



OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

# MARXISM IN AMERICA

History, Theory, Culture



# OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2

1. May 6 – Marxism: what it is ...and isn't
2. May 13 – Immigrant beginnings (1865-1900): Jewish Socialism in NYC
3. May 20 – Distinctly American Socialism
4. May 27 – The Debs Era
5. June 3 – Leninism in America
6. June 23 – Authoritarian Collectivisms
7. June 30 – Rise of the Culture Critique (1925-1940)
8. July 7 – After Leninism (1940-1960)
9. July 14 – The New Left and Decolonization
10. July 21 – Neoliberalism and Neocolonialism
- ▶ 11. July 28 – Visionary Gradualism & Battling the Era of Growing Inequality



# RECAP

## THE 'FANTASY' OF FREEDOM IN NEOLIBERALISM

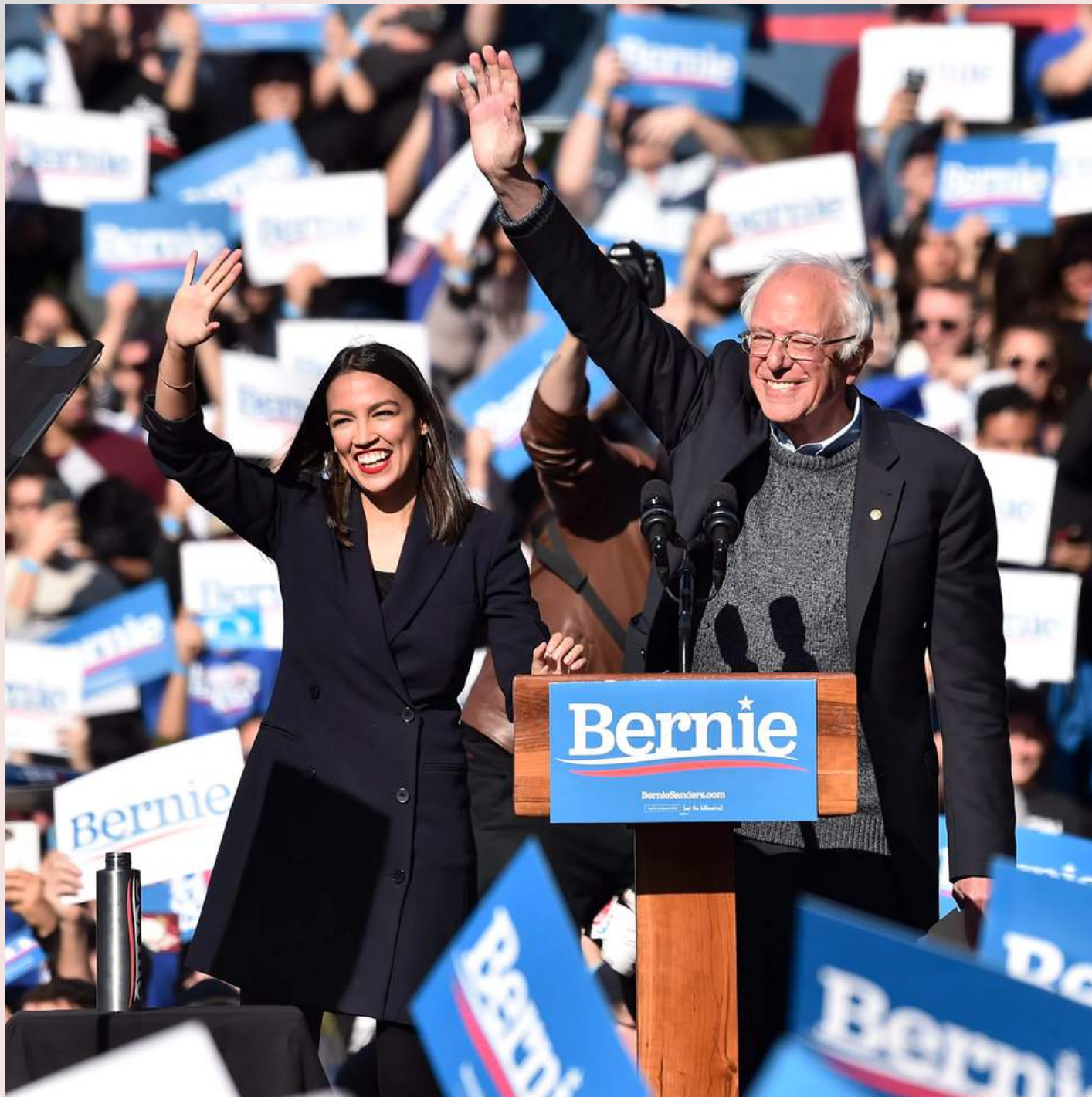
American companies increasingly offshored production to countries where wages were low, workers were nonunionized and sometimes repressed, and where governments offered subsidies and other incentives for foreign direct investment. Redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations, neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets. Freedom (rather than justice or equality) is the fundamental political value. The primary role of the state is to provide an institutional frame work for markets, establishing rights of property and contract, for exam ple, and creating markets in domains where they may not have existed previously.

