



Catalyst

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**Benjamin Y. Fong and
Christie Offenbacher**
Occupy in Retrospect

Doug McAdam
Understanding the
Civil Rights Movement

Chris Maisano
Is the Labor
Movement Back?

Matt Vidal
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Lean Production

Matías Vernengo
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The year 2021 marked the tenth anniversary of Occupy Wall Street. Over this past decade, we have seen the reemergence of genuinely progressive demands in the political sphere and even the normalization of socialist discourse. It is very uneven, and, as one might expect, it has often felt like one step forward and two steps back. What is beyond doubt is that the Occupy moment was something of a watershed, and that Bernie Sanders's presidential campaigns galvanized progressive forces like nothing we have seen in decades. What was the connection between these two events? Did the first give rise to the second, as many have claimed, or was the Sanders phenomenon *sui generis*? In this issue, Benjamin Fong and Christie Offenbacher make a compelling argument that the ethos and strategic perspective of Occupy Wall Street made it less a forerunner of the Sanders moment and more a direct expression of the amorphous lifestyle politics of the neoliberal era. In this respect, Sanders revitalized a style of politics and a strategic perspective quite distinct from those of Occupy.

If socialist politics are ever to gain traction politically, it will have to come through a reinvigorated working-class movement. Two questions immediately arise: Are there any signs of its reappearance, and in the event that it gathers steam, how might it navigate the current regime of accumulation? Chris Maisano examines the strike activity data for 2021 and notes that, while there was an uptick in labor actions, they fell short of those in 2018. Even more worrying, union density in the private sector actually declined during the year, in spite of the very visible strikes. And Matt Vidal

makes a bold argument, based on extensive fieldwork, that there are avenues for the labor movement to turn the apparatus of lean production to its own ends. For years, labor organizers and scholars have associated lean production with harsh managerial control and a remorseless speedup on the shop floor. Vidal agrees that this has been the case in some sectors. But he argues that, under the right conditions, lean production's promise of worker participation can be turned into a reality.

Continuing with the labor theme, Matías Vernengo contends that much of the public discourse around inflation is misguided. He shows that current price increases are not the product of excessive wage gains, nor of an overly aggressive fiscal stance. Instead, they are a supply-driven phenomenon brought on by breakdowns in the supply chain. Indeed, he forcefully argues, the bigger danger is not runaway inflation but the threat of ongoing economic stagnation if the administration scales back its expansionary stance.

We round out the issue with a conversation with Doug McAdam on the civil rights movement and the evolution of the scholarship around it. McAdam wrote what is probably the most widely cited study of the movement, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. One of the most noteworthy facts about the book is its reliance on a political economy framework, which has largely disappeared from the study of movements today, having been overtaken by discourse and cultural approaches. McAdam discusses the change in scholarly culture since his book was published in 1982, and how the turn away from political economy has affected the field.

Finally, we publish Aasim Sajjad Akhtar's terse but effective diagnosis of the United States' defeat in and retreat from Afghanistan. Akhtar goes beyond the usual explanation for the failure, which typically centers on corruption and graft, and shows how the American presence triggered a process of class formation in the

countryside that the imperial power had no way of managing. Now, in the wake of its withdrawal, the imperial state has responded by imposing a brutal sanctions regime on the Afghans, thus opening a new phase of its war against them that is less visible but no less devastating. Any Left worth its name has an obligation to keep this atrocity front and center. 🗨️

Correction: In the last issue of *Catalyst* (vol. 5, no. 3), we mistakenly produced an error that resulted in incorrect labels on the x-axis of Figures 2, 5, 6, and 7 in Adaner Usmani and David Zachariah's article "The Class Path to Racial Liberation." The x-axis in these figures should read 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100.





In reflections on the legacy of Occupy Wall Street ten years after its inception, the notion that Occupy led to the Bernie Sanders moment is quite common. In fact, this essay argues, Occupy Wall Street was not the beginning of a new political era for the Left but the last, carnivalesque expression of a period of defeat.

Occupy in Retrospect

Benjamin Y. Fong and
Christie Offenbacher

The year 2021 marked the tenth anniversary of Occupy Wall Street. In the impressive outpouring of reflections on the movement, one found much talk of birth and beginnings. Occupy was regularly portrayed as a social movement renaissance that brought issues of class and inequality back into mainstream discourse.¹ Lines were traced to Black Lives Matter, the Debt Collective, Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the Sunrise Movement, though in a manner more akin to montage than history. In the brewing activist *mélange* of the last decade, for many tenth anniversary commentators, Occupy lay at the origin.

1 Hadas Thier, "Ten Years After Occupy, We Have a Left That Matters," *Jacobin*, October 16, 2021.

Though it was undeniably an important event for the contemporary Left, the idea that Occupy inaugurated or birthed much of what followed it strikes us as incorrect, but in ways that are politically instructive. In this essay, we take up one component of what we will call the “Occupy origin story” — that which traces the Bernie Sanders moment to Occupy — and argue that it is unconvincing in its two broad assertions: that Occupy, in some meaningful way, made possible the success of Sanders’s campaigns; and that the involvement of many Occupy activists in those campaigns was a natural result of their political maturation.²

Our basic argument is this: the lurch to the left in American political consciousness followed from the 2008 economic crisis, to which Occupy was an insufficient response that quickly flamed out. In this, it constituted not a beginning but an *end* — of decades of nonstrategic activist-ism, of self-defeating horizontalism, and of protest without politics.³ Only with Sanders’s admittedly quixotic primary bid in 2015 did a majoritarian and politically strategic left current emerge, one that absorbed people activated by Occupy as well as many others who had been either hostile or indifferent to it in 2011. Occupy-inspired activists were thus *not* the origin of the Sanders moment but rather merely one group (albeit a particularly vocal and influential one) swept up in the first left awakening to mass politics in at least a generation, and it was *this* experience that transformed many of them from liberal anarchists to liberal socialists.

2 We are focusing here in particular on the connection between Occupy and Bernie Sanders. The other connections frequently made, for instance to Black Lives Matter, could also benefit from more scrutiny.

3 Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti, “Action Will Be Taken’: Left Anti-Intellectualism and Its Discontents,” *Damage*, July 16, 2018. To our minds, there is a much clearer connection between the Seattle anti-globalization mobilization of 1999 and Occupy Wall Street than there is between Occupy and Bernie Sanders. See Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: It Books, 2012), 121.

We then attempt to make sense of why this myth has taken such hold in left circles, and how it obscures significant political divisions that persist today. In brief, the Occupy origin story is a legitimating narrative for a certain activist set that has become influential in the left-liberal nonprofit and media worlds. In addition to being unconvincing, it performs, like all myths, an obfuscating function — in this case, covering over the ideological division responsible for much conflict within the Left during the past several years. We believe that reckoning with this division honestly, rather than trying to obscure it with a narrative of political continuity, is necessary to carry forward the gains of the current left revival into a true movement toward democratic socialism.

THE OCCUPY ORIGIN STORY

In his recent book *Generation Occupy: Reawakening American Democracy*, journalist Michael Levitin captures the spirit of much Occupy commentary from the past year.

Occupy Wall Street revived the labor movement, remade the Democratic Party and reinvented activism, birthing a new culture of protest that put the fight for economic and social justice at the forefront of a generation. Far from a passing phenomenon, Occupy inaugurated an era of political change in which the demands of the majority continue to grow louder and more focused. ... The seeds [Occupiers] planted took root overnight and quickly spread and multiplied, germinating in the country's consciousness.⁴

Though Levitin is a particularly committed believer in Occupy's lasting significance, the birthing and renewal metaphors he uses here were common in many left publications' tenth anniversary

4 Michael Levitin, *Generation Occupy: Reawakening American Democracy* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2021), 4.

reflections. Hadas Thier said “the new left ... was birthed” in Zuccotti Park, Jonathan Smucker that Occupy “helped inaugurate the start of a revival of a hitherto long-declining American left,” and Gabriel Winant that “Occupy was the critical event in the formation of a new anticapitalist intellectual milieu.”⁵

Fecund as Occupy was, however, its commemorators were quick to point out that the movement was far from faultless. They acknowledge that it was an overwhelmingly white and college-educated affair, inaugurated in response to a call from the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* for a “Tahrir moment” in New York City.⁶ They admit that its politics were more anarchist than socialist, that it suffered organizationally from what Jo Freeman called “the tyranny of structurelessness,” and that it refused to put forward concrete demands.⁷ According to Doug Henwood, there was “no vision of life beyond the parks and other spaces it was occupying. ... Nor was there any sense of how the larger world would be transformed along Occupy’s principles; there was no serious theory of social change circulating.”⁸

Compare these descriptions with that of the Left amid the Bernie Sanders moment (2015–2020). The activist core is still largely white and college-educated, but the political orientation differs dramatically from that of Occupy. It’s more directly

5 Thier, “Ten Years After Occupy”; Jonathan Smucker, “Happy Birthday, Occupy Wall Street,” *Intercept*, September 17, 2021; Gabriel Winant, “A New Political Identity,” *Dissent*, September 17, 2021.

6 Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, “Changing the Subject: A Bottom-Up Account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City,” CUNY Murphy Institute, 2013. There were, however, independent organizing efforts that, after the *Adbusters* call, converged on the date of September 17.

7 Jo Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” *The Second Wave* 2, no. 1 (1972).

8 Doug Henwood, “Occupy Wall Street at 10: It Was Annoying, But It Changed the World,” *Jacobin*, September 17, 2021.

socialist, vying for state power, focused on both elections and workplace organizing, and armed with concrete demands: Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, College for All. This remarkable transformation poses a significant narrative obstacle to the Occupy origin story, at least as it concerns the continuity between Occupy and Bernie Sanders. How *precisely* did such a sweeping reorientation occur?⁹ Why is this a progression rather than a simple break?

The claim to continuity is typically built on two points. First, the *rhetoric*: though expressive of a vague anti-capitalist orientation, Occupy's "1 percent vs. the 99 percent" framing was indeed used in Sanders's campaigns.¹⁰ It's this shared focus on inequality that informs claims that Occupy "animated the rise of Sen. Bernie Sanders," or that "It was thanks to Occupy that Bernie Sanders's first run for president achieved an unlikely measure of success," or even that "Bernie Sanders was a direct manifestation of Occupy Wall Street organizing efforts."¹¹ Author Susan Griffin offers one of the bolder versions of this claim: "Occupy gave Bernie a platform and gave him permission to talk about these things" (referring to the themes of Occupy, presumably).¹² Even though Sanders's democratic socialism grates uncomfortably against Occupy anarchism,

9 Filmmaker Dennis Trainor Jr offers a kind of osmotic explanation: "The enduring value of Occupy Wall Street [is] the ripples that emanated from its center, even if people don't recognize that they're now for Medicare for All, a fifteen-dollar minimum wage, a Green New Deal or guaranteed income for all." Quoted in Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 98.

10 Though it hardly affected the content of the speeches that Bernie had been giving for more than three decades: Bernie Sanders, "30 Years of Speeches," YouTube, March 24, 2016.

11 Emily Stewart, "We Are (Still) the 99 Percent," *Vox*, April 30, 2019; Natasha Lennard and Nikil Saval, "Was Occupy Wall Street More Anarchist or Socialist?" *Nation*, September 21, 2021; act.tv, "Occupy Wall Street's Activists Orchestrated the Rise of Bernie Sanders," YouTube, September 14, 2021.

12 Quoted in Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 82.

both ideologically and practically, the broad focus on inequality is said to unite the two strands of the Left.

Second, and more important, the *people*: from the encampments sprung networks of middle-class activists and media figures, forged for durability in the hot fire of celebratory chaos and world-changing ambition. It was the first time in years that people got together across a wide range of tendencies to think about political problems and organize for their solution. Having lived through and reflected on the failures of Occupy, they have, by their own accounts, grown past the constrained perspectives of their political youth. According to Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, the “unexpected traction” of Occupy helped embolden a marked shift in perspective, one that led away from a horizontalism without demands and toward building institutional, electoral, and state power.¹³ This trope is commonly repeated by many Occupiers: having “been there” was an important experience, but also one that, in its insufficiency, naturally led to something more. Its failure to materialize any immediate wins fueled the flame of popular frustration to which it first gave expression. After bringing all these people together, many commentators claim, the limitations of Occupy’s decentralized approach pointed to the need for concerted, strategic organizing and concrete demands.

As may be evident in our presentation thus far, it’s largely the Occupiers themselves who have made, and continue to make, this story. They have started new nonprofits, joined reformist union caucuses, and canvassed for Bernie. As Paul Mattick wryly notes, they’ve also been swept up into the new left media niche, where they “speak, naturally, for their fellows, their own class fraction: writers, academics, and political professionals.”¹⁴ It’s possible, he

13 Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, “Did Occupy Wall Street Make a Difference?” *Nation*, September 17, 2021.

14 Paul Mattick, “Occupied,” *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2021.

implies, that all the hullabaloo about Occupy at ten years old is the self-celebration of a group of people who made careers on the Left while inequality worsened.

TWO COUNTERFACTUALS

To our minds, the cogency of the Occupy Wall Street origin story depends on a negative answer to two questions: 1) Would the Bernie moment beginning in 2015 have happened if not for Occupy? And 2) Would the activists that emerged out of Occupy have retained what many of them now view as a less mature political orientation *without* having later experienced the Bernie moment? In essence, this is to imagine two counterfactuals: one where Occupy didn't exist, and one where Bernie's presidential campaigns didn't.

We doubt anyone would, if pressed, argue for the strongest version of a negative answer to the first question, i.e., that Occupy was *necessary* for Bernie's presidential campaigns to happen.¹⁵ Yet it's quite common to hear about how Occupy in some manner made possible the success of Sanders's two primary runs. As an *organizing* claim, this is difficult to justify: the Occupy activists who were interested in electoral politics, including Winnie Wong and Charles Lenchner, initially threw their support behind Elizabeth Warren as a presidential candidate by starting the "Ready for Warren" group.¹⁶

Indeed, in the Occupy milieu pre-2015, Warren was the only mainstream candidate that participants viewed as representing the moment's politics. This should not be overstated: some activists

15 Some do imply that this is a real possibility, though. See, for instance, Milkman et al., "Did Occupy Wall Street Make a Difference?"; Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 79.

16 They were joined in the effort by MoveOn, which started the much larger "Run Warren Run" campaign.

chafed against the idea that Warren was “Occupy’s sort of politician.”¹⁷ But there was a clear link between Occupy’s anti-corporate, anti-Wall Street ethos and Warren’s focus on financial regulation. In June 2015, Levitin called Warren “the party’s most dynamic leader” and “the closest thing to an Occupy candidate the movement ever got.”¹⁸ (He revised his position in *Generation Occupy* to say that Bernie is the *real* “Occupy candidate.”¹⁹)

Only after it was clear that Warren would not run and Bernie would did Wong and Lenchner turn their energy to “People for Bernie.” In People for Bernie lore, however, they were still way ahead of the curve: under the influence of Lenchner’s recounting, Levitin says that, when the idea for People for Bernie coalesced, “Bernie Sanders had made no indication that he was considering a run, much less on the Democratic Party ticket.”²⁰ Considering the fact that the People for Bernie Facebook group was started on April 1, 2015, and Sanders was already hosting events in Iowa in December 2014, this seems unlikely.²¹ Lenchner and Levitin also dramatize the role People for Bernie played in the success of the first primary, making it seem as though what was in essence a social media coterie “launched the Sanders political revolution.” The first Sanders campaign never worked with or even acknowledged People for Bernie, a fact about which Lenchner

17 Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 146.

18 Michael Levitin, “The Triumph of Occupy Wall Street,” *Atlantic*, June 10, 2015.

19 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 78.

20 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 59.

21 Erin Murphy, “Sanders, in Iowa, Calls for Political Revolution,” *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, December 16, 2014; Josh Hafner, “Sanders Rails on Billionaire Donors, Mulls ‘16 Campaign,” *Des Moines Register*, February 20, 2015. As Dustin Guastella notes in his April 2015 case for the Democratic Socialists of America to back Bernie, it was well-known for months that Bernie was actively considering a run. Guastella, “The Case for Bernie: Part One,” *Democratic Left*, April 22, 2015.

continues to be furious.²² Wong, for her part, was nonplussed: “It was never about electing Bernie Sanders. It was about creating a movement.”²³

Of course, many Occupiers did indeed end up in Sanders world — Wong, Claire Sandberg, Melissa Byrne, Becca Rast, Nick Martin — but this does not justify the idea that Occupy led, in any meaningful way, to Bernie.²⁴ The Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020 were the best things happening in the activist world; of course many Occupiers found themselves there. If we’re looking to answer the question of why Bernie ran in 2015 and succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations, however, the relevant factors seem to be Warren’s refusal, Clinton’s unpopularity, and the resonance of the economic populist message with Democrats — not the organizing efforts of Occupy or its “diaspora.”²⁵

We suspect, however, that the idea that Occupy led to Bernie is less an organizing claim and more one about “shifting the Overton window”: Occupy opened an *ideological* realm that Bernie was then able to capitalize on.²⁶ Occupiers themselves certainly talk about the moment as if no one had ever previously raised the issue of inequality. According to activist Dana Balicki, “Without us, I don’t know if there would be a story about income inequality

22 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 62.

23 Jesse Myerson, “Occupy Didn’t Just ‘Change the Conversation.’ It Laid a Foundation for a New Era of Radical Protest,” *In These Times*, September 17, 2016.

24 Astra Taylor, “Occupy Wall Street’s Legacy Runs Deeper Than You Think,” *Teen Vogue*, December 17, 2019.

25 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 24. You could see this connection being forced during Sanders’s first primary run. In an article covering the “March for Bernie” in 2016, in which it’s admitted that the march’s organizers weren’t involved with Occupy, the author nonetheless speaks of an “Occupy-Sanders mind meld.” Gregory Krieg, “Occupy Wall Street Rises up for Sanders,” CNN, April 13, 2016.

26 Sarah Jaffe, “Post-Occupied: Where Are We Now?” Occupy.com, May 30, 2014.

to tell.”²⁷ There was a recognition that they were tapping into something that was already there, but a sense that they were the first to articulate it.

Here, too, the claim is suspect. As Todd Gitlin observes:

Even before the Zuccotti Park occupation, polls consistently showed supermajority support — 60 percent or more — for progressive economic reforms like raising taxes on households that earn \$250,000 per year. Seventy-six percent of the public favored increasing the taxes of people who make more than a million dollars a year.²⁸

Public opinion was not shifted *by* Occupy toward economic populism; rather, both Occupy and Bernie spoke to a public that was already receptive to an economic populist message. Indeed, if anything, Occupy tainted this message: a poll conducted around the time Zuccotti Park was being cleared by police showed public support of Occupy tactics around 20 percent.²⁹

Both organizationally and ideologically, then, it’s not clear that Occupy Wall Street opened a space for Sanders’s success, as so many on the Left today claim it did. Occupy activists were certainly swept up in the Bernie moment, but the causal implications seem to run counter to their typical portrayal — not from Occupy to Sanders, but rather Sanders offering new relevance to Occupy.

27 Quoted in Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 29.

28 Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 37.

29 Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 40–1. Occupiers typically point to polls that indicate majority support for “the ideas and principles of the movement,” but this reflected the preexisting opinion about the need for progressive economic reforms. Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 3.

This naturally raises the question of our second counterfactual: Would Occupy activists have matured politically *without* the Bernie experience? In the books and articles written for 2021's ten-year anniversary, the connection between Occupy Wall Street and Bernie Sanders is taken for granted. No doubt many Occupy activists evolved in their political orientations *through* their involvement in Sanders's presidential campaigns, giving that narrative more credence. But for Occupy and not Sanders to be the key event, some demonstration of this evolution would have had to take place *before* Bernie's presidential bids — 2014 and 2015 seem like the best years to look at.

At the time, when Occupy Wall Street was in the news at all, typical stories either covered the fates of high-profile arrests or how Occupiers were, yet again, going back to Zuccotti Park. In the mainstream press, the movement was seen as “dormant,” having “vanished from the headlines,” though successful in making Wall Street no longer “cool.”³⁰ Micah White, later called out as an “Occupy grifter,” was one of its most prominent faces.³¹

Occupy alumni who defended the movement's ongoing significance pointed to the ways in which Occupiers had branched out. In some cases, this was more abstract: Occupy had “energized” the Fight for \$15 and efforts “to get money out of politics.” Some of these connections only work if you employ a somewhat blurry lens. Accounts of the origin of the Fight for \$15 rarely mention Occupy, though histories of Occupy often mention the Fight for

30 John Light and Joshua Holland, “After People's Climate March, Thousands Re-Kindle Occupy Wall Street,” *BillMoyers.com*, September 23, 2014; Moisés Naim, “Why Street Protests Don't Work,” *Atlantic*, April 7, 2014; Heather Long, “4 Years After Occupy Wall Street, Big Banks Are Hurting,” CNN, November 17, 2015; “Episode 519: Wall Street's Image Problem,” *Planet Money*, NPR, February 21, 2014.

31 Arun Gupta, “Micah White Is the Ultimate Occupy Grifter,” *Jacobin*, January 30, 2020.

\$15.³² And key gains in ending poverty wages have been spurred on by the work of groups like the Fairness Project more than the brilliance of Occupy's ideological articulation. More generally, the claim that Occupy "reenergized" labor forgets that the four-month occupation of the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, in response to legislative attacks on public sector unions took place in February 2011.

In other cases, however, the connection was more concrete: prominent Occupiers had started debt relief efforts like Rolling Jubilee and the Debt Collective, furthering a key theme of the original encampment. Rolling Jubilee's major accomplishment was buying up about \$4 million of debt held by students at a for-profit college.³³ This mutual aid orientation stands in obvious contrast to the properly political demand of College for All and state-authorized student debt relief. Thus, without taking anything away from the importance of the Occupiers' debt relief work, it did not signify any kind of political reorientation.

There's no doubt that Occupy inspired action: nonprofits were created, more marches and occupations were planned, and the people involved remained active. But were there any signs of political maturation in 2014? There was more attention to electoral politics, but, as we've already discussed, that attention was focused first and foremost on Elizabeth Warren. In addition, the electorally minded justified their own interests in the language of "diversity of tactics" and would never have imposed priorities on the movement. Otherwise, the belief in the "spark" predominated, and the movement, insofar as it still qualified as a movement rather than a collection of related individual actors, was stagnant. In June of

32 Ken Green, "The Fight for \$15: How a 200-Person Protest Turned Into a National Labor Movement," *Union Track*, August 27, 2019.

33 Sam Frizell, "Occupy Wall Street Just Made \$4 Million of Student Loan Debt Disappear," *Time*, September 17, 2014.

2014, Gitlin, who had written a rapid-fire history of Occupy Wall Street released in 2012, lamented the movement's dispersal and commodification. While still holding out hope that the spark of Occupy might lead to more sparks that would eventually turn into a blaze, he followed sociologist Zeynep Tufekci in blaming social media for the evanescence of huge mobilizations that come and go with little policy impact.³⁴

Bernie Sanders changed all this. For a network of activists flailing in the face of neoliberalism's intransigence, Sanders offered a chance to mount a challenge for real power. Occupy was tragically disconnected from the working class; according to polls, Bernie was not.³⁵ Many Occupiers understood this and began to slowly morph into socialists. In brief, then, the Occupy origin story is a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy: simply because Bernie came after Occupy, it does not mean that Occupy caused Bernie in any meaningful way. Again, we would argue, against the predominant narrative, that Sanders gave new relevance to both Occupy the event and Occupy the activist network.

MOTIVATED MYTHOLOGY

We hope, at the very least, to have cast some doubt on the Occupy origin story. But doing so raises the question of how it has settled into such a comfortable obviousness. Having demonstrated wrong, we must now establish motive.

