

The Washington Post

Bernie Sanders is not just a garden-variety social democrat

Megan McArdle

February 18, 2020

The world of comic books, in which characters are constantly dying and being revived or reinvented for a new legion of fans, eventually had to invent a concept known as the “retcon” — short for “retroactive continuity.”

You’ll have noticed the phenomenon in film and television even if you never knew its name: “retconning” means altering an already-established past story line, to cover up growing plot holes or simply to free an author to craft a more enjoyable narrative in the present, one unhindered by the back catalogue.

The term has obvious applications to modern politics. As Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) looks increasingly likely to win the Democratic nomination, left-of-center people are anxious to downgrade Sanders’s self-described socialism into something more politically palatable — like Great Society liberalism, or perhaps, at maximum, a Nordic-style welfare state.

In this, they struggle with an inconveniently well-documented Early Bernie Sanders, with his calls to nationalize “utilities, banks and major industries,” his kind words for left-wing dictatorships, and his “very strange honeymoon” in the U.S.S.R. — where he blasted U.S. foreign policy before returning home to say “Let’s take the strengths of both systems. ... Let’s learn from each other.”

One should be forgiven almost any number of youthful flirtations with bad ideology. But Sanders was in his early 40s when he went gaga for Nicaragua’s brutal Sandinista regime, and 46 during his sojourn on the Volga. In February 2019, when he was refusing to describe Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro as a “dictator,” Sanders was 77.

Forty years seems enough cultivate skepticism about what you’re shown while visiting a Communist dictatorship. And 77 is certainly old enough to have read the 2019 Human Rights Watch report on Venezuela, which noted that “polls had not met international standards of freedom and fairness,” and went on to state that no “independent government institutions remain today in Venezuela to act as a check on executive power. ... The government has been repressing dissent through often-violent crackdowns.” All of which sounds positively dictatorial. If that wasn’t enough, Sanders might have been convinced when Maduro started using military blockades to prevent humanitarian aid from reaching his own famine-stricken citizens.

Yes, by the September Democratic debate, Sanders had inched around to calling Maduro a “vicious tyrant,” but why was it such a struggle? No regime that is democratically accountable

could undertake such a blockade, which is why Great Society Democrats and Nordic-style social democrats don't hesitate to condemn the ones that do. That sort of reluctance occurs among people who still hanker for something much more radical than Western democracies are prepared to deliver — and can't quite admit that their idealistic program has birthed yet another moral and economic catastrophe.

Thus, it's unsurprising to find that Sanders remains considerably to the left of Europe's moderate social democrats. Economist Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute argues that even when you compare the current Sanders platform to the British Labour Party's 2019 election manifesto, the former is more radical. Sanders wants government to absorb a much higher share of gross domestic product, intervene even more heavily in sectors such as health care, and attack capital more aggressively than Labour promised to do under Jeremy Corbyn — and the Corbyn agenda was broadly recognized as a leftward leap in a country whose politics are already well to the left of ours.

Opinion | David Axelrod: The Iowa caucuses are problematic — but don't throw them out

David Axelrod, senior advisor to former President Barack Obama, says the presidential nominating process is flawed but should not change too much. (Video: Darian Woehr, Kate Woodsome, Ben Derico, Danielle Kunitz/Photo: Daniel Acker / Bloomberg/The Washington Post)

MIT economist Daron Acemoglu recently made similar points, tying them directly to Sanders's claim that he just wants the United States to be more like Denmark or Sweden. As it happens, he says, Sweden once tried a version of Sanders's proposals to transfer a sizable chunk of corporate ownership and managerial control to workers. This “workplace democracy,” an idea closely associated with democratic socialism, was eventually abandoned by those Nordic social democrats because it poisoned labor relations, and depressed both investment and productivity growth.

Sanders's undeniable radicalism, and his equally undeniable popularity with an exceptionally motivated portion of the base, presents a problem for Democrats. Young Democrats may think socialism sounds swell, but affluent older suburbanites will balk at both the word and the policies it denotes. With the white working class flocking Trumpward, Democrats needs those suburbanites; just boosting youth turnout probably won't be enough.

The obvious solution is to quietly persuade suburbanites that the Sanders socialism label is just personal branding, and either retcon his previous radicalism, or write a change of heart into his biography. One problem is that it's not clear this change of heart actually occurred; a bigger problem is that Sanders appeals to younger voters precisely because “he's been saying the same thing for 40 years.” But the biggest problem is that his defenders can't erase the things he's saying right now.