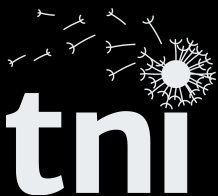




NEW POLITICS CONFERENCE 2021

Democratic Socialism in Global Perspective

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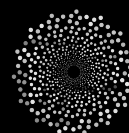
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Latin American, Caribbean, and
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DEMOCRACY
COLLABORATIVE

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The **New Politics Conference 2021 - *Democratic Socialism in Global Perspective*** was jointly organized by the Transnational Institute (TNI) and the Havens Wright Center for Social Justice at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, on 11-15 January 2021. For further information about the conference's objectives, program and contributors, visit **www.newpolitics2021.org**.

INTRODUCTION

The New Politics conference 2021 made a profound theoretical contribution to many of the most pertinent debates facing the left internationally. Over five days, participants explored questions about the state, social class, social movements, political parties, feminism and intersectional politics, eco-socialism, and much more.

In this summary report, we have sought to synthesize the key findings. We hope that readers will find a rich, nuanced and frank analysis of the challenges faced by the left today, and that it will serve as a useful aid in navigating the major social struggles to come.

CONTEXT: NEOLIBERALISM AND CRISIS

The fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent recession remained unresolved when the 2020 pandemic crisis hit. These overlapping crises are the primary conditions shaping the politics of the early 21st century, creating both opportunities as well as dangers for the left.

The financial crisis generated growing distrust in political and economic institutions worldwide, evidenced by the movement against *Troika* austerity in Europe at the start of the 2010s, the movement against neoliberalism in Chile in 2019, and, most recently, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) uprising in the United States in 2020. It also presents opportunities to re-write the rules of the economic order, which is now confronting a serious legitimacy crisis as a result of its inability to maintain growth and sustain living standards. On the other hand, there is little sign that neoliberalism will spontaneously combust. It has proven remarkably resilient, with the banks and big tech monopolies emerging from the crisis if anything stronger than ever.

The resilience of neoliberalism can be attributed in part to the weakness of socialist politics internationally. As the South African activist-researcher Brian Ashley reasoned, the expectation that crisis will do the work for the left has proven incorrect. There remains significant skepticism about socialism, and there has been a general failure to organize the working class from the base. In a joint presentation with Daniel Chavez – a Fellow of the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute (TNI) – the two analysts argued that socialists need to do a proper accounting of the strengths and weaknesses of the left parties, movements, and campaigns that emerged after 2008, including Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the *pink tide* in Latin America, Corbynism in the United Kingdom, and the two presidential bids of Bernie Sanders in the United States.

The left must rise to the challenge of the present crisis and build a viable route to democratic socialism internationally. Otherwise, the only alternatives are either a continued growth of the far-right, or a centrist revival. The latter appears unlikely, given that the old social democratic model offers few solutions to the challenges presented by the breakdown of the neoliberal order, including climate catastrophe. Hilary Wainwright and others made the case for an *internationalist disaster socialism* to respond to the pandemic, based around protecting workers and preserving the fabric of our democratic societies.

However, such an ambitious project only highlights the importance of many of the thorny questions that democratic socialism has long confronted: how to respond to the scale and urgency of the crisis while maintaining, and indeed expanding, democratic consent and participation; how to govern via a capitalist state while seeking to move beyond it; and how to build eco-socialism while protecting workers and raising living standards in the short-term. In grappling with these dilemmas, the historic experience of socialists in and out of power provides us with what former Uruguayan senator Constanza Moreira described as “a library constructed in practice.” Failing to draw on that library is to face the future while flying blind.

IN AND AGAINST THE STATE

Gramscian scholar Lucio Oliver described the state as “the vehicle for hegemony in political and civil society.” Understood in this broad sense, it provides us with a framework for considering all aspects of state power, of which governmental power is just one dimension. The experience of the Latin American *pink tide* and (to a lesser extent) European left governments, has revealed that winning governmental power cannot in any way be equated with control over the state as a whole.

Left governments face three critical structural constraints. The first is the need to maintain *governmentality*, which Argentine political scientist Mabel Thwaites Rey defined as the capacity to engage the capitalist world order in a manner that maintains popular and electoral support. Second, winning public office does not necessarily provide the left with hegemony over other state institutions, such as the military and civil service, and therefore cannot guarantee control over hard power, thereby limiting the range of political options available to it. Finally, left governments must govern in the context of a neoliberal civil society, in which the working class is fragmented and consciousness is largely individualist rather than national-political. Attaining hegemony over civil society therefore requires a significantly deeper process than merely achieving electoral success.

This does not diminish the importance of winning governmental power, however. As Podemos co-founder and political scientist Juan Carlos

Monedero argued, it is “destructive to capital for the left to take the government apparatus.” Moreover, if we are not aiming for government power, in what sense are we building a project aimed at systemic transformation?

The challenge of governmental power therefore requires a sophisticated strategy, which was summed up by SUNY professor Gabriel Hetland as *in and against the state*, revisiting the ideas originally put forward by the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group in the late 1970s: competing for government power while simultaneously deepening democracy at the level of consciousness and organization and building powerful movements outside the state. This necessarily involves tactical dilemmas about emphasis and priorities, which will depend on specific contexts. It will also have to grapple with inherent tendencies towards “electoralism” – the pursuit of electoral goals above all other concerns. It is the job of a theoretically informed left to organize against such dangers while not collapsing into abstentionism.

