The Bernie Sanders Paradox

When Socialism Grows Old

Murray Bookchin

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The posters that appeared all over Burlington — Vermont's largest city (pop: 37,000) in the winter of 1980-81 were arresting and provocative. They showed an old map of the city with a label slapped across it that read: "For Sale." A bold slogan across the top, in turn, proclaimed that "Burlington Is Not for Sale," and smiling amiably in the right-hand corner was the youngish, fairly well-known face of Bernard Sanders, sans tie, open-collared, almost endearingly shy and unpretentious. The onlooker was enjoined to rescue Burlington by voting for "Bernie" Sanders for mayor. Sanders, the long-time gubernatorial candidate of Vermont's maverick Liberty Union, was now challenging "Gordie" Paquette, an inert Democratic fixture in City Hall, who had successfully fended off equally inert Republican opponents for nearly a decade.

That Sanders won this election on March 3, 1981, by only ten votes is now a Vermont legend that has percolated throughout the country over the past five years. What gives Sanders almost legendary qualities as a mayor and politician is that he proclaims himself to be a socialist — to many admiring acolytes, a Marxist — who is now in the midpoint of a third term after rolling up huge margins in two previous elections. From a ten-vote lead to some fifty-two percent of the electorate, Sanders has ballooned out of Burlington in a flurry of civic tournaments that variously cast him as a working-class hero or a demonic "Bolshevik." His victories now make the New York Times and his trips outside of Burlington take him to places as far as Managua, where he has visited with Daniel Ortega, and to Monthly Review fundraising banquets, where he rubs shoulders with New York's radical elite. Sanders has even been invited to the Socialist Scholar's Conference, an offer he wisely declined. Neither scholarship nor theory is a Sanders forte. If socialist he be, he is of the "bread-and-butter" kind whose preference for "realism" over ideals has earned him notoriety even within his closest co-workers in City Hall.

The criss-crossing lines that deface almost every serious attempt to draw an intelligible sketch of the Sanders administration and its meaning for radicals result from a deep-seated paradox in "bread-and-butter" socialism itself. It trivializes this larger issue to deal with Sanders merely as a personality or to evaluate his achievements in the stark terms of lavish praise or damning blame. A sophomoric tribute to Sanders' doings in the Monthly Review of a year ago was as maladroit as the thundering letters of denunciation that appear in the Burlington Free Press. Sanders fits neither the heaven-sent roles he is given in radical monthlies nor the demonic ones he acquires in conservative letters to moderate dailies.

To dwell heavily on his well-known paranoia and suspicious reclusiveness beclouds the more important fact that he is a centralist, who is more committed to accumulating power in the mayor's office than giving it to the people. To spoof him for his unadorned speech and macho manner is to ignore the fact that his notions of a "class analysis" are narrowly productivist and would embarrass a Lenin, not to mention a Marx. To mock his stolid behavior and the surprising conventionality of his values is to conceal his commitment to thirties' belief in technological progress, businesslike efficiency, and a naive adherence to the benefits of "growth." The logic of all these ideas is that democratic practice is seen as secondary to a full belly, the earthy proletariat tends to be eulogized over the "effete" intellectuals, and environmental, feminist, and communitarian issues are regarded as "petit-bourgeois" frivolities by comparison with the material needs of "working people." Whether the two sides of this "balance sheet" need be placed at odds with each other is a problem that neither Sanders nor many radicals of his kind have fully resolved. The tragedy is that Sanders did not live out his life between 1870 and 1940, and the paradox that faces him is: why does a constellation of ideas that seemed so rebellious fifty years ago appear to be so conservative today? This, let me note, is not only Sanders' problem. It is one that confronts a very sizable part of the left today.

Sanders is by no means the sole focus of this paradox. The fact is that Sanders' problems, personal as they seem, really reflect problems that exist in Burlington itself. Contrary to the notion that Vermont is what America used to be, the state — and particularly, Burlington — is more like what America is becoming than what America was. The major corporations in the city and its environs are IBM and GE — and the GE plant in Burlington makes the only Gatling gun in the United States, a horrendous fact that should by all rights trouble any socialist mayor. The Old North End, Sanders' sans-culottes wards (Numbers Two and Three), consists in large part of home-bred Vermonters who work in service, repair, and maintenance jobs when they have jobs at all. The remaining four wards are filled with newcomers to the city and with elderly people who have the luck to own their homes.

