

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching About Democratic Socialism, American Style

by Peter Dreier



MEMBERS OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA GATHER OUTSIDE OF A TRUMP OWNED BUILDING ON MAY 01, 2019 IN NEW YORK CITY. SPENCER PLATT / STAFF / GETTY IMAGES

Introduction

In response to students' growing interest in democratic socialism, I decided to teach a new course in the Spring 2020 semester called "Democratic Socialism, American Style." I taught it again in Spring 2021 and Spring 2022, and will likely teach it again. I describe the course in some detail below.

My own political trajectory might be of interest in putting this course, and my general approach to teaching, in context.

I've thought of myself as a socialist since I was in high school, when I attended a talk by Michael Harrington. A few years earlier, his book *The Other America* (published in 1962) had helped inspire the nation's War on Poverty. Because this was still during the Cold War, and because he wanted it to have an influence, he didn't discuss socialism in the book. But I knew he was a socialist and when I heard him speak, I agreed with everything he said, so I figured I must be a socialist, too.

I didn't explore the idea of socialism while I was in college. I was more involved in Alinsky-style community organizing, the United Farm Worker boycott, and anti-Vietnam war activism than left-wing politics. In fact, the ideological squabbles among leftists at my university turned me off.

I always thought it was important to get progressives and radicals elected to office. After all, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was considered a major victory for the Civil Rights Movement. I worked for Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign. Some of my college friends worked for Senator Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign that year, but my more "radical" friends didn't think that electoral politics was a pathway toward serious radical change.

Since graduating from college in 1970, I've been a newspaper reporter, graduate student, community and tenants' rights organizer, government official (deputy to Boston Mayor Ray Flynn), and college professor at Tufts University and Occidental College. In each role, I encountered opportunities and dilemmas in advancing a progressive movement and agenda.

In graduate school at the University of Chicago in the 1970s, I joined the New American Movement, an explicitly socialist post-New Left organization. I learned a great deal through my activism and discussions with my NAM colleagues – more than I did in my UC classes -- but I thought that NAM was too isolated when it came to involvement with unions, community organizing groups, Democratic Party electoral campaigns, and other forms of "mass" politics.

In 1975, I moved to California for a year and worked on Tom Hayden's campaign for the U.S. Senate in California. He surprised the political pundits by winning 37% of the vote in the Democratic primary and then transformed his campaign operation into an effective statewide advocacy group, the Campaign for Economic Democracy. Many leftists at the time believed that Hayden was "selling out" simply by running for office. I recall attending a weekend retreat of left-wing sociologists from the West Coast and finding myself

on a panel where I was the only one who believed in the potential of electoral politics to help move the country in a progressive direction. Many leftists at the time often used Marx and Engel's famous statement that "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" to justify their stance against working in elections. They viewed "the state" (elections and government) as an unremitting capitalist tool that inevitably repressed or co-opted left-wing movements.

But the history of the American Left suggests that *both* electoral politics and mass movements are necessary to challenge the capitalist status quo. During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of influential books – including *Socialism* by Michael Harrington, *The State in Capitalist Society* by British socialist Ralph Miliband, *Strategy for Labor* by French radical Andre Gorz, Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, and *Poor People's Movements* by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward – helped stir that debate.

When I moved to Boston in 1977 to teach at Tufts, I left NAM and joined Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, whose members were involved in much of the vibrant community and labor organizing in the Boston area. When NAM and DSOC merged in the early 1980s to form Democratic Socialists of America, I was elected to DSA's founding national executive committee and served for several years. I got to know Harrington well and, like many other radicals of my generation, was profoundly influenced by his view of socialism as an idea, a movement, and part of a broad progressive coalition. His notion that socialists should pursue the "left wing of the possible" became a guiding principle.

I was active in DSA at the national and local levels when I lived in Boston in the 1980s, but I haven't been actively involved since I moved to Los Angeles in 1993 to teach at Occidental College, although I've continued my membership, occasionally been invited to speak at DSA events, have written a handful of articles for its national magazine *Democratic Left*, and still consider myself a democratic socialist.

Most of my activism has involved working closely with unions, tenants' rights groups, community organizing groups, and progressive candidates and elected officials. For example, I serve on the board of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, which has built coalitions of unions, and environmental and racial justice groups to win successful policy campaigns in Los Angeles and other nearby cities. I've also conducted research that supports progressive ideas and issue campaigns among Disneyland workers, UNITE HERE members, grocery store workers, and others. Most recently I coauthored a report that supported a successful ballot measure to tax expensive property sales to provide funding for affordable housing and renter protections. (For example, Dreier, 2023; Dreier, et al, 2022; Dreier and Flaming, 2018; and Dreier and Flaming 2022). In addition, through my journalism and opinion writing for newspapers and magazines like *The Nation*, *American Prospect*, *Jacobin*, *Dissent*, and others, I try to influence public discussion and build movements for social justice.

Since joining the Occidental faculty, I have taught three courses about social movements and activism. One is called "Movements for Social Justice," which reviews the major American movements (populism, labor, feminism, civil rights, environmentalism, LGBTQ rights, anti-war, civil liberties) since the late 1800s. Another is "Community Organizing," which is both an exploration of the history and different approaches to organizing and a nuts-and-bolts how-to seminar. The course also requires students to do an internship with a union, community organizing, tenants' rights, or other activist group in LA. A third, which I've only taught a few times, is called "Work and Labor in America," which focus on the past, present, and future of the U.S. labor movement as well as the nature of work in different capitalist societies. Since 2008, I have also coordinated a program called Campaign Semester that every two years, in the Fall semester, gives between 10 and 35 Occidental students an opportunity work full-time for 10 weeks (Labor Day through Election Day) on an election campaign in a "swing" or "battleground" race anywhere in the country, and then return to campus for the last five weeks of the semester to participate in a seminar that helps them put their experiences in context (Lovett 2012; Occidental College). It is, so far as I know, the only program of its kind in the country. For students who want to pursue activism, I help them find internships and jobs with my network of organizing and advocacy groups, think tanks, and elected officials.

