

# Remapping the American Left: A History of Radical Discontinuity

James N. Gregory

**I**s the American Left reemerging as a political force? Suddenly there are socialists in Congress, socialists on city councils, socialists in the Democratic Party, and much of the media has taken up the question of whether the Democratic Party is swinging to the left. If we are indeed seeing a new surge to the left and new phase of American radicalism, it would not be the first time. This is something that has happened repeatedly in the past century. The particulars are new, but the cycles of movement reinvention appear to be a feature of American politics, one that historians have not adequately explored.

American radicalism has been a vexing subject for many years. It was not long ago that historians could do little more than grieve, framing the subject as a story of failures and asking why-not questions. Why was there no revolution? Why wasn't the US Left more like the European Left or the Canadian Left? Why did the Socialist Party fall apart? Why did the New Left fade?<sup>1</sup> No longer. Books by Paul Buhle, Richard Flacks, Michael Kazin, Doug Rossinow, Howard Brick, Christopher Phelps, Rhodri Jeffrey-Jones, and Dawson Barrett have changed the tone, examining accomplishments as well as limitations, arguing that the Left has initiated significant transformations, especially involving the rights of previously excluded populations, while a century of radical action has also changed the dimensions of the civic sphere and democratic practice by fostering a culture of activism. The newer books do so in

This article began as my presidential address at the Labor and Working-Class History Association banquet at the 2018 Organization of American Historians conference in Sacramento. For critical readings I am grateful to Max Krochmal, Michael Kazin, Trevor Griffey, Andrew Hedden, Susan Glenn, and the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies Workshare reading group.

1. Michael Kazin explained the grieving syndrome in "The Agony and Romance of the American Left." Classic works include Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States*; Lasch, *Agony of the American Left*; Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*; and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*.

*Labor: Studies in Working-Class History*, Volume 17, Issue 2

DOI 10.1215/15476715-8114733 © 2020 by Labor and Working-Class History Association

sweeping narratives that move across decades and organizations, following threads that suggest an enduring tradition of American radicalism.<sup>2</sup>

I applaud these interventions and their claims about contributions of the Left. But in this essay, I am going to argue for a clarification to address the impression of continuity that emerges in these books and insist that we pay more attention to the radical discontinuities that mark each generation of the American Left. And I want to focus closely on a structuring condition that fuels that history of discontinuity. For almost a century, the Left in the United States has consisted solely of shifting constellations of social movements without the anchoring presence of competitive left-wing electoral parties. No one will be surprised by this characterization, but few scholars have fully grappled with its implications.

For the past four years, I have been coordinating an online project called Mapping American Social Movements with the mission of producing data and visualizations about scores of social movements that historically have comprised the American Left.<sup>3</sup> To track the left in this fashion is to come face to face with the fact that it is entirely composed of discrete and unstable social movements. Outside of the United States, radicalism has been and continues to be at least partly organized around electoral parties that are historically linked to socialist, communist, or other leftist traditions. As a result, in most societies across Europe, the Americas, and much of Asia, radicalism is a political commitment that carries on across generations, supported by long-lasting institutions and family political loyalties. In contrast, the Left in the United States has operated on the fringe of electoral politics without the institutional support that electoral parties can deliver.<sup>4</sup>

That has had several consequences. The key one is discontinuity. The organizations of the American Left come and go, flourishing for a time, sometimes making important impacts on policy, public discourse, and cultural production, then withering, only to be replaced at some later point by a new Left based in different organizations, with potentially different demography, geography, and ideological agendas. Historians acknowledge and examine this in the case of the 1960s New Left. But I will argue that this has happened repeatedly, and I will identify five distinct left formations in the decades since 1900.

The fact that radicalism has operated through unstable social movements has other consequences. First, the American Left has been highly sensitive to shifts in empire and capitalism, more so than movements in countries where the Left is

2. Buhle, *Marxism in the United States*; Flacks, *Making History*; Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*; Kazin, *American Dreamers*; Jeffrey-Jones, *American Left*; Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*; Barrett, *Defiant*.

3. The Mapping American Social Movements Project has developed maps, charts, and databases showing the historical geography of dozens of movements from the Knights of Labor to the 2006 Immigrant Rights protests ([depts.washington.edu/moves](https://depts.washington.edu/moves)).

4. The Socialist International's "Full List of Member Parties and Organizations" ([www.socialistinternational.org/viewArticle.cfm?ArticlePageID=931](http://www.socialistinternational.org/viewArticle.cfm?ArticlePageID=931) [accessed November 6, 2019]) lists ninety-four nations in which member parties compete in elections. On the European Left, see Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*; and Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

anchored in competitive electoral parties. Each collapse and reorganization of radicalism in the United States occurred in the context of global transformations: the destruction of the European world order and the Bolshevik revolution shattered the early twentieth-century Left. The second Left took shape in the context of the twin crises of the Great Depression and rising fascism. Its breakup was directly tied to the Cold War imperial system as was the subsequent emergence of the third Left that challenged the Cold War liberalism of the Democratic Party. Defeat in Vietnam and the newly competitive global economy of the 1970s and 1980s encouraged the fourth Left's reorientation from resistance to reengagement in those decades. The rise of the newest Left at the turn of the millennium had much to do with contesting the neo-liberal global order with its borderless capital flows, job destruction, deregulation, deunionization, and escalating forms of inequality.

Second, there is a degree of logic to the new radical formations that arise in these transitions. Todd Wolfson argues that patterns of struggle reflect the cultural logic of phases of capitalism. That may be overly deterministic—ignoring the particularities of political contexts that I will be flagging—but I agree with another part of his formula. Wolfson says that each new Left's innovations rest partly on purposeful engagement with the ways and woes of its predecessor: "Contemporary social movements are also in dialogue with the history of resistance that has preceded it."<sup>5</sup> Activists design new organizations and new strategies through analysis intended to avoid the mistakes and overcome the limitations of earlier movements. This points to one of the few advantages that accrue to the American Left, the freedom to readily innovate. Left movements tied to electoral parties with elaborate bureaucracies and the need to maintain voter loyalty have not been particularly nimble. American radicals led the turn to Black Power, second-wave radical feminism, ecoradicalism, and LGBTQ radicalism, among others.

Third, the gestation periods and redesign processes have typically involved allies and mediating institutions. Sociologists have produced a huge literature on social movements that historians often ignore. One subfield focuses on movement "diffusion," trying to model how movements spread.<sup>6</sup> I borrow from that the concept of "mediated diffusion," the theory that movements are helped by "brokers" who may not be themselves part of a movement. Mediating institutions can be identified for each of the left reorganization periods I will be discussing.

Fourth, I want to think in purposeful ways about the Democratic Party, which rarely figures prominently in studies of the Left. The last century has seen an intriguing oscillation in the relationship between radicalism and the Democratic Party, cycling between estrangement and various forms of engagement. And that fluctuating relationship has had much to do with the ways the Left has achieved what it has achieved. The ability to influence policy changes has mostly depended upon

5. Wolfson, *Digital Rebellion*, 3.

6. Givan, *Diffusion of Social Movements*. On social movement theory, see Tarrow, *Power in Movement*; and Tilly and Wood, *Social Movements*.

finding ways to motivate Democratic politicians either through protest and disruption or through votes and inside pressure. This means that at intervals the Left has managed to reshape the Democratic Party. Conversely the complicated relationship has added to the instability of the Left.

In what follows, I am going to quickly reperiodize American radicalism, focusing on the discontinuities while considering the issues mentioned above.

### What's Left?

What do I mean by the Left? We need to approach this dynamically, recognizing that this is one of the important inconsistencies in American radical history. If we set inflexible definitions, limiting ourselves to movements committed to socialism or anticapitalism or movements that stay clear of the Democratic Party, we reduce the Left to something quite marginal. The issue of "What's left?" (with its double question) plagues many societies these days as parties still aligned with the Socialist International or once aligned with the Communist International have moved away from classic socialistic principles. In country after country, parties of the Left now fight to defend social spending, regulatory laws, and publicly owned enterprises, striving to ameliorate capitalism where once they fought to end it. Today, little distinguishes most electorally competitive socialist, social democratic, communist, labor, or green parties abroad from what in the US context has at various intervals been called progressivism or left liberalism.<sup>7</sup> Doug Rossinow tried to specify the boundaries of radicalism and liberalism in his valuable book on the left-liberal tradition.<sup>8</sup> I am not approaching the question with the same rigor, proposing instead that we employ loose definitions sensitive to changing context. In the early twentieth-century context, the Left consisted of those committed to revolutionary or evolutionary alternatives to capitalism. Fifty years later, the Left that mattered involved a constellation of social movements fighting for racial equality and Black Power, women's liberation and gay liberation, anti-imperialism and environmentalism, some of which involved critiques of capitalism, but not all. And now fifty years further along, the "What's left?" question is best answered with a fluid understanding that includes most who embrace the label "progressive."

Notice that a key term I am using is "constellation of social movements." The historical literature of the American Left consists mostly of single-movement studies, books and articles centered on an organization such as the Communist Party, Industrial Workers of the World, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or Black Panther Party. This has resulted in an invaluable historiography that this article eagerly draws upon. But the wealth of single-movement studies has made it hard to see the bigger picture. We tend to equate organizations with phases of Ameri-

7. Birnbaum, *After Progress*; Hertner, *Centre-Left Parties and the European Union*; Bailey, *Protest Movements*, 171–210.

8. Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*. Most of the recent studies employ relaxed definitions of the Left or none at all.

can radicalism, most notably in writing about the pre–World War I Left as if it was encompassed by the Socialist Party and treating the Communist Party as if it dominated the Left of the 1930s. In fact, these and other peak organizations were part of larger constellations of social movements that collectively comprised the Left of each era. I am going to identify these wider parameters while sketching a revised history of the American Left from 1900 to the present. Of course, American radicalism has a much longer history, but the structuring arrangements of the American state and electoral politics that I am flagging belong to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I propose that we think in terms of five distinct left formations since 1900, representing different periods of radical activism, each based in a different constellation of social movements, each gaining adherents and political credibility while achieving influence for a time followed by decline and then a transition to something distinctly new:

- Pre-World War I Left
- New Deal Left (1930s and 1940s)
- Liberation Left (1960s to mid-1970s)
- Rainbow Left (mid-1970s through 1980s)
- Cyber Left (since 1999)

The labels are not important, chosen to avoid associating the movement constellations of an era with its peak organization. So instead of the Socialist Party era or Popular Front era or New Left era, I use Pre–World War I Left, New Deal Left, and Liberation Left. The “rainbow” label for the 1980s has an obvious reference to Jessie Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition but is meant to be much broader, as will be explained later.