Basically middle-class in work and values, the form a pepper mix of old Vermonters and "new professionals," a term that embraces anyone from insurance brokers, real-estate operators, and retailers to doctors, lawyers, and professors. Hippies still mingle freely with Yuppies; indeed, in egalitarian Vermont, there is a reasonable degree of intercourse between the wealthy, the well-to-do, and the poor. What is most important: Burlington is a town in frenzied transition. A sleepy little place some fifteen years ago with bacon-and-egg diners, hardware stores, clothing emporiums, and even a gun shop in the center of town, it is becoming a beehive of activity. Electronics in all its forms is moving into Vermont together with boutiques, inns, hotels, office buildings, educational institutions — and in Burlington, particularly, a thriving academic establishment that draws thousands of students and their parents into its commercial fold.

The problems of "modernization" that confront the town produce very mixed reactions — not only in its inhabitants but in Sanders. A large number of people feel plundered, including some of the plunderers, if you are to believe them. Burlington is living evidence that myth can be real, even more real than reality itself. Accordingly, myth holds that Burlington is small, homey, caring, crime-free, independent, mutualistic, liberal, and innocently American in its belief that everything good can happen if one so wills it to be. This glowing American optimism, in my view one of our national assets, often lives in doleful contradiction with the fact that if everything good can happen, everything bad does happen — including union-busting, growing contrasts between rich and poor, housing shortages, rising rents, gentrification, pollution, parking problems, traffic

congestion, increasing crime, anomie, and growth, more growth, and still more growth — upward, inward, and outward.

The tension between myth and reality is as strong as between one set of realities and another. Burlingtonians generally do not like what is happening, although there are far too many of them who are making the most of it. Even the alleged "benefits" of growth and modernization are riddled by their own internal contradictions. If there are more jobs and little unemployment, there is lower pay and rising living costs. If there are more tourists and a very amiable citizenry to receive them, there is less spread of income across social lines and more robberies. If there is more construction and less labor shortages, there are fewer homes and more newcomers. Office-building and gentrification go hand in hand with fewer small businesses and far too many people who need inexpensive shelter.

Very crucial to all of this is the conflict of values and cultures that "modernization" produces. Basically, Burlingtonians want to keep their city intimate, caring, and liberal. They like to believe that they are living an older way of life with modern conveniences and in accord with fiercely independent values that are rooted in a colorful past. It is this underlying independence of Vermonters generally, including newcomers who are absorbed into Burlington, that makes the clash between a lingering libertarian Yankee tradition and a corrosive, authoritarian corporate reality so inherently explosive. Ironically, Bernard Sanders owes his present political career to the irascible public behavior this libertarian tradition produces, yet he understands that behavior very little. To Sanders, Burlington is basically Detroit as it was two generations ago and the fact that the town was "not for sale" in 1981 carried mixed messages to him and his electorate. To the electorate, the slogan meant that the city and its values were priceless and hence were to be guarded and preserved as much as possible. To Sanders, all rhetoric aside, it meant that the city, although not on an auction block, had a genuinely high price tag.

Whether the electorate who voted for him was less "realistic" than Sanders is not relevant: the fact is that both saw the "sale" of the city from different, if not radically opposing, perspectives. Both, in fact, were guided by varying "reality principles." The electorate wanted a greater say in the city's future; Sanders wanted to bring more efficiency to its disposition. The electorate wanted to preserve the city's human scale and quality of life; Sanders wanted it to grow according to a well-designed plan and with due regard for cost-effectiveness. The electorate, in effect, saw Burlington as a home and wanted to keep its emphasis on old-style values alive; Sanders, together with many of his opponents, saw it as a business and wanted its "growth" to be beneficial, presumably to "working people."

This is not to deny that Burlington has its fair share of economic predators and political operators or that property taxes are very important and material problems ranging from shelter to the cost of food are very real. But this town also has a deep sense of municipal pride and its highly independent, even idiosyncratic, population exudes a form of local patriotism that fades as one approaches larger, less historically conscious, and less environmentally oriented communities. Sanders would never admit that for Burlingtonians, the electorate's independence has begun to clash with his fading regard for democratic practice; that technological "progress" and structural "growth" can arouse more suspicion than enthusiasm; that the quality of life runs neck and neck as an issue with material benefits. Indeed, for Sanders and his administration (the two are not necessarily identical), thirties socialism is notable for the fact that it rescues the marketplace from "anarchy," not that it necessarily challenges the market system as such and its impact on the city.

In Sanders' version of socialism, there is a sharp "business" orientation toward Burlington as a well-managed corporate enterprise.

