

What the Media Get Very Wrong About the Meaning of ‘Socialism’ — And About Presidential Candidate Sen. Sanders

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On April 30th, Jonathan Cohn at Huffington Post provided a perfect example of what the media get wrong about the meaning of “socialism” — and about the meaning of the new U.S. Presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders.

Cohn’s report was aptly titled, [“Bernie Sanders Is A Socialist And That’s Not As Crazy As It Sounds”](#); and, indeed, he started right away with an assumption that socialism is crazy but “not as crazy as it sounds.”

Cohn said that “Socialism, as commonly understood by Americans, means widespread government ownership of business,” but Cohn said that, “that’s not the agenda Sanders has actually been promoting.”

Cohn reassured the reader there that Sanders instead “generally identifies himself as a democratic socialist. The distinction matters. Democratic socialism, as generally conceived in the U.S., is a milder, more aspirational form of the ideology.”

First of all, Cohn fundamentally misrepresented Sanders in this. Sanders has *always* identified himself as a democratic socialist. There is a huge difference between “generally” versus “always,” in this particular context. To say that Sanders “generally” identifies himself as a democratic socialist is to say that *sometimes* he self-identifies as being instead a proponent of dictatorial socialism. That’s outright false.

But the mush in Cohn’s head then gets even mushier. He continues by alleging that “Democratic socialism ... is a milder, more aspirational form of the ideology” than is “widespread government ownership of business.”

Actually, it’s an *entirely different ideology*. It’s not a different “form of the ideology”; it’s a different and fundamentally opposite (because democratic) ideology. “Widespread government ownership of business” is communism, *not* socialism. Sanders never has supported or endorsed that. He has instead [said](#) — and repeatedly and clearly, much more so than mush-headed ‘journalists’ such as Cohn — that (to use his words):

“Branding someone as a socialist has become the slur du jour by leading lights of the American right from Newt Gingrich to Rush Limbaugh. Some, like Mike Huckabee, intentionally blur the differences between socialism and communism, between democracy and totalitarianism.”

In fact, that very same statement from Senator Sanders continued:

“If we could get beyond such nonsense, I think this country could use a good debate about what goes on here compared to places with a long social-democratic tradition like Sweden, Norway and Finland, where, by and large, the middle class has a far higher standard of living than we do.”

He was telling the truth there, not distorting what a U.S. Presidential candidate (namely, he) believes.

No matter how many times the junior U.S. Senator from Vermont (junior to the veteran Democrat Patrick Leahy, who is almost a soul-mate of Sanders but more moderate in his expressions of his beliefs, and also slightly less progressive than he) asserts that the nordic European countries represent reasonably close models to Sanders’s ideal, and that the former USSR never was anything of the kind, ‘journalists,’ and Republicans, mush together those mainly-opposite models.

For Republicans to do this is understandable, since they’re supporters of the corporate State, otherwise called “fascism,” and that’s (those corporations are) who donates the major money into the Republican Party and who have called its fascist tune almost without interruption since 1896; and democratic socialism is the very opposite of that.

However, there’s no excuse when ‘journalists’ do this. False ‘reporting’ is simply unprofessional. But it’s normal in American ‘journalism,’ a field that’s taught at the university level in schools that are in “Communications” departments where they [share personnel with public relations and other forms of outright and prostituted deceptions-for-hire](#). That’s the standard model of ‘journalism’ in fascist countries, because they’re controlled by their top international corporations. That’s the virtually universal standard of ‘journalism’ in the United States these days. Truthfulness is almost irrelevant in such ‘journalism.’ Authentic journalism is rare in such nations. (It’s sadly rare in all nations.)

Secondly, there is nothing at all ‘aspirational’ to Sanders’s ideology: it was the ideology of U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and I present [the case in my latest book](#) that FDR played a bigger role in establishing this ideology than did any other single person, starting in 1932 when he introduced in a campaign speech (and then in his subsequent Presidency) the intellectual underpinning for the most advanced form of this economic model, the most advanced form of a democratic-socialist economy and body-politic. If that was ‘aspirational’ for the greatest U.S. President of the 20th Century (as [historians generally recognize FDR to have been](#)), then what FDR was ‘aspiring’ to was still far more like today’s nordic European democracies than it is like today’s (the post-1980) U.S.A.; and Bernie Sanders represents that FDR-ideal far more than does any other current U.S. Presidential candidate.