The Importance of Movements as an Antidote to Cynicism and Hopelessness

One of my ongoing concerns is that many leftist professors in the humanities and social sciences are much better at critiquing "the system" than at offering students some sense of hope or possibility for change. In their courses and scholarship, these so-called radical faculty seek to "problematize" and "interrogate" the failures of capitalism, racism, sexism, and the liberal welfare state, but don't bother examining how these can be challenged and reformed in ways that improve people's lives, give people a sense of their own power, and change the structures of power.

In my discussions with many leftist faculty on my own campus and around the country, I see a profound cynicism and pessimism about the possibility for real change, which is reflected in much of the scholarship in the social sciences and humanities of the past few decades. Many don't acknowledge, or can't see, that the civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, environmental, and labor movements have actually made progress. Their emphasis on social injustice might appear to be radical, but their failure to acknowledge the success of movements and the potential for future change is nihilism.

Throughout human history, people have organized social movements to try to improve their lives and the society in which they lived. Powerful groups and institutions have generally resisted these efforts in order to maintain their own privilege, although there are always people from privileged backgrounds who join forces with the oppressed.

I encourage students to think about: How did these movements come about? What did they do to force society's elites to compromise and enact reforms? What did these movements accomplish in terms of improving people's day-to-day lives?

Back in 1900, people who called for women's suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, the right of workers to form unions, a progressive income tax, a federal minimum wage, old-age insurance, dismantling of Jim Crow laws, the eight-hour workday, and government-subsidized health care and housing were considered impractical idealists, utopian dreamers, or dangerous socialists. Now we take these ideas for granted. Many of the radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

But, in fact, the incremental changes that have occurred during the past half-century, and before – in response to protest movements – have added up in ways that have improved the lives of most Americans.

Progressive social movements have transformed radical ideas from the margins to the mainstream, and from polemics to policy. It is understandable that radicals who look at U.S. history are disappointed. But, in fact, the incremental changes that have occurred during the past half-century, and before – in response to protest movements – have added up in ways that have improved the lives of most Americans. Thanks to these movements, the U.S. is a more humane and democratic society than it was in the early 1900s or the 1960s.

Many obstacles to democracy and fairness have been removed or weakened. More Americans have the right to vote, including people of color and those between 18 and 21, despite Republican efforts at voter suppression. Gay couples have the right to marry. Cars, trucks, factories and other facilities have to control toxic emissions. Corporations have to provide warning labels on consumer products and medicines. Banks, landlords, developers, and employers face penalties if they are caught engaging in racial discrimination. Workplaces are safer, thanks to government regulations and enforcement.

Since 1961, the number of African American members of Congress has increased from four to 59. Since 1985, the number of Hispanics in Congress has grown from 14 to 52. Since 1977, the number of women in Congress has grown from 18 to 150. (Manning 2022)

Since the 1970s, wealth and income inequality has widened and labor union membership has declined. These facts – which are obviously interconnected -- are perhaps the most important trends that explain a great deal about the power of big business to shape our destiny in the absence of a stronger labor movement. (Economic Policy Institute 2021)

That said, progressives should be able to acknowledge progress when it does exist and take credit for those victories. In fact, most Americans are better off than they were in 1960. Since 1960, the overall size of the nation's pie has gotten bigger. Per-capita income has increased about four times. (St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank, May 2023) This, however, doesn't tell us how aggregate income is divided up. Even as the top 10 percent and top one percent of Americans have increased their share of aggregate income, most Americans are better off in objective, if not in relative, terms. The overall standard of living has increased. Since 1960, median household income has increased overall and for all racial groups, despite significant disparities by race. (Semega and Kollar 2022, Figure 2). Despite the fact that the U.S. has an outrageous level of poverty, the overall poverty rate has declined from 22.4 percent in 1959 to 11.6 percent in 2021. (It has been as low as 11.1% in 1973 and fluctuated in different periods). (Creamer, Shrider, Burns, and Chen 2022, Figure 1) Of course, 11.6 percent is too high – higher than in other democratic countries – but it demonstrates that tight labor markets and government policy intervention can make a difference. The poverty rate has particularly declined for elderly Americans. It has also declined for all racial groups, but there are still significant racial disparities. (Creamer Shrider, Burns, and Chen 2022, Table A-5).

Since 1960, Americans' life expectancy has increased significantly, despite persistent racial disparities and a dip in life expectancy in the last few years. (Medina, Sabo, and Vespa 2020). America's health care system is outrageously unequal, wasteful, and profit-oriented. On most measures, the US ranks very low compared to other wealthy countries. Even so, the creation of Medicare and Medicaid in the mid-1960s, and the creation of Obamacare a little more than a decade ago, have provided health insurance coverage and a measure of health security unknown in the U.S. in 1960. In 1959, only 67.1 percent of Americans had health insurance. It reached 80.8 percent in 1968. (Cohen, et al. 2009) By 2021, 91.7 percent of Americans had some form of health insurance. (Keisler-Starkey and Bunch 2022). There are many problems with cost and access – overall and by race and gender -- which is why progressives favor Medicare for All. Even so, we should be able to acknowledge that health care for most Americans is better now than in 1960, even though our lifestyles and diets may contribute to bad health outcomes.

Of course, it is not a tale of steady progress. At best, it is a chronicle of taking two steps forward, then one step backward, then two more steps forward. The successful battles and social improvements came about in fits and starts. When pathbreaking laws are passed -- such as the Nineteenth Amendment (which granted women suffrage in 1920), the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (which gave workers the right to unionize), the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (which created the minimum wage), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (which outlawed many forms of racial discrimination), the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, Title IX of the Education Act of 1972 (which outlawed gender discrimination in education), the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977 (which outlawed bank redlining), the Americans

With Disabilities Act of 1990, and the American Care Act (Obamacare) of 2012 – we often forget that those milestones took decades of work by activists, thinkers, and politicians. This is not meant to downplay the ongoing problems and serious setbacks, including the many states with anti-union "right-to-work" laws, the Supreme Court's ruling against *Roe v Wade* and affirmative action, and the persistence of racism, inequality, sexism, nativism, and militarism. Due to the COVID pandemic, Americans are more isolated. Wages are up, but work is more precarious. The number of Americans in prison is declining, but mass incarceration remains a reality.

