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MAPPING THE LEFT

Progressive Politics in the United States

By Ethan Young

Table of Contents

The U.S. Left on the Eve of Occupy. By the Editors.....1

Mapping the Left

Progressive Politics in the United States.....2

By Ethan Young

The Power of the Right.....3
The Three Lefts and the Ebb of Oppositional Politics.....4
 Social Movements, the Decisive Force in Progressive Politics.....4
 Labor.....5
 African American empowerment, civil rights, and racial equality.....7
 Peace/Environment.....8
 Women and gender equality.....9
 Healthcare, consumers, and media.....10
 The religious component.....11
 The Political Left.....11
 The Academic Left.....13
Left Rethinking After 1989.....13
 Broad coalitions versus anti-authoritarian action.....14
 Self-marginalization vs. political refocus.....15
 The Left and the Democratic Party.....16
 Rightist domination of the media and judiciary.....17
The Current Situation.....18
Afterword (November 2012).....21

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The U.S. Left on the Eve of Occupy

Occupy Wall Street arose like a force of nature over the landscape of the U.S. Left. Only a year after its birth, there are hardly any left institutions or tendencies that it has not in some way influenced. The inclination, then, may be to allow its influence to color our memories of the U.S. Left as it stood pre-September 2011.

To be sure, it was a barren landscape. The U.S. Left has no central political vehicle and only a very small and tenuous hold within the Democratic Party. The broader cultural memory of left social movements was obliterated with the rise of the Reagan Republicans in the 1980s, while the fall of the Soviet Union devastatingly reinforced the neoliberal formulation that “There Is No Alternative”, leaving the U.S. Left permanently weakened and seemingly shorn of its past victories. The following decades were characterized largely by fragmentation and low-key public visibility.

But nonetheless, the Left does have a place in U.S. history and society. Its activism has played a crucial part, from the abolitionist movement and the socialist movement to the creation of Roosevelt’s New Deal to a string of civil rights and environmental gains in the 1960s and 1970s. However unsuccessful at times, it most certainly has played a role in exposing and opposing the various contradictions and scandals of American capitalism. And on the eve of Occupy the U.S. Left was present, in all its fragmented and dysfunctional glory, but present nonetheless.

The following text by writer and activist Ethan Young, written in the summer of 2011, depicts with great detail the historical development and state of the U.S. Left before Occupy Wall Street. While his judgments are determined and at times unsparing, his tone conveys belief that the Left’s fragmentation can be overcome. The at least momentary reunification of divergent tendencies under the banner of the Occupy movement proves the timeliness of this message. Its importance is further revealed by the fact that, looking past the bright lights of Occupy, much of the U.S. Left landscape remains essentially the same. A postscript by the author, written more than a year after Occupy Wall Street began, provides readers with final thoughts on what that landscape may look like in years to come.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, November 2012*

Mapping the Left

Progressive Politics in the United States

By Ethan Young

The Left is hard to find and even harder to define. “In the absence of national organization, the left, decentralized and fragmented, lacks objective definition.” This 1988 verdict by Richard Flacks, a founder of the original SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), still holds. He continues: “For one to become an identified leftist is, therefore, very much a matter of self-construction. The left one identifies with tends to be the left one happens to see—and there is a good chance that one will not see the left at all, or see only a portion of its potentialities.”

The Left has no central political vehicle; it occupies a precarious niche in the Democratic Party but is denied any real power in the party’s leadership. This is in sharp contrast to the Right, which has gained substantial influence and visible presence within the leadership of the Republican Party. In a two-party, winner-take-all electoral system, the Left is the loser taking nothing.

This situation has been developing throughout the last century. In some ways it is unique to the United States. For decades, analysts fell back on a catch-all formula of “American exceptionalism,” and the relatively higher living standard, to explain it. The full circumstances are complicated and very specific to the nature of U.S. politics and the class structure of the society; and within those contexts, the troubled history of the Left.

The incoherence of the Left reflects its fragmentation. Few would deny this, but attempts to for-

mulate a resolution to this problem begin and end in transient proposals for coalitions around issues, electoral campaigns, or vaguely focused, short-lived dialogues involving various tendencies. The belief that a theoretical breakthrough would somehow serve as a new rallying point has proven futile many times over.

Some of the problems related to fragmentation and political incoherence have deep historical roots. No social democratic or labor party has ever come close to challenging power at the federal level. Intense government repression and widespread xenophobia made joining self-identified left groups extremely risky. The most radical groups to gain a mass following, such as the Industrial Workers of the World in the 1910s and 20s and the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 70s, were targets of murder and torture at the hands of police and vigilantes.

Political understanding of left social movements was nearly obliterated from popular memory at two intervals: the post-World War II Red Scare, and the resurgence of social conservatism that swept the country at the beginning of the neoliberal Reagan/George H.W. Bush era (the 1980s).

Yet the Left is still a part of U.S. society. Its fragmentation can also be viewed in the context of the fragmentation of the broader society. Its decline is part of a critical decline of democracy itself—those bourgeois democratic structures and practices that have endured, and in some

cases deepened (thanks to the Left itself), since the founding of the republic. The fragmentation and democratic decline are, in part, a result of the erosion of the nation's infrastructure and industrial base, which in turn has contributed

to the dissolution of communities and cultures built around traditional workplaces and shared spaces. This trend is accelerating with the ever-increasing turn to privatization, austerity, and social Darwinism.

The Power of the Right

2000-2001 was the turning point. The voting numbers overall would have handed the 2000 presidential election to the Democratic candidate. The outcome was instead determined by a combination of Electoral College votes, polling chicanery in key states, and the Supreme Court decision in favor of the Republicans in *Bush v. Gore*. Gore won the majority of votes, but the "will of the people," however polarized, was defeated by the Reagan-appointed majority of Supreme Court justices and rightist goon squads in Florida.

Within a year, the 9/11 attack precipitated the anti-terrorism campaign which led to new laws (beginning with the PATRIOT Act) increasing executive and police power as well as secrecy, and reducing civilian rights and privacy. By 2002, Americans were living in a system where the very concept of democracy had been stripped of much of its already limited meaning. The social contract was rewritten, with no quarrel from the Center and Right, and with the Left too weak even to be heard.

The political impact of street demonstrations was blunted in the course of the decade. George W. Bush's military adventures were met with widespread opposition, but centrist politicians were terrified of being labeled "soft on terrorism," and the media belittled the anger and numbers of the largest peace rallies. The exporting of jobs neutralized the ability of strikes and job actions to disrupt the economy.

The Bush era selection of conservatives to the Supreme Court was carefully planned to offset any future change of party power in the executive and legislative branches. The 2010 Supreme Court "Citizens United" ruling removed limits on corporate financial control of political campaigns. Thus, unrestricted corporate power over workers' rights, as well as protection of the private sector from most government regulation, is now federal law. Once again, the center has done little more than mutter disapproval.

Republicans have launched attacks on the voting rights of African American and Latino workers. Rightist think tanks have drafted legislation that would restrict the ability to vote in advance, in person, or via mail or phone, and would require voters to show photo ID at the polling place. These restrictions harken back to the measures used in the pre-civil rights South to harass and stymie African American voters.

