Rafael Khachaturian
Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, USA

Sean Guillory
University of Pittsburgh, USA

Mapping the American Left

The American political system is experiencing a crisis of hegemony. The moderate, bipartisan center that had been the mythical linchpin of American political identity during the "long Cold War" is facing the possibility of a terminal decline. Donald Trump's election is indicative of how this crisis has emboldened the American right. At the same time, however, the organized left is also resurgent in the United States. This article is a situated and provisional analysis of the American left resurgence midway through Trump presidency. The American left currently finds itself on unfamiliar political terrain. It is more energized today than it has been in decades. And yet, this rebirth comes with uncertainty. Four issues speak to the promise and challenges of the American left: the meaning and content of "democratic socialism," the left's relationship to the Democratic Party, bridging the divide between class and identity along which the left has fragmented since the 1980s, and the tension of organizing via both social movements and elections. These issues are likely to shape its organizing successes in the near future.

Keywords: american left resurgence, american political system, class and identity, new american socialism

doi: 10.22394/2074-0492-2018-4-128-146

The American political system is experiencing a crisis of hegemony. The moderate, bipartisan center that had been the mythical linchpin of American political identity during the "long Cold War" is facing the possibility of a terminal decline [Rana, 2018]. Donald Trump's elec-

Rafael Khachaturian—PhD in Political Science, Indiana University. Postdoctoral Fellow at the Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy, University of Pennsylvania. Associate Faculty, Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. Research interests: critical theory; democratic theory; modern and contemporary political thought. Email: rafael.khachaturian@gmail.com
Sean Guillory—PhD in History, University of California, Los Angeles. Digital Scholarship Curator in Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies, University of Pittsburgh. Research interests: Modern Russian history; the history of social and political movements; race and racism; and international communism. Email: guillory@pitt.edu

tion has put this crisis into stark relief, having turned the Republican Party's decades long flirtations with white ethnonationalism into an overt endorsement.

At the same time, the organized left is also resurgent. This revival was first exemplified in Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, and turned more durable with Bernie Sanders' insurgent campaign during the 2016 primaries. Sanders' social democratic message galvanized the Democratic Party's progressive base, and spurred the rapid growth and the electoral victories of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA and other left organizations outside the Democratic Party have achieved the unimaginable by returning "socialism" to the mainstream.

The American left currently finds itself on unfamiliar political terrain. It is more energized today than it has been in decades. Interest in socialism is growing, especially among a younger generation initiated into politics by Barack Obama's first presidential campaign. More recently, opposition to Trump, outrage toward his embrace of racism and xenophobia, millennials' anxieties about their economic prospects, and a deepening skepticism about the ability of established government institutions to address these problems has caused many to seek answers on the left. The American left hasn't experienced such a rapid influx of activists and adherents since the 1960s.

And yet, this rebirth comes with uncertainty. One of the challenges facing the left since the anti-globalization movement of the late 1990s is producing lasting institutions, and making tangible inroads within working class communities, especially among people of color. Though a diffuse swathe of organizations and groups are cultivating substantial political capital, these forces have yet to cohere into a unified movement or forge durable coalitions. Potential working class constituencies for a left policy agenda and their institutions — trade unions, churches, and social organizations — remain wedded to the Republican and Democratic parties. Questions about the sources of political power, how to take it, and the very ideological and institutional nature of democratic socialism dog many activists. Moreover, the task of recomposition into a new political force has inflicted the American left with its own internal polarization. It remains a patchwork of different groups split between trying to push the Democratic Party to the left or to carve out an independent space outside the existing American political duopoly. In many respects, the old specters familiar to organizing on the left continue to haunt it. Though revived, the left has a long uphill battle before it can claim solid support among working class Americans.

The reemergence of the American left is still unfolding, and like any analysis of a moving target, much is liable to change in the lead up to the 2020 presidential election and beyond. Since the social base for a resurgent American left remains ephemeral, the current situation is

best understood as a period of *ideological* and *organizational* renewal and consolidation. At the same time, within these disparate articulations of the left's content and form, it is possible to identify certain emerging tendencies and contradictions in its trajectory.

What follows is a situated and provisional analysis of the American left midway through Trump presidency. Four issues in particular — the meaning and content of "democratic socialism," the left's relationship to the Democratic Party, bridging the divide between class and identity along which the left has fragmented since the 1980s, and the tension of organizing via both social movements and elections — are likely to shape its organizing successes in the near future.

The US Left at the Beginning of the 21st Century

In many respects, the brief surge of the American left in 2011 with Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was a reawakening of political forces sublimated by the War on Terror. The 9/11 terrorist attacks punctured an active and vibrant anti-globalization (or alterna-globalization) movement. After a short period of disorientation, these left forces quickly recalibrated into an antiwar movement in the run up to the Iraq War[1]. But this, too, proved short lived. Global protests of millions of people failed to deter the Bush administration's drive for war in Iraq, and though the Iraq and Afghan wars quickly descended into quagmire, opposition to the American imperial thrust failed to unite the many strands of left tendencies into a coherent opposition.

