

Bernie's Example to America: Pull Yourself up by Your Bootstraps!

On Monday, Bernie Sanders released ten years of tax returns, and it turns out he and his wife are millionaires. Thanks especially to revenues from book royalties, Sanders is now, as CNN [put it](#), "in the category of the super-rich." Or, as some might say, he's part of "the 1%."

After years of denouncing "millionaires and billionaires" as a supposed source of America's economic problems, this information is a little awkward for Sanders.

Some critics of Sanders have claimed this makes him a hypocrite. Here's a man who trashes millionaires, and yet is one himself.

"Hypocrite," however, isn't really the right term here. So long as Sanders pays the taxes he says millionaires should pay, his income alone doesn't make him a hypocrite. Moreover, Sanders can (plausibly) claim that when he denounced millionaires, he didn't mean *all* of them. He just meant 90 percent of them. And he can then include himself in the "good" ten percent.

Nevertheless, Sanders appears not entirely comfortable with his status as a rich man.

When confronted as being among those he has long villainized, Sanders became defensive. "I wrote a best-selling book," he declared. "If you write a best-selling book, you can be a millionaire, too."

Translation: "I made my money fair and square, so quit hassling me about it."

It is at *this* point that we start to see Bernie Sanders undermine his own claims about millionaires, wealth, and capitalism.

Bernie Sanders, Capitalist

For a normal person, Sanders's defense of his riches would be no big deal. There's little doubt that a great many wealthy people, when asked how they earned their money, would respond with "I worked for it. I earned it."

But, when *Bernie Sanders* says this, it's quite remarkable.

After all, one of the central myths of the Bernie Sanders wing of the American left is that people who become rich do so on the backs of the poor. As is the case with orthodox Marxists, there is a persistent and widespread belief on the left that wealth is gained by exploiting workers. Moreover, it is believed that market-based economies systematically favor the wealthy while closing off economic success to those who are not already well off. In this narrative, those who haven't exploited workers directly have likely inherited their money from others who *have* exploited others.

To hear Bernie Sanders on the matter, however, it sure sounds like he does believe that wealth can be had through a little hard work: "I wrote a best-selling book. If you write a best-selling book, you can be a millionaire, too."

Translation: "You can make a lot of money if you work at it. It's just that easy!"

This sounds suspiciously like the "bootstraps" argument which the left so often and so vehemently rejects. And it's pretty odd to hear it from Bernie Sanders.

It shouldn't surprise us, though, that when called upon to justify his riches, Sanders ended up resorting to a capitalist cliché.

He did this, of course, because the argument makes sense to a lot of people. Sanders needed to make the case that his wealth was obtained morally. So he pointed out the most common-sense argument in favor of letting people keep their wealth: he *earned* it.

Assuming we're only talking about income received from book sales, Sanders is right. No one forced anyone to buy his books, and he made money when people voluntarily handed over money in exchange for the books. By this measure, Sanders did indeed "earn" the money.

But Sanders's observations about the origins of his wealth don't stop there. By noting that this was a "best-selling book" Sanders is also admitting that delivering a product or service to a large number of people is a key factor in getting rich.

In other words, had Sanders merely written a book, he would not have made millions. But since he wrote a *best-selling* book, that brought in a lot of money. But if the key to getting rich is to sell something a lot of people want, doesn't that show that "millionaires and billionaires" are providing a benefit to society? Sanders is recognizing that the extent of one's riches are tied to how many consumers an entrepreneur serves in the marketplace. Sanders apparently thinks at least *one* millionaire – himself – got rich by giving people what they want. And if this is the case, is it fair to assume that rich people aren't paying their "fair share?"

We might go on to extrapolate even more from this.

As to the matter of inequality, Sanders hints at its origins. What if not *everyone* writes a best-selling book? Wouldn't that mean some people have millions of dollars and other people have much smaller amounts of money? Wouldn't that create *inequality*?

The answer, of course, is "yes." And we can see from Sanders's

own success in selling books that inequality is not necessarily a result of the wealthy exploiting the poor. It can simply be a result of some people selling more books than others.

We can also conclude that Sanders apparently believes it is possible to produce a good or service without exploiting the workers. After all, his books did not appear by magic out of thin air. *Human beings* worked to print the books, assemble them, and distribute them. Sanders made money from their labors. In fact, he made *a lot more money* than any truck driver who delivered his books to stores. He made a lot more than any factory worker who assembled the books. Does Sanders believe he took advantage of these workers? Apparently not. Sanders justifies his wealth as a matter of writing books. He doesn't mention anything about the workers at all.

So, in this one short interview, we've learned a few things from Sanders:

1. He believes that providing an in-demand product or service justifies high incomes for those who produced it.
2. There is a connection between income earned and the total number of customers served.
3. If you do the same, you can be a millionaire, too.

That's quite a little capitalist manifesto from Sanders.

Unfortunately, he's unlikely to take any of these newfound revelations and translate them into decent public policy going forward. Instead, he's likely to keep telling his supporters what they want to hear. Why stop now? It's made him a rich man.

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