

In reflections on the legacy of Occupy Wall Street ten years after its inception, the notion that Occupy led to the Bernie Sanders moment is quite common. In fact, this essay argues, Occupy Wall Street was not the beginning of a new political era for the Left but the last, carnivalesque expression of a period of defeat.

Occupy in Retrospect

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The year 2021 marked the tenth anniversary of Occupy Wall Street. In the impressive outpouring of reflections on the movement, one found much talk of birth and beginnings. Occupy was regularly portrayed as a social movement renaissance that brought issues of class and inequality back into mainstream discourse.¹ Lines were traced to Black Lives Matter, the Debt Collective, Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the Sunrise Movement, though in a manner more akin to montage than history. In the brewing activist *mélange* of the last decade, for many tenth anniversary commentators, Occupy lay at the origin.

1 Hadas Thier, "Ten Years After Occupy, We Have a Left That Matters," *Jacobin*, October 16, 2021.

Though it was undeniably an important event for the contemporary Left, the idea that Occupy inaugurated or birthed much of what followed it strikes us as incorrect, but in ways that are politically instructive. In this essay, we take up one component of what we will call the “Occupy origin story” — that which traces the Bernie Sanders moment to Occupy — and argue that it is unconvincing in its two broad assertions: that Occupy, in some meaningful way, made possible the success of Sanders’s campaigns; and that the involvement of many Occupy activists in those campaigns was a natural result of their political maturation.²

Our basic argument is this: the lurch to the left in American political consciousness followed from the 2008 economic crisis, to which Occupy was an insufficient response that quickly flamed out. In this, it constituted not a beginning but an *end* — of decades of nonstrategic activist-ism, of self-defeating horizontalism, and of protest without politics.³ Only with Sanders’s admittedly quixotic primary bid in 2015 did a majoritarian and politically strategic left current emerge, one that absorbed people activated by Occupy as well as many others who had been either hostile or indifferent to it in 2011. Occupy-inspired activists were thus *not* the origin of the Sanders moment but rather merely one group (albeit a particularly vocal and influential one) swept up in the first left awakening to mass politics in at least a generation, and it was *this* experience that transformed many of them from liberal anarchists to liberal socialists.

2 We are focusing here in particular on the connection between Occupy and Bernie Sanders. The other connections frequently made, for instance to Black Lives Matter, could also benefit from more scrutiny.

3 Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti, “Action Will Be Taken’: Left Anti-Intellectualism and Its Discontents,” *Damage*, July 16, 2018. To our minds, there is a much clearer connection between the Seattle anti-globalization mobilization of 1999 and Occupy Wall Street than there is between Occupy and Bernie Sanders. See Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: It Books, 2012), 121.

We then attempt to make sense of why this myth has taken such hold in left circles, and how it obscures significant political divisions that persist today. In brief, the Occupy origin story is a legitimating narrative for a certain activist set that has become influential in the left-liberal nonprofit and media worlds. In addition to being unconvincing, it performs, like all myths, an obfuscating function — in this case, covering over the ideological division responsible for much conflict within the Left during the past several years. We believe that reckoning with this division honestly, rather than trying to obscure it with a narrative of political continuity, is necessary to carry forward the gains of the current left revival into a true movement toward democratic socialism.

THE OCCUPY ORIGIN STORY

In his recent book *Generation Occupy: Reawakening American Democracy*, journalist Michael Levitin captures the spirit of much Occupy commentary from the past year.

Occupy Wall Street revived the labor movement, remade the Democratic Party and reinvented activism, birthing a new culture of protest that put the fight for economic and social justice at the forefront of a generation. Far from a passing phenomenon, Occupy inaugurated an era of political change in which the demands of the majority continue to grow louder and more focused. ... The seeds [Occupiers] planted took root overnight and quickly spread and multiplied, germinating in the country's consciousness.⁴

Though Levitin is a particularly committed believer in Occupy's lasting significance, the birthing and renewal metaphors he uses here were common in many left publications' tenth anniversary

4 Michael Levitin, *Generation Occupy: Reawakening American Democracy* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2021), 4.

