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A Socialist Horizon: Crisis, Hegemony, and the Promise of a New Party

Benjamin Balthaser

Of the many epochal changes sweeping American politics, one of the most poignant, if least reported, was the dissolution of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) this past year. The ISO was never a large organization—at its peak perhaps 1200 members, and averaging 600 to 800 members. But its activists like to say that they “punched above their weight,” and it is true: in few strikes or social movements were the organization’s banner or its paper—sold by members as much as a sign of their loyalty to the organization as of any practical notion of political efficacy—absent. And ISO activists have been instrumental to U.S. social movements, from the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike to the Palestine solidarity movement to anti-death-penalty campaigning in the 1990s. I was never a member of the ISO but attended their yearly conference in Chicago and experienced it as an almost ritual performance of the Marxist Left’s collective memory: from singing “The International” to staging ongoing debates about the legacy of the Bolshevik Revolution to keeping books by Rosa Luxembourgh, Leon Trotsky, and V. I. Lenin in print. I got the sense that the ISO was not just an organization but a living archive of the Marxian left—not so much a fossil as a porous tribe bent on continuing their vital traditions “in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness,” to borrow a phrase from W. E. B. Du Bois.⁴²

It is often said that the ISO formed just as the New Left was collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, while the resurgent Right rose in the late 1970s. But that is not entirely accurate.

⁴² W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 12.

While debate surrounds the origin myth and the exact lineage of ISO, its roots are both in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and later in the International Socialists (IS). These Trotskyist groups saw themselves as the true inheritors of the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin's vanguard party, a revolution and a movement they felt was sold out, crushed by a Stalinist counter-revolution. The SWP's crowning moment in the United States was the Minneapolis Teamsters strike they helped organize, a militant labor battle that shut down the entire city for days in 1934. The strike not only saw workers effectively control large parts of the city but also helped build a new labor movement against both a bureaucratic leadership it saw as prefiguratively Stalinist and an increasingly concentrated monopoly capitalism: the birth pangs of what could be a new workers' movement, if not a new revolutionary moment. This vision of a Leninist party was briefly revived in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the New Communist movement, but its social base and concentration in urban working-class self-organization was absent. Despite thousands of dedicated cadre members across various Trotskyist and Maoist organizations, this party model seemed, by the 1980s, to have played itself out. The ISO's collapse could be seen as the final closing of the twentieth century, the last chapter of the Bolshevik Revolution that had, comet-like, illuminated the hopes and fears of human liberation for the better part of a tumultuous century.

And yet it is hard to miss the fact that the ISO's collapse—triggered if not constituted by an alleged sexual assault cover-up—coincided with the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), now the largest socialist organization in the United States since World War II. While some members of the DSA have gloated over the collapse of the ISO as proof of their organization's non-Leninist structure and history, that is, to me, a far too glib expression of the historical transitions we are now witnessing. After all, the DSA has done little to recruit these new members into its ranks, and for much of its history the DSA, like the ISO, was a small organization on the margins of the Left. I would go so far as to say that the DSA is not the same organization it was five years ago. Nearly all

local and national leadership has been replaced by new members, and many of the new resolutions adopted at local and national conventions have also radically changed the DSA's direction and its structure, pushing it to the left, embracing the boycott against Israel and the creation of an Afro-Socialist caucus, while moving the organization away from its long-held "realignment" strategy inside the Democratic Party. Rather, I would suggest, the collapse of the ISO and the radical transformation and explosive growth of the DSA are both contradictory signs of a new historical conjuncture.

What strikes me more than the differences between the ISO and the resurgent DSA are not their differences (which are many) but rather their singular similarity as socialist parties. While the DSA is not formally a third party in the sense of the Labor Party or Green Party (it is technically a nonprofit); it is far more party-like than any of the social movements of the last few decades. Even a glance at its last national convention suggests that the DSA is a far cry from the horizontalist social movements of the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Global Justice movement, with their consensus decision making, affinity groups, and lack of formal leadership structure. Unlike the social movements of the last decades that have focused on creating decentralized networks, unencumbered by unifying demands or an articulated base, the DSA is a class-focused organization intent on engaging state power through elections and placing concrete demands on the state for large social policy transformations through grassroots campaigns, such as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. This realignment not only toward socialism but to a socialist organization is perhaps the most dramatic historical rupture that I, as a writer and activist who came of age during the affinity groups and consensus decision making of the Global Justice Movement, have witnessed. A person wandering into the 2017 DSA national convention in Chicago might be forgiven if they felt they were witnessing a ritual from a previous century: mostly clean-cut young people electing new national leadership, forwarding motions from various formal factions, voting by card and by proxy, deploying the Anglo-Saxon strictures of Roberts Rules of Order. There were T-shirts, buttons,

candidates, and dues. Despite the end of the Leninist party, the convention made the DSA look very much like a political party.

