

Cornel West's campaign for US president: A pragmatic and bankrupt muddle

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23 June 2023

Professor and author Cornel West launched his presidential campaign, with much fanfare and even more platitudes, on June 5. In his campaign video, he pledged to “reintroduce America to the best of itself” and to fight for “truth and justice.” His campaign website explains that “justice” is “what love looks like in politics.”

West has been living off his reputation as a black intellectual, based on his early academic work, accumulating awards and honorariums. As the years have passed, the actual connection between his real achievements and reputation has grown increasingly indistinct and tenuous. He has become the sort of person who is, to use the words of Lincoln, “famous for being famous.” But however celebrated he may be, West’s hopelessly impressionistic politics will produce nothing and go nowhere.

Trotsky once wrote of a type of “intellectual semi-bourgeois” that staffs publications such as the *Nation* and the *New Republic*. “They feed upon half-thoughts and half-feelings. They wish to cure society by half-measures. Regarding the historical process as too unstable a phenomenon, they refuse to engage themselves more than fifty percent. Thus, these people, living by half-truths, that is to say, the worst form of falsehood, have become a genuine brake upon truly progressive, i.e., revolutionary thought.”

Changing what needs to be changed, this is an apt description of Cornel West. In his interviews and remarks, West makes certain points that are generally ignored or excluded from the media—noting, for example, that the war over Ukraine was provoked by the expansion of NATO up to Russia’s borders. But these are washed over by the overpowering wave of vague generalities and moralistic slogans in which nothing is worked through in a systematic way.

Everyone, it seems, no matter how rotten his or her politics, is his “dear brother” or “dear sister,” with whom West proclaims deep sympathy and agreement on many things, from the Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders and the Green Jill Stein, to the fascistically inclined RFK, Jr. and Joe Rogan. Everyone is his friend because he has no firmly held views of his own.

West elevates unseriousness and pragmatic maneuvers to the level of a principle in and of itself. He is a “jazz man in world politics,” West proclaims in his campaign video, “and the jazz man is always about improvisation, always about compassion, always about style, and always about a smile.”

The character of West’s campaign is evident in its beginning. On June 5, West released a video on Twitter declaring himself the presidential candidate of the People’s Party, a decision he said elsewhere had been arrived at in discussions between himself and People’s Party Chair Nick Brana.

The People’s Party, founded in 2017, is largely dominated by Brana, a former Democratic Party operative and staffer for Bernie Sanders. Over the past year, the “party,” which has no real program or policies, has focused its efforts entirely on forging a close political alliance with the far right, in particular, the Libertarian Party, with which it co-organized the

“Rage Against the War Machine” Rally in February and a follow-up event, the “Independent National Convention,” in April. Both were politically dominated by right-wing and even fascistic individuals and organizations, on the basis of the call for a “left-right” political alliance.

On June 13, just over a week after his initial campaign launch, West announced that he was no longer running as the candidate of the People’s Party, but rather would be seeking nomination for the Green Party, an organization that has long operated as a pressure group oriented to the Democratic Party. The switch was reportedly made after consultations with journalist Chris Hedges, himself a participant in People’s Party-organized events and someone at least as politically confused as West himself.

Whether the change was made due to unease over the ever more openly right-wing character of the People’s Party, concerns about the sexual scandals surrounding Brana, or pragmatic considerations relating to the Green Party’s access to ballot lines in more states—or some combination of these—is unclear. Regardless, the rapid flitting from one party to another speaks to the absence of any semblance of political coherence to the campaign.

In announcing his campaign, West declared it to be “in the spirit of a broad United Front and coalition strategy,” centered around demands such as “create true democracy,” “revitalize our economy,” advance “Medicare for all,” “end the war,” “expand civil liberties” and “protect the environment.”

