

Beyond Beltway and Bible Belt: Re-Imagining the Democratic Party and the American Left

Ben Agger

Electoral politics now matter. George W. Bush, Jr. and his evangelical-Christian supporters have seen to that. Bush threatens to undo the welfare state, roll back civil liberties (and block new ones), and isolate the United States from the rest of the world. His foreign policy is an admixture of isolationism and unilateral adventurism. Homeland Security, his contribution to our political lexicon, has a Nazi-era resonance. Gays, lesbians, foreigners, liberals, the left have been demonized by a supposedly literal interpretation of the Bible, which drives the Christian right, Bush's base of support. This has the makings of fascism.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party continues to fade toward the right, in defense of centrism and staying mainstream, a process begun during the 1970s, after Nixon's counterrevolution against the sixties was complete. Clinton, Gore and now Kerry sound like Republicans, defending capitalism, capital punishment and patriotism. Neoliberalism has replaced the welfare-state liberalism of FDR and even JFK and LBJ. FDR's welfare state, while not perfect, significantly buffered the ravages of capitalism for those without jobs and without hope. Reagan and now the junior Bush began to dismantle the welfare state, arguing that tax cuts and concessions for the wealthy would grow the economy and create jobs, allowing all boats to rise. This of course returns to Adam Smith's free market and Herbert Spencer's survival of the fittest.

The morning after Bush Jr.'s re-election, I was listening to NPR and I hear a sound byte from Ralph Nader. He quoted Eugene Debs. He quoted Debs, returning to an earlier socialist tradition in American politics. The Democratic Party needs to reinvent itself, borrowing from Debs, the New Left of Port Huron and, yes, from Karl Marx—he of the early writings, where he discussed alienation and presented his vision of a democratic society of praxis, in which people become fully human only by treating each other, and nature, as subjects, not objects.

The Dems lost to Bush, Jr., seemingly a beatable candidate, because they didn't get enough of their potential base—the poor, minorities, the working-class and students—to vote. Kerry didn't motivate enough eligible voters to go to the polls, not because he waffled on Iraq or was 'off message' until late in the campaign but because the Democratic Party has become a pale copy of the Republican. This convergence has given the Democratic base no real options and, as a result, people stay home. If the national turnout had been 70% or 80% of eligible voters, Kerry would have enjoyed a landslide. A realigned Democratic Party that gets out the vote would never lose. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, in their excellent *Why Americans Don't Vote*, make the case that those who don't vote are largely poor and Democratic.

One of the early goals of SDS was the realignment of the Democratic Party. The authors of Port Huron understood that traditional electoral politics was not to be abandoned but supplemented by SNCC-style activism. Jack Kennedy's New Frontier and then Bobby Kennedy's late arrival at an anti-war position inspired Tom Hayden more than did Eugene McCarthy's campaign against Humphrey. The New Left abandoned the Democratic Party because the faction we now called Beltway Democrats—then, Johnson and Humphrey—wouldn't budge on the disastrous war in Vietnam. This led to Chicago 1968 and the Nixonian counterrevolution, which, through Cointelpro

and then Watergate, effectively ended the optimism and activism of the 1960s.

There are several issues to be considered here:

The Religious Right

In a classic study published in 1950, Adorno et al analyzed the “authoritarian personality” that embraced fascism, hastening the final solution. They argued that powerless people can be mobilized from above to take out their rage on even weaker others, such as Jews. Divide and conquer is in play today as born-again Christianity redirects anger against economic and political elites toward women, minorities, gays and lesbians, Arabs, everyone considered “Other” by postmodernism. Evangelical Christianity is in part a response to the sixties and its aftermath in affirmative action. It is also in part a response to global cosmopolitanism that threatens to de-center America. Evangelical Christianity is found outside of cities, in the south, and among those without college education.

