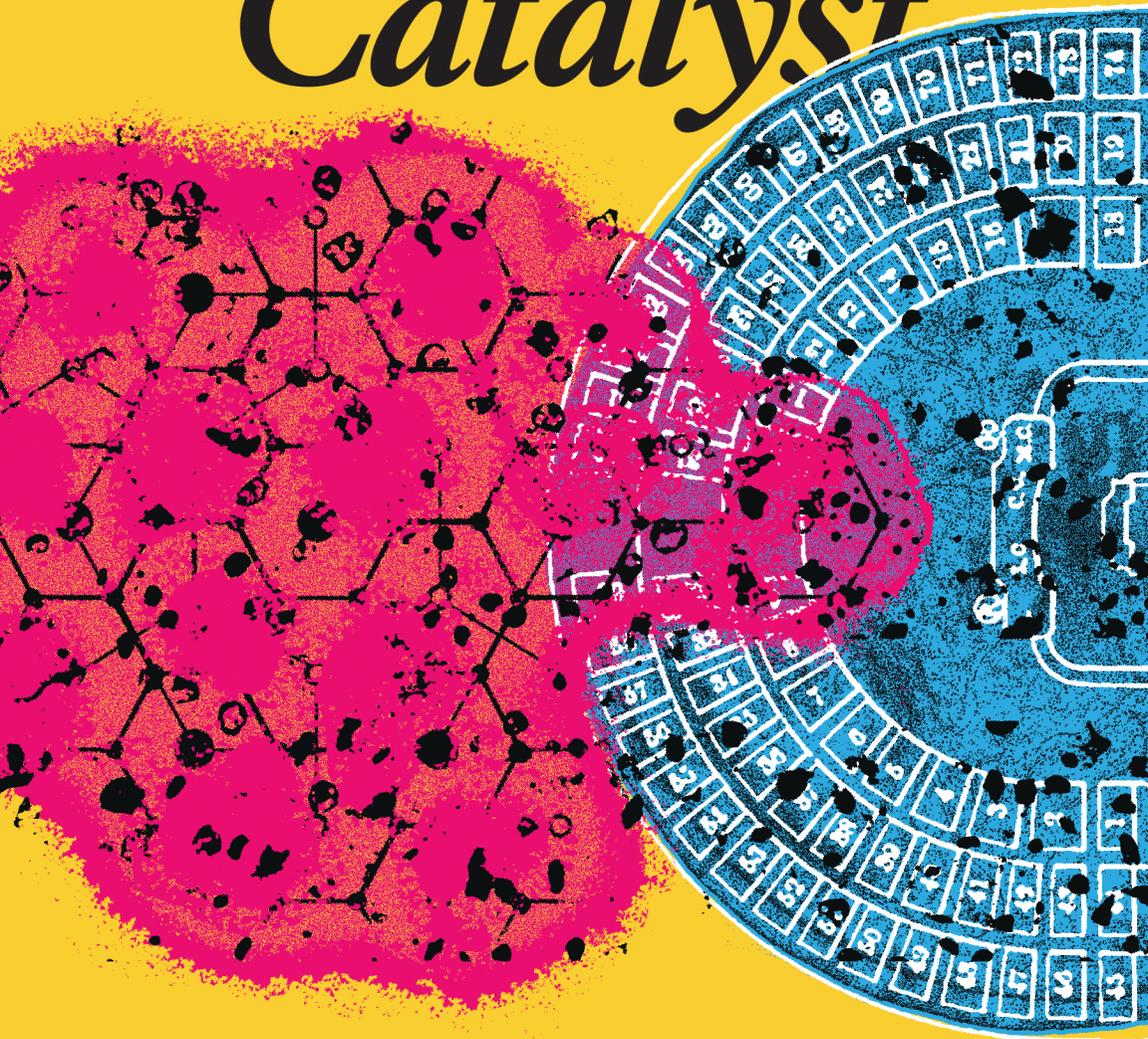


Catalyst



SIMON MOHUN
Britain: From the Golden Age to an Age of Austerity

MATT KARP
The Mass Politics of Antislavery

GRACE BLAKELEY
"The Left in the Global North Will Continue to Get Stronger"

CHRIS MAISANO
Democracy's Morbid Symptoms

JARED ABBOTT & DUSTIN GUASTELLA
A Socialist Party in Our Time?

MASTHEAD

EDITOR

Vivek Chibber

EDITORIAL BOARD

Bashir Abu-Manneh

Suzy Kim Lee

Chris Maisano

René Rojas

Adaner Usmani

Ramaa Vasudevan

DESIGN

Ben Koditschek

COPY EDITOR

Alex Press

PUBLISHER

Bhaskar Sunkara

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

\$40 student

\$60 sustainer

\$100 institution

[catalyst-journal.com
/subscribe](http://catalyst-journal.com/subscribe)

[subscriptions@
catalyst-journal.com](mailto:subscriptions@catalyst-journal.com)

MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO

Jacobin Foundation
388 Atlantic Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11217

*Include your email
and note *Catalyst* in
the memo field

Catalyst, A Journal of Theory & Strategy
is published quarterly by Jacobin Foundation.

ISSN 2475-7365

Catalyst

VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 2 | SUMMER 2019

3

Editorial

7

**JARED ABBOTT &
DUSTIN GUASTELLA**

*A Socialist Party
in Our Time?*

65

SIMON MOHUN

*Britain: From the
Golden Age to an Age
of Austerity*

111

INTERVIEW

GRACE BLAKELEY

*“The Left in the Global
North Will Continue
to Get Stronger”*

131

MATT KARP

*The Mass Politics
of Antislavery*

181

REVIEW

CHRIS MAISANO

*Democracy’s Morbid
Symptoms*

CONTRIBUTORS

JARED ABBOTT

is completing his PhD in political science at Harvard University.

GRACE BLAKELEY

is the *New Statesman's* economics commentator and a research fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research. She is the author of *Stolen: How to Save the World from Financialisation*. (Repeater Books, 2019).

DUSTIN GUASTELLA

is a graduate student in sociology at Rutgers University and a union staffer in New York.

MATT KARP

teaches history at Princeton University and is the author of *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

CHRIS MAISANO

is a union staffer in New York and on the editorial board of *Catalyst*.

SIMON MOHUN

is emeritus professor of political economy at Queen Mary University and has published widely on theoretical aspects of Marxian economics.

Editorial

This issue of *Catalyst* focuses on the United State and Britain. More specifically, it examines the political economy of democratic advance, past and present.

In our lead article, Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella offer an ambitious but practical proposal for a viable socialist electoral strategy. The anticapitalist left in the United States has, for decades, wrestled with the dilemma of building a party in an institutional setting that is perhaps the most forbidding in the world. Confronted by the obstacles imposed by a winner-take-all electoral system, a highly federated state structure, two parties that are entirely owned and operated by capital, and the oceans of money that overwhelm any popular control, the Left has never found a way of sustained electoral success.

For many, the obvious choice is to abandon the electoral arena altogether and to opt for a permanent “movementism.” But it should be clear by now that this is no solution. Abbott and Guastella soberly address the constraints that have thus far derailed all attempts to forge an electoral vehicle for the Left, and then propose a strategy that centers

on building a “party surrogate” in the short run, so that it might create a base for itself among the millions of working-class voters who have given up on the system and have dropped out of it altogether. They see this as the first step toward building a socialist party, distinct from workplace organizing, but vitally important to building popular power.

Across the Atlantic, British politics is in a state not seen since the birth of the Labour Party. On the one hand, Jeremy Corbyn has revitalized a Left that seemed to have been reduced to insignificance. And despite the unrelenting attacks upon him by his own party and the British establishment, Corbyn has not only held on to the leadership, but is in the process of turning the party into a force for the working class. But at the same time, Brexit has splintered British politics across class lines, thereby complicating the situation for the Labour left. Not only does Corbyn have to navigate the very muddy political waters in Brexit’s wake, but he also inherits perhaps the most forbidding economic situation of any political leader over the past century. If he comes to power at all, it will be at the helm of an economy with a stagnant manufacturing sector, flatlining wages, and a currency in a downward spiral.

To place the current scene in context, Simon Mohun offers a sweeping analysis of the British economy since the Second World War. He shows that the neoliberal era witnessed a profound restructuring of the economy, toward one in which employers rely more on low wages and work intensification, rather than on a steady upgrading of equipment. Hence, a Corbyn government would have to confront an incredibly hostile economic environment, not to mention a recalcitrant capitalist class.

To assess how prepared he might be for this situation, we offer an interview with Grace Blakeley, a UK-based economics commentator. Blakeley discusses both how Corbyn and the Left are positioned to deal with the very complex political conjuncture, and whether the Left within the Labour Party can survive if Corbyn were forced to resign in the wake of electoral defeat.

Interestingly, the political scene today is reminiscent in many ways of the years leading up to one of the most important shifts in American political history 150 years ago. In a bracing new analysis of the Civil War era, historian Matt Karp revisits the dynamics leading up to the abolition of slavery. Karp argues that while the nineteenth century witnessed the demise of slavery across the Americas and the Caribbean, the United States was alone in that its road to abolition led through a massive electoral movement.

Whereas in other countries, abolition came through war and revolution, or was elite-led, the American story was one in which an electoral victory preceded any military or elite action. Lincoln's Republican Party came to power on a platform dedicated to slavery abolition. Furthermore, it built a massive social base for its policy even in the North, by linking it to the class interests of Northern workers and farmers. Karp's article joins a growing wave of scholarship forcing us to rethink the origins of emancipation in the United States, but adds to it a critical dimension of class politics not sufficiently appreciated.

Whereas slavery abolition represented a massive victory for democratic forces, our current drift to oligarchy rides on their retreat. Chris Maisano takes stock of the current scholarship on this subject. He observes that there is a growing sense of a "crisis of democracy," in a manner reminiscent of the early 1970s, when the Trilateral Commission issued its famous report on the crisis then. But as he notes, the crisis then was explained by elites as a result of "democratic excesses," i.e., as caused by their loss of control over the political process. But today, nobody tries to make such a claim. Instead, it is widely understood that democracy is dying in the grip of an emerging oligarchy. Maisano makes a forceful case that the most effective antidote is not in tinkering with this or that element of the political process, but changing the balance of class power. ✎

**This article offers a way forward
for the electoral dimension of socialist
politics in the United States.**

**We begin by examining the barriers
imposed by existing institutions —
the electoral system, the Democratic
Party, and big-money donors.**

**We then propose as a solution a
regionally focused “party-surrogate”
model capable of mobilizing
working-class voters disillusioned
with the Democratic Party.**

A SOCIALIST PARTY IN OUR TIME?

JARED ABBOTT AND
DUSTIN GUASTELLA

The US left today is grappling with a challenge it hasn't faced in many decades: how to marshal widespread disenchantment with the political and economic status quo, combined with a sudden spike in Americans' openness to democratic socialism, into a political movement capable of gaining and exercising power. In other words, the ascendant, but still adolescent, US left is at last struggling with questions of strategy.

In this paper, we take up one set of strategic issues, specifically around the relationship between elections and the broader left pursuit of power. US socialists have struggled with two primary questions in their debates around electoral strategy: First, what type of organization is best suited to our goals? Second, how does a responsible and effective left relate to the Democratic Party?

Of course, these questions aren't new, but our unique political moment today has reignited old debates. Since the 1990s, a "movementist" approach toward political action has dominated the left-wing activist scene. This approach is skeptical of centralized organization

and ambivalent or hostile toward elections. In general, the activist left of the last several decades has preferred street protests and demonstrations to electoral campaigns. While these horizontally organized mobilizations were often successful in generating media attention, they largely failed to translate protest into power, or their demands into policy. On the other extreme, sectarian organizations have taken a messianic approach to political organizing, characterized by a hyper-centralized and largely antidemocratic organizational model that sees itself as the primary vehicle for radical social change. Sectarians have avoided all contact with the Democratic Party and insist that the road to power is through the activities of their own organizations, independent of any others.

Somewhere between these poles is what is often called the inside-outside approach. The “inside” and “outside” refer to the Democratic Party. This orientation is much friendlier toward elections, recognizes the constraints imposed upon socialists by the electoral system, and understands that the state must be a central arena of struggle for any serious socialist project. Yet accepting these premises leaves open a number of questions: Is the goal to “realign” the Democratic Party toward more progressive aims? Or, instead, do advocates aim to “break with” or exit the party? And, if so, how and under what conditions?

In what follows, we address these questions. First, we argue that the type of organization the Left and labor require is much like the mass parties of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: an organization that competes for elections, mobilizes a mass base, and has a democratic internal structure.¹ Of course, the formation of such an organization in the American context is fraught, given the structural limitations imposed by our political system. And while Seth Ackerman, in arguing that socialists make strategic use of the Democratic Party ballot line, offers a path to overcoming some of

1 Vivek Chibber, “Our Road to Power,” *Jacobin* no. 27, Fall 2017.

these challenges, he does not address the question of how to build a mass constituency.²

Despite numerous structural obstacles, there are good reasons to believe that the political terrain for the Left is improving, and that today there is a substantial constituency for working-class politics ready to be mobilized. The second half of the paper demonstrates the historic potential for mass mobilization among working-class voters due to a widening social cleavage between these voters and their middle-class counterparts. Finally, taking into account the structural limitations and historic opportunities, we argue for a strategy to mobilize a bloc of working-class voters that avoids the traps that often frustrate American left-wing electoral insurgents.

What is new about our argument is that we reject a voluntaristic approach to the questions of “realignment” or “break” — that is, we do not think the Left’s primary strategic choice right now is whether we seek to exit the Democratic Party or to realign it from within. On the one hand, as we will show, a concerted effort to realign the party through climbing the party ranks fundamentally misunderstands the organization of the contemporary Democratic Party. On the other hand, while insurgents always have the option of “exiting” the major parties, their alternative party or party-surrogate will only have a realistic chance of electoral success if the insurgents have made sufficient inroads within one of the major parties — and a significant section of the labor movement — to attract a large portion of its supporters. In other words, party realignment and exit are better understood as *effects* of a successful campaign to build a powerful electoral constituency independent of the Democratic Party, and less as strategies toward that end.

We argue instead that in order to approach some semblance of the power needed to exert real influence in the US political system, socialists need a powerful mass organization — what we call a

2 Seth Ackerman, “A Blueprint for a New Party,” *Jacobin* no. 23, Fall 2016.

party-surrogate — that is independent of the two major parties and can shield candidates from their outside influence. The party-surrogate would function similarly to a mass party but would make use of the Democratic Party ballot line to overcome some of the structural obstacles we discuss below. And, in order for such an organization to build in institutional capacity and generate real electoral support, it must concentrate its electoral energies regionally. We aim to show how such an orientation best mitigates the major structural limitations faced by the socialist movement, makes the most of newfound political opportunities, and provides a path toward the establishment of a permanent political institution of the working class in the United States.

We should note from the outset that we recognize the challenges any party of the Left confronts in government. In order to realize working-class demands once in power, socialists must work to expand what Erik Olin Wright calls the “associational power” of the class along different dimensions and in different contested “spheres.”³ This paper concerns only the sphere of formal democratic politics and therefore does not take up questions of how best to build the strength of the labor movement in the spheres of production and exchange. Indeed, without power in each sphere, any formal political power won on behalf of the working class would be easily liquidated or otherwise eroded by the immense structural power and instrumental influence of capitalist class interests. We see political success as dependent upon shop-floor power and the growth of a politically self-conscious trade-union movement. Nonetheless, as we argue, capacity-building in one sphere is not independent of capacity-building in other spheres. Building the power of unions, for instance, can be facilitated greatly by the constituency-building necessary for electoral success (and

3 Wright identifies three spheres (politics, production, and exchange) and three corresponding forms of associational power: the party, the trade unions, and works councils, respectively. See Erik Olin Wright’s “Working-Class Power, Capitalist-Class Interests, and Class Compromise” in *Understanding Class* (New York: Verso, 2015): 185–230.

vice versa). So, while the long-term strategy outlined in this paper is conditional on a resurgent labor movement, it can also play an important role in facilitating that resurgence.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE MASS PARTY

To begin, it's important to understand what was distinctive and advantageous about the mass parties of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how a similar structure would be useful to the Left today. These organizations represented a fundamental transformation of party politics. They were responsible for mobilizing working-class voters into the electorate, aggregating and articulating workers' political demands, and, as a result of their success, greatly democratizing capitalist states. Far from being a fetter on democratic and socialist movements, the organization of the mass party was a response to the impotence of the working class against the monopolization of politics by elites. The history of successful left-wing interventions in democratic capitalist political systems is thus a history of "externally mobilized" party organizations. Workers' parties, finding themselves outside positions of power, sought "to bludgeon their way into the political system by mobilizing and organizing a mass constituency."⁴ Unlike internally mobilized parties — which are dependent on elite political figures to attract a base and which operate as a loose, decentralized federation of voters — externally mobilized parties are built on ideological coherence, mass member participation, and internal party democracy.

These innovations were not a simple product of party leaders' idealism. To the contrary, they were born out of political necessity. Having no access to patronage, state resources, or a caucus of interested elites in the legislature, workers advanced a political program over and above the singularity of any given leader, inspired their

4 Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

membership through compelling ideological appeals, and provided an internal political life that helped attract and retain members. Instead of elite brokerage or cleaving off sectional interests among the establishment parties, their strategy was built around mobilizing a new or demobilized constituency into the electorate. In order for them to successfully articulate mass political demands, and in order to ensure leadership remained accountable to the membership, these parties required mechanisms for internal democracy. These included the regular election of party leaders at all levels, the institutionalization of dissent, and the limitation of individual contributions to the party. As a result, they became centralized and purposive parties.⁵

FIGURE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTY TYPES

ABBOTT & GUASTELLA

	INTERNALLY MOBILIZED	EXTERNALLY MOBILIZED
Origin	Congress	Constituency
Strategy	Elite Negotiation	Mass Mobilization
Orientation	"Catchall"	Ideological/Purposive
Structure	Decentralized Oligarchic	Centralized Democratic
Partisans	Supporters	Members
Financing	Donors	Dues

The innovative techniques employed by mass parties had far-reaching consequences. Figure 1 compares the differences between internally mobilized parties — those founded within the halls of power and by elite political insiders — and mass, externally mobilized parties. First, the advent of membership-driven financing ensured the party was primarily beholden to its members and not to a donor class. Second, the institutionalization of a party program helped not only to attract voters but inspired members to see beyond the short-term electoral failures of any given politician. A coherent ideological vision helped ensure partisans' commitment to the party, and the program allowed

5 James Q. Wilson, *Political Organizations* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 95–110.

members to judge how faithful their candidates had been to the party's goals. This, in turn, facilitated party leaders' responsiveness and accountability to rank-and-file membership.

Finally, the internal governance and structure of mass parties was unlike anything developed by internally mobilized parties. Elite parties treated partisans as "supporters" with few obligations or responsibilities to the party. In turn, the party did not expect much of the partisans, and voters were free to choose among a bevy of political options the way the consumer is free to spend her money in the market. By contrast, mass workers' parties were highly organized membership associations. Members were not only expected to pay dues, but they also had party responsibilities and were expected to participate in the daily life of the organization.

Candidates of these parties had strong incentives to cleave to the members' interests, since the latter were the campaign workers responsible for getting candidates elected, and they provided the lion's share of campaigns' financial resources.⁶ Political opportunism came at the cost of potentially weakening the mobilization machine, both in terms of alienating frustrated members and muddying the party's organizational and ideological coherence. Further, by giving members a meaningful stake in organizational decision-making, the party structure provided members a vibrant internal culture that built their identification with the organization and their class, and that limited the risk that members might abandon the party during (inevitable) periods of low electoral success. Such a structure also

6 Of course, the membership, even when vigilant, cannot alone ensure candidate fidelity to the program. The project of organizing a membership-based political organization in a hyper-decentralized and candidate-centric system like the United States is vulnerable to the possibility that candidates will outgrow the base of the organization. In these cases, the tail wags the dog. Thus, it behooves the party to rely on candidates that not only accept and agree to their program but those that are fiercely loyal to the party and its mission. The organization should groom and prepare candidates in this vein and insist on the candidates' full participation in the life of the organization. Ultimately, even with an externally mobilized infrastructure, the candidates themselves will play a major role in the success or failure of the project.

helped sharpen the ideological orientation of the party through constant programmatic debate tested against the real force of democratic electoral competition.

A mass political organization like those described above is not simply one avenue for left-wing electoral action; it is a necessary condition for success. Because parties of the Left and labor have fewer resources, they have to rely largely on the strength of their numbers and superior organization to make an impact. The innovations developed by externally mobilized parties help them overcome a number of obstacles presented by both hostile political systems and rival parties. The pooling of finances, the organization and mobilization of voters as members, the programmatic appeals, and their internal democratic structure all play a role in increasing their electoral competitiveness. As explosive as individual left-wing candidates may be, and as popular as socialist demands might be in the abstract, there is simply no substitute for a permanent structure that can mobilize members, organize political claims, and discipline party candidates.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the retreat of social democracy and the onset of neoliberalism coincided with the crippling and erosion of the historic workers' parties in Europe and Latin America. And, as Peter Mair has shown, since at least the 1970s, and accelerating in the 1990s, we have seen a "hollowing" of mass parties.⁷ This hollowing refers to both the retreat in the demands of the traditional social-democratic parties — their inability to distinguish themselves from other major parties — and the diminishing size of these parties themselves. For instance, Germany's Social Democratic party, once the pride of the world socialist movement, has witnessed a major decline in the percentage of its overall vote share, and an even more dramatic decline in the size of its dues-paying membership.⁸ By the

7 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2013).

8 Oskar Niedermayer, "Mitgliederentwicklung der Parteien," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, October 7, 2017, <http://www.bpb.de/politik/grundfragen/parteien-in-deutschland/zahlen-und-fakten/138672/mitgliederentwicklung>.

1990s, the parties of social democracy no longer looked like externally mobilized weapons bludgeoning their way into hostile political systems. Instead they morphed into establishment parties brokering their way into government, offering modest reforms, and limiting popular participation.

Of course, some might argue that the collapse of the mass parties in Europe and elsewhere portends the end of party politics altogether, or that the historic failure of social democracy was a function of the organizational form itself. But the demise of the workers' parties was not related to their commitment to a particularly stultifying party form. In fact, it was the abandonment of mass mobilization as a political strategy, the retreat of their political demands, and the increasingly oligarchic leadership structures that led to their hollowing and collapse. Nonetheless, these parties remain the single greatest weapons the working class has ever produced. Instead of seeking salvation in new forms of political organization, it seems that any contemporary political organization of the Left and labor would need to replicate the techniques and strategies employed by externally mobilized workers' parties.

The decline of mass parties of the Left everywhere demonstrates the challenge of maintaining these organizations. The urgency of democratic competition, and of managing the capitalist economy, can compel any such organization to favor short-term transactional goals over the long-term party program. Leaders often seek to consolidate their power through bureaucracy, and the rise of a particularly charismatic figure can destabilize the internal life of such an organization. Yet such liabilities are always present in politics, and however imperfect they may be, the mass parties described above remain the only bulwark against such machinations. But building such an organization is no easy task. We now turn to the key constraints that complicate this work in the United States today.

CHALLENGES TO PARTY FORMATION: STATE, PARTY, AND MONEY

Democratic socialists around the world are confronted by a range of constraints that limit the development and success of mass left-wing parties. Consider that everywhere the outsize resources of business interests affords them unparalleled political advantages.⁹ Further, the structure of capitalist democracies — dependent on taxation from income-generating enterprises — limits even the most successful reform efforts.¹⁰ Beyond this, politicians in all contexts tend to focus above all on getting elected and staying in office.¹¹ As a result, the imperatives of democratic party competition and the management of a capitalist economy generally create incentives for politicians to take a transactional approach to politics that undermines their commitment to particular ideological or policy positions.¹² These challenges are present even in the political contexts most conducive to socialist politics. In the US context, however, democratic socialists must also overcome a host of uniquely American challenges.

The United States' labyrinthine decentralized and semi-democratic political system has facilitated the growth of a unique form of party duopoly. What's more, the structure of the major parties, and the Democratic Party in particular, along with the enormous influence of money in US politics — unparalleled in the world — puts American socialists at a distinct disadvantage.

9 Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems*, (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

10 Fred Block, *Revising State Theory: Essays in Politics and Postindustrialism* (Temple University Press, 1987); Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, (London: Quartet Books, 1973).

11 Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957); John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties?: The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

12 Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, First edition (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

The Anti-Party State

Most observers of party politics in the United States will notice the peculiarity of the system. As E. E. Schattschneider rightly noted more than four decades ago, barriers to participation and the structure of “the most complex governmental system in the world” are sufficient grounds for questioning the “sovereignty” of the American voter.¹³ For our purposes, it is important to explore how the political system of the United States punishes *any* political opposition. What is perhaps most surprising about the system is that it was not built with the intention of stifling socialist agitation in particular, like the German Anti-Socialist laws (1878–88), but that its structure was designed to frustrate the existence of *any* party organizations, let alone mass workers’ parties.

Our highly unrepresentative “winner take all” single-member district electoral system was designed for individuals and not parties. In fact, factions and parties are quite clearly discouraged by the US Constitution. James Madison hoped to diffuse the possibility of party formation through a maze-like division of powers and the sheer magnitude of elected offices.¹⁴ So great was Madison’s fear of the formation of a “majority faction” that he claimed “the great object” of the American form of government was “to secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction.” His aim was to rid government of the “disease” of factionalism and the very possibility of party government — that is, a government ruled by a majority party.¹⁵

13 E. E. Schattschneider, *Party Government: American Government in Action* (Transaction, 2004); E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America*, (Hinsdale, IL: Cengage Learning, 1975).

14 The United States had an estimated 513,200 elected officials in 1992, the last time the US Census counted (https://www.census.gov/prod/2/gov/gc/gc92_1_2.pdf). As Schattschneider noted, “the authors of the Constitution set up an elaborate division and balance of powers within an intricate government structure designed to make parties ineffective. It was hoped that parties would lose and exhaust themselves . . .” (1975: 7).

15 James Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” November 22, 1787.

Nonetheless, real parties emerged by 1828 and matured in the Jacksonian era. And while the rules set forward in the Constitution were unable to stop the emergence of parties, they produced a strong tendency toward duopoly. In order to win, in each of the legislative districts that make up the electoral geography of the United States, a party must obtain a plurality of votes in the district. The victor then monopolizes political power in the entire district, even if they only win 30 percent of the vote. These zero-sum electoral contests mean that small differences in a candidate's vote share can have profound political consequences.

The implications are obvious. Because the loser of a given election wins zero seats (regardless of their electoral strength), smaller parties have an incentive to band together with larger parties to build majority coalitions. Failing to do this not only guarantees their own electoral defeat but also takes votes away from larger parties with which they are most closely aligned politically. Candidates, for their part, are unlikely to accept recruitment to minor-party tickets out of a justifiable fear that doing so will doom their electoral viability. Finally, voters are unlikely to cast ballots for third-party candidates out of a reasonable concern that this will contribute to a "spoiler" effect in which voting for a third-party candidate increases the chances of electing the candidate furthest from their own political perspective.¹⁶

To demonstrate how unrepresentative this system can be, consider that there is no way of knowing a priori how many seats a given party will win in the legislature based on the percentage of the total votes that party obtains. A party in the United States can win 60 percent of the total votes nationally and know nothing about how many seats it will capture in Congress. What matters chiefly is the *distribution* of votes across the districts. Thus, the Republican Party captured 12 million fewer votes than the Democratic Party in Senate races across the

16 Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State* (Hoboken: Wiley, 1954).

country in 2018 but wound up with a majority.¹⁷

Direct election of the president only compounds these problems. In “presidentialist” systems, parties have strong incentives to appeal to the broadest possible electoral base in order to win, rather than cultivate strong partisan ties around a clear and coherent political program.¹⁸ This, too, helps cleave the electorate into two great camps that encompass a broad array of ideological positions and class interests. Presidentialism also increases the candidate-centric nature of partisan politics. Further, given that presidential elections occur concurrently with both national legislative elections and a range of state- and local-level elections, lower-level party officials and office seekers also have strong incentives to ally themselves with leading party candidates to reap the benefits of presidential coattails (more on this below).¹⁹

Another obstacle facing third parties is the US system’s combination of presidentialism with first-past-the-post electoral rules. Under these conditions, the chance that third parties can compete effectively in the legislature diminishes considerably compared with mixed presidential/proportional representation systems — as in much of Latin America, where presidential systems often feature multiple parties in the legislature. In presidential systems that use proportional representation rather than first-past-the-post electoral rules, candidates seeking legislative offices have weaker incentives to hitch their electoral wagons to a party of one of the major presidential candidates, since they can still return members to the legislature even with a small share of the national vote.²⁰ As an example, take Brazil,

17 Sabrina Siddiqui, “Democrats got millions more votes — so how did Republicans win the Senate?,” *Guardian*, November 8, 2018.

18 David J. Samuels, “Presidentialized Parties: The Separation of Powers and Party Organization and Behavior,” *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 4 (2002): 461–83.

19 As an example, compare the United States, which has only two competitive parties for both the presidency and Congress, with South Korea (which has non-concurrent executive and legislative elections), where typically only two parties are competitive for the presidency but where three to four parties are often competitive in national legislative elections.

20 Scott Mainwaring, “Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy: The Difficult

which almost always features only two competitive candidates for the presidency, but whose national legislature currently has members from more than two dozen political parties.

Finally, consider, as Ackerman shows, the multitude of obstacles minor parties must overcome simply to appear on the ballot.²¹ Ackerman recognizes that the US government is not simply manipulated by private political parties, but rather that the state and party are now so intertwined that it is sometimes hard to find where government ends and parties begin. Consider that when one “joins” an American party, they do so by registering with the state, not with the party itself. This, combined with all the other challenges baked into the political system discussed above, is precisely why Ackerman and others advocate that political insurgents “rent” the Democratic Party ballot line. Indeed, there is nothing preventing socialist candidates from running as Democrats, and the solution provides an elegant and effective means for socialists to compete with major-party candidates. The ballot-line solution also does not preclude the formation of a mass membership organization that operates much like a party and mobilizes members in precisely the way mass parties are expected to, just as Ackerman argues. However, while renting the ballot line does provide a solution to many of the challenges described above, the tactic alone does not offer us a strategic orientation for overcoming obstacles to building a mass constituency for a left-wing party-surrogate, nor does it help us understand how socialists should engage with the Democratic Party itself.

The Structure of the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party is a famously diffuse and porous organization that offers a range of opportunities for left-wing challengers seeking to gain a foothold within it. At the same time, it is important not

Combination,” *Comparative Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 198–228.

21 Seth Ackerman, “A Blueprint for a New Party,” *Jacobin* no. 23, Fall 2016.

to exaggerate the party's "nonparty" character. In fact, the party's structure and internal procedures are remarkably effective in limiting candidates' autonomy and hindering progressive efforts at party takeover.

Beyond the party's open primary system, which offers left-wing challengers an opportunity to run on the Democratic Party ballot line, the other key factor that makes the party vulnerable to left entry is its remarkable level of decentralization. Its subnational organizations are largely independent politically and financially; state- and municipal-level party organizations are free to pick and choose their own local candidates and even their own political program. However, while the local nature of the "low party" has some advantages that increase its vulnerability, there are also powerful headwinds that effectively negate the possibilities for party capture discussed above.

First, the party doesn't hold direct elections to select its highest officers. This is in stark contrast to most parties of the Left and labor around the world. Consider that in order to win the leadership of the UK Labour Party, one of the most centralized parties in the world, a member need only be nominated by 10 percent of elected Parliamentary Labour Party members and win a majority of votes by preferential ballot in a one-person, one-vote system.²² If elected, she serves as prime minister; if not, she serves as opposition leader, but in either outcome, she appoints her cabinet or shadow cabinet, who stand as the party's senior leadership.

Who, then, leads the Democratic Party? When the party controls the executive branch, naturally the president is the party leader. But when the party does not control the executive, party leadership falls to the most senior legislative party member. When the party controls the House but not the Senate, this is the Speaker of the House; when the party controls the Senate but not the House, it is the Senate Majority

22 Labour Party, *Rule Book 2019*, 2019.

Leader; when the party controls neither the House, the Senate, nor the executive branch, the party is led by its minority leaders.²³ Notice, however, that these positions are not “party positions” elected by all party members. Indeed, the path to becoming Speaker of the House involves first winning an election in-district, then winning a party majority in Congress, and *only then* winning an election among party-caucus members. The party’s highest officers, then, are not elected by the party’s members (with the indirect exception of the president) but instead by their colleagues in the legislature. The election is a ratification of the candidate’s ascension to leadership rather than its mechanism. The whole affair is several steps removed from the rank-and-file party members.

It’s difficult to exaggerate how oligarchic and impenetrable this structure can be. Consider, again, the contrast with a more democratic and centralized party. In Jeremy Corbyn’s bid for the Labour Party leadership, he insisted that a new direction was needed in order to win government, he organized his supporters around the claim that Labour needed a left turn, the insurgency overwhelmed the leadership election with the help of the pressure group Momentum, and Corbyn campaigned for Labour in his proposed direction. In the United States, the process is almost entirely reversed; a party politician *must win government first in order to effectively lead their party*. For instance, Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House and the most senior leader of the Democratic Party, assumed party leadership after the Democrats took control of the House in 2018. Her election as speaker had little to do with any debate within the party membership and was confined exclusively to Democratic Caucus members in the House. Worse, if Democrats are unhappy with her leadership, they cannot collectively organize to “deselect” or replace her, as Labour Party members can. Instead, a candidate must primary her in her district, and only constituents within that

²³ See <https://www.house.gov/leadership> and <http://www.senate.gov/senators/leadership.htm>.

district may participate in the election. Finally, removing Pelosi from her position would not mean a democratization of leadership selection, since her successor would still be chosen by the Democratic Caucus in Congress.

In addition to the impenetrability of party leadership selection, over the past several decades the party has undergone a marked increase in internal discipline that has hindered the attempts of progressives to stake out an independent policy agenda. Historically, observers have insisted that the major parties are something like containers for pluralism, as divided, fractured, and decentralized as the American government itself. While this was always something of a fantasy, over the past forty years or so, a major change in the party system has resulted in the hyperconcentration of power in the hands of party and economic elites. This has resulted in increased party discipline, which in turn has dramatically raised the cost of internal party dissent.

The Collapse of the Machines and the Rise of the Presidency

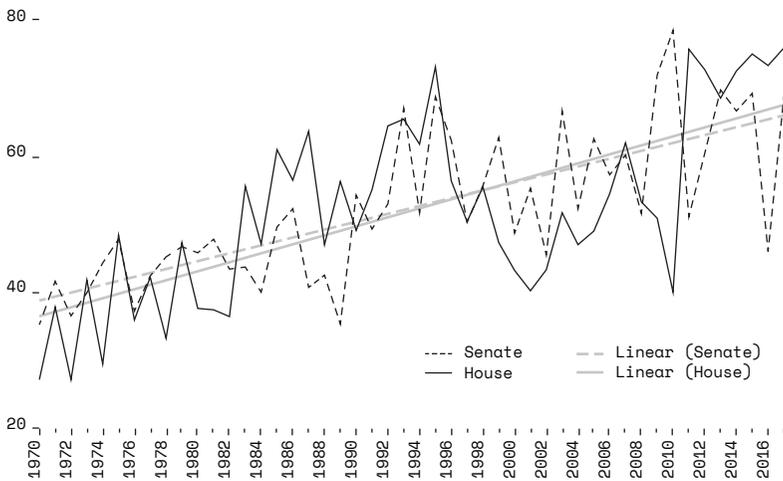
Perhaps the most striking change in the party system in the postwar era has been the near total disappearance of the political machine and the concentration of party power around the president. The collapse of the machine has been well documented and largely celebrated as a genuine step forward for democracy. Mid-century observers argued that, should the power of the local bosses and political machines be eroded, we would witness the centralization and “responsibilization” of the Democratic Party.²⁴ In other words, political machines were thought to be the primary obstacle preventing American parties from becoming ideological parties that would be responsible to their party memberships. This was partially correct. The collapse of machines has led to something like a pseudo-centralization of the party. The

²⁴ American Political Science Association, *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System: A Report of the Committee on Political Parties*. (New York: Rinehart, 1950).

evidence of this is the remarkable rise of party unity across both legislative houses over the past fifty years. One can no longer entertain the notion that political parties are hopelessly fractured and endlessly pluralistic. Figure 2 shows the increase in “party unity” votes – votes wherein the majority of party members in Congress vote together. Before 1970, less than 40 percent of votes in Congress were party-line votes; by 1990, more than half of all votes were; by 2010, party unity votes surpassed 60 percent and are set to surpass 70 percent in the next two years. This is something of a puzzle. The Democratic Party remains a highly decentralized and ideologically diverse organization, yet the sudden and remarkable rise of party unity seems to suggest the opposite – that the party has become responsible, ideological, and purposive.

ABBOTT & GUASTELLA

FIGURE 2: PARTY UNITY VOTES IN BOTH LEGISLATIVE HOUSES (1970-2016)



Note: Authors' elaboration. Data from Rollcall.com.

What explains the rise in party discipline at the congressional level if we have not seen a concomitant democratization and centralization of the party? In fact, the appearance of centralization obscures two

developments: (1) the rise of the presidency, as a substitute for party politics, and (2) the increase in the influence of money.

In their attempt to attack the patronage system of centralized machines like Tammany Hall, New Dealers set about institutionalizing the power of the executive branch in domestic policy, chiefly through the Reorganization Act of 1939. Martin Shefter describes the sweeping changes as follows:

The Reorganization Act would expand the White House staff; extend the merit system and replace the Civil Service Commission with a single personnel director appointed by the president; transfer the pre-auditing function from the Comptroller-General (and the Congress) to the Budget Bureau (and the President); create a central planning agency in the Executive Office; and place all administrative agencies, including the independent regulatory commissions under one of the cabinet departments.²⁵

These changes effectively allowed Franklin D. Roosevelt and his allies to usurp power from the local party machines and party bosses hostile to his reform agenda in major Democratic cities. The New Deal reforms were not an immediate death sentence for the urban machines. Notably, Roosevelt allowed the spoils and patronage systems to persist wherever a Democratic machine was friendly to his administration (like in Chicago), and he starved those that were hostile (like in New York). But, perhaps more importantly, New Deal liberals relied on a strategy of mass mobilization, much like the mass workers' parties in Europe. As such, Roosevelt needed machines in much the same way he needed industrial unions: such organizations provided a well-organized voter mobilization apparatus.

However, as subsequent administrations discovered the vastly expanded powers of the executive branch, they found little need for

25 Shefter, *Political Parties and the State*, 83.

the maintenance of political machines that often proved a liability for their political aims. The rise of the primary system is further evidence of the shift away from political machines. John F. Kennedy was among the first to eschew the machines and make serious use of the primaries in his 1960 campaign. The primary system would soon become the norm for electing candidates in almost all state parties. By the time of the New Politics reform movement of the late 1960s, the only remaining political machine of any import was in Chicago, and it, too, would soon collapse. The presidency, and electoral contests to control it, replaced the machines as both the singular programmatic force of the party and the major avenue of voter mobilization.

As patronage dried up, local party organizations were hollowed out. And without urban machines, candidates could no longer rely on a mobilization arm in the cities. As a result, the strategy for party candidates vying for office changed. Hitching their political careers to higher-office party leaders, and especially to the presidential candidate of the party, offered a number of advantages. By aligning with the party's presidential candidate (or likely presidential candidate), a candidate could reasonably expect to reap the benefits of riding his or her coattails, and if successful, loyalty would be rewarded by securing important committee seats in the legislature or cabinet. This shift in party power — from machines to leadership — partially explains the tendency toward party unity. Candidates and legislators recognized the advantages that come with loyalty to the leadership, and they also noticed the costs of dissent. Party leaders in Congress began employing a number of techniques to ensure unity around presidential issues and to discipline dissenting members.²⁶ The decline of minority-party participation in legislating, the disappearance of the conference committee, and the selective restriction of information

26 John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, "The Republican Revolution and the House Appropriations Committee," *The Journal of Politics* 62, no. 1 (2000): 1–33; James M. Curry, *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives*, Chicago Studies in American Politics (The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

to legislators by party leaders all demonstrate a tendency toward oligarchic centralization, a tendency that was once checked by the presence — however ignoble — of urban machines.

The collapse of the machines does present a unique opportunity for the Left and labor — without local party organizations, an organization of the Left has little competition on the ground for voter mobilization efforts, as we will explore below. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the oligarchic centralization of the party structure poses barriers for party “takeover” or realignment. For instance, as the party concentrates power at the top, insurgent candidates interested in reform must resist the incentives that come from aligning with party leadership, and without party machines, they must build their own mobilization operations without the support of (and often with resistance from) the national party.