The 2008 Financial Crisis offered new opportunities for the articulation a new left politics, especially in magnifying the growing class disparities that have defined post-1970s capitalism in the United States. The spontaneous explosion of Occupy Wall Street in September 2011 injected enthusiasm into a mostly dormant protest politics as Occupy camps mushroomed in cities, big and small, across the United States.Like the antiwar and anti-globalization movements before it, Occupy was an eclectic mix of progressives, socialists, anarchists, and even libertarians. This archipelago of protest activity, centered around the occupation of privately-owned Zuccotti Park in downtown New York City, though successful in putting forward the slogan "We are the 99%", failed to resolve all of its ideological and organizational contradictions.

1 It is worth nothing that there was little discernible opposition to the American invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. Like most, American left forces were shocked and disorientated by the 9/11 attacks and couldn't organize opposition to military action in Afghanistan or the consolidation and expansion of the American security state under the War on Terror.

Most importantly, OWS' emphasis on horizontalism prevented its concretization into lasting institutions to step in once its protest energies were exhausted. In their demand for autonomy and mutuality beyond state institutions, the Occupiers aspired to a society "based on organic, decentralized circuits of exchange and deliberation—on voluntary associations, on local debate, on loose networks of affinity groups" [Marcus, 2012]. As Jodi Dean has argued, the "individualism of [OWS'] democratic, anarchist, and horizontalist ideological currents undermined the collective power the movement was building." Instead of an institutional form to harness, direct, and deploy collective power, OWS' "'theology of consensus' fragmented the provisional unity of the crowd back into disempowered singularities" [Dean, 2016].

Moreover, the ephemeral nature of OWS and its organizational form based on the physical occupation of public space made it highly susceptible to police repression. By late fall 2011, Occupy camps were dismantled in a nationally coordinated effort between local police and the Department of Homeland Security, their actions reinforced by court orders that, ironically, argued the encampments were illegal *privatizations* of public space, rather than republican expressions of publicity [Kohn, 2013: 99-110]. Activists were placed under surveillance and subject to arbitrary arrest. In all, by June 2014, the website OccupyArrests had chronicled 7,775 arrests in 122 American cities.

The American left's inability to consolidate after the 2008 crisis was due to its uneasy relationship with the Obama administration. The first African-American President and his slogan of "Hope" stood in stark contrast to the mendacity and cynicism of the Bush years. Ironically, Obama served as much a vessel within which to spill political desire among many on the left, as he did as a vessel for political anger on the right. And though the Obama administration quickly revealed itself as Clinton-lite on economics and foreign policy, legislation like the Affordable Care Act, social-cultural victories like same-sex marriage, and the right's vitriol toward both Obama and his agenda were enough to temper the emergence of a left opposition after the defeat of OWS.

While an active left pushing a more equitable social-economic agenda went dormant after 2012, the racism at the heart of the American carceral state surged to the surface. Trayvon Martin's murder in February 2012, the acquittal of his killer George Zimmerman under Florida's "Stand Your Ground Law," and the police killings of Michael Brown (2014), Eric Garner (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Freddie Gray (2015) and other high profile police slayings of unarmed African Americans birthed the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM).

Black Lives Matter, along with the popularity of Michael Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, turned a glaring light not only on police extrajudicial killings and the prison industrial complex but the embedded racism in

the American criminal justice system as a whole. Whatever glassy-eyed presumptions that Obama's Presidency harkened about a post-racial America were dashed. The issue of police violence and incarceration, long ignored and even justified by the American media, became a focal point of public discussion. BLM transformed political activism in African-American communities, brought in a new generation of activists, especially black LGBTQ and feminist leaders, and signified the end of the Civil Rights generation's long dominance over black politics. Uttering "black lives matter" publicly even became a brief litmus test for many mainstream Democratic candidates, a gesture, even if opportunistic, that reinforced the precarity of black bodies versus the privilege of white bodies. The notion of "white skin privilege," a concept previously relegated to academia, entered public political discourse. Though BLM's lasting political successes were few and highly localized, its *rhetorical* intervention returned racism, police violence, and radical prison reform to a central place in any viable agenda for the new American left.

Despite their limitations, Occupy Wall Street and BLM made crucial contributions to our present moment. First, the OWS slogan "We are the 99%" or, more specifically, the channelling of outrage toward the 1%, moved income inequality and class into the American political mainstream. "Black Lives Matter" underscored the centrality of race to the American class structure by zeroing in on the "whiteness" of that 1% and the institutions of state violence that maintain it.As two BLM activists put it, "Sparked by police murder in capitalism's neoliberal turn, the post-Ferguson movement may therefore be understood as protests against profound austerity and the iron fist necessary to impose it"[1]. Ultimately, BLM reiterated an age old, though often sidelined, left truism: any serious analysis of capitalism must see the liberation of people of color as a condition for the equality of all. Both of these contributions laid the ideological and rhetorical foundations for a social democratic message that took aim the Democratic Party's neoliberal turn dating back to the Clinton presidency.

