



CONVERGENCE

A Magazine for Radical Insights

BLOCK & BUILD: Left Strategy in the MAGA Era

This is a syllabus for an in-depth study of the Block and Build strategy. *Convergence Magazine*, along with many other social justice groups, believes this strategy best addresses the challenges of the current moment.

The main dynamic shaping this moment is the drive by a powerful right-wing bloc to impose authoritarian rule and a white Christian Nationalist agenda on the country. This bloc, gathered under the banner of “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), has already captured the Republican Party and the Supreme Court, and holds trifectas (governorships and legislative majorities) in 22 states. The drama being played out today centers on whether MAGA will succeed in gaining full federal power in 2024 or soon after; and, if they are beaten back, what will be the character of the anti-MAGA governing coalition.

The strategy elaborated in this syllabus is aims to **block** MAGA’s bid for power and while doing so **build** enough independent progressive clout to start the country down the road to a robust multiracial, gender-inclusive democracy and an economy that works for all on an environmentally sustainable planet.

To help participants grapple with the dramatic impact the Gaza crisis has had on US politics, *Convergence* added a special session to this study.

Syllabus Overview

Discussion groups and classes based on this syllabus would ideally hold seven 90-minute sessions. Each session is focused on a major component of the Block and Build strategy, with three to four key points identified ahead of time. Each session will include some discussion of how this approach differs from some other views on the Left. There are readings for each section. A set of sample discussion questions for each session accompanies this syllabus.

The points in different sessions overlap, but each session has a distinct focus. Here are the session headings and a recommendation for obtaining a general overview of Block and Build before beginning the study:



Session 1: Unify and Expand the Broad Front Necessary to Defeat MAGA

Session 2: The Crucial Role of a Self-Conscious Progressive Trend

Session 3: Defend and Advance Democracy, Engage Elections, Fight for Governing Power

Session 4: Progressive Agenda Imperative I: Working Class Orientation, Special Place for Racial and Gender Justice

Session 5: Progressive Agenda Imperative II: Internationalism and Protecting the Environment Are Essential

Session 6: The Democratic Party, the Balance of Forces, Breaking the Current Stalemate

Session 7: Ceasefire Now! End US Backing for Israeli Apartheid, Make the Fight for Palestinian Rights an Integral Component of the Fight Against MAGA

Appendix: Resources for a Deeper Dive into Left Strategy

Pre-Study Preparation: For an overview of the Block and Build strategy that will help participants navigate the study, take a look at one or both of:

- [Building Power Against the Far Right](#) (video), Rachel Herzing and Tarso Ramos in conversation, from the People Get Ready 3 Conference, December 12, 2020.
- [“Strategy in the Time of MAGA: Block and Build,”](#) by Max Elbaum, *Common Dreams*, July 21, 2023.



Session #1


Unify and Expand the Broad Front Necessary to Defeat MAGA

Readings

- Michael Podhorzer, “[There’s Nothing Funny About MAGA’s Clown Car](#),” *Weekend Reading* on Substack, January 29, 2023 and “[The Emerging Anti-MAGA Majority](#),” *Weekend Reading* on Substack, June 8, 2023.
- Calvin Cheung-Miaw, “[The Pivot of US Politics: Racial Justice and Democracy](#),” *Convergence*, November 20, 2020.
- Jonathan Swan, Charlie Savage and Maggie Haberman, “[Trump and Allies Forge Plans to Increase Presidential Power in 2025](#),” *New York Times*, July 18, 2023.
- Sandra Hinson, “[The Role of Anti-Abortion Forces in the Rise of the MAGA Right](#),” *Convergence*, June 13, 2022.
- Sarah Churchwell, “[American Fascism: It Has Happened Here](#),” *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 2020.

Key Points

1. Today’s MAGA bloc is the US manifestation of a global rise in right-wing authoritarian movements. The MAGA bloc is anchored in two of the most deeply rooted sectors of US society: (1) a wing of the capitalist class centered in the fossil fuel industry and a set of reactionary billionaires, and (2) the large layer of people of many classes who are invested in a society ordered by racial and gender hierarchies. MAGA is thus the current manifestation of a white Christian Nationalist trend that is deeply intertwined with capitalism and has existed in the US since its origins. The invention and re-invention of “white” identity has historically been used by the US ruling classes to tamp down pressure from the working class during periods of economic crisis and popular uprising. The current resurgence of white Christian Nationalism relates to both the changing demographics of the country (including the election of its first Black president) and the crisis of the neoliberal model following the 2008 financial crash.
2. This MAGA bloc has captured the Republican Party and is intent on imposing authoritarian rule that would roll back the democratic gains won by Black people,



women, LGBTQ people, and others over the last two centuries. The MAGA bloc openly boasts about its detailed plan ([Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise](#), issued by the Heritage Foundation’s 2025 Presidential Transition Project) to transform the US government into a right-wing dictatorship if any Republican wins election to the presidency. Within the authoritarian MAGA Bloc, there is an openly fascist current that normalizes the use of extra-judicial violence, a trend that likewise dates back to the origins of the country.

3. Stopping MAGA’s drive for power and pushing this trend back to the margins is the main task of the US Left and all those who believe in democracy and fairness.
4. Though the majority of US people oppose the MAGA agenda, no single tendency in the opposition is strong enough to defeat MAGA on its own. It requires a common front of all anti-MAGA tendencies to accomplish that task. The anti-MAGA front is cross-class and seeks to include all individuals, groups and sectors that advocate debating and settling political differences via democratic means.
5. Defeating MAGA candidates in elections at all levels is the bottom-line unity of the anti-MAGA front. Fighting against MAGA’s repressive moves in states where it holds power and its general hate-mongering (restrictions on abortion, voter suppression, weaponization of transphobia, crusade against teaching history under the banner of “fighting CRT,” etc.) is also imperative.

