

Evolution of A Welfare State: Bernie Sanders and His Justice

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The welfare state is a form of political institution in which the state dedicates to creating equal economic and social foundations for its citizens. The concept of it has long existed, and is practiced in many countries, ranging from ancient India to contemporary European states. For example, Indian Emperor Ashoka established public clinical centers for the common people throughout his empire as early as 3rd century BCE. Otto von Bismarck established the first modern welfare state with his socio-welfare legislation. Nevertheless, in the context of 21st century America, the rise of a series of new problems such as identity politics, racial conflicts, and gender equality rendered traditional progressive-conservative dichotomy insufficient to meet the public's demand and expectation for a new welfare state. People increasingly find it difficult to place themselves in this dualistic narrative. For example, it is not uncommon to see some Asian minority groups calling for universal healthcare while opposing Affirmative Action policies simultaneously. As such, Bernie Sanders and his democratic socialist ideology naturally arose and brought new perspectives to the concept of welfare state in the context of America. This article attempts to dissect Sanders's democratic socialist vision through the lens of his approach to economic and social justice.

Economic justice refers to principles for creating fairer material conditions for all members of the society through economic institutions. It is a key component of a welfare state, and is also a direct manifestation of it. Sanders's perspectives on economic justice evolve from traditional progressive ideology, which emphasized the equal outcomes for each individual. Many leftists before the 21st century believed that the root of income inequality rests in the unequal outcomes, and thus prioritized the disadvantaged group by tilting the balance towards them. For example, the British Labor Party in 1997 achieved phenomenal progress in lowering the poverty rate by directly distributing wealth to the poor; Direct cash transfers programs were widely implemented in Asian and Latin American states in the 2000s; Andrew Yang's proposal for a Universal Basic Income in the 2020 US Presidential election was also a manifestation of this traditional equalist viewpoint. Nevertheless, Sanders's policies reflected a transition from the emphasis on the equal outcome to equal opportunity.

For Sanders, economic justice should cover all aspects of inequality, including but not limited to healthcare service, education opportunities, and internet accessibility, instead of simply transferring cash to the poor. His primary concern is to empower people with the ability and opportunity for personal development, rather than redistribution or retribution afterward. Specifically, traditional Equalists saw economic activity as a secondary concern as demonstrated by their forcible redistribution policies, while Sanders's economic justice believes that economic productivity remains a primary concern if the government wants to achieve a long-term effect of wealth redistribution. The prerequisite for future redistribution would be to create a dynamic economy to boost economic productivity. For example, Sanders's emphasis on universal health care and free education for all not only offers equal opportunities for personal development but also helps boost the long-term economic growth. As such, in Sanders's economic justice, equality and productivity intimately correlate and are valued as a whole.

While traditional Equalism concerns primarily with eliminating class differences and achieving equal status, Sanders's new approach to economic justice attempts to create equal living opportunities for generations in this much more diverse context. As the American social strata become increasingly complex and class division weakens, the traditional Marxist notion that emphasizes on class struggle and social exclusion as the key conflict in society no longer fits into

today's context. As such, Sanders differed from his leftist peers or predecessors in that he focused less on the concept of "class" and prioritized practical policies that benefit the public as a whole, allowing them to freely develop. This divergence from traditional viewpoint by Sanders can be seen from his lack of interest in "traditional" socialist agenda, such as nationalization, redistribution, and mobilization. Therefore, we can see that Sanders's economic justice emphasizes more on balancing opportunities and chances in life on the basis of equal outcomes, benefiting the disadvantaged groups in the society, and reducing income inequality through virtuous, universal social standards.

Sanders's social justice defines equality more along the line of social "inclusion" rather than the : "exclusionary" aspect embedded in Marxist theory. While Marxism emphasized on the relations of production in capitalism and recognizes the plight of workers, immigrants and forced labors were excluded from the expansion of capitalism. Sanders is different from many of his socialist predecessors that he emphasized more on social inclusion. In its general form, inclusion means citizenship for all, empowering all members of the society with civil rights, political rights, and corresponding civic duties. This aspect of Sanders's social justice is demonstrated by his inclusive attitude toward immigrants. As shown in his [immigration proposals](#), he supports a family-based immigration system grounded in civil and human rights, and is dedicated to building a more refugee-friendly environment. To him, social justice can only be achieved through equal values for each individual, regardless of their background, ability, religion, or race.

Furthermore, just like his economic justice value, the concept of inclusion in social justice also means equal opportunity and engagement in the public space. In a society in which a job is crucial to sustaining self-dignity and living standards, the possibility of employment is perhaps a significant component of "opportunity". This aspect of social justice can be demonstrated in his [Job For All proposal](#), in which he aims at providing a stable job for everyone. Another such important opportunity is education, even in the context that education is not very important for employment. His [College For All](#) scheme provides higher education opportunities for everyone, thus rendering students with equity gaps capable of attaining the education they want.

The prerequisite of civil rights and equal opportunities inherited in Sanders's justice values is civic responsibilities, without which a welfare state is reduced to an abysmal of selfishness and greed. Nevertheless, for a long time, social welfare and civic duties are separated as Bernie Sanders quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. that the US has "[socialism for the rich but individualism for the poor](#)." As a result, the country is filled with inefficient and failed welfare programs such as insufficient support for senior citizens, lack of unemployment benefits, and unaffordable healthcare. Sanders's taxation and wealth redistribution on the rich reflect his emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between rights and responsibilities of a citizen, the significance of civic duties as a part of democratic socialism, and the concept of "no duties, no rights".

Despite this evolution in the social justice values as illustrated above, the practical programs proposed by Sanders to achieve social justice are also different from their predecessors. The biggest distinction is the transition from a "passive" to an "active" welfare system. An active welfare state involves not only the state as the sole principle to redistribute wealth, but also extends to the government's cooperation with other institutions. For example, Sanders's [Green New Deal](#) program and his infrastructure bill all involve non-governmental organizations and socially responsible companies. In this active system, the contract between individuals and state evolves to include some degree of self-autonomy and personal development as compared to the traditional passive welfare system, in which social welfare is entirely created and redistributed by the state. For example, rather than just directly redistributing wealth, Sanders's policy proposals reduce the

possibility of welfare abuse by focusing more on the “social investment” programs, such as free higher education and universal healthcare, both of which do not directly redistribute money to the poor but provide opportunities for self-development.