In order to fully appreciate the discontinuities, I am going to sketch these eras in a structured way, keeping track of nine characteristics: objectives, demography, class/occupational composition, geography, relationship to major parties, scale of struggle, types of struggle, organizational forms, and media. Table 1 introduces the nine characteristics and shows in abbreviated form the changing dimensions of each movement era. Following that I will describe each of the five movement eras. Please understand that these are sketches that because of space limitations cannot do justice to the complexity of this history or historiography.

### **Pre–World War I Left**

Through the first two decades of the twentieth century, radicalism in the United States followed institutional pathways common to many other countries. The American Left had numerous components, the most important of which was the Socialist Party of America (SP), which until the 1920s operated effectively in the electoral arena. With branches in hundreds of cities and towns, the SP claimed a dues-paying membership of more than 90,000 in most years, reaching 113,000 in the 1912 election year. That year, presidential candidate Eugene Debs secured more than nine hun-

**Table 1.** Five movement eras as defined by nine characteristics

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Pre-World War I Left</i>	<i>New Deal Left</i>	<i>Liberation Left</i>	<i>Rainbow Left</i>	<i>Cyber Left</i>
Objectives	Socialism or revolution	Social democracy	Radical social equality, anti-imperialism	Defend/extend social equality gains	Resist neoliberalism, defend social equality gains
Demography	Immigrant Europeans in cities, native Protestant whites in rural areas	Whites, particularly Jews, some Black people	Young people: Black, White, Latinx	Not-so-young people: Black, White, Latinx	Young people of many backgrounds
Class/occupations	Blue collar, some farmers	Blue collar, cultural and public-sector white-collar workers	Students, marginally employed, public sector	Public sector, especially education and social services	Students, marginally employed, unionized workers, educators
Geography	Big cities and industrial towns of North and West, Great Plains rural areas	Big cities and industrial centers of North and West	Black communities and college communities in all regions	Big cities in all regions	Big cities and college communities, all regions
Relation to major parties	Independent electoral parties or rejected electoral politics	Worked with Democratic Party	Rejected electoral politics	Worked with Democratic Party	Worked with Democratic Party
Scale of struggle	Local: ran candidates for local office, influenced local laws	National: concentrated on federal laws and federal resources	Local: organized at community level, some national antiwar protests	Local: campaigns to elect candidates and transform cities, global solidarity campaigns	National: coordinated protests Local: electoral/lobbying campaigns
Type of struggle	Elections, propaganda, strikes, union campaigns	Unemployment campaigns, union organizing	Street demonstrations, publicity seeking protests, urban and campus uprisings	Elections, lobbying	Street demonstrations, publicity seeking protests
Organizational forms	Bureaucratically organized SP and somewhat bureaucratic IWW	Bureaucratic CP and bureaucratic CIO	Loosely organized SDS, SNCC, and thousands of collectives and tiny organizations	Small organizations and Jackson's Rainbow Coalition	Networks, collectives, online organizations
Media	Hundreds of local socialist and anarchist weeklies	National magazines and national CP and SP periodicals, <i>CIO News</i>	Thousands of local underground newspapers	Small circulation national magazines	Social media

dred thousand votes, and he did so again in 1920 while campaigning from a cell in a federal prison.<sup>9</sup>

The SP was a broad-spectrum organization that managed to hold together despite daunting ideological and demographic divisions. Antagonistic factions of revolutionaries and gradualists, scientific Marxists and Bellamyite persuasionists, fought over ideas and strategy. The party handled the challenge of ethnic difference by sanctioning foreign language federations that allowed immigrants to establish their own party organizations and newspapers. Equally challenging was the nation's vast geography and the yawning distinction between the big cities, where party membership was strongest among European immigrants, and farm-belt communities, where the party grew in the shadow of the Populist Party, attracting white Protestant families.<sup>10</sup>

The party was largely an electoral and educational organization, and its scale of struggle was mostly local. Presidential elections were useful every four years, but year in and year out the party ran local electoral campaigns. Socialist candidates won races for mayor, state legislature, city council, or other local offices in at least 353 towns and cities. The party won races in some big cities, electing US congressmen from Milwaukee and New York, state legislators in Chicago, Providence, and Los Angeles and mayors and council members in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis, but big city elections were difficult. Many urban socialists could not vote, and others, the red revolutionary faction, decried municipal politics as sewer socialism and called for direct action. Figure 1 shows the impressive geography of the party, emphasizing its effectiveness in hundreds of towns and small cities.

The SP's localism can also be seen in its media. More than 380 newspapers of various sizes and durations claimed Socialist Party affiliation or orientation in the first decades of the century. Some enjoyed huge national circulations, most notably the *American Socialist*, *National Whip-Saw*, *Jewish Daily Forward*, and *Appeal to Reason*, the later claiming 750,000 subscribers at one point. But most socialist newspapers sold copies within a county or state area and reached only a few thousand readers. As shown in figure 2, the geography of these socialist weeklies or monthlies was like that of local election victories. Notice on both maps the socialist crescent that moves north from Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas then bends across the Midwest into the mid-Atlantic states. This along with the big cities was the homeland of the first Left, but it would not survive. Starting in the 1930s, much of the red crescent would be lost.

The failure to establish a firm connection with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) proved to be one of the limiting conditions for the Socialist Party. Most socialists were also union members, and the party enjoyed the support of many union locals and some internationals, but AFL chief Samuel Gompers was wary of political commitments and beat back socialist attempts to create an alliance. This had conse-

9. James Gregory et al., "Socialist Party of America History and Geography," Mapping Social American Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/SP\\_intro.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP_intro.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

10. Among the important studies of the SP: Ross, *Socialist Party of America*; Weinstein, *Decline of American Socialism*; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*.

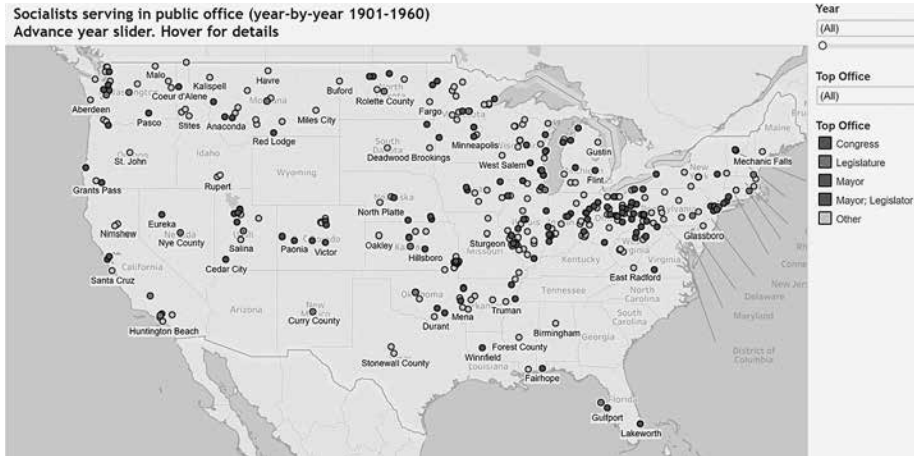


Figure 1. Screenshot of interactive map, “Socialist Party Candidates Elected 1901–1960.” Mapping American Social Movements Project, [depts.washington.edu/moves/SP\\_map-elected.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP_map-elected.shtml).

quences for both the party and the AFL and robbed the Left of a source of potential stability.

It also opened the door for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the prewar Left’s other peak organization.<sup>11</sup> Founded in 1905 by radical labor leaders who had given up on the AFL, the IWW in time moved away from the SP. After 1912 most Wobblies rejected all political parties, including the Socialist Party, and looked to direct-action strategies to make a revolution. The IWW was the largest and most visible of dozens of anarchist groups and networks. The dimensions of this side of the Left are hard to calculate. Kenyon Zimmer has located more than 270 anarchist periodicals published in eighteen different languages. Most were based in New York, Chicago, or San Francisco.<sup>12</sup> The IWW was active over a wider geography and won adherents of Anglo-Protestant background as well as among recent immigrants. Members numbered in the tens of thousands, but like the SP and all subsequent American radical organizations, turnover was high, and there were unknown numbers of supporters who do not show up in surviving records.<sup>13</sup>

The Mapping American Social Movements Project has mapped the incidence of strikes and other actions involving the IWW and the location of more than nine hundred IWW locals (figure 3). This geography is somewhat different from that of

11. Dubofsky and McCartin, *We Shall Be All*; Chester, *Wobblies in Their Heyday*.

12. Kenyon Zimmer, “Anarchist Newspapers and Periodicals, 1870–1940,” Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/anarchist\\_map-newspapers.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/anarchist_map-newspapers.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019); Zimmer, *Immigrants against the State*.

13. Chester, “Rise and Fall of the IWW.”



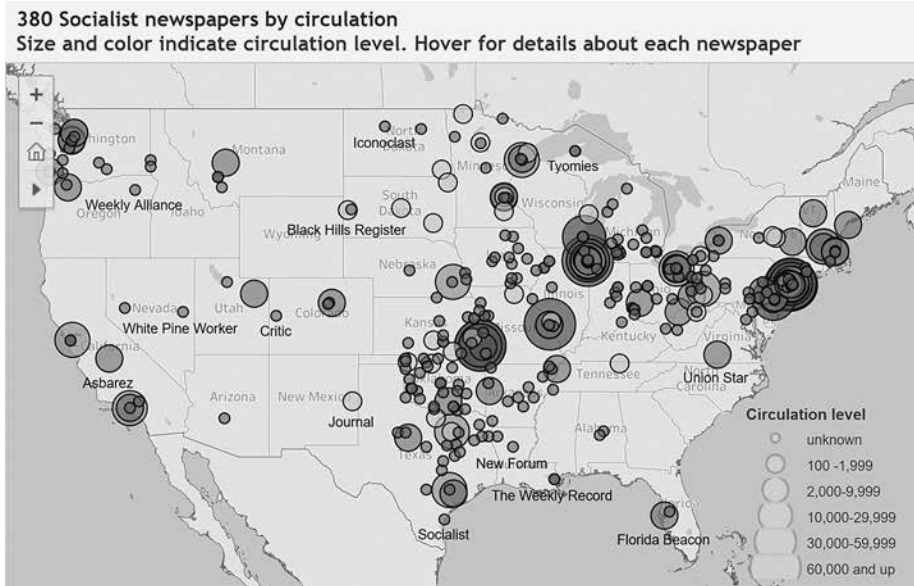


Figure 2. Screenshot of interactive map, “Socialist Newspapers and Periodicals 1900–1920.” Mapping American Social Movements Project, [depts.washington.edu/moves/SP\\_map-newspapers.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP_map-newspapers.shtml).