Three features of Occupy Wall Street seem necessary to grasp in order to answer this question. First, it was a radically politicizing event for many of the people involved, who sometimes describe it on the order of a conversion experience. Participants still speak

34 Todd Gitlin, "Where Are the Occupy Protesters Now?" *Guardian*, June 17, 2014.

35 Doug Singsen, "Labor Unions Were Occupy Wall Street's Key, Forgotten, Conflicted Ally," *Jacobin*, September 18, 2021.

of “the sublime intoxication of *being there*,” “this kind of uncorked exuberance, this intoxicating feeling of possibility.”³⁶ Occupy became “embedded in the life histories of those who went through it.”³⁷ The sense of community fostered by Occupy is undeniable. According to Sarah van Gelder, “This is a movement where you often hear the words, ‘I love you.’”³⁸

Second, many Occupy activists professionalized their politicization. They quickly started new organizations and campaigns — Rolling Jubilee, Strike Debt, Momentum, IfNotNow, the Wildfire Project, Movement Netlab, Dream Defenders, Decolonize This Place, Take Back St. Louis, and Solidaire, among others — and they leveraged their involvement with Occupy to lend legitimacy to those new organizations. They took jobs with existing left-liberal nonprofits and political advocacy organizations, energizing and strengthening their institutional networks. And, perhaps most important for making sense of the pervasiveness of the Occupy origin story, they held prominent positions in the burgeoning left media ecosystem. *n+1* cofounder Keith Gessen was arrested at Occupy, and the arrest received a remarkable amount of media coverage.³⁹ *New Inquiry* editor Malcolm Harris, *Intercept* columnist Natasha Lennard, *Nation* editor Sarah Leonard, artist Molly Crabapple, and filmmaker Astra Taylor, just to name a few, were all visible participants in Occupy. This absorption in the nonprofit and media worlds sets Occupy apart

36 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 51.

37 Winant, “A New Political Identity.” Many Occupiers talk about their time in an encampment the way veterans talk about their time in the military, as one of the most exhilarating rides of their life. Micah L. Sifry, “Occupy Wall Street at 10: What It Taught Us, and Why It Mattered,” *New Republic*, September 17, 2021.

38 Sarah van Gelder, ed., *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2011), 9.

39 The Nation, “Arrests at Occupy Wall Street, November 17,” YouTube, November 17, 2011.

from classic movements of the Left and locates it *within* the culture of neoliberalism.⁴⁰

Finally, Occupiers are devoted and effective self-mythologizers. We do not mean this disparagingly — every movement creates its own beloved and inspiring stories that are recounted as a means of lending legitimacy and authenticity. Occupiers are particularly skilled at and enthusiastic about this task. This explains some of the squabbles over who “founded” or “created” Occupy, the claims to responsibility for key pieces (the performance artist Georgia Sagri attributes “the 99 percent” to David Graeber and credits herself with the “we are” part⁴¹), and the efforts to call out who participated as a “grift” and who was a genuine part of the movement. The professionalization of the loving community has, in one sense, led to a battle over copyright and political capital, but it’s also involved the theorization of Occupy’s ideology, strategy, and tactics. Winant is thus correct in speaking of Occupy as the origin of a new “intellectual milieu” on the Left.⁴²

It’s these three features of Occupy — the conversion-like politicization of its participants, their professionalization of the movement, and their effective self-mythologization — that have made Occupiers particularly influential voices on the Left. They hold positions within the left-liberal nonprofit space, and they have access to the professional networks and media outlets needed to amplify their messages. As we mentioned, however, they had not advanced politically before 2015, and once it became clear that Bernie Sanders was igniting a movement with mass potential,

40 Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek, “NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector,” *Catalyst* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2021).

41 Stewart, “We Are (Still) the 99 Percent.”

42 Winant, “A New Political Identity.” It was indeed an ideological breakthrough, one in which parties at the Verso loft make sense as a form of political progress.

many Occupiers moved into his world despite their own more anarchist leanings.

In some cases, these Occupiers abandoned their earlier politics for organizing around Bernie's concrete demands, but anyone who was on the Left during Sanders's two runs knows that Occupy-style politics stuck around and grated against his universalism and social democratic demands. Many Occupiers were never comfortable with the Bernie moment, criticizing it "from the left" and appearing eager to move past it.⁴³ There were other axes of division that led to friction — for example, between Democratic Party operatives and progressives, or between digital and deep organizers — but the ideological and practical conflict posed by the integration of an influential anarchist current into a de facto social democratic coalition was a prominent one.

John L. Hammond helpfully identifies five key traits of Occupy activism: "horizontalism (no formal leadership), prefiguration (attempting to model the desired future society in the movement's own practice), autonomy from the state and other political organizations, mutual aid, and defiance of government authority."⁴⁴ All five sat uncomfortably within a movement oriented around a clear leader and concrete demands for state power. These traits are also simply not in evidence in some of the bright spots of left organizing in the last five years — the strike activity, the union caucus reform campaigns, the local electoral success — all of which favor discipline, coordination, and strategic demands. This is all obvious in some sense, and yet the bitter divisions on the Left during the last couple years have often been chalked up to

43 Malcolm Harris, "Is Bernie Sanders Really a Socialist?" *Al Jazeera*, October 19, 2015; Natasha Lennard, "Five Years After the Brooklyn Bridge Arrests, the Occupy Wall Street Worth Remembering," *Intercept*, October 1, 2016.

44 John L. Hammond, "The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street," *Science & Society* 79, no. 2 (April 2015).

social media squabbles and a lack of organization and experience. These were certainly important factors, but there was also a clear and substantive divide on the Left.

One place it was in evidence was in the early stirrings of the rejuvenated Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). On the one hand, the 2017 DSA National Convention created three priority campaigns around Medicare for All, labor, and electoral organizing — a clear organizational alignment with Bernie’s 2016 campaign. On the other, it approved a “training” program introducing new members to the “diversity of tactics” employed by “the movement.” The individuals and caucuses backing these opposing orientations fought bitterly for control over the direction of the organization, much to the dismay of the rapidly growing membership.

Another way it manifested was in casting doubt on the notion that Bernie was the clear candidate for the Left to throw its weight behind in 2020. Occupiers like Nelini Stamp never bought into Bernie’s economic focus: “When I’m listening to a speech, I don’t hear what the actual racial inequities in health care are.”⁴⁵ Stamp is now national organizing director of the Working Families Party (WFP), a position she held when the party endorsed Elizabeth Warren for president in 2019. Another prominent Occupier, Max Berger, ended up on Warren’s staff, and others endorsed her.⁴⁶ The fact that many on the Left wavered between a candidate with clear working-class support and a candidate of white-collar professionals demonstrated an unfortunate political immaturity. One way to make sense of this waffling, and the broader reticence to dismiss Warren 2020 as a spoiler campaign, was the wariness

45 Stewart, “We Are (Still) the 99 Percent.”

46 Kathleen Geier, “What an Elizabeth Warren Presidency Would Look Like,” *In These Times*, January 7, 2020.

of “movementists” to disturb their activist networks. Campaigns come and go; professional networks survive them.

Like any good origin myth, which appears to resolve frustrating contradictions in the name of legitimating a certain version of reality, the Occupy origin story papers over the clear ideological divisions within the contemporary left, making it appear as if Hammond’s five traits seamlessly integrated into and even *gave rise to* the Bernie Sanders moment. This is a good story to tell if you trace your own political roots to or through Occupy, but it is less helpful in trying to make some sense of what happened on the Left after 2015.

Even if one believes that the great investment in Bernie’s campaigns was a mistake, it is difficult to deny that substantive ideological differences were a source of inner turmoil, and that these continue to play out in destructive ways. There has been a reluctance to name that difference, as if doing so were inherently anti-solidaristic, but there are clear points of disagreement between the Occupy anarchist and the democratic socialist. Occluding those differences in a myth of continuity or in the name of left “unity” only makes the inevitable conflicts inscrutable and alienating to people new to the Left. To this day, there seems to be an instinctual resistance to grappling with the internal failures of Sanders’s presidential campaigns, leaving those criticisms to be made from the outside.⁴⁷ It is our belief that the translation of the Bernie moment into a true movement depends upon exorcizing these demons.

47 Angela Nagle and Michael Tracey, “First as Tragedy, Then as Farce: The Collapse of the Sanders Campaign and the ‘Fusionist’ Left,” *American Affairs* IV, no. 2 (Summer 2020).

“I HEARD RADIOHEAD WAS COMING”

In late September 2011, a rumor spread that the band Radiohead would be playing a surprise concert at Zuccotti Park in support of Occupy Wall Street. It turned out to be a hoax, but it was absorbed in stride in chaotic Zuccotti. According to Malcolm Harris, who claims to have started the rumor, it was all for the best: “Everyone ended up sticking around because no one wanted to admit that they were just there for the concert.”⁴⁸

It’s a wonderful image: embarrassed concertgoers becoming committed activists to avoid the impression of being hoodwinked. And in a way, it does capture what Occupy was about — in Levitin’s view, “Occupy made protesting cool again.”⁴⁹ It was about the injection of coolness into politics, making the 99 percent a desirable thing to reference. One must imagine what would have happened if Radiohead *had* showed up that day, if the itch to be “cool” had been scratched by traditional cultural offerings. Perhaps the Bernie moment would have arrived without a “cool” political subculture to absorb, with only the force of Bernie’s personality and his bread-and-butter demands. Counterfactual history is quack science, but it helps get at what matters.

Our aim here has been to lay out the case that the Occupy origin story, common sense in both left-wing and mainstream outlets, is a myth. Occupy was the last gasp of a tired left orientation, an echo of the neoliberal era’s political culture in its horizontalism, its lack of a program, and its refusal to take politics and organizing seriously. It was the Bernie Sanders moment — attended by strike waves, union reform activity, policy fights, and down-ballot electoral contests — that signaled the true beginning of a shift in disposition toward the task of building mass political will and

48 Stewart, “We Are (Still) the 99 Percent.”

49 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 199.

institutions. However, this shift was mixed with elements of the old, newly embedded in left-liberal nonprofit and media institutions. The Occupy origin story has served to legitimate this confusion and defensively preserve what most needs throwing away.

No doubt a more detailed history could uncover subterranean links and personal anecdotes that bolster the Occupy origin story. But from the evidence we have seen, it appears not that Occupy Wall Street led to Bernie Sanders but rather that Bernie gave an opportunity to a network of activists running up against the limits of their largely anarchist commitments to get more serious about their political orientation within a moment of mass political possibility.

That's fine, by the way. In our view, the proper reaction to the Bernie moment was to shift away from vague anti-capitalist commitments and toward a more disciplined and concrete democratic socialism. That process took many forms, and we're all better off for it. But some continue to hold tightly to the notion that there is clear continuity between their preexisting commitments and their current ones, and they further employ that manufactured continuum to speak from a position of authority within the socialist Left.

American politics has taken a frightening turn since Sanders's presidential runs came to an end. Neoliberalism is crumbling, without any new order coming into view.⁵⁰ The deep social divisions and fragility of democracy in the United States have been on uncomfortable display during the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing clear material gains for the broad majority of Americans, as promised but not delivered by the Biden administration, is the only way out of this mess. In order to be a beacon in the fog rather than just another player in a depressing culture war, the Left must organize around a program of universal demands, like the key

50 John Terese, "Is This the Green New Deal?" *Damage*, September 14, 2021.

elements of Bernie's platform, and definitively reject the elements of left ideology and practice that were absorbed during a period of prolonged defeat. Occupy Wall Street energized a core group of activists to commit to some of those elements just a few years before a majoritarian left current emerged that challenged every one of them. It generated a "movement" that was over before it ever really started, but one that was also institutionally embedded enough not to countenance its own end. In this unsettling moment of interregnum, the Left must be clear-eyed about what is living and what is undead in its present composition. ☹





Many on the Left see lean production as an inherently capitalist production model, the primary purpose of which is to deskill labor, defeat unions, and intensify work. But technologies developed within capitalism have important applications beyond capitalist control; neither machine tools nor computers necessarily degrade labor. I argue the same case for lean production. The path to union renewal and worker control entails fighting for comanagement of lean production as part of a broader campaign for workplace democracy.

The Politics of Lean Production

Matt Vidal

Lean production is a daily reality for tens, perhaps hundreds, of millions of workers around the globe. Originally known as the Toyota Production System, lean management spread from Japan in the 1980s and had diffused across the global auto industry by the end of the 2000s.¹ Today, lean management has been adopted in some form by nearly every manufacturing concern in North America and Western Europe, and it is increasingly spreading to other sectors, from health care to civil service to education.²

1 Ulrich Jürgens and Martin Krzywdzinski, *New Worlds of Work: Varieties of Work in Car Factories in the BRIC Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

2 Thomas Janoski and Darina Lepadatu, eds., *The Cambridge International Handbook of Lean Production: Diverging Theories and New Industries Around the*

The rise of lean management has taken place within a broader transformation of Western capitalism since the 1970s, including internationalization, deindustrialization, and financialization, alongside the rising hegemony of the neoliberal political project. A core factor driving this transformation has been class struggle: in response to declining profit rates, American capital took the lead in the Western world, launching a multipronged assault on labor via anti-unionism, whipsawing, concession bargaining, outsourcing, internationalization, and marketization.³ The outcomes are by now well-known: wage stagnation, rising inequality, increasing labor market insecurity, and widespread work intensification.

Many on the Left see lean management as an inherently capitalist management system that necessarily increases management control, undermines unions, and is the primary cause of work intensification. This view has been articulated in this journal by distinguished labor activist-scholars Mike Parker and Kim Moody, who champion the view from the radical wing of the labor movement.⁴ The theoretical foundation of this position is the neo-Marxist theory of management, which holds, in the words of Michael Yates, that “the essence of capitalist management is control: control over the labor process and therefore control over the worker.”⁵

But there is a persistent opinion that lean production offers a genuine opportunity for workers to gain some control over the

World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

3 Ian Greer and Virginia Doellgast, “Marketization, Inequality, and Institutional Change: Toward a New Framework for Comparative Employment Relations,” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 59, no. 2 (2017); Matt Vidal, “Postfordism as a Dysfunctional Accumulation Regime: A Comparative Analysis of the USA, the UK and Germany,” *Work, Employment & Society* 27, no. 3 (2013).

4 Kim Moody, “The New Terrain of Class Conflict in the United States,” *Catalyst* 1, no. 2 (2017); Mike Parker, “Management-by-Stress,” *Catalyst* 1, no. 2 (2017).

5 Michael D. Yates, “Braverman and the Class Struggle,” *Monthly Review* 50, no. 8 (1999).

labor process and share power with management. Joshua Murray and Michael Schwartz have articulated such a view in this journal, but with a novel twist: they suggest the American auto industry resisted adopting “flexible production” because the latter *requires* that management share power with labor.⁶ In this neo-Marxist analysis, the long decline of the American auto industry is a result of American executives sacrificing flexibility and efficiency to maintain control and power.

Neo-Marxism has made and continues to make enduring contributions to our understanding of labor management, labor markets, and labor politics. The contributions of Harry Braverman, David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and David Noble are foundational, including many innovative and compelling contributions that cannot be discussed here.⁷ This body of work remains original, insightful, and essential. I criticize two theses from this school of thought: that management concerns with control generally override concerns with efficiency or profit; and that capitalist relations of production warp the trajectory of technical change in service of management control. The question at hand is whether lean production is inherently about increasing management control and intensifying labor, or whether it is a general management system compatible with worker empowerment, strong unions, and worker control.

Let me first note points of agreement, focusing for now on Parker, Moody, Murray, and Schwartz. I agree with Parker and

6 Joshua Murray and Michael Schwartz, “Collateral Damage: How Capital’s War on Labor Killed Detroit,” *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (2017).

7 In addition to the work cited below, classical contributions include David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); David M. Kotz, Terrence McDonough, and Michael Reich, eds., *Social Structures of Accumulation: The Political Economy of Growth and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Michael Reich, David M. Gordon, and Richard C. Edwards, “Dual Labor Markets: A Theory of Labor Market Segmentation,” *American Economic Review* 63, no. 2 (1973).

Moody that an entire generation of auto workers — in the United States and UK, at least — experienced substantial degradation of formerly good jobs (via elimination of work rules, weakening of unions, and increasing work intensification) over a thirty-year period from the 1980s through the 2000s, during which lean production was implemented. I agree with Murray and Schwartz that managers often make bad decisions that harm rather than improve efficiency.

Yet I contend that lean production does not necessarily entail work intensification or undermining unions. Work intensification is a structural tendency of capitalism, which was moderated by the institutional configuration of the post-World War II growth regime and has been unleashed by the demise of that system under globalization and financialization.⁸ The source of work intensification is competitive pressure and operational strategy, not the particular tools used to achieve it.

Companies like Walmart and Dollar General are ferocious and highly successful in their anti-unionism.⁹ Employer anti-unionism is a central feature of the history of capitalism, and union-busting tactics are core tools in the capitalist struggle against labor. But occupying a position in the class struggle does not entail any particular ideological orientation; not all managers, capitalists, or corporations are anti-union. The primary goal of capital is profit; capitalists and their managers may use a range of means to secure profit, including strategies of multiskilling and worker participation. Rational capitalists may decide, in particular circumstances,

8 Matt Vidal, "Fordism and the Golden Age of Atlantic Capitalism," in *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*, ed. Stephen Edgell, Heidi Gottfried, and Edward Granter (London: SAGE, 2015).

9 The dominance of Walmart and its anti-unionism are well-known. Dollar General has 157,000 employees across 17,683 stores and has successfully avoided unionization through aggressive anti-union tactics. Greg Jaffe, "The Worker Revolt Comes to a Dollar General in Connecticut," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2021.

that accepting and even partnering with unions could increase their ability to make profit.

The explicit inclusion of principles of and practices for employee involvement in the Toyota Production System is due to a recognition that worker participation improves organizational performance. More fundamentally, the distinctiveness of lean management as a production model is that it provides the basis for flexible, high-quality production based on the principles of demand-driven, flow production and continuous improvement, as well as practices for quality control and problem-solving. These principles and practices put a premium on cognitive labor and the tacit knowledge of workers.

My working hypothesis is that a high-involvement approach to lean production, with substantive, widespread participation of workers in problem-solving and decision-making, is the technical frontier. Lean routines for continuous improvement are best institutionalized and most effectively realized when driven by workers. While these movements toward worker empowerment are necessarily limited to participation in task and process improvement under capitalist ownership, this very limitation means that capitalist ownership is increasingly a source of inefficiency. While capitalist ownership and management were necessary for the development of capitalism, the factory, the division of labor, and mass production, the advent of lean production — along with rising education levels and the increasing technical sophistication of the working class — are developments in the forces of production that have now made capitalist management unnecessary.

The reason high-involvement approaches to lean production are rare has less to do with managers attempting to preserve their own power and more to do with managers being myopic and tending to satisfice (settle for good enough), which is encouraged by the multiple, competing pressures they face. Bad management,

of course, is not news to workers, who have lifetimes of experience with ineffective, incompetent, and malicious managers routinely adopting practices and strategies that seem to rail against operational efficiency. The radical position is rooted in this shop-floor experience. I have great respect for this position, as eloquently articulated by Parker and the Labor Notes team. But I propose that unions can and should try to make lean production more participatory as part of a broader initiative to increase worker control.

As Andy Banks and Jack Metzger have argued, worker participation does not necessarily require unions to disavow an adversarial orientation or militant tactics. While maintaining these, “unions can use genuine worker participation to enhance worker and union power and as a first step in the revitalization of organized labor as a broad social movement.”¹⁰ Unions should make the case that by prioritizing work intensification and failing to substantively empower labor, capitalist management is harming organizational efficiency. Union comanagement of lean systems would improve organizational performance.

LEAN PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT CONTROL

Murray and Schwartz base their understanding of “flexible production” on the work of Charles Sabel, Martin Kenney, and Richard Florida, who incorrectly portrayed the Toyota Production System as based on self-directed teams that reunited conception and execution.¹¹ These authors failed to appreciate the centrality of

10 Andy Banks and Jack Metzger, “Participating in Management: Union Organizing on a New Terrain,” *Labor Research Review* 1, no. 14 (1989): 12.

11 Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Gary Herrigel and Charles F. Sabel, “Craft Production in Crisis: Industrial Restructuring in Germany in the 1990s,” in *The German Skills Machine: Sustaining Comparative Advantage in a Global Economy*, ed. Pepper D. Culpepper and David Finegold (New York: Ber-

work standardization and the neo-Taylorist division of labor to the Toyota System.¹²

The novel contribution of Murray and Schwartz is to add to the Sabelite story an argument that American auto executives resisted flexible production in order to preserve their power. They suggested Henry Ford had developed a “fully flexible production system,” based on “multilateral cooperative relationships in flexible production,” including “committed, skilled workers” and “cooperative rather than dictatorial relationships on the shop floor.” This model was adopted by the Big Three automobile manufacturers in the 1930s, then “copied in Europe and Japan in the years after World War II,” just as “the captains of capital in Detroit dismantled it as part of a successful effort to defeat the campaign of unionized auto workers.” The decline of the Big Three is thus a result of senior management sacrificing “efficiency and innovative capacity to obtain or retain unfettered control.”¹³

I agree with Parker that Murray and Schwartz’s historical narrative is “substantially wrong” on many key points, including their “contention that the regime of Henry Ford and Harry Bennett’s social police and condescending paternalism could be characterized in any sense as a cooperative stance by management, as workers’ control, or as respect for workers.”¹⁴ I also agree with

ghahn Books, 1999); Richard Florida and Martin Kenney, “Transplanted Organizations: The Transfer of Japanese Industrial Organization to the U.S.,” *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 3 (1991); Martin Kenney and Richard Florida, *Beyond Mass Production: The Japanese System and Its Transfer to the U.S.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

12 Robert M. Marsh, “The Difference Between Participation and Power in Japanese Factories,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 45, no. 2 (1992); Jyuji Misumi, “Decision-Making in Japanese Groups and Organizations,” in *International Perspectives on Organizational Democracy*, ed. Bernhard Wilpert and Arndt Sorge (New York: Wiley, 1984).

13 Murray and Schwartz, “Collateral Damage,” 119, 128, 135.

14 Parker, “Management-by-Stress.”

Parker that Murray and Schwartz are wrong to suggest that the Toyota Production Model is essentially the same model as the one developed by Henry Ford with some “new features.”¹⁵

Despite having opposing views on lean production, however, Parker, Moody, Murray, and Schwartz share a common view that controlling labor is the dominant concern of capitalist management. In this respect, these authors all articulate a neo-Marxist view of management. Murray and Schwartz suggest the management obsession with control overrides concerns with efficiency, an argument first developed by David Gordon and Richard Edwards. Parker and Moody suggest that this obsession with control increases exploitation. In seeing lean management as an inherently capitalist production model, they express an argument first developed by Harry Braverman and David Noble: that capitalists pursue the absolute deskilling of labor to protect their class power, and that this overriding concern warps technical development (including management systems) in service of increasing exploitation and disempowering labor.

Moody equates lean production with the entire range of contemporary management practices harmful to workers: outsourcing, downsizing, ideological co-optation through labor-management partnerships, whipsawing union factories in collective bargaining, work casualization, and part-time work.¹⁶ But using lean management as a general term for all practices harmful to workers makes it a chaotic concept, obscuring more than it illuminates.

Parker uses lean management to refer to the Toyota Production System, which is how owners, engineers, and managers understand the term. Still, he conceives of lean production in

15 Murray and Schwartz, “Collateral Damage,” 120.

16 Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (London: Verso, 1997), chapter 5.

ideological terms as an inherently capitalist weapon: “Features that might appear to provide worker control are actually about enabling tight management control over the work.” He suggests that the success of Japanese auto companies in claiming a huge share of the global market “depended in large part on intensifying work, super-exploiting most workers, reducing workers’ power at the workplace, and destroying or at least containing independent unions.”¹⁷

Against this analysis, I present a theory of technical change as having a relative independence from class relations; argue that lean production should be understood as a general (i.e., not specifically capitalist) development in the forces of production; and present evidence that deskilling, work intensification, and anti-unionism are particular capitalist strategies that are not inherent to lean production. But first, I critically analyze the neo-Marxist theory of management control.

THE NEO-MARXIST THEORY OF MANAGEMENT CONTROL

Stephen Marglin famously argued that managerial authority and hierarchy play no role in increasing efficiency: capitalists introduced the division of labor and the factory system entirely to establish control, extract profits, and accumulate capital.¹⁸ Marglin suggested his argument was Marxist, but in fact Karl Marx clearly and consistently argued that capitalist authority and hierarchy were necessary for the development of the forces of production.

For Marx, the epochal development unleashed by capitalist relations of production was “the productive forces resulting from

17 Parker, “Management-by-Stress,” 177, 183.

18 Stephen A. Marglin, “What Do Bosses Do?: The Origins and Functions of Hierarchy in Capitalist Production,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 6, no. 2 (1974).

co-operation and the division of labor.” These developments necessarily required concentration of the means of production in the factory, which in turn required the use of money capital for investment.¹⁹ Feudal relations of production, including the guild system, precluded the concentration of capital.²⁰ It was only the capitalist who would concentrate the means of production and develop large-scale production, which was the motive and condition of possibility for the division of labor and the radical increase in productivity it entailed:

Through the co-operation of numerous wage-labourers, the command of capital develops into a requirement for carrying on the labour process itself, into a real condition of production. That a capitalist should command in the field of production is now as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle.²¹

While Marglin’s argument had no basis in Marx, there is some basis in Marx for the neo-Marxist theory that control is the primary concern of capital and its agents. For one example among many, Marx suggested: “It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt.”²² Harry Braverman and David Noble posit that capitalists and their agents pursue the absolute deskilling of labor to protect their class power.²³ David Gordon and Richard Edwards suggest capi-

19 Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, [1867] 1990), 508.