But we should recognize that progressive movements, including socialism, have played an important role in making the U.S. a better society, for all its many flaws. Without recognizing that progress is possible, if not inevitable, students have a hard time imagining how we might overcome the problems of systemic racism, climate change, and poverty. If we can't acknowledge victories, why should anyone want to engage in political struggle? We shouldn't wear rose-colored glasses, but neither should we be blind to the victories of progressive movements.

Faculty who identify as liberal far outnumber those who view themselves as conservative, particularly in the humanities and social sciences (Abrams 2016). There are, of course, many progressive and even leftist college faculty who are deeply engaged with movements in the larger society. This is heartening and helpful to students. It isn't necessary for progressive professors to be activists, but many of them are, ironically, apolitical. They are out of touch with the world of activism and movements. They don't trust politics or politicians. They may not even know the name of their City Council member, state legislator, or Congressman. They wouldn't recognize a picket line if they fell over it. This kind of teaching fosters political paralysis and hopelessness. I consider this indifference to helping students engage in real-world solutions a form of academic malpractice.

That cynical view among many of today's college faculty, even those who consider themselves leftists, doesn't come out of nowhere. Much of it is due to troubling trends – including the rise of Trumpism and growing white nationalism – that can lead to either activism or demoralization. But in some ways, the current sense of political paralysis among many college faculty is a legacy of much of the New Left scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s, which argued that during the 19th and 20th centuries, most efforts at social and economic reform had been co-opted and undermined by America's corporate ruling class. Many of their studies focused on the Progressive Era of the late 1800s and early 1900s and the Depression and the New Deal of the 1930s, although some focused on more recent periods that included the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements. Such books include Gabriel Kolko's *The Triumph of Conservatism* (1963), James Weinstein's *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State* (1968), G. William Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* (1967) and *The Higher Circles* (1970), and Alan Wolfe's *The Seamy Side of Democracy* (1973) – all influenced, in some way, by C. Wright Mills' earlier book *The Power Elite* (1956).

These scholars were responding to the post-World War 2 Cold War celebration of American “exceptionalism” – the claim that our history, democratic institutions, middle-class standard of living, and political pluralism were unprecedented in world history. The underlying theme of these books was, in contrast, that American liberalism, the Democratic Party, and reform movements cannot overcome the dominance of the capitalist class and that efforts to make capitalism more humane or democratic are mostly futile.

Given that outlook, it is understandable that many radicals were and still are reluctant to engage in mainstream politics. For some, it has led to a belief that capitalism, racism, and global warming are so overwhelming that they are immutable.

The democratic socialist movement, however, recognizes the importance of not only participating in mass movements but also taking part in election campaigns, even serving in government, and pushing for reforms that challenge and change the relations of power. During the last decade, radical activists, including DSA chapters, have helped elect more progressives and leftists to office than at any time since the Depression. In fact, it was democratic socialist Bernie Sanders’s 2016 campaign for president that persuaded many progressives and radicals that protest and politics are not mutually exclusive.

The Resurgence of Democratic Socialism

According to a 2019 Gallup poll, 43% of all Americans, and 58% of those between 18 and 34, believe that socialism would be a “good thing” for the country (Younis). A 2021 Gallup poll found that 65% of Democrats, compared with 14% of Republicans, have a positive view of socialism (Jones).

But when people say they support the idea of socialism, what do they mean? Or do they even know what they mean?

The students who have taken my “Democratic Socialism, American Style” range from those who are skeptical but curious about socialism, to those who think of themselves as socialists but know little about what it means, to those who are political activists, even DSA members, but want to learn more about the past, present, and future of democratic socialism.

Much has been written about the polls revealing the growing acceptance of socialism among the American public, Sanders’s surprising showing in his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, and his ongoing influence within the Democratic Party. Sanders was defeated both times, but his ideas prevailed and changed the Democratic Party on issues like the Green New Deal, the minimum wage, and universal health care. In the past decade, Democratic Socialists of America has grown from about 6,000 to roughly 100,000 members, with 222 chapters in blue, purple, and red states (DSA). The rapid increase has been accompanied by many growing pains, but many DSA chapters have played key roles in building progressive coalitions, winning issue campaigns (on rent control, police reform, and union drives, for example), and electing progressives to office. For example, DSA members helped catalyze the growing

national union effort among Starbucks workers (Scheiber 2022; Eidelson 2023). As of 2022, more than 100 DSA members were serving in local and state office in addition to six in Congress: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Cori Bush, Jamaal Bowman, Summer Lee, and Greg Casar (Dreier, 2020). In a few cities (Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles), DSA members and DSA-endorsed candidates have gained considerable influence in municipal politics. This is also true in a handful of states, including New York and Pennsylvania.

The current Generation Z – those born after 1997 -- came of age and political awareness during this period (Dimock 2019). Sanders’s campaigns and persona, in particular, inspired them and captured their imaginations. These trends are particularly remarkable because there had been no significant socialist movement in this country for decades. After Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, the word “socialism” started making a comeback. But it wasn’t because the socialists were gaining momentum. It was because Obama’s opponents—the Republican Party, the Tea Party, the right-wing blogosphere, the Chamber of Commerce, and conservative media gurus like Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh—labeled anything Obama proposed, including his modest health care reform proposal, as “socialism.” During the 2012 presidential election season, every GOP candidate attacked Obama for being a socialist, or for trying to make America more like Europe, which has become a code word for socialist.