## "GREED IS GOOD" LEAVES A LOT OF PEOPLE OUT IN THE COLD (OR THE FLOOD)

Countries in the formerly colonized world have been compelled by international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to remove price controls, accept inferior terms of trade, and dismantle their public sectors as a condition for aid and loans. Structural adjustment policies involving cuts to state budgets and programs for the poor were thus instituted throughout the Second and Third Worlds to encourage the development of markets (or to eliminate barriers to the flow of capital and capacity outside countries to more profitable investment sites).



# VISIONARY GRADUALISM



A successful socialism must yoke together the contraries *visionary* and *gradualism*. There is no sudden leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. Fundamental change (even with technological advance and political revolution) takes time. There has been an emergent world built upon a technology with tendencies toward authoritarian elitism *and* human emancipation. Socialists, in order to forward that emancipatory potential, must make this process transparent and subject to democratic control while simultaneously winning political support from a majority of the people for the short-run governments that are the only possible agency of the long-run democratic change.



# VISIONARY GRADUALISM

- A rejection of the classic Marxist focus on the working class as the decisive class does not mean that one should adopt the superficial view that social class in general, and labor in particular, has now become irrelevant. Blue-collar working class, still concentrated in relatively large enterprises and unionized, have import – and often financial resources – that cannot be measured simply by counting heads.
- Socialism is not an explanation of all of the fundamental problems of life, of the meaning of death, the existence of evil, and so on. Socialists may well address these questions, and Marxism, as an atheistic humanism, makes a stoic response to them. But socialism itself deals with putting an end to the unnecessary evil of the world that is caused by economic and social structures. No more, no less.
- Socialism more than a hundred years ago understood the basic tendency of capitalist society, that drive toward an unsocial socialization. And it counterposed a vision of democratic socialization, one that has in fact inspired almost every gain in human freedom in modern times. But when socialism tried to implement that concept of a new civilization that went beyond simple reform, it was sometime disastrously wrong or else vague and merely rhetorical. The question is Can socialism learn from the defeats and betrayals that resulted from its flawed understanding of its own profound truths?
- If not, socialism will turn out to have been humankind's most noble and useful political illusion, and its demise may well be followed by a scientifically organized unfreedom. But if it can learn from its own past about how to create the future, then there is hope for freedom, solidarity, and justice.



# WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

## THE SOCIALIST CHALLENGE TODAY (2020)

- "It is significant that this new politics has galvanized tens of thousands of young people into groups like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Their affiliation thereby with the parties of the center-left is not only directly concerned with mobilizing support for these socialist leaders and their political discourse, but also using this support as a springboard for advancing class struggles in the workplace, the community, and the local state. Nothing like this has happened in at least three generations. The explosion of activist energy has much to do with the frustration of two decades of episodic mass protests and the marginality of those small revolutionary groups, which themselves provided little strategic guidance beyond direct action—in both cases leaving to the side the matter of how to enter the state to change what it does, let alone to change what it is."
- "It does indeed appear that socialism in the twenty-first century has finally broken free of the Bolshevik legacy, which so defined—pro and con—the political discourse of the left throughout the twentieth century."
- "The past four decades of the internationalization of capitalist states—not least through the removal of capital controls and the free-trade agreements that codified their sponsorship of neoliberal globalization—have rendered implausible any notion of merely rebooting the stifled socialist agendas that emerged within social democratic parties in 1935 or 1945 or the 1970s."
- "Any socialist-led government in the UK or US in the foreseeable future would have to face a still deeply integrated global capitalism, with capitalist-class economic dominance securely in place domestically, with working-class forces not strong enough, nor coherent enough, to sustain a full-blown challenge to that dominance, and with public institutions very far from having the capacity, let alone the orientation, to implement democratic economic and social planning."

# WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

## THE SOCIALIST CHALLENGE TODAY (2020)

- "A first condition for building on electoral success would be to deliver some material gains for working people. In the context of the massive growth of inequality and high profits in both the UK and the US, there is in fact both the ideological and economic space for delivering improvements in people's lives through programs for social provision."
- "A further step, which could open new paths to future structural reform, would be to expand economic democracy and public investment in infrastructure, transportation, and utilities. The crucial measure, however—one that distinguishes socialists from social democrats—is to develop these plans not in ways that would restore capitalist hegemony, but rather build the power, cohesion, and capacities of the working class to struggle for broader and deeper reforms than what are possible today."
- "Significant gestures toward a post-capitalist future must be introduced and struggled over in the present. This requires a politics that is at every step engaged in directly confronting a profound dilemma: giant steps are impossible, yet small steps risk being swallowed into the logic of the system."
- "The recent delegitimization of neoliberalism (2007-9) has restored some credibility to the radical socialist case for transcending capitalism as necessary to realize the collective, democratic, egalitarian, and ecological aspirations of humanity. It has spawned a growing sense that capitalism can no longer continue to be bracketed when protesting the multiple oppressions and ecological threats of our time."
- "This new politics is generally more class-focused than class-rooted. While it places issues of social inequality and global economic power front and center, it neither emerges from the organic institutions of the class-in-itself nor advances the socialist perspective of the class-for-itself."