20 Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 479.

21 Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 448.

22 Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 563.

23 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (Oxford: Oxford

talists and their agents often adopt inefficient practices in order to maintain their class power.²⁴ These arguments are intuitively appealing for those who see class structure and class struggle as fundamental features of capitalism. On close inspection, however, they are unconvincing. Gordon and Edwards were on the right track to focus on the management production of inefficiency, but their argument that capitalists prioritize the production of surplus value over efficiency is logically incoherent. Let me briefly elaborate.

Braverman argued that deskilling is a *universal imperative* of capitalist management.²⁵ Below, I argue that deskilling was the *dominant tendency* of capitalist management from the advent of the factory through the Fordist era (roughly through the 1970s) and that it remains a common tendency today, but capitalist management is about more than labor control, and many managers are open to strategies other than deskilling. Here, I want to focus on the arguments of Gordon, Edwards, Dan Clawson (cited by Murray and Schwartz), and Noble.

The argument that managers choose control over efficiency was first developed by Gordon and Edwards, who suggest that managers maximize the extraction of surplus value but not organizational efficiency.²⁶ In Edwards's formulation, managers consider "transforming labor power into labor" independently from the "possibilities for achieving efficiencies." This is an unsound distinction. Transforming labor power into labor is necessarily about efficiency. More broadly, the argument that managers prioritize surplus value

University Press, 1986).

24 David M. Gordon, "Capitalist Efficiency and Socialist Efficiency," *Monthly Review* 28, no. 3 (1976); Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

25 Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

26 Gordon, "Capitalist Efficiency and Socialist Efficiency"; Edwards, *Contested Terrain*.

over efficiency implies that owners, engineers, and managers would sacrifice radical productivity improvements of automation in order to keep workers employed (to increase the production of surplus value). This argument, of course, contradicts Marx and mainstream economic theory, both of which accurately predict the regular substitution of mechanization and automation for labor.

Clawson correctly notes that, from a capitalist perspective, cutting wages can be seen as a form of efficiency. He presented a vivid case study of deskilling and worker resistance under the introduction of Taylorism at Watertown Arsenal. He suggests that the only form of efficiency Taylorism and its bureaucratic apparatus produce is quantitative work intensification, but he admits that this is only speculation: extra output is “more likely to be the result of extra effort than of extra efficiency,” but his case study of Watertown Arsenal does not have the data to confirm or falsify this claim because the arsenal changed its bookkeeping and accounting procedures when it introduced Taylor’s system.²⁷ His contention that scientific management is no more efficient than craft production (only more profitable) is implausible in light of its continued persistence over a century of global capitalist competition. Paul Adler and Bryan Borys make a compelling case for how bureaucratic procedures can be designed to improve workers’ ability to perform and master their tasks and functions (rather than simply coercing more effort).²⁸

Noble suggests that managers and engineers prioritize control (as an end in itself) over efficiency. His analysis of automation in the twentieth century is in many respects magisterial, including rich stories of engineers obsessed with automation and managers

27 Dan Clawson, *Bureaucracy and the Labor Process: The Transformation of U.S. Industry, 1860-1920* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 251.

28 Paul S. Adler and Bryan Borys, “Two Types of Bureaucracy: Enabling and Coercive,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1996).

making bad decisions based on a deskilling logic of labor management, but it ultimately fails to demonstrate that a preoccupation with labor control overwhelmed the concern of engineers with efficiency. What he does show is how powerfully the logics of standardization and automation had gripped the American engineering profession.²⁹

The neo-Marxists are correct that technology is often explicitly used to cheapen labor via deskilling and that concerns with control loom large in managerial decision-making. But Noble, Murray, and Schwartz suggest that, at a national level, capital is able to and does systematically choose control over efficiency. This would mean that capitalists act in concert at the national level in an attempt to maintain control, resisting technical innovations from outside their economy and losing market share in the global economy, locking an entire country into a suboptimal technical trajectory.

Of course, control of the means of production is an end in itself: it is the basis of private profit and the primary source of the capitalist class's power. But it is important to distinguish control over the means of production from the business of labor management. The capitalist class relation does not entail that management prioritizes control at the expense of efficiency or profit. And capitalist competition ensures this: survival depends on making a profit, and certain minimum levels of efficiency are necessary for profit-making. While individual capitalists may pursue absolute control within the labor process, they are in danger of being put out of business by capitalists who prioritize profit and efficiency.

My alternative argument is threefold. First, technical change has a relative independence from class relations. Second, capitalist

29 For a more in-depth discussion of Noble, Marglin, Gordon, and Edwards, see Matt Vidal, "Contradictions of the Labour Process, Worker Empowerment and Capitalist Inefficiency," *Historical Materialism* 28, no. 2 (2019).

management concerns more than labor control and exploitation. The problem of securing sufficient labor effort is only part of the problem of management. In a market economy, managers must also determine issues regarding the organization of the broader labor process: the overall division of labor, the use of technology (beyond concerns with ensuring workforce discipline), the scale and scope of production, workflow, production control, quality control, flexibility, problem-solving, and continuous improvement.

Lean production is a general management system developed to address this broader set of competitive demands for organizational flexibility and improved product or service quality. The Japanese did not capture market share from the Big Three on cost alone; they achieved superior levels of quality and flexibility, outcomes that cannot be produced based on ever-higher levels of work intensification. What makes lean production distinctive, and more than just Taylorism on steroids, is a set of principles and practices for process control, quality control, functional flexibility, and the qualitative improvement of operational routines. These principles and practices put a premium on worker participation in problem-solving and decision-making.

Third, in the post-Fordist stage of Western capitalism, capitalist management is increasingly a source of organizational inefficiency, but the source of this is managerial satisficing rather than a concern with maintaining control. Detroit executives have badly mismanaged the American auto industry through all manner of poor decisions about labor, sourcing, supply chain management, and product design. But managers generally do not prioritize control over efficiency, because competitive pressures require that organizations maintain a minimum level of efficiency and that this level rises over time. These pressures are sufficiently strong that they focus managerial attention on efficiency. Yet competitive pressures are not powerful enough to require that

efficiency is maximized. Human beings generally satisfice, and managers generally settle for a satisfactory level of performance. Such satisficing is encouraged by the contradictory nature of the capitalist labor process.

A CLASSICAL MARXIST THEORY OF MANAGEMENT

I want to present a reading of Marx that is an alternative to neo-Marxist, technical determinist, and orthodox interpretations. Eric Hobsbawm and Paul Adler have, tongue in cheek, called this theory paleo-Marxism.³⁰ It sees the productive forces as having a relative autonomy, but without technological determinism or accepting the orthodox proposition that development of the productive forces will inevitably bring about conflict leading to a socialist revolution. Marx's historical materialism specifies the forces and relations of production as foundational categories for understanding human society. The forces of production include human labor, tools, machines, natural forces such as water and electricity, and the scientific knowledge to harness such natural forces. For Marx, the productive forces are fundamentally social: the primary productive forces are cooperation and the division of labor — “forces of social labour” — with tools, machines, nature, and science playing a subordinate role.³¹ The *contradictory interaction* between the

30 Paul S. Adler, “The Future of Critical Management Studies: A Paleo-Marxist Critique of Labour Process Theory,” *Organization Studies* 28, no. 9 (2007). Michael Hanagan, Lise Grande, Nasser Mohajer, Behrooz Moazami, and Eric Hobsbawm, “History in the ‘Age of Extremes’: A Conversation with Eric Hobsbawm (1995),” *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 83 (2013).

31 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 468, 508. In the famous “fragment on machines,” Marx speculated on how science and general knowledge, what he called the “general intellect,” will eventually become a “direct force of production.” When this happens, “the creation of real wealth” will depend less on labor and more on science and technology. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, [1857-8] 1993), 704, 706.

forces and relations of production animates history, shaping the rhythm and pattern of economic growth while generating economic, political, and ideological conflict.

Marx was scathing in his condemnation of the detail division of labor — the division of labor in which unskilled or semiskilled “detail workers” are limited to a single, simple task — as degrading, alienating, and stultifying.³² The detrimental impact of the detail division of labor and capitalist application of machinery on workers and working-class communities is one of the most prominent themes of *Capital, Volume 1*. Yet across a range of his key works is a view of science and technology as domains of human development that have a relative autonomy even though they are shaped by the relations of production.³³ Marx distinguished technical development in general from specifically capitalist *motivations* for developing technology and specifically capitalist *uses* for technology.

Against specifically capitalist motivations, Marx counterposes science, suggesting it is a relatively independent domain that is exploited by capital: “Science, generally speaking, costs the capitalist nothing, a fact that by no means hinders him from exploiting it. *The science of others* is as much annexed by capital as the labor of others.”³⁴ He distinguishes between machine systems controlled by humans and machine systems in which humans are subordinated to the machine: “The first description is applicable to every possible employment of machinery on a large

32 Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 481.

33 Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three and Supplementary Texts* (New York: International Publishers, [1846] 1996); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, [1848] 1978).

34 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers [1867] 1965), 333, emphasis added.

scale, the second is characteristic of its *use* by capital."³⁵ Critically, "we must distinguish between the increased productivity which is *due to the development of the social process of production*, and that which is due to the exploitation by the capitalists of that development." When the worker becomes subordinated to the machine, machinery is being "misused."³⁶ This distinction between machinery in general and its use by capital is also evident in Marx's discussion of various historical worker revolts against the introduction of labor-displacing machines: "It took both time and experience before the workers learnt to distinguish machinery and its employment by capital."³⁷

Adler has convincingly demonstrated that in the process of historical development, Marx saw the socialization of labor as a key factor in the development of productive forces.³⁸ It is this productive socialization that has transformed the producing class of society from illiterate peasants into highly educated and technically sophisticated workers capable of cooperatively managing society and its organizations. The profit motive and class structure of capitalism stimulate but also distort technical development, including productive socialization, which happens inside and outside the labor process. Even within the detail division of labor, "when the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species." Indeed, "it is only socialized labor that is capable of applying the general products of human development, such as mathematics, to the immediate process of production."³⁹

35 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 545, emphasis added.

36 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 547, emphasis added.

37 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 554.

38 Paul S. Adler, "Marx, Machines, and Skill," *Technology and Culture* 31, no. 4 (1990); Adler, "The Future of Critical Management Studies."

39 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 447, 1024.

Outside the workplace, Marx wrote about the importance of the emergence of popular education under capitalism.⁴⁰

Rather than suggesting an eternal state of total domination of labor by capital, Marx theorized stages in an ongoing, contradictory process of socioeconomic development. The division of labor reaches a particularly alienating and brutal apogee within unregulated capitalism, in the form of the detail division of labor, which continues to exist today and remains the dominant model in developing countries. Yet the division of labor is a productive force that, in different forms, will be compatible with and necessary under socialist relations of production.⁴¹

The contradiction between the forces and relations of production manifests within capitalism, among other ways, via pressures and experiences within the production process. Management has dual, conflicting roles: a productive role in coordination, including planning the division of labor and developing labor; and an unproductive role in ensuring discipline within the workforce, in attempt to secure sufficient output.⁴² While the labor process cannot be reduced to a concern with controlling labor, competitive pressures certainly focus managerial attention on ensuring workers produce sufficient levels of output (what Marx called valorization).

While deskilling and standardization have been dominant valorization strategies within large sections of the labor force, a fundamental conflict is inscribed into the labor management relation, flowing from the dual role of management: the need to ensure both discipline and coordination within the labor process. Coordination here is understood in a broad sense to include training

40 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 613–18; Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3 (London: Penguin, [1894] 1981), 414–15.

41 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 617–18.

42 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 449, chapter 13.

workers to harness the full potential of labor (including worker empowerment) where relevant for the product/service market.⁴³

TECHNICAL CHANGE AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LABOR MANAGEMENT

Granting that profit, cost reduction, and worker discipline are capitalist motives that stimulate technical innovation and powerfully shape the application of technology, technical innovation cannot be reduced to these motivations. There are alternative motivations that drive scientific and technical development, including curiosity, creativity, and efficiency. The efficiency motive is distinct from the profit motive; for capitalists, efficiency is only a means to the end of profit. But many scientists and engineers are motivated by concerns with efficiency (and creativity), independent from any concern with profit or control.

Perhaps some technologies developed within capitalism are only useful for capitalist control, cost cutting, and nothing else. A broad range of technologies developed within capitalism, however, do have important applications beyond capitalist control and could be used under worker control and socialism for the efficient production of goods and services. In this category, I include not only engines, machine tools, and computers (for example) but also management systems, including the division of labor and lean production.

I now present a stage theory of capitalist development, arguing that, within manufacturing, an inherent conflict between workforce discipline and worker empowerment was latent and subdued through the Fordist era (roughly from the 1920s through the 1970s) but has become manifest and is intensifying in the post-Fordist

43 This argument is developed in Vidal, "Contradictions of the Labour Process"; Matt Vidal, *Management Divided: Contradictions of Labor Management* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press).

era of flexibility, continuous improvement, and lean production. Of course, the complete elimination of human cognitive labor was never possible. As Clawson, Robert Farrant, and others have demonstrated, worker discretion (i.e., cognitive labor) was always necessary to keep Taylorist and Fordist systems running, despite management attempts to use workers exclusively for manual, deskilled, disempowered labor.⁴⁴ But a theory of worker control or employee involvement as increasing efficiency was not articulated — from management, engineering, or labor — until the 1950s and '60s.

Craft unions defended craft production, but craft control never had a chance in the face of scientific management, for reasons of efficiency as well as profit. Subsequent union efforts at “worker control” were about limiting management prerogative, through work rules and regulation of dismissals and layoffs, not about running the factory.⁴⁵ To the extent that worker participation was advocated by management (e.g., the Human Relations school), it was seen as a way to make work less alienating and improve morale, not as a means to improve efficiency and flexibility.

Standardized production was developed in the United States in the nineteenth century, but Ford was the first to focus on low-cost products for a mass market. With a strategy to manufacture a single product with no variations, Ford was able to develop a flow production system, which used “hand-to-mouth” inventories (which is what Murray and Schwartz mistake for flexible production). This highly rigid Model T production system of

44 Dan Clawson, *Bureaucracy and the Labor Process*; Robert Farrant, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: US Industrial Unions, Shop-Floor Participation and the Lean, Mean Global Economy,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 24, no. 6 (2000).

45 David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

forecast-driven, flow production with dedicated, single-purpose machinery in one location was inherently limited. The refinement and generalization of the Fordist model was accomplished by General Motors in 1927 to support its strategy of annual model changes: use of retoolable machinery and a decentralized structure with multiple assembly plants, batch production, and a just-in-case system of large buffer stocks to ensure continuity.⁴⁶ Ford quickly followed suit.

Scientific management was the first fully articulated theory of labor management. The logics of Fordism and Taylorism, which became deeply institutionalized in American industry and beyond, both presented labor specialization focused on simplified tasks as the one best way to maximize efficiency. These logics focused managerial attention on economies of scale, mechanization, task simplification, and process standardization, which became the efficiency basis of the Fordist era. The overriding focus of managers and engineers was on capacity utilization and task specialization in service of cost reduction. Here, I agree with Braverman and Noble that the commitment of American managers and engineers to mechanization and an authoritarian form of scientific management was remarkable in its near unanimity. Culture (the dominant institutional logics of Fordism and Taylorism embedded in practice and discourse) and technology (relatively stable forms of mechanization with sufficient productivity growth under scientific management) thus reinforced each other in making authoritarian scientific management the only game in town.

It was only in the late 1950s and early '60s that a new view of human resource management began to emerge, advocating multiskilling and worker participation in decision-making, with "the purpose of these practices" explicitly seen as being means

46 Vidal, "Fordism and the Golden Age of Atlantic Capitalism."

“to improve the decision making and total performance efficiency of the organization.”⁴⁷ The roots were planted in the 1950s: the experiments with autonomous teams in British coal mining, which gave rise to sociotechnical systems theory, and the quality control movement in Japan. These new developments activated the contradiction between discipline and empowerment. In the 1980s, advocacy of a high-involvement model took off, particularly in the new academic discipline of human resource management.

While enlargement, enrichment, and involvement programs are often superficial, focused mainly on changing worker attitudes, and while the rhetoric of participation and cooperation is often used to undermine adversarialism and union independence and to mask work intensification, it is a mistake to dismiss it all as nothing more than an attempt to co-opt and manipulate. True multiskilling and substantive worker participation generate real productivity, quality, and flexibility benefits above and beyond what can be achieved via sweating labor ever more intensively. There is a real opportunity here for limited but substantive forms of worker empowerment, which can improve organizational performance.

As a start, it is important to look beyond auto assembly. The difference between auto assembly and the supplier sector is huge. In 2017, employment in auto assembly accounted for just 2 percent of total manufacturing employment.⁴⁸ To my knowledge, the uptime rate of fifty-seven seconds per minute, an infamous outcome widely associated with lean production, is only a benchmark within auto assembly. It is possible that assembly line work in

47 Raymond E. Miles, “Human Relations or Human Resources?” *Harvard Business Review*, July 1965, 153.

48 Specifically, as a percentage of total manufacturing employment, motor vehicle manufacturing (North American Industry Classification System code 3361) accounted for 1.8% and motor vehicle body and trailer manufacturing (code 3362) accounted for 1.3%. Motor vehicle parts manufacturing (code 3363) accounted for 5% (my calculations of data from the Annual Survey of Manufactures, US Census).

general is the most intense job in manufacturing, due to the ability to speed up the line, as opposed to machining, machine tending, and working in cells or at assembly stations. But my hypothesis is that the crucial issue here is the distinctiveness of auto assembly.

Profit margins in auto assembly are razor-thin. The cost of downtime for auto assembly plants can run more than \$20,000 per minute. Along with high volumes due to the continuing importance of economies of scale in auto assembly, this generates intense pressure to prioritize uptime. In short, within auto assembly, the combination of low margins, astronomical downtime costs, and economies of scale have focused managerial attention on throughput as a key metric and work intensification as a priority. This has been facilitated by a dramatic reduction in the bargaining power of labor under the combined forces of union decline and employer whipsawing.⁴⁹ Intensification strategies are also common outside of auto assembly and are likely wherever margins are low or labor intensity is high. But in domestic suppliers of complex parts and subassemblies, margins tend to be higher, and just-in-time production emphasizes making only enough to satisfy existing orders, rather than prioritizing capacity utilization, uptime, or throughput.

In sum, the cause of extreme work intensification and dangerous working conditions in auto assembly is not lean production but intense global competition in a low-margin, high-volume sector under conditions of capital mobility. Indeed, the tools used today to increase work intensification — time-motion study and process mapping — were developed by American engineers around the beginning of the twentieth century. The primary addition of lean management in this regard is the set of practices that

49 Ian Greer and Marco Hauptmeier, "Management Whipsawing: The Staging of Labor Competition Under Globalization," *ILR Review* 69, no. 1 (2016).

make *demand-driven, flow production* possible. Specific practices developed by Toyota — *kanban* control for demand-driven, flow production; small lot sizes; quick changeover — combine with process (“value-stream”) mapping to facilitate the reduction of buffers, hence short breaks for rest and recuperation. But whether these tools are used to intensify the work to unreasonable or dangerous levels is a function of managerial strategy, which is shaped by competitive pressures, incentives, and management logics within particular organizations or sectors.

My research on the supplier sector in durable goods shows that many managers are more focused on the qualitative improvement of operational routines than on labor control or work intensification. In my study of twenty-two suppliers, ten adopted a high-involvement approach to lean production in which management attempted to substantively empower the workforce.⁵⁰ Here, I briefly present two factories where managers discuss their strategy of substantive worker empowerment to drive continuous improvement.

Inspired Castings, a nonunion, privately owned precision steel casting operation with around five hundred employees across two factories, reorganized based on lean principles. They moved from six job titles to a single position of “technician,” with rotation across jobs and cells. The vice president described their approach to worker empowerment: “The president and I get up in front of all the employees on a team-by-team basis, and we say, ‘Here’s where we fell short last quarter. Here’s what needs to be improved. Go back and work on it.’”

These managers sought to involve as much of their production workforce as possible in substantive participation, which may take a range of forms: “On a small scale, [a team] can start something

50 All company names are pseudonyms. For in-depth discussion of all twenty-two suppliers, see Vidal, *Management Divided: Contradictions of Labor Management*.

up [in] the cell, and they can work on something themselves, or ... the whole plant can work on it or set up a team that's separate on that." The personnel manager described how workers are allowed to run continuous improvement projects on their own initiative:

You can have many going on at one time, and I wouldn't even be aware of them. Some of the employees in Module 1 at one point in time had a real interest in the grind area and knew how they could streamline it and make it better. They talked to the plant manager. "Fine, go ahead. Start working on it." They'd come in and work on things here and there.

They'd just come in and do it on their own?

Mm-hmm. And then they came up with some programs to really help the process, implement it, reduced times drastically, you know, in setups and things like that to standardize stuff.

Second Tier Specialist, a low-volume union job shop with around ninety workers, makes hydraulic presses for customers like John Deere, Volvo, and General Motors. The plant manager wanted to implement a high-involvement approach to lean production, with substantive worker empowerment. To facilitate this, working with the collaborationist faction of the union and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) business representative, he signed on to a high-performance work organization (HPWO) partnership, using the IAM model, with the pro-union Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) as a facilitator. The IAM model includes the following components, among others:

- "A Full Partnership between the IAM and management"
- "Shared decision-making around the vital functions that are critical to the business, its costs, and the processes"

- “Shared technical and financial information”
- “Ongoing joint determination of the cost of the design, prototype development, production, and administrative overhead”
- “A jointly developed Strategic Business Plan”⁵¹

He explained how he sees the union and the labor-management partnership as key to developing a high-involvement approach to lean production:

Before me, the process was dictated from above. Now I let them know what we need help in, and we work together. So it’s going over much better than the dictated approach, which was going on before I got here, and that was very clumsy and met with a lot of resistance from the shop floor, which I fully understand. The company did a crappy job of implementing *kaizen* in the first place. First it was *kamikaze kaizen*, where they would swoop in and look at a particular machining center and people wouldn’t know in advance; they’d pick people the day of the event, and it was a multiple-day event.

Now what we do is we focus in from value stream mappings on where we need to target to get the biggest bang for the buck for the *kaizen* activities. ... I’m in the process of challenging each cell leader to perform X amount of *kaizen* events in their cell, but that’s just really getting rolling at this point. We’re still in the process of educating people on the different lean tools and how to implement them. *This is where the [IAM] HPWO group can help us.* [emphasis added]

51 For a summary of the full program, now apparently defunct, see “HPWO Components,” International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, goiam.org/uncategorized/hpwo-components.

This manager reported that a primary goal is to be able to “move the people to where the work is, have them as highly trained and able to run different machines, perform different operations, as possible.” In addition to cross-training on different machines, he was training them in “how to do brainstorming, problem-solving analysis, root-cause analysis, those sorts of things, team building,” with the goal of having the workforce drive continuous improvement, including “having team meetings that just involve the people out there on the factory floor.”

I now turn to present some evidence from workers. I interviewed fifty-two workers across twelve suppliers. In my forthcoming book, *Management Divided*, I present quotes from all fifty-two workers, showing that only one worker complained of the work pace being too fast or not having sufficient downtime for rest and recuperation (what I call negative quantitative work intensification).⁵² Thirty-nine workers did not experience any work intensification under lean production. Twelve workers experienced intensification they deemed to have improved their work experience, with two saying the increased pace of work made the work less boring (positive quantitative intensification), eight referring to increased demands for cognitive labor that made the work more challenging (positive qualitative intensification), and two discussing both.

Here, I briefly present interviews from two suppliers to illustrate workers experiencing lean production with no work intensification or positive work intensification along with substantive empowerment. Industrial Pumps is a nonunion shop with around forty workers who make high-end pumps for the food and beverage industry. A senior assembler gave an example of how lean tools have helped them improve processes to save time:

52 Vidal, *Management Divided: Contradictions of Labor Management*.

Can you talk about some of the big differences you've seen in your job after lean production?