The Party Fordism Built

So what to make of this end of the end of history? The collapse and rebirth within a year of a socialist party? Perhaps the best place to look would be the last time a mass-based Socialist party existed in the United States— the “red decade” of the 1930s. Much like the rise of the DSA, the rise of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) did not initially seem very promising. Small and marginal, the CPUSA was located among isolated enclaves of Russian and Jewish immigrants and a tight cadre of African American and bohemian intellectuals clustered in New York City and Chicago. How then did it evolve from a tiny party of a few hundred members to an average membership of 100,000 throughout much of the 1930s and 1940s? Not only did the CPUSA grow exponentially but its influence extended well beyond its membership base. At the peak of CPUSA power, party members were elected to leadership of over a dozen major labor unions, organized the largest nationwide student strike the country has seen, and established the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (the only socialist army to fight overseas), and nearly all major African American intellectuals and numerous writers, directors, actors, and artists were counted in the party’s orbit. While the support, and yes, even prestige, of the Soviet Union was not, at times, insignificant, Soviet support cannot alone explain the rise of the CPUSA nor its broad influence. Indeed, focus on the Soviet or Bolshevik nature of the CPUSA hides far more than it reveals about the party’s stunning growth and brief, hegemonic sway over the cultural life of the United States.

Counterintuitively perhaps, Michael Denning’s 1997 *The Cultural Front* is the most helpful text in understanding the rise of the CPUSA, precisely because Denning locates the party in the larger

cultural and political transformations of the Popular Front era.⁴³ It is not that he thinks the CPUSA was insignificant; indeed, he suggests that “it was the most influential left organization of the period.” Rather, he argues, to understand the CPUSA’s growth and influence in the era between the late 1920s and the Cold War, one must look beyond its membership rolls to the “condensation” of social forces that cohered to allow it to flourish.⁴⁴ Taking a Gramscian approach, Denning looks at the “long Popular Front” as the emergence of a “historical bloc,” a new constellation of social forces that, for a time, were hegemonic.⁴⁵ Calling it at times the “Age of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organization]” and at other times the New Deal coalition, Denning conceives of power less as something one party or class holds (or does not hold) and more an alliance of social forces— parties, unions, social movements, cultural actors. Such blocs do not seize the forces of production so much as gain consent and influence through multiple forms of representation, whether they be political, cultural, or economic. Significant in this approach is that it avoids nearly all of the tedious pitfalls in most histories of the Communist Party that focus on party line and schisms, the Comintern and the Soviet Union, to understand how the party wielded such unprecedented influence in the United States.

It is doubtful that, without the Great Depression, the Communist Party would have risen to a stature of influence. It may seem to go without saying that the Depression was a crisis for capitalism. Yet for Denning, it was not simply that the crisis laid bare suffering under the free market and that people awoke to its ills to become Communists; it was a crisis of representation, in all forms. A crisis, as Antonio Gramsci notes, occurs when political parties and the people they represent are “detached” from one another, when “the men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognized

⁴³ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997).

⁴⁴ Louis Althusser suggests that the multiple and even contradictory social antagonisms in Russian society were “condensed” into a single demand for “bread, peace, and land” Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in *For Marx*, by Louis Althusser (New York: Penguin, 1969), 49–86.

