

# Is That All There Is?

## American Politics and the "Evil of Two Lessers"

JOEL ROGERS

The draft Democratic National Program advertises itself as a "moderate, achievable, common-sense agenda that will improve people's daily lives and not increase the size of government." It's certainly moderate enough, and it certainly won't increase the "big government" in Washington that's already shrunk to its smallest size in 30 years. But it will do very little to improve people's daily lives—and what it doesn't do virtually assures their further coarsening and disruption by an economy unconstrained by democratic will.

"Opportunity, Responsibility, Community" are the documents alleged organizing themes—worthy, old-fashioned, focus-group-approved words. Neoliberalism with a smirking face. Deregulation, and costless cultural signalling. Trade deals for the big boys at Commerce. Food out of the mouths of those babes with parents stupid enough to be poor. "Opportunity" is mostly about education, without the resources to make it possible. "Responsibility" is mostly about crime—which we're all against—and defense, which we all want adequately supplied. "Community" is mostly about putting V-chips in TVs and taking cigarettes out of the mouths of the young. Cities are not mentioned. Women get choice and . . . well, what more could they possibly want? And on the topic of corporate violence and greed, get this precise and thundering condemnation: "Employers have a responsibility to do their part as well . . . We believe that values like loyalty, fairness, and responsibility are not inconsistent with the bottom line."

Same old same old. But they'll win in November, and we'll be glad they did, given the alternative.

At some point, though—and now's as good a time as any—we ought to start thinking about our alternative, about what a truly progressive program for American reconstruction might be. Assume for a moment the improbable, that we had a competent vehicle to put the message out—a vastly larger New Party, a truly reformed Democratic Party, or some other lowering beast still waiting to be born—what do we have

to say? Properly suspicious of discussions that go nowhere, but improperly unprepared to say something if we're ever going to go anywhere, progressives don't answer this question enough.

### Expressing Progressive Politics

Maybe that's because there are no answers—something that an increasing number of progressives, in their hearts, seem to believe. To hear all the talk of internationalization of capital, for example, you might think there is really nothing to be done before we get world government, which we can't get because we can't even organize a national one. Or to hear all the talk of racial and other differences, or the decline of working class solidarity, you might think there could never be enough of us willing to do something together even if there was something to be done.

Or maybe it's because there are too many answers—too many things that are screwed up, with too much interdependency in their solution—so that starting the "what is to be done" list is defeated by its having no clear end. Or, in a variant on this, there might be an impossible consensus constraint on getting started—that to act together on anything, we have to agree on everything.

Maybe, but I doubt it. It's true that our world is not the world of our mothers. The basic structure of the economy and politics has changed in ways that defeat traditional New Deal/Great Society politics. But that doesn't mean there is nothing to be done, or the best that we can hope for is triage in the rollback of that social democracy's achievements. This society is disorganized, and "organic solidarities" cannot be counted on as fuel for social movements. But that doesn't mean there's not a mass public for a new progressive politics. Indeed, there's probably a bigger public for such a politics now than at any time since the 1930s.

After all, a generation of economic decline and failed government response have not only made American politics ugly. They've also generated a huge potential base for the signature issues of progressives—greater social control of the

economy, and a democracy strong enough to enforce it. There is vast implicit demand for imposing some standards on corporate behavior, for making values matter in how we run our economy and distribute opportunity and reward. And there is vast demand for a more responsive and effective "government"—competent public and social authorities accountable to popular aims. Satisfying these demands could be the basis for a new mass democratic politics—a politics that would get progressives out of their marginal ghetto and into the business of running the country.

And it's not the case—it never has been—that we need to agree on everything before doing some good on some things.

Of course, a new progressive politics would need to take account of how the world has changed. It would recognize that the nation state can no longer be the only instrument of politics—the self-governing capacity of the society itself would need to be increased. Accepting the decline of "organic" solidarities—themselves often produced by completely oppressive practices we should be happy to be done with—it would take more explicit aim at creating



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an agent of reform. While the achievements of the welfare state were considerable, it would need to be far less defensive about its defects. And while the politics of expression and charity are all well and good, it would indeed have to say something about how to "improve people's daily lives" and offer some "common sense" solutions to real and urgent problems.