The Power of Money

The structural changes wrought by the mid-century reorganization of party politics triggered another shift: the rise of organized money. As urban machines folded up their voter mobilization operations, candidates realized the only replacement for mass mobilization was cash. And by the mid-1970s, reforms to campaign finance laws paved the way for a fundraising operation that offers wealthy donors inordinate influence in determining candidate viability and serves as the first line of defense against electoral insurgency.

Campaign finance has always been a major impediment for the Left in the United States. In fact, the first candidate to use organized cash was Republican William McKinley in his 1896 effort to defeat left-wing populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan.²⁷ But today, campaign cash plays a far greater role in American politics than it ever has, and its influence is only increasing. The rise of campaign

²⁷ George Thayer, *Who Shakes the Money Tree? American Campaign Financing Practices from 1789 to the Present* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

contributions in sheer dollar amounts, combined with the concentration and organization of money by the major parties, has had a considerable disciplining effect on candidates.

In 2012, the share of total campaign contributions from the top 0.01 percent of income-earners was over 40 percent, up from around 15 percent in 1980.²⁸ This increase is driven less by changes in campaign finance laws (which have been very favorable to high-income donors since the Supreme Court's 1976 *Buckley* decision) and more by the rising wealth of the superrich. The wealthiest donors in the 1980 federal election contributed \$1.72 million, which, at the time, was a huge outlier. Compare this to the 2012 elections, in which the two largest donors (Sheldon and Miriam Adelson) gave \$56.8 million and \$46.6 million respectively. Not surprisingly, then, the reliance of both major political parties on top donors has increased dramatically over the past thirty-five years.²⁹ Worse, relative contribution levels from countervailing organizations like labor unions has declined precipitously.

Given that the proportion of campaign finance coming from the superrich has increased dramatically over the past three decades, and since access to campaign finance plays a critical role in determining a candidate's viability, the declining proportion of campaign finance available to candidates not supported by the superrich makes their capacity to win elections increasingly slim.³⁰ In other words, it is significantly more difficult today than it was thirty years ago for a candidate without ruling-class sponsors to win elections.

28 Adam Bonica et al., "Why Hasn't Democracy Slowed Rising Inequality?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2013): 103–24.

29 Indeed, Democrats actually received *more* contributions from the top 0.01 percent of donors in six out of eight election cycles between 1994 and 2008 (Bonica et al).

30 Thomas Ferguson, Paul Jorgensen, and Jie Chen, "How Money Drives US Congressional Elections," *Institute for New Economic Thinking Working Paper Series*, no. 48 (2016); Thomas Ferguson, Paul Jorgensen, and Jie Chen, "How Money Drives US Congressional Elections: More Evidence," *Institute for New Economic Thinking*, <http://ineteconomics.org/uploads/papers/How-Money-Drives-US-Congressional-Elections-More-Evidence.pdf>, 2015.

What's more, the parties themselves have sought to organize and distribute money in these past thirty years so as to better secure majorities and effectively control their incumbents and candidates. As discussed above, without a voter mobilization outfit, candidates found themselves increasingly dependent on cash to get them over the electoral finish line. The collapse of urban machines hit Democrats harder than Republicans, and they were initially the ones who sought to outraise and better organize their fundraising efforts to beat their opponents.

The advent of member-to-member giving, initiated by Lyndon Johnson, allowed candidates with excess campaign funds to transfer their money to those candidates who were cash-strapped.³¹ By the 1990s, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) began to organize the process more formally. They encouraged incumbent members to dump excess campaign funds into the DCCC in an effort to redistribute the funds.³² The goal was twofold. First, by organizing and concentrating money, the party leadership would best determine how to maintain or win a majority. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the party leadership could discipline its congressional members through a carrot-and-stick approach. Giving to the DCCC soon became a mark of party loyalty, and receiving any cash from the committee was dependent on toeing the party line.³³

These party funds may not be necessary for candidates who already command impressive fundraising operations, but for cash-poor candidates, those representing poor urban or rural districts, or those with a decidedly redistributive policy agenda (because wealthy donors are

31 Ross K. Baker, *The New Fat Cats: Members of Congress as Political Benefactors* (New York: Priority Press Publications, 1989).

32 Marian Currinder, *Money in the House: Campaign Funds and Congressional Party Politics* (Boulder: Routledge, 2008).

33 Perhaps more remarkable is the role member-to-member giving has had on securing committee seats. It is not an exaggeration to say that, today, congressmembers effectively buy their committee seats through coordinated "leadership PACs" that donate to the campaign coffers of other members in order to secure votes. See Marian Currinder, *Money in the House*.

among economic elites will be adopted 18 percent of the time, while a policy with widespread support among the economic elite will be adopted 45 percent of the time. Of course, it could be the case that the interests of politicians are simply aligned with those of economic elites because politicians themselves are economic elites. Indeed, Carnes has shown that the class background of legislators is significantly correlated with their political preferences.³⁷ Specifically, working-class legislators are consistently more progressive in roll-call voting patterns than legislators from other class backgrounds. Thus, if the number of working-class congresspeople increased dramatically (it is currently around 2 percent in the US House of Representatives, 3 percent in state legislatures, and 9 percent in city councils), the interests of economic elites might not track so closely with the policy objectives of elected officials. However, it is likely that any changes in legislators' policy objectives caused by this increase in the number of working-class congresspeople would — due to the imperative to maintain the support of key financial backers — be limited at best.

Of course, there are important caveats to raise. The most obvious is the capacity of small-donor online fundraising to seriously threaten the power of entrenched economic elites and the leadership within the Democratic Party, a point made dramatically by the 2016 presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders. The role of money in politics can also be mitigated significantly at the local level, as the electoral effect of having a strong ground game becomes larger relative to the electoral effect of campaign contributions (we discuss this issue in more detail below). The Sanders campaign of 2016, as well as a host of local democratic-socialist electoral victories in 2017 and 2018, are a clear testament to this fact.

37 Nicholas Carnes, "Does the Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class in Congress Matter?," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2012): 5–34.

***The Compounding Effects of Party Structure,
Presidentialism, and Money***

Insurgents who want to realign the Democratic Party effectively have two options. The first, which we can call “realignment from below,” would involve organized attempts to capture local and state parties in an effort to change party rules in favor of cash-poor candidates. The idea here is that by taking over local and state parties, realigners could lower the barriers to entry for outsider candidates. Theoretically, of course, this is possible. However, given the financial and organizational weakness of these local and state parties, any advantages won by a liberalization of party rules would be neutralized by the fundraising power of big donors or the DCCC. In other words, even if realigners succeeded in capturing a local party, the insurgent outsider candidates they intend to help would still find themselves competing with better-financed establishment rivals in Democratic Party primaries.

Another realignment strategy might be called “realignment from above.” This would involve challenging the party leadership directly through the presidential primary system. A good example of such an attempt is Sanders’s 2016 presidential campaigns. Sanders had never attempted to work through the party structures to secure endorsements from party elites or financing from major party donors. As a result, he effectively avoided the moderating effects of the Democratic Party structure. Indeed, his independence was more than a ballot-line decision, it forced him to develop an independent fundraising infrastructure and mobilization machine. Consider that Sanders financed his campaigns almost exclusively through small-dollar donations and union contributions. And in 2016 Bernie took on the party’s leadership directly by going to voters in the presidential primary contests instead of donors in the DCCC. His campaign also demonstrates just how “presidentialized” American politics has become. His run inspired a string of legislative victories, which is yet more evidence

of the relative importance of coattail campaigns. Legislative candidates felt confident hitching their wagon to Sanders, adopting his program, and seeking his support precisely because he proved to be a politically viable *presidential* candidate.

This strategy has paid off in the short term, and repeating it isn't out of the question. However, success hinges on the singularity of the candidate: their ability to spend a political career resisting the incentives of the major parties, their ability to consistently win reelection, their ability to fundraise from small-dollar donors and labor, and their ability to create a mass electoral movement wholly independent of the Democrats' voter mobilization machine. This is no mean feat for any candidate. And even then, the strategy depends on energizing potential coattail candidates to run for congressional and down-ballot seats. But without any countervailing forces to ensure these candidates can win reelection if the presidential candidate loses in the general election (or, in the event of victory, after the progressive president leaves office), the existing oligarchic party structure and the need for campaign finance make the prospects of them maintaining a progressive, redistributive, and independent policy profile slim indeed.

The decentralized and duopolistic nature of American politics, combined with the oligarchic nature of the party structure and candidates' financial dependence on the superrich and party leadership, compound to effectively induce even the most progressive candidates "upward" and rightward — that is, closer to the party leadership and toward the center politically. Enjoying the coattail effect, accessing important committee seats, funding reelection campaigns, and securing resources from the party bureaucracy all but compel candidates to align with party elites and their donors.

In order to mitigate these effects, we need to build an institution capable of fundraising and mobilizing such that it could sufficiently counteract the incentive structure of the Democratic Party. Before we explain how such a party-surrogate could insulate effectively and

build a powerful enough constituency to exert political pressure, let's first examine the opportunities for mass working-class electoral mobilization today.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTY FORMATION:
THE UNALIGNED WORKING CLASS AND NEW
ORGANIZATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES**

Having analyzed the constraints to party formation and party takeover, we turn to structural opportunities that exist for a left-wing party-surrogate to mobilize a mass base and build a powerful institutional infrastructure. Historically, the rise of competitive outsider parties tends to reflect the emergence of new social cleavages that are not adequately incorporated into the political programs of existing parties. Examples include the emergence of liberal parties, reflecting the intensifying social cleavage between agrarian elites and the emerging liberal bourgeoisie in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries, and the rise of social-democratic and labor parties later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflecting the emerging social cleavage between capital and industrial labor.³⁸ Similarly dramatic changes have also been required to produce major partisan realignments within existing parties, such as realignments of US political parties in the 1860s, 1890s, and 1930s.³⁹ In the absence of profound changes to social cleavage structures, party loyalties are generally too strong to permit partisan realignment.⁴⁰ Consequently, without the emergence of a new social cleavage, a left-wing party-surrogate is

38 Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-national Perspectives* (The Free Press, 1967). Also see Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*.

39 Bradley Spahn, "Partisan Socialization and the Foundations of Stable Partisanship" (2018).

40 Philip E. Converse, "The Concept of a Normal Vote," *Elections and the Political Order* 9 (1966): 39; Donald Philip Green and Bradley Palmquist, "How Stable Is Party Identification?," *Political Behavior* 16, no. 4 (1994): 437-466.

unlikely to succeed in weakening partisan attachments to the Democratic Party. We argue that a new social cleavage has indeed emerged over the past several decades that provides a historic opportunity for voter mobilization of weakly aligned or unaligned voters: the cleavage between insiders and outsiders of the contemporary economy, specifically between downwardly mobile working-class Americans and members of the professional and middle classes.

The Working Class and Professional/Middle-Class Cleavage

As Dani Rodrik explains, the era of global neoliberalism (from roughly the late 1970s to the present) has produced one broad group of winners – what we refer to as the professional/middle class (PMC) – and another, much larger group of losers, what we refer to as the working class:

For those with the skills, capital, and savvy to prosper in the postindustrial age ... [there are] inordinate opportunities. Bankers, consultants and engineers [earn] much higher wages ... [and enjoy] much greater control over their daily lives ... On the other hand, for less skilled workers, service sector jobs [mean] giving up the negotiated benefits of industrial capitalism. The transition to a service economy ... [goes] hand in hand with the decline of unions, job protections, and norms of pay equity ... *So, the postindustrial economy [opens] a new chasm between those with good jobs in services, which [are] stable, high paying, and rewarding, and those with bad jobs, which [are] fleeting, low paying, and unsatisfying.*⁴¹

We operationalize the working class and the PMC based on Erik Olin Wright's typology.⁴² Wright explains an individual's class position

41 Dani Rodrik, *Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 85–86.

42 Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge

based on (1) their relationship to the means of production (owner vs. employee), (2) their relative autonomy in the workplace (do they have a supervisor or not?), and (3) the scarce skills they possess (expert, skilled, non-skilled). In this typology, any individual who is neither an owner nor a supervisor is a member of the working class — with the exception of experts who are not supervisors (most university professors, for example). In turn, anyone who is either a supervisor and/or an owner is a member of the middle or capitalist class.

We adopt Wright’s typology with one important exception: we view skilled workers who (a) work under conditions of relative independence, and/or (b) work in industries that are highly valued in the global economy, as members of the PMC. We argue that these workers are more likely than not to benefit, or at least not suffer, from the contemporary global economy. Skilled workers conducting their work under conditions of relative autonomy (such as business consultants and computer programmers) may feel more worried about job security or the threat of their jobs being outsourced or automated than in the past, but in general they have not experienced significant declines in living standards or work conditions over the last several decades. In turn, skilled workers in industries that are highly valued in the global economy may feel a sense of greater job insecurity or increased pressure to perform than in previous decades, but this is offset substantially by the knowledge that unemployment is low in their sector (which makes finding a new, well-paying job relatively easy).

University Press, 1997). For a similar typology, see Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (Cornell University Press, 2011). Note that we are not using the phrase “professional managerial class” because we have in mind a broader set of class positions that expands both to small business owners and professionals/managers that work for large corporations. The professional managerial class has a specific historical connotation connected to a specific subset of professionals sharing an ethical ideal “of a society ruled by reason and led by public-spirited professionals” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 2013: 16). We felt such a conception was too narrow to capture our understanding of the cleavage between winners and losers in the contemporary economy.

FIGURE 3: CATEGORIZING WORKING-CLASS AND PROFESSIONAL/MIDDLE-CLASS OCCUPATIONS

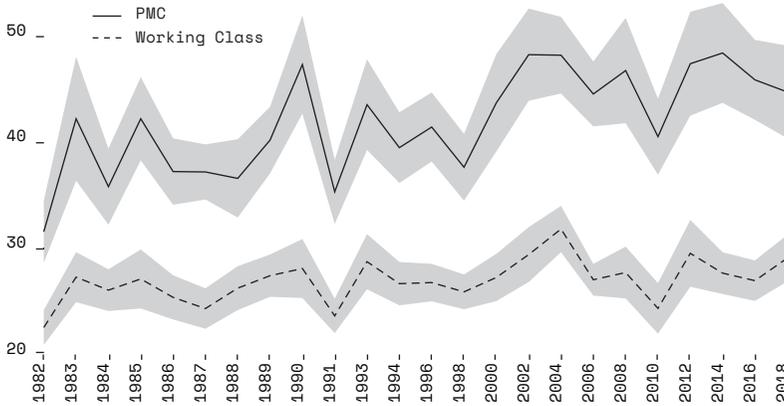
		Relation to Scarce Skills	
Relation to Authority	Expert Supervisors	Skilled Supervisors	Non-Skilled Supervisors
	Experts	Autonomous/ Globally Competitive Skilled Workers	Non-Skilled Workers
		Other Skilled Workers	
		Professional/ Middle Class	Working Class

Note: Adapted from Wright (1997).

Over the past several decades, subjective perceptions of living standards among the working class – critical for voters’ assessments of which political parties and candidates they will support⁴³ – have declined considerably relative to those of the PMC. First, with respect to income, Figure 4 shows that while average working-class incomes have increased since the 1980s (by around 9 percent), average PMC incomes have increased nearly 2.5 times as rapidly (around 23 percent). Further, since there was a significant decline in working-class incomes during the 2000s, the positive relationship between individual incomes and year between 1982 and 2018 is not statistically significant. By contrast, this relationship *is* statistically significant among the PMC. This suggests that in any given year since 1982, working-class individuals likely did not expect an increase in their income, while members of the PMC did. Finally, the average income

43 Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, “Retrospective Voting Reconsidered,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (2013): 285–306.

FIGURE 4: AVERAGE WORKING-CLASS AND PMC INCOMES, 1982–2018 (IN THOUSANDS OF USD)



Source: GSS, author's calculation. Self-reported family incomes adjusted to constant (1986) dollars.

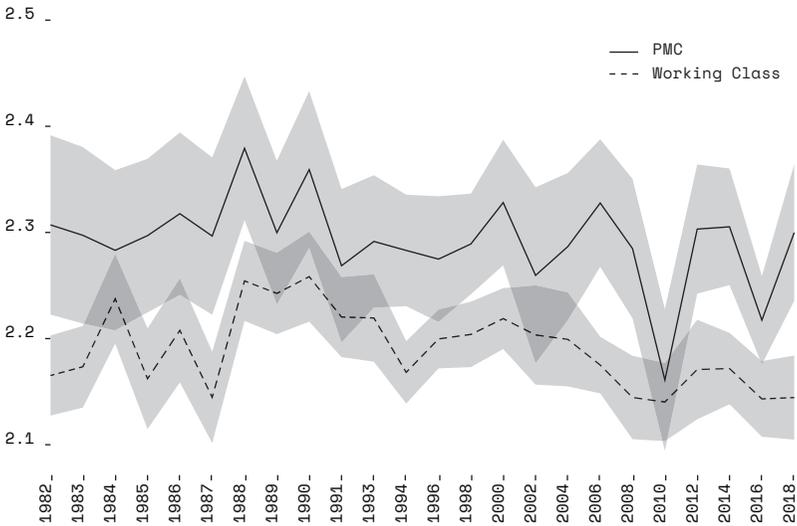
ABBOTT & GUASTELLA

FIGURE 5: AVERAGE WORKING-CLASS AND PMC SUBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF CLASS POSITION, 1982–2018



Note: GSS, author's calculation. Self-reported class identification, scale of 0–3, where 0 = “lower class,” 1 = “working class,” 2 = “middle class,” and 3 = “upper class.”

FIGURE 6: AVERAGE WORKING-CLASS AND PMC GENERAL HAPPINESS, 1982-2018



Note: GSS, author's calculation. Self-reported general happiness, scale of 1-3, where 1 = "not too happy," 2 = "pretty happy," and 3 = "very happy."

gap between the PMC and the working class increased more than 50 percent between 1982 and 2018. As a result, any absolute increase in working-class incomes during this period likely did little to improve working-class perceptions of their standard of living, since they were increasingly modest compared to those enjoyed by the PMC.

Turning to Americans' subjective assessments of their class position, Figure 5 shows that working-class Americans' views of their own class standing have become increasingly negative since the 1980s, while those of the PMC have remained largely unchanged. Specifically, there is a statistically significant inverse relationship between subjective assessment of class position and year among the working class, and no significant change in this relationship among the PMC. In turn, the gap between average subjective class position between the working class and the PMC also rose steadily during this period,

reaching a high point in 2014. Not only do working-class Americans believe they are downwardly mobile, then, but over time this perception has only become stronger relative to the PMC.

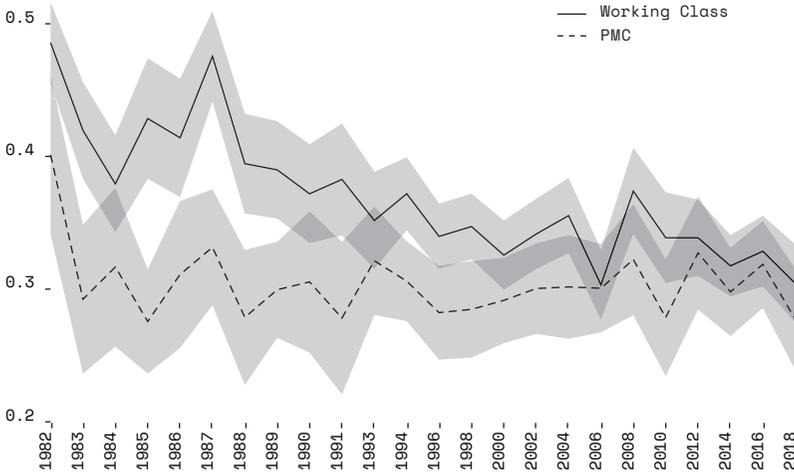
Finally, we see the same divergent trends between the working class and the PMC over the past several decades with respect to Americans' self-assessments of their general happiness. As Figure 6 shows, after rebounding from a low point during the Reagan years, happiness among the working class steadily declined between 1990 and 2018, with each decade's average happiness score being lower than that of the previous decade. By contrast, among the PMC, while we do not observe a positive happiness trend over the last several decades, we also do not see a significant decline. Further, the happiness gap between the working class and the PMC increased consistently during this period, and by 2018 was larger than at any other point since 1982.

Democratic Party Electoral Strategy and the Emergence of an Unaligned Working-Class Voter Bloc

As the gap between subjective perceptions of living standards between the working class and the PMC has widened, the Democratic Party has increasingly targeted PMC voters and moved away from its New Deal-era commitment to key social-democratic policies that would disproportionately benefit downwardly mobile working-class voters. From Jimmy Carter to Hillary Clinton, the dominant campaign commitments of presidential candidates (with the partial exception of Obama's 2012 campaign) have focused on pro-business, fiscally conservative policies, from free trade and financial deregulation to gutting welfare, pursuing Social Security reform, and corporate tax cuts.⁴⁴ This new policy direction is itself a consequence of the pressures and

44 Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015); Josh Mound, "What Democrats Must Do," *Jacobin*, September 30, 2017.

FIGURE 7: CLASS COMPOSITION OF DEMOCRATIC PARTY, 1972–2018



Note: GSS, author's calculation. Self-reported party affiliation. Respondents could choose among "strong Democrat," "not strong Democrat," "independent, near Democratic party," "independent," "independent, near Republican party," "not strong Republican," "strong Republican," or "other party." For Figure 7, we constructed a binary variable where 1 = "strong Democrat," "not strong Democrat," or "independent, near "Democratic Party," and 0 = all other responses.

ABBOTT & GUASTELLA

incentives in the political system described above.⁴⁵ These include the increasing power of the president and the decline of urban political machines – which in turn kickstarted the centralization of Democratic Party funding operations in the DCCC – as well as politicians’ increasing imperative to hew closely to the policy preferences of high-income donors.

45 It is important to note that another contributing factor to this shift was the Democratic Party’s attempt to woo white working-class voters who it believed had been alienated by the party’s excessive liberalism (beginning in the 1960s) back into the party fold, starting with the formation of the Democratic Leadership Conference in 1985. See Alan Abramowitz and Ruy Teixeira, “The Decline of the White Working Class and the Rise of a Mass Upper-Middle Class,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 3 (2009): 391–422.

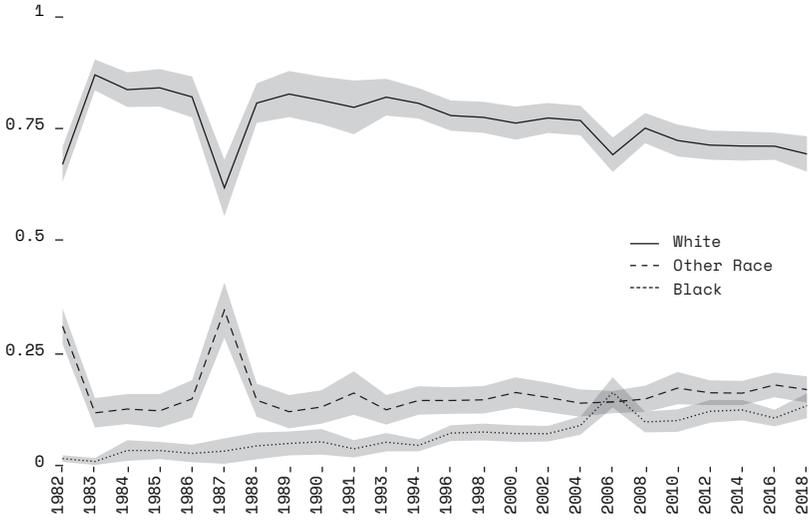
The increasing gap between the Democratic Party's priorities and policies capable of reversing decreasing living standards among the working class has been accompanied by a progressive abandonment of the Democratic Party by the working class. No similar abandonment occurred among the PMC, whose policy preferences are more closely aligned with the Democratic Party. These trends are reflected in Figure 7, which shows that as much as 50 percent of the working class identified with the Democratic Party in the 1970s, but that by 2018 this figure had declined to less than 30 percent. By contrast, after a slight decline between the 1980s and 1990s, each decade after the 1990s has seen an increase in the rate of PMC identification with the Democratic Party.

Of course, it may be the case, as many scholars have argued,⁴⁶ that this demographic shift in the Democratic Party was primarily a response to the party's increasing focus on identity-based issues since the 1960s. Indeed, it is true that working-class abandonment of the party preceded the neoliberal restructuring of the last several decades.⁴⁷ It is also true, as Figures 7 and 8 show, that declining working-class support for the party has been driven primarily by a decline in the proportion of whites among the working class as a whole, as well as defections of working-class white voters from the party. Specifically, the share of working-class whites who identify with the Democratic Party has declined from over 70 percent in 1982 to around 45 percent in 2018. Meanwhile, the share of Democrats from all other racial groups in the working class increased, suggesting that the decline in working-class membership in the Democratic Party was driven almost entirely by whites. In turn, given that the average rate of decline in party membership among working-class whites was much larger than the decline in this group's share of the working

46 Ilyana Kuziemko and Ebonya Washington, "Why Did the Democrats Lose the South? Bringing New Data to an Old Debate," *American Economic Review* 108, no. 10 (2018): 2830–67.

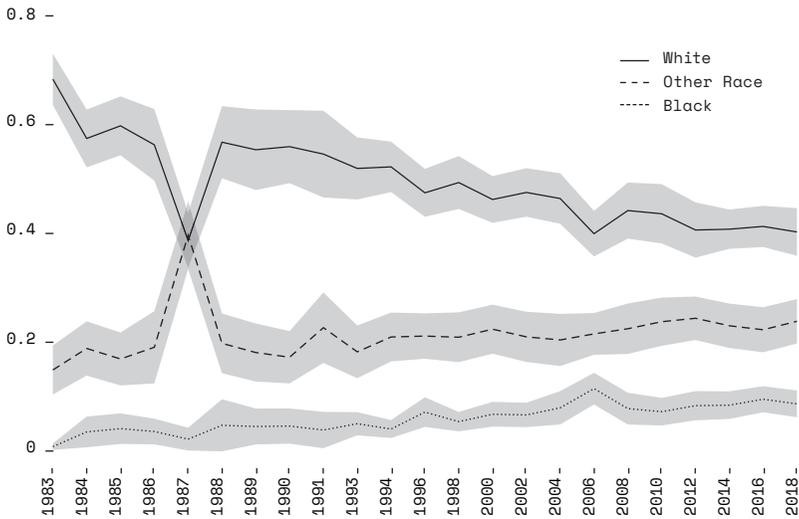
47 James Shoch, "Bernie Sanders, the Sanders Movement, and the Future of the Democratic Party" (Unpublished manuscript, 2017).

FIGURE 8: WORKING-CLASS RACIAL COMPOSITION, 1982-2018



Note: GSS, authors' calculation. Self-reported racial identification.

FIGURE 9: RACIAL COMPOSITION OF WORKING-CLASS DEMOCRATS, 1982-2018



Note: GSS, authors' calculation.

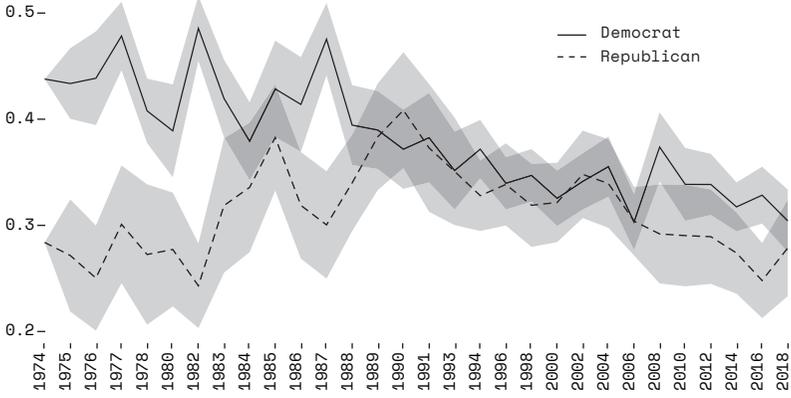
class as a whole, there must be additional factors driving the decline in working-class party membership beyond the shrinking proportion of whites among the working class.

If it were true that identity-based resentment drove these defections, however, we would expect that as working-class whites defected from the Democratic Party, there would be a corresponding increase in working-class support for the Republican Party, which could comfortably accommodate the socially conservative values of Democratic defectors.⁴⁸ As Figure 10 shows, this narrative is partially consistent with trends in partisan affiliation until the 1980s. In subsequent decades, however, decreasing support for the Democratic Party was accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in support for the Republican Party. It may be that working-class voters who abandoned the Democratic Party after 1990 were fiscally conservative advocates of small government who would not find a left-wing party-surrogate appealing. This possibility is largely belied by the fact, shown in Figure 11, that while independents are an ideologically diverse group, *less than 30 percent of them lean Republican*. Further, GSS data suggest that independent voters who do not lean toward either major party are overwhelming working class (nearly 80 percent), tend to self-identify as politically moderate, and, on average, support government intervention to reduce inequality. In other words, in general, defectors from the Democratic Party are neither particularly opposed to the party's stance on social issues (or they would have switched to the Republican Party), nor are they too libertarian for the Republican Party.

While we cannot be certain, a likely alternative hypothesis to explain working-class abandonment of the Democratic Party is that

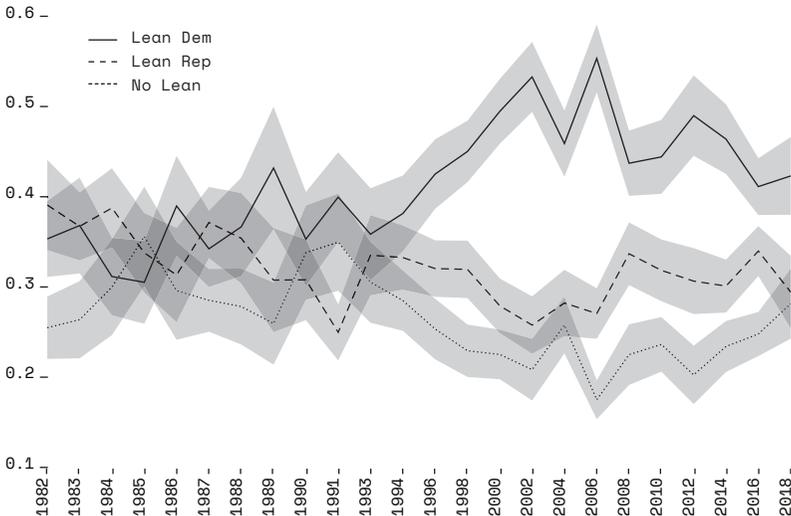
48 It should also be noted that “racial resentment” is not a wholly independent political factor. This is to say that racial resentment is best mobilized politically under conditions of economic uncertainty. Indeed, the politics of racial resentment are most often mobilized on the part of elite parties as a means of winning downwardly mobile and disaffected workers who would normally find the economic project of such parties insufficient.

FIGURE 10: PARTISAN COMPOSITION OF THE WORKING-CLASS, 1974-2018



Note: GSS, authors' calculation.

FIGURE 11: PARTISAN LEANINGS OF INDEPENDENT VOTERS, 1982-2018



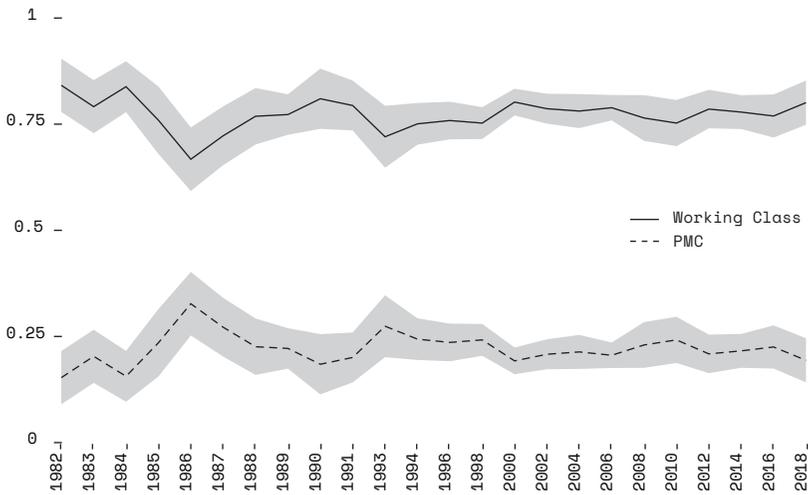
Note: GSS, authors' calculation. Self-reported racial identification. Respondents could choose between "strong Democrat," "not strong Democrat," "independent, near Democratic Party," "independent," "independent, near Republican Party," "not strong Republican," "strong Republican," or "other party." For Figure 11, we constructed a binary variable for each series where "near Republican Party" = "Lean Rep," "near Democratic Party" = "Lean Dem," and "independent" = "no lean."

many independent voters feel neither major party represents their core political and economic interests. If this is true, many of these voters would likely be attracted to a political platform focused on broad working-class demands that could stem the tide of decades of declining living standards. Given their disillusionment with politics as usual, these voters would find an externally mobilized party-surrogate particularly appealing. The party-surrogate would not only prioritize key policy items important to working-class voters that Democrats have largely ignored, but would also stress the importance of internal democracy and party transparency as a means of credibly committing to working-class voters that the party-surrogate would be structurally constrained in its capacity to sacrifice their interests for the sake of political expediency.

Not only are many non-Republican-leaning independents potentially open to a left-wing party-surrogate, but as Figure 12 shows, this is a large constituency. Specifically, based on GSS estimates from 2018, roughly 27 percent of Americans both do not identify with either major party *and* do not lean toward the Republican Party. Since this group is 75 percent working class, we can conclude that roughly 20 percent of Americans are working class, do not identify with either major party, and do not lean Republican. That said, it is possible, as some scholars have argued, that these are independents in name only, and that they actually vote consistently for one of the two major political parties.⁴⁹ Beyond the fact that more than 40 percent of them report not leaning toward either party – making them potentially receptive to challenger appeals even if they have voted consistently for one party in the past for strategic reasons – much of this group simply does not vote. According to the GSS, for example, approximately half of working-class independents in 2016 and 2018 reported not having voted in recent presidential elections

49 David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, and Mark C. Westlye, “The Myth of the Independent Voter Revisited” in *Facing the Challenge of Democracy: Explorations in the Analysis of Public Opinion and Political Participation* (2011), 238–263.

FIGURE 12: CLASS COMPOSITION OF INDEPENDENTS
WITHOUT PARTISAN LEANINGS, 1982-2018



Note: GSS, authors' calculation.

(compared to under 20 percent among working-class Democratic Party members), suggesting that a large portion of independents are available for political mobilization.

This constituency is not large enough to generate a new majority for social-democratic politics by itself, but it is large enough to offer an outsider party-surrogate a plausible strategy for winning a substantial base of support. Further, the demographic characteristics and ideological views of independents are similar to those of voters with expressed partisan preferences.⁵⁰ This suggests there is little reason to believe the political preferences of working-class members of the Democratic Party are further away from a social-democratic platform compared to working-class independents who do not lean Republican. Consequently, if a party-surrogate were able to cultivate an initial base of support from among politically disaffected working-class

50 Samara Klar and Yanna Krupnikov, *Independent Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Americans, non-disaffected members of the class might start to take the party-surrogate seriously, and might consider defecting from the Democratic establishment as the new organization gained electoral legitimacy.

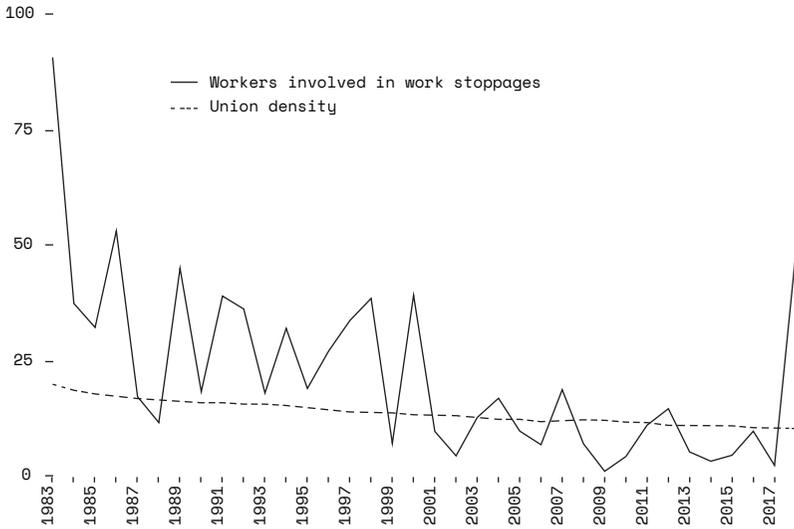
Increasing Supply of Organizational Infrastructure

As we have seen, a mass constituency open to the political program of a left-wing party-surrogate exists. Further, the collapse of the political machine means that, in many areas, the externally mobilized party-surrogate proposed here would have little organized competition to win or mobilize new voters. Without a base level of organizational resources, however, no party-surrogate can succeed. While still nascent, a range of new organizational resources have appeared in recent years that could provide the basic tools needed to get a party-surrogate off the ground. These resources can be classified as *financial* and *infrastructural*.

Financial resources are simply money available to hire organizers, rent offices, hold meetings or conferences, and run campaigns. The only realistic source of significant financial support that could be made available to a party-surrogate — beyond member dues, which would be critically important — is organized labor. There may be some opportunities for attracting nonprofit support, but this would be comparatively small and come with unappealing strings attached. Organized labor has been the key financial backer of most significant independent and quasi-independent electoral efforts in the United States (such as the Labor Party, Our Revolution, and the Working Families Party), and support from at least some sectors of organized labor would likely be necessary for the success of a new independent electoral effort.⁵¹

51 For a discussion of this issue with respect to the US Labor Party of the late 1990s and early 2000s, see Seth Ackerman, “A Blueprint for a New Party,” *Jacobin* no. 23, Fall 2016.

FIGURE 13: UNION DENSITY AND WORK STOPPAGES, 1983–2018



Note: Authors' calculation. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Work stoppage figures are counted in tens of thousands, union density by percent.

ABBOTT & GUASTELLA

While the number of unionized workers has still not begun to rebound from its decades-long decline, there is clear evidence of a positive trend in labor militancy. As Figure 13 shows, in the past three years, the number of workers involved in major work stoppages has increased fivefold, reaching a three-decade high in 2018. Though it may prove ephemeral, the recent increase in strikes we have seen — especially among teachers, but also in the hospitality and manufacturing sectors — represents the first concrete sign in recent memory that union activity could be gaining momentum. Further, more Americans have positive attitudes toward unions today than at any point since 2003 (62 percent), and more believe unions should have greater influence than at any point since Gallup began tracking the

question in 1999 (39 percent).⁵² This suggests the organizing climate for unions is also improving. Taken together, these factors suggest that organized labor may be in a position to grow its ranks for the first time in decades. This would increase the financial resources — as well as infrastructural resources, as we discuss below — available for mobilization by a left-wing party-surrogate.

Additionally, the involvement of important sectors of organized labor in Sanders’s 2016 Democratic primary campaign suggests that more unions are willing to take a risk on outsider candidates, provided those candidates have a viable path to power and a working-class political program. Specifically, seven national labor unions representing approximately 1.25 million workers (just under 9 percent of all organized workers in the United States) backed Sanders, as did more than seventy union locals within national unions that did not endorse Sanders. There are few signs that the leadership of the largest unions, such as the NEA, SEIU, and AFSCME would seriously entertain the idea of backing insurgent candidates in Democratic Party primaries. That said, the fact that an estimated 36 percent of Democratic union members backed Sanders over Clinton — despite vocal opposition to Sanders among the leadership of the largest unions — suggests they may face increasing pressure to do so.⁵³

In turn, by infrastructural resources, we refer to the organizational capacity of labor, progressive, and socialist organizations that would likely serve as an institutional foundation for a party-surrogate. In the absence of well-organized networks of labor and community activists, as well as electorally focused progressive and socialist organizations, the basic initial infrastructure upon which a new party-surrogate could be built would be missing.

As discussed above, the organizational capacity of labor organizations remains low, but momentum appears to be building for at least

52 Lydia Saad, “Labor Union Approval Steady at 15-Year High,” Gallup.com.

53 Sanders’s primary support among Democratic primary voters, calculated by the authors using data from the 2016 American National Election Study.

a partial resurgence of union activity in the coming years. Beyond this, though much of the post-2016 boom in progressive organization-building has proven short-lived, the extent of progressive and socialist political organizing that exists in 2019 is far beyond anything we have seen in decades. Tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of campaigners have been trained in the last three years by organizations such as Indivisible, Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Many of these activists are or could become receptive to the idea of a party-surrogate as they encounter the limitations of an internal Democratic Party realignment strategy but remain too pragmatic to endorse a third-party strategy.⁵⁴ These organizations alone could provide a sufficient initial base of organizers for a left-wing party-surrogate.