Herein lies the greatest irony of all: all rhetoric aside, Bernard Sanders' version of socialism is proving to be a subtle instrument for rationalizing the marketplace — not for controlling it, much less threatening it. His thirties-type radicalism, like Frankenstein's "monster," is rising up to challenge its own creator. In this respect, Sanders does not make history; more often than not, he is one of its victims. Hence to understand the direction he is following and the problems it raises for radicals generally, it is important to focus not on his rhetoric, which makes his administration so alluring to socialists inside and outside of Vermont, but to take a hard look at the realities of his practice.

Sanders' Record

SANDERS' CLAIM that he has created "open government" in Burlington is premised on a very elastic assumption of what one means by the word "open." That Sanders prides himself on being "responsive" to underprivileged people in Burlington who are faced with evictions, lack of heat, wretched housing conditions, and the ills of poverty is not evidence of "openness" — that is, if we assume the term means greater municipal democracy and public participation. What often passes for "open government" in the Sanders cosmos is the mayor's willingness to hear the complaints and distress signals of his clients and courtiers, not a responsibility to give them any appreciable share in the city's government. What Sanders dispenses under the name of "open government" is personal paternalism rather than democracy. After six years of Sanders' paternalism, there is nothing that resembles Berkeley's elaborate network of grassroots organizations and councils that feed into City Hall.

When it comes to municipal democracy, Sanders is surprisingly tight-fisted and plays his cards very close to his chest. Queried shortly after his 1981 election on a local talk-show, You Can Quote Me, Sanders was pointedly asked if he favored town-meeting government, a very traditional form of citizen assemblies that has deep-seated roots in Vermont townships. Sanders' response was as pointed as the question. It was an emphatic "No." After expressing his proclivity for the present aldermanic system, the mayor was to enter into a chronic battle with the "Republicrat" board of aldermen over appointments and requests that were to be stubbornly rejected by the very system of government that had his early sanction.

Sanders' quarrels with the board of aldermen did not significantly alter his identification of "open government" with personal paternalism. As an accepted fixture in Burlington's civic politics, he now runs the city with cool self-assurance, surrounded by a small group of a half-dozen or so aides who formulate his best ideas and occasionally receive his most strident verbal abuse. The Mayor's Council on the Arts is a hand-picked affair, whether by the mayor directly or by completely dedicated devotees; similarly, the Mayor's Youth Office. It is difficult to tell when Sanders will create another "council" — or, more appropriately, an "office" — except to note that there are peace, environmental, and gay communities, not to speak of unemployed, elderly, welfare, and many similar constituents who have no "Mayor's" councils in City Hall. Nor is it clear to what extent any of the existing councils authentically represent local organizations and/or tendencies that exist in the subcultures and deprived communities in Burlington.

Sanders is a centralist and his administration, despite its democratic proclivities, tends to look more like a civic oligarchy than a municipal democracy. The Neighborhood Planning Assemblies (NPAs) which were introduced in Burlington's six wards in the autumn of 1982 and have been widely touted as evidence of "grassroots democracy" were not institutions that originated in

Sanders' head. Their origin is fairly complex and stems from a welter of notions that were floating around Burlington in neighborhood organizations that gathered shortly after Sanders' 1981 election to develop ideas for wider citizen participation in the city and its affairs. That people in the administration played a role in forming assemblies is indisputably true, but so too did others who have since come to oppose Sanders for positions that have compromised his pledges to the electorate.

Bernard Sanders' view of government appears in its most sharply etched form in an interview the mayor gave to a fairly sympathetic reporter on the Burlington Free Press in June, 1984. Headlined "Sanders Works to Expand Mayor's Role," the story carried a portrait of the mayor in one of his more pensive moods with the quote: "We are absolutely rewriting the role of what city government is supposed to be doing in the state of Vermont.' The article leaped immediately into the whole thrust of Sanders' version of city government: "to expand and strengthen the role of the [mayor's] office in city government:" This process has been marked by an "expanding City Hall staff," an increased "role in the selection of a new fire chief," "a similar role in the Police Department," and "in development issues, such as the proposed downtown hotel." In response to criticism that Sanders has been "centraliz-ing" power and reducing the checks and balances in city government, his supporters "stress that citizen input, through both the Neighborhood Planning Assemblies and expanded voter output, has been greatly increased." That the Neighborhood Planning Assemblies have essentially been permitted to languish in an atmosphere of benign neglect and that voter participation in elections hardly equatable to direct participation by the citizenry has left the mayor thoroughly unruffled.