Well, I think what it's done is it's made the company take a look at how we manufacture. We were using old methods of putting bearings on shafts ... so that saved us a lot of time ... through the mapping of the processes, and through the lean manufacturing that we had done. We found out where our time — we did a lot of time studies. We did some videotaping of some of the activities to find out where the wastes were.

He explained that he feels like he has more control over his work processes and a better understanding of the overall process:

I feel like I've got a better handle on my job, and I have a little bit more control of saying ...

Mm-hmm, so you do feel like you have more control?

Yeah, I do. ... Through the value stream, you're finding out where the processes start out, you know, in doing the maps and finding out what is an outside vendor issue and what isn't. I've been able to approach ... purchasing and ask them about when something's going to come in and not feel like, "Oh, I'm stepping out of my bounds."

He described how he feels more effective and gets less stressed out under lean production:

I know that I can get more work done ... where now, we know that something's coming in our direction, and we don't have to worry about waiting too long.

Right. So it makes you feel like your job is more effective.

Yeah.

Does it also make you feel like you're working harder now, doing more responsibilities?

No ... I know that, for me physically, at the end of the day, I've worked an eight-hour day. ... *I've gotten a lot more accomplished than I did before, and a lot less stressed out as far as feeling like I went to work and I actually accomplished something, [and] the days go by very fast when you're busy.* [emphasis added]

So you're keeping busier, which is helping the time pass.

Mm-hmm.

And while you're working hard, you're also getting more accomplished.

Mm-hmm.

So it's not that you're working harder, I mean, it's not stressing you out more?

No.

A second assembler explained how he has more input under lean production: "We'll get together and brainstorm, you know, 'What do you feel about this, or what's your idea on it?' And I guess you've got to look at the cause and effect of it, too." He said that workers are allowed to experiment with changes, "which is nice, they'll give us the option to be able to do that, you know."

A third assembler saw job enlargement as a positive change:

When I first started, it was just building pumps. Now it's went to pulling your own parts, refilling bins, when we went to *kanban*. I mean, we've eliminated other jobs that people have done for

us, but we're building just as fast. So that's a plus that you've seen to the lean.

A polisher explained how he is gaining more skills and how lean production makes the day go by faster without providing work intensification or stress:

They're starting to cross-train everybody, so everybody gets a break and gets to jump back, and other people get a feel of knowing more pumps and doing ...

Right, and how do you like that?

I like it. It's good.

It breaks up the monotony a bit?

Yeah. You bet. Everything ain't so tight then.

Has that actually increased your workload and your stress at all?

Oh, I wouldn't say that.

Or does it maybe save monotony, make the day go faster?

Oh, yeah. The days fly, because you're just steady busy, you know.

A shipping and receiving worker explained that now he has to pay more attention but that, overall, lean production has improved his job:

Just-in-time has affected our job a lot, because *it has bettered our job* but also made it more — you have to keep under it all the time. You have to make sure you know all the inventory that you have, almost all the time ...

Actually, it's gotten easier. ... I think it has made my job

more satisfying. I mean, it's been, *it's a challenge*. Every day is a challenge. It's not a hard job, but it's a job that I, like I say, you have to be real attentive, too. [emphasis added]

At Second Tier Specialist (the union shop), a machinist described cross-training as a welcome challenge and opportunity to become a more highly skilled worker:

I like the challenge, and I want to learn something different. So I'm perfectly willing to move forward. ... It makes us more overall machinists rather than machine operators.

He went on to describe how it made his work less boring while also improving flexibility and ability to satisfy customers. The ability to keep busy was a benefit, and his assessment was that lean production had reduced the level of effort required:

Definitely less bored, because there's more flexibility, and you're able to stay busy longer. And as long as you stay — if you don't have to look at the clock, it moves faster. As soon as you look at that clock, it moves slower. So if we're busy, to any reasonable speed, reasonable amount of effort, a steady pace, then it would be better because then we can move.

Say you're down one man in that particular cell. Knowing how to do the job, one man conceivably — or two people — could do the job of three, or just picking up the slack of one. ... But having the ability to perform all of those jobs — at least most of the customers are going to get their product.

Okay, so in one sense, this reorganization, combined with some automation, has led to a decrease in some parts of worker effort, and it's led to an increase in other parts. Is that fair?

Probably a decrease in worker effort and an increase in production, if those don't offset each other.

He also described substantive empowerment, with the workers playing a primary role in the design of the cells: "I think for the overall input, as far as how the machines go together in the particular cell to produce the product, that was basically our input."

Another machinist, the union president, articulated a similar view, that lean production has not resulted in physical work intensification but has qualitatively intensified the work, which he saw in a positive light, improving the work by making it more challenging:

I think that the effort is not greater but more intense. They're more concerned with what comes across the table, as opposed to just making a rod or an endcap. They're familiarizing themselves with customer names. And that tells me that they're more involved with their psyche as to what goes across that machine, whereas they've just got a block or a tube or anything like that.

He noted that those resisting empowerment were the same people who had regularly complained in the past about management not listening to workers, despite the fact that the partnership had increased worker input and union involvement in decision-making:

I've been out there speaking positively about the whole management issue and the union working together, but these people are unmoving. But I had said to the union membership, "Look, how many times in the past have you said, 'Management doesn't know what the hell they're doing. Why don't they listen to us?'" And now we have an atmosphere where management has come in, and the union has been here with management, and they won't work with us. And we've got teams now. We've got cell lead [hourly] people that are involved, that has just taken off. We've got more committees than we had before. We have union involvement, more so than we had before.

A third machinist said that his work had not been intensified under lean production:

Do you think that this new form of organization has changed the effort levels that workers are expected to perform?

No, they haven't. ... You still have people standing around, and you still have people that are busting their butt.

THE POLITICS OF LEAN PRODUCTION AND UNION STRATEGY

In pursuing strategies of deskilling, work intensification, and static efficiency over substantive empowerment and dynamic efficiency, capitalist management is increasingly failing at the one thing that gives it legitimacy: ensuring the efficient use of organizational resources. The political position here is to emphasize mismanagement in terms of strategies and practices that harm or fail to improve organizational performance. In emphasizing mismanagement and managerial satisficing — to management, the public, shareholders, and corporate headquarters — unions should fight to (i) make lean production more participatory, and to (ii) make efficiency gains based on process improvement rather than work intensification.

Parker notes that joint labor-management programs within the Big Three were compromised by the co-opted leaders of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and led to a reduction of shop stewards. The UAW experience of management-dominated jointness programs established with a corrupt, conservative business union, however, is not the only form partnership and joint decision-making can take. We have other models, which show that lean management is compatible with strong unions. Lean production has been implemented in German and Scandinavian manufacturing,

where worker representation is institutionalized via corporatist codetermination arrangements, themselves the result of powerful labor movements.⁵³ I presented primary evidence above on an IAM high-performance work organization partnership in a small supplier factory. Harley-Davidson had an IAM HPWO partnership for twenty-two years, until the unions pulled out in 2017 after Harley management began enacting unilateral decisions, including the use of temporary employees and plans to develop a new plant in Thailand.⁵⁴ The fact that the partnership broke down does not invalidate the years in which unions had strong influence on how lean production was implemented and on other issues including operational and sourcing strategy.

Here, I briefly discuss the model proposed by Banks and Metzger. Their model, based in part on their observations of the union-driven partnership at Eastern Air Lines, has an even stronger foundation of union independence and power, in which partnership is “modeled on the adversarial structures and traditions of collective bargaining.”⁵⁵ Since worker knowledge and insight are valuable to the company insofar as they improve performance, the union is in a position to make participation conditional on getting something in return for it from management. Thus, the union should articulate its own goals. They suggest three.

First, unions should adopt cost reduction as a goal. This provides a basis for overlapping interests and partnership. But the union can articulate its own approach to cost reduction, which

53 Bjørn Gustavsen, “Work Organization and ‘the Scandinavian Model,’” *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2007); Ulrich Jürgens, “An Elusive Model — Diversified Quality Production and the Transformation of the German Automobile Industry,” *Competition & Change* 8, no. 4 (2004).

54 Rick Barrett, “Labor Unions End Partnership Agreement With Harley-Davidson,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 12, 2017.

55 Banks and Metzger, “Participating in Management,” 3.

defines efficiency in the broad sense of (in my own terms) total costs over a midterm timeframe based on capabilities, rather than narrowly focusing on labor cost cutting and exclusively short-term considerations. Second, as part of the partnership, management must acknowledge that the union aims to gain influence over decision-making at all levels in all areas of the company. Third, management must accept that jointly determined programs and practices should advance traditional union goals of increased job security, increased wages and benefits, and improved working conditions.

In addition, Banks and Metzger offer several important suggestions for specific practices and structures to help maintain union independence and increase union power. The union should demand the employer fund at least one full-time union coordinator and should develop its own set of structures and committees that are independent of the joint management committees, so that union proposals can be developed independently, based on rank-and-file suggestions, and then presented to management in joint forums. They suggest a union steering committee, area-wide union committees (AUCs), and special task forces.

Finally, the union should operate according to an organizing model (rather than a service model), and “unions need to be prepared to organize their membership to exert pressure on management by subjecting them to embarrassment and ridicule” around forms of mismanagement, in particular practices that harm efficiency or organizational performance.⁵⁶ Unions can acquire information and “go public” with this information, trying to get newspaper articles published about mismanagement and sending these to shareholders. Adding to the Banks and Metzger model, I suggest a broader campaign for workplace democracy

56 Banks and Metzger, “Participating in Management,” 43-4.

using community coalitions and social movement tactics, which Clawson eloquently wrote about as providing a basis for union renewal and transformation, with mismanagement (satisficing, short-termism, and attempts to maintain control) as a key theme for such campaigns.⁵⁷ Unions can collect examples, do their own calculations, and bring these to the public, the picket line, and the bargaining table.

This is a highly ambitious strategy that, of course, would be particularly difficult to realize in the context of US business unionism and whipsawing. But the goal is sound: seeking partnership on union terms, without disavowing the adversarial nature of the capital-labor relation, as a step toward increasing union power and worker control. This type of partnership requires a strong local union and, as such, it demands organizing and union democracy.

The IAM model has been realized in both large and small bargaining units. Even this model would be incredibly challenging to implement in a context such as that of UAW Local 900 in Wayne, Michigan, which has more than eight thousand members and represents nine different units spanning from the Ford Michigan Assembly Plant to the Cherry Hill Nursing and Rehabilitation Home. These difficulties, however, should not deter union activists from pursuing this strategy.

More broadly, I have tried to articulate the argument that, even in Marxist class terms, flexibility, employee involvement, and partnership are not inherently against the interests of labor. I am suggesting that the labor movement try to make teamwork and worker empowerment realities by pushing the union to develop its own approach to worker participation and, short of that, by using militant tactics to push for more genuine forms of worker

57 Dan Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2003).

participation within management initiatives. Unions can fight work intensification and whipsawing as such while making the case that a high-involvement approach to lean production is most effective for improving organizational performance and driving continuous improvement.

A long-term goal is to institutionalize a definition of efficiency that excludes cost savings derived by practices known to negatively impact worker health and safety (along with negative environmental externalities). These are false efficiencies. Rather than fighting productivity and efficiency as inherently bad for labor, unions should politicize them and offer a vision for achieving flexibility and continuous improvement via a high-involvement approach with institutionalized forms of worker participation — supported by their own performance analyses and proposals for process improvements, and backed by social movements and militant tactics. ☞





The scholarship on the civil rights movement has increasingly moved away from a focus on political economy. In this interview, Doug McAdam recounts the context in which he wrote his classic book, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, and how the evacuation of class analysis has changed the field.

Understanding the Civil Rights Movement

Interview with Doug McAdam

In the scholarship on the civil rights movement, Doug McAdam's work has played a pioneering role. His 1982 book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* — a classic in the field of sociology — presents a primarily materialist explanation of the civil rights movement. His book *Freedom Summer*, about the struggle in Mississippi in 1964, won the C. Wright Mills Award in 1990. And he is the coauthor, with Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, of the influential 2001 book *Dynamics of Contention*, which argues that social movements, revolutions, riots, and rebellions are related forms of “contentious politics.” McAdam's later works cover issues ranging from environmental activism to political polarization.

Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, which grew out of McAdam's doctoral dissertation at Stony Brook University, is far and away the most frequently cited academic book — or book of any kind — on the US civil rights movement, with over ten thousand citations. The book has also had an enormous influence on social science theorizing about social movements and the broader field of contentious politics.

Political Process develops a “political process model” to explain the civil rights movement. Scholars have subsequently applied this model to a wide range of social movements. The model emphasizes the importance of three factors for the emergence and dynamics of social movements: political opportunities, formal and informal organization, and what McAdam calls “cognitive liberation.” But these factors are, in a sense, secondary to McAdam's main argument — for lurking behind them are more fundamental political-economic forces and class interests.

The longest chapter in McAdam's book argues that it was the changing political economy of the South — the decline of cotton and the rise of urban industrial and service-sector employment — that led to the overthrow of Jim Crow and caste (but not class) oppression. As McAdam makes clear in this interview, Marxist scholars like Michael Schwartz (one of his dissertation advisers) and Jack Bloom led him to incorporate political economy into his explanation of the civil rights movement.

Ironically, this core element of McAdam's theoretical perspective would be forgotten (or willfully ignored) by subsequent scholars. *Political Process* is mainly remembered for the concept of political opportunities — or what some would call “political opportunity structure” or POS — not for its more fundamental political-economic analysis.

For the most part, political economy remains marginal to sociological studies of social movements, at least in the United States,

up to the present day. The Marxist roots of political process theory have been almost totally forgotten.

McAdam recently sat down with Jeff Goodwin to discuss the origins of his interest in civil rights and the influence of Marxism and political economy on his work on the civil rights movement.

JG: Where did your interest in the civil rights movement originate, biographically speaking?

DM: I was born in 1951. I don't know why, but I was always very attuned to politics and current events. I was only eight at the time of the lunch counter sit-ins in 1960, and I don't remember being aware of them at the time. But the other major campaigns of the civil rights movement — Birmingham, Freedom Summer, Selma — were exploding on television when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years of age.

I remember watching the Democratic National Convention in 1964. It was gavel-to-gavel coverage. They even showed some of the credential committee hearings with Fannie Lou Hamer, and she was so clearly standing for a just cause. That was seared into my brain as a kid.

I graduated high school in 1969 and was already somewhat involved in the antiwar movement. I went to college and played basketball at Occidental College, but I took a leave every spring to work for a coalition of peace churches on the West Coast, where I'm from. I remember going to DC to lobby for an end to the draft in spring of 1970 and 1971 and organizing on college campuses around the resistance in 1972.

And I had no illusions. I somehow understood that the touchstone struggle had been civil rights, and that my involvement in the antiwar movement was an extension of New Left struggles that had run from the 1960s forward.

We called what we were doing “the movement.” We didn’t say “the antiwar movement.” We had a sense that all these struggles were part and parcel of the same bigger struggle.

Remember that the first real antiwar critique was about race, and it came out of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It focused on the idea that black and brown soldiers were being sent to a far-off country to kill “yellow” people. I don’t think we give the civil rights movement enough credit for kick-starting the antiwar movement.

The Korean War never generated a mass opposition movement at all. So why did Vietnam? Because it occurred in the context of the civil rights movement, which had already sensitized progressives and the Left in general to the centrality of race in other areas.

When I went to graduate school at Stony Brook University, Charles Perrow had just secured this big grant to study insurgency in the 1960s. And he basically said that we could study any movement associated with the ‘60s and apply a given methodology. The project had been going for a year when I got there. People had chosen various movements to study. And I couldn’t believe nobody had picked the civil rights movement, the most important struggle of them all. It was the movement that launched the others.

JG: When you began graduate school, Marxism was all the rage. But if we fast-forward a decade or so, it seems like everyone had totally forgotten about political economy. Did things change that quickly and dramatically?

DM: I think so! Circa 1973, when I started graduate school, Marxism was everywhere. There were still lots of people at Stony Brook talking about the coming revolution. They were fully

expecting it to arrive in 1973 or 1974. I attended some meetings of the Union for Radical Political Economics, and they were trying to lay the theoretical groundwork for what was surely to come.

But, remember, my book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* didn't come out until 1982, and it took a few years for people to start reading it. We were in the middle of the Ronald Reagan years. And we weren't far from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the neoliberal "triumph" of the West and capitalism. In that context, there wasn't much receptivity to a straightforward political economy of contention argument.

JG: You recently wrote a glowing blurb for the second edition of Jack Bloom's book *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, which was originally published in 1987.¹ Why is this book so important?

DM: My blurb said that Bloom's book reoriented the field. Sadly, that's not quite true. But I wish the book had, in fact, reoriented the field, because I think he was onto something really important.

Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement had a significant influence on my dissertation. I think Bloom may have shared draft chapters of his dissertation with me, but I don't think I saw the full thesis till after I had finished my dissertation.² My argument on the political economy of race is borrowed substantially from Bloom.

Bloom's book is something of a revelation. He argues persuasively that the logic of the cotton economy virtually precluded political challenge. That's because so many powerful groups in American society had a stake in preserving the economy's labor

1 Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 2nd Ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

2 McAdam is referring to Bloom's 1980 Berkeley doctoral dissertation, which was later published as *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*.

conditions. It wasn't until the cotton economy fell apart under multiple pressures that opportunities for challenge emerged.

JG: So let's talk about *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. Your book strongly emphasizes political economy. The longest chapter in it underscores the importance of economic change for generating the civil rights movement. You argue that the collapse of "King Cotton" was necessary — although not sufficient — for the development of the movement. You wrote:

If one had to identify the factor most responsible for undermining the political conditions that, at the turn of the [twentieth] century, had relegated blacks to a position of political impotence, it would have to be the gradual collapse of cotton as the backbone of the southern economy.³

Can you say more about this claim?

DM: I actually don't think I would make that claim now. The big hole or weakness in the original edition of my book was the relative inattention to the Cold War. I think the Cold War was much more important than I initially realized. The second edition of my book came out later and, in the introduction to that, I talk much more about the Cold War.

That said, the collapse of King Cotton was hugely important. Political systems, to a large extent, rest on some kind of materialist foundation. The cotton economy was not simply the economic foundation for the southern United States. It was critically important to the national economy. Something like a quarter of all export dollars in 1900 came from the cotton trade. The cotton

3 Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 73.

economy was central to the economic fortunes of not only the southern states but the country as a whole.

So political and economic elites sought to fashion and support a political system which allowed that economy to thrive. Even though there was a constitutional amendment which granted blacks the franchise, that could be problematic for ensuring a supply of cheap labor. So the federal government opted not to intervene in the systematic disenfranchisement of Southern blacks.

As long as cotton was king, there was political commitment — not just in the South, but at the federal level— to grant southern states the leeway they needed to make the cotton economy thrive. When the cotton economy began to decline, which it did as early as the teens but especially in the 1920s and '30s, cotton became much less important — especially to the economic success or well-being of the United States as a whole.

The other thing that the decline of the cotton economy did was push lots of poor whites and blacks off the land. As cotton declined, you didn't need these massive armies of cheap labor, and that helped set in motion the so-called Great Migration, which was an incredibly consequential movement of poor blacks and whites out of the South to the industrial North and West. And it basically marked a movement from no voting or political participation by African Americans to increasingly significant political participation in the electorally critical northern industrial states.

This important set of conditions or processes began to undermine the logic of racial politics in the United States, and it also gave Northern politicians with national ambitions an incentive to at least rhetorically embrace the need for civil rights reform. Both the weakening of the economy itself and the political logic underlying King Cotton, plus the demographic movement of large numbers of African Americans from a condition of no political

participation in the South to significant political participation in the North, was critical to the civil rights movement.

JG: So the collapse of King Cotton rendered Jim Crow vulnerable, but of course it still required a massive push to topple the old order, and a variety of additional factors, from demographics to the Cold War, were instrumental in facilitating that push.

DM: Absolutely. If there was no massive pressure, both from below by the mass movement and from outside by international players, the South's economically inefficient caste system would have persisted for much longer.

JG: Could you say a bit more about the movement from below and its social composition? In his book, Bloom says that "it was primarily middle-class blacks, who were financially independent of whites, who led the assault [on Jim Crow] and were able to make use of its victories."⁴ Bayard Rustin said something similar in *Strategies for Freedom*.⁵ Do you agree with that?

DM: That's not something I looked at specifically in my research, but in general, I would agree with Bloom and Rustin. The black ministers who played such a key role in the movement — not just Martin Luther King Jr but Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, Andrew Young — were well-educated, middle-class blacks. And the black students who formed the core of SNCC also came from generally privileged backgrounds. That said, the sustained *mass* mobilization that characterized the movement from Montgomery through Selma depended on significant participation from all

4 Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 307.

5 Bayard Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

segments of the black community: the wholesale mobilization of many congregations, the “Children’s March” so key to the Birmingham campaign. I could go on, but you get the idea.

JG: I’m curious about whether there were specific mentors or individuals, other than Jack Bloom, who led you to this focus on the importance of the cotton economy in particular and political economy in general. In your book’s preface, you thank four mentors: Charles Perrow, James Rule, Michael Schwartz, and Charles Tilly. Sociologists are certainly familiar with these scholars. Could you say something about their influence on your book?

DM: Frankly, three of those four names are there because they were 75 percent of my dissertation committee. But they were extraordinarily helpful.

Charles Perrow was my chair. I wouldn’t say he influenced the substantive argument I was developing — he wasn’t a political sociologist, nor did he study race. But Perrow, as well as James Rule, was incredibly attentive. They read every last page I wrote and marked up my copies. I’m indebted to them both.

That said, I wouldn’t give them much credit for shaping the substance of the argument. Michael Schwartz is different in that regard. He is a Marxist sociologist who had studied the Populist movement in the South.⁶ Schwartz certainly influenced me. He pointed me toward texts and pushed me to emphasize political economy. He may have even turned me on to Bloom’s dissertation.

Charles Tilly didn’t influence me as I was writing the dissertation. I was aware of his work, but it didn’t seem particularly

6 Schwartz is the author of *Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Farmers’ Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880-1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

relevant to what I was working on. Tilly's influence came later, after I'd submitted the manuscript to the University of Chicago Press. He was one of three reviewers. To this day, I don't know who the other two were. Their reviews were no more than a page at most.

Tilly's review was twelve pages, single-spaced. It couldn't have been more helpful. Initially, I was overwhelmed by having to deal with twelve pages. But Tilly's comments forced me to sharpen my argument. He certainly influenced its final form, although his work was moving away from political economy during that time.

Like I said, the emphasis on political economy came in part from Michael Schwartz. But it was also just "in the water" of academic circles while I was in graduate school. This was during the early 1970s. Marxism was everywhere. It was a central analytic framework used by the likes of Jack Bloom, Jeffery Paige, William Domhoff, Nicos Poulantzas, and others. And lots of graduate students at the time followed suit by using Marxism to frame and fashion their work.

JG: You mention Michael Schwartz and Jack Bloom. Were there other Marxists whose approach to race influenced your perspective?

DM: During graduate school, in our required theory courses, I read a lot of Karl Marx. That was the initial set of texts that cemented the importance of political economy in my thinking. I knew of W. E. B. Du Bois, and I read some of his work, but I didn't really engage with it critically until later.

I was lucky to be in the Stony Brook PhD program with Aldon Morris, who was a classmate of mine. Both of us wrote dissertations on the civil rights movement but using very different methods.⁷

⁷ Morris is the author of *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

Morris influenced my thinking and urged me to take Du Bois's work more seriously. In writing *Political Process*, however, I can't say I was tremendously influenced by Du Bois. I was, however, powerfully influenced by my ongoing conversations with Aldon.

Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven also influenced the book a lot. *Poor People's Movements* hit like a bombshell in 1977.⁸ That was a book I engaged with quite a lot. I wouldn't call it especially Marxist, but it has somewhat of a Marxist flavor.

JG: How exactly did Piven and Cloward influence your book?

DM: You're forcing me to think about work I did some forty-five years ago! I think, for me, there were two big takeaways from Piven and Cloward. One was their stress on the insurgent potential inherent in any system of institutional power. So even "poor people" have a certain latent power that derives from their participation in these systems. Withdraw that participation, and the system will struggle to function.

But, interestingly, the bigger takeaway for me had to do with their stress on the subjective dimension of struggle. Somewhere in their book, they talk about the shared perceptions that are necessary for mobilization to occur. My concept of "cognitive liberation" owes a lot to this influence.