### The Root of Most Evil

But that still leaves plenty to be said, and it need not be timid. A full program would require plans for urban redevelopment, the reform of education, more substantive equality of opportunity for people to exercise their capabilities, and developing and sustaining the social and political institutions that promote genuine democracy. All of these programs, however, first require restructuring the root of most evil in the U.S.—the economy.

The basic problem with the American economy is not that it's subject to international competitive pressures, or that new technology is displacing the need for human labor. The problem is that we as a society have made it too easy to make a lot of money treating people as road kill and the earth like a sewer—the "low road" of industrial restructuring that most American firms are still on—and too hard to make money as a high-wage, low-waste, more democratically-minded producer—the "high road" response we should more systematically support.

Things to do here include *dramatically* raising the minimum wage—not just your \$5.15 an hour nonsense, but something more like \$10 an hour; ending public "subsidy abuse" to low-wage employers by abolishing all "corporate welfare" for firms paying less than that; and shortening the work week to provide a better distribution ("full") of employment within the context of vastly improved jobs.

Of course, those jobs need to be offered by firms, and the firms need to survive under competitive conditions, and doing so as a high-end producer or service provider requires an environment not only hostile to the low-road alternative, but supportive of the high-roading one. What is needed specifically are a range of quasi-public goods—from physical infrastructure to effective labor market and training institutions to more democratic industrial relations—that no individual firm has any in-

centive to provide on its own.

But that's where "we the people" come in. Just as in the Keynesian age we showed the worth of democracy by using its institutions (the state, unions) to solve the problem of effective demand, so in this age we can show its worth by solving the problem of "effective supply"—creating that environment to support a more dynamic and satisfying capitalism.

### Paying for Real Change with Real Money

Doing this will require some money. Where might it come from? Basically, all the obvious places. We finally arrange national accounts to separate capital accounts from services, and be quite willing to drive the first into deficit. We should in fact declare the "peace dividend" that we've paid for several times. We might use-

to believe these funds could earn competitive rates of return. If there are transition costs, the Federal Reserve might be pressured to do what its charter purportedly required it to do—use its regional authority to promote economic development in those regions—in this case by helping secure their credit-worthiness during startup.

What would be the result? Distressed communities would get needed capital, capital in general would become more rooted and less prone to the depredations of international finance, savers would get greater security in their investment than that provided in casino capitalism, the economy could be moved more squarely toward the high-wage, low-waste path of sustainable development. Not heaven, to be sure, but a heck of a lot better than the current hell.

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fully declare the "environmental dividend" as well—saving hundreds of billions on current waste merely through wholesale application of current conservation technologies. We should reform existing tax policy to reward those who invest here, not abroad. And we should finally liberate "labor's capital"—the trillions in worker "owned" but not controlled pension and other assets—for socially-minded use.

On this last, where some real money is to be found, we can reasonably speculate that individual working-class and middle-class savers generally have more interest in "keeping up the neighborhood" than anonymous corporate investors simply looking for the highest rate of return. After all, they live in the neighborhood, so profitable investments that improve it give them a double return; and they are people, not legal fictions, with affective ties to others. Well, imagine a system in which workers actually had control over their savings, could combine them freely, and had tax or other incentives to do so in regional investment pools doing economically targeted investing.

With sufficiently large and diversified investment portfolios, there's every reason

Much more needs to be said on these issues, but this is at least the beginning of a program that could positively address the other evils currently plaguing the majority of the U.S. population. A program, in short, that dramatically raises living standards, attends to obvious unmet social needs in a way that is fiscally prudent and productivity-minded, builds the democracy needed to realize efficiencies in administration and make the high-wage low-waste path of restructuring possible, gets the middle class realigned with the poor, shows a real break with old liberal politics, sticks it only to those unwilling to make a fair contribution to the society feeding them, and contributes to world peace and happiness.

Our kind of program. A program that could plausibly find majority support in the general population. Not something likely to be offered anytime soon by either of the major parties, but something we might do well to refine, improve, and publicize together.

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*Joel Rogers teaches sociology and law at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and is national chair of the New Party.*