

# Marx comes to the American Presidential Elections

No one could have expected that the current presidential campaign would feature not one but two candidates who resemble in some ways and might be considered Marxists, one of a traditional kind, the other a more modern version.

The traditional one, Bernie Sanders, is a self-described democratic socialist but all his emotional rhetoric and compassionate indignation at the inequities in American society is related to what Karl Marx wrote were the concentration of capital and the banking system and the contradictions in the capitalist mode of production. That indignation was evident as a young man when Sanders spent a few months in a left wing Israeli kibbutz as the guest of the Hashomer Hatzair youth, normally regarded as a progressive Zionist movement.

The anger at those capitalist contradictions, and the unfair nature of American society, mostly manifested in and epitomized as "Wall Street" remains in the older 74 year old Bernie, the advocate of the redistribution of wealth who believes in the desirability of socialism, though he might differ somewhat from Karl Marx who argued that capitalism was a historical and progressive (sic) stage on the way to socialism. The passion of Sanders is more agreeable and admired than is his analysis of political and economic reality.

The other presidential candidate, Donald Trump, is a figure who might sometimes be mistaken as a neo-Marxist, as an echo not of Karl Marx but of the incomparable Groucho Marx, the third son, born in 1890 and named Julius, of an impoverished Jewish tailor, above a butcher's shop near Lexington Avenue, Manhattan, New York. As a result of his public performances on

Broadway, films, and television, with his persona with bushy eyebrows, thick painted moustache, glasses, and long chewed cigar, Groucho is now a legendary figure. Indeed, he is officially recognized as such. The Marx Brothers film, *Duck Soup*, is preserved in the National Film Registry because the Library of Congress thinks it is culturally and historically significant.

Groucho who had no formal education has become immortal as the quintessential politically incorrect figure, saying things in an outrageous manner and style that are not usually said in public. His comedy was brash, often coarse, offensive, rude, and insolent and aggressive toward people and disregarding conventions. Groucho mocked existing authority in provocative fashion, sometimes directly but more often by ingenious word play or double entendre.

Trump, the fourth child of an increasingly successful real estate developer, was born in Jamaica, Queens, New York in 1946. After college at Fordham University and the Wharton School of Business, he started his career in 1968 with a gift of \$200,000, in today's terms more than \$1 million.

Trump is different from the real Julius Marx in his business career, accumulation of large wealth, and highly public personal life, but he is similar to Groucho in two respects. Both appeared in highly successful TV series. Trump was a very highly paid performer in the reality show *The Apprentice* from which he is said to have got as high as \$3 million for one episode and earned \$213 million for 14 seasons.

More relevant is Trump's penchant, like Groucho, for outspokenness and provoking people especially rivals. Trump, as was Groucho, is a colorful figure constantly drawing attention to himself and becoming the center of any scene. Both were and are bold, direct, straightforward, and take risks. Both were and are boastful, arrogant, full of mockery, often cruel, with a sense of entitlement, and perhaps

narcissistic.

Groucho appeared to be non-political. In contrast, Trump has identified himself over the years with inconsistent affiliation as Democratic (D), Republican (R), Reform, D, R, Independent, and now R. He supported both Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton for president and has changed position on key political issues. On this issue of inconsistency and lack of a clear agenda, Groucho had two things to say. One is that, "All the jokes can't be good. You've got to expect that once in a while." The other is his insolent remark "These are my principles, and if you don't like them, well I have others."

Both Groucho and Donald see themselves as outsiders. Interestingly, the almost stereotypical Jewish looking Groucho rarely if ever made Jewish jokes, with which he may have felt uncomfortable. Groucho was a self-educated person, a would-be intellectual who was unable to go to college because he was forced by the needs of his family to go to work as a teenager.

Groucho's intellectual aspiration is shown in the remarkable correspondence with and his meeting with T. S. Eliot in 1964. Yet his feeling as an outsider and insecurity as a Jew was shown in his famous telegram, quoted in different versions, to the Friars Club in Beverley Hills, California, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member."

Donald sees himself and is seen by the mainstream of the Republican party he hopes to lead as an outsider. His general behavior towards and disparaging remarks about political rivals, as well as his views on migration and deportations and other subjects have made him a polarizing figure. The outsider status of Trump is not lessened by his lack of specificity on how exactly how he plans to "make America great again."

The American electorate, in considering their vote can learn a lot from Groucho. In the Marx Brothers classic film *Duck Soup* of 1933 Groucho, playing Rufus Firefly, president of Fredonia,

declares war on neighboring Sylvania over the love of a woman. In *A Day at the Races*, Groucho, a veterinarian, poses as a doctor is appointed head of a sanitarium.

In *Horse Feathers*, Groucho is President of Huxley College, and sings us his message, "I don't care what they have to say. It makes no difference anyway. I'm against it."

Will this be the message of the presidential candidates discussed here? Groucho has given fair warning to the electorate in both the Democratic and Republican parties.