The Republican and right-wing attacks on Obama may have backfired with respect to the Millennials. Young people generally liked Obama, even if they were somewhat disappointed in what he was able to accomplish. In 2008, 66% of under-thirty voters favored Obama (*New York Times* 2008). So when Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, or former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (who wrote *To Save America: Stopping Obama’s Secular-Socialist Machine* in 2010) attacked Obama as a socialist, many young people reacted by saying, in effect, “Well, then maybe socialism can’t be that bad.” It made them at least skeptical of those who demonize the word socialism.

Americans are more liberal than most people believe (Dreier 2017). A 2022 Gallup poll found that more Americans (71%) think unions are a good thing than at any time since 1965 (McCarthy 2022). Support for same-sex marriage has increased from 27 percent in 1996 to 71% now (McCarthy 2023). Most white Americans think police racism is a problem – a big increase from, say, 10 years ago, even though there’s been a decline since the height of the BLM protests in 2020. (Smith 2020)

A Pew Research Center survey released in December 2011 found that most Americans (77%) – including a majority (53%) of Republicans – agreed that “there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations.” Not surprisingly, 83% of eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds shared that view. Pew also discovered that 61% percent of Americans believed that “the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy.” (Pew 2015). A significant majority (83%) of Americans now believe that corporations don’t pay their fair share of taxes,

82% think that wealthy people don't pay their fair share, and 61% think that Congress should increase taxes for households earning over \$400,000 – a significant shift in opinion over the past decade (Drake 2013; Oliphant 2023).

The Occupy Wall Street movement changed the national conversation on these issues, among the public and in the media. For example, between October 2010 and September 2011, the number of newspaper stories with the word "greed" fluctuated between 452 and 728 per month. But in October, only weeks after the Occupiers gained a foothold in New York and elsewhere, newspapers ran 2,285 stories with that word. A similar trend occurred with the word "inequality," according to a Lexis/Nexis search (Dreier 2011).

Since then, many politicians and pundits have changed their rhetoric to give voice to the growing anger toward Wall Street and big business. In [his December 5, 2011 speech](#) in Osawatomie, Kansas, Obama sought to channel the growing populist outrage unleashed by the Occupy movement. He criticized the "breathtaking greed" that has led to a widening income divide. "This isn't about class warfare," he said. "This is about the nation's welfare." Obama noted that the average income of the top 1 percent had increased by more than 250 percent, to \$1.2 million a year (Sulzberger 2011). He [returned to those themes](#) in his January 24, 2012 State of the Union address, in which he called on Congress to raise taxes on millionaires. "Now, you can call this class warfare all you want," he said, "Most Americans would call that common sense" (Obama 2012).

"I'm so scared of this anti-Wall Street effort. I'm frightened to death," Frank Luntz, an influential GOP pollster and strategist, warned Republican office holders in December 2011, referring to the burgeoning Occupy movement. "They're having an impact on what the American people think of capitalism." Luntz offered Republicans tips for fighting back and framing the issues that the Occupiers raised. For example, he urged GOP politicians to avoid using the word "capitalism." "I'm trying to get that word removed and we're replacing it with either 'economic freedom' or 'free market,'" Luntz said. "The public...still prefers capitalism to socialism, but they think capitalism is immoral. And if we're seen as defenders of quote, Wall Street, end quote, we've got a problem." (Moody 2011).

Even billionaire Donald Trump, in his first campaign for the White House in 2016, excoriated Wall Street and the "swamp" of corporate lobbyists that controlled national politics. Of course, Trump didn't mean what he said – and in many ways created a more toxic swamp during his own presidency – but he was politically savvy enough to understand that distrust and disgust that many Americans have for big corporations and their allies among politicians.

At the same time, throughout his presidency, Trump used red-baiting to mobilize his followers. "We are alarmed by new calls to adopt socialism in our country," he said in his 2019 [State of the Union](#) speech in January. "Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country" (Trump 2019). That April, at a rally in Las Vegas, Trump proclaimed: "Over 120 congressional Democrats are supporting a socialist takeover of our health-care system"

(Murphy 2019). Then-Vice President Mike Pence claimed that Democratic candidate Joe Biden was "advocating a socialist agenda" (Breuninger 2019). Warned former Trump aide [Sebastian Gorka](#) at the March CPAC conference, socialists "want to take your pickup truck. They want to rebuild your home. They want to take away your hamburgers. This is what Stalin dreamt about but never achieved" (Wise 2019). House Republicans even formed an "[Anti-Socialism Caucus](#)," chaired by Representative Chris Steward of Utah, to "defend individual liberty & free markets and highlight the dark history of socialism."

But that red-baiting didn't work among today's young people, many of whom associate capitalism with inequality, big corporations, climate change, and poverty. The positive poll results for socialism among young people contrasts with negative results for capitalism. Most Americans over 60 today think of socialism in terms of the Soviet Union. It is a viewpoint from the Cold War, when socialism was identified with Communism, which meant totalitarianism and dictatorship. But things have changed since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. If today's young people have any image of what socialism looks like in practice, it is probably northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia. They know that northern Europe has less poverty, more equality, and more social mobility. That's why Sanders often said that he'd like the U.S. to look more like Denmark.

The high levels of under-unemployment among today's youth (not just college students and graduates), and the enormous increase in debt owed by college students and recent graduates, has something to do with their growing doubts about capitalism. So does their uncertainty about their own future and the country's future.

The resurgence of democratic socialism as an idea and a movement has also spawned a growing number of books on the subject. In my course, the primary guide to America's radical history is Michael Kazin's *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*. Other recent books that could be incorporated into courses on the topic include sociologist Lane Kenworthy's *Would Democratic Socialism Be Better?*, *Social Democratic Capitalism*, and *Social Democratic America*; Paul Adler's *The 99% Economy: How Democratic Socialism Can Overcome the Crises of Capitalism*; Heather McGhee's *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*; John Nichols's *The S Word: A Short History of an American Tradition...Socialism*; John Judis's *The Socialist Awakening: What's Different Now About the Left*; Bhaskar Sunkara's *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*; and Bernie Sanders's new book, *It's OK To Be Angry About Capitalism*.

