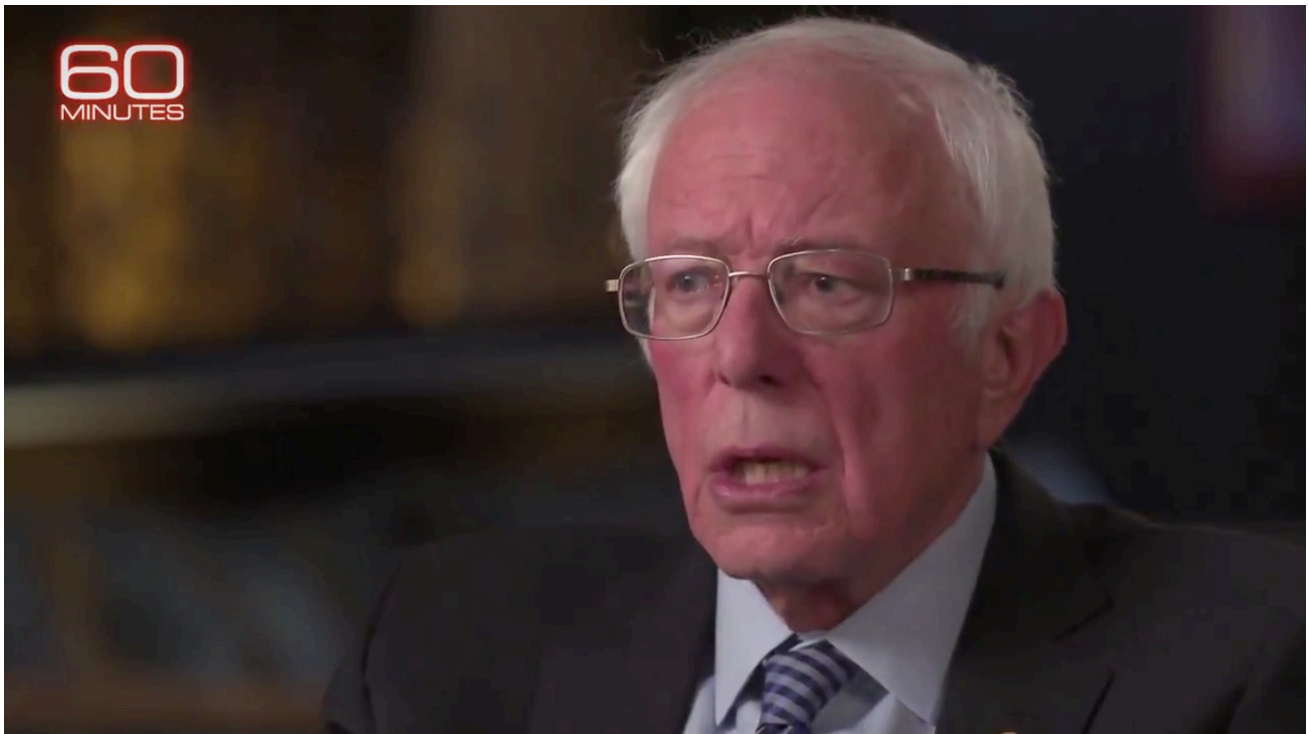


Bernie Sanders on Cuba: “Is That A Bad Thing?”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



On *60 Minutes*, Anderson Cooper asked Bernie Sanders about his early enthusiasm for Fidel Castro, the late Cuban dictator. Sanders said that he was no longer an enthusiast, but did want us all to remember that Castro had done some good. He praised the literacy program implemented by Castro, asking, “Is that a bad thing?”

No, it’s a not a bad thing. But it hardly makes up for 60 years of dictatorship, suppression of free speech, torture and imprisonment of political prisoners, destruction of much of the economy which for a long time was kept afloat by infusions of cash from the Soviet Union.

Anderson Cooper didn’t say it, but perhaps we can point out the obvious. There is hardly a dictator living or dead who hasn’t done some things that Bernie Sanders might appreciate, but their monstrous evil makes it absurd to even talk about

those “good things.”

