

YOU CAN'T USE WEATHERMAN
TO SHOW WHICH WAY
THE WIND BLEW

The Unfinished History of the New Left:
Participatory Democracy, Marxism, and the Goal of a
Democratic Constitution

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PREFACE

[W]hat I do not quite understand about some new-left writers is why they cling so mightily to ‘the working class’ of the advanced capitalist societies as *the* historic agency, or even as the most important agency, in the face of the really impressive historical evidence that now stands against this expectation.

Such a labor metaphysic, I think, is a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic....

...Forget Victorian Marxism, except when you need it; and read Lenin again (be careful)—Rosa Luxemburg, too.

C. Wright Mills
“Letter to the New Left” (1960)

This paper makes two claims about the history of the New Left: that SDS did not end with the breakup of the SDS National Office or with Weatherman and that SDS’s ideals and practice of participatory democracy share much in common with the political movements of classical Marxism. That the democratic ideology of the New Left is compatible in some way with Marxism is suggested by the above quotation from C. Wright Mills, but only suggested. Mills died before he had a chance to develop his ideas fully, and his meaning and intentions remained too obscure and idiosyncratic for anyone else to develop them either. For a complex set of reasons, it was Mills’ warning about Victorian Marxism and its labor metaphysic that was generally taken as his final verdict on the value of Marxism as a whole. The reference to Lenin and Luxemburg at the end of the “Letter to the New Left” remained for all intents and purposes invisible, as did Mills’ last book, *The Marxists*, in which he declared himself a “plain Marxist.”

I was a member of SDS from 1967-1970 and of the Revolutionary Union from 1970-1975 and from that experience arrived at my own understanding of the relationship between Marxism and democracy. Marxism’s claim to originality rested on its critique of capitalism and the necessity of socialism; but Marxism was at the same time a political movement that had inherited and assimilated the democratic principles and goals of the American and French revolutions, the most basic of which was the demand for a democratic republic based

on universal and equal political representation to replace the monarchies and privileged elites of Old Regime Europe. This European political history is relevant to the United States because the U.S. Constitution is not based on equal representation either, the equal vote given to each state in the Senate regardless of population being proof enough of that. The European working class and Marxist movements confronted the problem of how to get democracy when you don't have it for more than a century and the theories, ideologies, strategies, tactics, and organizations they created to achieve that goal have something to teach us in our own quest for a truly representative democracy in the U.S.

The puzzle at the center of the history of the New Left is why, given its commitment to democratic values, it didn't recognize and criticize the undemocratic nature of the Constitution itself. Democratic ideals can't be realized without democratic political institutions, yet the New Left never made this connection between its values and the constitutional structure of the government. As a consequence, the New Left's democratic ideology remained partial and incomplete. The goal of democracy in the U.S. requires confronting the undemocratic structure of the Constitution directly and demanding national political institutions based on equal representation.

The unconventional part of this story is that I came to this conclusion by way of reading Lenin on the democratic revolution in Russia as a participant in the Marxist-Leninist New Left. I always thought that the move from the campus to the factory was an expression of SDS's original democratic values, not their rejection, and I used the principles of democracy that I had learned in SDS to measure the value of Marxism for our situation here in the U.S. To tell that story, however, it is first necessary to dismantle the misconception that SDS ended with Weatherman. That is where this history begins.

INTRODUCTION

FORT DIX AND THE LOST HISTORY
OF THE NEW LEFT

We [Weatherman] utterly fell short of our goals in the third, and in some respects, the most crucial part of our building strategy for Chicago. The Fort Dix demo, originally scheduled for September 28, seemed to be a really good build-up action. The Fort Dix coffeehouse leadership, with two outstanding fighters from the Columbia University struggle, and a number of revolutionary GIs among them, appeared to be our allies at first. The political demands of the demo were good:

1. Free the Fort Dix 38
2. Free all political prisoners, especially the Panthers;
3. Abolish the stockade system;
4. End the war in Vietnam.

But in the marshals' meeting over the weekend of September 20, severe political divisions emerged between the NY Weatherman gang and a few independents [i.e., the Motherfuckers], and the rest of the movement people there....

At the end..., the coffeehouse leadership cancelled the demo because of our insistence on carrying the VC [Viet Cong] flags...[and] decided to hold the demo on October 12, specifically in order to provide an 'alternative' to the Chicago National Action for people on the East Coast....

So the third part of our building strategy, in a large measure, failed to materialize, and our whole effort suffered grievously because of it.

Shin'ya Ono
"You Do Need a Weatherman to Know
Which Way the Wind Blows" (1969)¹

On the same weekend in October 1969 that Weatherman carried out its Days of Rage in Chicago, another group of SDS members on the East Coast held a competing demonstration at the Fort Dix army base in New Jersey. The Fort Dix rally was organized to support thirty-

¹ Shin'ya Ono, "You Do Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows," in Harold Jacobs, ed., *Weatherman* (Ramparts Press: 1970), pp. 243, 249. (Digital version at sds-1960s.org with different pagination).

eight enlisted men who had been charged with a variety of crimes allegedly committed during a riot in the base stockade [prison] in June. Among the thirty-eight, the military made a special effort to punish four members of the American Serviceman's Union, an organization that advocated immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, the right to refuse service in unjust wars, and an end to racial bigotry and mistreatment in the military. The conspiracy, riot, and arson charges against these men carried maximum penalties of forty-six years in prison.

Antiwar sentiment on the base had first taken organized form the previous fall when several GIs, calling themselves "The Fort Dix Free Speech Movement," held a teach-in on the war in nearby Philadelphia for two dozen soldiers, where they then chose a representative to attend a GI-civilian antiwar conference in Chicago in December.² Then in April several men and women from New York and New Jersey SDS chapters opened a coffeehouse in town just outside the main entrance to the base. Following the riot in June, this coffeehouse group, GIs from the base, and relatives of the accused formed a committee to develop a legal and political defense of the thirty-eight.

During the summer the committee chose September 28 as the date for a rally, and Weatherman decided to join other SDS chapters on the East Coast in making the Fort Dix demonstration the focus for the start up of that fall's political activities; but, as preparations for the rally reached the final stages, severe disagreements broke out. Weatherman had announced that it planned to carry the flag of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front in attacks on various parts of the base, including the stockade, MP stations, and the receiving center for coffins from Vietnam. In response, the GI and SDS members of the coffeehouse argued that opposition to the war did not require political identification with the NLF and that carrying NLF flags in attacks on the base would be personally and politically suicidal.

The confrontation over these issues took place at the final demonstration planning meeting on the night of September 20 at a farmhouse in the vicinity of the base. At the tense gathering of dozens of activists from the New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia areas, the ideologies and tactics of the contending positions were argued for hours. Stuck at an impasse, the coffeehouse group finally announced that it would rather cancel the

² Fort Dix Free Speech Movement, "FSM TEACH-IN A SUCCESS,' *The Ultimate Weapon*, no.1, 12/18/1068, p.1. Copy online at Wisconsin Historical Society.

demonstration than be subject to Weatherman's whims. A majority of those attending supported this decision and the meeting broke up with bitterness and disappointment on both sides. Stunned by their defeat and political isolation, however, the Weatherman contingent re-approached the coffeehouse group early the next morning and offered to attend the demonstration without NLF flags; but by that point the coffeehouse group had decided to hold the rally on October 12 and thereby avoid any Weatherman participation at all, for Weatherman was committed to its Days of Rage in Chicago on that weekend.

Rid of Weatherman's suffocating presence, the Committee to Free the Fort Dix 38 proceeded with its plans. Literature explaining the case of the thirty-eight and opposition to the war within the military was distributed inside and around the base and throughout the well-established networks of SDS and anti-war groups on campuses and in cities along the East Coast. Even though Fort Dix was distant and unfamiliar territory for the anti-war movement, approximately five thousand people made the trip to attend the rally, by far the largest demonstration at a military base up until that time and three or four times larger than the coffeehouse group had originally hoped for. Although the base command put on a show of force on the day of the demonstration with barbed wire, imported riot troops, and tear gas, its larger response to this unwanted publicity was to release half of the prisoners from the overcrowded stockade and to dismiss or reduce the charges against most of the thirty-eight. The ASU members were convicted of some of the charges, however, and received the most severe sentences, ranging from dishonorable discharge to several years in prison.³

Political commentary following the demonstration agreed that the events at Fort Dix marked a significant shift in the direction and content of SDS activities. *The New York Times*⁴ placed a long story about the coffeehouse and the turmoil at Fort Dix on its front page the day after the demonstration; and the next issue of the *Guardian*,⁵ the main source of news on the New Left after the demise of the SDS National Office, devoted its front page and lead articles to contrasting the Fort Dix activities with Weatherman's dismal fate in Chicago. We even have Weatherman's own comprehensive post mortem of these events, Shin'ya Ono's

³ There is an interview with two of the thirty-eight and some footage of the rally attached as a supplement to the documentary, *Sir! No Sir!*, about antiwar GI's and the coffeehouses.

⁴ *New York Times*, October 13, 1969, pp. 1, 90.

⁵ *Guardian*, October 18, 1969, p. 1.

“You Do Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows,” in which the lead up to the Fort Dix demonstration was described as “in some respects, the most crucial part of our building strategy for Chicago,” but that this strategy “utterly fell short of our goals” and “in a large measure failed to materialize, and our whole effort suffered grievously because of it.”

Despite its prominent place in these contemporary accounts, however, no subsequent history of the New Left has even bothered to mention that the Fort Dix demonstration ever took place. This curious neglect began with Kirkpatrick Sale’s early history of SDS. While Sale did mention in passing that SDS members had opened a coffeehouse at Fort Dix in the spring of 1969, his only purpose in mentioning this effort was to portray it as a prime example of SDS’s *failure* to establish any meaningful ties to a nonstudent constituency.⁶ Somehow, neither the months-long campaign in support of the thirty-eight, nor the participation of soldiers from the base, nor the confrontation with Weatherman, nor the demonstration itself made it into Sale’s account. Unfortunately, subsequent histories have been only too willing to accept his conclusions and repeat his mistakes.

Why this gap in the writing of the history of the New Left? SDS is generally said to have had about 100,000 adherents in 1969, less than five hundred of whom ventured to Chicago to participate in the Days of Rage. What happened to the other 99,500? Why has the tortured desperation of a few hundred Weathermen and women been presented in book after book as the suicidal quintessence of the New Left?

The largest demonstrations against the war took place in the months after Weatherman’s debacle. This was a period in which SDS members continued their activities and helped launch the national student strike against the invasion of Cambodia at the New Haven May Day rally in support of Bobby Seale, Ericka Huggins, and other Black Panthers on trial for murder. The ten to fifteen thousand activists who met in New Haven that weekend settled on three demands to take back to their campuses:

1. that the U. S. withdraw from Southeast Asia immediately;
2. that the government cease its attacks on the Black Panthers and release all political prisoners; and

⁶ Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (Random House Vintage Books: New York, 1974) pp. 524-5. (Digital version at sds-1960s.com with different pagination).

3. that the universities end their complicity with the U. S. war machine.

A national strike information center was set up at Brandeis University and movement veterans, including all of the recently released Chicago 7, went out to speak at campuses across the country (Bob Scheer was our speaker at Princeton). Why, then, is SDS universally portrayed at this point as a spent and disorganized force?⁷

And why are the activists who opened GI coffeehouses and moved into working class jobs and communities in numbers thirty or forty times greater than the earlier SDS ERAP (Economic Research and Action Project) community organizers virtually absent from histories of the New Left?⁸

Part of the answer to these questions is that the writing of New Left history has been bound up from the beginning with the resentments of a deep-seated political grudge. A political grudge because many of the original leaders of SDS (who are also the authors or preferred sources of the main histories of the New Left) have always believed that the New Left started to go downhill precisely at the point where their own leadership and policies were rejected by the SDS membership in late 1965.⁹ Since then their accounts of New Left

⁷ George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left* (South End Press: Boston, 1987) pp. 117-153 for a good summary of the New Haven rally and national student strike. Unfortunately, Katsiaficas has a top-down organizationist rather than a network conception of the structure of SDS and equates the National Office of SDS with SDS as a whole. He therefore can't conceptualize how the chapters and regional organizations of SDS continued to function after the breakup of the National Office. I ran across the term "organizationist" in Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1989) p. 50. More on the organizationist conception of SDS later.

⁸ This sentence was written sometime in the early 1990's. Since then Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (Verso: New York, 2002), has filled in much of this gap with his comprehensive history of the adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the move into the working class by post-SDS New Leftists. I explain my differences with Elbaum's interpretation in more detail later, but the main difference is that my focus is on the continuity of the New Left's democratic values and practices within the New Communist Movement during its first five years and what these values and practices have in common with Lenin's theory of political consciousness in the democratic revolution. Elbaum's view of the content of Leninism is the traditional one that does not recognize the differences between the Lenin of the democratic revolution and Leninism after the Bolshevik Revolution. See Neil Harding's *Lenin's Political Thought: Volume 1, Theory and Practice in the Democratic Revolution* (1977) and *Volume 2, Theory and Practice in the Socialist Revolution* (1981) for the differences in Lenin's thinking in the two stages of the revolution in Russia. Originally published by St. Martin's Press, both volumes in a single paperback binding are available from Haymarket Books.

⁹ The rejection of the policies and personal leadership of SDS Old Guard National Secretary Paul Booth by the newer membership in late 1965 is the pivotal turning point in the standard narratives of the tragic rise and fall of the New Left. The basic framework of this narrative was constructed by Kirkpatrick Sale in his *SDS and it follows closely the view of this conflict supplied by Booth, Todd Gitlin, and other early leaders of SDS in*

history have smacked too much of I-told-you-so self-justification, with Weatherman coming to serve as the perfect object lesson of the New Left's failure to heed their political advice. A fat target, the exaggeration of Weatherman's influence and the repeated dramatization of its self-destruction have made it that much easier to dismiss any further discussion of the later New Left as superfluous; but this is just bad history, as I hope the Fort Dix example begins to indicate.

Indicating that there is a history to the New Left beyond Weatherman is a simple matter, however, compared to the problem of gauging the significance and consequences of that history. This difficulty is due in large part, of course, to the later New Left's deep entanglement in Marxism. It is here at the meeting of the New Left with the larger history of Marxism that C. Wright Mills' "Letter to the New Left" can provide some direction.

When I first sat down to write a response to the dozen or so histories and memoirs of the New Left that appeared in and around 1988¹⁰ (marking twenty years since the political traumas of 1968), I had no recollection that Mills had ended his letter with a recommendation to reread Lenin and Luxemburg. I remembered Mills' essay primarily for its critique of Daniel Bell's end-of-ideology thesis and returned to it merely in order to enlist Mills' original argument against Dick Flacks' proposition that the beliefs and practices of the early SDS were "experiential" but that the later SDS had succumbed to "ideological" politics.¹¹ [Mills' line in his "Letter" was that "It is a kindergarten fact that any political reflection that is of possible public significance is *ideological*; in its terms policies, institutions, and men of

interviews with Sale. Gitlin then repeated an expanded version of this same story in *The Whole World Is Watching* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1980). James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Street* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1987), repeats this story, citing Gitlin's *The Whole World Is Watching* as a primary source. Finally, Gitlin repackaged much of Sale's original narrative in *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Bantam Books: New York, 1987), often citing Sale as a source even though Gitlin himself was one of the main sources for Sale.

¹⁰ In addition to Miller (1987), Gitlin (1987), Breines (1989), and Katsiaficas (1987): Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (Random House: New York, 1988); Richard Flacks, *Making History* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1988); Hans Koning, *Nineteen Sixty-Eight* (Norton: New York, 1987); David Cate, *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (Harper and Row: New York, 1988); David Farber, *Chicago '68* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988); Ronald Fraser, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (Pantheon: New York, 1988); Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer...The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Basic Books: New York, 1987); Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks, *Beyond the Barricades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1989); and A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (Autonomedia: Brooklyn, 1988).

¹¹ Richard Flacks, *Making History* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1988), p.205.

power are criticized or approved.”¹² (Emphasis in original)] It was in rereading the letter that I stumbled across Mills’ advice to read Lenin and Luxemburg again. This chance discovery made it a little easier to tell the full story of the New Left.

That story has not been told yet because all existing histories of the New Left take it for granted that the later New Left’s attraction to Marxism necessarily entailed the repudiation of the early New Left’s most basic beliefs and values. Of course, it is Mills’ injunction to “forget Victorian Marxism” and its debilitating “labor metaphysic” that is routinely cited as proof of this moral and ideological divide. Yet it is clear that Mills himself did not consider Lenin and Luxemburg to be prisoners of this Victorian Marxist mind-set; and in his last book, *The Marxists*, Mills went so far as to characterize his own viewpoint as that of a “plain Marxist” along with the likes of Joan Robinson, E. P. Thompson, Paul Sweezy, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, and (with qualifications) even Lenin and Trotsky.¹³ Unfortunately, Mills died at the age of forty-five before he could provide more than the barest clues to his meaning in making these cryptic distinctions.

The early leaders of SDS either didn’t notice Mills’ comments on Marxism or, more likely, didn’t know what to make of them.¹⁴ For all practical purposes they continued to operate under the assumption that Victorian Marxism equaled Marxism in total and only took from Mills his earlier more general ideas about ideology, democratic publics, and the moral irresponsibility of elites. Working with these concepts they helped inspire a movement centered around the values of participatory democracy; but by the late sixties the pursuit of these values led the newer members of SDS back into Marxism, largely unaware they were retracing an ideological path similar to the one Mills himself had followed earlier.

¹² C. Wright Mills, “Letter to the New Left,” *Studies on the Left*, vol. 1, no.4, 1961, p. 68. Cover of magazine has Vol. II, No. 1. Volume and number are from Contents page.

¹³ C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists*, (Dell: New York, 1962), pp. 98-99.

¹⁴ There was nothing wrong about not knowing what Mills was talking about. Mills wasn’t sure himself. As Tom Hayden remarked in *Radical Nomad* (Paradigm Publishers: Boulder, Colorado, 2006), p.165, his M. A. thesis on Mills from 1964, Mills labeling himself a “plain Marxist” “was as much a mood as a distinct point of view.” True enough, but Mills’ mood at least suggested a hunch and a direction of inquiry. The early leaders of SDS chose not to follow that lead and did not begin to call themselves “plain Marxists” or suggest that the New Left read Lenin and Luxemburg. Even that’s understandable, but what is less forgivable is that they almost universally condemned those who did turn toward Marxism later in the decade, often using Mills’ criticisms of aspects of Marxism to rule out any consideration of Marxism at all.

I was a member of SDS at Princeton from 1967 to 1970 and of the Revolutionary Union in Oakland from 1970 to 1975 and so went through the political and ideological upheavals of those years. From that experience I took away an understanding of Marxism similar in most ways to Mills' but with several differences that together can provide answers both to the problem of practical political orientation that Mills left unresolved and how the values and practices of the New Left can be reconciled with the theory and history of Marxism. This reconciliation is possible because of two very large and elemental political facts that neither Mills nor the early leaders of SDS were able to see clearly.

The first of these facts is that classical Marxism, in addition to containing theories about capitalism and socialism, was at the same time a political movement that had inherited and assimilated the democratic principles and goals of the American and French revolutions, the most basic of which was the demand for universal and equal suffrage from the monarchies and privileged orders of Old Regime Europe. Whatever differences they may have had concerning the tactics required to achieve this goal or the specifics of the economic policies that a democratic majority would implement upon taking power, all Marxists (including Lenin until 1917) believed that the establishment of a democratic republic was the first priority of the working class movement and the form of the state through which the working class would rule.¹⁵

The second fact concerns the undemocratic structure of the U. S. Constitution. The most basic meaning of democracy is that the right to vote is universal and that all votes count equally, but by that measure the U. S. is not now and never has been a democracy. From the beginning the Constitution set up barriers to the principle of one person, one vote by, first, giving slave owners voting power for their slaves and, second, by giving the same voting power to each state in the Senate regardless of population. Even though slavery and formal Jim Crow are now gone, the rigid entrenchment of unequal representation in the Senate (combined with myriad other forms of effective disenfranchisement) means that the U. S. falls far short of the basic standards of representative democracy.

¹⁵ On the matter of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the form of working class rule, Hal Draper, "Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," *New Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Summer 1962, pp. 93 ff., established long ago that Marx and Engels equated the dictatorship of the proletariat with the democratic republic. Available at marxists.org.