Whether or not my students think of themselves as socialists, I want them to recognize that most Americans, even most liberals, don't necessarily agree with that perspective, and that it is important to be able to understand others' point-of-view and not dismiss them out-of-hand. So I encourage them not only to read left-leaning publications like *Jacobin*, *The Nation*, *In These Times*, and *American Prospect*, but also liberal and conservative publications that challenge many of their taken-for-granted assumptions.

Even if they identify themselves as democratic socialists, I want them to understand its many dimensions. So the course examines democratic socialism in America from several angles – as a utopian vision, as a social and political movement, as a set of practical public policies, and in contrast to more progressive social democracies in other countries.

Democratic Socialism as a Utopian Vision

Socialism has always been both an idea and a movement. As an idea, it is about advancing human progress by creating laws and institutions that give people the chance to reach their full potential and to tame the forces of greed, racism, inequality, and exploitation inherent in capitalism. As a movement, socialism is about promoting those ideas through education, grassroots activism, and elections. During the past half century, activists and thinkers have embraced the phrase “democratic socialism” to emphasize the importance of such democratic ideals as free speech and voting rights, and in part to distinguish their movement from authoritarian communism.

During the past half century, activists and thinkers have embraced the phrase “democratic socialism” to emphasize the importance of such democratic ideals as free speech and voting rights, and in part to distinguish their movement from authoritarian communism.

Socialism began as a utopian idea -- the notion that human nature was neither inherently cooperative nor competitive but a consequence of social conditions and culture. It was a product of the Enlightenment, which included a belief in progress, science, human rights, and the perfectibility of humankind. In the course, students read Danny Katch’s *Socialism...Seriously: A Brief Guide to Human Liberation* for its accessible look at these topics. We examine early experiments in creating socialist communities – like Brook Farm – that sought to test the ideas of European and American philosophers in the real world. Students also read essays like Bertrand Russell’s “In Praise of Idleness” (1932), and read utopian novels like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) and Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975). We discuss the contemporary co-operative movement, from food and housing co-ops to Spain’s large-scale Mondragon enterprises. Students wrestle with Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* as a treatise about human nature and capitalism as well as a call for action and blueprint for reform.

To explore these larger issues – and to help students examine their own beliefs and values – I ask them to consider this quotation from Eugene Debs:

Now, I ask this question, and it applies to the whole field of industry: If a hundred men work in a mine and produce a hundred tons of coal, how much of that coal

are they entitled to? Are they not entitled to all of it? And if not, who is entitled to any part of it? If the man who produces wealth is not entitled to it, who is? You say the capitalist is necessary and I deny it. The capitalist has become a profit-taking parasite. Industry is now concentrated and operated on a very large scale; it is co-operative and therefore self-operative. The capitalists hire superintendents, managers and workingmen to operate their plants and produce wealth. The capitalists are absolutely unnecessary; they have no part in the process of production – not the slightest.

Now I insist that it is the workingman’s duty to so organize economically and politically as to put an end to this system; as to take possession in his collective capacity of the machinery of production and operate it, not to create millionaires and multi-millionaires, but to produce wealth in plenty for all. That is why the labor question is also a political question. It makes no difference what you do on the economic field to better your condition, so long as the tools of production are privately owned, so long as they are operated for the private profit of the capitalist, the working class will be exploited, they will be in enforced idleness, thousands of them will be reduced to want, some of them to vagabonds and criminals, and this condition will prevail in spite of anything that organized labor can do to the contrary (Debs 1908).

There is no correct answer to Debs’ question. It forms the basis for considerable disagreement within American society, and even within the Left, over its assumptions about capitalism, work, and human nature.

Throughout the course, we look at what critics of socialism have said in the past, and today, about the idea of socialism and the practice of socialism in actual societies.

In 1906, a leftist German sociologist named Werner Sombart wrote a book, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, that sought to answer this question. According to Sombart, the U.S. was a much more open society than European societies that emerged out of feudalism. Americans believed in the possibility of upward mobility because class boundaries were more porous. Even if Americans didn’t believe in the possibility or virtue of social equality, they believed in the opportunity to escape the lower class. Although the “rags to riches” idea was mostly myth, there were many well-known examples of people who rose from poverty to wealth. Moreover, Sombart argued, America’s workers had a pretty decent standard of living compared with their counterparts in other capitalist countries. “All Socialist utopias,” he observed, “came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie.” In addition, America’s white working class won the right to vote before European workers did, so, Sombart concluded, they have a greater sense of political equality.

For over a century, historians, sociologists, political scientists, and others have debated Sombart’s thesis. Without doubt, socialist ideas and movements in the U.S. were far weaker than those in Europe.

Despite growing support for the concept, most Americans are still wary of “socialism.” Why shouldn’t they

be, after a century and a half of hostility and repression from the powers that be? I ask students to entertain the idea that, in the United States, the word “socialist” is so controversial that it inhibits the ability of progressives to advance their ideas. Are American socialists operating with one hand tied behind their backs? Why isn’t “democracy,” or “economic democracy,” or “social democracy” good enough to describe what socialists want to win? Would it be easier to pass Bernie Sanders’s proposal for a single-payer universal health plan if he didn’t call himself a democratic socialist? Would conservatives and even some liberals call it “socialist” no matter how Sanders described himself?

Democratic Socialism as an Historic Social and Political Movement

Has American socialism been a success or failure? If success means that the United States has become a democratic socialist country, then the movement has certainly failed. But if success means that many Americans now accept ideas that were once considered radical, even socialist, and made the United States a more egalitarian and humane society, then it has accomplished a great deal. Coming to grips with that debate is at the heart of the course.

The course looks at the history and current status of socialism as a social movement – a political battle fought in workplaces, communities, and elections – to change both the culture and public policy.

