super PACs,” which together have allowed corporate money to exert ever-greater control over the electoral process. Bernie regularly reminds us that he is the only candidate without a super PAC and that his campaign is corporate-free. Instead he is funded largely by small donations mixed with a few larger contributions from labor unions. Hillary’s campaign,

in contrast, is funded mostly by wealthy individuals and corporations; six of her ten largest donors are banks.

Bernie believes there has been a corporate takeover of American democracy, and this is where he returns to the idea of political revolution. In nearly every speech he makes this clarion call, and he is always unequivocal about the fact that neither he nor any other politician can make the necessary changes alone. Bernie’s idea of political revolution starts with the American people getting out to vote in record numbers—including a rollback of racist Republican disenfranchisement measures—taking back our democracy, and demanding the types of reforms he proposes to increase our control over the national economy and political process.

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Not surprisingly the powers that be are not happy about Bernie, and the biggest offense has been taken—also not surprisingly, if sadly—by the Democratic establishment. Their candidate, Hillary Clinton, has thus far received 455 endorsements from governors and congressional representatives, compared to three for Bernie Sanders; she has been endorsed by 18 unions representing 12 million workers versus his three unions representing one million workers. Among so-called superdelegates—an unpleasant particularity of the U.S. electoral system that together constitute about one-third of party votes and are *not* democratically accountable to actual voter preference—Hillary holds a reported 45-to-1 edge. The Democratic National Committee, for its part, has sought to limit debate opportunities and viewership in an effort to protect Clinton’s lead, and at one point actually cut off the Sanders campaign from its database in a completely disproportionate punishment for a minor (and disputed) offense. Meanwhile establishment talking heads are tripping over themselves to discount Bernie as unable to win a general election, despite ample polling evidence to the contrary.

The best-intentioned of Hillary supporters will argue something like the following: She still has the best chance to beat whichever crazy/dangerous thug emerges from the WWF-style brawl taking place in the Republican primary. They will say she also has the best chance to get things done once in government. Politics are ugly and the Republican Party has re-defined itself through its obstructionism as much as its fanaticism. While Hillary might not be pure, she is the person in the Democratic Party most likely to force at least a few positive reforms through our dysfunctional government. And they will add that it's about time we elect a woman president after more than two centuries of uninterrupted man-rule.

I would respond that Clinton represents too much of what is dysfunctional about our current political system to really do anything about it. She is tied as closely to Wall Street as any politician in either party. She voted for the Iraq War and remains loyal to the war-hawk wing of a Democratic Party running on the fumes of a widely discredited brand of liberal interventionism. Clinton is too politically expedient toward the goal of winning power, while Sanders has maintained consistent values over more than thirty years in elected office. The symbolism of electing a woman president is important, no doubt—a potentially historic event that would rival the election of Barack Obama as our country's first Black president eight years ago. However we have also seen the limitations of symbolism-as-politics during President Obama's administration, with Black median income and wealth declining while incarceration rates continue at a seemingly inexorable pace and the deportation of Latino immigrants has hit record highs. The value of this symbolism is outweighed by the hard currency of electing a president with a plan and a mandate to change the way that Washington, and our country at large, works.

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As should only be expected for what I'll loosely call "the Left," debates about this election have gotten pretty nasty in recent months. Bernie's insistence on not employing negative-campaigning techniques—together with Hillary's once-comfortable lead—kept things civil for a time. But as the campaign has worn on and her lead has shrunk, legions of Hillary followers have taken to the media to somewhat indiscriminately discount Bernie supporters as sexist "Brocialists." Bernie followers have been snarky and occasionally impolitic—albeit generally correct to judge by concrete positions and achievements—in responding that Bernie has supported policies and other measures that are far more progressive for women's equality (beyond the higher echelons of the professional classes, at least). This debate, while having potential to lead to a productive discussion on the distinctions between liberatory and corporate feminism, has more generally been led by partisans and hacks, and has not progressed much past the point of Twitter-style mudslinging.