Marxism can be reconciled with the democratic values of the New Left based on its original commitment to equal democratic representation and Marxism can still provide a useful orientation for practical political activity in the U. S. because an understanding of the history of Marxism's engagement in the battle for democracy in Europe can help in the formulation of the ideology and strategy required to achieve the same political objective in this country.

Now it may seem like an unnecessarily roundabout route to go back through the history of the Marxist New Left in order to trace the steps that led to a realization that the Constitution is an obstacle to democracy, and it would be unnecessary if the early leaders of the New Left had reached the same conclusion by more direct means and had made the Constitution part of their original criticism of the undemocratic nature of American society and politics; but they did not. The question is why, given their democratic values, the undemocratic structure of the Constitution remained outside the bounds of the political vision of both Mills and the early leaders of the New Left.

In Mills' case, the absence of any discussion of constitutional structure was almost certainly due to his lack of interest in what he called "the middle levels of power" in Congress.¹⁶ Mills' main focus was on the "Higher Circles" at the top of the political, military, and corporate bureaucracies that had grown enormously during WWII and were then redirected into the Cold War.¹⁷ Yet Mills also knew that power by itself was not self-justifying:

Those in authority attempt to justify their rule over institutions by linking it, as if it were a necessary consequence, with widely believed-in moral symbols, sacred emblems, legal formulae. These central conceptions may refer to a god, or gods, the 'vote of the majority,' 'the will of the people,' 'the aristocracy of talent or wealth,' to the 'divine right of kings,' or to the allegedly extraordinary endowment of the ruler himself. Social scientists, following Weber, call such conceptions 'legitimations,' or sometimes 'symbols of justification.'¹⁸

¹⁶ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1956) pp. 227, 245, 256, 263.

¹⁷ Mills, *Power Elite*, pp. 3 ff.

¹⁸ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1959) p. 36.

Any challenge to established power therefore also simultaneously involved a challenge to the legitimacy of the symbols used to justify that power:

Mere deprivation, for a while, will not start a movement, for simple deprivation may lead to apathy. With deprivation must come the rejection of the symbols and myths that justify the authorities and the acceptance of counter-symbols that will focus the deprivation politically, inculcate the truth about common interests and common struggles, and offer some hope of winning a better tomorrow. For this there must be intellect and power.¹⁹

Of course, the foundational symbol of political authority in the U. S. is the Constitution. Although ritually portrayed as the product of “We, the people” and the guarantor of “the vote of the majority,” the Constitution was purposely designed to block majority rule. Mills had the opportunity and the conceptual tools to separate constitutional reality from symbolic myth and to turn the accepted legitimacy of majority rule against the antidemocratic privileges embedded in the Constitution, but he chose to go off in another direction entirely. For his own idiosyncratic reasons, he chose to resurrect the Jeffersonian ideal of local small-group citizen discussion as his democratic counter-symbol.²⁰ This choice was unfortunate. For the purposes of focusing political discontent, identifying common interests, and orienting the direction of common struggles, the goal of equal democratic representation is a more realistic and potentially more effective embodiment of democratic aspirations than the idealization of the face-to-face discussion circles of early small-town America.

The early leaders of SDS were not blind followers of Mills and were not so dismissive of the importance of the structure of U. S. political institutions. Their direct involvement in the Civil Rights movement made them acutely aware of the outsized power of the South in Congress and the Democratic Party, and they therefore focused much more attention than Mills had on politics and government in Washington. Despite this focus, however, they still held back from any direct criticism of the Constitution itself because, at least in part, they

¹⁹ C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power* (Harcourt, Brace and Company: New York, 1948) pp. 273-4.

²⁰ Mills, *Power Elite*, pp. 298-300

were not prepared to venture too far beyond the bounds of conventional reform politics.²¹ Then, later, after their opposition to the Vietnam war had placed them outside the two-party Cold War consensus and the pressing need to “name the system” provided an opportunity to reconsider their original hesitancy in criticizing the Constitution directly, they, too, chose to go in other directions.

This avoidance of the problem of constitutional structure by both Mills and the early leaders of SDS left an intellectual and political hole at the center of New Left thinking that crippled its ability to chart a clear course for a democratic movement in American politics. Intellectually, it was impossible to “name, describe, analyze, and understand the system” that produced wars abroad and injustices at home without confronting directly how the government was constructed and how both parties worked to defend it. Politically, the failure to identify the Constitution itself as undemocratic put SDS in an ambiguous and unstable ideological position between the Cold War liberalism of the Democratic Party and the world of Marxist anti-imperialism without any coherent institutional theory of its own to stand on.

From the standpoint of the anti-communist liberal/labor forces within the Democratic Party, SDS’s attempted balancing act was bound to fail because Cold War liberalism did not recognize any middle ground between the ostensibly liberal democratic political institutions of the United States and communist tyranny. Todd Gitlin gives this summary of the liberal anti-communist view of the New Left at the time:

...SDS, having slipped away from the liberal-labor alliance, was sliding irrevocably into the gravitational pull of the hereditary Marxist-Leninist Left.... [T]he situation presented a precise analogue to the orthodox Cold War view of an either/or world. A student movement could never really go it alone; it was bound to become a satellite of one side or the other. SDS, having escaped the correct orbit, was on the verge of choosing the wrong, Communist, side.²²

²¹ Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets*, pp 122-3, for Dick Flacks’ response to a question about the deletion of a passage in Hayden’s draft of *The Port Huron Statement* that could have been construed as critical of the Constitution.

²² Gitlin, *The Sixties*, pp. 181-2, Gitlin’s summary of the views of Tom Kahn.

The fact that the political history of the New Left did follow the trajectory predicted in these warnings has been taken ever since as confirmation that the original liberal critique of the New Left was fundamentally correct, that it was not possible to create an independent, coherent, and sustainable democratic political movement to the left of the Democratic Party.²³

This conclusion should be rejected. The potential existed and has always existed to base an American left squarely on traditional democratic principles. The liberal critique of the New Left presumed that the U. S. already had a formal system of representative democracy in place and that political reform could be achieved through the normal workings of the existing political process. More by instinct than through any worked-out theory, events convinced the New Left that this confidence in the ability of the system to reform itself was mistaken. Those instincts were not wrong, but they were never grounded in a systematic critique of liberalism's central justifying claim that the basic structure of the U. S. political system was already democratic. Marxism-Leninism was able to make inroads into SDS in part by exploiting the gap left by this missing critique of America's democratic mythology.

In the standard view of the history of the New Left, this intrusion of revolutionary Marxist anti-imperialist ideology into SDS, symbolized most dramatically by the performance of Weatherman, was an unrelieved moral, intellectual, and political disaster. This catastrophe theory needs to be modified in three ways in order to make the history of the New Left intelligible and complete. First, the adoption of the language of revolution in the late sixties did not mean that most members of SDS believed that a revolution in the U.S. was imminent. Lenin's theory of imperialism predicted only that imperialist wars would inevitably intensify and produce a revolutionary situation at some point. Few outside of Weatherman believed that point had arrived. Second, it was the invasion of Cambodia that finally convinced substantial numbers of SDS members that Lenin had been right. Several thousand New Left activists then moved into working class jobs and communities to prepare for the larger wars and political crises to come; but Nixon's meeting with Mao and the continuing withdrawal of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia soon cut the ground from beneath the foundations of

²³ Breines, *Community and Organization*, pp. 1-4, for a review of the arguments by a number of critics that the (apparent) failure of the New Left proves that the original liberal democratic critique of the New Left was right.

Leninism, and the dominating force of the war that had driven the New Left for most of a decade gradually wound down. Those who could not see this change continued on for several more years in a delusory effort to form a new revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party. In the standard accounts, this last expression of the New Left as an identifiable political movement is taken as the final proof that Marxism was an intellectual and political dead end. The truth is more mixed. Until 1974, before the scramble to declare one's own tiny group the new revolutionary party, the effort to develop a common strategy and program had involved a great deal of reading, discussion, and debate about the history and meaning of Marxism both within and between the various Marxist groups.²⁴ Through those discussions and debates it was possible to piece together an understanding of the original democratic goals of classical Marxism that is still relevant to the U. S. today.

That was more than forty years ago. Since then the growing awareness of the undemocratic structure of the U. S. political system has owed little or nothing to Marxism or to any surviving remnant of the New or Old Left.²⁵ It has grown instead primarily from

²⁴ Elbaum, pp. 161-2, gives this summary of the general tenor of thinking and activity during the early stage of the New Communist Movement:

...[E]arly on, free-wheeling discussion, trial runs with a variety of organizing approaches, and even flexibility in organizational matters- including limits on the authority of central leaders- predominated.

Partly this was due to the influence of the grassroots side of the Cultural Revolution, to the spirit of experimentation associated with Che and the Cuban revolution, and to the general diversity of opinion and practice in the Third World movements that inspired young US communists. Even more it was due to the party building trend's origins within and continuing interaction with vibrant and diverse popular movements. The period's broad layers of energetic, independent-minded organizers acted as a check on tendencies toward dogmatism and abuse of authority. Most of the activists turning to the New Communist Movement came out of and were intertwined with this broader milieu; almost all had participated in and many had been leaders of the battles that had produced a revolutionary generation in the first place. There was simply no way such people were going to meld into a single organization or follow a single leadership without clashes of opinion and lots of practical experimentation.

²⁵ Although focused primarily on the Maoist New Communist Movement, Elbaum also provides summaries of the parallel histories of the Democratic Socialists, the pro-Soviet Communist Party, and the main Trotskyist groups. Throughout this period, the political thinking of these groups remained in traditional ruts. The Leninist groups generally continued to refer to the U. S. as a "bourgeois democracy" requiring a revolutionary transformation in order to establish a genuine proletarian democracy (p. 272). The reformist groups, on the other hand, rejected the "bourgeois" epithet and believed that the existing U. S. electoral system could be utilized to achieve socialism legally and peacefully. Nowhere in Elbaum's book is it suggested that the U. S. political system might not deserve to be called a democracy of any kind in the first place. The only substantive

within the conventional political system itself, particularly after the Democratic Party failed to pursue thoroughgoing reforms after the 2008 election. The sight of Max Baucus, Joe Lieberman, Christopher Dodd, Ben Nelson, Mary Landrieu, etc., etc., obstructing and mangling legislation from the House, already watered down in anticipation of Senate hostility, was a painful education in the realities of American political power.²⁶

criticism of the formal structure of U. S. politics is limited to the observation that first-past-the-post winner-take-all electoral rules have made it virtually impossible for a third party to gain any stable institutional footing (pp. 318-9).

As Elbaum also relates, by the mid-1990's the entire socialist left had effectively ceased to exist in any public form (301). The collapse of the Soviet Union and China's imposition of an authoritarian market system had seriously discredited the very idea of socialism as a workable system and had caused widespread disorientation and demoralization across the entire left. These were the years in which various pundits declared that the victory of liberal democracy over Marxist socialism marked "the end of history" and that "there is no alternative" to actually existing capitalism (326). Although unwilling to accept that these declarations were any more accurate than the similar declarations of the "end of ideology" in the 1950's, the fact of the matter is that the left in the 1990's was suffering from political and intellectual exhaustion.

²⁶ MSNBC's daily coverage with open-mouthed astonishment of Max Baucus' stranglehold on health care legislation was probably the main avenue by which large numbers of people were first drawn into a serious engagement with the Constitution's perverse system of representation. This TV coverage was accompanied by more detailed historical and analytical pieces in newspapers and magazines. As a representative example, Ezra Klein wrote an article on his *Washington Post Wonkblog* titled "Reminder: The Senate Hates Democracy" (6/19/2009) in which he informed his readers that California with its 36 million people was entitled to only two seats in the Senate, the same number as Wyoming with its 532,000, and that Baucus' handpicked health care committee was made up of Senators, half of them Republicans, from seven states with a combined population of 11.18 million, considerably less than the population of greater Los Angeles.

For political wonks like Klein, Baucus' obstructionism was not wholly unexpected. Whenever Democrats in the past had managed to take control of both houses of Congress and the Presidency at the same time, it was usually the Senate that had acted as a brake on reform. Until the 1960's, this opposition was generally attributed to the entrenched power of conservative Southern segregationists in the Democratic Party. With the realignment of the two parties in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, however, there had been a hope that the Democrats would be able to act with a more unified resolve under Clinton after twelve years of Republican dominance; but those hopes proved fruitless as the Senate once again quickly stepped in to derail reform of the health care system and to retain the ban on gays serving openly in the military.

Because the Senate's hostility to reform continued even after most of the South had left the Democratic Party, some political analysts began searching for a deeper explanation of the Senate's unchanging obduracy. For the first time in almost a century, that search began to dig behind the superficial labels of the political parties to the underlying structure of the Constitution itself. Thomas Geoghegan, "The Infernal Senate" (*The New Republic*, 11/20/1994), was the first of these new constitutional critiques, quickly followed by Daniel Lazare's much more thorough dismantling of the entire backward-looking political philosophy of the Founding Fathers and their Constitution, *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace: New York, 1996). Lazare's "pathbreaking book" (Hendrik Hertzberg's characterization in "Framed Up: What the Constitution Gets Wrong," *The New Yorker*, 7/29/2002) was eventually acknowledged by academic heavyweights such as Robert Dahl and Sanford Levinson, who came out with constitutional critiques of their own (Robert Dahl, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2002) and Sanford Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where the Constitution Goes Wrong* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2008). Although tamer in their criticisms and prescriptions than Lazare, they nevertheless conceded the main point that the Constitution is and always has been a bulwark against democratic self-government. It

For most progressives the answer to these disappointments has been to just keep trying: elect more Elizabeth Warrens, support Jeff Merkley's efforts to end the sixty-vote filibuster rule, back Bernie Sanders' opposition to corporate power and government austerity (and more recently his run for the Presidency), but never give up supporting the Democratic Party because it is the only realistic defense against the Republicans and the right-wing crazies. Others are now more sceptical of this straight Democratic Party electoral strategy because they can't forget that the Democrats had the numbers in 2009 to enact serious reforms but tied their own hands by retaining the rules that made it impossible to do so. By means of this self-incapacitation, Democrats carried out the job of obstruction that the Republicans were temporarily too weak to manage on their own. These delaying tactics gave the Republicans time to regroup and reassume their allotted role as the party of obstruction and gridlock (and then to move on to elect Trump).

The perennial left-wing answer to the failure of conventional politics to deliver on its promises has always been to "build a movement," and in the aftermath of 2008 two new left-wing political projects in particular have helped to do just that.²⁷ In a flash of brilliance, Occupy Wall Street catalyzed the sentiments of millions against the domination of politics by financial and corporate elites; and, on the more traditional socialist left, *Jacobin Magazine* has gained a following for its smart historical and political commentary. Neither of these political groupings is under any illusion that the U. S. is a functioning democracy, yet for various reasons both have chosen to focus their strategic energy on political targets other than the Constitution itself.

While no one can speak for Occupy as a whole, there are prominent figures in the movement whose views can be taken as indications of some widely held beliefs and attitudes. Micah White, for example, in the original call for the Occupation of Wall Street, wrote that "the core of why the American political establishment is currently unworthy of being called

was this intellectual preparatory work that made it possible for journalists such as Klein to declare with offhand casualness in 2009 that, of course, the Senate hates democracy. More on the importance of Lazare's work in the conclusion.

²⁷ Black Lives Matter started after these words were written and is another and even larger mass reaction to the unjust and undemocratic U. S. social and political order. Because racial injustice has always been inseparably bound up with the undemocratic structure of the Constitution itself, I first want to get the issue of the Constitution right.

a democracy” is because of “the influence money has over our representatives in Washington.”²⁸ This formulation is backward and muddled because the American political system has never been a representative democracy in the first place and has always used money to keep it that way. David Graeber, one of the original organizers of Occupy on the ground in New York, is also either unaware of or uninterested in the undemocratic structure of representation embedded in the Constitution. The only kind of democracy he seems interested in is the direct democracy of consensus decision-making practiced by the Occupy assemblies. He criticizes the Constitution not because of its structure of unequal representation but because it is not premised on the self-governing direct democracy of public assemblies.²⁹

Jacobin, on the other hand, gets the Constitution right. In “Burn the Constitution,” Seth Ackerman writes that the Constitution was “a document drafted by a coterie of gilded gentry,” that it sought “to restrict popular sovereignty to the point of strangulation,” that “it is a charter for plutocracy,” and that the “Senate is an undemocratic monstrosity;”³⁰ but *Jacobin* has not yet gone on to conclude that the principal strategic objective of the left should therefore be the establishment of a political system based on equal representation. Their general strategic perspective is comprised instead of three loosely defined areas of work: support for mass movements, the promotion of the ideas of democratic socialism, and cooperation with progressive elements in the Democratic Party when possible.³¹ By themselves these three points are too diffuse to differentiate between the distinct goals of democracy and socialism. Even if the ultimate long-term goal of socialism makes economic and political sense, the establishment of democracy is the precondition and means of getting there. The immediate barrier of an undemocratic political system is a prior and distinct problem of its own that requires more historical and strategic analysis than *Jacobin* has given it so far.

²⁸ Micah White, “#OCCUPYWALLSTREET: A Shift in Revolutionary Tactics,” Adbusters blog, 7/13/2011

²⁹ David Graeber, “Occupy Wall Street’s Anarchist Roots,” *Al Jazeera*, 11/30/2011.

³⁰ Seth Ackerman, “Burn the Constitution,” *Jacobin*, 3/26/2011.

³¹ Bhaskar Sunkara, “Interview,” *New Left Review*, no. 90, 12/2014.

The value of going back through the history of the New Left is that it took the struggle for democracy as its starting point, and it was from that perspective that the content and relevance of Marxism was analyzed and judged. At the time it was not able to pull those ideas together into a coherent ideological and strategic whole, but all the elements necessary for the construction of a systematic democratic ideology and strategy were there. That strategy is still needed today, and a review of the history of the New Left and its encounter with Marxism can contribute to its realization.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT WAS PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY? THE POLITICAL BELIEFS AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SDS

The place to begin an examination of the meaning of participatory democracy in the New Left is James Miller's account of the dilemma that Tom Hayden ran into while putting together his draft of what became *The Port Huron Statement*.¹ In its choice of a new name in early 1960, SDS had already declared that its goal was to help make the United States a more democratic society. Hayden's assignment in early 1962 was to explain more fully where and why the U. S. had fallen short of its democratic promise and how SDS intended to help close that gap. In examining the problem of democracy in the U. S., Hayden relied heavily on C. Wright Mills' diagnosis that the face-to-face public discussion of political issues that had once characterized American democracy had all but disappeared in the media-dominated mass society of the Cold War. In Mills' view, the formal legal machinery of democracy in the U. S. was still intact and available, but a knowledgeable and engaged public was needed to put it in motion.² Consequently, Mills' main polemical strategy was to hark back to America's lost democratic traditions and to call for a revival of the Jeffersonian ideal of public debate among the citizenry in order to counter the misinformation and propaganda of the corporate media. Mills influence was obvious in the notes Hayden made in preparing his draft, where Hayden emphasized that "I am primarily concerned about *the complete absence of an active and creative set of publics*" in American political life.³ The finished version of *The Port Huron Statement* called for a "participatory democracy" as the antidote for what Hayden had called America's "inactive democracy."⁴

At the same time he was characterizing the U. S. as an "inactive democracy," however, Hayden was also harboring doubts about whether the U. S. constitutional system was a democracy at all, a question that Mills himself had not broached. As Hayden put it in another

¹ Miller, pp. 78-98, 151-2.

² Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, pp. 188, 190.

³ Miller, p. 90.

⁴ Miller, p. 96.

note, “This is a central fatal fact about the United States: it is a republic, not a democracy, and nearly everyone wants to keep it that way.”⁵ In making this distinction, Hayden was merely repeating James Madison’s formulation in No. 10 of *The Federalist Papers* and accurately pointing out that the Constitution was explicitly designed by the Framers to limit democratic influence in the affairs of the national government, neither a new nor historically controversial assessment.⁶ If not historically controversial, however, the leading members of SDS felt that publicly challenging the undemocratic character of the Constitution would involve them in more political controversy than they were ready to handle.⁷ Consequently, Hayden’s one veiled reference in his draft to America’s undemocratic constitutional structure was dropped from the final text of the *Statement* at Port Huron.

