

## Bernie Sanders’ Socialism Will Not Save Us.

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“I firmly believe that the philosophy of my ancestors lines up quite tidily with the philosophy of communism. I make no apology for my principles.” -Lee Maracle

Bernie Sanders' threat to the American oligarchy is both formidable and, in my opinion, commendable. He has introduced many people to democratic socialism through common-sense politics that favor the 99% rather than the monopolistic hyper-elite. His legacy is tangible not only through his policies, but also the vast array of bumper stickers, memes, t-shirts, and, moreover, the dreams of change that he has offered to young people. But a radical approach to politics will always be most radical when epistemologically conceived by those most deeply affected by – and therefore most knowledgeable of – the various dimensions of systemic oppression they seek to eradicate. Born in a Jewish community in Brooklyn NY, Bernie Sanders comes from a Northeastern urban, intellectual tradition, and he has done a considerable amount for what we might call a socialist cause. But singularly highlighting Sanders as the face of socialism in America will hinder the progress of truly liberating leftist politics. The future of this country is being deeply influenced by a burgeoning demographic of young, left-winged, and non-white leaders, and for this reason, Bernie Sanders’ socialism will not save us.

Sanders is an old, white, upper middle class, T20 educated career politician. Although his ideas are influenced by diverse sources, such as 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century European socialism, Latin American socialist leaders, and the African American civil rights movement, his identity and life experiences limit the purview of his perspectives. If this is the case, to whom can we look for a socialist politic that is liberating without being idealistic, inclusive without being nebulous, and steeped in an appropriately rich historical precedent? I argue that dominant socialist thought in American should consider non-white and non-western ideology in addition to thinkers -- like Marx, Engels, and Debbs - who drew Sanders into the socialist fold. Indigenous socialists like [Howard Adams](#), Black Southern-bred socialists like [Angela Davis](#), Appalachian socialists like [Dom West](#) all provide much needed insight and hope. We must break out of the idea that all good thought is brought about in exalted northern urban intellectual spaces, like Sanders' own University of Chicago alma mater.

One of the foundational reasons for shifting away from the dominant socialist paradigm in North American politics is to offer a more holistic critique of capitalism. In the American context, capitalism has *always* been synonymous with settler colonialism, enslavement, and racial subjugation. These social, political, and economic systems of oppression constituted the primitive accumulation of capital in the Americas. Faulty in Sanders' thinking, and many white leftists', is the assumption of the Universal Worker. Some of this can be attributed to a [Marxist orthodoxy](#) in which race is economized as simply an issue of class or even a false consciousness that undermines class solidarity. The laborer is considered racially and sexually heterogeneous, and solidarity is all rooted in ties to class. If we wish to build a socialism that is appropriate for the American context, it must be historically rooted and constituted of the intersectional needs of the marginalized. Recently deceased scholar Lee Maracle of the Sto:lo nation writes in her book *I am Woman* that the development leftist politics from unions and European labor movements has always been riddled with racism. “The European labor movement was built on our backs... the workers of this land have always had us as a cushion to soften the blow of recession...” (Maracle 108). This does not mean that traditional Marxist ideas or labor union socialism should be abandoned, because

they still remain a significant and revolutionary theoretical foundation; nevertheless, they need to be critically assessed in tandem with the historical context from which they come, and to which they are deemed to be valuable, in order to create more inclusive politics moving forward. We cannot ignore our history if we ever hope for liberation. Socialism born specifically within marginalized groups, like Black Marxism and Indigenous socialism consider genocide, slavery, centuries of disenfranchisement, forceful removal, withholding of civil rights, economic empowerment, and political participation experienced by Black and Indigenous people not as incidental, but as central to their conception of socialist theory.

Additionally, North American socialist politics neglects to consider that socialism *has always been* an Indigenous, and therefore a natively situated, practice. When referencing successful democratic socialist societies, Sanders often makes reference to Scandinavian societies, such as [Finland](#) and Sweden. Such examples tend to dominate the socialist conversation because they are digestible as reasonable and relatable Western societies. Yet, some of the most bountiful and synergistic historical examples of socialism are Indigenous societies situated within our own continent. Métis socialist and Red Power activist [Howard Adams](#) wrote in his autobiography *Prison of Grass: Canada From a Native Point of View* that “there were no poor and needy by comparison with other members, and likewise no wealthy and privileged; as a result, on the prairies there were no classes and no class antagonisms among the people... Indian communal society was transformed into an economic class of labourers by European fur trading companies...”

It is important to acknowledge the existence of socialist practices within the Americas for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is epistemologically significant to trace political theory and practice to non-western points of origin. Without this purposeful acknowledgement, we reinforce ideas that good and valuable knowledge is only born of Eurocentric origins. Additionally, one of the many criticisms of socialism is that it would be a misfit for the American context; however, it has already existed in the Americas for centuries before the importation of capitalism via settler colonialism.

Finally, the dominant socialist strain needs to be more intersectional in its praxis. In opposing capitalism, we must consciously oppose heterosexism, patriarchy, anti-environmentalism, and ableism as well. The rhetoric of northern, urban intellectuals like Sanders often flattens socialism to simply an economic practice that can in turn influence social and political conditions. But leaders of [Queer Indigenous Feminist thought](#) argue for socialism as a collective, anti-colonial [mode of survival](#). Settler colonialism has imposed systems of racial, sexual, and gender domination that transcended economic practices. When we think of socialism as communal care networks, we can start to undo systems of domination that are predicated on hierarchical subjugation in much of the same ways as capitalism is. The queer indigenous feminists of [The Red Nation](#) get this. Black Marxist feminists get this, and in fact, it is intrinsic to their politics.

For these reasons, Indigenous and Black liberation must be at the roots of socialist revolution in this country.

We must lead the fight, not Bernie.