Democratic Socialism and Higher Education

Shula Horton

In his 2016 and 2020 campaigns, Bernie Sanders took advantage of the opportunity to push several new campaign issues based on his ideas of democratic socialism. Among those policies, Sanders advocated for College for All and Cancel All Student Debt. On a surface level, these policies appear on par with Sanders' goal of reducing economic inequality. Upon looking deeper, however, it is clear the emphasis Sanders places on education as an instrument for economic mobility is reflective of his understanding that the nature of the "worker" in democratic socialism is evolving in response to a changing world. In response, it is crucial to understand the nature of education and determine how education itself needs to evolve to serve as a mechanism for moving forward an agenda of democratic socialism.

Historically, self-education has served as a foundation for American democratic socialism. One of Sanders' great ideological inspirations is Eugene Debs, the founder of the American socialist class. Debs notably believed workers ought to protect their own interests by having their own political party, a socialist political party. Debs prided himself on being self-educated, having learned from his experiences as a worker on the railroad. In contrast, Sander's received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Chicago. However, in reflecting on his studies, Sanders described "the classroom [as] boring and irrelevant" and noted that "he learned 'infinitely more on the streets and in the community.'" Despite Sanders' personal views on the utility of higher education, his College for All proposal is reflective of the larger question of whether education is an instrument for the maintenance or redistribution of power.

The question about the nature of education, its goals as they relate to democratic socialism, and whether it is truly achieving those goals is not new. Its essence is contested in the difference between views held by Bertrand Russell and John Dewey, two major philosophers with notable views on education. Dewey was a strong proponent of democratic values in education whereas Russell believed that unchecked democracy in education had the potential to hinder individual growth by promoting ideological indoctrination. As such, if education can, as Dewey believed, help foster independently thinking individuals, it could serve as a tool for promoting democratic socialism. In contrast, Russell raised the key question: "Should schooling train good individuals or good citizens?" Russell highlighted that if "governments prefer citizens who support the status quo and who want to preserve it," the two may not be the same thing. If, as Russell claimed, education promotes uniformity and the status quo, that is contradictory of the aspects of democratic socialism that require a challenging of existing systems.

Noam Chomsky further explores the role of education and its ability to help students develop critical thinking skills. Chomsky defines the goal of education as "produc[ing] human beings whose values are not accumulation and domination, but instead are free association on equal terms." By Chomsky's definition, education should not only serve as a mechanism for economic equality, but also as a foundation for challenging existing norms. Hence, education itself can serve as an instrument for the redistribution of power. Even so, there exists the question of how Sanders' emphasis on support for higher education reflects his view of democratic socialism. As a Vanderbilt student, I have witnessed firsthand the ways that higher education can both foster critical thinking and increase conformity with the status quo. Therefore, it is important to recognize that while education can increase upward mobility, it often is used to maintain cyclical systems.

Access to higher education, alone, is not enough if education is intended to serve as mechanism of promoting democratic socialism. Bernie Sanders' agenda of democratic socialism

is notably limited by the realistic confines of the current American governmental structures. For instance, as opposed to suggesting that workers should control large corporations, Sanders instead supported a minimum livable wage of fifteen dollars an hour. Likewise, Sanders recognizes the reality that that education, and higher education specifically, is becoming increasingly important for employment opportunities in America. Therefore, Sanders has advocated for policies that will equalize the field of higher education as that can both improve economic mobility. To ensure education is fulfilling the goals of democratic socialism in which Sanders believes, it is imperative that he not only supports access to education but support an evolved education system that promotes independent, critical thinking.