Finally, the organizational infrastructure being created by DSA has the potential to serve as the nucleus for a party-surrogate. Ballooning from a membership of some 7,500 in 2015 to more than 60,000 in 2019, DSA currently has nearly two hundred chapters across all fifty states. Further, its electoral successes have increased exponentially, from only a handful of isolated municipal and state-level officials in 2015 to dozens of elected officials around the country, including two members of Congress. Though the scale of its electoral operations remains small, to a significant extent DSA already carries out its electoral work in a manner similar to the type of party-surrogate we're advocating. If it were able to concentrate its electoral resources more strategically in key areas of the country, develop a clear political program oriented to the broad working class (that all candidates had to accept), and cultivate a larger number of candidates from within its own activist base, there is no obvious reason why DSA could not provide the initial scaffolding for a mass party-surrogate.

54 Alex Vandermaas-Peeler et al., "American Democracy in Crisis: Civic Engagement, Young Adult Activism, and the 2018 Midterm Elections," *PRRI* (blog), <https://www.prri.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-civic-engagement-young-adult-activism-and-the-2018-midterm-elections/>.

A STRATEGIC ORIENTATION: PARTY-SURROGATE AND A SECTIONAL FOCUS

Even in the face of the political opportunities described in the preceding section, democratic socialists are caught in a strategic bind. Accounting for the structural factors discussed above, exhortations to “break with” the Democratic Party seem to misunderstand the unique configurations of the major parties and the undemocratic nature of the US electoral system.⁵⁵ This cut-and-run “exit” strategy reflects the third-party fetishism and wishful thinking associated with the American Green Party. The failures here are obvious and numerous.

Electoral abstention in the name of “base-building” is similarly a dead end. The far left-wing expression of this is best articulated by Mark Dudzic and Katherine Isaac in their criticism of the “organize first, build political power later” orientation.⁵⁶ This perspective entirely misses the strategic opportunities offered by democratic-socialist electoral campaigns — above all, those offered by the presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders.

On the other hand, advocates of “realignment” have routinely misunderstood the structure of the Democratic Party itself. As shown above, the party’s decentralized nature, combined with an increasingly oligarchic concentration of power within it, make the possibility of “realignment” from the inside a Herculean task.

The problem, it seems to us, is that both realignment of the Democratic Party *and* a break with it are not really strategies per se. Realignment and exit are, instead, potential *outcomes* of a successful left-wing electoral intervention. On the one hand, realignment of the

55 It should be noted that Marx and Engels themselves were quite flexible in their approach. When they broached the party question in regard to the American and British contexts, both urged socialists to work within existing liberal reform parties because that was, after all, where they would find workers (Zuege, Panitch, and Albo, *Class, Party, Revolution*, 90–91).

56 Mark Dudzic and Katherine Isaac, “Labor Party Time? Not Yet.,” *thelaborparty.org*, December 2012.

party is possible, but it does not occur through electoral abstention, the capturing of state and local parties, or the singularity of presidential campaigns. Instead, a left-wing challenger can only force its politics onto the national political stage — either through or outside of one of the major parties — if it poses a *credible electoral threat* to one of them. The Populists, Socialists, Progressives, and numerous other third parties have successfully achieved major-party realignment — even if that was not their goal — but only when major-party elites believed they had to absorb these parties' policies or risk serious electoral defections.⁵⁷ These parties were limited to influencing major parties' platforms (rather than challenging the parties directly) because they had no strategy for demonstrating to the electorate that they could compete seriously with one of the two major parties.

Alternatively, insurgent elements within the major parties are sometimes successful enough that they are able (or forced) to abandon the party and build a competitive third party. This was the case, for instance, with the creation of the Minnesota Farmer–Labor Party in 1921.⁵⁸ Of course, insurgents always have the option of exiting the major parties, but the alternative party they build will only have a realistic chance of electoral success if it breaks away a significant portion of one of the major parties' electoral base. Otherwise, it will lack the electoral credibility required to be competitive at the state or national level. At the national level, this has only been possible historically with the help of a popular and highly charismatic leader, Theodore Roosevelt.⁵⁹

57 Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus, *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 221–22.

58 Richard M. Valelly and Claude C. Smith, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

59 Roosevelt attracted enough Republican voters to his new Progressive Party in the 1912 presidential election that he was able to defeat Republican nominee Howard Taft (though he lost the election to Democrat Woodrow Wilson). Roosevelt's 1912 candidacy remains the only example in US history of a third-party presidential challenger receiving more votes than one of the two major-party candidates.

Regardless of whether a left-wing party-surrogate's ultimate goal is realignment or exiting the Democratic Party to build a new third party, then, its success depends upon building a mass constituency among working-class nonvoters and Democratic Party voters. Given the host of structural constraints described above that limit the success of third parties in the United States, the only possible means of building a mass electoral base (other than having an extremely popular party figurehead) would be by using the Democratic Party ballot line, since this lowers the stakes of supporting insurgent candidates. After building this constituency, insurgents may be forced out of the party by the Democratic Party establishment, or the establishment may abandon the party, effectively producing realignment. These outcomes depend on a range of contingent political factors and cannot be predicted in advance. The key point to bear in mind is that these are not strategies for building a mass working-class party. Instead, they are the potential *outcomes* of such a strategy.

The fundamental question for a democratic-socialist electoral strategy to answer is how a left-wing party-surrogate can organize a constituency with sufficient influence in US politics that it poses a credible electoral threat to the Democratic Party establishment without succumbing to inevitable pressures to sacrifice its political platform in the name of tactical expedience. A successful strategy has to address the medium-term obstacles listed above through both strong organization-building and a strategy for maximizing electoral gains. To do this successfully, democratic socialists must (1) establish a party-surrogate that is capable of insulating candidates from the incentive structures of the major parties through mass mobilization, and (2) strategically mobilize voters through a “sectional” concentration of political efforts.

Party-Surrogate

By adopting the Democratic Party ballot line, a party-surrogate can effectively sidestep many of the legal obstacles to party competition and access a much-needed mass constituency. Yet this alone is not enough. An effective surrogate must also mitigate the challenges associated with both the incentive structures of the Democratic Party and the power of money. We have seen how both obstacles effectively discipline progressive candidates upward and rightward. What is needed, then, is an organization that is able to maintain its autonomy from these incentives and offer candidates a *shelter* from the Democratic Party while using the ballot line to access a mass constituency.

Specifically, the party-surrogate could mitigate candidates' incentives to court Democratic Party elites and big-money donors by substituting a strong voter mobilization and grassroots funding apparatus for the financial resources candidates would otherwise need to secure through the party establishment. This would allow candidates to remain faithful to the surrogate's policy platform without sacrificing their electoral viability, since they could compensate for deficits in campaign financing with the kind of effective ground game that was once available to candidates through party machines and industrial unions. In turn, candidates' dependence on the party-surrogate's organizational resources would provide an effective disciplining mechanism to ensure successful candidates remained committed to the party program even as pressures to make ideological concessions in pursuit of broader electoral constituencies grew.

Accessing these organizational advantages alone, however, is not sufficient for electoral success. The capacity of a strong ground game to overcome financial disadvantages decreases considerably at higher levels of government where the role of television and internet advertising becomes more critical to success. This means the party surrogate would have to find a path to victory in contexts where its mobilizational capacity is not a silver bullet. Additionally, while

using the Democratic Party ballot line partially resolves the spoiler problem by allowing voters to express their true preferences in the primary rather than the general election (where the stakes of victory are much higher), it does not do so entirely. Voters will still be quite skeptical of insurgent candidates, even when they run on the Democratic Party ballot line. Consequently, a left-wing party-surrogate requires a strategy for building electoral credibility from a position of relative political weakness.

To address these problems, the surrogate must develop a strategy that initially concentrates its electoral efforts on specific regions of the country where it can become a political force as powerful as one of the two major parties (in terms of both numbers of elected officials and support among the electorate). In turn, it can use its success in these areas to demonstrate its electoral viability in other regions of the country.

A Sectional Focus

A party-surrogate will struggle to win elections and execute even a modest political program if it conceives of its immediate scope in national terms. This is due primarily to the nature of our first-past-the-post, single-member district electoral system at the national, state, and (in many cases) local levels. Specifically, candidates will fear that committing to the party-surrogate in order to win the Democratic Party nomination could undermine their viability in the general election, and voters will worry that the surrogate's candidates are too inexperienced or too radical to ensure Republican defeat in the general election. These problems can be partially overcome in areas with single-party dominance — in places where the winner of the Democratic primary is virtually guaranteed to win in the general election. Even in these areas, however, candidates may fear that committing to the party-surrogate might unduly tie their hands once in office and potentially undermine their reelection prospects. Further, voters may be

concerned that party-surrogate candidates will be politically isolated in office and incapable of delivering for their home constituency.⁶⁰

A surrogate, then, must find a way to convince strong candidates that it represents a credible path to electoral success, while assuring voters that it can be competitive and perform well in office. At best, an indiscriminate nationwide approach could yield a small number of isolated victories here and there. This will hardly be sufficient to show skeptical voters that the organization is a serious electoral vehicle with the capacity to represent anything beyond electoral anomalies, or that it can deliver material reforms in a way mainstream Democrats cannot. Suppose the organization has the capacity to put significant resources behind twenty candidates. If those candidates are spread across twenty states, this would yield at most marginal influence in a handful of municipalities across those states, and almost no name recognition or loyal voter base across any state. The Green Party is a case in point: it currently has city councilors in eleven states,⁶¹ but it does not have more than four in any state, and in no state does it have city councilors in more than three municipalities. As a result, the Green Party has virtually no stronghold in any state, and it has been unable to demonstrate its capacity to govern or carry out its platform in any municipality.⁶² Together, these factors all but ensure the party will not be viewed as a viable electoral alternative to the two main parties by more than a small handful of core supporters.

60 Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus, *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 37–39.

61 Greenparty.org.

62 Note that demonstrating capacity to govern is primarily relevant for new parties that are relatively unknown among the electorate and whose status as a “serious” party worthy of real consideration by voters is in question. Thus, it will be important primarily when a given party is working to establish itself at the local and state levels during its formative years. By the time the organization contests seriously for national-level offices, the imperative to demonstrate its governing capacity will be diminished (since it will already have established this through local and state-level victories), and contesting for these higher-level offices will itself be a sign of the party’s (or party-surrogate’s) credibility among the electorate.

However, if the party-surrogate concentrated its electoral efforts, at least initially, on a particular region of the country rather than allocate its resources in an ad hoc manner around the country, it could overcome the credibility problems discussed above. Say, for example, a party-surrogate focused on twenty candidates in three adjacent states. This could dramatically increase the density of the group's elected officials. Rather than having a single official in twenty states across the country, it could have six or seven officials across three states in the same region. This sectional strategy helps the party-surrogate further mitigate structural barriers to success and take advantage of a number of opportunities.

First, sectional concentration could (1) mitigate the disadvantages of single-member districts by *exploiting* geographic concentration, and (2) have a greater impact on the politics of the municipalities and state legislatures by increasing the density of elected officials. Because the structure of single-member districts places a premium on geographic concentration, any party-surrogate has a greater chance of increasing their success through the regional concentration of its political efforts.⁶³ Further, these election victories, when concentrated, offer greater benefits than when scattered. Put another way, a sectional concentration can turn the national disadvantage of the single-member district system into a regional advantage for a small party-surrogate. Because this system over-rewards the winners of political contests, a geographic concentration of campaigns could result in significantly more political victories than national-level strength — determined by vote share — would otherwise predict. As a result, geographic concentration could more quickly result in the establishment of a large minority (or even a majority) on a given city council or a state legislature. Such sectional concentration in government provides far more political leverage over a given locale than having the same number of elected officials segregated among

63 Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001): 47.

a handful of local governments. This is critical because an electoral organization's reputation among voters is based to a significant degree on its performance in office.⁶⁴ Principled stances against politics as usual by a lone independent city councilor or state representative simply don't have the capacity to generate the same reputation as, for example, building a majority coalition within city council to increase the number of affordable housing units and implement a living-wage ordinance.⁶⁵

Second, a regional concentration can help build a political identity. As mentioned above, the great retreat of the political machine left a large hole in the patterns of working-class political life. While machines were often politically corrosive, and corruption hampered any benefits these organizations wrought, they nonetheless helped organize working-class political claims and mobilized these voters into the political system. With their decline, working-class voters no longer had an easily identifiable local political organization that could provide this function. Today, a party-surrogate could fill this space without any real competitors and absent the objections of a local boss. A regional concentration can help the party-surrogate build an identifiable political profile and, if successful, it can generate a positive feedback loop among electoral success, name recognition, and electoral credibility. With each victory, more voters are exposed to the surrogate and its program for the first time, and more view it as a legitimate political alternative. Over time, this feedback loop can increase competitiveness in more races across the state, as well as at higher levels of office in the state. The experience of the Vermont Progressive Party is instructive here. Eventually, the party-surrogate can

64 This is true not only in the case of national and state-level elected officials, but also local-level officials. See Christopher R. Berry and William G. Howell, "Accountability and Local Elections: Rethinking Retrospective Voting," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (August 2007): 844–58.

65 The case of Richmond, California is a telling case study. See Steve Early, *Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money, and the Remaking of an American City* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

become a political force in the state, matching the power of the two major parties. Similarly, a sectional strategy can help demonstrate to voters in nearby states what an effective surrogate can do politically, and these voters will be more likely to take its candidates seriously in their own state.⁶⁶

Third, regional concentrations also allow party-surrogates to take advantage of our federated system by implementing reforms at the state level that can serve as signals of the party's intentions at higher levels of government and as evidence of its capacity to govern. Crucially, this approach allows party-surrogates to overcome many of the structural biases stacked against third parties through a regional ratcheting process where these limitations are first addressed within a few municipalities in a particular state, and in turn the success of these efforts allows the organization to overcome analogous difficulties in other municipalities as well as at the state level.

Finally, a regional concentration helps to maximize the organization's strengths, in particular the power of its volunteer army. As we have seen above, the most important way to mitigate the influence of money and to increase candidates' dependence on the party-surrogate is through maximizing the leverage of the surrogate's mobilizational base. By concentrating resources in select regions, the organization's members in neighboring states and municipalities can campaign across a given region in a more concerted fashion than if the organization were to divide its resources equally across races nationwide, or if local affiliates were left on their own to coordinate expensive and labor-intensive campaigns.

The sectional approach described here could be successful precisely because it would generate a political heartland for the party-surrogate. The development of such a heartland would allow for less

66 This will occur primarily as a result of exposure from shared media outlets and personal cross-state networks, but voters in neighboring states might also be more likely than voters in other regions of the country to believe the organization's success could be translated into success in their state — possibly because they view the conditions in nearby states as more similar to their own than those of faraway states.

labor-intensive cross-campaigning among party-surrogate members, voters, and candidates — it's easier for campaigners to mobilize members and voters in a given region than across a continent. Further, the heartland effect bolsters the insulation effect of the party-surrogate. Such a strategy, it should be noted, is not only advantageous in the United States, or even in the contemporary moment, it is in fact the genesis of almost all successful efforts of working-class party-building in duopolistic political systems.⁶⁷ Indeed, the UK Labour Party found its heartland in Northern England and the provincial midlands and built out its support to eventually displace the Liberal Party, while the Australian Labor Party initially relied on its concentration in New South Wales to do the same.⁶⁸

More recent examples include the consolidation of the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil. For the first two cycles of municipal elections in which it competed (1988 and 1992), the PT elected more mayors in one region of the country (the Southeast, particularly in the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais) than in the rest of the country combined. In 1996 and 2000, the party significantly expanded into the Southern region, particularly the state of Rio Grande do Sul, but it wasn't until after Lula's election as president in 2002 that the party significantly expanded beyond these regions, particularly to the Northeast.⁶⁹ The brief success of the New Democratic Party (NDP) in Canada is also instructive. Operating under electoral constraints similar to the United States, the NDP was able to develop a regional concentration in the western provinces of Canada, which helped it to overcome the constraints it faced competing in national-level politics. These

67 In the United States, the most important third-party endeavors were almost exclusively sectional parties. See Pendleton Herring, *The Politics of Democracy* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), 179–82.

68 For an analysis of the rise of the Australian Labor Party, see Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton University Press, 2008):16–17 and 81.

69 See the database of electoral returns provided by the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (<http://www.tse.jus.br/>).

examples and others demonstrate that, as mass mobilization has been the major strategy for externally mobilized working-class parties, its success depends chiefly on maximizing the mobilizational capacities of the party in formation. The best means of doing so, especially in duopolistic political systems, is through a concentration of efforts to establish a regional heartland.

CAUTION AND CONCLUSION

The challenge of American democratic socialists is to build working-class political strength absent a mass working-class party. What's more, given the nature of the American government, we lack even the basic parliamentary structures that Marxists from Kautsky through Poulantzas identified as a precondition for the democratic road to socialism.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, if we are to succeed, we must intervene seriously in electoral politics. Electoral abstention is not an option and will only serve to delay and defer confronting the immense challenge before us.

The analysis and strategy presented here provide a medium-term road to building a party-surrogate and a mass working-class constituency for democratic-socialist politics. It is important to note, however, that ours is not a strategy for broader democratic-socialist political success (i.e., some kind of socialist transition). Indeed, it is not clear how successful such a party-surrogate could be in winning elections before it ran up against insuperable funding barriers and constraints imposed by the imperatives of managing a capitalist economy. This is why we call ours a strategy for *competing* and not necessarily a road to victory. Instead, we limit ourselves to the still massive but relatively more modest question of democratic-socialist electoral strategy, grounded in an institutional and political-economic analysis of the

70 See Karl Kautsky, John H. Kautsky, and Raymond Meyer, *The Road to Power* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996); Nicos Poulantzas, "Towards a Democratic Socialism," *New Left Review* 109 (1978): 75–87.

structure of American politics and opportunities presented by the growth of an unaligned working-class constituency.

Revisiting the caveats raised in our introduction, we would like to note that absent the complementary associational power of the working class on the shop floor and a militant and powerful reform movement, the pressures facing the candidates of a party-surrogate — even if successful in their pursuit of a majority government — would be immense.⁷¹ The structural power of capital combined with the instrumental imperatives of democratic competition ensure that even under optimal conditions the chances of success are low. The task of building working-class political power strong enough to challenge and defeat one of the most entrenched and powerful ruling classes in world history is among the more daunting political projects ever attempted. That is, we must be prepared for failure. As democratic socialists, however, we have no choice but to try. ✎

71 See René Rojas, “The Latin American Left’s Shifting Tides,” *Catalyst* 2, no. 2 (2018): 7–72 for a discussion of the differences between the mobilizational capacities discussed here and the structural leverage needed to sustain reform efforts.

How did the UK economy arrive at its present state? This essay traces its evolution in terms of profitability and class struggle, rather than a Keynesianism at first implemented and then abandoned. It concludes with some discussion of the Labour Party's economic program and its transformative potential.

BRITAIN: FROM THE GOLDEN AGE TO AN AGE OF AUSTERITY

SIMON MOHUN

In his 2015 Labour leadership campaign, Jeremy Corbyn stood on an anti-austerity radical program that enthused the party membership and won him a landslide victory. This prompted eighteen months of opposition and noncooperation from most of the Parliamentary Labour Party, culminating in two-thirds of the Shadow Cabinet resigning and Corbyn losing a vote of confidence among his MPs (by 172 votes to 40). In the following leadership challenge in September 2016, in which just over half a million party members and supporters voted (a turnout of 77.6 percent), Corbyn won nearly three percentage points more votes than the 59 percent he had won in the previous year. Most of his opponents could only sullenly acquiesce, though a significant number continued their war of attrition.

The following year, Prime Minister Theresa May decided to take advantage of Labour Party divisions and called a general election. Facing predictions of a landslide Conservative victory, but with a manifesto “For the Many, Not the Few,” Labour dramatically increased its vote share by nearly 10 percentage points, to 40 percent, the largest

increase in any general election since 1945, and its net gain of thirty MPs deprived the Conservatives of their parliamentary majority. The latter could only remain in power by depending upon the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. Since then, the issue of Brexit has dominated, tempered by an unedifying sideshow of the mismanagement of disciplinary proceedings concerning the emergence of antisemitism within the Labour Party and its weaponization by Corbyn's opponents.¹

Meanwhile, health, social care, education, housing, policing, and transport are all in various stages of crisis, varying from the chronic to the acute. This is not just about the politics and economics of austerity, which have indeed been a disaster for the many. It is less well recognized that the contemporary era of neoliberalism is one of long-term economic decline. Table 1 adopts a common periodization of the economy: a golden age of social democracy from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, followed by a short transition through the remainder of the 1970s, to its replacement following the Conservative victory in the 1979 general election. This marked the start of the neoliberal era of globalization, which can be divided into three phases: the Tory years to 1997, the Labour years to the 2007 financial crisis, and the years since the outbreak of that crisis.

Several features are noteworthy.² First, in the golden age, output per head grew faster than consumption per head, creating a significant space for growth in investment. The reverse was true in the neoliberal era: consumption per head grew faster than output per head, and investment during the Tory neoliberal years lagged considerably behind, only picking up in the Labour neoliberal years as

1 Commentary on Israel-Palestine and Zionism by some on the Left has involved antisemitic positions especially on social media. These have been used by Corbyn's opponents within Labour as a destabilizing weapon against Corbyn's leadership. That leadership has also been compromised by a seeming inability to focus as precisely on the social media offense as it does on the destabilization thereby enabled.

2 Small differences in growth rates over long periods of time compound to produce very significant differences.

some repair was done to the neglect of public services (especially health), but still at less than half the pace of the golden age. Similarly, labor productivity (output per hour) grew faster than average weekly wages during the golden age, whereas the opposite was the case in the neoliberal era. More generally, all growth rates were lower in the neoliberal era than in the golden age (except for consumption per head), and the long-term decline has accelerated since 2007 with growth rates derisory in historical context.

TABLE 1: AVERAGE ANNUAL RATES OF GROWTH
(%, 2016 PRICES)

	SOCIAL DEMOCRACY		NEOLIBERALISM AND GLOBALIZATION		
	Golden Age	Transition	Tory Years	Labour Years	Crisis and austerity
	1948-73	1973-79	1979-97	1997-2007	2007-17
GDP per head	2.90	1.51	2.11	2.38	0.34
Consumption per head	2.34	1.46	2.70	2.94	0.21
Total investment	7.46	0.62	1.59	3.27	0.77
Output per hour	3.62	1.68	2.29	2.02	0.33
Average weekly wages	2.48	2.33	2.47	2.21	-0.09

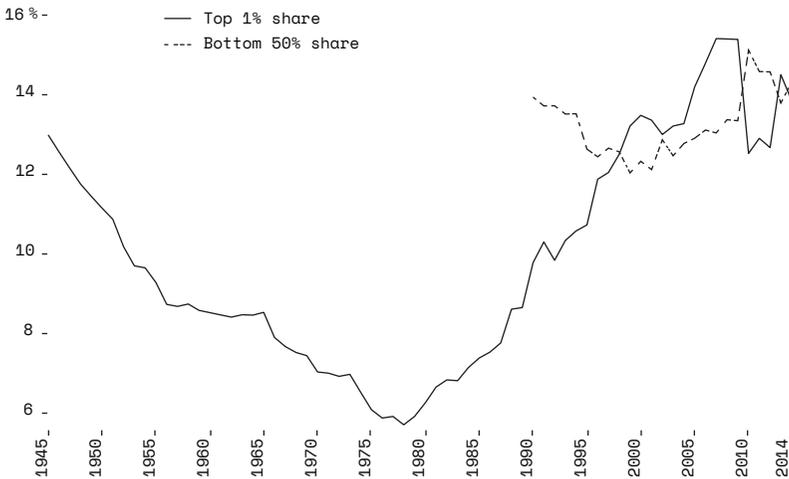
MUCHO

To reverse this long-term decline, it is tempting to imagine that a major burst of public expenditure is all that is required, a rediscovery of the Keynesian economics that supposedly underpinned the thirty years after World War II and was abandoned in the 1970s. Indeed, in this perspective, Labour's 2017 manifesto was only radical when set against the development of the UK economy since 1979. From the perspective of the 1960s, the manifesto was only mildly left of center. A deepening of its themes (on which some work has been proceeding) is essential: were Labour to win a general election, it would be faced with a neoliberal economy requiring major transformation. But what sort of transformation?

To understand the scale of what is required, consider not the many, but the few. Looking at deciles of (equivalized) households, the neoliberal era saw an increase, post-tax-and-benefit, in the ratio of (equivalized) household average income of the top decile to the bottom decile from about 4 to about 6, and in the ratio of the top decile to the fifth decile from about 2 to about 3, these changes all occurring through the decade of the 1980s. However, decile comparisons fail to capture what has happened at the very top of the income distribution, which is different from what has happened to the average of the top decile. Estimates for the top 1 percent of the distribution based on household surveys would draw on too small a number of households to make accurate estimates. An alternative approach uses tax data rather than household surveys, and Figure 1 shows the pre-tax shares in national income of the top 1 percent and the bottom 50 percent of taxpayers.³

MOHUN

FIGURE 1: PRE-TAX SHARES OF NATIONAL INCOME, UK, 1945-2014



3 There are difficulties here with tax avoidance and evasion. Note also there is a data break: from 1990 onwards joint tax assessment of husbands and wives was replaced with individual assessment. Missing years are interpolated.

The golden age and the 1970s transition was a period of falling income share of the top 1 percent, from 13 percent of national income in 1945 to a trough of 5.7 percent in 1978. But neoliberalism more than reversed this fall, and the pre-tax income share of the top 1 percent climbed to a peak of 15.4 percent in 2007.⁴ Compared with 1990 (eleven years into the neoliberal era), by 2007 the top 1 percent had increased its pre-tax share of net national income by 5.6 percentage points, whereas the bottom 50 percent share had fallen by almost one percentage point. These are very large sums. Comparing what both would have received in 2007 had 1990 shares not changed, with what they actually received, the top 1 percent had (at 2016 constant prices) £84.6 billion more, and the bottom 50 percent had £13.5 billion less. Figure 1 also shows that in the later years of neoliberalism the pre-tax amount appropriated by the top 1 percent was roughly comparable with the pre-tax amount accruing to the bottom 50 percent.

A return to the 1945–73 era is not possible: the conditions that underpinned that economy have long since disappeared. To evaluate what might be an appropriate and feasible set of policies for an incoming Labour government requires as a prerequisite an understanding of how UK capitalism has evolved into its present state. This evolution is best understood through the prism of class struggle, which provides a rather different perspective from the more common story of a Keynesianism at first implemented from 1945 to the early 1970s, and then abandoned.

4 Its post-tax share was 12.6 percent. Note that net national income in the ratios cited excludes the gross operating surplus of households and nonprofit institutions serving households, in order to avoid the entanglements of imputed rent.

A FRAMEWORK FOR EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Class Relations

Capitalism is above all else about making money, summarized as an aggregate flow of profit to the capitalist class. This is captured by a focus on profit as a share of total output, with the remaining share going to wages. Because the profit share and the wage share exhaust total output, each class only gains share at the expense of the other. So fluctuations in the profit share summarize an important aspect of class conflict and its outcomes.⁵

Profits arise out of the sale of output, hence from success in the war of competition. Since competition is fought through productivity increases, and productivity increases derive from innovation, then a second important indicator, in addition to the profit share, is the relation between output per labor hour (or labor productivity) on the one hand, and the means of production per labor hour required to produce that output (capital intensity) on the other. This ratio of labor productivity to capital intensity is called “capital productivity.”⁶ Historically, the predominant pattern of technical change in capitalism has been labor-saving (via mechanization), raising capital intensity. What happens to capital productivity therefore depends on how much labor productivity is generated by increases in capital intensity. So how capital productivity changes through time is determined by the interplay between the type of technical change (generic

5 Of course, this is an imperfect measure. Some profits are really labor income (for example, pension payments to the working class are sourced from profits on investments) and some labor incomes are better seen as profits (for example, the increases in labor income that have driven the increase in top incomes since the early 1980s).

6 The term is misleading because it seems to imply that capital is productive. Interpreting it as a ratio of labor productivity to capital intensity, with movements in the latter causing movements in the former, should avoid confusion. In addition, the paper assumes that the same price series is used to deflate the variables. If different price series are used for the different variables, matters become more complicated, and the paper ignores this.

or industry-specific, yielding changes in capital intensity) and class struggle at the point of production (over attempts by capital to raise labor productivity and extract more surplus value).

- If labor productivity rises less quickly than capital intensity, then capital productivity falls.
- If labor productivity rises more quickly than capital intensity, then capital productivity rises.

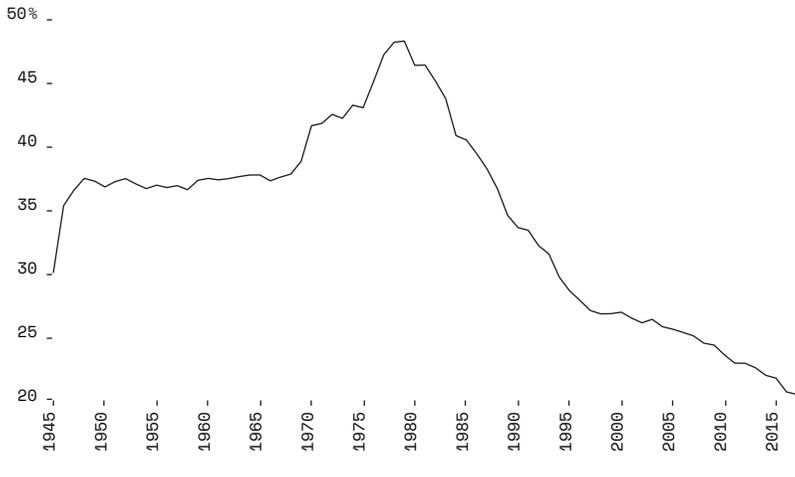
In sum, movements in the profit share capture changes in distributive relations between capital and labor (how much accrues to each class and how that changes over time), and movements in capital productivity (labor productivity relative to capital intensity) capture changing outcomes in the production of surplus value. While these movements are not independent of each other, they describe different but crucial aspects of the course of class struggle.

Class Fractions

Capitalism is based on labor market transactions between those who sell their labor-power and those who possess (either by ownership or through loan contracts) the means of production. In principle, these are individualized contracts, potentially pitting workers against one another in the competition for jobs. Consequently, the growth of trade unions was motivated by the realization that only collective organization could confront the power of capital.

Two consequences of this are important. First, once trade unions were established, it became useful for many (particularly large) employers in unionized sectors to agree to negotiate wage bargains collectively with relevant trade union leaderships. Significant trade union wage premiums could thereby be established, making union membership in turn more attractive. Second was the issue of how

FIGURE 2: PROPORTION OF EMPLOYED TRADE UNIONISTS TO TOTAL EMPLOYMENT (TRADE UNION DENSITY), UK, 1945-2017



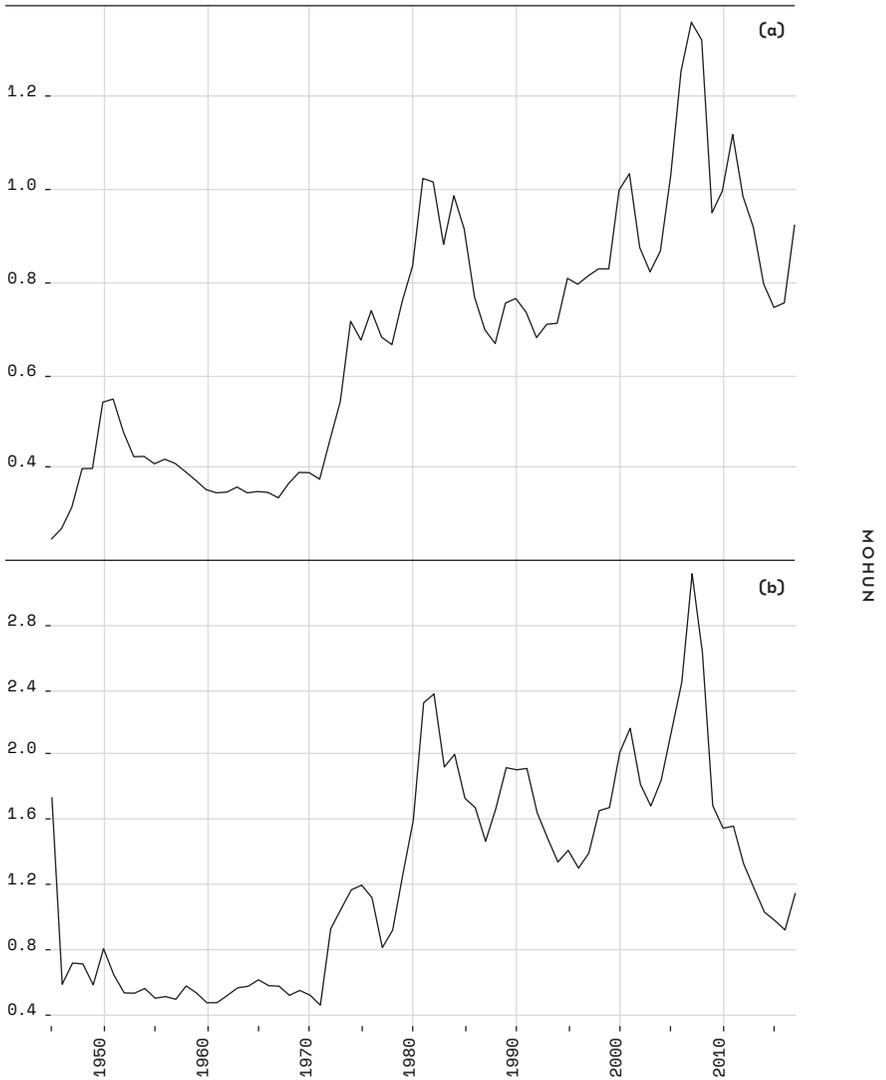
MOHUN

responsive trade union leaderships were to their members, and relatedly, how decentralized union activity was. In addition to local area representatives of national unions, parts of UK industry at the plant level had shop stewards, locally elected and unofficial trade union representatives whose autonomy from national union leaderships could become a major problem for employers (as well as national union leaderships). If shop stewards could gain and retain local influence and authority, then employers had to negotiate with two sets of union representatives, one official and national, the other unofficial and local. Class power in the latter resulted from the ability of shop stewards to call for a “work to rule” or, in extremis, an unofficial (“wildcat”) strike.

For the economy as a whole, some indication of actual and/or potential working-class power is given by the overall measure of trade union density — the proportion of employed trade unionists to total employment. This is shown in Figure 2.

Once peacetime conditions were established, union density was fairly constant through the end of the 1960s, rose through the 1970s to

FIGURE 3: INDICES OF INTERNATIONALIZATION, UK, 1945-2017



(a): Profits from any international activity relative to profits from purely domestic activities.

(b): Property income from overseas relative to profits from exports.

a peak in 1979, and thereafter fell. In 2017, trade union density, measuring actual and/or potential working-class power, was at its lowest not just between 1945 and 2017 but for the hundred years prior to 2017.

Whereas “labor” can be divided into those who are organized and those who are not, “capital” can be divided across various dimensions. First, one fraction of capital is internationally oriented while the other is entirely domestically oriented. Second, of that fraction that is internationally oriented, one part derives its profits from the export of goods and services, and the other part derives its profits as income from property held overseas. Both of these are shown quantitatively in Figure 3.

The upper panel, panel (a) shows the relative international orientation of UK capital by depicting the ratio of profits derived from any international activity to the profits derived from purely domestic activities. The lower panel, panel (b) shows the type of international orientation by depicting the ratio of property income from overseas to the profits derived from the export of goods and services.⁷

How the activities of capital are oriented affect the expression of its immediate interests:

- If profits are derived from the production of goods and services, then capital is proximately interested in expansionary policies that encourage both domestic investment in productivity-enhancing growth, and the growth of stable markets with high levels of demand. Broadly, this fraction of capital is summarized as “industrial capital.”

7 The right-hand panel understates its case, because the export of financial services is a component of the exports of goods and services, whereas generically the interests of financial capitalists might be expected to be more tied up with those receiving property income than with the export of nonfinancial goods and services. In terms of scale, in 1986 about 4 percent of all UK exports were exports of financial services, changing little until 1996, then rising to 12.4 percent by 2007 before falling back to 9.5 percent by 2017.

- For UK capital receiving property income from overseas, UK holders of foreign debt are interested in the security of their loans, and UK holders of overseas assets (from which are derived profit remittances) are interested in the security of their investments. If such security is threatened, holders of that capital would want to sell their assets and move their capital elsewhere. Hence capitalists in receipt of property income from overseas tend to advocate a deregulated world order because regulation typically hinders the mobility of capital. Broadly, this fraction of capital is summarized as “financial capital.”

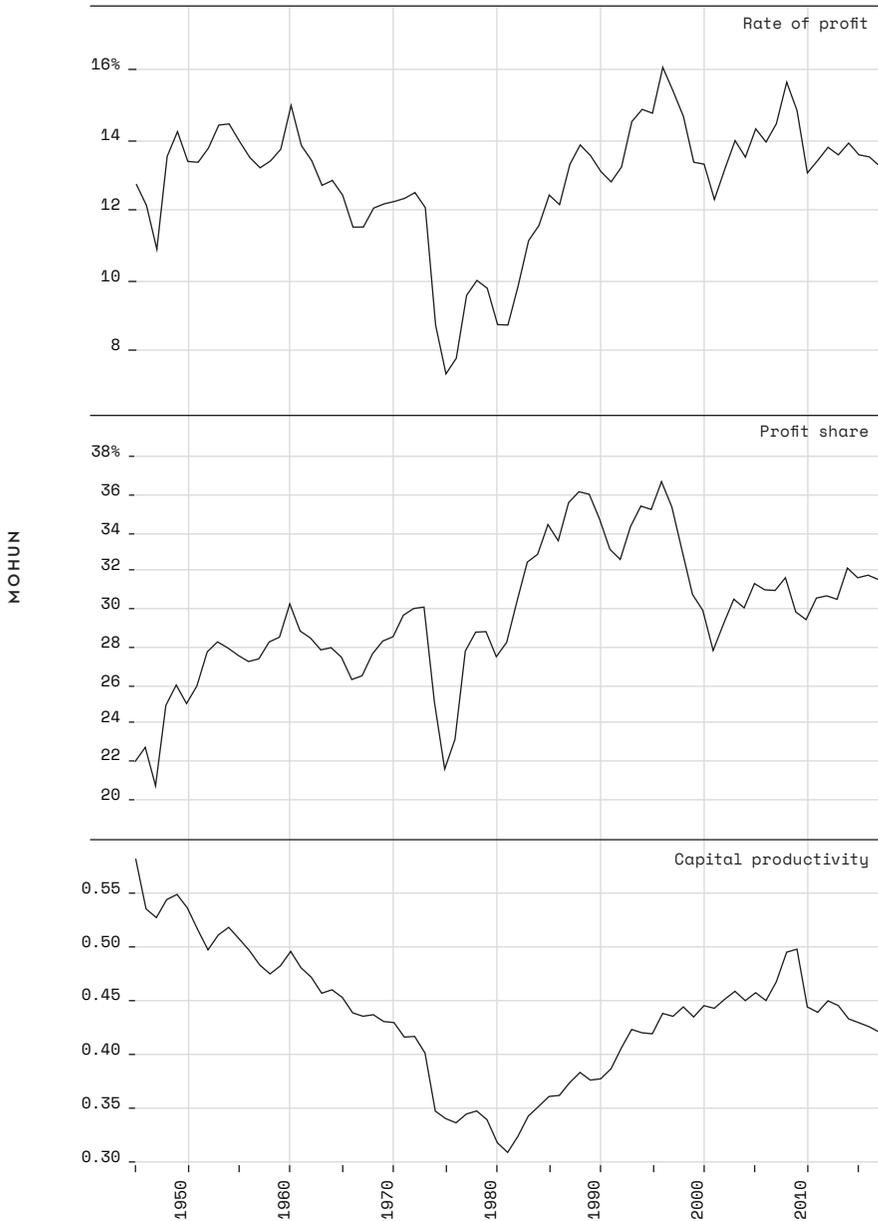
In Figure 3, panel (a) shows the profits from international activities becoming relatively more important than profits from domestic-focused activities beginning in the early 1970s (albeit with considerable fluctuation), that is, an increasing internationalization of the UK economy. Panel (b) shows that, from the mid-1970s, property income from overseas was almost always more important than profits from exports.

