Catalyst

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VIVEK CHIBBER

It's been a year and a half since George Floyd's murder catapulted racial oppression into the center of political debate. The evolution of that debate has offered much for activists and scholars on the Left to think about.

For most of the twentieth century, movements against racial oppression in the United States had a visible socialist and working-class component or were heavily influenced by one. From the 1920s to the civil rights era in particular, calls for racial liberation placed the interests of black workers and the poor at the center of their strategic perspective. Hence, this perspective went beyond just political enfranchisement and formal equality, so that economic demands for jobs, education, housing, and health care became strategic anchors for the movement. This not only implanted the black working class as the moral and political ballast of racial liberation but created a potential bridge for linking its advancement to the advancement of the working class as a whole.

Not so today. Politics, as the saying goes, abhors a vacuum. For some time now, the distinctive feature of mainstream black politics has been the near-total absence of a socialist or working-class organizational force. Instead, as Adolph Reed, Cedric Johnson, and others have persistently argued for years, political discourse has been hegemonized by a stratum of black politicos and professionals. The space that was once occupied by a socialist perspective on race is now occupied by this elite grouping, which has crafted a latter-day version of black nationalism to advance its own narrow interests.

This issue of *Catalyst* examines some central dimensions of this elite black nationalism. All nationalisms create a fictive history around an "imagined community," the putative nation that the discourse seeks to represent. Imagined communities need imagined histories. In the opening essay, James Oakes presents a devastating critique of the *New York Times*'s 1619 Project, a historiographical enterprise that seeks to present slavery and racial conflict as the taproot of American historical development. Oakes shows that the project not only creates a fictional history but, in so doing, rather blatantly advances an elite political agenda.

In an essay complementing Oakes's, Adaner Usmani and David Zachariah show that reparations politics is primarily designed to benefit the upper echelons of the black population and that, precisely for this reason, it has little chance of gaining traction. They argue, much as the progressive black leaders of the civil rights movement did, that the best way to achieve real material gains for the vast majority of black Americans is through a multiracial movement for economic redistribution.

The utility of racial identity politics as a conservative force has not been lost on European elites. Daniel Zamora shows that the French, long parodied for their putative anti-Americanism, have embraced this element of American politics: the culture wars, centered on race. And, much like its Yankee counterpart, the French "left" has taken the bait. The reason is not hard to fathom. The French left today is, like the American one, located in the professional classes and far more comfortable with the language of identity and culture than the language of class. The result, unsurprisingly, is the intensification of the Left's marginality.

In this, France is only following in the tracks of the recent debacle across the English Channel. Daniel Finn shows that the British establishment was able to play the culture wars brilliantly

against the resurgent Corbyn wing of the Labour Party, and indeed, that it did so with the active collusion of the Labour leadership.

Finally, we present an interview with Antoni Kapcia on the popular upheavals in Cuba this past summer. Much of the mainstream media presented the mobilizations as a signal of the Cuban government's impending demise. But, as Kapcia argues, the 1959 Revolution still has deep roots in civil society. Over the years, the Communist Party of Cuba has been able to survive one crisis after another. While its future is not by any means guaranteed, it is far from the brink of collapse.


STONEWALL JACKSON

ABSTRACT

The 1619 Project claims to reveal the unknown history of slavery and racism in the United States, when in fact these topics have been the subject of intense scholarly investigation for decades. What distinguishes the project is the ideological bias that leads its editors to erase the history of antislavery and distort the history of slavery.

What the 1619 Project Got Wrong

James Oakes

Between 2011 and 2015, the *New York Times* commemorated the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War by publishing, every day for four years, a series of original essays under the generic title "Disunion." The essays varied in length and subject matter. On dates of significant events — the Battle of Gettysburg, the release of the Emancipation Proclamation — longer, more thoughtful essays appeared. But the standard form was a short piece on a host of topics written by a wide range of scholars within and without the academy. There was a smattering of economic and diplomatic history, and rather more political and military history. Reflecting the current interests of the professoriate, there was a good deal

of social history — with particular attention paid, for example, to brief biographies of individual women and ordinary soldiers, especially black soldiers.

"Disunion" was, in many ways, the ideal collaboration of journalism and scholarship. Many of the leading historians of the Civil War era, reflecting a variety of different approaches, were given substantial space in the nation's premier newspaper. The series, as a whole, was refreshingly undogmatic. "We wanted a multiplicity of perspectives," the editors at the *Times* noted, adding that they never "expected to cover the entirety of the war."[1] By 2015, when the 150th anniversary of the war ended and the series concluded, the most demanding scholars could not help but be impressed by the range and quality of the essays.

The paper's next major foray into US history, "The 1619 Project," could not have been more different. Extravagant claims of long-suppressed truth displaced the *Times*' earlier, more modest recognition that each generation revises the past and different scholars argue over it. Collaboration was discarded by journalists who arrogantly dismissed any historians who raised substantive objections. The "multiplicity of perspectives" was gone, supplanted by an ideologically driven narrative. Not surprisingly, the 1619 Project was riddled with egregious factual errors. Yet, in some ways, the most startling thing about the project was the utter unoriginality of its claim to have discovered the historical significance of the year 1619. To anyone who earned a PhD in US history after 1965, this claim was almost risible.

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1 Ted Widmer with Clay Risen and George Kalogerakis (eds.), *The New York Times: Disunion: Modern Historians Revisit and Reconsider the Civil War From Lincoln's Election to the Emancipation Proclamation* (New York: Running Press, 2013), xiii.

"WHY WEREN'T WE TAUGHT THIS?"

In 2001, Reid Mitchell, the author of pioneering studies of Civil War soldiers, published a brief history of the American Civil War. "If we choose," Mitchell began, "we can trace the origins of the secession crisis to one of the most famous years in colonial history, 1619."[2] Scholars reading that sentence would have raised no objection. We all knew that 1619 was the year the first enslaved Africans were brought to the British colonies of North America. And since we all knew that slavery was the cause of the Civil War, Mitchell's sentence made perfect sense. Moreover, because Reid was a graduate school buddy of mine, I had a pretty good sense of where he was coming from.

The very first seminar I had at UC Berkeley, in the fall of 1974, was taught by Winthrop Jordan, who had published a monumental history of racial ideology in early America.[3] That book, *White Over Black*, had in a sense settled what we called the Handlin-Degler debate over the meaning of 1619. In 1950, Oscar and Mary Handlin published a major essay arguing that the first Africans brought to Virginia in 1619 were initially incorporated into the existing labor system and only gradually differentiated from indentured servants.[4] The implication of their essay was that there was nothing inevitable about the transition to slavery in early Virginia. In 1959, however, Carl N. Degler argued that prejudice against black people was present from the beginning. He highlighted evidence indicating that differential treatment of blacks and whites began earlier than

2 Reid Mitchell, *The American Civil War, 1861–1865* (London: Routledge, 2001), 6.

3 Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

4 Oscar Handlin and Mary F. Handlin, "Origins of the Southern Labor System," *William and Mary Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (April 1950).

the Handlins had suggested.[5] The message of Degler's piece was that the writing was already on the wall in 1619. To some extent, both positions were correct, Jordan answered. The importation of the first Africans was undoubtedly driven by the demand for labor, and it did take time for slavery to develop, as the Handlins had suggested. But Jordan also documented prejudices about blackness that were already evident when the English colonized Virginia. In 1619, however, those prejudices were inchoate, as was the labor system itself. From those ambiguous beginnings, Jordan concluded, racism and slavery would develop hand in hand, over time, into a full-blown system of racial slavery.

Jordan's book moved beyond the Handlin-Degler debate, but it did not stem the flow of books and articles exploring the significance of 1619. Senior scholars — Wesley Frank Craven, Edmund Morgan, Alden Vaughan — would weigh in, but so would innovative younger historians: Kathleen M. Brown, Anthony Parent, and others.[6] By the 1980s, historians recognized that the Atlantic slave trade had long predated 1619 and that racial ideology had deeper and more complicated roots in European history. The development of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database provided new

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5 Carl N. Degler, "Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 1 (October 1959).

6 Wesley Frank Craven, *White, Red, and Black: The Seventeenth-Century Virginian* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Anthony Parent, *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). See also Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); James Horn, *A Land as God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Lorena S. Walsh, *Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607–1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

information about the origins of those first twenty Africans. But scholars also moved on to other debates over slavery and its wider significance in European, Atlantic, and American history. Indeed, the 1970s were something of a golden age for slavery studies, as scholars debated — often quite ferociously — the paradoxical relationship between American slavery and American freedom, the capitalist vs. paternalist cast of Southern slave society, the vitality vs. the weakness of the slave economy, the robust culture of the "slave community" in the Old South, and the reasons for the astonishing emergence of antislavery politics in the Age of Revolution. It is safe to say that, for the past fifty years, no serious American historian doubted that 1619 was a significant date and that slavery and racism were central problems in the nation's history.

What are we to make, then, of the opening sentence of Jake Silverstein's introduction to the 1619 Project in the *New York Times Magazine*? He writes that 1619 "is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history."[7] It would be one thing if Silverstein simply promised to introduce readers to the diverse body of literature produced by generations of scholars who have meticulously combed through the records of early Virginia to unearth the story that began in 1619. Instead, readers got Silverstein's breathless suggestion that the *Times* was courageously introducing us to something we never knew about and had therefore underestimated. And if it was insulting to scholars, what did it say about the thousands of students who, for decades, listened to our lectures expounding on the meaning of 1619, or who read about 1619 in their US history books? According to the Pew Research Center, 93 percent of *Times* readers have finished college. What were they taught?

7 Jake Silverstein, "Why We Published the 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019.

Shortly after I entered college in 1970, Degler published a major comparative study of slavery in the United States and Brazil.[8] He had incorporated his own insights into the importance of racism and slavery into his popular one-volume survey of US history, *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America*, the first edition of which appeared in 1959. As it happens, that was the textbook I was assigned in the survey of US history I registered for as a freshman. Several other monographs were also assigned, but the only one I recall, because it left such a deep impression, was Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, the book that reoriented all subsequent slavery studies away from the racist, romanticized story that had prevailed for half a century. For the second half of the survey, we read Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877*, the book that, once again, broke decisively with the racist depictions of the post–Civil War years. We also read C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, quite possibly the most widely assigned history monograph of the time. It was from Woodward that I learned not only about the "nadir" of American race relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Jim Crow laws were hardened, when black men were disfranchised, when lynching was common, and when, in the aftermath of World War I, whites rampaged through the streets of major American cities, including the appalling massacre of black residents in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was taught that, until World War II, the term "race riot" generally referred to white mobs attacking black people.

By then, the early 1970s, *The National Experience: A History of the United States* was easily one of the most popular US history textbooks on the market, and among its distinguished group of

8 Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971).

authors were Stampp and Woodward. Jordan and another teacher of mine at Berkeley, Leon Litwack, coauthored yet another widely used textbook. These were well-written books by distinguished scholars who were not inclined to minimize the significance of slavery and racism in American history. It's possible that mine was an unusually enlightened education, but I doubt it. Certainly, the sales of books written by Stampp and Woodward, not to mention the popularity of their textbook, would suggest otherwise.

In 1979, Frances Fitzgerald published *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century*, an account of how dramatically US history textbooks written for both high school and college classrooms had changed over the previous decade. Unlike earlier generations, students were now systematically introduced to marginalized groups — black people, women, immigrants, workers. The tone of the books, far from being patriotic, struck Fitzgerald as surprisingly dark. Rather than nationalistic narratives telling of the inexorable rise of freedom and democracy, US history texts by then focused on conflict and violence, oppression and resistance to it, without all that much Whiggish progress.[9]

One year later, in 1980, when Howard Zinn published his extraordinarily popular *A People's History of the United States*, most of his younger readers would have sat in classes that likewise emphasized those same darker elements, perhaps relieved by tales of heroic resistance by slaves, feminists, farm laborers, and workers. Zinn's opening chapter was a harsh critique of Christopher Columbus and the decimation of the Native American peoples. Chapter 2, "Drawing the Color Line," was all about slavery. The first line of the chapter quotes from a black writer who "describes the arrival of a ship in North America in the year 1619." Zinn efficiently

9 Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Little Brown & Co., 1979).

summarized the Handlin-Degler debate. "Some historians think those first blacks in Virginia were considered as servants, like the white indentured servants brought from Europe," Zinn explained. But "the strong probability" was that "they were viewed as being different from white servants, were treated differently, and in fact were slaves." He quoted extensively from Edmund Morgan's 1975 book, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, a profoundly influential interpretation that tied the development of liberal republicanism to the simultaneous growth of slavery and racism. Zinn's book thus reflected the large body of scholarship on slavery in early America, all of which treated 1619 as a crucially important date in American history.[10]

In short, 1619 was there in every textbook and had been for decades. It was a staple of US history lectures in colleges and high schools across the country, and it was there in Zinn's iconoclastic alternative to mainstream textbooks. Yet Silverstein simply assumed that Americans knew nothing about it. And it's not only Silverstein. Historian Robert Cohen has noted that Zinn's archives are chock-full of letters from admiring young readers who claim to have had scales fall from their eyes upon reading his book. It was so different, they wrote, from the "stodgy" and "patriotic" textbooks to which they were subjected in school. It would be interesting to know which stodgy, patriotic textbooks they had been assigned, since, as Fitzgerald documented, they had long since been displaced by much more critical accounts of US history.

Maybe the problem is the specific year. How many times have students complained that history is just a boring compilation of names and dates? With so many dates to remember, students can be forgiven for not recalling 1619, even if they *were* told how

10 Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 23. Quotations are from the first edition.

important it was. But what if we think instead of the larger significance of 1619 and don't worry too much about that particular year? Even scholars sympathetic to the *Times* project have pointed out that the first enslaved Africans were brought to North America by Spanish colonizers in Florida, decades before 1619. One of the reasons the Handlin-Degler debate receded is that, as US historians stepped outside their provincial boundaries, they realized that the Atlantic slave trade had been in operation for more than a century by the time the first Africans were brought to Virginia. Thus, the particular year — 1619 — may have diminished precisely because historians have focused more on the larger significance of African slavery in the broader Atlantic world. If folks don't recall learning the date, it's not because they were not taught about the importance of slavery in early American history.[11]

This historiography, known to most any historian of the South, continues to elude Jake Silverstein in his recent introduction to the 1619 Project, published to promote the release of the book *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* in November 2021.[12] He is clearly unaware, for example, of the historians writing in the late nineteenth century who placed the struggle over slavery at the center of US history. They included participant-historians like Henry Wilson and Horace Greeley, gifted amateurs like James Ford Rhodes, as well as the first generation of university-trained scholars, like Hermann von Holst at the University of Chicago and Albert Bushnell Hart at Harvard. Not knowing this, Silverstein mistakes the intellectual context of the pioneering work of the black author George Washington Williams. In his "insistence on

11 The vast scholarship on Atlantic slavery is ably synthesized in Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2011).

12 Jake Silverstein, "The 1619 Project and the Long Battle Over U.S. History," *New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 2021.

the influence of slavery," Silverstein writes, Williams was writing "against the grain" of existing scholarship — when in fact Williams was swimming with the tide.

Silverstein credits the next generation of "Progressive historians" with replacing the supposedly mindless nationalism of nineteenth-century scholarship, while also noting that progressives like Charles Beard "hadn't focused much on slavery." It would be generous to call this an understatement. The progressive historians were hell-bent on *erasing* the significance of slavery in American history. Frederick Jackson Turner set the tone in 1896 when he declared that the fundamental conflict in American history was the struggle between East and West, not the struggle between North and South. So much for the Civil War. It was Beard who systematically ignored the debate over slavery in his history of the Constitutional Convention and who, together with Mary Beard, went on to write an influential textbook denying that slavery was the issue in the Civil War. Silverstein isolates Ulrich Bonnell Phillips from the progressive tradition of which he was a part, leaving readers unaware that his racist, romanticized histories of slavery were part of the larger effort to make it look as though slavery was not something anyone was or needed to be fighting over.

Silverstein's account of post–World War II historiography is a cartoonish reduction of "consensus" history to mindless Cold War patriotism. There is not the slightest indication that Richard Hofstadter, the premier consensus historian, was a trenchant critic of the shallowness of the American political tradition, or that, in 1944, he published one of the earliest denunciations of the racist biases of U. B. Phillips's account of slavery.[13] Nor that it was Arthur Schlesinger Jr who, in 1949, insisted on restoring the struggle

13 Richard Hofstadter, "U. B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend," *Journal of Negro History* xxix, no. 2 (April 1944), 109–24.

over slavery to the history of the Civil War.[14] Oblivious to the way it undermines his own chronology, Silverstein ticks off a list of the galaxy of scholars who, in the 1940s and 1950s, placed the study of racism and slavery at the center of US history.

Silverstein highlights the black scholars whose work he sees as a "counternarrative" to his stereotype of the mainstream. No one doubts that pioneering black scholars helped complicate our understanding of the American Revolution and the Civil War. But I'm leery of Silverstein's tendency to segregate the historical scholarship of blacks and whites. It's not only Williams who gets ripped out of his context. In the 1930s, W. E. B. Du Bois produced a dramatic account of slave resistance during the Civil War, but so did Bell Irvin Wiley. Lorenzo Greene published his pioneering study *The Negro in Colonial New England* in 1942, but a decade earlier, Frederic Bancroft had published *Slave Trading in the Old South*, a devastating rebuttal to U. B. Phillips. Benjamin Quarles highlighted the problem of slavery in the American Revolution, but so did Donald Robinson, Staughton Lynd, and — need I repeat — Winthrop Jordan. The pushback against the blinkered scholarship of the earliest decades of the twentieth century was undoubtedly central to the work of black historians, but they were not alone.

And this is where Silverstein's new introduction slides off the rails. For it was the success of that pushback that led conservatives, beginning during Ronald Reagan's presidency, to complain endlessly about the way US history was being written and taught. Every complaint Rush Limbaugh or Charles Krauthammer made against the "hijacking" of American history by "multiculturalists" showed, yet again, that by the 1980s and 1990s the conservatives had lost the war. Silverstein dutifully recounts Lynne Cheney's

14 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War," *Partisan Review* 16, no. 10 (October 1949).

complaint that Harriet Tubman was mentioned more often than Ulysses S. Grant in the proposed national history standards, without realizing that this undermines the *Times*' claim that the 1619 Project represents a salutary corrective to the way US history has been taught to schoolchildren for decades.

Like every ideologue who ventures into the study of history, Silverstein reduces the current controversy over the 1619 Project to a conflict between those who posit a patriotic myth and "the best scholarship" that sees the American Revolution as "sordid, racist and divisive." There you have it: Silverstein speaks for the truth, against the critics who cling to mythology. This is self-serving claptrap. Those of us who see in American history profound divisions over democracy, equality, racism, and slavery are not plumping for a myth.

It is Silverstein who still cannot wrap his mind around the fact that, during the American Revolution, "some" Americans defended slavery while "some" Americans opposed it, and that the opposition to slavery had momentous consequences. He clings to the popular liberal myth that conservatives have "prevented generations of Americans from learning" about the "fundamental contradiction" between democracy and inequality at the core of our history — yet he does not realize that the endemic conflicts arising from that contradiction are conspicuously missing from the 1619 Project.

So the 1619 Project begins with a cliché, a tiresome liberal trope, endlessly repeated: "Why weren't we taught this? Why didn't we know this?" To which the obvious answer is: You were taught this. Unless you didn't bother to take a US history class, or you didn't do the reading, or you weren't paying attention to the lectures, or you forgot. When I began my stint as a teaching assistant in my second year at Berkeley, where hundreds of students registered for the US history survey every semester, the first half was taught by Winthrop Jordan and the second half by Leon

Litwack. Litwack's class was justly famed for his extraordinary lectures, which, like his published work, strongly emphasized the depth and persistence of racial oppression in US history since the Civil War. His recent obituaries suggest that, over the course of his career, some forty thousand undergraduates sat through those lectures from the 1960s to the 1990s. He was not the only one stressing those themes. These days, when students register complaints about their US history classes, it's often that there's *too much* emphasis on race and slavery.

ERASING ANTISLAVERY

If the 1619 Project was not actually introducing Americans to an aspect of their history they were never taught in school, why the controversy? If all the *Times* was doing was restating what we already knew, why the complaints? What was it about the way the *Times* presented that history that caused so much strife? There were the egregious factual errors, of course, but it's more than that. It's the ideological and political framework of the project that led its editors to those inaccuracies and distortions. The 1619 Project is, to begin with, written from a black nationalist perspective that systemically erases all evidence that white Americans were ever important allies of the black freedom struggle. Second, it is written with an eye toward justifying reparations, leading to the dubious proposition that all white people are and have always been the beneficiaries of slavery and racism. This second proposition is based in turn on a third, that slavery "fueled" America's exceptional economic development.

Nationalism is always an interpretation of history, and it is always a distorted interpretation. Think of the way German nationalists, Southern nationalists, or Zionists have all used and abused history to justify their politics. History written with the goal of instilling patriotism in its readers, such as the 1776 Project, cannot

help but be distorted. Nationalist histories emphasize continuity, tracing virtually unbroken lineages back through centuries, even millennia, often through racial or quasi-racial conceptions of a folk heritage. And above all, nationalists erase class divisions within the putative national community. Black nationalism — understood not as a protest movement but as the dominant ideology of the black professional-managerial class — is a variation on the theme. It views US history almost exclusively through the lens of race. It defines racism as America's original sin, a sin that has been all but universal among whites and is passed down from generation to generation, like DNA. The metaphors of "original sin" and "DNA" are designed to freeze history, to emphasize continuity rather than change. Nikole Hannah-Jones refers in passing to the "progress" black people have made, but readers will be hard-pressed to find evidence of it — and in any case, whatever progress there has been was achieved by blacks alone, thanks to the racist gene embedded in white America's DNA.

None of which is to say that there are no continuities in history. The racial prejudices that Degler and Jordan documented in early Virginia developed into a racist defense of slavery that lived on well past slavery's abolition. The content of racial ideology, as an intellectual construct, *has* changed over time, as has the intensity and significance of racism. Frederick Douglass imagined — naively, in retrospect — that because racism was the product of slavery, the abolition of slavery would undermine the salience of racial ideology. But, of course, that didn't happen, and there is still good reason to think of the period from 1890 to 1920 as the peak years of racism's influence in American life. But racism has never had a life of its own. It exists in particular social and political contexts, and as those contexts change over time, so does the specificity and significance of racism. The persistence of "race" as an idea — for that's all race is, an idea — cannot obviate the fact that the

overthrow of slavery ushered in a revolutionary transformation in the lives of African Americans.

Nor is racism the only continuous force in US history. There is also a history of anti-racism that barely registers in most histories of racial ideology. Jordan famously observed that slavery and racism developed hand in hand, but *White Over Black* also demonstrated that racism and anti-racism developed hand in hand. And, like racism itself, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anti-racism did not look and sound like late twentieth- and twenty-first-century anti-racism. But it is impossible to read antislavery documents from the revolutionary era and not notice the attacks on racism. The opening paragraph of Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition statute is devoted entirely to a forthright condemnation of anti-black racism, for example. Abraham Lincoln is often quoted and justly criticized for his offensive remarks that pandered to his racist audiences, but most of the things Lincoln had to say about race were egalitarian, and he repeatedly denounced the racial demagoguery of his archnemesis Stephen Douglas. Anti-racism has always been part of the progressive tradition, and the challenge for progressive historians is to examine the conditions that activate the anti-racist tradition and submerge the racist one.[15]

But no such enterprise is conceivable within the terms of the 1619 Project, because the only tradition it acknowledges is the unchanging tradition of white supremacy. Christopher Lasch once pointed out that all-explanatory principles explain nothing, yet here was the *New York Times*, serving up a relentlessly monocausal explanation for virtually all of US history, presented without embarrassment. "Nearly everything" important about the United States, Silverstein declared, is the product of slavery and racism:

15 To my knowledge, the only scholarly survey of anti-racism is Herbert Aptheker, *Anti-Racism in US History: The First Two Hundred Years* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

> its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, its diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence from Britain.[16]

If nearly everything was caused by racism and slavery, it must follow, as night follows day, that the defense of slavery had to be one of the "primary" reasons for the American Revolution. This absurd, insupportable claim is derived from a syllogism rather than source material. The jury is not out on the question, because juries deliberate over evidence. When confronted by the absence of evidence, the *Times* changed to wording that read that protecting slavery was the primary reason "some" Americans rebelled. That may be true, but there's more evidence that "some" Americans rebelled so they could begin to undermine slavery. Either way, the effect of that rewording is to destroy the intellectual architecture of the entire project, for if — whatever the individual motives of "some" people — the revolution itself was not driven *primarily* by the defense of slavery and racism, it follows that slavery and racism cannot explain one of the most important events — if not the *most* important event — in US history.

More important, the *Times* got the relationship between slavery and the revolution completely backward. Consider the famous incident in late 1775 when a British official, Lord Dunmore, offered emancipation to slaves in Virginia who joined his troops. Silverstein tried to argue that Dunmore's famous proclamation so angered

16 Silverstein, "Why We Published the 1619 Project."

the colonists that it tipped them into rebellion. Scholars quickly pointed out that Dunmore was responding to a colonial rebellion that was already well underway. Yet Dunmore's proclamation is significant for reasons that escape Silverstein. The fact that so many enslaved people took up British offers of emancipation is significant in its own right, but the fact that the British even made the offers revealed a historic shift in the relationship between slavery and war.

Throughout history, war has been the largest single source of slaves. War has generally led to mass enslavement, not mass emancipation. But enlightened theories of war were biased against slavery, and that bias was reflected not only in British policy but in the Americans' acceptance of that policy. In three separate treaties with Great Britain — in 1783, in 1795, and in 1815 — the Americans accepted that slaves who escaped to British lines and were emancipated during the war would not be returned to their owners, nor would their owners be compensated. Slaves were legally defined as personal property, and both the Confederation Congress and the first US Congress affirmed that personal property could be legally confiscated in "just" and "lawful" wars. Thus, the American Revolution established the legal principle that military emancipation was a legitimate practice under the laws of war, thereby setting the crucial precedent for military emancipation during the Civil War.

Antislavery convictions were already being voiced by radicals during the English Civil War in the 1640s and 1650s — not coincidentally, at the same time the British were building a proslavery empire. As that empire developed, especially in the eighteenth century, so did antislavery voices grow louder and more insistent, not least among the dissenting Protestant sects. The rise of Anglo-American slavery gave rise to Anglo-American antislavery. But it was the revolution itself that put slavery in jeopardy. It was

the revolution that injected anti-racism into American political culture, as a counterpoint to the increasingly racist defense of slavery. And it was the revolution that inspired the world's first abolitionist movement, the world's first provision for the abolition of the slave trade, and the world's first abolition statutes.

A generation of brilliant historians debated the relationship between the emergence of abolitionism and the emergence of capitalism in the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution. Even Eric Williams, as skeptical as he was of the humanitarian motives of the first generation of abolitionists, never doubted the significance of the development — a development he attributed directly to the American Revolution. Once upon a time, historians asked how much the rise of abolitionism could be explained by the rise of capitalism. For the editors of the 1619 Project, there's nothing to explain.[17]

The abolition of slavery in the Northern states set the stage for generations of intense sectional conflict. In the early twentieth century, "progressive" historians systematically erased that conflict from American history. Readers of Beard's influential account of the Constitutional Convention would have been left scratching their heads over James Madison's observation that the major conflict at the Philadelphia gathering resulted from the division between Northern and Southern delegates. It took Staughton Lynd to expose Beard's suppression of the slavery issue at the Constitutional Convention, and now the *New York Times* wants it

17 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944). David Brion Davis revived the debate in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). A sophisticated discussion among several scholars ensued. See Thomas Bender (ed.), *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

suppressed again.[18] Conflict over slavery? Among the founders? Among *whites*? How can this be?

Where the reality of the conflict cannot be overlooked, antislavery is now routinely discounted on the grounds that its supporters had unacceptable motives. Sure, the argument goes, some whites argued against slavery, but it was never a moral argument. "Humanitarianism" has become an analytical red herring, held up chiefly to denigrate the antislavery movement. Opponents of slavery complained that it propped up an arrogant aristocracy that threatened American democracy. They pointed out that slavery inhibited Southern economic development, depriving poor whites as well as enslaved blacks of any chance for a decent life. Slavery stripped black men and women of the fruits of their labor — of the bread they earned from the sweat of their brow, Lincoln said. If it expanded into the territories, slaveless settlers would never be able to compete. But these are disparaged as mere political and economic arguments, not moral arguments grounded in humanitarian concern for the enslaved. And what about the claim, endlessly repeated among antislavery politicians, that slavery was a violation of the principles of the Declaration of Independence, that it deprived slaves of their natural right to freedom? This is taken to show what hypocrites they were, because — the claim is made — deep down, Lincoln and the Republicans were ordinary white supremacists. That's why, even when politicians like Lincoln denounced slavery as a "social, political, and *moral* evil," the 1619 Project ignores them, because such convictions are incompatible with the project's all-explanatory principle.

18 Staughton Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), part 2.

MISCONSTRUING THE SLAVE ECONOMY

The political goal animating the 1619 Project is reparations. "If you read the whole project," Nikole Hannah-Jones has said, "I don't think you can come away from it without understanding the project is an argument for reparations. You can't read it and not understand that something is owed."[19] But if the case for reparations rests on distorted history, it can't be a good case. On the subject of slavery, the distortions of the 1619 Project are numerous, and they are significant. It conflates the wealth of the slaveholders with the wealth of the United States. It asserts without evidence that slavery "fueled" the growth of the Northern economy. It betrays a stunning lack of familiarity with the basic facts of cotton cultivation. It stresses the expansion of the cotton economy but ignores the South's relative decline in the national economy. Slavery consigned generations of Southerners, black and white, to poverty and economic backwardness. Its legacy is hardship and misery, not widespread wealth.

Most of what the 1619 Project has to say about Southern slavery is contained in an essay by sociologist Matthew Desmond that grossly distorts the history of the slave economy and is riddled with factual errors.[20] He asserts, citing Walter Johnson, that the slave plantations were "dependent on upriver trade for food." In fact, it was conclusively demonstrated decades ago that the slave plantations produced their own food and did not rely on grain purchases from outside the region. Citing Caitlin Rosenthal, Desmond claims that modern-day accountants and managers employ bookkeeping "procedures whose roots twist back to slave-labor camps."

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19 Darcel Rockett, "5 Minutes With Nikole Hannah-Jones, the Architect Behind the *New York Times*' '1619 Project,'" *Chicago Tribune*, October 10, 2019.

20 Matthew Desmond, "In Order to Understand the Brutality of American Capitalism, You Have to Start on the Plantation," *New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019.