Most students come to college woefully uninformed or miseducated about American history. So it is always necessary to provide students with the historical context in order to understand why and how the socialist movement and closely-aligned reform movements emerged. The course involves considerable discussion about the history of the Left in general and socialism in particular since the mid-1800s. Kazin’s *American Dreamers* is the primary guide, but we also draw on other readings and watch several films, including *Debs and the American Movement*, *The Big Scary ‘S’ Word* and *We Have a Plan* (about socialist Upton Sinclair’s campaign for California governor in 1934).

We explore the history of the Socialist Party and its efforts to elect candidates to public office, but we also focus on the role that socialists played in so-called “reform” movements that we not explicitly socialist and as advocates for radical ideas that, over time, were incorporated into the mainstream. For example, in the early 1900s, socialists played key roles in the movements for women’s suffrage, child labor laws, consumer protection laws, and the progressive income tax. In 1916, Victor Berger, a socialist congressman from Milwaukee, sponsored the first bill to create “old-age pensions.” The bill didn’t get very far, but two decades later, during the Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt persuaded Congress to enact Social Security. Even then, some critics denounced it as un-American. But today, most Americans, even conservatives, believe that Social Security is a good idea (Sanders 2023). What had once seemed radical has become common sense. Much of FDR’s other New Deal legislation – the minimum wage, workers’ right to form unions, and public works programs to

create jobs for the unemployed – was first espoused by American socialists.

Socialists were in the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement from the founding of the NAACP in 1909 through the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Socialists have long pushed for a universal health insurance plan, which helped create the momentum for stepping-stone measures such as Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s, as well as Obamacare.

All movements have a division of labor. We explore the differences and overlaps between three kinds of movement activists.

First, there are organizers, leaders, and rank-and-file activists who build organizations and mobilize people for action.

Second, there are writers, journalists, musicians and singers, artists, intellectuals, and clergy who investigate social justice and inspire people to consider alternatives. All movements involve both creating an internal culture for its participants and an effort to shape society’s larger culture. So we look at how music, leaflets, speakers, religion, slogans, and other elements of socialist movements got people to participate in efforts that may not succeed and/or may take a long time to win. Socialists also played an important role in shaping American culture. In the 1890s, for example, a socialist Baptist minister, Francis Bellamy, wrote “The Pledge of Allegiance” and a socialist poet, Katherine Lee Bates, penned “America the Beautiful.” Many socialists influenced American culture through novels, poetry, plays, film, painting, and other means. Each semester, we’ve done a reading of Clifford Odets’s 1935 play *Waiting for Lefty* to explore these issues and listened to the music of Woody Guthrie, Yip Harburg, Paul Robeson, and other radicals. Odets, Guthrie, Harburg, and Robeson were Communists, not socialists, but the questions remain the same.

Third, there are politicians, lawyers, and judges who popularize radical ideas and turn them into public policy. Some socialist electoral campaigns, like Debs’s and Norman Thomas’s presidential runs, don’t expect to win, but to engage in the battle of ideas. Others, like Upton Sinclair’s 1934 campaign for California governor, come close to winning but, even in defeat, change the political landscape. Four years later, California elected a progressive governor, Culbert Olson, who adopted many of the radical ideas that Sinclair has espoused.

Throughout American history, some of the nation’s most influential activists, artists and thinkers, and politicians, such as Eugene Debs, John Dewey, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Helen Keller, Rose Schneiderman, Frances Perkins, Margaret Sanger, W.E.B. DuBois, Albert Einstein, A. Philip Randolph, Walter Reuther, Arthur Miller, Martin Luther King, Michael Harrington, and Gloria Steinem, embraced democratic socialism. We stand on their shoulders. So I ask students to read profiles of earlier generations of reformers, radicals, and idealists, to consider what inspired them to become socialists, and to explore the different strategies they adopted to change hearts, minds, and public policy.

I encourage students to avoid “presentism” – judging yesterday’s Americans by today’s standards – which is widespread on many college campuses these days. We discuss how all of them were products of their times – “heroes but not saints” (Dreier 2012 and 2018). Many accepted ideas that we now find troublesome and offensive. We need to consider the totality of people’s contributions to the struggle for justice. All reformers and radicals are human beings. They are trapped by and seek to escape the social and political straightjackets of their times. If we require our progressive and radical heroes to be saints – if we eliminate leaders from the progressive pantheon because they held some views or engaged in behaviors that were conventional in their day but problematic today – we won’t have many people left to admire.

Movements are usually more successful when they can persuade a significant slice of the public that their cause is just and should be supported. Thus, they must engage in the battle of ideas to influence public opinion. I ask students to consider how the socialist movement – or the reform movements that socialists were deeply involved in – tried to appeal to a wider audience – how, in contemporary parlance, movements “framed” their goals and demands to gain the moral high ground.

In the course, we look at the repertoire of strategies and tactics that socialists and radicals have employed to change hearts and minds and to shape public policy. How important are strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins, music, and the mass media? What is the relationship of protest movements to conventional politics – elections, political parties, voting, lobbying, and so on? How do activists and movements balance the tension between being outsiders and insiders? Martin Luther King explored these questions in his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” one of the readings I always incorporate in the course.

We also explore how some of the Left’s failures have been self-inflicted and some have been due to repression by business, hostile public officials, and the criminal justice system.

No course on democratic socialism can avoid the divisions among the Left. So we delve into the triumphs and travails of the socialist movement as it competed with movements to its left and right for the loyalty and involvement of Americans. Throughout its history, socialists have argued with each other over race, gender, US foreign policy, and the Russian Revolution.

The socialist movement has always been characterized by splits within its ranks over philosophy and strategy. Milwaukee’s Victor Berger was the nation’s first socialist Congressman, serving intermittently from 1911 until 1928. He sponsored bills providing for government ownership of the radio industry and the railroads, abolition of child labor, self-government for the District of Columbia, a system of public works for relief of the unemployed, and women’s suffrage. He introduced the first bill in Congress to provide old-age pensions, an idea that eventually was adopted in 1935 when President Franklin Roosevelt created Social Security.