⁴⁵ Denning, *Cultural Front*, 6.

by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression.”⁴⁶ The schism between representatives and represented for Gramsci leaves “the field open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces.” It must be remembered that Gramsci was arguing with the so-called “orthodox” Marxists who understood the state to be merely the “central committee of the bourgeoisie.” He was also arguing with Marxists who felt workers would respond spontaneously when their objective conditions were revealed to them. Rather, for Gramsci, political parties, and the cultural field, as a whole, are complex acts of “articulation,” not simply a one-to-one correspondence. A sense “the ruling class has failed” and a “‘crisis of authority’ is spoken of,” not an objective increase in the level of suffering, ignited a new political class formation.⁴⁷ In the 1930s, this meant that the entire idea of the “working class” was up for grabs, realigned, in motion, no longer content to be represented by the Democratic Party, the American Federation of Labor, or Hollywood. The Depression was a crisis of hegemony, a cultural and political crisis, because the elite were not able to comprehend, much less address, the economic crisis of their own making.

Jodi Dean argues that the CPUSA grew in the 1930s because it was able to bind people’s affective needs, organizing their desires within a coherent program and a cadre of comrades and fellow-travelers.⁴⁸ While that was true for individual or even collective members, it does not explain how and why the CPUSA became the vehicle for a larger social imaginary. One of Denning’s more profound insights about the movements of the 1930s was to note that the nature of the working class was in a profound state of change. Not only were working people realigning their political allegiances across racial and regional lines, the working class itself was in process of radical transformation. As Gramsci was one of the first to note, Fordism was not just a new means of production but also a

⁴⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 217–20.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2018), 218.

cultural system. It produced “a new type of worker,” and new types of social, cultural, and sexual relations.⁴⁹ For the first time, second-generation immigrant workers and African Americans in urban and industrial centers shared a common condition of labor, a common language, and a common mass culture, from factory work to radio plays to swing music to gangster films. Working-class urban heroes such as James Cagney, Duke Ellington, and Barbara Stanwyck were as much a part of a shared mass culture as boxing and jazz. One organizer recounted white and Black members listening to a Joe Louis fight on the radio before going to recruit members for its integrated locals, and Richard Wright famously wrote of the Louis-Baer match as leading to a jubilant, spontaneous uprising among working-class African Americans on Chicago’s South Side.⁵⁰ The Popular Front, Denning argues, was not just a movement about the realignment of a political Left, but a counterculture of Fordism, a way to reimagine the modernity of the machine age. Taking over factories and stopping the machines during massive sit-down strikes could be seen as not just a labor tactic but a metaphor for the movement: not to leave modernity, but to subject it to a working-class, democratic will.

Within the midcentury cultural and material matrix of Fordism, the Communist Party, unlike the Democrats or Republicans, built an entire way of life, vertically and horizontally integrated, with softball leagues, newspapers, dances, and activity groups such as Friends of the Earth (camping) and the John Reed Clubs (writing) that provided not only for the political needs of its members but also for their social and even romantic needs. “You could live an entire life within that world,” one former Communist related in Vivian Gornick’s oral history of the movement.⁵¹ The Communist Party, like the centralized and Taylorized mass culture of the period, was constituted by a sense of totality and organization that marked both work and leisure. The Communist Party was not just a political

⁴⁹ Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 289–91.

⁵⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2, 333; Richard Wright, “Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite,” in *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 31–35.

⁵¹ Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 36.

organization but also a cultural one that demanded of its members not just activism but a new cultural sensibility. Mike Gold wrote for the *New Masses* that party members should attend Harlem jazz clubs; interracial dating was not only sanctioned but officially encouraged. The CPUSA emerged as the radical organization of the Great Depression precisely because it so closely resembled the culture in which it operated. As capitalism's "other," Communism organized much like the Fordist corporations it opposed. In other words, it is not that the CPUSA hit upon a correct strategy by design so much as that it was the organization that formed a structural homology to its cultural and political moment.

The CPUSA's power was not primarily discursive or based on its ever-shifting proclamations. The CPUSA's rhetoric and strategy changed dramatically through the 1930s and 1940s, from its revolutionary Third Period in which it formed independent radical unions and denounced the New Deal as "social fascism" to the Popular Front period during which it forged alliances with liberals and other leftists against the far Right at home and fascists abroad. Nothing exemplifies the shift better than Kenneth Burke's speech before the 1935 Writers' Congress, in which he suggested that the party abandon its alien-sounding language of the "worker" for a more populist and familiar democratic language of the "people."⁵² Burke was denounced by none other than Mike Gold for being a "nationalist," and his speech was panned. Yet as Denning notes, Burke spoke for "the vast majority of the Depression left," and his language of popular democracy was officially adopted by the party later that year.⁵³ While the party and much of the organizing of the Depression left may have been class-based and internationalist, much of the rhetoric and imagery was conjunctural: redefining a popular subject of sovereignty.