But Rosenthal says that the connection between plantation and modern accounting techniques is "murky" and explicitly warns that hers "is not an origins story" of contemporary accounting practices.[21] In a podcast elaborating his thesis, Desmond asserts that cotton cultivation "in this country . . . dates back to the earliest years of the colonies. And when slavery begins on these shores, it begins in cotton fields."[22] In fact, cotton was not grown commercially in the South until the 1780s, one and a half centuries *after* 1619.

Desmond claims that the planters' "meticulous bookkeepers" were "just as important to the productivity of a slave-labor camp as field hands." This cannot be true. Thomas Affleck's "Plantation Record and Account Book," to which Desmond devotes several paragraphs, was first published in the late 1840s, after the bulk of the productivity increases in cotton cultivation were achieved. Indeed, productivity slowed and seems to have leveled off in the 1850s, when Affleck's and similar books were most popular — and they were never all that popular. Rosenthal estimates that perhaps a quarter of the plantations used such books, and most of those were filled in haphazardly.

Desmond's account of the increase in the productivity of enslaved laborers presupposes the prevalence of an implausibly rigid system of bureaucratically structured gang labor, a system in which every slave's daily quota was closely monitored and carefully recorded, all with the goal of maximizing cotton production. "Because overseers were tracking everyone's haul," Desmond says, "if you fell short of that quota, you were often beat. . . . But if you overshot, that brought another terror, too, because the overseers

21 Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), xii.

22 *The 1619 Project Podcast*, "Episode 2: The Economy That Slavery Built," August 30, 2019.

might increase your quota for the next day." Every day, he writes, overseers "recorded each enslaved worker's yield," and with each passing day, the slave was expected to meet or exceed the previous day's weight.

But the record books themselves tell a very different story — a story worth spending some time on because it reveals the implausibility of Desmond's account. In the decades before the Civil War, as cotton production was reaching its peak, for example, planters were abandoning the exclusive use of gang labor in favor of hybrid systems in which slaves were sometimes assigned tasks, sometimes offered incentives, and sometimes organized in gangs. The systematic monitoring of slave gangs cannot account for productivity increases on cotton plantations where the gang system was never universally deployed and anyway was being abandoned.[23]

From one day to the next, the amount of cotton a slave picked varied, sometimes dramatically. Some slaves got sick. It rained, so nobody worked. The weeds got out of hand, or "rust" appeared on the plants, or worms, any or all of which required shifting slaves from a singular devotion to picking cotton. There were many reasons why it would have been impossible to set a quota to which slaves were held each day. Mostly, however, the slaves could only pick cotton that was available to be picked, and that changed unpredictably from day to day, but more predictably

23 On the irregular and declining use of the gang system, see John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 78–80; Philip D. Morgan, "Task and Gang Systems: The Organization of Labor on New World Plantations," in Stephen Innes (ed.), *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Peter A. Coclanis, "How the Low Country Was Taken to Task: Slave-Labor Organization in Coastal South Carolina and Georgia," in Robert Louis Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger (eds.), *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 95–6.

over the course of the picking season. Cotton plants began to blossom in late summer, and the amount ready for picking rose rapidly for a month or two before beginning a steady decline until the season ended around Christmas. This means that, for about half the picking season, the amount of cotton available for picking diminished from day to day. Under such circumstances, it would have been physically impossible for slaves to maintain, much less exceed, the previous day's quota. Then, too, the cotton crop varied from year to year, depending on the rainfall or on the spread of blight or the exhaustion of the soil. Desmond notes the wasteful planting practices that led to the steady deterioration of Southern soil, but he does not realize that this contributed to a general crisis that spread across the South by the 1850s.[24]

We know all of this precisely because, despite Desmond's abuse of them, the plantation records are a crucial source of information about slavery. We even know about the increased productivity of cotton, because two remarkable economic historians aggregated tens of thousands of individual measurements of cotton picked by individual slaves on individual days over many decades.[25] This aggregation obviated the unreliability of the records as a gauge of productivity from one day to the next. Planters' letters and diaries register the problems they faced as the soil on their farms deteriorated. The record books also tell us about the managerial ideal to which many slaveholders aspired, an ideal that few planters actually achieved. Affleck, for example, repeatedly advised against maximizing cotton production at the expense of

24 For a longer, somewhat broader, discussion of these issues, see James Oakes, "A Few Random Thoughts on Capitalism and Slavery," *Economic Historian*, September 21, 2020.

25 Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, "Biological Innovation and Productivity Growth in the Antebellum Cotton Economy," *Journal of Economic History* 68, no. 4 (December 2008).

food production and plantation upkeep, and against too much whipping, lest it demoralize the enslaved workers and thereby decrease the plantation's overall productivity. But this ideal was proposed as a corrective to the wasteful farming practices and irregular patterns of labor discipline that prevailed across the slaveholding South — all of which is to say that the 1619 Project's description of labor organization on cotton plantations scarcely bears a passing resemblance to historical reality.

SOUTHERN SLAVERY AND NORTHERN CAPITALISM

The 1619 Project's larger purpose, beyond likening slave plantations to modern capitalist organizations, is to tie the fortunes of Southern slavery to the fortunes of the larger capitalist world economy in which it was embedded. No one doubts that the slave economy of the South was linked to the rapidly developing economies of the North and of Britain, but anecdotes about this bank or that insurance company doing business in the South do not qualify as evidence that Northern economic development was "fueled" by Southern slavery, nor do they demonstrate that Northern finance "fueled" the growth of slavery. These are two different arguments, and they need to be carefully distinguished, if only because the case for reparations rests on the former rather than the latter. It makes a difference whether the wealth of the North depended on slavery or the prosperity of slavery depended on the North.

Desmond says that "the majority of credit powering the American slave economy came from the London money market," which, if true, would mean that the slaveholders were heavily dependent on the London money market, not that the London money market was heavily dependent on the slave economy. It was not. The New York and London markets provided the yearly credit through Southern factors to cotton producers until the crop went

to market. But a good deal of the credit "powering the American slave economy" was extended in the form of mortgages on slaves, the majority of which were financed privately and locally. After the Panic of 1837, London banks grew leery of the speculative nature of the slave economy and stopped investing in it — but their Southern investments had rarely constituted a significant fraction of their portfolios, and their withdrawal from the Southern market did not prevent the revival of cotton prices in the 1840s or the cotton "boom" of the 1850s.

Desmond rehearses the familiar claim that the slaves were worth more than all the factories and railroads put together. "You know," he says, "land wasn't worth that much." As a result, he says, "the enslaved workforce in America was where the country's wealth resided." He is mistaken on both counts. Land in the slave states was not cheap, and the price of fertile land was rising to the point where nonslaveholders were being squeezed out of the market. Nor is it true that the bulk of the country's wealth resided in slaves. Economic historian Gavin Wright calculates that the value of farms and buildings outside the South was $4.422 billion in 1860, whereas the total value of slaves that year was $3.059 billion.[26] When the Civil War began, the North was still a largely agricultural economy, so the comparison of slave wealth with factories is misleading. Moreover, the value of Northern railroads was directly tied to the prosperity of Northern agriculture. It was the rail lines, fanning out from East to West, that tied Western farmers to Eastern and Atlantic markets — and not, incidentally, to the Southern market.

This is a crucial point: Northern economic growth was fueled primarily by the nexus of the city and the countryside *within the North*. The textile industry was impressive for its factories, but

26 Gavin Wright to James Oakes, email correspondence, October 23, 2021.

the bulk of Northern industrialization was located elsewhere, in manufacturing establishments that produced clocks, hats, farm implements, cigars, plates, and silverware. Those establishments were located not only in cities and mill villages but in the hundreds of market towns that had been a hallmark of the Northern economy since the eighteenth century. The markets for the North's manufactured goods were almost entirely in the North. Eighty-five percent of the shoes produced in Northern factories were sold in the North. Northern communities prospered by attracting settlers, and they attracted settlers by building schools, roads, and market towns that made farming prosperous. As a result, not only did millions of immigrants pour into Northern states, so did tens of thousands of Southern whites. They left the slave states because there were no schools and few market towns, the transportation system was terrible, and the railroads were designed to serve the needs of slaveholders rather than small farmers. The slave economy thereby impoverished not only millions of enslaved blacks but millions of slaveless whites as well.[27]

THE CRISIS OF SOUTHERN SLAVE SOCIETY

By focusing so relentlessly on the productivity of cotton and the wealth amassed by Southern planters, the 1619 Project creates a misleading impression that the slave economy was much stronger than it was. Its editors thereby ignore a long tradition of

27 David R. Meyer, *The Roots of American Industrialization* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). For further evidence that Northern capitalism originated in the Northern countryside, see Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (eds.), *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992); Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011). On the crucial difference between the Northern and Southern economies, see Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development.*

scholarship pointing to serious internal weaknesses within the slave economy and the social and political tensions that became quite severe by the 1850s, at the very moment when the force of Northern antislavery politics was gathering momentum. William L. Barney ably summarizes the issue in his excellent recent history of secession:

> The prosperity of the South in the 1850s bypassed most Southern whites. That prosperity was built on slaves, fertile land, and an expanding global demand for cotton, the antebellum production of which peaked in 1859. By then, good land and slaves were increasingly beyond the reach of the bulk of the white population. Slave prices more than doubled in the 1850s, and only the wealthy or those with substantial lines of credit could afford to purchase them. Decades of soil depletion and degradation had reduced the amount of cheap, fertile land for new plantations. A growing underclass of white poor found themselves reduced to working as farm tenants, sharecroppers, or hired laborers for the farmers and planters who did own slaves. Depending on the agricultural sub-region, 20 percent to 40 percent of the farm household heads owned neither land nor slaves. As a result, the color line blurred as more whites were forced into economic competition with slaves and free blacks.
>
> Anger and frustration over shrinking opportunities for economic independence and advancement produced challenges to the established rule of planter elites and widened the cracks in the façade of white unity planters presented to the outside world. As the threat of the antislavery North loomed increasingly, planters grew uneasy over their mastery at home.[28]

28 William L. Barney, *Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 13.

What was the "looming threat" from the antislavery North? The opponents of slavery were determined to prevent slavery from expanding beyond its current limits. They assumed, as did many a Southern slaveholder, that slavery needed to expand to survive and that fencing slavery in would cause it to die what Abraham Lincoln called "a natural death." Preventing slavery's further expansion was the centerpiece of what I call the "antislavery project," to which virtually all antislavery politicians were committed, including Abraham Lincoln.[29] Radicals called it the "cordon of freedom." The federal government would no longer support the expansion of slavery, admit new slave states, protect the rights of slaveholders on the high seas, or deploy the armed forces to help recapture fugitive slaves.

When William Lloyd Garrison called for the secession of the free states — "No Union with Slaveholders" — he had the same thing in mind. Critics complained that Northern secession would "leave the slaves to the mercy of their masters," but Garrison denied it. To dissolve the Union, he explained,

> is to withdraw from those masters all the resources and instrumentalities now furnished to them by the North, without which they are powerless. It is admitted on all sides, and especially by the leaders of the Republican party, that it is madness for the South to threaten a dissolution of the Union; for it is only through the Union she is enabled to keep her millions of slaves in their chains. Let her cut the connection, and she will be struck with paralysis.[30]

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29 James Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition: Abraham Lincoln and the Antislavery Constitution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021), 54-98.

30 Garrison to James Miller McKim, October 14, 1856, in Louis Ruchames (ed.), *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume IV: From Disunionism to the Brink of War, 1850–1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 409–10.

Disunion would deprive the slave states of the federal power they had long depended on to expand slavery's territorial reach and participate in the capture of fugitive slaves. "If this Northern support were withdrawn," writes Elizabeth Varon, summarizing Garrison's position, "slavery would be doomed."[31]

The Republican Party's antislavery project was designed to do the same thing, yet nowadays, skeptics are quick to dismiss it as "delusional." It could not have worked without a civil war, they argue, apparently on the assumption that the slave economy was so vibrant that it would have survived indefinitely had it not been for the war. But the weakness of the slave economy has been a persistent theme in the historiography, and over the years, numerous scholars have agreed that slavery had to expand to survive. "Slavery confined," Allan Nevins wrote, "would be slavery under sentence of slow death."[32] As Eugene D. Genovese once put it, "The South had to expand, and its leaders knew it."[33] For the slaveholders to have agreed to their own geographical confinement, he argued, would have amounted to a self-inflicted beheading. The continued expansion of slavery was "a matter of economic necessity," Barney explained in an earlier study. Because the wasteful planting practices intrinsic to slavery exhausted Southern soil, expansion satisfied one of "the basic internal needs of the South," he noted, adding that "additional territory sustained the economic viability

31 Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 153. For a similar summary of Garrisonian disunionism, see Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 452.

32 Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln: Douglas, Buchanan, and Party Chaos, 1857–1859*, volume 1 (New York: Scribner, 1950), 344

33 Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 267.

of slavery."[34] Charles Post is more emphatic. The "continued development of slavery," he writes, "*required* geographical expansion into new territories."[35] John Clegg and Duncan Foley have recently offered a sophisticated model that they believe substantiates the hopes of Abraham Lincoln and the fears of Jefferson Davis. Slavery, they conclude, "did indeed have to 'expand or die.'" [36] From this perspective, the antislavery project of preventing slavery from expanding would have put slavery "on a course of ultimate extinction," even without a civil war.

But no counterfactual speculation is required to discern the contours of the slaveholding South's internal crisis. The extraordinary wealth that so bedazzles the editors of the 1619 Project was in fact evidence of a rapidly developing crisis. Slave ownership was concentrating in fewer and fewer hands. Thirty-five percent of Southern families owned slaves in 1830, but that number fell to about 30 percent by 1850 and fell still more precipitously to 25 percent in 1860. The price of slaves skyrocketed to the point where a single "prime" field hand cost what, in today's currency, would amount to tens of thousands of dollars. Yeoman farmers who aspired to slave ownership were thwarted, and even the sons of established planters found it difficult to reproduce the wealth of their parents. Meanwhile, the rates of landlessness became widespread in many parts of the South, and the number of poor

34 William L. Barney, *The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 6, 10.

35 Post, *American Road to Capitalism,* 237.

36 John Clegg and Duncan Foley, "A Classical-Marxian Model of Antebellum Slavery," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 43, no. 1 (2018), 22. The internal weakness of the slave economy is also a central claim of John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, *Volume 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *Volume 2: The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For Ashworth, the weakness of the slave economy was caused by slave resistance.

whites increased dramatically. For a slaveholding class that had long justified itself by claiming that buying a slave was the first step up the social ladder, the ladder's collapsing rungs generated both an ideological and a political crisis.

Long-simmering social tension — between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, on the one hand, and between masters and slaves, on the other — bubbled to the surface during the 1850s and burst into the center of Southern politics during the secession crisis. Insurrection panics swept the South as enslaved people learned of the election of the first president committed to slavery's destruction. But as the slaveholders launched their rebellion, the nonslaveholders resisted and voted against secession. The ensuing war exposed the failure of Southern slave society, as 450,000 Southerners joined the Union Army.[37]

There is no reason to believe that taking the Civil War out of the story would have significantly altered the trajectory of the slave economy's paradoxical history. By 1860, the South was the largest, wealthiest slave society on Earth — quite possibly the largest slave society in the history of the world. But even as King Cotton was ascending his throne and extending his reach across the Southern frontier, the Southern economy was steadily declining relative to the North's. Within the larger American economy, cotton was pawn, not king. A late nineteenth century without a war would have witnessed the North's great leap into industrialization, even as the cotton market stagnated. Under conditions of geographical restriction, the price of slaves might well have collapsed, and with that, much of the South's "wealth" would have evaporated.[38]

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37 William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

38 Clegg and Foley, "A Classical-Marxian Model of Antebellum Slavery."

The decline of the South's power in the federal government, already evident in the 1850s, would likely have accelerated. Here, too, the story was paradoxical. The "Slave Power" had long exercised disproportionate influence in the federal government, repeatedly tilting it in proslavery directions. And yet, as the slave economy slid into relative decline, so did Southern political power. Having long since lost control of the House of Representatives, the South came to depend on maintaining an "equilibrium" of slave and free states in the Senate. But that equilibrium was shattered in 1850 when California came into the Union as a free state. The slaveholders had secured a new fugitive slave law, but they could not enforce it. They managed to repeal the Missouri Compromise, but they could not get Kansas admitted as a slave state. Nor could they get the federal government to build a Southern rail route to the Pacific, or get Southern California to split off into a new slave state, or annex Cuba or Nicaragua. The South got an outrageous proslavery decision from the US Supreme Court in 1857, but it made little practical difference, and when the antislavery Republicans took control of Congress and the presidency in 1861, they disregarded the court's ruling and repudiated its legal reasoning. Antislavery Northerners, their economic system dependent on access to "free soil," had become steadily more aggressive in their determination to undermine slavery. By 1860, a "Liberty Power" had been thwarting the Slave Power for some time.[39] It is delusional to imagine that an increasingly powerful North would have wilted in the face of a South that somehow managed to avoid a war.

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39 Leonard L. Richard, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Corey M. Brooks, *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

But there *was* a war, and it was the explosive combination of social upheaval in the South and antislavery politics in Washington, DC, that transformed the war into a revolution. Readers of the 1619 Project can be excused if they fail to notice.

ERASING EMANCIPATION

The 1619 Project's insistence on a timeless, almost genetically determined white racial consensus reduces the Civil War and emancipation to mere afterthoughts, blips in a history in which nothing has really changed. According to this account, Reconstruction offered a brief glimmer of hope, but those hopes were quickly dashed as white Redeemers reestablished control and restored slavery, if by another name. For the sake of historical continuity, slavery is thereby transformed from a social relationship in which one human being owns another as chattel property into a minor variation on the capitalist theme of commodified labor, as though contracting out your labor power — something we all do — were the same thing as being owned by someone else as a piece of personal property. No doubt racism could flourish under both systems. But the significance of racial ideology varies, depending on the particular social and political conditions within which it thrives, and the conditions of the postbellum South were fundamentally different from those of slavery. You can't understand this — which means you can't even understand how racism works — if you diminish the significance of the Civil War and emancipation from the history of the United States.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the former slaveholders, now landlords, made strenuous attempts to return their workers to something as close to slavery as possible, but the freed people resisted, and through that conflict, they forced the landowners to settle for a system of sharecropping. Black farmers now worked in families, on their own plots, rather than under supervision in large

fields. The overseers were gone, as were the slave auction houses. Sharecropping was legally defined as a form of wage labor based on contracts voluntarily entered every year between black farmers and white landowners. As the decades passed, black farmers gradually accumulated land. As slaves, their marriages had no legal standing, but freed people scrambled to have their marriages certified, and for the first time, their lives were shaped by the laws and customs of domestic patriarchy. It had been a crime to teach slaves to read, but after the Civil War, black parents struggled to have their children educated, even in grossly inferior segregated schools. The average life expectancy of Southern blacks doubled between 1860 and 1900.[40]

But this radically new system of social property relations emerged under conditions of severely constrained economic opportunity and racial terror. One measure of the desperation of ex-slaves' condition was the extraordinary turnover rates of tenants and sharecroppers on postwar Southern plantations. Year after year, they moved from one landlord to another in search of better terms or better land. But they lived by credit, and to get credit, they had to grow cash crops. As a result, even as the cotton market stagnated, cotton remained the crop that secured credit and ensured sharecroppers the greatest return. The Southern labor market offered no options. The cotton mills were segregated, but even if they hadn't been, it would not have made much difference. Isolated from the national and even international labor market, the South remained a low-wage region in a high-wage nation. Sharecroppers were thereby trapped in a system that offered no viable alternatives. And as Leon Litwack taught generations of undergraduates, it was not the failure but the success of black

40 On the transformation of the slaveholders from "labor lords" to "landlords," see Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

workers — the slow accumulation of land, of literacy, and of rising life expectancy — that provoked so much of the racial terrorism that reached its horrific apex in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It was a deeply, profoundly repressive system, but it wasn't slavery. Sharecroppers were legally free. Adult men shopped their services from landlord to landlord, contracting their family's labor power, compelled to work not by the direct domination of a master but by the force of economic necessity imposed by the indirect mechanisms of a labor market. One way to appreciate how different this was is by thinking of politics as a mirror of the South's dramatically transformed social realities.

Antislavery politics was focused primarily on delegitimating property rights in human beings, on exposing the horrors of the domestic slave trade, the slaveholders' virtually unrestricted access to the slave's sexuality, the extreme vulnerability of slave families, and the enforced illiteracy of the slaves. Emancipation made such politics irrelevant. Indeed, even as the Civil War was raging, the revolutionary overthrow of slavery led almost immediately to a new kind of politics. As Union forces replaced the incentive of the whip with the incentive of the market, the freed people began demanding higher wages, better working conditions, and more equitable contracts. Slave rebels struggled for emancipation, but emancipated people struggled for civil and political rights — and for land. They understood that formal legal equality, though necessary, was not sufficient. Slaveholders had no need to disfranchise black voters, whether by terror or by law, because there were no black voters in the slave states. Slaveholders used direct legal domination to control the lives of enslaved people; postwar landlords used the credit system. The politics of the postwar South were different from the politics of slavery because a radically different social and political system called for a radically different kind of

politics. Anti-racism would be a feature of struggles for justice in both the antebellum and postbellum world, but it would never be enough.

Students will learn none of this from a 1619 Project that has botched the history of the slave economy, misconstrued the origins of Northern economic development, erased the history of antislavery, and rendered emancipation irrelevant. And, having failed in all these ways, the 1619 Project leaves its readers ignorant of one of the great problems in the history of the United States, indeed of the modern world. The problem can be stated succinctly: capitalism gave rise to both slavery and antislavery. Put differently, slavery became a problem *within* the history of capitalism.

CONCLUSION: CAPITALISM, SLAVERY, AND ANTISLAVERY

For its first 150 years, the Atlantic slave trade was dominated by the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, neither of which had experienced a transition to capitalism, and neither of which was propelled into a capitalist transition by the profits of slavery or slave trading. Up to that point, Atlantic slavery was no more "capitalist" and had no more to do with capitalism than the ancient slave systems of Egypt, Greece, or Rome. It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that Britain launched the first truly capitalist empire, with momentous consequences for the history of slavery in the Americas. For another century and a half, this "second slavery" flourished. Slave plantations began producing commodities — tobacco, sugar, cocoa, coffee, and rice — on an unprecedented scale for mostly British consumers. Dutch, French, and Iberian empires reoriented their slave systems to accommodate the needs of the new capitalist market.

At the center of it all was the British empire, and not surprisingly, the relationship between slavery and the early industrial

revolution in England in the eighteenth century became a subject of intense scholarly interest. Few historians any longer doubt that slavery played some role in England's industrial revolution, though they continue to disagree about how to measure that role and how large it was. But the lines of force worked in two directions. Slavery undoubtedly had some part in stimulating British economic development, but British economic development played a central role in stimulating the growth of slave plantations in the New World. This is the larger context that has led historians to shift some of their focus away from 1619.

Historians now speak of a "transition" to slavery in colonial Virginia that occurred sometime in the last half of the seventeenth century. Before then, most of the labor on Chesapeake tobacco plantations was performed by white indentured servants. What stimulated the shift to slave labor? Edmund Morgan hypothesized that it was Bacon's Rebellion in the mid-1670s, which alerted the planter class to the dangers of a growing number of landless settlers. But it probably had more to do with capitalist development. Allan Kulikoff and others pointed to the revival of the British economy that stemmed the flow of indentured servants. In the immediate aftermath of the English Civil War, moreover, the restored monarchy, cut off from its traditional sources of income, began actively promoting slavery and the slave trade in the 1660s. Deprived of their established source of workers at the very moment consumer demand for tobacco was exploding, Chesapeake planters turned to the well-established Atlantic slave trade. It was then that the tobacco plantations became primarily slave plantations. Soon thereafter, South Carolina established a slave system of its own, though it was focused chiefly on rice rather than on tobacco. In the eighteenth century, Britain became the world's leading importer of enslaved Africans into the Americas, and though its North American colonies played a relatively small

role in that commerce, by the third quarter of the century, nearly half a million Africans had arrived in the colonies that would later become the United States.

But the same capitalist revolution that was stimulating the spectacular growth of American slavery was prompting the emergence of powerful arguments against slavery. Appearing first among the dissenting sects during the English Civil War, antislavery sentiment became particularly pronounced among Quakers. But antislavery had a pronounced secular component. Though often framed in religious terms, the opponents of slavery adopted the premises of "possessive individualism," the conviction that the right of property originated in the right of self-ownership. The ownership of one human being by another was increasingly denounced as "man-stealing." Thus did the principal ideological justification for capitalism become, at the same time, the principal rationale for opposing slavery: it was a violation of the natural right of freedom, above all the right to the fruits of one's own labor. The ideology flourished in the Northern colonies, where farm families achieved a "competency" based on self-sufficient communities supplemented by access to regional and Atlantic markets.

When the American Revolution established that principle as the ideological basis for American nationhood, a century of antislavery sentiment suddenly generated the world's first major moves toward abolition in those same Northern colonies. By the time the delegates arrived at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, the split between the Northern and Southern states was already clear.

But as increasingly commercialized agriculture spread across the Northern frontier, the paradox of capitalism and slavery became more obvious, and more unsustainable, than ever. The unprecedented wealth of the North once again stimulated the demand for the products of slave labor, above all cotton. At the same time,

however, the basis of Northern wealth — "free soil" extracted from dispossessed native peoples — became the foundation for rising Northern hostility to slavery. The defining feature of this "third slavery" was the simultaneous growth of slavery and freedom and the ultimately irreconcilable contradiction between proslavery politics in the South and antislavery politics in the North. Of the manifold failings of the 1619 Project, this may be the greatest: it all but erases the fact that, for the first seventy years of its existence, the United States was roiled by intense, escalating conflict over slavery, a conflict that was only resolved by a brutal civil war.

The problem of slavery is not that it was a forerunner of modern capitalism. It wasn't. The problem is not that slavery "fueled" the economic growth of the North. It didn't. The problem, all along, was capitalism itself. And once the problem of slavery was resolved by the Civil War and emancipation, there remained, and still remains, the problem of capitalism.

ABSTRACT

Leftists have long debated whether race-based strategies are a necessary tool in the egalitarian tool kit. In advanced capitalist societies where majorities of the population and working class are white, race-based strategies to reduce racial inequality are a dead end. We argue that class-based strategies are the only viable egalitarian path to racial liberation.

The Class Path to Racial Liberation

Adaner Usmani and
David Zachariah

In the United States today, one of the fiercest debates on the Left concerns the relationship between race and class. On one side, it seems, are those who deny the independent relevance of racial inequality to the case against capitalism. People on this side are interpreted to be arguing that racial oppression is, in fact, just class oppression in disguise. On the other side are those who argue that class inequality cannot explain the specific injustices of racial oppression, and that racial inequality is thus a distinct problem that requires a distinct political strategy.

For an egalitarian today, deciding which side to take in these "race vs. class" wars is one of the hardest and most fraught tasks

they will face. It must often seem to them that they are not being asked simply to answer an important strategic question, but also to declare whom and what they care about, and thus whom and what they disregard.

Our aim in this essay is to address egalitarians in this predicament. We think it is no surprise that so many are confused, since we think that the race vs. class debate has often been a confused one thus far. This is for at least two reasons.

First, participants frequently fail to clarify some basic descriptive and explanatory tasks. The race-class debate encompasses at least three issues that are usually left unstated. People on the Left disagree, but mostly implicitly, about which life outcomes egalitarians should care most about; what shape the race-specific distributions of these outcomes take in the general population; and what causal pathways generate these distributions.

The first objective of this essay is to defend specific ways of thinking about these three questions. We argue that the race-class debate should center on one principal domain: the distribution of material resources. This is because these resources determine the ability of people to pursue whatever ends they value and to resist the designs of others over them.

Such a foundation sets the race-class debate on surer empirical footing. If resources are what matter, we must ask: How are material resources distributed in modern, race-divided societies? And what generates these distributions? Some leftists speak as if the distributions of these outcomes are substantially nonoverlapping (e.g., that all or most black people are worse off than all or most whites), and that race explains these outcomes in an unmediated way. But, as we illustrate in the first part of this essay, income data from the contemporary United States show a substantial overlap between race-specific distributions. We propose a simple framework to help egalitarians be more precise about the ways in which race and class intersect to affect outcomes.

Second, the debate is also a debate about strategy. What kinds of coalitions should egalitarians build? And what kinds of remedies should these coalitions demand? Some people defend race-based coalitions and race-targeted remedies like reparations. In the second part of this essay, we address those egalitarians who dedicate themselves to the specific goal of reducing racial inequality (e.g., the gap in earnings between the median black and the median white person). We argue that even these egalitarians will find that race-based politics has fatal limits. In societies in which racially oppressed groups are a minority of the population, race-based coalitions are fatally constrained by demography. Thus, even if all one cares about is racial inequality, race-based politics are a dead end. *Class-based politics are the only viable route to racial liberation*.

To defend this conclusion, we argue that conventional race-based and class-based goals can be conceptualized as different ways of redressing inequality in modern societies. We show that these two agendas will have radically different bases of support. Partisans of "race-based" politics appeal to electoral coalitions built on the support of the black population. They will find it impossible to build viable electoral or working-class coalitions because, in the United States, they have nothing to offer to a majority of the potential members of either group. "Class-based" politics, by contrast, can be anchored in either the disruptive power of a multiracial working class or in electoral coalitions of the poor.[1]

1 We are using the adjective "class-based" in two senses in this essay. First, it refers to either policies or coalitions that target or are based on a person's "class location." Second, it refers to policies or coalitions that target or are based on a person's income, such as income-based redistribution or the income-based electoral coalition that would support that redistribution. Even though it is not precise to use the same term for both, we choose to do so because the term has greater resonance. The existing debates are framed around "race" and "class" and rarely, if ever, distinguish between class location and income. Sometimes, where greater precision is necessary, we will use the term "income-based" to distinguish the second from the first.

Class-based politics are thus a much more promising vehicle for egalitarian change in the advanced capitalist world.

In the final part of the essay, we argue that, even in countries where the parameters of racial demography furnish more hospitable foundations for race-based politics, the case for class-based over race-based strategies is still overwhelming. When the income distributions of racial groups are substantially overlapping (as in the United States), poor members of racially oppressed groups will gain more from class-based interventions (like income-based redistribution) than from race-based ones, while richer members of the racially oppressed will gain more from race-based interventions than class-based ones. This gives race-based politics a decidedly inegalitarian veneer. To choose race-based politics or coalitions over class-based ones is to elevate the interests of the rich over the interests of the poor.

THE MATERIALIST WAGER

A standard way to summarize racial inequality is to refer to the average or median gap in some outcome between racially oppressed groups and their racial oppressors. In the United States, we know that this gap exists in any number of dimensions of social life. White Americans are richer in both income and wealth. They have greater political power and representation. They are less likely to be stopped and killed by the police, and less likely to be imprisoned. They are more likely to be represented in popular culture. And they are less likely to be stigmatized in any interpersonal, everyday encounter with an average member of their society (ignored by a taxi driver, shunned by a realtor, stereotyped by a teacher, cursed at by a racist or a nativist, and so on).