THE STATE IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

The state has been re-shaped in the neoliberal era as a result of the growth in oligarchic power and the deepening of financialization. On the one hand, with each crisis, there has been a growing tendency toward monopolization, in which industry and financial flows have been captured by an ever smaller number of firms. According to Greek economist and former parliamentarian Costas Lapavistas, this increasingly oligarchic form of capitalism “wholly depends upon the state” to sustain its dominance and is “without precedent” historically.

The emergence of oligarchy, which is closely connected to a hardening of class boundaries and rising inequality, creates enormous dangers for democracy. As Lucio Oliver observed, oligarchy creates an “organic crisis of the state,” whereby the balance between political society and civil society (which is required for stable capitalist hegemony) withers. In this context, the potential for *new Caesarisms* to emerge is significant. According to Greek historian Spyros Marchetos, the left must respond by clearly articulating a sharp binary between democracy and oligarchy. As he put it, “the dividing line between the left and other actors is that the left realizes oligarchic power must be broken. It is not simply a matter of giving more to the many; it is also taking a lot from the few who have too much.”

The neoliberal state also buttresses a bloated and volatile financial sector through the permanent intervention of Central Bank fiat money creation. In the context of the pandemic, this is creating a huge speculative bubble as the financial sector continues to be pumped up with Central Bank liquidity, while real economic activity has entered a major recession.

At the same time, the internationalization of finance, as well as its growing importance in non-financial firms, means that the state has diminished capacity for exercising political control over financial actors. This has specific consequences for any government seeking to rein in finance, which would

likely be met with investment slowdowns and strikes as well as capital flight. There are added challenges for governments that rely heavily on dollar access, as access to central bank swap lines with the Federal Reserve has been essential for banks in Europe following the 2008 financial crisis.

The result is that finance needs the state while the state is dependent on financialization. This relationship has deep roots in modern capitalism. For instance, a significant portion of workers have a stake in financialization through pension funds, whose investments, sociologist Mike McCarthy noted, “moves in the same way in financial markets as assets held by the rich.” This confluence has clear political implications in terms of the entrenchment of capitalist hegemony.

THE STATE IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

European integration poses distinct challenges for the state, especially in Eurozone countries. In Southern Europe in particular, the nation-state now has “very few sovereign capacities,” according to Portuguese activist Catarina Principe. The state is tied into indebted relationships with the north and a service sector-led economic model that makes it doubly dependent on the Eurozone, despite persistently high levels of unemployment and low-growth.

The consequence, Principe finds, is that the EU has become an “iron cage” for southern Europe, a dynamic which creates added political complexities for the left. It is not simply that the public does not believe that left populist ideas are realistic; it is that the left is placing demands on the nation-state that it does not have the capacity to meet.

The object lesson in this respect comes from Greece, where Syriza was elected in 2015 on the promise that it would confront the country’s lenders and domestic elites, which the nation-state did not have the capacity to do. At that point, according to Lapavistas, Syriza baulked from a necessary “rupture” with the Eurozone, and the result has been a “historic retreat for the left,” not just for Greece but for Europe as a whole, as it “doesn’t look like it promises a different future.”

THE STATE IN LATIN AMERICA

The *pink tide* demonstrated that left governments can deliver significant redistribution and poverty reduction in the context of a commodities boom without challenging the fundamental structure of the economy. The rapid reductions in poverty in Venezuela in the mid-2000s, for example, are testament to this record, but the Chávez government relied on an extractivist economic model based on oil exports. If anything, according to Thwaites Rey, extractivism “deepened” under the left governments in Latin America. However, that capacity disappeared once the commodities boom ended a few years after the 2008 crisis. At that point, the state could no longer sustain the prevailing model (massive social spending to meet consumer needs of the

working class while leaving the class structure largely untouched) and the left governments quickly entered a period of crisis and decline.

It is important to be honest about the difficulties of breaking with extractivism in the Latin American context, which is highly dependent on exports of raw materials to the United States and Europe, and more recently, China. Overcoming this economic dynamic would require a fundamental re-shaping of the state, which in turn would require far greater power from below than was true under the *pink tide* governments. Going forward, the left will need to develop a strategy towards the state during times of capitalist crisis.

The state came under its most sustained challenge from the left in Venezuela. Bolivian political economist Jorge Viaña argued that Venezuela under Chávez presented the most significant transformative potential, even if many of the processes it promoted were contradictory, limited, and ultimately defeated. These included the incorporation of the army into the revolutionary process, the construction of the communal state, the re-organization of the PSUV, the organization of militias, the centrality of mass struggle, and aspects of dual power between the masses and the state.

Similarly, Gabriel Hetland argued that Venezuela was “the most spectacular case of left governance in decades,” even if it became “the most spectacular failure.” Hetland pointed to the engagement of tens of millions of people in genuinely participatory budgeting processes, and the fact that the Venezuelan right had to shift ideologically on to the turf of socialism between 2005 and 2013, offering a kind of Chávez-lite platform, as proof that capitalist hegemony was genuinely contested during that period.

CHALLENGES IN CONTESTING THE STATE: LOCAL VERSUS NATIONAL

The left also needs to develop a nuanced perspective with regard to the scale of the state and its relationship to class power. On the one hand, local governments have significant transformative potential via their capacity to build a more direct relationship between the state and the masses. Daniel Jadue argued that the left has “wasted” the opportunity presented by local government, highlighting his own case as mayor of Recoleta in Chile, where the Communist Party has built a participatory model guided by the motto “understanding the people as the state.” Jadue added that following the uprising against neoliberalism in Chile in 2019, it was only local mayors who continued to have political credibility with the public, in a nation-state where 80% of spending is controlled by the central government.