reflections. Hadas Thier said “the new left ... was birthed” in Zuccotti Park, Jonathan Smucker that Occupy “helped inaugurate the start of a revival of a hitherto long-declining American left,” and Gabriel Winant that “Occupy was the critical event in the formation of a new anticapitalist intellectual milieu.”⁵

Fecund as Occupy was, however, its commemorators were quick to point out that the movement was far from faultless. They acknowledge that it was an overwhelmingly white and college-educated affair, inaugurated in response to a call from the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* for a “Tahrir moment” in New York City.⁶ They admit that its politics were more anarchist than socialist, that it suffered organizationally from what Jo Freeman called “the tyranny of structurelessness,” and that it refused to put forward concrete demands.⁷ According to Doug Henwood, there was “no vision of life beyond the parks and other spaces it was occupying. ... Nor was there any sense of how the larger world would be transformed along Occupy’s principles; there was no serious theory of social change circulating.”⁸

Compare these descriptions with that of the Left amid the Bernie Sanders moment (2015–2020). The activist core is still largely white and college-educated, but the political orientation differs dramatically from that of Occupy. It’s more directly

5 Thier, “Ten Years After Occupy”; Jonathan Smucker, “Happy Birthday, Occupy Wall Street,” *Intercept*, September 17, 2021; Gabriel Winant, “A New Political Identity,” *Dissent*, September 17, 2021.

6 Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, “Changing the Subject: A Bottom-Up Account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City,” CUNY Murphy Institute, 2013. There were, however, independent organizing efforts that, after the *Adbusters* call, converged on the date of September 17.

7 Jo Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” *The Second Wave* 2, no. 1 (1972).

8 Doug Henwood, “Occupy Wall Street at 10: It Was Annoying, But It Changed the World,” *Jacobin*, September 17, 2021.

socialist, vying for state power, focused on both elections and workplace organizing, and armed with concrete demands: Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, College for All. This remarkable transformation poses a significant narrative obstacle to the Occupy origin story, at least as it concerns the continuity between Occupy and Bernie Sanders. How *precisely* did such a sweeping reorientation occur?⁹ Why is this a progression rather than a simple break?

The claim to continuity is typically built on two points. First, the *rhetoric*: though expressive of a vague anti-capitalist orientation, Occupy's "1 percent vs. the 99 percent" framing was indeed used in Sanders's campaigns.¹⁰ It's this shared focus on inequality that informs claims that Occupy "animated the rise of Sen. Bernie Sanders," or that "It was thanks to Occupy that Bernie Sanders's first run for president achieved an unlikely measure of success," or even that "Bernie Sanders was a direct manifestation of Occupy Wall Street organizing efforts."¹¹ Author Susan Griffin offers one of the bolder versions of this claim: "Occupy gave Bernie a platform and gave him permission to talk about these things" (referring to the themes of Occupy, presumably).¹² Even though Sanders's democratic socialism grates uncomfortably against Occupy anarchism,

9 Filmmaker Dennis Trainor Jr offers a kind of osmotic explanation: "The enduring value of Occupy Wall Street [is] the ripples that emanated from its center, even if people don't recognize that they're now for Medicare for All, a fifteen-dollar minimum wage, a Green New Deal or guaranteed income for all." Quoted in Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 98.

10 Though it hardly affected the content of the speeches that Bernie had been giving for more than three decades: Bernie Sanders, "30 Years of Speeches," YouTube, March 24, 2016.

11 Emily Stewart, "We Are (Still) the 99 Percent," *Vox*, April 30, 2019; Natasha Lennard and Nikil Saval, "Was Occupy Wall Street More Anarchist or Socialist?" *Nation*, September 21, 2021; act.tv, "Occupy Wall Street's Activists Orchestrated the Rise of Bernie Sanders," YouTube, September 14, 2021.

12 Quoted in Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 82.

both ideologically and practically, the broad focus on inequality is said to unite the two strands of the Left.