In sum, from 1945 through the early 1970s, profits from domestic activities were quantitatively more important than profits from any international activities, and profits from exports were quantitatively more important than property income from overseas. Industrial capital was thus the dominant fraction of capital. This changed during the 1970s. By the end of that decade, financial capital had superseded industrial capital as the dominant fraction of capital, and it was precisely thereafter that trade union density began to fall.

The Rate of Profit

Multiplying profit share and capital productivity together yields the ratio of profit to the fixed capital stock, which is the economy-wide average rate of profit. Hence movements in the rate of profit occur if and only if there are movements in its constituent parts, the profit

FIGURE 4: THE RATE OF PROFIT AND ITS COMPONENTS, UK, 1945-2017



share, and capital productivity. shows the rate of profit, the profit share, and capital productivity for the UK economy.⁸

It should be emphasized that the rate of profit is used here as a summary statistic of the relative success of profit-making. There is no long-run falling rate of profit driving down the rate of accumulation. While the rate of profit almost halved from 1960 to 1975, it then rose to a post-1945 peak in 1996, and, after a fluctuation, rose almost as high in 2009. There are periods of falling profitability, periods of rising profitability, and periods of broadly stationary profitability. These periods can now be considered in more detail.

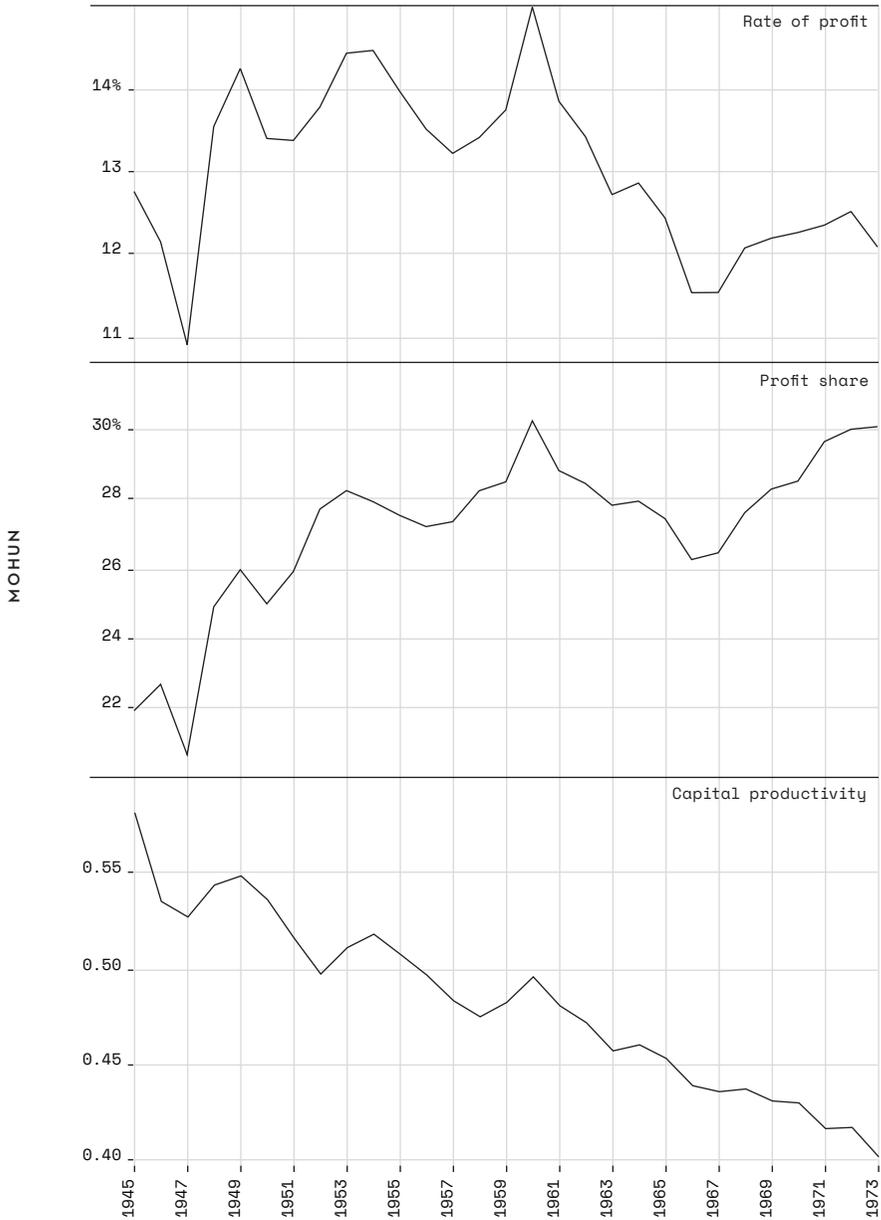
THE GOLDEN AGE, 1945–73

The last years of World War II and the immediate postwar years initiated an era of social democracy, characterized by the creation of the modern welfare state, nationalization of basic industries, and some policy commitment to the pursuit of full employment. Complementing the direct domestic controls over credit and financial institutions was a new international framework established at Bretton Woods in 1944: a postwar dollar/gold standard of fixed exchange rates, along with a regulatory framework operating through the international institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These complementary international and domestic regulatory frameworks were successful in encouraging both the growth of multilateral international trade and, alongside it, an investment boom. The consequences were low levels of unemployment and rising levels of domestic demand (in particular the growth of mass markets for consumer durables).

While the United Kingdom shared in the general prosperity of the metropolitan capitalist world through the 1950s and 1960s, its

8 In Figure 4, and in all subsequent figures, for visual clarity the scale of the vertical axis is adjusted to fit the data. While this provides visual impact, it is important not thereby to exaggerate the fluctuations that the graphs depict.

FIGURE 5: THE RATE OF PROFIT AND ITS COMPONENTS, UK, 1945-1973



performance in terms of productivity and growth was less impressive. Partly, there were characteristics of European capitalist economies (such as large agricultural populations that could move off the land and into industrial employment) that the United Kingdom did not share contemporaneously (because of its earlier industrialization). Partly, postwar (indicative) planning proceeded in a somewhat haphazard manner: the nationalized industries were never adequately coordinated with one another nor used as significant instruments of overall industrial policy; indeed, Cold War rhetoric disavowed planning as undemocratic. These features shaped both class struggle and technology, summarized in Figure 5.

Capital productivity fell steadily throughout the golden age, as greater and greater increases in capital intensity were required to generate a given increase in labor productivity. While UK labor productivity failed to keep up with its competitors, nonetheless the buoyant conditions of demand through the 1950s and a relatively quiescent labor movement subdued by Cold War rhetoric combined to produce an increase in the profit share that, up to 1960, more or less compensated for falling capital productivity, so that the rate of profit fluctuated along a flat trend.

After 1960, this was no longer the case. With growing labor militancy (culminating in a seamen's strike in 1966) the profit share fell and combined with falling capital productivity to produce a falling profit rate, only partially arrested by a devaluation of sterling in 1967. The fall in capital productivity was relentless, manifesting itself politically as the claim that labor productivity just wasn't high enough. This in turn was attributed to the "problem" of organized labor.

Organized Labor

The historical development of trade unionism in the United Kingdom was quite different from that of later developing capitalist economies. Prior to the 1970s, statutory legislation was conspicuous by its

absence. There was no legislation compelling employers to bargain with trade unions, no legislation that made collective agreements legally enforceable, no legislation concerning either workers' right to join a trade union or employer recognition of unionization, and no legal right collectively to withdraw labor and hence to strike.

This was because English common law (based on judicial opinion over the centuries) had evolved to protect individual rather than collective rights (for example, the property rights of landowners rather than the customary rights over common land). Any action that interfered with contract and property rights was a "tort," and those so interfered with could seek punitive legal redress (with effectively a judicial guarantee of success). And because any collective action by organized labor was a "restraint of trade," in common law, trade unionism was impossible.

The only way to nullify this was both to exempt trade unions from liability in tort, and to protect individual organizers of trade union activity from torts concerning trade disputes. This was the effect of the 1906 Trades Disputes Act, which was the sole legal basis for trade unionism until the 1970s. There was indeed a raft of legislation in the 1960s and 1970s establishing individual rights for workers: minimum notice periods for employees (1963), minimum redundancy payments (1967), protection against unfair dismissal (1971), protection in case of accidents (1974), extensions of workers' statutory rights (1975 and 1978), and protection against discrimination on grounds of sex (1970 and 1975) and race (1976), together with a system of industrial tribunals before which breaches of individual rights could be brought. But these were not the collective rights of trade unionism. The latter only existed by virtue of the 1906 immunity from torts arising out of restraint of trade.

For this reason, the development of trade unionism in the public sector was especially important. The wave of nationalizations after 1945 in mining, utilities, transport, and communications, in pursuit of a modernization that the interwar private sector had demonstrated it

could not deliver, together with the expansion of public sector health, social services, housing, and education, encouraged the spread of public sector trade unionism.⁹ And postwar growth also boosted trade unionism in private sector manufacturing.

Outside of private sector manufacturing and the expanded public sector, trade unionism was much weaker; it was the historically low levels of unemployment that made trade unionism appear stronger than it in fact was (but this was not evident until the 1980s). With the low unemployment of the golden age, the problem of organized labor was identified as its apparent ability to lead a wage-price inflationary spiral through wage demands in excess of productivity increases. Three approaches to resolving this issue were attempted. The first was to incorporate trade unions in some form of corporatist agreement around wage increases (known as an “incomes policy” to its supporters, and “wage restraint” to its opponents). The second was to alter the legislative framework to which trade unions were subject. The third was to manage the economy at higher levels of unemployment to weaken the position of those in employment.

These three approaches were all pursued, receiving different emphases in the decades after the 1950s. After a hesitant experiment with a timid corporatism in the early 1960s, the remainder of the decade saw attempts at an incomes policy, the voluntary adherence to which was intended to be bought by policies of “fairness” toward both incomes and prices. But the unions never wholeheartedly signed up to the policy, particularly at the grassroots level, where the “prices” part of the policy was seen as merely a cover for the implementation of wage restraint. Recourse was additionally made to higher levels of unemployment. The increase in unemployment appeared large at the time (an increase in the unemployment rate from less than 2.5 percent in the mid-1960s to 3.75 percent in 1970), but international demand conditions remained buoyant, and the increase in unemployment

9 In 1980, for example, trade union density among full-time employees of nationalized industries was 97 percent and of general government 89 percent.

proved too small to have much impact. With neither incomes policies nor rising unemployment seeming to work, proposals were made toward the end of the 1960s to alter the legislative framework governing trade union activity, but the (Labour) government was divided, and the proposals came to nothing. By 1970, then, all three approaches to trade unions had been attempted — but none had had great success, and the difficulties that organized labor posed for capital remained unresolved.

Collapse and Transition 1973–79

These difficulties deepened in the first half of the 1970s at the same time as the golden age came to an end. The Conservative government of 1970–74 attempted to alter the legislative framework, but the imprisonment of trade unionists did not prove popular, and an unwise confrontation with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) triggered a “who governs?” general election that the Conservative government lost in 1974. Cooperation was then tried again, but the circumstances were not propitious, for the postwar conditions of buoyant demand had evaporated.

Throughout the golden age, from its inception to the early 1970s, the profits derived from export production were about twice as important as property income from overseas (Figure 3, panel b). In that sense, the interests of industrial capital predominated. It took some time for these interests to dominate the nostalgia for empire, but in 1961, the United Kingdom applied to join the European Economic Community (EEC). However, the application was vetoed by France in 1963, fearing that the United Kingdom would act as a US-sponsored Trojan horse with respect to European integration.

After this rejection, there was political drift for a decade. But in 1958, the dismantling of exchange controls had begun, and through the 1960s, the debt financing of both US domestic social programs and the US war in Vietnam led to substantial offshore Eurodollar dealings

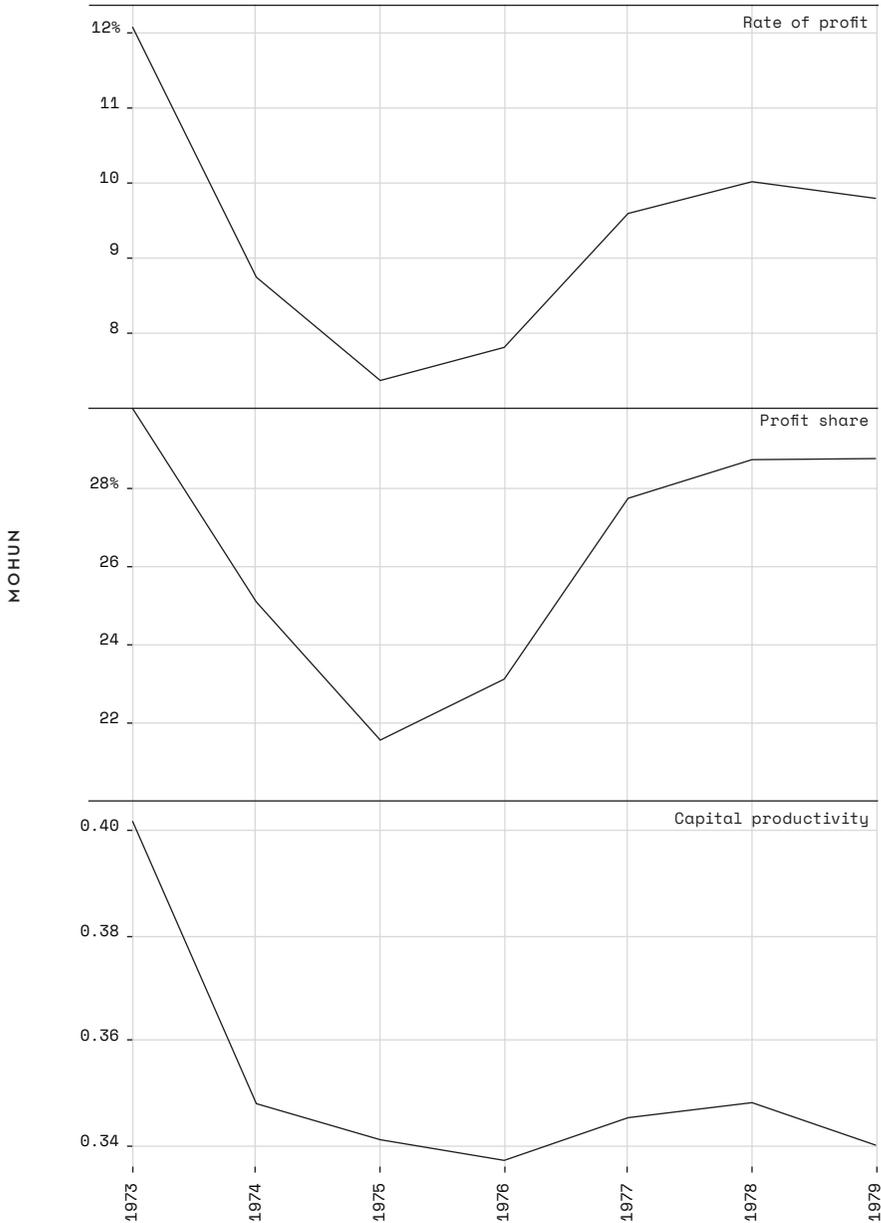
in which the City of London proved important.¹⁰ The domestic liberalization of postwar financial flows was further facilitated by the introduction of “competition and credit control” in 1971, when the Bank of England replaced the previously existing direct controls over the money supply and lending with market-based activities. Just as joining the EEC was finally achieved in 1972–3,¹¹ there was a significant increase in the relative importance of property income flowing into the United Kingdom compared with the profits derived from the export of goods and services. That is, financial capital began to increase its significance just as the golden age ended.

The golden age had been structured around US hegemony amid an acute dollar shortage. The United States had financed the economic recovery of its defeated enemies, (West) Germany and Japan, partly as Cold War economic bulwarks against the Soviet Union and China, and partly also to provide growing markets for US exports. But German and Japanese recovery, alongside that of the other countries of mainland Europe, began to undercut US supremacy in productivity, so that by the 1960s the dollar appeared overvalued in terms of its exchange rate with gold. Because of the dollar’s reserve currency status, other capitalist countries were forced to finance the growing US budget and payment deficits by holding dollars overseas, whether or not they wanted to, and this destabilized the system of fixed exchange rates, forcing the United States to suspend the convertibility of the dollar into gold at the Bretton Woods fixed rate in August 1971. Subsequent attempts to revive the fixed exchange rate system failed in the face of speculative currency attacks, and in March 1973, a floating rate system was established.

10 The 1960s Eurodollars (and other eurocurrencies) were so-called because they were held offshore from their original domicile; the etymology is unfortunate, for they had nothing to do with the much later euro. They were important because they were an unregulated source of bank borrowing outside of the reach of the US Federal Reserve.

11 In 1975, a referendum confirmed continued EEC membership by 67.2 percent to 32.8 percent.

FIGURE 6: THE RATE OF PROFIT AND ITS COMPONENTS, UK, 1973-1979



This massive deregulation proceeded surprisingly smoothly. The same could not be said of the consequences of the rise in oil prices in October 1973. A symbol of waning imperial dominance, the OPEC price rise (part of a worldwide commodities price boom) had a sudden and large deflationary effect on the world economy. From a low of 2.2 percent in 1967, (CPI) inflation increased to over 9 percent in 1971, peaking at 22.7 percent in 1975; it then fell back somewhat, but was still 11.4 percent in 1979. At the same time, unemployment between 1973 and 1979 averaged 4.7 percent, compared with 2.8 percent in the 1960s, a comparison that was seen at the time as a shocking failure of the postwar demand-management consensus.

Figure 6 summarizes the outcome. There was a steep fall in the rate of profit from 1973 to 1975, produced by the continuing fall in capital productivity and a sharp fall in the profit share. Profits fell with declining demand, but the unions were strong enough that wages increased with prices. Trade union density had risen from about 30 percent in 1945 to about 42 percent in 1973 (Figure 2), with a substantial shop stewards' movement whose local autonomy was to an unusual extent encouraged by some national union leaderships.¹² Strikes by the powerful National Union of Mineworkers, power cuts, a three-day week, and the election of a Labour government with elements of a radical manifesto all served to produce a sense of the possibility of dramatic change.

In these stagflation conditions, capital was split between industrial interests whose representatives wanted an expansionary fiscal policy and an accommodative monetary policy to boost demand in the face of falling profitability, and financial interests whose representatives wanted a deflationary fiscal policy and a restrictive monetary policy to increase real interest rates. This conflict between industrial capital on the one hand and financial capital on the other played out in policy terms as a Keynesian-Monetarist controversy, in which the

¹² Especially the two large unions, the Transport and General Workers Union and the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers.

Monetarist approach was increasingly ascendant. The abandonment of the Keynesian approach was definitively announced in the United Kingdom in Prime Minister Callaghan's 1976 speech to the Labour Party Conference.¹³

Against this background, successive Labour governments (1974–79) attempted a more corporatist approach toward organized labor, involving a “social contract” in exchange for an “incomes policy” in an attempt to toughen the incomes policy stance that had been adopted in the 1960s. The right of the Labour Party had successfully faced down the more radical elements of the party seeking an alternative industrial strategy, so that the social contract became straightforward wage restraint. This enabled the profit share (in Figure 6) to begin to rise from its 1975 nadir.

Moreover, the fall in capital productivity bottomed out in 1976. Rises in capital intensity began to be matched by rises in labor productivity because union leaderships managed to impose more cooperation with capital on their members. Hence there was a mild rise in the profit rate in the second half of the 1970s. But under the stresses of three successive years of wage restraint, the social contract of the mid-1970s disintegrated in a revolt of low-paid workers in a 1978–79 “winter of discontent.” The general election of 1979 resulted in a Conservative government committed to the abandonment of any sort of corporatism, the reduction of the size of the public sector, deregulation, and a vigorous anti-union legislative agenda.

13 “Britain faces its most dangerous crisis since the war ... The cosy world we were told would go on for ever, where full employment would be guaranteed by a stroke of the Chancellor’s pen, cutting taxes, deficit spending, that cosy world is gone ... When we reject unemployment as an economic instrument – as we do – and when we reject also superficial remedies, as socialists must, then we must ask ourselves unflinchingly what is the cause of high unemployment. Quite simply and unequivocally, it is caused by paying ourselves more than the value of what we produce ... We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession, and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting Government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists, and that in so far as it ever did exist, it only worked on each occasion since the war by injecting a bigger dose of inflation into the economy, followed by a higher level of unemployment as the next step. Higher inflation followed by higher unemployment.”

THE NEOLIBERAL ERA FROM 1979*The Dominance of Finance*

The 1970s drift away from a managed Keynesianism towards a deregulated neoliberalism was hard to combine with a wholehearted commitment to a neo-corporatist EEC and its social market underpinnings. Relations with the EEC in the 1980s were dominated by UK resentment and renegotiations over the financial commitments that were entailed by membership, and then by the negotiations over the 1986 Single European Act followed by the 1993 Maastricht Treaty. Insofar as these treaties revolved around the single market, they were supported by UK capital, but as these treaties also presaged and developed extra-economic processes of integration, the United Kingdom's general attitude ranged from ambiguous support to outright hostility, particularly towards anything that might be interpreted as support for Franco-German proposals for greater political integration.

Commitment to the EEC required a serious attempt to modernize UK industry, but the 1970s retreat from even a weak form of social democracy ensured that this did not happen. After the Conservatives took office in 1979, the deregulation agenda of financial capital was pursued enthusiastically: in 1979, all exchange controls were abolished, and in 1986 the City was opened to US capital by abolishing the institutional separation of stock-jobbing from stockbroking, retail from wholesale banking, and commercial from merchant banks. This consolidated the City of London as a major world financial center, and its orientation to financialization within a world market took precedence over any modernization of the United Kingdom's industrial structure. So deregulated markets condemned the latter (apart from certain niche areas) to low investment, low productivity, low wages, and contraction.

After the end of the golden age, property income inflows became significantly more important as deregulation proceeded (Figure 3).

While all capital could unite in support of the bonfire of regulations that created the Single Market, property income inflows became larger than the profits derived from exports. The increasing openness of the UK economy gave an outside option to capital in struggles over the wage bargain, and the lack of modernization amplified that effect by making closure, relocation, and outsourcing much easier. In terms of class struggle, the international orientation of capital significantly tilted the balance of power away from labor.

Defeating Organized Labor

The monetarist policies pursued by the incoming Conservative government had an immediate effect on the manufacturing sector. This was partly because there was a rise in the (trade-weighted) exchange rate as North Sea oil came onstream and OPEC raised oil prices for a second time. This exchange rate rise rendered much of manufacturing uncompetitive; as a percentage of domestic demand, manufacturing imports were 26 percent in 1980 and 45 percent in 1995. It was also partly because of the ways in which labor-saving new technologies affected a number of sectors (notably printing, newspapers, shipping, and the docks).

The traditional strength of (craft) trade unionism was thereby undermined by an intensification of product market competition. The collapse of manufacturing in turn increased unemployment as the employment rate dropped very sharply. Compared with an average unemployment rate of 5.3 percent in the 1975–79 period, unemployment averaged almost double that rate over the next fifteen years: 10.1 percent over 1980–84, 9.8 percent over 1985–89, and 9.1 percent over 1990–94.

With this backdrop of a collapse in manufacturing and a normalization of higher levels of unemployment, there was a state-sponsored assault on the institutions of organized labor. This took a number of forms. Privatizations reduced the size of the public sector, the head-count employment in nationalized industries falling from 1.85 million in 1979 to 0.72 million a decade later, and to 0.23 million in

1997. State-sponsored support of collective bargaining was reversed, with the elimination of procedures that had extended the effects of industry-wide collective agreements to nonunionized private sector firms. In the early 1980s, the twenty-seven wage councils set legal minimum rates of pay for some 2.7 million workers. But the powers of wage councils to set wage floors were reduced in 1986, and wage councils themselves were abolished in 1993.¹⁴ All of this was an historical reversal of the encouragement of trade unionism through the public sector, substituting in its place a state-sponsored active low-wages policy in both public and private sectors.

At the same time, the state began an assault on trade union organization. A succession of Employment Acts restricted (1980 and 1982) and then eliminated (1988 and 1990) the legal basis for the closed shop, rendered secondary picketing illegal (1980), imposed balloting requirements upon unions (1984, 1988), and, crucially, partially removed trade union immunity from torts by successively narrowing the definition of what constituted a legitimate trade dispute (1980, 1982, 1984, and 1990). There were also significant changes to what constituted unfair dismissal.

After a decade of “reforms,” in the event of unofficial industrial action, unions were faced with endorsing the action (opening themselves to damages in tort) or repudiating the action (in which case they could not defend their members from selective dismissal). Further, while these reforms were in progress, a conflict was deliberately provoked with the National Union of Mineworkers in 1985–86, and aggressive policing was used demonstratively to crush the union.¹⁵ Thereafter, employers were not slow to use the new legislation to obtain injunctions and penal damages against (largely craft-based) unions with pre-entry closed shops.

14 Except for the Agricultural Wages Board.

15 While there was some criticism of the NUM's tactics in mobilizing the support of its members, the NUM probably had little choice in its responses to a state determined on payback for the humiliations suffered by the Conservative government at the hands of the NUM in the early 1970s.

The consequences of the neoliberal assault was significantly to reduce trade union membership. First, the sectors in which union membership was concentrated — manufacturing and general government — were contracted. In 1973, at the end of the golden age, well over a third (37.5 percent) of all jobs were in production industries (mining, manufacturing, utilities, and construction), and not far short of three-quarters of these (26.8 percent of all jobs) were in manufacturing. A further 7.6 percent of all jobs were in public administration and defense. By the beginning of the financial crisis in 2007, the proportion of all jobs in production industries had halved to 17.5 percent (and only just over half of these were in manufacturing); and in public administration and defense, the proportion had fallen by over a quarter to 5.5 percent. Secondly, the counterpart of the systematic and successful attack on trade unionism was ideological demoralization and demobilization, so that unions failed to gain recognition in private sector firms formed in the 1980s.

There were two further consequences of note. First, whereas more than four-fifths of the workforce had been covered by collective bargaining and statutory sectoral wage arrangements in 1980, by 1994 just under half the workforce was so covered. By 2007, collective bargaining agreements covered just 20 percent of all private sector employees, and 72 percent of all public sector employees, for a total of just over a third of all employees. In terms of trade union power, the United Kingdom was diverging from its European neighbors, and converging on the US experience.

Second, the abolition of wage councils, and the statutory minimum pay levels they had set, facilitated greater pay dispersion in the lower part of the wage distribution, affecting not only the traditional low-paid sectors (agriculture, retail, hospitality, and care) but also the young, and this contributed to wage inequality growing more rapidly in the United Kingdom than in any other developed capitalist economy save the United States.

FIGURE 7: THE RATE OF PROFIT AND ITS COMPONENTS, UK, 1979–2009



For the economy as a whole, trade union density had stood at just over 48 percent at the outset of the neoliberal era in 1979. Under the impact of the assault of the state, it was more than halved to 23.6 percent by 2010. In the private sector, density was 14.2 percent (2.5 million trade unionist employees), and in the public sector 56.4 percent (4.1 million trade unionist employees). Unsurprisingly, the trade union wage premium was just 5.9 percent in the private sector whereas it was 20 percent in the public sector.

In sum, by 2007 trade unionism had only a marginal significance in the private sector of the economy, and the relentless pressure of neoliberalism on the public sector threatened its position there. The legal sanctions made available to employers after 1979 were the latest step in a long-run historical record of economic class conflict in British labor-capital relations. British trade unionism had always tended to demur from the social market traditions of Continental Europe and the social-democratic traditions of Scandinavia, so that comprehensive economic defeat meant that there was nothing on which to fall back.

The massive defeat of organized labor had entirely predictable effects on profitability and its components, illustrated in Figure 7. First, capital productivity rose steeply. Increases in labor productivity were generally faster than increases in capital intensity right through the neoliberal era from 1981 to 2009. In part, this was the era of the computer and the internet. But the state assault on organized labor also dramatically altered the balance of class forces at the point of production (symbolized by the growth in precarious, zero-hours contracts), so that resistance to the extraction of surplus value was considerably lower than in the golden age.

Second, the decade of the 1980s saw a large increase of more than a quarter in the profit share. After a fluctuation due to the collapse of a property boom at the end of the 1980s, the profit share rose to a peak of 36.7 percent in 1996. Combined with rising capital productivity, this generated a rise in the rate of profit from around 9 percent in 1980 to

16 percent in 1996, higher than at any time since World War II.

Third, the second half of the 1990s saw a complete reversal of the earlier rise in the profit share. This was partly because of a pent-up demand for wage increases: whereas real average weekly wages had grown by a total of 4.7 percent from 1991 to 1996, from 1996 to 2001 they grew by a total of 13.5 percent. It was also partly because of New Labour policy to support incomes at the bottom of the income distribution.¹⁶

The second half of the 1990s saw the rise in capital productivity flatten — rising real wages and perhaps the optimism engendered by the 1997 election of a Labour government made it more difficult for capital to continue to extract high levels of labor productivity from rises in capital intensity. This combined with the fluctuations in profit share to produce a fall in profitability from 1996 to 2001. But New Labour was explicit that it would not reverse the labor market legislation of the 1980s, and the years running up to the financial crisis saw a restoration of the earlier trends of the neoliberal period.

The Financial Crisis 2007–10

The neoliberal assault on trade unionism combined with its contraction of production industries, its pressure on social security benefits (and its demonization of their recipients), and its tolerance of high levels of unemployment, generated considerable distributive changes. The rise in the income share of the top 1 percent — detailed earlier in Figure 1 — had a dramatic consequence.

Through the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s, banking had been restructured to make every part of the loan-making business into a separate market process with its own financial institutions. Each stage of the process sold its “output” to the next stage, and financed the process by borrowing in short-term money markets against the revenues to be received. The end of the process was the

16 New Labour’s National Minimum Wage came into effect in April 1999.

sale in tranches of bundles of loans as bonds, specified according to riskiness. The financial institutions involved might be subsidiaries of an existing bank, or they might be quite independent, or indeed somewhere in between; but since they were all engaged in the classic business of banking (borrowing short and lending long), they were either banks (and subject to banking regulation) or “shadow” banks (and subject to no regulation).

The whole set of processes which turned a bundle of (credit card, auto, and especially housing) loans into bonds is summarized by the term “securitization.” And it required willing buyers of bonds to work. Partly, these buyers were the financial institutions themselves; they needed the bonds to post as collateral in order to borrow short-term cash to finance themselves. So, they were selling bonds and buying them back after a short period of time (often overnight). And partly they were worldwide investors who used the short-term purchase of bonds from financial institutions and resale back to them as a safe way of earning short-term interest on very large cash-holdings.

The increase in income share of the top 1 percent was a worldwide phenomenon (the United Kingdom being notable for one of the largest increases), and so year by year from the late 1980s onwards there were larger and larger amounts of money seeking a home. This put continued upward pressure on the price of bonds and hence downward pressure on their rate of return. Real rates of return fell steadily through the 1990s, in turn exacerbating a “search for yield” by investors, and driving financial innovation in the securitization process, particularly in the supply of complex derivatives ultimately based on housing debt. But in the summer of 2006 the US housing price bubble burst, and after a further year of gradually growing turmoil (as lower-grade mortgagees could not refinance their debt and lost their homes) it became impossible to value the complex derivatives built out of mortgage debt. The markets in which they were dealt froze, and so financial institutions could no longer use these derivatives as collateral to borrow the short-term cash out of which they financed

their activities. Consequently, they were effectively bankrupted; bank lending collapsed, and without bank lending, industry was forced to cut output and employment.

the financial crisis was the worst since 1929–33. It was worldwide, because the neoliberal international financial system was based on the US dollar and run from Wall Street and the City of London. And the response in every country was large-scale increases in sovereign debt as the banks were subsidized and recapitalized, together with some support to aggregate demand.

The Age of Austerity From 2010

Capital productivity peaked in 2009, and Labour lost the 2010 general election. Following the huge bank bailouts, and the subsequent sharp recession, sovereign debt had increased dramatically. National debt relative to GDP rose from 36 percent in 2006 to 71.7 percent in 2010. This was not especially high historically; it was less than its level in every year from 1945 to 1967. Under the impact of debt-financing of World War II, the ratio had peaked at 262.7 percent in 1946, but had been steadily reduced thereafter by GDP growing faster than the national debt, and by inflation.¹⁷

With meager growth rates and negligible inflation after the financial crisis, such methods of reduction were not possible. In their place was put a set of unprecedented austerity policies by the Conservative-led coalition government formed after the 2010 general election. The imperative to reduce debt was justified by the frequent reiteration that states like households had to live within their means, and that too high a level of debt would lead to a crisis of confidence by lenders. The former was theoretical nonsense, and the lack of evidence for the latter was dubbed the “confidence fairy” by critics. Nonetheless, austerity became the leitmotif of policy.

¹⁷ Inflation reduces the real value of debt, and redistributes from lenders to borrowers.

Its effects on the debt to GDP ratio were to increase it from 61.2 percent in 2009 and 71.7 percent in 2010 to 86.1 percent in 2017. But rather than see austerity as therefore a spectacular failure, it is more appropriate to see beyond its stated aim. Following the crushing of organized labor through “reform” of the trade unions in the 1980s, austerity’s purpose was fundamentally to restructure and reduce the welfare state by consistently supporting and extending individual responsibilities over social responsibilities. It did this by greatly reducing the social safety net, by privatizing as much of the National Health Service as was politically feasible, by taking schools out of municipal control and placing them in the hands of private trusts (academies), by encouraging the growth of the private rented sector in housing, and by massively reducing the ability of local authorities to fund social services.

Specifically, the tightening of eligibility criteria, the capping of totals, and the freezing of benefits to working-age people have all been implemented across a wide range of social security benefits. There has also been a sustained policy of raising income tax thresholds, benefiting those who pay income tax and doing nothing for the poorest who don’t. Restrictions on the availability of legal aid (affecting particularly the poor and people with disabilities) together with the tightening of means-tested eligibility criteria meant that legal redress to challenge benefit denials or reductions was unaffordable for most. From 2010–11 to 2017–18, there was a 49 percent cut in real terms of central government funding of local government, forcing local government to reduce spending on services by 19 percent and focus provision on statutorily mandatory adult social care and child protection services.

The effects of austerity were obvious: because there were fewer resources to support the poor, the poor increasingly had to rely on charities and crisis services. From 2010 to 2017, homelessness rose by 60 percent and rough sleeping by 134 percent. There were 1.2 million people on the social housing waiting list, but just 6,463 social housing homes were built in England in 2017–18. Food bank use increased by

almost four times; whereas there were twenty-nine food banks during the financial crisis, by 2017 there were almost two thousand.

Those most affected were children, women, minorities, single parents, and people with disabilities. By 2017, a total of 14 million people lived in poverty, and of these, 4 million lived more than 50 percent below the poverty line, and 1.5 million were destitute. A recent report characterizes government policy as a “punitive, mean-spirited and often callous approach apparently designed to impose a rigid order on the lives of those least capable of coping, and elevate the goal of enforcing blind compliance over a genuine concern to improve the well-being of those at the lowest economic levels of British society.”¹⁸ Table 2 summarizes the effects of austerity on both cash and in-kind benefits in real terms, comparing 2016–17 first with the precrisis years of 2007–08, and second with 2010–11, the first year of the coalition government.

TABLE 2: BENEFIT CUTS AT 2016–17 PRICES: % CHANGES, 2016–17 FROM 2007–08 AND 2010–11

PERCENTAGE CHANGES	AVERAGE BENEFITS IN CASH		AVERAGE BENEFITS IN KIND	
	Bottom Decile	All Households	Bottom Decile	All Households
2016–17 compared with:				
2007–08	1.3	7.0	-10.3	2.3
2010–11	-11.7	-3.7	-0.9	-6.4

As William Beveridge recognized in 1944, social insurance was both for those who were poor and for a much larger group of people — about 2.5 million in the United Kingdom in recent years — who were a single crisis (an unexpected health condition, the loss of a job, family breakdown, a child with disabilities, housing problems) away from financial disaster. While employment was obviously better than

18 Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, United Nations A/HRC/41/39/Add.1, April, 23 2019.

unemployment, the prevalence since the financial crisis of insecure jobs, zero-hours contracts, and above all low wages meant that a buoyant employment market was not a secure way out of poverty.

Nearly 60 percent of people in poverty were living in families in which someone worked, and 2.8 million lived in families in which all adults worked full-time. The median real weekly wage of adults in full-time employment peaked in 2009 and by 2017 had only recovered to its 2004 level. Marx died in 1883. In the years 1883–2017 there are 126 ten-year periods, and, comparing the total growth in each ten-year period, every one of the 125 ten-year periods has higher real average weekly wage growth than the period 2007–17.

Austerity's effects were not distributed evenly across the United Kingdom. Table 3 shows regional gross household disposable income (GDHI) at 2015 prices per head of population in that region.¹⁹

TABLE 3: REGIONAL HOUSEHOLD DISPOSABLE INCOME PER HEAD OF POPULATION (2015 PRICES, INDEXED ON LONDON)

	1997	2016
UK total	82.1	71.6
London	100.0	100.0
South East	98.2	82.4
East of England	86.5	74.7
South West	84.8	70.3
Scotland	74.2	67.1
East Midlands	74.9	62.8
West Midlands	74.8	61.8
North West	74.3	61.7
Yorkshire and The Humber	73.4	60.3
Wales	71.6	58.3
Northern Ireland	66.8	57.9
North East	70.3	57.4

19 Since people live in households of varying size and composition, per capita figures provide at best a crude indication of living standards. Note also the figures are distorted by the high housing costs of London.

Each column of the table is indexed on London's GDHI per capita for that year. Hence for example, the North East region had a per capita GDHI in 1997 which was 70.3 percent of London's per capita GDHI in 1997; by 2016 it was only 57.4 percent of London's per capita GDHI in 2016. The falling figures across each row indicate increasing regional inequality, regions falling progressively further and further behind London.²⁰ This was largely a consequence of neoliberal deindustrialization, with little investment in anything coherent to take its place, declining infrastructure, and with a concentration on financial services in London. Large swaths of the country have been left behind.²¹

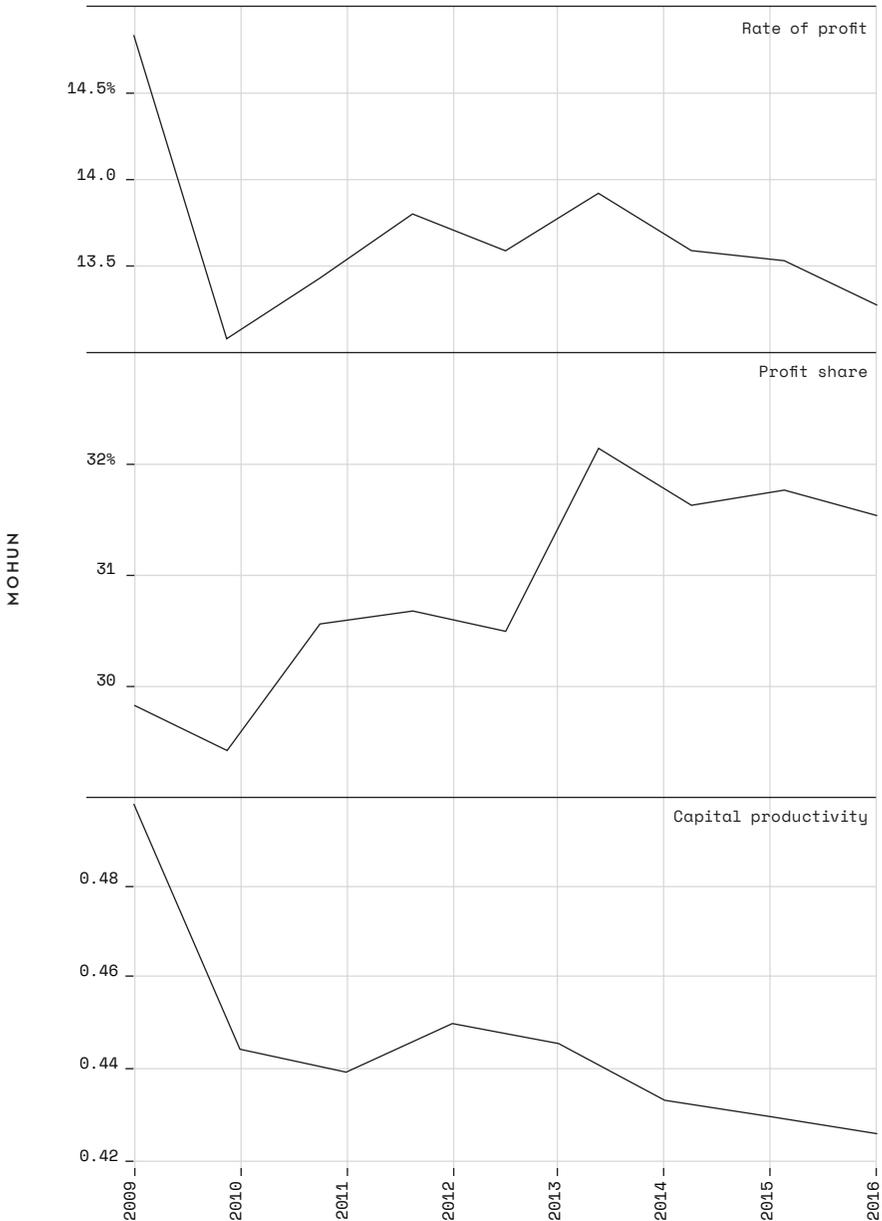
There was little class resistance to the imposition of austerity. Largely this was because of the weakness of the organized working class, as trade union density continued its fall. By 2017 just over half of public sector employees were unionized, and in the private sector just 13.5 percent. Overall, trade union density levels in 2017 were lower than at any time since the early years of World War I. But also there was a massive political failure of the Labour Party, at least until 2016, to propose any alternative. The Conservatives had placed the blame for the financial crisis and its effects on the then Labour administration. While the indictment was absurd, it both reinforced the right-wing trope that progressive governments were financially incompetent, and demobilized any opposition to the cuts, because the Labour opposition held out no alternative to the Conservative shrinking of expenditure in order to live within one's means.