Gabriel Hetland highlighted the municipality of Torres, led by radical left mayor Julio Chávez during the peak of the socialist turn in Venezuela, as a local example of operating “within and against the state” to build socialism. Although identifying with the Bolivarian revolution, Chávez succeeded in defeating the ruling party candidate – effectively mounting a challenge of the left from the left. He was able to build a genuine system of popular power based on deliberative democracy and popular mobilization, where even he

couldn't veto decisions taken by the people. Key to his success was Chávez's sustained links to popular movements that remained formally autonomous from the state, made possible by ongoing popular mobilizations that repeatedly confronted and overcame opposition from elected officials and bureaucrats.

On the other hand, the local level can also lack sufficient scale for the sort of rapid transformation required to address climate change, and under certain circumstances can even act as a conservative obstacle to radical reforms. Trade union organizer Sean Sweeney, for example, argued that de-carbonization could only be delivered centrally, via public ownership, because the "movement of electrical power across large spaces is essential" at a technical level. Sweeney argued that there is neither the time nor the technical capacity to deliver a *Green New Deal* through a fragmented patch-work of changes to the energy system, and that the vision in Labour's program under Jeremy Corbyn for community-based energy solutions was a mistake. In the case of Latin America, Colombian trade union organizer Lala Peñaranda noted that community energy was extremely popular in the region, but fell short of "the scale, coordination and urgency of what is required," which calls instead for a strategy of *commoning the state*.

It is not necessary to see the local and the national as inherently in conflict if they are brought under one unified strategy for socialist hegemony. Havens Wright Center Director Joel Rogers argued for strong citizen-led institutions in municipal spaces, connected to a project for "national self-sufficiency," based on the understanding that the nation-state cannot be "the guarantor for the politics we want."

Public Administration researcher Erick Palomares highlighted the "new form of governance" that has emerged between social movements and municipalities, which has won real victories against neoliberalism at the local level. The key has been to energize the "social majority around concrete demands," such as the right to water, food, energy and housing. Municipal projects have been more successful, he argued, when the social movement has entered power at the local level, as this "increases the scope of the transformation" that is possible. Palomares contended that a sort of "government school" for social movements is required to teach municipalism. And in the process of trans-local learning and the design of alternatives, it is important to build on alternatives already happening (*real utopias*, as Erik Olin Wright would say).

Community organizer and activist Kali Akuno argued that the left in the United States "doesn't have the muscle to pivot in the municipal direction quickly" because its focus has been on national-political campaigns, such as removing Trump from office. After the presidency of Donald Trump, the far-right movement looks likely to turn towards a more localized politics, including white supremacist militias, and the left will need to "build the database" required for serious self-organization at the municipal level to resist the right-wing offensive.

Alternative economy expert Camila Piñeiro Harnecker looks at the case of the *comunas* in Venezuela, perhaps the most ambitious municipal project to come out of the *pink tide*. The *comunas* are an agglomeration of community councils that operate on the principle of “endogenous radical development”: communities organizing the production of basic necessities. The *comunas* have not gone on to become the building blocks of a new revolutionary state as they were initially envisaged. Nonetheless, out of 500 active *comunas*, Piñeiro Harnecker finds that 70% are organized from below, and many Venezuelans say they would not have been able to survive the hyper-inflation crisis without them.

BUILDING SOLIDARITY ECONOMIES

An important question for the left in taking governmental power is: to what extent can it be used to strengthen the social solidarity economy? Camila Piñeiro Harnecker finds that in the case of Ecuador, following the creation of a new constitution in 2008 explicitly committed to a social solidarity economy in harmony with nature, a system of “positive discrimination” was established to ensure co-operatives were given certain advantages over capital. The solidarity economy grew over 120 percent between 2012 to 2017, with an important role played by the state in emphasizing associations or co-operatives in public procurement policy.

However, this co-operative growth has not been without its problems. Critically, the governance of these institutions is not always based on the principles of *buen vivir*, with some people establishing associations or co-operatives solely to gain certain commercial advantages. They have not all been well integrated into local development strategies, and there is no proper representation of the co-operatives, so they remain uncoordinated. This speaks to certain limits in a state-led approach to building the social solidarity economy, as without the organic emergence of co-operatives from below it can be hard to build the traditions and culture on which cooperativism is supposed to be based. Venezuela is another example of a state-led growth of cooperativism that has run into real difficulties, most importantly the problem of corruption (“false co-operatives”), creating a negative impression of cooperativism in general.

In a different context, former Labour Party political advisor James Meadway argued that one of the key reasons for the failure of the Corbyn project was that by the 2019 General Election the party had developed an overly statist vision for the economy, at a time when the state was discredited by austerity and Brexit. The emphasis was on what the state would do for people, rather than on giving people themselves power to change things from below. The British state is highly centralized, and economic and financial power is also heavily concentrated in the nation’s capital, London. Hence, in order to combat capitalist hegemony, there is a need to decentralize and democratize the state and support the emergence of co-operatives and community banks based on local economic development strategies.

LEFT POLITICS AND CLASS

The left has to face up to the harsh realities of working class fragmentation in the neoliberal era, which has undermined the traditional base for socialist politics. In the United States, trade unions have declined to just 6 percent density in the private sector, though in other parts of the world trade unionism has proved more resilient. Gar Alperovitz, co-founder of the Democracy Collaborative, argued that the decline in trade unionism generates a profound question for the left: “How does one think about the transformation of a political-economic system that loses its institutional base in labor?”