Second, and more important, the *people*: from the encampments sprung networks of middle-class activists and media figures, forged for durability in the hot fire of celebratory chaos and world-changing ambition. It was the first time in years that people got together across a wide range of tendencies to think about political problems and organize for their solution. Having lived through and reflected on the failures of Occupy, they have, by their own accounts, grown past the constrained perspectives of their political youth. According to Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, the “unexpected traction” of Occupy helped embolden a marked shift in perspective, one that led away from a horizontalism without demands and toward building institutional, electoral, and state power.¹³ This trope is commonly repeated by many Occupiers: having “been there” was an important experience, but also one that, in its insufficiency, naturally led to something more. Its failure to materialize any immediate wins fueled the flame of popular frustration to which it first gave expression. After bringing all these people together, many commentators claim, the limitations of Occupy’s decentralized approach pointed to the need for concerted, strategic organizing and concrete demands.

As may be evident in our presentation thus far, it’s largely the Occupiers themselves who have made, and continue to make, this story. They have started new nonprofits, joined reformist union caucuses, and canvassed for Bernie. As Paul Mattick wryly notes, they’ve also been swept up into the new left media niche, where they “speak, naturally, for their fellows, their own class fraction: writers, academics, and political professionals.”¹⁴ It’s possible, he

13 Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, “Did Occupy Wall Street Make a Difference?” *Nation*, September 17, 2021.

14 Paul Mattick, “Occupied,” *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2021.

implies, that all the hullabaloo about Occupy at ten years old is the self-celebration of a group of people who made careers on the Left while inequality worsened.

TWO COUNTERFACTUALS

To our minds, the cogency of the Occupy Wall Street origin story depends on a negative answer to two questions: 1) Would the Bernie moment beginning in 2015 have happened if not for Occupy? And 2) Would the activists that emerged out of Occupy have retained what many of them now view as a less mature political orientation *without* having later experienced the Bernie moment? In essence, this is to imagine two counterfactuals: one where Occupy didn't exist, and one where Bernie's presidential campaigns didn't.

We doubt anyone would, if pressed, argue for the strongest version of a negative answer to the first question, i.e., that Occupy was *necessary* for Bernie's presidential campaigns to happen.¹⁵ Yet it's quite common to hear about how Occupy in some manner made possible the success of Sanders's two primary runs. As an *organizing* claim, this is difficult to justify: the Occupy activists who were interested in electoral politics, including Winnie Wong and Charles Lenchner, initially threw their support behind Elizabeth Warren as a presidential candidate by starting the "Ready for Warren" group.¹⁶

Indeed, in the Occupy milieu pre-2015, Warren was the only mainstream candidate that participants viewed as representing the moment's politics. This should not be overstated: some activists

15 Some do imply that this is a real possibility, though. See, for instance, Milkman et al., "Did Occupy Wall Street Make a Difference?"; Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 79.

16 They were joined in the effort by MoveOn, which started the much larger "Run Warren Run" campaign.

chafed against the idea that Warren was “Occupy’s sort of politician.”¹⁷ But there was a clear link between Occupy’s anti-corporate, anti-Wall Street ethos and Warren’s focus on financial regulation. In June 2015, Levitin called Warren “the party’s most dynamic leader” and “the closest thing to an Occupy candidate the movement ever got.”¹⁸ (He revised his position in *Generation Occupy* to say that Bernie is the *real* “Occupy candidate.”¹⁹)

Only after it was clear that Warren would not run and Bernie would did Wong and Lenchner turn their energy to “People for Bernie.” In People for Bernie lore, however, they were still way ahead of the curve: under the influence of Lenchner’s recounting, Levitin says that, when the idea for People for Bernie coalesced, “Bernie Sanders had made no indication that he was considering a run, much less on the Democratic Party ticket.”²⁰ Considering the fact that the People for Bernie Facebook group was started on April 1, 2015, and Sanders was already hosting events in Iowa in December 2014, this seems unlikely.²¹ Lenchner and Levitin also dramatize the role People for Bernie played in the success of the first primary, making it seem as though what was in essence a social media coterie “launched the Sanders political revolution.” The first Sanders campaign never worked with or even acknowledged People for Bernie, a fact about which Lenchner

17 Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 146.

18 Michael Levitin, “The Triumph of Occupy Wall Street,” *Atlantic*, June 10, 2015.

19 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 78.