Figure 8 describes how profitability and its components changed over the years of austerity. From 2009 capital productivity began to fall, meaning that productivity increases had become less than capital intensity increases. Investment rates were not high after the financial

20 Of course these are broad averages, completely hiding, for example, that London has areas that are among the most deprived in the country. But nevertheless they do indicate the increasing scale of regional inequality.

21 One consequence was that a substantial section of the working class in the north and the midlands nihilistically voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 Referendum, no matter what the consequences.

FIGURE 8: THE RATE OF PROFIT AND ITS COMPONENTS, UK, 2009-2016



crisis, but productivity increases were very low indeed (Table 1). The suspicion was that instead of any conventional causal effect from productivity increases to wage increases, the reverse had become the case: with high levels of employment in low-paying jobs, technical progress had become labor-using rather than labor-saving; the productivity increases thereby available were negligible. The same low pay and insecurity of employment saw a rising profit share, and the latter combined with capital productivity changes after 2010 to generate a high and stable profit rate, profit share and profit rate being little different from their golden age levels.

But there *was* a major difference, for neoliberalism had transformed the UK economy into one of insecure employment, low wages, and low productivity. This was reinforced by austerity, by opening up areas of social activity to profit-making that had hitherto been partially or completely closed off. Many of these were labor-intensive, dominated by women, and poorly paid, but with better-than-average working conditions. Effectively privatizing such areas through contracting out could reduce those working conditions to private sector standards and at the same time weaken organized resistance in the remaining public sector.²² In one sense of course, this was just a continuation of neoliberalism. But it is not that profitability was low (quite the opposite historically, as Figure 4 shows), but rather that neoliberalism has so wasted the structure of the economy that the scale of investment in the production sector required to compete in global markets was too great — far better to pick off the low-hanging fruit of the domestic public sector.

Second, low wages were reinforced by welfare policies of income support and housing benefit to the working poor; originally intended by Blair's New Labour to support the poorest, in-work benefits have become an important subsidy to wages, enabling private employers to keep wages low. Third, and directly related, the international

22 Thus competitive tendering was controversially extended to the National Health Service in 2013.

orientation of capital shown in Figure 3, panels (a) and (b), implied that globalized capital had no particular interest in the reproduction of the UK working class. The net effect was that the hardships produced by austerity were of interest to capital only if money could be made out of them.

EXAMINING LABOUR'S ALTERNATIVE

What policies might be appropriate to the scale of the task involved in transforming the UK economy in a more progressive direction?

First, a simple rejigging of monetary and fiscal policy is unlikely to suffice. As regards monetary policy, currently the Bank of England sets interest rates that it thinks consistent with its mandate of a 2 percent inflation target. Labour is considering expanding this mandate (the Fed for example has a broader mandate than just an inflation target), but no final decision has been taken. The Bank is also responsible for overall financial stability, and again Labour is considering reforming the financial stability framework.

As regards fiscal policy, there are serious political constraints around increasing taxation, because the years of neoliberalism have cemented an ideology of low taxation: taxation is the state taking its citizens' (hard-earned) money; individual freedom always requires that the individual is the best judge of how her resources should be used; and the state will always use money wastefully because it is not bound by market discipline and the profit motive. As long as Labour's record is one of accommodating to this destructive ideology, rather than actively opposing it, the scope for increasing revenues will remain limited. The rich could be taxed more heavily on their income, but the consequent tax revenues are more uncertain, because the rich are more mobile internationally, and also are more able to switch resources between income and capital depending on the structure

of taxation.²³ Similarly, companies could be taxed more heavily on their profits, but with potentially similar problems.

Labour is proposing modest increases in taxation on the top 5 percent of income-earners, an increase in Corporation Tax (a tax on corporate profits) back to its 2011 level, and is considering other measures such as a land value tax,²⁴ reforms to the inheritance tax, a company levy on very high salaries, and extending VAT²⁵ (a sales tax) to private school fees. The intention is to increase annual current expenditure on public services by just under £50 billion, and to finance this entirely from increases in taxes. This would take the overall tax take back to its 2010–11 levels, repairing the more egregious damage of austerity but enabling little else.²⁶

While increases in current expenditure are largely to be financed by increases in taxes, increases in capital expenditure (some £250 billion over a ten-year time horizon, via a new National Investment Bank) can be financed by increases in borrowing, taking advantage of current low interest rates. On the one hand, this is sensible; there is no reason why the current generation should pay for the investment that benefits future generations. On the other hand, there is a major difficulty. While building a new hospital or school is obviously a capital expenditure, staffing that hospital with doctors and nurses, or that school with teachers, is a current expenditure; yet employing doctors, nurses, and teachers is also an investment in future health and education. Many aspects of expenditures on social reproduction

23 Only the United States taxes its citizens on their worldwide income, but the beneficial effects of this are overwhelmed by the number and variety of exemptions and tax breaks.

24 Unlike individuals and companies, land is immobile, and its taxation could act as a proxy for a wealth tax.

25 Value Added Tax is a uniform sales tax.

26 Specific proposals include universal free childcare for all 2–4 year olds; an increase in social house building; reforms to Universal Credit; free school meals; abolishing tuition fees in higher and further education; insourcing rather than outsourcing service provision by the state, and where outsourcing continues, much greater regulation with sanctions and conditionality.

have this property. The distinction between current and capital expenditure is at the heart of Labour’s “fiscal rule,” but it is problematic, and runs the serious danger of importing an austerity bias into social reproduction.

In sum, in its approach to public services, Labour is proposing a certain amount of redistribution, some reforms, and additional longer-term investment, but these proposals are modest. Its fiscal and monetary proposals are left-of-center conventional; they provide for some desperately needed investment in the public sector, and reverse many (but by no means all) of the cuts delivered by austerity since 2010. But that is all. Labour’s radicalism rather lies elsewhere.

Rather than the market deciding what is produced, where it is produced, and how it is produced, Labour is proposing a greater role for the state in determining priorities based on use rather than profit. A Green Industrial Revolution is being planned, alongside reforms to constrain corporate power, promoting value creation rather than extraction, long-termism over short-termism, and strengthening the rights of trade unions to access workplaces and organize. Restructuring in this manner might be considered an updated version of the domestic program of the post-1945 Labour government. But what is different is the ambition to integrate this restructuring with a widening of corporate ownership and an extension of economic democracy.

Labour is proposing that every UK company with more than 250 staff set up an “Inclusive Ownership Fund,” and annually transfer 1 percent of their ownership into this fund to reach an eventual stake of 10 percent. This stake would be managed collectively by workers, giving them the same rights as any other shareholder over company strategy and receipt of dividends (capped at £500 per employee, with any surplus above that accruing to the state). Each Fund would be run by a Board of Trustees elected by eligible employees. Its shares could not be sold or transferred, but would be held under an asset-lock

mechanism, as in current employee-owned enterprises.²⁷ Alongside this, Labour is also proposing that all companies with at least 250 employees have one-third of their Boards of Directors as directly elected employee representatives. There are also plans to double the size of the cooperative sector, and to establish sectoral collective bargaining. Finally, Labour will encourage Community Wealth Building (local economic strategies based on local public procurement, cooperatives, and living-wage policies).

Taken together, these measures amount to a significant attempt to change corporate ownership, giving workers more of a stake in the companies in which they work, without directly challenging production for profit. But they are also an attempt to deal with discredited forms of nationalization as state monopoly, by instituting new forms of collective ownership in those areas of social reproduction (water, transport, energy, and the Royal Mail) which Labour plans to take out of the private sector. These policies of widening ownership and democratizing economic forms of private and public ownership are seen as a crucial means of entrenching a progressive economic restructuring against the neoliberal economy. Instead of the market freedom from constraint for the consumer, Labour is proposing the positive freedom of the citizen through democratic participation, through the creation of a culture embracing universalism rather than means-testing, collectivism rather than individualism, and solidarity rather than competitive behavior, with increases in well-being rather than money as the criterion of success.

MOCHU

WHAT CAN GO WRONG?

As with any transformative political program, it is difficult to strike a balance between the optimism of the goals and the realism of the

27 More development is required, because the policy would not apply to overseas-listed companies with UK subsidiaries, and it is unclear what would happen to private companies that do not pay regular dividends.

constraints. Expanding production for use at the expense of production for profit has not had a happy historical record. Labour is proposing a different strategy from the traditional top-down planning of social democracy, but democratizing the economy requires enthusiastic participants, a culture which is quite different from the privatized and individualistic context of the neoliberal economy. Clearly, there is a lot that can go wrong.

First, and most immediately, there is the politics of Brexit. While leaving the European Union (EU) with some sort of free trade deal and close alignment to the Single Market is Labour's preferred option, leaving the EU without a deal will deliver a sharp trade shock, increase unemployment, and precipitate recession. But remaining in the EU might impose unwanted constraints on Labour's development of a state-led industrial strategy, and will anyway require concerted effort to build pan-EU alliances to begin to change the neoliberal orientation of the major European institutions.

Stepping back from these immediate issues, there are other difficulties. First, "socialism in one country," particularly in a globalized interdependent world economy with neoliberal international institutions, is not possible. A cornerstone of the neoliberal economy is the promotion of the combination of capital mobility and labor immobility. Transforming the neoliberal economy in a socialist direction requires the opposite, and these remain for obvious reasons the big unmentionables in combatting the material power of finance and the ideological power of xenophobic populism.

Further, if there is an incoming Labour government, where are the resources to transform neoliberalism to come from? The UK working class is extraordinarily weak politically, because trade unionism has been so marginalized, first by the assault of neoliberalism, and second, by the subsequent New Labour acquiescence. The difficulties of increasing taxation revenues have already been mentioned. But there are also difficulties in motivating citizens to take up their rights of economic decision-making, in coordinating that decision-making

across the economy, in reconciling local and national economic interests, and so on. Replacing the allocation mechanisms of a market economy in however gradual a form requires both some detailed elaboration of measures that are at present sketchy and not wholly convincing, and some serious building of political support.

These are difficult problems. And yet perhaps Labour's program is beginning to push at an open door (or at least one that might be ajar). Consider again Figure 4. Because capitalism is technically progressive over the long term, one would expect the trend in the rate of profit to be determined by the trend in capital productivity, and short-term fluctuations around the trend to be driven by movements in the profit share. This is what Figure 4 shows. The rate of profit follows the overall pattern of capital productivity, but with more fluctuations corresponding to movements in the profit share. Broadly four different periods can be identified.

1. 1945–1973: the golden age, ending around the first OPEC oil price rise, characterized by *falling* capital productivity;
2. 1973–79: the transition to neoliberalism, with fluctuating but still generally falling capital productivity;
3. 1979–2009/10: the neoliberal era, beginning with the 1979 Conservative general election victory, embracing Blair's New Labour, and finishing with the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government; characterized by *rising* capital productivity;
4. 2010–17: the age of austerity following the depths of the financial crisis to the present; characterized by *falling* capital productivity.

This paper has treated the age of austerity as a post-2010 phase of neo-liberalism. But in terms of underlying economic fundamentals, the movement of capital productivity is defining an austerity era that is structurally different from the neoliberal era. Whereas the transition from social democracy to neoliberalism in the 1970s was a short one (its advocates knew exactly what they wanted), the transition from neoliberalism to its successor is likely to be protracted since there is no precise vision of what the future might look like. Gramsci famously remarked, “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”²⁸ Right-wing populism is of course one possible future, but so too is Corbynism (with or without Corbyn himself). In that sense, an alternative is still within our grasp. ✎

APPENDIX

Data Sources

All data are from the Office of National Statistics at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/> and are spliced into the relevant series from the Bank of England’s research dataset “A Millennium of Macroeconomic Data”, version 3.1, available at <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/statistics/research-datasets>.

Definitions

The Rate of Profit: There is no one rate of profit, but many possible definitions depending on the object of investigation. That used in this paper is a macroeconomic definition appropriate to an index of profitability for the economy as a whole.

²⁸ Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

The numerator, profit, is GDP at factor cost less imputed rent less compensation of employees less an estimated wage component of mixed income (mixed income multiplied by the wage share in gross value added for all companies).

The denominator, the fixed capital stock, is UK total nonfinancial assets (valued at current cost) less dwellings less the implied value of land under dwellings less other machinery, equipment, and weapons systems for central government.

The income denominator in the profit share, and the income numerator in capital productivity, is GDP at factor cost less imputed rent.

Define r as the rate of profit, Π as total profit, K as the fixed capital stock, Y as total net output, H_p as the hours of productive labor and P an index of prices. Then the rate of profit $r = \Pi/K$, which can be written as the product of the profit share (Π/Y) and capital productivity (Y/K). Capital productivity in turn can be expressed as the ratio of labor productivity ($(Y/P)/H_p$) to capital intensity ($(K/P)/H_p$).

Globalization: UK profits for the production of exports of goods and services is taken as the share of exports in gdp multiplied by total UK profits.

The ascension of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the British Labour Party constitutes one of the most sudden and dramatic politics shifts in recent times. While in many ways a stunning victory for the Left, it has also unleashed an unrelenting and vicious campaign against him, both within his own party and from the British establishment. Through a combination of adroit maneuvering, a simple and compelling political platform, and the continued degeneration of the Tory party, Corbyn has withstood the myriad attacks on him thus far. But how secure is his control over the party, and how prepared is he for power?

INTERVIEW

“THE LEFT IN THE GLOBAL NORTH WILL CONTINUE TO GET STRONGER”

GRACE BLAKELEY

How do you think things have gone for the British left in the two years since the 2017 election?

I think there are a couple of different trends that are worth attending to. On the one hand, we have the deepening of the Corbyn project’s social base. Organizations like Momentum and The World Transformed have built out, with a much greater engagement in political education in particular. You’re starting to see The World Transformed operate as a locus for the political education of the Left in the UK, and events springing up in various places all around the country: Birmingham Transformed, Newcastle Transformed, Brighton Transformed, and so on.

There is an increasingly self-confident movement that is able to discuss ideas and conduct political education in a way that we haven’t seen in a very, very long time. I think that will only deepen as time goes on. As the social and resource basis of these organizations expands, the movement will further deepen and broaden out.

BLAKELEY

At the same time, the basis of the success in 2017 — a focus, after it had been avoided for forty years, on class — is being blurred, if not eradicated, by the debate around and process of Brexit. The Brexit division is not primarily based on class — this is the biggest struggle we face. It cuts across the class divide in this country, and undercuts the relevance and precision of the economic message that we've been putting forward.

In 2017, the big ideas that resonated broadly were nationalizations and taking a vast swath of goods and services, from public services to housing provision, outside of the market mechanism. It was the attack on vested interests, on big business, on finance. This added up to a picture of what a good life might look like, on socialist terms.

The division of the many and the few, as I flesh out in the book, is essentially an effort to bring together a coalition of people who live off work versus people who live off wealth — effectively workers versus owners. The divides over Brexit, which cut across both class and identity, along with a whole load of other things like geography, make that message much more difficult to effectively communicate. As finance and investment is allowed to flow much more freely around the world, we see parts of cities like London, Dubai, or New York sucked up into this ethereal realm of the global economy, while many other communities in the rest of the country are left behind.

Today we're seeing something of a reversal of globalization as it runs up against its political contradictions. We are in a crisis moment of the neoliberal political-economic model, which has resulted in novel political trends like this mass movement against an international, bureaucratic organization like the European Union. Rather than attempting to fit the concerns that motivated the Leave vote in Northern working-class communities into an identitarian frame, one that portrays Northern working-class people putting their cultural interests in front of their economic interests, we should say, "No, these people are perfectly right to recognize that the last thirty years of financial globalization has significantly harmed them, while benefiting

other parts of the working class in different areas of the country.”

The fact that we’ve been unable to do that has turned the Brexit cleavage into something like a culture war. From there, you can envision a situation in which the UK left ends up in a situation not unlike the US left.

This is not to say the specific interests and concerns of black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) members of the working class do not have a significant place in the socialist project. Obviously they do, because capitalism is not just a system of economic exploitation, it’s also a system of social, cultural, gender, racial, and other forms of oppression. But the question that we have today is whether we have a project that is able to combine a critique of imperialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and economic exploitation into a wider critique of capitalism, or if those issues are treated separately and we end up with a tug-of-war between those who want to frame the major political cleavage on grounds of identity and culture, and those who focus specifically on economics.

What hasn’t happened in the last two years is a big uptick in strike activity, a rising tide of labor movement activity at the base. Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party has coincided with one of the least active periods in the recent history of the British left, in terms of social and street mobilization. How much has that contributed to the inability to stem the rise of cultural conflicts?

It’s an oversimplification to suggest that there are two poles of political contestation in this country, one of which is economic and one of which is identity-based, because those sets of issues interact with one another in incredibly complicated ways. We have failed to deliver a cohesive critique of capitalism that is able to overcome that quite simplistic identity/economic dichotomy. Why have we failed? We have often consistently refused to combine race and class into a narrative that says, “There is a tiny elite that benefits from the fact that different

sections of the working class are scapegoating one another — we all have more in common with each other than we do with those on top.” There’s lots of very interesting work on that kind of combined race/class narrative in the United States which suggests it’s very powerful. The same can be said for gender as well.

Additionally, we fail to connect a critique of domestic capitalism with an analysis of imperialism. This is, in part, due to the success of the 2017 campaign, which pitted workers against owners, which said capitalism isn’t working, which said we need to be able to move towards a democratic-socialist system if we are going to combat any of the major challenges facing humanity. This message worked so well at the time that we thought we didn’t need to take it any further. We should have continued toward a much broader critique of capitalism that incorporated an understanding of how contemporary capitalism subjugates and divides the working class into different categories that can be subject to differential levels of exploitation.

This is very difficult to achieve in practice because any viable democratic-socialist project needs to include progressive Remain voices, as well as those sections of the working class that voted to leave. It needs to include everyone who works for a wage. And that requires, as I said, a very holistic view of capitalism.

So that’s the discursive challenge. But movement-building and mobilization is really the biggest challenge the Left faces today. We’ve been having this debate for a very long time about who the revolutionary subject is in modern capitalist systems. And for a long time there’s been this idea that the working class, for whatever reason, is no longer going to be that subject. Many have argued that this question doesn’t even matter in the first place, because of the rise of social movements that mobilize based on the multiple forms of oppression that capitalism generates, whether that’s race, or gender, or something else, and that these can complement class-based movements. But as you say, we have yet to see the levels of social disruption and contestation that we last saw in Britain during the 1970s.

I think there are two reasons for that. First, the vast majority of the global proletariat does not live in the Global North. Capital ownership, however, is concentrated in the Global North, and because of the political economy of financialization, the benefits of capital ownership have been extended to a wider group of upper middling earners through homeownership and pension funds. And that is a very real problem.

It's likely that any revolutionary attempt to overthrow capitalist power relations will have to happen in the Global South, which is why anti-imperialism is such an important part of socialist movements in the Global North. At the same time, I do not think that the nature of imperialism prevents socialist organization and mobilization in countries in the Global North. And that's partly to do with reasons that I outline in the book, partly to do with financialization.

The kind of political/economic bargain that I just mentioned, which is based on the extension of asset ownership to a larger number of higher wage earners, was premised upon the liberalization of credit and the privatization of a huge number of formerly collectively owned assets. That model created a limited fix that encouraged capitalist growth from the end of the 1970s through the crisis of 2007–2008. That fix increased returns to the top 1 percent, consolidated the power and hardened the boundaries of the 1 percent, so we now have a much more monopolistic form of capitalism than we have ever had in the past.

What we are now seeing results from the fact that this model has reached the limits of its ability to placate a large enough section of workers in the Global North. You're seeing this with the housing crisis, you're seeing it with continued austerity that's eroding public services and reducing living standards. There are many people in Britain today who increasingly have an interest in moving away from the status quo. And those contradictions are only going to accelerate as the system deteriorates. How do we turn that discontent — which can be mobilized either by the far right or the far left — into a potential base for socialist transformation in the Global North?

This is the impetus behind Corbynism, which is an attempt to use those tensions and sources of conflict to gain control over the state, to rebalance power away from capital and towards labor. And in doing so, increase the social and political confidence of labor. That's really the task of a parliamentary socialism today. The question then, which has been obviously the question on the Left since the days of the Independent Labour Party, is whether parliamentary socialism is possible absent a mass workers' movement that is disrupting capitalist relations outside the formal political system.

In 2017 we came a lot closer to the Left winning office than we have in a very long time. Obviously, had we gained control over the state then, we would have faced all the same problems that people like Ralph Miliband have been writing about for decades. The Labour Party was and probably still is insufficiently democratic to prevent the rightward drift that inevitably takes place when a workers' movement collides with the power of the British state.

We have made inroads, definitely, over the last couple of years. We're still not really there.

So where is the Labour Party? The Labour right has had a resurgence over the last year or so, partly because of Brexit, partly because of the antisemitism claims. How strong is the Left's current position within the party? And what reforms has it failed to achieve since 2017?

When we're talking about the Labour Party, we have to take different parts of the organization in turn. The Left's position in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) remains pretty weak, not just because right-wing MPs predominate, but also because only a minority of the socialist MPs have an understanding of what socialism really is, and what the role of the Labour Party is in furthering that. A lot of the leading lights of the Corbyn front bench came out of this Unite program, that started before the Corbyn surge, in 2010. That is one of the only reasons why we've actually ended up with more left-wing MPs than we've had in a while.

Some progress has been made on the selection process. This has obviously not gone far enough because we're not at open selections, but the trigger ballots process combined with the fact there are lots of more Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) in which the Left has control, means that in the next election, even if we lose seats, we will gain more left-wing MPs. This will start to shift the balance of power within the PLP.

But on the current trajectory it would take decades for the Left to be in a position of power within the PLP. Then there's obviously all the other elements of the Labour Party. There is the National Executive Committee (NEC) and the National Policy Forum (NPF); you've got administrative and bureaucratic positions within the party itself. The Left has actually made substantial inroads in all of those areas, and I think that will continue.

Then there is the relationship between the unions and the party, which over the last decade has been positive. But I would say that most of the unions are at the moment insufficiently internally democratic to facilitate the kind of left-wing push they would need to for the Labour Party to maintain a left-wing orientation in a confrontation with the state.

Finally, there's the membership. The left-wing members are now predominant. The question is how the Left's numbers and energy are organized and mobilized within the Labour Party. The Democracy Review was a step forward, but it wasn't enough to ensure that the predominance of left-wing Labour members ensures a left-wing Labour Party. The question of internal democracy is crucial in this regard. And unfortunately, I don't think we are going to get to the level of internal party democracy we need to reach by the time we are able to enter government.

The Corbyn project faces a unique difficulty in getting its message across because of the deep hostility of the British media. The British press has always been right-wing, but the Labour Party has

typically been able to rely on the Daily Mirror and the *Guardian* to back it up. Whereas now, the *Guardian* in particular is arguably more hostile to Corbyn than the right-wing press. In the absence of any major British media outlet that is reliably pro-Corbyn, how do you go about getting that message across?

On the one hand, a hostile media could be seen as an asset, because a hostile media can reliably be used to project your message to the public. They will constantly turn to the public and say “Oh my God, Corbyn’s going to do this policy, it’s absolutely insane.” They made a massive misstep when they started talking about rail nationalization in 2017. All it did was project the message, and people started saying, “Oh they want to nationalize the railways, that’s great.” They’re amplifying the message that we want to be heard.

Even so, that isn’t close to being enough on its own. We need ways of communicating our message in a positive and constructive way, which combine policy proposals with a broader vision of what a socialist future would look like. And I think the most important way of doing that, and again we saw this in 2017, is exciting and mobilizing Labour’s base. Most people distrust, and in many cases actively loathe, the media as a whole. It’s one of the least trusted institutions in society. So when it’s attacking you that’s not necessarily a bad thing. But it also means that it’s a less useful medium for getting your message across. People have reacted to the reduction of interest in the mass media by going to a whole variety of different sources for their news, particularly social media.

That’s helped some left media organizations like *Tribune* or *Novara*. But I think that the party itself has been less effective at using the grassroots energy of the members to communicate its message. Because in the context of that mass distrust of the media, what is going to convince people more? Hearing someone like me go on *Question Time* and say, “This is what the Labour Party is going to do,” or hearing your friend, neighbor, coworker, say, “Have you heard about

this thing that the Labour Party has considered doing?”

The 500,000 members of the Labour Party are our biggest asset. That’s why I’m taking my book to 75-plus CLPs and Momentum groups all across the country. I can go and do as many BBC shows as I like, but it will only have an impact on a tiny portion of the population. If I’m going to a CLP group that has maybe fifty people in attendance, they listen, they ask questions, they think, they engage, they go out and discuss these things. That’s infinitely more powerful over the long run. And I think Labour has missed a bit of a trick in figuring out how to use the membership and the wider movement for that purpose. The issue with Brexit, again, is that as long as the movement is divided against itself on this question we are not focused on projecting our message outward.

If, and it’s a big if, the next election goes well and the Labour Party manages to return a majority government, do you think the Corbyn leadership is prepared for the challenges of government? Do you think it’s prepared for the level of hostility, for the economic warfare that would be waged against a left government? Do you think it’s prepared to take the radical measures it has been promising to take up for years now?

A Labour government that came to power during this point would have to do the inverse of the Thatcherite project: use the state to effect class war, but on behalf of the workers against capital. And that takes real guts. Even Thatcher encountered unremitting hostility during the beginnings of her project, not just from the media or the unions, but from elements of the Tory party that didn’t understand the kind of hegemonic shift that she was attempting to undertake.

There would undoubtedly be the same sort of thing within Labour, and it would be rendered more powerful by the fact that Labour has to, in one way or another, operate in a more democratic way than the Conservative Party. Thatcher could effectively run a kitchen

cabinet and control everything from within that. A Labour government would find it much harder to do that. There are people in positions of power in the Labour Party who understand that that is what the next Labour government would have to do. They understand that it would effectively be having to undertake this class-war project from inside the state. But they don't have the social base that a socialist project from below would need to rely on to achieve its most ambitious goals. Which as you said, would be a combination of the labor movement, various social movements, a coalition of the most active and class-conscious members of the working class. So you've got the issues of internal Labour Party democracy. You've got the absence of a strong and well-developed social base, and you've got the fact that you are taking on the power of the British state, supported by global capital and US imperialism.

BLAKELEY

In terms of the social base, the Brexit question matters there too, right? Because many working-class people in some of the most deprived parts of the country who are most inclined to support change voted to Leave.

Yes. There are people that would say it doesn't matter if we lose working-class heartlands in the North, because we can rely on social movements who are much more class-conscious than perhaps large parts of what traditionally would have been Labour's base. I don't think that the same kind of militancy can be expected from large parts of what would constitute those groups in Britain today. I don't think you can rely on just one or the other — we need to mobilize all sections of the working class.

Let's look at that question of a left government in a different way. If Labour wins the election, what should it do? How should it approach power, what should its first measures be, and how should it secure itself against the onslaught?

The basic strategy would entail a combination of the labor movement with various other social movements supporting and pressuring the government from below. So that would be the revolutionary subject, I suppose. And the support of that coalition would be necessary for any project that would aim to shift power relations away from where they currently stand. In Thatcher's day, you had effectively a tripartite system of unions, business owners, and the state, with the state committed to full employment, based on mediating between those different interests. Thatcherism was about subverting that arrangement and giving the clearly predominant share of power to capital in general — international financial capital in particular — backed by the British state. The Corbynite analog of that would be the executive of the Labour Party, supported by an expansive social movement, working to shift power away from people who live off wealth, towards people who live off work.

There are two main sets of tasks related to that project: the first is eroding the power of your enemies, and the second one is strengthening the power of and expanding the consciousness of your base. In the UK, today, eroding enemy power involves a whole host of measures to constrain the power of capital, and particularly of the most powerful section of capital, which is financial capital. There is not, as some people might argue, a division between financial and industrial capital the Labour Party can exploit in order to ally with the latter to defeat the former. That's not how financialization works. Today, finance acts as the coordinating mechanism for the whole of capital.

In terms of specific policies, this includes first and foremost the imposition of capital controls. I argue for qualitative capital controls that operate as a tax. So if you take £100,000 out of the country, we'll tax you at a rate of 50 percent. You must give £50,000 over to the Exchequer. And that level of taxation could obviously be increased and decreased based on circumstances.

Another policy is proper bank regulation that limits private credit creation. Cheap and almost limitless private credit is what allows

people who already own large amounts of wealth, large amounts of collateral, to expand excessively over into other parts of the economy. Capital controls, limiting private credit creation, loan-to-value ratios for housing, leverage ratios, all these sorts of things are technically simplistic ways to reduce the power of the finance sector.

Then there is a question of ownership in the rest of the economy. I've laid out the idea of a people's asset manager that operates as a mechanism to socialize ownership without resorting to mass state nationalizations of everything. Nationalization is obviously appropriate in many cases, but it's not appropriate for everything. You combine that with all the stuff that's already underway in terms of alternative forms of ownership, and you start to get towards a situation in which the power of finance capital as allocator of investment, as owner, is substantially reduced.

At the same time, you have to undertake measures to strengthen the power of your base. And that means both increasing people's capacity to mobilize and reducing the power of the market mechanism to determine the scope of government action. So it's a process of improving and expanding collective bargaining, removing the regressive anti-union laws that have been implemented recently, alongside a program of decommodification. This entails taking the means of subsistence out of allocation by the market mechanism. That means mass expansion of social housing, free transport, free utilities, a certain basic amount of food, clothes, etc. Everything that you need to subsist is provided to you for free outside the market mechanism.

There is a lot that nation-states can do. Capitalism today is hugely, arguably more than ever before in history, reliant on the coordinating capacity of the nation-state. Look at the way in which the private sector has changed in terms of its relationship with the state since the financial crisis. It's not just that you had the bailouts, you had quantitative easing to sustain the conditions that allow finance to continue to be profitable.

The nation-state is incredibly important in modern capitalism, and control of it is vital to effect a shift towards socialism. But unless you start to see things happening internationally at the same time, there's only so long that that process can continue. Ideally, you would see a Corbyn government in the United Kingdom at the same time as a Sanders government in the United States. That's the absolute utopian ideal. What's more realistic is a process that would slowly aim to increase the already latent but repressed energy of movements in the Global South to effect social transformation in their states. In my book I write a bit about how a Corbyn project could build new alliances with social movements, with labor movements, all over the Global South. It means international development banks that support global Green New Deals, withdrawing support for neocolonial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank — and yes, the European Union — it means resisting US imperialism at every turn, which is going to be more effective in the context of the continuing conflict between China and the United States. Boosting the power of labor movements in the Global South is key to social transformation in the long term. Just doing it in the United States and the United Kingdom isn't going to be enough.

What happens if Labour loses the next general election? The likelihood is that Corbyn loses his position as leader of the Labour Party. In that situation, are we going to see the Left completely marginalized, or has it made enough gains to hold on inside the party structures?

There is generally a lot of pessimism about the use, not just of the Labour Party but of political parties in general, as vectors of socialist transformation. There is also pessimism about their ability to act as potential vehicles for the rebalancing of power that would facilitate stronger social movements. Many of these doubts about the ability of parties to actually use the powers of the state to rebalance power relations in society came from the very particular moment that we found ourselves in between 1980 and 2007. This was, of course,

the “end of history” moment, where one could not even imagine a political party, of whatever kind, that had any sort of mass support, challenging in any fundamental way the social relations that underpin capitalism. Today it’s implausible to say that a political party could never be used to rebalance power in the way that I’m attempting to lay out here.

It’s a different thing to say that the Labour Party, or other left political parties, may or may not be explicitly socialist parties. But the idea that the Left could completely move away from electoral politics altogether is farcical. The prevalence of those attitudes prior to 2007 was really determined by the historical juncture in which we found ourselves. So whatever happens, the Left is going to continue to have a relationship — a strong relationship and an important relationship — with the Labour Party in the UK. Whether the Labour Party remains the locus of socialist organizing in Britain, which is a really historically unusual situation, is another question. I would argue that it would not be a positive development if the Labour Party continued in the role it’s playing now in coordinating different social movements and the labor movement to attempt to disrupt capitalism.

We really want that mantle of disruption, of agitation, of political education, to be passed from Labour, which is always going to have to have a more managerial and less revolutionary tinge, given what we’re expecting it to do, to the movements, regardless of what happens in the next election.

I think that is what will happen if Labour loses the next election. I don’t think the revitalized movement for socialism will dissipate. As I said at the very beginning of this interview, there is a lot of energy at the grassroots. I think someone like me, who is spending a lot of time talking at different CLP meetings, talking at different events and groups, engaging with the people who are ultimately currently the base of this project, can see that that energy is not going to go away.

The experience of the financial crisis, followed by the emergence of Brexit, followed by the emergence of Corbynism, is central to people’s

political identity. This, combined with the fact that my generation is going to continue to get worse off, that this model we have is not going to be able to provide an increase in living standards for the vast majority of people, means that the impetus towards social transformation is going to grow and continue to expand.

The Labour Party's future, on the other hand, is obviously much more contingent. We've seen this with left political parties all over the world. The emergence of the left movement is much more dependent upon underlying socioeconomic conditions. The relationship between those movements and parties is much more contingent, and related to historical change, related to the way in which those parties function, the relationships between individuals in those spaces. And there is nothing to suggest that Labour will continue to play the role that it currently does on the Left.

If we lose, Corbyn's likely to be forced out. And Corbyn being out will be a significant dent in the self-confidence of the membership. But, I'm still fairly optimistic about Labour's future, even if we do lose the next election. In part, this is because if we do win the next election, it wouldn't be ready to implement the kind of projects and provide the return on the hope that people have invested in it, in the way that people expect of it.

And the leadership contest after Corbyn will, I think, potentially surprise a little bit. I think there are a lot of people in the Labour Party who genuinely do think getting rid of Jeremy Corbyn means getting rid of all their problems. And there are, if not a lot of very good potential candidates, at least some candidates. I'm thinking primarily of someone like Laura Pidcock, who is inexperienced but really gets it in terms of strategy and policy, who could carry on the mantle effectively.

Whether or not that happens, again, it's contingent and dependent. Who knows?

Does the British left come out of Corbynism in a better place, even if Corbyn loses this next election?

Yes, it does. Partly because of Corbynism itself. Partly because of the structures that have been put in place, the institutions that have emerged, the self-confidence, the new narrative, and all the rest. But partly just because of the historical juncture that we find ourselves in today.

I don't want to paint a deterministic view of the reemergence of socialism around the world, because it's happened very differently in different places depending upon particular national histories, the relationship between movements and parties, the impact of the financial crisis, etc. But there are trends which suggest that the Left in the Global North will continue to get stronger. And there are reasons to suspect that even had it not been for the rise of Corbynism, the Left in the United Kingdom would still have been getting stronger, and we would still likely be talking about socialism today, where we haven't been able to talk about it for forty years.

In 2008, neoliberal, financialized capitalism reached the peak of its contradictions. There is no way of reviving a model that sees the 1 percent gain the vast majority of the increases in growth, while also rendering that model stable by providing greater levels of asset ownership to upper-middle earners. Because doing so would require the creation of double the amount of debt that's already been created. It would require the expansion of credit creation beyond the capacity of the economy that we currently have to expand credit.

Household debt is already at 150-something percent of household disposable incomes, and that was up from 80 percent in the 1970s. You'd have to have a similar sort of increase, which is not only implausible on its own terms. It's implausible in the sense that there aren't enough assets of any level, in the context of a fairly unproductive capitalism, for that amount of credit to purchase to facilitate the kind of political economy that emerged in the precrisis period. So the model is failing on its own terms, and you see that now in terms of falling productivity, falling levels of production investment, falling wages,

a slowdown in globalization as the driving force of all this financialization before the crisis.

And it's also failing politically. There is now a growing constituency, and a constituency that will grow every year, that has more to gain from a fundamental rupture with the status quo, than a continuation of it. At the moment you're seeing this often in generational terms. And that is basically to do with the fact of which generation was able to jump on the ladder of the housing crisis during the asset price inflation boom. Obviously people who are now retiring — a lot of the wealthier members, and actually middle-earning members of that generation — were able to jump on the housing ladder, were able to benefit from capital gains that now allow them to retire comfortably.

But increasingly that is not going to be the case. If we moved to a system of asset-based welfare, the individualization of risk rather than its socialization, then that system is going to become less and less effective as more people are prevented from being able to own assets, and as asset price inflation reaches its limits. We talk a lot about the housing crisis, but the pensions crisis is something that is really completely not commented upon. But most pension funds have unimaginably large deficits, not enough assets to be able to invest in, partly because governments aren't creating enough debt, partly because capitalism isn't working, so there aren't enough assets that create the returns that fund people's retirements. And no one's doing anything about it, because we see it as a problem for ten or twenty years down the line.

The environmental crisis is something that is only going to continue to radicalize people as it gets worse. We are obviously now at a point where we are attempting to control climate change, while also recognizing we are going to have to adapt to it. Add to that an austerity project that has led to the erosion of the National Health Service, the deterioration in schools, rising crime, and so on. All of these issues are becoming very hot political topics that people want to address in a radical way. The concatenation of all these things means that there's

going to be an increasingly large constituency of people that want fundamental rupture with the status quo, rather than its continuation.

So I don't see why we shouldn't be optimistic about the potential of socialism, because capitalism is literally eating itself. There is the question of who benefits from that politically, of course. Because unless we're able to get over all the massive problems that we've discussed during this interview, it's likely that the far right will be the biggest beneficiary, at least in the short term. By the time the far right has been dealt with, you get to the point of climate change and environmental degradation that means the capacity of a socialist project is, if not completely destroyed, massively limited.

So what happens in the next couple of years is really important. We can't just say, fine, let's forget Brexit for now and lose the next election, and then come back again in five years and ride to victory. What happens next is really very important, and I hope it goes our way. But I'm not sure that it will.

I do want to end by saying that it is also the case that what we believe and what we tell one another, and the way we make sense of our world and our trajectory and the state of our movement, has power in determining what happens next. So I don't accept a pessimistic narrative that focuses relentlessly on our weaknesses and the constraints that we face. As socialists we have a duty to be optimistic, and to communicate that optimism to one another and to the world — even when it seems insane to believe that what we're talking about could ever happen. So yes, there are lots of challenges, and I'm very worried about what could happen in the next couple of years. But I am also optimistic about our capacity as a movement and as human beings to work together to build a better world. ✎

DONATE

Catalyst is in its infancy –
it needs your support. Please
send your tax-deductible
contribution to:

Jacobin Foundation
388 Atlantic Ave.
Brooklyn NY 11217

catalyst-journal.com/donate

The destruction of slavery in the United States was a landmark in the global history of emancipation, and remains the most revolutionary transformation in America's national history. This essay argues that the process leading up to the overthrow of slavery was neither the accidental byproduct of capitalist development, nor the triumph of an enlightened activist vanguard, but a battle waged and won in the field of democratic mass politics.