The rise of the populist Right accompanied the decline of government services—the very term "welfare state" has been turned into a negative buzzword—and the naked expansion of corporate hegemony. The politicization of Christian fundamentalist congregations, beginning in the 1970s, created a fervent populist right electoral base driven by social conservatism, which pushed hard for Bush in 2000 and 2004.

Today, the purportedly anti-elitist, "big government"-hating far Right's "grassroots" arm, the

Obama-phobic Tea Party, has neutralized the Center-Rightists in the Republican Party. Sections of the stridently populist right movement are openly subsidized by corporate billionaires. Neo-fascist elements have found legitimacy in the movement, which is now accepted as a legitimate political player by the mainstream media, with only minor argument.

In this overwhelming scenario, the struggle of the Left to cohere and reconstruct is intercon-

nected with the renewal and restoration of U.S. democracy itself. The Center and Right offer only pseudo-democratic spectacles to lend legitimacy to the blatantly destructive enormities of capital in power. It is now up to the Left to present to the public the case for democracy as mass, self-interested (in the class sense) political action, in opposition to both the populist Right and the show biz spectacles of the Republican and Democratic national leadership-led campaigns.

The Three Lefts and the Ebb of Oppositional Politics

The terrain of the U.S. Left—in its broader, social definition—appears in three distinct areas: social movements, political formations, and academia. They are, for the most part, isolated from one another and have separate roles in society. They make their influence felt mainly through public discourse, limited campaigns, demonstrations, strikes, and elections.

The extent of that influence was demonstrated by the ability of the Democratic Party's social movement base to make a major contribution to the election of Obama in 2008. This base consciously and effectively worked to turn widespread disillusionment with Bush into a solid voter turnout. They simultaneously broke through deep-rooted racist presumptions about the first black major-party presidential candidate.

But after the election, that left/liberal activist base was quickly reined in by the party and campaign leadership. Since Obama took office, the Left has not moved the administration on any issue (excepting gay rights and some ground gained for immigrants).

These episodes highlight both the surprising strength and fundamental weakness of the U.S. Left. As long as the Left is fragmented

and marginal, as long as it lacks any connecting structure or strategy, its component parts exist in a constant state of demoralization and grossly underestimate their own potential strength.

Each sector must be analyzed individually and in relation to the others to understand the present condition of the U.S. Left as a whole.

Social Movements, the Decisive Force in Progressive Politics

The sector of the Left with the most tangible power consists of progressive social movements that have, at various times, reshaped social relations; pushed through laws, government services and policies to protect workers and specially oppressed groups; and limited U.S. military adventurism.

Social movements are distinguished by their mass character. They manifest nationally and retain an attraction for new generations. They are often stereotyped as reflecting marginal sentiments—"special interests"—a stereotype that is in turn embraced by some in the movements themselves.

Yet various movements' appeal and influence find their way into many social settings. To the extent that movements express themselves culturally, they change that culture. To the extent that they organize and move politically, they challenge power relations, at least in terms of social policy and access to democratic rights.

How can movements that have only rudimentary politics (single issues, group demands) be considered part of the Left—a political phenomenon by definition? Because they come from, and are driven by, the social contradictions that foster politics which clash with the power of capital.

Even so, within each movement an array of political tendencies struggles for dominance. When a movement is threatened and isolated by the Right, it may be isolated and its left leadership weakened—as happened during the 1950s Red Scare.

Left politics can sometimes gain in influence, as recent developments suggest is happening in labor. Some national and local leaders are drawing a sharper line between workers and corporations, the financial sector in particular. At the same time, we see more identification by some labor leaders and unions with social movement demands, immigrant rights, and women's equality. But there is a widespread "culture of concessions" that has still to be overcome.

Obama's 2008 election strategy was aimed at mobilizing the fragmented left social movements, in particular unions, civil rights groups, and electorally-oriented NGOs. However, Obama has taken pains since his election to avoid identification with the social movement Left—not coincidentally, the political sector with the strongest ideological and historical ties to the civil rights movement. (The administration has been particularly concerned about racial fears that Obama would side against whites in any

conflict.) Obama's deliberate snubs have underscored the Left's powerlessness in asserting a political agenda, even as his return to courting its support during the campaign season reflects his continued reliance on the Left, as the Republicans repeatedly point out.

The movements have waned steadily since the 1970s but remain ingrained in many settings: urban centers, college towns, some suburban and exurban towns with educated populations, union strongholds in industrial towns, and among the most impoverished workers in rural areas. Notably, an informal convention of social movement groups and activists, the U.S. Social Forum, was held in Atlanta in 2007 and Detroit in 2010.

A very broad overview of the main social movements follows.

Labor

In the early 20th century, industrial organizing swept the U.S., terrifying the centers of power. While the great strikes following World War I had no political banner beyond syndicalism, the Depression-era rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was energized by hardcore leftists, became more and more identified with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal legacy. FDR sought to encourage union organizing to build a counterweight to the Right. The bond between the labor movement and the Democratic Party was cemented by the wartime demand for national unity.

Hence, while the labor movement retained a class character—it was and is accountable to its members for protecting their financial security, at least—its political stance was susceptible to pressure from the state.

When the New Dealers—the left wing of the FDR administration—were forced out of the

federal power arrangement under Truman with the onset of the Cold War, the Center and Right in labor leadership attacked the Left. During the Red Scare, entire unions were blacklisted, and left leaders were purged locally and nationally. The consequences were major: the CIO and the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) merged. A plan to organize black workers in the South (Operation Dixie) was dropped in order to protect segregationist Democratic office holders. The AFL-CIO lined up with Washington's crusade against Communism, worked to undermine left unions around the world, and backed U.S. wars and sabotage of foreign governments.

A general acceptance of conservatism and conformism went largely unchallenged by the membership. Postwar "business unionism," in a setting of economic boom and rigid social conservatism, prevailed over the prewar drama of nationwide organizing, mass strikes, police attacks, and factory takeovers. Organized labor went into a steady membership decline that has ever since been ongoing and relentless.

When new social movements began to emerge in the postwar period, they were rarely welcomed by union members. Attempts to link labor with the civil rights movement were only minimally successful. In 1968, the powerful, predominantly white teachers' union in New York struck to undercut a community control experiment in an African American ghetto. In the 1970s, some unions opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, a major campaign of the women's movement, as a threat to laws designed to protect women from harsh labor conditions.

Thus, when the postwar "labor-management partnership" was broken under the Reagan administration, labor lacked strong allies besides the Democratic Party. The Nixon-era economic shift from industry to service already weakened the core of blue-collar unions. The grow-

ing assault on taxes and government spending pursued by big and small business sectors undercut government employees' strength. While Democratic administrations slowed the pace of attacks on labor, they did nothing to shore up the movement as the economy declined.

The Democratic Party leadership was shocked when traditionally loyal working-class voters—middle-income and white—deserted them in 1972 and 1980: the dreaded "Reagan Democrats" phenomenon. Democratic campaign organizers fixated on restoring that loyalty, basing their strategy on further distancing the party from left social movements, and adapting to white racial phobias and social conservatism (within limits imposed by key constituencies influenced by previous left social movement successes).

