

APOCALYPTOPHILES, OR THE DEAD PARROT THEORY OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE



In this time when we hear, over and over, that there has never been a presidential election this crazy, it makes sense to try to understand what is going on. Of course, there are ideological precedents on both left and right. There is also a precedent for the hostile, deadlocked congress: the period just before the Civil War. Seeking clarity in this chaos, the wisdom of the old Monty Python troupe may be just what we need. Such preposterous insistence on so many things that are contrary to fact (lies, I believe, is the precise word) reminds me of the notorious dead parrot skit, featuring Michael Palin and John Cleese. The only way to explain the existence of cable news panels featuring pundits, some who argue that the parrot is dead and some that "It's a Norwegian Blue, just pining for the fjords," is the dead parrot theory of political discourse. It is defined as the stubborn repetition of utter absurdity because you want it to be

so or you want to appeal to your corporate sponsors or to your crazy political base. Like Michael Palin's pet shop owner, there is no shame in being immovable, no matter how much evidence to the contrary is presented.

People keep trying to fact check Donald Trump, but it's not that Trump followers don't know he's lying. It's just that the sheer audacity of his lies and his verbal bullying appeals to them. They hate the idea of reasoned argumentation, because they are apocalypticophiles. They want to blow the whole place up, starting with the federal government. They are just like ISIS, with its islamist version of a coming Armageddon between the West and Islam, and those evangelicals who are waiting impatiently for the Rapture. Lazy thinkers on the left, with their utopian demands, can be similarly irrational. If their preferred candidate is not nominated, they say they will not vote. In the past that same kind of

thinking also argued that the election of a horrible right wing candidate to the presidency would hasten the Revolution. I heard that argument in 1968 when many on the left decided Hubert Humphrey was unacceptable, so it might as well be Nixon. They voted Peace & Freedom Party. (In fact, HHH was planning to end the war as quickly as possible, so Nixon's "secret plan to end the war" by escalating it was considerably different.) If the election of Nixon led to a revolution, I must have missed it. Same argument with Ronald Reagan. He proceeded to kill the unions and set in motion the massive shift of wealth to the upper class. No Revolution. Ditto with George W. Bush. When Green Party candidate Ralph Nader argued that there was no difference between Bush and Al Gore (and this was after VP Gore had raised the early alarm about global warming) he was doing his best Michael Palin. Now I'm hearing the same kind of

thing about Hillary Clinton.

I like Bernie Sanders. I've always admired his voice in the Senate. As a New York kid who went to the University of California, Berkeley, in 1962, I was surrounded by people like Bernie. I was a lot like Bernie myself. We joined the Free Speech Movement in 1964, were gassed and beaten. (The ignition point of the FSM was the arrest of a student who had set up a table to collect money for the Freedom Riders.) We organized protests against the Vietnam War. More gassing and beating. In "Cambodia Spring" 1970, when many of the colleges in the country (including U. C. Berkeley) shut down in protest against Nixon's sudden escalation of the Vietnam War by bombing Cambodia, I organized English Department grad students in an empty Wheeler Hall to do anti-war work in the East Bay. We put together a fake newspaper ("The American Bulletin") for people to use as they canvassed from door to door. It had American flags on the masthead and a big picture of Dwight Eisenhower. Beneath that was his farewell address, warning about the military-industrial complex. Inside there were extensive arguments for ending the war, but seeing Ike and the flags on page one got a lot of people to open their doors and engage in discussions with our canvassers. One of the grad students, who thought we were selling out, decided to go instead to the Oakland Terminal docks, the main shipping point for the Vietnam War, and organize the dock workers into cadres. For his trouble, he got the tar beat out of him by those same workers. It was a collision of ideological purity and reality. It is easy to forget that the iconic figures of the 20th century revolutions, with the possible exception of Trotsky,

were hard-headed realists.

After the 1968 uprising of students and workers in Paris, which I admit I enthusiastically supported, a traumatized France brought back right wing authoritarian Charles de Gaulle. Or more recently, think about all the successful democracies that rose out of the Arab Spring. Revolutions are not always the answer. Yes, the bank executives are mobsters and most of them deserve to be serving time in prison. But do we really want to nationalize our banking system as opposed to re-regulating it? Elizabeth Warren makes a lot more sense on this.

Bernie Sanders said he was the only politician who would tell us that nothing could happen, even after he was elected President, without continued widespread national activism and support. However, on election night in 2008, Barack Obama said precisely that. Also remember that the Democrats had majorities in both houses as President Obama tried to get health reform done, and that he wanted single payer as an option in the exchanges. That was blocked by members of his own party, not the Republicans. How is Sanders going to get the whole system to go single payer? It worries me greatly when I hear supposed purists on the left saying what a failure President Obama has been. That is like climate change denial, or the dead parrot theory of political discourse: a complete rejection of reality. Barack Obama has been the most consequential president for progressive change since LBJ. And without LBJ's grim legacy of the Vietnam War. I have been interested in politics since 1952, when I wore a Stevenson button to school. I can unequivocally say that Obama is the best man to hold the office in all of the time that has transpired since.

Not voting has consequences, as does casting a protest vote. When large numbers of Democrats were irked with President Obama because he had not created a progressive utopia in his first one and a half years, they sat out the midterm elections of 2010. Since 2010 was a census year, that allowed the victorious Republicans to gerrymander districts throughout the U. S. The result was the fascist-leaning obstructionist congress we have now. What was the sense in that, ideological or otherwise? And enough with the vitriol from both the Sanders and Clinton camps. In her time in the Senate, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders voted the same 93% of the time. Quoting Bernie in one of the earlier debates, "On our worst days we are 100 times better than any Republican candidate."

The dead parrot skit is enormously funny, but not if the kind of thinking (or posturing) it ridicules continues to thrive in our politics. The followers of Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders must come together when the dust has settled. If we cannot preserve the Obama coalition, we will lose, no matter what ultra-rightist the Republicans nominate. That outcome will not be the beginning of the Revolution; it will be a disaster beyond anyone's worst nightmare.