It is likely that this new base will have to come about through a process of reconstructing working class formation, but with greater heterogeneity than in the past. The combination of a revived trade unionism, municipalism, social solidarity economies and electoral success - using governmental levers to enhance the capacities of the working class to organize - will all have to play their part in piecing together a socialist consciousness.

LEFT POPULISM AND CLASS

We need to be attentive to the effects that working class fragmentation has on left electoral politics itself. Left populism has emerged as a way of bridging over class fragmentation in appealing to “the masses” as a whole, in contrast to the elite. The cadre of left populist formations in the western world tends to be rooted in the lower professional middle class whose social mobility is downwards. However, Scottish political activist James Foley argued that this has not led to a political and cultural convergence with the more traditional sections of the working class, as many thought it would. In fact, the opposite has happened, with the left populism of Corbynism and to a lesser extent Sanders finding themselves cut-off from de-industrialized towns and former manufacturing centers, with their support concentrated among the urban lower middle class and “precariat.” Both Corbyn and Sanders blunted their populist messaging as time went on. Sanders, for example, began to position himself as the most left-wing Democratic candidate, rather than as an anti-establishment “outsider” whose economic message appealed to Republican voters as well as Democrats. This led fellow Scottish activist Pete Ramand to argue that the weakness of these projects was not that they were populist, but rather that they were “not populist enough.”

Italian political sociologist, Paolo Gerbaudo argued that our analysis of the relationship between class and left populism is critical and requires new thinking, since this is “the first time since the 19th century that socialism was popular and trade unionism was weak.” Gerbaudo finds that the rhetoric of populism always implicitly contains an appeal on class terms, specifically to “excluded, disgruntled citizens” who have been “left-behind or fallen below.” Left populism specifically is targeted at the service sector, especially

socio-cultural professionals, as well as marginalized groups of workers in the urban space, like delivery workers, cleaners, and care workers. There is potential to link the revival of socialism in the west to a revival of trade unionism, with a recent Gallup poll finding that 68% of citizens in the United States view trade unions favorably, up from 50% a decade ago. In that context, the task is to “move from a rootless socialism which is constantly in flux to a socialism that is able to construct strongholds among not just the service sector but also the old working class.”

ELECTORAL POLITICS AND CLASS

Havens Wright Center Managing Director Patrick Barrett addressed the renewed debate within the left over the role of elections in advancing the cause of democratic socialism in the United States. This debate, he noted, has taken on heightened importance thanks to the two presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders and the related growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). He directed the bulk of his comments to the “dirty break” / “class struggle elections” perspective, which he regards as a serious and welcome, though ultimately problematic, engagement with the strategic challenges of advancing the cause of democratic socialism. In response, he focused on the possibilities – as well as the limitations – of democratizing the state, and the electoral system in particular, as a necessary first step in that direction.

This in no way offers a magic bullet; indeed, quite the contrary. Nonetheless, he contended that if the left is to take elections seriously and make them a key component of its political strategy, the struggle to democratize the regime that regulates them is a necessary, even if far from sufficient, condition for increasing its capacity for collective action, and in particular building a socialist party. It is also essential for meeting the increasingly aggressive political challenge posed by the right. This is especially true in the United States, where that challenge is particularly menacing and the impact of a more democratic state on the left’s prospects would be especially consequential, not only domestically but globally. The key reform, he argued, would be to move from single member plurality to proportional representation, which would provide space for a left party to emerge.

Barrett argued that social movement building and electoral competition constitute two very distinct logics of collective action that make a productive articulation between working class movements and political parties quite difficult. The access to the state that the political arena offers is essential to defending workers’ interests, but this must be weighed against the risks of subordination to the logic of elections and the cooptation or corruption of the movement’s leaders. And while these effects are nearly universal, their intensity will vary depending on the specific characteristics of the state, including the type of electoral regime. Indeed, in the case of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), labor activist Andy Sernatinger has found that

the focus on elections has taken leading activists away from building at the base, a problematic shift “from protest to politics.”

More broadly, it is unclear, at least within the west, whether the current class composition of left politics offers a realistic prospect for socialist advance in government. Hungarian sociologist Agnes Gagyí argued that the “disillusioned middle classes” have dominated left parties in recent times, and while this can take the form of anti-systemic struggle, it is not a reliable class base for socialism once entering government. Middle class left political imaginaries pursue a politics based on general solutions that can deliver for a common interest, but once this imaginary meets the realities of governing a capitalist state, “their interests directly collide with the workers interest.” Gagyí argues that we should be skeptical of middle class disillusionment as an “inherently anti-systemic force.”

CLASS AND COMMUNITY/WORKER-OWNED INSTITUTIONS

The institutional basis upon which people organize from below is never fixed in stone. There is no absolute necessity for class struggle to be based on a trade union model. Alperovitz argued that the community can act as “a reconstructive long-term basis for transformative politics,” offering the prospect for resistance but also the foundations for a different economic model based on ownership in the *commons*.

This is not a short-term solution and thus requires persistent work over decades, but the bounty for the left is a new, inclusive basis upon which democracy from below could be built. Joel Rogers highlighted trends towards urbanization all over the world, where in 30 years’ time 85 percent of the global population will be living in urban areas. This, Rogers argued, offers “the spatial basis for egalitarian politics.” There is therefore a confluence of cooperativism with municipalism, both of which can be built through strong community organization. Rogers went as far to argue that it is the citizen, participating in a “productive democracy” at the community level, which is the agent of historic change rather than the working class.

