

A New Politics in America - Part - 7 - From Occupy to Progressive Politics and Black Lives Matter

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This is party 7 of A New Politics in America. Part 6 and links to earlier parts can be found here.

Progressive Politics

Occupy, though it had eschewed politics, had important political ramifications. A few liberal Democrats soon appeared to give expression to the new movements within their rightward moving party.

Elizabeth Warren—a former Harvard law professor who had served as chair of the Congressional Oversight Panel created to keep an eye on the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) created by Bush and had then headed the Consumer Protection Bureau for Obama—decided to run for senator in Massachusetts. In *The Two-Income Trap*, written with her daughter Amelia Tyagi, they wrote, “Our data show families in financial trouble are working hard, playing by the rules—and the game is stacked against them.” Coming from a background of modest means, daughter of a “maintenance man” as she wrote in her biography *A Fighting Chance*, Warren put herself forward as the defender of ordinary working people against the banks and corporations—and was elected the first woman senator from Massachusetts in 2012. Many progressive Democrats, unsatisfied with or even hostile to Hillary Clinton, hoped that Warren would run for president in 2016—but she declined.

In New York City, another liberal Democrat, Bill de Blasio, ran for and won the office of mayor in 2014. De Blasio, who had been one of the many youths attracted to the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, visiting the country in 1988 and become a supporter of its socialist government. Moving to New York City he became a Democratic Party politician connecting with all the right people and making all the right moves. He served in Mayor David Dinkins' administration, managed Congressman Charlie Rangel's 1994 reelection campaign, served under Bill Clinton as the highest Housing and Urban Development official in the region, was elected to the New York School Board in 1999, managed Hillary Clinton's successful campaign for the U.S. Senate in 2000, and was elected to the city council in 2001. He became the city's Public Advocate from 2010-2013, giving him the role of the people's ombudsman to the government.

When de Blasio ran for mayor in 2014, he was backed by a diverse coalition of community groups; the unions divided their forces among several candidates with de Blasio winning the backing of only

a few. De Blasio ran as an opponent of the city's racist police stop-and-frisk program, an advocate of more affordable housing and of universal pre-kindergarten education. He won election with a remarkable 73 percent of the vote.

The elections of Warren and de Blasio gave a strong indication that at least in the Northeast, some in the Democratic Party electorate were turning against the politics of the Democratic Leadership Council and against austerity combined with police repression. Space also opened up to the left of the Democrats. In Seattle, Kshama Sawant, an Indian immigrant, erstwhile college instructor with a Ph.D. in economics, and an activist in the Occupy movement, ran as Socialist Alternative's candidate and was elected to the Seattle City Council in 2013, the first socialist to hold office in Seattle in nearly 100 years (though there had been Socialist Party mayors in Milwaukee and Connecticut up until the 1960s). Sawant's victory signaled that it had now become possible for socialists to run for and win office in the United States.

The elections of Democrats Warren and de Blasio and of socialist Sawant hardly represented a trend, much less a force, but they did demonstrate the continuing existence of liberal and left currents within American politics. The Democratic Party has, of course, always had such politicians—Dennis Kucinich and Ron Dellums come to mind—and the Congressional Progressive Caucus has about 70 members. The existence of a left-liberal wing of the party, usually too weak to have much influence on the whole party's course, is precisely what makes it possible for the Democrats to hold on to voters and to contain labor and social movements when they begin to become a challenge to the party's fundamental commitment to the banks, corporations, and capitalism.

Democratic liberals and progressives soon find out exactly how far they can go. De Blasio provides an excellent example of the limits of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. When it appeared that New York's Working Families Party, which functions as a pressure group on the Democratic Party, might decide to endorse for governor the progressive Zephyr Teachout, de Blasio—dependent on Democratic governor Cuomo for much of his budget—worked to pressure the WFP to support the center-right Cuomo.[i] And, after months of vacillation, de Blasio also joined Cuomo in supporting Hillary Clinton—not the more progressive Bernie Sanders.[ii] Progressive though he may be—and that is very debatable[iii]—de Blasio was forced to back Cuomo and Clinton, the embodiments of the party's centrist, corporate leadership.



Black Lives Matter

In 2014 another social movement erupted on the American scene much as Occupy had. Black Lives Matter—founded by three Black women organizers Alicia Garza, Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance; Patrisse Cullors, Director of the Coalition to End Sheriff Violence in Los Angeles; and Opal Tometi, an immigrant rights activist—had been founded in 2013 with the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to protest the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who had killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old Black youth.