Competing View

The main alternative view on this point is that leftists should not vote for Democrats to beat MAGA candidates. For an example of this argument as it applies to 2024, see “[Cornel West and the Campaign to End Political Apartheid](#)” by Chris Hedges writing on Substack.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think will be the result if the Republican Party captures the White House and majorities in both houses of Congress in 2024? For specific sectors of the population, for the areas of politics that you work in or pay attention to? For people and the planet outside the US?
2. How much power do you think MAGA has already achieved? Think about ways the MAGA bloc’s rise has affected the psychology (including hopes and fears) of people that you are connected to as well as changes in laws, living conditions, and the



character of political debate.

3. How broad of an alliance of political and social forces will it take to stop MAGA's drive to rule the country?
4. What is the role of electoral engagement in stopping MAGA? What kind of relationship do you think is needed between electoral and non-electoral work?



Session #2

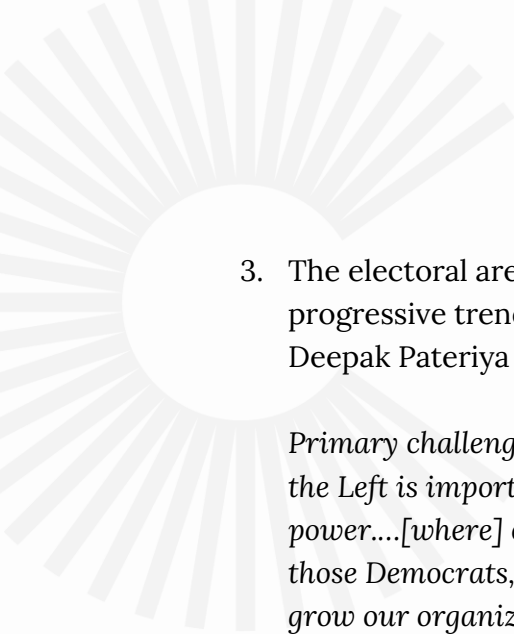
The Crucial Role of a Self-Conscious Progressive Trend

Readings

- Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Bill Gallegos “[Time to Re-Align: We Can’t Win from Our Safety Zones](#),” *Convergence*, October 24, 2022.
- [Building the Front, Strengthening Our Movements](#) (video), featuring Maurice Mitchell, Alexa Horwart, Sendolo Diaminah, and Brendan Walsh, hosted by Hashim Benford and Priya Johnson, from *Convergence* and *The Forge*, March 6, 2023. If you prefer to follow this conversation in print form, an article covering this panel by Sandra Hinson, with extensive quotations from the panelists, can be found [here](#).
- Linda Burnham, Max Elbaum and María Poblet, [2020 Was an Extraordinary Year](#), the **Introduction** to the book [Power Concedes Nothing: How Grassroots Organizing Wins Elections](#) (OR Books, 2022).
- Barbara Ransby, “[Chicago’s Rich Organizing Tradition Paid Off, Delivering Victory for Brandon Johnson](#),” *The Nation*, April 13, 2023.

Key Points

1. Since the 2008 financial crash, and especially since Bernie’s 2016 campaign and Trump’s election that same year, a distinct progressive trend in US politics has begun to take shape. That trend is characterized by commitment to defeat MAGA; the need to build independent power for social justice organizations in the course of the anti-MAGA fight; seeing electoral engagement as one key site for both those tasks; and broad agreement on a vision for a multiracial, gender-inclusive democracy and an economy that works for all on a peaceful and environmentally sustainable planet.
2. Developing the strategic perspective of this emerging trend and uniting as much of it as possible in some common organizational form or forms, is a prime task. We must become stronger, more united, and more sophisticated if we are to navigate the complex unity-and-struggle relationship we must have with non-progressive tendencies in the broad anti-MAGA front.

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3. The electoral arena has been and will remain a key site of battle for the emerging progressive trend. The dominant strategy within this current was described by Deepak Pateriya in the chapter he authored in the [Power Concedes Nothing](#) book:

Primary challenges to moderate and obstructionist Democrats with candidates from the Left is important - if and when it's based on an unromanticized analysis of local power....[where] our base and our movements lack the power, we have to work with those Democrats, apply pressure smartly with the power we have, and aggressively grow our organized bases to change the facts on the ground over time....Also, under the current realities of political power and ideological alignment in the US, that lining up behind whoever wins a Democratic Presidential nomination (or US Senate nomination for that matter) and throwing left movements' full electoral energy behind ensuring they win is the right and necessary thing to do. While we help elect those often mediocre candidates, we have to simultaneously work every day to build an organized and disciplined mass base and voter turnout apparatus large enough and powerful enough to command attention, instill fear, and dramatically shift the center of gravity of US electoral politics. We can't just be marginal electoral actors from the Left. Neither can we just be unquestioning subjects of the Democratic Party as it exists.

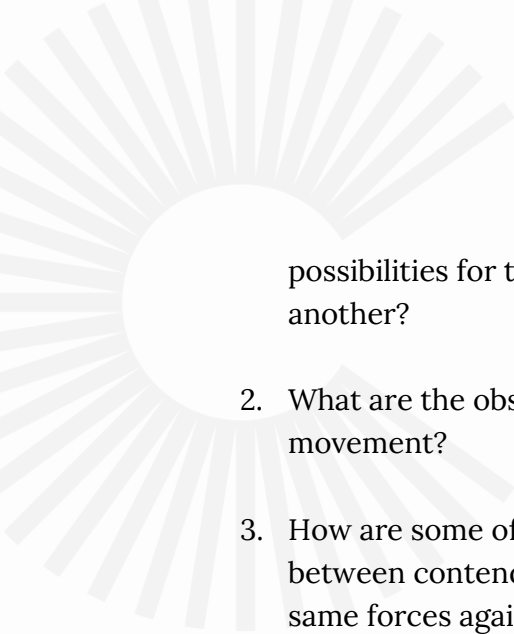
Competing Views

There are two main alternatives to these ideas. The first argues that almost any criticism of anti-MAGA Democrats or energetic efforts to contend with them plays into the hands of the right, is too risky, and should be avoided. The second, which is often but not always combined with the “don't-vote-for-mainstream-Democrats” view discussed in study session one, argues that leftists should only build a disciplined socialist trend, not a broader progressive one. The argument is that progressives—even some who self-identify as socialist—are not a genuine opposition force. For an expression of the second view, see [For an Independent Socialist Movement](#), by the Marxist Unity Group in *Socialist Forum*.