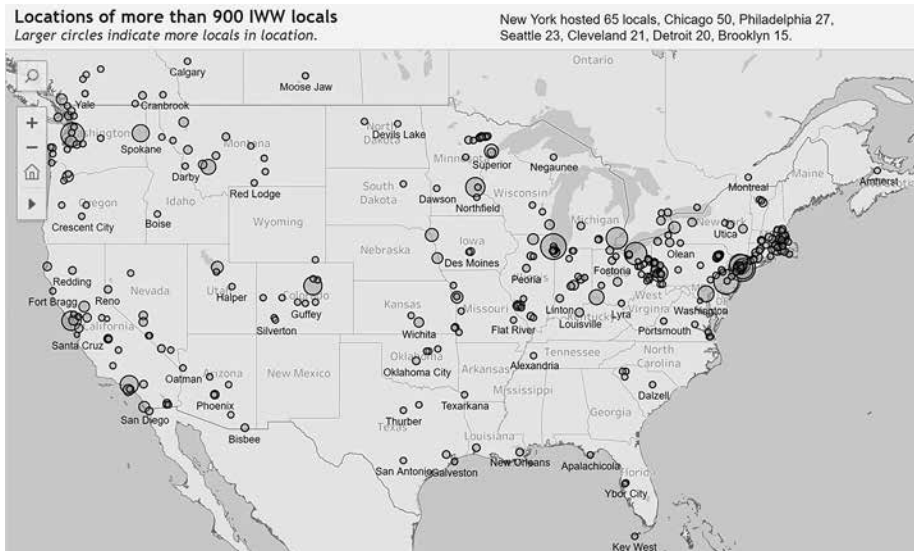


Figure 3. Screenshot of interactive map, “IWW Local Unions 1906–1917.” IWW History Project, [depts.washington.edu/iww/map\\_locals.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/iww/map_locals.shtml).

the SP. While sharing the Midwest and Northeast industrial belt, the IWW had trouble operating in the southern plains states where socialists had a strong base. On the other hand, they made substantial inroads in the West, in the mining regions of the intermountain states and up and down the West Coast.

The Red Scare and Bolshevik revolution broke up this movement constellation, turning the 1920s into a decade of decline for all elements of the Left. By 1925, the Socialist Party was a shadow of its former strength. Ninety percent of its members had left. Membership would hover at around eight thousand in the mid- and late 1920s, compared with the eighty to one hundred thousand who regularly paid dues from 1911 to 1919. And those who remained mostly lived in New York, Milwaukee, and a couple of other locations.<sup>14</sup> The hundreds of elected officials were gone. Only in the Milwaukee area was the party strong enough to win local elections. And the great socialist press, the several hundred large and small newspapers that had carried the message of the party into counties far and wide, was nearly gone too. When the Rand School of Social Science tabulated labor and radical newspapers at the end of 1924, only thirty-one SP affiliated papers remained, and some of them would soon fold. The *Jewish Daily Forward*, the Finnish daily *Raivaaja*, the daily *Milwaukee Leader*, and the newly launched party weekly *New Leader* would carry on along with smaller Polish-, Lithuanian-, and German-language periodicals.<sup>15</sup>

The IWW was in worse shape. Along with anarchist groups, the IWW had borne the brunt of the Red Scare that began in 1917 and escalated after the war. Hundreds of its leaders went to prison, and the organization also lost some of its best organizers to the new Bolshevik parties. The organization split in two in 1924, and by the late 1920s, the IWW barely existed outside of Chicago, Seattle, New York, and Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup>

As had happened in nearly every country, the emergence of the communist movement had divided the prewar formations of radicalism. Launched in 1919, two communist parties competed for members and for Moscow's recognition, and succeeded in attracting a majority of veteran Socialist Party members, an even stronger majority of foreign-language Socialist Federation members, and a significant number of Wobblies. But early enthusiasm soon faded, and by 1926 the now-united Workers Party reported only 7,597 members, slightly fewer than the much-reduced Socialist Party.<sup>17</sup>

14. James Gregory and Rebecca Flores, "Socialist Party Membership by States, 1904–1940," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/SP\\_map-members.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP_map-members.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

15. Josue Estrada and James Gregory, "Labor and Radical Newspapers and Periodicals 1925," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/LaborPress1925\\_map.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/LaborPress1925_map.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

16. Chester, *Wobblies in Their Heyday*, 160–65.

17. James Gregory, "Communist Party Membership by Districts, 1922–1950," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/CP\\_map-members.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/CP_map-members.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

Still there was more to the Left than these organizational remnants. Indeed, many veterans of the prewar movement had spent the early 1920s trying to build a new electoral party modeled on the British Labour Party, a party that would be radical but not sectarian and thus able to draw in the trade union movement. Taking shape in some states under the name Farmer-Labor Party and elsewhere as the Conference for Progressive Political Action, the effort drew conditional support from both the SP and the Communist Party (CP) but was also hurt by the efforts of both to capture and control the movement. The potential was demonstrated in the 1924 presidential election when Robert La Follette, the veteran Wisconsin progressive, agreed to challenge the Democratic and Republican candidates. Appearing on the ballot under various party labels, including the Socialist Party in California and a few other states, La Follette collected nearly 5 million votes and came in second in several states (first in Wisconsin). But wary of the Communists and ultimately unconvinced that a third party should be formed, La Follette insisted on a solo campaign. There were no down-ballot candidates, and the race did nothing to establish a new electoral party of the Left.<sup>18</sup>

The 1924 election demonstrates both the relative size of the Left—roughly 5 million voters and uncounted noncitizen supporters—and the problem of institutional discontinuity. With little of the organizational apparatus that had made the prewar Left promising, many radicals would drift away from activism in the final years of the decade. Thus began the first of the winter periods, the dying-back periods, a syndrome that would be repeated several times in the next century.

### **New Deal Left**

We often speak of the next era of radicalism as if it were a continuation or reawakening of the prewar Left, bringing them together under the label “Old Left.” But the formations that emerged in the 1930s were decisively new. Yes, the CP and SP returned as the most readily identifiable proponents of radicalism, but the New Deal Left was much bigger than the two parties and would develop strategies and alliances, demography, and geography that were fundamentally new. Returning to the table 1 matrix, notice that there are changes in most of the dimensions, including media systems and scale of struggle, and most important, there is a new orientation toward electoral politics. Where the earlier Left had stayed rigidly apart, the new Left after 1934 moved into alliance with the New Deal Democratic Party, pushing it toward labor-friendly and social-democratic commitments. The project of union building under the umbrella of the CIO and with support of the Democratic Party was the other big enterprise of this era.

18. Waterhouse, *Progressive Movement*. For vote distributions, see James Gregory, “Votes for Radical and Progressive Parties by States and Counties, 1904–1948,” Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/radical\\_votes.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/radical_votes.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

The collapsing economy of the early 1930s revived the prospects for radicalism and brought new attention to the Communist Party, which took to the streets staging protests on behalf of the unemployed. The CP's Unemployed Councils were established in scores of cities, but much of the action was concentrated in just a few locations: New York, Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Toledo, Duluth, San Francisco, and Seattle. Party membership reflected the same concentration. In spring 1932, the CP recorded an official membership of 13,949, with nearly half registered in New York and Chicago.<sup>19</sup>

The Socialist Party was also recovering, and its membership passed fourteen thousand in 1932, concentrated in the same cities as its rival as well as Milwaukee, which continued to elect socialists to office. The SP attempted to follow the Communists into unemployed organizing and enjoyed some success in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but the older party concentrated on elections, hoping to register a significant comeback in the 1932 contest, where Norman Thomas would carry the message that capitalism had failed and that capitalist parties were incapable of leading the way out of the Great Depression. The CP also mounted an energetic electoral campaign in 1932, attacking the socialists along with the two mainstream parties, hoping for a strong showing for party leader William Z. Foster. Both parties' results fell below expectations. Foster received just under 100,000 votes; Thomas, 884,000. Supporters were concentrated in a handful of cities. Twenty-four percent of Foster's votes came from New York City, with another thirteen percent from Chicago.<sup>20</sup> The Communists chose to read positive news in the tally, not caring about elections except as organizing opportunities. The Socialist Party had no room for optimism. Thomas had come nowhere near the count that La Follette had registered in 1924 and had not even matched Eugene Debs's 1920 total. The geography deepened the bad news. New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Los Angeles accounted for one-quarter of the socialist tally. Meanwhile, the formerly red towns and small cities that followed Tornado Alley from Texas to Indiana and Ohio were lost, delivering only 2, 3, or 4 percent of their votes for Thomas.<sup>21</sup> The message was clear. When push came to shove in November 1932, many old radicals both in the small towns and big cities had voted for Roosevelt. The Socialist Party comeback had failed.

Communist prospects were better, and the party would grow in the years that followed. Membership climbed year by year, hitting thirty-eight thousand at the start

19. James Gregory, "Communist Party Membership by Districts, 1922–1950," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/CP\\_map-members.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/CP_map-members.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019). Key books include Storch, *Red Chicago*; Ottanelli, *Communist Party of the United States*; and Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*.

20. James Gregory, "Votes for Radical and Progressive Parties by States and Counties, 1904–1948," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/radical\\_votes.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/radical_votes.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

21. James Gregory and Rebecca Flores, "Socialist Party Votes by Counties and States, 1904–1948," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/SP\\_map-votes.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/SP_map-votes.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

of 1937, topping sixty-six thousand in early 1939, falling during the Hitler-Stalin pact period, then climbing again after 1943, reaching seventy-five thousand in 1947.<sup>22</sup> And CP influence extended in many directions, involving hundreds of thousands of people in various organizations and causes, ranging from CIO unions and civil rights organizations to antiwar campaigns and cultural projects. But the CP remained deeply controversial, and its influence, circumscribed. This was so in the CIO, which thrived only because the party's role was limited and often hidden. It was true also in the intellectual Left. Most left-wing artists and writers did not join the party even while they may have shared with party loyalists a commitment to social justice, social-democratic ideals, and a renewed interest in social realism.<sup>23</sup>

We make a mistake in paying too much attention to the Communist Party, not to mention the Socialist Party. They were only part of the Left. After 1932 a much bigger constituency, larger even than the 5 million who supported La Follette, would begin to operate within or in relation to the Democratic Party and within or in relation to the CIO. Doug Rossinow had it right when he said that we need to pay attention to "the far larger numbers of Americans who worked in the space between the New Deal and the left-wing parties."<sup>24</sup>

Clarifying this "space between" formation is not simple, and we should start by addressing a labeling problem. Historians have too readily applied the label "Popular Front" to the left coalition of the late 1930s and 1940s, thus overemphasizing Communist influence. In fact, the term *Popular Front* was rarely used by contemporaries to describe political arrangements in the United States in the 1930s, let alone the 1940s. In Spain, France, Chile, and a few other countries, communist and socialist parties formed Popular Front alliances, but in the United States, the SP rejected CP calls for a formal alliance, and after 1937 talk of building a Popular Front faded, even among Communists. Instead Earl Browder declared in 1938 that the CP would pursue a "Democratic Front," which involved supporting the election of progressive New Dealers. Instead of labeling this a Popular Front left formation, it is more accurate to refer to a New Deal Left in which the CP was very active but hardly dominant.<sup>25</sup>

One aspect of this struggle involved renewed efforts to create a new political party of the Left. This stalled in all but two states: Minnesota, where the Farmer-Labor Party established a lasting presence, and Wisconsin, where a new Progressive

22. James Gregory, "Communist Party Membership by Districts, 1922–1950," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [https://www.washington.edu/moves/CP\\_map-members.shtml](https://www.washington.edu/moves/CP_map-members.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

23. Zieger, *CIO*; Cochran, *Labor and Communism*; Denning, *Cultural Front*; Hemmingway, *Artists on the Left*.

24. Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*, 150.