JG: One of your key claims is that the changing political economy of the South created new "political opportunities" for toppling Jim Crow. What are you referring to here? What exactly do you mean by "political opportunities"?

8 Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

DM: By political opportunities, I simply mean changes that serve to render movement opponents newly vulnerable and/or receptive to movement aims. Movements, in my view, tend to emerge when the power disparity between the movement and its opponents has been significantly reduced. But it isn't the changes themselves that catalyze movements. It is the shared perception or "social construction" of these changes and the opportunities they may afford insurgents that are really the key, which gets us back to the "cognitive liberation" component of my argument in *Political Process*.

JG: I recall you once telling me about a conference you attended in Europe where people were talking about "POS." You were confused by that term. What is POS?

DM: I cannot believe you remember that! I had just finished a session where everyone was saying "POS." I had no clue what anybody was talking about.

Then I went to the bathroom, and Hanspeter Kriesi was there. I asked him what POS was, and he informed me that it's my concept of "political opportunity structure." On the one hand, it felt good that my idea had been turned into an acronym. But I also felt that something was being lost. What was lost was the subjective or socially constructed nature of political opportunities. I don't think I ever used the term "political opportunity structure" in the book. More important, I didn't conceive of political opportunities as constituting any kind of "structure." Here's how I put it in the book: "While important, expanding political opportunities ... do not, in any simple sense, produce a social movement. ... Mediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations."⁹

9 McAdam, *Political Process*, 48.

JG: I was struck by a particular phrase that appeared in your book. You link the decline of the civil rights movement with “shifting the focus of insurgency from questions of caste to those of class.”¹⁰ What led to this shift, and why did it render the movement less successful than it had been previously?

DM: When we look at the southern United States, there was a peak period of mobilization starting with Montgomery and extending through the 1960s. The great success of that mass movement was in dismantling Jim Crow. And that’s what the central focus was through the mid-1960s. They desegregated buses, lunch counters, schools, libraries, drinking fountains — public facilities generally.

Activists were combating an increasingly anachronistic caste system. It was apartheid, really. But it was also economically inefficient since authorities had to maintain separate facilities. So, while not very public, there was opposition to Jim Crow among some Southern whites who saw it as a drag on the economic development of their poor region.

Then, of course, there was pressure from below by an extraordinary mass movement. And you had increasing pressure from the international community. As a result, Jim Crow was viewed more and more as something that could be let go of. Holding on to it wasn’t in the interest of powerful white actors.

The civil rights movement did such a good job of dismantling Jim Crow that it then logically turned its attention to trickier forms of racial discrimination in the North. This included segregated housing and schools, as well as employment discrimination and concentrations of poverty in urban America. And there was a lot more vested interest in maintaining those systems of racism — class-based racism. All those liberal allies who supported

¹⁰ McAdam, *Political Process*, 206.

desegregating public pools and city bus lines weren't happy about dramatically expanding job opportunities for urban blacks. Nor were they thrilled about their kids being bused to integrated schools, or the possibility of meaningful residential desegregation.

That's what I'm trying to signal. The great successes of the civil rights movement that we celebrate are almost entirely bound up either with the dismantling of caste in the South or with certain legislative victories at the federal level. But the movement started to confront the more entrenched, class-based, difficult patterns of systemic racism as it moved north.

Martin Luther King Jr, after all his triumphs in the South, turned his attention to open housing marches in and around Chicago. There, he ran into an entrenched opposition and was never able to accomplish much.

JG: Could you say a bit more about this opposition? Some say demands for redistributing income and resources to African Americans alienated the movement's business and Democratic allies. Significant redistribution was just a bridge too far. Do you agree?

DM: Only in part. Yes, there was some erosion of support by the movement's business and labor allies. But the more significant opposition came from the Dixiecrats, the Southern wing of the Democratic Party. President Lyndon B. Johnson's aggressive advocacy of civil rights reform angered the Dixiecrats and ultimately undermined the so-called New Deal coalition that had kept Democrats in power since 1932. Richard Nixon and other Republicans recognized the significance of this change and began to aggressively court Southern white voters. The breakthrough came with Nixon's election in 1968.

JG: Let's talk about the initial reception of your book. Was there any pushback to certain aspects of it?

DM: I don't remember much of a response for the first few years. But then it did start to generate some attention, most of which was positive. My argument is a fairly complicated one. It identifies a confluence of factors that made Jim Crow particularly vulnerable to challenge, both politically and economically.

When books have nuanced arguments, certain elements are isolated and attention is devoted to them while others fall away. That's what happened with *Political Process*. The book emphasizes the role of political economy in the civil rights movement, which is an element that so often gets left behind today.

JG: A concern for political economy, as you say, is generally missing from current scholarship on movements. It largely dropped out of the scholarship, at least in the United States, as early as the 1980s. Has scholarship on contentious politics suffered from this neglect?

DM: I remember you, at a conference, arguing that virtually all movements have significant economic or material dimensions. People pressed you, and you went on to give one or two examples of movements that would not seem to fit this perspective and to make a persuasive case for the economic dimensions of those movements. I don't remember the movements you picked, but I think your general point was right. And if you are right, then ignoring the material dimension of struggle impoverishes our field. Period. ☺





Accelerating inflation has been a striking feature of the COVID-era economy. Perhaps the dominant view of the phenomenon in the media and among policymakers is that this inflation is the result of excessive government spending. The real culprit, however, is the breakdown in supply chains. I argue that stagnation, not inflation, is the bigger danger facing the economy.

The Inflationary Puzzle

Matías Vernengo

In the conservative imagination, inflation is a violation of the sacred property rights that bind civilized society together. If fears of unemployment and the possible return of the Great Depression shaped the postwar period of growth and stability known as the Golden Age of Capitalism, it is inflation paranoia that has been the hallmark of the world we live in since the crisis of the 1970s, dubbed analogously the Great Inflation. In this view, inflation is caused by government overspending, financed by money printing. State power and the excesses of democracy, defined simply as the rule of the majority, along with the inevitable demands for higher welfare spending, would bring down Western civilization, or at least American hegemonic power. The great priests of

neoliberalism thought the problem should be dealt with at the root. Milton Friedman wanted an independent central bank that followed monetary rules, taming monetary expansion,¹ while Friedrich Hayek wanted to privatize money. Adherents believe markets should impose limits on the demands of the masses.²

These ideas are alive and well in right-wing circles, where a return to the gold standard, balanced budget amendments on fiscal policy, and private digital currencies like Bitcoin are touted as panaceas for the problems of modern society. Restrictions on democratic participation, particularly where minorities are a large part of the franchise, are also part of the accepted canon on the right side of the political spectrum. With the rise of inflation during the last economic crisis caused by a pandemic in which we are still submerged, it should not be a surprise that government action — in particular the fiscal rescue packages to keep the economy afloat and those more vulnerable out of poverty — is the main cause of conservative anxieties and loud condemnation.

The possibility of the resurgence of Keynesian ideas is conservative intellectuals' worst nightmare. Stoking inflation fears will bring any plans for the expansion of the welfare state to an end. The liberal and progressive camps remain more ambiguous about the resurgence of inflation. Many see it as a necessary

1 In modern versions of this theory, the central bank would control inflation by managing the interest rate, maintaining inflation around a target of 2 percent per year. That target has been modified in the United States to an average target over a period of years, with inflation possibly being higher in some years. For the statement about the new policy goals, see Federal Reserve, "2020 Statement on Longer-Run Goals and Monetary Policy Strategy" (2020).

2 Constitutional limits on the ability of the government to run budget deficits were also part of the neoliberal program to contain the growth of the Leviathan and avoid another inflationary crisis. James M. Buchanan, of the Virginia school, was keen to tie up the hands of self-interested politicians and impose legal limits on public spending. See Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

consequence of the pandemic but would not disagree with the conservative diagnosis that excess demand, in part caused by a rapid recovery related to state action, is behind the inflationary resurgence.³ Some progressives have suggested that the real cause of inflationary pressures is large and ubiquitous corporations with vast oligopolistic power that have increased their profit margins during the pandemic. If corporate power is the bogeyman behind the acceleration of inflation in the alternative discourse, then rather than curtailing spending, stabilization would require regulation of monopolies and price controls.

Both views tend to accept to a great extent that demand-pull inflation, the increase in demand with respect to supply, is at the heart of the problem. For conservatives, workers who are allowed to stay at home and receive benefits without working are the main source of the increase in demand. This is something that justifies all mythical views about welfare queens in conservative folklore. In the progressive camp, the same demand from workers, who are helped by the state to survive in incredibly difficult circumstances, is at the heart of the problem. But they are not necessarily to blame, since it is the oligopolistic corporations that create scarcities and raise prices to enrich the ultimate culprits, their wealthy stockholders and CEOs.⁴ One does not need to be a keen

3 Both Paul Krugman and Larry Summers have suggested similar views. The former sees inflation as a necessary evil, while the latter, perhaps more in line with what Nancy Fraser has referred to as “progressive neoliberalism” when discussing Bill Clinton’s New Democrats (Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump — and Beyond,” *American Affairs* 1, no. 4 [2017]), sees inflation as an indication of the need to curtail fiscal spending. In Krugman’s view, the main distinction between the two camps is that one sees inflation as transitory while the other sees it as permanent and requiring more drastic action. See Krugman, “The Year of Inflation Infamy,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2021; Summers, “The Fed’s Words Still Don’t Measure up to the Challenge of Inflation,” *Washington Post*, December 16, 2021.

4 For a recent exposition of this view, see Stephanie Kelton, who argues that “Companies with enough market power can also unilaterally raise prices in a quest

observer of economic reality to understand that the real threats to social stability are excessive corporate power and income and wealth inequality, not the expansion of government welfare — but that does not imply that inflation is the result of corporate malfeasance, or that regulation, which is certainly needed, would lead to price stability. The oligopolistic view of inflation, no less than the orthodox view, misses the role of cost-push inflation, and, more important, it disregards the role of distributive conflict at the heart of heterodox views of inflationary processes.⁵

The debate between those who emphasize cost-push factors and those who stress demand-pull forces has an important pedigree in economics, going all the way back to the beginnings of the field and the debate about inflation in England during the Napoleonic Wars. The importance of class conflict, central to understanding inflationary processes, was only fully appreciated

for greater and greater profits” (Kelton, *The Deficit Myth: Modern Monetary Theory and the Birth of the People’s Economy* [New York: Public Affairs, 2020], 47). A similar argument was put forward by Isabella Weber in the context of the pandemic (Weber, “Could Strategic Price Controls Help Fight Inflation?” *Guardian*, December 29, 2021). Progressive views emphasize supply-side problems, but only to suggest that “large corporations with market power have used supply problems as an opportunity to increase prices and scoop windfall profits.” Corporations are not constrained so much as they use supply problems, creating unnecessary scarcity as a tool to obtain extra gains. As such, it is not the supply constraint in action but rather that oligopolistic firms, faced with expanding demand, can increase prices before the capacity limit is truly reached. This view echoes the language used by Jen Psaki, White House press secretary, blaming greedy corporations for inflation (Jeanna Smialek, “Democrats Blast Corporate Profits as Inflation Surges,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2022).

5 Orthodox economic views follow the dominant neoclassical paradigm in economics, and essentially believe that markets produce efficient outcomes. Note that many liberals and more than a few progressives are, from an economic point of view, orthodox, and while they believe that markets are efficient in an idealized world, they think that market imperfections are common in reality. Heterodox views of the economy derive from the work of John Maynard Keynes’s disciples at Cambridge, which suggested that markets do not lead to efficient outcomes. See Marc Lavoie, *Post-Keynesian Economics: New Foundations* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014).

considerably later. Work by Joan Robinson, the erstwhile disciple of Keynes who became arguably the key author in the development of progressive or heterodox economics in the postwar era, was central for the development of the conflict theory of inflation. In this view, whether inflation accelerates or not will depend not only on the source and size of the shock, whether it has been a demand or a supply shock, and how these can be tackled, but, more important, on the social and institutional conditions related to class conflict. To what extent we are observing a resurgence of class upheaval not seen since the 1970s is, obviously, an open question. But before we discuss whether or not this is indeed a rerun of *That '70s Show*, we must discuss the genealogy of inflationary theory, and the reasons for the acceleration of inflation in that fateful decade and the long period of price stability that followed.

BULLIONIST, ANTI-BULLIONISTS, GERMANS, AND ALLIES

Historically, periods of inflation were periods of expansion of the global economy. Economic historians concerned with the *longue durée* argue that there were at least four price revolutions in the West: one tied to the revival of trade routes after the Crusades in the thirteenth century, one after the discovery of the Americas and the opening of the trade route around Africa with Asia in the sixteenth century, one during the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century, and one with the expansion of the Industrial Revolution beyond its core in the twentieth century.⁶ These were prolonged periods of moderate inflation associated with significant transformations of the real economy.

6 Matías Vernengo, "Money and Inflation," in *A Handbook of Alternative Monetary Economics*, ed. Philip Arestis and Malcolm Sawyer (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006).

By the sixteenth century, a version of what would be called the quantity theory of money (QTM), which would eventually become the banner of Friedman and the monetarists of the Chicago school, was relatively well established. In the view of its proponents, inflation resulted from the increase in circulation of metallic money, often associated with a new discovery of precious metals like the silver from American mines. Adam Smith and other classical authors rejected this view. For them, the increase in monetary supply did not explain higher prices. Higher prices resulted from changes in real activities — for example, bad crops creating higher prices for foodstuff and increasing the costs of production. The banking sector would adapt, providing the bills of exchange (basically paper money) needed for the functioning of the economy. This view was called the real bills doctrine (RBD), in which the bills needed for the functioning of the economy adjust endogenously to real changes in production, and it can be seen as the opposite of the QTM.⁷

It is worth noting that the Bank of England (BoE), arguably the first central bank, was founded in 1694 not to control the quantity of money or manage inflation but explicitly to finance the expansionist policies of the crown.⁸ By 1797, the international crisis initiated by the French Revolution forced the BoE to make the pound inconvertible and allow it to fluctuate against gold. Convertibility would only be fully reestablished in 1821. David Ricardo, the main inheritor of the classical doctrines of Smith, suggested that the period's inflation resulted from the overissuing of paper currency by the BoE. He endorsed the famous Report of the Bullion Committee of 1810, which recommended a return to

7 Roy Green, *Classical Theories of Money, Output and Inflation: A Study in Historical Economics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

8 Matías Vernengo, "Kicking Away the Ladder, Too: Inside Central Banks," *Journal of Economic Issues* 50, no. 2 (2016).

the gold standard. The Ricardian view, which saw bank policies in the context of the budgetary needs of war as inflation's main cause, was known as the Bullionist school. It is still, in some ways, the basis for conventional views on inflation.

The anti-Bullionist position was taken by, among others, Thomas Tooke, who essentially defended the RBD perspective, suggesting that inflation had been caused by a combination of bad crops and higher import prices resulting from the Napoleonic embargo that made importation of grain from the continent considerably difficult. Higher costs of production, and not excessive demand caused by monetary policy, were at the heart of the inflationary process for Tooke. Even though Ricardo's views, as noted by Keynes, dominated England as completely as the Holy Inquisition conquered Spain, the conventional wisdom now is that Tooke and the anti-Bullionists were basically correct.⁹

If the Bullionist controversy marked the understanding about inflationary processes within the economics profession, it was the German hyperinflation of 1923 that created almost all the myths about inflation that still plague debate about the topic. German hyperinflation followed the defeat in World War I and the infamous Treaty of Versailles, heavily criticized by Keynes, that burdened the Weimar Republic with an unsustainable amount of debt in foreign currency. According to the Allies trying to collect the reparations, the inflationary process resulted from the excessive spending of the German government and the overissuing of money by the Reichsbank — a position accepted by Keynes, whose views on inflation remained relatively conventional throughout his life. The Germans, not surprisingly, disagreed. Karl Helfferich, who had been finance minister during the war and who was one of the main

9 Lawrence H. Officer, "Bullionist Controversies (Empirical Evidence)," in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

leaders of the German balance of payments school, argued that the cause of hyperinflation was the need to pay for reparations in dollars. (It wasn't only Germany that owed money to the United States; the web of inter-allied debts forced France and the United Kingdom to pay back their obligations in dollars, too.) In their view, the need to depreciate domestic currency to make exports more competitive and obtain dollars for the repayment of reparations caused hyperinflation.

While reviewing a classic book on German hyperinflation that described the Allied and German views, *The Economics of Inflation* by Costantino Bresciani-Turroni, Robinson noted that both views were incomplete and that an analysis of the role of the distributive conflict was needed to provide a full explanation of the events. For her, "neither exchange depreciation nor a budget deficit can account for inflation by itself. But if the rise in money wages is brought into the story, the part which each plays can be clearly seen."¹⁰ In other words, German hyperinflation was triggered by depreciation and higher import prices, but it was the resistance of workers, whose real wages had declined as a result of the higher prices of imported goods, that created the conditions for an inflationary crisis. Higher wages implied further increases in prices and the need for more depreciation, since German exports lost competitiveness with higher costs of production. A wage-price spiral followed, and inflation, resulting from the distributive conflict, got completely out of control.¹¹

10 Joan Robinson, "A Review of *The Economics of Inflation* by Bresciani-Turroni," *Economic Journal* 48, no. 191 (1938).

11 Fiscal policy could also lead to higher prices, and, with wage resistance, a wage-price spiral could follow. But Robinson, writing in the late 1930s, was well versed in the ideas of the Keynesian Revolution and knew that the economy normally fluctuated at a position below full employment. Similar ideas on the possibility of supply-side shocks, with propagation mechanisms related to incompatible income claims by workers and capitalists, were developed slightly later in Latin

Inflation is not just about shocks to demand and/or supply that lead to higher prices but about sustained processes that create the conditions for a persistent increase in price level. At the root of the problem are the social norms of what is acceptable for different groups and the deep-seated historically and institutionally grounded questions of the bargaining power of those groups. Inflation, in this heterodox framework, is about the distributive conflict.¹²

FROM GREAT INFLATION TO GREAT MODERATION

The decades that followed World War II were not only associated with relatively rapid rates of output growth but also with fairly stable prices. The long period of price stability, at least in advanced economies, reflected an implicit social agreement. The macroeconomic environment that emphasized the maintenance of full employment, and the social legislation that protected workers' rights within the context of the expansion of the welfare state, strengthened the power of trade unions. However, the Keynesian consensus implied that wages would only increase at the same pace as productivity gains, maintaining inflation under control. In other words, the reductions in costs associated with increasing productivity were not reflected in lower prices or in higher gains

America. The Mexican economist Juan Noyola Vázquez noted that the process of development required a change in the structure of production, with a decrease in the share of agriculture. Bottlenecks in the production of foodstuff, together with wage resistance, led to a wage-price spiral and to structural inflation. This was the basis of the so-called structuralist school of thought in Latin America (see Alcino Camara and Matías Vernengo, "Allied, German and Latin Perspectives on Inflation," in *Contemporary Post Keynesian Analysis*, ed. L. Randall Wray and Matthew Forstater [Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2005]).

12 For a recent survey of heterodox theories of conflict inflation, see Robert A. Blecker and Mark Setterfield, *Heterodox Macroeconomics: Models of Demand, Distribution and Growth* [Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019]).

for corporations but were essentially passed on as wages. This was an economy in which prices had floors but no ceilings, in Robert Heilbroner's apt expression, something clearly visible in the data since the 1940s, when deflationary periods almost vanished (Figure 1).¹³

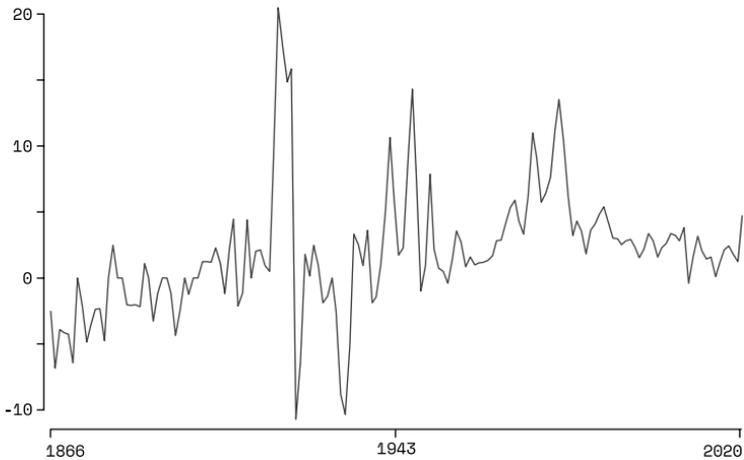
This policy consensus, which began to collapse in the 1960s and was completely shattered by the 1970s, was only possible in the context of the Cold War.¹⁴ It is important to emphasize that in the United States, the welfare state was incomplete, with women and minorities excluded from many of the civil and political rights taken for granted in the so-called free societies. The reasons for the collapse of the Keynesian consensus are associated with what Christopher Lasch would call the revolt of the elites, and can be seen as part of the Polanyian "double movement," according to which those social groups that lost out with the rise of the Golden Age led a backlash against it.¹⁵ But as the consensus that provided the social and institutional basis for economic prosperity was

13 The postbellum period in the late nineteenth century, tied to the rise of the modern oligopolistic corporation and the initially subdued efforts to regulate their power, was a period of deflation, which makes the argument for oligopolistic inflation hard to defend. Friedman, in his classic book on the monetary history of the United States, suggested that deflation was caused by the demonetization of silver, the infamous "crime of 1873," and that it was resolved by the discovery of gold in South Africa (see Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963]). This was essentially the view of Populist politicians like William Jennings Bryan, and the reason for his famous fight against the gold standard. The reduction of transportation costs, in an age of globalization with a relatively weak labor force, played a more important role in the deflationary pressures of the era.

14 See Andrew Glyn, Alan Hughes, Alain Lipietz, and Ajit Singh, "The Rise and Fall of the Golden Age," in *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the Post-war Experience*, ed. Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet B. Schor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

15 See Matías Vernengo, "The Consolidation of Dollar Hegemony After the Collapse of Bretton Woods: Bringing Power Back In," *Review of Political Economy* 33, no. 4 (2021).

Figure 1. Inflation Rate (1866–2021)



Sources: Samuel H. Williamson, "Annual Inflation Rates in the United States, 1775–2020, and the United Kingdom, 1265–2020" (MeasuringWorth, 2022) and Federal Reserve Economic Data

collapsing, the militancy of the working class and other social pressure groups was at its pinnacle. One of the fundamental consequences of the Golden Age's demise was the Great Inflation of the 1970s.

The conventional view about the acceleration of inflation emphasizes the role of the Vietnam War, mostly its fiscal costs, and the expansion of welfare programs during the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, including the War on Poverty and the extension of medical benefits to the elderly and the poor. Many would blame the lax monetary policies of Arthur F. Burns, a relatively orthodox economist appointed by Richard Nixon to head the Federal Reserve. Friedman's view on the monetary causes of inflation seemed vindicated, and he received the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, legitimizing that opinion. Nobody would deny the importance of

the two oil shocks, in 1973 and 1979, in explaining the acceleration of inflation, but the orthodox argument certainly became the accepted view about inflation's fundamental causes.¹⁶ Even before the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980, which finally brought the radical right to power with an explicit critique of the Keynesian consensus, Democrats had accepted the orthodox view of inflation and implemented its policies. Jimmy Carter appointed Paul Volcker, a monetarist and an inflation hawk, as chairman of the Fed.