The alternative views on both key points 1 and 2 are current expressions of longstanding differences on the left between popular front/anti-fascist unity strategies and their far left critics. See the treatment of this difference in the piece by Al Richmond in the study syllabus [appendix](#).

Questions for Discussion

1. Looking at the resistance to MAGA since 2016, what groups do you think have played important roles in fighting back with a social justice agenda? Do you see



possibilities for these groups and others to connect coordinate work with one another?

2. What are the obstacles to more unity among the different parts of the social justice movement?
3. How are some of the organizations you are familiar with navigating the tension between contending with powerful non-progressive forces and uniting with these same forces against MAGA? What does pursuing that approach look like in the electoral arena and on other battlefronts?



Session #3

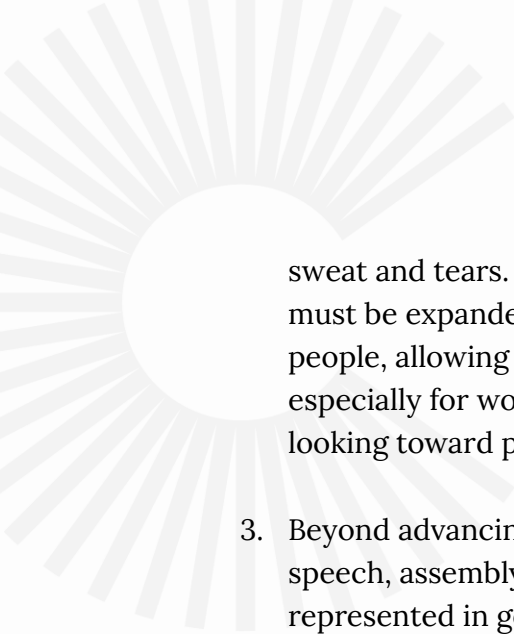
Defend and Advance Democracy, Engage Elections, Fight for Governing Power

Readings

- Erica Chenoweth, Marcy Rein and Zoe Marks, “[Organizing Against Autocracy in the US](#),” *Convergence*, November 11, 2022. And if you have time, see the [Organizing Against Autocracy Series](#) featuring responses and follow-ups to the Chenoweth/Marks interview by Bob Master, Desmond Serrette, James Mumm & Scott Nakagawa, Molly Shack & Stephanie Luce, Lauren Jacobs & Stephanie Mitchell, Mariana Ruiz Firmat, Erin Heaney, and Sulma Arias.
- Richard Healey, “[Organizing for Governing Power](#),” Grassroots Policy Project, December 2015.
- Peter Olney and Rand Wilson, “[On the Sidelines: DSA’s Abstentionism on Biden vs. Trump](#),” *Convergence*, December 16, 2020.
- Anthony Thigpenn and Jon Liss, “[The Left Needs a United Front in Every State](#),” *Convergence*, October 17, 2019.

Key Points

1. The fight for political democracy is integrally connected to—and an indispensable component of—fighting for a better life for all those who are exploited, oppressed, marginalized, and discriminated against. Because of the close interconnection between white Christian Nationalism and capitalism, democratic struggles are essential to opening up progressive resolutions to the crisis of neoliberal capitalism.
2. The electoral system in the US is structurally biased in racist and anti-democratic ways (Electoral College, Senate, winner-take-all system instead of proportional representation, the role of money in politics, gerrymandering, etc.). Still, it is elected bodies that make crucial policy choices, and the vast majority of the population engages politics through the electoral system. So, the struggle for social justice and radical change cannot bypass the existing electoral system even as we fight to transform its character. The right to vote, the right for everyone’s vote to be counted fairly and have equal weight, the checks on racist voter suppression contained in 1965 Voting Rights Act—gains in all these areas were won via blood,

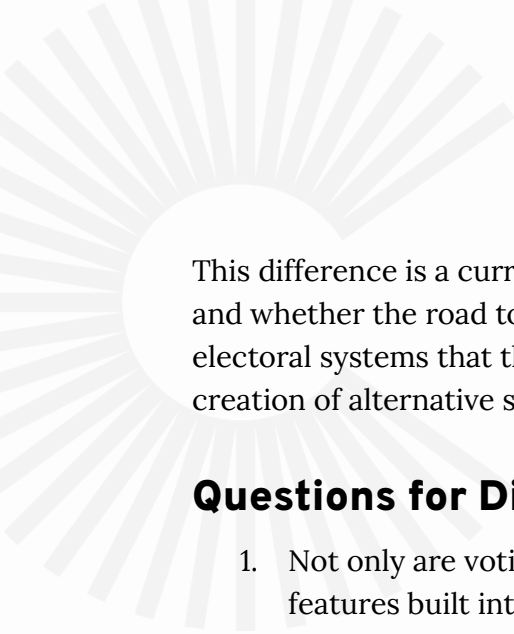


sweat and tears. They are under severe attack and must be defended. Indeed, they must be expanded in numerous ways: re-enfranchising formerly incarcerated people, allowing immigrants to vote in local elections, making voting easier especially for working-class and poor people via vote-by-mail and early voting, and looking toward passage of legislation such as the John Lewis Voting Rights Act.