In James Miller’s judgement, this refusal by the founders of SDS to discuss openly their doubts about the Constitution and the full implications of their commitment to the principles of participatory democracy was extraordinarily irresponsible. In Miller’s melodramatic hyperbole, if participatory democracy was incompatible with the political system established by the Constitution, then SDS’s promotion of the idea was in effect a disguised enticement to “political revolution,” a “betrayal of America’s civil religion,” and “tantamount to treason.”⁸ It is not necessary to go along with Miller’s overblown rhetoric in order to recognize that he has identified a problem of genuine political substance: how did SDS think it was possible to make the U. S. a democratic society without confronting directly the undemocratic character of the Constitution? To answer this question, it is first necessary to clear up a confusion in Hayden’s understanding of Madison’s distinction between a republic and a democracy.

At the time of the constitutional ratification debates, the single word “democracy” was used to refer to two very different forms of government. It could refer either to the direct democracy of personal face-to-face decision-making in a small town or to a system of representative democracy in which elected delegates made decisions for the members of a group too large and/or far-flung to meet together face-to-face. The New England town

⁵ Miller, pp. 90,151.

⁶ Miller, p. 151.

⁷ Miller, pp. 122-3, 151.

⁸ Miller, pp. 151-2.

meeting is the classic example of a direct democracy, and the Pennsylvania legislature during the Revolution was the closest approximation to a representative democracy in the former colonies.⁹ Whether direct or representative, the common element that made both of these forms of decision-making democratic was the universality and equality of voting rights. The curious thing about Madison's discussion of democracy in *Federalist No. 10* is that he did not talk specifically about a system of representative democracy at all. He focused instead on the difference between "a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person" and "A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place."¹⁰ Madison made this distinction between representation in general versus direct face-to-face decision-making not because anyone was arguing that a national or even a state government could possibly be run by a direct democracy but because he wanted to make an entirely different point about the ability of a large national republic with a complicated system of representation to contain the power of factions.

Measured by Madison's standard of pure democracy, of course the United States is not a democracy because a direct democracy is physically impossible in a society with a large population spread over an immense geographical area. Under this meaning of democracy, a democracy and a republic are mutually exclusive because one uses representation and the other doesn't. Under the representative meaning of democracy, however, a democracy and a republic are not opposites or incompatible. A representative democracy is a type of republic in which representation is apportioned equally and the right to vote is universal. Of course, the Constitution blocked this form of democracy as well, but the *Federalist Papers* were purposely written to obscure the mechanisms by which this suppression of representative democracy was accomplished.

In his brief comments on the Constitution, Hayden gave no indication he was even aware that these two distinct meanings of democracy were at play in the ratification debates or that a republic and a democracy are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts. These distinctions matter for two reasons. First, they bear directly on the question of whether SDS's

⁹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (W.W. Norton & Co.: New York, 1972), pp.226-31.

¹⁰ James Madison, *The Federalist, No. 10* (E.P. Dutton & Co.: New York, 1937), p. 45.

advocacy of participatory democracy had as its goal the creation of an impossibly utopian state of direct face-to-face democracy or whether the aim was the humanly possible but extremely difficult goal of making representative political institutions in the U. S. more democratic; and, second, these distinctions are also required in order to name, describe, analyze and understand “the system” that participatory democracy was intended to change. On the first of these questions there can be no dispute. In interviewing the original members of SDS for his book, Miller asked each of them directly whether participatory democracy was ever intended as a replacement for representative institutions, either within their own organization or in the country as a whole. Their uniform response was that participatory democracy was conceived of only as a broad moral and political call to action intended to infuse new life into or put pressure on representative institutions, not as the name for an entirely new system of direct face-to-face decision-making. Miller grants that “This is one point on which virtually all the key participants at Port Huron agree.”¹¹ Unfortunately, neither Miller nor any of the SDS members he interviewed then went on to clear up Hayden’s original failure to distinguish between a democratic or undemocratic republic or to state clearly that the U. S. is not a representative democracy.¹²

Getting to the Roots of Democracy:

The Vietnam War and the Nonexclusion Principle

When SDS was first beginning to take shape in early 1960, Al Haber insisted that SDS needed to be radical in the sense of going to the root of social and political problems.¹³ On the fundamental problem of the Constitution, however, SDS did not dig deep enough. It was

¹¹ Miller, p. 142.

¹² Miller’s work corrects the mistaken conception, traceable primarily to Kirkpatrick Sale’s *SDS*, that participatory democracy originally meant “rule-by-consensus” (Miller, p. 16 and Note 1, p. 379). The idea that rule-by-consensus was the essence of the meaning of participatory democracy came later and was derived from the practice of some of the SDS ERAP community organizing projects and from some of the statements of Jeff Shero in 1965 about how the National Office should be organized and run. Miller argues that rule-by-consensus then *became* the accepted meaning of participatory democracy, ending up at the same point as Sale. I argue that rule-by-consensus never became the dominant regulating meaning of participatory democracy within SDS and that the charge of utopianism and romanticism by both Miller and Sale against the new membership is misguided. See note 17 below.

¹³ Sale, p. 25.

possible to challenge the legitimacy of the Constitution while still “speaking American”¹⁴ (Students for a Democratic Constitution would have sounded equally “American”), but that is a step SDS did not take. The leading members of SDS felt that criticizing the Constitution directly was just too much to take on and would only marginalize them politically. They therefore suppressed any doubts they may have had about the Constitution, as they also suppressed many of their doubts about the Democratic Party and the U. S. role in the Cold War. They hoped instead that their activities would help create enough pressure to push through reforms within the country’s existing political framework. With the escalation of the Vietnam war, however, the tensions in these intellectual and political compromises snapped.

SDS’s original strategic perspective was based on the theory that a powerful but rational liberal corporate elite would respond to public political discontent with reforms in order to head off the more costly consequences of outright social conflict and disorder; but as Dick Flacks, the person most responsible for developing this strategic perspective within SDS, candidly admits:

If we had been right, President Johnson should have avoided the Vietnam War in preference to stabilizing the domestic economy. He shouldn’t have tried to do both at once. We were right that you *couldn’t* do both at once. But I don’t think that anybody expected that the war would go on and on and keep escalating. (emphasis in original)¹⁵

Because U. S. corporatism turned out to be not so rational and liberal after all, SDS President Paul Potter made the need to “name the system” the centerpiece of his speech at the first Washington anti-Vietnam War demonstration in April 1965.

Despite the realization that their original political analysis could not account for the actions of the government or of the Democratic Party, however, the original leaders of SDS never proposed any alternative theory of “the system.” Just the opposite. They almost immediately began to back away from the intellectual and political challenge that Potter had staked out in his speech. Potter himself, in a paper presented at the next National Convention

¹⁴ Miller, pp. 54, 145.

¹⁵ Miller, pp. 181-2.

just two months later, argued that SDS should not entangle itself any further in foreign Cold War conflicts¹⁶; and by October National Secretary Paul Booth was willing to compromise SDS's opposition to the draft in order to regain the political protection of liberal Democrats against a campaign of redbaiting launched by the media, members of Congress, and the Johnson administration. This effort to reestablish ties with conventional liberalism put Booth at odds with most of the new members of SDS (and many veteran members as well) who had been attracted to SDS precisely because of its uncompromising stand against the war. As a consequence, Booth and the rest of the Old Guard leadership of SDS were swept from office at the next National Convention in 1966.

The standard histories grant that Booth was trying to reimpose a political analysis and strategy that the Old Guard itself had rejected just six months prior, and they also grant that the new membership remained committed to the imperative to name and change "the system" that Potter had set out as the movement's central challenge; yet these same histories then go on to label the efforts of the new members "romantic" and "utopian" while the political U-turn of the Old Guard is deemed "responsible" and "realistic" in comparison.¹⁷ The justification for these judgements is that the new members took the slogan of participatory democracy to self-destructive extremes: they were naïve and reckless in their rejection of an alliance with liberalism, they refused to institute a responsible system of representation and leadership within SDS, and they allowed the Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party to enter and operate freely within SDS for too long. These impulsive decisions and lax rules are said to have weakened SDS's defenses and prevented it from controlling the rise of factions, which eventually led to the destruction of SDS at its last

¹⁶ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, pp. 188-9.

¹⁷ Miller, pp. 244-258, Sale, pp. 214-7, 224-235. Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, pp. 30-31, 104-109, 127-139. SDS Vice President Jeff Shero comes in for particularly harsh (and wholly undeserved) criticism in these accounts for creating "chaos" in the National Office as a result of his efforts to introduce "office democracy." For an account of the situation in the National Office in the summer of 1965 from someone who was actually there see Robert Pardun, *Prairie Radical* (Shire Press: Los Gatos, CA, 2001) pp.120-4, 131, and footnotes 70 and 76. Contrary to the cheap effort in the standard accounts to portray the new members as intellectually and politically incompetent, after the Prairie Power people fully displaced the Old Guard in 1966 the National Office actually operated "with surprising energy and perhaps with more efficiency than it had ever shown before." (Sale, p.340).

convention in June 1969. As for the quest to name and change the system, it is said to have ended in “intellectual squalor and moral collapse”¹⁸ “in the fetid bogs of Marxism.”¹⁹

Here’s a view of participatory democracy from the other side. Participatory democracy was neither weak nor naïve. Nor did the arrival of organized Marxist-Leninists do serious harm to SDS. The Progressive Labor Party never amounted to more than a nagging irritant because its ideology and practical policies were always unappealing to the vast majority of SDS members. Of course Marxist ideas spread within SDS, but in response to the escalating war and the black revolt in the cities rather than to any ideological influence or pressure from PL. Factions also formed, and one of them, Weatherman, decided to wreck the 1969 National Convention when SDS’s principle of non-exclusion and open debate got in its way; but SDS as a whole did not collapse as a result. SDS was never an organization with a centralized structure of administration on which the local chapters depended for direction and initiative. From its beginnings in Al Haber’s earliest ideological and organizational thinking, SDS was conceived of as a voluntary network of political discussion and autonomous local activity;²⁰ and that network was only minimally affected by Weatherman’s disruptions. Finally, Marxism, rather than a sinkhole of moral and intellectual depravity, can be a positive aid in answering the still unsolved problem of “naming the system” and formulating a positive democratic strategy.

The differences between these two views of the history of SDS and participatory democracy hinge on a disagreement over the consequences of repealing the ban on the participation of Marxist-Leninists in SDS at the 1965 National Convention. SDS was widely criticized for this decision, and in response Al Haber and Carl Oglesby put together two careful and thorough explanations of the assumptions underlying SDS’s conception of the workings of participatory democracy.

SDS’s dilemma was that its criticism of Cold War policies in general and of the Vietnam War in particular had crossed the line set by the prevailing two-party anti-communist consensus. Consequently, SDS itself was then subjected to redbaiting and to demands that it

¹⁸ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 389.

¹⁹ Sale, p. 157.

²⁰ Sale, pp. 24-5, Miller, pp. 67, 70-4.

pull back from this prohibited political territory. In his response, Haber argued that acceptance of these limits would make SDS's "ideas of radical democracy...undiscussable"²¹:

As long as the rhetoric of anti-communism, and the views of reality which it enshrines, remain unchallenged in the American public, the left will always be marginal.... As long as we offer no challenge to anti-communism as the public's frame of reference, our program, no matter how democratic, will gain no hearing or debate in that public....

The 'new left' refuses quietly to submit to such a future for itself and for democratic radicalism.²²

Allowing Marxist-Leninists to participate in SDS was one part of this effort to break out of the ideological straitjacket of Cold War anti-communism. While Leninism's doctrine of the Party and the State was certainly in conflict with SDS's democratic beliefs, there was just as obviously an overlapping practical political opposition to U. S. imperialism in general and to the Vietnam War in particular with these same Marxist-Leninists. Haber argued that in this difficult and complex political situation it was impossible to draw an "unambiguous formula...that would differentiate those who are 'really' sincere in their commitment to democracy from those who only profess sincerity."²³ Haber believed it would be better to have an unlimited and ongoing debate about the meaning and practical implications of democracy under one organizational umbrella where political behavior could be seen and judged directly rather than try to define and enforce a doctrinal test for membership in advance.²⁴

Critics of SDS warned that this open door nonexclusion policy was naïve and would allow Marxist-Leninist groups to "infiltrate" and "take over" the organization. Haber agreed with Oglesby that this threat of an organizational takeover was a "pseudoproblem." In Oglesby's words:

It is hard to see how a group could be 'taken over' unless it has handles of power that can be seized, some 'central apparatus' that can enforce

²¹ Al Haber, "Nonexclusionism: The New Left and the Democratic Left," in Massimo Teodori, ed., *The New Left: A Documentary History* (Bobbs-Merrill Co.: New York, 1969) p. 223. Digital edition available at sds-1960s.com

²² Haber, p. 223.

²³ Haber, p. 225.

²⁴ Haber, p. 220.

orders. SDS has no such apparatus—only a beleaguered hotspot in Chicago—and it is a main hard point with us that it never shall.... Bureaucracies concentrate and conceal power. We avoid them. Anyone who tries to invade us therefore invades only himself; for the only power available to any of us is the power of good sense and humanity.²⁵

After ruling out the possibility of a bureaucratic take over, however, Oglesby went on to acknowledge that nonexclusion would expose SDS “to the danger that our democratic faith might be out-argued from within.” Although he considered the likelihood of such a development “galactically” remote, he was clear-sighted and honest enough to recognize the full implications of SDS’s commitment to unrestricted participation. He along with most of the rest of SDS believed that the defense of democratic values within SDS would be “enforced” through the ongoing debate and examination of action by individual members at the grass roots level of the organization. Per Haber: “Thus, there *is* internal ‘ideological control.’ But it operates individually through continual debate and examination of action.... And if there must be ‘exclusion’ the process is the traditional one of grass-roots democracy: their colleagues stop listening to them and grant them no responsibility and support in the organization.”²⁶

Haber and Oglesby’s theory of the organizational workings of participatory democracy in fact proved out. Weatherman’s attempt to expel PL and declare itself the “real” SDS was a grasp at a figment of its own fevered imagination. At the same time, PL was left presiding over an empty shell as hundreds of SDS chapters and tens of thousands of SDS members saw nothing useful in PL’s bizarre pronouncements and went their own way. In his extended commentary on SDS following the 1969 convention, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” Oglesby identified the political conceit that afflicted both Weatherman and PL as the “equation of the social movement with the organizations that arise within it.”²⁷ While it was certainly possible that a faction in the grip of such an organizationist²⁸ delusion might disrupt or take over a meeting, the broader movement was not something that could be

²⁵ Carl Oglesby, “Democracy Is Nothing If It Is Not Dangerous,” Speech at *Guardian* dinner November, 1969. Available at www.sds-1960s.com.

²⁶ Haber, p. 220.

²⁷ Carl Oglesby, “Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin,” *Liberation* vol. 14, nos. 5,6, 1969, p. 15.

²⁸ Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968*, p. 50 for the term “organizationist”.

similarly seized. Nor could it be prevented from creating new lines of communication and avenues of activity. In short, the SDS National Office and National Conventions were communication hubs and forums, not command centers, and the organization of SDS was a political network, not a pyramid of authority.

Given his view of SDS as a movement rooted in the chapters, it might be expected that Oglesby would have had something to say about how the movement continued in the wake of the 1969 convention; but he did not. He himself was so demoralized by the ideological and factional infighting within SDS that he ceased his political involvement altogether. Convinced that the Marxist rhetoric permeating the movement was a moral and intellectual dead end, Oglesby thought the New Left had lost the good sense and humanity that was its only source of strength. While I have a different view on this last point, this is not the place to dispute particular ideologies or strategies. More important than any particular ideology or strategy are the general organizational conditions within which these ideological and strategic debates took place. The bottom line is that, despite the year-long effort by the National Office/Weatherman faction to expel PL and turn SDS into a centralized cadre organization, SDS had the same organizational form in 1969 as it had in 1965: it still had no central apparatus to enforce orders and could not in any meaningful sense be taken over or destroyed merely by a few days of political theater at a meeting in Chicago. SDS had become Marxist in many of its political beliefs, but it was also still decentralist and voluntarist in its organization and activities.

The central failing of all New Left histories is their refusal to acknowledge the continuing viability of SDS's political network following the 1969 convention. Instead, as they introduce the ideological influence of Marxism into their accounts, every New Left history simultaneously abandons a decentralist description of SDS's organizational structure and operations and reverts to the misplaced rhetoric of "infiltration" and "takeover" to characterize SDS's organizational dynamic, a rhetoric that Haber and Oglesby argued was applicable only to bureaucratic organizations with centralized levers of control. This switch is made without explaining how Haber and Oglesby might have been mistaken in their original analyses or how and when a transition to organizational centralism might have taken place. It is this National Office-centered construct that is then said to have "collapsed,"

“imploded,” “died,” or been “taken over” in Chicago. Originally created by Kirkpatrick Sale, all subsequent histories of the New Left have followed Sale and adopted this organizationist catastrophe²⁹ theory as a valid diagnosis of SDS’s ultimate fate.³⁰ The key to getting New Left history back on track is to locate where Sale makes this switch from decentralism to centralism and to switch it back.

Kirkpatrick Sale’s Organizationist Diversion of New Left History

In the first half of *SDS*, where his better journalistic instincts predominate, Sale readily acknowledges (against his own predilections) that SDS’s decentralized organizational arrangements worked extraordinarily well for most of the decade. It is in the second half of the book, where his anti-Marxist political prejudices take over, that he begins to force the historical evidence into his organizationist straitjacket. This progression from journalism to ideological special pleading can be traced by following his observations on the growth of SDS’s activities from 1964 to 1969 despite a lack of strategic consensus at or direction from the national level of the organization.

Sale’s first substantial comment on the shape and nature of SDS’s organizational affairs focuses on the fallout following the fragmented and inconclusive 1964 National Convention:

And yet, ultimately neither the weakness of the leadership nor the inefficiencies of the National Office [NO] really seemed to matter that much. For there was now, more than ever before, a considerable strength in the chapters themselves.... [M]ost SDS people...wrote their own pamphlets, sent their own releases to the student paper, planned their own campus activities...;³¹

and of activities in early 1966 he writes:

The [anti-draft] rank protests, held without the slightest push from the NO, and the free universities, largely chapter-created, were two

²⁹ I wrote the words “catastrophe theory” some time before I ran across the term “sixties-as-catastrophe” in *The New Left Revisited* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2003), John McMillian and Paul Buhle, eds.

³⁰ Even Breines and Flacks, who are otherwise sceptical of the enormous importance that Sale, Gitlin, and Miller attribute to the powers of the National Office and its potential for altering the course of the movement, adopt the language of infiltration, take over, and the death of SDS as a whole when it comes to the matter of PL and the final convention. Breines, pp. 12, 116, 155 note 2. Flacks, p.205.

³¹ Sale, p. 122.

indications [of the local initiative of the grass-roots membership]. The continued growth of regional organizations, with their own meetings, newsletters, presses, and programs was another...;³²

and in the fall of 1968:

Regional offices enjoyed an influx of new life, too. New regional centers were established in Ann Arbor, Chicago, Dallas, Newark, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, joining those already functioning in Cambridge, Ithaca, New York, Los Angeles, and Washington. Though still not the self-sufficient kind of organizations that SDSers envisioned, Regional Offices did put out their own newsletters, hold regional conferences, and coordinate interchapter activities...;³³

and in the spring of 1969:

Dark days for national SDS, perhaps, but there was more to SDS than its national presence...

On the campuses, protests were more frequent, more diverse, and more violent than even the previous years....

SDS—SDS as catalyst had clearly done its job well: protest was percolating into every part of the porous republic...³⁴

Yet Sale then goes on to write that just a few months later in the fall of 1969 all of this local initiative, organization, communication, discussion, meeting, and activity suddenly evaporated:

[Many] SDS chapters simply splintered, duplicating the factionalism of the national organization on a smaller scale, others...simply collapsed within weeks for want of a guiding national presence...;³⁵

The collapse of SDS on the nation's campuses had several important ramifications.... There would generally be no pamphlets or literature tables, no newspapers to proselytize with, no buttons to sell, there would be no regional travelers dropping by, no national meetings for recurrent contacts and inspiration....

This in turn meant that the job of political transmission, of passing on political insights, connections, meanings, and ideology...was stymied and

³² Sale, p. 272.

³³ Sale, p. 482.

³⁴ Sale, pp. 511-13.