20 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 59.

21 Erin Murphy, “Sanders, in Iowa, Calls for Political Revolution,” *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, December 16, 2014; Josh Hafner, “Sanders Rails on Billionaire Donors, Mulls ‘16 Campaign,” *Des Moines Register*, February 20, 2015. As Dustin Guastella notes in his April 2015 case for the Democratic Socialists of America to back Bernie, it was well-known for months that Bernie was actively considering a run. Guastella, “The Case for Bernie: Part One,” *Democratic Left*, April 22, 2015.

continues to be furious.²² Wong, for her part, was nonplussed: “It was never about electing Bernie Sanders. It was about creating a movement.”²³

Of course, many Occupiers did indeed end up in Sanders world — Wong, Claire Sandberg, Melissa Byrne, Becca Rast, Nick Martin — but this does not justify the idea that Occupy led, in any meaningful way, to Bernie.²⁴ The Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020 were the best things happening in the activist world; of course many Occupiers found themselves there. If we’re looking to answer the question of why Bernie ran in 2015 and succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations, however, the relevant factors seem to be Warren’s refusal, Clinton’s unpopularity, and the resonance of the economic populist message with Democrats — not the organizing efforts of Occupy or its “diaspora.”²⁵

We suspect, however, that the idea that Occupy led to Bernie is less an organizing claim and more one about “shifting the Overton window”: Occupy opened an *ideological* realm that Bernie was then able to capitalize on.²⁶ Occupiers themselves certainly talk about the moment as if no one had ever previously raised the issue of inequality. According to activist Dana Balicki, “Without us, I don’t know if there would be a story about income inequality

22 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 62.

23 Jesse Myerson, “Occupy Didn’t Just ‘Change the Conversation.’ It Laid a Foundation for a New Era of Radical Protest,” *In These Times*, September 17, 2016.

24 Astra Taylor, “Occupy Wall Street’s Legacy Runs Deeper Than You Think,” *Teen Vogue*, December 17, 2019.

25 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 24. You could see this connection being forced during Sanders’s first primary run. In an article covering the “March for Bernie” in 2016, in which it’s admitted that the march’s organizers weren’t involved with Occupy, the author nonetheless speaks of an “Occupy-Sanders mind meld.” Gregory Krieg, “Occupy Wall Street Rises up for Sanders,” CNN, April 13, 2016.

26 Sarah Jaffe, “Post-Occupied: Where Are We Now?” Occupy.com, May 30, 2014.

to tell.”²⁷ There was a recognition that they were tapping into something that was already there, but a sense that they were the first to articulate it.

Here, too, the claim is suspect. As Todd Gitlin observes:

Even before the Zuccotti Park occupation, polls consistently showed supermajority support — 60 percent or more — for progressive economic reforms like raising taxes on households that earn \$250,000 per year. Seventy-six percent of the public favored increasing the taxes of people who make more than a million dollars a year.²⁸

Public opinion was not shifted *by* Occupy toward economic populism; rather, both Occupy and Bernie spoke to a public that was already receptive to an economic populist message. Indeed, if anything, Occupy tainted this message: a poll conducted around the time Zuccotti Park was being cleared by police showed public support of Occupy tactics around 20 percent.²⁹

Both organizationally and ideologically, then, it’s not clear that Occupy Wall Street opened a space for Sanders’s success, as so many on the Left today claim it did. Occupy activists were certainly swept up in the Bernie moment, but the causal implications seem to run counter to their typical portrayal — not from Occupy to Sanders, but rather Sanders offering new relevance to Occupy.

27 Quoted in Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 29.

28 Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 37.

29 Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 40–1. Occupiers typically point to polls that indicate majority support for “the ideas and principles of the movement,” but this reflected the preexisting opinion about the need for progressive economic reforms. Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 3.

This naturally raises the question of our second counterfactual: Would Occupy activists have matured politically *without* the Bernie experience? In the books and articles written for 2021's ten-year anniversary, the connection between Occupy Wall Street and Bernie Sanders is taken for granted. No doubt many Occupy activists evolved in their political orientations *through* their involvement in Sanders's presidential campaigns, giving that narrative more credence. But for Occupy and not Sanders to be the key event, some demonstration of this evolution would have had to take place *before* Bernie's presidential bids — 2014 and 2015 seem like the best years to look at.