Second, the burning out of OWS and the fading of BLM from the national agenda signalled the shortcomings of horizontalism and activistism that had been hegemonic in the American left since the 1990s. Activists who cut their teeth in OWS learned from its limits and began reevaluating the necessity of institutional engagement, organization building, and the party form as a locus for political activity[2]. Those inside and outside BLM realized that coalition building and the forming of united fronts on the local and national levels with other movements

1 Quoted in [Ransby, 2018, p. 153].

2 On the revival of the party form on the trans-Atlantic left, see [Gerbaudo, 2018].

were necessary for substantive radical political change. Both of these became major features of the American left's flowering in the watershed year of 2016.

The New American Socialism

The return of the "socialism" to American political discourse is a surprise to many. Most liberals and conservatives assumed that advocating socialism as a viable political project disappeared with the collapse of Soviet communism. Yet since the 2008 economic crash, attraction to alternatives to really existing capitalism, especially among a new generation reared after the Cold War, has increased. Bernie Sanders' Presidential campaign, the rapid growth of the DSA, and the election of new figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have revived curiosity in what "democratic socialism" exactly is, and how it differs from "socialism" and even "communism."

The growing popularity of democratic socialism has placed new pressure on its advocates to provide a clear definition. Among self-identified Democrats, positive views of socialism now outpace those of capitalism, 57% to 47%, even as Americans' views about the two have stayed relatively consistent since 2010[1].

Part of the confusion comes from Sanders' own popularization of "democratic socialism." In a speech in November 2016, Sanders equated "socialism" with FDR's New Deal, robust labor and environmental regulations, and the welfare state[2]. While no socialist would oppose such measures, many would see Sanders' notion as rather milquetoast. Judging from debates about "democratic socialism" in the left press, the ideology contains much of what socialists from previous generations have advocated: an end of exploitation and oppression through the radical democratic restructuring of political, economic, and social relations along equitable and cooperative lines[3]. Notions of what a socialist economy would look like range from a form of mixed economy to one based on cooperatives and workers' control. Most democratic socialists are skeptical of centralized planning. Many call for a mixed, market socialist approach where the nationalization of key industries like healthcare, telecommunications, and the financial sector coexists with small, privately-owned businesses and worker-owned cooperatives. Like social-

1 https://news.gallup.com/poll/240725/democrats-positive-socialism-capitalism.aspx

2 "Senator Bernie Sanders on Democratic Socialism in the United States," 15 November 2015, https://berniesanders.com/democratic-socialism-in-the-united-states/

3 See for example, [Meyer, 2018; Desan, McCarthy, 2018; La Botz, 2018].

ists of the past, today's adherents broadly see the end of all oppressive Isms (sexism, racism, imperialism, etc.) as only possible through the radical transformation of the relations of production under capitalism.

If "identity politics" dominated much of the American left since the 1970s, today's left seeks to reinsert class back into the pantheon of struggle. But this is not to say that today's democratic socialists are economic determinists in a vulgar Marxist vein. Socialist ideology today is an eclectic mix of a variety of Marxist, post-structuralist, and progressive tendencies. Namely, while class analysis may provide the primary lens for a socialist analysis, sexual, gendered, racial and other identities and positionalities add myriad layers that shape the particularities of a group's class relationship and struggle.

A broad view might cause an observer to wonder what is distinct about today's socialism from the old. The distinction, however, is in the emphasis on *democratic* socialism. The modifier "democratic" plays two functions. First, it is an ideological commitment to democracy as a central aspect of any socialist policy, institution, or practice. The insistence on democratic is at once a distancing from and a recognition that the lack of democracy caused the failures and tragedies of communist states in the twentieth century. Rhetorically, it is also a preemptive rebuttal of the dismissals of socialism as a necessarily totalitarian and democidal ideology, which have been the standard arguments from the right and the center for decades. Following from this, the democratic aspect is a disavowal of the democratic centralism of the Leninist party model, and of insurrection and violence as the primary means for revolutionary change.

Today's democratic socialists range from gradualists to advocates of immediate sweeping reforms. But all show a willingness to work politically within the confines of liberal democracy, at least temporarily and provisionally, to achieve power. Unlike the communist revolutions of the last century, democratic socialists see the most viable road to socialism being the building of a constituency through some combination of mass movements and the ballot. In this, the strategic orientation of today's democratic socialists is closer to the Eurocommunist movements of the 1970s than to the Bolsheviks of the early 1900s.

Despite consensus on the broad strokes of democratic socialism, the DSA is a "big tent," multi-tendency organization. It includes a myriad of left-wing trends, many of which entered the organization during its membership boom in 2016. This has resulted in a fragmented identity within and between local chapters. Moreover, the influx of new members often unfamiliar with the nuances of socialist ideology, terminology, history, and practices add to the challenges of forging a shared organizational identity. An "identity crisis" resulting from the rapid interest in socialism and the growth of DSA currently inflicts the American left,

and is most vivid in discussions over the left as a community, its values (ideological, moral, and cultural), and how to regulate them.

The left as a community of shared values, ethics, friendship, comradeship, and mutual aid has a long history. Socialist and communist parties were more than just political movements. They were also social and cultural spaces that gathered like-minded people. Crucial to party life was the provision of entertainment, spaces of sociability, and the cultivation of personal relations in addition to politics[1].

However, the history of these organizations also shows that the line between politics and values is porous. Not only do internal alliances intersect with personal relations, but conflicts over values tend to take on political valances. As historians of socialist and communist parties have shown, most party expulsions resulted not from ideological differences, but from personal behaviors deemed in violation of "party ethics."