Despite these radical stances, Berger was criticized by the Socialist Party’s left wing because, they argued, these measures, even if passed, would not add up to socialism. They criticized Berger’s “step at a time” brand of socialism. Berger disagreed. One of his favorite mottos was, “Socialism is coming all the time. It may be another century or two before it is fully established” (Shannon 1955).

Socialists and feminists have often been politically aligned, though sometimes at odds. In 1905, Eugene Debs had a speaking engagement in Rochester, New York and went to visit the aging women’s rights pioneer Susan B. Anthony at her home there. They exchanged memories of their previous meeting; then Anthony took Debs’s hand and, with good humor, said, “Give us suffrage and we’ll give you socialism.” Debs’s good-natured reply was: “Give us socialism and we’ll give you the vote” (Debs Foundation, n.d.; Dreier 2016).

The American socialist movement has not been immune from racism. Particularly in the first half of the 20th century, some in the movement struggled over whether or how to organize Black Americans within socialist organizations and within the unions in which socialists were deeply involved (Allen 1974).

Another factor in accounting for the Left’s fortunes is the repression of radical movements and ideas. We explore the Red Scares after World War 1 and World War 2 that were designed to stifle both the right to dissent and the will to dissent. We discuss how these periods of repression had a chilling effect on American culture and politics and that had ripple effects for decades after. The documentaries *Paul Robeson: Here I Stand* and *Hollywood on Trial*, the War Department propaganda film *Red Nightmare*, and the controversy surrounding the Billie Holiday song “Strange Fruit” give students a flavor of Cold War culture and Red Scare repression.

Democratic Socialism as a Set of Practical Public Policies

Through its history, socialism has also been a set of public policies and practices designed to make the U.S. a more humane and inclusive society. Occasionally, socialists had enough power to govern – in places like Milwaukee, for example -- but there have been many times when socialists had sufficient influence to get elected officials to take their ideas seriously and adopt them as public policies, even if in somewhat water-downed form.

We look at the 1912 Socialist Party Platform and discuss how many of those radical ideas – from old-age pensions to women’s suffrage to the minimum wage to national parks – are now part and parcel of American life (Labor History Links, n.d.). We take a deep dive examining Milwaukee’s “sewer socialists” and their counterparts in other cities. We consider how the influence of socialists in movements like the Non-Partisan League in the early 1900s led to the adoption of radical policies like the creation of the state-owned Bank of North Dakota (which still exists) and the role of socialists in the New Deal and other governmental administrations.

The upsurge of democratic socialism in recent years has borne fruit in the electoral and policy arenas. So in the course we examine what kinds of policies help improve people's lives while also moving the country in a more socialist direction.

Students are always curious about whether democratic socialists really believe in transforming society or simply want to make incremental reforms. This leads to the question: What does "success" mean for a socialist movement? So we examine the age-old question: reform or revolution? How important is "reform" — pressing for short-term gains (such as a moratorium on evictions during COVID or a shutdown of a nuclear power plant) — in achieving longer-run changes?

As Mick Jagger observed: "You can't always get what you want...But if you try sometimes, you'll find you get what you need."

In *Strategy for Labor* (1964), French writer André Gorz coined the phrase "non-reformist reforms," which captured Jagger's insight. Activists who believe in all-or-nothing change are ineffective and self-destructive. The goal of progressive and radical politics is to reduce suffering and improve people's lives. That comes by winning steppingstone reforms -- victories that can lead to further victories that can lead to further victories. Major democratic structural change doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes progressive change happens slowly, sometimes more quickly, but always by winning victories that whet people's appetites for further victories. There is an ongoing debate within the Left over how far left, and how explicitly socialist, a movement should be if it wants to have a significant impact. Too many radicals view "compromise" as a defeat rather than a steppingstone. It depends on whether a movement builds on that compromise victory. In the 1800s, workers first fought for the 10-hour day, for example, before they demanded and won an eight-hour day. Lots of leftists understandably criticized the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) for not being radical enough. But, in retrospect, we can see that it not only provided millions of Americans with subsidized health care, but it also established a new baseline/standard, and so now we're able to push for an even more progressive health care system that is closer to a universal and single-payer approach.

The essays in *We Own the Future: Democratic Socialism – American Style* (2020), the book I co-edited with Kate Aronoff and Michael Kazin, provide proposals for moving the U.S. in a more progressive direction on education, health care, cities, the family, criminal justice, racism, immigration, corporate regulation and banking, sports, and other topics. Students grapple with the practical and political feasibility of these ideas, which range from reformist to radical to revolutionary.

I've been fortunate to be able to invite several local and national DSA leaders, Yael Bridge (director of the film *The Big Scary S Word*), and LA City Councilmember Nithya Raman to speak to my students.

Democratic Socialism in Comparative Context

Is it possible to create a more humane, fair, and equal society? Many students – even activists – are skeptical.

I call my course "Democratic Socialism, American Style" because any progressive movement has to resonate with the society it is trying to change. On the other hand, there is much that Americans can learn from the successes and challenges of democratic socialism and social democracy in other countries, particularly those in Europe, but even in Canada.

In class, we discuss how much inequality and how much poverty is acceptable. How far can we go in changing our racist criminal justice system that breeds mass incarceration? How quickly do we need to address climate change before it is too late? Can we dramatically reduce our reliance on cars and fossil fuels the way other societies have done? If we reduce the availability of guns, would America have fewer gun deaths and be a less violent society? Can we imagine a society without homelessness and the deep levels of poverty that most Americans take for granted? Is it possible to have a society that is both prosperous and still dramatically reduces the average number of hours people work over the course of a year? Can we construct a higher education system that doesn't burden low-income and middle-class students with decades of debt? Can we give everyone four weeks of paid vacation a year, or provide all parents with high-quality, low-cost childcare?