Capitalism, Christianity, Capital Punishment: Democratic Centrism

It has become conventional wisdom inside the Beltway that Democrats must loudly support a free-market economy, Christian values and the death penalty. They must also wave the flag. One of the most absurd images of the recent campaign was Kerry dressed up in hunting garb. They must make these concessions in order to pursue the Southern, rural, evangelical voter, especially after 9/11. The problem is that the hard right knows an imposter when it sees one. Kerry, after all, volunteered to fight in Vietnam and saw action and was still pilloried for lack of leadership qualities. He, Hilary Clinton and Ted Kennedy are conflated as northern liberals outside the mainstream of Babbitt-like Baptism. This rightward fade has robbed the Democratic Party of a discernible identity, especially FDR-era progressivism. The WPA is scarcely imaginable today.

The loss of Democratic identity causes important segments of its base to stay home, even after Florida 2000, when we learned that every vote counts, given Electoral College mathematics. The much-ballyhooed large voter turnout this November is large only by comparison to the even lower turnout of 2000, when scarcely 50% of eligible voters went to the polls. And the people most likely to stay home are those without economic and educational advantages, for whom voting is an unnecessary hassle given the meager benefits now that the two parties have drifted together.

The people who vote are largely suburban and now, with the born agains, rural. People in cities making less than \$50,000 in household income—the core of the Democrats’ base—are less likely to vote. Bush won this time because the Republicans realized that born-again voters did not turn out in healthy numbers in 2000, largely because it was not yet clear to them that Bush, Jr. was one of them. (He is really not, as Texans understand. This is all persona cooked up by Rove in order to prevent Bush, Jr. from losing the hard-right vote denied his father in his bid for a second term.) 9/11 was used to mobilize the fears of the powerless, much as Hitler used Germany’s humiliation at Versailles and the dismal German economy to re-channel rage against international Jewry. Gays and lesbians may become the new Jews as Bush puts into practice his twin investment in “family and faith,” code for heterosexual patriarchy and evangelism.

Restoring the Democratic Party’s Progressive Identity: An Agenda for Social Democracy

To get its base to vote—especially urban people whose household incomes put them in the bottom two quintiles—the Democrats need to move back to the left, albeit in ways somewhat different from FDR. What it means to be “left” is at stake. We need to borrow images and practices from Canada, with its four-party system and its healthy social-democratic party, called the New Democratic Party. We could even rename the Democratic Party by inserting the Canadian adjective “new” in front of it. Social democracy is derived not from FDR but from the Webbs, from Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism and especially from the New Left and the 1962 Port Huron Statement, which stressed participatory democracy and rejected Old-Left discourses of socialism and Marxism where these terms were

corrupted by their confusion with Soviet statist socialism.

An agenda for American social democracy should include commitments to:

- ***Economic justice***

Enhancing economic justice would involve the federal government in a serious (this time) war on poverty. The bottom fifth of American households average \$9,000 in annual income; the poverty threshold for a family of four is over \$18,000. Images of Americans as wealthy, gleaned from our media culture, are betrayed by income data from the U.S. Census. The average household, frequently with two earners, averages just over \$40,000. The second-highest fifth of households average \$75,000, with the highest fifth averaging barely over \$100,000. Nearly a third of Americans live in poverty. Most of these, of course, are potential Democratic voters, but few vote.

- ***Economic restructuring***

Economic restructuring addresses what Marx called the flight of capital, its insensitivity to national boundaries, which leads to globalization. The problem with tariffs is that it keeps poor countries poor. Outsourcing, though, cannot be sold politically, nor is it a tolerable way to deal with labor. Instead, the Democratic Party must take the lead in reconceptualizing the United Nations not only as an international police force but as an agent of the redistribution of capital. The U.S., Japan and the EU countries—indeed, all industrialized countries—would shift a portion of capital each year to the United Nations, restructuring the world economy. This way, poor countries could be industrialized and prepared for democracy, which would inhibit nuclear proliferation, block terrorism and religious tyranny and lower the birth rate, which, as demographers now understand, only drops when countries industrialize. We can persuade voters of the reasonableness of this massive “foreign aid” by showing them that it will help them keep their jobs, mitigate international strife and address runaway world overpopulation. We can pay for this economic restructuring by implementing a multilateral demilitarization, of the kind addressed below.