³⁵ Sale, p. 615.

all but abandoned.... Without something like an SDS, there would be no ready political mooring; without a political mooring, activism goes adrift....³⁶

This last series of comments shouldn't be taken seriously. The literature tables went back up, leaflets were written, meetings arranged, demonstrations organized, and politics discussed and transmitted just as before. Sale is merely substituting here an organizationist proxy for what he believes is the larger and more fundamental ideological catastrophe of New Left Marxism in general. If Marxism truly was the pit of moral and intellectual depravity that Sale believes it is, then his use of an organizationist shortcut to end the story of SDS quickly wouldn't matter all that much; but if the New Left's immersion in Marxism had some positive consequences, then Sale's contrivance is more harmful.

The fact is that the autonomy and initiative of the local chapters and regional associations that Sale catalogued throughout *SDS* continued after the breakup of the National Office. The main difference was that the ideological and strategic debates that were formerly conducted at large national and regional meetings were now carried out in position papers circulated by the various Marxist groups or in the pages of the *Guardian* (although a case could be made that the New Haven May Day rally was actually the last national convention of SDS). The apparent paradox in this new situation was how the decentralized organizational structure and ethos of participatory democracy could possibly mesh with the Marxist-Leninist proposition that the movement needed to form a new revolutionary party governed by the rules of democratic centralism. The provisional solution to this paradox was that those on both sides of this divide moved slowly and tentatively to see if they could establish any common ground. The Marxist-Leninist Bay Area Revolutionary Union put it this way in their widely read (20,000 copies)³⁷ *Red Papers*, first distributed at the 1969 SDS National Convention:

AT THE PRESENT TIME, THE BUILDING OF COLLECTIVES ON A LOCAL BASIS, AND THE EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES BETWEEN THEM, CAN

³⁶ Sale, pp. 616-7.

³⁷ Elbaum, p. 99, "Within a year of its publication, *Red Papers 1* had gone through several printings and 20,000 copies were in circulation."

CONTRIBUTE THE MOST TO THE CREATION IN THE NEAR FUTURE OF A MARXIST-LENINIST PARTY.³⁸

The Revolutionary Union, the largest and most influential of the Marxist-Leninist groups to grow out of the New Left, was itself at this time just a small circle of perhaps several dozen individuals scattered in a handful of collectives without any worked out practical political program, so the conditions that Oglesby described in 1965 still prevailed: there was no central apparatus to enforce orders and the only power that aspiring leaders of the movement possessed was the power to propose and persuade. It is therefore not possible to understand the ideological contours of the Marxist-Leninist New Left simply by reading off the formal statements of the various Marxist groups themselves. Because these groups were not yet consolidated and centralized, discussions and debates about the meaning and implications of Marxism went on for several years between the leaders of these organizations and the members of the New Left they were trying to recruit and win over to their views.

Participatory Democracy Meets Marxism: Discovering the Democratic Lenin and the End of the Vietnam War

Just by a simple twist of fate, I happened to meet a friend in college whose cousin and husband worked in West Virginia in VISTA and the Appalachian Volunteers. Sometime in 1968 they packed up and moved to join a small Marxist group called the Bay Area Revolutionary Union doing working class organizing in Richmond, California. So, over the next couple of years I was able to keep up with what the RU was doing and after the invasion of Cambodia and the national student strike I headed out to California to sign up. In mid-1971 I had been working in Oakland for about a year when George Jackson was killed while attempting to escape from San Quentin Prison and I got the job of writing an article explaining why Jackson's life was important to the working class for *People Get Ready*, the RU-backed tiny monthly newspaper in the East Bay, the main purpose of which was to give new recruits something to do. Putting the black liberation struggle together with an as yet

³⁸ Bay Area Revolutionary Union, *The Red Papers*, p. 9. (San Francisco, 1969).

non-existent revolutionary working class movement in a coherent way was proving difficult, so the RU leader who headed up the paper (who happened to be the male half of the couple from West Virginia) suggested I read “The Drafting of 183 Students into the Army,”³⁹ a 1901 article by Lenin from *Iskra*, to get some ideas. The article, which was a report on the punishments meted out to university students demanding greater academic freedom from Tsarist authorities, read more like something out of *I. F. Stone’s Weekly* than one of Lenin’s dense major polemics; but the bigger surprise came at the end of the article. In the conclusion, Lenin argued that “The workers must come to the aid of the students,” that the working class “cannot emancipate itself without emancipating the whole people from despotism, that it is its duty first and foremost to respond to every protest and render every support to that protest,” and that any “worker who can look on indifferently while the government sends troops against the student youth is unworthy of the name socialist.”⁴⁰

From my one reading of *What Is to Be Done? (WITBD?)* I was of course familiar with Lenin’s argument that socialist consciousness could “be brought to the workers *only from without*”⁴¹ (emphasis in original), but I thought the content of that consciousness was just the accumulated body of Marxist doctrine regarding capitalism, socialism, the vanguard party, imperialism, war, revolution, etc. In the article, the “from without” part seemed obvious enough; but the content of socialist consciousness was not nearly so straightforward. It appeared that belief in the need for socialism by itself was not enough to qualify as genuine socialist consciousness. Genuine socialist consciousness required opposition to every form of tyranny no matter which group or class was affected. I hadn’t picked up on this broader scope of socialist consciousness from reading *WITBD?* the first time, so I went back to see if I had missed something. Reading back and forth between *WITBD?* and its references to articles in *Iskra* and other writings in the early volumes of the *Collected Works*, it became obvious that the content of the socialist consciousness advocated in *WITBD?* was the same broad opposition to Tsarist tyranny spelled out so clearly in the article on the student protests. So, Lenin’s advocacy of socialist consciousness in *WITBD?*

³⁹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th ed., 1964, vol. 4, pp. 414-19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁴¹ Lenin, vol. 5, p. 422. Also p. 375.

did not just mean consciousness of the need for socialism versus the Economist theory of trade union reformism, but also, against otherwise devout believers in the need for socialism, consciousness of the need for full political freedom for all groups and classes culminating in the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy and the establishment of a democratic republic.

Of course, what I was discovering was that *WITBD?* was a polemic embedded in the first or democratic stage of the revolution in Russia. Unique to Russian Marxism, the theory was that Russia's revolution had to take place in two stages because of Russia's extreme economic and political backwardness, first a democratic stage and then a socialist stage after industry and the working class had developed to a sufficient level. This two-stage theory differed from the standard socialist theory of Western European Marxism in a number of distinctive ways. The most basic difference was that the Russian Marxists did not believe their democratic revolution would abolish classes or result in the undivided rule of the working class. Such a result was inconceivable in the democratic stage in Russia because peasants, capitalists, and liberal constitutionalists were integral if ambivalent players in the anti-Tsarist movement. Although conceived of as only a transitory historical phase, this acceptance of a period of genuine political pluralism gives the early writings of the Marxists in "backward" Russia a non-utopian immediacy and realism largely missing from the overoptimistic socialist evolutionism that prevailed in the "advanced" West until WWI.

Faced with this three-sided contest involving a conservative autocracy, a reform-minded liberalism, and a rebellious working class, Lenin developed his own unique conception of the relationship between these three political forces. Because this conception differed from that of most other Marxists, a long and intricate debate ensued concerning the content and character of political consciousness, leadership, and organization. The core of Lenin's position was that political consciousness was not a fixed body of theory that could be learned from books or explained in generalities. It was the immediate situational political awareness that could be achieved only through the ongoing examination and criticism of government policies and actions as they were happening. This immediate political consciousness could be communicated in a timely manner only by the regular distribution of a newspaper throughout the whole of Russia. All of the other controversies about spontaneity versus consciousness, socialist versus trade union consciousness, consciousness from "inside" or

“outside” the working class, and centralized versus decentralized organization were derivatives of his primary argument about the necessity of distributing an illegal democratic political newspaper under conditions of censorship in an autocratic police state.

Two things about Lenin’s theory seemed obvious to me. First, it was easy to recognize and accept the need for this kind of immediate political consciousness because the political consciousness of the New Left had itself grown out of similar criticisms of government policies by I. F. Stone, C. Wright Mills, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Tom Hayden, Carl Oglesby, *Ramparts Magazine*, etc., etc.; and, second, our tiny local newspapers were woefully incapable of producing anything of comparable quality. The New Left badly needed this kind of political knowledge in 1971 and 1972 because that is when the U. S. and China were beginning to forge their agreement to end their hostilities. Neither our understanding of U.S. imperialism nor of China’s revolutionary anti-imperialism prepared us for the possibility of such a reconciliation. The savagery of the U. S. war against Vietnam had convinced us that the U. S. empire depended for its survival on crushing wars of national liberation and that it would extend the war to China if necessary rather than accept defeat. The New Left’s whole attraction to Leninism hinged on these assumptions, so to my mind the most important challenge facing the New Left was to acknowledge our ignorance and find an explanation for these changes in U. S. and Chinese foreign policy.

Until mid-1972 it was still possible to talk about these issues inside the RU with the focus primarily on improving the quality and effectiveness of our newspapers, but the entire political atmosphere of the Marxist-Leninist New Left began to change at that time. Other groups, particularly the Communist League, relying on *WITBD?* as their authority, had begun to criticize the RU systematically for overemphasizing trade union work, failing to promote scientific socialist consciousness among the workers, and neglecting the primary task of creating a new revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party, all of which were true.⁴² Unfortunately, these critics’ conception of socialist consciousness and the revolutionary party were just rote

⁴² Steve Hamilton, “On the History of the Revolutionary Union (Part II)” (available at marxists.org), points out that the late 1972 “Secretariat Report to the National Central Committee” “began to move the organization in a sharply different direction.” This report was directed at the supposed “lack of boldness” of the rank and file members and was the leadership’s reaction, in part, to criticisms that the RU had overemphasized trade union work and neglected Marxist-Leninist propaganda and party building.

repetitions of the Leninist doctrines codified by the Third International and Stalin in the early 1920's and had nothing whatever to do with the actual historical and political content of *WITBD?* Then, under increasing political pressure, most of it self-imposed,⁴³ the RU itself soon swung around to adopt all the worst features of its critics' traditional dogma regarding socialist consciousness, the party, and the content of *WITBD?*

I protested that the RU was mangling the meaning of *WITBD?* to justify its own crackpot plan to declare itself the new revolutionary party and was ignoring the really valuable theory of democratic political consciousness to be found there. The main objection I ran into was that Lenin's early concern with democracy and the complex political contest with liberalism was due to the peculiarities of the democratic stage of the revolution in Russia but were now out of place in the socialist stage of the struggle against imperialism. My response was that, whatever adjustments had to be made because of different levels of economic and political development, there was an undeniable continuity in Lenin's theory of democratic political consciousness across both stages of the revolution. The surest proof of this continuity was that both at the time of *WITBD?* in 1902 and in *Left Wing Communism* in 1920 Lenin pointed to the Dreyfus Affair, "the conflict that arose in France between all the progressive elements and the militarists," as his paradigmatic illustration of the need for Marxists to understand and engage in every liberal and democratic protest against reaction at all times.⁴⁴ France had certainly reached, in Marxist terms, the socialist stage of revolution when the Dreyfus Affair broke out in the late 1890's and even more so when *Left Wing Communism* was written; yet Lenin insisted that the same conception of democratic consciousness that applied in semi-feudal Tsarist Russia in 1902 also applied in capitalist republican France in 1920. How he could square the invocation of these universal democratic principles with the party dictatorship he was consolidating at the same time in Russia is part of the larger tragedy of the Russian Revolution, but to miss the continuity in his theory of what constituted

⁴³ The RU's insulting proposal to the Black Workers' Congress and the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers' Organization to give up their organizational independence and to consolidate quickly into a party set off a cascade of negative responses to the RU. See Elbaum, pp. 186-7, and the collection of polemics in *Red Papers 6: Build the Leadership of the Proletariat and Its Party*

⁴⁴ Lenin, "Political Agitation and "The Class Point of View,"" vol. 5, p. 341. *Left Wing Communism*, vol. 31, p. 98.

political consciousness is to miss his conception of what Marxist politics was supposed to be about.

My disagreements with and protests against the RU's party-building delusion didn't add up to a coherent alternative political viewpoint until I ran across Franz Schurmann's *The Logic of World Power*⁴⁵ in early 1974 while scouring through the bookstores on Telegraph Avenue. The most important book on U. S. and world politics since the beginning of the Cold War, Schurmann explained why U. S. imperialism's violent brinkmanship stopped short of all-out war between the major powers, why both China and the Soviet Union wanted access to the international capitalist market, and how the socialist project that began with the Russian Revolution ended with the U. S.-China rapprochement. After quitting the RU over its decision to declare itself the new revolutionary communist party, I organized a couple of study groups that combined Lenin's theory of democratic political consciousness with Schurmann on U. S. and world politics and Barrington Moore⁴⁶ and Anthony Giddens⁴⁷ on revolution and class consciousness in the making of the modern world. It was Moore's chapter on the American Civil War and Reconstruction and his reference to the Southern "Junkers" in particular that finally brought the contradiction between the Constitution and democracy clearly into focus.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Franz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power* (Pantheon: New York, 1974). Schurmann, in addition to being an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam war from its inception, was also well known on the left as the author of *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, 2nd edition (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1967), the essential introduction to the theory and practice of Chinese communism and the Cultural Revolution.

⁴⁶ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1967).

⁴⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (Harper: New York, 1975).

⁴⁸ To avoid any misunderstanding, let me emphasize that Moore did not directly point out the contradiction between the Constitution and a democratic republic himself. Recognition of this contradiction was triggered in my mind by reading Moore in light of Lenin's theory of democratic politics. Moore did see that the Radical Republicans wanted to change the entire Southern economic, social, and political order and the structure of the Constitution itself before the South was readmitted to the Union (pp.144-6) and he recognized that the defeat of Reconstruction allowed the Southern "Junkers" to reenter the Union and form a counterrevolutionary alliance with Northern capitalists (148-9), yet in his final analysis he still ended up calling this reactionary social and political outcome a democracy. Compared to the dictatorships of Germany, Japan, Russia, and China included in his study, it was no doubt easy to fall back on the characterization of the U. S. political system as a democracy, which was the standard terminology both in the fight against fascism in the 1930's and 40's and during the Cold War; but it does not accord with historical and political reality. The U. S. has never been a democracy. It has been and continues to be a liberal or not so liberal capitalist republic. If Moore had titled his book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and the Liberal Republic*, he would have dispelled a great deal of confusion.

Discussion of the history of Reconstruction was important in the New Communist Movement because it was central to the debate about the existence of a Black Nation in the United States. Whether one ultimately agreed with the Black Nation Thesis or not, there was no disagreement that the “bourgeois democratic revolution” in the South had been cut short by the defeat of Reconstruction; but then conventional Marxist thinking hit a wall. Instead of recognizing that an incomplete democratic revolution in the South meant that the democratic revolution was also incomplete in the nation as a whole, the Marxist groups continued to talk and act as if a system of democracy already prevailed in the rest of the country outside the South. The most obvious expression of this myopia was the extent to which the left was willing to protest against the limitations of black rights in the South at the same time it continued to ignore the larger national denial of equal voting rights permanently embedded in the Electoral College, the Senate, and the Constitution as a whole. Rather than take on this universal national political struggle for true democratic representation in which blacks and other minorities were clearly the leading and most dynamic force, however, the Leninist groups clung to the fantasy of a repeat of the Bolshevik Revolution and continued to denigrate the concept of electoral democracy as irredeemably reformist and inadequate.

CHAPTER TWO

LENIN AFTER THE NEW LEFT

Thanks to Neil Harding's *Lenin's Political Thought*, which is appropriately divided into two volumes, *Theory and Practice in the Democratic Revolution* (1977) and *Theory and Practice in the Socialist Revolution* (1981), the democratic content and goals of Lenin's early political work are now well documented and widely recognized. Far from being an unorthodox departure from traditional Marxism, Lenin's theoretical outlook and practical policies prior to 1914 were thoroughly conventional formulations drawn directly from the mainstream of European Social Democracy. "Leninism," on the other hand, was created in a few short years in reaction to the twin cataclysms of war in Europe and civil war in Russia. The reason why the details of the earlier phase of Lenin's political work were not more well known or studied for many decades is not hard to explain. For most of the twentieth century the early years of Russian Marxism were generally of interest to Leninists and non-Leninists alike only insofar as they formed the "roots" or "origins" or "foundations" of the later Bolshevik seizure and exercise of power.¹ As a consequence, the theoretical and practical differences distinguishing the democratic and socialist stages of Russian Marxism were glossed over in favor of constructing a single unified theory of "Leninism" as a consistent whole from beginning to end.

The central point of Harding's first volume is that the political goal that Lenin campaigned for in the first twenty-five years of his political life was democracy as it had been commonly understood for more than a century: the establishment of a representative system of universal and equal suffrage to replace the privileged rule of monarchy and aristocracy. This democratic goal constituted, moreover, the political consciousness that the newspaper *Iskra* and *WITBD?* were created to promote. Of course, Lenin and all later Leninists came to reject these democratic institutions as historically obsolete after 1917 and reference to them as the central political subject of *Iskra* and *WITBD?* was effectively replaced in later Party

¹ See Harding, "Introduction," vol. 1, for a review of the history of Lenin studies.

teachings by decontextualized slogans extolling revolution in general, the science of Marxism, the privileged knowledge and leadership of the vanguard Party, and the permanent necessity of centralized Party control. On the specific question of whether Lenin put forward a plan for a permanently centralized and hierarchical revolutionary party in *WITBD?*, Harding's history backs up in detail Hal Draper's earlier (1971) but much briefer criticism of the "fable of Lenin's 'party concept'."² The only "concept of the party" that Lenin held was that the form of the party needed to fit the specific tactical needs of the movement: clandestine in conditions of police censorship, open and fully democratic when freely published newspapers and public meetings were possible. In either case, a full airing of all political disputes in the party press was the norm until after the revolution of 1917.

Harding's work has not only changed the terms of debate about Lenin in academic circles; it has also made its way into debates among practicing Marxists as well. Peter Camejo and Louis Proyect read *Lenin's Political Thought* soon after it was published and began to rely on it in their criticisms of the concept and practice of democratic centralism in the Socialist Workers Party and in other Marxist-Leninist sects.³ They then applied these ideas in creating the North Star Network in the 1980's, an effort to build a mass socialist movement in the U.S.; and Harding's research has continued to underpin much of Proyect's work over the last twenty years in his moderation of the discussions on marxmail.org and in his own prolific writings at louisproyect.org.⁴ Another path by which Harding's ideas were developed runs through Lars Lih. Lih, who already had a Ph. D. in Russian history and politics, writes that "when I first read Harding's books back in the 1980's, he shook me, as he did many others, out of my dogmatic slumbers."⁵ The product of Lih's rethinking was *Lenin Rediscovered*:

² Although Draper knew by the early 1960's that Lenin's ideas on political organization had been distorted by both Marxist-Leninist and anti-Leninist commentators, he never wrote an historical study of Lenin of any length. Most of his energy went into his multi-volume work on Marx. In 1971 Draper did circulate "Toward a New Beginning- On Another Road: The Alternative to the Micro-Sect," a paper that did contain some brief comments on Lenin's "Concept of the Party," and in 1990 wrote a longer piece titled "The Myth of the Leninist 'Concept of the Party,'" but Harding's work has had the greater influence.

³ louisproyect.org, 3/14/2011, Comment made in discussion of *Historical Materialism* symposium on Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered*. Camejo helped form the North Star Network in 1984, a non-sectarian socialist organization that rejected democratic centralism, Elbaum, p. 262.

⁴ The most concise catalogue of the sources informing Proyect's political views can be found in his post "The Leninist Party: an annotated bibliography," (3/11/2009) at louisproyect.org.

⁵ "Lars Lih on Neil Harding" at marxmail.org archives 2/21/2012. Subject search for Lars Lih.

What Is to Be Done? In Context (2006).⁶ Then in 2012 Lih's book became the main point of reference in a "Great Lenin Debate"⁷ triggered by the failure of certain Leninist/Trotskyist groups to participate fully in Occupy Wall Street. Pham Binh, a member of the International Socialist Organization and deeply involved in Occupy, initiated this debate by criticizing the ISO's sectarian teachings on Lenin, the history of the Bolshevik Party, and democratic centralism. Relying heavily on Lih's research, Binh was soon joined by Proyect and Lih himself in this controversy with the ISO. The significance of this debate is that the left had finally reached the point where it could have a serious discussion of the nature of its political and organizational responsibilities within a major ongoing mass movement that was fully informed by an accurate historical understanding of Lenin's entire political career.