At the time, when Occupy Wall Street was in the news at all, typical stories either covered the fates of high-profile arrests or how Occupiers were, yet again, going back to Zuccotti Park. In the mainstream press, the movement was seen as “dormant,” having “vanished from the headlines,” though successful in making Wall Street no longer “cool.”³⁰ Micah White, later called out as an “Occupy grifter,” was one of its most prominent faces.³¹

Occupy alumni who defended the movement's ongoing significance pointed to the ways in which Occupiers had branched out. In some cases, this was more abstract: Occupy had “energized” the Fight for \$15 and efforts “to get money out of politics.” Some of these connections only work if you employ a somewhat blurry lens. Accounts of the origin of the Fight for \$15 rarely mention Occupy, though histories of Occupy often mention the Fight for

30 John Light and Joshua Holland, “After People's Climate March, Thousands Re-Kindle Occupy Wall Street,” *BillMoyers.com*, September 23, 2014; Moisés Naim, “Why Street Protests Don't Work,” *Atlantic*, April 7, 2014; Heather Long, “4 Years After Occupy Wall Street, Big Banks Are Hurting,” CNN, November 17, 2015; “Episode 519: Wall Street's Image Problem,” *Planet Money*, NPR, February 21, 2014.

31 Arun Gupta, “Micah White Is the Ultimate Occupy Grifter,” *Jacobin*, January 30, 2020.

\$15.³² And key gains in ending poverty wages have been spurred on by the work of groups like the Fairness Project more than the brilliance of Occupy’s ideological articulation. More generally, the claim that Occupy “reenergized” labor forgets that the four-month occupation of the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, in response to legislative attacks on public sector unions took place in February 2011.

In other cases, however, the connection was more concrete: prominent Occupiers had started debt relief efforts like Rolling Jubilee and the Debt Collective, furthering a key theme of the original encampment. Rolling Jubilee’s major accomplishment was buying up about \$4 million of debt held by students at a for-profit college.³³ This mutual aid orientation stands in obvious contrast to the properly political demand of College for All and state-authorized student debt relief. Thus, without taking anything away from the importance of the Occupiers’ debt relief work, it did not signify any kind of political reorientation.

There’s no doubt that Occupy inspired action: nonprofits were created, more marches and occupations were planned, and the people involved remained active. But were there any signs of political maturation in 2014? There was more attention to electoral politics, but, as we’ve already discussed, that attention was focused first and foremost on Elizabeth Warren. In addition, the electorally minded justified their own interests in the language of “diversity of tactics” and would never have imposed priorities on the movement. Otherwise, the belief in the “spark” predominated, and the movement, insofar as it still qualified as a movement rather than a collection of related individual actors, was stagnant. In June of

32 Ken Green, “The Fight for \$15: How a 200-Person Protest Turned Into a National Labor Movement,” *Union Track*, August 27, 2019.

33 Sam Frizell, “Occupy Wall Street Just Made \$4 Million of Student Loan Debt Disappear,” *Time*, September 17, 2014.

2014, Gitlin, who had written a rapid-fire history of Occupy Wall Street released in 2012, lamented the movement's dispersal and commodification. While still holding out hope that the spark of Occupy might lead to more sparks that would eventually turn into a blaze, he followed sociologist Zeynep Tufekci in blaming social media for the evanescence of huge mobilizations that come and go with little policy impact.³⁴

Bernie Sanders changed all this. For a network of activists flailing in the face of neoliberalism's intransigence, Sanders offered a chance to mount a challenge for real power. Occupy was tragically disconnected from the working class; according to polls, Bernie was not.³⁵ Many Occupiers understood this and began to slowly morph into socialists. In brief, then, the Occupy origin story is a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy: simply because Bernie came after Occupy, it does not mean that Occupy caused Bernie in any meaningful way. Again, we would argue, against the predominant narrative, that Sanders gave new relevance to both Occupy the event and Occupy the activist network.

