

Book Review

***It's OK to be angry about capitalism*, by Bernie Sanders. Allen Lane: London. 2023. ISBN 978-0593238714**

At a time when most politicians are wary of the phrase "working class", Bernie Sanders has no such qualms. It recurs countless times in this book, most of which is devoted to detailing the current plight of the American working class, its causes and the remedies needed. Sanders does not mince his words: the American working class lives a precarious, underpaid existence and suffers abysmal health care and poor education. Attempts at unionisation are aggressively put down. The force oppressing the working class, the Sanders narrative continues, is a handful of billionaires, who make massive donations to America's two major political parties (sometimes to both at once), by which means they are able to block policy changes threatening their own financial interests. He expresses, at length, a quite personal loathing for these people and their values. Sanders informs us that the Democrats have more billionaire donors than the Republicans but he is justly proud that he did not solicit or receive any funding from them for his own campaign for nomination as the Democratic candidate for the presidency in 2020 (and when they read his book they won't be giving him a cent in the future).

Sanders is truly democratic (with a small 'd'). He shows no bitterness at having lost the nomination, even though the Democratic Party machine was deployed against him. He hates Trump but he quotes himself as saying, just before the election, "if he wins, he wins" (p60), an affirmation of majoritarianism that is apposite across the political spectrum and both sides of the Atlantic. As chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, he has proposed many measures which would improve working-class lives, several of which, he stoically reports, were defeated by 98 votes to one.

Sanders only partially confronts the changing demographics of American voting. The Democratic Party is losing working-class voters to the Republicans, while gaining affluent voters from them. The Republicans, he says, play on "long-standing racism and resentment on the part of white working-class voters at the gains Black Americans have made" (p280), while the Democratic Party is guilty of "turning its back on the American working class" (p281). Both parts of this explanation are inadequate. Sanders himself tells us that growing numbers of

Latino voters are also transferring from Democrat to Republican and, though to a lesser extent, Black voters are too. And he does not explain *why* the Democratic Party has rejected the working class. This would require bringing the middle class (or 'professional and managerial class') into the discussion, together with the economic, cultural and political differences between it and the working class (cf. Williams, 2017). Unfortunately for Sanders (and us all) these two classes dislike each other more than they do the billionaires (in fact, each has its favoured and disfavoured individuals among the more prominent billionaires). Sanders skilfully circumvents this deep divide within American society. He completely ignores the existence of the middle class; at the same time, the views he (very briefly) expresses on identity and climate-change are recognisably those of the progressive middle class. He describes no active political role for the working class, save on labour issues; they would otherwise be passive recipients of beneficial legislation passed in the Senate. Presumably, the political wing of the middle class would be saving the world while that of the working class pursued unionisation. Sanders would be actively helping the latter, encouraging the former and pushing bills on health-care and so on through the Senate.

This balancing act has allowed Sanders to achieve wide popular success but whether it would ever be enough to allow him (or a younger successor) actual victory, is questionable. However, President or not, Bernie Sanders is good for America. No other senior politician works so tirelessly and single-mindedly for its working class.

Reference

Williams, Joan C. (2017). *White Working Class: Overcoming class cluelessness in America*. Boston MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

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