For Binh and Proyect, who remain committed socialists, Harding's and Lih's work is important primarily for providing ammunition in a political argument about how socialists should organize themselves in order to be effective in mass movements while still promoting socialist ideas. Within these parameters, the scholarly work of Harding and Lih is entirely on the side of those who advocate open and democratic forms of organization against the defenders of democratic centralism; but it must be emphasized that neither Harding nor Lih are Marxists or socialists themselves and do not believe their research has the practical relevance for contemporary politics that Binh and Proyect think it does.

Lih, for example, describes his own political sentiments as only "vaguely left" and believes the fusion of socialist ideas with a mass working class movement that characterized Marxism around the beginning of the twentieth century was an historically unique phenomenon that is not likely to be repeated.⁸ Although he does not make the reference himself, Lih's outlook is similar to C. Wright Mills' verdict on the labor metaphysic: "It is an historically specific idea that has been turned into an a-historical and unspecific hope."⁹ While Lih does have a lingering sympathy for Marxism's original promise to bring the "light and air" of political freedom to the working class, he believes that those freedoms in large

⁶ Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered* (Haymarket Books: Chicago, 2008).

⁷ "Great Lenin Debate," Collection of over twenty articles, externalbulletin.org with introduction. PDF of twenty-three articles at redatlanta.files.wordpress.com.

⁸ Lars Lih interview, *The North Star*, 10/2/2013, northstar.info.

⁹ Mills, *Letter*, p. 70.

measure have been won and any revival of a socialist movement as conceived of and practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is highly unlikely.

Harding's opinion of Lenin and Marxism in general is much harsher. Harding's view is that Marxism and Lenin's appropriation of it always had a deep intellectual and political arrogance at its core that ran counter to its professed goal of bringing freedom and democracy to the working class. In his final judgement, Harding comes down on the side of Eduard Bernstein's gradualist reformism¹⁰ against Lenin's uncompromising revolutionism and believes Bernstein's views have been vindicated by the working class' attainment of full political rights within the liberal Western democracies.¹¹

Democracy and Socialism, Sombart and Mills

An unspoken assumption in all of the above appraisals of Lenin's relevance to contemporary politics is that the U. S. is one of those democracies, so no participant in these discussions ever broaches the possibility that Lenin's early advocacy of a democratic republic might still be directly applicable to the United States. It's not that any of them are unaware that the U. S. political system is a strange animal that does not fit the European pattern with its social democratic and labor parties, but their discussion of this American anomaly is still generally stuck within the conceptual framework set by Werner Sombart's question from more than a century ago: why is there no socialism in the United States? From Sombart's perspective in a Europe still saddled with autocratic governments and strict limits on political rights, the United States looked like a democracy in comparison; but, against Marxist expectations, political freedom in the U. S. had not led to widespread socialist class consciousness among American workers. Just the opposite. Political freedom and universal (white male) suffrage actually seemed to have undermined class identity and left American workers at a more backward ideological level than their socialist European counterparts. Marxists have been waiting ever since for this true class consciousness finally to emerge.

¹⁰ Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1993)

¹¹ Neil Harding, *Leninism* (Duke University Press: Durham, North Carolina, 1996) pp. 58-66 on Bernstein, p.34 on Marx and Lenin's arrogance, pp.258-63 on Lenin's authoritarianism in power.

Critics of Marxism, beginning with Bernstein but continuing in more recent years with such writers as Daniel Bell¹² and Seymour Martin Lipset,¹³ have been happy to work within the same basic historical categories that Sombart employed, only in reverse. In their historical scheme, socialism is the more primitive ideology associated with the early stages of industrialization and American liberal democracy the more advanced system that showed Europe what its future would be. Given this either/or choice, the weight of historical evidence has been on the side of Marxism's critics.

C. Wright Mills found this either/or framework too confining. He agreed with Marxism's critics that socialism was the ideological product of an earlier age ("It would seem that only at certain (earlier) stages of industrialization, and in a context of autocracy, etc., do wage-workers become a class-for-themselves, etc."¹⁴) and he also thought that politics in Western Europe and the United States had generally followed the reformist evolutionary path laid out by Bernstein;¹⁵ but he could not agree that the end of socialism meant the end of ideology altogether or that the practice of American political institutions matched what he believed was their legal democratic form. In this ideological space carved out between Marxism and American Cold War liberalism, Mills wanted to "work out a political philosophy adequate to the world era which we now enter"¹⁶ and he had a very definite conception of the methodology needed in order to do so, which he called, following Marx, "the principle of historical specificity."¹⁷ According to this principle, an adequate contemporary political philosophy could only be arrived at through a comprehensive study of the structural features of what he thought was an entirely new post-Marxist, post-liberal, post-Modern Cold War historical era.¹⁸ When he ventured to indicate what the essential elements of that new philosophy might be, however, he could only fall back on the classic Enlightenment values of reason, freedom, and his notion of democracy as a collection of informed publics, all

¹² Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1952).

¹³ Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (Norton: New York, 2000).

¹⁴ Mills, *Letter to the New Left*, p. 70.

¹⁵ Mills, *The Marxists*, pp. 109, 135-7.

¹⁶ Mills, *The Marxists*, p. 12.

¹⁷ Mills, *The Marxists*, pp. 3-8, *The Sociological Imagination*, pp. 149-54, 163.

¹⁸ Mills, *The Marxists*, pp. 13-4. *The Sociological Imagination*, pp. 165-6.

ideological products of the Modern era's struggle to emerge from the Medieval Dark Ages.¹⁹ Why these values should carry over unchanged from the Modern to the post-Modern when there was no such ideological continuity between the Medieval and the Modern Mills did not seek to explain. This unexplained continuity does not mean that Mills' principle of historical specificity is not useful, but it does mean that his characterization of the break between the Cold War era and the preceding historical period was inconsistent and overstated. Mills could have eliminated this inconsistency by saying that the political movement for full democracy was also a distinct historical trend or ideological current within the Modern epoch along with liberalism and socialism, one that was not exhausted yet, particularly in the country where it began.²⁰

But not only in the United States. Mills also granted too much credence to Bernstein's theory of the peaceful evolution of democratic reform in Europe. The problem with Bernstein's theory is that democracy did not come to Europe by peaceful evolutionary means, was not entirely indigenous, and is still not fully sovereign. It advanced instead through the great upheavals of two world wars, revolution in Russia, and economic depression. While there was no successful revolution outside of Russia, it was the threat of similar mass rebellions that forced elites in Britain, Germany, Sweden, Austria and other countries to give in to major parliamentary reforms and greatly expanded voting rights after WWI. Then the fascist reaction of the interwar years was overturned by another revolution in WWII, only that revolution was carried out by the Soviet, American, and British armies. After the war, the U. S. then oversaw the establishment of new political systems in the Western half of Europe that truly were democratic in form and more egalitarian internally than the U. S. itself. Externally, however, these democracies were enmeshed in a web of international political, military, and economic institutions shaped by the Cold War and dominated by the U. S., a subordination that continues to the present.

In short, Mills overestimated how far democracy had progressed in the advanced capitalist world, particularly in the United States, which still did not have a formal system of

¹⁹ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, pp. 166-8, 187-90, *Letter to the New Left*, p. 67.

²⁰ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, pp. 151, 153, 154, for Mills on historical trends, counter-trends, and the interaction of several trends together.

democratic representation, and he underestimated how difficult it had been to achieve the progress that had been made, particularly in Europe, where anti-democratic Old Regimes had dragged the world through three decades of war, depression, and inhuman savagery. These misjudgments, in turn, closed off the possibility of seeing the common ground shared by Marxism's struggle for democracy in Europe and political conditions in the U. S., a common ground that included both the need for a truly representative democracy and the practical ideological and political means needed to get there.

Means and Ends: Bernstein, Luxemburg, and Lenin on Reform and Revolution, Democracy and Delay

The problem of the practical means needed to gain political power has routinely been presented in histories of Marxism as a choice between reform and revolution, and Mills' comments on this problem were no exception.²¹ Taking the title of Rosa Luxemburg's classic polemic against Bernstein's revisionism as the defining existential choice facing the Marxist movement, Mills followed convention in mistaking rhetoric for substance; for, as Luxemburg immediately made clear in the first lines of her essay, it was Bernstein who posed the choice in this way, not Marxists. For Marxists, reform and revolution were not opposites or mutually exclusive because it was only through the everyday struggle of the workers for the amelioration of their condition that the conquest of political power was possible.²² This everyday struggle would become a direct struggle for power when some economic, political, or military crisis made it impossible for the existing order to meet the workers' immediate demands and it would become violent if those demands were opposed by force. The word "revolution" in regard to these political possibilities could refer either to the final passing of political power to the working class, by either peaceful or violent means, or, more narrowly, to the specific tactics of violent insurrection if peaceful methods failed (a double meaning that has been the source of endless confusion within Marxism).

²¹ Mills, *The Marxists*, pp. 132-42.

²² Rosa Luxemburg, "Reform or Revolution," in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1970) p. 36.

If Bernstein's argument had simply been that the Social Democrats would achieve their goals of democracy and socialism gradually and peacefully because the German state would eventually surrender its power without violence, then time alone would have been enough to decide the issue of violence or non-violence; but Bernstein's revisionism was not limited to this single question about the peaceful or violent transfer of power. Bernstein argued further that the fundamental Social Democratic demand for a democratic republic was itself too radical and unnecessarily threatening to the bourgeoisie. Citing labor support for the Liberal Party in England, Bernstein maintained that "The English workers gained the right to vote not when the Chartist movement was at its most revolutionary but when they abandoned revolutionary slogans and forged an alliance with the radical bourgeoisie for the achievement of reforms."²³ So Bernstein viewed the original Chartist campaign for universal and equal suffrage as an unacceptable threat to the bourgeoisie that should be scaled back in order to secure whatever reforms were compatible with prevailing bourgeois sentiments. Claiming that he still believed in Marxism's ultimate aims of democracy and socialism, Bernstein argued that these goals would be achieved by a slow process of gradual reform in cooperation with the bourgeoisie and the German state rather than by a struggle against their resistance.

More than any inherently speculative dispute about whether *future* crises would involve violent conflict or peaceful accommodation, Bernstein's proposed alliance with the bourgeoisie would have changed the content and conduct of *current* Social Democratic advocacy and activity. As Luxemburg emphasized, the workers and the Social Democrats were already engaged in ongoing struggles against the employers over conditions of work, against the state's denial of democratic rights and institutions, and against the growth of

²³ Bernstein, pp. 157-8 on Social Democracy "threatening" the bourgeoisie, p. 188 on the Chartists and the later alliance with liberalism. Bernstein's claim that the English workers "gained the right to vote" refers to the Reform Act of 1832, which still left almost half the men and all the women in England without voting rights, restrictions that would not be removed entirely until 1928. Also, Bernstein's use of English labor's alliance with liberalism as a model for Germany was invoked just a few years before the founding of the British Labour Party and the beginning of the end of the alliance with liberalism. Finally, the passage where Bernstein declared the Chartist movement too radical and revolutionary was not included in the original English translation of Bernstein's essay, titled *Evolutionary Socialism*, and that is the form it retained in English until Cambridge published a complete translation in 1993. My speculation is that Bernstein's derogation of the heroic battle of the Chartists for equal political rights was judged too offensive for an English audience to stomach.

militarism and the threat of war.²⁴ Bernstein wanted to pull back from direct opposition to all of these abuses in exchange for the promise that capitalism, the bourgeoisie, and the autocratic German state were evolving in a peaceful, cooperative, and democratic direction on their own. The binary categories of reform versus revolution don't capture the nature of this disagreement over the content of current political demands. This disagreement was about the programmatic demand for democracy now versus withdrawal from and postponement of the fight for democratic principles and institutions until some time in the indefinite future.

This issue of direct democratic advocacy and action versus prevarication and delay is not just a relic of the distant past. It is the subject of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail":

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed....

... I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice;... who constantly says: 'I agree with the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season'....

... This 'Wait!' has almost always meant 'Never.'

...[T]ime itself is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively.... We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy...²⁵

²⁴ Luxemburg, pp. 54-57 for Luxemburg's view of the political conflicts then developing within Germany and the conflict between the demands of working class democracy and capitalist cartels and militarism

²⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (HarperCollins: New York, 1986) pp. 289-302.

The principle of direct democratic advocacy and action versus prevarication and delay stands out much more clearly on its own in King than in Luxemburg because in Luxemburg it is wrapped up inside a larger defense of Marx's entire theory of the inevitability of socialist revolution. Luxemburg believed that Marx had proved with scientific certainty that the anarchy of capitalism would necessarily lead to economic catastrophe.²⁶ For Luxemburg, knowledge of this necessity was what distinguished scientific socialism from mere radical bourgeois democratic idealism, and this knowledge constituted the essential consciousness that the working class needed in order to prepare for the coming crisis.²⁷ It is this overlay of the theory of capitalist crisis and socialism on top of the practical struggle for democracy that has made it difficult to disentangle the specifically democratic component from the socialist component in the history and theory of Marxism.

The distinctiveness of Lenin's theory of political consciousness is that it broke this connection between the struggle for democracy and the working class' knowledge of scientific socialism. As Harding put it, "Lenin's argument was that workers did not have to come to socialist consciousness in order to acquire political consciousness."²⁸ Lih agrees: "If you were willing to fight for political freedom, you were Lenin's ally, even if you were hostile to socialism. If you downgraded the goal of political freedom in any way, you were Lenin's foe, even if you were a committed socialist."²⁹ From the standpoint of Luxemburg's theory of scientific socialist consciousness, Lenin was a mere radical bourgeois democratic idealist; and, indeed, that is exactly what Pavel Axelrod and Leon Trotsky said of Lenin in their 1904 criticisms of him and the whole *Iskra* project.³⁰

²⁶ Luxemburg, p. 39.

²⁷ Luxemburg, pp. 36, 40-1.

²⁸ Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought*, vol. 1, p. 122.

²⁹ Lih, p. 9.

³⁰ Leon Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks*, 1904, available at marxists.org., Lih, pp. 508-517, 181 and 189 on "the class point of view" and Akselrod's and Trotsky's criticism of Lenin's democratic theory of political consciousness. I found Lih's Chapter 9 on Akselrod's and Trotsky's conception of a "class party" as opposed to Lenin's conception of a "democratic revolutionary party" the most original part of the book. My one reservation is that Lih seems to hold a conception of Marxism that equates class consciousness with the theory of socialism rather than with democracy. Lih first makes this identification on p. 181 where he writes, "*Iskra* called on the proletariat to take upon itself 'the function of leader [*vozhd*]' of the whole democratic revolutionary movement'. Of course, this mission did not mean forgetting 'the class point of view', the antagonism between capitalist and worker, the final aim of socialism." In this case, however, Lih is summarizing a document on the history of the Russian party submitted in 1904 to an international meeting of Social Democrats and is just reporting the words of others. On pp. 196-7, on the other hand, where Lih is giving his own characterization of the content

Not just a feature of the peculiarities of the two-stage theory of the revolution in Russia, Lenin believed his conception of the struggle for democracy was applicable in both the backward conditions of Tsarist Russia as well as in the advanced capitalist parliamentary, but still not fully democratic, republics of the West. While he certainly believed along with Luxemburg that the abolition of private property and the system of wage labor was the ultimate goal of Social Democracy, his theory of political consciousness was focused on the content of the agitation required to reach the more proximate goal of democratic political power.

(Note: After 1905, inspired by the revolution in Russia, Luxemburg's focus shifted from the theoretical battle against Bernstein's revisionism to the practical political battle against the political conservatism of the nominally revolutionary leadership of the German Social Democratic Party. In 1906 she wrote "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions" and in 1909-10 she joined with striking workers demanding changes in the electoral laws and the establishment of a democratic republic, a policy and tactic similar to Lenin's and opposed by the German Party's leadership.³¹)

of Lenin's agitational articles in *Iskra*, he writes: "The goal of all this activity is the overthrow of the autocracy or, in positive terms, the achievement of political freedom. The imperative necessity of political freedom is the central theme of Lenin's political agitation, so much so that it is often difficult to remember that the author is a Marxist socialist. Of the twenty-seven articles in the series, only two contribute to the readers strictly Marxist education." In this second case, Lih himself adopts the view that only socialism is "strictly Marxist" and that Lenin's democratic agitation fell into some other unspecified non-Marxist category. The problem is that Lenin did not accept any such division within Marxism and said so emphatically in *The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats*, in *WITBD?*, and in the absolutely essential "Political Agitation and "The Class Point of View". The whole point of the latter two works was to argue that the democratic political consciousness that Lenin's political agitation was designed to foster embodied "the class point of view" of scientific socialism and that any narrower conception of "the class point of view" was a distortion of Marxism and would leave the working class under the sway of the bourgeoisie.

*After rereading E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923, vol. 1* (Pelican: London, 1966) pp. 39-40, for the first time since 1970, it turns out that Carr had recognized this difference between Lenin's theory of a democratic revolutionary party and Axelrod's and Trotsky's conception of a "class party" seventy years ago. Lih doesn't cite Carr as a source. It seems that both Carr and Lih found this distinction in Theodor Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism*. Maybe I've had Carr's interpretation operating in the back of my mind since then.

³¹ See Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy: 1905-1917*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1955) for full background.

From Lenin to Marx and Engels

In his first published article in 1895, a commemoration of the life and work of Frederick Engels, Lenin made a point of emphasizing that both Marx and Engels “became socialists after being *democrats*, and the democratic feeling of *hatred* for political despotism was exceedingly strong in them. This direct political feeling, combined with a profound theoretical understanding of the connection between political despotism and economic oppression...made Marx and Engels uncommonly responsive *politically*.... “The emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself”—Marx and Engels constantly taught. But in order to fight for its economic emancipation, the proletariat must win itself certain *political* rights.”³²(All emphases in original) No doubt Lenin picked out this aspect of Marx and Engels’ political biographies because it mirrored so closely the situation of revolutionaries in Russia under the autocracy, but it is no less true for that. Marx and Engels did hate political despotism in all its forms, they were democrats before becoming socialists, and they did believe that winning the battle for democracy was the first goal of the working class movement and the means by which the further goal of socialism would be achieved. This relationship between democracy and socialism was spelled out in the two founding documents of Marxism as a political movement: *The Principles of Communism*, written by Engels and adopted by the Communist League in November 1847 as the basis for a formal manifesto, and the finished *Manifesto* of February 1848. In answer to the question of what course the proletarian revolution would follow, Engels declared in the *Principles* that “Above all, it will establish a democratic constitution, and through this, the direct or indirect dominance of the proletariat. Direct in England, where the proletarians are already a majority of the people. Indirect in France and Germany, where the majority of the people consists not only of proletarians, but also of small peasants and petty bourgeois...”³³; and in the *Manifesto* the proletarian movement is described as “the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority” and “that the first step in the revolution by the working

³² Lenin, *CW*, vol. 2, pp. 26-7.

³³ Frederick Engels, *The Principles of Communism*, Principle 18, at marxists.org.

class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.”³⁴

For many years the plan outlined in the *Manifesto* to form a political party of the working class seemed “to be doomed to oblivion,”³⁵ and neither Marx nor Engels ever became the direct leaders of the kind of working class movement they had originally envisioned. They did participate briefly in the democratic upheavals of 1848, and Marx did work in the 1860’s and early 1870’s to pull and hold together the disparate elements of the International Workingmen’s Association; but both of these efforts fell far short of the full working class political program of 1847-8. The most they could do from their lifelong exile in England was to try to persuade the leaders of German Social Democracy in their home country to uphold and adhere to the principles of democracy and socialism they had established in the late 1840’s. Their two most important efforts in this regard were Marx’s 1875 “Critique of the Gotha Program” and Engels’ 1891 “Critique of the Draft of the Erfurt Program.”³⁶

The main political problem of these years, unlike in the late 40’s when there was a strong sense that Europe was on the verge of a revolutionary upheaval, was how a working class movement should conduct itself when the prospect of revolution had retreated far over the horizon. Marx and Engels’ strategy under these conditions was to preserve the integrity of their central theory of the transformation of capitalism into socialism and at the same time to press for the greatest possible expansion of democratic rights. In Marx’s eyes, the agreement at Gotha failed on both accounts. The purely economic flaws of the program regarding “the iron law of wages,” “the undiminished proceeds of labor,” “the fair distribution of the proceeds of labor,” etc., were irritating enough; but the greater part of Marx’s ire was directed at the program’s practical political proposals. They called on the German government to fund workers’ cooperatives as the first step on the path to a fully socialist economy. This appeal for state sponsorship was accompanied by a pledge to use only legal means in the pursuit of working class interests. Marx responded that it was a delusory fantasy to believe that democracy and socialism could grow gradually and

³⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, (International publishers: New York, 1932) pp. 20, 30.