THE MASS POLITICS OF ANTISLAVERY

MATT KARP

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the United States was the largest, strongest, and richest slave society in the history of the modern world. By 1860 nearly four million enslaved laborers, valued collectively at over three billion dollars, produced an agricultural product that accounted for well over half of American global exports. The United States did not stand alone as a major slave-holding society — the slave economies of Brazil and Cuba were also booming — but it was unquestionably the most dynamic and influential in world affairs. At a moment when there were more enslaved workers and more slave-produced goods than ever before, the political and economic power of the United States led the way.¹

The recent flood of scholarship on this general subject, devoted to the intimate historical relationship between slavery and capitalism, would not have surprised contemporary observers. “So long as slavery shall possess the cotton-fields, the sugar-fields, and the

1 For population and trade estimates, see Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011), 296–97.

rice-fields of the world,” declared New York Senator William Seward in 1850, “so long will Commerce and Capital yield it toleration and sympathy.” Today economic historians continue to debate the nature of this relationship: in what ways did enslaved African labor fuel and shape capitalist development, both in the United States and across the broader Atlantic World?² It is not the purpose of this essay to intervene in that important debate. Instead I will take up the challenge posed by Seward in the next sentence of that same 1850 speech, in which he contemplated not the economic structures that gave slavery its power, but the political effort necessary to overthrow it: “Emancipation,” said Seward, “is a democratic revolution.” Likening the struggle against American slavery to the struggle against European aristocracy, Seward argued that any challenge to the power of the slaveholding class must come through mass democratic politics.

This political dimension of the question, as James Oakes has observed, has often gone missing from the recent debates around slavery and capitalism in the United States.³ And yet in some ways it is the politics of antislavery, more than the economics of slavery itself, that made the mid-nineteenth-century American experience so distinctive. The largest and strongest slave society in the modern world history also produced the largest and strongest antislavery political movement in modern world history. Almost alone among its contemporaries, the United States ended chattel slavery not through

KARP

2 *Speech of William H. Seward, on the Admission of California ...* (Washington: Buell & Blanchard, 1850), 42. For some key position statements in this multisided discussion, see Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); John J. Clegg, “Slavery and Capitalism,” *Critical Historical Studies* 2 (2015): 281–304; Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, “Cotton, Slavery, and the New History of Capitalism,” *Explorations in Economic History* 67 (January 2018), 1–17; Walter Johnson et al, “Forum: To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice,” *Boston Review*, February 20, 2018; Gavin Wright, “Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited,” Tawney Lecture at Economic History Society annual meeting (Queen’s University Belfast, April 7, 2019).

3 James Oakes, “Capitalism and Slavery and the Civil War,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 89 (Spring 2016), 195–220.

royal decree, judicial verdict, or armed insurrection, but through mass democratic struggle. To be sure, electoral victories alone were not sufficient to destroy human bondage: that required the hard and bloody work of the American Civil War. But the legal emancipations of that war were all threatened, announced, executed, and sustained democratically, by an antislavery political party that won office through national elections. Even the armed resistance of the Southern slaves themselves, so essential to the defeat of the Confederate rebellion, can hardly be understood without reference to the power wielded by the slaves' Northern allies in government. Every emancipation that came at the point of a bullet began, and in a critical sense depended, on the face of a ballot.

In the classic formulation of W.E.B. Du Bois, the motor behind this Northern political revolution was the "abolition-democracy," a vanguard of antislavery radicals whose effective alliance with African Americans in the South made emancipation and Reconstruction possible. For Du Bois, this group only represented "a minority in the North," which was otherwise "overwhelmingly in favor of Negro slavery, so long as this did not interfere with Northern moneymaking." And yet the narrative of *Black Reconstruction*, beginning in 1860, largely skimmed past the political struggle in which this heroic minority somehow obtained control of a federal government heretofore dominated by slaveholders. This was a crucial element of the story: it was the electoral triumph of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party, after all, that sparked secession and first opened the door to a military struggle against slavery thereafter. In fact, the construction of an antislavery *majority* in the North — the true "abolition-democracy" — was an essential precondition for the Civil War's emancipatory bond between Republican politicians, Northern soldiers, and Southern slaves. It was "votes," as Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, that "made war and emancipated millions."⁴

4 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992 [1935]), 81–83, 182–236; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago:

If contemporary scholars have eagerly documented the many links between American slavery and capitalism, they have been far slower to explore the relationship between American emancipation and democracy. For the most part, US historians remain less impressed by any fundamental conflict between slavery and democracy than their apparent inextricability. This is the devious and tragic “American paradox” proposed by Edmund S. Morgan nearly half a century ago, in which rights for free white Americans depended on the oppression of African slaves. Morgan’s story centered on the rather specific history of colonial Virginia, but that has not stopped scholars from regarding it as a kind of skeleton key for the whole of American experience, in which the legacy of slavery remains unchangingly entwined with the democratic promise of freedom.⁵ But whatever its merits as an interpretation of Bacon’s Rebellion or the mind of Thomas Jefferson, this “paradox” evades the obvious and profound tensions between American slavery and American democracy, across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Above all, it does little to help us understand the long history of antislavery struggle in the United States, which — from the earliest abolition societies to the battles of Reconstruction — nearly always rooted itself in democratic politics.⁶ In the 1850s, the mass movement that broke the power of the master class took shape as a political party within Northern electoral democracy.

Marxist historians, from Du Bois onward, have been better at identifying the basic contradictions between slavery and democratic

A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 7.

5 Edmund S. Morgan, “Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox,” *Journal of American History* 59, (June 1972), 5–29; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); Carole Emberton, “Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Southern History* 82 (May 2016): 377–79.

6 For important recent work on this theme, from a number of angles, see John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason, eds., *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Corey M. Brooks, “Reconsidering Politics in the Study of American Abolitionists,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8 (June 2018), 291–317.

politics. And yet very often, the adjective “democratic” tends to function either as a synonym or subordinate modifier for the more historically significant category of “bourgeois.” From this angle, the political rout of the Slave Power was less a victory for popular democracy than a loud consequence of much more deep-lying structural developments, that is, “the subordination of merchant- to industrial capital in the US economy.”⁷ To be sure, economic change in the early nineteenth-century North — including the decline of bound labor, the spread of wage relations, and new transportation links between markets in the Northwest and Northeast — helped provide a material foundation for the social critique of slavery in the 1850s. As Eric Foner has argued influentially, the Republican celebration of “free labor” drew in part on “loyalty to the society of small-scale capitalism” in the North.⁸

Yet the triumph of the Republicans cannot be reduced to the victory of industrial capitalism, either in material or in ideological terms. On the eve of the Civil War, over 70 percent of Northerners lived in rural areas and made a living from agriculture: this distinctive society of small farmers, which formed the bedrock of the Republican Party, certainly sought economic development but hardly organized itself around the accumulation of capital. The average size of Northern

7 Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 242–45; Louis M. Hacker, *The Triumph of American Capitalism: The Development of Forces in American History to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 248–66, 312–38; John Ashworth, “Free Labor, Wage Labor, and the Slave Power: Republicanism and the Republican Party in the 1850s” in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 128–46. For a conservative affirmation of this basic view, see Allen C. Guelzo, “Reconstruction as a Pure Bourgeois Revolution,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 39 (Winter 2018), 50–73.

8 Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 [1970]), esp. 11–72; see also John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, vol. 2, *The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173–303; Marc Egnal, *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 101–49, 205–57.

farms decreased across most of the nineteenth century.⁹ Meanwhile the antebellum Northern owners of capital themselves had very little to do with the origins, the organization, or the electoral triumph of uncompromising antislavery. Indeed, many of them fought it at every turn.¹⁰ The opponents of the slaveholding aristocracy, William Seward reminded an audience in Wisconsin, could not rely on the virtue of “commercial and manufacturing communities” to save them. “There is no virtue in Pearl street, in Wall street, in Court street, in Chestnut street, in any street of the great commercial cities, that can save the great democratic government of ours, when you cease to uphold it with your intelligent votes ... You must, therefore, lead us.”¹¹

The Republican Party aimed to transform the slave South not simply through economic modernization — by building railroads or factories in a backward hinterland — but necessarily through political struggle, by organizing Northern voters into a phalanx that could overthrow the master class and its allies in Washington. The Achilles’ heel of the Slave Power was not its inability to adapt to capitalism, but its weak foundation within a majoritarian democracy. “The whole

KARP

9 James L. Huston, *The British Gentry, The Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), xi–xvi, 75–128; Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015); Ariel Ron, *Grassroots Leviathan: Northern Agrarian Nationalism in the Slaveholding Republic* (forthcoming, Johns Hopkins University Press).

10 Philip S. Foner, *Business and Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1941); Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 78–97; Noam Maggor, *Brahmin Capitalism: Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America’s First Gilded Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 22–36.

11 Seward, speech at Madison, September 12, 1860, in *The Works of William H. Seward*, ed. George E. Baker (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1884), vol. 4, 320–21. As David Brion Davis has noted, even scholars “as far separated ideologically as Robin Blackburn and Robert William Fogel agree that the triumphs of abolitionism ... must be explained in political, not economic terms”: Davis, “The Perils of Doing History By Ahistorical Abstraction,” in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Product of Historical Interpretation*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 296.

number of slaveholders is only three hundred and fifty thousand,” Seward pointed out in 1855, just “one hundredth part of the entire population of the country.” To overcome this antebellum 1 percent, he argued, antislavery forces must turn to the “agency of the ballot-box,” with a firm confidence that “the people of the United States do not prefer the wealth of the few to the liberty of the many.”¹²

Approaching the antebellum birth of the “abolition-democracy” as a political revolution, this essay underlines the radicalism of that revolution from two distinct perspectives. First, by putting American antislavery politics in context with other struggles against servitude across the Atlantic World, we can better understand the particularity of the US experience. The scale of the political mobilization against slaveholding power, in the decade before the Civil War, distinguished the American antislavery movement from its international peers throughout the nineteenth century. Second, by exploring the genuinely popular basis of American antislavery in the North — and its tentative but significant connections with enslaved people in the South — we can better establish the roots of the even more revolutionary transformations of the Civil War. The fusion of antislavery sentiment and mass democratic politics in the 1850s has often been regarded as a diminution of the more radical abolitionist movement that preceded it. But in crucial ways the emergence of the Republican Party as a major political force only deepened the radical potential of the antislavery struggle as a whole. By linking the moral battle against slavery to the material concerns of millions of Northern voters — through participation in concrete electoral campaigns — Republicans elevated and sharpened the collision between “freedom” and “slavery” in America. It was this process, commenced years before the first shots of the Civil War, that prepared the way for the most convulsive era of emancipation in nineteenth-century world history.

12 Seward, speech at Albany, September 12, 1855, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 237–38; Seward, speech in Senate, February 29, 1860, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 630.

ABOLITION IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

The modern history of abolition begins in the late eighteenth century. For millennia, of course, enslaved people from Rome to Russia resisted their enslavement — often to the last extremity — and this was no different for the millions of Africans captured and transported to the Americas after 1492. But across ancient and modern history, resistance and even collective rebellion has seldom sufficed to challenge the power of a slave regime, and this too was true in the exceptionally brutal conditions of the Atlantic plantation complex. From within this European-dominated system, meanwhile, occasional voices lamented the cruelty of New World bondage, or offered religious denunciations of the conduct of the slave trade. But isolated pockets of Jesuits and Quakers — like early slave rebels and maroons — generally failed to rattle the foundations of the larger plantation regime, if they even sought or imagined such an ambitious goal.¹³

The serious struggle to abolish slavery itself — to emancipate the millions of bondspeople across the Americas and end the chattel system altogether — only emerged with the great revolutions that shook the Atlantic World after 1770. In the long century that followed, every slave regime in the Western Hemisphere was dismantled, from the first legal abolition written into the Vermont constitution of 1777 to the final emancipation of Brazilian slaves in 1888. Within this longer span of struggle, it is possible to distinguish between two waves of emancipation. During the first wave, from roughly 1776 to 1825, gradual abolition was achieved in the context of anti-colonial warfare and revolutionary regime change. The black Jacobins of

KARP

13 For surveys of slavery's rise and fall in the Atlantic world, see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Anti-slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

Saint-Domingue, whose twelve-year military struggle established the independent state of Haiti — the only successful slave rebellion in modern history — were just the most outstanding example of the era’s anti-colonial abolitionists. Vermont’s pioneering constitution was composed by a huddled conclave of rebel delegates, anxiously tracking the progress of British general John Burgoyne, who had captured Fort Ticonderoga three days before. Only the American victory in the Saratoga campaign, later that autumn, allowed the Vermont Council of Safety to distribute its abolitionist constitution to the people for approval. The social contexts of these struggles, of course, varied radically. But from Pennsylvania’s Gradual Abolition Act of March 1780 — passed by another revolutionary assembly in the teeth of the American War of Independence — to the Colombian Manumission Law of July 1821 — pushed by Simón Bolívar amid the war against Spain — effective antislavery politics generally tracked the progress of anti-colonial revolutions on the battlefield.¹⁴

Most of the successful emancipations between 1770 and 1830, with the spectacular exception of Haiti, came in continental societies where colonial slavery had been relatively weak or peripheral to the regional economy. Where plantation slavery had been economically central and politically influential — in the Southern United States, Spanish Cuba, the British and French West Indies, and the Empire of Brazil — it generally weathered the storm of anti-colonial rebellion and persisted deep into the nineteenth century. The second major wave of abolition, from 1830 to 1888, thus unfolded in a different set of contexts. The growing industrial economies of the North Atlantic demanded ever larger helpings of cotton, sugar, and coffee, fueling a dramatic expansion and intensification of the hemispheric plantation complex, especially in Cuba, Brazil, and the US South. This “second slavery,” as historians have called it, featured politically powerful

14 Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 109–30, 161–264, 331–418; Gary J. Aichele, “Making the Vermont Constitution: 1777–1824,” *Vermont History* 56 (Summer 1988), 166–90.

slaveholders presiding over economically dynamic slave societies, in which the tools and techniques of industrial capitalism were brought to bear on plantation production. By the 1850s this international master class, with American planter elites at its head, was richer and more sophisticated than ever before in modern history.¹⁵

Yet in spite of these differences, the second wave of mid-nineteenth century emancipation shared at least one key feature of the first: violent revolution and war were catalysts for antislavery political action. In an echo of the earlier anti-colonial rebellions, the Paris revolution of 1848, followed by slave uprisings in Martinique and St Croix, dealt a coup de grâce to French and Danish slavery in the Atlantic. Two decades later, the Cuban rebels of 1868 did not succeed in winning independence from Spain, but the bloody Ten Year War (1868–78), the increasing assertiveness of Cuban slaves, and a liberal revolution in Madrid were all necessary to produce the Spanish abolition laws of 1870, 1880, and 1886.¹⁶ In imperial Britain and Brazil, meanwhile, royal governments responded to peacetime abolitionist pressure by instituting a range of gradual antislavery measures. And yet in both cases, interstate wars (the American Revolution of 1775–83, the Paraguayan War of 1864–70) and slave uprisings (Jamaica’s Baptist War of 1831–32) significantly hastened the progress of abolition.¹⁷

KARP

15 On the second slavery, see Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 56–71; Javier Laviña and Michael Zeuske, eds., *The Second Slavery: Mass Slavery and Modernity in the Americas and in the Atlantic Basin* (LIT Verlag: Münster, 2014); Daniel B. Rood, *The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

16 Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 473–516; Rebeeca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Rebeeca Scott, “Explaining Abolition: Contradiction, Adaptation, and Challenge in Cuban Slave Society, 1860–1886,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (January 1984), 83–111.

17 Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006), 1–33, 209–58; Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Celso Thomas Castilho, *Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Political Citizenship* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016); Sey-

In the largest slave society of the nineteenth-century Atlantic World, the United States, emancipation also came in the course of a devastating war, as the Union Army, aided by nearly two hundred thousand ex-slave soldiers, crushed the Confederate rebellion from without and within. The final destruction of American slavery – written into the US Constitution in the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865 – depended upon Union military triumph in the Civil War. And yet the chronological sequence of mid-nineteenth century American abolition differed crucially from the events that ended bondage in other Atlantic societies, across both waves of emancipation. Elsewhere, from Vermont to Colombia to Cuba, antislavery gains *followed* violent revolution and military conflict – struggles that often originated over issues far removed from the question of slavery itself. Only in the United States, from 1854 to 1865, did an explicitly antislavery political victory precede, produce, and in a critical fashion sustain an abolitionist military revolution.¹⁸

Before the mid-1850s, after all, slaveholders remained confidently at the helm of all three branches of the US government, while overseeing the expansion of the most powerful slave state in the hemisphere. It took the triumph of an antislavery political party to convince Southern masters to abandon the American union. In April 1861 Jefferson Davis, the president of the breakaway Confederacy, offered a clear explanation of how slaveholders understood the meaning of Republican victory in the election of 1860 in the United States:

Finally a great party was organized for the purpose of obtaining the administration of the Government, with the avowed object of using its power for the total exclusion of the slave States from all participation in the benefits of the public domain ... of surrounding

mour Drescher, "Brazilian Abolition in Comparative Perspective," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 68 (August 1988), 429–60.

18 For commentary on US abolition in hemispheric context, see Blackburn, *American Crucible*, 277–419; Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777–1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 1–26.

them entirely by States in which slavery should be prohibited; of thus rendering the property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless, and thereby annihilating in effect property worth thousands of millions of dollars. This party, thus organized, succeeded in the month of November last in the election of its candidate for the Presidency of the United States.

As a graduate of West Point, an officer in the US war with Mexico, a long-serving Senate chairman of the Military Affairs committee, and a pioneering Secretary of War, Davis had worked as hard as any antebellum American to build the strategic power of the United States. Like most of the slave South's national leadership, he was far from a rash or single-minded secessionist. But the electoral victory of the Republicans in 1860 — followed by their refusal to compromise over the future of slavery — drove a reluctant Davis to quit the union he had worked so hard to strengthen.¹⁹

In this sense, the Republican political revolution led directly to a Confederate counterrevolution, which itself produced the social revolution of the Civil War. “Slaveholders,” as Frederick Douglass put it as early as May 1861, had “invited armed abolition to march to the deliverance of the slave.” In that same month, the first Southern slaves crossed Confederate lines and were effectively emancipated by the US military, a process quickly ratified by Republicans in Congress. War, to be sure, accelerated antislavery politics; but unlike nearly every other slave society in the Americas, peacetime antislavery politics had first triggered war.²⁰

19 Jefferson Davis, Message to the Confederate Congress, April 29, 1861, in *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers, and Speeches*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), vol. 5, 69–71; Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 226–50.

20 Frederick Douglass, “Nemesis,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, May 1861. On the first few months of the Republican war of emancipation, see Adam Goodheart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 267–348; James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 84–144.

Among major slaveholding states in the Atlantic, only Brazil, Great Britain, and the United States developed popular antislavery movements that exerted major influence on peacetime politics. In Britain, where Seymour Drescher and others have most fully demonstrated the power and efficacy of antislavery protest, abolitionists concentrated on mobilizing public opinion outside of government, chiefly through massive petition campaigns. Such extra-parliamentary activity was a vital ingredient in the eventual abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and British West Indian slavery itself from 1833 to 1838. It also served as a significant inspiration and precedent for antislavery struggles in the United States and elsewhere.²¹

Yet across the early nineteenth century, the British struggle for abolition unfolded within an aristocratic society, where both economic and political power was concentrated in the hands of the dominant landowning class. Threatened by waves of middle-class protest and working-class unrest, Britain's rulers succeeded in fending off any revolutionary challenge to their authority.²² The Reform Act of 1832 granted the vote to some middle-class men, but denied the secret ballot, retained a property qualification for suffrage, and ultimately underlined the ongoing power of landholders in government. "The whole edifice of the state," concludes Robin Blackburn, "remained oligarchic in character." British antislavery reforms had to pass through the House of Commons, whose antidemocratic system of representation was adjusted rather than transformed by the 1832 Act. They had to win the sanction of the House of Lords, the terrain of a landed

21 Seymour Drescher, "British Way, French Way: Opinion Building and Revolution in the Second French Slave Emancipation," *American Historical Review* 96 (June 1991), 709–34; Drescher, "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the Slave Trade," *Past and Present* 143 (May 1994), 136–66; Drescher, "History's Engines: British Mobilization in the Age of Revolution," *William & Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (October 2009), 737–56.

22 On the predominance of the landed elite in British society and politics, across the nineteenth century, see Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 10–11, 88–95, 152–66; on the failure of democratic or working-class revolution in Britain, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 110–19, 209–12.

nobility that still constituted the wealthiest class in Britain and still exerted a major influence on politics. Last, British abolition had to receive the royal assent from King William IV, not entirely a formality in this period, and in any case a potent symbol of the essentially aristocratic nature of the regime.²³

The final Slavery Abolition Act, as approved by the monarch in 1833, was the recognizable product of this British society and this British government. After extensive negotiations with planter representatives in London, Parliament granted a handful of West Indian slaveholders £20 million in compensation — four times the annual budget of the Royal Navy — while assigning eight hundred thousand West Indian slaves to a six-year period of forced “apprenticeship.” The rights of property were respected in full; the system of class rule was maintained; and the end of slavery in the British Caribbean, whatever changes it slowly wrought in West Indian society, was something well short of a “democratic revolution.”²⁴

As scholars from Eric Williams to David Brion Davis have shown, the struggle against West Indian slavery also brought numerous rewards — structural, ideological, and otherwise, to the metropolitan men of business who helped advance the fight inside and outside of Parliament.²⁵ That does not mean, exactly, that abolition was the work of capital: even Britain’s highly unequal emancipation would

KARP

23 Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 452–59; Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (London: Clarendon, 1990); Itzak Gross, “The Abolition of Negro Slavery and British Parliamentary Politics 1832–3,” *The Historical Journal* 23 (March 1980), 63–85.

24 Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation, and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

25 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1944), 126–77; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 333–468. For a vigorous recent recapitulation of Williams, see H. Reuben Neptune, “Throwin’ Scholarly Shade: Eric Williams in the New Histories of Capitalism and Slavery,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 39 (Summer 2019), 299–326.

have been impossible without the extra-parliamentary agitation of radical abolitionists, who were far more likely to critique than celebrate the workings of British capitalism. Popular antislavery mobilization, involving a large swath of Britain's working class, certainly helped make slave abolition possible within a society whose propertied leadership showed little inclination to take any such initiative on its own.²⁶ But that same antislavery mobilization, for all its breadth, never really threatened the power of the existing elite, or managed a realignment of national politics from the ground up. Ultimately, British emancipation in the 1830s involved the acquiescence, even the active cooperation and connivance, of the ruling classes themselves — aristocratic landowners and industrial capitalists alike. Considering the course and outcome of British abolition as a whole, it would be difficult to disprove Linda Colley's blunt verdict: "Britain's rulers ended the slave trade and freed the West Indian slaves because they wanted to."²⁷

Antebellum America's slaveholding rulers, by contrast, did not write their own script. In Britain, antislavery press and petition campaigns influenced Parliament from the outside, but even at their height in the 1830s, slavery remained just one of many issues roiling national politics. Britain's elites adopted and administered the Abolition Act in the same narrow period that they also managed the progress of Reform and Catholic emancipation, reorganized imperial rule in Ireland and India, fended off the Ten Hours Movement, and passed a new (and draconian) Poor Law.²⁸ In the United States, on the other hand, the birth of a dedicated antislavery party in the mid-1850s broke apart

26 Seymour Drescher, "Cart Whip and Billy Roller: Antislavery and Reform Symbolism in Industrializing Britain," *Journal of Social History* 15 (Autumn 1981), 3–24; Betty Fladeland, *Abolitionists and Working-Class Problems in the Age of Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

27 Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 453–59; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 358–59.

28 Colley, *Britons*, 321–63; Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, 166–67; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966 [1963]), 335–49, 807–30; Peter Mandler, "The New Poor Law Redivivus," *Past & Present* 117 (November 1987), 131–57.

the political order and virtually took over American congressional debate for seven continuous years. The political triumph of American antislavery in 1860 did not resolve a crisis, but accelerated one, with South Carolina announcing its secession just weeks after the Republican victory at the polls. Nor did American abolition grow out of negotiated settlement between elites, but precisely the failure of such a negotiation: it was the Republican refusal to compromise on the future of slavery, in the winter of 1860–61, that finally sent Jefferson Davis from Washington back to Mississippi to break up the Union and (within a few months) start the Civil War. Antebellum America's democratic politics, once invaded by a popular party opposed to slavery, proved far less amenable to elite brokerage than the oligarchic system of Hanoverian Britain.

Of course, the nineteenth-century United States was far from an egalitarian democracy: only adult men could vote, and in many states, only adult white men. Yet selective mass suffrage in America was also fundamentally distinct from the property-based regime in Britain, where, even after the Reform Act, just 18 percent of adult males had the right to vote (and far fewer actually did).²⁹ The fusion of antislavery struggle and electoral politics, finally, meant that the scale of antebellum popular mobilization against bondage was also quantitatively greater than anywhere else in the Atlantic. In 1833, Drescher reckons, about one in five adult men in Britain signed a petition against West Indian slavery. In the fiercely contested 1860 presidential election, which turned out 80 percent of eligible voters, more than one in three adult men in the North cast a ballot for Lincoln.³⁰

29 For most of the half-century of British abolitionist activity, before 1832, the figure was perhaps as low as 12 percent, with actual voter numbers much lower than that: Frank O'Gorman, "The Electorate Before and After 1832," *Parliamentary History* 12, no. 2 (1993), 171–83. On voting laws and the practice of electoral democracy in the nineteenth-century United States, see Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic, 2000); Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

30 In 1860 Lincoln received nearly 1.84 million votes out of a Northern voting-age

In September 1862, when Lincoln announced the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Karl Marx declared it “the most important document in American history since the establishment of the Union, tantamount to the tearing up of the old American Constitution.” But rather than salute the President himself, Marx recognized that the structure of America’s mass democratic institutions — more than the character of its leadership — had played a decisive role in the US road to abolition. Lincoln the man, he wrote, was “without extraordinary importance,” merely “an average person of good will ... placed at the top by the interplay of the forces of universal suffrage unaware of the great issues at stake. The new world has never achieved a greater triumph than by this demonstration that, given its political and social organisation, ordinary people of good will can accomplish feats which only heroes could accomplish in the old world!”³¹

ANTISLAVERY AS MASS POLITICS

But even if ordinary voters of good will drove the process of American abolition, can we really regard the rise of the Republican Party as an antislavery mobilization? Or was Marx’s own functionalist view of US electoral politics — “the forces of universal suffrage unaware of the great issues at stake” — a better characterization of the 1850s? Generations of historians, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, have tied

male population of about 4.96 million (37.1 percent). Excluding men disenfranchised by residency, race, or other state-level suffrage restrictions, perhaps 45 percent of all eligible Northern voters cast a ballot for Lincoln. For data and discussion, see the 1860 US Census; Michael Dubin, *United States Presidential Elections, 1788–1860: The Official Results by County and State* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2002), 159–88; John P. McIver, “Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, By State: 1824–2000,” *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition*, ed. Susan B. Carter and Scott Sigmund Gartner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), series Eb62–113; Walter Dean Burnham, “Those High Nineteenth-Century American Voting Turnouts: Fact or Fiction?” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16 (Spring 1986), 613–44.

31 Marx in Vienna *Die Presse*, October 7, 1862, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, ed. Andrew Zimmerman (New York: International Publishers, 2016), 133–34.

themselves into knots denying the popular basis of American anti-slavery before the Civil War. Republican voters, argues one school, were driven largely by religious identity (as pietistic Protestants) and cultural bigotry (toward Irish immigrants), rather than the politics of slavery. But it is one thing to show that most evangelicals voted Republican, and most Catholics voted Democrat; it is another thing to construct a narrative of the 1850s that does not turn on the political struggle over slavery, which dominated every national election in the second half of the decade. As the foremost scholar of the “ethnocultural school” has acknowledged, when the Republicans achieved a breakthrough in 1856, their “master symbol” was “the concept of a Slave Power” — an oligarchy of Southern slaveholders whose ambitions “threatened the very essence of republican government.”³²

The fallback position for skeptics, then, is to assert that popular Northern hostility to the Slave Power — or to the extension of slavery — somehow did not constitute popular hostility to slavery itself. Such a view, however, willfully neglects the very tangible ways that containing slavery’s expansion would undermine the institution at its core. It papers over the contemporary understanding, almost ubiquitous on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line (and readily grasped by distant observers like Marx), that a Republican quarantine of bondage was a means to “put it on the course of ultimate extinction,” as Lincoln famously said in 1858.³³ It ignores the frequency and the vividness with which Republican leaders before and beyond Lincoln made this same

KARP

32 William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–56* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 358–60; William E. Gienapp, “The Republican Party and the Slave Power” in *New Perspectives on Race and Slavery in America: Essays in Honor of Kenneth M. Stampp*, eds. Robert H. Abzug and Stephen E. Maizlish. (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 51–78.

33 Marx and Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, 29, 31, 44–47. Authoritative discussions of Republican antislavery policy are in Oakes, *Freedom National*, 1–48, and James Oakes, *The Scorpion’s Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 13–50; Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 292–320; Graham A. Peck, *Making an Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

point. As Seward declared in the 1855 speech which announced his conversion to the party: “Slavery is not, and never can be, perpetual. It will be overthrown, peacefully or lawfully, under this constitution, or it will work the subversion of the constitution, together with its overthrow. Then the slaveholders would perish in the struggle.”³⁴

Historical skepticism about Republican antislavery often emerges from the many Republican disavowals of any intention to meddle directly with slavery inside the Southern states. Yet we should remember that such formal reassurances to the South — including Lincoln’s famous effort in his First Inaugural — universally failed to reassure. “The difficulty,” Frederick Douglass noted in 1861, as Southern states fled Lincoln’s union, “is the slaveholders understand the position of the Republican party too well. Whatever may be the honied phrases employed by Mr. Lincoln ... all know that the masses at the North (the power behind the throne) had determined to take and keep this Government out of the hands of the slave-holding oligarchy, and to administer it hereafter to the advantage of free labor against slave labor.” It makes little sense to place limp and unconvincing rhetorical disclaimers at the center of Republican politics — as if Republicans campaigned chiefly on what they would *not* do — while obfuscating the political essence that made such disclaimers necessary. That essence lay not in specific doctrines or proposals, but, as Seward put it, the party’s amorphous but relentless antagonism toward “slavery,” in the broadest sense:

the character and fidelity of any party are determined, necessarily, not by its pledges, programmes, and platforms, but by the public exigencies, and the temper of the people when they call it into activity. Subserviency to slavery is a law written not only on the forehead of the democratic party, but also in its very soul — so resistance to slavery, and devotion to freedom, the popular

34 Seward, speech at Albany, September 12, 1855, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 237–38.

elements now actively working for the republican party among the people, must and will be the resources for its ever-renewing strength and constant invigoration.³⁵

From 1854 to 1860, Republican antislavery agitation — and its enthusiastic response within the Northern electorate — forcibly reorganized American political conflict around this blunt binary between “slavery” and “freedom.” As Ohio governor Salmon Chase put it during the 1856 election, “the popular heart is stirred as never before, for the issue is boldly made between Freedom and Slavery — a Republic and a Despotism! ... The chain-gang and Republicanism cannot coexist, and you must now elect whether you will vindicate the one at whatever cost, or whether you will yield to the other.”³⁶

With Republicans established as a major political party, such rhetoric multiplied across the national elections of the late 1850s, coursing through stump speeches, mass rallies, newspapers, and periodicals, and converting the ordinary infrastructure of electoral politics into a vast propaganda apparatus. In this sense, the emergence of a nationally competitive antislavery party did not narrow the scope of the battle against bondage or redirect it toward an elite effort to win office. On the contrary, the regularly scheduled engagements of the antebellum electoral calendar offered antislavery forces further chances to expand their rhetorical war on the Slave Power. If skeptical historians persist in seeing the party of Lincoln, Seward, and Chase as a party of slavery non-extension, slaveholders themselves knew better. The Republicans were, as the 1856 Democratic platform put it, preeminently a party of “slavery agitation.” In the words of the *Richmond Enquirer* on the eve of that year’s election:

35 Frederick Douglass, “The Inaugural Address,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, April 1861; Seward, speech at Rochester, October 25, 1858, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 300.

36 Chase speech at Cincinnati, June 30, 1856, in *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 4, 1856; *New-York Tribune*, July 4, 1856.

Slavery, slavery is the war-cry inscribed on the black banner of a reckless party, and, with stereotyped phrases, repeated morning, noon and night, at public meetings and in social circles, by knots in the streets and orators in the stump, from the pulpit and the grogshop, echoed and re-echoed from the Rocky Mountains to the mighty oceans which surround our vast domain ...”³⁷

It was this popular agitation against bondage, as much as any item in the Republican agenda, that terrified Southern elites, who began to threaten secession if the “antislavery excitement” continued. Virginia Senator R.M.T. Hunter, urging a New York audience to vote down the Republicans or risk disunion, declared that he would “pass over some of the subjects of sectional difference, raised by the platform of this party,” and lay aside “the constitutional argument ... familiar to us all.” The Republicans threatened the peace because of their effort to “agitate the public mind of the North against the South,” chiefly by whipping up hostility to slavery and hatred of slaveholders. It was this same fear, across the late 1850s, that united a wide range of antebellum conservatives — whatever their programmatic positions on slavery in the territories — around a pledge to kill the dangerous “agitation” once and for all. But Republican politicians, responding to the manifest political appetite of Northern voters, refused to let it die.³⁸

As their conservative opponents recognized with increasing alarm, Republicans did not embrace antislavery rhetoric as a way to shape Northern public opinion, but a way to *meet* Northern public opinion, in order to win votes. “It is idle and child’s play to deny that the masses at the North are opposed to the institution of slavery,” lamented one Louisiana observer in 1856. The arrival of a major antislavery party

37 William Tyler Page, *Platforms of the Two Great Parties, 1856–1920* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1920), 5–11; *Richmond Enquirer*, October 28, 1856.

38 *The Democratic Demonstration at Poughkeepsie: Speech of Hon. R.M.T. Hunter, of Virginia* (n.p., [1856]), 3–4; *Washington Union*, October 7, 1856; “The Merchants of Philadelphia, Raising their Voices in Behalf of the Constitution, Denouncing Frémont Abolitionism and Disunion,” *Philadelphia Daily Pennsylvanian*, October 11, 1856.

disclosed the extent to which most Northern voters, including many who did not ultimately vote Republican, despised the idea of human bondage. On the campaign trail in the North, Democrats emphasized the Republican danger to the Union, the Republican threat to white supremacy, even wild rumors that various Republicans (Seward, Charles Sumner, John C. Fremont) were once slaveholders — anything rather than confronting the question of slavery itself. By contrast Republicans aimed whenever possible to present the election as a direct contest with the forces of bondage. “The word slavery,” admitted the leading Democratic party organ in Washington, “furnishes to sectional agitation its chief argument and support ... What occurs half so frequently in the harangues and editorials of abolitionists and black republicans as the terms ‘slave-driver,’ ‘slave power,’ ‘slaveocracy,’ ‘slave oligarchy,’ and the like expressions?”³⁹ Northern conservatives likewise trembled at this new brand of popular agitation. In Massachusetts, the rise of the Republicans left the moderate Whig Robert Winthrop, once the political prince of Beacon Hill and a former Speaker of the House, isolated and despondent about the state of national politics. Like R.M.T. Hunter, Winthrop located his fear not in “platforms” or “persons,” but the new temper of Republican engagement with the public. “The agitations and extravagances of Anti-Slavery Men and Anti-Slavery Parties” had only sharpened “passions and prejudices of the hour.” “Nothing but denunciation & defiance,” Winthrop wrote a friend, “seem to be tolerated by the masses.”⁴⁰

It was either a vicious or a virtuous cycle: antislavery feeling multiplied itself through mass politics, while mass politics encouraged a

39 “Views of a Distinguished Louisianan,” *Boston Traveller*, November 11, 1856; *Washington Union*, July 8, 1856.

40 *Washington Union*, July 8, 1856; “Views of a Distinguished Louisianan,” *Boston Traveller*, November 11, 1856; Robert C. Winthrop, speech in Boston, September 3, 1856, *Addresses and Speeches on Various Occasions* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1867), vol. 2, 244–58; Joanne B. Freeman, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 231.

hardening of antislavery feeling.⁴¹ The Republican Party press, whose circulation numbered in the hundreds of millions, probably printed more column inches of antislavery text in the summer of 1856 alone than a decade's worth of abolitionist tract-writers. After Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner was attacked by a proslavery South Carolinian in the Capitol, his speech that had triggered the assault — laced with lurid attacks on “property in human flesh” — became perhaps the most important propaganda document in the Republican arsenal. The *New-York Tribune*, the largest newspaper in the country, declared its intention to distribute “three million copies” of Sumner's hundred-page address, instructing local organizers to deliver a copy “into every voter's door.”⁴² The ubiquitous mass campaign rallies of 1856 and 1860, which brought tens of thousands of Republican voters to hamlets like Massillon, Ohio, and Beloit, Wisconsin — chiefly to hear orators like Seward and Sumner flay the Southern master class — fused the fanfare of mid-nineteenth century democracy and the fervor of antislavery commitment.⁴³ Nothing in this line surpassed the Wide-Awake movement of 1860, which enlisted perhaps 100,000 Northern young men into something like a grassroots Republican paramilitary organization. Mostly wageworkers and farmers, Wide-Awakes from

41 The idea of “election agitation” as a tool to expand radical struggle is hardly unknown to nineteenth-century Marxist thought: the rise of popular socialist parties, Engels wrote in 1895, had transformed universal suffrage from “a means of deception ... into an instrument of emancipation In election agitation it provided us with a means, second to none, of getting in touch with the mass of the people ...” Friedrich Engels, introduction to Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France (1848–1850)* (London: Martin Lawrence, [1895]), 20–21.

42 *New-York Tribune*, June 13, 1856, July 31, 1856. By 1860, the total newspaper and periodical circulation of the North was over 800 million: Craig Miner, *Seeding Civil War: Kansas in the National News, 1854–1858* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), x.

43 *Cleveland Leader*, August 28, 1856; Michael D. Pierson, “‘Prairies on Fire’: The Organization of the 1856 Mass Republican Rally in Beloit, Wisconsin,” *Civil War Quarterly* 48 (June 2002), 101–22; William E. Gienapp, “‘Politics Seem to Enter into Everything’: Political Culture in the North, 1840–1860” in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840–1860*, eds. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 23–31.

Maine to Minnesota formed themselves into companies with ranks and officers, donning soldiers' caps and dark cloaks for midnight infantry drills. Their theatrical torchlight parades, accompanied by brass and drums, under banners celebrating "Free Labor," "Free Land," and "Lincoln, Liberator of Slavery," attracted hundreds of thousands more awestruck spectators, and testified to the martial intensity of Northern popular feeling.⁴⁴

ANTISLAVERY AS CLASS POLITICS

In many ways, the newfound power of the antislavery appeal benefitted from the activist labors of American abolitionists, from William Lloyd Garrison to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had spent over two decades creatively decrying the sin and crime of human bondage. On a speaking tour in central Ohio in 1856, after the election of Governor Chase, Frederick Douglass contrasted his enthusiastic reception there with the brickbats that greeted abolitionists a decade earlier: "Things are very different now. It is not always given to Reformers to see the gratifying results of their labors. They sow, and others reap ... But such has been the progress of Anti Slavery principles in Ohio, that a lecturer of a dozen or fifteen years standing ... can now lay side by side, in pleasant contrast, the toils of seed time and the joys of harvest." "Lincoln is in *place*, Garrison in *power*," cried Wendell Phillips after the election of 1860.⁴⁵

KARP

44 *New-York Tribune*, October 4, 1860; *Boston Evening Atlas*, October 17, 1860; Jon Grinspan, "'Young Men for War': The Wide Awakes and Lincoln's 1860 Presidential Campaign," *Journal of American History* 96, (September 2009), 357–78; Goodheart, *1861*, 23–56.

45 *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, June 27, 1856; Wendell Phillips, "Lincoln's Election," speech in Boston, November 7, 1860, in *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters of Wendell Phillips* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1884), 305; James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 9–28; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 461–99; W. Caleb McDaniel, "The Bonds and Boundaries of Antislavery," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4 (March 2014), 84–105.

Douglass and Phillips were right to claim Republican victories as victories for the cause of abolition, whose true strength lay with an agitated public, not heroic leaders or artful politicians. Yet it would be a mistake to regard the mass politics of antislavery, as they emerged after 1854, as primarily an exercise in consciousness-raising. While Republicans like Seward and Sumner often adopted the moral intensity of Garrisonian abolitionists, they also appealed to the very material self-interest of Northern voters. Above all, Republicans depicted the battle against slavery as a species of class struggle — a social war not simply between slaves and masters, but between the overwhelming majority of Americans and a tiny aristocracy of slave lords who controlled the federal government. In such a struggle it was obvious that large and concrete interests were directly at stake.