"Democratize Everything": The Populist After Party

⁵² Kenneth Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," in *American Writers' Congress* (New York: International Publishers, 1935).

⁵³ Denning, *Cultural Front*, 102–3.

Flash forward a half century and, in many ways, we traverse similar cultural and political ground. The organizations that represented the working class (i.e., large bureaucratic unions of the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party) are either in decline or in crisis; the working classes themselves have “detached,” in Gramsci’s words, from their membership and their leadership. In addition, inequality is at the highest rate since before the Great Depression; racial segregation is at an all-time high; our planet is in a state of fundamental rupture in its ability to sustain human life; the far Right is again on the march. The thirty-year consensus around neoliberalism seems to have crumbled; this is a crisis of hegemony in much the same way the Great Depression threw all ruling-class institutions into disarray. People are again in the streets. A long twenty-year chain of spontaneous and horizontalist uprisings against the harsh classed, raced, and gendered contours of neoliberalism has occurred in the United States: the Global Justice movement, the direct actions against the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the mass marches of the immigrant rights movement, Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Women’s March. Whether the ruling classes have the legitimacy or the self-confidence to restore order, much less to solve the multiple crises facing them—primarily a crisis of legitimacy—is unclear. It is not surprising that “socialism,” in such a conjuncture, has reemerged.

And yet, the landscape of both capitalism and the Left have radically changed. As Chilean activist and writer Marta Harnecker notes, the rise of globalization, neoliberalism, and the end of the Cold War have led to what she calls the “social disorientation” of both the working class and the Left.⁵⁴ The organization of workers into giant Fordist factories in urban centers, the growth of social and cultural institutions, such as massive schools and state colleges, also did the work of organizing people into shared sites of social production and reproduction. Globalization and neoliberalism have not only widened the gap between the rich and the poor within and between nations but they have also dramatically reorganized the economy away from large-scale urban manufacturing to

⁵⁴ Marta Harnecker, *Rebuilding the Left* (London: Zed Books, 2017), 7–27.

decentralized and increasingly mobile just-in-time production. While this shattered what was left of the large AFL-CIO unions and sent union membership into a free fall, it also disrupted the material basis for social, even socialist, organizing. White flight, suburban sprawl, strip malls, the spread of automobile culture and online micro-communities have not only changed the way social life is organized but have also disrupted the forms of organization on which the Old Left was built. If the counterculture of modernism was based on the chance encounter on the city street and the collective anonymity of the factory and rail car, suburban sprawl and the post-modern cubicle entered a new form of fragmented alienation, as isolated as it is subcultural.

While “socialism” and “the party” may have reemerged, they have done so on radically different terrain than when capitalism previously faced such a crisis. As Ernesto Laclau, perhaps the foremost writer on Gramsci for the current age, writes in *On Populist Reason*, “we can no longer understand capitalism as purely an economic reality, but as a complex in which economic, political, military, technological, and other determinations . . . enter into the determination of the movement of the whole.”⁵⁵ While one could argue whether capitalism was ever “purely an economic reality” governed by the “contradictions of the commodity form,” his description of “globalized capitalism” covers, if not the experience of exploitation, the affective terrain of its contemporary subjectivity. Despite people’s common experience of working for wages, the end of the twentieth century has witnessed a critique of capitalism along multiple intersecting fronts: the biosphere, the racialized state, the national border, the predatory logic of financialized capitalism, and sexual violence. Rather than attempt to unify the multiple factors of exploitation at the point of production, Laclau suggests the term “populism” should condense the shifting antagonisms that shatter the “harmonious continuity of the social” into a series of constitutive demands. Unlike Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept

⁵⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 230. See also Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985).

of the “multitude,” in which they imagine a “nomadic, rhizomatic” unity without demand or claim to hegemony, Laclau’s formation is decidedly political: demands on the state are what unify the new class logic of the “99 percent.” In other words, the DSA has reemerged as an organization to engage with the state, precisely because the working class has been historically disorganized by three decades of neoliberal assault.