Unions inside and outside the AFL-CIO remained strong enough to help elect Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996 and Barack Obama in 2008. But their strength, in numbers and internal cohesion, continues to decline. They are in a proper trap: unable to make any headway without strong allies on the Left and unable to ward off further erosion without bolstering from the Democrats, which does not seem to be forthcoming.

Yet and still, the labor movement has stronger national structure, more money, and closer ties to the working class than any other social movement. Unlike other social movements, they also have the experience of an uninterrupted engagement with national and local politics over nearly a century. If they can consolidate these relative strengths and build closer ties with other movements on a political basis, they can lead in filling the gap in society that has empowered the Right, as well as save themselves from extinction. There are indications that labor leadership is moving in that direction, such as joint action with the NAACP, the largest civil rights group; expanded organizing beyond workplace settings; and increased interaction with environ-

mentalist groups, non-union organizations of informal (domestic, undocumented, *per diem*) workers, and community groups.

African American empowerment, civil rights, and racial equality

The movement of African American people to assert racial equality produced a tectonic shift in U.S. society. But the “color line” remains the fundamental division cutting across all classes and sectors. It characterizes class stratification, employment, housing, the polarization of skilled and unskilled workers, and access to education, health care, as well as civil rights, despite progress—some real and some hyperbolized.

The color line separates more than two racial demographics. The experience of African Americans is unique. The bloody path from chattel slavery to wage exploitation shaped the U.S. as a nation and as the strongest capitalist world power. The civil rights movement was a breakthrough, unleashing the clash of community interests that continue to shape national politics in many and complicated ways.

At the same time, the struggles and transformations of Chicanos, Mexicanos, and established Latino immigrant populations are central to the history of the U.S. working class. The American Indians, various Asian nationalities, and Arabs all have lived under the yoke of systemic racism. These communities mobilize for distinct goals—which are, at the same time, fundamentally interconnected.

Meanwhile, the Right has gained ground by playing to many whites’ fear of being outnumbered and “losing America.” Racist panic is intensified by increased immigration from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The election of a black president illustrates the continuing impact of the civil rights movement

on the nation’s ideology and mores, for better (very few would have expected a black candidate could win just a few years before) and for worse (with the familiar backlash of overt racism).

The 1960s civil rights movement exposed the continuation of white supremacy and black oppression, from slavery to the violent suppression of Southern Reconstruction to the century-old *de jure* racial caste system of Jim Crow, enforced by the state. In turn, the same system in its Northern, *de facto* form, extralegal but also state-enforced, was confronted, and the mass urban explosions in the mid-to-late 1960s showed in no uncertain terms that there was a price to be paid should U.S. society not reform its power relations regarding race and racism.

In the years following, colleges and businesses were integrated, and African Americans entered the professional world—a few at the highest levels of power. Most of the black population, however, suffered the worst consequences of urban decay and industrial collapse.

The rise of race consciousness and political radicalization among working-class black youth was met with fierce police repression. Beginning in the 1970s, a concerted effort to contest major elections grew rapidly in the politically developing black “inner cities.” This “empowerment” movement spread to other racially oppressed groups, most significantly Mexican-descended and Puerto Rican communities. (A large portion of the Southwest, formerly part of Mexico, is made up of U.S. citizens of many generations’ standing who speak Spanish and identify as Chicanos. Despite their actual national status, they are subject to the same harassment and attacks as undocumented Latin Americans.)

Elected positions long reserved for whites only were filled at city, state, and federal levels by

politicians from black and brown constituencies, whose politics tended to lean left. (The promotion of non-white, rightist figures by the Republican Party is a new phenomenon.)

Successful electoral campaigns led by the empowerment movement sought and won support from unions and other movements. Jesse Jackson's presidential primary campaigns in 1984 and 1988 built off this development, creating the first distinct left presence in national politics since the failed 1972 antiwar candidacy of George McGovern. Jackson's popularity took the political establishment by surprise, both as a black contender in a white domain and as a figure associated with social movements considered obsolete in the Reagan era. However, Jackson's unwillingness (or perhaps inability) to turn his campaign coalition into a continuing political organization after 1988 dealt a blow to the Left, which then fell below the electoral radar for two decades.

Today, Obama claims a fierce loyalty from African Americans of all classes. Yet black oppression is on the rise: wildly disproportionate unemployment, affordable education and health-care under attack, a huge prison system that recalls slavery in its blatant racism, and renewed threats to voting rights. As a result, a renewed politicization around issues rather than figureheads is stirring in civil rights groups, if not yet in the black community in general.

Taken as a whole, the Latino population is growing rapidly; its numbers recently surpassed that of the African American demographic. Pan-Latin identity has won recognition in the broader culture, following the path broken by the black community. At the same time, xenophobic nativism, aimed mostly at Latino immigrants, has been deployed successfully by the far Right and adopted by the Republicans. Civil rights for "illegal aliens" has since become a major mobilizing issue in the complicated constellation of Latino communities. A trend toward solidarity

and politicization among long-established populations, as well as new arrivals from Central and South America, is already affecting election outcomes.

The spread of Islamophobia since the 9/11 disaster has led to government and street-level harassment of Arabs and South Asians. These growing immigrant groups have begun to organize in defense of their own democratic rights. This movement spans religious and secular approaches but is only beginning to have an impact on local political scenes.

Peace/Environment

The peace and environmental movements are distinct in their moral, rather than economic or civic demands. Both challenge powerful state and corporate institutions but speak less directly to living standards. Their success in remolding public opinion has been phenomenal, in a society as invested in military buildup and expansion and in the "free market" as the U.S. was in the last century.

The peace movement in the U.S. reached two high points: during the Vietnam War, and in 1982 with the massive demonstration against the nuclear arms race. Cold War consensus—conspicuous during the Korea War—was effectively reversed. The Johnson administration, which had achieved the biggest electoral majority in history in 1964, was broken by 1968 with the rise of the peace movement. After Reagan's election, highly influential centrist forces seized on public support for peace to challenge the newly empowered Right's revival of the Cold War. The June 1982 nuclear freeze rally in New York was the largest demonstration in U.S. history, with more than one million people.

The peace movement, over the decades, has left a legacy in the form of "Vietnam syn-

drome,” the widespread opposition to extended military interventions. Numerous pretexts for war, from “victories” like the invasion of Grenada to proxy wars, “humanitarian” invasions, and revenge scenarios, have failed to reverse antiwar sentiment. Opinion polls consistently show military adventures meeting public opposition, whether from leftist anti-imperialism, liberal/centrist caution, or rightist isolationism.

Similarly, the environmentalists have steadily raised public awareness about pollution, nuclear energy, and climate destruction over the course of 40 years, despite fierce efforts by corporations and the Right to discredit them. The movement has branched out in all levels of society, from elite foundations to local efforts to challenge social norms in waste disposal, energy use, food policy, transportation, animal rights, and so on. The movement emphasizes social/moral choices rather than economic demands but in the process are thrown into conflict with corporations and their agents in the state.