A FAIR CONSIDERATION of the results produced by Sanders' increased role in city affairs provides a good test of a political strategy that threatens to create institutional forms for a Burlington version of New York's Mayor Koch. The best case for the mayor appears in the Monthly Review of May, 1984, where a Pollyanna article written by Beth Bates, "a writer and farmer," celebrates the virtues of Sanders' efforts as "Socialism on the Local Level" — followed, I might add, by a prudent question mark. Like Sanders' own claims, the main thrust of the article is that the "socialist" administration is "efficient." Sanders has shown that "radicals, too, can be fiscal conservatives, even while they are concerned that government does the little things that make life more comfortable" like street repair, volunteer aid to dig paths for the elderly after snowstorms, and save money. The administration brings greater revenues into the city's coffers by modernizing the budgetary process, principally by investing its money in high-return institutions, opening city contracts to competitive bidding, centralizing purchasing, and slapping fees on a wide range of items like building permits, utility excavations, private fire and police alarms, and the like.

That Sanders has out-Republicaned the Republicans should not be taken lightly. Viewed in terms of its overall economic policies, the Sanders administration bears certain fascinating similarities to the Reagan administration. What Sanders has adopted with a vengeance is "trickle-down" economics — the philosophy that "growth" for profit has a spillover effect in creating jobs and improving the public welfare. Not surprisingly, the City's 1984 "Annual Report" of the Community and Economic Development Office (a Sanders creation) really begins with a chunky section on "UDAG Spur Development." UDAGs are Urban Development Action Grants that are meant to "leverage" commitments to growth by the "private sector." The Office celebrates the fact that these grant requests to Washington will yield $25 million from "the private sector" and "create an estimated 556 new full-time, permanent jobs, and generate an additional $332,638 per year in property taxes." Among its many achievements, the grant will help the owners of the

Radisson Hotel in Burlington (an eyesore that is blocking out part of Burlington's magnificent lake view, and a corporate playground if there ever was one) expand their property by "57 guest rooms and an additional 10,000 square feet of meeting and banquet space. A new 505 space parking garage with covered access to the hotel will be constructed. The Radisson Hotel will now be able to accommodate regional and association conventions. The project also includes expansion of retail space (32,500 square feet) within the Burlington Square Mall. Construction has begun, and the project is scheduled for completion in late 1985." The other grants are less lascivious but they invariably deal with projects to either construct or rehabilitate office, commercial, industrial, and department-store construction — aside from the noxious Sanders waterfront scheme, of which more shortly.

One seriously wonders who this kind of descriptive material is meant to satisfy. Potential employees who commonly sell their labor power for minimum wage-rates in a city that is notoriously closed to unionization? The Old North Enders who are the recipients of scanty rehabilitation funds and a land-trust program for the purchase of houses, an innovative idea that is still to fully prove itself out? A few small businessmen who have received loans to develop their enterprises or others who have had their façades improved in what Sanders celebrates as an attempt to "revitalize" the Old North End, an area that is still one of the most depressing and depressed in Vermont? The ill-housed and elderly for whom the office-building spree makes the limited amount of low-income housing construction seem like a mockery of their needs? Apart from the condos and so-called "moderate-income" houses that have surfaced in part of the city, housing for the underprivileged is not a recurring theme in Sanders' speeches except when the mayor is on an electoral warpath. After a tentative stab at some kind of "rent control" which was defeated at the polls on the heels of a huge propaganda blitz by well-to-do property owners, the administration has been reticent about raising rent-control issues generally, let alone making a concerted effort at educating the public about them. Burlington, in effect, is witnessing what one journalistic wag has appropriately called "gentrification with a human face." Indeed, such crucial issues as housing for the poor and elderly, unionization of the grossly underpaid, environmental deterioration, and the rapid attrition of old, socially useful, small concerns that can no longer afford the soaring downtown rentals — all have taken second place during the past year to big structural schemes like a waterfront plan. More so than any other Sanders proposal, this plan has opened a long overdue schism between the mayor and his popular supporters in the Old North End, the most radical constituency in Burlington.

SANDERS' WATERFRONT PLAN is burdened by a highly convoluted a history that would take an article in itself to unravel. The 24.5-acre property, owned partly by the Vermont Central Railroad, the Alden Corporation (a consortium of wealthy locals), and the city itself, faces one of the most scenic lake and mountain areas in the northeast. Paquette, Sanders' predecessor, planned to "develop" this spectacular site with highrise condos. Sanders has made the demand for a "waterfront for the people" a cardinal issue in all his campaigns. Civic democracy was ostensibly served when an open meeting was organized by the administration in February, 1983, to formulate priorities which the public felt should be reflected in any design. Broken down by wards in NPA fashion, the meeting's priorities centered around walkways, open space, public access, restaurants and shops, even a museum and wildlife sanctuary — and, in addition to similar public amenities, mixed housing. Whether these priorities could have been met without a UDAG is highly problematical. What is fascinating about Sanders' response, even before the UDAG was refused, was the clutter of structures that grossly compromised the whole thrust of the public's

priorities: a second version of a Radisson-type hotel, a retail pavilion that spanned half the length of the city's pedestrian mall, a 1200-car parking garage, an office building, a narrow public walkway along the lakeside — and an ambiguous promise to provide three hundred mixed housing units, presumably "available for low and moderate income and/or handicapped people:" Even so, this housing proposal was hedged by such caveats as "to the extent feasible" and the need to acquire "below-market financing" and rent-level "subsidies."

