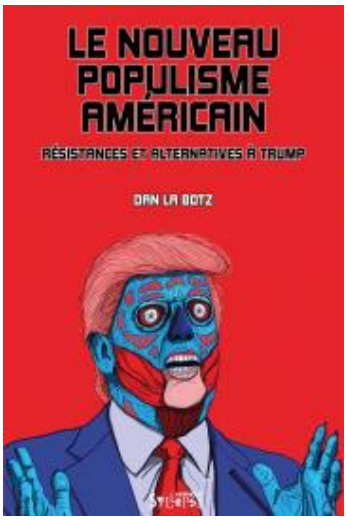
Dan La Botz on his New Book on Trump and the Resistance

written by Dan La Botz | July 23, 2018



Dan La Botz is a member both Solidarity and of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA), and a co-editor of New Politics*. Trained as a historian of the United States and Mexico, he is also a teacher in the graduate Labor Studies program of the Murphy Institute of the City University of New York.* New Politics *interviews him here about his new book* The New American Populism: Resistance and Alternatives to Trump (*Nouveau populisme américain: Résistances et alternatives à Trump*).

New Politics: You've written a book on Donald Trump and the Resistance that most of won't be able to read because it has only been published in French. In this book you discuss both the rise of the new populism of Sanders and Trump and its social and historical roots, but you also look at the Resistance and discuss its strengths and weaknesses, as well as examining the strategies of the left and its future. That's a lot. Tell us a little about your book. What distinguishes it from the many books on Trump that have hit the market since he became president?

Dan La Botz: I argue in my book that the ideology of the "American Dream" or, as it was often called, "The American Way of Life" that has been coming apart from the 1960s and 1970s finally collapsed following the Great Recession of 2008.[1] The American middle class and working people—who faced 10 percent unemployment and lost millions of home—felt abandoned by Republican and the Democratic parties. The economic crisis and the collapse of the dominant ideology opened the way for populism on the left and the right, for Sanders and for Trump.

Both Trump and Sanders offered working people a program to protect them from the economic crisis. Sanders, called for a war on the "billionaire class," declared himself a "democratic socialist," and proposed universal economic programs such as single-payer health care and free higher education. At the same time Trump proposed to keep out Mexican job seekers and Muslim terrorists and to protect American workers from unfair Chinese competition. Sanders offered a return to Roosevelt's New Deal while Trump offered a white nationalist economic platform that resembled the European far right's programs.

I think most would agree with that view. But, unlike most liberal and even some left authors, I also argue that Bill and Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, whose first loyalty was to the banks and the

corporations and who had abandoned the labor unions and the working class, must share responsibility for the rise of populism. The Democratic leadership's continued opposition to single-payer is indicative of their fealty to finance over any sense of responsibility to working people. The leaders of the Democratic Party made decisions over decades that led voters, especially white male voters, to abandon the Democrats for the Republicans and finally vote for Trump.

NP: And how do you explain Trump's rise to power?

DL: Well that's a long complicated story. I see Trump as the product of the world he sprang from. Let me read you a few of the opening paragraphs from my chapter on "The Rise of Trump":

> Donald Trump is a product of American business, in particular of New York real estate development, a world of high finance and speculation, heavily reliant on local politics and deal making of all sorts. He rose to national notoriety through his reputation as the builder of high-rise apartment and office buildings, of golf courses, and gambling casinos. A tireless and clever self-promoter and media manipulator, throughout his career he sought not only wealth but also fame, leading him to become the host of the popular reality program "The Apprentice," a TV show where he frequently humiliated contestants and then told them "You're fired!,"; though some contestants who groveled were rewarded with a job. The Apprentice made him a star of sorts and his name a household word around the country. Throughout his half-century career Trump became involved in a multitude of enterprises and made thousands of business deals that if not illegal—as some were—often verged on illegality. He constantly fabricated figures about his wealth and the value of his properties, either to enhance his reputation as a billionaire, to take advantage of others, or to avoid paying taxes.
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> During his long career in business, television, and then in politics he has been associated with much of what is unseemly and distasteful, offensive and malevolent in American society. His friends and associates have included Mafia mobsters, alt- right white nationalists and neo-Nazis, drug dealers and pimps, swindlers and crooks of all sorts—not to mention nefarious financiers, businessmen, and corporate lawyers. His racist practices are a matter of record, having engaged in racial discrimination in his housing projects and in employment in his casinos. His relationships with women have often been exploitative and misogynistic and, as he himself said, he was not above sexual abuse. His cheating of subcontractors and mistreatment of workers is notorious.
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> Trump, like many businessmen, and particularly real estate speculators and builders, came to believe that government with its rules and regulations about banking, construction, labor, and the environment was an impediment and a burden that might well be abolished. Politicians and parties that he had lavishly financed, he came to believe, could not be trusted or counted on. Those views corresponded to a rightwing ideology–long present in American society but growing since the 1980s—an ideology compounded of a resentment of the political elite and the state together with the infantile belief in that a brilliant individual who would run the country like a business could save America's middle class from the government bureaucracy, the labor movement, Blacks and Latinos, homosexuals and lesbians, and nasty women. Upper-, middle-, and working-class white people looking for a strong if abusive father figure found it in Trump. With a brilliant if base political instinct, Trump seized the moment and transformed himself from the television personality into a populist politician, demagogue, and rabble-rouser.
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> Trump came to epitomize everything we think when we hear the word "businessman": greedy, selfish, egotistical, lacking in compassion, a speculator, a control-freak and a