However, sentiment and awareness without political organization and strategy cannot bring about change. Both the peace and environmental movements are atomized organizationally. They have no national structure beyond loose or short-lived coalitions. Like the unions, they are constantly on the defensive against the ever more rightist Republicans, while their inability to hold Democrats accountable further undercuts their attempts to grow and gain new active support. There is little identification with other social movements, and non-profit groups are in constant competition for disappearing funding sources. The default tactics of demonstrations, petitions, and ad campaigns do not make up for the movements’ current political dead end. However, ongoing discussion among diverse forces has been established, with a stated determination to come up with effective strategy and tactics.

Women and gender equality

The women’s liberation movement opened society to women in uncountable ways. It also developed political vehicles aimed at promoting female candidates and appointments, fundraising for candidates with pro-women policies, and lobbying for women’s rights. As a result, the Democratic Party has held steadfast to support for abortion rights, despite fierce (and often violent) pressure from the Right.

The women’s movement, like the environmental movement, takes a range of forms, with an elite sector of foundations and innumerable local expressions which tend to disdain economic issues and have little direct influence in working-class communities. This stance contrasts strongly with the movement in its early years, which sought to break out of academic/professional settings, drew on the spirit of mass resistance of the civil rights movement, and shared much of the worldview of the left-wing of the antiwar movement.

The main opposition to feminist goals came from social conservatives, mainly the insurgent religious Right, who until the 2001-2008 Bush administration were relatively isolated from federal power centers. Since then, the reassertion of 1950s-style “family values”—heterosexual male-led households, severe curtailment of women’s and children’s rights, and constant use of biblical authority to enforce these “values”—has become a hallmark of Republican policy.

Since the heyday of the early women’s movement, there have been many attempts to portray feminism as puritanical and hidebound. This has at times been accepted by women themselves, many of whom have increasingly assumed that the movement’s achievements are not hard-won rights but social norms. In this setting, the wealthier sectors of the movement have tended to shy away from targeting

corporations and maintained support for political allies who took stands opposed by other social movements. Some feminist groups have chosen to back otherwise conservative Republican candidates who broke ranks over abortion rights, and some have campaigned for Democratic women over male candidates with more progressive politics.

That setting has shifted with the increased power of social conservatives, particularly since the Republican Party's agenda turned to overt opposition to women's rights (along with the rights of organized workers, oppressed groups, immigrants, and advocates of government regulation of corporations in general). The women's movement now finds itself ill-equipped to mobilize supporters and carry on even a defensive fight. However, it still has allies in the Democratic Party who gain no benefit from adapting to the Republicans' social conservatism and who stand firm on abortion rights and against gender discrimination. Centrist Democratic officials have maintained support for Planned Parenthood, a health service provider under siege by the Right for championing abortion rights and birth control.

The early gay movement was heavily influenced by the women's movement and has itself consolidated its forces enough to begin to effectively challenge prevailing homophobia. This is no small accomplishment, given the long-standing, deep-rooted and violent rejection of homosexuality in U.S. society. The gay movement was the first social movement to bring grievances directly to Obama. It has made headway against the military's "don't ask/don't tell" policy, and in favor of same-sex marriage. Openly gay men in particular have moved into some positions of power and influence. However, despite a growing cultural questioning of homophobia, gains in acquiring legal rights have been consistently obstructed by both Right and Center.

The radical contingent of the gay movement is alive and well, having been tested in the life-or-death stakes of the AIDS epidemic. The presence of radical politics creates a tension within the movement that pushes it out of a purely defensive posture. Despite this, the radical trend is not strong enough to broaden the scope of the movement as a whole toward building strategic ties to other movements.

Healthcare, consumers, and media

The movement for healthcare reform has spread into unions, professional groups, and community organizations. The main focus has been advocacy for a national single-payer plan to provide universal health care. A secondary branch of the movement emphasizes a government-run health insurance plan in competition with private insurers (the "public option," which Obama promoted and then abandoned in the face of opposition from Republicans and the insurance industry). The movement has shifted from the national arena to local and state-level proposals, with a recent first legislative victory for single-payer in Vermont.

The movement continues to grow despite enormous pressure and massively expensive public relations efforts to bolster a failed private insurance system. The spiraling costs of healthcare in the midst of increased unemployment have weakened the free-market faith at the heart of the Right's program. The contradictory arguments of the right populist Tea Party (which is heavily bankrolled by the insurance industry) have had little adverse effect on the universal health care movement, but there is recognition of the need to move forward without hoped-for support from the White House.

Similarly, the consumer movement's demand for stricter government oversight of the marketplace for goods, property, and services chal-

lenges the political mantra of neoliberalism: “an unregulated market will provide.” The very notion of public safety and regulation of commercial goods was made controversial only recently, when purist free-market libertarianism came to dominate the Republican Party. The Right has shifted the center of gravity on this issue at a time when commercial corruption and cheating have become even more commonplace in this wonderland of fraud. Any hint of regulation of business now suggests “government interference” in the market. Again, opinion polls show the public favors solutions advocated by the Left, but this is rarely discussed in the mainstream media, which live on advertising revenues.

The fight against misleading advertising has brought consumer groups into the movement for media democracy. There are hundreds of local media activist groups involving thousands of staff and volunteers in every region of the country. They work in local media and computer centers, broadcasting and video production, broadband deployment, media literacy, cable television and digital access, media consolidation, news reporting and content-production, and related issues like software access, copyright, privacy, and culture. The movement has grown more political as the Right has increased its hegemony in mainstream media, and as excluded groups—particularly youth—develop their own projects.

The religious component

The U.S. is a stronghold of every religion, and the intersection of religion and politics is a constant feature. The influence of various religious groups is tangible in social movements of every political stripe. In turn, the major religious groups or movements are subject to polarization over social issues, leading to internal power struggles.

In the late 20th century, marginal Protestant denominations, liberal Catholics, and Reform Jews were most identified with left social movements around particular issues—rarely with the Left as a whole. In major denominations—Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc.—the mainline churches have quietly identified with causes aimed at ameliorating suffering and inequality. Institutions like the National Council of Churches and denominations like the United Church of Christ have been important funders of, and actors in, social movement campaigns.

Black churches have been divided on social action, as have Muslim mosques, but the congregations and leaders who have taken political stands have influenced many in their broader communities. This is a legacy continued from the civil rights movement.

Over the last decades, rightist forces have organized within large church communities to wrest power and redirect the faith to more conservative interpretations of religion, particularly toward male supremacy and homophobia. The question of control of church funds has serious implications for social movements.

The mainline churches have sought to settle these disputes by keeping the Right at bay without making a strong counter-challenge. However, the general political polarization in the U.S. will continue to force political differences to the forefront. The extent to which the main religious groups identify with and openly support left social movements is likely to have a big impact on the direction of national politics.

The Political Left

The section of the Left organized around political program and ideology covers a broad, intricate spectrum but is thoroughly fragmented and marginalized. Sectarianism is normal in politics but

in the U.S. it is more pronounced because no historical left tendency—social democracy, Greens, post-1989 communism, Trotskyism, Maoism, anarchism—has an organized expression that amounts to more than a sect.

It has become commonplace when discussing American political history to note the absence of a mass social democratic party. Historic attempts to break the duopolistic party system are scarcely remembered, and current ones get virtually no media attention. Political campaigns are dismissed merely on the basis of lack of financial resources, regardless of their actual influence or the pertinence of the issues they raise.