- ***Renewable energy***

Burning fossil fuels pollutes, attacks the ozone layer, contributes to global warming, politicizes the middle East, enriches patriarchal Saudi Arabia and American oil companies. Kerry proposed tax rebates for people who buy hybrid cars. We must go far beyond that, committing ourselves to energy conversion within our lifetime.

- ***National health care and child care plans***

Canada and all of Europe have national health care plans. Canada’s model is workable and affordable. Canada is moving toward a child care plan, thus addressing pressures on women, still largely responsible for children, created by the massive influx of women into the labor force since the 1960s. The United States lags far behind Canada and Europe on these two issues.

- ***Global multilateralism***

Manifest Destiny mixed with unilateralism has led to the irresolvable war in Iraq. Bush’s macho adventurism has lost the U.S. every ally except Tony Blair. We need to deal with the likes of Saddam, Al-Qaeda and North Korea collaboratively, using the United Nations and the EU. The isolation of the United States in the world community exacerbates the so-called terrorist threat.

- ***Demilitarization and an end to nuclear proliferation***

We cannot end domestic poverty and restructure global economies without reducing the massive defense budget of the U.S. Global multilateralism enables us to share the burden of checking nuclear proliferation, which is a far more serious problem than so-called terrorism.

The Democratic Party’s New Constituencies: The Next New Left

To win political power and prevent the regression into an atavistic hard-right evangelism, Democrats must develop new alliances among minorities, young people and a working class that one might best characterize as the anxious working class—anxious about job loss. This working class includes office and factory workers, women and men, workers who belong to unions and workers who don’t. This is the post-Fordist working class of the so-called service sector. This is not very different from the combination of change agents identified in Port Huron as

relevant to post-Eisenhower America. Indeed, in the early history of the New Left we find fascinating models of voter registration and mobilization that can help get out the vote for “new” Democratic candidates. Borrowing from the example of SNCC, early SDS participants moved to inner cities in the north in order to organize poor people. This was called ERAP—economic research and action program. Where SNCC’s drive was largely voter registration, ERAP tried to organize the poor at a neighborhood level. Hayden, for example, lived and worked in Newark for four years, largely before SDS turned its attention to the war in Vietnam. Today young people could work in cities and elsewhere in order to register and mobilize voters every two years. If conducted on a massive national scale, this new ERAP would enable the Democratic Party to regain power. It would have the additional advantage of coalition building, helping bring together a large-scale movement for social democracy and social justice that moves beyond electoral politics to transform a host of public institutions and personal arrangements. This radicalizes the traditional agenda of FDR-era Democrats, replacing liberalism with social democracy.

Changing the Discourse of Social Change: Democrats and Social Democracy

The new Democratic Party needs to change its discourse and seek new metaphors of change. No longer pandering to the flag, the market, religion and the family, Democrats must argue for secular social justice, unashamedly. The early SDS was certainly correct to abandon a European discourse of leftism as unsuited to the New World, even if they had read C. Wright Mills and early Marx. As I suggested earlier, “an agenda for social democracy” carries little overt baggage and can help both Democrats and democrats reposition themselves in the struggle for social change. This agenda must be coherent; it must also connect political and personal, as Mills and feminists have urged. To be New Left means that one requires social change to pass through everyday life, not bypassing it either via a vanguard party or the imagery of a long road. For new Democrats to get out the vote, they must demonstrate that avoiding the hard right and embracing a significant alternative will matter—to welfare mothers, school teachers, the anxious working class, college students.

Bush has done us a favor. He has galvanized the Democratic Party and the left to reinvent themselves. We will reflect, write and organize in dialectical counterpoint. Four years will pass quickly in the meantime.