Who is to be included in West’s “United Front” he does not say, but in his interviews and statements he leaves the door very wide open—certainly to the People’s Party, the Green Party, and various individuals in and around the Democratic Party, including the DSA and Socialist Alternative, which has written a statement supporting him. Though West has not called for a “left-right” unity, as the People’s Party does, he has spoken favorably about RFK, Jr., an extreme-right COVID-19 denialist who is running in the Democratic Party presidential primaries with the encouragement of figures like Trump’s former adviser Steve Bannon.

West notably says nothing in his announcement or on his campaign website about the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 21 million people due to the criminal subordination of human life to profit by capitalist governments throughout the world.

In an interview earlier this week with a prominent supporter of a “left-right” alliance, Craig Pasta Jardula of “The Convo Couch,” West adapted entirely to the far-right positions on the pandemic. Jardula, who had previously touted his relationships with fascistic figures like Arizona gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, opposed masking, vaccines and all mitigation measures to stop the spread of the virus. Jardula denounced Dr. Anthony Fauci, a favored target of the extreme right, for “crimes against humanity” for his advocacy of vaccination.

West responded to this right-wing rampage by thanking his “dear brother” and assuring Jardula that he would not be “dogmatic” on any of these issues. He also said that he was open to theories that the virus was

the product of a lab leak or a bio-weapon produced by the Chinese government in alliance with Fauci, a fascistic conspiracy theory also promoted by RFK, Jr.

In an interview with Chris Hedges, West sought to give an explanation for why he is not running in the Democratic Party primaries, despite previously campaigning for Bernie Sanders and supporting Biden and Obama. A “jazz man in the world of ideas,” West replied, repeating what has quickly become a trope of his campaign, “has to be improvisational, can’t be dogmatic.” As evident in his statements on the pandemic, West has already elevated this “non-dogmatic” principle into a legitimization of the extreme right.

West has implemented a series of such “improvisations,” from which he draws no lessons, throughout his long and meandering political history in and around the Democratic Party. He entered politics in the early 1970s through an interest in liberation theology and black nationalism. In the early 1980s, he was close to Michael Harrington and was an early member of the organization Harrington founded, the Democratic Socialists of America, which he joined in 1982.

Harrington, an acolyte of ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman, defined the politics of the DSA as the “left wing of the possible,” by which he meant the left wing of what the Democratic Party and the ruling class considered acceptable. West later referred to the DSA as “the first multiracial, socialist organization close enough to my politics that I could join.” He became an honorary chair for the organization, a position that he held for many years, as it backed one Democratic Party politician or another and what was “possible” moved steadily to the right.

During the 1980s, West campaigned for Jesse Jackson during his two campaigns as a Democratic Party candidate for president, in 1984 and 1988. Later, in 2000, he backed New Jersey Democrat and Senator Bill Bradley.

In 2008, West supported the Democratic Party campaign of Barack Obama, whom he referred to in 2007 as “my brother … companion and comrade.” Upon Obama’s election, West said that he hoped that Obama would be “a progressive Lincoln” and that he, West, aspired “to be the Frederick Douglass to put pressure on him.” When Obama inevitably proceeded to implement the dictates of the ruling class, West became critical, calling him “a war president with a [Nobel] peace prize” and “a black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs.”

In 2016 and again in 2020, West supported and served as an adviser for Bernie Sanders in his own bid for nomination in the Democratic Party primaries. When Sanders backed Hilary Clinton in 2016, West chose to support Green Party candidate Jill Stein. In 2020, however, he joined Sanders in lining up behind Biden, declaring that a vote for the now-president was a necessary part of forming “an anti-fascist coalition.”

Asked in interviews why the same considerations do not apply in the 2024 elections, West replies that he has now concluded that it is impossible to defeat fascism through the “milquetoast neo-liberalism” of the Democratic Party or to advance except through a fight against the “corporate duopoly.”