Today is no different. The DSA recognizes the importance of community building as an important aspect to political work. "Community building helps sustain us," reads one chapter organizing document. Members are urged to recruit friends, hold house parties, and, especially for newcomers, speak to their personal socialist conversion experience. The document suggests: "Let people talk about why they are there and tell their personal story," "you can talk about yourself/pair shares" "how did you become political?" "what does democratic socialism mean to you?" All of this "builds bonds between people." The importance of a socialist community is not just to bring people together. It also contains a crucial political thrust: to "counter neoliberal capitalism which divides and isolates us"[2].

Yet, what are the "socialist" ethics of the socialist community? The left has a poor track record in reconciling its political mission (build a mass base among the working class) with its emphasis on community (providing a social space for its adherents). One of the main hindrances for the left is its historical tendency to slip into puritanism, expunge heretics, and overly regulate and adjudicate norms. Often, and the DSA has endured many national and local scandals (exacerbated by social media), building a "socialist" community is constituted through the identification, isolation, shaming, or expulsion of its transgressors. Given the politically charged atmosphere of the left, these ethical questions are often articulated, judged, and punished in a political and ideological key[3].

1 See for example [Sacks, 2017].

2 "Chapter Organizing Call Notes," February 24, 2017, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QN5hY8JrmLss18T_ujmXtJLj8POllMk0Xv8bcpHVkgQ/edit.

3 See Benjamin Fong, "The DSA Community," https://www.dsausa.org/weekly/the-dsa-community/

The contradictions between politics and community have not gone unnoticed. The ethical contours of the "socialist community" has been the subject of debates about the social purpose of organizations like the DSA. In a biting critique, Benjamin Studebaker warned against the left as "a substitute for going to church" and serving as a site of "spiritual self-actualization." Others have warned against members' tendency to "fixate on the purity and homogeneity of their own in-group and attack other members of DSA for not meeting their standards." Still others point at a penchant toward "rigid radicalism" by reducing "good" politics to an individual's values, morals, and ethics[1].

The question of the socialist community raises other challenges. Socialist organizations pride themselves on getting rank-and-file members active, promoting them to leadership, and leaders maintaining strong bonds with lower ranks. The community, therefore, functions as a reserve to collectivize resources, tap and develop talent, and foster participation. As the aforementioned DSA organizing notes state, "*We're not looking to form socialist clubs … We're looking to build working class power.*" The left must reconcile the tensions between cultivating a community that is inclusive of new members and developing a core cadre of activists.

Yet, building working class power requires facilitating the activism of that class. This is easier said than done. Activism oftens requires a measure of social and economic privilege. Often the demands of work, family, and other responsibilities and risks preclude the involvement of working class members, especially those of color. In these cases, activism tends to fall on the shoulders of a small coterie of members.

Moreover, the community itself can serve as a bulwark. Often it is privileged minorities that exercise disproportionate power in shaping a community, and substitute informal relations (often cultivated in the very social and online spaces the organization encourages) for procedure. Like socialist and communist organizations before them, today's left runs the risk of cliques and factionalism not necessarily based in ideology (though often expressed in those terms), but forged through informal networks and friendships. Common attempts to remedy the power of informal networks with calls for horizontalism (a flattening of internal hierarchies) or transparency merely mask these relations, rather than defining a clear, accountable leadership.

1 See Benjamin Studebaker, "The Left is Not a Church," https://benjaminstudebaker.com/2018/04/28/the-left-is-not-a-church/; Jeremy Gong, "DSA Is At A Crossroads," https://medium.com/@jer.gong/dsa-is-at-a-crossroads-60de6a4c84b6; and Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery, "The Stifling Air of Rigid Radicalism," https://thenewinquiry.com/the-stifling-air-of-rigid-radicalism/

The question of what is "democratic socialism" is therefore not merely an ideological or programmatic one. It is also about creating a community of shared values that can at the same time include different positionalities, identities, and class relationships.

Organizing Beyond Class and Identity

A major effect of the post-2016 period was to relitigate the longstanding debate on the left about class and the politics of identity. On the surface, Sanders' narrative of the corruption of the "billionaire class" and Clinton's cynical deployment of the language of intersectionality seemed to neatly capture this division between an Old Left focus on "working class issues" (jobs, social protection) and a post-New Left shoehorning of the language of identity into what Nancy Fraser has called the "progressive neoliberalism" of the Clinton and Obama years [Fraser, 2017].

Trump's victory, as well as Sanders' earlier success in Rust Belt states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Indiana, prompted many liberal observers to advance the dual narrative of populism and white working class revenge. Since then, centrist writers like David Brooks, Mark Lilla, and Francis Fukuyama have faulted politically-correct college radicals and their liberal Democratic Party advocates for an excessive fixation on identity politics instead of on the tangible, material concerns of average Americans. According to this reading, the 2016 election is understood through the quasi-psychological lens of anti-elite *ressentiment*: middle America's silenced voices' embrace of Sanders and then Trump are equivalent expressions of populist anti-establishmentarianism.