Following the refusal of the UDAG, the plan resurfaced again from City Hall with two notable alterations. Mixed housing disappeared completely even as a promise — to be replaced by 150 to 300 condos priced at $175-300,000 each (a typical Burlington houses sells for $70-80,000) and public space, meager to begin with, was further attenuated. From a residential viewpoint, the "waterfront for the people" had become precisely an "enclave for the rich," one of the verbal thunderbolts Sanders had directed at the Paquette proposal.

The privileges accorded by the waterfront plan to moneyed people are a reminder that only token aid has been provided to the poor. The methods employed by Sanders to engineer public consent for the plan have been especially offensive: the blitz of ads favoring the mayor's and Alden Corporation's version of the scheme, in which Sanderistas found their names listed with those of the most notorious union-busters in the state, stands in sharp contrast with the relatively weak campaigns launched by City Hall on behalf of rent control and improved housing.

Public reaction came to a head when the electorate, summoned to vote on a bond issue to cover the city's contribution to the plan, produced startling results. Despite the sheer frenzy that marked the mayor's campaign for a "yes" vote, the ward-by-ward returns revealed a remarkable shift in social attitudes toward Sanders. Although a two-thirds majority is needed to carry a bond issue in Burlington, Wards 2 and 3 of the Old North End voted down the bond issue flatly. So much for the reaction of Sanders' "working-class" base which had given the mayor his largest pluralities in the past. Ward 4, a conventional middle-class district, regaled the mayor with barely a simple majority of five votes, and Ward 5, the most sympathetic of his middle-class constituencies, a flat fifteen-vote rejection. Sanders' highest returns came from Ward 6 — "The Hill," as it has been called — which contains the highest concentration of wealth in the city and its most spacious and expensive mansions.

For the first time, a Sanders proposal that patently placed the mayor's public credibility on the line had been soundly trounced — not by the wealthiest ward in Burlington which alone supported the bond issue by a two-thirds vote, but. by the Old North End, which flatly rejected his proposal. A class issue had emerged which now seems to have reflected a disgust with a rhetoric that yields little visible results.

THE ULTIMATE EFFECT Of Sanders' aging form of "socialism" is to facilitate the ease with which business interests can profit from the city. Beyond the dangers of an increasingly centralized civic machinery, one that must eventually be inherited by a "Republicrat" administration, are the extraordinary privileges Sanders hasprovided to the most predatory enterprises in Burlington — privileges that have been justified by a "socialism" that is committed to "growth," "planning," "order," and a blue-collar "radicalism" that actually yields low-paying jobs and non-union establishments without any regard to the quality of life and environmental well-being of the community at large.

Bernard Sanders could have established an example of a radical municipalism, one rooted in Vermont's localist tradition of direct democracy, that might have served as a living educational arena for developing an active citizenry and a popular political culture. Whether it was because of

a shallow productivist notion of "socialism" oriented around "growth" and "efficiency" or simply personal careerism, the Burlington mayor has been guided by a strategy that sacrifices education to mobilization and democratic principles to pragmatic results. This "managerial radicalism" with its technocratic bias and its corporate concern for expansion is bourgeois to the core — and even brings the authenticity of traditional "socialist" canons into grave question. A recent Burlington Free Press headline which declared: "Sanders Unites with Business on Waterfront" could be taken as a verdict by the local business establishment as a whole that it is not they who have been joining Sanders but Sanders who has joined them. When productivist forms of "socialism" begin to resemble corporate forms of capitalism, it may be well to ask how these inversions occur and whether they are accidental at all. This question is not only one that must concern Sanders and his supporters; it is a matter of grim concern for the American radical community as a whole.

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This is a polemic written by Bookchin when he and Bernie Sanders were both making their political homes in Burlington, Vermont. While other writers, such as the late Alexander Cockburn and other contributors to Counterpunch, have long chronicled Sanders' career and his embrace of Democratic Party imperialism, union busting, and mistreatment of frontline communities, Bookchin's analysis is unique in that it took on Sanders' politics from a position that included both policy as well as economics.