Today the situation is worse than ever. Public identification as “left” is anathema in mainstream politics. Even the most moderate left groups that focus on working inside the Democratic Party have memberships that number in the low thousands at best. Open socialists and revolutionaries are generally considered too controversial to associate with. For example, when the Right exaggerated Obama’s fleeting association with a forgotten leader of the long-dead Weather Underground, they essentially tainted every figure in the political expanse between the two.

The current left political spectrum runs from Democrats who identify strongly with social movement goals to anarchists who dismiss reform of any kind. The groups in between, mostly socialists, are successors to the tendencies that dominated the Left in the heyday of the Socialist (SP) and Communist (CP) Parties, from the beginning of the last century to the post-World War II period.

At the start of the Cold War, the number of former members of the SP and CP rose higher than that of the parties’ memberships. The “party Left” dwindled, to be eclipsed by the informal “independent Left.” The postwar criminalization

of the CP and rightward drift of the SP left both groups unable to establish a lasting presence in the civil rights movement and the New Left, although they did play important, distinct roles in the peace movement.

There was a brief resurgence of far left political formations during the decline and after the fall of the largest New Left group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Some rallied to the CP. Maoist groups proliferated in the 1970s, and Trotskyist splinters attracted radicalized students. But the international crisis of the Left laid these efforts to waste. Today, there are various divisions within, and cutting across, surviving socialist tendencies, forced to operate (and sometimes determinedly rooted) in the margins.

A number of left national and local third party groups are actively involved in electoral politics. The largest, the Green Party of the United States, is left of the Democrats but not socialist. The labor-linked Working Families Party works in several states, more as a ballot line than an independent party. They mainly cross-endorse Democrats running with union support but have elected a few officials on their own.

Finally, there are groups that build support for Democratic campaigns on an explicitly left platform, such as the netroots group MoveOn.org and the membership/chapter-based Progressive Democrats of America.

The political Left, for all its weaknesses, is crucial to the revitalization of the Left as a whole. If it can come to grips with the realities of U.S. politics, it can cohere as a force for training, educating, and developing the political capacities of social movement activists. It can give Left intellectuals the political grounding needed to make their work a material force in giving focus to mass action, especially in the electoral arena. But the obstacles it faces are severe, beginning with its own fragmentation.

The Academic Left

One of the lasting legacies of the New Left student movement is the growth of freedom of expression in academia. Leftist educators faced purges at various times, most fiercely during the 1950s Red Scare. But the campaign against the Left in education, though sweeping, was more limited in its effectiveness than the purge in labor. The Left retained influence in various departments and found refuge in various fields and campuses.

Starting during the brief Kennedy administration, the new student movement brought radicalism back, challenging faculty and a new generation of scholars in the humanities. The radicalization brought on by the Vietnam War and political repression against the civil rights movement reshaped social policy and cultural expression in an unprecedented sweep, despite a significant rightist backlash in such crucial areas as economics and law.

This relative freedom was partly maintained thanks to left intellectuals' growing numbers and organization at the professional level. Political economists, political scientists, historians, sociologists, scientists, and regional specialists came out in the open with their politics. They effectively challenged the Right and organized groups such as the Union of Radical Political Economists and the Union of Concerned Asian Scholars, as well as in left caucuses in the major professional associations.

This new, energized left intelligentsia made a big difference through the Reagan era. In society at large, the "liberal" label became as

tainted as "red" had been in the 1950s. Only in academia could one openly identify with left politics, socialism, or Marxism. The relative freedom that left intellectuals enjoyed attracted social movement and political leftists to scholarly gatherings like the Left Forum, where they can meet and discuss radical politics openly and freely.

But the academic setting has not provided a vehicle for political discussion leading to concrete results. Much left intellectual discourse has foundered in various intellectual strains that reject politics, except in abstract forms or *a priori* arguments. The influence of the ideas emerging from social movements is real and pervasive, but in academic left discourse the problems presented by these ideas tend to be removed from historical context. In many cases, context is even disdained altogether, and the experiences of those movements are left unanalyzed. The turn of cultural studies away from concrete political analysis, for example, made its intellectual output worthless for social movements' political purposes.

Today, educators are facing direct threats that require them to abandon the fashions of the past few decades. The Right is organizing against "left bias" in higher education; education funding is shrinking drastically; and the work hierarchy is developing more exploitative roles for aides and adjuncts. The future of the left academy will depend on educators' willingness to organize politically, in coordination with social movements both on and far, far off campus. The rise of union organizing on campuses has become an important vehicle for this transition away from elite professionalism.

Left Rethinking After 1989

The political Left in the U.S., like the Left everywhere, was rocked on its heels by the collapse

of the Soviet bloc and the Chinese state attack on a mass student protest. It is still a long way

from recovering its bearings. Two decades later, “existing” socialism, which was a defining reality for the Left, has become a “specter” once again.

1989 marked the end of the state socialist experiment begun by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution of 1917. The existence of the Soviet state redefined the Left’s self-definition and mission—for would-be Leninists of various stripes, as well as for those drawing from pre-WWI socialist tendencies and movements. Even anti-Soviet groups were deeply affected. The once-great Red Locomotive was run off the rails, and those who rode it were confronted by a world where 20th century analyses no longer seemed to work.

The events of 1989-91 were all the more devastating, coming in the midst of an already prolonged period of decline. The relative weakness of the U.S. Left comes in part from its lack of continuity with its own history—aggravating its marginality from political processes—and its alienation from the broader culture, for better or worse. A concerted campaign of suppression swept the U.S. in the 1950s, when such important historical figures as Frederick Douglass and Eugene V. Debs were nearly erased from the national memory. An attempt to re-appropriate that history in the context of a left movement came in the 1970s and 80s, but the decline of that wave of activism and the rise of the Right broke the link once again.

Now the Left is forced to find its way without a red “North Star.” Its weaknesses are often mocked but are really no joke. Differences in political orientation and notions of strategy and tactics are generally not confronted directly, in part as a backlash against the crippling sectarian battles of the 1970s and 80s, which coincided with the decline of the Left internationally. Internet debates, though superficial, have become more pronounced (and sometimes hysterical) in the 2010s, with the spread

of anguish over austerity and disappointment with Obama.

What follows is an attempt to sum up the divisions that frame current left politics.

Broad coalitions versus anti-authoritarian action

The main way the Left has maintained a public presence is through mass demonstrations. These have been most effective when built by broad coalitions reflecting diversity of politics and constituencies. With no political party or ongoing national vehicles for consultation or coordination, social movement rallies in Washington, New York, and San Francisco are the closest thing to assemblies of the Left *in toto*.

The crash of “existing” socialism made Marxism in its various forms much less attractive to newly radicalized young people. Anarchism became the new magnet for the rebellious. This turned out to be less a new lease on life than a period of repeated attempts to reinvent the wheel. The vanguard party model lost its appeal, but anarchism could also lay claim to multiple variations on the theme. The authoritarian cadre party was replaced by consensus decision-making, utopianism, mutual aid experiments, and maximalism in different forms. This coincided with a new explosion of information technology that transformed interpersonal and mass communication.