25. Browder, *Democratic Front*. Use of the term *Popular Front* probably began with Eugene Lyon's 1941 book *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America*, a right-wing expose that claimed that the CP controlled cultural and political institutions. A search of the *Readers Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982* (which indexes periodical literature) yields articles about the Popular Front in reference to France, Spain, Chile, and Canada, but none involving the United States. A search of six daily newspapers indexed by ProQuest Historical Newspapers yields only a few articles discussing the SP's rejection of the CP's call for a Popular Front.

Party won elections. Elsewhere third-party efforts were shelved. Worried about the potential for Republican victory, nearly all the leaders of the Farmer-Labor Political Federation abandoned the strategy in the 1936 election cycle, instead joining forces with Roosevelt's Democratic Party as it became crystal clear that the New Deal had long since captured the hopes and votes of the vast majority of reform-minded Americans.<sup>26</sup>

Trying to reshape the party of Roosevelt was the more lasting radical initiative of the era. In some states this was a fully articulated strategy. Upton Sinclair demonstrated the potential. Late in 1933, the veteran socialist reregistered as a Democrat and won that party's nomination in the 1934 California gubernatorial contest. Announcing a radical plan to "End Poverty in California" (EPIC) by establishing state-owned cooperatives and replacing capitalism with a system of "production for use," he captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands who joined his EPIC crusade. He lost the final election but garnered more votes in one state than Norman Thomas had won nationwide. Equally important, newly elected EPIC members were sent to Congress and the state legislature and soon established the infrastructure for a lasting progressive wing of the California Democratic Party. A similar effort in Washington state, launched by former socialists following Sinclair's lead, was even more successful. The Washington Commonwealth Federation operated as a party within a party until it was destroyed in the Red Scare at the end of the 1940s.<sup>27</sup>

It was not only on the West Coast that the strategy unfolded. That same year, 1934, the United Mine Workers (UMW) campaigned heavily in Pennsylvania and in the following years turned what had been a very conservative Democratic Party into a union-friendly progressive instrument. Progressive Democrats won elections in Michigan, Ohio, and many other states in 1934, sending to Congress the committed block of Democrats (David Plotke labels them "progressive liberals") who would pass the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, and other measures in the so-called Second New Deal. These progressive New Dealers situated themselves to the left of President Roosevelt and often advocated measures linked to social-democratic principles, some wanting to nationalize banks, most calling for new cooperative and public enterprises and a radical redistribution of wealth.<sup>28</sup>

The CIO led the next effort to influence the Democratic Party. Organized by CIO vice president Sidney Hillman, who simultaneously launched the American Labor Party in New York to ease the transition of that city's socialists into the New Deal alliance, Labor's Non-Partisan League (LNPL) mobilized a massive campaign to support FDR in the 1936 election. And its goals went beyond reelecting the presi-

26. Lawson, *Failure of Independent Liberalism*, 219–21; Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*, 134–38.

27. Gregory, "Upton Sinclair's 1934 EPIC Campaign." On political strategy and the Washington Commonwealth Federation, see James Gregory, "Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California Campaign," University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/epic34](https://depts.washington.edu/epic34) (accessed November 6, 2019).

28. Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, 108–17; McCoy, *Angry Voices*.

dent. Hillman hoped to rearrange the Democratic Party, turning it into the equivalent of a labor party. LNPL campaign effects were felt up and down the ticket in the states where the CIO was most active: Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York. As liberals took governorships and legislatures, “Little New Deals” were declared in several states, while a new cohort of progressive congressional representatives headed to Washington.<sup>29</sup>

From then on through the remainder of the New Deal era, the CIO was the largest institutional embodiment of the Left in America. The CP operated within the CIO, devoting its considerable energies to building and trying to control unions. Socialists, both active and former members, joined the enterprise, as did thousands and thousands of independent radicals, many of them politicized in the fierce campaigns to organize new unions. And the CIO in turn worked on the New Deal administration and the Democratic Party. This “space between” Left arrangement was not quite the “Democratic Front” that Earl Browder imagined, but that label is instructive as we map how this Left was different from its predecessor and from the next iteration of American radicalism.

The New Deal Left was new in other ways, including its geography, demography, media, and scale of struggle. It lost the rural geography of the prewar Left in stages as federal policy changes and the federally sanctioned Farm Bureau engineered the consolidation of agriculture into larger and larger units and erected a safety net supporting farm incomes. By the late 1930s, agrarian uprisings like the Farm Holiday Association were fading into memory, and rural districts that once had supported socialists and then had supported the New Deal began to elect conservatives who opposed both.<sup>30</sup>

The prewar Left base in immigrant communities fared better. Second-generation Italians, Poles, and other European immigrants responded to the CIO organizing campaigns, and Eastern Europeans, especially Jews, were overrepresented in the Communist Party and throughout the Left.<sup>31</sup> The most important demographic change in this era involved African Americans. Here was one of the signal accomplishments of the Communist Party, whose commitment to racial justice marked a critical turn in Left strategy and helped the CP find recruits and legitimacy in the Black and Latinx communities. CIO unions also gradually opened their ranks to people of color. As new unions hired Black organizers and supported calls for fair employment, African American workers responded. In the 1940s, as defending the Fair Employment Practices order became a political goal uniting African American communities and CIO unions, radicalism had found a lasting home in African American communities.<sup>32</sup> Radicalism already had deep roots in Mexican Amer-

29. Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 356–76; Zieger, *CIO*, 39–41, 179–88; Arnold, “CIO’s Role in American Politics”; Keller, *Pennsylvania’s Little New Deal*.

30. McConnell, *Decline of Agrarian Democracy*.

31. Glazer, *Social Basis*, 130–68; Klehr, *Communist Cadre*.

32. Mullin, *Popular Fronts*; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*; Glazer, *Social Basis*, 160–84.

ican communities in the Southwest, where Magonistas, IWWs, and other veterans of Mexican revolutionary struggles had been active a generation earlier. The United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America, the CIO's multiracial union of field and processing workers, now built on that base, especially in Texas and California.<sup>33</sup>

The other new constituency involved parts of the cultural class and certain categories of white-collar workers, especially social workers and government employees in some cities. Writers, artists, and musicians had been drawn in some numbers to the prewar Left, but in the 1930s radical politics became almost standard in literary and artistic circles, especially after 1935 when the Works Progress Administration began offering employment to writers and artists under the innovative Federal Arts Project. Often dominated by leftists, these arts and theater programs served as recruiting grounds while helping to advance the radical intellectual and artistic florescence that Michael Denning describes as the Cultural Front and "laboring of American culture."<sup>34</sup>

Importantly, the New Deal Left changed the scale of struggle. The prewar Socialist Party had focused intently on local activism, running candidates for municipal office, supporting local socialist weeklies, and participating in AFL local unions and their campaigns. But the new Left of the 1930s focused much more on issues and institutions at federal and state levels. Never before had federal policy seemed so important. Unemployed organizing in the early 1930s had been localized, with demands falling on city and county authorities, but as activists turned to union organizing, first in the 1934 strike wave and later under the CIO, the scale of action shifted. The big industrial unions operated across large regions and needed friendly governments in Washington and in state capitals. This manifested itself in various ways. The frequency of street protests diminished in the second half of the decade, and while radicals did run for office in some cities, it was the congressional races and state office races that mattered most.

The changing scale of struggle also shows up in the media system of the New Deal Left. One of the most striking discontinuities in the five Left formations of the last century involves movement media. In contrast with the hundreds of socialist-linked local newspapers of the prewar Left and the thousands of underground periodicals that would carry the messages of the liberation-era radicals in the 1960s and 1970s, the New Deal Left operated with a skimpy communication system that included only a few periodicals, and those mostly with national distributions and little room for local concerns or community-level organizing. The Communist Party began the 1930s with one English-language newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, which managed a pitiful circulation outside of New York even among party members. In 1932, the party added the San Francisco-based weekly *Western Worker* (renamed *People's World* in 1937) and in 1938 the Chicago-based *Midwest Record*. Party members sold

33. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*; Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*.

34. Mangione, *Dream and the Deal*; Denning, *Cultural Front*; Bremer, *Depression Winters*.



them on the streets, using them as organizing tools, but circulations never extended much beyond party circles. The CP's monthly magazine *New Masses* did better. Soliciting work from writers not affiliated with the party, the magazine attracted readers beyond party members. Still the numbers rarely exceeded thirty thousand.<sup>35</sup>

The Socialist Party had few periodicals in the early 1930s and lost most after 1932. The *Jewish Daily Forward* remained important along with Polish-, Ukrainian-, and Slovak-language publications, and Victor Berger's *Milwaukee Leader* survived until 1938. The New York-based weekly *New Leader* was the main English-language organ, claiming an inflated circulation of forty-three thousand in 1939. More influential were two venerable non-socialist progressive weeklies, the *Nation* and *New Republic*. Still, their circulations hovered in the thirty- to forty-thousand range throughout the New Deal period.<sup>36</sup> Launched in December 1937, the weekly *CIO News* was the most widely circulated left-oriented periodical of the New Deal period. Edited by CIO publicity director and quiet Communist Len DeCaux, the eight-page tabloid appeared in different editions tailored to the various international unions and reached hundreds of thousands of members, distributed through local union affiliates as well as individual subscriptions.<sup>37</sup>

It is curious that the decade saw nothing like the explosion of localized radical journalism that marked the early twentieth century, with its hundreds of socialist and anarchist weeklies, and that would be seen again in the 1960s, with the underground press. In both periods enterprising individuals and collectives raced to publish local weeklies in support of the ideas and movements that were galvanizing the energies of millions. But not in the New Deal era. Only a handful of local market publications can be identified, the most significant being *PM*, the progressive New York daily newspaper, launched by Ralph Ingersol in 1940. That absence is part of why historians are confused about the New Deal Left. We have trouble assessing movements that do not have a dedicated media system. The Communists were loud and visible, so we focus on them.<sup>38</sup>

35. The party also produced specialized small-circulation periodicals, including the *Southern Worker*, *Labor Defender*, and *Labor Unity* and many mimeographed shop papers.