The movement remained small until August 2014 when it began to grow rapidly in response to another police killing, that of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, where the grand jury decided not to indict his killer Darren Wilson. In Ferguson local activists reinforced by supporters from around the country took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations and disruptive activities, at times accompanied at times by looting, arson, gunshots and riots. The militarized local police, armed with high-powered weapons and using tanks, could not suppress the movement—not with the whole world watching.

Black Lives Matter organized a “freedom ride” of 500 activists to Ferguson to support the protests there, an event that created a sense of identity and community among the participants. Leaving Ferguson, the young Black activists returned to their hometowns to continue to work together to turn the movement into a national organization. What had been a network of activists thus became a national movement.

Black Lives Matters, founded as it was by women, broke with the patriarchal and heteronormative notions of Black movements of the past. Of course, there have always been Black women leaders from Ida B. Wells, who fought against lynching, to Ella Baker of the Student Non-Violent Organizing Committee, as well as gay leaders, such as civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin. In the past, both women and LGBT people faced discrimination not only in the broader society, but also in the Black movement itself. Black Lives Matter also made it clear that *all* Black lives matter, whatever their gender identity, including those of the foreign-born who may have a different culture, religion, language, or legal status.

Throughout the end of 2014 and the first months of 2015, tens of thousands of mostly young Black people, often accompanied by Latino, Asian and white allies, demonstrated in cities around the country protesting the many police killings of Black men. While the demonstrations were peaceful, they were also militant: marchers blocked major streets and highways, sat-in in front of sports arenas, interrupted political candidates, including both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, and challenged government officials at public meetings and press conferences. While Black Lives Matter focused its demonstrations against the police and the criminal justice system, but Black activists also criticized economic inequality, lack of access to housing, and racism on college campuses.

In September 2015 at the University of Missouri Black students began to hold “Racism Lives Here” protests over racist epithets and symbols displayed on campus, forcing the resignation of President Tim Wolfe resign. The student victory at Missouri sparked protests at public and private colleges across the country from East to West: Princeton in New Jersey; Ithaca College in New York; Smith College in Massachusetts; Yale in Connecticut; the University of Michigan; Arizona State College; the University of California at Los Angeles; and at many others as well.

All of this made clear that a layer of young Black activists both in the colleges and in the streets was growing, developing, and radicalizing throughout the country. The new Black movement became part of the broader radicalization on the left that had begun with Occupy, though how far left remained an open question. Several of Black Lives Matter’s founders and leaders are politicians, hold appointive government office or inhabit the world of the NGOs that at its highest levels merge with the inside-the-DC-Beltway lobbyists and think tanks or the Manhattan world of philanthropy and foundations as well as at the more rarefied levels within the Democratic Party. With some of its leaders and activists involved in that world, maintaining political independence would be a challenged.

While Black Lives Matter has not yet endorsed any candidate in the Democratic Party,[iv] it did become part of the Democratic primary, working with the Democratic Party National Committee to organize town hall meetings,[v] and some BLM activists are now running as Democratic candidates

in local elections, an issue that has divided the movement. DeRay Mckesson, a prominent Black Lives Matter leader and the special assistant in the office of human capital with Baltimore City Public Schools, opted to run as a Democrat for mayor of Baltimore.[vi]

In a somewhat different case, Maria Chappelle-Nadal, a sitting Democratic Party State Senator in Missouri and a Black Lives Matter leader decided to run for the U.S. Congress against William Lacy Clay Jr., an eight-term incumbent whose father was a founder of the Congressional Black Caucus.[vii] In Philadelphia, Movita Johnson-Harrell, a Black woman, a Muslim, and the founder of the Charles Foundation that assists at-risk youth, is running a “progressive Democrat.”[viii] Not all Black Lives Matter candidates are Democrats. Rashad Turner of St. Paul, is running on the Green Party line for the Minnesota House. There will be tremendous pressure for Black Lives Matter to move into the Democratic Party and eventually into Hillary’s campaign for the presidency, presuming she wins the nomination.

In the larger picture, it is clear that, like Occupy, Black Lives Matter represent part of what seems to be a new era of short-lived, pop-up social movements that despite their evanescence are contributing to a new left-leaning demographic among youth. The young people who created Occupy and those who created Black Lives Matter share—albeit in different ways and to different degrees—share a conviction that the establishment is failing them and that there has to be some other way forward. And they have had an impact and an influence among millions of other mostly people mostly young but also some older folks who in the current political season have in large numbers looked toward Bernie Sanders as the candidate who not only offers the genuinely progressive agenda so long absent from American political campaigns, but also talks about democratic socialism, an idea that not only does not scare this generation, but intrigues and attracts.