> megalomaniac. Some have called him a congenital liar. Psychologists have suggested that he suffers from the personality disorders known as narcissistic, paranoid, and anti-social, and warn that he is dangerous. One might say he is capitalism incarnate, the creator-destroyer for whom profit and power are everything, humanity nothing.

In that chapter I describe his first ventures into politics with his 1987 "open letter from Donald Trump" on U.S. foreign policy and his 1989 ad calling for the death penalty for five black and Latino teenagers unjustly accused of rape in the Central Park jogger case. I describe his frustrated bid to be the presidential candidate of the Reform Party in 2000 and his flirtation with running for Republican presidential campaign in 2012, and then of course his 2016 campaign. I follow in detail his first year and a half in office with its legislative failures—except on reducing corporate taxes—and its racist and anti-labor administrative decisions and executive orders. Trump's achievement was not his alone, of course. He was the product of twenty years of rightward movement by Republicans and Democrats.

NP: But this rightward drift of American politics didn't begin in the last twenty years. It's been going on for a long time.

DL: Absolutely. Rightwing racist and xenophobic politics have been growing in the United States since the 1960s and more rapidly since the 1980s. In my book I show the deep roots of Trumpism in America's long history of populist xenophobia and racism, beginning in the early nineteenth century with the Know Nothings and continuing through the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan. I then take up the rise of the post-war racist populism of George Wallace, whose approach was later followed by Richard Nixon with his Southern Strategy. I also discuss the rise of the New Right of the 1980s and its impact. I believe that one cannot really understand Trump or Sanders unless one has an understanding of America's long history capitalist exploitation, xenophobia, and racism but also an equally impressive history of social struggles from below. So I also provide chapters that discuss the history of the American labor and social movements and the left as well as another that discusses the contemporary movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter and their relationship to the Bernie campaign and to the left.

NP: And what do you have to say about the labor and social movements and the left and their relationship to the Resistance and the struggle against Trump?

DL: The struggle against Trump *and the corporate, neoliberal Democrats*… First, of course, the American labor movement is at its lowest point in almost 100 years. Only 10.7 percent of all workers are members of unions. In the private sector membership is 6.5 percent. There were only seven major work stoppages in 2017 involving just 25,000 workers, while in 1970 there were 381 stoppages involving 2.4 million. That is, the class struggle in America is at an all time low. Without a higher level of working class struggle it is hard to imagine a move in a progressive direction. The West Virginia teachers strike and similar strikes in other states give us hope for a revival of the labor movement, but if there is to be one, it has only just begun.

We have had a series of tremendously impressive mass social protests in the United States beginning with the immigrants protests of 2006, the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 2014, and then the Women's Marches of 2017. All of these mobilized hundreds of thousands of people and in the case of the immigrant protests and the women's marches participants numbered in the millions. Yet the movements have been uneven and episodic. While there are tens of thousands of committed activists, we cannot really say that we have today a national environmental movement or a national women's movement.

We do not see today the creation of a continuous or what we might call a permanent movement such

as existed in the United States from 1956 to 1975. So, given the weakness of the labor movement and the sporadic character of the social protests, I do not believe that we have yet the kind of movement that can create a new left politics in the United States.

I believe that it is important for the left to educate and train the cadres who can help to provide leadership to the labor movement and to more stable and long-lasting social movements. As I write in my book:

> What makes for a sustainable mass movement? A sustainable movement requires cadres, that is, dedicated activists who have acquired organizational and political skills that can maintain and advance the movement over years, even over a lifetime. In American social movements cadres have come from religious, ethnic, and political organizations; one cannot imagine the civil rights movement without its religious leaders, the black power movement without its black nationalists, or the progressive labor movement without socialist, Trotskyist, and Communist cadres. (Not all ideologies are equally valid or desirable, but without cadres there is no sustained movement.)
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> Cadres who can build, sustain, and advance a movement share several characteristics: 1) they have deeply held ethical principles; 2) they have a vision for a better future; 3) they have a set of powerful explanatory ideas; 4) they have an ability on the basis of the first two to elaborate a set of strategic concepts and tactics; 5) they have the ability to take all of those things to a social base in which they have become embedded and which they can help mobilize. What this means is, that while we cannot create mass movements, we can train the cadres, both movement cadres socialist cadres, who can, when a movement arises, carry it as far forward as possible. We on the left should devote ourselves to creating the socialist cadre of mass movements, which means both organizational training and socialist political education.