36. *Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals, 1939* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Sons, 1939). Little radical parties and organizations published their own national newspapers, and the IWW managed to keep the *Industrial Worker* alive for a few thousand member/subscribers. The EPIC movement kept a weekly newspaper going for several years in California, while the Washington Commonwealth Federation maintained a weekly in that state until 1948.

37. DeCaux claimed that circulation at one point approached 1 million (*Labor Radical*, 269).

38. Mainstream journalism now pulled in readers who in an earlier era would have spent their nickels on radical newspapers. The advent of syndicated columns by celebrated commentators, an innovation popularized in the 1920s, widened the editorial stance of daily newspapers, most of which remained in the hands of conservative publishers through the 1930s. Still, editors of Scripps and even Hearst newspapers wanted liberal columnists on the opinion pages. Heywood Broun, the engagingly outspoken socialist and leader of the new Newspaper Guild remained a featured columnist for the Scripps chain and was even offered a column by Hearst in 1938. He said no.

The portrait that I am drawing for this era is intended to turn us away from the standard notion of an Old Left that circled tightly around the Communist Party. Instead, it is best understood as more diffuse and circling around the New Deal state, with the Communists and the CIO providing intertwined institutional bases. And my key point is that the 1930s–1940s Left was different from its predecessor. Like the Pre–World War I Left, the New Deal formation remained based in and committed to the working class and ideologically spread across a range of socialistic principles, but its strategies, alliances, and much else were new. Unable to compete directly at the ballot box, the American Left in this era had veered away from independent electoral parties, pouring energy instead into two alliances in which radicals would operate as junior partners: the CIO and the Democratic Party.

### Liberation Left

Like its predecessor, the New Deal Left was broken up by a Red Scare that accompanied the rearrangement of empires. The 1950s registered the most complete left collapse of the twentieth century as federal, state, and local authorities hunted Communists and those suspected of working with the CP. This new Red Scare demonstrated the extraordinary capacity for repression of the American state, which paired a punishing legal campaign that drove the CP underground with a more devastating cultural offensive. Equating radicalism with treason, a powerful coalition of antiradical interests—including mass media, business and civic organizations, and both political parties—joined in frenzied campaigns to expose the threat of subversion. The effects registered well beyond the Communist Party; radicalism of all kinds suffered as the cultural assault delegitimized socialistic ideas and weakened public support for progressives and for unions. This taking down of the whole Left was unique to the United States and can be tied, at least partly, to the absence of an independent left electoral apparatus. Anticommunism raged in other nations without severely damaging their Labor and Socialist Parties, but in the United States, where the Left had buried itself in the Democratic Party and the CIO, as those institutions pulled right and ran for cover, progressives and socialists as well as communists became vulnerable. The potential for this kind of isolation was one of the costs of doing business with the Democratic Party.<sup>39</sup>

The American Left did not die; it retreated; it hibernated. While the CIO leadership and progressive Democrats turned to embrace Cold War liberalism, some radicals carried on in organizations and settings that would serve as the “mediating” institutions keeping the flame of social-justice activism burning and helping to incubate the next left renaissance. Books by Maurice Isserman, Barbara Ransby, Aldon Morris, Max Krochmal, and others explore the transition, showing how peace organizations, liberal religious bodies, and surviving left-wing unions—along with key Old Left veterans—nurtured the renaissance. Especially important were churches and the

39. Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*; Heale, *American Anticommunism*; Zieger, *CIO*; Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*.

NAACP in Black communities and the relatively safe space afforded by some college and university campuses.<sup>40</sup>

We can count the early 1960s initiatives led by Ella Baker and Martin Luther King Jr. as part of the mediation/transition or as the opening phase of the new social movement constellation. Either way we should acknowledge that the political conditions that have repeatedly shattered American Left constellations made it possible for US radicalism to reorient in a more dramatic way than was common in countries with competitive left-wing electoral parties. Racial justice was going to be the initial focus of this new era, a big shift from earlier lefts.

The New Left in the 1960s was new in demographics, in social movement organizations, and in agendas. Unionism and socialism—key agendas of the earlier eras—took a backseat as this new movement attacked systems of inequality based on race, and then on gender and sexuality. The other focus was the Vietnam War and American imperialism. The basics of this will be familiar to most of us, so I am not going to narrate the transition in detail. I will change the labeling, avoiding the term *New Left* for this movement era because it evokes young white people, when this movement was from start to finish inspired by Black activists, beginning with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the early 1960s, and continuing through the Black Power era. The term *liberation* resonated throughout the era, used by anticolonial movements abroad and in domestic struggles by women, LGBTQ activists, and organizations of various kinds to signal agendas centered on demands for self-determination as well as equality, power as well as recognition, with implications for new forms of democratic participation. It comes as close as anything to crystalizing an ideological focus for this movement era, which in truth was unified more by a spirit of resistance and experimentalism than by ideology.

This Liberation Left was demographically different both in substance and logic. Comprised mostly of young people, the movement developed a politics of race that saw not only new forms of activism and consciousness in Black communities but also among Chicanxs, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. And significantly also among young white activists, who abandoned the Euro-ethnic concerns of earlier generations and embraced racial social justice for nonwhites as a primary movement project.

This movement broke the organizational/bureaucratic model of earlier Lefts, which had featured national organizations with authority over local units. Three national organizations—SNCC, CORE, and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)—played important roles in the first years of the era, but they deliberately avoided bureaucratic and centralizing practices. Consequently, they never developed the capacity to coordinate left forces and actions in the manner of the Communist Party and CIO. Instead the 1960s radical movements exploded in a dozen direc-

40. Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer*; Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*; Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*.

tions and operated through hundreds of issue organizations, many of them local and short-lived. The catalog of causes and conflicts after 1965 cannot be quickly listed. An expanding antiwar and antidraft movement, Black freedom organizations and Black student unions, campus and urban uprisings, youth countercultural formations, women's liberation, gay liberation, the Black Panthers, the United Farm Workers (UFW) and Chicano movement, the American Indian Movement, more urban uprisings, Eugene McCarthy, the Chicago Democratic convention—the second half of the decade was a whirlwind of movement building and resistance that politicized a significant section of the baby-boom generation and many of their elders. In numbers that are impossible to count because only a tiny slice of the activists joined organizations—and those organizations rarely kept records or lasted very long—a Left had reassembled and was operating in very different ways than its predecessors.<sup>41</sup>

We do get a sense of scale and reach by observing its communication system. The Mapping American Social Movements Project has located more than twenty-six hundred underground, alternative, or radical periodicals serving more than three hundred communities during the decade from 1965 to 1975. They reflect the multiple foci of this left era, with scores of African American and Latinx movement publications, others belonging to the women's movement and gay and lesbian organizations, along with countercultural publications and several hundred tabloids and newsletters aimed at antiwar GIs. Together they reveal a demography and geography that was new to this generation, with the South now a region of activism and campus communities an important base for radicalism along with the traditional big-city locations. And they reveal, too, a return to the localism of the early twentieth-century movement. While the sixties Left articulated grievances that were national or international in scope—notably resistance to war, racism, and sexism—its organizational forms and activism were almost entirely local. Apart from a handful of nationally coordinated antiwar marches in Washington DC, New York, and San Francisco, this movement constellation surged in hundreds of communities and campuses where local activists designed actions on their own or in loose coordination based on information spread through underground newspapers or informal modes of communication. This was a left constellation that spread like seeds on a warm wind, fulfilling the Maoist slogan “Let a thousand flowers bloom.”

The Liberation Left adopted a different relationship to electoral politics and organized labor than either of its predecessors. The Democratic Party and former CIO unions like the United Auto Workers (UAW) and United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) were important to the early phases of the movement when civil rights activists demanded legislation and federal action to end de jure segregation and restore voting rights, but things changed after 1964 as the Democratic president Lyndon Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam and young African Americans tired of asking liberals for help and instead followed Malcolm X into the

41. There is a vast literature on these movements, including these works: Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*; Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*; and Rosen, *World Split Open*.

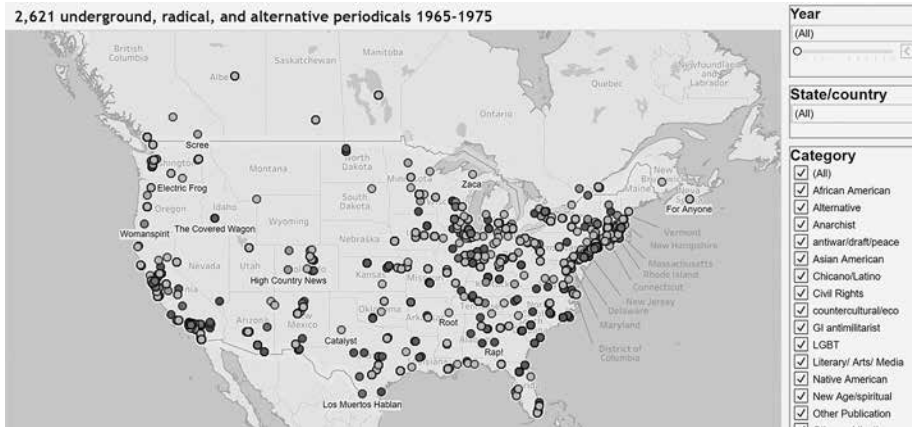


Figure 4. Screenshot of interactive map from “Underground/Alternative Newspapers History and Geography.” Mapping American Social Movements Project, [depts.washington.edu/moves/altnews\\_intro.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/altnews_intro.shtml).

forceful language of power. Liberalism and the Democratic Party offered nothing to most radicals of the late sixties. Nor did third-party electoral strategies. There were of course adherents of each. The Peace and Freedom Party was launched in California in 1966 and mounted a wider campaign in the 1968 election, with Eldridge Cleaver leading the ticket. But most radicals were too busy to help with the campaign. Eugene McCarthy’s maverick bid to unseat Lyndon Johnson in the 1968 primary season attracted the energies of thousands of young people, though typically not those calling themselves radicals. When Hubert Humphrey claimed the nomination in the explosive Chicago convention that summer, any thought that even the moderate wing of the antiwar movement would reconcile with the Democratic Party disappeared.