Still, to read the resurgence of the left strictly as the "materialist" pushback against liberal identity politics cedes far too much ground to the liberal narrative of a clash between class and identity — between material and "post-material" concerns, or between the winners and losers of globalization.

Today, the American left is being forged anew through mutually-informing organizing and critique. It is undergoing a complex process of organic reconstitution, in which traces of both the Old and New Lefts exist (which never existed in a self-contained, schematic way). Old debates — on nationalism and internationalism, race and political economy, social reproduction and the limits of neoliberal feminism — are being reworked and reframed. Moreover, these debates are now more closely influenced by the immediate pressures of contesting for power than before.

Within them, there is a shared understanding that the left must move beyond the Democrat-endorsed neoliberal identity politics of the 1990s and 2000s [Riofrancos, Denvir, 2017]. More controversial is the political subject that should be the main focus of organizing efforts.

One fault line has been a distinction between a strategy backing a handful of national campaigns (Medicare for All, a Green New Deal) in coalition with organized labor's "rank and file," and one seeking to broaden the sites of struggle to include precarious and undocumented workers, racial minorities (especially in poor urban areas), tenants, students, the LGBT community, and sex workers, among others. The disagreement between these two outlooks is not about the need for building a mass movement and the democratization of existing political and social institutions. Here they agree. Rather, it is about the locus of the most transformative and radical energy. Namely, who will be the new political subject, what form will it take, and how to balance between a national program and local initiatives?

One point of controversy is whether the socialist left should throw the bulk of its energy and resources into universal, popular demands, such as Medicare for All. Building on Adolph Reed's critique of liberal identity politics, proponents of this position argue for the creation of a "cohesive block" forged from "shared economic demands based on one's location in the capitalist class structure." To do this would require a conscious move away from the focus on identity that has defined much of the left since at least the 1980s [Naschek, 2018]. At the core of this approach is an insistence upon the ultimate class character of identity politics, and against the essentialization of the identity-subject position of an oppressed group [Reed, 2018].

In contrast, those who stress the unique structure of racial domination and theracialized and gendered nature of all class struggles argue that adhering to a normative concept of class "excludes social relations anchored in rightlessness, wagelessness, and extra-economic coercion, [that obscure] the violence constituting capitalism's capacity to reproduce itself" [Singh, Clover, 2018]. Per these accounts, the left cannot neglect the radical origins of identity politics and the multifaceted struggles, demands, and contestatory narratives that they enable, despite their displacement by liberal treatments of identity and intersectionality in recent decades [Mohandesi, 2017].

These discussions over identity and class have functioned in part as a proxy for strategic debates, within the DSA and beyond, about the most effective means of organizing a viable socialist movement that can lay claim to institutional power. If the major problem with liberal identity politics has been its tendency to essentialize subjects and project a specific political affect onto them, today's left faces the challenge of translating and articulate existing grievances into a new political formation. Rather than the conversion of people to socialism as a preformulated ideology or doctrine, the left must approach this problem politically: advancing concrete measures that speak to popular discontent and draw specific subject positions into a broader coalition of forces. Politics is the process of forging unity from out of plurality.

Such work has been the aim of the now-annual International Women's Strike, which sought to counter the liberal feminism of the Women's March by advancing a "new international feminist movement that organizes resistance not just against Trump and his misogynist policies, but also against the conditions that produced Trump. Namely, the decades long economic inequality, criminalization and policing, racial and sexual violence, and imperial wars abroad"[1]. Bringing together the demands of an end to gender violence, reproductive justice, labor rights, anti-racism and anti-imperialism, full social provisioning, and environmental justice, the Strike is one example of how distinct agendas can be fused into a common vision of emancipatory politics without at the same time sacrificing the plurality of demands that this project requires.

Ultimately, should the left hope to overcome the stale debate between the primacy of class or identity, it will be done politically or not at all. It will involve creatively bridging local, mobilizational campaigns, including for racial and criminal justice, climate justice, and a "feminism for the 99%," with local, city, and state-level electoral efforts that can cement the gains of these localized struggles within public institutions, and potentially open the way for further radical demands.

Between Elections and Movements

The resurgence of the left has also renewed debates about political strategy. Today's socialists are beginning to ask what it would take to govern, and if so, how a political movement can meaningfully engage with the state. These conversations have become more concrete and nuanced, and largely inspired by twentieth century Marxist theoreticians like Luxemburg, Gramsci, Miliband, and Poulantzas that sought to move beyond the dichotomy of "reform or revolution." This revival of state-strategic thinking has attempted to outline a viable path that draws on the best of both electoral and mass movement politics, all the while acknowledging the productive tension between them[2]. The new American socialism is highly (some would say excessively) aware that the pressing short-term issues that will determine the future of this movement will be fought out, at least in a large part, on the terrain of the liberal-capitalist state.

As the largest socialist organization in the United States, the DSA has become the reference point in these discussions. Given that the United States' "first past the post" electoral system incentivizes a two-party arrangement that has historically marginalized socialist and labor parties,

1 http://www.womenstrikeus.org/our-platform/

2 See for example [Tarnoff, 2018].

the Democratic Party casts a shadow over most of these left strategic and tactical conversations today. Historically, the DSA's political strategy had been pragmatically pushing the Democratic Party to the left, toward what its founder, Michael Harrington, had called "the left-wing of the possible"[1].