Yet it seems that Black Lives Matter has had little measurable impact on the larger Black community’s political loyalties. Among black voters, three quarters or more support Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders. Disturbed by this trend, Michele Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow* asked Black readers, “Why are we supporting Hillary Clinton?” given that Hillary had supported all of Bill’s policies. Alexander explained

Bill Clinton presided over the largest increase in federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history....He supported the 100-to-1 sentencing disparity for crack vs. powder cocaine, which produced staggering racial injustice in sentencing and boosted funding for drug-law enforcement.

Bill championed the idea of a federal “three strikes” law in **his 1994 State of the Union address** and, months later, signed a \$30 billion **crime bill** that created dozens of new federal capital crimes, mandated life sentences for some three-time offenders, and authorized more than \$16 billion for state prison grants and the expansion of police forces. The legislation was hailed by mainstream-media outlets as a victory for the Democrats, who “were able to wrest the crime issue from the Republicans and make it their own.”

When Bill left office in 2001, the United States had the highest rate of incarceration in the world.

But, despite criticisms like Alexander’s, most African American voters were not moved to break with Hillary Clinton. Why?

We on the left in America have always believed that African-Americans stood to the left of the white working class or practically any other group in our society. African-Americans, after all, have always constituted the most oppressed and exploited sector of American society, together with Latinos and

especially undocumented immigrants. Blacks' experience of the fight against slavery, of the struggle for Reconstruction, of resistance to Jim Crow, and of the Great Migrations and of the fight for Civil Rights had given Black people a critical view of government and our society. The exploitation Black workers suffered at work—fewer job opportunities, fewer promotions, lower wages, worse jobs (always the hard, hot, heavy and dangerous work), also made African-Americans leaders of the labor movement. At the same time, their higher levels of unemployment, greater poverty, and fewer resources made Blacks more likely in general than whites to look upon government intervention as desirable.

The two related but different sorts of experiences—as fighters for their rights and advocates of state intervention—made African-Americans among the most loyal members of the Democratic Party, especially during its more liberal periods in the 1930s-40 and the 1960s-70s. At the same time, given their history as a kind of dispersed Black nation within the United States, to a far greater degree than whites, Blacks have tended to stick together; about 70 percent of Black voters have always supported the same party, Republican until 1936 and Democratic since then. All of those experiences have made Blacks more likely to stick with the Democratic Party establishment and with the Democratic politicians from whom they could get a hearing.

At the same time, the Democratic Party leadership shrewdly and successfully worked to maintain this loyalty by building relationships with Black churches, Black civil rights organizations, with labor unions with Black leaderships and memberships and, naturally with Black politicians and businessmen. Many Black voters remember—and are encouraged to remember—the Bill Clinton years not for high rates of incarceration and welfare-to-work programs, but for their relative economic prosperity.[ix] And, as already discussed, Blacks remained proud of and loyal to President Obama, even though their situation did not improve during his presidency. All of this has insured that Hillary Clinton, who promises to build on Obama's presidency, has a virtual stranglehold on the Black vote.

[i] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/01/nyregion/cuomo-secures-support-of-working-families-party.html?_r=0

[ii] <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/hillary-clinton-supported-de-blasio-cuomo-n-y-rally-article-1.2551243>

[iii] <http://newpol.org/new-york-city-has-power-do-better-de-blasio%E2%80%99s-housing-plan>

[iv] http://www.democracynow.org/2016/2/9/we_endorse_no_one_black_lives and https://ballotpedia.org/2016_presidential_candidates_on_the_Black_Lives_Matter_movement

[v] <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2015/10/democratic-national-committee-asks-black-lives-matter-activists-organize-racial-justice>

[vi]

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/04/us/black-lives-matter-activist-deray-mckesson-jumps-into-baltimore-mayoral-fray.html>

[vii]

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/us/emboldened-by-protests-black-lives-matter-activists-move-from-street-to-ballot.html>

[viii]

http://www.phillytrib.com/metros/anti-gun-advocate-joins-race-for-th-district-seat/article_759723ad-52df-580d-8530-2004c9c37625.html and

http://www.phillytrib.com/news/state-legislative-races-feature-old-faces-newcomers/article_ca9927eb-ea6e-5c2c-8c25-30c767a3de14.html

[ix] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/behind-hillarys-lock-on-black-support-1457478630>