For all egalitarians, these inequalities are unjustifiable. There is no justification for a society that distributes life chances by the morally arbitrary features that constitute people into racial groups.

Yet precisely because all these inequalities are unjustified, and because no domain has any obvious normative priority over any other, when seeking to confront them *all*, racial egalitarians find themselves in a bind. Resources are finite. Not everything can be tackled at once. And so the question arises: Is any one of these domains more urgent than all the others?

Our first claim is that the answer to this question is provided by what we call the "Materialist Wager." This wager is the claim that a person's economic resources have an asymmetric effect on that person's political, cultural, and social influence. That is, a person's power in these noneconomic domains is fundamentally constrained by the economic resources they possess. To be clear, we are not denying that influence can run in both directions. The acquisition of political power, for instance, might enable a person or a group to acquire economic resources. But we are asserting that the influence of material resources on other domains is larger and more significant than any of these reciprocal influences.

What this implies is that economic inequalities between racial groups constrain the range of all other normatively relevant racial inequalities. And if this is right, the most effective way for egalitarians to attack racial inequality in general is to direct their efforts toward ending racial inequality in income and wealth.

Summarizing, we argue:

1. Modern societies are characterized by economic, political, cultural, and social inequalities between races.
2. Each of these racial inequalities is wrong, but none is obviously more wrong than any other.
3. Egalitarians have finite resources and thus cannot tackle all inequalities at once.
4. The Materialist Wager is that a person's (and thus a group's)

economic resources have an asymmetric effect on that person's (and thus that group's) political, cultural, and social influence.

5. It follows that campaigns to end racial inequality in economic life will have a greater effect on political, cultural, and social inequality among the races than the reverse.

6. Therefore, it is rational for egalitarians to concentrate on ending racial inequalities in economic life.

In other words, if the Materialist Wager is true, the most effective thing to do will be to fight the racial divide in economic life.

The Materialist Wager implies that the cultural, social, and political subjugation of the racially oppressed is in large part a consequence of the fact that they lack conventional economic resources. It implies that if the oppressed were to gain these resources, they would also gain much of the political leverage, cultural clout, and social status necessary to end racial inequality in the political, cultural, and social domains, respectively. As Kwame Turé (born Stokely Carmichael) once said, "If a white man wants to lynch me, that's his problem. If he's got the power to lynch me, that's my problem. Racism is not a question of attitude; it's a question of power. Racism gets its power from capitalism."

This argument is sometimes criticized for being deterministic and thus a little dour (no resources, no power), but in another sense, it is more optimistic than any alternatives. After all, as Vivek Chibber has argued, any account of political, cultural, and social oppression has to answer an obvious question: Why do the oppressed submit to their oppression?[2] If, for instance, the cultural subjugation of the racially oppressed is a result of an autonomous system of ideas that denigrate the oppressed, why do the oppressed ever internalize these ideas? One might reply

2 Vivek Chibber, "Understanding Oppression," unpublished lecture, 2020.

that the oppressed rarely do. But if this is true, these ideas could hardly explain their oppression.

The Materialist Wager suggests that the oppressed submit because they do not have the resources to overthrow their oppressors, whose control of income and wealth gives them the power to fashion a dominant, legitimating ideology. But "culturalist" accounts would have to emphasize something about the quality or nature of this ideology itself. It is not difficult to see why down this road lies pessimism: the fate of the oppressed hangs on the ideas and thus the actions of the oppressor, rather than on the capacities and actions of the oppressed.

The rest of this article begins where this argument concludes. We ask, if it is correct that egalitarians should focus their energies on closing racial inequalities in economic life, what follows? What shape do these inequalities take? What generates them? And what kinds of policies and coalitions might reduce or eliminate them?

DESCRIBING AND EXPLAINING RACIAL INEQUALITY

Consider income inequality by race in the United States.[3] We use data from the American Community Survey (2015–2019).[4] We restrict our sample to working-age black and white men, to mitigate the difficulties introduced by family formation, gender, age, and other racial groups. These facts are relevant to politics, but we omit them on the view that egalitarians must think clearly

3 We do not present data on wealth inequality in this essay. The American Community Survey does not report wealth for individuals. There are other surveys that do, so our analysis could easily be extended to include it. This would change some of the specifics of our discussion, but it would not change the overall argument of the essay.

4 We use the publicly available files curated by IPUMS. Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler, and Matthew Sobek, IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 (Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021). Code to replicate all calculations and figures is available at https://github.com/ausmani23/classpath.

about this simplified reality before we can think clearly about more complex ones.[5] The median working-age black man earns about $30,000 per year, while the median working-age white man earns about $50,000. The racial gap at the median is thus $20,000 (or 40 percent of the median white man's income).[6]

Yet there are two important points that the simple invocation of this racial gap does not establish. One is descriptive, and one is explanatory. These points are important to establish because, as we will show, the nature and causes of racial inequality govern the kinds of egalitarian policies and coalitions that egalitarians can build.

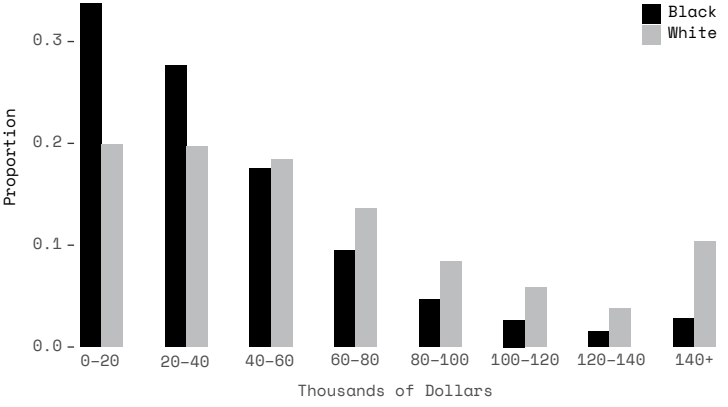
Describing the Gap

Not all black and not all white men make the average income, and so they are "distributed" differently across the income spectrum. The first, descriptive point is that, on its own, the size of the racial gap tells us nothing about the extent to which these race-specific income distributions overlap. Activists sometimes take the median gap of 40 percent to imply that most (or all) black men are poorer than most (or all) white men. But this is far from being the case in the United States today. Consider Figure 1. The horizontal axis of the graph shows a series of income brackets. The height of each box displays the proportion of a given racial population that earns incomes in that bracket. One can immediately see

5 We also bottom-code income at $1,000, to avoid the difficulties introduced by people who report zero or negative incomes.

6 One might worry that our choice to use black Americans rather than all nonwhites together is biased in favor of our argument. As the reader will see, our argument emphasizes the fatal difficulties introduced by the fact that black Americans are a minority of the population and the working class in the United States. But one might note that black Americans are a smaller minority than is the total nonwhite population. Yet it is easily shown that, even if we treat all nonwhites as a single racial group, our argument is unchanged. Like blacks, nonwhites in America are a minority of both the general population and the working class, so the choice makes little difference.

Figure 1. **Distribution of Incomes by Race***

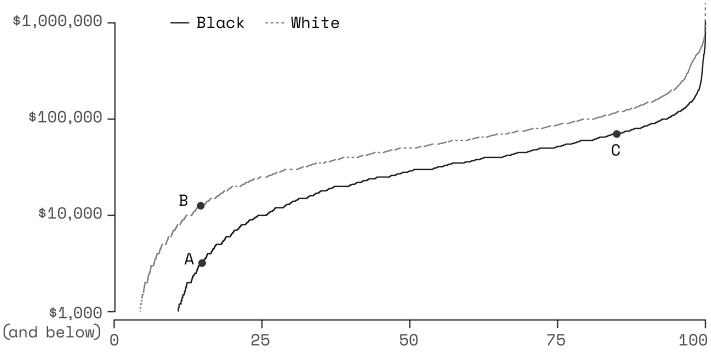


racial inequality — blacks are overrepresented among the poor and underrepresented among the rich. But it is also important to observe that significant fractions of the white population are substantially poorer than significant fractions of the black population.

Consider a different way of visualizing the income gaps in the same data. Figure 2 plots the income distribution of the two races separately. The horizontal axis orders the population from poorest to richest percentiles, and the level of the curve gives the corresponding income level. In other words, at the 50th percentile is someone who sits in the middle of the income distribution of his racial group, so that 50 percent of his co-racialists earn lower incomes than he does. This is also known as the median income. Similarly, a person at the 10th percentile is someone who sits above the bottom 10 percent of his racial group and is thus close to the bottom of his race-specific income distribution, while someone at the 90th percentile sits above the bottom 90 percent of his co-racialists and is thus close to the top.

* The data for all figures has been sourced from the American Community Survey, 2015–19.

Figure 2. **Quantile Plot of Incomes by Race**



Both the horizontal and vertical gaps between the curves illustrate racial inequality, in slightly different ways. The horizontal gap illustrates what is sometimes called "the earnings rank gap": the difference between the rank of a black man among his co-racialists and the rank he would hold if he were white. One can pick a given income level — say, $10,000 — and observe that this is the income of the 25th percentile black man but the 13th percentile white man. The earnings rank gap is thus 12 percentiles. The vertical gap between both curves illustrates the "earnings gap": the difference in earnings at a given percentile. The size of this gap at the median is a very conventional way to summarize racial inequality. But, as the graph suggests, this can sometimes be misleading, since these gaps vary in size from rich to poor. For instance, the racial gap between the 15th percentile black man (who makes $3,200) to the 15th percentile white man (who makes $12,500) is $9,300, which is larger (relative to the income of the black man) than the gap at the median mentioned earlier.[7]

7 For a lengthier discussion of the "earnings rank gap" and the "earnings gap" and a discussion of how they have evolved over time, see Patrick Bayer and Kerwin Kofi Charles, "Divergent Paths: A New Perspective on Earnings Differences Between Black and White Men Since 1940," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133, no. 3 (August 2018).

The main advantage of Figure 2 is that it allows us to visualize a corollary fact that is central to the argument of this essay: namely, the remarkably high levels of *within*-race inequality relative to *between*-race inequality. Visually, within-race, or intraracial, inequality is illustrated by the dispersion of each line in the vertical dimension. If all blacks or all whites made the same income, the lines on the graph would be horizontal. But this is far from being the case. In fact, black and white incomes are extremely dispersed. And it is because this dispersion is so significant, relative to the size of the black-white earnings gap (i.e., the gap between the two lines), that the distributions of income are substantially overlapping.[8]

Observe, for example, the size of the gaps between a poor black man, a poor white man, and a rich black man. We have indicated the positions of each with points labeled A, B, and C, respectively. The vertical distance between these points corresponds to the magnitude of the income gaps between these three types of individuals. As we noted earlier, the racial gap between poor men (the vertical distance between A and B) is about $9,300. As Figure 2 also shows, the class gap between black men (the vertical distance between A and C) is about $66,800. Thus, *the gap between a poor black man and a rich black man is about seven times greater than the gap between a poor black man and a poor white man* ($66,800 / $9,300 ≈ 7.2).

A different way to see the relative importance of within-race inequality is to estimate the overall and within-race Gini index. The Gini index is a common way to summarize the inequality of income. It ranges from 0 percent (meaning perfect equality) and 100 percent (meaning all income is earned by a single person). The Gini index in the overall population in our sample of working-age men is about 52 percent, which is very high. Yet remarkably, when

8 If there were no overlap, the highest point on the black line would be lower than the lowest point on the dotted line.

restricting the sample only to working-age black men, the index is almost as large (about 50 percent).[9] If black men were a country unto themselves, that country would be about as unequal as Colombia. As we will argue in what follows, the size of these gaps between the black poor and the black rich imply an unavoidable tension between race-based and class-based political strategies in today's United States.

Note that what we have *not* argued is that Figure 2 should suggest to egalitarians that they should pursue a different aim. Our argument is not that egalitarians are wrong to care more about the racial gap between poor black men and poor white men than about the class gap between poor black men and rich black men. Until the penultimate section of this essay, we will have nothing to say about which of these two aims egalitarians ought to prioritize. Instead, for most of this essay, we will focus on what it would take to reduce the racial gap. What we are suggesting here is that the relative size of these gaps will govern the politics of building a coalition to tackle this racial gap.

Explaining the Gap

Advocates of race-based politics often write as if the facts of racial gaps entail specific explanations. For example, people often cite the fact that black men are much more likely to be imprisoned than white men to prove the magnitude of racial discrimination inside the criminal justice system. Yet these gaps require explanations; they are not explanations themselves. They are the start rather than the conclusion of a research program.

Any racial gap, such as the disparity in imprisonment rates or the gap in earnings, can be the result of any number of causal

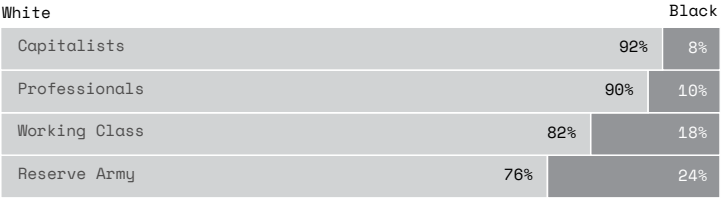
9 Social scientists typically measure the Gini index, which is on a scale from 0 to 1. For clarity, we use 0 percent and 100 percent to refer to the same scale.

mechanisms linking a person's racial identity to social outcomes. Different accounts of a given racial gap invoke different *mediating* mechanisms from race to outcome.

Since much of the debate on the American left centers on the relative importance of race and class, consider the mediating role of class in generating racial inequality in earnings. Using the same American Community Survey sample of working-age men we described earlier, it is possible to use employment and occupational information to approximate individuals' class location. We define the working class as people who work for wages and who are in the bottom 75 percent of the occupational distribution (i.e., we rank the hundreds of occupations in the survey by the percentage of people in that specific occupation with a college degree). We also define three other class locations: the reserve army (anyone who is unemployed or out of the labor force), professionals (anyone who works for wages and who is in the top 25 percent of the occupational distribution, or anyone who is self-employed but not incorporated), and capitalists (anyone who is self-employed and incorporated, or anyone who depends on a significant amount of investment income for a majority of their income).[10] Unsurprisingly, members of the reserve army generally

10 We set this "significant" amount at $10,000 a year. This is, of course, arbitrary, but lower amounts include large numbers of people who make very little money but report negligible investment income of a few hundred or a few thousand dollars. We also note here that the American Community Survey data is not an ideal source for identifying capitalists or measuring their income. It is a survey in which people self-report their income, so it almost certainly underestimates top incomes and is unlikely to include the very, very rich (who are very small in number and thus missing from most national surveys). It yields only a snapshot of people's finances, which means we cannot distinguish rich people who have had a bad year from poor people who are making very little money year over year. And finally, the definition we use is likely too expansive: many of the incorporated self-employed are just small businessmen. The result is that we, unavoidably, have fewer rich capitalists and more poor capitalists in our sample than is surely true in reality.

Figure 3. **Racial Composition of Four Classes**



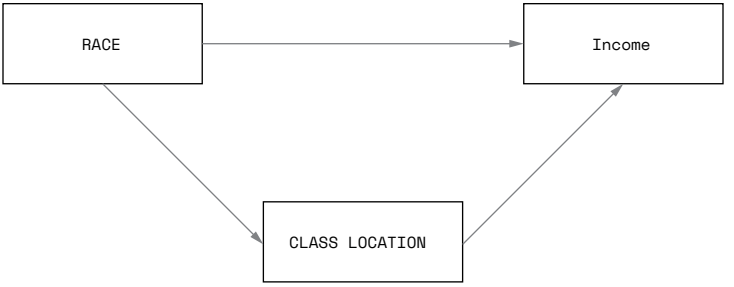
make less than workers, who make less than professionals, who make less than capitalists.[11]

Figure 3 shows the relative proportions of these four classes among blacks and whites. One can immediately see that, in part, racial inequality in earnings is the result of racial inequality in class position. One of the reasons whites will earn more than blacks is because whites are overrepresented in the higher-paid, upper reaches of the American class ladder. This is what it means to argue that class mediates the relationship between race and earnings. Some proportion of racial inequality is, in this sense, "explained" by class.

Figure 4 illustrates the relevant causal mechanisms in the form of what is called a path diagram. There are three arrows. The arrow from race to class illustrates that race affects how people are sorted into class locations. The arrow from class to earnings illustrates that earnings are in part a function of individuals' class locations.

11 Note that while the median incomes of the four class locations are ordered as we suggest, their income distributions overlap considerably (i.e., there are many people in the working class who make more than some people in the capitalist class). Returns on capital and property are especially dispersed, such that a few capitalists can earn vastly greater incomes than the rest. See, for instance, A. Christian Silva and Victor M. Yakovenko, "Temporal Evolution of the 'Thermal' and 'Superthermal' Income Classes in the USA During 1983–2001," *Europhysics Letters* 69, no. 2 (January 2005); and Allin F. Cottrell et al., *Classical Econophysics* (Routledge, 2009).

Figure 4. **Causal Pathways From Race to Income**



And the arrow from race to earnings shows all other mechanisms that link race to earnings (which are otherwise omitted from this graph).[12] The first two arrows together comprise the *class-mediated* path, described above. The latter arrow is what might be called the *unmediated* path.

A common mistake is to think that this unmediated path measures the extent to which racial inequality is the result of racial discrimination. That is, sometimes people propose to estimate discrimination by adjusting for class position (by, say, calculating the gap between the earnings of black and white workers). But any such gap is both an overestimate and an underestimate of the true magnitude of racial discrimination. It is an overestimate because it will in part be the result of many things that are not racial discrimination. For example, black and white workers are located in different parts of the country and therefore have access to labor markets that pay different wages. It is an underestimate because it excludes many things that are racial discrimination.

12 In this causal model, all other determinants of earnings (independent of race and class) are implicit in the variation of earned incomes within a given racial group in a specific class location. Note that the unmediated effects of race on earnings may differ for people located in different class locations. For instance, the relative racial gap is greater within the reserve army than in the working class.

After all, some racial discrimination happens prior to the labor market. Black students may be discriminated against in schools, leaving them with weaker credentials than they would have had had they been white, in turn consigning them to lower positions in the labor market than they would have otherwise occupied. The point is simply that it is wrong to think the unmediated path is a good estimate of racial discrimination.

One might worry that this raises some political issues for egalitarians. If sophisticated modeling and careful analysis are required to estimate the precise effect of racial discrimination, does this mean that egalitarian strategy awaits the results of an extensive research program? After all, both sides in the race vs. class wars tend to think that the relative magnitude of discrimination has great strategic import. Those on the "race" side of the divide tend to argue that discrimination in the United States is pervasive and call for race-based policies and coalitions on this basis. Those on the "class" side tend to argue that discrimination is no longer very extensive and therefore, on that basis, tend to advocate race-blind policies and coalitions.

Yet one of the important implications of our argument in this essay is that, in the United States, the right strategy to reduce racial inequality does not depend on how much racial discrimination matters. Both sides are wrong to believe that the extensiveness of race-based discrimination determines the desirability of race-based policies and coalitions. The question of how important discrimination is to racial inequality may be of academic interest. But it has no important strategic implications. We turn now to defend this argument.

STRATEGY AND DEMOGRAPHY

To summarize what we have argued so far, egalitarians have every reason to attack racial inequality. And if the Materialist Wager is

correct, they should devote special energies to attacking racial *economic* inequality. We propose that the facts and apparatus introduced above can help us understand what this task requires. In doing so, we are encouraging social scientists to think more strategically, and we are encouraging socialists to think more scientifically.

The Fatal Limits of Demography

To significantly transform the income distribution in any way, one must identify a coalition with the capacity to put pressure on elites, as well as policies that have two properties: they could transform the income distribution if implemented, and they can command the support of a sufficiently powerful coalition.

Historically, there are two kinds of mass coalitions that have wielded this kind of power over government and economic elites. There are electoral coalitions, which exert power over government by virtue of the clout that democratic institutions give to a majority of the population. And there are coalitions of the working class, which exert power (either over employers or over government) by virtue of their vital location in the process of production.

To assemble either coalition, organizers must appeal to the material interests of potential members. More than a century of campaigns by socialists and activists has taught us that, in order to assemble durable coalitions of large numbers of people, organizers have to speak to people's self-interest. Historically, it has not been sufficient to appeal to altruism or compassion to ask many ordinary people to bear the significant costs of collective action. If a given group of people is to make common cause, that common cause must address the interests of the individuals that comprise it.

Thus, to build either coalition, one must identify a policy agenda that is in the interests of either a majority of the population (an

electoral coalition) or a majority of the working class (a class coalition). The former task requires identifying an egalitarian intervention that the government could make and that can attract more than 50 percent of the support of the voting population. The latter task requires identifying a policy the working class will rationally support. Some of these policies will target the interests of workers as a class. For example, the goal of shifting the distribution of income from capitalists to workers (whether predistributive, like building strong unions, or redistributive, like taxing capital incomes) ought to command working-class support. But because the working class is disproportionately poor, the list of feasible egalitarian policies extends beyond policies based specifically on people's class locations. Income-based policies that redistribute from rich to poor can also gain working-class support. To reduce the *racial* gap, then, egalitarians must identify policies that can build either or both of these two kinds of coalitions.

Consider the most obvious way to do this, which we will call the "race-based" strategy. An egalitarian might note that all members of oppressed racial groups have an economic interest in interventions to reduce racial inequality. Observing this, they might propose organizing around race-based policies to close the racial gap. There are any number of policies that aim at this effect, including things like affirmative action, targeted hiring, and anti-discrimination policies. Yet perhaps the most vivid example of an intervention of this type is race-based reparations.[13] A policy like this has been the subject of frequent debate on the American left. It is thus a

13 One need not justify reparations by reference to the racial gap. There are other (less egalitarian) justifications, like libertarian ones. But most proponents of reparations today seem to think of themselves as racial egalitarians. For instance, in *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, William A. Darity Jr and A. Kirsten Mullen calculate the size of the reparations bill by the amount that would be sufficient to eliminate the mean racial gap in per capita wealth. We do something similar here, but for income rather than wealth and for the median gap rather than the mean.

useful way to illustrate whom this kind of race-based policy would (and would not) attract.

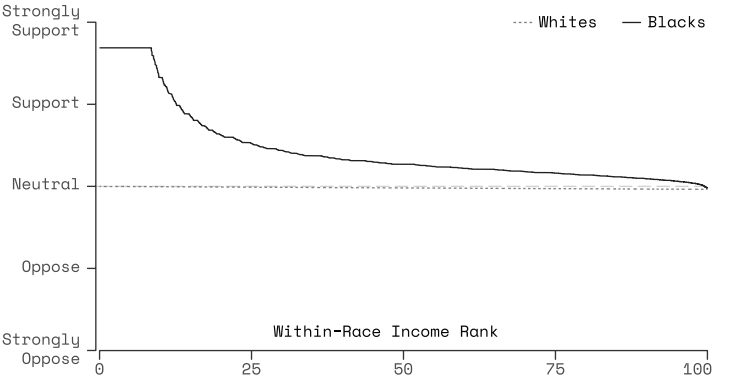
To see this, consider a simple simulation exercise based on the same sample of working-age men from the American Community Survey. We implement race-based reparations by taxing all men (black and white) in our sample using a progressive formula and redistributing the proceeds equally to all black Americans. We tax all men at a rate that is a linearly increasing function of their income percentile, with the percentages set to rates that are sufficient to raise enough revenue to close the median gap between blacks and whites. In this exercise, each black person receives around $16,000 to $19,000 dollars (since richer blacks are taxed to fund reparations, their net receipts are smaller).[14]

Figure 5 illustrates the results of this exercise. The horizontal axis is ordered by how poor or rich someone is, relative to other members of their race.[15] The vertical axis is ordered by how strongly they can be expected to support reparations (based on much they benefit from them, calculated as the relative change in their income). Immediately, one sees that race-based reparations can command the support of blacks. This is unsurprising, since all blacks benefit. Further, due in large part to the fact that the

14 Note that an easier way to implement race-based reparations would be to tax only white people in a flat rather than a progressive way. But this kind of reparations would be a strange combination of class inegalitarianism and racial egalitarianism. It also would be less like current reparations proposals that circulate, all of which seem to imagine some kind of progressive funding structure. Darity and Mullen propose to fund reparations by directing the Federal Reserve to issue new funds; but for the policy to not be merely inflationary, this would imply a redistribution of relative incomes.

15 In this and the following graphs, the reason that the lower percentiles of the income distribution benefit equivalently (illustrated by the horizontal line) is that we bottom-code incomes at $1,000. Everyone at the percentiles spanned by the horizontal line thus makes the same income and therefore benefits or is harmed equivalently. This horizontal line is longer for blacks than for whites because a larger share of blacks report income at or below $1,000.

Figure 5. **Beneficiaries of Race-Based Reparations**



transfer implies a greater *relative* change in the incomes of a poor black person than a rich black person (i.e., a check of $19,000 means a lot more to someone making a little bit of money than it does to someone taking home six figures), poor blacks benefit most of all.

Yet Figure 5 also illustrates why race-based strategies meet with fatal limits. Reparations do nothing for whites. This has a simple but profound implication. Because blacks are a minority of the population, it means that no electoral coalition is possible. Reparations cannot command the support of a majority of the population.

Nor is a working-class coalition feasible. Even the most progressive version of reparations (which exempts the poorest whites from paying the reparations tax) can only command the apathy of the poorest whites, not their support. This dooms the working-class coalition as well. As Figure 3 showed, despite the overrepresentation of blacks in the lower reaches of the class ladder, whites are about 82 percent of the white and black

working class.[16] A policy that fails to move them fails to move the working class.

Thus, a policy like race-based reparations is a nonstarter. It cannot build either an electoral coalition or a coalition of the working class. Therefore, *in the advanced capitalist world, the race-based strategy is fatally limited by demography.*

Three Objections to Our Argument

One might object to the idea that it is necessary to corral a majority of the working class to transform the distribution of income under capitalism. After all, one might argue, minorities of the working class can yield significant power if located in strategic sectors of the economy.

But there is little reason to think that there is a stratum of strategically located black workers in the United States. Strategic jobs are much coveted and thus well remunerated. Given racial inequality in education and training, the black share of strategic sectors is in fact likely smaller, and not larger, than the black share of the working class as a whole. To the extent that one can identify workers' structural power with gross industry aggregates, this seems to be the case in the American Community Survey sample we analyze. Black workers are underrepresented in manufacturing and construction, which are conventionally considered high-capacity industries. They are somewhat overrepresented in transport and warehousing, but mostly because they seem to be

16 Whites are 82 percent of the black and white working class, but they comprise a little over 60 percent of the American working class. Thus, as we explained in an earlier footnote, the arguments of this essay would be no different if one proposed to count all nonwhites as an oppressed group. In fact, there might be reasons to think it would strengthen our overall argument. If race-based politics has an advantage, it is because existing family and neighborhood ties run within rather than across racial lines, and thus that it requires less effort to cultivate solidaristic preferences. Yet as soon as the race-based strategy requires aligning the interests of a multiracial set of constituencies, it loses this advantage.

overrepresented in the least strategic subsectors of that broad field (e.g., taxi and limousine service, bus service and urban transit), and anyway, not nearly to the point of being a majority of any of them.

Some readers of this essay will also no doubt dispute the idea that coalition building requires appealing to people's self-interest. After all, many have suggested that socialists appeal to the altruism of whites. In a recent interview, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor argued something along these lines. She identified socialists with the task of "win[ning] white people to an understanding of how their racism has fundamentally distorted the lives of Black people."[17] This implies that socialists should try to explain to whites that they benefit at the expense of black people. Presumably, the purpose of this explanation is to encourage them to support policies to redress harms done to black Americans. Indeed, if it were true, one might imagine that white Americans could be compelled to support something like race-based reparations for black slavery.

There would certainly be something admirable about altruism of this kind. Few things would be more heroic than white workers risking their own interests to stand up for black ones. But it is precisely the fact that these attitudes are heroic rather than ordinary that should give us pause. As we have suggested already, we think it is naive to expect people to bear the costs of collective action out of altruism or compassion. Certain exceptional people might be willing or able to behave in this way. But exceptions do not make a movement.

There is also something strange about the fact that this argument is often made by the same people who speak of the persistent and overwhelming force of white racism on American

17 Michael Powell, "A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury.," *New York Times*, August 14, 2020.

development. They seem to be caught in a kind of trilemma: the intractable racism of white people has generated the racial inequalities that define American history; to fight these racial inequalities, we must unite whites and blacks; yet to unite whites and blacks, we must convince whites to abandon the racism that has been the source of their success. It is not difficult to see why down this path lies moralism and despair. The argument proposes that racism is the foundation of white advancement — and then asks the majority of whites to surrender those advantages on moral grounds alone. Could one imagine anything more difficult than turning white supremacists into white altruists?

Given the facts we presented earlier, socialists in this specific case should be worried that the problem is in fact worse than this. As Figure 2 showed, a large fraction of the white population is in fact poorer than a substantial fraction of the black population. The kind of strategy outlined by Taylor would ask this large fraction of poor whites to identify not just with the interests of those who are worse off than they (i.e., even poorer blacks) but also, in many instances, to sacrifice their interests for blacks who are much better off economically than they are. This strategy might do worse than simply result in apathy. It might in fact lead many whites to resent socialists, thereby creating a perfect opportunity for racists on the Right to unite them around their white identity.

Some readers might also object to the idea that race-first policies intended to reduce the racial gap are zero-sum. Couldn't anti-racism in fact lead to gains for both blacks and whites? In any kind of race-based redistribution, whites would bear costs that are immediate and tangible. But one might expect them to forgo these based on the promise that they will reap material gains in a less racially divided society at some point in the future (perhaps because a less racially divided economy would be more productive).

Yet even if it were true that such gains could be realized, the resulting benefits would at best be distal and diffuse.[18] And the more distal and the more diffuse they are, the more irrational it would be for any whites to forgo their immediate privileges in exchange. More important, we believe that this kind of strategic thinking could only be rational if there already existed a coalition of solidaristic wage bargaining and employment policies that could win whites the gains of higher productivity.[19] Thus, if racial redistribution is to be viable, *it presumes that an interracial class-based coalition has already been built*.

What Is to Be Done?

At first glance, then, it seems that egalitarians find themselves in a bind. They have good reasons to want to attack racial inequality but, as of yet, no viable strategy to do so. What are they to do?