Yet today's DSA is a different organization. The rapid influx of younger members caused the median age to drop from 68 to 33 in the last five years [Heyward, 2017]. Though a national organization, its fairly decentralized structure provides substantial autonomy for local chapters (although not always autonomy *within* a given chapter) to set their own priorities. Each chapter is, in theory, capable of adopting a set of initiatives that are sensitive to the local correlation of political forces, institutional capacities, and resources for political campaigns.

In turn, this has led to two broad political trajectories within the DSA. One prioritizes electoral activism within the Democratic Party around universal social measures such as housing, healthcare, and criminal justice reform. The other focuses on "base-building" through organizing workers, tenants, and students, and stressing autonomist initiatives, usually with the aim of breaking from the Democrats via the formation of a working class party.

A dominant intellectual tendency within *Jacobin*, with which the DSA is closely linked, advocates "non-reformist reforms" or "revolutionary reforms." Late last year, Vivek Chibber argued that, since overcoming capitalism in the near future is highly unlikely, the left should rely on a gradualist approach: a "combination of electoral and mobilizational politics" seeking to eventually build a labor-based party that can both pursue policy reforms and generate power in civil society [Chibber, 2017]. With the emergence of such a labor-based party unlikely in the short term, the focus has been on actualizing Sanders'"political revolution" by supporting popular universal measures such as Medicare for All and the more radical gains that this would inspire [Beckett, 2018].

In contrast, responses to this dualist strategy have pointed to the structural limitations set by both state and capital, and the contradictions inherent in a strategy that bridges electoral participation and cultivating social movements [Post, 2018b]. To that extent, critics argue that substantive, base-building socialist reforms cannot be won through the Democratic Party. Attempts to either reform the Democratic Party or compete on its terrain, these critics posit, is counterproductive. Instead, political energies are best directed at cultivating independent organizations and building a mass socialist party[2].

---

1 On Harrington, see [Isserman, 2000].

2 See the recently dissolved DSA's Refoundation Caucus : https://dsarefoundation.org/points-of-unity/, and "Building the Mass Party: The Merger Formula in the

Yet appeals to "base building" within the working class are likely to remain a political slogan without an accurate concept of that class. Setting aside the superficial analyses of the "white working class" and its role in the election of Trump, decades-long changes in the composition of the American working class make it hard to take this common subject for granted[1].

The relative absence of the language of the "working class" in American political discourse compared to the overwhelming appeals to the "middle class" is indicative of this problem. Some analyses continue to point to the relationship between capital and class formation, and stress that the main obstacles are not automation or outsourcing, but the "fragmented consciousness, ethnoracial divisions, and poor organization" of the working class [Moody, 2017]. In recent years, campaigns such as the Fight for $15, the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike, graduate student unionization efforts, and the Marriott workers' strike hint at the reformation and emergence of a more racially diverse and increasingly precarious "new working class," especially drawn from education, service work, and care work [Winant, 2017]. Still, these pockets of organizing have not yet coalesced into a larger movement representing all skilled and unskilled, full-time and itinerant, native and immigrant, and industrial and service workers. Forging a new politics that brings a multifaceted conception of class to the center of working people's identities, and thus constitutes them as a new political subject, will be the crucial test of the left's success in the near future.

The problem of class is not the only hindrance in building a viable socialist party. The structural limits of American liberal democracy present serious challenges as well. The pattern of DSA-endorsed candidates running on Democratic ballots has been a strategic choice imposed by the institutional barriers of the American electoral system. American electoral laws create a high threshold for third parties to appear on ballots. A first past the post system discourages the left from splitting the vote. A decentralized voting system encourages voter-suppression schemes, including frequent voter roll purges and strict identification requirements. These, in addition to the anachronistic electoral college, disproportionately affect left-leaning working class voters. The American system structurally over-represents sparsely populated conservative rural areas at the expense of left-leaning urban centers [Riley, 2017].

American Context," *Cosmonaut:* https://cosmonaut.blog/2018/12/09/building-the-mass-party-the-merger-formula-in-the-american-context/. For a related critique of the limitations of "parliamentary socialism," see [Haider, 2016].

1 On the misconceptions surrounding the white working class, see [Davis, 2017, p. 151-171].

Despite these barriers, there have been creative proposals for navigating these institutional labyrinths. Thus far, DSA's legal status as a political organization rather than as a party has allowed it to instrumentally use the Democratic ballot line to either endorse or run left candidates without the accompanying financial and legal constraints. Seth Ackerman sketched out the most cited outline of this strategy. He advocated that"a national political organization that would have chapters at the state and local levels, a binding program, a leadership accountable to its members, and electoral candidates nominated at all levels throughout the country" could exploit a legal loophole by registering as a "party committee" rather than a party [Ackerman, 2016]. While informally popular, this proposal has not been officially adopted by the DSA as a uniform program. The majority of DSA-endorsed candidates simply run on Democratic Party ballots in a patchwork manner.