³⁵ Engels, “Preface’ to *Communist Manifesto*, p. 4.

³⁶ Both at marxists.org.

peacefully within the existing political and economic structure of the Prusso-German Empire. While he had come to accept that a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism might be possible in already established parliamentary systems such as England or the United States where elected representatives had some genuine power³⁷, the idea that such a peaceful development was feasible under Germany's "police-guarded military despotism" defied logic. Against these delusions, Marx repeated his conviction that the conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie could only be resolved by the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into communism. This economic transformation would be accompanied by a corresponding political transition period in which the state would be transformed from a dictatorship of the capitalist class into a dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx then added that the democratic republic was the specific form of the state within which this class struggle would be fought out to its conclusion.³⁸

It was this last point that posed the most immediate practical difficulty for the German working class movement because the semi-absolutist German political system was not yet a republic in any form at all and it was illegal to advocate that it become one. After reminding the German Social Democratic leaders that the French workers had stuck with their demand for a democratic republic for forty years under similar conditions of illegality, Marx allowed that, if conditions in Germany demanded more caution, then it would at least be more honest and decent to say nothing than to engage in the subterfuge that democracy and socialism could evolve peacefully under a regime of arbitrary police power.

Marx's "Critique" had originally circulated only privately among the leaders of the nominally Marxist faction of the German Workers' Party; but sixteen years later, just as the Party was getting ready to draw up a new Program at Erfurt, Engels made Marx's "Critique" public in order to bolster the left wing of the Party against the moderates. Engels was largely satisfied with the theoretical section of the draft of the new program, which dropped the appeal for state aid for cooperatives and replaced it with a passable summary of Marx's theory of capitalist development and the necessity of socialism, but he, like Marx earlier,

³⁷ Karl Marx. "La Liberté Speech", Amsterdam, 9/8/1872, marxist.org

³⁸ As early as 1962 Hal Draper clarified the meaning of Marx's and Engels' use of the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" and its relationship to the democratic republic in "Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat", at marxists.org.

remained deeply critical of the failure of the practical political part to confront directly the autocratic foundation of the German state:

The political demands of the draft have one great fault. It *lacks* precisely what should have been said. If all the 10 demands were granted we should indeed have more diverse means of achieving our main political aim, but the aim itself would in no wise have been achieved....

First, if one thing is certain it is that our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.... It would seem that from a legal point of view it is inadvisable to include the demand for a democratic republic directly in the programme, although this was possible under Louis Phillipe in France, and is now in Italy. But the fact that in Germany it is not permitted to advance even a republican party programme openly, proves how totally mistaken is the belief that a republic, but not only a republic, but also communist society, can be established in a cozy, peaceful way.

However, the question of the republic could possibly be passed by. What, however, in my opinion should and could be included is the demand for *the concentration of all political power in the hands of the people's representatives*. That would suffice for the time being if it is impossible to go any further....

To touch on that is dangerous, however. Nevertheless, somehow or other, the thing has to be attacked. How necessary this is is shown precisely at the present time by opportunism, which is gaining ground in a large section of the Social-Democratic press. Fearing a renewal of the Anti-Socialist Law,...they now want the party to find the present legal order in Germany adequate for putting through all party demands by peaceful means.... One can conceive that the old society may develop peacefully into the new one in countries where representatives of the people concentrate all power in their hands...such as France and the U.S.A.... But in Germany where the government is almost omnipotent..., to advocate such a thing... means... becoming oneself a screen for [absolutism].

In the long run such a policy can only lead one's own party astray.... What can result from this except that at the decisive moment the party suddenly proves helpless and that uncertainty and discord on the most decisive issues reign in it because these issues have never been discussed?³⁹

³⁹ Engels, "Critique of the Draft of the Erfurt Program," at marxist.org.

George Lichtheim's *Marxism* may seem an unlikely place to find an unqualified endorsement of Engels' political instincts and abilities, but there is no better summary of the consequences of the German Social Democratic Party's failure to follow Engels' recommendations:

...Under German conditions—and the same was true of Austria-Hungary, the other citadel of 'orthodox Marxism'—democracy was still a revolutionary slogan. Indeed it was easier for the governments of the day to compromise with quasi-socialist demands which did not touch the political structure, than to yield to the growing pressure for popular rule. It was the latter, not the former, that constituted the really revolutionary aspect of the Social-Democratic movement.

If the party failed in the 1890's to work out a clear cut strategy adapted to the situation, this was partly owing to the enforced remoteness and isolation of the only major figure it possessed. Engels does not compare with Marx as a thinker, but as a political strategist he had no equal in the Germany of his day; or if he had, his only equal was Bismarck. A full-scale confrontation between these two would have been a spectacle worth watching. Had Germany been a normal country, Engels would have stood out as the leader of all democratic forces against the governing caste. As it was, he had to content himself with the role of grand old man and theoretical adviser to a movement whose actual leaders lacked both his comprehensive understanding of European politics and his combative temper. The drift which set in after his death was already foreshadowed in the fatalistic spirit of the 'Erfurt Programme.'⁴⁰

The German Social Democrats may not have followed Engels' advice, but the Russians did. Where the Erfurt Program and German Social Democracy settled for a legal electoral strategy within the parameters of the existing semi-absolutist German state structure, Lenin was successful in mobilizing the Russian Social Democrats around the central demand for a democratic republic. Unfortunately, Lichtheim paid little attention to this programmatic continuity connecting Lenin to Marx and Engels. Like most other historians of Marxism until Harding, Lichtheim was more interested in trying to divine the sources in Lenin's thinking that could account for the extraordinary course of the Russian Revolution. Harding rejected

⁴⁰ George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (Praeger: New York, 1965), p. 263.

this selective retrospection and traced Lenin's thinking as it had developed without the ominous foreshadowing of events far in the future. The result was a comprehensive exposition of the theory of the democratic revolution in Russia and how it was derived directly from Marx and Engels' own experiences in the revolutions of 1848.⁴¹ Lichtheim was right that this return to 1848 was a revival of the revolutionary element in Marxism, but he neglected to clarify that it was simultaneously a revival of the direct programmatic advocacy of the democratic republic as well.

What Was Marxism?

Marxism was created at the intersection of two great historical forces: the industrial revolution centered in England and the demand for democracy that erupted out of the American and French Revolutions. Marx and Engels' unique historical insight was to see that the working class being created by industrial capitalism would continue to grow in size and strength until it would challenge the power of capital itself. On top of this core dynamic of capitalist development and class conflict, they also layered a number of additional theories predicting the complete victory of the working class; the abolition of private property and the system of wage labor; the institution of comprehensive economic planning; and, in the higher stage of communism, the final elimination of the division of labor and the need for a state separate from and standing over society. Along with this elaboration of what they believed "the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement"⁴² would be, they also engaged in speculations about where the revolution might begin. Engels in particular thought early on that conditions were most favorable in England, the home of capitalism in its most advanced form and where the working class was most developed politically; but both Marx and Engels recognized that a combination of other factors might lead to a revolutionary outbreak somewhere else. Particularly in regard to Germany, Marx suggested at the end of the *Manifesto* that the revolution might begin in a more economically backward country where a newly emerging bourgeoisie and proletariat confronted an archaic and inflexible autocratic political order. This idea, that a revolution might begin at a "weak link"

⁴¹ Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought*, vol. 1, pp. 48-9.

⁴² Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, p. 22,

in the intertwined systems of markets and states, was picked up later by Lenin to account for the Russian Revolution and was employed again by the Chinese in their theory that the national liberation struggles of the Third World “countryside” would encircle and choke off the imperialist system headquartered in the advanced “cities” of the West.⁴³ During the Cold War, this conception of a world divided into hostile capitalist/imperialist and socialist/anti-imperialist blocs roughly corresponded to political reality, and Vietnam formed the front line in the battle between these two systems; but this bi-polar division of the world broke down with the settlement in Asia involving the U. S., China, and Vietnam, and the conceptual system of Leninism broke down with it.

In Marx and Engels’ imaginary future, socialism and then communism were supposed to entail the completion and then transcendence of democracy as a form of state standing above and separate from society. Even though this fantastic vision was never remotely realizable, their practical participation in the immediate struggle for democracy as the precursor to the hoped for future communist transformation is another matter. Within Europe outside of Russia, their efforts and those of the movements and parties they inspired may not have resulted in revolution or socialism, but they were the main political force behind whatever progress was made toward the goal of political rights and democracy for the working class. In Russia, Marxism began as an extension of mainstream European Social Democracy but was then transformed by war and revolution into Leninism. It then became an instrument of forced industrialization and an ally and model for many colonial peoples seeking their own independence from foreign domination. Until WWII the U.S. for the most part remained on the periphery of these Old World affairs, but in an historical instant WWII transformed the U.S. into a globe-encircling empire and the enforcer of Europe’s old colonial privileges and possessions. This was the world in which the New Left came to political consciousness. Marxism was no longer a model for it, and in Marxism’s place it tried to create a new form of politics centered around basic democratic values; but the enormity of the Vietnam War overwhelmed these careful and modest beginnings and dragged the New Left back into the

⁴³ Lin Biao, *Long Live the Victory of People’s War!* at marxists.org.

world of Marxist-Leninist anti-imperialism in search of some explanation for U. S. barbarism in Asia.

In trying to make sense of this head-spinning ideological turnaround, Carl Oglesby concluded that:

it has to happen: (a) because there was no way to resist the truth of the war, no way, that is, to avoid imperialism; (b) because once the policy critique of the war had been supplanted by the structural critique of the empire, all political therapies short of socialist revolution appeared to become senseless; and (c) because the necessity of a revolutionary strategy was, in effect, the same thing as the necessity of Marxism-Leninism. *There was—and is—no other coherent, integrative, and explicit philosophy of revolution.*

I do not want to be misunderstood about this. The practical identity of Marxism-Leninism with revolutionary theory, in my estimate, does not mean that Marxism-Leninism is *also* identical with genuinely revolutionary practice in the advanced countries. That identity, rather, constitutes nothing more than a tradition, a legacy, and a problem which I think the Left will have to overcome. But at the same time, I don't think the American Left's first stab at producing for itself a *fulfilled* revolutionary consciousness could have produced anything better, could have gone beyond ancestor-worship politics. It was necessary to discover—or maybe the word is confess—that we had ancestors in the first place.⁴⁴ (All emphases in original)

Oglesby got a lot of things right. The New Left did discover that it shared with Marxism-Leninism an opposition to imperialist predation, but this common opposition did not mean that Leninism was a useful guide to political practice in the advanced societies of the West. The question then was which, if any, part of the Marxist legacy was useful. Oglesby's own answer was that Marx's theory of the forces and relations of production could be refashioned to account for the rise of a new kind of working class formed in the universities and in conflict with the irrationalities of post-industrial, post-scarcity capitalism. This strand of New Left thinking, in a defensive reaction against the appeal of traditional Marxism, tried to substitute a new class interest theory for the New Left's original moral commitment to the universal

⁴⁴ Carl Oglesby, "Notes on a Decade Ready for the Dustbin," *Liberation* vol. 14, no. 5,6, 1969, pp. 5-19.

values of justice and democracy.⁴⁵ Very few were aware at the time that there was another more relevant democratic legacy in Marxism. This aspect of classical Marxism had been all but lost when Europe plunged into the abyss of WWI and European Social Democracy split into warring Bolshevik and anti-Bolshevik camps; but thanks to the historical work over the last several decades of Hal Draper⁴⁶, Richard N. Hunt⁴⁷, Neil Harding, August Nimtz⁴⁸, Lars Lih, and others, this legacy has now been pieced back together.

“A Political Philosophy Adequate to the World Era Which We Now Enter:”⁴⁹

The Place of Marxism in the Age of the Democratic Revolution

In trying to come to grips with the realities of power in the Cold War, C. Wright Mills found the contemporary incarnations of liberal and Marxist ideology analytically and politically useless. In earlier historical periods, both liberalism and Marxism had been vital insurgent political philosophies; but in the Cold War they had each been reduced to crude rationalizations in a propaganda war between the two great powers. Despite these vulgarizations, however, Mills did not think that either liberalism or Marxism could simply be discarded and replaced with something entirely new. He believed that these philosophies in their original forms still contained many of the essential moral ideals and political ideas out of which a relevant contemporary political philosophy could be constructed. Like liberalism and Marxism, this new philosophy would have to articulate the *ideals* it wanted to realize, develop *theories* of how society and politics worked, identify the *agencies* by which programs and goals could be achieved, and elaborate the *ideology* and rhetoric for the public criticism of existing policies and institutions.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Greg Calvert, “In White America,” in Teodori, pp. 412-18, for the original SDS advocacy of new working class interest theory and the accusation that political action motivated by the universal value of justice is action out of “guilt motivation.”

⁴⁶ Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, 5 vols. (Monthly Review Press: New York, 1977-1990).

⁴⁷ Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, 2 vols. (University of Pittsburgh Press; Pittsburgh, PA, 1974, 1984).

⁴⁸ August Nimtz, *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (SUNY Press: Albany, NY, 2000) and “Marx and Engels: The Unsung Heroes of the Democratic Breakthrough,” *Science & Society* vol. 63, no. 2, Summer 1999.

⁴⁹ Mills, *The Marxists*, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Mills, *The Marxists*, pp. 12-3 and “Letter to the New Left,” pp. 66-7.

In his search for this new political philosophy, Mills made two errors in judgment. One, he was too willing to grant that the U. S. political system was already democratic in its institutional structure and, two, he failed to recognize that Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, and the pre-1917 Lenin had all made the democratic republic their primary political goal. In misreading this history, Mills placed the formal democratic aspect of Marxism entirely within the framework of Eduard Bernstein's revisionist evolutionary liberalism. Mills further thought that Bernstein's reformism had been generally accepted and institutionalized throughout the industrialized West, including the U. S., where the New Deal had tempered the most extreme features of capitalist fundamentalism. For this combination of reasons, it doesn't seem that Mills ever considered the possibility that democracy was still an independent political philosophy of its own distinct from liberalism or that the history of Marxism could be tapped to help fill out its theoretical and practical content. The early SDS also suffered from many of these same misconceptions, and the later Marxist New Left similarly remained blind to the political content of classical Marxism and was consequently unable to develop any coherent alternative to orthodox Leninism. On this last point, the inability of the Marxist New Left to free itself from the dead weight of Leninism is also the subject of Max Elbaum's comprehensive history of the New Communist Movement, *Revolution in the Air*, so I'll explain here how my view of Lenin and the history of the Marxist New Left differs from his.

In his criticism of the dogmatism and sectarianism that came to dominate the New Communist Movement, Elbaum fixes responsibility for the movement's self-destructiveness on a pathological "quest for orthodoxy."⁵¹ This quest was based on the "proposition that there is one and only one correct, revolutionary doctrine—and that this doctrine finds expression in one pure tradition that has defeated a series of deviations since Lenin's time."⁵² Two quotations in particular from Lenin and Mao were drawn upon repeatedly to justify a never-ending ideological battle over possession of this one correct line: Lenin's defiant challenge in *WITBD?* that "before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first

⁵¹ Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, (Verso: New York, 2002) pp. 7, 90, 130.

⁵² Elbaum, pp. 90, 323.

of all draw firm and definite lines of demarcation”⁵³ and Mao’s dictum that “the correctness or incorrectness of the ideological and political line determines everything.”⁵⁴ Elbaum concludes that the belief that there can be one and only one correct political line was the fatal sectarian conceptual flaw that crippled the movement and prevented it from uniting to build a mass anti-capitalist political bloc.⁵⁵

In its description of the beliefs and activities of the main New Communist groups, Elbaum’s analysis is accurate and incisive; but the usefulness of the political lessons that he draws from this analysis is limited because he largely accepts the adequacy of the traditional version of the history and theory of Leninism and the Leninist party and because he overstates the degree to which the mass of activists in the New Communist Movement accepted uncritically this traditional model of a Marxist-Leninist party as their goal.

Beginning with the Leninist revolutionary tradition in general and the Leninist concept of the party in particular, Elbaum writes as if Leninism is the only such tradition and that *WITBD?* was its founding document.⁵⁶ But *WITBD?* and later Leninism drew their “lines of demarcation” at entirely different points. Lenin’s reference to “lines of demarcation” in *WITBD?* was taken from the joint “Declaration of the Editorial Board of *Iskra*” announcing the launch of their new Social Democratic newspaper, and the line of demarcation drawn in this declaration marked off all those who believed in the then orthodox Marxist priority of overthrowing the Tsarist autocracy and establishing a democratic republic from all those—“Economists”, Bernsteinians, and liberal “critics of Marxism”—who believed the first priority of the working class movement should be the struggle for its own economic interests.⁵⁷ This line of demarcation was hardly the same as that drawn by later Leninism. Elbaum also holds to the view that *WITBD?* contains a proposal for the creation of a “party of a new type” (a phrase Lenin never used and an intention he specifically disavowed) based on the proposition that other European Social Democratic parties, the German party in particular, strove to “embrace the entire working class”⁵⁸ whereas Lenin proposed that membership in

⁵³ Lenin, *CW*, vol.5, p. 367. quoted in Elbaum, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Elbaum, pp. 7-8. 157, 323.

⁵⁵ Elbaum, pp. 326, 334.

⁵⁶ Elbaum, pp. 148-51, 159.

⁵⁷ Lenin, *CW*, vol. 5, p. 367 and vol. 4, pp. 351-6.

⁵⁸ Elbaum, p. 146.

a revolutionary party should be “restricted to a self-conscious *vanguard* layer”⁵⁹ of “advanced workers.”⁶⁰ (Elbaum’s emphasis) This distinction between the German and Russian parties, however, only emerged after 1914 in order to account for the German party’s *practice* prior to 1914 and its failure to oppose Germany’s entry into the war. Up until that time the prevailing *theory* of the German party was the same as the Russian (and was drawn directly from the *Communist Manifesto*): the party was the leader (i.e. vanguard) of the struggle of the entire working class but its membership was made up of only the class conscious minority of workers who agreed with and were willing to contribute to the achievement of the party’s goals.⁶¹ At one point Elbaum seems to recognize that there might be something off about the orthodox doctrine of a “party of a new type” when he observes that “Lenin did not, however, call for a monolithic party with no provision for inner-party democracy or dissenting views. He argued that differences within the party were normal and healthy and needed to be publicly expressed.... Whenever legality permitted Lenin argued for elections to determine the party leadership, and defended members’ right to form factions on the basis of competing platforms.”⁶² Rather than take this evidence of Lenin’s actual political practice as an indication that the traditional version of the Leninist concept of the party was a retrospective construct, however, Elbaum lets it slide and continues on within the orthodox framework. In short, Elbaum doesn’t take into account the work of either Hal Draper or Neil Harding and doesn’t distinguish between the early Lenin of the democratic stage of the revolution and the doctrine of Leninism created after the Bolshevik seizure of power. As a consequence, his ideological conclusions are too sweeping and the lessons he draws from the New Communist Movement’s immersion in Marxism too self-

⁵⁹ Elbaum, p. 148.

⁶⁰ Elbaum, p. 149.

⁶¹ See the *Erfurt Program* at marxists.org: “It is the task of the Social Democratic Party to shape the class struggle of the working class into a conscious and unified one and to point out the inherent necessity of its goals.” For the history of the conflict between revolutionary theory and timid practice in the German Social Democratic Party see Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy: 1905-1917* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1955). At its peak strength in 1912 the German Social Democratic Party had 900,000 members, the socialist-aligned trade unions 2,500,000 members, other unions had 1,700,000 out of a male industrial workforce of 5,400,000 and a total male wage labor force of over 10 million. The Social Democratic Party garnered 4,000,000 votes in the 1912 national elections out of 11,500,000 total. The Party appealed to the whole class, but it did not “embrace” the whole class. Sources are Schorske and Thomas Weiskopp, *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*.

⁶² Elbaum, p. 152.

limiting. There *is* a correct ideological and political line that can be drawn from the Marxist revolutionary tradition: the primacy of the political struggle for full democratic rights and institutions. Until 1917 Lenin was part of this classical Marxist democratic tradition and *WITBD?* was his most comprehensive statement of these democratic principles and goals.

