

STEADY WORK

BINJ Dispatch #4 from Our Man in Philadelphia

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Now that the Democratic Convention in Philly is over, I'm visiting my sister at her house atop a mountain in rural Pennsylvania. This is gun country. It's unusual to walk along the wooded paths outside my sister's place without hearing the sound of hunting rifles firing. My brother-in-law tells me that the big division in this area is between people who own at least ten guns and those who own no more than five. Tonight I sat with my sister and two of her neighbors huddled around an outdoor fire, listening to the cicadas and the gunshots in the distance. When I remarked that I was surprised to hear gunfire so late at night, one of the neighbors said simply, "This is the mountains." My sister and I took a car ride yesterday evening through a local town where I saw a number of Trump for President signs in people's front yards. For a variety of reasons, rural Pennsylvania tends to vote Republican. Earlier today, Hillary Clinton drove near the mountain I'm on as part of a bus trip to the steel towns of Pennsylvania. She's trying to win over some of the white steelworkers and former steelworkers who are inclined to vote for Trump. Considering her past support for the trade deals that made it easy for US companies to take their industrial operations off shore, Hillary has a lot of talking to do.

In the aftermath of Philly, I find my thoughts turning to Irving Howe. Howe was never one of my favorite people. As editor of *Dissent* magazine, he spilled a great deal of ink lambasting the New Left of the 1960s, with which I identified at the time. But while his fellow New York Intellectuals—like Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Bell—dug up their socialist roots when they founded the Neoconservative Movement, Howe remained a moderate socialist until his death. I've been thinking about a story Howe relates as a preface to his book on the history of democratic radicalism in the United States. As I recall, the tale goes like this:

A Jewish man in a shtetl in Central Europe is given the job of sitting outside the village gate waiting for the Messiah to come. One day a friend visits him. The friend asks, "Schlomo, what are you doing here? If you're looking for the Messiah, you're going to have a very long wait." Schlomo replies to his friend, "I know, I know. But at least it's steady work."

Steady Work is the name Howe chose for his book; it's a fitting moniker for the vocation of those who spend their time trying to advance "social, political, racial, economic, and environmental justice," as Bernie Sanders likes to say. If you crave immediate gratification, the Left isn't the place for you.

Once established, all institutions have an inertia that makes them resistant to change. Otherwise they would be ephemeral social arrangements rather than institutions which, by definition, are enduring. This is especially true of those that protect the power and material interests of the dominant groups in society. The Democratic Party is one of the institutions devoted to such protection. The Party was never going to come tumbling down like the walls of Jericho when Bernie's legions began blowing their horns.

Since the Great Depression and the rise of Roosevelt's New Deal, the Democrats have been the party of cooptation. They have functioned as an arena where subordinate groups can pursue their interests, provided they accept their second-class status in relation to those who operate the real machinery of power. For example, in FDR's own day, labor unions were welcomed into the "Democratic Coalition" as long as they didn't challenge the ownership of industry by private capital, or its managerial control of the workplace. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was given a seat at the Democratic Party table by presidents Kennedy and Johnson, on the condition that it refrain from opposing the War in Vietnam. (Several of Martin Luther King's advisors futilely counseled him against coming out in opposition to the war because they worried it would end his influence in the Democratic Party).

There are times, of course, when the Democrats are willing to use force against subordinate social groups, especially when the latter rise up in rebellion. The Democratic mayor of Philly, Wilson Goode, once ordered his police department to drop a bomb on a house occupied by Black radicals, killing eleven people and destroying a whole city block. But, generally speaking, the Democratic Party co-opts, while the Republican Party represses. That's why it's nonsensical for the Left to argue that there is no difference between the two parties. There *is* a difference, and it is crucial to preserving the status quo. In order to stabilize an exploitative social order, both cooptation and repression are necessary. And it turns out to be most effective to divide these options between the two major parties.

The principal quandary that leftists have faced since the early 1930s is what to do about the Democrats. Ignore them and you risk losing contact with the subordinate groups who have something to gain from cooptation. Join them, and you find yourself in the Party's deadly embrace.

At the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia, the Sanders campaign confronted this dilemma. Sanders himself decided to risk cooptation with the hope that the movement he initiated might act as the thin side of a wedge able to pry the machinery of the Party loose from the forces that now control it. The Sanders delegates who walked out of the convention on Tuesday night as well as, more generally, the whole Bernie or Bust wing of the campaign are betting that they have a better chance finding the leverage they need to turn the world upside down outside the Party rather than within it. Many will undoubtedly support Jill Stein's Green Party campaign. I don't know which is the better strategy. As I tried to show in my first dispatch, both face difficult obstacles. Personally, I've decided to vote for Stein, whose platform is similar to that of Sanders. I think it's good to show, to whatever extent possible, that the Democrats cannot take the votes of leftists for granted. But I can make this choice without fear of contributing to Trump's election because I live in Massachusetts, a solidly "blue" state. I'm not sure what I would do if I lived in Pennsylvania or Ohio. But I don't relish having to choose between an imperialist with the blood of Hondurans, Libyans, and Palestinians on her hands, and an egomaniacal crypto-fascist. In any event, I suspect that both Sanders' strategy and that of his obstreperous supporters may soon be outrun by the economic and environmental crises that are coming down the pike. But the only thing that I'm truly certain about is that those who continue to struggle for a just, sustainable, and genuinely democratic society are going to have plenty of steady work in the years ahead.