Some of students' skepticism is a legacy of the Cold War and the Red Scare. During that era, many Americans confused socialism with communism. Such thinking was encouraged by the mainstream media, public schools, most colleges, and popular culture. In fact, democratic socialists opposed the totalitarian governments of the Soviet Union, China, and their satellites, including Cuba. But many New Leftists in the 1960s and 1970s entertained romantic views about Communist countries as the major bulwark against U.S. imperialism. Michael Harrington and DSA tried to steer the Left toward an embrace of what many call social democracy or democratic socialism, viewing aspects of European societies, particularly Scandinavian ones, as exemplars. We can see in the attacks on Bernie Sanders, even on Barack Obama, that many Americans view government in general as a hostile force and anyone who calls for more government regulation of business as a dangerous socialist. But we can also see, simultaneously, that the post-Cold War chill has started to wear off, as evidenced by Sanders's popularity and the Gallup polls showing a greater openness to socialism.

Although Sanders often says that America needs a "grassroots political revolution," he is actually a reformer, not a revolutionary. His version of democratic socialism is akin to the New Deal, which sought to make capitalism – specifically, American hyper-capitalism – more humane, and which undertook a dramatic shift in values and politics at the time.

This is why Sanders says that the U.S. should learn from Sweden, Norway and Denmark – countries with greater

equality, a higher standard of living for working families, better schools, free universities, less poverty, a cleaner environment, higher voter turnout, stronger unions, universal health insurance, and a much wider safety net.

A thought-provoking way to address these questions is to look at America from the perspective of people living in more social democratic societies. We read articles that explore how social democratic countries approach social well-being very differently from the U.S.

It is often said that a fish has a hard time imaging water because they are so immersed in it and they know nothing different. The readings, films, and videos we discuss in this part of the class are a real eye-opener for American students.

We begin with a four-minute video, *How Europeans See America*, produced by the *New York Times*, that depicts young Europeans expressing shock and dismay at many aspects of American culture and policy (NYT, 2019). We watch Michael Moore's film *Where to Invade Next*, which explores with humor but great seriousness the ways that Europeans take for granted their more vibrant health care system, employee participation on corporate boards, elementary and college education, prisons and police, and other elements. In *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life* (2016), Anu Partanen, a Finnish journalist who spent many years living in the U.S. with her American husband, examines how daily life differs dramatically in the two countries, including parenting, spouse relationships, anxiety, economic security, and other matters. Additional articles look closely at the strengths and weaknesses of different institutions in social democracies.

But is this enough? Social democracies have many flaws. As conservative forces gain influence, in part in response to rising immigration and economic challenges, even some Scandinavian countries have started to rethink some of their egalitarian policies.

Conclusion: The Moral Imperative

Each generation of Americans faces a different set of economic, political, and social conditions. There are no easy formulas for challenging injustice and promoting democracy. But unless we know this history, we will have little understanding of how far we have come, how we got here, and what still needs to change to make America (and the rest of the world) more livable, humane, and democratic.

A consistent theme of every course I've taught is to give students an understanding of the root causes and symptoms of our current problems, and an appreciation of past and current struggles to make our society more livable. I also want them to recognize that the ruling class is not invincible, and that opinions, policies, and systems can be changed. It is possible to imagine a better world – for themselves, for their children, and for future generations beyond that.

But it doesn't happen overnight. Michael Harrington used to say that activists for justice had to be long-distance runners. But I prefer the metaphor of a relay race. Each generation does what it can to change society, and then

hands the baton to the next generation to continue the struggle for justice.

Ultimately, movements are about real people making choices about how to use their time, talents, and resources.

Most sociologists and historians believe that, in everyday parlance, movements emerge when the "time is ripe." That's what Carl Oglesby, a leader of Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, meant when he observed, "It isn't the rebels who cause the troubles of the world; it's the troubles that cause the rebels" (Carlson 2011).

But it is also true, as Oglesby and all other activists understand, that human beings are actors in their own history (Flacks 1988). They don't wait for the time to be ripe. Instead, they "ripen the time."

For that to occur, people must believe not only that conditions *should* be different, but also that they *can* be different, and that they have a responsibility to participate in collective efforts to bring about a more just society.

"An individual has not started living," said Rev. Martin Luther King, "until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity" (King 1960). Similarly, the Jewish tradition says, "No one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it."

King's famous statement that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice" is often misinterpreted. He did not mean it as a prophesy that progress is inevitable. He saw it as a call to action to join movements that bend the arc.

This is what abolitionist Frederick Douglass meant when he wrote in 1857:

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters... Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress (Douglass 1857).

The point is to introduce students to the possibility that their actions can radically transform their society into a more egalitarian, democratic, and inclusive one. Not every student, or even most of them, will fully embrace democratic socialism. Many will find different ways – in college, after they graduate, and as they pursue their lives and careers – to engage in movements for social justice that embody socialist ideas even if they aren't explicitly socialist.

When that happens, it reminds me why I enjoy being a college professor. Such was the case, when I received this email at the beginning of 2023:

I hope you are doing well. I took your class on Democratic Socialism last spring. I took my newfound

knowledge with me that summer as I worked with two Colorado state legislators, Elisabeth Epps and Javier Mabrey. They were the only DSA-endorsed candidates in Colorado this past election cycle. Elisabeth had a tough primary with a much more moderate candidate but was able to overcome her. Javier did not face any challenges in his primary, and ultimately both were able to be elected to the Colorado State Legislature. In the past couple of weeks, Javier has introduced bills to repeal the prohibition of rent control in Colorado and also introduced a bill to require just cause before the eviction of tenants! Building off that, this semester I am taking Lawyering for Social Change and learning about the intersection between lawyering and organizing. I want to continue my explorations of these spaces outside of this classroom.

Feedback like this reminds me how lucky I am to be able to do what I do.

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