In the labor movement, I believe it's important to support the rank-and-file strategy, that is a strategy—such as that used in the West Virginia teachers strikes—in which the union's grassroots workers take the initiative and exercise their power, when necessary bypassing union leaders, in order to fight the employer, whether private sector bosses or the government as boss.

NP: You haven't yet mentioned the left? What are your thoughts about the left and especially about the Democratic Socialist of America, which has been so much in the public eye of late?

DL: The spectacular growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—its membership now number 45,000—is incredibly impressive and very exciting. DSA as an organization and the ideas of socialism have suddenly become topics of discussion in the major media as well as in the social media. Bernie Sanders campaign gave the DSA its initial boost, followed by the "Trump bump" after the Donald's inauguration, and most recently another growth spurt following Alexandria Ocasio Cortez's victory over Joe Crowley in the Democratic Primary in the fourteenth congressional district. We have for the first time since the late 1940s when the Communist Party dominated the left—then with 100,000 members and one million in its periphery—a small mass left political organization. I think everyone on the left find its an exciting and important development, the development of a still quite small left pole in American politics.

The principal question posed to DSA and to the entire left revolves around the Democratic Party. I explain in my book that the American left has over the last 75 years attempted two different strategies: independent political action outside of and to the left of the Democratic Party and a strategy to reform the Democratic Party. Both of these strategies have failed miserably, with nothing to show for them. At present DSA supports work both within and outside of the Democratic Party in

an attempt to build an independent political force, though it is too early to see if this strategy will bear fruit.

As I have argued as a delegate at the DSA Convention and as a member of the leading committee of the New York branch, the greatest danger to DSA is that it simply becomes part of the "progressive" organizations on the left of the Democratic Party and with that losses its organizational and political independence. Progressive organizations are our ideological and organizational competitors and we have to be able to explain why we as socialists have a different and a superior strategy and program.

We will only have social change when the Democratic Party breaks up and its middle class and working class base moves to the left to create a new political party. I believe that we do not at present in the United States have the levels of class struggle and of social upheaval that would make possible a significant political shift to the left.

NP: You mention program. What program that faces a left organization such as DSA and for that matter the entire left? What sort of political program should DSA advance?

DL: I think that that's an important question. DSA has in the last couple of decades talked about "non-reformist reforms" while Solidarity has since its founding talked about a "transitional method." I think it is the later that should guide the movement.

Let me explain this by quoting a key passage from my book.

> The elaboration of a socialist program—essentially a program for the democratic collectivization of the economy—will come from the social movements themselves, but it will be up to socialists to create the demands on the capitalist class and on the state that give such a program a transitional character. Some socialists have raised the notion— taken from readings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the French radical André Gorz—of "non-reformist reforms" that introduce structural changes that move from creating public institutions in certain spheres, such as health care, and ultimately lead to a complete break with the capitalist system.
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> Whatever it meant for Gramsci in the 1920s and for Gorz in the 1960s, as used by some contemporary socialists it is simply another version of social democratic gradualism that can never lead to a socialist transformation because it does not see the need to overthrow the capitalist state. The non-reformist reform strategy, in fact, usually suggests that we can somehow work through the Democratic Party and through the existing capitalist state to get to socialism. The last 150 years of the experience of the socialist movement suggests that this is an impossibility. Nowhere have socialists been able to use the capitalist state to accomplish socialist aims, and where they have tried, for example Salvador Allende government in Chile in the early 1970s, the results have been disastrous, leading to the destruction of the movement.
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> Rather than "non-reformist reforms," we on the left should advocate transitional demands. By transitional—a term that comes from Leon Trotsky's writing in the 1930s—we mean demands that tend to set ever large numbers of forces in motion in an escalating series of steps, or, better put, in a continuous process that leads to challenges to capitalist economic and political power at the highest level. The ultimate goal is to replace the economic and the political system that we have with one through which the working class can exercise its power.
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> At present in the United States, however, where, as we have described here, the labor and

> social movements are at such an embryonic stage of development, most of our demands will simply be setting portions of the working class in motion around more minimal demands, such as, for example, a living wage. But even in raising these minimal demands, we can do so in a transitional fashion that leads the movement to advance from one conflict to another and eventually toward national confrontations with the capitalist class and the state, toward revolution. Today, we work to organize the labor and social movements to resist Trump, the Republicans, and the neoliberal Democrats, but we do so while working to build a revolutionary movement for socialism.