MOTIVATED MYTHOLOGY

We hope, at the very least, to have cast some doubt on the Occupy origin story. But doing so raises the question of how it has settled into such a comfortable obviousness. Having demonstrated wrong, we must now establish motive.

Three features of Occupy Wall Street seem necessary to grasp in order to answer this question. First, it was a radically politicizing event for many of the people involved, who sometimes describe it on the order of a conversion experience. Participants still speak

34 Todd Gitlin, "Where Are the Occupy Protesters Now?" *Guardian*, June 17, 2014.

35 Doug Singsen, "Labor Unions Were Occupy Wall Street's Key, Forgotten, Conflicted Ally," *Jacobin*, September 18, 2021.

of “the sublime intoxication of *being there*,” “this kind of uncorked exuberance, this intoxicating feeling of possibility.”³⁶ Occupy became “embedded in the life histories of those who went through it.”³⁷ The sense of community fostered by Occupy is undeniable. According to Sarah van Gelder, “This is a movement where you often hear the words, ‘I love you.’”³⁸

Second, many Occupy activists professionalized their politicization. They quickly started new organizations and campaigns — Rolling Jubilee, Strike Debt, Momentum, IfNotNow, the Wildfire Project, Movement Netlab, Dream Defenders, Decolonize This Place, Take Back St. Louis, and Solidaire, among others — and they leveraged their involvement with Occupy to lend legitimacy to those new organizations. They took jobs with existing left-liberal nonprofits and political advocacy organizations, energizing and strengthening their institutional networks. And, perhaps most important for making sense of the pervasiveness of the Occupy origin story, they held prominent positions in the burgeoning left media ecosystem. *n+1* cofounder Keith Gessen was arrested at Occupy, and the arrest received a remarkable amount of media coverage.³⁹ *New Inquiry* editor Malcolm Harris, *Intercept* columnist Natasha Lennard, *Nation* editor Sarah Leonard, artist Molly Crabapple, and filmmaker Astra Taylor, just to name a few, were all visible participants in Occupy. This absorption in the nonprofit and media worlds sets Occupy apart

36 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 51.

37 Winant, “A New Political Identity.” Many Occupiers talk about their time in an encampment the way veterans talk about their time in the military, as one of the most exhilarating rides of their life. Micah L. Sifry, “Occupy Wall Street at 10: What It Taught Us, and Why It Mattered,” *New Republic*, September 17, 2021.

38 Sarah van Gelder, ed., *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2011), 9.

39 The Nation, “Arrests at Occupy Wall Street, November 17,” YouTube, November 17, 2011.

from classic movements of the Left and locates it *within* the culture of neoliberalism.⁴⁰

Finally, Occupiers are devoted and effective self-mythologizers. We do not mean this disparagingly — every movement creates its own beloved and inspiring stories that are recounted as a means of lending legitimacy and authenticity. Occupiers are particularly skilled at and enthusiastic about this task. This explains some of the squabbles over who “founded” or “created” Occupy, the claims to responsibility for key pieces (the performance artist Georgia Sagri attributes “the 99 percent” to David Graeber and credits herself with the “we are” part⁴¹), and the efforts to call out who participated as a “grift” and who was a genuine part of the movement. The professionalization of the loving community has, in one sense, led to a battle over copyright and political capital, but it’s also involved the theorization of Occupy’s ideology, strategy, and tactics. Winant is thus correct in speaking of Occupy as the origin of a new “intellectual milieu” on the Left.⁴²

It’s these three features of Occupy — the conversion-like politicization of its participants, their professionalization of the movement, and their effective self-mythologization — that have made Occupiers particularly influential voices on the Left. They hold positions within the left-liberal nonprofit space, and they have access to the professional networks and media outlets needed to amplify their messages. As we mentioned, however, they had not advanced politically before 2015, and once it became clear that Bernie Sanders was igniting a movement with mass potential,

40 Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek, “NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector,” *Catalyst* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2021).

41 Stewart, “We Are (Still) the 99 Percent.”

42 Winant, “A New Political Identity.” It was indeed an ideological breakthrough, one in which parties at the Verso loft make sense as a form of political progress.

many Occupiers moved into his world despite their own more anarchist leanings.

