**The Left and Presidential Primaries. Mike Miller. *Social Policy*, Spring, 2016.**

***A review of* The Primary Route: How the 99% Take On the Military Industrial Complex; *by Tom Gallagher; coasttocoastpublications.org; 2015***

When I was a mid-1950s undergraduate at UC Berkeley and an elected “representative-at-large” on the student government Executive Committee, a group of students organized Toward an Active Student Community (TASC), one of the first of the liberal-to-radical campus political parties that became expressions of the re-birth of a student movement in the north. TASC endorsed student government candidates. But it did more: it had them sign an undated letter of resignation that TASC would call them to honor if they failed to be accountable to the platform on which they ran—as interpreted by TASC.

TASC was savaged by our campus newspaper, *The Daily Cal*. It said in editorials and news stories that this small group (TASC) was seeking to control representatives elected by the people. We, in our nascent student movement most self-righteous manner, tried to tell the student body that we were simply implementing what was a practice of British parliamentary politics—creating a mechanism that would itself be a democratic membership organization to hold our politicians accountable to the platform on which they ran.

Whatever the democratic theory merits of our argument, we were flying in the face of American political tradition, and the electorate would have none of it. Our candidates were trounced in the election, and, to make matters worse, the turnout was small indicating a “ho-hum” attitude by the student body to the whole thing. TASC soon thereafter died. It was replaced a semester later by SLATE, which endorsed candidates, but stayed within the experience of the student body in how it ran its campaigns. We doubled the electorate, and won a substantial number of votes though none of us was elected. Soon, SLATE was electing candidates, including the student body president.

**The Left and Presidential Politics**

In *The Primary Route* Tom Gallagher’s broad definition of “the left” includes people who think:

* “America suffers from too great a concentration of wealth and power.
* “Our permanent war economy is not bringing us closer to genuine ‘national security’.
* “We are currently frittering away our opportunities to develop energy sources that won’t further degrade the planet.”

Pretty good, but not the whole cigar. I think two additional planks to this platform should be considered, and the “permanent war economy” one needs elaboration:

* Economic populism/progressivism is not enough. Race, ethnicity, gender and immigration should be part of a core platform. Included among those formulating this plank should be respected people from these constituencies. They need to agree on language that can reach a broader public; persuading them of that may be difficult. The important thing is not the words but who is involved in articulating them.
* It’s implied but needs to be said: government policy must create a firm floor of economic security, including guaranteed work for all physically able, affordable housing, quality public schools, universal health care and other essentials of life.

Here’s where I’d elaborate:

* The toughest of all is a foreign policy formulation that challenges the role the United States now plays in the world—a return to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor” policy that led him to refuse to intervene when Mexico nationalized its oil. “In the field of world policy,” FDR said in his March 4, 1933 inaugural address, “I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others.” Finding language that connects being a good neighbor to a different kind of “war on drugs” and a different way of eliminating terrorism aimed at the U.S. would be difficult, but it could resonate with majorities of Americans. If Rand Paul can do it, why not “the left”?

Gallagher’s platform seeks common ground for large numbers of people. He is properly impatient with sectarians. His analysis of the history of third parties is respectful of those few that made a difference, but critical of the idea that this approach to presidential politics can again be useful. I think he’s right.

**Presidential Politics**

In his “pamphlet” (it runs 187 pages), Gallagher, himself a former state assemblyman in Massachusetts, gives us a civics lesson on how the left must stay within the American experience if it wants to be effective in presidential politics. He knows whereof he speaks having been involved in most of the last 40 years of quadrennial campaigns. His lesson is in two parts.

First, Gallagher describes U.S. third party campaigns as “subtractive”—that is, in effect they take votes from the lesser of the two evils, typically a Democrat, and give them to the Republican, who is usually worse and sometimes far worse. If we were in Europe, he convincingly demonstrates, third, fourth and fifth parties on the left end of the political spectrum can all be “additive” because if their candidates are elected, they can form coalitions in parliament to determine who will be prime minister, and to create legislation that expresses whatever compromises are needed on the left to get measures passed.