The fact that the AFL-CIO was tightly embroiled in Cold War anticommunism and a vocal backer of the war policy of Johnson and then Nixon was one reason that for the first time in history American radicalism was not based in labor issues and union organizations. Some unions harbored the new radicals—UAW, UE, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, UFW—but most were too conservative. Many remained white male preserves with deep cultures of racism, sexism, and masculine moral traditionalism that grew more overt as young radicals challenged racial, gender, and other social norms. The 1970 hard-hat battles with antiwar marchers in New York and against Black workers seeking jobs in construction in Seattle and Philadelphia symbolized the historic break between radicalism and organized labor.<sup>42</sup>

42. Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*; Goldberg and Griffey, *Black Power at Work*; Boyle, *UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism*, 185–261.

## Rainbow Left

The Liberation Left was not crushed as its predecessors had been, and it may be wrong to separate it from what followed, but there were important differences. Most of the organizations created in the 1960s collapsed in the next decade only to be quickly succeeded by a new constellation of social movement organizations that pursued some of the same agendas—racial, gender, sexual, environmental justice—in different ways. Tone and strategy changed. The sixties Left had pulled away from the Democratic Party while embracing radical separatist visions of independent Black communities or independent countercultures and while using tactics of the streets. Starting in the mid-1970s and continuing through the 1980s, many leftists moved back into the Democratic Party and used the ballot box to elect African American, Latinx, and white female candidates in cities across the country. And they succeeded in liberalizing some city governments and advancing environmental reforms even in the era of Reagan conservatism. Radicals in this era also gained access to mass media journalism to a degree that exceeded that of earlier generations.

Before detailing the changes, let's think theoretically about the shift. The Liberation Left seemed to wither from within rather than under the weight of the kind of repressive assault that devastated the first two left formations. This is not to ignore the FBI's COINTELPRO assault on the Black Freedom movement and other organizations. Raids, murders, arrests, and false information took a toll, especially on the Black Panther Party, but not enough to cause widespread fear or demoralize the broader field of radicalism. Burnout and internal division destroyed SDS, SNCC, and many other organizations, while the lure of new opportunities for a different kind of activism pulled many radicals away from confrontational strategies and often away from revolutionary goals. We might theorize this, in Piven and Cloward's terms, as an example of political elites responding to a sequence of disruptions and threatened insurrection by opening institutional doors and luring activists into sanctioned political behavior and eventual cooptation.<sup>43</sup>

Context is the other part. One of the key arguments of this essay is the idea that American radicalism, lacking the institutional continuity provided by competitive electoral parties of the Left in other countries, has been highly sensitive to changes in political context connected to new phases of capitalism and empire. After 1973, the multiple crises of the Nixon administration—oil boycott, global recession, murderously slow Vietnam withdrawal, and Watergate scandal—dramatically changed the political context, and leftists turned in several new directions. Some thought the times called for Leninist, Maoist, or Trotskyist revolutionary praxis and split their energies between a dozen competing new communist organizations whose sectarian agendas complicated the landscape of the Left and made it difficult to mount the kind of community actions that had been possible a few years before. More effective were a set of new single-issue movements that mounted carefully orchestrated campaigns involving both lobbying and protest actions. Notable were the global

43. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*.

solidarity movements—both the Central American and South African focused—the poverty rights and voter registration campaigns coordinated by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) in scores of cities, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and AIDS activism, the antinuclear movement that deployed civil disobedience alongside media campaigns, and the environmental movement that included both lobbying organizations and the daring eco-activists of Greenpeace and Earth First!<sup>44</sup>

But the major development of the era was the softening of the boundary between radicalism and liberalism and a surge of leftists into the Democratic Party, particularly at local levels. The rapprochement started in 1972, when George McGovern won the Democratic nomination on the strength of his antiwar record and commitment. He lost badly that November, but as Doug McAdams and Karina Kloos explain, the Democratic Party would now accelerate the historic turn that would over time remake the two-party system, ultimately eliminating the Jim Crow wing of southern white conservatives while paving the way for more ideological consistency. The Democrats would become the nation's center-left party, associated with liberalism in all regions of the country. It was a hugely consequential change even if it happened slowly. In the 1970s, the Democratic congressional delegation still included unreconstructed segregationists like James Eastland. Forty years later, actual conservatives were gone, and the spectrum of Democratic elected officials ranged from left liberals to cautious centrists.<sup>45</sup>

The Left's reengagement with the Democratic Party was most apparent in local politics. Radicals found little to like about the Democratic presidential nominees during this period. They cringed at Jimmy Carter's nomination in 1976 and did little to help Walter Mondale or Michael Dukakis. There was excitement around primary campaigns, beginning with that of Teddy Kennedy, who challenged Carter in 1980. In 1984, when Jessie Jackson announced his candidacy reusing the term "Rainbow Coalition," which had once belonged to the Black Panthers, the Left surged into action, helping deliver more than 3 million primary votes. Four years later, the Rainbow Coalition was big enough to be taken seriously. Jackson won eleven primaries or caucuses and collected almost 7 million primary votes before eventually conceding to Michael Dukakis.<sup>46</sup>

The lasting effects were at local levels. Radicals who had sneered at the ballot box ten years earlier now worked on political campaigns and helped elect hundreds of Black, Latinx, and white female candidates. They were also changing the political life of cities, promoting local reforms based on environmentalism, neighborhoodism,

44. Foley, *Front Porch Politics*; Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*; Martin, *Other Eighties*; Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 173–217. Flacks, *Making History*, 217–36, captures some of the organizational dynamics of the post-sixties Left.

45. McAdam and Kloos, *Deeply Divided*, 121–77; Shafer, *Quiet Revolution*.

46. Barker and Walters, *Jessie Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign*; Martin, *Other Eighties*, 119–43; Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 254–59; Marable, *Black American Politics*.

welfare rights, renter's rights, childcare rights, educational experimentalism, and a host of other initiatives.

New media supported these transformations. Three new national publications—*Mother Jones*, *In These Times*, and *Labor Notes*—set the tone for this softened and strategic radicalism, but more important were changes in local journalism. Most underground newspapers had been short-lived, but in many cities, one or two survived and became profitable alternative weeklies supported by entertainment advertising and attracting readers with both entertainment coverage and local political advocacy. Invariably positioned to the left of the mainstream daily newspapers, the weeklies helped progressive local candidates win elections and advance reforms. They also caused major daily newspapers to adjust coverage and sometimes editorial positions. Many big-city dailies quietly became more sympathetic toward causes and communities they had previously criticized or ignored.<sup>47</sup>

The strategic and institutional rearrangements of this period changed the face of liberalism and the composition and commitments of the Democratic Party. They also undermined the integrity of the radical movement. By the end of the 1980s, the boundary between left and liberal had nearly disappeared, and the self-identifier “radical” was fading as evolving leftists relabeled themselves “progressives.” Activism continued, mostly focused on defending social equality and environmental gains from earlier eras and largely using channels linked to governmental institutions and the Democratic Party. A self-conscious left carried on in some marginal spaces—including the Green Party, which repeatedly challenged the left-liberal Democratic fusion, and small socialist parties and anarchist groups that refused to give up hope—and among a sector of the intelligentsia that John Diggins labeled the “academic left.” Despite that, American radicalism had fallen into one of its recurring winter periods, dying back, waiting for seeds spread earlier to feel the warmth of a new spring.<sup>48</sup>

### Cyber Left

In *Digital Rebellion*, Todd Wolfson documents the rise of what he calls the Cyber Left, marking the Zapatista uprising in Mexico and the World Trade Organization (WTO) confrontation in Seattle at the turn of the millennium as the incubation moments for a movement constellation that once again is new in many ways: based on new modes of communication and action, on younger generations that do not need advice from baby boomers, on a different institutional framework, and on opposition to a new era of capitalism—neoliberal globalism. This new Left, now two decades old, has hardly any organizational footprint. If the organizations of the Liberation Left and eighties Left had been decentralized, short-lived, and often localized, the Cyber Left operates almost entirely through networks that are continually changing, that appear, seemingly, out of nowhere and then just as quickly disappear. This is a constellation not of organizations in the old sense but of thousands of mostly

47. McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters*, 172–85.

48. Diggins, *Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 278–306



online organizations, collectives, blogs, Facebook and Twitter groups—only a fraction of which are anchored in face-to-face relationships, have voting or otherwise responsible memberships, or have lasted more than a year or two. But this seemingly tenuous framework has produced some of the most massive protest mobilizations in American history, which, since Seattle, have included the demonstrations against the planned Iraq invasion in 2003, the immigrants' rights marches of 2006, the Occupy Wall Street encampments in 2011–12, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Fight for \$15, the 2016 Bernie movement, the 2017 women's marches, and the many mobilizations of “resistance” since Trump's election.<sup>49</sup>

This is a more globalized left than its immediate predecessors. Globally coordinated (or contagious) protests included those related to global social justice movements at the turn of the millennium, then worldwide demonstrations after 2001 as the United States invaded the Middle East, Arab Spring uprisings, anti-austerity protests in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, and more.<sup>50</sup> Facilitated by formal and informal networks, as well as speed-of-light communications, they reflect the new capacity of social movements to spread quickly through social media, with minimal coordination, often involving emulation rather than direct contact between activists in different locations. The skills of the movement organizer, so critical in earlier eras, have been augmented and to some extent superseded, as movements can now spread as if by contagion.<sup>51</sup>

In the United States, the Cyber Left has drawn support and resources from some venerable mediating institutions. Colleges and universities, which have cradled several new lefts, have again been important. On campuses across the country, student groups have organized for global social justice; against US-led invasions; for action against racial, gender, and sexual injustice; against the criminal injustice system; and for radical solutions to climate change. And this young Cyber Left has had help from aging radicals of various kinds, from the surviving cohort of left-wing publications, and from dozens and dozens of NGOs—including think tanks and progressive foundations along with local and national environmental and social justice groups.<sup>52</sup>

Organized labor, missing from the alliance systems of the Left since the late 1940s, is important once again. The AFL-CIO made an important turn to the left in 1995 with the election of John Sweeney and the “New Voice” slate. Calling for a return to social movement unionism, the new leadership began to change the federation's approach to a variety of issues, including immigration, affirmative action, gender and racial justice, LGBTQ rights, and environmentalism. The WTO Battle of Seattle was the coming-out party for this more progressive AFL-CIO. Not only did

49. Wolfson, *Digital Rebellion*; Castells, *Networks of Outrage*.

50. A stunning heat map created by John Beiler based on data from the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) shows the worldwide explosion of protest activity after the turn of the millennium. Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone Project, “Mapping Global Protests Redux.”