This is where the facts and the conceptual apparatus we introduced earlier can help. As we argued, racial inequality arises not only through the unmediated path from race to income, but also through various mediated paths and through other causes. This

18 In general, we are skeptical of the idea that a less racially divided economy would be significantly more productive. Aggregate productivity growth is the result of individual firms cutting unit costs and modernizing their productive assets. (See Emmanuel Farjoun and Moshé Machover, *Laws of Chaos: A Probabilistic Approach to Political Economy* [New York: Verso, 1983], chapter 7.) There are some ways in which less racially divided societies might generate additional growth (perhaps by bringing up the wage floor, incentivizing firms to invest in labor-saving technologies), but, in general, productivity growth seems to have upper limits decided mainly by technological factors. It rarely exceeds the range of 2–3 percent per year. In any case, we think our argument remains intact. The redistribution of income growth faces similar challenges to those considered above. Whites have no standing interest in moderating this growth to meet the demands of a minority coalition of black people.

19 Within the Swedish trade union movement, for instance, there is a long-standing debate about how centrally negotiated wage gains should be distributed across workplaces and employees. It is recognized that prioritizing wages at the bottom disproportionally affects females at the expense of higher-paid workers that are disproportionately male.

has a pivotal implication: *race-blind interventions can reduce racial inequality*.

Again, take the case of class, which we discussed earlier. Since racial inequality is partly an effect of the fact that blacks are overrepresented in the ranks of the working class, predistributive or redistributive interventions to shift income toward workers will reduce the racial gap. Further, and maybe more straightforwardly, since blacks are overrepresented among the poor in general, income-based policies to redistribute from rich to poor will also reduce racial inequality.[20]

To see the contrast between race-based redistribution like reparations and class-based redistribution, consider a parallel simulation exercise, based again on the same American Community Survey data. We implement income-based redistribution by redistributing from those above the mean to those below the mean an amount sufficient to reduce the Gini index to social democratic levels. As is well-known, the Gini index in the United States is remarkably high. In our sample, the Gini index is about 52 percent.[21] This is about twice the size of the Gini index in social democratic countries like Norway and Sweden. And so we compress the distribution of income around the mean until it looks more like a social democratic country (a Gini index of 26 percent).

Figure 6 illustrates the results of this exercise. As before, the horizontal axis orders people from poor to rich (as compared to other members of their race), and the vertical axis orders people by the size of the relative change in their income under redistribution. The set of beneficiaries stands in stark contrast to the set who benefit from reparations. Both the black and the dotted lines

20 Again, in this essay, we will refer to both class-location-based and income-based policies as "class-based."

21 As readers can verify, estimates of the overall Gini index in the United States range from around 40 to 50 percent.

slope downward, which shows that, unsurprisingly, support for redistribution falls as income rises. The black poor benefit, while the black rich are harmed. And the white poor benefit, while the white rich are harmed. But in both cases, black and white, the share of those who benefit is substantially larger than the share of those who do not. The poorest 80 percent of blacks benefit from redistribution and thus support it, as do the poorest 67 percent of whites.

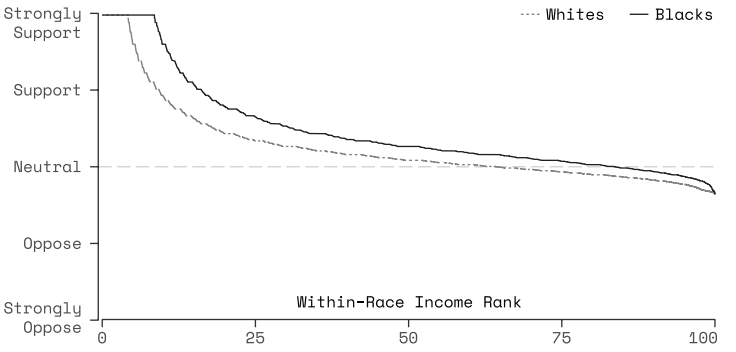
This last fact has a pivotal implication. *Unlike race-based interventions such as reparations, redistribution has a plausible social base*. It can build majority support. In the United States (as in all capitalist societies), the distribution of income is dramatically skewed. The median person makes well below the average income. This is the reason that more than half the population benefits from redistribution and, therefore, an electoral coalition is feasible. Further, a majority of workers also have an interest in this kind of income-based redistribution. Because a majority of the working class makes below-average income, redistribution is also in the interests of a majority of the working class.

These facts thus present egalitarians with a solution to their earlier predicament. To reduce racial inequality, they need not turn to race-based strategies. Class-based strategies, like redistribution, also reduce racial inequality.[22]

Admittedly, redistribution does not do so as efficiently as race-based reparations. Race-based reparations eliminate the median racial gap entirely, while social democratic redistribution only reduces it by half (the black-white gap at the median reduces from $20,000 to $10,000). But there are two reasons

22 The converse is also true. Because blacks are disproportionately poor, race-based redistribution from whites to blacks reduces income inequality. Note that it does so much less efficiently than class-based redistribution. Even progressively funded race-based reparations only reduce the Gini index in our sample from 52 percent to 48 percent.

Figure 6. **Beneficiaries of Class-Based Redistribution**



that this inefficiency should not deter egalitarians. First, and most important, unlike race-based reparations, income-based redistribution is viable. It is more rational to shoot for the moon and have a chance at success than to aim for the stars and be sure to fail. Second, redistribution that is more dramatic than the specific intervention we consider closes the racial gap more substantially. After all, in extremis, total redistribution would eliminate the racial gap entirely (since everyone would earn the average income).[23] Undoubtedly, total redistribution is an egalitarian pipe dream. Even though it would command the support of electoral and working-class majorities, the incentive structure it implies is incompatible with the imperatives of a modern market economy. But something short of it yet more radical than our scenario may be a viable goal.[24] Thus, the upper limit of the effect of redistribution on

23 In this case, the converse is not true. There is an asymmetry here: it is possible to eliminate racial inequality without eliminating income inequality, but it is not possible to eliminate income inequality without eliminating racial inequality.

24 At their height, trade unions and the welfare state in Sweden in fact achieved an income Gini index of about 20 percent (Statistics Sweden, "Gini Coefficient 1975–2019"). The backsliding of social democracy since the 1990s has led to an increase in the Gini index, due to changes in the extensiveness of both predistributive outcomes and redistributive efforts by government. (Organisation for Eco-

the racial gap depends somewhat on how optimistic one is willing to be about what kind of egalitarian transformation is possible.

In summary, a minority coalition of black Americans has no prospects for reducing racial inequality in a majority-white America. It thus cannot help black people. A majority coalition of the working class or the poor, however, can. *Class-based redistribution is the only viable anti-racist tool in the racial egalitarian's tool kit*.

This has an important implication for the *ideology* of anti-racism. Coalitions require individuals to sacrifice their time and resources for others in the expectation that others, too, will do the same. That is, they require solidarity. Organizers must cultivate these kinds of solidaristic preferences, since without them, few members will commit their limited resources to common causes, and thus the coalition will have little prospects of winning any concessions.

It is therefore in precisely the environment of a class coalition that anti-racism has its best chance of success with whites. Whites in this kind of coalition will identify with the coalition's aims since it is organized to advance their interests. Yet they will also soon realize that these aims cannot be achieved if they or their fellow whites think their black allies are intrinsically inferior. If only to better defend their own interests, whites will be compelled to think of the black members of the coalition as their equals, and some will even be compelled to cultivate these convictions in other whites.

Today, anti-racism has become identified with extramural and purely ideological campaigns to convince whites that they benefit at the expense of blacks. As we have said already, it is not difficult to see why these efforts are destined to alienate the white poor. Yet this does not mean we should give up on the goal of turning

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nomic Co-operation and Development, "OECD Income Inequality Data Update: Sweden, January 2015.")

racists into anti-racists. It simply suggests that the aims of anti-racism are best served by an entirely different strategy. It is in the exigencies of class-based coalition building that anti-racism is likely to have its greatest success.

WHERE DEMOGRAPHY IS DIFFERENT

What we have argued so far is subject to an important boundary condition: that blacks are a minority in the overall population and in the working class. Because they are a minority, they cannot change society alone. And because they cannot change society alone and race-based strategies appeal only to them, these strategies are not viable.

Yet the demographic balance of the white and black population is reversed in much of the postcolonial world.[25] In countries with a history of European settlement, whites are still disproportionately rich but also a much smaller proportion of the total population.

Obviously, under such conditions, race-based strategies are viable. Policies to narrow the racial gap by redistributing from whites to blacks would command the support of a majority of the population and a majority of the working class. It is no surprise that in these demographic contexts, therefore, nationalist mobilizations have had great success. Unlike in the United States, these race-based alliances are viable and powerful.

What should egalitarians do in an environment like this one? After all, while race-based strategies are now viable, so are electoral or class-based coalitions. The highly skewed nature of income distributions under capitalism means that class-based redistribution can always attract the support of the electorate or the working class.

25 The demographic context is also different in certain cities and even states in the United States. This means that race-based coalitions are viable at these subnational levels. But because cities and states have no real power to transform the income distribution, our argument is unaffected.

To give a full answer to this question, we must relax the constraint that has guided our argument thus far. Everything we have said up to this point is premised on the idea that the only thing egalitarians care about is the reduction of *racial* economic inequality. If this were really the case, the answer is in fact quite straightforward. While class-based strategies to redistribute income will have some impact on any given racial gap, they will never have a larger effect than race-based strategies that close that gap directly. As we have already noted, for example, social democratic redistribution halves the racial gap, while race-based reparations eliminate it entirely.

Yet notice that if egalitarians were to make their choice on this basis alone, it would commit them to choosing one side in a kind of trade-off. After all, the two strategies do not have the same constituencies. The coalitions that unite around nationalist or race-based goals comprise all blacks, poor and rich. The coalitions that unite around class-based or income-based goals comprise the working class and the poor, black and white.

Why is this a trade-off? Why can't egalitarians simply commit to building both, either simultaneously or sequentially? This is for the simple reason that pursuing one will make the other more difficult. At least in circumstances where a proportion of the working class and poor are white, the nationalist coalition alienates future members of the class coalition. And in circumstances where a proportion of the rich are black, a class strategy will alienate future members of a nationalist coalition.

To address this predicament, note a further point from the simulations discussed earlier. While the black poor benefit from reparations *and* from redistribution, *they benefit more from redistribution than from reparations*. This is a consequence of the fact that the gap between the median black person and the median white person is smaller than the gap between a poor black person and the

Table 1. **Ranking of Preferences by Income and Race**

Poorest Blacks	**Richest Blacks**	**Poorest Whites**	**Richest Whites**
Redistribution	Reparations	Redistribution	Status quo
Reparations	Status quo	Status quo	Reparations
Status quo	Redistribution	Reparations	Redistribution

counterfactual income that poor black person would make under social democratic redistribution. Figure 7 illustrates the difference in everyone's relative preferences.[26] As it illustrates, it is only the richest half of blacks who have more to gain from race-based reparations than from income-based redistribution.

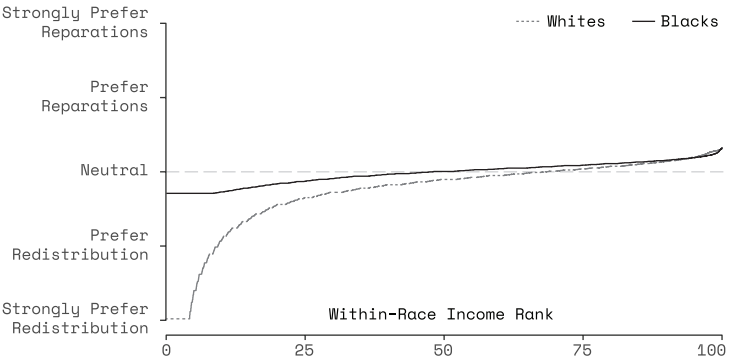
Table 1 summarizes these results in a different way. We note how four types of actors (the poorest blacks, the poorest whites, the richest blacks, and the richest whites) would rank the three scenarios considered in our simulation: the status quo, reparations, and redistribution.

Both whites and blacks exhibit a clear income gradient in their preferences. The poorest blacks benefit more from closing the rich-poor gap, while the richest blacks benefit more from closing the black-white gap. The poorest whites benefit more from closing the rich-poor gap, while the richest whites are hurt less by closing the black-white gap than by anything else.

This has a striking implication for egalitarians and their trade-off. If they were to choose race-based interventions over class-based ones, they would, in effect, be making an inegalitarian choice. After all, the essence of egalitarianism is that we care most about those who suffer the most. The Materialist Wager has given us reason to believe that poor blacks suffer more than

26 By this we mean that the vertical axis of Figure 7 plots the difference between the two differences in logs shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

Figure 7. **Preferences for Reparations Versus Redistribution**



rich blacks, and poor whites more than rich whites.[27] Therefore, *to choose race-based interventions would be to elevate the interests of the rich over the interests of the poor*.

By this reasoning, the conclusion should be clear. Even in places where both strategies are viable, socialists have an overriding reason to prioritize class-based strategies over race-based ones. The premises below summarize the argument.

The Case for the Class-Based Strategy

1. Because the race-based strategy attracts rich blacks, there are limits to how profoundly it can transform the gap between rich and poor.
2. Because total redistribution is not feasible, there are limits to how profoundly class-based strategies can transform the gap between blacks and whites.

27 More controversially, it also gives us reasons to believe that poor whites suffer more than rich blacks, but our conclusion does not depend on this being true.

3. There is thus a trade-off between the race-based strategy and the class-based strategy. They have different bases of support, so pursuing one makes the other less feasible.

4. In a wide range of circumstances, the poorest blacks benefit more from interventions to close the gap between rich and poor than they do from interventions to close the gap between black and white; the richest blacks benefit more from race-based interventions than they do from class-based ones; the richest whites are hurt less by race-based interventions than by class-based ones. [28]

5. Therefore, to choose the race-based strategy over the class-based strategy would be to elevate the interests of richer blacks over poorer blacks, and richer whites over poorer whites; to choose the class-based strategy over the race-based one would be to elevate the interests of poorer blacks over richer blacks, and poorer whites over richer whites.

6. The animating impulse of egalitarianism is that we care more about the interests of those who suffer most.

7. By the Materialist Wager, in general and on average, those who are poor suffer more than those who are rich.

8. Therefore, even in places where they are both viable, egalitarians should prioritize the class-based strategy over the race-based one.

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28 Precisely how "wide" are the circumstances to which this argument applies? The race-based strategy could only achieve more for the poorest members of the racially oppressed under two conditions: the oppressed would have to be a majority, and race-specific income distributions would have to be largely nonoverlapping. Cases like this are historically conceivable (e.g., settler colonial or slave societies), but we suspect they are not likely to be found in any present-day capitalist society.

CONCLUSION

We began this essay by asking how best to achieve racial liberation. The intuitive answer is that racial liberation requires a specifically *racial* politics. Yet we have ended the essay by defending almost exactly the opposite conclusion. The path to racial liberation, we have argued, runs through race-blind, class-based policies and coalitions. In countries where the racially oppressed are a minority of the population and a minority of the working class, this is a simple consequence of the nature of capitalist democracies. If egalitarians need majorities or the disruptive capacities of the working class to change the world, even those who care only about racial inequality can win what they seek only if they build a coalition on class-based lines. In other places, where the racially oppressed are a majority and the race-based coalition is viable, the reason to prefer the class-based strategy is a normative one. We care more about those who suffer the most; the Materialist Wager tells us that those who suffer the most are those who have the least; and class-based strategies are better calibrated to their interests.

This is not to say that the pursuit of these class-based strategies is a simple matter. We have suggested that the white and black poor share a common interest in them. Yet this is merely a starting point. To build coalitions of the poor and the working class, organizers must solve some challenging collective action problems. As we have said already, a coalition will have no collective power to mobilize unless members are willing to bear risks and make sacrifices for one another. This raises formidable challenges in racially divided societies. Neighborhood and kinship ties run within rather than across racial lines. Racists on the Right and ruling ideologies counsel racial division rather than solidarity. At no point, therefore, do we want to be misunderstood for thinking that the task of building a coalition is as easy as identifying an

agenda that it would be rational for both whites and blacks to pursue. Politics is much more complicated than this. Our point is not that the class-based path is easy, but that it is the only (egalitarian) game in town.

If we are correct that egalitarians — even those egalitarians committed *exclusively* to racial equality — ought to prioritize class-based strategies over race-based ones, it raises an obvious question: Why is this such an uncommon conclusion? Certainly, we are far from the first to reach it, but the conclusion remains rare today, even on the socialist Left.[29] To understand why, it might be helpful to return to Table 1. As that table suggests, the rich of both races prefer race-based interventions to class-based ones, while the poor prefer class-based interventions to race-based ones.[30] Mostly, today's Left resides in universities and NGOs, not in workplaces and working-class neighborhoods. Thus it may be that the salience of race-first thinking on the Left today is just one of the many unfortunate consequences of our historic divorce from our natural social base.

If this is accurate, it suggests that our ability to rethink racial liberation will depend on our ability to reverse the Brahminization of the Left. This is no small task. But perhaps the place to begin is to recognize that the relationship is at least partly reciprocal. After all, if we are correct, rethinking what racial liberation requires is really just the task of learning to prioritize the interests of the black and white working class.

29 See, for example, Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr, "The Trouble with Disparity," *Nonsite.org* 32 (September 2020).

30 Of course, the white rich prefer the status quo above all else. But if the status quo is untenable and the white rich are asked to choose between two counterfactuals (perhaps because a social movement takes the status quo off the table), it is an easy choice. Reparations barely affect them, while redistribution affects them gravely.


NON À LA DISCRIMINATION SÉROLOGIQUE
STOP À LA DICTATURE
LIBERTE
MACARON PANTIN
AUX PIQUES


BUS
LIBERTÉ
LIBÉRONS LA FRANCE!
NON AU PASSEPORT SANITAIRE

ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, France has been torn by culture wars — a shift that was less the effect of American concepts imported into French universities, as many on France's right claim, than of the long-term decline, beginning in the early 1980s, of class politics and alternatives to capitalism. In a post-ideological France, class struggle has been displaced onto the terrain of identity.

The Culture Wars Come to France

Daniel Zamora

"Today, with the decline of socialist ideology, especially in its Marxist form, we are witnessing a revival of the idea of national identity."
— Club de l'Horloge, 1985

Americanization. Less than a year from the 2022 French presidential election, the concept is on everyone's lips. The idea, as the *New York Times* recently pointed out, has become a familiar refrain, increasingly held responsible for all the problems of the nation.[1] Politicians, media commentators, and scholars from both left and

1 Cole Stangler, "France Is Becoming More Like America. It's Terrible.," *New York Times*, June 2, 2021.

right all seem to agree that the French political debate has been contaminated by American ideas. While over the last forty years the French have been watching more American than French movies and increasingly eating at McDonald's, and traveling to the United States has become a required *voyage initiatique* for its elites, none of these cultural trends is what worries French politicians and intellectuals.[2] What they've been labeling "Americanization" is a certain kind of identity politics they believe is threatening French republicanism. Conservative thinkers such as Marcel Gauchet have denounced the "racialist and 'decolonial' ideologies … transferred from North American campuses," while some progressives have also deplored the race reductionist lens of such an approach.[3] Others, like Étienne Balibar, have rather celebrated the arrival of American debates in France, where they may open the path to an anti-racist and decolonized French Republic.[4] All seem, however, to agree that, one way or another, France has been intellectually and politically transformed by American ideas over the last couple of years. In October 2020, President Emmanuel Macron himself warned against the influence of social science theories he thought were imported from the United States. Intersectionality in particular, he would later add, "fractures everything."[5] But it would be a mistake to see such dissent as hostility to identity politics as such.

Indeed, despite Macron's professed disdain for identity politics, his alternative can scarcely be construed as anti-identitarian.

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2 See in particular: Jérôme Fourquet and Jean-Laurent Cassely, *La France sous nos yeux* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), 381–406.

3 "Sur l'islamisme, ce qui nous menace, c'est la persistance du déni," Le *Monde*, October 31, 2020; Stéphane Beaud and Gérard Noiriel, "Who Do You Think You Are?," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2021.

4 "Pour une République française antiraciste et décolonialisée," Mediapart, July 3, 2020.

5 "Emmanuel Macron nous répond," *Elle*, no. 3941, July 2, 2020, 16.

Building on what we have in common, Macron argued, meant finding an answer to the question, "What does it mean to be French?" The doubts plaguing French citizens, according to him, arose from mass immigration and the "cultural insecurity" it created for their identity. Flirting with far-right rhetoric threatening a great replacement of the French people by immigrants, Macron has decided to wage his next electoral campaign on the question of identity. From this perspective, the problem with American woke culture isn't that it essentializes identities, but that it essentializes the wrong ones.

In fact, disputes over the meaning of "Frenchness" betoken not the rejection of identity politics but its triumph. Macron and, with him, most of the French political class have more in common with their bugbears across the Atlantic than they might like to admit. To understand this state of affairs, we need to look at the recent history of identity in France, a history that begins not with woke concepts colonizing French universities but rather with the long-term decline, beginning in the early 1980s, of class politics and alternatives to capitalism.

With the collapse of Gaullism and French communism, debates about the meaning of being French, often under the banner of republicanism, became increasingly appealing within both left and right ruling elites.[6] As Patrick Buisson, the right-wing historian and former adviser to Nicolas Sarkozy, has written, "In the great breakdown of ideals and the desert of collective hopes, the identity revolt first expresses the attachment of the most modest to an identity way of life."[7] In twenty-first-century France, Buisson observed, identity trumps class, and conflicts over the economy

6 On debates about French republicanism, see Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

7 Patrick Buisson, *La Cause du Peuple* (Paris: Perrin, 2016), 318.

give way to disagreements over the definition of the national lifestyle and how to preserve it.

In short, the problem with France is not so much an elusive Americanization, but rather that the denunciation of identitarianism is becoming itself a form of identity politics. France has become a country where the clash of opinions (about the kind of politics we want) has increasingly been supplanted by assertions of identity (what we want depends on who we are). And in a world of *differences* rather than political *disagreements*, as Walter Benn Michaels notes, "the relevant thing about you is not what you believe but who you are, who you were and who you want to be."[8] In this framework, French republicanism has essentially become an empty notion, reduced to competing definitions of what it is to be French. "We are engaged in a fight to preserve France as we know it and as we have known it," the far-right polemicist and likely presidential candidate Éric Zemmour recently proclaimed.[9] Social conflict, as he wrote in his reactionary best seller *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, is no longer centered around economic issues but rather around history wars. That is to say, wars about who we are — who is and who cannot be French.

If there is anything like an Americanization of France, its most significant manifestation would be the displacement of class struggle onto the terrain of culture wars. Over the last forty years, left and right governments alike have advanced a neoliberal agenda and promoted cultural controversies as a substitute for meaningful debate over the economy. It is this post-ideological turn that has increasingly reshaped French politics along identitarian lines.

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8 Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 78.

9 Éric Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot* (Paris: Rubempré, 2021).

OUT OF THE IDEOLOGICAL AGE

In 1988, the conservative historian of the French Revolution François Furet had already announced nothing less than the end of French exceptionalism. Along with the historians Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon, he celebrated the decline of the political culture inherited from the French Revolution.[10] With the turn of the socialist government toward economic orthodoxy in 1983, the revolutionary tradition within French politics was finally vanquished. The working class was integrated into a modernized capitalism, the French Communist Party was in disarray, and even the Gaullist right didn't survive the death of its patriarch in November 1970. A new "centrist republic," they argued, was emerging from the ruins of the old in the name of political and economic realism. "The pedagogy on economic constraints and the dissemination of the critique of totalitarianism," Rosanvallon noted, brought "France out of its ideological age."[11] But what they termed the normalization of France meant essentially the end of any meaningful alternative to capitalism. Here, this long decline of the aspiration for the revolutionary takeover of the state wasn't the effect of American books smuggled into French universities, but rather a conscious political project led from the top down by elites.

French socialists in particular, who had been elected in 1981 on a radical program that included the nationalization of the bank system and of major industrial firms, coupled with a vast public works program, had been very open in assuring Ronald Reagan that he had nothing to fear from their victory. Three days before the composition of the new government was made public, François Mitterrand sent a personal message to the American president,

10 François Furet, Jacques Julliard, and Pierre Rosanvallon, *La République du centre: La fin de l'exception française* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1988).

11 Furet, Julliard, and Rosanvallon, *La République du centre*, 138.

arguing that France would assume "all its commitments, [which] in the field of security are clear and precise, within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance [and] following the principles of an open economy."[12] The following day, in a secret meeting with the US vice president, George H. W. Bush, at the Élysée Palace, he added that he had been the first politician able to significantly reduce communist influence in France and that, with four communists in unimportant ministries, "they find themselves associated with my economic policies and it's impossible for them to foment social troubles."[13] It was then no surprise that, a decade later, when Bush and Bill Clinton launched their wars against Iraq and Yugoslavia, they both found in Mitterrand a strong ally. By the mid-1990s, it was clear that the socialists had made the transatlantic alliance the backbone of French foreign policy. The Quai d'Orsay, which is the French ministry of foreign affairs, would be increasingly controlled by strongly pro-American circles, whose influence culminated with Sarkozy's final reintegration of France within the military command of NATO in 2009.[14]

In the economic domain, the French "new economists" had successfully popularized and translated neoliberal thinkers like Milton Friedman in the 1970s before Mitterrand himself embraced austerity in 1983. Nationalizations were replaced by privatizations, and labor market reforms and wage moderation were implemented to enhance France's industrial competitiveness in a globalized market. Inflation became the priority of a government that had promised full employment, and the reduction of taxes was promoted to boost private rather than public investment. When, in

12 Quoted in Philip Short, *A Taste for Intrigue: The Multiple Lives of François Mitterrand* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

13 Quoted in Short, *A Taste for Intrigue*.

14 This was a reverse of the decision made by General Charles de Gaulle to quit NATO's military command in 1966.

1984, the president made his formal visit to the United States, he described to the US Congress a French economy preferring "risk" over "comfort" and planned a visit to Silicon Valley to inquire about start-ups, venture capital, and technological innovation.[15] Jacques Delors, then minister of finance and soon to become president of the European Commission, called for a French modernization *à l'américaine*. "All the French," he later added, "must convert, as a matter of urgency, to the spirit of the market." In the name of economic realism, the Left had now to chase "away the anticapitalist myth" and rehabilitate "the market, business and employers" since "a society progresses also thanks to its inequalities."[16]

That same year, in a short column signed by young members of the Socialist Party, including François Hollande, the future socialist president, it was noted that France was living the end of an era. "The dogmatic conception of the working class, the idea that the workplace could also be a space of freedom, the notion that individuals belong to solid social groups, the affirmation of a timeless political programme," the young socialists argued, "all this must be abandoned."[17] While the French market turn never converted into American-style neoliberalism, preserving its *dirigiste* bent and, until recently, a quite redistributive social model, it nevertheless put an end to any serious socialist agenda.[18]

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15 Richard F. Kuisel, *The French Way: How France Embraced and Rejected American Values and Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 25.

16 Quoted in Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini, *The Last Neoliberal: Macron and the Origins of France's Political Crisis* (New York and London: Verso, 2021), 57, 54.

17 Jean-Yves Le Drian, Jean-Pierre Mignard, Jean-Michel Gaillard, and François Hollande, "Pour être modernes soyons démocrates!," *Le Monde*, December 17, 1984; quoted in Amable and Palombarini, *The Last Neoliberal*, 52.

18 On French neoliberalism, see notably: Antoine Vauchez and Pierre France, *The Neoliberal Republic: Corporate Lawyers, Statecraft, and the Making of Public-Private France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); François Denord, "French Neoliberalism and Its Divisions: From the Colloque Walter Lippmann to

Engaging itself in the European project as a substitute for Mitterrand's socialist program, French socialists became key players in building a neoliberal European Union, first with the liberalization of capital movements in 1988, and then with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which was massively rejected among blue-collar workers[19]. As Mitterrand famously noted, "I am torn between two ambitions: that of building Europe and that of social justice."[20] "Capitalism," proclaimed his party in 1991, "limits our historical horizon." The socialist triumph of 1981 being, then — to take Jean Baudrillard's metaphor — a version of the movie *Alien* with neoliberalism as the monster. "Neither a revolution nor a historical twist," Baudrillard added, "but a kind of long delayed post-historical childbirth."[21]

In this post-ideological France, a country finally delivered of conflicts about how to structure the economy, what would become the organizing principle of its politics? For many thinkers, it soon became clear that, if the specter of the revolution had vanished, culture and identity would become the central question for French politics. Julliard, who had celebrated the birth of this new centrist republic, expected that culture, by "replacing ideologies in perdition," would become the "key word for the new ruling class."[22] As Hollande himself had written in 1984, if the French had hoped for ideological and miraculous solutions, they now understood that the Left wasn't "an economic project" anymore but "a system of values," not "a way of producing but a way of being." It involved

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the Fifth Republic," in Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (eds.), *The Road From Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 45–67.

19 Rawi Abdelal, *Capital Rules: The Construction of Global Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

20 Quoted in Jacques Attali, *Verbatim I* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 399.

21 Jean Baudrillard, *La gauche divine*, (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 71.

22 Furet, Julliard, and Rosanvallon, *La République du centre*, 117–18.

a commitment to equality of opportunity and, for everyone, "the freedom to be different."[23] Culture therefore foregrounded conflicts that weren't strictly ideological, meaning conflicts that opposed different definitions of who we are rather than different modes of social organization. Class itself was to become just another identity, rather than a structure around which capitalism organizes itself. The point wasn't to transform the economic system anymore, but to allow everyone to compete in it.

A central actor in such shift would be the French "second left," a minor but influential current in French socialism associated with Michel Rocard's Unified Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste Unifié) and the French Democratic Confederation of Labour union (CFDT). It had acquired its name after a speech made by Rocard at the 1977 congress of the Socialist Party, in which he made a distinction between two lefts: one "that was long-dominant, Jacobin, centralized, statist, nationalist, and protectionist," and the other, the second left, which was "decentralized" and "refuses arbitrary domination, that of the bosses as well as of the state." Such a Left was about "liberating dependent majorities like women or badly integrated minorities in society: youth, immigrants, and the disabled."[24] While minoritarian, Rocard would become prime minister after the turn toward austerity, when his line more or less won within the party.

CULTURE AGAINST CLASS

Obliged to reinvent themselves as they abandoned any serious project of social transformation, French socialists would strategically choose the cultural battle to become their new raison d'être.

23 Le Drian et al., "Pour être modernes soyons démocrates!"

24 Michel Rocard, "Les deux cultures politiques, discours prononcé aux congrès de Nantes du Parti socialiste en avril 1977," in Michel Rocard, *Parler Vrai* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 80.