And Sanders represents not at all Marxism or communism (what Cohn called “widespread government ownership of business”), and is just as alien to that tradition as he is to fascism, because both of those traditions are simply the left-and-right wings of dictatorship, and democracy is at the very opposite end from any of that.

This essay from Sanders goes on, in fact, to describe his impression of one of the nordic democracies, Finland, from his recent visit there:

“Finland is a country which provides high-quality health care to all of its people with virtually no out-of-pocket expense; where parents and their young children receive free excellent childcare and/or parental leave benefits which dwarf what our nation provides; where college and graduate education is free to students and where children in the public school system often record the highest results in international tests. In Finland, where 80 percent of workers belong to unions, all employees enjoy at least 30 days paid vacation and the gap between the rich and poor is far more equitable than in the United States.”

But Sanders also is realistic about the difference between any particular example, such as Finland, versus any ideal, such as democratic socialism:

“Let’s be clear. Finland is no utopia. Not so many years ago, it experienced a severe economic downturn. Its economy today is not immune to what is happening in the rest of the world. There also are, to be sure, important differences between the United States and Finland — a small country with a population of only 5.2 million people. Finland has a very homogenous population. We are extremely diverse. Finland is the size of Montana. We stretch 3,000 miles from coast to coast.”

If you want to know what Sanders believes, read his statements, not articles about him in corporate media. Whereas the campaign statements of politicians such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have often been contradicted by their actual actions once they have gained power, Sanders’s statements and his entire record as a public official have been one-and-the-same.

But, above all, get to know his [actual voting-record as a U.S. Senator and a Congressman before that. It’s a record that Franklin Delano Roosevelt would probably be proud to call his own if he were still alive and in politics today.](#)

Senator Sanders just wants to bring the Democratic Party — and the American Government — back to the ideals that motivated it when the greatest Democratic President was in charge.

Sanders’s message is based on something timeless. It goes all the way back to [the Gracchi brothers in ancient Rome](#). You see lots of that in FDR’s speeches, too, and in FDR’s subsequent actions as the U.S. President. It’s the ideology, progressivism, but Sanders sometimes uses the term “socialism” to refer to it, because that’s the term that is used in the most-successful countries, where it has actually long been instituted.

And, if you want to understand where that ideology comes from in the very particular case of Sanders himself, just read [his background](#). (That’s from wikipedia, but it fails to link to any documentation where it says that he “opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq,” so [here’s the source](#) on that highly important matter. He’s not like Hillary Clinton; he doesn’t have to apologize on that enormous ‘blunder’ by this country; he doesn’t have to say, “A person who got that judgment wrong will be the best person to occupy the Oval Office.” He can hold his head high while he speaks the truth about important matters.)

There: you now already know more about Sanders — and more about his “socialism” — than you are likely to get to know truthfully from America’s corporate media (or from our corporate-backed NPR or PBS either).

Making these sorts of things clear is not what America's press is designed to do. And that fact is going to become a very big problem for candidate Sanders to try to overcome — he won't be trying to overcome only Hillary Clinton and the Republican Party, but also the press. Or, as the propagandists put it: "our free press." (It's not 'ours,' and it's not 'free.')

They can mock his idealism and say that our country is too corrupt for anything of the sort to "work" here. But that was already the general direction America was heading in between 1932 and 1968, when the racist and corporate opposition finally brought it down and Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" restored the planter-class in its newer corporate form. Sanders is merely trying to turn that around. He wants to make a real political difference.

He wants to present a clear alternative — and to do it within the Democratic Party, which was formerly led by the very same ideological tradition that he represents. He wants to bring the Democratic Party back to its own modern FDR roots.