The place where additive politics can be played in presidential politics is in the primary. Here Gallagher carefully takes us through an understanding of the state-by-state delegate selection process that leads to a national convention. It is delegates, whether selected in caucuses (states don’t use primaries), or by direct vote of those eligible to participate in a primary (and that varies, with some states limiting electors to registered party members and others not). These delegates actually nominate candidates for president and vice-president, and then typically unify behind their party’s winner. In times past, hotly contested nominating contests in a convention often led to more than one ballot. Delegates for the candidate with the lowest number of first ballot votes would negotiate with delegates for other candidates whose politics were more congenial to their own and “throw” their votes to that candidate. It is the convention delegates who also adopt the party platform, which in days past, he reminds us, was often a hotly contested matter.

Second, Gallagher wants the left to do more than support self-declared candidates for president. Rather, it should be involved in the selection process so that it does not rely upon chance and the existence of either a politician (McGovern, McCarthy, Kucinich, Dean and others) or a respected public figure (Jackson) who decides to seek the nomination: “some form of organization that could maintain a measure of continuity from one presidential election cycle to the next”. He sees the major means for accomplishing this as either a “party within the party”—a continuing coalition of unions, issue organizations and progressive politicians that, whatever the organizational form, would be central to success.

Gallagher elaborates:

While American unions constitute the most important counterweight to the country’s dominant corporations, their cumulative weight is…far from sufficient to carry the day politically. Fortunately, there is a dizzying array of “issue organizations” working largely outside of the electoral arena that are trying to reach the remainder of the “99%” on the concerns central to this book…[I]n terms of both their current importance and their future potential, it is these disparate groups…that will probably hold the key to any future transformation of American politics from the presidential level on down.

He concludes this well-argued, fun to read and thoughtful book with a series of questions and a conclusion:

Will the American left actually start to take…presidential primaries more seriously that it has in the past…? Can it pull together a significant, but declining, labor movement; independent political operatives; and unconnected issues organizations into a force capable of steering a new course for the nation?...Will the American left meet with success if it does attempt to systematically engage with the presidential election process?...[W]hile it may never be possible to be sure of success, failure can be guaranteed [if it doesn’t].

…If the American left does not find its voice within the presidential election process it will remain but a marginal force in American life. We may score excellent debating points from the sidelines but we will not actually be a part of the debate.

**What About Congress?**

Gallagher makes us look at the national political arena. I think he is right in doing so. I think it is a mistake for community organizing and constituency-based issue groups to stay as far from the electoral arena as many have.

But his exclusive focus on presidential primaries raises doubts. The Dixiecrats used their congressional power for roughly 50 years, beginning in the 1930s, to have a deep impact on American politics, beginning with Roosevelt’s New Deal. Their influence continued when there were Democratic presidents and, especially, when Democrats had majorities in the House, Senate or both where Dixiecrat longevity in office gave them crucial committee chairmanships. They focused on one principal concern, race. They made it their litmus test for all legislation and implementation. They were devastatingly effective. We live with results from their work today. A different kind of bloc, formed around different issues, could learn lessons from how the Dixiecrats pursued their racist agenda.

Why not house and senate races as well as the presidential one? No president can pursue the 99% agenda without strong majorities in both houses. Furthermore, strong campaigns on the issues agenda outlined above can have trickle down benefits for state and local races by changing the terms of the political debate.

**Is He Right?**

Gallagher repeatedly says he’s not trying to draw energy away from all the good things that people are already doing: issue campaigns, local elections, congressional elections, educational work, whatever. I think he’s trying to neutralize the many defensive reactions that are likely to come from those who disagree with his priority. I cannot imagine how his enterprise could be launched without refocusing the energies of lots of people, particularly those in key organizational positions where decisions are made or policies recommended regarding the allocation of time, money and talent. (As I’ll argue below, two different groups of people need to put time into the effort.) For a number of reasons, I don’t think it would be a good idea to make that reallocation, though I also don’t think present allocations are all that good either. His two major organizational bases are themselves too weak to sustain the pressure from below required to hold elected officials accountable. The question they should be addressing is how to broaden and deepen their own base.