There are limitations, however, to re-constructing democracy from below on the community basis. One is the issue of scale. “How do you have participatory democracy in a system 3,000 miles in scope?” Alperovitz asked, in the context of the United States. The solution to this is a “progressive federalism” according to Rogers, or a “regional de-centralization,” according to Alperovitz. But these present the same challenges in terms of social hierarchy as all forms of representative democracy do. There are also many examples of cooperatives becoming sectional and sclerotic institutions over time, and disconnected from a broader socialist consciousness and movement.

PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

A key issue for socialists is the value placed on the party versus social movements and community/union organization. Experience in Latin America, Europe and the United States all show that without strong social movements, the gains that can be made by left parties are limited. At the same time, as Juan Carlos Monedero put it, ultimately social movements need the “institutional leverage” parties can offer at the level of government to enact social change.

CRITICAL TENSIONS

The relationship between party and movement has critical tensions. First, parties and social movements have different political logics. Parties are organized around electoral representation, and their development is usually dictated by electoral cycles. In contrast, social movements, according to political scientist Frances Fox Piven, are more disruptive in their orientation and tend to be more loosely and horizontally organized, and their tempo is dictated by events. It is therefore inevitable that parties and social movements will come into conflict when these logics collide.

Second, when parties achieve governmental power they become part of the state, whereas the power of social movements is located outside, and often in direct conflict with, the state. The risk for social movements is that they lose autonomy from parties and have their energies absorbed into the state. The risk for parties is that when they enter government they become disconnected from the social movement, and thus lose their radical orientation. In the case of Syriza in Greece, we have seen a left party abandon the key social movement demand to resist austerity following its electoral victory.

Echoing Barrett, socialists therefore need to think through the real tensions that exist between the social movement and the party so as to enhance the capacities of both, and ensure that one does not come at the expense of the other.

THE PINK TIDE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The cycle of left governments in Latin America, starting with Hugo Chávez's election in 1998 and ending with his death in 2013, largely absorbed the energy of social movements. Mabel Thwaites Rey contended that a distinctive feature of the cycle was that the social movements that were active during the rise of the popular struggles delegated the tasks of transformation to the “reliable” governments. The governments directed this energy into the preservation of the system, which we can call a process of “passivation” that distanced the masses from the most decisive disputes. However, the process has been more complex than a mere exercise of will from above, and there are question marks about the real capacities of the popular bases to twist the relations of forces in their favor. Politics professor Jeffrey Webber argued

that despite providing gains for the working class, the *pink tide* governments tempered and moderated the antagonistic potential of the social movements. Juan Carlos Monedero highlighted a conversation he had with former Brazilian President Lula, who admitted that when the Workers' Party was in office it stopped listening to Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST). On the other hand, Constanza Moreira highlighted the fact that all of the left governments acted as bulwarks against movements of the Right, many of which are now resurgent on the continent.

Following the decline of the left governments, a new phase of social movements has emerged, most notably in 2019 with the revolt in Chile against neoliberalism, which sparked struggles across the continent. Argentine political scientist Hernán Ouviaña argued that this phase has been marked by new characteristics, in contrast to the economic model of the *pink tide* governments. These include the movement of women into "the vanguard," the promotion of food sovereignty, the rise of indigenous movements, and the adoption of a larger ecological focus that seeks to build a "post-extractivist economy." TNI Associate Gonzalo Berrón finds that the new social movement in Brazil (which is led by black, working class Brazilians, has strong LGBTQ representation, and is focused on racial justice and feminism) operates completely autonomously from the Workers' Party and other traditional centers of the Brazilian left, such as the liberation theology wing of the Catholic church. The relationship between these movements and electoral representation is therefore in flux at the moment.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE LEFT IN THE NORTH

There has been a complex relationship between social movements and the left in the Global North too. On the one hand, elements of the "movement-party" formulation have been evident in the emergence of the DSA and Momentum in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively. But while these organizations have attracted significant sections of young leftists, they have themselves become detached from broader social movement goals, often operating in narrowly electoralist terms. Andy Sernatinger finds that "for an organization of 85,000 members, [DSA] consistently punches below its weight" due to its lack of cohesive capacity to organize beyond electoral cycles. For TNI Fellow Hillary Wainwright, Momentum came to believe that its "job was to act like a government in waiting" during Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, rather than as a social movement force.

There has also been a tension between the social movement base of new left parties, which have expectations of horizontalist modes of organizing, and the need for the political leadership to consider broader constituencies, most importantly the electorate. Pete Ramand pointed out that "the circles," which were the original organizational base of Podemos following its emergence out of the Indignados movement in 2010, were eventually "shut down" by the leadership because they had become unwieldy and were negatively

affecting the party's message discipline. Ramand argued that it is an inevitable feature of left populism that it has a "top down logic," due to its focus on the communicative aspect. In the case of Corbynism, the social movement base, which was fairly narrowly defined socio-culturally, pulled the leadership away from a left populist position, creating message confusion, culminating in Corbyn, for example, opposing a "bankers Brexit," despite the fact that the banks opposed Brexit. The result is that the "cleavage between the people and the establishment receded" in the Corbyn project.