3. Beyond advancing toward full voting rights and political rights generally (free speech, assembly, press, etc.), the emerging progressive current must fight to be represented in government at all levels. We aim to elect candidates that are committed to a social justice agenda, to grow strong enough for blocs of progressive candidates to be a recognized force in governing coalitions at the local, state, and federal level, and eventually to be the dominant partner in such governing coalitions. This fight for representation and governing power cannot be won via electoral efforts alone; it requires electoral work to be conducted in tandem with other forms of political, economic, and cultural struggle, including: labor strikes, mass protest actions, base-building, mutual aid, contention in the spheres of art and culture, etc.
4. The US has a unique federal system in which extensive powers are granted to state governments, so contention for governing power at the state level must be a crucial component of the Block and Build project. The Far Right is already implementing its agenda and building “authoritarian enclaves” in states where the Republican Party controls both the governorship and state legislature. Progressives must be in the forefront of efforts to break their grip on power in these “Red States” and gain enough clout in some “Blue States” to show what progressives can deliver when they have a major share of governing power.

Competing View

The main alternative left view on this point disagrees with seeing electoral engagement as a part of a strategy aimed at gaining a measure of governing power. In its most extreme version, electoral work is seen as distracting from or even undermining the “real work” of building power through non-electoral mass movements. A more common version is not opposed to all electoral efforts but sees them strictly as an educational or agitational tactic, that might in some situations be useful for building non-electoral mass movements. For an example of the latter, see [“Building Class Power, Not Electoralism, Is the Future of the Left,”](#) by Natalia Tylim in *New Politics*.



This difference is a current manifestation of debates in the Left on the nature of the state, and whether the road to working-class rule in advanced democracies runs through the electoral systems that the majority of that country's residents engage in, or through the creation of alternative structures and/or revolutionary ruptures with existing structures.

Questions for Discussion

1. Not only are voting rights under attack, but there are numerous anti-democratic features built into the US electoral system. What do you see as current priorities for the Left in terms of defending the right to vote and making changes toward a more democratic arrangement? What do you see as possible to achieve between now and the 2024 election and in the immediate aftermath of that contest?
2. What prospects do you see for progressives to be an influential part of a governing coalition in the state you live in? How do you compare your state to others on the spectrum of Republican-controlled state governments through state governments where neither party is in total control to states where Democrats hold trifectas?
3. What's your assessment of the level of influence of progressives in the current national governing coalition, and what gains do you think can be made in 2024?
4. What do you see as the potential and the limitations of attaining governing power for the structural changes needed to bring about a truly democratic and just society?



Session #4

Progressive Agenda Imperative I: Working-Class Orientation, Special Place for Racial and Gender Justice

Readings

- Van Gosse, “[Who Is Working Class and Why It Matters](#),” *Convergence*, April 9, 2022.
- Karen Nussbaum, “[Unions Protect Democracy, How Do We Protect Unions?](#),” *The Nation*, July 13, 2022.
- Bob Wing, “[The White Republic and the Struggle for Racial Justice](#),” *Convergence*, April 29, 2022.
- Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, “[Beyond Roe: The Mutually Reinforcing Nature of Misogyny and Authoritarianism](#),” podcast and transcript, *The Foreign Affairs Interview*, July 7, 2022.

Key Points

1. Because of the historic connection between White Christian Nationalism and capitalism, the emerging progressive current can be durable and effective only if it fights for the rights and interests of all who face injustice and discrimination in the US and around the world—and stands firm against attempts to fragment people using identity-based wedges. We stand for racial justice, gender justice, immigrant rights and language justice, disability justice, environmental justice, against ageism, homophobia, and transphobia. We embrace the fights for peace and against militarism, and the urgency of a just transition to a fossil-fuel-free, sustainable environment.
2. The majority of people in this country are working-class. Because of its role in US capitalism this class has great potential power. A key element of gaining and exercising that power is organization—and unions are workers’ basic organization for day-to-day struggle against their employers. They are structure-based rather than self-selecting; they bring together people based on a common condition of their lives, not on a certain political opinion. Revitalizing and expanding the labor movement is therefore a prime task, and to be durable and effective a progressive

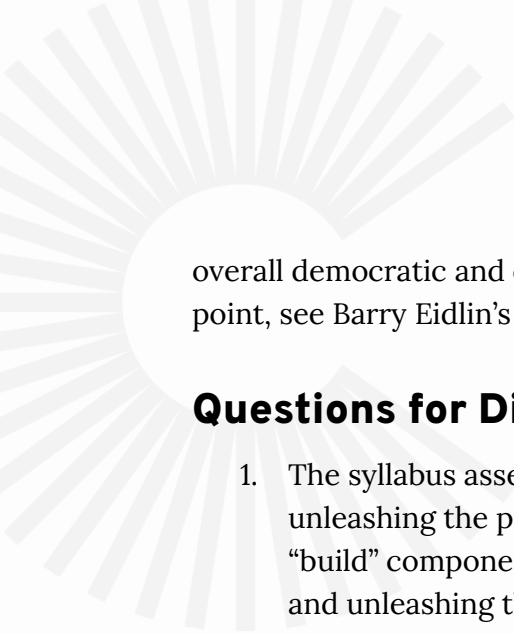


trend must have deep roots in the working class in all its diversity.