I want to be clear that we are today in the United States far from any social revolution, but we should not lose our focus on that goal. We want to turn this society upside down and see working people taking power and running it.

NP: Can you make clearer your distinction between "non-reformist reforms" and "transitional demands," perhaps by giving us an example?

DL: Yes, let's take DSA's current campaign for Medicare for All. I think this is an excellent demand and some in DSA have argued that it is a "non-reformist reform," that is a reform that tends to make fundamental structural changes to the capitalist economic system. Yet this demand is raised independent of a call for a national health care system, which would actually involve taking over the entire health care system: all insurance, medical groups, hospitals, pharmaceutical manufacturers, medical equipment manufacturers and others. At the same time, we know that even in countries that have or have had national health care systems, there was no direct road to socialism. The call for Medicare for all is not linked to either the construction of a revolutionary political movement or to the revoltionary transformation of our society.

"Transitional demands," while they may also aim at legislation, put greater emphasis on the mobilization of the working class to the next stage of the struggle, with an eye to the actual socialization not only of the medical system but of the entire economy. A transitional demand for Medicare for All would link it to a national health care system and to the nationalization of the banks and corporations, together with the creation of a workers' party. There is no doubt a similarity between the two, but, to put it simply: non-reformist reforms suggest a gradual and peaceful evolution toward a social democratic resolution, toward a new social pact within capitalism, while transitional demands are guided by a democratic socialist but revolutionary strategy aimed at changing the entire economic and political system.

NP: What did you most enjoy about writing this book?

DL: In order to write this book I had to read biographies of the Clintons, of Obama, of Sanders, and of Trump, and accounts of the political careers of George McGovern and George Wallace. I've have always loved reading autobiographies and biographies, and I found it fascinating to learn how these people from their various backgrounds became important national political figures. After all, Bill Clinton, Obama, and Sanders all came from the lower middle class, while Hillary came from the petty-bourgeoisie and Trump a third-rate bourgeois family. Yet, through a combination of their educational experiences, life experiences, and their personal ambition, they all rose to become rival powers attempting to set the agenda for the world's largest capitalist economy.

All of them—Sanders included—are opportunists who demonstrate a remarkable ability to see and seize the main chance at a certain historic moment. Nothing is more fascinating than the role of individuals in history, in relation, of course, to social classes in struggle and to the political economy of a nation in a particular permutation. I believe that in this book I've been able to demonstrate just how these individuals on the merry-go-round of their lives reached out and seized the ring. And by

the way, for four of them, it involved a talk with Goldman Sachs, while for Sanders it meant an ability to turn from the banks and appeal to the middle class and to working people. It was that, of course, that represented much of his appeal.

NP: Dan, you've written this new book about Trump and the Resistance, but for some reason it only exists in French, meaning most of our readers won't be able to read it. How in the world did that happen?

DL: Well, a couple of years ago, during the U.S. primary election period, I did a speaking tour in several countries in Europe and Latin America talking mostly about the Bernie Sanders phenomenon, the American labor and social movements, and the left. In the course of that tour, while in Paris I met Patrick Silberstein and Patrick LeTrehondat, the founders and publishers of *Syllepse*, a wonderful French publishing house. I discussed with them the idea of writing a book on American politics and they expressed interest. We thought then that it would be mainly about Sanders, the movements and the left.

A few months later, as you know, to the surprise of all, Donald Trump had won the Republican nomination and subsequently the U.S. presidency. So I set about writing a book about Trump and the Resistance, sending the chapters along to my friends at Syllepse who translated the book and published it this June. My book title *The New American Populism: Resistance and Alternatives to Trump* (*Nouveau populisme américain: Résistances et alternatives à Trump*) attempts to put the rise of Trump in the broader context of American history and politics.

NP: And why no English language edition?

DL: I approached the major English language left publishing houses, but for one reason or another it didn't work out. They found my 300-page book to be too long, or to be too historical, or to be just one of too many competing books on Trump. Some wanted a more theoretical book, or a shorter book, or a manifesto, but in truth I liked my book as it was, so it didn't happen. I think that now, because Trump has evolved during his second year from a conservative businessman and flamboyant television star into a genuine far right politician, my book would have to be revised and update for an English language publication. So, perhaps there will be an English language edition in a year or two. And then all of our readers will be able to see what they think of my view of American politics. In the meantime, thanks for giving me this opportunity to talk about the book.

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[1] The first chapter of the book was originally an essay in *New Politics*: http://newpol.orgcontemporary-crisis-american-ideology