The “Battle of Seattle” in 1999 was the first major demonstration mobilized on-line, with alliances formed in the course of the action itself. It was a breakthrough in several other respects. It was both broad and militant but did not come in response to a particular controversial government move or act of violence. It started with youth but picked up support from community people and unions. Its politics were anti-capitalist, in the *altermondialiste* (“another world is possible”) rather than the Marxist sense.

While Seattle was a success in execution (if not in concrete gains), the anti-capitalist movement came and went within a decade. The older coalition model—a long list of groups rallying around a single issue or theme—returned in response to George W. Bush’s war moves. But this too did not last, as the inability of the peace movement to affect policy raised questions about the effectiveness of nonviolent mass mobilizations. In the intersection of the anarchist and the anti-capitalist movements, an anti-authoritarian “direct action” trend—attacking property and police, sometimes in mass nonviolent settings—has reappeared for the first time since the 1970s. And as in the 70s, confrontationism was bred by the widespread despair of affecting policy through peaceful protest.

Seattle showed how social media can generate interest and mobilize diverse forces in particular situations. It demonstrated that imagination and multiplicity of tactics can affect mass consciousness and challenge authority. But Seattle came up short as a model for developing a coherent, continuing political movement, with internal democracy and the capacity to turn ferment into organized opposition. Suspicion of political thought and organization is rampant in the U.S., including among radicalized youth.

Self-marginalization vs. political refocus

The prevalence of subcultural marginalization in the Left is a debilitating symptom of fragmentation. This phenomenon has been derided as “political correctness,” but it is more complex than either a political standpoint (what the Right characterizes as “left-wing bias”) or a dismissive label for a form of rhetoric. Essentially, people who have been active for many years, and people who were attracted to radical politics only recently and have had no experience with mass movements, embrace and defend

their marginality. The result is a habitual projection of small subcultural in-groups as social or political movements.

In one sense, this is an understandable byproduct of decades of fragmentation and stagnation on the Left. There is comfort in this arrangement, in which outsiders are pitied or scorned, loyalty is measured by acceptance of rules of speech and behavior, and shared commitment to a set of values. It becomes destructive for the Left in that it fights to “protect” movements from the taint of outside influences, i.e., ordinary people—“Us” vs. the dreaded, unenlightened “Them.” The self-marginalized activists fear anything that might threaten their conception of the Left as an inward-directed, martyrized “progressive community” that views politics as a struggle against “false consciousness” and its purveyors.

The lack of any conception of politics rooted in the increased class-interested political activity of the majority of the population—democracy—is a recurring problem in the U.S. Left. The influence of racism among whites and social conservatism in the whole working class make defining the democratic aspect of left politics particularly difficult. But the beginnings of mass opposition, as demonstrated in the Wisconsin upheaval of spring 2011, have pulled that task into sharper focus.

Reframing democracy for the Left is part of a process of reevaluating political premises in light of the lessons and changed conditions facing activists in the new century. This process seeks to break the Left out of isolation and to establish connections with new forces emerging in response to the crises on the basis of mutual respect, serious dialogue, and democratic interaction. The level of maturity required in this process is not strongly in evidence in the Left’s public discourse, but it will need to be achieved if the Left is to become a serious political force again.

The Left and the Democratic Party

Choosing how to approach work inside, through, or with the Democratic Party has been a perennial debate. For some on the Left, progressive electoral action really begins only when the Democratic Party is recognized as a capitalist party and rejected. Other leftists work with Democratic campaigns, though they are aware, and critical, of the Party's failures as a progressive force—that's what distinguishes them from party Centrists. The problem is that the two-party system makes it nearly impossible for any third party even to get recognition in any contest.

The Democratic Party is neither particularly democratic nor a party in the traditional sense. From one perspective, it is a "big tent" encompassing hundreds of sectors and subsectors of society. But it also functions as a grid of federal and local political blocs vying for the reins of power and the favor of the corporate sector, without a clear-cut program or strategy beyond the broadest outlines of difference from its only rival.

The cornerstone of the two-party system is the Electoral College, composed of delegates from each state and the District of Columbia. The number of delegates from each state is equal to the sum of that state's Senators (two in every case) and Representatives (based on number of Congressional districts, determined by state population numbers). The electors, chosen by popular vote, assemble in their respective state capitals on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December and vote for president. Electors are supposed to vote for the candidate who received a plurality of votes in the state or area they represent. To become president, a candidate must get more than half of the Electoral College votes (270 out of 538 votes). These electors are thus the direct voters on presidential candidates.

While the election process appears to voters as a direct one, in fact, when casting ballots for

avored presidential and vice presidential candidates, they are actually voting for correspondingly pledged electors, who are free to vote for anyone eligible to be President. The process is weighted against larger states with dense urban populations, and contending parties automatically are eliminated from representation under a system of winner-take-all. The resulting underrepresentation of progressive constituencies and effective strangling of "third parties" have brought continual calls for reform. But the Electoral College system has deep roots in class and racial politics, and change is not on the horizon.

Another roadblock to independent politics is the power of state law over federal and local elections. The federal government's power is restricted, but national parties can use executive and legislative power at the state level to intervene in federal election procedures. Each state sets its own rules for its own electoral college, primaries, and state and local races. They also manage the terms of voter eligibility, a wrinkle which the Right seized upon to suppress votes from left-leaning constituencies.

The biggest "third parties" act as spoilers in the two-party races, not political forces with independent strength. The Tea Party functions mainly as a rump pressure group in the business-dominated Republican Party. The Tea Party's ability to shape policy is fueled by the threat of secession from the Republicans. That would strip the Republicans of much of its active base—and send the movement to the same political oblivion as previous rightist breakaway campaigns, such as George Wallace (1968) and Pat Buchanan (2000).

Access to campaign funds is another obstacle for third parties. Electoral campaigns are media spectacles, driven by huge amounts of money—which is the primary way the relationship between capital and the two parties is secured. Real competition is impossible, even when a

billionaire like Ross Perot enters the fray as an Independent (1992).

Building a voter base beyond the centrism of the Democratic Party leadership, therefore, requires agitating among non-voters and nonpartisans (“swing voters”), while winning Democratic voters over to politics to the left of the party leadership. The funding of such projects alone takes a huge effort.

Organizing within Democratic campaigns involves fighting established figures inside the party at both local and national levels. Party apparatchiks routinely work to isolate candidates they deem too far to the left to be “winnable.” Successful challengers are bought off as often as not. Another common strategy to hold the Left in check has been “triangulation,” executed with great success by Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996, meaning that he borrowed neoliberal Republican ideas while taking progressive base support for granted. As a result of these strategies, to the extent that there is a public, unequivocal left voice on any issue, it is generally perceived as coming from inside the Democratic Party—even if that voice is usually not heard from the national leadership level.

Breaking from the Democrats cuts through that predicament but assumes that a new political force could grow and challenge the Democrats from the outside and split the party’s base, without automatically giving an advantage to the Right, who use their every day in office to further isolate the Left. There is no historical case of the breakaway strategy strengthening the Left, but hope is constantly refueled by every new Democratic shift or concession to the Right. Third party campaigns try to grow before, and stabilize in between elections but are perpetually stymied by the fear of aiding the Republicans.

