

NATIONAL REVIEW

Fellow Millennials: Don't Be Deceived by Democratic Socialism

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February 17, 2016

Bernie Sanders has prompted a new trend: Millennial-splaining of the term “democratic socialism.”

“Bernie isn't a socialist, he's a *democratic* socialist!” Millennials explain, with an eye roll. “It's about the people retaking control from greedy corporations and working together as equals. It's about ‘togetherness.’” That's basically how a baby-faced twentysomething with a lot of product in his hair describes it on the [“Democratic Socialist” Facebook page](#). His three-and-half-minute explanatory video titled “A Pretty Good Intro to Democratic Socialism” has had more than 3 million views.

In the New Hampshire primary, Sanders won 83 percent of Millennial voters younger than 30. After his swift rise in the national polls, about 60 percent of American Millennials currently support him, according to the latest Reuters poll. A majority of the 18–34-crowd don't know what democratic socialism is, or even what regular old socialism is: A 2010 CBS/New York Times Poll found that only 16 percent of Millennials could define socialism as government ownership, or some variation thereof. But a recent YouGov poll shows they prefer socialism to capitalism. Riddle me that.

Emily Ekins and Joy Pullmann at *The Federalist* have laid out a [comprehensive look of Millennial views on socialism](#), including their distance from its Soviet connotations and their misunderstandings. For instance, though a majority approve of socialism, a majority disapprove of government's running businesses such as Apple and Uber.

Whether the glib qualifier “democratic” fixes the problems of socialist economies turns on whether “democratic socialism” is a coherent concept or an oxymoron. Moreover, my peers tend to conflate democratic socialists and social democrats. Scandinavian countries, contrary to popular assumption, are probably better described as social democracies, and these distinctions matter. In fairness, Bernie seems to confuse the two as well. His rhetoric evokes socialism, but the details of many of his actual policy proposals resemble a more banal welfare-state expansion.

Now, I'm not an old fogey trying to patronize the youngsters. And I believe I apprehend the reasons for their support that go deeper than his “free-stuff” policies. What I am is a Millennial pleading with my peers: Please resist jejunely embracing the notion of “justice” that conceals radical political and economic transformation. Millennials suppose that the qualifier “democratic” refutes worries about socialism. To them, worries about growing government,

higher taxes, and unfeasible policies are only so much condescension from older generations who have a phobia of things they don't understand. My peers think democratic socialism is a happy idea embraced by blond, bike-riding Scandinavians, not a concrete *system* requiring a byzantine, tyrannical bureaucratic apparatus and potentially radical lifestyle changes.

Sanders's sunnily vague portrayal of democratic socialism and the average young person's approach to politics have created the perfect storm. He has inspired a litany of memes overlaid with catchy quips. They are shared thousands or millions of times on social media, often suppressing debate and sober, independent thought. These memes portray "democratic socialism" as the idea that "no one who works 40 hours a week in this country should live in poverty," or as the suggestion that relinquishing a few kinds of deodorant will help feed starving children. Share, tweet, share.

It's possible that some young Bernie supporters have done their research and know exactly what they're getting into. But I'm disgusted with the largely unserious meme politics among members of my generation; with their cultlike insistence that they know something about socialism their elders don't or even can't; with their naïve belief that the arc of history bends toward income equality, or that history has a predetermined arc at all (even though you probably couldn't pay most of us to read the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel).

Why does the under-35 crowd take a shine to the man himself — the bespectacled, cotton-haired Brooklyn-born Vermonter? On style, Millennials seem to like his curmudgeonly mien, his nonsense and plainly worded stump speech, and his refusal to toss out forced pop-culture references. On substance, he probably *has* piqued their interest with such promises as "free college" and single-payer health insurance, especially given that many young people don't get coverage through employers. These conjectures would explain the appeal of Bernie's *ethos* and *logos*, but his Millennial-magnet *pathos* seems more complex.

Sanders's "the people vs. the corporations" and "end Wall Street greed" themes offer a simple problem with an obvious solution. Millennials are rightfully frustrated by economic stagnation, but they are easily taken in by deceptive quick fixes.

I'd rather Sanders's "free-stuff" policies were his sole or primary draw for Millennials, because that would be easier to counter in a debate. But my generation's desire for justice has an often-misguided intensity. Social-justice warriors seem to be in the business of infinitely lengthening their list of grievances, but they probably do so because the human yearning for ultimate justice is unsatisfied and ineradicable. And maybe they haven't been taught that achieving any justice requires the slow, steadfast, unsexy work of individuals on one small part of one problem at a time, and that the achievement will be imperfect and perhaps impermanent.

Perhaps these militant SJWs harbor a Marxist hope that a classless society would wipe away every tear, and they could at last lay down their arms. Bernie himself claimed in the February 11 debate that he would resolve racial tension by creating jobs and reducing income inequality. He has also blamed income inequality for the rise of ISIS. In parallel fashion, some journalists on the left try to explain his appeal to the young in solely material terms, saying it's a matter of job anxiety or being burdened by debt. I don't buy it.

Most simply, Sanders's brand of democratic socialism appeals to the desire for a system that produces comprehensive social, political, and economic justice. The reality, however, is that while there are good systems and bad systems, we cannot factor individual humans out of our political equation. We, you and I, are the variables. Some young people aren't taught this. Older people who weren't taught this are more likely to have discovered it by now.

That is why conservatives continually emphasize individual liberty and responsibility, local-community involvement, and the centrality of the family. A purportedly just system that makes no moral demands of *all* individuals is an illusion. This illusion is the shiny, hollow core of what Bernie is selling, and it is attractive indeed.