**Labor**

If anything, labor should be reallocating its resources toward organizing—both internal and external. Nor should these be thought of as conflicting terrains. “Organizing the unorganized” at the scale required to reverse the present state of the unions will require a dramatic infusion of volunteer organizing on the part of existing members. Who better to tell the story of why you’re better off with a union than without? But to do that requires that unions be participatory organizations in which members express their values and interests—not insurance agencies from which they buy policies and expect benefits. Internal renewal and external organizing are two sides of the same coin. Accomplishing this change requires a tectonic shift in most of today’s unions. If they don’t make it, they will continue to shrink in numbers and influence.

Unions now participate in both legislative and electoral politics, including at the presidential level. They haven’t got a lot to show for it; indeed the opposite. Their money and their votes are counted upon by the Democrats before elections take place because the unions have demonstrated by their past behavior that they won’t go anywhere, or do anything, else. They don’t make much use of mass-based nonviolent direct action, and strikes are largely a thing of the past. They aren’t in on-going relationships with constituency-based (as distinct from typical “NGOs” which depend on grants for their budgets and are governed by self-perpetuating boards of directors) community organizations to create an agenda that encompasses both workplace and non-workplace issues. If these activities were going on, electoral politics would be one among many that can build the self-confidence and competence of members thus creating a more meaningful understanding of democratic citizenship, one among many forms of activity to move the country toward an active democracy.

**Issue Organizations**

Gallagher’s “’issue organizations’ working largely outside of the electoral arena that are trying to reach the remainder of the ‘99%’” are themselves problematic. Most of them are narrowly focused on not only their issue, but their specific take on it. Invidious distinctions pervade the field, in large part because funders want to know “What makes you different?”

Further, their way to reach the 99% is typically through the media. They thus are endlessly protesting this or that action by, or policy of, incumbent public authority or economic power but building little-to-nothing as a result. Their protest is oriented toward the evening TV news. Cultivating relationships with the uninvolved and finding ways to engage them that include them defining the problems and solutions is simply not part of their modus operandi. When they do reach out, it is typically by social media and the internet. Click of the computer-key politics alternates with media-oriented protest. Engaging in electoral politics, particularly at the presidential level, will demonstrate how thin these organizations are, not that they are the route to the 99%.

**A Different Kind of Permanent Organization?**

The permanent organization Gallagher envisages runs the risk of being defined as a group meeting in “smoke-filled rooms” where union bosses and their allies try to dictate who can run for president. That was the TASC problem I encountered when I was at UC Berkeley. We can agree that without organization there is no accountability. But we need to build organizations in a way that is within the experience of voters. Accomplishing that requires careful strategizing.

Consider this: what if Sanders began now laying the groundwork to create a permanent electoral *mobilization* organization that would do serious on-the-ground voter education, registration and get-out-the-vote every two years in national elections. He could build a national board with “notables” who have endorsed him in this race. For example, labor leaders could include Larry Cohen, former president of the Communications Workers of America, Mark Dimondstein, president of the American Postal Workers Union, and Larry Hanley, president of Amalgamated Transit Union.

There would have to be people with their kind of weight from the African-American, Latino and other minority communities, and women who are respected in the women’s movement. Other key constituency groups would have to see people on a national board and sponsor committee whose names carry weight with them. He could add members of the Progressive Caucus in Congress—John Lewis and John Conyers come immediately to mind. Add sports and entertainment figures as well. He could broaden the national board by reaching out to people who have proven their commitments to the 99%, but who didn’t endorse him in this election—Elizabeth Warren comes to mind. I have a very large body in mind—as large as needed to get everyone under one tent—certainly in the hundreds. Under the auspices of this body, congressional district committees with the same breadth could be formed on an ad hoc basis for specifically targeted races: to borrow a phrase, “think nationally, act locally”.