There is a strain of electoral abstentionism among activists, but its influence, too, ebbs in the face of the direct threat posed by the Right.

Despite disillusionment with the Democratic leadership’s default mode of triangulation—as well as a broader demoralization that responds to and reinforces the Left’s marginality—most progressives see too much at stake to stay neutral in electoral races, particularly those for the presidency.

Rightist domination of the media and judiciary

The dilemma of the Left cannot be fully understood without recognizing the successes of the Right. The insurgent populist Right has occupied the ideological and political vacuum created by the inability of an incoherent Left to respond to the failure of capitalism and the state to maintain a relatively high living standard for working-class Americans.

The Right has scored a long string of victories against the Left, from the decertification of the air traffic controllers union in 1981 to the break-up of the largest network of community groups, the electorally active ACORN, in 2010. ACORN became the bogeyman in the racist hysteria that gripped many white citizens unable to account for the election of a black president.

The resurfacing of the populist Right in the form of the Tea Party movement came after the waning of the last mass populist movement, the Christian fundamentalist Right. The Tea Party coalition combines the religious Right, the nativist/racist Minutemen (demonizing Latino and Arab immigrants), the Ayn Rand School libertarians (railing against government services, public sector workers, unions, and regulation of businesses), and terrified small businesspeople and white workers (whose social status is increasingly undermined by economic polarization).

The focus of the populist Right, in classical proto-fascist style, is on blaming economic decline on the poorest, most defenseless members of

society and on conspiracies by “elitist” tastemakers, money-changers, and profligate politicians squandering tax revenues.

Even before the Cold War ended, the Right has more and more defined itself in its opposition to social movements, using coded catch phrases like “special interests” (unions and inner city communities); “law and order” (imposed on lower income blacks and Latinos), and “protecting family values” (from feminists and gays). They demonize “the 60s” as a time of aberration when conservative views began to be broadly questioned—and in many cases rejected—by the majority. The Right is constantly asserting itself to regain the ideological hegemony it lost in the 1970s: renewed xenophobic patriotism; belief in personal enrichment as the “American dream;” and distrust of government, combined with obeisance in dealing with the overwhelming power of the corporate sector.

These advances for the Right did not come spontaneously. The emergence of the Tea Party as a political force is testimony to the influence of right-dominated talk radio and television, particularly Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News cable channel. Beyond the substantial audience for blatant propaganda, other more “neutral, objective” venues in mass media have adopted the “Right as Center” ideology. It would be impossible, relying on U.S. television, to tell that the White House and the Senate—i.e., the greater part of the elected federal government—is in the hands of the Democratic Party. The Repub-

lican agenda took the major media focus during the 2001-2008 Bush administration and has held on to it in Obama’s.

There is simply no left counterpart to Fox News or the right influence in the rest of the major media. Another cable channel offers a few liberal voices speaking more or less for the Democratic side, but MSNBC (owned by Comcast and General Electric) tries to keep a tight leash on their employees moving too far from the “Center,” unlike Fox News, where blatant demagoguery and lies are aired nonstop. The Left has established itself on the Web, and most left publications have sites, but radio and television—completely controlled by corporate owners and advertisers and used by many millions daily—are off limits.

The Right also has organized successfully in the judiciary through the meteoric rise of the Federalist Society. This group of conservative legal figures, some from the highest levels of the courts and government, has come to equal or surpass the firmly centrist American Bar Association as the dominant political force in the judiciary. The Society trained and promoted young conservatives who have moved into important appointed positions in the court system, locally and federally. This undercut left influence in making and interpreting laws. Influential groups, like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and American Legislative Executive Council, supply sweeping pro-corporate, repressive legal decisions dutifully passed by Center-Right legislators.

The Current Situation

The obstacles facing even a re-energized Left are formidable. Obama’s first term has been a period of profound political instability for the U.S. The nation has lost considerable stat-

ure economically, and it has still not recovered from the unexpected end of the Cold War. If Indochina was a swamp, West Asia is quicksand. Yet Washington seems unable to

function without the engine of war, even as its explanations for its endless military engagements are dismissed as fallacious by the majority of the public, domestically and worldwide.

The Republicans promote a metanarrative that blames decline completely on taxes and government spending. The Tea Party has declared open war (with violent rhetoric) on incumbent Democrats in Congress and state and local offices, including center-right Republicans. The populist Right's surprising success in 2010 laid the groundwork for major changes in the political scene, and the public response has only begun to unfold.

The populist far Right now holds enough power in the Republican Party to pressure (though not outweigh) the historically fixed hegemony of the corporate sector. This also indicates a political turn to the far Right within the corporate sector, which was once viewed as welfare state appeasers (or part of the international Communist conspiracy itself) by the traditional Right—from the small-business tax-haters of the John Birch Society to the Ivy League Cold Warriors of the National Review circle.

Centrist Democrats would ordinarily consider this a signal to find a new "middle ground" that would overlap with the Right. Obama's stance on healthcare and the national debt are good examples at the executive/federal level. Such moves further isolate, marginalize, and polarize the Left as a whole—which is part of the Democratic leadership's campaign strategy.

The popular response to the 2010 elections also offered some surprises, however, and the scenario has not gone according to the usual script. This was demonstrated most forcefully in early 2011 by the union-based wave of mass protest from traditionally docile sectors of the working class, in the Midwestern industrial states of Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan and Indiana.

The mass upsurge in Madison, the Wisconsin state capital, gives an indication of what may ensue as the empowered Right enacts its program. The protest came in response to ending collective bargaining rights for public employees, by a bill pushed through by the new majority Republican state legislature and Tea Party-backed governor. The Republicans had the state judiciary on their side, along with the supposedly large, energized Tea Party base.

The public-sector unions made their stand, winning unexpectedly broad support from the Democratic minority of the legislature, the conservative police and firefighters unions, and tens of thousands of ordinary civilians. They rallied with vocal militancy usually heard only from the political Left. The protests also demonstrated a new level of the Left's capacity to mobilize and connect through social networking.

The attempt to recall the rightist governor fell short of votes, but the Democrats regained a majority in the state legislature. The Right's win in the recall campaign was short-lived, as court action cut the legs out from under their crack-down on state workers' bargaining rights. The center of political gravity, it seems, has shifted, and the mass outpourings in support of workers' rights in the Midwest undoubtedly had a big impact.

The Right misread their 2010 electoral victory as a decisive ideological shift in their favor throughout society. They advanced with a direct attack on social movements, with democracy itself the overall target: labor rights, abortion rights, immigrant rights, and voting rights of racially targeted constituencies. They also pushed through disproportionate payoffs to rightist groups by deeply cutting progressive taxes and gun control laws and by freeing corporations to despoil the environment.

The Democratic Party's left social movement base and its periphery were not inspired to

campaign in 2010, both overestimating the support they could expect from Obama and underestimating the Right's political capacities. But in the non-electoral year 2011, they came out in force when faced with the consequences of the Tea Party sweep. The Democrats have been handed an energized base through no great effort of their own. It remains to be seen if they will respond to the base's demands or back away for fear of alienating "swing votes."