3. White supremacy has been a foundational aspect of US racial capitalism since 1619 and defense of white supremacy has been a driver of reactionary movements from the reversal of Reconstruction to the backlash against the gains of the 1960s which we are still living through today. And the fight for racial equality, the Black Freedom Movement in particular, has been a central force in advancing democracy and social justice for all sectors from abolitionism and Reconstruction to the Black-led Civil Rights Movement that reached a tipping point in the 1950s and 60s. Appeal to white grievance is at the heart of the MAGA bloc's coherence today. The fight for racial justice must be a central feature of today's fights to defend democracy and win structural change. The idea that the program of today's emerging progressive trend is a call for a "Third Reconstruction" links us to this deep pattern in US history.
4. Attacks on reproductive justice, bodily autonomy, LGBTQ rights, and the very right of transgender people to exist are central to the MAGA program. This reflects the theocracy-based patriarchal view of gender relations that pervades the MAGA bloc. Indeed, patriarchy, enforcement of rigid gender roles, and elevation of "strongman," "masculine" leadership has been a fundamental feature of fascist movements almost everywhere they have arisen. These attacks fall hardest on women and LGBTQ people who are poor, working-class, and/or people of color. As the emerging progressive trend fights for full democratic rights and gender justice for people of all classes and combats the Right's patriarchal world view, it has the responsibility to bring its anti-racist, working-class and internationalist politics into the fray.
5. Concerning both race and gender, there are distinctly neoliberal understandings of what it means to fight for inclusion and democracy that can lead to unhelpful or divisive practices, as other forms of neoliberal "identity-essentialist" politics do. We have work to do in developing a lens on issues of inequality and discrimination that tie them to capitalism and attacks on the working classes.

Competing View

The most active controversy in the Left concerning the points in this session revolve around strategies to tackle both race and class/white supremacy and capitalism. Critiques go back and forth about alleged "race reductionism" and "class reductionism." *Convergence* pieces have been aligned with the arguments in Bob Wing's piece cited above, which opened a major symposium we organized. In numerous pieces we have stressed the way people of color-led, especially Black-led, fights against racism have driven forward the



overall democratic and class struggle in this country. For a sample of the debate on this point, see Barry Eidlin's [response to Bob](#) and [Bob's rejoinder to Barry](#).

Questions for Discussion

1. The syllabus asserts that the majority of US people are working-class; that unleashing the potential power of this class is crucial for both the “block” and “build” components of political strategy; and that organization is crucial to building and unleashing that power. What level of power do you think working-class organizations currently possess in the US? What role do you see trade unions and other “structure based” organizations playing in increasing working-class unity and power?
2. The left has long debated the complicated set of historical, theoretical, and strategic issues surrounding “race and class” in the US. Bob Wing and Barry Eidlin advance different views on how to address those in the current moment and generally. What do you make of their debate, and does it get to issues you confront in your own work? Do you think either strategy—or some other perspective—is the scaffolding needed for the current moment?
3. Crusading against trans rights and trans people’s very existence seems to have replaced crusading against abortion at the top of MAGA’s current patriarchal agenda. Why do you think this is? What are the implications for the fights for women’s and LGBTQ rights going forward? And how are both stances connected to MAGA’s overall view of gender roles and how society should be organized?



Session #5

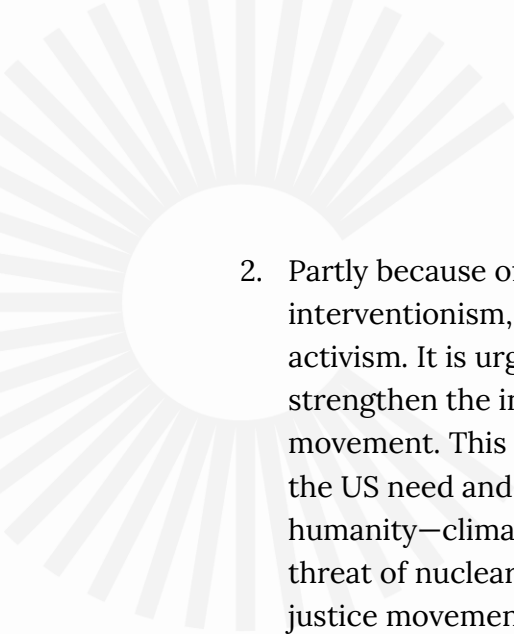
Progressive Agenda Imperative II: Internationalism and Protecting the Environment Are Essential

Readings

- William J. Astore, "[America's Disastrous 60-Year War](#)," *TomDispatch*, February 15, 2022.
- Interview with Rhiana Gunn-Wright, "[How the Green New Deal Changed the Conversation](#)," *The New Republic*, November 3, 2022.
- Max Elbaum, "[Internationalism: Urgent for the Moment and the Long Haul](#)," *Convergence*, August 15, 2020.
- Marc Steiner and Bill Fletcher, Jr., "[The Rise of the Far Right Is a Global Phenomenon](#)," *The Real News Network*, April 24, 2022.
- Usha Kumar, "[We Haven't Seen the Last Vivek Ramaswamy](#)," *Convergence*, February 8, 2024.

Key Points

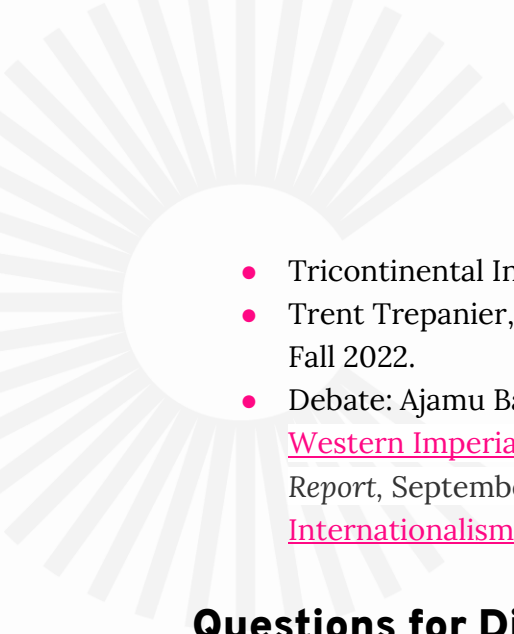
1. The power relationships between different states and the dynamics of global politics have changed dramatically since the period of the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War years of capitalist triumphalism centered in the US. New phenomena include the growing strength of right-wing authoritarian movements worldwide; the relative decline of US global hegemony leading to increased discussion of the possibility (and meaning) of a "multi-polar world"; the rise of China and US-China tensions; and the crisis of neoliberal globalization. There are wide differences on the US and global Left, including within the emerging progressive trend in US politics, on how to analyze these phenomena. There remains a commitment to internationalism, anti-militarism, human and class solidarity, and peace, but there is not agreement on how to translate these tenets into action. In numerous specific situations. It will take considerable time and work to unite a critical mass of the left on a perspective that can lead to sustained work at building a powerful movement infused with a coherent internationalist vision.