In some cases, these Occupiers abandoned their earlier politics for organizing around Bernie's concrete demands, but anyone who was on the Left during Sanders's two runs knows that Occupy-style politics stuck around and grated against his universalism and social democratic demands. Many Occupiers were never comfortable with the Bernie moment, criticizing it "from the left" and appearing eager to move past it.⁴³ There were other axes of division that led to friction — for example, between Democratic Party operatives and progressives, or between digital and deep organizers — but the ideological and practical conflict posed by the integration of an influential anarchist current into a de facto social democratic coalition was a prominent one.

John L. Hammond helpfully identifies five key traits of Occupy activism: "horizontalism (no formal leadership), prefiguration (attempting to model the desired future society in the movement's own practice), autonomy from the state and other political organizations, mutual aid, and defiance of government authority."⁴⁴ All five sat uncomfortably within a movement oriented around a clear leader and concrete demands for state power. These traits are also simply not in evidence in some of the bright spots of left organizing in the last five years — the strike activity, the union caucus reform campaigns, the local electoral success — all of which favor discipline, coordination, and strategic demands. This is all obvious in some sense, and yet the bitter divisions on the Left during the last couple years have often been chalked up to

43 Malcolm Harris, "Is Bernie Sanders Really a Socialist?" *Al Jazeera*, October 19, 2015; Natasha Lennard, "Five Years After the Brooklyn Bridge Arrests, the Occupy Wall Street Worth Remembering," *Intercept*, October 1, 2016.

44 John L. Hammond, "The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street," *Science & Society* 79, no. 2 (April 2015).

social media squabbles and a lack of organization and experience. These were certainly important factors, but there was also a clear and substantive divide on the Left.

One place it was in evidence was in the early stirrings of the rejuvenated Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). On the one hand, the 2017 DSA National Convention created three priority campaigns around Medicare for All, labor, and electoral organizing — a clear organizational alignment with Bernie’s 2016 campaign. On the other, it approved a “training” program introducing new members to the “diversity of tactics” employed by “the movement.” The individuals and caucuses backing these opposing orientations fought bitterly for control over the direction of the organization, much to the dismay of the rapidly growing membership.

Another way it manifested was in casting doubt on the notion that Bernie was the clear candidate for the Left to throw its weight behind in 2020. Occupiers like Nelini Stamp never bought into Bernie’s economic focus: “When I’m listening to a speech, I don’t hear what the actual racial inequities in health care are.”⁴⁵ Stamp is now national organizing director of the Working Families Party (WFP), a position she held when the party endorsed Elizabeth Warren for president in 2019. Another prominent Occupier, Max Berger, ended up on Warren’s staff, and others endorsed her.⁴⁶ The fact that many on the Left wavered between a candidate with clear working-class support and a candidate of white-collar professionals demonstrated an unfortunate political immaturity. One way to make sense of this waffling, and the broader reticence to dismiss Warren 2020 as a spoiler campaign, was the wariness

45 Stewart, “We Are (Still) the 99 Percent.”

46 Kathleen Geier, “What an Elizabeth Warren Presidency Would Look Like,” *In These Times*, January 7, 2020.

of “movementists” to disturb their activist networks. Campaigns come and go; professional networks survive them.

Like any good origin myth, which appears to resolve frustrating contradictions in the name of legitimating a certain version of reality, the Occupy origin story papers over the clear ideological divisions within the contemporary left, making it appear as if Hammond’s five traits seamlessly integrated into and even *gave rise to* the Bernie Sanders moment. This is a good story to tell if you trace your own political roots to or through Occupy, but it is less helpful in trying to make some sense of what happened on the Left after 2015.

Even if one believes that the great investment in Bernie’s campaigns was a mistake, it is difficult to deny that substantive ideological differences were a source of inner turmoil, and that these continue to play out in destructive ways. There has been a reluctance to name that difference, as if doing so were inherently anti-solidaristic, but there are clear points of disagreement between the Occupy anarchist and the democratic socialist. Occluding those differences in a myth of continuity or in the name of left “unity” only makes the inevitable conflicts inscrutable and alienating to people new to the Left. To this day, there seems to be an instinctual resistance to grappling with the internal failures of Sanders’s presidential campaigns, leaving those criticisms to be made from the outside.⁴⁷ It is our belief that the translation of the Bernie moment into a true movement depends upon exorcizing these demons.