It is also not certain that left social movements will recognize their real strength in this situation and will start to build ties and work out joint strategy and tactics: to politicize and de-fragmentize.

Fear of jeopardizing individual groups' ties to the White House and Democratic Party leadership has had a potent conservatizing effect for decades. These ties involve money, access to chambers of power (if not always actual policy-making influence), and the coveted mantle of "legitimacy" and "respectability" for the organizations' leaders. Some measure of protection from harassment by the Right and the state is implicit in this arrangement.

The 2010 far-right electoral sweep puts this whole contract in doubt. This is understood by the base, if not by the leadership. The continuation of the Clinton-era strategy of triangulation, courting "Reagan Democrats" while shunning the left social movement-identified base, would overlook the evidence that increasing numbers of "swing voters," faced with joblessness, irrational and interminable wars, and unbridled attacks from the Right, are trending to the left of the administration.

The situation on the Right is unstable as well. Polling indicates that the far Right is losing the ideological war. Humiliated centrist and soft-right Republicans are furious. The ties that bind the multiple tendencies of the Tea Party coalition are tenuous. With no one recognized leader, their fundamental unity is racially-based

Obamaphobia, which has not proven as widespread as the Right had expected. Libertarians are uncomfortable with social conservatism's assault on individual rights through opposition to abortion rights, gay marriage, and church-state separation. Christian fundamentalists are finding that some in their younger generation are more resistant to bigotry.

The direction of the country may be up to groups and individuals in the left social movement base, acting politically to meet the Right head-on. In this situation, the political Left and the academic Left have crucial roles to play: organizational training, political education, generating proposals, and developing a nationwide political discourse.

After the 2012 election, the U.S. Left will have to overcome and reverse fragmentation, find its own political trajectory, and develop its own capacities as a national political force. Any measure of success in this direction will reconfigure the alignment of forces in the two-party system and transform the nation's political imagination.

The panic on the far Right poses a serious danger. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, are convinced that their birthright has been usurped. Many are armed and bitter, and they have been listening to cynical, world-class liars for a long time. This unstable tendency could even lead to violence in the years to come if the Left is unable to find a coherent, clear, empathic voice and make it heard.

Many on the bottom and in the middle have defined this country's national identity as "whites on top." The rapid decline of the middle class will confront many Americans with choices they never thought they would have to make: to join with have-nots, to identify with racial and gender equality; or rather, to become politically engaged in order to empower the powerless, sweep aside spectacle and actually take a hand in making history.

The myth of gated, privileged enclaves in an impregnable empire is shattering before our eyes. There is real potential for an egalitarian, socialist opposition movement grounded in expanded, class-conscious democracy. The

Left's response to this new chapter can take it from marginality and fragmentation to coordinated action, a culture of dialogue and solidarity, and effective political power for millions.

Afterword (November 2012)

The Occupy Wall Street movement burst on the scene just weeks after this paper was written. A year later, it may be safe to consider some of the changes in the political scene and what caused them.

In the Wisconsin drama, following the 2010 midterm elections, neoliberalism took its most open political form in the newly empowered Tea Party-backed officials. Governors like Scott Walker (R-WI) and John Kasich (R-OH) and their legislative supporters pushed austerity, government service cuts, and attacks on public sector workers and their unions. They did not expect a mass backlash of angry working-class sectors. It proved that unrest and willingness to make a left political stand was closer to the surface than even observers on the Left could see.

The spread of Occupy, beginning in September 2011, reflected some of the same social ferment, minus the class aspect of a focus on workers' rights—initially. Yet the slogan “We are the 99%” brilliantly captured the moment and changed the national conversation. Occupy neatly deflected the Tea Party's “shrink the government” libertarianism—which was easily co-opted by a corporate sector lurching right—and redirected the thrust of populism for millions.

In the space of a few months, a wide range of possibilities for the Left appeared in Occupy's culture of horizontalism, DIY (Do It Yourself), and ad hoc activism. In a period in which the Left is denied political space, Occupy seized

physical space. The occupations were broken up by police in short order, but in the wake of the Zuccotti Park occupation and literally scores of local counterparts, the number of new radicals has multiplied. This is a reawakening for the isolated, unfocused Left. Occupy as a movement is finding its way forward, in some cases groping along, in others exploding. Its strongest footing is its identification with the 99%, of which it is only an infinitesimal part. Its weak point is a tendency to forget that fact, to raise the slogan “We are the 99%” as literal fact. But Occupy has played a political role by shining a light on the power of Wall Street. This has given other movements, in particular labor, a needed spotlight to break out of the gloom of corporate hegemony. When Occupy and other social movements have worked together the results have been impressive. There have also been disasters when they work at odds.

The Left seemed to take a hit when the recall campaign against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker failed at the polls in June 2012. The demoralization was real. But the campaign accomplished quite a bit. Wisconsin's mobilized union and community forces joined together in a political campaign that became a national event. Discontent with Walker's anti-labor offensive went directly to the public. The tepid opposing candidate pushed through by Chicago mayor and national Democratic power broker Rahm Emanuel performed as if it were just another election. The race failed to win over the ma-

majority of rural Wisconsinites and private sector workers. But many were reached, and several Republican legislators were removed.

How (or whether) the state's political terrain has changed remains to be seen. But the historical importance of the taking of the state Capitol building in Madison is real and lasting. It was an uprising—interracial, but mostly white; working class, but more middle than poor. Yet the stance of those involved was unwaveringly progressive—no capitulation to racism or condescension toward blue collar or low-income workers. The movement had the potential to create a broader alliance than any in recent memory. That, in itself, is a turning point in class consciousness, broadly defined.

Then the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike took developments a step further. The strike was no ordinary job action. After years of work, a radical caucus organized its way into leadership of a compromised, broken union facing a vicious onslaught against the city's public school system. The CTU recognized the inseparability of economic demands and the degrading of inner city public education. They understood that the support of other unions, community groups, and parents was crucial to the strike's success. An Occupy group became a full-time solidarity outreach campaign. Preparation among the members took years. Communities responded: mass rallies and demonstrations attracted tens of thousands. In September, after a week out, the teachers won. They held their own against a

powerful, intransigent (and Democratic) mayor and a full-blown anti-union campaign aided by the wealthy, pro-privatization charter schools campaign.

The strike and its victory illuminates the potential of the U.S. Left—in particular, the growing importance of “small-d” democratic demands, goals, structure, practice, and front-building. The unifying efforts of the CTU, partnered with community groups and other unions, were a breakthrough in conscious de-fragmentation. The impact of the strike on the broader labor movement—starting with the two giant national teachers' unions—remains to be seen. But victory for public workers, at a time when they are the target of demonization and fierce cut-backs, has already prompted rethinking in labor and other social movements, the political Left and the left intelligentsia.

As in Wisconsin, the Chicago teachers' strike was an occasion for mass interracial expressions of solidarity. Significantly, unlike Wisconsin, the African American and Latino communities were at the heart of the solidarity movement. This development, in a city that has been shaped by racist violence by police and whites against blacks—side-by-side with sweeping union growth and mass strikes in the 20th century—is extraordinary.

It indicates that conditions for the reemergence of the Left as a national political force are ripening fast. Partisans are needed to make it happen.

Related Studies

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