Volcker initially tried monetary targets as prescribed by Friedman, and later, as the policies of explicitly managing the money supply failed, the Fed switched to the more conventional hikes of its policy interest rate.¹⁷ The Volcker interest rate shock was part of a set of policies that brought inflation down, even if their effects were not necessarily the ones anticipated by orthodox economists. Stabilization was not the result of lower monetary emissions so much as the fact that significantly higher interest rates, and the recession that followed, together with the opening of the American economy to foreign competition (in particular East Asian economies with lower wages), led to a large increase in unemployment and a decrease in the bargaining power of trade unions. Deregulation, which also started with Democrats under Carter and accelerated under Reagan, provided a further blow to

16 This is not to say that Friedman's views on the acceleration of inflation should be taken at face value. For a critique of the orthodox view on the acceleration of inflation and the relationship between inflation and unemployment, see James Forder, *Macroeconomics and the Phillips Curve Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

17 Charles Goodhart noted that every time a central bank tried to control a monetary aggregate, the previously stable relationship between that particular monetary aggregate and economic activity broke down. This became known as Goodhart's Law. In the 1980s, the relatively stable relation between money supply and prices broke down, and central banks more explicitly moved in the direction of following interest rate policies with explicit inflation targets. For a discussion of the evolution of central banking, see Goodhart, "The Changing Role of Central Banks," *Financial History Review* 18, no. 2 (2011).

the position of the working class. In addition, a steady decline of commodities prices, particularly oil, in the 1980s was instrumental for achieving price stability. Volcker is seen in orthodox circles and in the mainstream media as having promoted the stabilization, along with what the more recent chairman of the Fed Ben Bernanke called the Great Moderation, the long period of price stability that followed the Great Inflation.¹⁸ In reality, it was the restraining of workers' demands and the attenuation of the distributive conflict that mattered.¹⁹

To some extent, it was the success of the Golden Age that led to a less combative working class, in particular once the rights of minorities created a wedge in the Democratic coalition and allowed for the rise of right-wing populists like George Wallace and for Nixon's "Southern strategy." The new accumulation regime based on trade liberalization, financial deregulation, and the curtailing of workers' rights was only exacerbated during the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations. And while Barack Obama did expand medical coverage and remains for some a more elusive and harder to

18 See Ben Bernanke, "The Great Moderation," remarks given at the Eastern Economic Association, Washington, DC, February 20, 2004.

19 Nathan Perry and Nathaniel Cline argue, on the basis of the post-Keynesian and structuralist theories of conflict inflation, that stabilization was due primarily to wage declines and falling import prices caused by international competition and exchange-rate effects (Perry and Cline, "What Caused the Great Inflation Moderation in the US? A Post-Keynesian View," *Review of Keynesian Economics* 4, no. 4 [2016]). The view that inflation in the 1970s was not the result of the excesses of the Keynesian state and the overissuing of money supply were broadly shared at that point by more conventional Keynesians. James Tobin, a neoclassical Keynesian and an acerbic critic of Friedman, argued that he was "not sure how to classify the inflations ... in [the 1970s]. [He had] been pretty sure that United States inflation was of the inertial species, but [he] would not exclude the possibility that more fundamental social conflict is arising from the frustrations of continued economic reverses" (Tobin, "Diagnosing Inflation: A Taxonomy," in *Development in an Inflationary World*, ed. M. June Flanders and Assaf Razin [New York: Academic Press, 1981], 29).

classify figure, it is clear that he did not challenge the basis of the new neoliberal consensus that eventually replaced the old Keynesian one of the Golden Age.

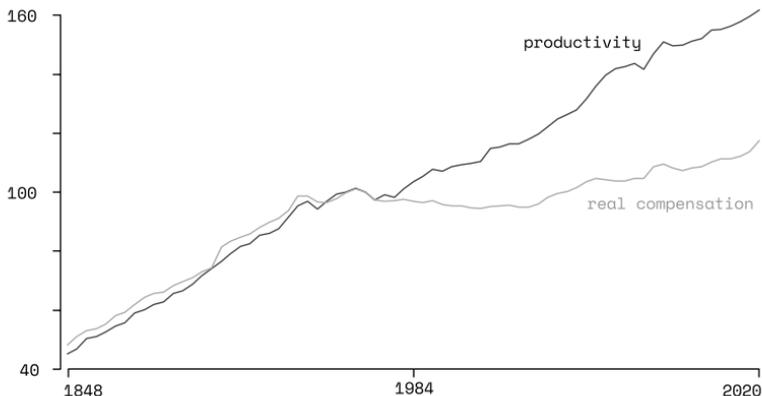
The neoliberal consensus provided a new social and institutional basis for the process of accumulation, one in which inflation remained subdued. The fundamental difference between the two accumulation regimes can be seen in the relationship between productivity and real compensation of nonsupervisory workers (Figure 2). While real wages increased with productivity in the postwar era, from the 1980s onward there has been a decoupling, with wage stagnation creating the conditions for price stability. During the Keynesian consensus era, productivity grew at around 3 percent per year, while in the neoliberal era, the pace slowed down to about half a percent per year. The slowdown in productivity went hand in hand with lower growth of output and employment. Financial accumulation, rather than real accumulation associated with output growth, became the norm, something referred to as financialization.²⁰ It would take a change to the underlying social conditions that regulate the process of capitalist accumulation and a significant increase in the bargaining power of the working class to lead to a new inflationary crisis.²¹

The legacy of the Great Moderation and the neoliberal period of deregulation, particularly in financial markets, has been one

20 For a discussion of financialization, see Gerald A. Epstein, ed., introduction to *Financialization and the World Economy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2005); and Thomas I. Palley, "Financialization: What It Is and Why It Matters," Levy Economics Institute, Working Paper no. 525, 2007.

21 Charles Goodhart and Manoj Pradhan are among the few that argue that inflation will return for structural reasons. However, their argument proceeds along orthodox lines. They suggest that the global slowdown of population growth would lead to higher dependency ratios and more demand, since the young and the elderly consume but do not produce, leading to persistent excess demand and inflation. See Goodhart and Pradhan, *The Great Demographic Reversal: Ageing Societies, Waning Inequality, and an Inflation Revival* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Figure 2. Productivity and Real Compensation in the US (1948–2020)



Source: Economic Policy Institute

of increasing instability. As a result of the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008, with its epicenter in the United States related to the housing market bubble, the Fed was forced to intervene heavily in the economy. A relatively moderate fiscal package was also passed, and a slow and prolonged recovery started during Obama’s administration and continued well into Donald Trump’s. Nobody seriously thought there was any significant risk of the demise of the Great Moderation.²² But then the pandemic hit in late 2019 and early 2020.

THE PANDEMIC AND COST-PUSH INFLATION

The overwhelming preoccupation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was with precluding a total shutdown of the economy. Vigorous financial rescue plans were implemented, larger than the

²² An exception was Allan Meltzer, who argued that “If President Obama and the Fed continue down their current path, we could see a repeat of those dreadful inflationary years [of the 1970s]” (Meltzer, “Inflation Nation,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2009).

one after the GFC a decade or so before, suggesting that something was learned from the last crisis. Monetary policy was geared to prevent the collapse of financial institutions and maintain levels of spending, just like in 2008, with the Fed expanding on the already large balance sheet and increasing the money supply even further. In other words, both fiscal and monetary policy were largely expansionary, as has become the norm in recessions going back at least to the postwar era, where the lessons of inaction during the Great Depression were understood.

The shutdown led to an immediate reduction in demand for several sectors, as people stayed home and stopped consuming many goods and services. In addition, significant supply-side effects were felt in sectors that had to shut down, either for lack of consumers or simply because sanitary conditions prohibited continuous production.²³ This in turn led to additional supply-side bottlenecks that caused increased costs of production in sectors acutely impacted by the pandemic. The increase in prices was localized to a few sectors: used cars, airfare, restaurants, housing, and, more important, the energy sector, with reductions in production and transmission spreading through the whole economy. Transportation issues, with clogged ports and problems in the trucking industry, added to the inflationary pressures from the cost side. Note that energy and transportation are costs of production for almost everything else, creating economy-wide inflationary pressures. These are temporary shocks, but their persistence depends not only on the ability of supply chains to adapt but also on the end of the pandemic, which is a global problem that will persevere while there are unvaccinated people. If the pandemic

23 For an early discussion of whether the pandemic should be seen as a demand or supply shock, see Matías Vernengo and Suranjana Nabar-Bhaduri, "The Economic Consequences of COVID-19: The Great Shutdown and the Rethinking of Economic Policy," *International Journal of Political Economy* 49, no. 4 (2020).

persists and the intermittent disruptions become endemic, so will the moderately higher levels of inflation.

It is clear that these cost pressures would have an impact on the economy even if the fiscal and monetary packages had not promoted a recovery in demand. But it is hard to agree with the notion that it was the government's generous social spending that spawned inflation.²⁴ Orthodox economists like Clinton's Treasury secretary and Obama's adviser Larry Summers, who did not seem to have much influence within the White House and the Fed at the beginning of Joe Biden's administration, are now much more popular within the corridors of power. Summers's view that fiscal restraint and tighter monetary policy are needed to control inflation has gained some momentum, and Jerome Powell, recently reappointed as chair of the Fed, has already suggested that monetary tightening is on the agenda. However, the notion that the recovery has been extremely fast, defended by Summers and, for obvious reasons, by the White House, is misplaced, and it should be taken with a grain of salt. The recovery has been significant, but the economy has not been close to full employment for a long time, even if the pre-pandemic unemployment rate was low. This is the key issue in the discussion of whether more restraint regarding fiscal and monetary policy is needed or not. If the economy is not at full employment, and the recovery is not caused by excess demand, then contractionary fiscal and monetary policy to curb demand would make little sense.

24 Summers suggests that the stimulus packages were so strong that the economy is essentially back to full employment. He argues that if one looks "at what's happening in the labor market, it looks to me like we've got substantial labor shortages that push wages up, but only with a lag because wages aren't reset constantly" ("Larry Summers Gets His 'Told You So' Moment on Inflation," Bloomberg, December 23, 2021). In other words, the economy recovered, and inflation is demand-driven. Krugman, who thinks we are in the midst of a strong recovery, is less keen about contractionary policies.

The arguments suggesting that the economy has recovered quickly tend to point to the steep increase in personal consumption after the pandemic, which was possible, even with higher unemployment, as a result of the government's fiscal transfers. It is true that personal consumption, as a share of gross domestic product (GDP), has recovered fast, as shown in Figure 3. Stimulus checks and child tax credits, both of which allowed for sustained consumption, together with restrictions on evictions and temporary increases in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), promoted a large decrease in poverty.²⁵ This increase in consumption suggests that demand was repressed, but it does not imply that the economy is at its capacity limit.

Give the poor some additional money, and they will consume. The question, then, is whether firms can provide for that demand and whether they are investing in order to increase production capacity. As can be seen in Figure 3, gross domestic investment, as a share of GDP, has recovered, but it has not increased significantly. In fact, capacity utilization remains relatively low, below pre-pandemic levels and below the levels of the previous early 2000s boom (Figure 4), suggesting that lack of growth, and possibly secular stagnation, as Summers described it before, are still relevant concerns.²⁶ Labor force participation rates have been low for years, having peaked at the end of the Clinton administration more than two decades ago, as can be seen in Figure 4. Employment

25 The estimates of the reduction of poverty rates as a result of the pandemic stimulus measures are nothing short of shocking. By some estimates, poverty would be reduced by about 67 percent (Laura Wheaton, Linda Giannarelli, and Ilham Dehy, "2021 Poverty Projections: Assessing the Impact of Benefits and Stimulus Measures," Urban Institute, 2021).

26 See Lawrence H. Summers, "U.S. Economic Prospects: Secular Stagnation, Hysteresis, and the Zero Lower Bound," *Business Economics* 49, no. 2 (2014). On the possibility of persistently lower rates of growth, see also Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The US Standard of Living Since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Figure 3. Personal Consumption and Gross Domestic Investment (% GDP)

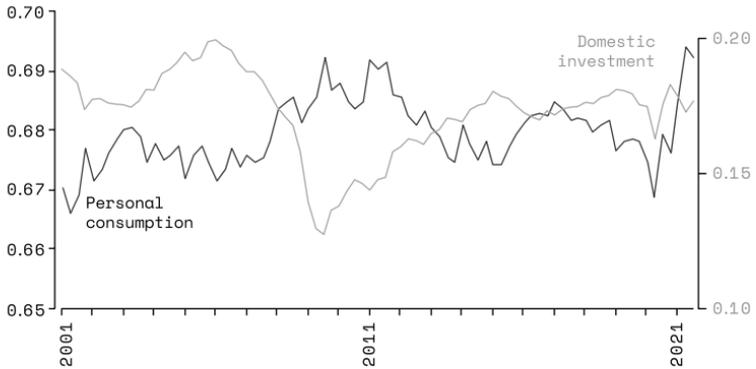
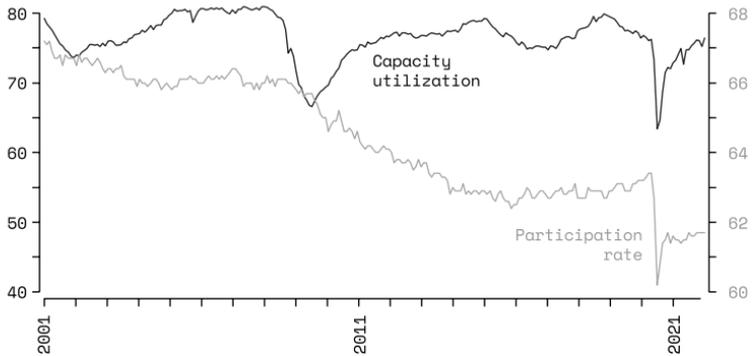


Figure 4. Capacity Utilization and Labor Force Participation Rate



Sources: Federal Reserve Economic Data

will take a while to return to its pre-pandemic levels, and depending on the ability to sustain the current levels of spending, that would perhaps happen only by the end of 2022.

All in all, the economy still shows signs of slack rather than being at full capacity. Average hourly earnings of production and nonsupervisory employees (i.e., workers' wages) have grown faster

during the pandemic, even if below 1970s levels, and more in sectors that were hit harder by sanitary measures, like leisure and hospitality. Employers are finding it harder to hire workers, too. But that reflects workers' ability to avoid dangerous health situations or to cope with child-rearing issues and other family circumstances as a result of the fiscal transfers, rather than a labor market that is close to full employment. There were about 3.5 million more workers employed in March 2020 than in December 2021. Irrespective of the official definition of a recession, the economy cannot seriously be thought to have recovered before employment levels surpass the previous peak. All these reinforce the notion that inflation is caused by cost-push factors related to the supply chain shocks, and that these may be somewhat persistent, to the extent that the pandemic endures. The current risk is not one of accelerating inflation but one of persistent stagnation and lukewarm growth with moderate inflation. In other words, it might be called stagflation.

THE DANGERS OF INFLATION PARANOIA

The danger of stagflation does not imply a return of the relatively high inflation of the 1970s, in part because workers are less organized now and it is unclear that significant wage resistance is possible. In this new Gilded Age, with extreme corporate power, workers are not positioned to push for higher wages. The neo-liberal branch of the Democratic Party went along, grudgingly, with the Biden fiscal transfers and the infrastructure plan, but it managed to stall and most likely kill the vast majority of progressive programs in the Build Back Better initiative, given the refusal of senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema to pass it without Republican votes. Several pandemic programs that have been essential for the recovery — for maintaining the levels of demand and for reducing poverty rates — have ended or are about to expire. Even if it is unlikely that the Fed can increase its policy

rate significantly, simply because doing so would likely throw the economy into a tailspin, moderate increases might have an impact on the housing market and slow down the recovery.

For neoliberal progressives, the persistence of inflation makes the risks of contractionary policy a necessary evil. As they accept the conventional story about the Great Inflation, they have bitterly decried the use of price controls that some progressives, as noted before, have defended,²⁷ suggesting that they failed back then and would not work now.²⁸ Price controls worked sometimes, though, under certain circumstances. For example, during World War II — when the government had ample ability to intervene and plan what private companies had to produce as part of the war effort — price controls were fairly efficient, as discussed by Isabella Weber in *How China Escaped Shock Therapy*.²⁹ But it would be an exaggeration

27 Kelton, in *The Deficit Myth*, suggests two basic measures to control inflation. The first is higher taxes that would reduce spending and pressure on the supply of goods and services, but that would seem to be relevant only at full employment. She also defends a job guarantee program that would provide employment to all who wanted to work. This latter mechanism can be seen as a type of incomes policy, trying to reduce wage demands. Kelton briefly cites wage and price controls in a footnote to her discussion of tax increases.

28 Noah Smith has provided a brief description of orthodox views on why price controls would not work. Essentially, he argued that price controls would create additional imperfections and retard the adjustment of supply chains (Smith, “Why Price Controls Are a Bad Tool for Fighting Inflation,” *Noahpinion*, January 1, 2022). It is worth noting that Tobin, back in the early 1980s, favored some use of price controls. He said: “We are not going to have a successful disinflation without some kind of wage and price controls. Right now, we are just relying on tight money and on the natural desperation of disaster ... to moderate the wage demands of workers, stiffen the backbones of employers and induce price discounting. That will work eventually, but it is a very painful way to do it and very costly to the economy” (Jane Bryant Quinn, “Economist Tobin on Inflation: How It Started, How to Stop It,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 1981). Those views have increasingly lost support within mainstream Keynesianism.

29 Isabella Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (London: Routledge, 2021). John Kenneth Galbraith recounts his experience within the Office of Price Administration during World War II in his book *A Theory of Price Control* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952). Hugh Rockoff sug-

to suggest that the relatively moderate inflation of the 1950s up to the late 1960s, other than during the Korean War, was tied to price and wage controls, which were used only sporadically. As noted before, the basis of price stability in the postwar era was the social accord guaranteeing that wages increased with productivity. It was the social and institutional arrangements keeping the distributive conflict under control that did the job. And while it is true that the pandemic and the return of hegemonic disputes between China and the United States implies that a greater degree of control over the supply chain by US corporations is likely, it is unreasonable to assume that the current administration has the tools to implement price controls as effectively as it did back then, or that these could meaningfully reduce inflation pressures.

In the neoliberal era, what has moderated inflationary pressures is the stagnation of wages. Some might think that the rise of Bernie Sanders and progressive Democrats in Congress signals a change in the social conditions underlying the macroeconomic regime of accumulation. It is true that the rise of the socialist left or the return of New Deal liberalism (depending on one's preferences), more than the resurgence of a violent and militant right, is the fundamental political change of our time in the United States. The populist right has an old pedigree, and a direct line can be traced from Barry Goldwater to Trump.³⁰ It is also true that this

gests that price controls were effective in certain periods, essentially from 1942 to 1946, but less so when controls were relaxed. For him, in order to be effective, price controls had to be "backed up by a vigorous enforcement effort and three important supplementary measures — wage controls, the seizure of noncomplying industries, and rationing both of resources and of final products" (Rockoff, *Drastic Measures: A History of Wage and Price Controls in the United States* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 108). These additional conditions are hard to replicate in the current circumstances.

30 It is worth noting that Trump has abandoned some elements that were central to the right-wing coalition, like the defense of free trade, something that is also part of the progressive agenda on the Left.

change comes after several popular movements, from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter, that urge a radical reform of the current economic system and its social forms of domination. These movements demand higher wages, a Green New Deal, unionization (e.g., at Amazon and successfully at Starbucks), broader and tighter regulation of corporate power, and better working conditions more generally. Inflation was not on their agenda, even if it clearly impinges on their demands. But the danger for the Left, and for the current administration, is to accept an exaggerated estimation of the social evils of moderate inflation.³¹

The political economy of inflation suggests that if the administration goes for tighter fiscal policy, and the Fed complements it with even slightly less expansive monetary policy, one can expect not just a defeat in the next midterm elections but a full-fledged return of right-wing populism, with Trump or someone like him winning the presidency in 2024. James Galbraith correctly pointed out that it was not inflation per se that caused Carter's political defeat and the rise of Reaganism, but the way in which the government responded to it.³² Tighter budgets and higher interest rates, which have dominated anti-inflationary policy ever since Volcker, led to twelve years of Republican rule. This might be a repeat of the 1970s — this time, not as a tragedy but as a farce. ☹️

31 While inflation paranoia runs high in DC policy circles and in the media, the fact remains that very few can explain the reasons for an inflation target of 2 percent, or even a target of 2 percent over a period of time. A famous study by the World Bank in the 1990s could not find any effect of very high inflation (40 percent per year) on economic growth. See Michael Bruno and William Easterly, "Inflation Crises and Long-Run Growth," *Journal of Monetary Economics* 41, no. 1 (1998).

32 James K. Galbraith, "Whipping Up America's Inflation Bogeyman," Project Syndicate, November 19, 2021.



TEAMSTERS UNION 533
ON STRIKE



RUC
Contractors

KEOLIS
Transit

UNFAIR TO TEAMSTERS

I'M STICKING WITH MY UNION
AFL-CIO

I'M STICKING WITH MY UNION
AFL-CIO

SAVE THE
CENTER STREET
CYCLE TRACK

I'M U

STICKING WITH MY
UNION

AFL-CIO



I'M STICKING WITH MY
UNION

While the uptick in strike activity in 2021 is heartening, its influence should not be exaggerated. The number and extent of job actions was noticeable but still very small by historical standards, and union density continued to decline. A significant labor upsurge might be in the works, but it is not in evidence yet.

Is the Labor Movement Back?

Chris Maisano

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, Pope Francis spoke movingly of the workers keeping the world turning in dark times:

People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines or on the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history. Doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious, and so very many others. They understood that no one is saved alone.¹

1 Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*, December 8, 2020, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html).

These workers have done everything we've asked of them and more. They have been through hell, particularly those who have risked their health and well-being to care for the sick, educate the young, feed the hungry, and deliver the things the rest of us need to get through this period of grinding uncertainty. Employers, politicians, and talking heads have lauded them as essential workers, but the stark gap between the praise and the grim realities of working life in the United States — which was already miserable for millions before the pandemic — have pushed many to the breaking point. Indeed, record numbers of American workers have quit their jobs in what the media has dubbed the Great Resignation. According to the US Labor Department, 4.5 million workers voluntarily left their jobs in November 2021. The number of monthly quits has exceeded three million since August 2020, and the trend shows no sign of slowing down.² Job switchers span the employment ladder, but turnover has been largely concentrated in the low-wage service sector, where workers are taking advantage of the very tight labor market to get a better deal for themselves. According to data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, workers with high school diplomas are currently enjoying a faster rate of wage growth than workers with bachelor's degrees, a remarkable situation that has not occurred in decades.³

Worker discontent is not only finding expression in the form of quitting and job switching. In 2021, we witnessed a modest increase in the frequency and visibility of collective action in the workplace. Tens of thousands of workers, union and nonunion alike, challenged employers through protests and strikes across sectors and in many different geographical regions. Workers in

2 Ben Casselman, "More Quit Jobs Than Ever, But Most Turnover Is in Low-Wage Work," *New York Times*, January 4, 2022.

3 Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, "Wage Growth Tracker," accessed January 13, 2022, atlantafed.org/chcs/wage-growth-tracker.

health care and social assistance, education, and transportation and warehousing led the way, but they were joined by workers in hotels and food services, manufacturing, and other industries. Protests and strikes tended to be concentrated in states where labor is relatively stronger, namely California, New York, and Illinois, but some states with low union density, like North Carolina, saw an uptick in labor action, too. Pay increases were easily the most common demand, but health and safety, staffing, and COVID-19 protocols were high on the agenda as well.

The year 2021 was less a strike wave than a strike ripple, and it has not yet resulted in any appreciable increase in unionization. A few trends stand out. The first is that labor protest and strike action were heavily concentrated among unionized groups of workers. Unionized groups of workers accounted for nearly 95% of all estimated participants in labor protests and more than 98% of all estimated participants in strikes. The second is that protests and strikes were concentrated by industry — namely health care and education, which together accounted for roughly 60% of all labor actions. Finally, protests and strikes were heavily concentrated geographically. Just three states with relatively high levels of union density — California, New York, and Illinois — accounted for more than half the total estimated participants in protests and strikes. In short, collective workplace action is by and large taking place where organized labor still retains residual sources of strength. In this context, spreading protest and strike action beyond its current industrial and regional confines depends on unionization in new places.

Conditions conducive to labor action — rising inflation, pandemic-related pressures, and a tight labor market — are likely to persist into 2022, and the Biden administration's National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has been meaningfully supportive of worker organizing. US labor is probably not on the verge of a historic

breakthrough, but in this context, workers may have an opportunity to make modest material and organizational gains.

Making new organizational gains is critical to the fortunes of the labor movement and the reviving US left. The vast majority of the workers involved in strikes and labor protests last year were already members of unions, not unorganized workers looking to unionize. This is why it is so concerning that last year's uptick in labor action occurred amid a further decline in union density in 2021. The overall rate of union membership stands at 10.3% of the total labor force, while the total number of union members, just over fourteen million in 2021, continues its long decline.⁴ While some have argued that treating union density as the key measure of labor's strength is a mistake, it seems clear that, at least in the US context, where union density and union coverage almost entirely overlap, it does provide an effective measurement of working-class power.⁵

Boosting the level of union density should therefore be among the leading priorities of progressives and socialists in the United States. As the power resources school of welfare state scholars has long argued, the relative strength of the labor movement and its affiliated political parties has been the single most important factor shaping welfare state development over time and across countries. Here in the United States, where we have never had a nationwide social democratic party aligned with a strong labor movement, the weakness of working-class organization is clearly reflected in the fragmentation and stinginess of our welfare state. The state-level wave of attacks on organized labor that began in

4 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Union Members - 2021," accessed January 22, 2022, bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm.