The results have been mixed. Since November 2016, progressive and self-described socialist candidates have garnered growing national media attention. In the 2018 electoral cycle, DSA-endorsed candidates were elected to state-level offices in Virginia, New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Maine, among other states. In addition, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the face of the new electoral socialism for many, was recently elected to the House of Representatives as the youngest ever woman in Congress. However, a number of other progressive candidates backed by Sanders' Our Revolution organization lost in "purple" (red-blue) swing states. A broader liberal antipathy to Trump, especially in more moderate suburban areas, rather than a thirst for a more social democratic agenda, motivated the Democratic "Blue Wave."

The left remains well outside the institutions of power. The media narrative of a brewing civil war within the Democratic Party and Sanders' influence on the policy agenda for 2020 should not be overdetermined. The example of Ocasio-Cortez notwithstanding, socialist organizations like the DSA do not currently have the capacity to define or influence either federal-level or gubernatorial elections. Even its ability to influence or win local elections is highly subject to local conditions.

Concerns about the cooptation of the DSA by the Democratic Party as well are indicative of the growing pains over the collective identity of an organization that saw an unexpected, rapid influx of new members. The DSA's growth over the last two years has largely been been the result of liberals and progressives disaffected with the Democratic Party. With DSA-backed candidates continuing to run as Democrats, successfully pushing the Democratic Party to the left may encourage the exit of newer members who joined as part of the organization's post-2016 membership surge. Yet, at this moment, the tactical disagreement between working with(in) the Democratic Party and independent base building is a false binary. Both cases overstate the left's capacities to simply choose

one or the other path, rather than its course being largely determined by circumstances not of its own choosing.

The DSA's self-described character as a "big tent" organization also raises questions about its future direction, especially regarding Sanders' likely declaration of his 2020 presidential candidacy. His campaign's success will indicate just how much the left has made socialist messaging more mainstream for both Democrats and the general electorate.

While the DSA is likely to endorse Sanders, this will be controversial, nevertheless. Sympathetic critics have pointed out the risks of throwing in with Sanders. More mainstream Democrats will likely be hostile to Sanders' messaging even as they appropriate parts of his agenda. Sanders' supporters will also be expected to back another Democrat should he lose the nomination, as in 2016, potentially reducing the DSA to another electoral auxiliary for the Democratic Party. Finally, there is uncertainty as to what exactly the DSA can independently contribute to Sanders' campaign beyond that of Our Revolution [Post, 2018a].

Given these nuances, the choice between elections and social movements confronting the left today is more tactical than strategic. Put differently, it requires a shift from ideological struggles to political ones, and realizing them into institutional power. Radicalizing disaffected liberals by appealing to "socialist" values is in tension with the support for policies that speak to the interests of disaffected but largely non-politicized people. Short-term alliances with Democrats and progressive liberals, especially in congressional and local elections, may be necessary as both as defensive and offensive measures. Defensive, to stave off right-wing assaults on democratic institutions (civil and political rights, including voting rights and birthright citizenship). Offensive, to challenge Republican hegemony in local and state legislatures across much of the country. Such a "Popular Front" would not mean a blanket support of Democratic Party candidates and policies, nor official endorsements (which should be extremely selective). Instead, such a progressive-left coalition would be contingent on the left's ability to set the agenda on popular reforms such as health care, labor and reproductive rights, and immigration.

Looking Forward

One hundred years ago, the Bolshevik Party was able to channel the demands of the masses — peace, land, and bread — into a revolutionary political program. Today, the challenge facing American socialists is more daunting. Unlike the revolutionary wave that swept Europe in the aftermath of WWI, capitalism — in national, regional and global forms — remains hegemonic. However, the current crisis of capitalism and liberal democracy in the West has produced cracks in the edifice.

If we are currently living through an interregnum between a dysfunctional old order and an uncertain new one, the task of the American left is to articulate a convincing alternative vision to thecurrent widespread societal discontent, economic inequality, and racial domination. Not only must this vision be transmittable to a broad spectrum of the population, it must posit convincing, short-term, realizable reforms while not tempering its long term goals for a total social transformation.

So far, the growing popularity of socialism has been bolstered by a handful of energetic electoral victories and a widespread sense that politics as usual is incapable of addressing the magnitude of the social problems facing the US. Once again, liberal democracy has shown itself to be incapable of adequately addressing racial and economic inequality, the hollowing out of representative democratic institutions, and climate change. Trump's election and the growth of far right wing movements in the US and Europe has only punctuated this fact. At the same time, these challenges require a reevaluation of the left itself. Notions of a left simply comprised of a "movement of movements" or an amorphous multitude once popular in leftwing circles in the 1990s and 2000s have revealed their limits. Growing a mass social movement requires turning outward the many ideological struggles of the past and present within the left, transforming them into political struggles, and building tangible institutional power to achieve victory.

Despite positive signs, as of now, the left is yet to have a significant impact on the political balance of forces. Yet as socialist ideas become more mainstream and popular amidst a broader, generational shift in the organization of class hegemony, they will also draw more scrutiny and concerted undermining from both the right and the liberal center. At the same time, the left is confronted with its own internal growing pains, conflicts, and challenges. The left, therefore, remains a target of two old foes: repression and delegitimation from without, and self-destruction and cannibalism from within. How the American left navigates these waters in the run up to 2020 and beyond will reveal just how much mettle the current resurgence possesses. The real test of the left's power and influence, in other words, is still to come.