In the case of the left party France Insoumise, it was necessary for the left to rid itself of the baggage of the "left" badge, which had become "toxic," according to activist and member of Parliament for Paris Danièle Obono, due to its associations with the neoliberal French Socialist Party. This idea of the masses "having enough of the left and just wanting their demands to be met" was reinforced by the Yellow Vests movement, which emerged out of the rural working class and was characterized by its sharp antagonism towards the French establishment as a whole. France Insoumise was the only party in the French Parliament to support this movement.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States has largely emerged separately from the organized left, and yet has been "one of the most sustained and militant working class uprisings" in American history, according to historian and activist Barbara Ransby. Ransby added that the Movement for Black Lives, one of the main organizational expressions of BLM, has a strong critique of capitalism, and could only be dismissed as an expression of "identity politics" by the left if it isn't properly engaging with the intellectual output the movement is producing. For the left going forward in the United States, expanding its influence will necessitate "centering" those at the forefront of BLM.

CENTER-LEFT PARTIES AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM

Corbynism in the United Kingdom and the two Sanders presidential campaigns highlight both the possibilities and limitations of operating within center-left parties for socialists. As Hillary Wainwright pointed out, even capturing the leadership of the Labour Party proved insufficient to transform the party as a whole. The left "underestimated the resilience of the imperial establishment" within Labour. Although the party's old guard has few ideas about how to solve the crisis of capitalism, it nonetheless retains significant institutional and factional influence, which enabled it to regain control with the election of Keir Starmer to party leadership in 2020. Secondly, the left also "over-estimated the popularity of Corbynism," which was limited by the lack of socialist consciousness among the population as a whole. This can be attributed to the dominance of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom, which has minimized the "scope for a sustained socialist experiment in an institutional form" over the past 40 years. Socialists therefore have to take seriously the job of re-building socialist capacities and consciousness from the ground up.

In the Sanders case, there has also been a problem of assuming you can “start from the top” when it comes to building socialist capacity, according to Andy Sernatinger. The DSA’s line is officially that elections are a lever for re-building trade union power and social movement influence (“class struggle elections”), but the practice “is very uneven.” There is a lack of confidence that a socialist organization can take the lead in social movements, and operating within the Democratic Party acts as a constant pull towards the center-left establishment. There is a need for the left to maintain political independence from liberal positions, which is all the more important if socialists are operating within center-left formations. As Spyros Marchetos argued, “the left must avoid turning itself into an auxiliary of the liberals when crisis hits. It’s a matter of survival for the left today to regain its autonomy.” Moreover, we should not limit the repertoire of left organization to social movements and parties. As Agnes Gagyi pointed out, “the streets and the state are not the whole field of the struggle.”

CAPITALISM AND OPRESSION

The left needs to rethink the relationship between capitalism and oppression. The conception of “specially oppressed” groups within capitalism, as separate from the intrinsically exploited group of wage laborers, misunderstands the factors of social reproduction. Just as important to the capital accumulation process are subsistence activities like care and domestic duties, as well as public service provision. According to feminist activist and author Tithi Bhattacharya, we need to understand capital accumulation as “an uninterrupted process based on stable and reliable relations for wage labor, private property, and accumulation.”

The pandemic exposed the true character of social reproduction under capitalism, revealing stark inequalities not only between workers and bosses but also between those with caring responsibilities (predominantly women and disproportionately ethnic minorities) and those without those responsibilities. The government category of ‘essential worker’ consists overwhelmingly of low paid female-dominated professions like social caregivers, while informal workers (who could not access government financial support) are also predominantly women. As Bhattacharya put it, this highlights the need for a “new generation of the left” to “orientate to capitalism’s current predations.”

FEMINISM AND INTERSECTIONAL POLITICS

The emergence of popular feminist and intersectional movements in the global north and south has been one of the most important developments of the past five years. This is creating a new left, in which oppressed groups are playing a leading role, but also where some of the intellectual and organizational underpinnings of democratic socialist politics are being challenged.

This requires the capacity for traditional left organizations to learn and adapt, if they are not to be left behind.

The experience of left governments in Latin America over the past two decades shows that there should be no assumption that the left in power will deliver on feminist objectives. Uruguayan activist Lilian Ciliberti argued that left-feminists were “frustrated by the neo-developmental plans” of *pink tide* governments, which were based around an extractivist model of economic growth. She added that “this did not allow us to distinguish between the economic proposals of the left and the predatory proposals of capitalism.”

Nonetheless, the majority of feminist trends remain broadly connected to left politics, and feminism has been critical to progressive movements, such as in the decriminalization of abortion in Uruguay and more recently Argentina, and in the movement against neoliberalism in Chile. Constanza Moreira argued that while there was “some co-optation” of feminism by the left governments, there were also positive developments. Peruvian social scientist and activist Gina Vargas finds that the gains that were accomplished were often due to the involvement of feminists.

Some of the most ambitious intersectional ideas have come from the indigenous women’s movement, which has connected feminism with the struggle for land rights through the slogan “our body, earth, territory,” meaning, according to Vargas, that “patriarchy does to our bodies what extractive economies do to our territories.” She added that “all of this expands the horizons of struggles and spaces of resistance.”

Going forward, the left needs to do more to incorporate feminist modes of thinking and activity, which favor open assemblies and the perspective of people’s daily experiences, a way of operating and thinking which is often anathema to traditional left parties. This also requires a changing sensibility at the strategic level. Rather than focusing exclusively on capturing state power, the left needs to put more focus on the construction of cultural hegemony, in which questions of care, sexual violence, and living with dignity are critical.

ECO-SOCIALISM

Global capitalism is failing monumentally to respond to the climate crisis, with no genuine transition away from fossil fuels currently happening. Democratic public ownership to deliver a rapid decarbonization plan is needed, but to get there will require an eco-socialist program that can win broad support. This means breaking with the politics of voluntary carbon emission reduction targets and market-based approaches like the Paris Agreement, and refocusing the debate on immediate actions on an unprecedented scale.

