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USA

Paradoxes of Politics

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While the roster of Republican presidential candidates seems to expand exponentially, on the Democratic side â€” with one Democratic candidate awaiting either coronation or token competition â€” Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who has long identified as an “independent democratic socialist,” entered the Race in May.

We'll discuss below what the Sanders candidacy might mean for the left and proponents of independent political action. It's one of a number of paradoxes in U.S. politics as the presidency of Barack Obama, so disillusioning to so many of his supporters, creaks toward conclusion. And as the nasty, brutish and long 2015-16 electoral cycle cranks up, multiple interlocking crises are rocking domestic politics along with Europe, the global economy and the international state system.

Paradox: The same Republicans who brought Benjamin Netanyahu to Congress to sabotage president Obama's most urgent foreign policy objective continue to try to wreck the pending nuclear deal with Iran. Yet he simultaneously relies on their votes to override the open revolt in his own party against the latest “free trade” corporate global coup known as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP).

That's “bipartisanship.” Can we please have our gridlock back? (As we go to press, after the initial defeat of fast-track authority, the maneuvers over bringing it up for another vote remain unresolved.)

Paradox: Six years onto the administration of the first African-American U.S. president and a Black attorney general as well, police killings of unarmed Black civilians occur almost on a weekly basis. Fifty years after the Voting Rights Act, Republican-dominated state legislatures have rolled out an ensemble of voter-suppression laws that amount to a game of Grand Theft Election 2016. All this occurs against the backdrop of the Great Recession during which African American and Latino economic resources have been gutted.

Paradox: President Obama, who embodied the hopes of so many environmental activists and made so many promises to tackle the menace of climate change, presides over the historic expansion of U.S. fossil fuel extraction. By opening up Arctic oil drilling, he has all but cemented his environmental legacy as worse than that of George W. Bush.

While Obama's regulations on fuel efficiency, carbon emissions and renewable energy sources are easily reversible by a future administration, the pillaging and destruction of the Arctic would be permanent on an historical timescale. In the name of “American energy security and leadership,” extraction has mushroomed on a massive scale that dwarfs even the Keystone XL pipeline scenario.

Paradox: The president elected by U.S. voters and celebrated globally with a Nobel Peace Prize for promising to end wars is now deep in the quagmires of Iraq and Syria, and launching drone strikes from Yemen to Pakistan without acknowledging large-scale civilian casualties. Now, while he openly admits there isn't yet an overall strategy for fighting ISIS, “the Obama administration is attempting to secure congressional support for a measure that would authorize expanding the war to such nations as Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen.” ([On this ruinous course see Gregory Shupak, “A Disaster Waiting to Happen.”](#))

Paradox (but not really): After all the “hope and change” that the Obama presidency promised, any real progress either in law or public consciousness â€” limited but important â€” has come about through social upsurges that act

independently, including by direct action, regardless and sometimes in open defiance of the administration's wishes. Most notable among these of course are the LGBT, immigration activist and Black Lives Matter movements.

We say that this is "not really" a paradox. In fact, positive change has always come about by way of struggles that were prepared to both think and act "outside the box" of what the received "realistic" political wisdom of the day dictated. That's how slavery was ended in the 19th century and Jim Crow segregation broken in the 20th, how union organizing rights were won in the great upsurge before, during and after World War II, and how the lies the Cold War Democrats told to promote the Vietnam War were discredited in the 1960s.

Paradoxes Unraveled

In truth, we could have inserted "but not really" behind those other paradoxes too. When it comes to the TPP and the fossil fuel industry, president Obama has simply proven to be what he always said he was: a pro-corporate centrist Democrat. That's where any serious analysis of the Obama presidency begins.

The same applies to other apparent-but-not-real paradoxes: the 2009-10 economic stimulus that was just enough to prevent collapse but insufficient for a robust recovery; weak financial re-regulation that's left the "too big to fail" banks larger, fatter and more dangerous than ever; an Affordable Care Act that enriches the private insurance industry and falls tragically short of the universal health care that Americans need and want. (Given the appalling pre-Obamacare status quo of close to 50 million uninsured people in this country, it has been an improvement in covering around 16.4 million.)

In all these matters, this president sought reforms that would "make logical sense" without treading on the power, profits and prerogatives of corporate America from which the wealth of "the one percent" comes. The Republicans of course were having none of it. While Obama enjoyed Congressional Democratic majorities, the Republicans worked to ruin so that they could rule.

Once having taken the majorities, Republicans are pushing their unrestrained hard-right agenda while happily backing the TPP, on which there's a substantial corporate consensus, and pushing Obama even further than he wants to go back into the spreading Middle East catastrophes that George W. Bush's wars created. They're supporting this president, as Lenin put it in a different context, "as a rope supports a hanging man."

The balance sheet of the Obama program remains incomplete until the Supreme Court issues its ruling on striking down the tax subsidies for low-income people insured under federally run exchanges where rightwing-governed states have refused to create them. This is an absurd case on every level, where abolishing the subsidies would throw Obamacare into chaos, disrupt the insurance industry and immediately threaten the health care of millions of the most vulnerable people. This of course is exactly why the right wing is gleefully pushing it.