5 For a criticism of "density bias," see Richard Sullivan, "Density Matters: The Union Density Bias and Its Implications for Labor Movement Revitalization," *Mobilization* 14, no. 2 (2009).

2010 have made it that much harder for unions to defend working-class interests and reduce inequality. But the fact that they were able to meaningfully mitigate the growth of inequality, even during the period of neoliberal retrenchment, shows that rebuilding the labor movement needs to be a chief priority of any progressive political agenda.⁶ The Biden administration's pro-union stance suggests it understands this. But if it's unable to act decisively to boost union membership, all the pro-union rhetoric it can muster will ultimately amount to little.

TRACKING LABOR ACTION

Researchers at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) began documenting strikes and labor protests in late 2020. Their ILR Labor Action Tracker provides a database of workplace conflict across the United States, based on information collected from government sources, news reports, organizational press releases, and social media. It counts both strikes and labor protests as "events" but distinguishes between the two. The major distinction between strikes and labor protests, according to this methodology, is whether the workers involved in the event stopped work. If they did, the event is defined as a strike; if they did not, it is defined as a labor protest. The Labor Action Tracker also collects data on a number of additional variables, including employer, labor organization (if applicable), local labor organization (if applicable), industry, approximate number of participants, worker demands, and more.⁷

6 For more on organized labor's impact on inequality, see Laura C. Bucci, "Organized Labor's Check on Rising Economic Inequality in the U.S. States," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (2018).

7 A full explanation of the Labor Action Tracker methodology can be found here: ILR Labor Action Tracker, "Methodology," striketracker.ilr.cornell.edu/methodology.html. The Labor Action Tracker data used to write this article was provided by Johnnie Kallas of the Cornell ILR School.

Action Types

In 2021, there were 786 events with 257,086 estimated participants.⁸ Over 60% of the events were labor protests, while less than 40% were strikes (there was one recorded lockout). Roughly one-third of the estimated number of workers participated in labor protests, while roughly two-thirds participated in strikes. Further, the average number of estimated workers per labor protest (188) was significantly smaller than the average number of estimated workers per strike (553, see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Labor Action Events by Type

Event Type	Number of Events	% of Events	Est. Number of Participants	% of Est. Number of Participants
Lockout	1	0.1%	400	0.2%
Protest	487	62.0%	91,907	35.7%
Strike	298	37.9%	164,779	64.1%
Grand Total	786	100.0%	257,086	100.0%

Source: All data in tables and figures is from the ILR Labor Action Tracker, striketracker.ilr.cornell.edu.

⁸ The data set contains data on both bargaining unit size and approximate number of participants. It treats bargaining unit size as a proxy for the approximate number of participants in an event if the latter was not available. Nonunion workers are counted only in approximate number of participants since there was no bargaining unit involved. The data set also contains events where neither a bargaining unit size nor an approximate number of participants is recorded. For the purposes of this analysis, I used bargaining unit size for actions that did not include an approximate number of participants. I used approximate number of participants for events that also included bargaining unit size, because there were some events that did not involve the entire bargaining unit. If an event included an approximate number of participants but no bargaining unit size, I used the former as a proxy for the latter. I then combined these data points into a single variable that I refer to here as “estimated number of participants.”

Duration

Neither labor protests nor strikes tended to last very long, which tracks with the generally sharp decline in strike duration in recent decades.⁹ Labor protests in particular were very short affairs. Of the labor protests with a start and end date, 96% lasted for just one day or less. Strikes also tended to have a short duration, but they typically did not end as quickly as protests. Of the strikes with a start and end date, one-third lasted for one day or less. Roughly two-thirds of strikes (68%) ended within a week, and over 90% ended within thirty days. One strike stands out for its unusually long duration: a 701-day strike by United Auto Workers (UAW) members against a metallurgical company in Pennsylvania, which began in September 2019 and ended in August 2021.

Industries

An informed observer will not be surprised by which industries saw the largest number of labor action events (Table 2). The leading two industries by far were health care and social assistance and education, which are both highly unionized and have been subjected to enormous pressures during the pandemic. Together, they accounted for nearly 40% of the total labor protests and strikes. These industries also comprised over 60% of the overall number of estimated labor action participants — health care with 41.5% of the estimated participants, education with 18.8%. The overrepresentation of health care and education workers becomes even starker when we compare this to their employment shares in the overall labor force. In 2020, these two industries accounted for 16.3% of total nonfarm employment — health care with a 13.8%

9 For data on strike duration measured in terms of “days of idleness” and percent of total working time, see US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Annual Work Stoppages Involving 1,000 or More Workers, 1947–Present,” accessed January 18, 2022, bls.gov/web/wkstp/annual-listing.htm.

share and education with 2.3%.¹⁰ Put another way, the share of health care workers in 2021 labor actions was roughly three times larger than their share in the nonfarm labor force, while the share of education workers was more than eight times as large.

These two pace-setting industries were followed by a second tier of industries including transportation and warehousing, accommodation and food services, and manufacturing. It is not surprising to see these listed among the most turbulent industries, as they contain a mix of highly unionized employers and nonunion employers that have become a major focus of labor organizing activity, namely Amazon — the most frequently targeted employer, with twelve total labor actions — which was the target of twice as many labor actions as McDonald’s, the second-most targeted employer.

The industrial distribution of labor protests generally follows the overall distribution of labor action, with the notable exception of manufacturing, which saw far more strikes than protests. While the health care industry did not experience the largest number of strikes, it accounts for more than half of estimated strike participants (53%). Workers in education (12.4%) and manufacturing (16%) also accounted for outsize shares of the estimated number of participants.

Types of Worker Organization

Table 3 reveals that unions accounted for roughly three-quarters of all labor action events of each type in 2021. Unionized groups of workers were responsible for roughly 4.5 times as many labor protests, roughly seven times as many strikes, and roughly five times as many labor actions of either type as nonunion groups

10 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment by Major Industry Sector,” accessed January 17, 2022, bls.gov/emp/tables/employment-by-major-industry-sector.htm.

Table 2. Total Actions and Participants by Industry

Industry	Industry Frequency	% of Industry	Sum of Est. Participants	% of Est. Participants
Health Care and Social Assistance	156	19.8%	106,648	41.5%
Educational Services	148	18.8%	48,371	18.8%
Transportation and Warehousing	77	9.8%	19,627	7.6%
Accommodation and Food Services	72	9.2%	1,337	0.5%
Manufacturing	69	8.8%	38,947	15.1%
N/A	57	7.3%	1,692	0.7%
Retail Trade	37	4.7%	10,148	3.9%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	36	4.6%	2,509	1.0%
Public Administration	31	3.9%	5,891	2.3%
Administrative and Support and Waste Management	25	3.2%	4,786	1.9%
Information	22	2.8%	5,353	2.1%
Construction	17	2.2%	3,558	1.4%
Other Services (except Public Administration)	10	1.3%	107	0.0%
Wholesale Trade	8	1.0%	2,090	0.8%
Mining	7	0.9%	5,250	2.0%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting	5	0.6%	200	0.1%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	4	0.5%	315	0.1%
Utilities	3	0.4%	224	0.1%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	1	0.1%	30	0.0%
Finance and Insurance	1	0.1%	3	0.0%
Grand Total	786	100.0%	257,086	100.0%

of workers. This overrepresentation of unionized workers stands out even more when we consider that union members account for just 10.3% of the total labor force.¹¹ While both groups of workers engaged in more protests than strikes, nonunion workers had a higher ratio of protests to strikes than union workers.

Table 3. Protests and Strikes by Organization Type

Event Type	Non-union	Non-union % of Total	Union	Union % of Total	N/A	N/A % of Total	Grand Total
Protest	80	16.4%	362	74.3%	45	0.2%	487
Strike	31	10.4%	225	75.5%	42	14.1%	298
Grand Total	111	14.1%	588	74.8%	87	11.1%	786

One of the most remarkable observations we can make is that unionized groups of workers accounted for the overwhelming majority of estimated participants in labor action events of all types. Unionized workers accounted for nearly 95% of all estimated participants in labor protests and over 98% of all estimated participants in strikes. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) was far and away the most active union in 2021, with 123 total labor actions. This was more than twice as many total labor actions as the Teamsters, the second-most active union with 53 total actions. SEIU alone accounted for 20% of all strikes involving a union. Other relatively active unions included the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (29 actions), UNITE HERE (27), the American Federation of Teachers (26), and the United Auto Workers (22). Moreover, the most active “nonunion” worker organization in 2021 was the Fight for \$15 campaign, which is funded and directed by SEIU. Fight

11 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members – 2021,” accessed January 22, 2022, bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm.

Table 4. Labor Actions and Participants by State

State	State Frequency	Sum of Est. Participants	% of Est. Participants	State % of US Pop.
CA	106	81,981	31.9%	11.8%
NY	101	26,930	10.5%	6.0%
IL	56	34,171	13.3%	3.8%
PA	46	3,395	1.3%	3.9%
MA	39	6,752	2.6%	2.1%
WA	27	7,124	2.8%	2.3%
MI	25	5,802	2.3%	3.0%
MD	22	628	0.2%	1.9%
NC	22	321	0.1%	3.2%
MN	21	7,201	2.8%	1.7%

for \$15 is not the only active nonunion organization that receives substantial support from unions. The Fund Excluded Workers Coalition, Arise Chicago, and other nonunion organizations that sponsored multiple protests or strikes in 2021 are backed by unions in various ways.

Geography

The geographical distribution of labor protests and strikes generally reflected the uneven geographical distribution of union density in the United States. California and New York each had over a hundred labor action events in 2021, and most of the remaining states in the top ten were among the most highly unionized states in the country (see Table 4). One notable exception was North Carolina, a state with very low union density that nonetheless reported more than twenty labor protests and strikes. The estimated number of North Carolina workers reported to be involved in these actions, however, was quite small at just 321 participants.

Geographical concentration was also expressed in terms of the estimated number of labor action participants. California alone accounted for nearly one-third of all estimated participants. Just three states — California, Illinois, and New York, all of which have a higher-than-average unionization rate — represented over half of the estimated participating workers. The state that accounted for the next-largest number of estimated participants, Virginia, only represented roughly 7.5 percent of the total, while thirty-five states and territories accounted for less than 1 percent of the total number of estimated participants each.

This overrepresentation of California, New York, and Illinois appears even more notable when we compare their shares of estimated labor action participants with their shares of the total US population. California's share of estimated labor action participants is nearly three times as large as its share of the total population; New York's share is 1.75 times higher; and Illinois's share is 3.5 times higher. These figures undoubtedly reflect a further concentration of union members within these states — Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, the New York City metropolitan area, and Chicago, as well as Sacramento, Albany, and Springfield, the state capitals. States like Pennsylvania and Michigan are underrepresented in terms of their population shares, as is North Carolina, which has over 3% of the country's total population but just 0.1% of the estimated labor action participants.¹²

Demands and Issues

Pay was easily the most common demand or issue. Pay-related demands occurred twice as often as the second-most common demand, health and safety. These were followed by demands for staffing, health care, and COVID-19 protocols, along with a range

12 United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts, accessed January 17, 2022, [census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221).

Table 5. Selected Demand Frequencies by Action Type

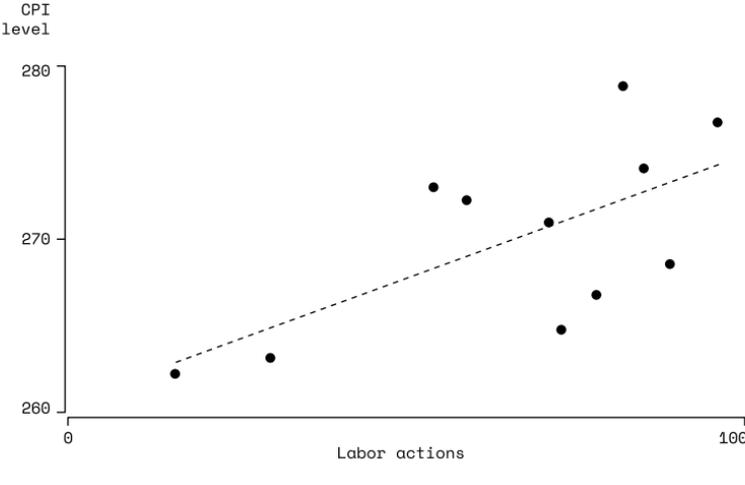
Demand	Protest	Strike	Total
Pay	212	177	389
Health and Safety	104	86	190
Staffing	90	49	139
Health Care	51	69	120
COVID-19 Protocols	56	51	107
Job Security	62	21	83
Union Recognition	27	17	44
Racial Justice	29	11	40
Pandemic Relief	35	0	35
Sexual Harassment and Misconduct	5	9	14
Vaccine Policy	6	6	12

of additional demands. There were a few labor actions related to broader social issues like racial justice or sexual harassment and misconduct, but these occurred far less frequently than demands for higher pay, health and safety measures, and staffing. Finally, while some have speculated that resistance to vaccine mandates has helped to drive labor action in the past year, there does not appear to be much evidence for this claim (see Table 5).

VECTORS OF LABOR UNREST

The uptick in labor action was not the only development that captured headlines in 2021. Last year also witnessed the fastest increases in the pace of inflation since the early 1980s. Was there a relationship between inflation and labor action? Monthly correlations are suggestive. Figure 1 shows a positive correlation between the number of labor action starts per month and the monthly Consumer Price Index level ($r = 0.65$) for the months of January through November 2021.

Figure 1. Labor Action Starts per Month and CPI, January–November 2021

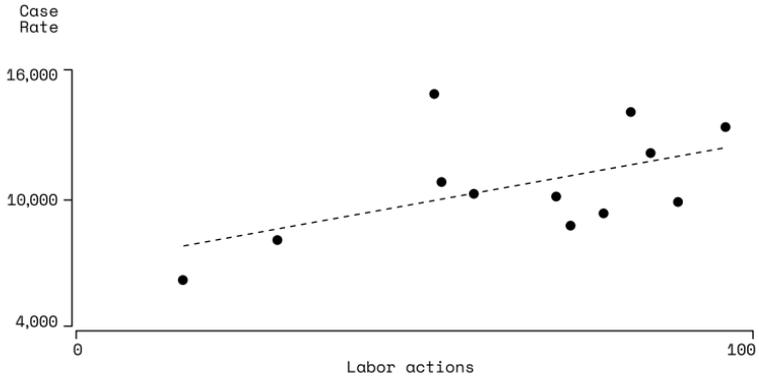


This finding is in line with economists’ long-established observation of the relationship between the rate of inflation and labor unrest. Research conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s, the last major period of strike activity in the United States, found that, at least within certain industries, “the most important cause for the recent increase in strikes has been the disrupting influence of inflation on collective bargaining.”¹³ If rapid inflation persists into 2022, it will likely continue to stimulate labor protests and strike action around the country.

It seems plausible that increases in the cost of living driven by pandemic-related disruptions are compelling workers to demand higher wages to keep up with rising prices. The fact that pay increases, while larger than in recent years, have tended not to keep pace with inflation, much less exceed it, suggests this is the

13 Bruce E. Kaufman, “Bargaining Theory, Inflation, and Cyclical Strike Activity in Manufacturing,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 34, no. 3 (April 1981), 353.

Figure 2. Overall Labor Action Starts and Total Case Rate per 100k per Month, January–November 2021



case.¹⁴ So does the fact that employers’ projected pay increases for 2022 are only about half the current level of price increases.¹⁵ While increases in labor costs may well be driving inflation in certain sectors, the evidence so far suggests that 2021’s increase in prices was generally not the result of wage-push inflation.¹⁶ Workers are waging defensive struggles to protect their living standards amid a general increase in the cost of living.

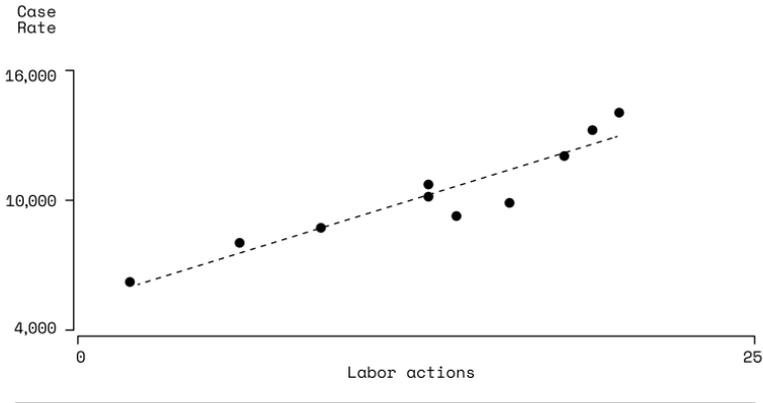
The other major story of 2021 was, of course, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While vaccines and improved treatments contributed to a general decline in death rates, the emergence of new variants like Omicron raised US case rates to record levels by the end of the year. Was there a relationship between case rates and labor action? Figure 2 suggests a correlation ($r = 0.55$)

14 Ben Casselman, “Only 17% of Workers Say Their Pay Has Kept Pace with Inflation,” *New York Times*, January 4, 2022.

15 Alicia Doniger, “How Inflation Is Changing the 2022 Annual Employee Pay Raise Equation,” CNBC, December 13, 2021.

16 Tim Barker interviewed by Daniel Denvir, “A Socialist Primer on Monetary Policy and Inflation,” *Jacobin*, September 19, 2021.

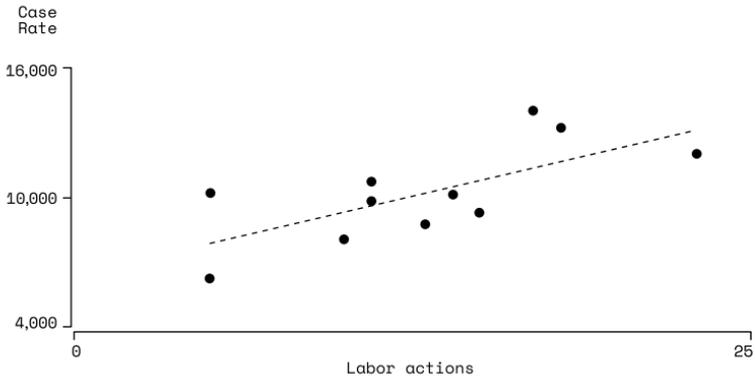
Figure 3. Health Care Labor Action Starts per Month and Total Case Rate per 100k per Month, January–November 2021



between labor action starts per month and the total COVID-19 case rate per 100,000, but it was not as tight as the relationship between labor action and the CPI level.

The relationship between COVID-19 case rates and labor actions becomes much stronger, however, when we look at health care and education, the industries with the most labor protests and strikes in 2021. Figure 3 suggests a tight relationship ($r = 0.93$) between COVID-19 case rates and labor action starts per month in the health care industry. Health care workers have been subjected to enormous pressures during the pandemic. The grinding toll of longer shifts, more and sicker patients, and staffing shortages caused by resignations have pushed hospital workers in particular to the wall. Protests and strikes at hospitals tended to be larger and of longer duration than events in other industries and workplaces. Notable examples include a thirteen-day strike involving 4,500 workers at the University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago (SEIU and Illinois Nurses Association); a forty-day strike involving 2,200

Figure 4. Education Labor Action Starts per Month and Total Case Rate per 100k per Month



workers at Catholic Health in Buffalo, New York (Communications Workers of America); a weeklong strike of 1,400 workers at Keck Medicine of USC in Los Angeles (California Nurses Association / National Nurses United); and a bitter open-ended strike of 700 nurses at Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts (Massachusetts Nurses Association) that began in March 2021 and spilled into 2022. The nation’s health care workforce is in crisis, and it is reasonable to assume that labor unrest in the industry will continue at least until the pandemic begins to subside.

The nation’s education workforce is also under very high levels of stress. Figure 4 suggests a fairly tight relationship ($r = 0.70$) between COVID-19 case rates and labor actions in education. During the pandemic, teachers and support staff have had to deal with ever-shifting policies, inadequate ventilation systems, and a lack of sufficient testing capacity, among other challenges. The Chicago Teachers Union was the single most active group of educators, with five recorded protests against Chicago Public Schools and one strike against a charter school network. Other

notable examples included a six-hundred-worker strike in East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools in Louisiana; strikes of the same size in Meridian, Idaho, and Gahanna, Ohio, public schools; and an Oakland Education Association protest for better COVID-19 protocols and health and safety standards in that city's public schools. Most of the action was in public K-12 schools, but the biggest and longest strike in education happened at Columbia University, where three thousand UAW Local 2110 graduate workers waged a ten-week strike for a first contract settlement.¹⁷ Local 2110 also waged a nineteen-day strike at New York University, which resulted in substantial improvements in pay and health benefits.¹⁸

THE POLITICAL SCENE

In a recent issue of *Catalyst*, I argued that, despite the election of Joe Biden to the White House, a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, and Democratic control of the Senate, the election cycle probably did not move the needle far enough to fundamentally change organized labor's fortunes in the United States.¹⁹ It brings me no pleasure to say that this forecast has so far been confirmed. Labor's signature piece of legislation, the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, easily passed the Democratic House but did not win enough support in the Senate to surmount an inevitable filibuster. Congressional Democrats attempted to circumvent this by inserting a number of important PRO Act provisions into the \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better (BBB) bill, including card check union certification, a ban on state-level

17 Ashley Wong, "Student Workers at Columbia End 10-Week Strike After Reaching a Deal," *New York Times*, January 7, 2022.

18 Annie Levin, "How NYU's Grad Student Union Went on Strike — and Won," *Progressive*, June 2, 2021.

19 Chris Maisano, "Can Labor Break Its Double Bind?" *Catalyst* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2021).

“right-to-work” laws, and heavy penalties for employers who violate federal labor laws.²⁰

Like the PRO Act itself, however, BBB has not overcome the stubborn opposition of conservative Senate Democrats, namely Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona. As of this writing, the fate of the bill remains uncertain. President Biden insists that he will still push to “get something done,” but doing so may entail breaking up the sprawling bill into smaller pieces and passing them separately, and it is not clear whether PRO Act provisions will be among them.²¹ Once again, the Senate appears to be playing its historic role as the graveyard of federal labor law reform.

With legislative action stalled, the Biden administration has made extensive use of its executive powers to combat some of the worst employer abuses and support worker organizing. One of the administration’s first acts was to appoint former CWA lawyer Jennifer Abruzzo as general counsel of the NLRB. Last summer, the president cemented a Democratic majority by appointing two lawyers from SEIU to vacant seats on the board. Since then, Biden’s NLRB has been unusually aggressive in promoting a pro-labor agenda. In December, it announced a high-profile settlement with Amazon that should make it somewhat easier for the company’s warehouse workers to organize. Under the settlement, which resulted from six worker complaints about union-busting tactics, Amazon agreed to directly notify up to one million of its employees of their right to organize and allow workers to enter break rooms and common spaces and talk to coworkers on non-work time. The settlement will probably not batter down the walls

20 Timothy Noah, “There’s an Excellent Labor Provision (Sssh!) in the Build Back Better Act,” *New Republic*, November 1, 2021.

21 Paul LeBlanc and Manu Raju, “Biden Insists He and Manchin Will ‘Get Something Done’ After Build Back Better Setback,” CNN, December 21, 2021.

of Fortress Amazon, but as one former NLRB attorney put it, “You sort of have this David and Goliath story going on. ... Maybe the giant isn’t down, but David just got a hit.”²²

While private sector labor laws are ultimately enshrined at the federal level, state and local governments are not powerless in this area. Last summer, the Democratic government in California passed a law that bars large warehouse distribution centers from maintaining punishing productivity quotas that prevent workers from taking breaks or going to the bathroom.²³ Bills like this will not open the floodgates to organizing a company like Amazon. But they should give workers some breathing room from management’s worst practices, reduce Amazon’s astronomical turnover rates, and give workers more incentives to stay and organize their workplaces.²⁴

In the waning days of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s term, New York City passed new “labor peace” laws that would leverage the city’s power to support unionization in the private sector. For example, one law backed by AFSCME District Council 37 requires non-profit social service providers operating on city contracts — who collectively employ roughly 125,000 workers, many of them badly paid — to allow their employees to unionize. It’s framed as a labor peace agreement because it also entails a prohibition on strikes and lockouts. Employers who do not comply with the law will have their contracts with the city terminated.²⁵ A similar new law

22 Ian Kullgren, “Amazon Labor Board Settlement Is ‘Crucial’ for Union Organizing,” *Bloomberg Law*, December 27, 2021.

23 Annie Palmer, “California Passes Bill Targeting Amazon’s Productivity Quotas That Can Penalize Bathroom Breaks,” *NBC News*, September 9, 2021.