47 Angela Nagle and Michael Tracey, “First as Tragedy, Then as Farce: The Collapse of the Sanders Campaign and the ‘Fusionist’ Left,” *American Affairs* IV, no. 2 (Summer 2020).

“I HEARD RADIOHEAD WAS COMING”

In late September 2011, a rumor spread that the band Radiohead would be playing a surprise concert at Zuccotti Park in support of Occupy Wall Street. It turned out to be a hoax, but it was absorbed in stride in chaotic Zuccotti. According to Malcolm Harris, who claims to have started the rumor, it was all for the best: “Everyone ended up sticking around because no one wanted to admit that they were just there for the concert.”⁴⁸

It’s a wonderful image: embarrassed concertgoers becoming committed activists to avoid the impression of being hoodwinked. And in a way, it does capture what Occupy was about — in Levitin’s view, “Occupy made protesting cool again.”⁴⁹ It was about the injection of coolness into politics, making the 99 percent a desirable thing to reference. One must imagine what would have happened if Radiohead *had* showed up that day, if the itch to be “cool” had been scratched by traditional cultural offerings. Perhaps the Bernie moment would have arrived without a “cool” political subculture to absorb, with only the force of Bernie’s personality and his bread-and-butter demands. Counterfactual history is quack science, but it helps get at what matters.

Our aim here has been to lay out the case that the Occupy origin story, common sense in both left-wing and mainstream outlets, is a myth. Occupy was the last gasp of a tired left orientation, an echo of the neoliberal era’s political culture in its horizontalism, its lack of a program, and its refusal to take politics and organizing seriously. It was the Bernie Sanders moment — attended by strike waves, union reform activity, policy fights, and down-ballot electoral contests — that signaled the true beginning of a shift in disposition toward the task of building mass political will and

48 Stewart, “We Are (Still) the 99 Percent.”

49 Levitin, *Generation Occupy*, 199.

institutions. However, this shift was mixed with elements of the old, newly embedded in left-liberal nonprofit and media institutions. The Occupy origin story has served to legitimate this confusion and defensively preserve what most needs throwing away.

No doubt a more detailed history could uncover subterranean links and personal anecdotes that bolster the Occupy origin story. But from the evidence we have seen, it appears not that Occupy Wall Street led to Bernie Sanders but rather that Bernie gave an opportunity to a network of activists running up against the limits of their largely anarchist commitments to get more serious about their political orientation within a moment of mass political possibility.

That's fine, by the way. In our view, the proper reaction to the Bernie moment was to shift away from vague anti-capitalist commitments and toward a more disciplined and concrete democratic socialism. That process took many forms, and we're all better off for it. But some continue to hold tightly to the notion that there is clear continuity between their preexisting commitments and their current ones, and they further employ that manufactured continuum to speak from a position of authority within the socialist Left.

American politics has taken a frightening turn since Sanders's presidential runs came to an end. Neoliberalism is crumbling, without any new order coming into view.⁵⁰ The deep social divisions and fragility of democracy in the United States have been on uncomfortable display during the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing clear material gains for the broad majority of Americans, as promised but not delivered by the Biden administration, is the only way out of this mess. In order to be a beacon in the fog rather than just another player in a depressing culture war, the Left must organize around a program of universal demands, like the key

50 John Terese, "Is This the Green New Deal?" *Damage*, September 14, 2021.

elements of Bernie's platform, and definitively reject the elements of left ideology and practice that were absorbed during a period of prolonged defeat. Occupy Wall Street energized a core group of activists to commit to some of those elements just a few years before a majoritarian left current emerged that challenged every one of them. It generated a "movement" that was over before it ever really started, but one that was also institutionally embedded enough not to countenance its own end. In this unsettling moment of interregnum, the Left must be clear-eyed about what is living and what is undead in its present composition. ☹