51. Castells, *Networks of Outrage*; Bailey, *Protest Movements*, 171–217.

52. Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter*, shows the variety of little and big organizations that young activists in the anti-incarceration and BLM movements have interacted with.

it announce a new relationship between labor and environmentalists (“Turtles and teamsters together at last!”), it was the first large-scale street protest that the federation had mounted in decades. Since then, the AFL-CIO and many of its state and city labor councils and affiliated unions (along with the unaffiliated Service Employees International Union) have provided financial support, organizing support, and political support for many of the mobilizations of the Cyber Left, including Occupy, immigrants’ rights, Black Lives Matter, and especially the Fight for \$15 movement. The labor movement’s life-and-death struggle with courts and legislatures bent on destroying unions and workplace rights has made this a two-way relationship. The unions need allies and need legitimacy now more than at any time in the past century.<sup>53</sup>

We also need to think about the kinds of support that have been available to the resurgent Left from some segments of the Democratic Party and from elected politicians in some of the nation’s biggest and bluest cities. This is tricky and exposes one of the mysteries of the Cyber Left: how much does it lean toward anarchist-inspired forms and principles? The practices of decentered network organizing, direct action, consensus decision making, and other “horizontal” or “flat” as opposed to bureaucratic organization forms have been common to much of what the Cyber Left has done, showing up especially in the global social justice and the Occupy movements. Occupy Wall Street burst into flames in September 2011 in response to a call from Vancouver-based *Adbusters* magazine to “flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months.”<sup>54</sup> Starting with the tent-encampment occupation of Zuccotti Park, near Wall Street, the movement quickly spread across the country and around the world. Protests were recorded in more than one thousand cities and campuses in the weeks that followed. Encampments were established in parks and other public spaces, some lasting for months. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, blogs, and livestreaming were the principal methods of diffusion as well as communication. “The movement was born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet, and maintained its presence on the Internet,” explains Manuel Castells, who reports that Occupy-related tweets averaged 120,000 each day during November 2011.<sup>55</sup>

From the start, the encampments practiced “democracy all the way down,” operating without leaders, making decisions by consensus in general assemblies, dispersing responsibilities to collectives, using innovative mass meeting techniques like the “human microphone” while engaging in endless discussion.<sup>56</sup> An extraordinary experiment in ultra-democracy, it meant that the movement turned much of its energy inward, leaving it to outsiders—journalists, politicians, academics—to interpret the movement’s objectives. This prevented the Occupy movement from strate-

53. Fletcher and Gapsin, *Solidarity Divided*; Fantasia and Voss, *Hard Work*.

54. Castells, *Networks of Outrage*, 162.

55. Castells, *Networks of Outrage*, 171–215; Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*; Milkman, “Millennial Movements.”

56. Wolfson (*Digital Rebellion*) clarifies that these practices had been central to the global social justice movement networks and had been refined by the Indymedia network.

gizing a next phase, deciding what to do besides occupying parks and other spaces. And it left the movement vulnerable to exhaustion and demoralization when winter and police raids shut down the encampments. As a result, in the early months of 2012, the Occupy movement evaporated. *Aerosolized* is a better term, suggesting invisible dispersion in thousands of directions with potentially consequential future effects.<sup>57</sup>

Some of the same practices of decentered network organizing and direct action were apparent in the next huge explosion of street activism, the BLM movement. If anything, this was less coordinated than Occupy. It began with a Facebook/Twitter conversation led by three young women of color who had been organizing against mass incarceration. After a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman in the cold-blooded shooting of Trayvon Martin, they launched a social media campaign using the electrifying hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. The online campaign then moved into the streets after the police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in summer 2014. It quickly spread to hundreds of cities and campuses and fostered many different kinds of actions. The original leaders offered inspiration and attempted to coordinate the chapters that sprang up through Facebook organizing in various cities, but in practice the movement was beyond coordination. It spread by contagion as activists across the country embraced the slogan and improvised in their own communities.<sup>58</sup> Unlike the Occupy movement, where “democracy all the way down” was an articulated commitment, the decentered practice in BLM and many of the other mobilizations of the Cyber Left may be less a matter of intention than a condition that has become habitual in the age of social media activism. People can be mobilized more readily than ever before, but building a functioning mass organization has become more difficult.

The decentered practice (and often philosophical commitment) of the Cyber Left coexists awkwardly with the institution that has been interacting with American radicalism in an on-again, off-again way since the 1930s—the Democratic Party. Until 2008, the relationship seemed tepid at best. Bill Clinton was president when the global social justice movement moved into high gear. His administration had fully embraced the North American Free Trade Agreement and WTO agreement negotiated by Republican predecessors, and his reappointment of Alan Greenspan as chair of the Federal Reserve signaled that Clinton and most Democrats in Congress were fully committed to neoliberal economic policies. The forty thousand labor activists, environmentalists, and direct-actionists who shut down the Seattle ministerial meeting of the WTO in the final days of 1999 were speaking directly to Clinton and wildly cheered the news that the president had fled the city without being able to address the delegates.

The movement that took to the streets to protest plans to invade Iraq also targeted Democrats as well as Republicans. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, congressional Democrats had overwhelmingly approved the notorious Patriot Act. In the

57. Thanks to Amy Hagopian for suggesting this term.

58. Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter*.

Senate, only one Democrat, Russ Feingold, voted no. The following year, a majority of Democratic Senators, including Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, supported the Joint Resolution authorizing the invasion of Iraq, while in the House a majority of Democrats opposed. Protests were already underway, and over the six months leading up to the March 2003 invasion, millions marched and marched and marched again in hundreds of cities around the world, including an estimated 8 to 12 million in a coordinated series of protests that followed the time zones around the globe on February 15, 2003.<sup>59</sup>

The next great street mobilization also targeted congressional Democrats along with Republicans. “The Great American Strike” is the label Paul Ortiz assigns to the waves of immigrants’ rights protests that suddenly erupted in spring 2006, catching journalists and academics by surprise, appearing seemingly out of nowhere in a manner that we now see is standard for the Cyber Left. When the House of Representatives passed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act in December 2005, most Democrats opposed the bill, but thirty-six helped pass it. That draconian measure would have hardened border enforcement, raised the penalties for being in the United States without documentation, and made it a felony to assist an undocumented person.<sup>60</sup>

Activists, notably a group meeting in Riverside, California, planned an initial series of demonstrations in February that exploded over the following three months into something larger than they had imagined, as demonstrations involving an estimated 3 to 5 million people were recorded in hundreds of communities. These included towns and small cities where Latinx Americans had never before staged public protests. And young people joined by the hundreds of thousands in what might be considered the opening salvo of activism by the millennial generation. High school students marched that spring—White, Black, Asian, and especially Latinx high school students. The protests culminated on May Day, which activists had declared would be “A Day Without Immigrants,” a one-day strike to demonstrate the numbers and power of the people targeted by the proposed law. On May 1, an estimated 500,000 people filled the streets of downtown Los Angeles, 750,000 marched in Chicago, and 50,000 or more in many other cities. The protests worked. Quickly, the Senate declined to consider the bill.<sup>61</sup>

The 2008 Democratic presidential primary changed the political calculus, bringing with it enthusiastic, for a time, engagement with the Democratic Party. When Barack Obama declared that he would challenge Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, most of the Left saw the potential, joined the campaign, and

59. Barrett, *Defiant*, 117–23.

60. Ortiz, *African American and Latinx History*, 172–77.

61. Voss and Bloemraad, *Rallying for Immigrant Rights*; Xochitl Bada, Jonathan Fox, Jane Guskin, “Immigrant Rights Protests – Spring 2006,” Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, [depts.washington.edu/moves/2006\\_immigrant\\_rights.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/2006_immigrant_rights.shtml) (accessed November 6, 2019).

rejoiced in Obama's eventual victory. Not since the 1936 Roosevelt reelection campaign had the Democratic Party seemed to offer so much hope to those who viewed it from left perspectives. The Obama victory felt like a new day. The fact that the preceding neoliberal administrations had allowed runaway financial wizardry to wreck the global economy, and that Wall Street and its friends in the Republican party had been discredited and were seemingly out of power, added to expectations. Obama would now launch a new New Deal, many thought. Labor rights would be restored, tax policy and social spending would be rebalanced, and the looters and wreckers would go to prison.

It didn't happen. When Obama turned to the same crew that had caused the crisis and prioritized restoring Wall Street, he broke the spell, and when he sidelined the AFL-CIO's plan to update the Wagner Act and gave in to conservatives on issue after issue, it set the stage for disillusionment on the left and mobilization on the right as the Tea Party tore into Obama and gave the Republican Party renewed power. The Occupy movement, with its direct-action rejection of formal politics, made sense in that context.

But others were drawing different lessons from the failures of the Obama administration, planning ways to remake the Democratic Party and use governmental powers more effectively. We see this in the Fight for \$15 mobilizations, which won victories by pressuring city and state governments to raise minimum wages. Living wage demands were paired with electoral campaigns by newly inspired progressive candidates, many of them young, female, and nonwhite, and some of them queer. Since 2013, city councils in major cities on the West Coast have shown these changes, turning unmistakably to the left, enacting wage and workplace protections, attempting their own little new deals to make up for what the federal government will not do. Legislatures in some deep blue states have followed suit, enacting legislation aimed at protecting rights and restoring safety nets that have been shredded in red states and by the Trump administration. Not since the 1970s have progressives seen this kind of opportunity for local and state legislation.<sup>62</sup>

Campaigns by avowed socialists have been part of this progressive electoral initiative. When Kshama Sawant, a leader of Socialist Alternative, a Trotskyist party, won election to Seattle's city council in 2013, it suggested to some that the label "socialist" was no longer the third rail of American politics. Next came the 2016 Bernie primary campaign. In an Upton Sinclair–like move, the Vermont senator joined the Democratic Party without hiding his Democratic Socialist commitments and stunned the establishment, winning the enthusiastic support of millions of millennials who had skipped the standard American civics lesson about the horrors of socialism. That set the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in motion. In the last few years, DSA chapters have sprung up in scores of cities and campuses, allowing the organization to claim more than fifty-five thousand members by 2019. If true, it gave DSA a membership larger than any socialist or communist organization since the

62. Gregory, "Seattle's Left-Coast Formula."

1940s. And DSA's initial electoral success has been even more impressive. Sanders lost in 2016, but following the same practice of running as Democrats, DSA members won a slew of local and state elections in 2017 and then elected Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib to Congress in 2018 and scored more local victories in 2019.