At the same time, he would have to build a staff organization from among the volunteers who are turning out in large numbers to help his campaign. When I was at the phone-banking office, I felt like father time. With a few exceptions, the people in the room were 50+ years younger than I. They are a parallel to what the national boycott staff was for the farm workers union. They could be organizing house meetings, convening leaders of house meetings, identifying precinct committees and captains, and otherwise building an electoral apparatus that operates within the policy framework set by the national board. But they, like the boycott staff, would have to understand they are not the policy makers—they are staff. Training this staff would be crucial.

This apparatus is not a community or issue organization, or a union local. It is a different kind of animal, but one that could be very important. I think broadly-based community organizations and labor union locals must necessarily be careful to achieve near-consensus among their members before engaging in electoral politics. Otherwise they can be too divisive. That is an inherently conservatizing pressure. When constituency-based organizations do that well, they can then be a powerful pressure from below on politicians. But something is needed to pull these organizations out of their more conservative tendencies. This organization could do that—just as, for example, the sit-in and freedom ride young black people did in the black belt counties of the Deep South in the early 1960s.

It is interesting that much of his advocacy for presidential primary participation is that it will affect the national debate and the Democratic Party platform. That’s not enough. Liberals historically were given planks in the platform to shut them up. They didn’t have the organization to enforce action on those planks. Good words didn’t leave the paper on which they were written. For the ideas Gallagher cares about to become implemented policy requires persistent organization, the kind that cannot be engaged in elections only, but that can be a continuing presence in the battles over implementation, battles that are often left to full-time lobbyists in which “our side” is hopelessly outnumbered and doomed to defeat. Our side needs to take those battles to a different terrain from the usual “inside the Beltway” one, engaging in pressure that includes disruptive mass non-violent direct action, boycotts, strikes and other tools available to people power organizations but not part of the arsenal of electoral organizations. That’s where the labor unions, community organizations, and issue organizations come in.

Many years ago, I met with Manfred Rommel, Lord Mayor of Stuttgart, Germany, and son of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. We were having a typical 1970s argument that was going nowhere about pressure “from below” versus electing politicians. At one point he stopped, and said something like this: sometimes it is the grassroots that offers leadership by pushing the politicians. But other times it is politicians who pull the grassroots out of their parochialism. That idea stuck with me. When the presidential race is over, perhaps the Sanders campaign will create a mobilizing organization that can pull the grassroots.

**The Sanders Campaign**

For most of my adult life I’ve voted in elections, though I have to admit there was a time when I argued—as did other organizers I knew—that it didn’t matter who got elected because once they got into office you had to hold them accountable. That’s a slippery slope formulation. Some politicians are more readily held accountable to a program that benefits people in their everyday lives than others. If you care about people more than abstract ideas, in U.S. politics you support lesser-of-two-evils candidates. Gallagher wins this argument hands down.

In most cases, my electoral participation hasn’t meant more than voting. The last time I did more in an electoral campaign is so long ago that I don’t even remember who was running! But on a rainy January Saturday, I went to a downtown phone bank and spent three hours identifying likely Sanders voters in Iowa and Nevada; I plan to do more.

Sanders is living testimony to the merits of many of Gallagher’s arguments. I have my quarrels with some of his program formulations; until recently he’s been tone deaf to current people of color issues; his “socialism” doesn’t seem to be much more than the welfare state, whose bureaucracies and technocratic tendencies worry me. But having said that, I think he means it when he says he’d break up the banks, fight for free public college/university education, tax the rich, support a living wage and full employment, and do other things that would be good for the vast majority of the people of the country, and his foreign policy would be good for the world.

The big questions about his campaign for me are, “What will be the after-election benefits and organization that are left behind?” “What will this army of young activists be invited to do with their energy?” “Will some continuing electorally and legislatively oriented organization that is independent of candidates be formed?” I hope Sanders and the people around him will look at the option I’ve outlined above. Stay tuned. We won’t know until after the next Democratic Party convention, though the seeds need to be planted now.

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