Think of Benito Mussolini, he of the jutting jaw, the endless speeches from a balcony at the Piazza Venezia, the gestures. He was known, because of that jaw and the poses he would assume, as “Il Granitico.” He did some good. He famously made the trains run on time (“I treni sono puntuali”). He drained the Pontine Marshes in Lazio, turning malaria-infested swamplands into some of the most productive farmlands in all of Italy. But then there is the other side. He also murdered his political opponents, famously beginning with the politician Giacomo Matteotti. On May 30, 1924, Matteotti openly spoke in the Italian Parliament, alleging that the Fascists had committed fraud in the recently held elections, and denounced the violence they used to gain votes. Eleven days later he was kidnapped and killed by Fascists. There were many others thrown into jail, tortured, and murdered, by Mussolini and his jackbooted Black Shirts. He sent troops and military hardware to help the fascist Franco – Mussolini’s great admirer – in the Spanish Civil War. He sent troops to invade Ethiopia, because it was there, and they conquered the country, using mustard gas, and committing war crimes against the overmatched Ethiopians. This war was remembered in the Fascist song “Faccetta Nera” (Little Black Face). Mussolini passed the anti-Jewish laws that deprived Italian Jews of the possibility of practicing most professions, prevented them from acquiring higher education, limiting their rights to own property and businesses. Mussolini joined Hitler as his faithful ally during World War II. But he did drain the swamps, and he did make the trains run on time. Is that a bad thing?

Then there was Hitler himself. Yes, the Nazis tortured, gassed, shot, stabbed, burned to death, six million Jews and millions of others – Resistants, Soviet prisoners, political opponents of the Nazis throughout Europe. Hitler was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions. But let’s not

forget that Hitler also built the Autobahn, the first national network of roads constructed anywhere in the world. And what's more, the Nazis mass-produced the Volkswagen, the "People's Car," to take advantage of that new highway system. Was that a bad thing?

Joseph Stalin is another dictator whom Bernie Sanders might want to study. Sure, Stalin did condemn tens of millions to death, sometimes by slow death in labor camps or on construction projects, and sometimes by immediate execution. During the Great Purges, Marshal Tukhachevsky and many other army officers were murdered. Writers – most notably, Osip Mandelshtam and Isaac Babel – were executed. The charges were always absurd, even crazy – Babel was accused of being a "Trotskyite" and at the same time a "spy for Austria and France." The Old Bolsheviks were made to endure show trials where the chief state prosecutor, Andrey Vyshinsky, accused them of being "wreckers" of the Soviet state. But just think of the good Stalin did. His laborers built the White Sea Canal. They also built the magnificent Moscow Subway. Were those a bad thing?

Finally, since we began this piece with Castro, and Bernie Sanders's praise for Fidel, let's end with Venezuela. A dictator, Nicolas Maduro, the heir of another dictator, Hugo Chavez, has continued Chavez's policy of suppressing freedom of the press and speech, and of jailing political dissidents. Five million Venezuelans have fled and now live abroad. As long as oil prices were high, Hugo Chavez had been able to improve literacy rates, access to food and housing, but as oil prices fell, the reversal beginning after around 2012, the economy began to fall apart, and under Maduro it has cratered. But after all, Chavez and Maduro did introduce musical education, especially training in violin, for hundreds of thousands of poor students throughout the public schools, in what became known as "El Sistema."

In a televised interview with Mexican-American journalist

Jorge Ramos on Univision on February 22, 2019, Sanders said he did not consider Guaido to be the legitimate president of Venezuela. Every other Democratic candidate has recognized Guaido as the "interim president" of Venezuela, which is what the American government has named him. For Maduro "lost" to Guaido in a vote that the Organization of the American States and a Catholic Bishop's council in Venezuela said was illegitimate. Other countries quickly followed in no longer recognizing Maduro as Venezuela's president, including Colombia and Brazil.

No doubt Bernie Sanders is impressed with El Sistema.

But he might wish to reconsider how much about El Sistema is true, and how much is hype.

In November 2014, British music scholar Geoffrey Baker published a newspaper article and a book that disputed many of the claims made by and about El Sistema, and suggested that much of the publicly circulating information about the program was hyperbolic or simply false. The book's allegations included a culture of authoritarianism, hyper-discipline, exploitation, competition, and gender discrimination. It argued that the program was deeply conservative beneath its progressive exterior and that its claims of social transformation were unproven and exaggerated. For example, Baker's work alleges that the IADB's claim that El Sistema was reaping about \$1.68 in social dividends for each \$1 invested was based on dubious calculations and had been withdrawn by the bank itself. Considerable controversy ensued, with furious denunciations by Sistema advocates and enthusiastic responses from music education experts. In his review of Baker's book, Damian Thompson, arts editor for The Spectator, highlighted Baker's contention that the rampant sexual abuse of young musicians in El Sistema is part of "classical music's dirty little secret."

So there has been some political and economic repression in

Venezuela. Five million people have fled the country. Bernie's not denying that. But think of all those violin players. Was that a bad thing?

Bernie Sanders just wants to be fair. Some rulers are tough, really tough. He doesn't deny it. "They do stuff we may not like." But we shouldn't forget the good stuff they did, either – making the trains run on time, draining the swamps, building the autobahn, digging the White Sea canal, giving Venezuelan children violin lessons. Was any of that a bad thing?

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