URGENCY AND CENTRALIZATION, OR ECO-RESILIENCE AND DE-CENTRALIZATION?

The climate emergency has, according to Sean Sweeney, “compressed the historical time-frame for revolutionary change,” meaning “a minimum program is necessarily a maximum program.” Given this context, Sweeney argued that the left must emphasize technical capability and operating quickly at scale over fragmented, localized solutions. The case of South Africa, where almost the whole green movement advocated the privatization of energy because they thought it would accelerate wind and solar development, is an example to avoid. Privatization does not decentralize power, and neither does it provide for the cross-sector planning required to deliver a coherent decarbonization program. Daniel Chavez also argued for urgency and strong state leadership as essential elements in any progressive response to the climate emergency, stating that “going slow is going backwards.”

Joel Rogers, on the other hand, argued that the world’s ecology is more resilient than many socialists would have it, and that “catastrophism” will not help the left, arguing instead for an “optimistic” politics that does not pit local versus national or reform versus revolution. While accepting that public ownership at the center is required, Rogers argued that “often the really radical change is piece-meal and fragmentary,” and that we shouldn’t only value what is “consequential” in terms of global emissions reduction. Croatian environmental researcher and activist Vedran Horvat also argued that “calls for urgency can demotivate and demobilize,” and made the case for the local being a key part of any eco-socialist strategy.

A GREEN NEW DEAL?

The *Green New Deal* (GND) has become a rallying cry for much of the left in recent years, and has advanced the debate about solutions to the climate crisis significantly, but with certain limitations. Sean Sweeney pointed to the fact that many GND activists are still focused on targets, when the debate should have moved long ago to concrete actions. The left also does not have a coherent GND plan ready for implementation should it win governmental power. Vedran Horvat finds that the GND is often conceptualized in terms of a green growth plan, as in the case of the EU’s “Green Deal,” which does not attempt to challenge the framework of the market and capitalism. Horvat made the case instead for a “de-growth orientation,” based on “decoupling the economic model from profit accumulation and putting it into planetary boundaries.” Daniel Chavez questioned whether the language of “de-growth” would be useful in the developing world, where large sections of the population still go without enough in terms of basic necessities.

In a similar vein, Agnes Gagyí finds that the GND is framed as an agenda of hope based on the notion that it is possible to transition to a zero-carbon economy while maintaining existing lifestyles in the advanced economies, when in fact it will be necessary to reduce energy demand significantly in the global north. There is a danger that allowing the left’s politics to be

framed in this westernized imaginary about staving off decline could lead to reactionary conclusions in any geopolitical conflict, where the GND could become “easily aligned with western interests.” In a world where the center of capital accumulation is moving from west to east, the left needs to develop a genuinely international imaginary which is anti-systemic, and our vision for tackling climate breakdown has to be part of that.

ECO-SOCIALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

One of the principle fault lines within the Left during the period of the *pink tide* relates to energy and the environment. According to Mabel Thwaites Rey, the progressive governments of Latin America often intensified the reigning extractivist model of development, as part of their attempts to meet the consumption needs of the working class. Left-wing resource nationalists from Brazil to Venezuela sought to tackle energy poverty and economic inequality through the redistribution of national resources. Meanwhile, environmental activists from Chile to Bolivia pushed back, emphasizing anti-extractivism, territorial autonomy, and decolonization. Lala Peñaranda finds that progressive energy sector unions in Latin America have been using their strategic position within the left to incorporate demands from both factions, while pushing for a Just Transition.

Thwaites Rey finds that it is imperative now for the Latin American left to break entirely with extractivism, but to do so will require a deep engagement with “the people who live it.” In that sense, the role of trade unions will be important to engage workers in a zero-carbon transition. Peñaranda cited the example of the Petroleum Workers Union in Colombia, which is fighting for re-nationalization and a transformation “from within” and has proposed a fund from oil revenues to facilitate a green energy transition. The unions are positioned between “resource nationalists” on the one side and “anti-extractivists” on the other. Engaging social movements will be critical in determining what role they ultimately play in an energy transition.

CONCLUSION

As Mike McCarthy noted, the New Politics 2021 conference examined key “strategic dilemmas” facing the left internationally, in which there are no simplistic solutions. Paraphrasing the late Erik Olin Wright, it is necessary to “embrace the dilemmas, as it’s only by working through that process that we can advance.” Problems of strategy would not be problems if they did not have to engage theory and practice to attain answers.

New Politics 2021 was intended as a starting point or a stepping stone for thinking through the challenges faced by the left internationally. We plan to continue this conversation with the participants of the conference and with new people, movements and regions in the months ahead. Join us.

TEN KEY TAKE-AWAYS

1) The state is not only the government

The state is the vehicle for capitalist hegemony in political and civil society, yet it is also a vehicle the left invests many of its hopes in for transformation.

The reality the left must grapple with is that achieving governmental power is not equivalent to winning state power as a whole. When the left wins elections, it still faces profound structural barriers to implementing its program, including the need to govern an economy deeply integrated into global capitalism, the control exerted by non-elected state actors, and a neoliberalized civil society, where consciousness is individualized and working class organization is fragmented.

To overcome these structural constraints requires a strategy that goes beyond simply winning elections, seeking to build a counter-hegemonic project which challenges the state in all its dimensions.

2) The state has become oligarchic and financialized

The left needs to have a clear understanding of how the state has changed in the neoliberal era.