While endorsing a neoliberal economic agenda, they expanded their action on the cultural front and promoted a modernized anti-racist discourse, slowly abandoning a straightforward defense of class struggle. Only a year after the austerity turn, socialist militants created SOS Racisme to promote a narrowly moral anti-racism, framed around equal opportunity and disconnected from any broader concerns about redistribution. The organization was created as a way to co-opt the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism that was launched by young French Arabs after a spike in racist crimes hit France during the early '80s.[25] Beginning in Marseille in October 1983 with seventeen people, the march crossed the whole country, traveling through Strasbourg and Grenoble and ending up in Paris in December of the same year, accompanied by one hundred thousand people. Not overtly political, the movement was led by Toumi Djaïdja, a young Franco-Algerian activist who, after being shot by a police officer, imagined a march for civil rights in reference to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. But unlike the French march it was inspired by, the socialist NGO created in its image ended up advocating an apolitical conception of anti-racism made of public concerts, television shows, and support from celebrities and wealthy liberals. Used as a political tool by the socialist government, SOS Racisme promoted a narrow understanding of racism disconnected from the broader struggle against inequality. Reduced to a question of stereotypes, anti-racism soon became a politically empty enterprise, leading, to quote Gérard Noiriel, "to mobilizing racial vocabulary for problems that [had] their root in social relations."[26] Issues of police brutality, housing, and employment after

25 See, in particular, Abdelalli Hajjat, *La marche pour l'égalité contre le racisme* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2013).

26 Gérard Noiriel, *Racisme : la responsabilité des élites* (Paris: Éd. Textuel, 2007), 10.

deindustrialization had hit immigrant workers hard, but they were inherently sidelined by the government's framing of the problem.

The most striking part of such depoliticization was the cultural framework used to describe these young, second-generation immigrants. By popularizing the term "beur" to refer to young Arabs, this modernized anti-racist discourse put their culture at the center of the political discussion, accelerating the split from working-class struggles for this generation.[27] This shift was particularly important, as it played a part in a broader disqualification of a series of strikes between 1982 and 1984. Taking place in several auto factories owned by Citroën and Renault, the strikes were led by unionized immigrant workers around traditional questions of working conditions and wages. But the lack of support from the government and the infamous depiction of the strikes as "Islamist agitations" had profound effects on the French labor movement. As the sociologist Abdelalli Hajjat noted, while the young Arabs of the march became examples to promote tolerance and made their symbolic entry into public space, unionized workers were depicted as Muslim agitators.[28]

In a way, religion was emphasized over class struggle in the workplace, while in the suburbs, culture eclipsed social problems like housing and employment. Such a strategy by French socialists made it more difficult for young Arabs to think about their conditions through the lens of class relations. This transformation, fueled by socialists' complete retreat on the economic front and the decline of working-class militancy, would, in the following decade, accelerate the disconnect between the Left and the working class. The transmutation of the social into the

27 "Beur" was how young Arabs used to refer to themselves in the suburbs of Paris.

28 Hajjat, *La marche*, 159–60.

cultural, as the anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle noted, would soon become the major characteristic of this modernized left.[29] Such a shift was in fact a long-term attempt to recompose a new social bloc around which socialists could win.

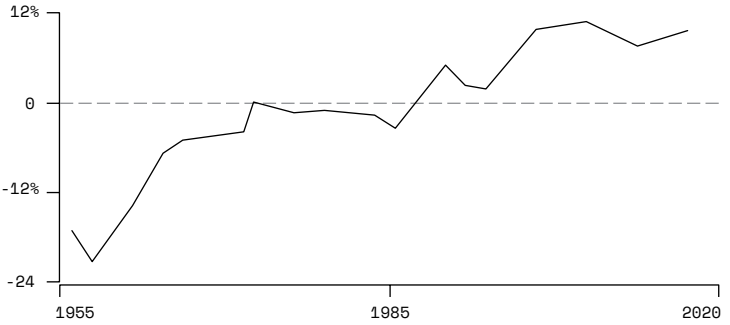
Indeed, in a France hit by high unemployment and deindustrialization, the economic realignment would have lasting effects on the political coalition that led socialists to power. The new macroeconomic orientation, as Bruno Amable recently noted, "meant neglecting the most fundamental political expectations of the left bloc, which implies that the social base of the so-called 'left-wing' government would eventually have to be replaced by another one, more favorable to the neoliberal orientation."[30] The coalition that led socialists to win in 1981 couldn't be sustained. It required the socialists to build their modernizing project around a new social base made of more educated voters, part of the skilled middle class and those excluded from the economic game. As the ecological thinker André Gorz wrote in his polemic *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*, the traditional worker was disappearing anyway, while "new social movements," focused on those marginalized in the economic game, could favor equal opportunity as an alternative to the problem of exploitation.

In the long run, such an evolution accelerated the slow shift from a class-based party system to a multiple-elite party system. While in the 1950s and 1960s, as Thomas Piketty illustrated, the most educated essentially voted for the Right, a great reversal would take place during the following decades (see Figure 1). Working-class voters would increasingly abstain from voting, while the Left relied more and more on educated voters. In such

29 Jean-Loup Amselle, *L'ethnicisation de la France* (Paris: Lignes, 2011), 27.

30 Bruno Amable, *La résistible ascension du néolibéralisme: Modernisation capitaliste et crise politique en France, 1980–2020* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021).

Figure 1. **Left-Wing Vote in France, 1956–2017: Difference Between % of University Graduates Voting Left and % of Nongraduates Voting Left**



Source: Author's computations using French post-election surveys, 1956–2017 (see piketty.pse.ens.fr/conflict).

a configuration, French socialists turned quite rapidly into the party of the educated elite (the Brahmin left), allowing the Right to become the party of the business class (the merchant right).[31]

By the 2000s, the crisis of social democracy resulting from such a realignment led many socialist leaders to radically reevaluate their strategy. The third-way think tank Terra Nova would come up with a radical proposal to build a new electoral majority. For the reformist policy institute, by the end of the 1970s, new political cleavages appeared on the cultural front, with a crisis of the historical coalition based on the working class. The decline of the working class, resulting from unemployment, precariousness, and the loss of "class pride," noted the think tank, opened a path for building a new coalition. The "new left," it argued, should have "the face of the France of tomorrow: younger, more feminine, more

31 Thomas Piketty, "Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right: Rising Inequality & the Changing Structure of Political Conflict (Evidence from France, Britain and the US, 1948–2017)," World Inequality Lab Working Papers, Series 2018/7 (March 2018), 3.

diverse, more educated, but also more urban and less Catholic." Unlike the historical electorate of the Left, the study added, "this France of tomorrow is above all unified by its cultural, progressive values: it wants change; it is tolerant, open, united, optimistic, proactive."[32]

Redefined as an identity, class now appeared as an outmoded and conservative social formation. And while, in the following election, François Hollande won partially through his open criticism of financialized capitalism, his presidency in many ways conformed to such a line. On the economic front, it vastly expanded tax cuts for corporations, labor market deregulation, and deindustrialization, while on the cultural front it won substantial victories on gay marriage, surrogacy rights, and the recognition of France's colonial past. But such historic marginalization of the language of class in public discourse would only reinforce references to identity as points of difference in the cultural field, opposing more and more various notions of French identity. A renewed appeal to republicanism itself would become the object of contested definitions of citizenship. On one side was a plural notion, calling into question a monolithic definition of what it is to be French, and on the other, an anti-pluralist and assimilationist defense of French Catholic identity and history, increasingly hostile to Muslims and shaped by Islamophobia.[33]

IDENTITY AGAINST SOCIALISM

In an almost symmetrical move, the Right came up with its own version of republican identity-based politics during the 1980s. Obsessed by the notion that the Left had won the battle of ideas

32 Olivier Ferrand, Romain Prudent, and Bruno Jeanbart, "Gauche: quelle majorité électorale pour 2012?," Terra Nova 1, May 2011, 10.

33 See Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobie: Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le "problème musulman"* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).

on the cultural front, extreme-right thinkers began to elaborate their own cultural project, looking for new ways to mobilize their electoral base. It was particularly the case among think tanks such as Club de l'Horloge. Founded in 1974 around a group of *énarques* (graduates of the École Nationale d'Administration), the club popularized the idea that socialism had been responsible for the "loss of their identity."[34] Marxism, they argued, had been "a war machine against national sentiment." Jean-Yves Le Gallou, one of the club's founders, didn't hesitate to qualify the early years of the Socialist government as totalitarian, openly calling for an identitarian and neoliberal turn.[35] But by the mid-'80s, they observed, "with the decline of socialist ideology, especially in its Marxist form, we [were] witnessing a revival of the idea of national identity."[36] In other words, for the Right, class politics was a problem precisely because it undermined identity as the principle around which they could organize society.

With the demise of Gaullism, republicanism on the Right soon became the perfect vehicle for a renewed affirmation of a restrictive definition of citizenship. By 1985, the ex-president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, in an interview given to the extreme-right journal *Valeurs actuelles*, would endorse such a narrative and argue that immigration was becoming a threat to French identity. Mainstream political figures and newspapers like *Le Figaro* would openly associate Muslims with a great threat to the survival of "French culture."[37] What France was experiencing, they thought, was the destruction of its identity, drowned out by the new pluralism and the immigration policies promoted by a modernized

34 Club de l'Horloge, *L'identité de la France* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985), 20.

35 Quoted in Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, 249.

36 Club de l'Horloge, *L'identité de la France*, 314.

37 Gérard Noiriel, À *quoi sert "l'identité nationale"* (Paris: Agone, 2007), 70–3.

left. Influential within the right wing of Jacques Chirac's Rally for the Republic (RPR), the Club de l'Horloge would have a lasting effect following the definitive demise of the Gaullist legacy.

While those ideas remained on the margins of the political field for quite a while, intellectuals, journalists, and opinion makers, operating in a newly privatized media landscape as party democracy was collapsing, brought this narrative into the mainstream with the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007. At that point, mass parties were soon replaced by American-style televised primaries, with competing political entrepreneurs trying to win shares of a market. Like any other Western democracy, France was now characterized by free-falling electoral participation, corrupted political campaigns flooded with cash, and privately owned media channels that increasingly looked like Fox News. While Mitterrand spent around 7 million euros on his 1981 campaign, it is believed that Sarkozy spent more than 40 million in 2012, half of it through illegal financing schemes.[38] France was becoming a country like any other in the West, with entrepreneurs ruling over a void filled with atomized citizens waiting to be formed by a new populist sensibility.

Understanding this profound transformation, Sarkozy seized the opportunity to radically push the old Gaullist party further to the right, mixing a neoliberal program with identitarian themes. "The need for identity," he argued a few days before the election, was back to face globalization. The architect of such a strategy was the president's closest adviser, Patrick Buisson, who had been an extreme-right propagandist during the 1980s and close to Jean-Marie Le Pen, supporter of French Algeria and director of the far-right journal *Minute* between 1981 and 1987. Convinced that "the traditional divide, structured by economic and social

38 Christophe-Cécil Garnier, "21, 33, 40, 50 millions . . . Quel est le vrai montant de la campagne de Nicolas Sarkozy?" *Slate France*, October 14, 2015.

questions, was being erased," Buisson expected the rise of "a new divide around the question of identity." That was, to him, and to many more in the following years, "the political question that prevailed over all the others."[39]

Under Buisson's advice, Sarkozy centered his campaign and presidency on the restoration of French identity, lost in the storm of globalization and Muslim immigration. Focusing on the reassertion of authority and the denunciation of May 1968, which was accused of having imposed intellectual and moral relativism, he promised his electorate that France would become "a nation which claims its identity, which assumes its history."[40] Taking most of the classic ideas of the extreme right of the 1980s mainstream, he argued that if capital could now easily travel beyond borders, "cultural borders" needed to be preserved at all costs. With such an aim in mind, Sarkozy created one of the most controversial ministries in contemporary French history, the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity, and Codevelopment. The point was to transform the social insecurity generated by neoliberal reforms and deindustrialization into a fear of losing one's culture due to Muslim immigration. Connecting immigration with national identity, the French president openly framed the discussion on citizenship along racial and religious lines. Being French wasn't a legal matter, but rather depended on one's ability to accept a restrictive definition of republican values.

By 2009, the government would organize hundreds of debates on national identity across France, through local municipalities and virtual platforms. French citizens all around the country were invited to discuss the question of what it means to be French

39 Buisson, *La Cause du Peuple*, 319.

40 Nicolas Sarkozy, "Appel aux électeurs du centre pour le second tour," April 29, 2007.

today. The aim, the government argued, was to reaffirm "pride in being French" — but it ended up fueling resentment against immigrants and suspicion of French Muslims that has never really receded since.

Macron's current iteration of such a strategy is no different: not an alternative to identity politics but a way of avoiding the social question. In order to address the class conflicts generated by his own policies, especially the two-year struggle of the *gilets jaunes* movement, the president consciously decided to focus the political conversation on what it means to be French. Openly inspired by Sarkozy's 2009 debate, Macron chose to endorse the controversial narrative of his predecessor while millions took part in a movement across the country against rising prices and neoliberal fiscal policies. Following the rule of taxing the poor to give to the rich, Macron's revolution has been the most inegalitarian presidency in modern France. As noted by Mitchell Dean, in Macron's France, "every tear-gas projectile and rubber bullet, and every injury caused by them, to the eyes, hands, faces and bodies of the protesters" attested not to a crisis of identity but "to the failure of the imposition of a neoliberal governmentality."[41] For more than a year, millions occupied the streets all over France, debating democracy, inequality, work, and taxes, but none argued about the preservation of a mythical French lifestyle. If there was something to be preserved for the Yellow Vests, it was not their culture but their income. The historian Gérard Noiriel pointed out that one of the great achievements of the movement was precisely its success in momentarily marginalizing identity quarrels, putting the social question at the center of the public sphere.[42]

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41 Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (New York and London: Verso, 2021), 187.

42 Gérard Noiriel, *Les gilets jaunes à la lumière de l'histoire* (Paris: L'aube, 2019), 57–9.

In response, Macron decided to launch a national debate that would take place in municipalities, online platforms, and meetings everywhere in France. Among the topics first picked by the president for the French people to discuss was, unsurprisingly, the question of immigration and identity. "I also want," the president argued to the *gilets jaunes*, "to put the nation in agreement with itself on what its core identity is — that we address the issue of immigration."[43] Such an attempt was, however, met with anger, and under pressure from the movement, it was removed from the list of topics. The suggestion was particularly cynical as, out of the Yellow Vests' forty-five-point program, none concerned immigration or national identity. Yet while one of the *gilets jaunes*' central claims was the reestablishment of a wealth tax, Macron decided not to include it for discussion.

But his failure to shift the terms of the discussion in the immediate aftermath of the movement didn't last very long. It only took a year for the government to fully refocus the public debate on identitarian questions. By the time the government succeeded in marginalizing the *gilets jaunes* movement and its claims, the push around identity — under the guise of a defense of republicanism — took a far more sinister tone, focusing public attention around Muslims' ability to be proper citizens. As Amable has recently remarked, Macron combined elements of the neoliberal model with the illiberal, identitarian one.[44] Openly associating the question of French citizenship with Muslim immigration, as Sarkozy had before him, Macron decided to move the public debate to the far right. The problem, the government argued all over the media, was how liberal American ideas had facilitated a tolerance for Islamic extremism.

43 Emmanuel Macron, "Le discours d'Emmanuel Macron face aux 'gilets jaunes,'" *Le Monde*, December 10, 2018.

44 Amable, *La résistible ascension du néolibéralisme*.

In February 2021, one of the main French newspapers, *Le Figaro*, warned on its front page that "Muslim extremists and the radical left" are progressing into the university, both "nourished by militant concepts coming from the United States."[45] Frédérique Vidal, the minister of higher education, would speak a few days later about how those Islamist and radical left concepts were undermining French society. This rather surprising association became widely diffused after the murder of the high school teacher Samuel Paty by an Islamist in the suburbs of Paris in October 2020. In response, the French minister of education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, went on a rant against the "very powerful" "Islamo-leftist currents" within the university. The terrorist, an eighteen-year-old Chechen refugee working in construction after being expelled from high school, had been, according to the minister, encouraged by "other people, who were in a way the intellectual authors of that crime." Far from being a lone terrorist, Blanquer added, he had been conditioned by ideas promoting such radicality, by "an intellectual matrix coming from American universities and intersectional theses." That vision, of essentialized communities and identities, "converged with the interests of the Islamists."[46]

More significant, perhaps, was the investigation launched by Vidal. "Whether research on postcolonialism" or on race and intersectionality, she said at the National Assembly, a vast and worrisome state inquiry was to be undertaken into all currents of research in connection with "Islamo-leftism."[47] Such a concept,

45 Caroline Beyer, "Comment l'islamo-gauchisme gangrène les universités," *Le Figaro*, February 11, 2021, 1–3.

46 Interview with Jean-Michel Blanquer, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, October 25, 2020.

47 In an unprecedented move, the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) refused to undertake such an inquiry and openly attacked the minister for employing a concept that "doesn't correspond to any scientific reality," denouncing an "emblematic controversy of the instrumentalization of science."

invented by the French philosopher Pierre-André Taguieff in 2002, referred to a convergence between Muslim fundamentalists and extreme left groups.[48] Now, emboldened by American campus culture, Islamists and leftists were supposedly waging a war against European civilization and French republicanism under the triple motto of "decolonize, demasculate, de-Europeanize."[49]

While it's hard to imagine young jihadists living in the suburbs of Paris compulsively reading books by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Robin DiAngelo or trying to impose intersectional feminism, the polemic was meant from the very start to set the stage for the coming presidential election. This Trumpian tone was mainly designed to attract the voters of the far-right National Rally and avoid a conversation about the government's mediocre economic policy and disastrous management of the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted by Cole Stangler, while France is living one of the worst economic crises in recent history, "the French news cycle isn't led by discussion over truly universal issues like wealth inequality, the health system or climate change. Instead it's focused on navel-gazing debates about identity, fueled by television personalities."[50]

FAREWELL TO CLASS POLITICS?

Less than a year before France decides who's going to be its next president, the question of what it means to be French (or not French) has become the subject of endless debates, books, and essays on both sides. French ministers spend interviews debating

48 On the origins of the notion, see, in particular, Valentine Faure, "'Islamo-gauchisme': histoire tortueuse d'une expression devenue une invective," *Le Monde*, December 11, 2020; Corinne Torrekens, "Islamo-gauchisme," *La Revue Nouvelle*, July 2020.

49 Pierre-André Taguieff quoted in Norimitsu Onishi, "Will American Ideas Tear France Apart? Some of Its Leaders Think So," *New York Times*, February 9, 2021.

50 Stangler, "France Is Becoming More Like America."

whether there should be ethnic food in supermarkets or if, as the far-right polemicist Éric Zemmour has recently argued, foreign names for newborns should be banned in France. The meteoric rise of Zemmour's candidacy has, however, put Macron's strategy in doubt. Moving the debate to the right in the hopes of beating Marine Le Pen's National Rally, Macron may have opened a far more dangerous path for Zemmour's ideas. Convicted several times of hate speech, Zemmour became a national sensation when he sold more than three hundred thousand copies of his book *Le Suicide Français* in 2014, in which he denounced the feminization of society and the deconstruction of French history and tried to rehabilitate the Vichy regime. Someone who could easily be seen as a French Tucker Carlson was popularized by his permanent presence on CNews, the "French Fox News" channel owned by the conservative billionaire Vincent Bolloré. Marginal only a couple years ago, his suggestion of deporting five million Muslims from France to avoid the "great replacement" of the French population is now debated on mainstream TV shows. Identity and immigration, Zemmour has noted, are the vital questions that make "all others subordinate, even the most essential, such as school, industry, social protection, and France's place in the world."[51] His omnipresence on mainstream media channels to present his apocalyptic vision, facilitated by Macron's strategy, has brought him close to second in opinion polls. Expecting to run for president next year, Zemmour didn't hesitate to argue that it's time for the French people to "choose their camp in this war of civilizations that is unfolding on our soil."

If Macron achieved anything during his chaotic presidency, it was certainly not, as Jürgen Habermas had enthusiastically hoped, transforming the European "elite project into a citizens'

51 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*.

project," but rather the emboldening and normalization of France's extreme right.[52] By accepting interviews in their journals and using their vocabulary, themes, and solutions, the president who had impressed Habermas with his "intimate knowledge of Hegel's philosophy of history" has ended up being the most right-wing president of the Fifth Republic.

A Huntingtonian clash of civilizations now structures French political debates, in which calls for strong political action against Muslim "barbarians" are common. Where Zemmour might be right is that, as he argued while preparing his run for the presidency, whoever wins the presidential election is the one who imposes his question.[53] And if the French left wants to have any chance in the coming struggle, it needs to change the question. With the demise of communism and of the Gaullist grandeur during the 1980s, debates about republicanism and alternatives to American-led globalization are often reduced to nostalgia for French traditions and lifestyle and competing definitions of French citizenship. While the candidate for the socialist left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has been arguing for a "creolization" *à la française* to promote cultural diversity and exchange in society, Zemmour is preaching his assimilationist model to protect a fixed notion of French identity.[54] But if Mélenchon, through his reading of the poet Édouard Glissant, has been trying to shape a less essentialist and more progressive definition of French citizenship, one that is concentrated more on reciprocation than on roots he has still brought the debate exactly where the Right

52 Jürgen Habermas, "How Much Will the Germans Have to Pay?" *Der Spiegel*, October 26, 2017.

53 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*.

54 On Zemmour's assimilationist vision, see Jean-Loup Amselle, "Éric Zemmour, la haine de soi au service de l'extrême droite," *Politis*, October 7, 2021.

wants it to be.[55] Focusing too much on another version of identity, a more fluid one, perhaps, would only provide the Right with the kind of Left it wants.

For socialists, the true resistance to identity politics today lies in opposing Macron's "rubber-bullet liberalism," not in sterile debates about campus politics. The plea for a strong national identity — or its rejection in favor of pluralism — is obviously not an alternative to so-called Americanization, but rather its very implementation with French characteristics. The real Americanization, openly promoted by the French political class over the last forty years, is the long but steady transformation, as Walter Benn Michaels pointed out, of replacing "the differences between what people think (ideology) and the differences between what people own (class) with the differences between what people are (identity)."[56] In such a framework, conflicts over the distribution of wealth have been conveniently replaced by conflicts over who we are. Replaced, in other words, by another kind of class politics — the class politics of the ruling elites. To change the narrative, the Left needs its own class politics, outside the identitarian trap.

55 On Édouard Glissant's notion of "créolisation" and its uses in French politics, see Amselle, *L'ethnicisation de la France*, 101–10.

56 Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 24.

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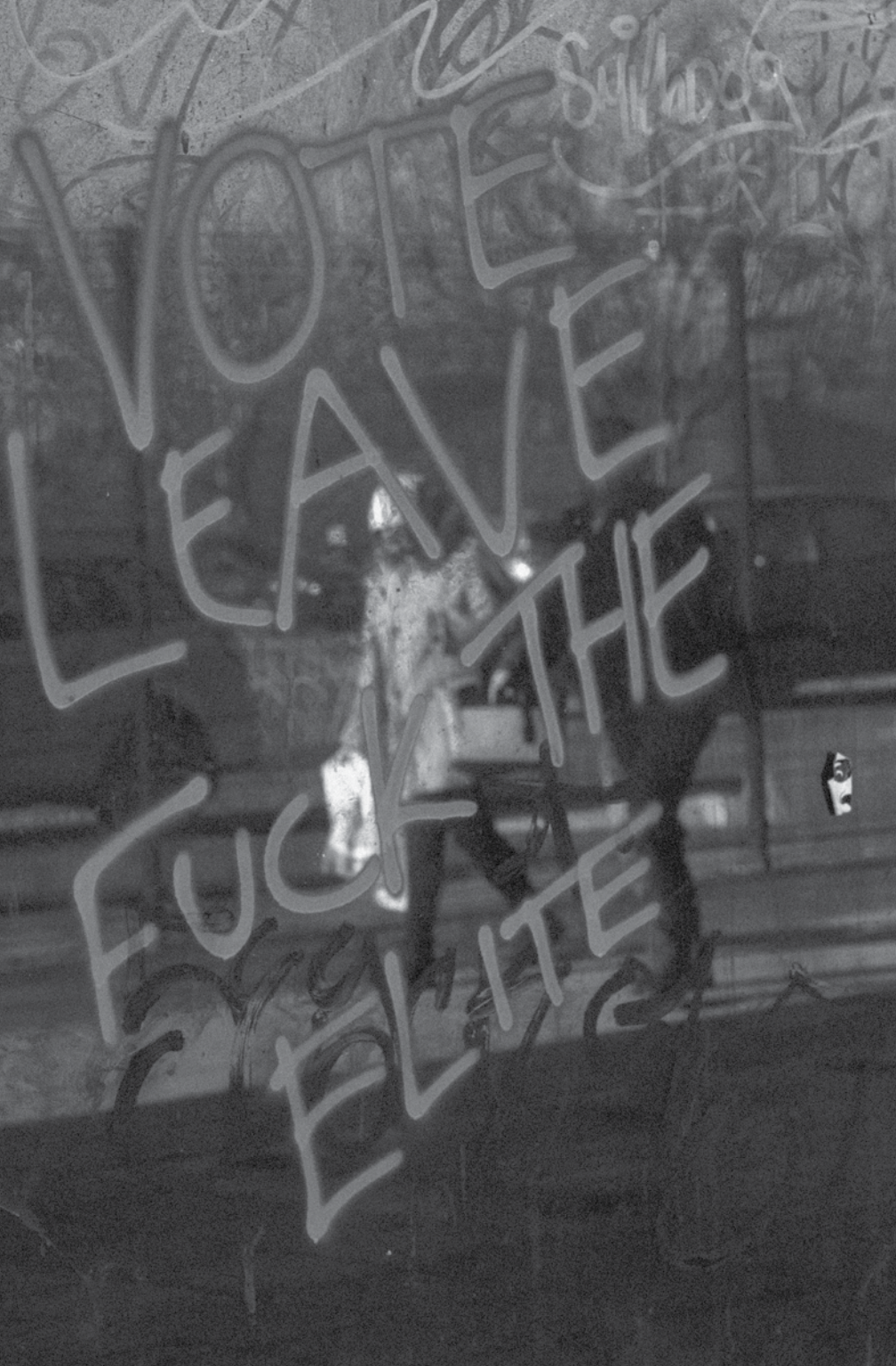
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ABSTRACT

The Brexit crisis dominated British politics between 2016 and 2019. Its outcome will shape the UK's relationship with Europe for decades. One factor above all decided that outcome: the determination of Britain's right and center alike to contain a left-wing upsurge inspired by Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

How Brexit Broke the British Left

Daniel Finn

Between 2014 and 2019, there were three upsurges that attempted to break the mold of British politics: the Scottish independence movement, the campaign for Brexit, and the mobilization around Jeremy Corbyn in the British Labour Party. They sought, respectively, to shrink the borders of the United Kingdom, to sever its links with the European Union, and to overturn the social settlement that has governed its class relations since the 1980s.

Their combined effect was to generate a political crisis such as Britain had not seen for decades, with its governing institutions effectively paralyzed for months at a time. The unresolved Scottish question is likely to remain a source of contestation over

the years to come. But the outcome of the 2019 general election simultaneously buried Corbynism and ensured that Brexit would go ahead on terms dictated by Boris Johnson and the right wing of the Conservative Party.

The fact that these challenges unfolded more or less simultaneously was no coincidence. They all came in response to long-term dysfunctions of the British political system and its governing parties, which the economic crash of 2008 had greatly exacerbated, and they interacted with one another throughout the years of crisis. The campaign for Scottish independence, which requires careful study in its own right, was located exclusively in one part of the UK that has its own distinct political culture. In what follows, I will concentrate on the relationship between Labour and Brexit under Corbyn's leadership, which was crucial for the fate of both, but which remains poorly understood in Britain itself, let alone the wider world.

Johnson's triumph at the end of 2019 could not have happened without a convergence of interests between right and center in British politics that transcended their divisions over Brexit. When push came to shove, the leaders of these political tendencies joined forces to ensure the defeat of a left-wing project that appeared capable of forming a government. Johnson's Brexit deal was a price that centrist politicians and opinion formers gladly paid in order to marginalize the socialist left and regain control of the Labour Party.

BEFORE BREXIT

Corbyn's victory in the 2015 leadership contest came as an unwelcome shock to most Labour MPs, and to the country's media. The tendency that he represented had spent the previous generation on the margins of the Labour Party, excluded from any position

of real influence.[1] When the party hierarchy decided to adopt a new system for electing its leader, entrusting the Labour membership with responsibility, they never imagined what was going to happen in 2015. Corbyn's landslide owed at least as much to the weakness and complacency of Labour's right-wing faction as it did to the discovery of unexpected strength on the British left.[2]

A large section of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) simply did not accord the new leader basic legitimacy. Much of the British media followed their example, including ostensibly nonpartisan outlets such as the BBC, which reported on Corbyn's leadership primarily from the vantage point of his factional opponents.[3] This compounded the inevitable problems that stemmed from lack of experience and preparation time: Corbyn and his team had to do the work that would normally precede taking control of a major political party after they had already been thrust into the spotlight.

This was the backdrop against which Corbyn had to face the Brexit referendum during the opening months of his leadership. First coined as recently as 2012, the term "Brexit" referred to a political project that originated within the British right. Conservative prime minister David Cameron had agreed to hold a plebiscite on Britain's membership in the EU because of pressure from his own right-wing current and the electoral competition of Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP). When the Conservatives unexpectedly won a majority of seats in the 2015 general election, ending their coalition pact with the Europhile Liberal Democrats, Cameron had to follow through on his commitment.

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1 Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *Searching for Socialism: The Project of the Labour New Left from Benn to Corbyn* (London: Verso, 2020).

2 Daniel Finn, "Crosscurrents: Corbyn, Labour and the Brexit Crisis," *New Left Review* 118 (July/August 2019), 8–11.

3 Paul Myerscough, "Corbyn in the Media," *London Review of Books* 37, no. 20, October 22, 2015.

To the prime minister's surprise, senior Tory politicians like Boris Johnson and Michael Gove decided to join the campaign against EU membership, which became known as the Leave camp — an effort that also had the support of Britain's two most popular newspapers, the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. Right-wing opposition to European integration was hardly unique to Britain, but the purchase of such views within a major party of government certainly was. In the rest of the EU-15, one could never imagine a referendum of this kind being held in the first place.

Brexit posed a particular dilemma for Labour's new left-wing leadership. Pro-EU attitudes were deeply entrenched in the Labour Party. This dated back in particular to a speech Jacques Delors had delivered to Britain's Trades Union Congress in 1988, in which he promised to construct a federal structure that would "preserve and enhance the uniquely European model of society" based on "similar mechanisms of social solidarity, of protection of the weakest, and of collective bargaining. … It would be unacceptable for Europe to become a source of social regression."[4]

The fact that European leaders never translated such rhetoric into practice, while embedding neoliberal doxa in the structures of the eurozone, barely registered with the British center left. This was partly because the prevalence of right-wing Euroscepticism obstructed any serious discussion of what the EU actually was, and partly because Britain stayed out of the single currency. It was easier to maintain unrealistic fantasies of a "social Europe" that had already taken shape because the EU played a very limited role in Britain's own, largely homegrown form of neoliberalism.