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2. Partly because of the above, resistance to Washington's imperial policies of interventionism, militarism, and war is currently the weakest area of progressive activism. It is urgent to rebuild a powerful peace and solidarity movement and strengthen the internationalist spirit and practice of the entire social justice movement. This is urgent not only because workers and oppressed people outside the US need and deserve our solidarity, but also because the major crises facing humanity—climate change, rising inequality, the spread of new diseases, and the threat of nuclear war—can only be solved by international cooperation. And a social justice movement in the US that cedes political and moral ground to the national security state can never achieve its political goals.
 3. Climate change is a threat to human survival. Already it is devastating regions and communities across the globe, driving people from their homes, increasing health risks, spreading disease, and worsening inequality in numerous areas. Without a much more rapid end to the use of fossil fuels than is being implemented by all but a handful of countries, environmental degradation and its consequences will only accelerate. The fight against climate change and for environmental protection and environmental justice must be a central feature on the agenda of the progressive movement and the Left.
 4. The experience of the last few years in fighting for a Green New Deal is full of rich lessons that can be utilized for progressive efforts going forward. Of special importance are what has and has not worked in connecting the fight against climate change with working class struggles for a better life, the fights for racial and gender justice, and for international cooperation and peace.

Competing Views

There is a general consensus on the Left that on peace/solidarity/anti-militarist issues the progressive currents in US politics are far weaker and more divided than we must become. There are various ideas about what route or routes might show the best results at revitalizing this sector of the Left and infusing the entire progressive movement with an internationalist vision and practice. Here are a few ideas and efforts, at various stages of development, for consideration and debate:

- Yanis Varoufakis, "[The Progressive International: Today We Begin Organizing the World's Progressives](#)," *The Progressive International*, November 5, 2020.
- Phyllis Bennis, "[A Bold Foreign Policy Platform for the New Wave of Left Lawmakers](#)," *In These Times*, August 9, 2018.

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- Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, [Mission Statement](#).
 - Trent Trepanier, “[What World Order Does the Left Want Today?](#),” *Socialist Forum*, Fall 2022.
 - Debate: Ajamu Baraka, “[We Can No Longer Avoid Raising the Contradiction of the Western Imperial Left’s Collaboration with the Western Bourgeoisie](#),” *Black Agenda Report*, September 1, 2021; response by Bill Fletcher, Jr., “[21st century Internationalism of the Oppressed](#),” ZNET, September 17, 2021.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do you think the dynamics of global relationships and power have changed since you first got active in progressive politics? What do you see as the key features of today’s world situation?
2. What do you think it will take to build/rebuild progressive strength sufficient to change US foreign policy? What do you make of the current differences on the left regarding international politics and how they affect our capacity to get this level of clout?
3. MAGA argues for expanding the use of fossil fuels and is generally in the climate change denialism camp; the Biden administration’s climate/energy policies are a mixed bag which inadequately address the depth of the threat and what needs to be done. What’s the road to preventing climate catastrophe, and what if any is the role of electoral engagement in this fight?



Session #6

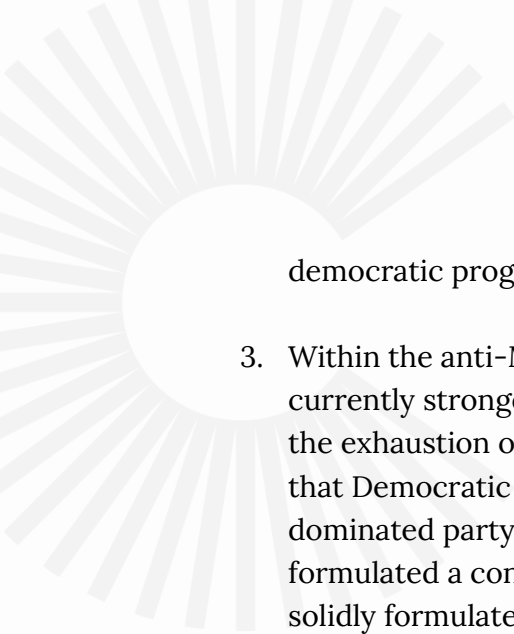
The Democratic Party, the Balance of Forces, Breaking the Current Stalemate

Readings

- Carl Davidson, “[The US ‘Six-Party System,’ Version 5.0](#),” *Convergence*, March 19, 2022.
- Tom Gallagher, “[Cornel West: The Primaries Call](#),” *Stansbury Forum*, June 22, 2023. (See also the author’s book, [The Primary Route: How the 99% Takes On the Military Industrial Complex](#).)
- Loretta Ross, “[Don’t Let the Chain of Freedom Break at Your Link](#),” *Convergence*, July 6, 2023.
- Al Richmond, [Notes on the Revolution and the 1930s](#), a chapter in Richmond’s autobiography, *A Long View from the Left*. The entire book is recommended.