Over fifty years ago, Eugene Genovese laid out the materialist view of the American sectional crisis in one sentence: “So intense a struggle of moral values implies a struggle of world views and so intense a struggle of world views implies a struggle of worlds — of rival social classes or of societies dominated by rival social classes.” It was this core insight that inspired Eric Foner to relate the social transformations of the early nineteenth-century North, including the decline of bound labor and the emergence of an interlinked market economy, to the free labor ideology of the Republican Party.⁴⁶ Republican leaders did sometimes broadcast the worldview of the North’s emerging capitalist class, which was conveniently optimistic about the prospects for social mobility in an unequal society. But on the campaign trail they tended to emphasize a very different form of class politics, aimed at heightening a very different sort of class rivalry.

46 Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 7; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men*, ix–xxix, 1–10; for commentary, see Frank Towers, “Partisans, New History, and Modernization: The Historiography of the Civil War’s Causes, 1861–2011,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1 (June 2011), 237–65. This quotation from Genovese is highlighted and affirmed in Foner’s original notes: Eric Foner Papers, Box 13, Columbia University.

As Republican organizer Francis Blair declared of the party's strategy during the election of 1856: "the contest ought not to be considered a sectional one but rather the war of a class — the slaveholders — against the laboring people of all classes." Such populist rhetoric came naturally to old Jacksonians like Blair, who had cut their teeth in battle against the early republic's banking elite, and now converted their hatreds from the Money Power to the Slave Power. But it also flew with ease off the tongues of Blair's former rivals, ex-Whigs like Seward, Horace Greeley, Benjamin Wade, and Thaddeus Stevens, who largely jettisoned their old party's celebrations of social harmony in favor of all-out political war on the slaveholding class, as a class.⁴⁷ Seward proved especially energetic on this theme. His maiden speech as a Republican lambasted slaveholders as a "privileged class," which he later refined into a "property class," akin to the patricians of Rome and the landlords of Europe. In 1860, Seward's major Senate address divided the republic not between North and South, but between "labor states," subject to democratic self-government, and "capital states," where master-class barons monopolized political and economic power, quashed free speech, and organized all society around "the system of capital in slaves."⁴⁸

To be sure, the nature of Seward's private political beliefs remains ambiguous, even to his biographers. The conservative turn of his politics after 1861, at the very least, offers reason to doubt his commitment to a serious struggle against "slave capitalists," or any capitalists at all. But in the 1850s the force of this Republican class-conscious attack on slavery did not grow out of individual moral conviction; it grew out of the requirements of mass democratic politics. As Seward once

47 Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 58–65; Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004); Michael E. Woods, "What Twenty-First Century Historians Have Said about the Coming of the Civil War: A Civil War Sesquicentennial Review of the Literature," *Journal of American History* 99 (September 2012), 435–37.

48 Seward, speech at Albany, September 12, 1855, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 226–27; Seward, speech at Detroit, October 2, 1856, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 254–55, 272; Seward, speech in Senate, February 29, 1860, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 619–43.

said winkingly to Jefferson and Varina Davis, he did not believe every word of his own aggressive speeches, but he knew that such rhetoric was “potent to affect the rank and file of the North.” Whether this was or was not a revealing joke is beside the point. Every player in antebellum politics seemed to understand, especially at election time, that the way to win the Northern masses lay less in lofty vindications of the market economy than scathing attacks on the oligarchic master class. After Seward’s senate speech, the Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas summarized this strategy: Republicans were attempting to turn the slavery debate into “a question between capital and labor,” so they could “take the side of the numbers against the few.”⁴⁹

That much was unmistakable, and Republicans did not take the side of the numbers with senatorial rhetoric alone. In 1856 they made a detailed case that master-class rule in Washington, and the commercial policy it demanded, actively suppressed workers’ wages in the North. Dubbing Democratic nominee James Buchanan “Ten Cent Jimmy” because he had once suggested that ten cents a day might satisfy a working man, at campaign parades Republicans hitched together dilapidated wagons packed with ragged mechanics, pantomiming labor in a “Buchanan Workshop.” “The proprietors of the mines, and of furnaces, forges, and rolling-mills,” declared the *Albany Evening Journal*, were Buchanan’s “companions and friends ... Being politically bound to oppose Protection of American Manufactures, he could profit the capitalists only by reducing laborers’ Wages.”⁵⁰ “In view of some oligarchs,” argued Greeley’s *Tribune*, “\$20 a year is all-sufficient for the food, raiment, and shelter of the workingman,

49 Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 259–61; Stephen Douglas in Senate, February 29, 1860, *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st Sess., 915.

50 George M. Weston, “Southern Slavery Reduces Northern Wages,” *Republican Campaign Documents of 1856: A Collection of the Most Important Speeches and Documents* (Washington: Republican Association of Washington, 1857), 30–37; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 17, 1856; *Albany Evening Journal*, August 6, 1856; Albert Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858* (2 vols.: Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1928), vol. 2, 438–39.

while the magnificent master is entitled to all the rewards, and may be a prince on a plantation as well as a fashionable swell at a watering-place.” Drawing on an older abolitionist critique of slavery’s links to capitalist elites in the North — the lords of the loom allied to the lords of the lash — helped Republicans deliver a pointed election-day appeal. In Boston, where a congressional race pitted an antislavery radical against a leading merchant and banker, Republicans made their case bluntly: “To protect a poor man’s rights, you must vote for Burlingame. To increase a rich man’s pocket, vote for Appleton.”⁵¹

In 1860, with Lincoln the “Rail-Splitter” at the top of the ticket, the class politics of the Republican campaign became even more theatrical. Working men’s companies of Wide-Awakes marched “with ruddy capes and gleaming hatchets” to celebrate “honest toil,” while Republican speakers and newspapers declared that Democrats, through their alliance with slaveholders, had come to believe that “Capital should own its Labor.” (After the election, one triumphant Illinois broadside depicted a wide-winged eagle with a banner in its beak: “capital shall not own us!”)⁵² By 1860, too, the party had developed an economic program specifically designed to deepen its material case against master-class rule. A protective tariff, federal funding for infrastructure projects, and a range of agricultural and educational reforms — in Republican hands, this was neither simply the old Whig agenda, nor exactly a cunning plot to advance the interests of industrial capital. For political purposes, it was above all a series of desirable economic goods, backed by a broad majority of Northern voters, but blocked by a rapacious and oligarchic slaveholding class.⁵³

KARP

51 *New-York Tribune*, September 19, 1856; *Appleton and Burlingame, which shall be your representative?* (Boston: N.p., 1860), 2; Thomas H. O’Connor, *Lords of the Loom: Cotton Whigs and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Scribner, 1968).

52 *New York Times*, October 4, 1860; *Chicago Press and Tribune*, October 6, 1860; *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, October 31, 1860; *The Republican Songster for 1860*, ed. William H. Burleigh (New York: H. Dayton, 1860), 24–25; broadside published in *Freeport* (Ill.) *Wide Awake*, November 17, 1860, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:80549/>.

53 Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: In-

The centerpiece of Republican economic policy, in any case, was something no Whig or industrialist would have dreamed of on their own: a homestead act by which the government would give away millions of acres of land for free. This idea, of course, depended on an assumption that the North American West rightly belonged to Euro-American settlers, not its indigenous inhabitants.⁵⁴ Yet in its conception it also represented an unprecedented distribution of wealth from the government to ordinary citizens, on the premise that land should be “as free to all its inhabitants as the sunlight and the air; and every man has, by his nature ... a perfect right to a reasonable portion of it.” Although Foner and other historians have depicted the homestead idea as an expression of “middle-class, capitalistic” ideology — an effort to convert restive eastern workers into industrious western farmers — its origins lay in radical, “agrarian” labor movements, and its advocates in the 1850s generally summoned a rather different sort of class politics. Homesteads, declared the leading Republican congressional advocate of the measure, were necessary to resist “the power of soulless capital and grasping speculation.”⁵⁵

KARP

ternational Publishers, 1947), vol. 1, 266–96; James L. Huston, “A Political Response to Industrialism: The Republican Embrace of Protectionist Labor Doctrines,” *Journal of American History* 70 (June 1983), 35–57; Ariel Ron, “Summoning the State: Northern Farmers and the Transformation of American Politics in the Mid-nineteenth Century,” *Journal of American History* 103 (September 2016), 347–74.

54 Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 128–71.

55 George Julian, speech in House, January 29, 1851, *Speeches on Political Questions by George W. Julian* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1872), 51–52; Galusha Grow, *Free Homes for Free Men ...* (Washington: Republican Executive Congressional Committee, 1860), 8. On the politics of homesteads and land reform, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men*, 27–29; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 335–43; Adam Tuchinsky, *Horace Greeley’s New-York Tribune: Civil War-Era Socialism and the Crisis of Free Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 126–64; Mark A. Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Sean G. Griffin, “A Reformers’ Union: Land Reform, Labor, and the Evolution of Antislavery Politics, 1790–1860,” (PhD diss., City University in New York, 2017).

But like the other major items on the Republican platform, the chief political function of the homestead idea was to illuminate the ways that class rule by slaveholders and their tools strangled the economic prospects of the Northern masses. After Southern Democrats helped convince James Buchanan to veto a homestead bill in 1860, Republicans made this alliance of slave aristocracy and land monopoly a major theme in the national campaign. The Democratic Party, as one Minnesota Republican charged in typical fashion, “would place the lands of the nation in the hands of the capitalist, and permit him to buy and sell the tillers of the soil — negroes if convenient, if not, white men ... The homestead bill will divide the soil into small qualities, and make every tiller of the soil an independent freeman.”⁵⁶

Indeed the particular power of homestead politics, as Republican opponents recognized, was its ability to offer Northern farmers and workers a clear material reward for linking arms against the Slave Power. “Free Homes to Actual Settlers,” read a Wide-Awake banner in Chicago. What could a Northern conservative propose as an alternative? “He has no pay or plunder to offer,” complained the *Richmond Enquirer* in 1856, reluctantly acknowledging the strength of the Republican appeal. “He tells not the masses, follow me, and the fair fields of Kansas, and all the wide prairies of the West, shall be yours now ... He points not to his rich neighbor’s field, inveighs not at land monopoly, nor promises to each one his fig and vine tree.” In this sense, the Republican homestead plan was not so much a social “safety valve,” designed to alleviate class conflict, but something closer to a political weapon of class conflict, aimed at Northern speculators and Southern slaveholders alike.⁵⁷

56 William Windom, speech in House, March 14, 1860, *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix 172; Griffin, “A Reformer’s Union,” chap. 9; Huston, *The British Gentry, The Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer*, 183–242; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 721–24, 762.

57 *Chicago Press and Tribune*, October 3, 1860; *Richmond Enquirer*, Paul W. Gates, “The Struggle for Land and the ‘Irrepressible Conflict,’” *Political Science Quarterly* 66 (June 1951), 248–71.

For some abolitionists — and many later historians — the Republican embrace of class-conscious free labor rhetoric, and the party's support for tariffs and homesteads, represented the dilution of a purer struggle against slavery's injustice. The Garrisonian abolitionist Henry Wright offered a critique of the Republican Party that has resonated with many later scholars: "the party, as a party, has nothing to do with the enslavement of the African; that the only question at issue is — *Shall the North be enslaved?*" For these critics the Republicans' broader appeal to Northern voters precluded a truly moral campaign against slavery's injustice. But this perspective reflects the limits of a liberal humanitarian view of politics: it categorically rules out self-interest as a motive for radical action, conflating egalitarian struggle with charitable sympathy. Even more perversely, it brands the very boldness of the Republican agenda — building a mass movement to overthrow a ruling-class oligarchy — as moderate or even conservative politics.⁵⁸ The Republican achievement in the 1850s was not to isolate moral, cultural, or economic arguments against slavery, but to combine them into a compelling and victorious whole.

Within the racial caste society of the antebellum United States, where the electorate in most states was exclusively white, and many free black residents lacked basic civil rights, no political movement or party could assail the Slave Power without reckoning with racism. In this environment, as historians have documented in considerable detail, some Republicans did embrace the language of white supremacy, either out of political calculation or sincere belief.⁵⁹ Yet

58 *Liberator*, September 19, 1856. For scholarly versions of this view, see Michael F. Holt, "Making and Mobilizing the Republican Party, 1854–1860" in *The Birth of the Grand Old Party: The Republicans' First Generation*, eds. Robert F. Engs and Randall Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Adam I.P. Smith, *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics, 1846–1865* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017).

59 James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana:

after 1854 the Democratic Party of the North, allied to slaveholders but unwilling to celebrate slavery, increasingly and aggressively defined itself as the party of the white man, with Republicans cast as “woolly-heads” and “negro-worshippers.”⁶⁰ In response to such taunts, Republicans for the most part sought neither to refute nor outbid Democratic racism, but rather to insist on the thread that bound both issues together — the struggle of all working people against the aristocratic Slave Power. Southern masters, declared a Cleveland newspaper, “enslave the blacks, not because they are *black*, but because they are laborers — and they contend that the highest civilization demands that the laboring class should be subjected and owned by the ‘*higher* class.’ The election of 1856, argued a Republican editor in Pittsburgh, was “not a contest of races, but a contest of institutions.” It was a fight “between the Slave-holding Oligarchy, on one hand, who desire to introduce slave labor and slave institutions into Kansas, and the laboring white people of the country opposed to slavery ... who wish to introduce Free Labor.”⁶¹

Reading this rhetoric, some contemporary abolitionists and many later historians have found prime evidence that the demands of mass political competition pushed the Republicans away from racial equality. To win votes from a deeply racist white electorate, this argument goes, Republicans — unlike the much smaller abolitionist movements before them — were forced to downplay any actual or potential commitment to black people, whether enslaved or free. There is a nugget of truth in this, amid many contradictions. Yet as Frederick Douglass observed in 1860, “no bowing or cringing to the

University of Illinois Press, 1971).

60 Joshua A. Lynn, *Preserving the White Man's Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race, and the Transformation of American Conservatism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

61 *Cleveland Leader*, August 21, 1856, October 14, 1856; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 15, September 17, 1856; Michael F. Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 201–206, 264–303.

popular prejudice against color, will win for the Republican Party the support of genuine pro-slavery men, or avert from the party the odium of being the advocate and defender of the Negro as a man and a member of society.” Republican racism and pandering aside, there was no real confusion about which antebellum party spoke for unstinting white supremacy in the 1850s. It was not the party that denounced black bondage, contended for black civil rights, and claimed the support of virtually every black voter in the North.⁶²

In other ways, moreover, the demands of mass political struggle — the development of a material case against the Slave Power to win over white voters — gave the Republicans an armor against aggressive white racism that earlier abolitionist groups had lacked. In 1856, after all, when Democrats organized their first national campaign against the “Black Republicans,” those same Black Republicans became the largest party in the North; in 1860, brushing off even more virulent attacks, the so-called “negro-worshippers” took the White House. In this basic sense the antebellum victory of the Republicans, in the face of fever-pitch appeals to white supremacy, delivered a more severe blow to American political racism than anything their abolitionist predecessors had achieved. It showed that the power of “prejudice against color,” however formidable, was not entirely invincible; and it established the abolition-democracy as a political force that could and would continue to triumph over white racism in even more dramatic fashion in the national elections of the next decade.

62 Frederick Douglass, “The Republican Party,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, August 1860; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 187–90. Many Republicans dodged or even opposed state-level struggles for black civil rights, but the fact remains that nearly everywhere in the North, the emergence of the party materially advanced those struggles: see Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 321–42; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 281–300; Robert R. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

BLACK ABOLITIONISTS

Perhaps the most suggestive readings of Republican mass politics came from contemporary black observers. One familiar narrative in African-American history casts the 1850s as a time of pessimism and even withdrawal: buffeted by the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott decision, some black abolitionists grew gloomier than ever about the prospects for political change in the United States; others embraced incipient forms of nationalism, including plans for black emigration to Canada, Haiti, or West Africa.⁶³ Yet this was very far from the whole story. In many other ways, black activists, political leaders, and voters viewed the mass politics of the 1850s as a new and exciting opportunity for antislavery struggle. Returning to New York after several years in the Caribbean, in the early stages of the 1856 election, the black minister Henry Highland Garnet was happily surprised by “the great spread and intensification of Anti-Slavery feeling at present ... The most promising sign of the coming downfall of Slavery is, that the people are beginning to think and talk, and above all, to vote and pray aright for it.”⁶⁴

While African Americans seldom failed to register the strength of white racism, at any time in the nineteenth century, many black activists in the 1850s began to notice a more unusual phenomenon: popular antislavery sentiment, aroused and organized, that outstripped the

63 Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787–1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Howard Bell, “Negro Nationalism: A Factor in Emigration Projects, 1858–1861,” *Journal of Negro History* 47 (January 1962), 42–53; Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002), 209–33. But see also Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle Against the Colonization Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

64 *New-York Tribune*, May 7, 1856; Joel Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet: A Voice of Black Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), 134–44. Later in the decade, Garnet returned to his advocacy for emigration, but won few converts among an increasingly mobilized and militant black activist community: Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 233–62.

positions taken by more cautious political leaders. Attending a mass meeting in Boston in 1856, John Swett Rock noted that “most of the speakers were ten years behind the people ... The people were aroused and enthusiastic, and what they wanted was, the speakers to make ‘a clean breast of it’, and call things by their right names. The more radical the sentiments the more extravagant it was appended ...” By addressing white Northern voters directly, argued the black Ohio politician John Mercer Langston in 1858, Republicans had enlisted the masses in the battle against bondage in a new and powerful way. In that sense they had expanded, rather than diminished, the anti-slavery movement as a whole:

[T]he enslavement and degradation of one portion of the population fastens galling fettering chains upon the limbs of the other ... This identification of the interests of the white and colored people of the country — this peculiarly national feature of the anti-slavery movement — is one of its most cheering, hope-inspiring, and hope-supporting characteristics ... White Americans cannot stand as idle spectators to the struggle, but must unite with us in battling the fell enemy if they themselves would save their own freedom.⁶⁵

KARP

A number of black abolitionists, too, testified against the notion that electoral competition itself would somehow dilute the antislavery struggle. Quite the opposite was true, suggested William Still, the veteran leader of the Philadelphia underground railroad. While attending the 1856 Republican convention, Still noted that “the most radical and vehement antislavery speeches, were most cordially received and enthusiastically applauded and endorsed throughout. This popular

65 Rock [John Swett Rock], “From Our Boston Correspondent,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, May 30, 1856; John Mercer Langston, “The World’s Anti-Slavery Movement,” lecture at Xenia and Cleveland, Ohio, August 2–3, 1858, in *Freedom and Citizenship: Selected Lectures and Addresses of Hon. John Mercer Langston* (Washington: Rufus Darby, 1883), 64–66.

demonstration on the side of freedom, surpassing by far anything ever known in the United States before, perhaps, [will] have had its influence upon the people ...” For Still, the major virtue of the Republican campaign was not its limited platform or problematic leadership, but the radical simplicity of its political formula. By boiling the national election down to the binary of “*Slavery or Freedom*,” Republicans would do mighty work in the larger battle for abolition.⁶⁶

The most influential black abolitionist in the country agreed. Like many Northern activists, Frederick Douglass’s estimate of the Republican Party wavered across the 1850s, alternating between delight in the emergence of a mass antislavery organization, loyalty to his particular tendency (for Douglass, the Radical Abolitionist party of Gerrit Smith), and fear that the Republicans, in pursuit of electoral success, might abandon the antislavery struggle altogether. “Principles,” Douglass wrote in his newspaper in early 1856, endorsing Smith’s hopeless bid for president, “are more precious than numbers.”⁶⁷ And yet when the national campaign acquired momentum, and mass Republican rallies came together across the North, Douglass recognized the power of numbers, too. As angry letters from his disproportionately black readership urged him to reconsider — some threatening to cancel their subscriptions — the editor admitted that Republicans were “the most numerous Anti-Slavery Party, and, therefore, the most powerful to inflict a blow upon ... the Slave Oligarchy.”⁶⁸

Finally in August 1856 Douglass endorsed the Republican candidate, John C. Fremont, on the same fundamental grounds as William Still: “There is now but one great question of widespread and all-commanding national interest; and that question is Freedom or Slavery.” He was joined that fall by “colored political meetings” in Boston,

66 W.S. [William Still], “National Republican Convention,” *Provincial Freeman*, June 28, 1856.

67 *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, April 25, 1856; David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass’s Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 26–58.

68 *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, July 4, July 25, August 15, 1856.

Brooklyn, Syracuse, and elsewhere, which all pledged to work for Republican victory in the fall. By reorganizing national politics around the binary of freedom or slavery, Douglass argued, Republicans would not disarm the struggle against bondage, but mobilize, concentrate, and heighten it:

One by one the old parties have been driven by the pro-slavery sentiment of the South, and the Anti-Slavery sentiment of the North, from the positions which denounced slavery agitation ... until the two great parties stand front to front, one pledged to the sustenance and extension of slavery, the other being forced by the positions of its adversary, the surgings of public sentiment, to work for its overthrow. It may be as yet, an unorganized mass; demagogues ... may deny its aim, and inevitable mission; thousands of its adherents may as yet see but dimly the great work which they have addressed themselves; but the party is formed and its purpose is fixed, and that purpose is to destroy slavery.⁶⁹

Over the next four years, Douglass's view of national politics continued to ricochet between excitement at antislavery progress, devotion to Radical principle, and dread of Republican betrayal. In 1860 he was still capable, on occasion, of delivering a magnificent jeremiad on the moral decline of American antislavery politics, from the pure abolitionism of the 1840s to the "corrupt" Republican embrace of "non-extension" only. Yet even so, he had little difficulty declaring a preference in the 1860 election: "I sincerely hope for the triumph of that party over the odds and ends of slavery combined against it." Like Rock, Langston, and other black activists, Douglass retained hope in the Republicans chiefly as a means to channel and accelerate

69 *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, August 15, 1856, October 31, 1856; for black convention endorsements, see *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, September 5, October 10, October 24, 1856.

“the surgings of popular sentiment” against human bondage. “The vital element” of the Democratic Party, he noted, was “hatred of the Negro”; “the vital element of the Republican party” was “the anti-slavery sentiment in the Northern States.”⁷⁰ Among black voters in the North, Douglass was hardly alone in this view. At a rally in Boston in October 1860, where ten thousand Wide-Awakes marched for Lincoln’s election, their number included over two hundred black men, representing the “Sumner Blues” and “West Boston Wide-Awakes,” wearing caps, carrying torches, and bearing aloft a banner “presented by the colored ladies of Boston, with the inscription, *God never made a tyrant or a slave.*”⁷¹

SLAVES AND REPUBLICANS

If black abolitionists in the North had begun to see how a mass anti-slavery party could revolutionize American politics, enslaved people in the South may have grasped more than an inkling, too. Was it pure coincidence that the largest slave insurrection panic in antebellum American history arrived just weeks after the first Republican election campaign, in the late fall of 1856? The rumored insurrection plots, vigorously prosecuted by Southern authorities from Maryland to Tennessee to Texas, involved the trial of hundreds of slaves, and the execution of dozens of alleged slave rebels. The panics of 1856 remain

KARP

70 Douglass, speech at Geneva, NY, August 1, 1860, *Douglass’ Monthly*, September 1860; “The Republican Party” and “The Democratic Party,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, August 1860; Bruce Levine, “‘The Vital Element of the Republican Party’: Antislavery, Nativism, and Lincoln” in *Abraham Lincoln and Liberal Democracy*, ed. Nicholas Buccola (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 139–63. On Douglass’s twists and turns in 1860, see David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 320–26; James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 87–132.

71 Boston *Daily Evening Traveller*, October 17, 1860; *Liberator*, October 19, 1860. See also Edward B. Rugemer, “Slave Rebels and Abolitionists: The Black Atlantic and the Coming of the Civil War,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2 (June 2012), 179–202; Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, “Rehearsal for War: Black Militias in the Atlantic World,” *Slavery and Abolition* 26 (April 2005), 1–34.

understudied in the historical literature, but Douglas Egerton's recent investigation concludes that the ideological turmoil of the autumn campaign played a crucial role in shaping the way the scares — and perhaps some slave plots themselves — spread across the South.⁷² “The recent Presidential canvass has had a deleterious effect on the slave population,” one Nashville newspaper noted in late 1856. “The negroes manifested an unusual interest in the result, and attended the political meetings of the whites in large numbers.” In Memphis, reported another paper, a plantation mistress “went into her kitchen and gave some directions to the negro cook, who replied with a sneer, ‘When Fremont’s elected, you’ll have to sling them pots yourself.’” Even when masters failed to notice, some slaves were paying attention: in Missouri, Henry Clay Bruce recalled becoming “a ‘Fremont man,’ but a very silent one”; in Kentucky, William Webb remembered, “the name of Fremont sounded in every colored person’s heart.”⁷³

John Brown’s famous 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry sent a wave of panic throughout the slaveholding South, but in some ways the election of 1860 — with its rowdy mass politics of “freedom” versus “slavery” — represented an even more disruptive event. A July fire in Dallas led panicked authorities to discover another wave of Republican-inspired slave insurrection plots across the state of Texas. In the fall, as the campaign grew hot, reports of intrigues and incendiary anti-slavery rhetoric spread from Richmond to Talladega, Alabama, where enslaved people reportedly believed that a literal “black republican”

72 Douglas Egerton, “The Slaves’ Election: Frémont, Freedom, and the Slave Conspiracies of 1856,” *Civil War History* 61 (March 2015), 35–63; Harvey Wish, “The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856,” *Journal of Southern History* 5 (May 1939), 206–22; Samuel Niu, “The Slave Insurrection Panics of 1856: Exploring the Southern Psyche and National Politics in Late Antebellum America” (bachelor’s thesis, Princeton University, 2019).

73 Wish, “Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856,” 213; William Webb, *The History of William Webb, Composed by Himself* (Detroit: Egbert Hoekstra, 1873), 13–16; Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man: Twenty Nine Years a Slave. Twenty Nine Years A Free Man* (York, Pa.: P. Anstadt and Sons), 85–86.

was running for president, and would set them free at once.⁷⁴ On the ground, slaves' information was often imperfect, but their awareness of a mass movement in the North — “another Nation wishing for the slaves to be free,” as Webb put it — climaxed amid the unprecedented “excitement” of the 1860 campaign. William Still's underground railroad agent in Virginia, himself a slave, reported that “the politics of the day is in a high rage,” and hoped that Still would be “one of those wide-awakes as is mentioned from your section of the country now-a-days, etc.”⁷⁵

“Virtually every slave who left an account of the times,” concludes Stephanie McCurry, “recalled Lincoln's election as a major development.” Booker T. Washington, then a small child in Virginia, remembered his enslaved mother, Jane Ferguson, kneeling over her children and praying for Lincoln's success:

From the time that Garrison, [Owen] Lovejoy, and others began to agitate for freedom, the slaves throughout the South kept in close touch with the progress of the movement During the campaign when Lincoln was first a candidate for the Presidency, the slaves on our far-off plantation, miles from any railroad or large city or daily newspaper, knew what the issues involved were. When war was begun between the North and the South, every slave on our plantation felt and knew that, though other issues were discussed, the primal one was that of slavery.⁷⁶

74 Ollinger Crenshaw, “The Psychological Background of the Election of 1860 in the South,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 19 (July 1942), 260–79; Donald E. Reynolds, *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); William Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003); Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics*, vol. 2, 96–97.

75 Webb, *History of William Webb*, 13, 29–30; Bruce, *New Man*, 93–96; “Letter from Ham & Eggs, Slave (U.G.R.R. Ag't),” October 17, 1860, in William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), 40–41; Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 47–49.

76 Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday,

Slaves, Lincoln said at Cooper Union, “would scarcely know there was a Republican party” if not for the panicked misrepresentations of slaveholders themselves. Most historians have agreed with him.⁷⁷ But was what slaves like Jane Ferguson knew — and later acted on — so erroneous? The primal issue of midcentury American politics was in fact slavery, or, specifically, the future of slavery. And the most dangerous threat to slavery’s future, by the late 1850s, was no longer radical abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, or even rogue militants like John Brown. Instead it was Republican politicians like Owen Lovejoy (elected to Congress in 1856), and indeed Abraham Lincoln, who were armed not merely with printing presses or a few steel pikes, but the support of millions of mobilized Northern voters, and — in the not-too-distant future — the power of the American state.⁷⁸

Escorted by uniformed Wide-Awakes to an October 1860 rally at Republican headquarters in Chicago, Lovejoy closed his speech with a series of bold predictions, cheered by the crowd of thousands and reprinted from Iowa to New Hampshire: “I see the spirit of freedom revived here and everywhere. I behold it going into the slave States and the free States commencing a system of emancipation, and finally emancipating their slaves and ridding the country of this evil; and in that bright future, now close at hand, I behold a free American Republic reposing proudly among the nations of the

1900), 7–8; Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 229; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 59–62, 65–68; Merton L. Dillon, *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and their Allies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 231–42.

77 Lincoln, speech at Cooper Institute, February 27, 1860, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. 3, 539–40; Egerton, “The Slaves’ Election,” 57–63.

78 Another comparison to late nineteenth-century European social democracy may not be out of place: “And so it happened,” Engels wrote in 1895, “that the bourgeoisie and the government came to be much more afraid of the legal than of the illegal action of the workers’ party, of the results of elections than of those of rebellion.” Engels, introduction to Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, 21.

earth.”⁷⁹ Not all Republicans promised so much, so soon. Yet even those who disclaimed any immediate plan of emancipation, across the 1850s, were helping fashion a political order that sustained a shared struggle between antislavery actors in the North and enslaved people in the South.

Although national Republican platforms dodged the question of the Fugitive Slave Law, the party’s emergence coincided with a mounting Northern hostility to the recapture and return of Southern runaways. This was most dramatic in Wisconsin, where the Republican Party itself only coalesced after a crowd of abolitionists broke into a Milwaukee jail to free the former slave Joshua Glover. In Iowa, Republican governor James Grimes personally assisted a fugitive’s escape to Canada in 1855, cheered by a thousand supporters; he thought that “three-fourths” of the people agreed with him, and that “a slave could not be returned from Des Moines County to slavery.”⁸⁰ Throughout most of the Upper North, indeed, state liberty laws and fierce popular resistance — often organized by leading Republicans — made the Fugitive Slave Law a dead letter by the mid-1850s. Even in more conservative central Illinois, Lovejoy could close a public meeting by boasting about his aid to fugitives, knowing he would receive cheers from the Republican crowd. When slaveholders accused the Republican-governed North of scorning its lawful duty to return runaways, they had a point.⁸¹

KARP

79 *Chicago Press and Tribune*, October 16, 18, 1860; *Cleveland Leader*, October 24, 1860; *Muscatine* [Ia.] *Weekly Journal*, October 26, 1860; Concord [N.H.] *Independent Democrat*, November 1, 1860; William F. Moore and Jane Ann Moore, *Collaborators for Emancipation: Abraham Lincoln and Owen Lovejoy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

80 Michael McManus, *Political Abolitionism in Wisconsin, 1840–1861* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1998), 140–47, 174–80; William Salter, *The Life of James W. Grimes* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1876), 73.

81 Thomas D. Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780–1861* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 166–201; *Bloomington* [Ill.] *Pantagraph*, July 23, 1856. See also R.J.M. Blackett, *The Captive’s Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Finally, across the 1850s, Republicans were not shy about warning slaveholders that a violent commitment to bondage would lead to a violent end to bondage. After the raid on Harper's Ferry, many party leaders worked to distance their party from John Brown, but even these disclaimers, such as they were, retained a quality of ambivalence not likely to soothe the owners of slave property. At Cooper Union, Lincoln denounced the raid and dismissed the likelihood of a general slave insurrection, but observed, almost casually, that "occasional poisonings," "open or stealthy assassinations," and "local revolts extending to a score or so" were all among "the natural results of slavery." Salmon Chase deplored Brown's attempt as "mad" and "criminal," but praised "his unselfish desire to free the oppressed," and called for greater reprobation of "slavery itself, which underlies it all."⁸²

And as news of Brown's trial and execution washed across the North, prompting mass meetings and hundred-cannon salutes, outraged public opinion increasingly viewed the old captain as an antislavery martyr. In the words of Horace Greeley's *Tribune*, still the largest newspaper in the Union, "Thirty Millions of Americans — including the Four or Five Millions of Slaves — are talking and thinking of John Brown — of his daring, his purpose, his defeat, and his death." The realignment of national politics around the primal issue of slavery, and the tyrannical rule of the master class, meant that even cautious politicians were now subject to the antislavery fervor of the masses. Democrats who initially hoped that the Harper's Ferry raid might shatter the Republican organization instead faced a party perhaps even more entrenched in its opposition to the Slave Power. "I find the hatred of slavery greatly intensified by the fate of Brown," wrote the radical Ohio congressman Joshua

82 Lincoln, speech at Cooper Institute, February 27, 1860, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 541; Salmon P. Chase to Joseph Barrett, October 29, 1859, in *The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harper's Ferry Raid*, eds. John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2012), 99.

Giddings; “men are ready to march to Virginia and depose of her despotism at once.”⁸³

The prospect of a violent collision with slavery came most clearly into view when Republicans considered the prospect of Southern secession. Slaveholders, Seward argued in 1855, would never flee the Union because they depended on it “for their own safety. Three millions of slaves are a hostile force in their presence ... The world without sympathizes with the servile enemy.” As James Oakes has shown, by the 1850s antislavery statesmen had already stocked a powerful arsenal of moral, political, and legal arguments for military emancipation during wartime. When the South began to secede in the winter of 1860–61, Republicans lined up to inform slaveholders that in the event of disunion, “slavery will go out in blood.”⁸⁴

Yet well before the crisis of secession winter, key Republicans depicted slaves themselves as political actors and ultimately potential authors of their own freedom. On the floor of the Senate, Ben Wade mocked slaveholders for being afraid to read the Declaration of Independence aloud, lest it “stir up the blood of servitude.” Seward laced his commentary on slavery’s inherent lawlessness with vague but unmistakable references to the moment “when the African race itself shall rise to assert its own wrongs.” Speaking in St Louis on the eve of the 1860 election, the German-American Republican Carl Schurz painted a vivid picture of a slave South turned upside down by war, insurrection, and social revolution from below:

The probability, therefore, is that wherever a Northern army appears, the slaves will disappear, and so much of slavery with

83 *New-York Tribune*, December 3, 1859; Brian Gabriel, *The Press and Slavery in America: The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 71–80; C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 59–61.

84 Seward, speech at Buffalo, October 19, 1855, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 248; Oakes, *Freedom National*, 34–41, 66–73.

them... The slave States, therefore, cannot expose their territory without leaving unprotected the institution for the protection of which the war was undertaken. They have to cover thousands and thousands of vulnerable points, for every plantation is an open wound, every negro cabin a sore

Besides, the slave States harbor a dangerous enemy within their own boundaries, and that is slavery itself. Imagine them at war with anti-slavery people whom they have exasperated by their own hostility. What will be the effect upon the slaves? The question is not whether the North will instigate a slave rebellion, for I suppose they will not; the question is, whether they can prevent it, and I think they cannot.⁸⁵

It took almost another year for this process to begin in earnest, in Virginia, in South Carolina, and everywhere the Union Army made contact with the Confederacy. But by 1860 the foundations of the abolition-democracy that linked Jane Ferguson, Frederick Douglass, and Abraham Lincoln had already been laid.

KARP

EMANCIPATION AS REVOLUTION

“Easily the most dramatic episode in American history,” Du Bois began *Black Reconstruction*, “was the sudden move to free four million black slaves in an effort to stop a great civil war, to end forty years of bitter controversy, and to appease the moral sense of civilization.” In its drama, its suddenness, and its scale, slave emancipation remains the most revolutionary episode in the American past, and perhaps the most spectacular event of its kind in the modern history of slavery and

85 Seward, speech in Senate, August 27, 1856, *Works of Seward*, vol. 4, 568; Wade in Senate, *Cong. Globe Appendix*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., 756; Carl Schurz, “The Doom of Slavery,” speech at St. Louis, August 1, 1860, in *Speeches, Correspondence, and Political Papers of Carl Schurz*, ed. Frederic Bancroft (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1913), 122–60.

abolition. But this revolution, for all its terrific speed, did not come out of thin air. It was not the benevolent gift of a great emancipator, nor a spontaneous rising of the oppressed; neither was it some kind of ironic accident of war. The second American revolution had its roots in political struggle — an antebellum antislavery movement, as C.L.R. James once wrote, that united “petty bourgeois democrats,” “the free farmers of the Northwest,” and “certain sections of proletariat,” alongside “the independent mass action of the Negro people.” First taking shape within “the vigorous political democracy of the North,” it was this broad movement — the true abolition-democracy — that animated the Republican Party, triggered Southern secession, and ultimately achieved revolutionary emancipation by fire and sword.⁸⁶

The revolution, of course, did not go on forever. In the decade after the Civil War, the fragile alliance between Southern freed-people and Northern masses was shattered by what Du Bois called a “counterrevolution of property,” which put an end to the democratic experiment of Reconstruction. The Republican Party remained in power in Washington, but the reign of the abolition-democracy was over. A new industrial capitalist class entrenched itself in the North, while unblushing racial tyranny fought its way back to power in the South. In the continental West, and before long the Caribbean and the Pacific, too, the US imperial state only grew more fearsome under Republican rule, usually with devastating consequences for indigenous people.

The destruction of slavery in the United States, for all its dramatic significance, did not break the power of homegrown white supremacy, much less derail the march of global capitalism.⁸⁷

86 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 3; J.R. Johnson [C.L.R. James], “Negroes in the Civil War: Their Role in the Second American Revolution,” *New Internationalist* 9, no. 11 (December 1943), 338–41.

87 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 580–636; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 270–400; Erik Mathisen, “The Second Slavery, Capitalism, and Emancipation in Civil War America,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8 (December 2018), 677–99.

All this is unmistakable, and yet it is equally unmistakable that we must reckon with the most momentous era in American history, when the largest slave society in the nineteenth-century world was demolished and revolutionized. Writing against half a century of racist propaganda, Du Bois insisted that the Civil War era had witnessed “the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen.” In today’s academic literature, it has become axiomatic that the African-American struggle for emancipation and civil rights represented the central democratic movement of the era.⁸⁸ When it comes to the antebellum political struggle against slavery, however, scholars remain much more skeptical. And in recent years, as Civil War scholars turn pessimistically against the binary that once served Republicans so well – pitting “freedom” against “slavery” – the idea of a truly democratic struggle against bondage seems perhaps stranger and more distant than ever.⁸⁹

Yet for the antebellum architects of the abolition-democracy, it was obvious that mass politics presented the central front in the fight against enslavement. “There is a judgment and a feeling against slavery in this nation,” Abraham Lincoln warned slaveholders in 1860, “which casts at least a million and a half votes.” Less than a decade earlier, such a statement would have been preposterous; the anti-slavery candidate for president in 1852 had received just one-tenth of that number. In the event, Lincoln undercounted his own support by nearly four hundred thousand ballots. What accounted for this astonishing change? Not just the sagacity of Republican statesmen, or

88 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 727. For a useful window on Du Bois’s ongoing importance within the field, see the essays in “W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*: Past and Present,” ed. Thavolia Glymph, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112 (Summer 2013), 409–535.

89 Emberton, “Unwriting the Freedom Narrative,” 377–94; Yael A. Sternhell, “Revisionism Reinvented? The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3 (June 2013), 239–56; David W. Blight and Jim Downs, eds., *Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017); Evan Turiano, “Two Visions of Abolition and Emancipation: An OAH ‘State of the Field’ Roundtable,” *Muster* (blog of the *Journal of the Civil War Era*), April 25, 2018.

the audacity of abolitionist activists, but the unpredictable and transformative experience of democratic struggle itself. By constructing a popular base morally and materially hostile to the Slave Power, the Republican Party had concentrated the “Anti-Slavery sentiment of the North,” as Frederick Douglass put it, into a single unit whose ultimate purpose, however hazy its horizon, was to “DESTROY SLAVERY.”⁹⁰ It was this fusion of antislavery energy and mass politics, more than any other development in nineteenth-century history, that marked the course of slavery’s destruction in the United States. This was not tragedy or irony or paradox; it was simply democratic revolution. ✎

90 Lincoln, speech at Cooper Institute, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 541–42; “No More Compromises,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, October 31, 1856.

INTRODUCING THE ABCS OF CAPITALISM

Political organizing is hard – political education shouldn't have to be.

Our first three pamphlets, by *Catalyst's* Vivek Chibber, focus on: "Understanding Capitalism," "Capitalism and the State," and "Capitalism and the Class Struggle."

\$10

jacobinmag.com/store/

The rise of populist and far-right forces has generated widespread concern over a contemporary “crisis of democracy.” Much of the literature on this question, however, fails to register the extent to which democratic backsliding is related to the weakness and disorganization of the world’s working classes. In a review of four recent books, I conclude that a recovery of class politics must guide any project for democratic renewal in the present moment.

