

From Ben and Jerry’s to the Mittens and the Dove

Robert F. Barsky

From the mid-1970s until the late 1980s I was a member of the [Powderhounds](#), a team of ski ambassadors who were sponsored by a Montreal radio station called CHOM FM. , which gave me the opportunity to ski almost anywhere on the Eastern seaboard without paying for my lift tickets. My favorite ski destinations were in Vermont, most notably Smuggler’s Notch, Stowe, Killington and Jay Peak, where we’d thrill to the moguls and powder amidst those gorgeous Green Mountains. Trips from Montréal to the US with my close friends often included stops in Burlington VT, where we [had terrific ice cream in a converted gas station](#), beginning in 1979, served by a couple of dudes named Ben and Jerry. Burlington also boasted a rather famous ‘lefty’ resident named Bernie Sanders, who was elected Mayor there, and served in that position from April 6, 1981, to April 4, 1989.

[Bernie’s politics were actually tied to our ice cream gurus](#), a fact we didn’t know at the time, but wouldn’t have come as any surprise, given what we knew from our ski bum friends about the politics of 1980s Burlington. And we were no strangers to marginal politics, in part because of the lifestyle we had adopted, but also because we grew up in Montréal, which was no stranger to ideas of socialized medicine, alternative lifestyles, sexual liberation, and progressive taxation aimed at maintaining reasonable proximity between the haves and the have-nots in society. We loved hearing that Bernie was a socialist, or communist, or whatever he was, a notable figure who stood far outside the American mainstream.

My own pathway led me to and from the US, for my studies as an undergraduate (in Boston), and of course for a multitude of CHOM sponsored ski days. In 1990, I collaborated with [Michael Holquist](#) (Comparative Literature at Yale) on a special issue of a journal I’d founded called [Discours social / Social Discourse](#). I decided to send a copy of the issue, called *Bakhtin and Otherness*, to Noam Chomsky, with whose works I’d become obsessed as an undergraduate. He seemed to speak to me directly about arbitrary authority, the misuses of power, the importance of studying language, and the quest for creativity. I was nervous sending out the package to Noam Chomsky, and I expected that he would be unlikely to reply, given his massive research, teaching and writing agendas. Instead, he wrote back with kindness and generosity: “Many thanks for sending me the fascinating issue on Bakhtin, about whom I know far too little” (March 20th, 1991). It was a small note, but for me, this seemed like receiving a letter from the likes of Charles Dickens, Mahatma Gandhi, or Albert Einstein.

As it turned out, this was the first of hundreds of letters that have passed between us for over thirty years, addressing issues of language theory, US politics, immigration law, travel, friendship, love, loss, and the social responsibility of intellectuals. For me, Chomsky’s irreverence for powerful people and institutions for their own sake, his challenges to arbitrary authority, his resolute conviction that people are born with an instinct for freedom and the powers imbued by common sense, and his extraordinary generosity in regards to the sharing of ideas, were and have remained beacons in a world often filled with disappointment, mediocrity, and unthinking obedience.

[My work on Noam Chomsky and his milieus](#) expanded over the years, as I researched and taught in areas pertaining to [NY Jewish intellectuals](#), the student [Zionist organization Avukah](#), [anarchism](#), and, moreover, the many challenges facing [vulnerable migrants](#), [refugees](#), and [homeless persons](#). Bernie Sanders remained interesting to me, if only because he offered up a vision of what could be possible, even via mainstream politics, in the US. By 2016, I began to be fascinated in Bernie’s rise to mainstream US politics, and with the catastrophic election of Trump, I was dragged,

kicking and screaming, to examine much more carefully than I ever had the idea of populism and its purveyors on different ends of the political spectrum. It was in this context, and with a view to understanding how two aged White men were appealing to such a broad segment of the US population even after 8 years of a dynamic and inspiring (but often disappointing) Barack Obama. In this context, Bernie was particularly interesting, because he combined so many realms with which I’d had truck over the years, from syndicalism and social justice to NY Jewish intellectuals and the bohemia of Burlington VT.

My initial idea was to explore the political milieus from which Bernie Sanders has drawn for his “political revolution.” I wanted to undertake a critical engagement with his ‘New Deal’ style liberalism, his ‘democratic socialism’, and [his long-standing interest in Eugene V. Debs’s work](#) as a labor leader and a candidate for office. In so doing, I hoped to outline the intellectual and political strands that have informed Sanders’ approach to governing, while at the same time identifying what makes Sanders’ unique in the history of American socialism. The America that Sanders has engaged has significantly different challenges from those faced by figures from the American socialist past, so it seemed important to examine how he has crafted a new ‘future to believe in’ by addressing the issues raised in such contemporary events as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter.

My real interest, though, was “those college years”, as [Judith and Robert Wallerstein](#) once described that era of life to me with reference to their own experience in Avukah in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Furthermore, I had the not-unpleasant experience of reading [an excellent book by Nicolas Gachon](#) that covered much of the intellectual history ground I was hoping to till, particularly when read alongside of works by Stanley Gutman, Harry Jaffe, Garrison Nelson, Richard Sugarman and others.

So to address the appeal of Bernie Sanders for a college-age population, it seemed most interesting to create a course at Vanderbilt, and see what the students had to say about the Bernie they knew, and the Bernie they came to know better as they read primary and secondary texts relating to his life and work. The Political Science Department at Vanderbilt University was amenable, and so in the fall of 2021 I opened the course up to (a flood of!) students. I limited the class size, however, because I wanted to review all of the material myself, and not have to rely on a graduate student. I decided as well to invite guests who could broaden and deepen the conversation, and so we had memorable talks from [John Geer \(Vanderbilt Professor and Dean\)](#), [Ryan Nobles \(CNN\)](#), [Alex Rogers \(CNN\)](#) and [Faiz Shakir](#), Bernie’s campaign manager.

Within weeks of starting the course, I realized that I’d struck intellectual gold with these students. They were engaged, sharp, critical, and deeply aware of the issues. I wanted to hear their voices, though, rather than leading them to follow a set course plan, and so I asked them to contribute “position papers” pertaining to their specific areas of interest, and to present their ideas to the class in oral presentations. They also turned in final projects, which sometimes expanded their work for the other assignments, or else set out on new pathways. I also invited them to read from a broad list of works connected to Bernie’s ideas, and (as an optional assignment) to contribute a book review as well. By mid-semester, I knew that I wasn’t going to write that biography of Bernie Sanders, but I was instead going to invite, help edit, and then publish those students who wrote position papers and/or book reviews in *AmeriQuests*.

This special issue, *The Mittens and the Dove*, is the result.

I also taught a course on the Beat Generation that same semester, and realized that some of the work done for that class was connected, thematically or in terms of general attitudes expressed, to the Bernie work. So I decided to open up the option for students to include some of their own creative Beat works in this issue, making the always-interesting connection between art and life. And

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finally, inspired by a superb painting by Lauren McKee for the Beat class, I asked if she’d be willing to create her own vision of *The Mittens and the Dove*, the result being the magnificent cover and artworks that grace this special issue.

This has been a very enjoyable journey, from biography to class, and from the mittens to the dove.