Key Points

1. The Democratic Party must be the main terrain of progressive electoral activism and struggle for the foreseeable future. This is for two reasons. One, because we are still forced to function under a winner-take-all, two-party electoral system, the only way to defeat MAGA/GOP candidates for office is to elect their Democratic opponents. Two, the constituencies with the greatest stake in progressive change currently engage in politics mainly via the Democratic Party. Therefore, struggling to maximize progressive influence within the party, to move its center of gravity to the left, to change its rules to make it more “small-d” democratic, and to restrict the power of money, are part and parcel of our political tasks.
2. We are now in the most intense phase of the backlash against the gains of the 1960s movements that has been underway for 50-plus years. Thanks to an outpouring of resistance in various forms and the way that energy manifested in the 2018, 2020 and 2022 elections, the opponents of MAGA have so far stopped MAGA’s drive for total power. The two sides are now in stalemate, neither able to fully implement its agenda on a nationwide scale (though in states where Republicans hold trifectas they are rapidly constructing “authoritarian enclaves” and implementing their anti-

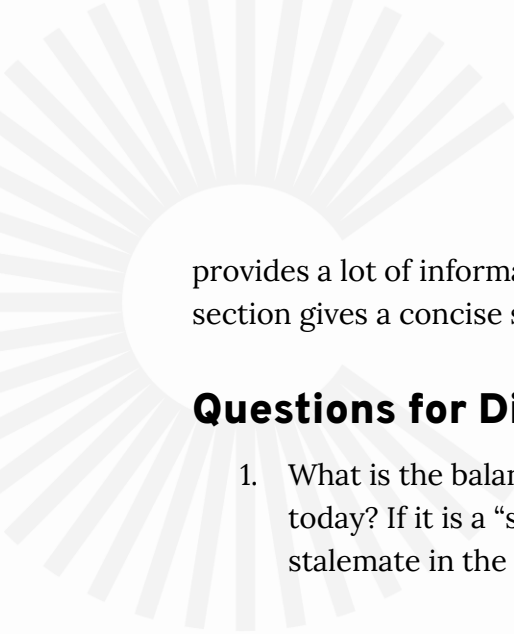


democratic program).

3. Within the anti-MAGA front, the mainstream wing of the Democratic Party is currently stronger than the progressive forces. Due to pressure from the Left, and the exhaustion of the neoliberal model as highlighted by the 2008 financial crisis, that Democratic mainstream is moving away from the neoliberal orthodoxies that dominated party policy from the Clinton through Obama years, but it has not yet formulated a consistent alternative. Likewise, neither progressives nor the Left have solidly formulated a next-stage alternative to neoliberalism.
4. What will be decided in the political battles in the next few years is whether the current MAGA vs. anti-MAGA stalemate will be broken in favor of MAGA rule or in favor of the anti-MAGA forces; and whether the emerging social justice trend will have gained sufficient strength to ensure that the post-stalemate governing coalition will be able to launch a new progressive cycle in US history that can constitute a successful Third Reconstruction. Becoming the most resolute and consistent organizers in defending against MAGA attacks today is essential if progressives are to gain the trust and support of key sectors of the anti-MAGA majority. The more effective we are at our defensive tasks today, the better our prospects for taking the offensive tomorrow.
5. The experience of radicals in key periods of US history shows that the Left grows when it participates in broad fronts against the main enemy of workers and the oppressed in every given period (the “slave power” in the arc from abolitionism through the Civil War; fascism and corporate despotism in the 1930s; the segregationists’ “mass resistance” to the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s/60s). It is a challenge to navigate the complexities of building the broad front necessary to defeat the center of reaction while contending effectively with backward, anti-Left forces within the broad front. But standing aside from the front is self-marginalizing: “the problem is not, to coalesce or not coalesce, but the character of coalition, and how the Left retains independence and integrity and exerts influence in a coalition” (Al Richmond in this session’s recommended reading).

Competing View

This session draws upon the general strategic points from previous sessions to make a concrete assessment of the current political landscape. The relevant controversy of most interest concerns the range of Left strategies for relating (or not relating) to the Democratic Party. [What Is the Democratic Party, Exactly?](#) by Luke Elliott-Negri in *Jacobin*



provides a lot of information about what the Democratic Party is and isn't, and in its final section gives a concise summary of the main approaches that exist on today's Left.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the balance of forces between the MAGA and anti-MAGA blocs in the US today? If it is a "stalemate" as the syllabus argues, what will it take to break that stalemate in the direction of the anti-MAGA coalition?
2. What do you see as the balance of strength between the progressive and mainstream wings of the Democratic Party? What will it take to shift that balance and increase the clout of the progressive wing?
3. Is it true that voting for Democrats against Republicans is a necessary (but not sufficient) component of a strategy to keep MAGA out of power in today's conditions? What light does the experience of radicals in earlier struggle-filled period of US history (build up to the Civil War, the 1930s, the 1950s-1960s) shed on this question?



Session #7

Ceasefire Now! End US Backing for Israeli Apartheid; Make the Fight for Palestinian Rights an Integral Component of the Fight Against MAGA

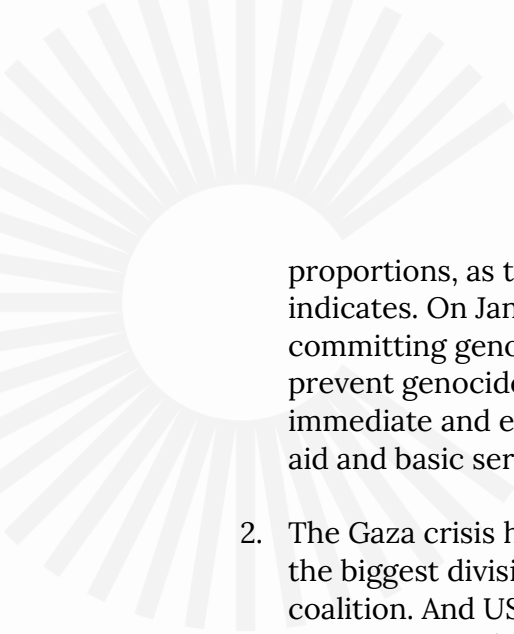
Readings

- Al Jazeera Staff, “[What’s the Israel-Palestine Conflict About? A Simple Guide](#),” *Al Jazeera*, October 9, 2023.
- Rashid Khalidi, “[A Paradigm Shift in the Hundred Years War on Palestine?](#),” *Mondoweiss*, November 18, 2023.
- Max Elbaum, “[Palestine Solidarity and the Fight Against MAGA](#),” *Convergence*, November 8, 2023
- Naomi Klein, [Doppelganger, Chapters 13 and 14](#), available free of charge courtesy of Farrar, Straus and Giroux & Naomi Klein, September 12, 2023.
- Waleed Shahid and Ryan Grim, “[The Squad Is Getting Primaried for Standing Against the War](#),” *Deconstructed Podcast Audio and Transcript, The Intercept*, November 3, 2023.
- Maurice Mitchell, Lara Kiswani, Max Elbaum and Maya Schenwar, [Gaza and US Politics in the Shadow of MAGA](#), Livestream Recording, *Convergence*, December 11, 2023.