DEMOCRACY'S MORBID SYMPTOMS

CHRIS MAISANO

**STEVEN LEVITSKY
& DANIEL ZIBLATT**
*How Democracies
Die (Crown, 2018)*

YASCHA MOUNK
*The People vs.
Democracy*
(Harvard University
Press, 2018)

**BENJAMIN PAGE
& MARTIN GILENS**
*Democracy in
America? (University
of Chicago Press,
2018)*

**CHANTAL
MOUFFE**
For a Left Populism
(Verso, 2019)

Last spring, the world was treated to the ghastly spectacle of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro exchanging soccer jerseys and back slaps in the White House. Practically speaking, their meeting amounted to little more than lunch and a photo opportunity. But it carried a great deal of symbolic weight. It represented the convergence of reactionary political trends in the Americas and around the world, and it reinforced the perception that democracy is retreating before a cohort of strongmen striding the global stage.

Hand-wringing over the “age of the strongman” has become a staple of mainstream punditry. There is, of course, much to be worried about. In addition to Trump and Bolsonaro, nationalist and authoritarian forces seem to have the upper hand in an alarming number of countries. Xi Jinping has abolished China’s presidential

term limits, centralized power, and enshrined “Xi Jinping Thought” in the country’s constitution. Narendra Modi and his aggressive brand of Hindu nationalism won a huge victory in India’s elections earlier this year. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded to the recent coup attempt by cracking down on opposition parties and journalists, and his government has effectively suspended democracy in the country’s Kurdish regions. Viktor Orbán continues to consolidate his ultranationalist regime in Hungary; Rodrigo Duterte’s “war on drugs” has killed twenty thousand Filipinos and incited violence against journalists and critics; Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has cleared the way to hold power in Egypt until 2034; Vladimir Putin’s autocratic presidency has no end in sight. While claims of incipient global fascism are overblown, there’s no doubt that this is, as Gramsci’s famous epigram puts it, a time of monsters.

These developments, as well as the broader “populist moment” that spawned them, have made politicians, journalists, and scholars very anxious about the future. They have fueled a cottage industry of think pieces and books dedicated to diagnosing the “democratic recession” that is shaking elite confidence in the durability of Western-style liberal democracy. Indeed, a trip to any bookstore today will greet the visitor with an array of bloodcurdling titles announcing democracy’s impending doom. While anxiety about the durability of democratic government is nothing new, the breadth and depth of pessimism about its prospects marks a sharp contrast with the triumphalism of the post–Cold War years.

The current angst recalls an earlier episode of hand-wringing among the upper echelons of society. In 1975, the Trilateral Commission published a now infamous book called *The Crisis of Democracy*, a report on the “governability of democracies” from the perspective of the world’s political and economic elites. In his chapter on the United States, Samuel Huntington surveyed the American scene and concluded that the “democratic surge” of the 1960s produced both “a substantial increase in governmental activity and a substantial

decrease in government authority.” In every area of American life, groups who had hitherto accepted their marginal and subordinate positions in society had become increasingly assertive, more willing to challenge the holders of power and privilege, more likely to claim their right to participate in the decisions that affected their lives.¹

For many, this would seem like a positive development, a harbinger of the full extension of democratic rights and freedoms to those who had been previously excluded. For Huntington, however, this was cause for alarm. Demands for a massive expansion of welfare spending put too many burdens on the system while the emergence of “adversarial” media and critical intellectuals repulsed by Vietnam and Watergate undermined the effectiveness of traditional political leadership. Instead of a greater degree of democratic participation, the country needed a “moderation in democracy” that would keep the twin dangers of popular mobilization and ballooning public expenditures in check. Democracy, in other words, had to be saved from itself through a reassertion of elite authority against those who would take it too far if given the chance: striking public employees, militant African Americans, tenured radicals, student protestors.

The financial crash of 2008, like the economic crisis of the early 1970s, marked the beginning of an interregnum in the history of capitalist rule. An interregnum begins when the previously dominant regime, in this case the neoliberal order, suffers a shock of sufficient magnitude to prevent it from keeping potential hegemonic alternatives off the political agenda. The near collapse of the global economy fractured political systems and has fostered an atmosphere of confusion and chaos across the capitalist world. Instead of a relatively stable equilibrium, we find an absence of consensus among elites, the reemergence of competing economic strategies, a decrease in the effectiveness of key institutions, and a realignment of social

1 Michel J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies by the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 59–118.

forces, particularly in the realm of party politics. This last point seems particularly salient today, and constitutes an important difference between the present moment and the 1970s. As Rune Møller Stahl has argued, today's interregnum not only entails a crisis of the previously dominant economic strategy but a deep crisis of the institutions of representative democracy as well.²

This crisis stems above all from the fact that the vast majority of citizens across the advanced capitalist democracies have been systematically prevented from translating their needs, interests, and preferences into effective political representation. Over the last forty years, elites in country after country have followed Huntington's advice all too well. They have effectively smashed organized labor, rolled back the welfare state and restructured it along neoliberal lines, and shoved the genie of popular mobilization back into the bottle. By any measure, this counterrevolution was a huge success for those who waged it. The "democratic distemper" that so worried Huntington and his co-thinkers was put down, not just in the United States but around the world.

This reassertion of elite dominance generated the defining trends of our time: the massive explosion of inequality, the dismantling of working-class organizations, and stagnant or declining living standards for the vast majority. In the United States, today's real wage for workers is the same as it was in the 1970s, despite the significant increase in productivity growth that has occurred since then. This gloomy situation is undoubtedly the main cause of the political fractures that are so frightening to the punditocracy. Research has shown that dissatisfaction with the state of democratic politics is strongly related to popular views about the current economic situation as well as assessments of how the average person's welfare has changed over the last two decades. The list of countries where these assessments are the most negative should not be surprising: Greece, Mexico, Spain,

2 Rune Møller Stahl, "Ruling the Interregnum: Politics and Ideology in Nonhegemonic Times," *Politics & Society* 47, no. 3 (2019): 333–360.

Brazil, Italy, and Tunisia, among others. The United States is in the same neighborhood as the United Kingdom and Hungary, which tracks nicely with political developments in all three countries.³

What appears as a crisis of democracy is fundamentally a crisis of the world's working classes. Universal suffrage and substantively representative institutions are, to a significant extent, the product of struggles from below — and the key actor in these struggles has almost everywhere been the organized working class. It is no accident that the global decline of the labor movement has coincided with many of the most troubling developments of our time: extreme inequality, the hollowing of democratic politics, the return of the racist and nationalist right. Unfortunately, much of the recent commentary on the health of democracy overlooks both the class-struggle origins of democratic politics and the dismantling of collective working-class organizations. Often, the result is an overreliance on cultural explanations of democratic backsliding, and prescriptions that reinforce the mistaken notion that the prudence of elites is democracy's best defense.

Two recent books — *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt and *The People vs. Democracy* by Yascha Mounk — exemplify this conservative approach to the crisis of contemporary democracy. Like their predecessors in the Trilateral Commission, these authors' primary concern is strengthening the position of incumbent elites and the institutions they control under the pretense of protecting and consolidating democratic politics. Then as now, the key maneuver is redefining democracy as a system of elite-driven conflict management rather than popular control of government. Whatever measures of social and political reform they recommend seek to restore the status quo that prevailed before the financial crisis, instead of reducing elite domination or enhancing popular capacities for democratic rule.

3 Alexandra Castillo, Christine Huang, and Laura Silver, "In many countries, dissatisfaction with democracy is tied to views about economic conditions, personal rights," Pew Research Center, April 29, 2019.

Not all assessments of democracy's ailing fortunes look to incumbent elites to save the people from themselves. *Democracy in America?* by Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens and *For a Left Populism* by Chantal Mouffe both recognize that the problem with democracy today is not that there is too much of it, but rather far too little. Page and Gilens exhaustively document the ways in which economic elites dominate the US political system, and how the scope of government activity is severely constrained by capitalist class power. For her part, Mouffe's work is primarily concerned with formulating a political strategy capable of guiding an effective popular challenge to that power. Both these books make important contributions to understanding the contemporary impasse of democratic politics. Unfortunately, however, neither of them offers a satisfying answer to the question of what is to be done about it, and how. Both tend to reduce the defeat of organized labor to just one explanatory factor among many, and both fail to adequately elaborate the constituencies, agencies, and strategies that would allow a movement for democracy to act upon their often valuable insights.

MAISANO

MORE FUEL FOR THE FIRE

What do we mean by democracy? For our purposes here, democracy is defined by three basic conditions: regular and free election of representatives on the basis of universal and equal suffrage, responsibility of the state bureaucratic and administrative machinery to the popularly elected government, and basic guarantees of freedom of expression and association as well as the protection of individual rights against arbitrary state action.⁴ There is widespread agreement that the emergence of political democracy is intimately related to the rise of capitalist social relations, but the nature of that relationship

4 This conception of the conditions of formal political democracy is drawn from Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43.

has often been misunderstood. For many scholars, the key development is the emergence of a capitalist class with an interest in breaking apart the fusion of the state with the landowning classes that defined feudalism.⁵ Many Marxist accounts of the rise of democracy have also viewed the capitalist class as the main actor in this process, reinforcing the widely held but mistaken notion that basic political rights and freedoms have a bourgeois provenance.⁶

A number of important works, however, have effectively demolished the notion that political democracy is an organic byproduct of capitalist development or the handiwork of the bourgeoisie. Democratic rights and freedoms did not result from the gradual and peaceful spread of wealth, literacy, and urbanization, but rather social upheavals resulting from war and class conflict. It was the emergence of the working class and the labor movement that opened the path to democratization, not the rise to power of the capitalist class. To the extent that they exist, democratic rights and freedoms are the fruit of hard-fought victories won from and defended against the bourgeoisie.⁷

The history of the right to vote shows that the lower classes had to fight their way into the political system by presenting elites with a credible revolutionary threat. The founders of modern representative governments shared the assumption that political participation should be restricted to men of wealth and property. In country after country, elites resisted pressures from below when they could and were forced into concessions when they could not. Political rights were therefore not granted from above, but conquered through mass action by the subordinate and excluded, above all by the organized working classes. The labor movement was not the only social agent

5 Barrington Moore Jr, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). Moore's classic work is the source of the well-known dictum "no bourgeois, no democracy."

6 Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013), 146.

7 The pathbreaking work in this field is Goran Therborn, "The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy," *New Left Review* no. 103 (May/June 1977): 3–41.

that fought for and won the extension of democratic rights and freedoms; in many countries, sections of the middle classes played an important role as well. But the weight of evidence in support of the basic premise is overwhelming. The working class, not the bourgeoisie or other elite actors, has been the most consistent champion of democratic politics around the world. The measure of working-class strength and organization is the measure of democracy itself.⁸

In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt pin much of the blame for democratic backsliding on the actions (or nonactions) of elites. They do not, however, take them to task for busting unions or gutting the welfare state, but rather for aiding and abetting the process of “norm erosion.” For Levitsky and Ziblatt, the establishment and maintenance of democracy ultimately depends on a culture of mutual toleration among elite-level political adversaries. “All successful democracies,” they argue, “rely on informal rules that, though not found in the constitution or any laws, are widely known and respected. In the case of American democracy, this has been vital.”⁹ While institutions also play a major role in safeguarding democratic politics, norms are the final bulwark that is supposed to be activated in case of emergency.

False hopes in elite prudence also mar Mounk’s widely discussed work, *The People vs. Democracy*. Mounk has set himself up as a leading scourge of “populism” in recent years, which in his usage encompasses any political expression he finds to be insufficiently respectful of mainstream political norms. Mounk is not wrong to observe that the relationship between liberalism and democracy seems to be unraveling, and that the underpinnings of liberal democracy are under

8 For further elaboration of this thesis, see Adam Przeworski, “Conquered or Granted? A History of Suffrage Extensions,” *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 2 (April 2009); Adaner Usmani, “Democracy and the Class Struggle,” *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 3 (November 2018), 664–704; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.

9 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 100.

mounting stress. But his palpable distrust in mass politics prevents him from providing effective answers to the burning questions of our political moment.

For the norm-erosion school, Donald Trump represents the failure of elites to defend a culture of civility and mutual toleration. Figures like Trump always threaten to emerge in periods of turbulence, but it is the job of traditional political leaders, in this view, to prevent them from ever making it onto a ballot in the first place. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, this was much easier to accomplish in the era of political bosses and smoke-filled rooms. By taking important decisions like presidential nominations out of the hands of elites and giving them to voters, reformers have unintentionally eliminated an important part of the “peer review process” and opened the door to “populist outsiders.”¹⁰ Democracy, in their view, can best be protected by political elites with enough prudence to maintain the guardrails and prevent a slide toward demagoguery and extremism.

By contrast, Mounk’s diagnosis of the causes of democratic malaise is actually fairly incisive. He concedes that political systems in countries like the United States and Britain were founded “not to manifest but to oppose democracy,” and that whatever democratic legitimacy they enjoy today was the product of struggles from below.¹¹ In recent decades, however, this partial democratization of representative institutions has been significantly eroded. There has been a general shift in power away from parliaments and toward bureaucratic agencies, independent central banks, international treaties, and other institutions that insulate elite decision-makers from popular accountability. Even where decisions haven’t been taken out of the realm of democratic contestation, the views and preferences of the majority are often not translated into public policy. Private interests have captured the political system, elites are socially

10 Levitsky and Ziblatt, 51.

11 Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 54–55.

disconnected from the mass of the population, and many supposed democracies have been reduced to little more than competitive oligarchies. The result is mass disillusionment in democratic politics and the emergence of new forces willing and able to take advantage of the situation.¹²

Despite this greater degree of diagnostic clarity, Mounk fails to carry through the logic of the analysis to its conclusion, which would be a reassertion of the need for mass politics and struggles from below — the forces that brought us democratic politics in the first place. For him, the resurgence of electoral participation and the emergence of new political forces is a source of alarm, not potential democratic renewal. “There is good reason to think,” Mounk argues, “that the recent thawing of the party system is far from benign” because they “do not just provide ideological alternatives within the democratic system — they challenge key rules and norms of the system itself.”¹³ This dread of “populism” encompasses a disparate array of political forces, from Marine Le Pen, Fidesz, and Alternative für Deutschland — a far-right party with neo-Nazi roots — to Podemos, Syriza, and Jeremy Corbyn.¹⁴ Such capaciousness renders the concept utterly meaningless and reduces it to a tool of political demonology rather than sober analysis.¹⁵

This impulse to confine political conflict to a narrow range acceptable to elites leads Levitsky and Ziblatt down some very strange interpretive paths. Take their analysis of the coup in Chile, for example. In their view, “politics without guardrails killed democracy in Chile,” an outcome for which the Allende government and its opponents were equally responsible.¹⁶ In reality, neither domestic elites nor the US

12 Ibid., 60–97.

13 Ibid., 114.

14 Ibid., 31–39.

15 For a critical analysis of the uses and abuses of “populism,” see Ronan Burtenshaw and Anton Jäger, “The Guardian’s Populism Panic,” *Jacobin*, December 5, 2018.

16 Levitsky and Ziblatt, 116.

government could accept the fact that the Popular Unity coalition was elected to see through a democratic transition to socialism in Chile. This process would have required, of course, an irreversible shift in economic and political power from industrialists and landowners to the working class and its allies. In short, it would have entailed a fundamental clash of *interests*, not simply “incompatible worldviews” or “partisan rivalries.” Levitsky and Ziblatt give us little sense that rational perceptions of power and interest might necessarily result in political conflicts that cannot be forestalled through mutual toleration or institutional forbearance.

This weakness becomes even more obvious when they attempt to explain the origins of the US Civil War. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, democratic norms were not strong in the early American republic. Republicans and Federalists considered their opponents to be mortal enemies and sought to destroy them by almost any means necessary. But over time, a fresh crop of career politicians like Martin Van Buren lowered the temperature and instituted a politics of tolerance and forbearance. This new culture of democratic norms began to unravel, however, under the pressure of conflict over slavery. The country’s fragile norms of mutual toleration were destroyed, and previously unthinkable modes of political activity became acceptable on both sides of the slavery question. Before long, a bloody war broke out, during which President Lincoln suspended *habeas corpus* and issued legally questionable executive orders. After the shooting stopped, the triumphant Union imposed military rule on the states of the former Confederacy. “Mutual toleration was established only after the issue of racial equality was removed from the political agenda,” after the abandonment of Reconstruction and the establishment of Jim Crow in the South.¹⁷

Levitsky and Ziblatt are at pains to stress that they don’t view slavery or segregation as good things. But their relentless advocacy

17 Levitsky and Ziblatt, 119–125.

of mutual toleration necessarily leads them to a both sides–ism that elides fundamental problems of the modern state. In their view, there’s no political disagreement that can’t be dealt with in a spirit of courtesy and reciprocity. But history has shown that conflict — whether at the ballot box, in the streets, or on the field of battle — is sometimes necessary and unavoidable. Elite-level cooperation and compromise simply could not defuse the slavery crisis. As William Seward argued in his famous speech on the eve of the Civil War, the failure to apprehend the “irrepressible conflict” between free labor and slavery induced “so many unsuccessful attempts at final compromise ... and it is the existence of this great fact that renders all such pretended compromises, when made, vain and ephemeral.”¹⁸ Conflict is the essence of democratic politics, and there are moments when the fulfillment of democratic justice requires the overthrow of traditional norms, come what may.

The rising generation of young adults has come of age in a period of rampant inequality and blatant political corruption. It is therefore no surprise that this cohort is highly receptive to political appeals from outside the mainstream, including various forms of radical and socialist politics. This flowering of youthful radicalism should be a particular cause for concern, according to Mounk. Unlike the older generations, who lived through the horrors of fascism and actually existing socialism, today’s young adults have little idea of what it would mean for them to live under a different kind of system. Rather than a source of hope, they represent to Mounk a potentially disruptive anti-systemic force that unscrupulous populists won’t hesitate to mobilize if given the chance. Mounk’s condescending alarmism about millennials has been challenged by a number of academics, who accuse him of misrepresenting survey data concerning their views on democracy.¹⁹ But even if his claims concerning young adults’

MAISANO

18 “William Seward, “His ‘Irrepressible Conflict’ Speech,” *Bartleby*, May 17, 2019.

19 Sam Adler-Bell, “Yascha Mounk Tells People What They Want to Hear,” *The Outline*, March 11, 2019.

questionable commitment to democracy were empirically grounded, his explanation for those views would still miss the mark. Youthful discontent with the status quo is driven above all by the fact that young adults cannot expect to do as well or better than their parents did — to say nothing of the looming ecological catastrophe that incumbent elites are doing far too little to address. They want more democracy, not less.

Levitsky and Ziblatt evince a moment of lucidity toward the end of their book, as they search for ways to address the problems of democracy. Something should be done, in their view, to reduce the vast social inequalities that are exacerbating racial and religious resentments in the United States.²⁰ They're certainly not wrong about this, but how could a program of redistribution be achieved without a dramatic increase in popular pressure? Levitsky and Ziblatt want a prudently managed reduction of the sources of political conflict. But, as Frederick Douglass memorably put it, you can't raise crops without plowing up the ground.

To his credit, Mounk recognizes that the current order is in serious need of renovation. But his prescriptions for dealing with the challenges of our time would only pour more fuel on the fire. He wants one, two, many Emmanuel Macrons, an impulse belied by the rebellion of the *gilets jaunes*. He recognizes the need to raise labor's bargaining power in a globalized economy, but he emphasizes skill development for individual workers at the expense of collective organization.²¹ The same goes for his program to modernize the welfare state, which is premised upon economic flexibility and entrepreneurialism, not the reduction of market dependency or boosting the security and collective strength of the working classes.²²

In the end, we are once again left to rely on the prudence of elites to deliver us from the current impasse. "Unlikely as it might seem at

20 Levitsky and Ziblatt, 228–9.

21 Mounk, 229.

22 Ibid., 232.

the moment,” Mounk argues, “the only realistic solution to the crisis of government accountability (and, most likely, the larger crisis of democratic norms) is therefore a negotiated settlement, in which both sides agree to disarm” and political leaders agree to once again observe the unwritten rules of the game.²³ The likes of Mounk, Levitsky, and Ziblatt want nothing more than a return to normalcy. But observance of this very normalcy is what brought us to our dire state of affairs. Macron and Obama are on one side of the coin; Le Pen and Trump are on the other.

AMERICAN OLIGARCHY

Fortunately, not everyone agrees that the ills of democracy can be cured by less democracy. Much of the best recent work on the dysfunctions of the US political system has come out of mainstream Americanist political science, a subfield that has long been criticized for its detachment from issues of public concern. In 2001, the American Political Science Association (APSA) established the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, and three years later it issued an incisive report that laid out an ambitious research agenda for the field.²⁴ Over the last fifteen years, important studies by Jacob Hacker, Suzanne Mettler, Martin Gilens, and others have analyzed the massive growth in inequality in the United States and its negative impact on an already counter-majoritarian political system.²⁵

In *Democracy in America?*, Page and Gilens survey the dire state of American politics and call for a thoroughgoing program of democratic

23 Ibid., 242.

24 American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality,” 2004, apsanet.org.

25 Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer — and Turned its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011); Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

renovation. For them, the fundamental failure of the system is the fact that it does not consistently and effectively translate majority preferences into public policy. The interaction of extreme wealth concentration with the undemocratic features of the US constitutional order has made it nearly impossible for citizens to exercise popular control over the government. A small group of very wealthy donors exerts a huge degree of influence over what kinds of actors can get into the political game, as well as the kinds of issues that make their way onto the agenda in the first place. The result is a political system that “often reflects the wishes of those with money, not the wishes of the millions of ordinary citizens who turn out every two years to choose among the preapproved, money-vetted candidates for federal office.”²⁶

On the basis of their research, Page and Gilens reach a remarkable and widely reported finding: ordinary Americans have essentially zero independent influence over politics and policymaking at the national level. Working- and middle-class people get the policies they want when these preferences coincide with the preferences of the rich — if the rich don’t want it, it’s not very likely to get through Congress. Page and Gilens call this regime a “democracy by coincidence,” a description that doesn’t offer much consolation to those of us who equate democracy with popular rule.²⁷ They also find that even the richest and most influential Americans often fail to translate their preferences into policy. Wealthy people and corporations almost always succeed at blocking policy changes they don’t want, which tend to be the very policy changes the vast majority wants most — particularly higher taxes on the rich and redistributive social programs. But according to Page and Gilens, even policy changes overwhelmingly supported by the rich have only a fifty-fifty chance of being adopted.²⁸ The deliberately byzantine design of the US

26 Benjamin I. Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3–8.

27 *Ibid.*, 67–69.

28 *Ibid.*, 91.

constitutional order (separation of powers, federalism, veto points, etc.) can make it difficult to achieve much of anything through political action.

Even so, it's quite clear that the rich have little reason to complain about this state of affairs. By investing even a relatively small portion of their massive resources into politics, they've made Lenin's dictum that politics is a concentrated expression of economics all too real.²⁹ And since the systematic bias toward policy drift mostly benefits those who already hold wealth and power, there is little incentive for them to upend the system, no matter how much they might complain about gridlock and red tape.

Unlike Mounk, Page and Gilens follow the logic of their analysis to the end by calling for a "social movement for democracy" to weaken the overwhelming political power of the rich. To this end, they draw inspiration from the familiar highlights of American popular democracy: Populism, the New Deal period, the Civil Rights Movement. Page and Gilens are rare in recognizing the importance of organized labor to political democracy, and the role that strong unions have played in bringing a modicum of popular power into US politics. But they are ultimately analysts, not strategists. They give us little sense of how the movement they call for might be constructed, and their temperamental preference for moderation cuts against the grain of their own proposals. They are critical of the drift toward oligarchy because, in their view, this has moved the country away from a time when US politics was ostensibly more "moderate, bipartisan, and reasonably democratic."³⁰ They call on moderate candidates to run for office, and they deplore the outsize influence that the most strongly partisan activists and voters exercise through primary elections. All of this sits uncomfortably against their comprehensive program for political reconstruction, which includes demands for proportional

29 V. I. Lenin, "Once Again on the Trade Unions," *Marxists Internet Archive*, January 1921.

30 Page and Gilens, 247.

representation in the House of Representatives, abolition of the Electoral College, a constitutional convention to democratize the Senate and other institutions that can't feasibly be reorganized under the current Constitution, stripping federal courts of jurisdiction over key political issues, and packing the Supreme Court to dilute its power.³¹ This is a recipe for disruption on a massive scale, tantamount to the establishment of a new US republic. Instead of a restoration of bipartisan comity, Page and Gilens have given us an agenda for political revolution, whether they want to acknowledge it or not.

Still, these criticisms do not detract from the valuable contributions that Page and Gilens have made. Their focus on challenging the undemocratic nature of the political regime should be taken up by the resurgent US left, and their call for a wide-ranging movement against the rich is welcome and perhaps unexpected, coming as it does from a pair of rather mainstream political scientists.

WHO ARE “WE”?

Which strategy, then, should guide the movement for democratic renewal? This is the question that Chantal Mouffe has been trying to answer for the last four decades, and her recent book *For a Left Populism* refines and summarizes many of the key themes of her work. With her late husband, Ernesto Laclau, Mouffe developed the theoretical and strategic vocabulary that informs contemporary movements for “radical democracy” in Europe and the Americas. Anyone who has spent time on the radical left since the 1980s has been directly or indirectly exposed to their ideas, particularly their reformulation of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemonic politics. In their landmark work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (hereafter *HSS*), Laclau and Mouffe praised Gramsci's approach to political strategy in the advanced capitalist countries. But in their view, he failed to

³¹ Ibid., 212–35.

carry through his analysis to its ostensibly logical end: a rejection of Marxism’s “class essentialism” and its insistence on the organized working class as the leading force for radical social transformation. The working-class movement would still play a role in the movement for radical democracy, but as just one link in a “chain of equivalence” in which no single actor or set of demands carried any particular social weight or strategic importance.³² Here was the theoretical justification for the “movement of movements” perspective that has been the Left’s default position in the post–Cold War era.

Before entering into a critical assessment of Mouffe’s main themes, it is worth taking a moment to register the important strategic questions that she gets right in the book. Mouffe offers an incisive critique of the horizontalist approach to political organization that has dominated the radical left since the end of the Cold War.³³ So long as post-2008 protest formations remained within a horizontalist framework, one that refused any meaningful articulation with existing political institutions, their impact and staying power was limited.³⁴ They had to turn from protest to politics in order to broaden their appeal and institutionalize their demands, and in doing so they have reinvigorated an organizational form that had been repudiated as an outmoded relic of the twentieth century: the political party. The massive growth of the Corbyn-led Labour Party, the unexpected success of Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaigns, and the emergence of new radical political formations in Europe and Latin America show that, as Mouffe argues, political parties are not obsolete and can be reactivated to advance popular goals and aspirations.³⁵ Relatedly, the return of the party shows that, contrary to the advocates of horizontalist politics,

32 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985).

33 For a brief explication and defense of horizontalist politics, see Marina Sitrin, “Horizontalism and the Occupy Movements,” *Dissent* (Spring 2012).

34 Mouffe, 19–20.

35 *Ibid.*, 38.

representation itself is not the problem. The problem with political institutions today is that they are insufficiently representative of the needs and interests of the vast majority. In Mouffe's view, therefore, the "remedy does not lie in abolishing representation but in making our institutions more representative."³⁶ Finally, and perhaps most controversially, Mouffe is correct to argue that the nation-state is still the most strategically decisive institutional level in world politics.³⁷ For decades, the Left has tended to evacuate the arena of national-level politics in two directions: downward toward autonomist localisms, and upward toward often quite blurry conceptions of transnational politics. Whether we like it or not, the nation-state is still the primary framework through which many of our most pressing problems will have to be addressed and resolved.

Despite these strengths, however, Mouffe's book bears many of the flaws and limitations of the "discursive turn" in radical politics that she and Laclau did so much to inaugurate in the 1980s. According to Mouffe, the traditional parties of the Left are in crisis because their conceptions of politics are still trapped by a supposedly outmoded dependence on economic and sociological categories. If the Left wants to break out of its impasse and take advantage of the opportunities before it, it must adopt a "discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy.'" The people, in this face-off, represent a "collective will that results from the mobilization of common affects in defense of equality and social justice" and against the chauvinistic politics of right-wing populism. The demands of working people, immigrants, queer people, precarious elements of the middle class, and others should be united in a negative opposition to a common adversary, with "democracy" and "citizenship" serving as the signifiers that bind the various elements together.³⁸

36 Ibid., 56–57.

37 Ibid., 71.

38 Ibid., 1, 5, 6, 24.

These arguments will be familiar to anyone who dutifully worked their way through *HSS*. Indeed, *For a Left Populism* reiterates and distills many of the key arguments from that foundational book. The crucial moment in the passage highlighted above is the emphasis on common affects in defense of an abstract value called “democracy.” Such a conception drains democracy of its social content; when translated into practice, it is a politics of style, culture, and discourse — not interests, a concept that is rejected along with the “privileged” status the Left has traditionally assigned to the working class and class politics.

Even so, Mouffe cannot help but take into account the fact that the recovery of class politics must be a central aspect of any strategy for democratic renewal in the present moment. “In fact,” she concedes, “it could be argued that the situation today is the opposite of the one we criticized thirty years ago, and that it is ‘working-class’ demands that are now neglected.”³⁹ This is certainly the case, but the fact that she shows no sense of responsibility for this situation is rather frustrating. What’s more, today’s “populist moment” signals the crisis of “a set of political-economic practices aimed at imposing the rule of the market ... and limiting the role of the state to the protection of private property rights, free markets and free trade.”⁴⁰ Considering the crucial importance of political economy in the present moment, Mouffe concludes, the effective construction of a people requires “reasserting the importance of the ‘social question.’”⁴¹

This constitutes a welcome recalibration of the perspective she and Laclau advanced in *HSS*, which argued for the full autonomization of politics and ideology from any kind of social basis. Mouffe’s belated rediscovery of political economy, however, sits awkwardly next to her emphasis on common *affects* over common *interests*. It also cuts against the grain of her own analysis of Thatcherism, which

39 Ibid., 59.

40 Ibid., 11–12.

41 Ibid., 61.

she takes to be the paradigmatic example of a hegemonic project. Following Stuart Hall, she views Thatcherism as primarily a cultural and ideological phenomenon, and its success as definitive proof of the bankruptcy of “essentialist” class politics. While Thatcher was advancing a new understanding of the values of liberty and equality, an ideological reinterpretation made possible by the crisis of the postwar order, the Labour Party and the trade unions remained prisoners of their congenital economism. Trapped in a conceptual framework inherited from a bygone era, they were “thereby unable to resist the assault of forces opposed to the Keynesian model and this opened the way for the cultural and ideological victory of the neoliberal project.”⁴²

Thatcherism undoubtedly had a strong cultural, ideological, and mediatic aspect to it. But the core of the project was a ruthless class war against the labor movement, the Left’s social and organizational backbone, backed by the raw force of state power. Indeed, Thatcher herself understood her project as an attempt to remake Britain’s economic order in the service of her larger political and ideological goals. As she put it in a now infamous 1981 interview,

What’s irritated me about the whole direction of politics in the last 30 years is that it’s always been towards the collectivist society. People have forgotten about the personal society. And they say: do I count, do I matter? To which the short answer is, yes. And therefore, it isn’t that I set out on economic policies; it’s that I set out really to change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.⁴³

42 Ibid., 28.

43 Ronald Butt, “Mrs. Thatcher: The First Two Years,” *Sunday Times*, May 3, 1981, <https://www.margarethatcher.org/document/104475>.

Mouffe fundamentally misunderstands why Marxists and socialists have traditionally emphasized the political centrality of the organized working class. She summarily dismisses those “sectors of the left who keep reducing politics to the contradiction of capital/labor and attribute an ontological privilege to the working class, presented as the vehicle for the socialist revolution.”⁴⁴ The problem with this formulation is that the socialist emphasis on the working class isn’t ontological, nor is it an expression of some sort of abstract preference. It’s a strategic inference drawn from an analysis of the dynamics of capitalism and class relations. If capital constitutes the main center of power in our society and constitutes the main barrier to the establishment of a truly democratic polity, then it follows that the working-class movement must play a leading role in that struggle.

If the Left truly wants to learn from Thatcherism’s success, it must recover its grounding in the material conditions of working people’s lives. This obviously does not entail a rejection of cultural and ideological interventions, as these will be key to recreating a strong and widely held working-class political identity.⁴⁵ But it does entail a strong emphasis on rebuilding working-class organization to the level where it can effectively wield power in the workplace and in politics. Such a commitment cannot be carried out in the absence of a program and a politics that is addressed first and foremost to meeting the material needs and interests of the vast majority. In the absence of such class-based power, abstract appeals to democracy and citizenship may redound much more to the benefit of the Right, not the Left. It’s no accident that right-wing appeals to “take back control” in the name of “the people” have succeeded so well in a context of widespread social disorganization and material deprivation.

In this sense, Mouffe’s brand of left populism may be just as much a symptom of the fractures that have produced figures like Trump than

44 Mouffe, 80.

45 Vivek Chibber, “Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn,” *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 27–55.

a cure for them.⁴⁶ This is reflected perhaps most clearly in Mouffe's argument for the importance of individual leadership figures in the construction of a people. Since her conception of collective will is grounded in affect and not interest, something must provide the glue that binds the people together. In this case, that binding agent is shared support for a charismatic leader.⁴⁷ Indeed, almost every radical movement of our time is closely associated with a leadership figure whose name is virtually synonymous with the movement itself. The trend began in South America, where Lula da Silva and Hugo Chávez stood at the head of popular political movements in Brazil and Venezuela, and has since migrated to Europe and North America. Podemos is inconceivable without Pablo Iglesias; France Insoumise without Jean-Luc Mélenchon; the new radicalism in the Labour Party without Jeremy Corbyn; the resurgent US left without Bernie Sanders; Mexican national reformism without AMLO. The sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo describes this dynamic as a form of "distributed centralization," which combines a mediatic "hyperleader" at the top with an engaged but largely reactive "superbase" at the bottom. Unlike the mass parties that preceded them, these new formations tend to lack the extensive network of physical structures, intermediate party cadres, and local branches and sections that used to play a major role in making decisions and setting policies. Today's most successful politicians, whether of the Right or the Left, have learned how to use new digital media to bypass intermediaries and appeal directly to a mass audience, particularly among younger people.⁴⁸

This phenomenon poses obvious dangers. The difficulties that popular movements in Venezuela and Brazil have faced in the absence of their leaders may well offer the left populist forces of Europe and

46 I borrow this insight from Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello, "Is Left Populism the Solution?" *Jacobin*, March 31, 2019.

47 Mouffe, 70.

48 Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organization and Online Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2019); Paolo Gerbaudo, "The age of the hyperleader: when political leadership meets social media celebrity," *New Statesman*, March 8, 2019.

North America an image of their own future. Even so, there is probably no way to avoid the need for charismatic leadership to help overcome the deficiency of popular organization, at least in the short term. Forty years of neoliberalism have disorganized the working classes and undermined the mass political parties that gave them shape through much of the twentieth century. In the current period, leadership figures will continue to play a key role in giving voice to discontent and, hopefully, shaping it into a more stable political expression. The big question, of course, is whether these leaders are willing and able to stimulate mass organization beyond their own projects, and whether the new formations they're associated with can ultimately outgrow their current dependence on them.

CONCLUSION

In the meantime, the erosion of democracy's social substratum will continue to present morbid symptoms in the United States and elsewhere. The hollowing out of civil society and class-based organizations has provided fertile ground for the most antisocial tendencies to thrive, including the alarming proliferation of xenophobic, white supremacist killers incubated on the internet. Whereas historical fascisms grew in a context of intensive party-political and civil society organization, today's radical right is an expression of profound social disintegration.⁴⁹ It is, in the words of Marco Revelli, "the formless form that social malaise and impulses to protest take on in societies that have been pulverized and reworked by globalization and total finance,"⁵⁰ and which are highly susceptible to the kinds of disinformation and paranoia that digital technology is so effective at spreading. The main locus of far-right radicalization today isn't the local branch

49 Dylan Riley, *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso: 2019), xxxi.

50 Marco Revelli, *The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss* (New York: Verso, 2019), 11.

of a fascist mass party, but rather the anonymized world of online discussion forums and group chats. This is the deeply anti-political environment that has given us the twinned phenomena of Donald Trump and the extremely online mass shooter.

The combination of social disorganization and the breakdown of effective interest representation is a dangerous cocktail. Dictatorship is not on the agenda in capitalist democracies, but this situation has allowed the forces of the radical right to advance their agenda quite effectively through the existing political systems — not least because it reinforces popular cynicism about the value of deliberative and representative democracy. The current sociopolitical terrain is, in many respects, much more favorable to the Right than what remains of the Left, and it will continue to be so in many capitalist democracies, barring significant reversals of fortune.

Still, the situation is far from hopeless — particularly in the United States. Bernie Sanders's first presidential campaign sparked the beginnings of a revival of the long-dormant US left. The stunning growth of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the election of figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib are among the fruits of that campaign. Sanders's second campaign has the potential to push these developments even further, even if he doesn't win the Democratic Party primary campaign or the presidency. It represents a significant opportunity to promote social organization on a mass scale, for as Sanders himself constantly reminds his supporters, there is no way he will be able to break the domination of the billionaire class on his own, even with the powers of the US presidency behind him. His campaign slogan is "Not Me, Us." This isn't just cheap campaign talk. Sanders's campaign is demonstrating its commitment to mass organizing and popular mobilization by using his lists to turn supporters out to picket lines, and to encourage the development of organizing skills among his base.

This is where the other major development in US politics, the modest but unmistakable return of the strike, is so important. The

US labor movement has been mired in a seemingly endless decline since the 1970s. Structural changes in the economy, combined with an employers' offensive supported by politicians, has cut the rate of private sector unionization from roughly 25 percent to just 6.5 percent. Public sector unions were much more successful in maintaining their position, but the erosion of unions in the private sector left them very vulnerable to political and judicial attacks. These culminated in a recent Supreme Court decision called *Janus v. American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees*, in which the conservative majority imposed a so-called "right-to-work" regime on public employment nationwide. This means that union membership in the public sector is now totally voluntary in all fifty states, a significant threat to the unions' organizational and financial security.⁵¹

All of these pressures, however, seem to have finally aroused a fighting spirit among US workers. Close to 400,000 public education workers went on strike in 2018, bravely led by workers in West Virginia and other Republican-dominated states where public employee strikes are illegal. There were also upsurges in strike activity among health care workers, hotel employees, telecommunications workers, and even in the technology sector, where Google employees walked out in protest of sexual harassment and Big Tech's collusion with the military-industrial complex. While it may be premature to herald the coming of a strike wave, more American workers went on strike in 2018 than in any other year since the 1980s.⁵² Whether this results in a recovery of union organization or the reversal of anti-worker laws still remains to be seen.

The leftward ferment in the electoral arena, combined with the tentative steps toward working-class reorganization, are grounds for hope in democratic renewal. In this context, the most important contribution that Bernie Sanders has made is not his advocacy of

51 For more on these developments, see Chris Maisano, "Public Sector Unions After *Janus*," *Catalyst* 2 no. 2 (Summer 2018), 135–148.

52 Kim Moody, "We Just Remembered How to Strike," *Jacobin*, April 20, 2019.

Medicare for All or tuition-free public higher education, as welcome and necessary as these demands are. It is his call for a political revolution in the United States. The nascent socialist movement should develop this call into a program for democratic revolution, one that links the democratization of political institutions with support for working-class organizational capacity in politics, the economy, and every arena of social life. This may not be what the ersatz guardians of democracy have in mind, but it is the only genuine cure for democracy's morbid symptoms. ✎

LIBRARIANS, UNITE!

Encourage your university or public library to get an institutional subscription to *Catalyst*. Institutional subscriptions are \$100 and include full archive access and IP authentication.

[catalyst-journal.com/
institutional-subscriptions](http://catalyst-journal.com/institutional-subscriptions)

NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS

Catalyst is an interdisciplinary journal.
We welcome scholarly articles
from all fields and any specialization.

STYLE

Articles submitted to *Catalyst* should be written in simple and clear language, avoiding unnecessary jargon. Although technical language is sometimes necessary, but it should be kept to a minimum, as should footnotes and tables.

LENGTH

We do not have a standard word limit, but we encourage contributors to not exceed 10,000 words.

CITATIONS

Sources should be cited in footnotes according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Authors do not need to provide a bibliography.

DRAFTS

Please email drafts to submissions@catalyst-journal.com. We will try to respond as quickly as possible, but may require a month for review.

ISSN 2475-7365

\$15