Corbyn and the Labour left kept a closer eye on the real development of the European project, from the Maastricht Treaty to the Stability and Growth Pact and the draconian management of the

4 Jacques Delors, "1992: The Social Dimension," speech at the Trades Union Congress, Bournemouth, September 8, 1988.

eurozone crisis by troika officials. When the British referendum took place, it had been less than a year since the gleeful "waterboarding" of the Syriza government in Greece — European integration as a "source of social regression," in the purest sense of the term. Under those circumstances, it was out of the question for any honest politician of the Left to give the EU his or her wholehearted endorsement. But at the same time, it was also unthinkable for a Labour leader to recommend a Leave vote in a debate where the nationalist right had effectively monopolized that position for decades.

Corbyn's main asset in his battles with the Labour establishment was the support he received from the party membership. His victory in the leadership election gave him a clear mandate to develop an antiwar, anti-austerity platform, breaking with the orthodoxy of recent decades. It did not give him a mandate to support withdrawal from the EU. Even if Corbyn had wanted to put forth a left-Leave platform, the very limited support for that perspective among Labour members would have been an insurmountable obstacle.

CAMERON'S WATERLOO

The Labour leadership tried to establish a left-Remain pole in the debate when the campaign over the Brexit referendum got started in earnest. They summed up that position in the slogan "Remain and Reform." As Corbyn declared in a speech shortly before the vote:

> Labour is calling for a vote to remain in Europe at next week's referendum because we believe staying in the European Union offers our people a better future in terms of jobs, investment, rights at work, and environmental protection.
>
> But we are also campaigning for reform of the European Union because we are convinced Europe needs to change to

work for all, to become more democratic, strengthen workers' rights, ditch austerity, and end the pressure to privatize.[5]

"Remain and Reform" was open to two interpretations. The first was the one Corbyn expressed in this passage: a call for pan-European action to transform the EU into a more progressive institution. This required a good deal of optimism after the events of the previous few years, when the EU's governing bodies appeared hell-bent on proving that they would permit no reform of its rigid neoliberal policy regime.[6]

There was also a less ambitious way of reading "Remain and Reform" — as a recommendation for Britain to stay in the EU and carry out social democratic reforms at the national level, testing the limits of European rules if they conflicted with that plan. As a much larger member state than Greece, with its own currency and central bank, Britain might well have a better chance of resisting outside pressure to conform. Corbyn made no attempt to conceal his criticisms of the EU, insisting that it would have to change "quite dramatically" to satisfy him. Yet he also took a stronger position against the scapegoating of immigrants than most politicians who flaunted their support for European integration.[7]

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5 Jeremy Corbyn, "Don't Blame Migrants or the EU for Britain's Problems," *LabourList*, June 16, 2016.

6 The former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis had experienced that rigidity at close quarters the previous year. However, Varoufakis and his Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 initiative called for a Remain vote in Britain on similar grounds to Corbyn: Chris Johnston, "Brexit Would Be the Worst of All Worlds, Says Varoufakis," *Guardian*, April 7, 2016.

7 "Corbyn: EU 'Has Got to Change Dramatically,'" Sky News, June 20, 2016. In an extraordinary display of chutzpah, sources on the Labour right presented Corbyn's defense of immigrants as evidence that he had engaged in "deliberate sabotage" of the party's Remain campaign. Journalists passed on these claims without appearing to notice the contradiction that was staring them in the face: Laura Kuenssberg, "Corbyn Office 'Sabotaged' EU Remain Campaign — Sources," BBC News, June 26, 2016.

Corbyn struggled to break through with this message for a number of reasons. He lacked the usual authority of a party leader because of the hostile effort that Labour MPs and officials had launched as soon as he took over. To make matters worse, broadcasters like the BBC focused overwhelmingly on the struggle between pro-Remain and pro-Leave factions in the Conservative Party: this fitted their usual template for political reporting as a Punch-and-Judy show in which personalities mattered more than ideas. Academic research found that Tory and UKIP politicians accounted for roughly 80 percent of all appearances on TV news bulletins during the campaign.[8]

In any case, the Remain defeat of June 2016 was primarily the responsibility of David Cameron and his allies. Even though he spoke with the prestige of his office, flanked by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, Cameron could not persuade a bare majority of the 2015 Conservative electorate to support EU membership. According to one exit poll, the Leave/Remain split among Tory voters was 58 to 42 percent; for Labour voters, by comparison, it was 37 to 63 percent.[9] Some people voted Leave because of concerns about national sovereignty, others because they wanted to reduce immigration, and still others because they wanted to give the domestic political establishment a good kicking or register a protest against long-term neglect of their postindustrial regions.[10] The Conservative leader had been reckless enough to present all of these disparate strands of opinion with the opportunity to strike at once, and without having made any preparations for defeat.[11]

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8 Tom Mills, *The BBC: Myth of a Public Service* (London: Verso, 2020), 207–08.

9 Michael Ashcroft, "How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday … and Why," Lord Ashcroft Polls, June 24, 2016.

10 Tom Hazeldine, "Revolt of the Rustbelt," *New Left Review* 105 (May/June 2017), discusses the crucial role of Northern English votes in the outcome.

11 Susan Watkins, "Casting Off?", *New Left Review* 100 (July/August 2016), 16–18.

Cameron and Osborne attempted to repeat the script from their victories in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2015 UK general election, warning that a Leave vote would result in economic catastrophe. This time, however, they had important sections of the Tory press ranged against them, unpicking their arguments. As one staffer from the official Remain alliance put it: "You cannot run the kind of campaign that focuses on economic risk and is fronted by Conservatives unless you have the echo chamber of the right-wing press."[12] Cameron resigned the day after the referendum, triggering a Conservative leadership contest that looked set to be a bloodbath.

At this point, not for the last time, Corbyn's inner-party opponents converted a Tory crisis into a Labour one. There almost certainly would have been a move by Labour MPs against Corbyn regardless of what the result was. Labour's right-wing current expected Corbyn to assist their plans to oust him by stepping down, relieving them of the need to defeat him in a leadership election. When he refused to do so, even after a vote of no confidence by the majority of Labour MPs, they had no choice but to put forward a rival candidate, Owen Smith, in a contest that lasted until late September 2016. Corbyn defeated Smith by a comfortable margin: 62 to 38 percent. In the meantime, the Tories had recovered their poise after a moment of panic in the immediate wake of the referendum, rallying behind Theresa May as Cameron's successor. May opened up a comfortable polling lead and vowed to take Britain out of the European Union.

INTERREGNUM

The months between the referendum and the snap election that May called in June 2017 are highly revealing, because they offer

12 Tim Shipman, *All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class* (London: William Collins, 2017), 255–7.

us a glimpse of the approach that Labour's right faction and its press outriders would have taken to Brexit if their hostility to Corbyn had not intervened. Although Corbyn had fended off Owen Smith's leadership challenge, his internal opponents considered him to be a lame duck. Labour's poll ratings were dire, and every precedent suggested that the party would suffer a heavy defeat if there was an election in the near future. The Labour right thus framed its arguments on the assumption that it would soon have to take responsibility for managing the crisis.

The Labour approach to Brexit that took shape during this transitional period was in no way distinctly "Corbynite." It represented a broad consensus across the party's ideological divide that Labour should accept the referendum result and focus on the terms of its implementation. Two of Corbyn's most uncompromising opponents in the PLP, Chuka Umunna and Wes Streeting, spelled out the logic behind that consensus after voting at Westminster in February 2017 to trigger Article 50 — the clause that allows EU member states to begin negotiating the terms of their departure:

> We believe as democrats that we must abide by the national result which is a clear choice to leave the EU. To stand against the decision of the country would be to deepen Labour and the country's divisions and undermine our ability to build a coalition uniting the cities with the towns and country, the young with the old, immigrant with settled communities, the north with the south. We have to build this coalition in order to win an election to form a Labour government.[13]

For Labour, Brexit had the potential to cut right through its base: while the party's 2015 electorate divided roughly two-thirds to one-third between Remain and Leave voters, respectively, the

13 Chuka Umunna and Wes Streeting, "Why We Labour Remainers Voted to Trigger Article 50," inews.co.uk, February 1, 2017.

concentration of anti-Brexit voters in the larger towns and cities meant that there were more Labour-held constituencies with a Leave than a Remain majority.[14]

Although right-wing nationalists had led the Brexit campaign, the Leave vote did not come with any specific program or personality attached to it. This set Brexit apart from the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump, with which pundits often compared it. In itself, the idea of leaving the EU was politically and ethically neutral: there were several different ways of putting it into effect, some more desirable than others, depending on one's perspective. Umunna and Streeting stressed that they were not offering any blank checks to Theresa May if she attempted to use Britain's exit from the EU as the cloak for a radical right-wing agenda: "Neither Leavers nor Remainers want Britain turned into a bolt hole for the super rich, a tax haven for monopoly capitalism, a sweatshop for Europe."[15]

Labour's deputy leader, Tom Watson, derided the Liberal Democrats, who had already begun calling for a second referendum, as "Brexit deniers" who were proposing to "ignore the democratic will of the British people." Watson insisted that Labour would "press the government hard on the terms on which we leave the EU in order to achieve a settlement that benefits us all," but would not attempt to stop the process of withdrawal.[16] Yvette Cooper, one of Corbyn's rivals in the 2015 leadership election, compared Labour MPs who intended to vote against triggering Article 50 to Donald Trump.[17]

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14 Chris Hanretty, "Areal Interpolation and the UK's Referendum on EU Membership," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 27, no. 4 (2017).

15 Umunna and Streeting, "Why We Labour Remainers Voted to Trigger Article 50."

16 "Watson Mocks Lib Dem 'Brexit Deniers' and Vows Labour Will Not 'Disrespect' Public by Trying to Overturn EU Vote," *LabourList*, November 25, 2016.

17 Rob Merrick, "Labour's Yvette Cooper Compares MPs Voting Against Article

There was no pressure on Corbyn from the Labour right to offer outright opposition to Brexit at this time. In fact, the main criticism of the party leader concerned his reluctance to support new immigration controls for the citizens of EU member states: the *Guardian*'s Polly Toynbee described this as a "jaw-dropping kamikaze mission," while her colleague Jonathan Freedland scolded Corbyn for saying that he would address rational concerns about the possible impact of immigration on wages and public services: "What if it's not just the strain on services and pressure on pay that makes people fear immigration? What if it's actually more nebulous, and more toxic, questions of culture and identity that lie at the heart of this matter?"[18]

Senior Labour politicians lined up to demand a more hawkish line on immigration, including Watson, Cooper, Hilary Benn, and Andy Burnham. Strictly speaking, scrapping the right of EU citizens to take up British employment without the need for visas would require the UK to leave the European single market as well as the EU's political structures — an option that commentators had begun referring to as "hard Brexit." At the start of 2017, Corbyn gave a speech that contained the following equivocal lines: "We are not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle. But I don't want to be misinterpreted — nor do we rule it out."[19]

During the same month, Theresa May declared herself unambiguously for the "hard Brexit" model. She pledged to take Britain

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50 to Donald Trump," *Independent*, January 20, 2017.

18 Hugh Muir et al., "Did Jeremy Corbyn's Conference Speech Win Over the Party? Our Writers' Verdict," *Guardian*, September 28, 2016; Jonathan Freedland, "Jeremy Corbyn Could Heal Labour's Immigration Divide. Sadly, He's Doing the Opposite," *Guardian*, October 1, 2016.

19 Charlie Cooper, "Jeremy Corbyn Backtracks on Freedom of Movement," *Politico*, January 10, 2017.

out of the single market, end free movement of labor, and repudiate the European Court of Justice.[20] May also began using a slogan that would later come back to haunt her: "no deal is better than a bad deal." She was in a position of considerable strength at the time, with a comfortable polling lead and high personal ratings. May could have used that position to start managing expectations on the pro-Brexit side for the negotiations to come; instead, she set the bar extremely high.

BREXIT BLUEPRINTS

Theresa May had her eye fixed on the domestic political scene rather than on Britain's future relationship with the EU. In the 2015 general election, just under 50 percent of the electorate had supported either the Conservative Party or UKIP. If she could use Brexit to combine the existing Tory vote with the greater part of UKIP's support, it might very well produce an electoral landslide, especially with Labour so enfeebled. May could then face the Brexit negotiations with a personal mandate and a large majority of seats at Westminster — large enough to overcome any dissenters in her party who weren't happy with the final deal. In April 2017, she called for an early general election, to be held in June.

Going into the campaign, both of the main parties accepted that Britain was going to leave the EU. This aligned with the popular mood at the time: according to one poll in May 2017, just 22 percent of voters wanted politicians to ignore or overturn the referendum result.[21] In other respects, however, the Conservative and Labour manifestos pointed in opposite directions. As the Brexit crisis reached its crescendo, British liberals frequently argued

20 Jon Henley, "Key Points from May's Brexit Speech: What Have We Learned?" *Guardian*, January 17, 2017.

21 Marcus Roberts and Chris Curtis, "Forget 52%. The Rise of the 'Re-Leavers' Means the Pro-Brexit Electorate Is 68%," YouGov, May 12, 2017.

that there was no meaningful difference between the negotiating platforms of Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn. A close study of the two manifestos gave the lie to that claim.

The Tories made sure to include May's favorite slogan ("we continue to believe that no deal is better than a bad deal for the UK"), vowed to take the country out of the single market and the customs union, and stressed the importance of new barriers to immigration from the EU. On the one hand, the Conservative manifesto promised that "rights of workers and protections given to consumers and the environment" would "continue to be available in UK law" at the moment of departure. Yet it strongly implied that this might be a temporary state of affairs — "Once EU law has been converted into domestic law, parliament will be able to pass legislation to amend, repeal or improve any piece of EU law it chooses" — and dropped similar hints about the 1998 Human Rights Act, which had incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic legislation: "We will not repeal or replace the Human Rights Act while the process of Brexit is underway but we will consider our human rights legal framework when the process of leaving the EU concludes."[22]

Labour's manifesto turned May's slogan on its head, insisting that a no-deal exit would be "the worst possible deal for Britain," and pledged to negotiate with "a strong emphasis on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union," prioritizing "jobs and living standards" over the idea of putting the greatest possible distance between the UK and the EU. As well as committing to retain all "workplace laws, consumer rights and environmental protections" that were currently enshrined in EU law "without qualifications, limitations or sunset clauses," Labour also

22 "Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future," The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2017, 35–37.

promised that the UK would not "lag behind Europe in workplace protections and environmental standards in future."[23]

On the issue that proved central to the negotiations over Brexit, the status of Northern Ireland, there was a clear difference of emphasis between the two manifestos. The Tories said that they would "maintain as frictionless a border as possible for people, goods and services between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland," leaving readers to interpret the words "as possible" in any way they chose. Labour simply insisted there could be "no return to a hard border" on Britain's neighboring island, which would contain the only territorial frontier between the UK and the EU, if and when Brexit was complete.[24]

Labour's policy on immigration after Brexit attempted to walk a tightrope:

> In trade negotiations our priorities favour growth, jobs and prosperity. We make no apologies for putting these aims before bogus immigration targets. Freedom of movement will end when we leave the European Union. Britain's immigration system will change, but Labour will not scapegoat migrants nor blame them for economic failures.[25]

The promises to scrap "bogus immigration targets" and stop blaming migrants for the ills of British society sat awkwardly with Labour's commitment to end free movement. The latter pledge would rule out an arrangement like that already existing between Norway and the EU, unless one engaged in a Jesuitical reading of the manifesto, whereby freedom of movement could end in its current form, to be replaced by something that was functionally indistinguishable from the status quo.

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23 "For the Many, Not the Few," The Labour Party Manifesto 2017, 24–26.

24 "Forward, Together," 36; "For the Many, Not the Few," 27.

25 "For the Many, Not the Few," 28.

MELTDOWN

The 2017 election proved to be a disaster for Theresa May: instead of increasing David Cameron's small majority of seats, she came back with a deficit of nine. It is easy to forget how close she was to achieving her goal of a post-Brexit landslide. May's vote share, 42.4 percent, was the best Conservative performance since the 1980s, and 5.5 percent higher than the party's 2015 result. In some of the key Leave-voting regions, the Tory increase was well above the national figure: 9.1 percent in North East England, 7.8 percent in Yorkshire and the Humber, 7.3 percent in East and West Midlands alike, and 6.3 percent in Wales. In every British region other than London, the Conservative vote share went up.[26]

What undermined May's ambitions was the Labour performance. Corbyn's party gained thirty seats and won 40 percent of the vote, adding nearly 10 points to its 2015 score — the biggest increase in support for either of the main parties in any election since 1945. The Labour vote share went up by a bigger percentage than the Tory increase in every region apart from North East England — even there, it was only half a percent smaller — and Scotland, where Labour also had to compete with the Scottish National Party (SNP). In Yorkshire and the Humber, the Labour vote went up by 9.9 percent; in Wales, by 12.1 percent; in the East of England, by 10.7 percent (nearly double the Tory increase in that area). Labour increased its vote in every British region, and by double-digit scores in seven out of twelve.[27]

The big story of the 2017 election was a Labour surge, not a Tory collapse. As one of Corbyn's most persistent media critics observed, the credit for this "astonishing" result lay squarely with

26 "General Election 2017: Full Results and Analysis," House of Commons Library, 10.

27 "General Election 2017," 12.

the Labour leader and the unconventional mobilization he had inspired:

> While the professional and pundit class were testing his performance and chances against the traditional political rulebook, he took that volume and put it through the shredder. … After the crash, and after seven years of austerity, it's clear that many Britons are simply sick of stagnant wages, underfunded public services and unaffordable homes. Putting the case in moral, not coldly technocratic terms, Corbyn successfully framed voting Labour as the only way to say enough is enough.[28]

Theresa May patched together an arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), whose ten Westminster MPs enabled her to carry on with the day-to-day business of government. But it was now inconceivable that she would ever get a Brexit deal through parliament without support from a large number of opposition MPs. Even with the DUP on board, if just a handful of Conservative MPs decided that May's agreement with the EU didn't go far enough, it would not be able to pass.

The pivotal role of the DUP brought the question of Northern Ireland into sharper focus. At the end of 2017, May signed a preliminary agreement with the EU affirming that there could be no hard border between the two parts of Ireland — a clause upon which the Irish government had insisted.[29] This left May with two options. On the one hand, she could accept a much closer relationship with the single market and the customs union for the whole of the UK than she had promised in her 2017 election manifesto. That would be unacceptable to much of the Tory right.

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28 Jonathan Freedland, "Jeremy Corbyn Didn't Win — but He Has Rewritten All the Rules," *Guardian*, June 10, 2017.

29 Tony Connelly, *Brexit and Ireland: The Dangers, the Opportunities, and the Inside Story of the Irish Response* (London: Penguin UK, 2018), 373–6.

On the other hand, she could agree to separate arrangements for Northern Ireland that would distinguish it from Britain. That would be unacceptable to the DUP.

To add to her problems, May lacked any semblance of personal authority after the 2017 election result. Boris Johnson's leadership bid in the summer of 2016 had imploded because many Tory MPs who supported Remain and David Cameron saw him as an opportunistic wrecker, but May's newfound vulnerability encouraged him to revive those ambitions. The easiest way for Johnson to position himself would be to denounce any deal May reached with the EU as a sellout.

In theory, May could have escaped her double bind by reaching out to Labour and trying to forge a cross-party consensus around a softer version of Brexit. The fact that she never even considered doing so was symptomatic of her belief that the opposition leader was simply not a legitimate figure. This view of Corbyn was certainly not unique to May. If Labour had possessed a more conventional leadership team, promising continuity rather than change, May would in all likelihood have come under intense pressure to strike a bargain. However, the elite social actors most likely to reject a disruptive form of Brexit were even more hostile to the social democratic reform agenda that Corbyn and his ally John McDonnell had put together.

For their part, Corbyn and his associates could have used their strengthened position after the 2017 election to flesh out their Brexit policy by committing to a specific model, such as one based on membership of the European Economic Area (the model that became known as "Norway Plus"). This would have meant taking a clearer position on immigration and explicitly rejecting the idea that new controls were necessary or desirable. Instead, they decided to keep their options open and wait for May to put her cards on the table. Labour's shadow Brexit secretary, Keir

Starmer, put forward six criteria for any deal with the EU that were nebulous — but almost certainly unachievable.

CONTINUITY REMAIN

Between the elections of 2017 and 2019, a third political force that defined itself against both Jeremy Corbyn and Brexit pushed to the front of the stage. Broadly speaking, self-described centrists saw the legitimate political field as one that stretched from Tony Blair and Gordon Brown on the left to David Cameron and George Osborne to the right. They found the expansion of the ideological spectrum at both ends after 2015 to be profoundly unnatural and disturbing. In party politics, this tendency had a strong base among the Labour right and the Liberal Democrats, with a scattering of Conservative MPs on its side as well. It was also well represented in the British media and the cultural sphere.

The centrist fightback crystallized around opposition to Brexit. Its main organizational vehicle was the People's Vote (PV) campaign, founded by the millionaire businessman Roland Rudd. PV lobbied tirelessly for Labour to oppose Brexit in any form, not merely the version that the Conservative Party wanted to enact. For anyone in British public life who wanted to avoid the worst potential consequences of Brexit, this was a high-risk strategy with a strong possibility of failure. Labour's 2017 electorate contained a large minority of Leave voters — 31 percent, according to one exit poll.[30] If they defected to its rivals or chose to abstain in an election polarized around the idea of stopping Brexit, it would have dire implications for Labour.

We should not imagine that this prospect was unwelcome for the People's Vote leadership. The Labour Party's former communications director Tom Baldwin worked for PV as it built up

30 Michael Ashcroft, "How Did This Result Happen? My Post-Vote Survey," Lord Ashcroft Polls, June 9, 2017.

a head of steam. He has described the internal dynamics of the campaign in a retrospective interview:

> There was always an issue about how much the People's Vote Campaign should be a stick with which to beat the Labour Party rather than a neutral instrument for just winning a People's Vote. I was trying to maintain some strategic discipline around the latter but there were constantly people who wanted it to be an anti-Labour thing, an anti-Corbyn thing, a re-alignment thing, a Liberal Democrat thing, a proportional vote thing.[31]

As events would show over the course of 2019, the people who saw PV primarily as "an anti-Corbyn thing" were the ones who actually called the shots. The campaign relied upon an army of sincere foot soldiers to populate its demonstrations, but its inner core was strictly Machiavellian.[32]

Labour politicians such as Tom Watson and Chuka Umunna, who had previously supported the party's Brexit policy when they expected their factional allies to regain control in the near future, now experienced a Damascene conversion to anti-Brexit maximalism. Their incessant criticisms of Labour's approach contributed to a sense of incoherence that had a negative impact on Corbyn's public image.[33] Umunna eventually joined a breakaway group called Change UK that made opposition to Brexit one of its core demands.

"FLAT-OUT OPPOSITION"

What were the actual motivations of figures like Watson and Umunna when they came to adopt such a hard-line anti-Brexit

31 Tom Baldwin, Brexit Witness Archive, UK in a Changing Europe, July 5, 2021, 12.

32 Daniel Cohen, "'Loud, Obsessive, Tribal': The Radicalisation of Remain," *Guardian*, August 13, 2019, is the best ethnographic study of these authentic "Remainists."

33 Chris Curtis, "Brexit Indecisiveness Is Seriously Damaging Corbyn," YouGov, January 30, 2019.

position? Few subjects in contemporary British politics receive such inadequate coverage in the country's media as the internal divisions of the Labour Party. At the time of the Change UK split, Jeremy Gilbert crisply dismantled the hegemonic view that presented Corbyn's Labour opponents as well-meaning social democrats, anxious to reform Britain so long as that was compatible with electoral success:

> The clearest way of understanding their position is in basic Marxist terms. They are the section of the party that is ultimately allied to the interests of capital. Some may advocate for social reform and for some measure of redistribution, some may dislike the nationalism and endemic snobbery of the Tories more than others; but they will all ruthlessly oppose any attempt to limit or oppose the power of capital and those who hold it.[34]

As Gilbert observed, it was not simply a question of what these MPs believed. Most of them had entered parliament during the period between the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the financial crisis of 2008, and their entire conception of a Labour parliamentarian's role reflected this point of origin:

> According to this understanding, the purpose of a Labour MP is to try to persuade the richest and most powerful individuals, groups and institutions to make minor concessions to the interests of the disadvantaged, while persuading the latter to accept that these minor concessions are the best that they can hope for. That job description might well entail some occasional grandstanding when corporate institutions are engaged in particularly egregious forms of behaviour (such as making loans to very poor people at clearly exorbitant rates), or when

34 Jeremy Gilbert, "An Inevitable Division: The Politics and Consequences of the Labour Split," openDemocracy, February 20, 2019.

> the political right is engaged in explicit displays of racism or misogyny. But it doesn't entail any actual attempt to change the underlying distributions of power in British society; and in fact it does necessarily, and structurally, entail extreme hostility towards anybody who proposes to do that.[35]

Although they coexisted in the same party, the ideological gulf between Labour's right-wing and left-wing tendencies was in fact much wider and deeper than that between the Labour right and the Conservatives.

Tony Blair summed up this mindset in September 2017 when he sneered at the mobilizations around Corbyn and Bernie Sanders in Britain and the United States — "we're going to give you this for free, or that for free" — while urging people "from the progressive side of politics" not to greet Donald Trump with "flat-out opposition" and look for common ground instead: "If something happens that is good, then don't disagree with it just because of its author."[36] The "good" Trump policy that Blair had in mind was a more aggressive stance toward Iran than Barack Obama's. Throughout the Corbyn years, Blair issued regular hostile communiqués about the Labour leadership that contrasted sharply with his collegial attitude toward figures like Trump, the Italian far-right leader Matteo Salvini, or the Saudi royal Mohammed bin Salman.[37]

For Corbyn's inner-party opponents, defeating him unquestionably took priority over removing the Tories from office or stopping Brexit. *Sunday Times* journalists Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire describe a meeting of anti-Corbyn Labour MPs,

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35 Gilbert, "An Inevitable Division."

36 Susan B. Glasser, "Tony Blair: The Full Transcript," *Politico*, September 25, 2017.

37 However, within months of Joe Biden's inauguration as Trump's successor, Blair launched a bilious attack on the new president, denouncing his "imbecilic" withdrawal from Afghanistan.

including Tom Watson, that the Labour peer Peter Mandelson organized in the summer of 2018. Those in attendance differed sharply on the question of Labour's Brexit policy: "What they *did* agree on made that difference in opinion seem much less fundamental. All of Mandelson's guests longed for the day Corbyn was no longer leader of the Labour Party, regardless of whether the sweet release came inside of the EU or out."[38] Mandelson himself once boasted that he worked "every single day in some small way" to hasten the end of Corbyn's leadership.[39]

The unwillingness of most British journalists to recognize the political character of Labour's internal divisions gave their reporting on the party's civil war a hallucinatory quality. One of the Change UK defectors, Chris Leslie, had previously argued that Labour lost the 2015 election because it was too critical of landlords and insufficiently enthusiastic about deficit reduction.[40] In his book *All Out War*, the *Sunday Times* political editor Tim Shipman claims that the dividing line between Corbyn and Leslie was the latter's "commitment to the parliamentary road to socialism," as if Corbyn was proposing a Leninist-style insurrectionary path against Leslie's Fabian or Eurocommunist gradualism.[41] Reporters almost

38 Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire, *Left Out: The Inside Story of Labour Under Corbyn* (London: Vintage, 2021), 162–3.

39 Rowena Mason and Jessica Elgot, "Peter Mandelson: I Try to Undermine Jeremy Corbyn 'Every Single Day,'" *Guardian*, February 21, 2017. At a time when Mandelson was one of the most prominent figures in the People's Vote campaign, his business consultancy firm Global Counsel advised its clients to operate on the assumption that Brexit could not and would not be stopped: Solomon Hughes, "Peter Mandelson Calls for a 'People's Vote' While Telling Potential Clients Brexit Can't Be Stopped," *Vice*, December 19, 2018.

40 Heather Stewart, "Chris Leslie: 'The Temptation for the Centre Left Is to Step in and Take Control,'" *Guardian*, May 30, 2015.

41 Shipman, *All Out War*, 482. In July 2020, the Credit Services Association, which proudly describes itself as "the voice of the UK debt collection and purchase industry" (more popularly known as bailiffs), appointed Leslie as its chief executive. Around the same time, his Change UK colleagues Luciana Berger and Chuka

invariably referred to Corbyn's Labour opponents as "moderates," no matter how immoderate they showed themselves to be in both the form and the content of their politics.[42]

A leaked report on Labour's internal culture under Corbyn conveyed a more realistic picture. The report drew heavily on messages exchanged between party officials at Labour's headquarters, most of whom were bitterly hostile to the left-wing leadership and departed within months of the 2017 general election. They desperately wanted Corbyn to fail and responded to the party's electoral advance as if they had experienced a personal bereavement. "Stunned and reeling," "silent and grey faced," "in need of counselling," "opposite to what I had been working towards for the last couple of years!" — these were the words chosen by the officials themselves to convey their reaction to an exit poll that showed Labour increasing its vote for the first time since 1997.[43]

Their hostility to Jeremy Corbyn clearly stemmed from profound ideological disagreements rather than concerns about "electability." Corbyn's speech after the May 2017 Manchester terrorist bombing, which linked terrorist attacks on British soil to the disastrous results of Anglo-American wars in the Middle East, encapsulated this division between opposing worldviews. Two

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Umunna began working for the PR firm Edelman, although Umunna soon left to take up a role with JP Morgan.

42 Tamara Cohen, "Jeremy Corbyn Tightens Grip on Labour as Moderates Watson and Austin Quit," Sky News, November 7, 2019. The "moderate" ex-Labour MP Ian Austin campaigned for a Tory victory in the 2019 general election and received a life peerage from Boris Johnson's government shortly afterward.