The often-criticized “vagueness” of socialism since the rise of the DSA is not a weakness of the movement but rather a constitutive element of its populist nature. As Laclau writes of populist movements, they are not the stereotype of a “people” against an “elite” but rather a democratic “social demand” that produces itself discursively to define an irreparable social antagonism. Populists redefine democracy from a cohesive consensus to a constitutive state of conflict. Society functions, as many liberals like to argue, through debate, discussion, compromise, and mediation; populists redefine the social totality as riven by irreparable “frontiers” of contestation. Laclau includes in his idea of populism not just popular democratic movements such as The Levelers or Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution but also the Bolshevik’s slogan “All Power to the Soviets” and Mao Zedong’s construction of “the people.” For Laclau, populists’ “vagueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse about social reality, but in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such.”⁵⁶ In diverse, uneven movements, such as the Bolivarian Revolution or the Popular Front, “populism” articulates a rupture in the ruling hegemony that can bring together a new political subject around demands for the state. While the DSA may be for the working class, it is not necessarily of it, at least in the same way the second-generation industrial working class of the Communist Party could easily define its class roots.⁵⁷ Most of the DSA’s membership is not organized around a shared identity or form of exploitation, but

⁵⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁷ As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin point out, the Bernie Sanders campaign and much of the new “socialist” Left is “class-focused” rather than “class-rooted.” See Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn* (London: Merlin Press, 2018), 43.

rather around a shared set of demands that unify a heterogeneous subjectivity under capitalism. The DSA's major campaigns— for rent control, socialized medicine, and a Green New Deal— are class demands, but they are also demands that bring together, by their nature, broad constituencies that are determined by many points of structural violence and exploitation by capitalism. Such campaigns are not attempts to seize the means of production but rather to seize hegemony and usher in a new consensus about democracy.

That such campaigns address their grievances to the state as a radical series of reforms should not be understood as the DSA's liberalism against a more radical Communist Party, as some charge. Rather, such demands and such modes of organization are a sign of the current DSA membership's materialism, a sign that they intuitively or strategically understand the historical conjuncture. As Gramsci wrote after the defeat of the Bolshevik Revolution to bring Communism to Europe, our "situation is 'democratic,' because the broad working classes are disorganized, dispersed and fragmented into the broad undifferentiated people."⁵⁸ In a fragmented and heterogeneous working class that often aligns its own subjectivity along multiple intersecting identity formations—gender, race, religion, class—the DSA offers an anticapitalist populism, a political articulatory process by which a new kind of movement can cohere. Such a political formation is expressed "discursively," as Laclau suggests, not "empirically," in so far as it recognizes itself not by region or workplace, but by the program it puts forth. The DSA's campaigns are not simply ways to achieve victories for a broad working-class struggle but, rather, are ways to articulate a constituency, to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal governance. It is crucial to point out that demands for a Green New Deal or socialized medicine are bids not only to save the planet but also to expose the gap between the Democratic Party's claim to representation and its ability to represent its constituency's needs. Hegemony, as Laclau states, is not a "re-ordering of things"; it is, rather, "a partiality that can become the name of

⁵⁸ Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 140.

an impossible totality.”⁵⁹ Socialism is the expression of a new political subject that can say it represents the whole, by challenging the state to change its class orientation. When Maria Svart, the national director of the DSA, said she wanted to “democratize everything,” it was a revolutionary demand to include the economy and the military implicitly, subjects off limits to democratic control, and to redefine “democracy” as a source of class conflict, not harmony.⁶⁰

The vagueness of socialism does not run counter to Jodi Dean’s claim that a new party is needed. As Dean suggests in her manifesto, *The Communist Horizon*, radicals have never taken the claims of horizontal democracy as seriously as they proclaim. All movements, she argues, are vanguard acts; they make claims of representation: *We are the 99%*. *The Movement for Black Lives*. They claim to represent “the people,” however they are defined against an elite or a class or an institution. Yet the question Dean poses is not so much whether we will commit acts of representation but rather whether we will build organizations that can contain difference and the multiple gaps, omissions, and divisions within capitalism.⁶¹ The DSA, by that logic, is a party, yet it is a very different kind of party than the one organized by the CPUSA. While the DSA has elected officials and votes on resolutions governing the organization, the chapters and branches are all almost entirely autonomous—the centralized structure of the National Political Committee (NPC) can do little to direct what chapters work on. That said, enough structure and unanimity exist to allow the DSA to coalesce around a few central campaigns and principles, such as mentioned above: the Green New Deal, socialized medicine, electoralism, and rent control. This form of flexibility, cohered by a discursive unity of key demands, marks the DSA as the party form for a post-Fordist, “globalized,” mode of capital accumulation.