Further to the left, the usual suspects have come out of the woodwork to accuse Bernie of not being the bearer of the *true* revolution. They accuse him of a litany of original-sin-style offenses, broadly relating to him not aligning in every possible way with a particular (and dare I say esoteric) brand of politics. Some say he is acting as a "sheep dog" for the Democratic Party, leading disaffected youth back into its fold—never mind that he has been an Independent for most of his career and is now pretty much the Public Enemy No. 1 of the Democratic establishment. Others will never forgive him for *actually* being a social democrat when he so clearly mislabels himself as a democratic socialist—oh, the gall! And then there are those who think Bernie fell from grace because of this or that foreign-policy vote, showing himself to be just like everybody else—no matter that he openly criticizes our country's history of regime change and maintains that climate change is a greater existential threat to

us than terrorism in the face of aggressive media fear mongering. While irrelevant to mainstream political consciousness, these political pathologies are worth mentioning insofar as they have sharpened and clarified distinctions on the broader “socialist left”—between those who go where the people are and build politics on the basis of existing realities, and those who would rather sit out on the edges and shout at everybody who is not already with them.

More interesting and relevant to the current moment in U.S. politics is a debate that started in full during Netroots Nation, a prominent annual progressive political convention. Activists from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement interrupted a Bernie speech to call attention to ongoing police violence against Black people and demand the adoption of more forthright political agendas to dismantle structural racism in the United States. Sanders’ response was derided by some as off-pitch and overly dismissive. His initial follow-up attempts—to laud his own racial justice record and link the issue of racism back to economic policies designed to alleviate inequality—did him no favors in this regard. A few weeks later, a Seattle-based group of BLM activists interrupted another Bernie Sanders speech, this time at a rally to celebrate the 80th birthday of Social Security. The protestors grabbed the microphone before Bernie could speak, refused to let him respond to their critiques, accused the city of Seattle of “white supremacist liberalism” in response to boos from the audience, and held the stage until the event was called off.

Just after this second action, the Sanders campaign released a racial justice agenda (presumably crafted after the first intervention) that opened—in an explicit nod to the requests of BLM and other activists—by saying the names of Black women and men recently killed by the police. It continued by directly addressing the physical violence perpetuated by the state and right-wing extremists against Black and Brown

bodies in this country, and then shifted to a lengthy list of policy proposals and demands also addressing issues of political, legal, economic, and environmental violence against communities of color. This new agenda has been applauded by prominent leading voices from the Black Lives Matter movement.

While the first BLM intervention provided an example of two distinct but overlapping progressive movements in critical and productive conversation, the latter showed that the two can still speak past each other at times. Bernie, a 74-year-old white Jewish man from the second-whitest state in the U.S. (96.7%), was initially slow to recognize the immediacy of this moment in racial justice, as well as the bad optics of folding BLM concerns into his pre-existing economic justice platform. BLM activists were opportunistic in exploiting these optics at the expense of somebody who has, at the very least, been a good “white ally” to racial justice movements since he marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963. Their tactic, while usefully provocative at Netroots, was overwrought in Seattle. In this second case the group—led by activists relatively new to social justice and much further from the leadership of what is essentially an open-door movement—came across as cynical and not particularly interested in building progressive politics across essentialist divisions.

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As a whole, the Bernie/BLM saga has been a good learning experience for Sanders and his followers, and this should come as comfort to us as progressives. In addition to his racial justice agenda, Bernie has hired more people of color to prominent staff positions. He has also become increasingly active in spotlighting the horrific on-going trend of police violence against Black people—for example visiting the family of Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old woman found dead in jail after being arrested for a

minor traffic violation, and afterward issuing the powerful, if tragically simple, proclamation that she “would be alive today if she were a white woman.” He has also toured with prominent Black cultural figures like Killer Mike of the rap group Run the Jewels and gotten better at explicitly discussing the racism that has underpinned so much of U.S. economic development ever since slavery. While his name recognition among minority communities still lags far behind Hillary, his likeability and likely voter ratings have risen significantly.

More broadly we can view these debates as part of a rising moment—and perhaps even a generation—of renewed leftist activism in the United States. Several decades of progressive retreat, at least at the level of mass consciousness, were suddenly reversed during Occupy Wall Street in September 2011, as I’ve previously written.¹ This incipient movement had all the guile and beauty of a newborn, which it more or less was as far as most people connected to it were concerned. In this way it served as a generational awakening to the possibility of transformative political activism in the United States. Black Lives Matter, while not directly linked to or inspired by OWS, entered the mainstream media in its wake and incorporated (intentionally or not) many of the critiques against its predecessor.