43 Aaron Bastani, "'It's Going to Be a Long Night' — How Members of Labour's Senior Management Team Campaigned to Lose," Novara, April 12, 2020. The majority of British journalists have studiously ignored the evidence contained in this report, implying that it consists of partisan tittle-tattle if they deign to mention it at all. However, Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire present it as a vital source for their "inside story of Labour under Corbyn," referring to "the leaked report whose contents inform much of this book": Pogrund and Maguire, *Left Out*, 359.

party officials, Jo Greening and Francis Grove-White, were horrified by the thought of what Corbyn was planning to say. Greening hoped that it would cause the party grave electoral damage: "With a bit of luck this speech will show a clear polling decline and we shall all be able to point to how disgusting they truly are."[44]

Grove-White was worried that Corbyn's perspective "won't go down as badly as it deserves to thanks to the large groundswell of ill-informed opposition to all western interventions." Greening reassured him that there was no cause for concern: "In the face of a terror attack normal people do not blame foreign intervention they blame immigration."[45] In fact, British public opinion overwhelmingly endorsed Corbyn's analysis — 53 percent agreed with the statement that "wars the UK has supported or fought are responsible, at least in part, for terror attacks against our country"; just 24 percent disagreed.[46] Greening would have preferred to see "normal people" scapegoat immigrants for the bombing instead.

CRUNCH TIME

As well as enlisting support from MPs, the People's Vote campaign worked through the Labour Party's internal structures, organizing constituency motions in the run-up to the 2018 party conference that called for a second referendum on EU membership. Another Europe Is Possible (AEIP), a left-wing group that was opposed to Brexit in any form, also took part in such efforts.[47]

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44 Bastani, "'It's Going to Be a Long Night.'"

45 Bastani, "'It's Going to Be a Long Night.'"

46 Matthew Smith, "Jeremy Corbyn Is on the Right Side of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy: Except for the Falklands," YouGov, May 30, 2017.

47 Pogrund and Maguire, *Left Out*, 132–4, 138–9. AEIP's leading figures came to adopt an all-or-nothing line on Brexit whose strategic recklessness should have been apparent at the time: Michael Chessum, "Why Labour Must Not Fall for the Charms of a Norway-Style Deal," *Guardian*, March 13, 2019.

The Labour membership was predominantly anti-Brexit in its sympathies — far more so than the party's wider electorate. Members might accept on pragmatic grounds the idea that Labour could not oppose withdrawal from the EU, but they would not do so with any great enthusiasm. Corbyn's leadership largely neglected to organize in support of its desired policy within the party, which proved to be a serious error. It meant that there was an empty discursive space in which arguments that Labour must oppose all forms of Brexit could take hold.

Politicians from the Labour right traditionally argued that, whenever there was a divergence of opinion between Labour voters and members, it behooved the latter to eat their greens and compromise for the sake of "electability." Now they turned that position on its head. Since the majority of Labour members would prefer to stay in the EU, they insisted that the views of the membership must prevail at all costs — and that Labour must therefore ignore what a substantial part of its working-class electorate wanted it to do, irrespective of the electoral risks.

At the 2018 conference, the leadership agreed to a compromise motion whose key passage was as follows:

> Should parliament vote down a Tory Brexit deal or the talks end in no-deal, conference believes this would constitute a loss of confidence in the government. In these circumstances, the best outcome for the country is an immediate general election that can sweep the Tories from power. If we cannot get a general election Labour must support all options remaining on the table, including campaigning for a public vote.[48]

In his conference speech, Keir Starmer gave the idea of "campaigning for a public vote" a strong anti-Brexit inflection — "nobody

48 "Labour's Brexit Composite Motion in Full," *LabourList*, September 26, 2018.

is ruling out Remain as an option" — much to the annoyance of Corbyn and his allies.[49]

Toward the end of 2018, Theresa May returned with a Brexit deal that managed to antagonize both the Tory right and her temporary allies in the DUP. Instead of making a clear choice about the status of Northern Ireland, May postponed the decision through the so-called backstop arrangement, which ended up pleasing nobody. Westminster voted against May's deal three times between January and March 2019.

During the same period, Corbyn came forward with an alternative negotiating platform for the Brexit talks that EU officials publicly welcomed.[50] Labour's proposals were in line with the soft-Brexit, "Norway Plus" model that would have minimized the disruptive impact of leaving the EU while avoiding the need for a second referendum.[51] This cut no ice with the People's Vote campaign, which avowedly wanted to eliminate any possibility of a soft-Brexit option so that voters would face a stark choice.[52]

When pollsters asked the British public to rank different outcomes in order of preference, from a no-deal exit to staying in the EU, the soft-Brexit model was by far the most popular — or, at any rate, the least unpopular.[53] In August 2019, academic Will Jennings described the findings of a survey designed to capture

49 Pogrund and Maguire, *Left Out*, 142–3.

50 Alberto Nardelli and Alex Wickham, "Donald Tusk Told Theresa May That Jeremy Corbyn's Plan Could Be 'a Promising Way' out of the Brexit Impasse," *BuzzFeed News*, February 7, 2019; Jon Stone, "EU Parliament Chiefs Welcome Jeremy Corbyn's New Brexit Plans," *Independent*, February 7, 2019.

51 Stephen Bush, "Jeremy Corbyn Throws His Weight Behind a Soft Brexit in Surprise Letter to Theresa May," *New Statesman*, February 6, 2019.

52 Alex Wickham, "The Campaign for a People's Vote on Brexit Has Descended into Infighting and Splits," *BuzzFeed News*, January 22, 2019; Adam Payne and Adam Bienkov, "The People's Vote Campaign Approaches Judgement Day in Battle to Secure a New Brexit Referendum," *Business Insider*, January 25, 2019.

53 Christina Pagel, "The Crazy Polling of Soft Brexit," politics.co.uk, April 23, 2019.

the gradations of public opinion. According to Jennings, soft Brexit was "the option where public opinion is least divided." In contrast, the idea of stopping Brexit altogether was deeply controversial:

> Remain is incredibly divisive with around 35% considering this a very bad outcome and 31% considering it a very good outcome. Just 7% consider Remain an acceptable compromise. This suggests that a second referendum and voting to Remain would be far more polarising than the option of Single Market and Customs Union membership.[54]

The People's Vote campaign and its parliamentary allies were not solely responsible for the failure of a soft-Brexit deal to materialize, and it might well have proved impossible regardless of what position they had taken in the opening months of 2019. But they certainly deployed all their political capital against it. The last opportunity for compromise passed at the beginning of April, when the British parliament held a series of nonbinding indicative votes on different Brexit options. The "Norway Plus" model fell short by twenty-one votes, while a proposal to keep the UK in the customs union — a softer form of Brexit than the one May had proposed — was three votes shy of passing. A motion calling for a second referendum was defeated by twelve votes.

The failure to pass any version of Brexit ensured that Britain would be taking part in the European elections at the end of May. This unexpected contest proved to be a windfall for the hard-Remain camp, composed of the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, and the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. Their combined vote share was nearly 36 percent, while Labour came in third with less

54 Will Jennings, "In Search of the 'Median Voter' on Brexit," YouGov, August 29, 2019. A report by the Liberal Democrats on the 2019 general election suggested that public opinion was "divided into three groups" at the time: "20-25% passionate Remainers, 20-25% passionate Leavers, and 50-60% who weren't really that passionate either way." Liberal Democrats, "2019 Election Review," 13.

than 14 percent. Turnout was very low — just over 37 percent — but the result convinced the Labour leadership that it could no longer hold out against calls for a second referendum, despite the very real danger that this would alienate Labour Leave voters.

The Conservative performance was even worse: fifth place and less than 9 percent of the vote. The Brexit Party, an astroturfed operation that the former UKIP leader Nigel Farage had established just a few months earlier, topped the poll with 30.5 percent. The Tories responded to this calamity by replacing Theresa May with Boris Johnson, the only man who could rival Farage as a barnstorming, populist champion of Brexit. Johnson pledged to extricate his country from the EU at all costs by October 31.

MOVING THE GOALPOSTS

If the People's Vote campaign and the broader centrist fraternity were actually committed to stopping Brexit, they should have greeted Labour's change of policy with unqualified delight. The main opposition party — the only party other than the Tories capable of forming a government — was now committed to holding a second referendum with Remain as an option. Instead of welcoming this move, the centrists responded by moving the goalposts.

In late August, with the deadline fast approaching, Sky News journalist Lewis Goodall expressed his bewilderment at their attitude:

> It is not enough that Mr Corbyn gives them what they want, that he has moved to the position they sought because of his head. He has not given them enough of his heart. He does not believe enough, which in this Brexit culture war is a graver sin than not providing the political means of getting what you want. Every time he moves, the anger is that he has not moved quicker — that he should declare Labour a Remain party, that

> he should move straight to Article 50 revocation, that he must pledge in advance to campaign to remain against a deal of his own negotiation, that he cannot be allowed to balance delicate politics because the signal and the noise is more important than his direction of travel.[55]

For Goodall, this contrasted sharply with the willingness of hard-line Brexit supporters to use Boris Johnson as their implement, despite a well-founded suspicion that he cared far more about "Brexit as a potential springboard for his own installation in Downing St" than about the cause itself.[56] If, however, we assume that the primary goal of Britain's centrist politicians was not to stop Brexit but to break up the left-wing advance of 2017, then the behavior Goodall described so accurately makes perfect sense. The final months of the year eliminated any room for doubt.

Johnson's initial plan upon becoming Tory leader was to call a snap election at the beginning of autumn. That way, he could declare his willingness to take Britain out of the EU without a deal and hope to claw back support from the Brexit Party on that basis, but he would not have to follow through on such rhetoric in advance of the October deadline. Johnson wanted to secure the

55 Lewis Goodall, "Remainers Can No Longer Take Yes for an Answer," Sky News, August 21, 2019. One of the figures who was most vocal in "pushing the limits of Labour's Brexit policy beyond the realms of political possibility" — as Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire describe it — was Tom Watson: Pogrund and Maguire, *Left Out*, 252. Watson stood down as an MP in advance of the 2019 election and left another Labour candidate to argue for his desired Brexit policy in a constituency that had voted Leave by 68 to 32 percent in 2016. Labour lost the seat on a 24 percent swing to the Conservatives, whose vote share roughly matched the percentage they had jointly achieved with UKIP in 2015. In September 2020, Watson took a job working for Flutter Entertainment, the world's biggest online gambling firm. One of Watson's former aides insisted that his goal would be to stiffen the company's ethical backbone: "I don't think he would have taken it if he didn't think he could do some good." Rob Davies, "Tom Watson Takes Job as Adviser to Paddy Power and Betfair," *Guardian*, September 17, 2020.

56 Goodall, "Remainers Can No Longer Take Yes for an Answer."

large parliamentary majority May had lacked, enabling him to push through a new Brexit deal, even if it only differed in cosmetic detail from the previous one. Corbyn's instinct was to grant Johnson the early election he wanted and present Labour as the best option for those who wanted to avoid a no-deal exit.[57] However, Keir Starmer and John McDonnell argued for delay, and their views won out.[58]

With the electoral road blocked, Johnson began negotiating in earnest with the EU and soon came back with a new deal. He agreed that Northern Ireland would have its own special status, allowing the rest of the UK to leave the single market and the customs union without any qualifications. Theresa May had always resisted this step, not only because of her reliance on DUP votes at Westminster, but also because of its destabilizing implications for the governance of her state. According to Johnson's estranged ally Dominic Cummings, his then boss never intended to respect the terms of the agreement: after "whacking Corbyn" in a general election, Johnson planned to scrap those parts of the deal that he found bothersome.[59] On the campaign trail, Johnson simply lied about the sections that related to Northern Ireland, denying that they would create trade barriers in the Irish Sea.[60]

The deal was bad news for Labour's election prospects. The Labour leadership considered blocking the vote until the new year, but the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party indicated their willingness to facilitate Johnson, since both parties

57 The Fixed-term Parliaments Act enacted by David Cameron's government in 2011 meant that an early dissolution would require support from two-thirds of Westminster MPs.

58 Pogrund and Maguire, *Left Out*, 250–2.

59 Emilio Casalicchio, "Dominic Cummings: UK Always Intended to Ditch Northern Ireland Brexit Deal," *Politico*, October 13, 2021.

60 "Boris Johnson Insists There Will Be No Border Checks Post-Brexit and Labels Leaked Treasury Document 'Wrong,'" ITV News, December 8, 2019.

wanted to cash in on their polling figures while the going was good. In any case, a delay of several months would most likely have seen Johnson's Brexit plan secure a parliamentary majority with support from rebel Labour MPs who represented Leave-voting constituencies. That would have allowed the Conservative leader to call a snap election as the man who had delivered Brexit, with every prospect of storming to victory. In the last week of October, parliament voted for an election to be held on December 12.

The Conservative Party, the right-wing press, and Britain's capitalist class lined up behind Johnson. There was an unprecedented flow of cash from members of the Sunday Times Rich List in 2019: the fifty largest donors collectively gave nearly £25 million to the Tories, while Labour attracted just £5,000 from the same cohort.[61] When Nigel Farage denounced Johnson's deal as a betrayal and threatened to run a spoiler campaign against him, the Leave-supporting businessman Arron Banks quickly brought him into line, stressing the need to "save Brexit and save the country from a Corbyn government."[62]

On the other side of the political fence, there was no such consolidation of forces. The centrists who had presented Brexit as a matter of supreme importance now refused to support the only party that could stop Johnson's deal from going through. Roland Rudd shut down the People's Vote campaign overnight to ensure that none of its resources would be used to support Labour candidates. Rudd was in a position to do so because the campaign had always been a private company rather than an authentic social movement. According to one of Rudd's disgruntled allies, the businessman was "more interested in using its database

61 Nick Rodrigues and Alastair McCall, "Top 50 Political Donors Who Bankrolled the UK Election 2019," *Sunday Times*, May 16, 2020.

62 Alastair Jamieson, "Arron Banks Likens Nigel Farage to Casino Gambler and Says Brexit Is Under Threat," *Reuters*, November 12, 2019.

to create a new pro-European, Lib Dem-centred political force after Brexit — a sort of mirror image of the Brexit Party capable of realigning British politics — than he was in securing a second vote and preventing Brexit."[63]

The Liberal Democrats responded to Labour's change of line on Brexit by pretending that it hadn't happened, as their own election review later acknowledged.[64] Their leader, Jo Swinson, claimed that she could stop Brexit single-handedly by overtaking both Labour and the Conservatives and becoming Britain's prime minister. This was a transparently absurd notion — the Lib Dems ended up losing one of their twelve seats, the one held by Swinson — and the party's review has the grace not to pretend that they were sincerely deluded: "We chose to claim to believe we could win outright ourselves."[65] The supermarket tycoon David Sainsbury gave the single largest donation from any individual — £8 million — for a Lib Dem campaign that functioned primarily to fragment the anti-Brexit or anti-Tory segments of the British electorate.[66]

Liberal media outlets followed a similar approach, with the *New Statesman* refusing to endorse Labour, and *Guardian* columnists expressing outrage at the very idea that they might be expected to choose between Johnson and Corbyn.[67] The *Financial Times* editorial board appeared to be wishing a plague on both houses — "the main parties have put ideological purity before the good of Great Britain" — but went on to present Johnson as the lesser of two evils:

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63 Martin Fletcher, "How People's Vote Destroyed Itself," *New Statesman*, November 20, 2019.

64 Liberal Democrats, "2019 Election Review," 12.

65 Liberal Democrats, "2019 Election Review," 12.

66 Rodrigues and McCall, "Top 50 Political Donors."

67 "Britain Deserves Better," *New Statesman*, December 4, 2019; Rafael Behr, "No Brexit, No Johnson, No Corbyn. Is That Too Much to Ask?" *Guardian*, December 11, 2019.

> The party most distant from FT values — and whose policies are most perilous — is Labour under Mr Corbyn. Its socialist blueprint would replace a thriving market economy with a statist model. Labour aims to reverse, not revise, the Thatcherite revolution of the 1980s. … many in the business community and beyond will inevitably conclude they must vote Conservative, however reluctantly, as the only way to keep Mr Corbyn from power. While a hung parliament might, in theory, allow Brexit to be rethought, this too would risk ceding dangerous influence to the Labour leader.[68]

The election campaign was an unprecedented whirlwind of disinformation, with public-sector broadcasters openly favoring the Conservatives despite their statutory obligation to remain impartial.[69] Much of this disinformation focused on provably false claims that Corbyn had allowed the Labour Party to become overrun with antisemitism, and even that his party posed a quasi-genocidal threat to the safety of British Jews, echoing similar attacks on the "Squad" of left-wing Democrats in the United States.[70] Astonishingly, a group of celebrities could publish an open letter tacitly depicting Boris Johnson as the superior choice for anti-racists

68 Editorial Board, "Britain's Fateful Election Offers No Good Choices," *Financial Times*, December 5, 2019.

69 Tom Mills, "The Last Days of the BBC?", *Jacobin*, December 8, 2019; and Mills, *The BBC*, 206–12.

70 For more detail on this extraordinary campaign, which took shape over a number of years, relying on assertions rather than evidence and perceptions rather than facts, see Daniel Finn, "Corbyn Under Fire," *Jacobin*, April 9, 2018; "The Antisemitism Controversy," *Jacobin*, September 16, 2018; "The Never-Ending Story," *Jacobin*, July 11, 2019; "A Fabricated Crisis," *Sidecar*, February 1, 2021. Peter Beinart's comment on the US critics of Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and their colleagues — "the evidence that the Squad's critics are anti-Palestinian is far stronger than the evidence that the Squad is anti-Jewish" — applies just as much to Corbyn and his British opponents: Peter Beinart, "It's Time to Name Anti-Palestinian Bigotry," *Jewish Currents*, July 16, 2021.

and fully expect to be taken seriously by the liberal press.[71] The sheer unreality of the discourse surrounding the 2019 election beggared belief.

THE BREXIT ELECTION

Worn out by divisions over Brexit and other issues, and facing a party whose new leader was a highly effective performer, Jeremy Corbyn and his allies were in no position to repeat their 2017 achievement. The well-documented organizational and communicative flaws of the Labour election campaign were ultimately a symptom of the wider political malaise afflicting the party leadership, rather than a primary cause.[72]

If Boris Johnson had flopped in the same fashion as Theresa May two years earlier, analysts would no doubt have identified multiple shortcomings in his campaign, from the refusal to offer a substantial manifesto to the moment when Johnson quite literally hid in a refrigerator to evade scrutiny from reporters. Under the circumstances, Johnson would have had to make a Herculean effort if he wanted to lose. His core message, "Get Brexit Done," functioned on two levels, appealing to hard-line Brexit supporters as well as those who were fed up with the issue and just wanted to get it over and done with. Corbyn's pledge to hold a second referendum after negotiating a fresh deal seemed to hold out the prospect of further delay and disputation.

Labour's vote dropped by almost 8 percent. Boris Johnson improved on Theresa May's score by just over 1 percent but now had a majority of eighty-one seats. The People's Vote campaign

71 Rowena Mason and Frances Perraudin, "Labour Antisemitism Row: Public Figures Say They Cannot Vote for Party Under Corbyn," *Guardian*, November 14, 2019.

72 For an account of those flaws from the perspective of one subfaction within the leadership, see Owen Jones, *This Land: The Struggle for the Left* (London: Penguin UK, 2021), 285–304.

Table 1: **Conservative and Labour Vote and Seat Shares, 1983–2019**

	Conservative (%)	Labour (%)	Conservative (seats)	Labour (seats)
1983	42.4	27.6	397	209
1987	42.2	30.8	376	229
1992	41.9	34.4	336	271
1997	30.7	43.2	165	418
2001	31.7	40.7	166	412
2005	32.4	35.2	198	355
2010	36.1	29	306	258
2015	36.9	30.4	330	232
2017	42.4	40	317	262
2019	43.6	32.1	365	202

got the polarization between Leave and Remain camps that it had been looking for. While Labour held on to four-fifths of its 2017 Remain voters, barely half of its Leave electorate stuck with the party. Of the sixty seats that Labour lost, fifty-two had a pro-Brexit majority in 2016, while the one Labour gain, Putney, had voted overwhelmingly against leaving the EU.[73]

In the lost Labour constituencies scattered throughout Northern England, the Midlands, and Wales, the party's vote share fell back to its 2010 level — 39 percent — after having risen to 50 percent in 2017. There was a massive post-Brexit increase in support for the Tories, from 32 percent in 2010 and 2015 to 42 percent in 2017 and 47 percent in 2019.[74] Combined with the

73 "General Election 2019: Full Results and Analysis," House of Commons Library, 57, 50–51.

74 Jo Michell and Rob Calvert Jump, "Labour, the 'Red Wall,' and the Vicissitudes of Britain's Voting System," openDemocracy, August 20, 2020.

earlier loss of its Scottish constituencies to the SNP, this meant that Labour won fewer seats than in 2010 or even 1983, despite having a bigger share of the vote, as Table 1 shows.

An article by Lewis Goodall, published on the eve of the general election, usefully complements this quantitative evidence about the importance of Brexit for the outcome. Goodall returned to the West Heath district in Birmingham, England's second-largest city, having paid it a visit during the 2017 election campaign. On his previous trip, he had gathered the impression that "Conservative overtures to this bit of the Midlands working class were failing, or at least, not succeeding enough," above all because "the Tory attempt to link [Labour] with any kind of Brexit reversal had manifestly failed." The mood this time was very different: "Labour has become associated with attempts to block or reverse our leaving the EU."[75]

Goodall offered a shrewd assessment of how working-class Leave voters had greeted the attempt to overturn the referendum result:

> Whatever Remainers say about the referendum being only advisory, or long ago, it misses the point of the pain which the impression of its dismissal has created. Rightly or wrongly, class politics suffuses the interpretation of the election result.
>
> Again and again you hear "they don't pay attention, our vote counts for nothing." It causes incomprehension. For certain types of voter, the Brexit process has thus reaffirmed and cemented old doubts about politics.
>
> In their minds, it has proven that change is not possible, that democracy doesn't work, that its practitioners aren't interested in making it work for anyone but themselves. We hear a lot about the supposed anger of certain places.

75 Lewis Goodall, "Corbyn's Greatest Failure Is Not Providing a Left-Wing Alternative to Brexit," Sky News, December 9, 2019.

> There's some of that but at least as abundant is pure confusion and incomprehension.[76]

The constituency in which West Heath is located, Birmingham Northfield, swung to the Conservatives in 2019 for the first time since 1987.

This is not to argue that Labour could have repeated its 2017 result if only it had stuck to its original Brexit policy. In that scenario, it would almost certainly have lost a significant number of its Remain voters to the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, and other parties. The outcome might have been less damaging, especially in terms of seat share, because of the way the Leave/Remain divide mapped onto the British electoral system. But the party would still have taken a substantial hit.

At the beginning of 2019, Jeremy Corbyn identified the danger of a lasting polarization between Leave and Remain camps that would divide the country's working class and the forces working to bring about radical change:

> People across the country, whether they voted Leave or Remain know that the system isn't working for them. Some see the EU as a defence against insecurity and hostility. Others see the EU as part of an establishment that plunged them into insecurity and hostility in the first place. But it's the failed system, rigged against the many to protect the interests of the few, that is the real cause of inequality and insecurity, whether it's in Tottenham or Mansfield. And the real solution is to transform Britain to work in the interests of the vast majority by challenging the entrenched power of a privileged elite.[77]

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76 Goodall, "Corbyn's Greatest Failure."

77 "'Labour Is Ready to Bring Leave and Remain Voters Together' — Corbyn's Full Speech on Brexit," *LabourList*, January 10, 2019. The North London constitu-

Those who wanted to maintain the "entrenched power of a privileged elite" used Brexit to beat back an unexpected challenge. Whether they attached Leave or Remain labels to their political clothing, they were clearly delighted with the outcome. Four months after the election, the former Labour MP Gavin Shuker reflected on the short history of Change UK, the splinter-group of which he had been the chief organizer. With the COVID-19 pandemic now in full spate, Shuker expressed his personal satisfaction at having assisted Boris Johnson's rise to power:

> People might ask me in 30 years, "what did you achieve in your time in politics?" I'm no fan of this government obviously. But still, I will be able to say I helped prevent Jeremy Corbyn from leading us through a huge national crisis. And to be honest, I'll take that.[78]

In October 2021, a parliamentary report found that Johnson's mismanagement of the pandemic during its opening phase had resulted in "many thousands of deaths which could have been avoided."[79] The UK had one of the highest death rates in the developed capitalist world, reflecting not just the negligence of its current leader but a much longer period in which successive governments had hacked away at the social safety net.

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ency of Tottenham voted for Remain by 76 to 24%; the Midlands constituency of Mansfield voted to Leave by 71 to 29%. In 2016–17, Mansfield had a slightly higher child poverty rate than Tottenham (22.7% to 19.8%); by 2019–20, their position had reversed (18.9% to 24.5%): commonslibrary.parliament.uk/constituency-data-child-poverty/.

78 Tim Adams, "A Year on, Did Change UK Change Anything?", *Guardian*, April 19, 2020.

79 Shashank Bengali, "Britain's Covid Missteps Cost Thousands of Lives, Inquiry Finds," *New York Times*, October 12, 2021.

THE REAL BATTLE

For the Labour right and its media allies, the election that really mattered came in April 2020. In the wake of Jeremy Corbyn's defeat, the party membership swiftly gravitated toward the leadership campaign of Keir Starmer, which had been in preparation for some time. Starmer's popularity among Labour members predated the 2019 election: in July of that year, a poll found that 68 percent thought he was a good candidate to replace Corbyn. The second-most popular choice was Corbyn's ally John McDonnell (64 percent).[80]

This suggests that much of the Labour membership had not grasped the nature of the party's ideological divisions during the Corbyn years. Starmer was far more popular than Labour politicians who had been openly hostile to Corbyn, such as Tom Watson (37 percent) or Jess Phillips (33 percent). Although he supported the attempt to oust Corbyn in 2016, Starmer later served in his shadow cabinet and refrained from public attacks on the party leader. This was enough to buy him credibility with a crucial segment of Labour members who voted for Corbyn in 2015 and 2016 and now opted for Starmer over the left-wing candidate Rebecca Long-Bailey.

Much like People's Vote, Starmer's campaign had a dual character: the public face that he presented to the Labour membership, and the private assurances that he offered to the Labour right. A campaign video presented him as a friend of striking miners and printworkers, an opponent of Tony Blair's war in Iraq, and an ally of Jeremy Corbyn. His ten pledges set out a policy agenda that would stand well to the left of Ed Miliband, let alone Blair. Starmer combined this platform with a commitment to end factional squabbles

80 Matthew Smith, "Corbyn's Reputation Takes a Big Hit with Labour Members, but Most Still Want Him to Stay," YouGov, July 22, 2019.

and develop a more effective media strategy, while enlisting some prominent figures who had supported Corbyn to make his pitch look more convincing.

In a nutshell, he told people what they wanted to hear after a shattering reverse, while refusing to publish the list of donors that would have been a more reliable indication of what he planned to do as leader. When Starmer finally revealed his campaign donations after the election was over, it emerged that eight wealthy individuals who had been declared opponents of Corbyn, including the Blairite peer Waheed Alli and the gambling tycoon Peter Coates, contributed a total of £455,000 to support him.

For all of Starmer's dissembling, it should have been clear that he was promising incompatible things. If he stuck to the ten pledges, there would be no end to party infighting or improved relations with the British media.[81] But the Labour left proved unable or unwilling to expose the contradictions of his leadership pitch. Its candidate, Long-Bailey, was slow to get started with her own campaign. She lacked Starmer's profile and had almost certainly lost the contest before it even began.

Long-Bailey's team decided to hold back on criticisms of Starmer with an eye to what might happen after the leadership election: Jon Lansman, founder of the pro-Corbyn group Momentum, believed that it was essential for Long-Bailey to join Starmer's shadow cabinet in the probable event of his victory.[82] It is unlikely that a more confrontational approach would have tilted the balance of the contest decisively in Long-Bailey's favor. However, it might have obliged Starmer to speak more frankly about his intentions and tarnished his image as a unity candidate.

81 Tom Blackburn, "The Starmer Illusion," *Tribune*, January 20, 2020.

82 Pogrund and Maguire, *Left Out*, 345–6.

CARGO CULT

Many of those who voted for Jeremy Corbyn and then Keir Starmer must have thought the party's shift to the left was locked in, because the membership would not tolerate a regression to Blairite policies. If so, they greatly overestimated the leverage of party members once the leadership election was over. As soon as Starmer was over the line, with 56 percent of the vote on the first round, he began stripping members of influence by changing the electoral system for Labour's national executive committee.

At the 2021 Labour conference — the first since the pandemic — Starmer attempted to restore the old electoral college system for choosing the party leader, which gave Labour MPs the same weight as the entire party membership. That effort failed, but Starmer did manage to raise the threshold of nominations from Labour MPs for any future leadership candidates. This made it harder to envisage a repeat of Corbyn's surprise 2015 breakthrough.

Once Starmer and his allies had the party's organizational levers in their grasp, they were in a position to marginalize the Labour left and begin dismantling the policy platform it had constructed between 2015 and 2019. In March 2021, historian Adam Tooze bemoaned Labour's retreat from the left-wing environmental program it had developed under Corbyn into managerial mediocrity:

> The Green New Deal was not radicalism for its own sake. It was radical because reality demanded it. Faced with the 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath, the world historic presence of China, Trump, the escalating climate crisis, and an unprecedented global pandemic, what more is needed to demonstrate this point? A politics that does

not want to mobilise around these challenges, which prefers to deal in patriotic pastiche, forfeits any claim to be progressive.[83]

Starmer's political project has rapidly transmogrified into a Blairite covers band, playing a set of familiar hits from the 1990s in a world that has changed beyond recognition. Insofar as Starmer has a plan for winning the next election, it is to make Labour entirely inoffensive to any powerful interests in British society and hope that the Tories self-destruct. This strategy could work on its own terms: the Conservative Party has been in office for a long time and may simply run out of road. But this do-nothing approach certainly comes with no guarantee of success, and in any case, a Labour government formed on that basis would be a dismal affair, incapable of addressing the social and ecological crises that will only worsen in the meantime.

The coterie that surrounds the Labour leadership will not lose any sleep over that. Their overriding priority is to hammer the party's left wing, not to challenge the Tories or win an election. On that front, Starmer quickly showed himself to be a dirty fighter, expelling Rebecca Long-Bailey from his shadow cabinet in June 2020 on a trumped-up charge of antisemitism that was outlandish even by the standards of the previous few years, before suspending his predecessor in October of that year for stating the facts about the prevalence of antisemitism in the Labour Party.[84] The ineffectual, tongue-tied response of the Labour left to Corbyn's suspension,

83 Adam Tooze, "The Green New Deal's Time Has Come — but What's Happened to Labour's Radicalism?" *Guardian*, March 11, 2021.