Библиография / References

Ackerman S. (2016) A Blueprint for a New Party, *Jakobin*, November (https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/bernie-sanders-democratic-labor-party-ackerman).

Beckett B. (2018) Political Revolution in the Twenty-First Century, *Socialist Forum*, Fall (https://socialistforum.dsausa.org/issues/fall-2018/political-revolution-in-the-twenty-first-century/)

Chibber V. (2017) Our Road to Power, *Jacobin*, December (https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/our-road-to-power).

Davis M. (2017) The Great God Trump & the White Working Class, *Catalyst*, Spring: 151-171.

Dean J. (2016) Crowds and Party. *Verso*, 9.

Desan M., McCarthy M.A. (2018) A Time to be Bold, *Jacobin*, july (https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/socialism-democrats-alexandria-ocasio-cortez).

Fong B., "The DSA Community," https://www.dsausa.org/weekly/the-dsa-community/

Fraser N. (2017) From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump — and Beyond, *American Affairs* 1:4 (https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/).

Gerbaudo P. (2018) The Return of the Party, *Jacobin*, Oct. 22 (https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/10/mass-party-labour-podemos-neoliberalism).

Haider A. (2016) Bernstein in Seattle: Representative Democracy and the Revolutionary Subject, *Viewpoint*, May 15 (https://www.viewpointmag.com/2016/05/15/bernstein-in-seattle-representative-democracy-and-the-revolutionary-subject-part-1/).

Heyward A. (2017) Since Trump's Victory, Democratic Socialists of America Has Become a Budding Political Force, *The Nation*, December 21 (https://www.thenation.com/article/in-the-year-since-trumps-victory-democratic-socialists-of-america-has-become-a-budding-political-force/)

Isserman M. (2000) *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington.*

Kohn M. (2013) Privatization and Protest: Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Toronto, and the Occupation of Public Space in a Democracy. *Perspectives on Politics* 11(1): 99-110.

La Botz D. (2018) The New Deal is Not Enough, *Socialist Forum*, fall (https://socialistforum.dsausa.org/issues/fall-2018/the-new-deal-is-not-enough/).

Marcus D. (2012) The Horizontalists. *Dissent*, Fall (https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-horizontalists).

Meyer N. (2018) What Is Democratic Socialism?, *Jacobin*, july (https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/democratic-socialism-bernie-sanders-social-democracy-alexandria-ocasio-cortez).

Meyer N., Ben B. (2018) The Case for Bernie 2020, *The Call,* August (https://socialistcall.com/2018/08/16/bernie-2020/).

Mohandesi S. (2017) Identity Crisis, *Viewpoint*, March 16 (https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/03/16/identity-crisis/).

Moody K. (2017) The New Terrain of Class Conflict in the United States, *Catalyst,* Summer.

Naschek M. (2018) The Identity Mistake, *Jacobin,* August(https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/08/mistaken-identity-asaid-haider-review-identity-politics).

Post C. (2018) Debating "The case for Bernie 2020", *Socialist Worker*, Oct. 16 (http://socialistworker.org/2018/10/16/debating-the-case-for-bernie-2020).

Post C. (2018) What Strategy for the US Left?, *Jakobin*, February (https://jacobinmag.com/2018/02/socialist-organization-strategy-electoral-politics).

Rana A. (2018) Goodbye, Cold War. *N+1*, 30 (https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/politics/goodbye-cold-war/).

Ransby B. (2018) *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*, University of California Press.

Reed A. (2018) Response to Backer and Singh, *Verso*, 10 (https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4073-response-to-backer-and-singh).

Riley D. (2017) American Brumaire?, *New Left Review* 103 (Jan-Feb).

Riofrancos T.N., Denvir D. (2017) The "Identity Politics" Debate Is Splintering the Left. Here's How We Can Move Past It, *In These Times*, February 14: (http://inthesetimes.com/article/19902/heres-how-we-can-move-pastthe-identity-politics-debate-splintering-the-left)

Sacks A.J. (2017) When Social Democracy Was Vibrant, *Jacobin*, november (https://jacobinmag.com/2017/11/german-social-democratic-party-second-international-culture).

Singh N.P., Clover J.I. (2018) The Blindspot Revisited, *Verso*, 10 (https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4079-the-blindspot-revisited).

Tarnoff B. (2018) Building Socialism from Below: Popular Power and the State, *Socialist Forum*, Fall (https://socialistforum.dsausa.org/issues/fall-2018/building-socialism-from-below-popular-power-and-the-state/).

Winant G. (2017) The New Working Class, *Dissent* (https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/new-working-class-precarity-race-gender-democrats).

Рекомендация для цитирования / For citations:

Khachaturian R., Guillory S. (2018) Mapping the American Left. *Социология власти*, 30 (4): 128-146.

Khachaturian R., Guillory S. (2018) Mapping the American Left. *Sociology of Power*, 30 (4): 128-146.

Поступила в редакцию: 01.12.2018; принята в печать: 22.12.2018