The Bernie Sanders campaign has reached millions of people for whom it was easier to engage politics through the prism of a presidential campaign. Considered together (even if they wouldn’t always have it as such), this triple movement marks the ascendance of a new era of progressive politics in the United States. And while debates between these and other political movements are necessary, as is the critical struggle for the shape and direction of progressive politics, it is equally necessary that we not let destructive infighting distract us from

the underlying issue of our time, which is how to remake the U.S. political and economic system into something that works for everybody in our country and does more to help than to harm the rest of the world.

Bernie Sanders is doing everything he can to keep us focused on this big issue, always clear that it cannot be solved by him alone. This, more than any other reason, is why I support Bernie Sanders and think you should, too. Bernie is the best-positioned person to galvanize a broad movement with the chance to win power and also realign political alliances around class-based and racial solidarity, as opposed to the divisions that corporate interests would impose upon us. He did this in Vermont, perhaps not at the level of our greatest socialist fantasies, but certainly in a transformative and durable fashion. And when we look at the state of U.S. politics—where a right-wing populist like Donald Trump has captured the imagination of a sizeable portion of the Republican electorate with his outside-the-Beltway message—we see the urgent need for us to battle for a *new* new majority in this country that is based around togetherness and not hate.

Back home Bernie Sanders continues to hold together the coalition he has built with politics that move beyond typical partisan trench warfare. He is well known for his support for U.S. war veterans as well as his efforts to audit the U.S. Federal Reserve, both typically considered conservative issues. And he is surprisingly well liked by many of his Congressional Republican colleagues, not as somebody who talks baseball with them, but as a person who doesn’t talk one way and act the other. In a recent speech at the conservative Christian Liberty University, Bernie invoked a rhetorical tool that has been common throughout his career, basically telling the audience, “we may not agree on everything, but we can agree on the injustice of inequality and the corruption and dysfunction that defines our system.”

¹ Earle, Ethan, “A Brief History of Occupy Wall Street,” Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office, November 2012, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

For as much as the current primary showcases deep splits in both parties, it shows an even deeper split in the country between conservative and progressive cultures. Nobody seems to be able to imagine anything worse than anybody from the opposing party being elected president. Beyond Bernie's message of economic and political transformation, he also speaks to how we may re-envision our fractured polity in the 21st century. The possibility of a Sanders presidency provides us with an important roadmap for how to move beyond the culture of political gridlock that has overtaken us.

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The last time I visited Vermont, my Argentine wife and I went to see my 90-year-old grandmother, a lifelong Vermonter and avid follower of golf and talk-show politics. Not surprisingly we got to talking about the elections, and she said that one of her sons, my uncle, was trying to convince her to vote for Bernie. She remained undecided. She has known Bernie for decades and likes him and trusts his judgment, but she also really wants to see a woman president before she dies. It was a simple, strong argument and one that I take seriously.

My wife responded that *her* home country has had a woman president—a progressive, Cristi-

na Kirchner—for most of the past decade and that, while she understands how historic it would be for us, how could it compare to having a socialist president in the most powerful capitalist country in the world? Hold on, my grandma said—not exactly suspiciously but as if shaking the dust off an idea she hadn't considered in a long time—are you two socialists? We looked at each other and paused for a moment, hesitantly, before my wife answered, yeah, I guess if that's what it takes, then we are. My grandma's eyes widened slightly with surprise or a hint of mischief—or perhaps in an attempt to take in her grandson and granddaughter-in-law and the breadth of old and new ideas, all at once. Well, she replied, her words slow and careful, how about that.

The next time I visit my family, I look forward to celebrating Vermont's latest intervention in the course of U.S. history. In the best of cases we will celebrate the election of the country's first democratic socialist president. But even if Bernie loses, I believe his campaign will have nonetheless succeeded in creating a space to envision a new era in progressive politics. Either way, Bernie's message of political revolution will have been passed down to a new generation of young people, a plot of ground for us to build on as we strive for a better future.

Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, January 2016

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With support from the German Foreign Office.

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