Far from its being 'aspirational,' Sanders's "socialism" was the actual direction this nation was going in during 1932-1968, and is the direction in which much of Europe has already surpassed America after the U.S. itself turned away from this "socialism."

The corporate media will mock him, and the big money will be against him, but he is only doing what, under the prevailing historical circumstances, he believes that America, at this stage in our national history, needs to be done. He really believes that, if he doesn't do it, then no one will. And he really believes that the only way it can be done is if he wins the U.S. Presidency. Unlike Ralph Nader, he really is in this to win, [not merely to throw the election to the Republican nominee in order to punish the Democratic Party for its lack of purism.](#)

One of the few real journalists (as opposed to mere stenographers to the powerful) whose career is successful in today's America, Matt Taibbi, headlined in *Rolling Stone* (since he's too good a journalist to be hired by such media as *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or FRONTLINE or "60 Minutes," or etc.) on April 29th, ["Give 'Em Hell, Bernie: Bernie Sanders is more serious than you think,"](#) and he wrote, of Sanders, "That's the one who cares." Taibbi should know; he is among the few good journalists who have met enough of the aspirants to be able to recognize the difference between authenticity and fakery. And he had spent lots of time with Sanders back in 2005, to do an in-depth article subtitled, ["A month inside the house of horrors that is Congress."](#) Sanders is not part of the Establishment, and doesn't want to be.

Sanders is a progressive populist who says what he means, and who means what he says; and that's the main reason why the Establishment is so afraid of him. They don't want to lose control of the Government. But he is committed to their losing control of the Government. Calling his ideology by any name, either "socialism," or "progressivism," or "populism," or simply "democracy," they fear it. And they fear him.

And this is why, if his candidacy somehow takes off, the bosses will be taking off their gloves, and putting on their brass knuckles. It will be political war in America, no mere political campaign. Thus, his candidacy, if it gets any traction at all, will supercharge Hillary Clinton's already-enormous campaign chest. All prior campaign-spending records will become exceeded long before Election Day has arrived. And things will have gotten very ugly.

This will not be a sectional war, like 1860. It will be a class war. In 1860, the issue was whether to free the slaves from their masters. In 2016 it will be whether to free the public from the aristocracy. Think [Europe 1848](#), though it won't necessarily be the failure on this side of the Atlantic that that was on theirs nearly two centuries ago.

But if Sanders's campaign fails to take off, there won't be any such war at all, just continued ongoing victory for the [aristocracy](#), against [everyone else](#). For example, in the latter link, the "Table 1. Real Income Growth by Groups" shows that during 2009-2012, the bottom 99% received 0.8% of America's "Real Income Growth," while in 2012-2013, the bottom 99% received 0.2% of that "Real Income Growth." Though essentially all of the economic benefits from the post-'recession' 'recovery' went to the top 1% economic group, there was, starting in 2009, no more 'recession' in the U.S. as economists measure those things; all of this is instead referred to by them as 'economic recovery,' even though far fewer than 1% experienced any of whatever it was.

Beyond any abstractions about ideology, Senator Sanders is now entering the Democratic Party to take it over by declaring that this is an economic performance that Democrats should condemn, as a Party. And he is hoping that many Independents and even a few Republicans will join with him in this fundamental battle for the collective heart, mind, and body, of this nation, this culture, this country, this society.

Sanders is not a William Jennings Bryan type. He is no religious fundamentalist. His war is strictly about this world, not about any other. To him, morality concerns only how people treat others, not about how they treat any god.

If he wins his war, then he will change the world, but it will be only this world, not any other, that he changes. His enemies might try to turn God against him, but he will not worry, if he has the people with him. And, in aristocrats' hearts of hearts, that's all they really worry about, too. Everything else is mere propaganda. The media know all about it. In a sense, it's their specialty.

Investigative historian Eric Zuesse is the author, most recently, of [They're Not Even Close: The Democratic vs. Republican Economic Records, 1910-2010](#), and of [CHRIST'S VENTRILOQUISTS: The Event that Created Christianity](#), and of [Feudalism, Fascism, Libertarianism and Economics](#).

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