24 For an extensive investigation of Amazon’s brutal workplace regime, see Jodi Kantor, Karen Weise, and Grace Ashford, “The Amazon That Customers Don’t See,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2021.

25 Reuven Blau, “Social Service and Unions Leaders Clash Over Effort to Help Workers Organize,” *City*, August 2, 2021. The nonprofits’ lobbying organization

covers retail stores, restaurants, and warehouse distribution centers located on any property that receives at least \$500,000 in public subsidies. The driving force behind the bill was the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), the New York-based United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) affiliate that led the failed campaign to organize the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, last year.²⁶

Of course, such laws are likely to be passed only in states and localities where union density is already relatively high and where Democrats dominate politically. In that sense, they demonstrate the strength that organized labor still has in its residual strongholds while highlighting its biggest political weakness: its geographical concentration in a small number of places. This would be a weakness in any context, but it is amplified by the United States' distinctively fragmented and territorialized political system. As a group of prominent political scientists have recently argued, "in a fragmented system, organization confers power, and durable organization confers greater power," which in turn advantages those with the resources to act at multiple scales and in different venues at the same time.²⁷ Organized labor might be able to win legislation in the seven states where over half its members live, but those seven states have just fourteen out of one hundred US senators.

has sued the city in an attempt to strike down the law, claiming that it gives unions "veto power" over city contracting. For details, see Reuven Blau, "Social Service Nonprofits Sue City Over Pro-Union Law," *City*, January 9, 2022.

26 Steve Wishnia, "Labor-Peace Bill for Shops, Restaurants in City-Aided Projects Sails Through NYC Council," *LaborPress*, November 24, 2021.

27 Jacob S. Hacker, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen, eds., "The American Political Economy: A Framework and Agenda for Research," in *The American Political Economy: Politics, Markets, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 22.

WHERE'S THE UPSURGE?

The labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein recently brought a measure of historical perspective to the enthusiasm for “Striketober”:

Non-union workers, no matter how aggrieved, do not go on strike. They can quit their job, even walk out together for a shift or two, but in the absence of some independent organization, almost always a trade union, their protest soon dissolves. Virtually every strike in today’s headlines, from that of the agricultural implement workers in Iowa, to the coal miners in Alabama, and the studio crews in Hollywood, are members of unions formed eighty years ago in the Great Depression. It does not matter if the union was once radical or conservative; organization is essential to any sustained and potent worker protest. And once the strike is over, that same organization does not fade away. It stays right there in management’s face, policing the contract, mobilizing the workers, lobbying politicians, and preparing for the next contract fight.²⁸

The data unambiguously bears out his argument. Unionized groups of workers accounted for the overwhelming majority of labor actions and participants in labor actions in 2021, despite being the overwhelming minority of the American labor force. If this momentum does not contribute to a meaningful increase in new union organization, it is not likely to accumulate and spread, and labor will remain trapped in the binds that have kept it down for so long. If unions continue to decline in both relative and absolute terms, it does not seem likely that militancy among nonunion workers will even partially compensate for this erosion.

The conventional wisdom on the labor left, which I have long shared, is that upsurges in collective action lead to worker

28 Nelson Lichtenstein, “Is This a Strike Wave?” *Dissent*, October 25, 2021.

organization, not the other way around. In the current moment, however, the arrow clearly points in the other direction. It is already-organized groups of workers who are engaging in collective action, while nonunion workers remain inactive or turn to individualistic strategies like job switching. Should the labor left continue to ground its strategy in preparing for the “next upsurge” that will break the political impasse and reorganize the working class?²⁹ This is not an easy question to answer.

As John D. Stephens observes in *The Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*, big leaps in labor organization have historically occurred in two situations. The first was during and just after the two world wars. These wars “affected class relations, shifting power in civil society in the direction of labour in a number of ways,” including the mass mobilization of citizen-soldiers, the decline in unemployment in the war economy, and the diminished threat of capital flight, among others.³⁰ But this type of situation seems unlikely to present itself again, nor should we want it to, considering the likely consequences of great power conflict in the twenty-first century.

The second situation Stephens identifies is the “combination of severe economic crisis and the accession of leftist parties to power. (Crisis alone causes membership to deteriorate.) This has occurred only once (in the depression) so it might have been an idiosyncratic unrepeatable event.”³¹ The financial crisis of 2007–8 caused suffering and deprivation on a huge scale, but the unemployment rate in the United States peaked at 10% because of massive, globally coordinated government interventions. Compare

29 See Dan Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

30 John D. Stephens, *The Transition from Capitalism to Socialism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 113.

31 Stephens, *The Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*, 201.

that to the worst days of the Great Depression, when US unemployment peaked at 25%. Or take the COVID-19 crisis, which has caused massive social dislocations in addition to hundreds of thousands of needless deaths. Even though huge swaths of the world economy were shut down and millions of jobs disappeared, poverty in the United States actually went down in 2021 because of trillions of dollars in government spending.³² If elites have learned not to wage world wars against one another and to prevent crises from turning into global depressions, this will take some of the main historical vectors of working-class upheaval off the table. Combined with the dramatic growth of low-productivity service industries where workers have seemingly limited structural power, this makes the prospect of a 1930s-style upsurge seem remote.³³ If that is indeed the case, the labor left will have to reckon with the political implications. ☞

32 Ben Casselman and Jeanna Smialek, "U.S. Poverty Fell Last Year as Government Aid Made Up for Lost Jobs," *New York Times*, September 14, 2021.

33 For a thought-provoking study of the transformation of the working class in Pittsburgh, see Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021).

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The US occupation of Afghanistan ended in a humiliating withdrawal, but its failure is wrongly explained by the media as resulting from the corruption of Afghan elites. In fact, the defeat arose from the occupation's exacerbation of the urban-rural divide and the American forces' exceedingly thin social base within the local population.

Breaking Afghanistan

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

On August 29, 2021, the longest war in US history culminated in an American drone strike killing ten members of a single family in Kabul. After making “peace” with and meekly handing Afghanistan back to the same Taliban against whom the so-called war on terror was waged for twenty years, Washington now claimed that the clandestine militant group known as the Islamic State (IS) was active on Afghan soil. The closing act of the US war in Afghanistan, then, was a microcosm of so many that preceded it — a depraved empire dropping bombs on hapless civilians under the guise of neutering a nebulous threat to US national security.

The US military-industrial-media complex will continue to devise enemies to sustain Washington’s imperial ambitions while

blaming catastrophic fallouts on native collaborators.¹ Indeed, soon after the Taliban's largely bloodless reconquest of Kabul, corporate media "experts" were blaming the rapid demise of the US-backed Ashraf Ghani regime on the corruption of Afghan political elites. While the latter certainly proved to be unconcerned and out of touch with the majority of the country's people, especially outside the comfortable environs of heavily fortified Kabul, the dramatic events of August 2021 reflected how the Pentagon's relentless air war lent legitimacy to a Taliban-led insurgency that made gains across much of rural Afghanistan in direct proportion to the ever-weakening writ of the US-backed government in Kabul.

For the best part of two decades, the much-trumpeted "gains" of the American occupation were concentrated in urban areas, while millions of Afghans in the countryside suffered indiscriminate bombings and ground raids. This essay argues that the occupation exacerbated major social fault lines of class, geography, gender, and ethnicity in Afghanistan, thus creating the conditions for the Taliban to retake power.

The Taliban's recovery from their initial defeat by US and NATO troops in 2001 was certainly assisted by external patrons, most notably Pakistan. Islamabad has in fact craved "strategic depth" in Afghanistan since the early 1970s — long before the Red Army entered the country.² But neither Afghan militants who waged the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s nor the Taliban have ever functioned singularly as Pakistan's pawns. Afghanistan's recent history has been marked by highly uneven geographical development undergirded by the political economy of war. Lasting peace, dignity, and

1 John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Robert W. McChesney, "The U.S. Imperial Triangle and Military Spending," *Monthly Review* 60, no. 5 (October 2008).

2 Tariq Ali, "Afghanistan: Mirage of the Good War," *New Left Review* 50 (2008).

freedom from material want for a majority of Afghanistan's brutalized people will remain a pipe dream without transformation of the material and ideological logics of war and development.

OF TOWN AND COUNTRY

Even before the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) came to power in 1978, the Afghan monarchy ruled from Kabul and enjoyed only tenuous control over the countryside. However, the divide between town and country took on new significance after the anti-Soviet jihad was launched with the backing of the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Since then, communists, Islamists, and American empire have all struggled to secure Kabul and other big urban centers like Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif, while insurgent forces have sought to wrest control away from the centralizing authority by deploying guerrilla tactics in rural geographies suited to asymmetrical warfare.

In explicating the town-country dialectic, Karl Marx notes, "The town already is in actual fact the concentration of the population, of the instruments of production, of capital, of pleasures, of needs, while the country demonstrates just the opposite fact, isolation and separation."³ Over the past fifty years, cultural, political, and economic life in Afghanistan has featured an ever greater concentration of power and wealth in the proverbial town, even as the country has been left deprived and, therefore, functioned as a powder keg in cycles of armed resistance.

After its formation in 1965, the PDPA gestated and expanded in and around the campus of Kabul University, relying largely on support from the intelligentsia and the small industrial working class in the public sector. The PDPA's comparatively limited influence

3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 69.

in the countryside was decisively exploited by the mujahideen. The Soviet army became almost exclusively associated with and representative of the town, while the mujahideen developed and extended their influence within the country by harvesting a complex amalgam of “traditional” authority.⁴

Between 1978 and its eventual downfall in 1992, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) undertook infrastructural investments within and between major urban centers and tried to bolster a still-inadequate industrial sector with minimal success. The most trumpeted policy initiative to win over the rural masses was a land reform agenda — announced soon after taking power in 1978 — that effectively amounted to state decrees abolishing usury and existing debt obligations of the small and landless peasantry. Notwithstanding the initial appeal of such pronouncements, weak party organization and limited popular mobilization in the countryside meant that potential gains could not be capitalized, while the counterrevolution could draw on deeply rooted ideologies and the class, tribal, clan, and other social structures that underlay them.⁵

Even relatively limited enforcement of land reform measures in the first year of the revolution led to a temporary decline in agricultural production, the fallout of which was borne by the most exploited social segments. This represented the perfect foil for a well-funded counterinsurgency coordinated by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan as the frontline state. Petty production of poppy was willfully stimulated and became the major source of livelihood for many farming households. Between 1982 and 1983, poppy production in Afghanistan doubled to 575

4 Alex Strick van Linschoten and Anand Gopal, “Ideology in the Afghan Taliban,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2017.

5 Feroz Ahmed and Jim Paul, “‘The Khalq Failed to Comprehend the Contradictions of the Rural Sector’: Interview with Feroz Ahmed,” *Merip Reports* 89 (1980).

tons, supported by more than one hundred heroin refineries in the Khyber district of Pakistan.

By 1984, a bona fide class of warlords had been created from among the mujahideen, facilitated by the Pakistani military-controlled National Logistics Cell, with the latter transporting heroin from Afghanistan through Peshawar down to the port city of Karachi for export to Western markets. In 1986, heroin produced in Afghanistan-Pakistan accounted for almost a third of the global drug smuggling industry's total value of US\$100 billion.⁶ The similarities of the Afghan to the Latin American theater of the Cold War were striking; to take but one notorious case, CIA-backed Contra rebels bled the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua through funds generated in the production and trade of cocaine.

As Soviet helicopter gunships bombed the countryside to prop up the government in Kabul — the PDPA was itself wracked by violent factionalism and engaged in wanton repression — the town-country fissure became ever more pronounced. By conservative estimates, more than a million Afghan civilians were killed during the anti-Soviet jihad, while some fifteen thousand Soviet soldiers perished. After the CIA started supplying Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the mujahideen via Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in 1986, the tide turned conclusively against the DRA. The Red Army exited Afghanistan a little more than two years later.

The town-country divide has remained significant ever since, intensifying greatly during twenty years of American occupation. For the first two years or so after the US invasion, there was little unrest in large parts of rural Afghanistan, with Taliban cadres either in hiding or having retreated to safe havens within Pakistan. War hysteria in the United States and the rest of the "free

6 Ikramul Haq, "Pak-Afghan Drug Trade in Historical Perspective," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 10 (1996).

world,” however, had to be sustained. As indiscriminate raids on civilian populations, drone attacks, and other facets of air war intensified, an insurgency was reborn, and individuals and families who had no love lost for the Taliban were driven into their rehabilitated ranks.⁷

It would be overstating the case to suggest that the entire Afghan countryside became uniformly pro-Taliban and anti-occupation, or that urban areas benefited evenly from the twenty-year war on terror. Kabul’s population, estimated to be six million by the end of the war, was in any case buttressed by waves of migration from rural hinterlands, both permanent and seasonal. The capital city now accounts for almost a sixth of Afghanistan’s total population of forty million, and the American occupation certainly did not insulate the majority of Kabul’s residents from violence, exploitation, and tyranny.

Nevertheless, the insurgency was rooted in the countryside. From 2016 onward, poppy production, officially banned during the Taliban’s first stint in power, boomed in Helmand province, confirming the futility of heavily funded anti-narcotics campaigns conducted by the occupying force. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, by 2012, Afghanistan accounted for more than 80 percent of global opiate production.

Official figures released by the US government’s special inspector general’s office for Afghanistan suggest a total outlay of almost \$1 trillion over the twenty-year occupation, of which \$850 billion qualified as military aid, while “reconstruction activities” accounted for \$131 billion. Disaggregated further, most funds under the head of reconstruction were directed toward fortifying the Afghan police and army, leaving \$36 billion for “governance

7 See Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

and development.”⁸ Despite these significant expenditures — and persistent claims to the contrary — the occupation failed to build a functioning and inclusive administrative regime beyond major urban centers.

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of external aid flowed into Kabul and other cities, through both local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In a related vein, up to 40 percent of nonmilitary aid went into the pockets of foreign consultants and corporate firms fronting “reconstruction” like Halliburton, which counted George W. Bush’s vice president, Dick Cheney, as a former CEO.

A report issued by an independent Brown University think tank even documents cases of once small-time Afghan interpreters becoming millionaires through links to defense contractors. The same report estimates the Pentagon’s total spending since 2001 to be in excess of \$14 trillion, up to half of which was disbursed to contractors.⁹

Despite massive profiteering, graft, and waste, some sections of the ordinary civilian population in Afghanistan did benefit from the occupation. Most notably, enrollment of girls and women at the primary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels increased, while infrastructural investments were made in roads and residential housing. But as flows of nonmilitary aid started to dry up over the occupation’s last few years, the unevenness between town and country became more acute — with the latter experiencing far less development than destruction. Civilian killings due to NATO and US air strikes increased exponentially after 2016.¹⁰

8 See “Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction’s Quarterly Report to the US Congress,” Section 2, April 30, 2021, sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-04-30qr-section2-funding.pdf.

9 William D. Hartung, “Profits of War: Corporate Beneficiaries of the Post-9/11 Pentagon Spending Surge,” Watson Institute Costs of War, September 13, 2021.

10 Neta C. Crawford, “Afghanistan’s Rising Civilian Death Toll Due to Airstrikes,

CIVIL SOCIETY

Washington invaded Afghanistan under the pretext of eliminating the Taliban and the nebulous al-Qaeda operatives that the former apparently harbored. The war on terror also featured a classic civilizing mission, with “women’s rights” serving as one of its main ideological props. The neoliberal mainstream in both the United States as well as prominent segments of civil society in Muslim countries lapped up the narrative that brown women had to be rescued from brown men, thus creating an ostensibly indigenous mandate for the occupation.¹¹

It was this deliberately depoliticized civil society that championed so-called colored revolutions in ex-socialist republics of Eastern Europe, while also becoming a favored destination for donor funding in countries like Pakistan — and, after 2001, Afghanistan.¹² During the occupation, a significant segment of Afghan civil society, marshaled by an indigenous professional-managerial class, was directly supported by the US Agency for International Development, other Western governments, and international non-governmental foundations. Women and girls represented arguably the single most prominent target group in the donor-funded effort to support and build “civil society.”

The motif of women’s empowerment featured centrally in the ideology and practice of the Saur revolutionaries more than four decades ago. The elimination of forced marriage and dowries and the establishment of compulsory primary education for girls were among the primary measures announced by the PDPA soon

2017–2020,” Watson Institute Costs of War, December 7, 2020.

11 See Saadia Toor, “Imperialist Feminism Redux,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 36 (2012).

12 See Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, “The Professionalization of Political Culture,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 17, no. 3 (2006).

after its assumption of power. Alongside land reform, it was the communist government's attacks against patriarchal structures that the mujahideen propagated as being inimical to both Islam and so-called Afghan tradition.¹³

The PDPA's modest success in challenging retrogressive norms was reflected in the ascension of prominent women to important positions in the party and state hierarchy. But in the final analysis, the communists were defeated both in the realm of ideology and in terms of real material transformation, as most of the countryside remained in the grip of insurgents and their imperial patrons, with women's liberation the antithesis of their political horizon.

It is therefore more than a little ironic that slogans of women's empowerment were such a central plank of the American occupation. The generation of young Afghan girls and women who have come of age under the war on terror regime have unsurprisingly imbibed liberal notions of individual liberty, with some experiencing upward class mobility through the NGO or corporate sectors. This is why many are now lamenting their "betrayal" at the hands of the United States and Western governments more generally.

The return to the outrightly misogynistic governing logics of the Taliban undoubtedly represents a major step backward for Afghan women. At the same time, however, girls' and women's access to public spaces, employment, education, and many other markers of social mobility were mediated by class, geography, and ethnic identity under the American occupation. Most women in Afghanistan remained subject to patriarchal domination and violence during the war on terror, as they continue to be after its end.

13 Van Lischoten and Gopal, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban," 2017.

STRATEGIC DEPTH

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has been celebrated with great gusto by Pakistani officialdom, the intelligentsia, and a large segment of a population weaned on confessional state nationalism. Secular Pashtun nationalism — in both its Afghan and Pakistani varieties — has always been viewed as a threat by Pakistan's security establishment. This perceived threat became even more acute after the secession of the country's eastern wing in 1971 to form Bangladesh. In the fifty years since, Islamabad has patronized various Islamists as part of its strategy to install a friendly regime in Kabul. The obsession with strategic depth is also directly correlated with Pakistani generals' perennial obsession with India's "nefarious designs" on the country's eastern border.

Importantly, the Islamabad-backed ideological-political formation that took on the name Taliban and established the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996 has itself undergone numerous changes over time. Prominent members of what became the Taliban were among one of many different militant factions that comprised the anti-Soviet mujahideen in the 1980s.

After the fall of the DRA in 1992, the Taliban — headquartered in Kandahar — emerged as the most organized of competing militant outfits, with a puritan religio-cultural agenda to boot. Having gained Islamabad's and Riyadh's favor amid cynical geopolitical wranglings involving Iran, India, and other regional states, the Taliban eventually established tenuous control over all of Afghanistan. As I noted at the outset of the essay, however, the Taliban have never simply been Islamabad's pawns; some were certainly nurtured as refugees in both metropolitan and peripheral Pakistan, but most materialized from the village context of southeastern Afghanistan and bordering Pakistani Pashtun tribal zones.¹⁴

14 See Jon Armajani, "The Taliban," in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*,

During the American occupation, the Taliban reestablished themselves in Pashtun-majority regions of the country, while extending their influence to Dari-speaking north and west Afghanistan through alliances with a plethora of militant outfits, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

After deposing the Taliban regime in 2001, Washington accorded the major share of political and economic spoils in the early years of the occupation to the predominantly non-Pashtun and pro-Iran Northern Alliance. Having welcomed the demise of the Taliban at the outset of the war on terror, Tehran did not mourn Washington's retreat from Afghanistan twenty years later, thereby at least conditionally accepting the Taliban's return to power.

Of other regional powers, China and Russia greeted Washington's exit from Afghanistan by cautiously engaging the incoming Taliban regime. Beijing is clearly interested in extending the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into Afghanistan and has indicated that the Taliban must cut its links to the Turkistan Islamic Party, and ensure more generally that Afghan territory is not used as a launching pad for Uyghur militancy.¹⁵

And then there is India, the Ghani regime's most prominent patron. Delhi invested more than \$3 billion in Afghanistan during the American occupation, collaborating closely with Kabul and Tehran in the construction of the Chabahar Port, which is widely perceived to be a competitor to the China-funded Gwadar Port on the southwestern tip of Pakistan.¹⁶

ed. Muhammad Afzal Upal and Carole M. Cusack (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 348–78.

15 Derek Grossman, "China and Pakistan See Eye to Eye on the Taliban — Almost," *Foreign Policy*, September 20, 2021.

16 See Amir Mohammad Haji-Yousefi and Hadi Narouei, "Geopolitics, Geoeconomics and the Prospect of Iran-India Cooperation in Chabahar," *Geopolitics Quarterly* 17, no. 63 (2021). For details on Chinese interests in Pakistan, see Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Beyond the Rule of Capital?" *Monthly Review* 70, no. 2 (June 2018).

All told, the Taliban's second coming may have been championed most prominently by Pakistan, but it enjoys the tacit approval of other regional players, with Islamabad's securing of strategic depth largely coming at archrival Delhi's expense. Yet Pakistan's seemingly omnipotent generals have paid the price for delusions of grandeur on many occasions in the past. Since the retaking of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban, in fact, the Pakistani government, fronted by Prime Minister Imran Khan but widely understood to be a "hybrid regime" due to the military's influence, has been shaken by a plethora of disruptive mobilizations by the religious militant outfit Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), even as it dithers in the face of the rapid rehabilitation of the entity known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The TTP enjoys a symbiotic relationship with at least some segments of the Afghan Taliban; the latter has multiple power centers, and Islamabad continues to hedge its bets on the so-called Haqqani network that it patronized throughout the American occupation. How the inner power struggle evolves between the Haqqani and other factions of the Taliban — and how this spills over into Pakistan — will determine how relations between the Afghan Taliban and Islamabad play out.

CONCLUSION

In line with its geostrategic objectives, Islamabad has advocated forcefully for the international community to diplomatically engage the Taliban in the post-US withdrawal phase, initiating a series of multilateral dialogues and hosting a summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). More than any other regional player, Washington continues to exercise significant bargaining power in Afghanistan; it has yet to release approximately \$10 billion in Afghan government foreign currency reserves, while

also doing little to stem panic in financial markets that has led to massive capital flight.

A huge segment of Afghanistan's population faces acute economic hardship and descent into total destitution.¹⁷ Only imperial hypocrisy explains how Western media outlets and the American political elite are able to reconcile rhetoric about the lack of democracy and human rights in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan with what is in effect a sanctions regime that is directly spawning a humanitarian catastrophe.¹⁸

It is worth being reminded here that the Clinton administration facilitated high-level contacts between the Unocal Corporation and the first Taliban regime in 1996 and 1997 to collaborate on oil-gas extraction from the Caspian Sea.¹⁹ Political correctness about women's rights and the like aside, political-economic interests, including the imperative of containing Russia and China, will in due course determine the nature of Washington's relations with the Taliban.

Meanwhile, Iran — which has hosted millions of Shia Hazara refugees for decades — will remain an important political player, while Delhi can hardly be expected to sit idly by as Islamabad, Beijing, and Moscow pursue their strategic interests. In the final analysis, Afghan's long-suffering and fragmented people are facing another historical conjuncture at the whims of regional and global establishments, and the militant right wing that will rule over them for the foreseeable future. Left progressives across the region, not

17 "97 Percent of Afghans Could Plunge Into Poverty by Mid-2022, Says UNDP," United Nations Development Programme, September 9, 2021.

18 Lee Fang, "Humanitarian Exemptions to Crushing US Sanctions Do Little to Prevent Collapse of Afghanistan's Economy," *Intercept*, December 28, 2021.

19 See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

to mention Western metropolitan contexts, must equip themselves to understand the highly uneven Afghan social formation, as well as the political-economic logics — including trade in contraband, oil and gas, and mineral exploration — that underlie both geopolitical games and Afghanistan’s fragmented structure of power. Only then can a hateful identity politics be displaced by a meaningful popular alternative to wage the struggle for a genuine and lasting peace in Afghanistan and the region at large. ☞

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