⁵⁹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 226.

⁶⁰ Gregory Krieg, “We Want to Democratize Everything?: Inside DSA’s Rise with Its Leader,” CNN, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/17/politics/democratic-socialists-of-america-interview-maria-svart/index.html>.

⁶¹ Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012), 217–20.

That is not to say no contradictions exist. Just as the “democratic centralism” of the CPUSA allowed it to resemble and to challenge the centralized corporations it organized against, so too did its centralism make it vulnerable to sclerotic sloganeering, top-down decision making, and state repression when its leaders were eventually imprisoned under the Smith Act (1940).⁶² While the DSA may at some point come under assault by the state, that is not its main challenge at the moment. Like the CPUSA, the contradictions faced by the DSA are embedded within the cultural contradictions of the current conjuncture. As a hybrid democratic party, the DSA constitutes itself discursively and symbolically through demands made on the state. It has no empirical base, as did the CPUSA, in the giant factories and ghettos, large industrial unions, and immigrant neighborhoods of the modern period. This is not a critique but rather an observation of how the terrain of the working class has changed. Yet these articulatory acts naturally lend themselves to replication: Who is to say who represents the “true” DSA? The DSA is not governed by a centralized NPC, thereby allowing a proliferation of discursive mobilizations.

Concretely, numerous ideological caucuses have sprung up, each with a narrow interpretation of what “socialism” should mean. These are distinct from “identity caucuses,” such as the queer caucus, or Afro-Socialists, which form to address historical exclusions and hierarchies that continue, even in a socialist organization. The ideological caucuses are discursive platforms representing programmatic definitions of socialism. While real debates occur on either end of the spectrum, revealing for the most part latent and perhaps receding strains within the DSA’s history (among the “horizontalists” or libertarian socialists or the social democrats), the vast majority of the DSA’s tens of thousands of members agree on the broad outlines of the DSA’s programmatic goals and organizing tactics, and they are unified around the central demands mentioned in previous paragraphs. In the same way the rapidly changing party lines of the CPUSA revealed the political limitations of

⁶² Smith Act, 54 Stat. 670 (1940).

democratic centralism, so too does the proliferation of ideological caucuses (there are roughly a dozen now, and counting) represent the political limitations of discursively constituted forms of populist organizing. Already, whole chapters have split over what amounts to relatively minor ideological differences when it would seem abundantly clear that the DSA's entire purpose is to find broad common ground among working people. In a party organized nodally, much like the web, the temptation for further fragmentation and subcultural differentiation may prove too great.

Still, the prospects seem hopeful for the moment. Unlike in countries with large far-right movements among the young, such as India, Italy, Brazil, and Hungary, young people in the United States seem like they are moving to the left in what looks to be a generational realignment. The Bernie Sanders campaign and the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib have moved the ballast of the Democratic Party far enough to the left so that Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi, and Elizabeth Warren have had to respond to the question of whether they are “socialists”; six socialists were recently elected to the Chicago city council; the *New York Times* recently endorsed a socialist candidate for Queens district attorney; and New York State just passed the first progressive rent-control law in over a half century—a campaign in which the New York DSA played a large part. It would seem that the DSA, like the Communist Party, is not the entire story of America's current move to the left, at least at the grassroots, but it has emerged as an ideological and organizational center for this moment of transformation. Of course, it is impossible to know where the current crisis of hegemony will take us. Donald Trump is also a sign of shifting alignments and a crumbling political order no longer capable of summoning the self-confidence or mass support necessary to effectively rule. And it seems that the Democratic Party, along with its superstructure of media outlets, nonprofits, think tanks, and affiliated union leadership, has been more capable than the GOP in maintaining a grip on power, even as its base falls away. Indeed, it may very well be the effectiveness of the Democratic Party and its aligned superstructural support that provides an opening for the far

Right, if it is successful in containing movements to its left. Much remains to be seen. But the return to the party and thus the return to the state in this moment of crisis may be what saves us from the combined nightmares of fascism, economic ruin, and ecological collapse.

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