84 On Long-Bailey's firing, see Ahmed Masoud, "Let's Measure the Exact Angle: A Palestinian Perspective on the Maxine Peake controversy," *Ceasefire*, June 30 2020; on Corbyn's ongoing suspension as a Labour MP, despite his readmission as a party member, see Daniel Finn, "Jeremy Corbyn's Suspension Is a Monument to Keir Starmer's Political Bankruptcy," *Jacobin*, October 29, 2021.

an unprecedented act of factional warfare, spoke volumes about its demoralization.[85]

With Starmer's rightward march turning into a stampede, Tony Blair's former consigliere, Peter Mandelson, once again became a central figure in the party's internal life. As the first anniversary of the 2019 election approached, Boris Johnson's government was still haggling with the EU over the final terms of its trade agreement. Writing in the *Guardian*, Mandelson predicted that the result would be "a very hard Brexit, mitigated only by a barebones deal that will help us over tariffs but keep all the customs and other frictions that will impede Britain's trade and supply chains."[86]

The Labour peer pointed the finger at "hardline Tory Brexiters" for this outcome, but he acknowledged that it was "also the price the rest of us in the pro-EU camp will pay for trying, in the years following 2016, to reverse the referendum decision rather than achieve the least damaging form of Brexit." Yet Mandelson had no regrets: "If I could turn the clock back, I have little doubt I would do the same again."[87] There is no reason to question this self-assessment. Mandelson and his co-thinkers, who have now regained control of the Labour Party, were only too pleased to accept the hardest version of Brexit as the quid pro quo for defeating their left-wing opponents. We cannot begin to understand the current state of British politics without recognizing this fact.

85 Daniel Finn, "Perceptions and Reality," *Sidecar*, February 3, 2021. Len McCluskey, the outgoing general secretary of the Unite trade union, has explained that the Labour left's leading figures sought a "negotiated solution" that would secure Corbyn's readmission: Len McCluskey, "I Trusted Keir Starmer — Until I Saw How He Handled Jeremy Corbyn's Suspension," *Guardian*, September 13, 2021. However, there was no turn to a more confrontational strategy when Starmer reneged on the deal.

86 Peter Mandelson, "Labour Shouldn't Fall out Over Brexit: It Ought to Focus on What Happens Next," *Guardian*, December 3, 2020.

87 Mandelson, "Labour Shouldn't Fall out Over Brexit."

ABSTRACT

The Cuban system has now outlasted the Soviet Union by thirty years, defying predictions of collapse. But the long-anticipated retirement of Raúl Castro means that the revolutionary generation no longer holds sway in Havana. Recent protests have again raised questions about Cuba's future. To grasp where Cuba might be going next, we need to look at the country's history since the revolution of 1959 and consider how its system and leaders responded to previous crises.

Cuba After the Revolutionaries

Interview with Antoni Kapcia

What was the political character of the 26th of July Movement during the struggle against Fulgencio Batista? What particular roles did Fidel and Raúl Castro play in its leadership?

AK: The movement changed quite significantly over the three years of its formal existence. It became more radical. If you compare it in the period from 1953 to 1955, when it was set up, to what emerged in late 1958, it changed a lot. But the aim was always to remove Batista, then — and this was its crucial distinction from other groups — to achieve the long-overdue process of nation-building, which most Cubans recognized had been promised in 1902, when Cuba got independence, but which had never arrived — mostly because of the close relationship with the United States.

There was a degree of consensus within the movement that the long-awaited overhaul of the system meant a *radical* overhaul via some form of socialism. The programs always emphasized the vast inequality of Cuba before 1958 and its dependence on the United States. Corruption was another issue that was quite dominant in politics, as well as general underdevelopment. These were to be dealt with by some form of socialism — although not all agreed with that. This was the distinction that eventually emerged within the movement.

It was a very mixed, amorphous movement, but by late 1958, it had greater consensus than at its start. It was much more radical than had originally been intended by many of the people who joined the movement. Fidel's role was crucial. You cannot deny that he was crucial to this particular development — not least because he articulated the ideas and plans of the movement better than anybody.

He was also skilled at publicity from the beginning. He was politically astute, much more so than any other leader. He commanded loyalty. That was a crucial element for the remarkable fidelity of the original group throughout the decades that followed. He did so partly through his character, but also through the fact that he survived all the defeats and setbacks. That gave him a mythical status, even within the group.

He was crucial as a leader, and he also outlined the original program, which was the famous "History Will Absolve Me" defense speech. It then became a text somewhat different from the speech itself but that nonetheless made the same arguments.

The program outlined there was remarkably similar to the reforms that were actually passed in 1959 and 1960. There *was* a blueprint, and it was that text. Most of the early reforms followed that document quite closely. In that sense, Fidel was significant.

Raúl was less significant. He was simply one of the captains — not *comandantes* — when the *Granma* landing took place. But by late 1958, when he was given charge of the second front in another sierra in the east of Cuba, the Sierra del Cristal, he came into his own and became much more significant in that particular area. He staked his claim to be part of the revolutionary leadership.

The other person with great influence, along with Fidel, was Che Guevara. He was crucial in those three to five years, because he shared the ideology that Fidel and Raúl were beginning to develop quite clearly, but his sense of ideology and his political awareness were much stronger. Already he was moving toward more unusual and unorthodox versions of Marxism.

He also realized the importance of political education of the guerrillas. He led that effort and was therefore a significant element of the radicalization process. The difference between Raúl and Che, on the one hand, and Fidel, on the other, was that they were more enthusiastic, or at least pragmatic, about the need to collaborate with the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), as the Communist Party was then known. Fidel was less sure about it until the very end, when the PSP changed its approach.

What relationship did the 26th of July Movement have with the pro-Soviet communist party in Cuba, the PSP?

AK: The PSP changed their tune, after having opposed and criticized the rebellion early on. They were highly critical of it until mid-1958, when, under pressure from their youth wing, they shifted their policy and came on board. By January 1959, they were the only party beyond the movement to provide unconditional support.

All the other parties were imposing conditions, but the PSP made a clever move. They said: "We will support you unconditionally,

and our several thousand members and sympathizers are ready to be your foot soldiers if you need them."

These foot soldiers were highly disciplined and politically aware. That was a significant resource for the revolution. The PSP also gave them links to the Soviet Union, which would be useful.

What were the key events after the revolution that led to Cuba's alignment with the Soviet Union by the early 1960s?

AK: This was less a result of events than of processes and pressures. One example is that the existing political current in Cuba accepted some kind of socialism. That's why I define the movement as having a consensus on something called socialism.

The 1940 Cuban constitution remained symbolically important because it was never fully enacted. The text of that constitution fused radical nationalism with socialist approaches. The currents of socialism were already present, and not just in the PSP.

The question was: What kind of socialism would develop? In the end, the socialism that developed was shaped by a number of things. The most obvious was the experience in the Sierra Maestra. That refers, to some extent, to the influence of Che Guevara and Raúl Castro. But it was also the process of shared struggle.

There are any number of examples in history of revolutionary struggle changing the thinking of those who take part in it, particularly those who are actually doing the fighting. This is one clear case of that. The Ejército Rebelde, the rebel army up in the Sierra Maestra, became much more radicalized than the urban movement did, because the latter had not gone through precisely the same shared struggle. That was the first factor that shifted them.

The second was US hostility from very early on. Initially, it was confusion, uncertainty, and fear, but by May 1959, the United States

openly opposed the land reform. That fed into the nationalism that was inherent in the rebel movement.

In some respects, Cuba was not that different from many other parts of Latin America: in the twentieth century, radical nationalist movements developed in Argentina, Bolivia, and lots of other places. They tended to focus on the United States as an imperialist power.

Nationalism became radical and left-wing, focusing on the evils of capitalism, and the need to abolish capitalism and imperialism. Cuban nationalism was further fueled by US opposition. This wasn't the sole factor that pushed them toward the Soviet Union and toward communism, but it was a significant one.

Another element that has often been overlooked in studies of the revolution is the role of sugar. Cuba was locked into the export of sugar, principally for the US market, by the mid-nineteenth century. Cuba had been a key producer of a product that was much needed in Europe and in the United States.

By the 1950s, that had changed. Sugar producers struggled to get into an oversupplied market, which meant that the consuming countries, principally the rich North, determined the conditions of the relationship. Every sugar-producing, sugar-dependent country had to find a close, costly relationship with one single market. Typically, that was Britain, France, or the United States.

The problem was that, for producers looking to sell sugar outside the United States, there was only one market large enough to accommodate that need. That was the Soviet market, which could not produce enough sugar for its consumption. For Cuba and the Soviet Union, it was a marriage of very great convenience to both sides, quite apart from the ideological affinity.

During the 1960s, relations between Havana and Moscow became increasingly fraught. Many observers thought there might be a break toward the end of that decade. What were the

factors behind that tension? And why did the break not materialize in the end?

AK: The relationship was never easy, and only later was there any substantial enthusiasm for it. Early on, the rebels — partly because of the PSP's history — treated the PSP with some degree of suspicion and antagonism. Some within the movement were anti-communist; for example, the allied guerrilla group, the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil, were quite clearly anti-communist.

There was also suspicion of the PSP because, in the late 1930s, the Communist Party had been part of an electoral alliance with Batista. Admittedly, it was a different Batista, in a sense; it was Batista the populist. In their search for a popular front following the Moscow line, the Communist Party went into an alliance with him.

That was something they had to live down later. It made political sense at the time, but nonetheless, given what happened with Batista's later incarnation, it was a problem. The rebels were always suspicious of the perceived Stalinism of the party, and suspicious of that link with Batista.

There was also a generational suspicion, because the Communist Party had been created in the 1920s, and many of those original leaders were still there. It made them a much older and more staid movement than most of the rebels perceived themselves to be. The basis of the relationship was not good. However, when the PSP came on board and offered them unconditional support, that won many of the rebels over.

Still, the behavior of the PSP in the first two or three years didn't do a great deal to help the relationship. These tensions emerged fully in 1962. One of the leaders of the PSP, Anibal Escalante, had come on board pragmatically, but he was among those PSP members who believed that the revolution in Cuba could not be socialist because Cuba wasn't ready for socialism.

Escalante was put in charge of combining the three revolutionary groups into one alliance, and he made a clear move to influence the direction and decision-making within the new, united movement. That became a public scandal.

Interestingly, not only was he removed and packed off to Eastern Europe to a diplomatic post, but the PSP members within the alliance were relegated in their access to decision-making. They were not in charge. It was quite clear that the rebel group, and particularly the rebel army, the Sierra group, was in charge.

Those same tensions played out in the relationship with the Soviet Union. In the same way that the PSP argued that Cuba wasn't ready for socialism, so, too, did the Soviet Union. It was highly suspicious of the Cuban leadership's unorthodox approach to what was needed.

In particular, neither Moscow nor the PSP liked Che Guevara's economic ideas. They thought these ideas were chaotic and inappropriate. They believed that the economic pattern Cuba should follow was that of a mixed economy, along the lines of Vladimir Lenin's New Economic Policy way back in the 1920s. Their opposition was known.

They also completely disagreed with Guevara's ideas of the subjective conditions for socialism. His view was that, if the conditions for socialism did not exist in Cuba, they could be overcome by subjective conditions, meaning the action of revolutionaries like those of the 26th of July Movement, and also by consciousness.

By 1962, he was a disciple of Antonio Gramsci, bringing a new perspective to his interpretation of Cuba's path toward socialism, as well as its rapid path toward communism. All that was rejected by both Moscow and the PSP, as was the insurrectionary policy in Latin America. By 1959, the rebels were already attempting to help revolutionaries in neighboring countries. This became a much more conscious policy in 1961 and 1962.

From 1962 to 1968, relations between Moscow and Havana were strained. This was not helped by the fact that Moscow refused to let Cuba into the Comecon trading bloc — the socialist bloc. The leadership in Havana resented this because they saw Comecon as a path to development. The reason they were kept out was that Moscow believed the whole running of the Cuban economy was chaotic, therefore making it likely to destabilize Comecon and create a very vulnerable economy within that organization.

In spite of the fact that Cuba was constantly challenging Moscow's argument about peaceful coexistence with the US-led bloc throughout the 1960s, the relationship between Cuba and the USSR didn't collapse because, at that stage, the USSR needed Cuba as much as Cuba needed the USSR. As Cuba moved toward a socialist and then communist model, the Moscow leadership saw Cuba as a possible ally in their arguments with China. The USSR worried about China's influence in the Third World lessening their own influence.

In 1966, this produced the Tricontinental Conference, which was designed to win over anti-colonial movements throughout the developing world, bringing them over to the Moscow line. It failed miserably, because the line that won the argument at the Tricontinental was the Cuban line of anti-imperialist activity and revolution.

This line completely challenged Moscow's approach of peaceful coexistence with the United States. The USSR had no choice but to keep on supporting Cuba economically, albeit in a very minimalist way, because it needed Cuba to survive for its own credibility.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Cuba was perceived as having become a fairly orthodox member of the Soviet-led bloc, following its political and economic model. Was that perception justified?

AK: It was partially justified. It's true that, for about ten years — dating from 1975 to 1985 — institutionalization was based somewhat on Soviet and socialist bloc patterns. The electoral structure that was created in 1976, the National Assembly of People's Power, followed the principles and structures of the Soviet system.

In 1975, after that first congress, the Communist Party began to grow, and to look a little bit more like an Eastern European model. The constitution of 1976 closely followed the patterns of the Soviet constitution from the 1950s. The Cuban leadership stopped criticizing Soviet policies in the Third World and, at a conference in Algiers, described the Soviet Union as the natural ally of the Third World.

That was something of a shock to many people who had seen Cuba's policies in the years before as being much more revolutionary. There was also a shift in the economy, abandoning Guevara's ideas, or at least an interpretation of Guevara's ideas, and moving toward a slightly more decentralized economy, reflecting some of the principles of market socialism in the socialist bloc. This created the impression that Cuba was following Soviet patterns.

Another factor that contributed to the idea of a Sovietized Cuba was that, around that time, young Cubans were sent to the socialist bloc and to the Soviet Union to study in universities. Many of their PhDs were earned in the socialist bloc and Soviet universities, and many of those students came back with Soviet thinking, Soviet textbooks, and Soviet ideas of what socialism should be. These ideas clashed a little bit with the older generation of the former rebels. Nonetheless, the influence was there.

Having said that, there's always a caveat with Cuba. The first caveat is that many of the structures that grew up and reflected the nature of the 1960s simply did not disappear. The most obvious

one is the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), the most characteristic of all the mass organizations that were created. The CDRs did not disappear. They coexisted with the new electoral system — uncomfortably, but they coexisted.

One of the patterns of Cuban development over the last six decades has been that, when a new system emerges, it doesn't necessarily replace what was there before. It has either grown on the old system or lived alongside it. One example is the mass organizations. They often get overlooked in explanations of the revolution's development and survival, but they were vital.

Most of them were created in 1960 or 1961, predating any of the versions of the single party that grew up. The CDRs were one, and the Federation of Cuban Women was another. In a sense, the 1960s remained present through those organizations. Looking at the Communist Party of Cuba that was created in 1965 and reshaped in the First Congress in 1975, you can see that it was still dominated by the former rebels, the people of the 26th of July Movement.

One of the constant patterns of the whole revolutionary trajectory since 1959 has been continual internal debate over the definition of socialism — not just about the path of revolution and the path of the economy, but about the definition of revolution that was used in 1959.

Those debates did not disappear. That's one reason why I date the institutionalization of Cuba from 1975. The crisis of the failed ten-million-ton sugar harvest in the late 1960s is often seen as the catalyst for the shift toward institutionalization. But that harvest and the economic crisis were followed by a five-year period of intense debate about what went wrong. How do we go about this? How do we change things? What is the right strategy but the wrong scale?

That debate took five years. We know this because it took

five years to set up the First Congress. When that first congress came, there was consensus. That's one of the big clues in Cuba as to whether a debate was going on. Look at the scheduling of the congresses — because you don't hold a congress until there is consensus, and there was none at that time. The debate carried on, below the surface, through those ten years of institutionalization.

I would make one other point to show that this wasn't just a period of Sovietization. It relates to Cuban involvement in Angola in 1975, right at the start of the institutionalization phase. The decision to get involved in Angola was fully a Cuban decision. It went against Soviet interests.

The Soviet Union's policies toward Angola were not the same as Cuba's. It was the Cubans who forced the Soviets' hand, forcing them to provide the material and transport for the involvement. And that clearly does argue against the thesis of Sovietization.

What positions did Fidel and Raúl Castro take on the question of relations with the Soviet Union and the version of socialism that Cuba should adopt? Was there a difference in outlook between them?

AK: There was a difference, but this difference was largely a question of means, not ends. Raúl was instinctively closer to the Soviet model. He had joined the Communist youth wing very briefly in 1953. When he joined the rebellion, he immediately left the movement because they were taking a different line, but, instinctively, he was closer to Marxism much earlier than Fidel was.

He saw the Soviet Union as a model for efficiency and effectiveness. Despite being highly critical of what he saw in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, in terms of corruption and privilege, he nonetheless believed that a communist party, properly run and meeting on schedule, with proper accountability, could be a

guarantee of a much more accountable system. He believed this much more than Fidel did.

His belief in systems and structures was what led him to an admiration of the Soviet Union. He was particularly close to the Soviet military and appreciated the organization and the efficiency they brought to events. So, instinctively, he was more in favor of that link, and he was a conduit in the early '60s for the discussions with Moscow.

Having said that, he wasn't totally opposed to Fidel's approach. Fidel always preferred passionate mobilization — namely ideological commitment and mobilizing as much as possible the characteristic approach of the '60s. Raúl always preferred formal structural accountability, because that delivered the goods. I describe it as one feeding the soul and the other feeding the body.

Raúl was a pragmatist, and he recognized the importance of ideological commitment and mobilization at a certain stage, not least in the '60s, when you could not actually deliver material goods properly because of the embargo. The 1970s institutionalization came at the right time, and the reforms of the 1970s were to some extent approved by Raúl. They weren't his ideas, necessarily, but he certainly gave them the stamp of approval. He was associated from then on with the idea of economic reform.

There was a difference between Raúl and Fidel, but it wasn't a substantial difference: it was a question of means rather than ends. They both shared the same goals of nation-building through some form of socialism.

Several years before the demise of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the Cuban leadership had already announced a policy shift in the mid-1980s. What was the nature of that shift?

AK: This shift was referred to as the "Rectification of Past Errors and Negative Tendencies." "Past errors" were the errors made during institutionalization, and the "negative tendencies" were the very orthodox views that drove some of those policy decisions, creating a communist party that was beginning, by 1985, to look like Eastern European communist parties — namely, it was bureaucratic and served as a vehicle for individual privilege and acquisition.

This shift arose from an awareness of three things. First, the Cuban leadership was aware that Comecon was in crisis and could easily collapse. That turned out to be very true. Raúl was aware that Cuba needed to prepare for a world without Comecon in case it did collapse. That meant some form of economic streamlining.

The second awareness was of the threat posed by Mikhail Gorbachev. By 1987, Gorbachev had made it clear that Cuba was expendable and that, in order to achieve agreement with Ronald Reagan in the United States, he could willingly drop Cuba, and eventually would do so if it didn't change its policy. They had to prepare for that.

The main cause of it, however, was the negative effects of the reforms and institutionalization, which changed the nature of the party. People joined the party, as in Eastern Europe, sometimes because of what it would bring them, rather than out of ideological commitment. That went completely against what both Fidel and Raúl agreed with.

This period saw something of a revival of Che Guevara's ideas. His writings started to become more publicly available as a result of this shift, leading people to think that the party had gone back to the '60s. It did in one sense, in spirit, but not in terms of policy. Its leaders were preparing for the crisis that they felt was coming.

How did the Cuban leadership respond to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s? Why was Cuba able to defy the predictions at the time that its system would soon experience the same fate?

AK: The immediate response was shock and horror, and the realization that this was far worse than any crisis they had expected. I would describe it as the Armageddon scenario, because that's what it felt like. In 1991, the party congress met on time, and there was a rapid consensus on a whole program of unprecedented economic reforms.

That was driven very largely by Raúl. Raúl wanted to pick up on the reforms of the 1970s, but this time in a different context. Those reforms were vital. They decriminalized the holding of the dollar, allowing the dollar to come in. This allowed remittances; it allowed people to earn dollars one way or another.

Self-employment was the other reform that came in. The government had abolished self-employment outside agriculture in 1968; it was nearly the most characteristic policy element of the 1960s. It proved to be a disaster, and they restored self-employment — but that was all they restored, in terms of breaking up the state system.

It wasn't a shift toward private enterprise, as one might have expected. The shift was small-scale, toward supporting self-employment. Even when they broke up the state farms, they broke them up into cooperatives, not by distributing land to individuals.

The reforms were very limited, but they were enough to generate recovery. The economy started to grow again, having collapsed by 35 percent in the previous four to five years. That also meant a recovery from the crisis that became evident in 1994.

In light of the recent protests, it is interesting to remember that the 1994 protests were even greater and far more worrying for the system. It looked as though the system was about to collapse, but the protests ultimately came to nothing other than mass emigration, and the economy and the political system started to recover.

Interestingly, though, what followed was a debate. The first debate, from 1989 to 1991, was around the question, "How do we save the revolution?" They *had* saved it when the economy recovered, but the next question was, "We've saved the revolution, but what have we saved?" What is the revolution? What do we mean by it?

This was a very open debate; you could see it play out in magazines and in newspaper criticisms. What emerged by the early 2000s was an updated version of the period from 1959 to 1961. It was the model that Cuba had started to put into effect by 1961 — before the Cold War came into the picture.

The big response was to reemphasize patria: fatherland, homeland, and nation. Those principles had never been forgotten, but they were overshadowed by the Soviet and socialist bloc models. They now came back with a force, returning to the original model of nation-building via socialism. In other words, one response from the leadership was to say, we're going back to what we had started doing, but — and this is Raúl speaking — we're updating how to do it.

Beyond that, there are any number of factors that can explain why Cuba defied all the predictions of collapse. The mass organizations were a crucial element. The Soviet system worked in so many ways, but it collapsed so quickly that it told a story of institutional weakness, particularly when it came to involving people. That wasn't the case in Cuba. One of the most characteristic

elements of the Cuban system was the level and scale of participation through mass organizations.

Those mass organizations were then called upon during the early 1990s, even before the recovery, to rebuild the state. The state was in a condition of collapse. The government was often saying: "We cannot afford to do this. You have to find a way of doing it yourselves." It was the mass organizations that rallied locally.

These organizations started to restructure the state from the grassroots, and that guaranteed the supply systems. It was not a story of individual survival, which is the way it's often described. That did happen to some extent, as dollars flowed in from families abroad, but it was a matter of collective survival at the local *barrio* level.

Another factor was the decision to protect the *logros sociales*, the social achievements, which focused particularly on health and education. But there were two other factors as well. One was that the government decided to pay unemployment benefits of 60 percent of their salary to the people who were laid off because of the shortages and shutdown of factories. The other was the use of the ration card. Rationing came back on a scale that had not been seen for some time. This was one of the weapons to save public support that was largely unseen outside Cuba.

Beyond that, there was a residual loyalty. There were enough older Cubans and middle-aged Cubans, including those who had gone to the Soviet Union to study, who had a degree of loyalty to the values of the system. Those values of solidarity, commitment, and working together were increasingly shared by most of Cuba's churches, including the Catholic Church.

For a while, the Catholic Church thought it would play a role like the one it had played in Poland during the 1980s, as the leading opposition to a system that was about to collapse. However, in

Cuba, the Catholic Church was frightened by the threat of disunity and social disintegration. It came to an understanding with the Communist Party and the Cuban leadership, agreeing that the important thing was to prevent social disintegration. The Communist system called for solidarity and working together, and the churches were saying the same thing.

Finally, US policies played a significant role. Remember, the US response to the collapse was not to build bridges, as it had done in Vietnam. It did precisely the opposite. In 1992, the embargo was tightened, and in 1996, with the Helms-Burton Act, it was tightened even further.

That played into the hands of the inherent nationalism in Cuba. The more that they emphasized the nation as part of the new approach, the deeper this nationalism became, and the more counterproductive the US policies were. Most Cubans now feared disunity and disintegration, rather than demanding the end of the system.

I've always argued that if an American president really wanted to destabilize the Cuban system, they would get rid of the embargo, or promise to get rid of the embargo. To some extent, this is what Barack Obama did, at least in the sense of saying the established policy had failed and slightly easing some restrictions, although he certainly didn't lift the embargo altogether. But most of the US presidents have done precisely the opposite and tightened it, or at least continued the involvement. That gives the system and the leadership an alibi in Cuba. But it also plays into nationalism.

When Raúl Castro took over from his brother as president, was there more continuity than change in his approach, or vice versa?

AK: It was a bit of both. There was continuity between the approaches, but by different means. In 2008, when Raúl was elected, already promising reform, he was annoyed by the accusations that he was going to be Cuba's Gorbachev, and he said, quite clearly, "I haven't been elected in order to destroy the revolution. I'm going to save it, but by the correct means, which is to update socialism."

It was no good to talk about socialism as it was in the 1960s, because that socialism was no longer possible. It had to be updated for the 2000s, and its leaders had to find a feasible, achievable version. Raúl now began to stress not communism but socialism. He even talked about Cuba being in transition to socialism, rather than being socialist already. This was a significant shift.

What he did was nothing drastically new. He extended the reforms that he had very largely driven in the 1990s. Very little of it was new; he simply increased the scale of self-employment, as well as the decentralization of the economy. He moved in a cooperative direction, rather than a private direction, with the exception of foreign capital. Foreign capital was still limited to 49 percent of enterprises.

He did that, and he did it quite slowly. The slow pace annoyed the younger generations, but it helped the older generation of Cubans, who were all increasingly worried that, while reform might be necessary, it could end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Raúl recognized that and decided to negotiate his way through the process. Reforms could have happened earlier if he had insisted, but that would have caused great destabilization. By moving slowly but steadily, he managed to achieve quite a lot of the reforms that he promised.

He did have opposition from the party. The party was not under his control until he was elected as first secretary. Elements in

the party opposed the reforms, with some popular support. That annoyed him, and it led him to reform the party quite considerably, returning it to what he called a "guiding role," rather than an "interfering role." He did that very slowly and steadily, by restructuring the provincial parties and bringing in younger leaders who were more reliable, efficient, and effective than those who were simply political appointments.

He also started the process of clearing out the older generation, whom he saw as no longer speaking the same language as the majority of Cubans. He did keep a lot of them going, because he had to and because he wanted to, partly through trust and loyalty — and also because he recognized that they had a voice in the system. But he did create a younger party and a younger government as a result.

However, he continued to share the same project that he and Fidel had back in the 1960s. The only change was his willingness to do reform. He was helped, of course, by events in the United States. The election of Barack Obama made an enormous difference; it enabled him to deliver some goods. Of course, the embargo was still there, and nothing was going to change that, but it nonetheless created a different mood in Cuba as a result of recognition and a little bit more contact with the United States.

Raúl Castro's retirement meant that the revolutionary generation had finally passed on the baton to a younger leadership team. What was the significance of this? And what do you think the future holds for Cuba?

AK: It's a symbolically significant moment, because Miguel Díaz-Canel is the first Cuban president who did not participate in the revolution. Whatever historical legitimacy both Fidel and Raúl

enjoyed — and they did enjoy considerable legitimacy — he hasn't got it. He has to earn his legitimacy from other sources: delivering goods, delivering change, and keeping the system going in some form or other.

His reforms were focused on two things. First, he took up Raúl's promise to end the dual currency — the situation of having a convertible peso based on the dollar and a Cuban peso as the national currency. This was first introduced as an emergency measure in the early 1990s, but it had become the system.

It was highly divisive. The inequalities that emerged in Cuba in the 1990s and 2000s were partly a result of the fact that not everybody had access to hard currency, not least remittances. Most of those remittances went to the white population, because most of the emigrant population was white.

The policy was clearly corrosive, and it led to local corruption. Everybody wanted to end the dual-currency system, but no one quite knew when and how. The pandemic provided the opportunity. In January 2021, to everybody's surprise, Díaz-Canel did precisely that. He warned them very briefly in advance, because you couldn't warn them too early — there would be money flight. He did so very quickly and effectively, but at a cost, because any fusion of the currency, depending on the rate at which it was fused, was going to have losers as well as winners.

Those who had hard currency were much more likely to suffer, because the convertible peso was overvalued and the Cuban peso was undervalued. You could get more for your Cuban peso before the change than you could for the convertible peso. This has contributed to the current protests, because many people who had hoarded the savings and remittances now see that they have less value than they once did.

The other reform Díaz-Canel wanted to commit himself to was writing a new constitution, which Raúl had promised but

not delivered. It's interesting that Díaz-Canel gave Raúl the role of leading the discussions on the constitution, which looked very similar to the old constitution of 1976 when it came out in 2019.

But the discourse was different, showing a shift back to patria. One or two elements in the document also indicate a future shift toward a different constitutional structure. We can't yet predict what that's going to be because that depends on internal debates. Díaz-Canel was saying to most Cubans: "I've got your interests at heart. I'm willing to take this very bold step at a cost, and the constitution is not over. And we will go on discussing the future."

His great misfortune is that he came to power coinciding with Donald Trump, who tightened the embargo more than any US president had done since the 1960s — 240 measures is the count that's normally given. That actually amounts to a measure and a half every month, or something like that, to tighten the embargo. That has had a real effect on suppliers, on the ability to buy abroad, and even on the ability to operate financially.

The other misfortune is COVID-19. The pandemic closed the borders, which immediately destroyed, at least for the moment, the basis of Cuba's economy, which is tourism. That is not the best context for a new president, one who is not from the historic generation, to come into power. So far, he's coping, but you can see that the future depends largely on the success of the currency fusion.

Joe Biden could reverse any of the measures that Trump put into effect, but he doesn't show any signs of doing so at the moment. His language is not unlike Trump's language sometimes. As ever, the United States holds the key to what happens in Cuba, and to a recovery of tourism. That recovery might happen after COVID, but that is out of Cuba's hands.

Interestingly, there were violent protests in Cuba in 1980 and in 1994, immediately followed by mass emigration to the United States that was tolerated and even encouraged. That's not possible

now. The reason it's not possible is not because the Cubans have stopped people from leaving. They don't; the need for an exit visa was abolished under Raúl. But the United States has effectively closed the door to the Cubans. Once it was an open door to Cuba, more than anybody else. That is now closed.

Now you cannot get a visa to enter the United States from the US Embassy in Havana, because it is effectively closed. You have to go outside Cuba, if you can afford it, to get an entry visa elsewhere, and even then, it's not automatic. The safety valve from 1980 and 1994 doesn't exist now. The scale of protest is perhaps partly fueled by the frustration of those who don't see a way out.

That doesn't answer your question: "What happens next?" But it clearly is going to be the younger generation. Very few of the older generation are left in positions of power. What happens next depends on what happens in the United States and what happens with COVID.

Some recovery might well happen soon, and they are coping at the moment. They're certainly coping with COVID, however much they fear they're not. If you compare their statistics to the British statistics of death rates and infection rates, the UK would love to have the Cuban version of that. Cuba, however, doesn't have the wherewithal to cope with it, and that's the problem.

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