The second and related problem in Elbaum's account is his overestimation of the degree to which the mass of activists in the New Communist Movement accepted uncritically the traditional model of a Marxist-Leninist party as their goal. This problem can be seen by comparing his assertion that:

Within the early New Communist Movement, the party model developed under Stalin and Mao held predominant influence. The entire movement considered Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* its basic text and most of it viewed Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* as the authoritative interpretation of Lenin;⁶³

with his observation that:

...early on, free-wheeling discussion, trial runs with a variety of organizing approaches, and even flexibility in organizational matters—including limits on the authority of central leaders—predominated.

Partly this was due to the influence of the grassroots side of the Cultural Revolution, to the spirit of experimentation associated with Che and the Cuban revolution, and to the general diversity of opinion and practice within the Third World movements that inspired young US communists. Even more it was due to the party building trend's origins within and continuing interaction with vibrant and diverse popular movements. The period's broad layers of energetic, independent-minded organizers acted as a check on tendencies toward dogmatism and abuse of authority. Most of the activists turning to the New Communist Movement came out of and were intertwined with this broader milieu; almost all had participated in and many had been leaders of the battles that had produced a revolutionary generation in the first place. There was simply no way such people were going to meld into a single organization or follow a single leadership without clashes of opinion and lots of practical experimentation.⁶⁴

These two statements are at odds with one another, and the problem lies in the first one. First, it is an overreach to say that Stalin and Mao developed a single common model of the party. The Cultural Revolution blew up the traditional Stalinist and pre-Cultural Revolution Maoist model of the party, which is why it makes sense to refer to "the influence of the grass

⁶³ Elbaum, p. 159.

⁶⁴ Elbaum, pp. 161-2.

roots side of the Cultural Revolution” but no sense at all to refer to the grass roots side of Stalinism. Second, Elbaum consequently overstates in the first passage the degree to which a specifically Stalinist model of the party was accepted by the mass of movement activists. Although he points out that the Revolutionary Union’s widely read *Red Papers* contained a defense of Stalin and of the need for a traditional Marxist-Leninist party, he fails to clarify that the RU had to make this argument precisely because “we do expect some resistance to this idea [of the need for a Marxist-Leninist party] on the part of many who consider themselves revolutionary and, in the present situation, objectively are revolutionary.”⁶⁵ Third, even as the RU defended Stalin and the need for a Marxist-Leninist party, it conceded that it was necessary “to achieve rank-and-file selection and supervision of leaders”⁶⁶ “to ensure that the leaders and leading bodies of the Party constantly receive criticism and supervision from the Party rank and file and the masses.”⁶⁷ Although these words turned out to be hollow, they are an indication that even among the proponents of democratic centralism it was generally felt early on that any new party would have to find some way to prevent the arbitrary hyper-centralism practiced by Stalin and Stalinist parties in the past, including the practice in the recent past of the Progressive Labor Party, which Elbaum rightly points out was viewed by most of the movement “as a prime example of what a Marxist-Leninist party was *not* supposed to be.”⁶⁸(emphasis in original) All of which is to say that Elbaum’s characterization of the movement’s expectations in the second passage of how the process of party building was supposed to proceed and how a party was supposed to operate after it was formed gives a truer picture of the early New Communist Movement’s predominant attitude than the first. The final point concerns the kind of knowledge of Marxism that New Left activists brought with them in considering the proposals advanced by the established New Communist groups. Elbaum mentions that many movement activists put together their own reading groups to study the Marxist classics but makes no reference

⁶⁵ *The Red Papers*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ *The Red Papers*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ *The Red Papers*, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Elbaum, p. 64.

to the college courses on Marxism that were widely available to the student New Left.⁶⁹ In addition to readings in the primary Marxist sources, these courses included Mills and Lichtheim on the general theory and history of Marxism, Carr on the Russian Revolution, Deutscher on Trotsky and Stalin, Schorske on German Social Democracy, and Schurmann on Chinese Communism, all of which I had read in college along with many of my SDS classmates before joining the RU. On the history of the Russian Revolution, my main takeaways were:

- 1) There was no general theory of centralized organization in *WITBD*? All of Section E in Chapter IV, "Conspiratorial' Organization and 'Democratism'," was devoted to explaining that the democratic procedures of the German Social Democratic Party were normal and appropriate where unhindered publicity and open elections were feasible but that the special conditions of police censorship in Russia imposed the need for a small, secret organization;
- 2) I saw no problem with the idea in *WITBD*? that political consciousness needed to be brought to the working class "from without." Students had led the antiwar movement and exposing and explaining how the system of imperialism worked was imperative;
- 3) Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of Lenin and Trotsky for making a virtue out of necessity in their justifications for the suppression of democracy and the establishment of a party dictatorship was thoroughly convincing;⁷⁰ and
- 4) It was a political fact that Stalin was a leader in the war against Hitler and gave aid to anticolonial struggles, but Stalin's codification of Leninist doctrine was a transparent rationalization for his own autocratic rule.

I have no idea how many other activists held similar views back then, but the more important point is that these views lead to a different conclusion about the lessons to be drawn from the history of the Marxist New Left. Elbaum writes that the movement

⁶⁹ For a handy summary of work on the history and content of Marxism available in the early sixties see the SDS syllabus by Carl Wittman, "Seminar on Marxism," in the Documents section at sds-1960s.org.

⁷⁰ Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," pp, 393-5.

considered *WITBD?* its basic text and most of it viewed Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* as the authoritative interpretation of Lenin. He then draws the conclusion that the Leninist tradition beginning with *WITBD?* leads to sectarianism and dogmatism. To the extent that Lenin was read in this way, then he was misread and badly misunderstood. From 1895 until the 1902 publication of *WITBD?*, Lenin was engaged in a sustained effort to establish the democratic political struggle against the Tsarist autocracy as the principle goal of the Russian Social Democratic movement and the writings he produced in those years are some of the most important we have on the ideology and politics of the struggle for democracy.

These writings are important, first, because of their systematic coherence. They are a practical historical example of Mills' model of a working political philosophy with full explanations of its guiding *ideals*, its *theories* of society and politics, its specification of political *agencies* and program, and the *ideology* and purpose of its public communications. The ideals of this philosophy were those of the modern democratic tradition that began with the American Revolution and consisted of the fundamental rights to freedom of speech, press, association, religion, and a democratically elected constitutional assembly and legislature.⁷¹ Other elements of this philosophy were particular to Russian political and economic conditions, such as the clandestine techniques and organization required to avoid the Tsarist police and the challenges posed by the uniquely Russian pattern of concentrated industrialization in a vast expanse of backward peasant agriculture. Then there were the elements of practical ideology and politics inherited from the Russian and European revolutionary traditions that Lenin developed to such a degree that they became new and distinct categories of political thinking and activity. These new elements included a clear differentiation between the separate goals of democracy and socialism, a unique and demanding conception of political consciousness, and a whole constellation of strategic and tactical propositions aimed at finding and exploiting the most important link in the infinite chain of links that make up political life.⁷²

⁷¹ See Lenin's various drafts of a party program and the official program of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party adopted in 1903. 1895 draft, *CW*, vol. 2. p. 97, 1899 draft, vol. 4, pp. 235-6, 1902 draft, vol. 6, pp. 27-8. Official 1903 program at marxists.org.

⁷² On the difference between the goals of democracy and socialism see *The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats*, vol. 2, pp. 323-51. On the idea of a key link see *WITBD?* vol. 5, p.502.

If we compare the ideology and practice of the New Left to Lenin's early democratic philosophy, these are the most important similarities and differences:

1. Ideals—The democratic ideals of the New Left and the early Lenin are virtually identical because both were drawn from the same social democratic tradition. The early members of SDS knew that their roots extended back through the League for Industrial Democracy and the Intercollegiate Socialist Society to the American Socialist Party and the wider movement of pre-WWI international Social Democracy, but they suffered from the common Cold War misconception that Lenin fell outside this democratic socialist tradition;

2. Program—This is the major difference. European Social Democracy's democratic ideals were linked directly to the programmatic demand for fully democratic political institutions based on universal and equal suffrage. This direct connection between ideals and program was also part of the platform of the pre-WWI American Socialist Party, which called for the abolition of the Senate, the abolition of the Presidential veto, and the abolition of the Supreme Court's power to declare legislation unconstitutional.⁷³ By the time of the Cold War, however, the social democratic left in this country had dropped its criticism of the Constitution and this political amnesia was passed on to SDS;

3. Ideology and Strategy—The New Left wasn't socialist (although it was anti-corporate). Like Lenin, its primary focus was on the immediate struggle to advance democracy. This conception of political activity was expressed both in the rhetoric of participatory democracy and in the subject matter of its most important writings and speeches. The New Left spent very little time trying to construct what an alternative society might look like but a great deal of time analyzing and criticizing "the system" and searching for ways to build a movement to oppose it. Strategically, the New Left rejected a politics of coalition with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and saw itself as the "cutting-edge" of an entirely new and independent left.⁷⁴ It was consequently accused of practicing the

⁷³ Sageamericanhistory.net/progressive/docs/SocialistPlat1912

⁷⁴ Greg Calvert was the most forceful advocate of a break with liberal coalitionism and the creation of an independent "cutting-edge" left, Sale, pp. 296-7. 314-6. In articulating this strategy, Calvert was expanding upon Tom Hayden's original break with conventional liberalism in 1964, Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 165-6 and Hayden's essay, "Liberal Analysis and Federal Power," at sds-1960s.org.

Leninist tactic of attacking the liberal center and thereby strengthening the Right.⁷⁵ If the U. S. had actually been a democracy and the Democratic Party truly represented the interests of its constituents, then this criticism might merit some consideration; but, given that both the Democratic and Republican parties are the joint guardians of an undemocratic political order, this argument is empty. The New Left rejected a coalition with liberalism for the same reason Lenin rejected a coalition with liberalism, because liberalism did not support full and consistent democracy;

4. Agents of Change and Theories of Society and Politics—Why did Mills recommend rereading Lenin and Luxemburg as an antidote to the a-historic hopes of those still clinging to the labor metaphysic? Because Lenin and Luxemburg, like Marx and Engels, were political intellectuals who created theories, ideologies, strategies, and programs that contributed to real live political movements and who were themselves real live agents of historical change.⁷⁶ By counterposing Lenin and Luxemburg to the labor metaphysic Mills was indicating that the labor metaphysic did not apply across the board to all aspects of Marxism. It did apply to Marxism's overarching historical conviction that the working class would destroy capitalism and establish socialism and communism; but this long-term historical expectation, no matter how unrealistic, also had immediate and very real practical consequences because it oriented and prompted Marxists to engage with workers in the here and now to create mass movements for economic and political change. Within this practical labor empiric both Marxist intellectuals and workers were active agents, the intellectuals as the propagators of theories and programs and the workers as the mass constituency that weighed and responded to Marxist initiatives as they saw fit. After WWII, however, even this practical empirical side of Marxism lost any serious connection with working class realities. Neo-Keynesian management of the economy was institutionalized, the depression did not return, and important trade union and social welfare reforms had been won. Now even the practical concentration on the working class as the most important oppositional social and political force became an unrealistic and a-historic hope, particularly in the face of the new

⁷⁵ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, pp. 289-91 for an equation of Hayden's radicalism with the strategy of the German Communist Party prior to Hitler's elevation to power.

⁷⁶ Mills, *The Marxists*, p. 134 for the concept of a "political intellectual".

challenges of nuclear weapons, the Cold War, race, and the anti-colonial revolutions. It was in this new Cold War era of working class political quiescence that Mills began to think about intellectuals as “a possible, immediate, radical agency of change.”⁷⁷ By simultaneously referring to both intellectuals and the working class as possible alternative agencies of change, however, Mills left his meaning open to the potential misinterpretation that intellectuals now constituted a new social class comparable in size and importance to the old industrial working class of classical Marxism.⁷⁸ This class reductionist take on Mills’ conception of intellectual political agency was adopted by some even though Mills had made it perfectly clear in his *White Collar* that intellectuals did not form a separate class of their own:

Of all middle-class groups, intellectuals are the most far-flung and heterogeneous. Unlike small businessmen, factory workers, or filing clerks, intellectuals have been relatively classless. They have no common origin and no common destiny....

Intellectuals cannot be defined as a single social unit, but rather as a scattered set of grouplets. They must be defined by their function and subjective characteristics rather than in terms of their social position: as people who specialize in symbols, the intellectuals produce, distribute, and preserve distinct forms of consciousness.⁷⁹

Of course, the very idea that only classes can be political agents and that theories and programs created by intellectuals are merely the outward expression of an underlying struggle between classes goes back to Marx and the *Communist Manifesto*:

The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be reformer.

They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our eyes.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Mills, *Letter*, p. 70.

⁷⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale draws this conclusion directly, p. 338. Greg Calvert and Carl Oglesby, the two main proponents of new working class theory within SDS, didn’t connect their theory directly to Mills, but “it did not escape new left theorists that they were moving in a direction Mills had pointed toward in 1961,” Breines, p. 102.

⁷⁹ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (Oxford University Press: New York,1956) p. 142.

⁸⁰ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, p. 23.

This peculiar self-effacing conception of the relationship between intellectuals and the working class has been the source of unending controversy within Marxism, particularly around Lenin's theory of political consciousness coming from outside the working class. Mills essentially agreed with Lenin in the sense that he held that both workers and intellectuals were independent actors with their own interests and ideas that might or might not coincide.⁸¹ Mills' position was certainly not anti-working class, "Where labor exists as an agency, of course we must work with it...,"⁸² but intellectuals first had to define what their own ideals and goals were before they could identify which other political actors might be potential constituencies or allies.

The New Left, Marxism, and the Rediscovery of the Democratic Republic

The ideals of democracy are old, but efforts to realize those ideals are constantly new. They are constantly new because new generations are constantly replacing the old and must figure out for themselves the relevance of the past for the present. The meaning of the past for the New Left was particularly problematic because the victors in the recent battle against the evil of fascism were themselves morally compromised, the Soviet Union by Stalinism and the U. S. by its cynical and criminal use of the atom bomb, its prosecution of the Cold War and associated loyalty purge, and its continuing tolerance of racial injustice. Unmoored from any identification with a traditional political movement or existing political system, members of the New Left felt compelled to examine carefully the bedrock moral and political values on which they could stand. For both Mills and SDS, those values were to be found in America's traditional democratic ideals. As the *Port Huron Statement* put it, "Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we could live...." The aim of the New Left was to find some way to close the gap between these ideals and American political reality. Because the New Left did not succeed in this effort and ultimately foundered both ideologically and organizationally, the overwhelming preponderance of political and historical opinion has been that the New

⁸¹ Mills, *The Marxists*, p. 114.

⁸² Mills, "Letter," p. 70.

Left's conception and practice of democracy was naïve, utopian, unrealistic, and/or irresponsible. This conclusion is often dressed up with knowing references to Max Weber's defense of an "ethic of responsibility" against an "ethic of absolute ends," which is supposedly more concerned with symbolic expressions of moral outrage than with realistic political consequences.⁸³ The short answer to this pompous sanctimony is that the New Left was responding to the very real injustices of an undemocratic social and political order and that the principle of one person, one vote is not an irresponsible utopian fantasy. For that subgroup of critics, made up mostly of early members of SDS, who believe the original democratic values and aspirations of the New Left were legitimate but were overwhelmed and destroyed by sectarian Marxism later in the decade, the answer is that the history of Marxism's impact on the New Left isn't over yet. It isn't over yet because what the New Left learned about the U. S. political system and about the history of the struggle for democracy in other countries still has not been fully absorbed and integrated.

The New Left as a self-conscious political movement began in 1960 when small groups of college students, SDS most prominently, adopted as their own political self-identification the ideology outlined by C. Wright Mills in his "Letter to the New Left." It ended for all practical purposes in 1974 when the Revolutionary Union renounced the democratic ideals of its New Left roots and opted for the cult of Marxist-Leninist scientific socialism.⁸⁴ Over that span of time the New Left evolved from a "student" movement seeking reforms into an "adult"⁸⁵ movement with the goal of creating a new revolutionary political party in the U. S. The idea of creating a new political party was not wrong, but the primary goal of that party should have been the establishment of a genuinely democratic system of representative government. This proposal for what should have been is not just retrospective wishful thinking. All of the elements needed to construct a coherent democratic ideology and

⁸³ Breines, pp. 1-3 for the invocation of Max Weber and the language of "expressive" vs. "instrumental" politics. Todd Gitlin also employs this language throughout *The Sixties*.

⁸⁴ For this explicit rejection of the ideals of democracy and equality in favor of the "revolutionary science of the proletariat" see *Important Struggles in Building the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, (RCP Publications: Chicago, 1978) p.11. Available at marxists.org. Also, see Elbaum, pp. 95-102 and 185-7, for the central role of the RU before the break in relations with the Black Workers' Congress and the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers' Organization in 1973.

⁸⁵ See Breines, pp. 75, 111, 119-20, for the distinction between a "student" movement and an "adult" movement.

strategy were present at the time. The core of that ideology was the New Left's original moral commitment to democratic values and activity. While that commitment did not lead immediately to a systematic critique of the constitutional order as a whole, it did immediately lead to opposition to the Democratic Party's tolerance of Southern segregationists within its ranks, to a rejection of Cold War McCarthyite red-baiting, and to resistance to the Vietnam war and the draft with all of its class and racial inequities. As conflict around these issues grew, interest in Marxism grew with it. It is useless to bemoan this rise of Marxism within the New Left, as the standard histories do, because "it had to happen." It had to happen because of the war, because of the empire, because of the black revolt in the cities, and because the paralysis of historical and political thinking induced by the Cold War ideology of the end of ideology couldn't maintain its grip forever. Marxism was the New Left's route back into history, back into the history of colonialism and imperialism, of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction and its reversal, of the European working class movement's struggle for democracy and socialism, and of the U.S. working class' own decades-long battle for union recognition and, briefly, its own socialist party. Of course, along with its useful historical and political insights, Marxism also carried with it an overweening self-certainty about its status as a science that had discovered the "law of development of human history"⁸⁶ and the "necessity and inevitability" of socialism.⁸⁷ In sorting out the useful from the baneful in this complex of history and ideas, it turns out that *WITBD?* can be extraordinarily useful in reorienting our understanding of the history and content of Marxism. Although couched in the most uncompromising language of Marxist scientific socialism, Lenin harnessed the claim to be "*guided by the most advanced theory*"⁸⁸ to an argument for the primacy of the struggle for political liberty and representative democracy. Recognition of the actual content of this argument is useful because it (1) provides insight into the importance of classical democratic thinking in traditional Marxism,

⁸⁶ Frederick Engels, "Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx".

⁸⁷ Lenin, *WITBD?*, *CW*, vol. 5, p. 353.

⁸⁸ Lenin, *WITBD?*, *CW*, vol. 5, p. 370. The "advanced theory" and "scientific" principle that Lenin appeals to in making his argument is Marx's declaration in the *Communist Manifesto* that "every class struggle is a political struggle," which consequently leads the working class to organize itself into a political party.

(2) undercuts the historical basis of the myth of the Party constructed after the Bolshevik Revolution, and (3) provides a standard by which our own social and political system can be judged. That is the lesson to be drawn from the New Left's immersion in Marxism: the goal of a truly representative democracy, which was central to the theory and history of classical Marxism, should be the central political objective of the left in the United States today.

CONCLUSION
BERNIE SANDERS
AND
THE DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTION PARTY

In left-wing thought, there's always been a powerful emancipatory possibility associated with understanding the past; the specific opposite of false consciousness is historical consciousness. To see yourself in time is to grasp the way the world is in flux. Anyone who has ever done any kind of political organizing learns this intuitively: the work of mobilizing is always in urging people to un-forget, to see how their circumstances came to be, how others responded to similar circumstances in the past, and how they might also—now, today. To engage in political struggle is necessarily to do history.