While legal and even corporate logic should have dictated that the case be laughed out of court, in the current bizarre configuration of this Supreme Court by all indications it will be a closely decided and politically influenced decision. Paradoxically, a ruling that effectively dismantles Obamacare might wind up backfiring on the Republicans who would be put in the nearly impossible position of coming up with a "fix."

On even more explosive issues around racial inequality, oppression, police brutality and deadly violence, president Obama's record of reluctance to engage has been repeatedly discussed in the pages of this magazine. This has been not only a matter of electoral opportunism, but even more of his core politics of trying to substitute elite

bridge-building for militant demands and mass action.

The results are all too evident. The overt doctrine of white supremacy has gone into hiding, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court proclaims that the election of a Black president demonstrates that the Voting Rights Act is outdated. Meanwhile the plagues of mass incarceration and police brutality, the growth of inequality even during an economic recovery, and the destruction of public education in major U.S. cities — architected jointly by Obama's own Department of Education and vicious education profiteers, another poisoned fruit of "bipartisanship" — all show the realities of race and class in Barack Obama's presidency.

That's exactly why the Black Lives Matter movement has erupted, and why it pays little attention to what the Obama White House says one way or the other.

All this was never a question of what Obama may have intended. It's a matter of what flows from accepting the basic dictates of the corporate capitalist agenda.

Sanders, Clinton and the Future

For present purposes we'll leave aside the Republican horror picture show to focus on what the Democratic "race" and Bernie Sanders in particular may portend. The fact that 100,000 folks contributed \$1.5 million online to Sanders overnight says something about their attitude to the Democratic establishment and the overall state of politics. In some sectors of the labor movement, there may be sentiment for backing Bernie rather than racing to endorse Hillary at the first possible moment.

His sharp populist critique of the banking, insurance and pharmaceutical thieves deserves due credit, and will generate genuine excitement. And the domination of big money and restrictive ballot access laws leave many people arguing, like Sanders himself, that "there's just no practical alternative" to running in Democratic primaries.

But if Hillary Clinton for some reason doesn't turn out to be the presidential nominee, it won't be because she loses out to Sanders.

Those of us on the left who support progressive independent political action, especially we who respect and admire Sanders' impressive contributions to independent politics and his stance on many issues from the "free trade" fraud to single-payer health care, must harbor no illusions about any of this. In the end, there's a 0.00% chance of Bernie Sanders winning the nomination, and a 100.00% certainty that when it's over he'll be calling on his followers to work all-out for the Democratic slate.

Another paradox of politics is that Sanders' entry into the Democratic primaries doesn't reflect some sort of "opening" or split in the Democratic Party. To the contrary, Sanders is filling a vacuum at the liberal end of the party spectrum, attracting supporters who are well to the left of where the party leadership stands. The instant popular groundswell around his campaign confirms this.

Elizabeth Warren will not run against Hillary Clinton. The Black leadership, and most labor officials, have no public criticisms of the Clintons' record on "free trade," the Effective Death Penalty Act or anything else. Much of the congressional Democratic revolt against president Obama's fast-track-to-TPP may immediately dissipate in some sidebar legislation on punishing countries over currency manipulation — which has nothing to do with the fundamental realities of how this kind of "free trade" entrenches corporate power while pushing workers,

environmental standards and social protection to the bottom in all countries.

What then is the impact of the Sanders campaign? The popular reception for Sanders' message will likely push the party's rhetorical campaign, and Hillary Clinton's, a shade or two leftward. This doesn't change the party's real program at all, and ultimately means nothing.

Clinton herself in May has begun talking a good line on protecting undocumented immigrant youth and families from deportation. You could even say that on this issue Clinton stands somewhere to the "left" of Sanders, who hasn't had much if anything to say about it — but that's only if you imagine that Clinton actually means what she says about this or anything else, an assumption for which there's been precious little evidence for many years now.

In the end, Sanders might do well enough to get a token speaking slot at the Democratic convention, in order to instruct his support base to "unite" behind the nominee — the same dead end as ever.

The critical question at that point might well become whether there's a viable presence for genuine independent politics, whether it's a political party formation or broader coalition. What's needed is a force embracing the rising social insurgencies around race and national oppression, mass incarceration, immigrant rights, Fight for Fifteen, confronting the environmental disaster and endless imperialist wars — along with labor's traditional economic issues — capable of attracting thousands or tens of thousands of activists out of the corporate two-party trap.

Can it be done? That's an open question, but trying to develop that alternative force certainly beats the other option: hoping to somehow sleep through 2016 and wake up when it's finally over.

[NOTE: This editorial statement for the July-August Against the Current went to press before the Supreme Court rulings on health care and marriage equality, and Congressional approval of fast-track authorization for negotiating the Trans Pacific Partnership.]

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