So, after a slow start, the Cyber Left seems to have reengaged with the Democratic Party and for the time being is having some success pulling it to the left. *Neoliberalism* has become, for the moment, a bad word in Democratic circles, with nearly all candidates in blue states paddling away from the Clintons, and some moving left of Obama. Where this goes is anyone's guess, and writing this in the summer of 2019, I am wise enough to leave the guessing to others. I will mention a question that Max Krochmal posed recently. Has a "new new new cyber left" been forming since 2008 or 2016, since the Great Recession destabilized the neoliberal global order or since Trump and fellow would-be autocrats signaled a turn toward nationalism and authoritarianism? If the latter, that would mean that the Left is currently adjusting to a new set of challenges that echo those of the 1930s. It would mean that we should be talking about a sixth left formation in the making.<sup>63</sup>

In any case, the past twenty years have witnessed the creation of at least one constellation of social movements that is distinctly different from formations that preceded it, that arose in response to different arrangements of capital and empire, and in response to perceived limitations in earlier left movements. This is the way the American Left operates. Operating without the anchoring infrastructure of a competitive left-wing electoral party, the social movements of the American Left flare into life, matter for a time, and sputter out. But, remarkably, embers remain, ensuring that at some point the cycle will repeat.

### Further Questions

The foregoing is meant to emphasize, more than historians usually do, the discontinuities in the history of the American Left by flagging the changing constellations of social movement organizations and noting shifts not only in causes and strategy but also in demography and geography. With the possible exception of the 1980s phase, each new Left was substantially different from its predecessor. Reworking the history of radicalism in this way raises a number of questions that I hope will guide future research.

How do the social movement constellations of each era actually form a left? To what extent and in what ways do the independent social movements work together and therefore constitute a concrete political force? Or is the Left mostly a floating construction, an idea more than an entity? And if the latter, how does it come to matter? What roles do outsiders—journalists, academics, and politicians—play in creating the notion of a left? Neither social movement scholars nor historians have thought much about this. The former typically produce a list of discrete movements

63. Max Krochmal, pers. comm. (reader's report, July 2019).

without saying much about how they fit together. The latter describe a left “tradition” without adequately specifying institutions and fully understanding relationships between them. I hope this article inspires the search for a productive fusion point between these disciplines that will allow us to investigate the discursive and organizational systems that structure each left.

And we need to think more about the transition periods between left formations. I have mentioned mediating institutions that help sustain and revive radicalism, but that does not adequately explain the phenomenon that is so important to this history, the bursts of innovation. It is not the case that the Left simply hibernates in tough times like the 1950s or 1990s and then revives. Instead something new is born. How does that work?

Then there is the Democratic Party, which I have woven through this history to show the cycling between estrangement and various forms of engagement. The American Left has operated in relation to the Democratic Party since the 1930s, not always happily but in a rocky marriage that neither side can break. Here are the oscillations in a nutshell: Radicals moved into the Democratic Party in the 1930s, helping to pull it away from its Jim Crow Southern base, hoping to make it a progressive party. After 1948, the organized Left was pushed out while many former radicals stayed, embracing Cold War liberalism. When new organizations and projects emerged in the mid-1960s, that New Left soon turned against the party of Lyndon Johnson, blaming Democrats for war abroad and waffling policies at home, returning only when there was an opportunity after 1972 to work again on the project of turning the Democratic Party into a force for progressive change.

Since that time, roughly the mid-1970s, the oscillations have become shallower. This is because the stakes have changed as the party system has been steadily reorganized. Over the past forty years, the two parties have become more ideologically differentiated. Gone is the old Tweedledee-Tweedledum system that housed liberals, centrists, and reactionaries in both parties. The Democratic Party, as McAdams and Kloos argue, became a center-left party as it shed its reactionary elements, mirroring the transformation of the Republicans into a center-right party that over the same decades lost its liberal wing.<sup>64</sup> This evolving ideological consistency has raised the stakes for the Left, making Republican victories increasingly dangerous, thus increasing the incentive to participate on the Democratic side. Moreover, the center-left character of the party clarifies the potential gains from engagement. Whether they recognize it or not, progressives have been fighting within the Democratic Party, fighting for each social movement agenda—from Central American solidarity to environmentalism to Black Lives Matter to the campaigns for immigrants’ rights and against mass incarceration—with the hope of winning policy attention that only comes through Democratic office holders and liberal judges. Thus, much of what radicals and progressives have done since the 1970s amounts to a fight for influence within the Democratic Party, a fight against more conservative elements who gener-

64. McAdams and Kloos, *Deeply Divided*.

ally manage to dominate the national party but not always the blue state local parties. It's a fight that is likely to continue. That happens in rocky marriages.

JAMES N. GREGORY is the Williams Family Endowed Professor of History at the University of Washington and Immediate Past President of the Labor and Working-Class History Association. He is the author of numerous articles and prize-winning books, including *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. Most recently he edited the 2019 Centennial Edition of the classic *Seattle General Strike*. This article derives from his ongoing work with the born-digital Mapping American Social Movements Project.

## References

- Arnold, Delbert D. "The CIO's Role in American Politics, 1936–48." PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1952.
- Bailey, David J. *Protest Movements and Parties of the Left: Affirming Disruption*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.
- Barker, Lucius, and Ronald Walters, eds. *Jessie Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign: Challenge and Change in American Politics*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Barrett, Dawson. *The Defiant: Protest Movements in Post-Liberal America*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.
- Bell, Daniel. *Marxian Socialism in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- Birnbaum, Norman. *After Progress: American Social Reform and European Socialism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Boyle, Kevin. *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- Bremer, William W. *Depression Winters: New York Social Workers and the New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984.
- Brick, Howard, and Christopher Phelps. *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Browder, Earl. *The Democratic Front*. New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1938.
- Buhle, Paul. *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left*. London: Verso, 1984.
- Castells, Manuel. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015.
- Chester, Eric Thomas. "The Rise and Fall of the IWW as Viewed through Membership Figures." *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 55 (Winter 2011): 13–18.
- Chester, Eric Thomas. *Wobblies in Their Heyday: The Rise and Destruction of the Industrial Workers of the World during World War I*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014.
- Cochran, Bert. *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Cowie, Jefferson R. *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York: New Press, 2010.
- DeCaux, Len. *Labor Radical: From the Wobblies to the CIO, a Personal History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.



- Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Diggins, John Patrick. *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
- Dubofsky, Melvin, and Joseph Anthony McCartin. *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Eley, Geoff. *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Fantasia, Rick, and Kim Voss. *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Flacks, Richard. *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Fletcher, Bill, Jr., and Fernando Gapsin. *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Foley, Michael Stewart. *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013.
- Fones-Wolf, Elizabeth. *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Fraser, Steven. *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor*. New York: Free Press, 1991.
- Gitlin, Todd. *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street*. New York: Harper Collins, 2012.
- Givan, Rebecca Kolins, Kenneth M. Roberts, and Shar A. Soule, eds. *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanism, and Political Effects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Glazer, Nathan. *The Social Basis of American Communism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961.
- Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone Project. "Mapping Global Protests Redux." *GDELT Project Blog*, June 11, 2015. [blog.gdeltproject.org/mapping-global-protests-redux/](http://blog.gdeltproject.org/mapping-global-protests-redux/).
- Goldberg, David, and Trevor Griffey, eds. *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2010.
- Green, James. *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.
- Gregory, James N. "Upton Sinclair's 1934 EPIC Campaign: Anatomy of a Political Movement." *Labor* 12, no. 4 (2015): 51–81.
- Gregory, James N. "Seattle's Left-Coast Formula." *Dissent* 62, no. 1 (2015): 36–42.
- Heale, M. J. *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830–1970*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Hemmingway, Andrew. *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Hertner, Isabelle. *Centre-Left Parties and the European Union: Power, Accountability, and Democracy*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2018.
- Isserman, Maurice. *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Isserman, Maurice, and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

- Jeffrey-Jones, Rhodri. *The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society since 1900*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
- Kazin, Michael. "The Agony and Romance of the American Left." *American Historical Review* 100 (December 1995): 1488–1512.
- Kazin, Michael. *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.
- Keller, Richard C. *Pennsylvania's Little New Deal*. New York: Garland, 1982.
- Klehr, Harvey. *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the Communist Party Elite*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1979.
- Klehr, Harvey. *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.
- Krochmal, Max. *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Agony of the American Left*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.
- Lawson, R. Alan. *The Failure of Independent Liberalism, 1930–1941*. New York: G. P. Putman, 1971.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Gary Marks. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000.
- Lyon, Eugene. *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941.
- Mangione, Jerre. *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers Project, 1935–1943*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1972.
- Marable, Manning. *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jessie Jackson*. London: Verso, 1985.
- Marable, Manning. *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991.
- Martin, Bradford. *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2011.
- McAdam, Doug, and Karina Kloos. *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- McConnell, Grant. *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953.
- McCoy, Donald R. *Angry Voices: Left-of-Center Politics in the New Deal Era*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1958.
- McMillian, John. *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Milkman, Ruth. "Millennial Movements: Occupy Wall Street and the Dreamers." *Dissent* 61, no. 3 (2014): 55–59.
- Morris, Aldon. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press, 1984.
- Mullin, Bill. *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African American Cultural Politics, 1935–46*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- Naison, Mark. *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1983.
- Ortiz, Paul. *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018.

- Ottanelli, Fraser. *The Communist Party of the United States from the Depression to World War II*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Plotke, David. *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Ransby, Barbara. *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.
- Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, rev. ed. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Ross, Jack. *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.
- Rossinow, Doug. *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Ruiz, Vicki L. *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987.
- Sassoon, Donald. *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The European Left in the Twentieth Century*. New York: New Press, 1996.
- Schrecker, Ellen. *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1998.
- Shafer, Byron E. *Quiet Revolution: The Struggle for the Democratic Party and the Shaping of Post-reform Politics*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983.
- Storch, Randi. *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–1935*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Tilly, Charles, and Lesley J. Wood. *Social Movements, 1768–2012*. 3rd ed. Boulder: Paradigm, 2013.
- Voss, Kim, and Irene Bloemraad, eds. *Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in the 21st Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Waterhouse, David L. *The Progressive Movement of 1924 and the Development of Interest Group Liberalism*. New York: Garland, 1991.
- Weber, Devra. *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Weinstein, James. *The Decline of American Socialism in America, 1912–1925*. New York: Vintage, 1969.
- Windham, Lane. *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2017.
- Wolfson, Todd. *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014.
- Zieger, Robert H. *The CIO, 1935–1955*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Zimmer, Kenyon. *Immigrants against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in the United States*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015.