Gabriel Winant
"Slave Capitalism" (2013)¹

It is now July 2019. Bernie Sanders' second campaign for President is in full swing, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has been brilliant, membership in the Democratic Socialists of America has ballooned to sixty thousand from seven, and socialism has become a frequent subject of discussion in the mainstream media. What's not to like? For some socialists, plenty. For two hundred years, the definition of socialism has been that the means of production, distribution, and exchange must be collectively owned and controlled; but by socialism Bernie means a revitalization and expansion of FDR's New Deal economic and social policies,² a political program that almost everyone else in the world calls social democracy rather than socialism. In addition to blurring the difference between the regulation of capitalism and its elimination, Sanders' decision to run in the Democratic Party also seems to violate the socialist principle that the working class must form an independent political party of its own in order to fight for its interests. Lastly, Sanders' campaign is

¹ Gabriel Winant, "Slave Capitalism," *N+1*, Fall 2013

² Bernie Sanders, Georgetown University Speech, 11/19/2015.

suspect because it is premised on the tactic of “electoralism,” the belief that fundamental political change can be achieved by electing enough progressive Democrats to office; but this promise of an electoral road to power will almost certainly be blocked either by the anti-democratic structure of the existing electoral system itself or, if this hurdle can somehow be overcome, by the unwillingness of those in power to surrender it peacefully. What’s a socialist to do?

Like every other strategic debate in the history of socialism since Marx, the different parties to this debate appeal to the history of socialism itself for analogies and justifications. Now I want to add the historical and political analysis developed in the pages above to this debate and compare it to four other political positions that have been staked out in the writings of Daniel Lazare, Nora Belrose, Eric Blanc and the *Jacobin* crew in general, and the more traditional Marxism represented by the (now disbanded) International Socialist Organization and such writers as Charlie Post and Louis Proyect. Together these four positions span most of the important subjects at issue on the left today and all contain valid points that must be part of any coherent democratic socialist ideology and strategy.

Daniel Lazare’s *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* was published in 1996. In *The New Yorker* in 2002, Hendrick Hertzberg called Lazare’s book “pathbreaking,” and that is exactly right.³ As Lazare explained in his introduction, in 1996 the Constitution was still an object of quasi-religious reverence that opinion writers, politicians, and the oracles sitting on the Supreme Court all appealed to in order to divine solutions for the ills afflicting American society. The problem, Lazare argued, was that the ills afflicting American social and political life were largely the product of flaws in the construction of the original Constitution itself. American political life and thought were thus caught in a paralyzing doom loop, the only escape from which was to acknowledge the Constitution’s anti-democratic rigidity and replace it with a truly representative democracy. The last twenty years have more than confirmed Lazare’s diagnosis. Instead of the finely calibrated machinery of constitutional checks and balances moving to prevent the concentration and exercise of despotic power, we have seen the Supreme Court intervene in

³ For full citations see note 26 of Introduction, p. 80.

and nullify the vote count in the 2000 Presidential election, the President and Congress launch an invasion of Iraq on fabricated evidence, the intelligence agencies construct a pervasive surveillance state, the Obama administration rescue banks and abandon homeowners, and the Electoral College once again anoint a President who had lost the popular vote. Criticism of the formerly sacrosanct Constitution has grown in parallel. Lazare was eventually joined in his criticism by such academic heavyweights as Robert Dahl and Sanford Levinson who, while they didn't go along with all of Lazare's sweeping reform proposals, certainly did agree that the Constitution was paralyzing democracy. Seth Ackerman's "Burn the Constitution" in *Jacobin* in early 2011 marks the point where this accumulating constitutional criticism made the jump from the realm of intellectual discussion in books and small magazines into the realm of direct political advocacy in an emerging mass movement. Ackerman didn't say whether or not Lazare was a source for his views, but since then most of the articles on the Constitution appearing in *Jacobin* have been by Lazare⁴, who has continued to argue that an undemocratic Constitution forms the main fault line in U. S. politics and that the establishment of a truly representative democracy should be the primary strategic objective of the left. Drawing on the historical examples of the French Revolution, the revolutions of 1848, and the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, Lazare suggests that the left should aim for the convocation of a constituent assembly with the power to reconstruct U. S. political institutions on a new democratic foundation. Socialism would follow simultaneously or as a consequence of the establishment of democracy.

When I first ran across Lazare's work in 2002, I had been plodding along in fits and starts on the history of the New Left and its adoption of Marxism for more than ten years. Since Lazare had already made the case for a democratic reconstitution of the U.S. political system far more effectively than I could ever hope to, I wondered whether it was worth continuing. I decided to keep plugging away because the history of the New Left still needed a fundamental reassessment and because Lenin's early political thinking was still widely

⁴ Daniel Lazare, "Abolish the Senate," (12/2/2014), "Abolish the Electoral College." (11/10/2016), "A Constitutional Revolution," (1/3/2017), "Instability Comes Home," (3/22/2017), "'We the People' and the Lone Gunman," (10/18/2017), all at jacobinmag.com. See also "Constituent Assembly: 1917-2017," *Platypus*, 11/2017, no. 101.

misunderstood. I see these two historical issues as supplements to and support for Lazare's breakthrough work on the Constitution. Call this the Democratic Constitution position. How does this position compare to the other three?

Nora Belrose has written a series of articles over the past year ("In Defense of Electoralism," "The Left Can Capture the Democratic Party—And Nothing Else Will Work," "Put Down Your Pitchforks: Why Insurrectionary Politics Doesn't Work," "Nobody Is More Left-Wing Than Bernie Sanders," and others at norabelrose.com) that makes a case for an electoral road to socialism through the Democratic Party. Before launching into any criticisms, it's only right to give credit where credit is due. Despite grumblings from many socialists (even the moderate socialists at *Jacobin*⁵) that Bernie isn't really a socialist or that running in the Democratic Party is no way to develop an independent working class or socialist movement, Bernie's 2016 campaign and the progressives who urged him to run and those who supported him did more to spread consciousness about economic inequality and the idea of socialism than the efforts over the past fifty years of all other socialists and socialist groups combined.⁶ Belrose saw this potential and was part of this movement and thinks it has a lot farther to run. On many points she is right: the McGovern-Fraser reform of the Democratic Party primary system in 1971 did create a "bureaucratic shell" or "empty vessel" open to invasion by insurgent left forces, electoral activity currently is the most important thing socialists can be working on and does not detract from other movement activity but complements it, and third party efforts are largely unworkable at the present time because of our first-past-the-post electoral system. That said, electoralism does have its limits because we know the U. S. does not have a system of equal representation and that even large voter majorities can be fragmented and neutralized. In such a situation, electoral campaigns can only be one of a number of possible tactics in a larger strategy to establish a political system where all votes count equally and all are represented. Like the Civil Rights, black liberation, and anti-Vietnam war movements, a movement to establish electoral democracy in the U. S. as a whole will most likely also involve activities that are extra-

⁵ "The Socialism of Bernie Sanders," *Jacobin*, 11/20/2015.

⁶ José G. Pérez makes this observation in "What's behind the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America," hatueysashes.blogspot.com, 8/6/2016.

electoral and extra-legal. Pitchforks? Nobody knows and there is not much to be gained by speculating about unknowable future contingencies. Besides, the only way to “prepare” for an insurrection is not by calling for revolution and practicing at the shooting range (we already tried that in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s) but by helping build a mass movement for justice and democracy. The main point is that, far from being historically obsolete, the experience of European Marxist and labor movements in confronting the problem of how to get democracy when you don’t have it is still relevant to the U. S. today. Belrose doesn’t see the need to consider this historical parallel, but Eric Blanc does.

Blanc and *Jacobin* in general want to take a “democratic road to socialism” that runs somewhere between Belrose’s Democratic Party electoralism and the “insurrectionary strategy” of Leninism. However, they have had some difficulty identifying exactly where this road is located because so far their immediate political recommendations have been virtually indistinguishable from straightforward electoralism. Like Belrose, they believe that at the present time the Democratic Party ballot line should be used to run socialists and progressives; but unlike Belrose, they say that participation in the Democratic Party is only temporary and that at some point in the future when they are strong enough socialists will break away from the Democrats and form an independent party of their own. It is Blanc’s view that this new socialist party will then compete in elections and directly challenge the capitalists for power. Drawing on Karl Kautsky’s theory that a workers’ party in an advanced country with an established parliamentary system must first win an electoral majority in government, Blanc argues that Kautsky’s strategy is the appropriate guide for socialists in the U. S. rather than the Leninist strategy of insurrection and workers’ councils.⁷

These arguments are way too convoluted and tendentious. First, Blanc and *Jacobin* should abandon their too clever fake-right-go-left rationalization of entering the Democratic Party only with the intention of leaving it later. Belrose is right that if the left were to gather enough ideological and organizational strength within the Democratic Party to enable it to break away and form another viable party, then it almost certainly would have already gathered enough strength to have won control of much of the Democratic Party’s formal

⁷ Eric Blanc, “Why Kautsky Was Right (and Why You Should Care),” *jacobinmag.com*, 4/2/2019.

apparatus. Judging by what happened to the McGovern reform forces in 1972, the most likely consequence in such a scenario is that the corporate and conservative forces in the Democratic Party will be the first to withdraw their money and support in an attempt to sabotage the left. This strategy of sabotage worked against the McGovern forces because they were not ideologically and organizationally mature enough at the time to resist the charge that McGovern had lost the election because the Party had moved too far to the left. It is not likely that such a strategy against the left would be effective today. If the left held fast and did not give in, it's very likely that the corporate Democrats would themselves form a separate party (think of the current threats of Michael Bloomberg and Howard Schultz). What would happen next is anybody's guess. Second, Blanc and *Jacobin* should ignore the straw man of Leninism and insurrection. Yes, there are still some socialists around who dream of a replay of the Bolshevik Revolution. Yes, they still fulminate against reformism, oppose participation in the Democratic Party, and call for revolution and workers' councils; but countering only those political stances should give no sense of satisfaction that the job is done. The most important historical/political debate is not between the early Kautsky and later Leninism but between Kautsky and Luxemburg in 1910 over how to fight for a democratic republic. Charlie Post brings up this conflict in his critique of Kautsky in *Jacobin*;⁸ but both he and Blanc in his reply mishandle it, Post by approving of Luxemburg's mass strike tactic but replacing the political goal of a democratic republic with his preference for insurrection and workers' councils, Blanc by ignoring it entirely. No one can doubt that Luxemburg also wanted to find a "democratic road to socialism," but her road and Kautsky's were very different. Germany had an extremely peculiar political system combining an authoritarian monarchy with universal male suffrage but radically unequal representation in a legislature with no real legislative powers. Luxemburg thought elections in this system were a sham and backed the mass demonstrations for reform of the voting laws and the establishment of a democratic republic. Kautsky joined with the leadership of the Social Democratic Party in banning Luxemburg's call for a democratic republic from the Party's leading newspapers and argued that the strikes and demonstrations undermined the Party's

⁸ Charlie Post, "The 'Best' of Karl Kautsky Isn't Good Enough," *jacobinmag.com*, 3/9/2019.

electoral chances in 1912. For Luxemburg, electoral campaigns in an undemocratic political system had to serve the mass political struggle for genuine democracy. For Kautsky and the Party and trade union leaders, winning elections in an undemocratic system was primary and would result in real democracy only somewhere way off in the distant future. (If this conflict sounds similar to the one between the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Democratic Party establishment at the 1964 Party Convention, it should.) Blanc and *Jacobin* muddy this issue by continuing to call the U. S. a democracy despite knowing its political system is “extremely undemocratic.”⁹ *Jacobin* should get off the fence on this issue and stop referring to the U. S. as a democracy at all. Third, the good news is that the issue of an undemocratic Constitution is gradually working its way into more political discussions in *Jacobin* and the DSA. Blanc’s references to Chris Maisano’s “The Class Struggle and the Constitution”¹⁰ and Jamal Abed-Rabbo’s “Ready for a (Political) Revolution?”¹¹ indicate he is aware of the obstacles to unadulterated electoralism, but this analysis needs to be tightened up and focused much more sharply on the primacy of the struggle for a true democracy.

Finally, there are the traditional Marxists who think that participation in the Democratic Party violates everything that Marx and Engels wrote about the principle of working class political independence and who maintain that socialism vs. capitalism forms the main political fault line in the U. S. rather than anything having to do with the absence of representative democracy. Charlie Post’s critique of Kautsky is one expression of this view; but as a baseline it’s better to start with the International Socialists’ position back before Lars Lih’s work on Lenin, Occupy Wall Street, *Jacobin*, and Bernie Sanders. Back in late 2000, just before the Bush-Gore election, Paul D’Amato wrote “Marxists and Elections,”¹² an article still listed as an “Editor’s Choice” on the *International Socialist Review* website. Taking reform vs. revolution as the principle divide running through the history of Marxism, D’Amato had no difficulty amassing many denunciations of reformism and misplaced faith in peaceful electoral change in the works of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, and Lenin. Unfortunately, he left out the following complicating factors:

⁹ Blanc, “Why Kautsky...”

¹⁰ Chris Maisano, “The Constitution and the Class Struggle,” socialistcall.com, 11/27/2018.

¹¹ Jamal Abed-Rabbo, “Ready for a (Political) Revolution,” socialistforum.dsa.org, Fall, 2018

¹² Paul D’Amato, “Marxists and Elections,” *International Socialist Review*, Issue 13, August-September 2000.

(1) before WWI neither the U. S. nor any European country, except maybe Norway, was a representative democracy. Of course Marxists were sceptical of the idea of peaceful electoral change in systems with weak and stunted forms of political representation;

(2) the big four of Marxism all repeatedly called for the establishment of a democratic republic and it was the primary demand in all the major socialist party programs prior to 1917. One can believe that the creation of the soviets in 1917 superseded this earlier demand, but it is misleading to leave it out of review of a general history of Marxist attitudes toward democracy and representative institutions; and

(3) before 1917 all of the big four Marxists also conceded that it was possible that the workers in some countries with stronger representative institutions (England, the U.S., Holland) might be able to “conquer political power” electorally and make the transition to socialism peacefully. Even Lenin in absolutist Russia in 1899 argued that it would be wrong to exclude this possibility, writing that “This is the reason the programme of ‘working-class socialism’ speaks of the winning of political power in general *without defining* the method, for the choice of method depends on a future which we cannot precisely determine.”¹³ [emphasis in original] D’Amato relegated this issue to a footnote, uninterested in why any of the great Marxists would ever have considered such a concession in the first place.

The ISO has suffered over the last several years for this one-sidedness. Lars Lih’s historical work on Lenin, Pham Binh’s criticisms during Occupy, competition from *Jacobin*, the popularity of the Sanders campaign, and the growth of the DSA, apart from the ISO’s own internal crises, have taken their toll. All of this should make the ISO thoroughly forgettable except for one thing: in their antipathy to reformism and the Democratic Party, the ISO was the main organization responsible for keeping alive the Marxist idea of the necessity of working class ideological, political, and organizational independence. Although they remained too bound up with the delusions of Leninism to have much useful to say about what that independence consists of, they were right that the formulations of Blanc, *Jacobin*,

¹³ Lenin, “A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy,” *CW*, vol. 4, p.276.

and the DSA were inadequate. For a non-Leninist Marxist take on this issue, it's better to turn to Louis Proyect.

Proyect abandoned the Socialist Workers Party and Leninism forty years ago and since then has argued for a broad-based socialist movement free of organizational and doctrinal sectarianism.¹⁴ Now there is one, but he thinks it will not be able to maintain its independence if it gets entangled with the Democratic Party.¹⁵ There have been a couple of responses to Proyect's position on this issue by socialists who are also concerned about maintaining socialist/working class ideological and political independence, are not entirely in the *Jacobin*/electoralism camp, but do think it is necessary to work in the Sanders movement within the Democratic Party. One is by José G. Pérez, who blogs at Hatuey's Ashes and is an old friend of Proyect's and also a former SWPer. Pérez has come to accept, against a lifetime of disgust with the Democratic Party, that the Sanders movement represents a genuine working class upsurge that should be (critically) supported even with all its contradictions.¹⁶ Pérez draws a parallel between working in the Sanders movement and Marx's and Engels' attitude toward working with the Chartist "party" in England or the Henry George United Labor Party campaign in the U. S., arguing that what Marx and Engels meant by a "political party" back then—"people that shared a common outlook and had organized themselves as a distinct group around demands for changing the government"¹⁷—now exists around the Sanders movement. That this "party" now largely operates within the larger Democratic Party certainly poses difficulties, but there is no alternative to facing the facts and dealing with them. The second response cites Lenin's recommendation to British communists in *'Left Wing' Communism, An Infantile Disorder* to work within and cooperate in elections with the "bourgeois" Labour Party. Proyect is right that these historical

¹⁴ Louis Proyect, "Rethinking the Question of a Revolutionary Program," louisproyect.com. 1/5/2011.

¹⁵ Proyect, "The excuses some Marxists make for voting democratic," Part 1, 7/16/2018, Part 2, 8/7/2018, and "Young Marxist Intellectuals and the Democratic Party," 8/3/2018.

¹⁶ José G. Pérez, "What's behind the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America?" 8/2018, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Superstar" 8/2018, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Superstar: What Engels would have said about it" 8/2018, "The Democratic Socialists, the Democratic Party and the tactic of critical support" 10/2018, "The question facing the Democratic Socialists of America: What are we?" 3/2019, "Bernie, AOC and the Chartist movement of British workers in the 1800's" 3/2019, "For Bernie, but against a DSA 'independent expenditure campaign' 3/2019. All at hatueysashes.blogspot.com.

¹⁷ Pérez, "Bernie, AOC and the Chartists..."

examples by themselves can never be definitive and political decisions ultimately come down to a judgement call. All we can do is study history, look for comparisons and clues, and make these judgements as informed and effective as they can be.

My suggestion about the history of Marxism is that there was a time when the demand for a democratic republic was the foremost demand of the working class movement and that we face a similar situation in the U. S. today. In considering how a democratic/socialist movement can establish and maintain its own ideological and political independence in the face of pressure from the Democratic Party to compromise and submit, a simple demand for democracy can be a clear, defensible line of demarcation. To take just one example, Congress has always had the legal authority to establish uniform national voting rights in federal elections and to eliminate gerrymandering by instituting proportional representation in elections for the House of Representatives. As surely as the gain in popularity of the demand for Medicare for All has distinguished progressive Democrats from corporate Democrats, the demand to democratize the political system can do the same and more. In fact, in Pérez's sense, a Democratic Constitution "Party" is already in the process of formation because there is already widespread understanding that the U. S. political system is not based on one person, one equal vote and any future progressive legislation will inevitably run into this roadblock. In answer to the inevitable doubts and reservations about making the demand for democracy primary because it's too abstract to gain real political traction, I'll end with my favorite example of Lenin's reply in a similar situation:

Hence, the workers must demand from the Tsar the convocation of an assembly of the representatives of the people, the convocation of a Zemsky Sobor. The manifesto distributed in Kharkov on the eve of the First of May this year raised this demand, and we have seen that a section of the advanced workers fully appreciated its significance. We must make sure that *all* advanced workers understand clearly the necessity for this demand and spread it, not only among the masses of workers, but among all strata of the people who come into contact with the workers and who eagerly desire to know what the socialists and the 'urban' workers are fighting for. This year when a factory inspector asked a group of workers precisely what they wanted, only one voice shouted, 'A constitution!'; and this voice sounded so isolated that the correspondent reported somewhat mockingly: 'One proletarian *blurted out....*' Another correspondent put it, 'Under the circumstances,' this reply was 'semi-comical.' As a matter of fact, there was

nothing comical in the reply at all. What may have seemed comical was the incongruity between the demand of this lone voice for a change in the whole state system and the demands for a half-hour reduction in the working day and for payment of wages during working hours. There is, however, an indubitable connection between these demands and the demand for a constitution; and if we can get the masses to understand this connection (and we undoubtedly will), then the cry 'A constitution!' will not be an isolated one, but will come from the throats of thousands and hundreds of thousands, when it will no longer be comical, but menacing. It is related that a certain person driving through the streets of Kharkov during the May Day celebrations asked the cabby what the workers wanted, and he replied: 'They want an eight-hour day and their own newspaper.' That cabby understood that the workers were no longer satisfied with mere doles, but they wanted to be free men, that they wanted to be able to express their needs freely and openly and to fight for them. But that reply did not yet reveal the consciousness that the workers are fighting for the liberty of the whole people and for the right to take part in the administration of the state. When the demand that the Tsar convene an assembly of the people's representatives is repeated with full consciousness and indomitable determination by the working masses in all industrial cities and factory districts in Russia; when the workers have reached the stage at which the entire urban population, and all the rural people who come into the towns, understand what the socialists want and what the workers are fighting for, then the great day of the people's liberation from police tyranny will not be far off!¹⁸

¹⁸ Lenin, "Preface to the Pamphlet, *May Days in Kharkov*," *CW*, vol. 4, pp. 364-5.