The form of West’s current political intervention has somewhat altered, but the essential content remains the same. While he has announced a plan to run on the Green Party ticket, his overall orientation is firmly in the orbit of what he refers to as the “corporate duopoly.” In one interview given in recent days, West explained that he hoped that his campaign could be used to “put the pressure and bring to bear so that the politicians who are on the inside have spaces to breathe.”

West’s latest improvisation will prove no more fruitful than his earlier ones, if it succeeds in getting off the ground.

West’s philosophical conceptions relate directly to his political positions. In his books as in his political statements, West is an extreme eclectic, claiming affinity but never quite agreement with everyone from Marx to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Foucault, Du Bois, Derrida and

Wittgenstein. He draws from everything and everyone in creating a philosophical outlook that has no definite form, takes no position on anything, and can’t seem to make a clear and precise statement as to what he actually stands for.

In essence, however, West’s philosophy belongs to the school of American pragmatism as it was developed in particular by Richard Rorty, with whom West studied while at Princeton in the early 1970s. Pragmatism has different varieties, all revolving around a denial of the possibility of objective truth, and, bound up with this, a rejection of history as a law-governed process.

In its modern forms and especially in the writings of Rorty, pragmatism is directed explicitly against Marxism and Trotskyism, which insists that the working class is an objectively revolutionary force, that the same contradictions that led to revolution in the 20th century persist at a higher level in the 21st, and that the basic task is to build a socialist leadership in the working class.

“The time has come,” Rorty wrote in 1998, “to drop the terms ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism’ from the political vocabulary of the Left.”

It would be a good idea to stop talking about ‘the anticapitalist struggle’ and to substitute something banal and untheoretical—something like ‘the struggle against avoidable human misery.’ More generally, I hope that we can banalize the entire vocabulary of leftist political deliberation. I suggest we start talking about greed and selfishness rather than about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about the commodification of labor, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes.

Responding to this statement, WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North wrote in 2005:

What Rorty calls “banalization” would be better described as intellectual and political castration. He proposes to banish from discussion the achievements of more than 200 years of theoretical thought. Underlying this proposal is the conception that the development of thought is an arbitrary subjective process. Words, theoretical concepts, logical categories and philosophical systems are merely verbal constructs, pragmatically conjured up in the interest of various subjective ends. The claim that the development of theoretical thought is an objective process, expressing man’s evolving, deepening, and evermore complex and precise understanding of nature and society is, as far as Rorty is concerned, nothing more than a Hegelian-Marxian shibboleth.

West has borrowed much from Rorty in his own philosophical and political outlook, including the removal of any reference to capitalism and socialism from his political vocabulary. This is replaced with terms such as “the corporate duopoly,” “big tech,” “big pharma” and the like.

In his book, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, West defined his own variant of what he calls “prophetic pragmatism,” which, he stated, “worships at no ideological altars.”

“Prophetic pragmatism,” West wrote, counterposes “the precious ideals of individuality and democracy” to “all those power structures that lack public accountability, be they headed by military generals, bureaucratic party bosses or corporate tycoons. Nor is prophetic pragmatism confined to any preordained historical agent, such as the working class, black

people or women. Rather, it invites all people of good will both here and abroad to fight for an Emersonian culture of creative democracy in which the plight of the wretched of the earth is alleviated.”

West’s “banishment” of the working class as a “preordained historical agent” is an explicit rejection of Marxism and the understanding that capitalism and all it produces—inequality, war, dictatorship and repression—can only be opposed through the development of a revolutionary and socialist movement of the working class. In contrast, “all people of good will” are to be brought together in a campaign for “creative democracy” that does not touch the organization of social and economic life.

Under conditions of unprecedented capitalist crisis, West is now developing this conception in his proposal for a “United Front” presidential campaign for “truth and justice.” For the ruling elites, such campaigns as West’s play the valuable role of serving as safety valves, hence the professor’s sympathetic treatment in the media.

What one has in the end is a complete pragmatic mess that can serve no other function than to spread confusion and undermine the development of a political movement in the working class. In a word, a muddle.



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