As the global economy has become financialized – the dominance of financial actors over the economy as a whole ≠ it has become increasingly reliant on the state to protect financial wealth and manage financial crisis. At the same time, the internationalization of capital means that finance disciplines the policies of the state. This has combined with the growth of tech monopolies in the digital age to create a capitalism that is increasingly oligarchic, whereby the top corporations are so powerful that they exercise a dominance over the state as a whole which is increasingly difficult for democratic actors to challenge.

The crises of 2008 and 2020 have only further entrenched a capitalism that is now deeply integrated with the state.

3) Capitalist hegemony can be challenged

The experience of the *pink tide* left governments in Latin America shows that it is possible to challenge capitalist hegemony, despite the challenges and contradictions.

The most profound example of this was the *Bolivarian revolution* in Venezuela, where at its peak a socialist strategy of *in and against the state* could be observed. Ultimately, democratic socialism was defeated because the economic model was reliant on extractivism at the time of a commodities boom, and was not prepared for a crisis in global capitalism and falling commodities prices. Secondly, the social movement was not strong enough at the base to build a powerful alternative to the state, and had much of its energy absorbed into the ruling party.

4) Working class fragmentation presents challenges for the left

The long-term weakening of trade unions, especially in the western world, means socialist politics is no longer built on its traditional institutional base in labor.

Left populism emerged as a means to bridge over working class fragmentation through a communicative strategy based around an antagonism between the masses versus the elite. However, left populist projects, such as Corbynism in the United Kingdom, have also found themselves reliant on a narrow class base - the lower professional middle class and the 'precariat' - for support, and cut off from more traditional sections of the working class.

Ultimately, the left needs to build a new institutional base as part of a process of working class formation, but this will be more heterogeneous than in the past, involving social movements, community organization, municipalism and social solidarity economies, as well as a trade union revival.

5) Social movements and parties need each other, but are not symbiotic

No transformative process is possible without a powerful social movement, but they ultimately rely on the institutional leverage offered by parties to enact social change.

The idea of the 'movement-party' seeks to develop parties which can sharpen the edges of social movement demands. However, parties operate according to a different logic of collective action than social movements, and therefore it should not be assumed that building parties will help build social movements, or visa-versa. Indeed, in many cases it is the party or the social movement that has been ascendent in a particular phase of anti-capitalist struggle, rarely both.

The left therefore needs to think practically how to build up the capacities of social movements and parties, and ensure they do not come at the expense of the other.

6) The left needs to retain political independence from the center

When operating within broader center-left formations, democratic socialists need to avoid becoming narrowly electoralist nor an auxiliary for the center when crisis hits.

The experience of Corbynism in Labour and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the Democrats shows that gains can be made by the left in broader formations alongside centrists, but that there are also clear threats to the left if it does not organize itself independently in this context. Assuming that socialist politics can be re-built from the top-down and that electoral success should always take primacy are two of these dangers.

If elections are to be taken seriously as a means of building socialist infrastructure over the long-term, a strategy of seeking to secure 'non-reformist reforms' needs to be applied consistently, where permanent changes which democratize the state are integrated as central planks of the left's program.

7) The left needs to build power at the community and municipal level

The streets and the state are not the whole field of struggle.

The community and municipal level are the basis for an inclusive form of democracy from below, that can act as an alternative basis of power to the state. The experience of radical municipal projects such as Barcelona en Comú, the *comunas* in Venezuela or even state-level initiatives such as the Left Democratic Front (LDF) ruling government in the Indian state of Kerala, shows that it is possible for community-level democracy to become intrinsically important to economic development at the local and regional level. Many of these administrations have won real victories against neoliberalism, and brought the social movement into local government.

8) Building the social solidarity economy requires long-term, persistent work

There are important examples showing that building a post-capitalist economy is possible, but it requires consistent work and has contradictions.

In Ecuador, Venezuela and Cuba, there are examples of growth in co-operatives supported by changes at the state level to privilege these firms over capitalist ones. However, this state-led co-operative growth has run into problems, not least corruption ('false co-operatives').

Even in the richer countries of the North, there are examples which show it is possible to build community and worker co-operatives and other alternative economy forms, but it requires consistent work over a sustained period of time, and there are dangers of co-operatives becoming sclerotic and cut-off from social movements.

9) The left must integrate feminist, anti-racist and intersectional perspectives, changing how it works and organizes

Popular feminist and intersectional movements have emerged over the past five years internationally.

This is shaping a *new left*, where oppressed groups are playing a more important leadership role. This brings with it new modes of organizing, where popular assemblies are increasingly important over bureaucratic formations, and new ideas, which seek to develop a more holistic understanding of the factors of social re-production, accounting for care, domestic duties and the role of ecology, as well as the labor process.

In this context, the traditional left will have to adapt and learn if it is not to be left-behind.

10) Eco-socialists need their own global narrative

Climate breakdown requires urgent solutions at a huge scale which can only be delivered through a publicly-owned and planned approach to energy and decarbonization.

The left needs to win the argument for eco-socialism as the solution to climate breakdown, but to do this it needs to show it has technical competence, understands the need for decisive action and operating at scale (not only the local level).

While the *Green New Deal* has been a step forward in the debate about climate solutions, discussion remains focused on targets rather than urgent actions. Moreover the left still hasn't resolved the tensions, debates and fundamental challenges posed by a model of economic growth that is destroying the ecosystem on which we depend. The left therefore still needs to build a global imaginary of a post-carbon future.