# ▶ WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

## THE SOCIALIST CHALLENGE TODAY (2020)

- Of course, the specific policy measures advanced by Bernie Sanders were, as he constantly insisted, reforms that had at some point been introduced in other capitalist societies. But when the call for public Medicare for all, or free college tuition, or infrastructure renewal through direct public employment, is explicitly attached to a critique of a ruling class that wields corporate and financial power through the direct control of parties, elections, and the media, it goes beyond the bounds of what can properly be dismissed as mere reformism, even if the demands hardly evoke what the call for bread, land, and peace did in 1917.
- The fact that the Sanders campaign was class-focused rather than class-rooted may have been an advantage here: It opened space for a new politics that could try to become more rooted in the sense of being grounded in working-class struggles but committed to the radical transformation of the generally exhausted institutions established by and (in some ways) still run by the labor movement.
- Becoming more class-rooted and effective would require building the institutional capacities to creatively organize workers in different sectors into new city-wide organizations, as well as develop a coordinating national infrastructure.
- To create lasting change, the focus must not only be distribution but democratization. Thus, when Bernie Sanders says workers should be stockholders for the company, be on corporate boards, he does not sustain a democratized workplace so much as encourage *more* competition among individual workers by sustaining a petit bourgeoisie.
- A socialist strategy should see economic democracy not just in terms of empowering workers within firms, but of engaging in a political struggle to transform the *conditions* within which productive units operate and how they relate to each other. This requires undertaking a class-based rather than a firm-based struggle for democracy, whereby production is oriented to serving social needs rather than corporate/monetary interests.



# ▶ WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

## HOW WE WIN - SOCIALIST MANIFESTO (2019)

- Protestors were grappling with the tension between the undeniable progress since the Civil Rights Movement—there were now Black mayors, police chiefs, even a Black president—and the fact that the social and economic conditions of Black Americans were still deplorable. The Movement for Black Lives, then, was a challenge to local Democratic machines and a national party hat took Black voters for granted. But like Occupy, BLM went from the diffuse organizational nature of the movement went from strength to weakness.
- Demands for social equality and an end to state violence clash with branding exercises and the more individualistic prerogatives of the professional class—for representation, not material redistribution... The Movement for Black Lives' trajectory is another reminder that any serious struggle against oppression has to demand the massive redistribution of power and wealth from the elite to the poor and working classes.
- Sanders believes the path to reform was through confrontation with elites. Rather than saying we were all going to work together to make a better America, Sanders declared that we were going to seize power from the same millionaires and billionaires that he'd denounced a century ago. In this way, he is much more closely aligned with the socialists throughout history than the liberal reformers he's had to ally with (Democratic Party) to pass laws.

# ▶ WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

## HOW WE WIN - SOCIALIST MANIFESTO (2019)

### How We Win:

1. Class-struggle social democracy does not close avenues for radicals; it opens them.
2. Class-struggle social democracy has the potential to win a major national election today.
3. Winning an election isn't the same thing as winning power.
4. They'll do everything to stop us.
5. Our immediate demands are very much achievable.
6. We must move quickly from social democracy to democratic socialism.
7. We need socialists.
8. The working class has changed over the past hundred fifty years—but not as much as we think.
9. Socialists must embed themselves in working-class struggles.
10. It is not enough to work with unions for progressive change. We must wage democratic battles with them.
11. A loose network of leftists and rank-and-file workers isn't enough. We need a political party.
12. We need to take into account American particularities.
13. We need to democratize our political institutions.
14. Our politics must be universalist.
15. History matters.





# *The Ghosted Protest*

## *Deviance and Spectrality in Contemporary American Protest Cultures*

- My dissertation seeks to demonstrate the theoretical and cultural work protest literatures produce in their use of the ghost, a figure of horror. Ultimately, I argue that we need literary and cultural studies to understand the protest culture in which we find ourselves
- There are really two trends I'm bringing together: the first is the 'hauntologies' (Derrida) of modernity; the second is contemporary protest marches and demonstrations that stage death
- I write that **the literary protest genre should be taken literally**. Rather than staging a metaphorical protest, cultural producers perform literal protests in their texts in similar (but distinct) ways that protests march through streets.
- I write about the work of poet and essayist The Cyborg Jillian Weise, Native American author Louise Erdrich, filmmaker Nia DaCosta, queer Black writer and essayist Roxane Gay, Guatemalan filmmaker Jayro Bustamante, and 2-Spirit poet and scholar Qwo-Li Driskill.
- While I use the term 'deviance' from sociology, I ultimately prefer how literary texts and methods of interpretation use the speculative mode - a mode that asks 'What if..?' - by way of the ghost to teach us nonviolent ways of protest we had never considered before
- Like the spectrality of the ghost, these protests are neither 'embodied' (in the flesh) nor dis-embodied (invisible), neither present nor absent, not in present nor past nor future - these are, in a literal sense, **queer protests**