Key Points

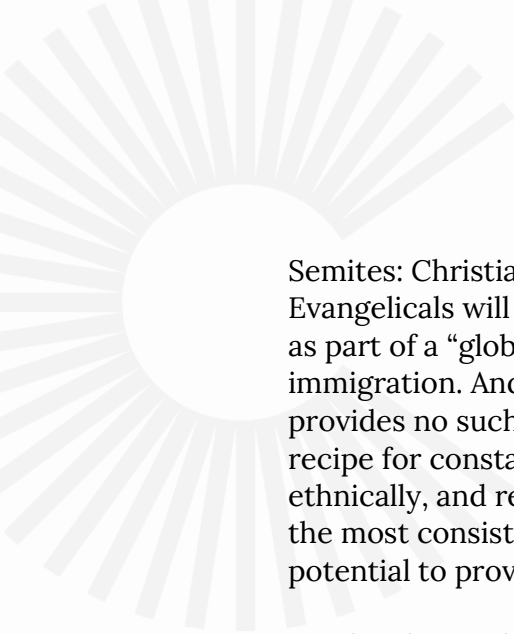
1. The context to the current crisis is the conflict between the Israeli settler colonial project backed by Western imperialism vs. the Palestinian movement for national liberation. In recent major international and Israeli human rights organizations ([Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), [B’Tselem](#)) have joined numerous Palestinian activists in categorizing Israel as an apartheid state. The far-right elements in Israel, now in government, speak openly of their desire to drive more Palestinians out of the country and formally annex all historic Palestine.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas, which has governed Gaza since 2007, led a military operation which attacked Israeli military forces and civilians. Hamas’s killing of civilians and taking civilian hostages were violations of international law. But this is no justification for Israel’s much more egregious violations or for using these actions to smear the entire Palestinian cause. Israel’s actions are at genocidal



proportions, as the [suit brought by South Africa to the International Court of Justice](#) indicates. On January 26, 2024, that court ruled that it was “plausible” that Israel was committing genocide and ordered Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent genocide, punish those inciting genocide against Palestinians, and take immediate and effective measures to ensure the provision of urgent humanitarian aid and basic services. Israel has not complied with the Court’s order.

2. The Gaza crisis has had a huge impact on US politics. Foreign policy has long been the biggest division within the centrist and progressive wings of the anti-MAGA coalition. And US policy toward Israel-Palestine is one of its most volatile components. The Biden administration is Israel’s main international backer. The administration offers rhetorical nods to protection of Palestinian civilians and openly disagrees with Netanyahu’s vow to never allow a Palestinian state. But the administration is sending arms to Israel, rejecting even minimal calls for Congressional oversight, and defending Israel in the United Nations and other international bodies. Meanwhile the Republican Party, political home for Christian Zionists and white nationalists, is 100% behind Israel and a driving force in the campaign to silence all voices who support Palestinian rights.
3. Opposing Biden’s stance is an unprecedented movement in both scale and breadth calling for a ceasefire and defense of Palestinian rights. That movement is strongest among Arab and Muslim communities and Black youth, but it extends to all other sectors, including progressive Jews, important sectors of the labor movement, and even significant numbers of Biden administration staffers. An especially important role is being played by pro-Palestine voices in Congress, where the leadership of several Squad members and others has rallied more than 50 Representatives and four Senators to demand a ceasefire. Within the broad ceasefire movement, there is a growing contingent who center Palestine solidarity and reject Zionism.
4. Those mobilizing for a ceasefire argue that it is not only the right thing to do—especially for an administration that claims to be a supporter of human rights—but it is also crucial for beating MAGA in the 2024 election. The defense of Palestinian life and rights is a crucial issue for both organizers and voters in constituencies that made decisive contributions to the victories over MAGA in 2018, 2020 and 2022 and whose support is needed if MAGA is to be defeated in 2024.
5. A major dynamic in US politics is that major pro-Israel groups paint people and groups that are harsh critics of Israel as anti-Semitic. They claim that opposition to Zionism is inherently anti-Semitic, ignoring among other things the long history of opposition to Zionism within world and US Jewry. Especially since October 7, progressives and radicals, including Jews, have made a priority of [rejecting this framework](#). This is a crucial task, but other ideological initiatives are needed as well, including regaining the Left’s traditional role in the forefront of the fight against anti-Semitism. The forces who are backing Israel today include diehard anti-



Semites: Christian Zionists who see Israel as prelude to a “rapture” when Evangelicals will go to heaven and Jews to hell, and white nationalists who see Jews as part of a “globalist” conspiracy to destroy America via “great replacement” immigration. And the Israeli ethno-state, supposedly a guarantee of Jewish safety, provides no such thing, as its dispossession and oppression of the Palestinians is a recipe for constant violence. It is those who fight for equal rights for all in racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse societies—including in Israel/Palestine—who are the most consistent opponents of anti-Semitism and whose program has the potential to provide security for Jews as part of providing security for all.

6. On the electoral front, the next big battle will be defense of the Squad and all ceasefire Congressmembers who face primary challenges financed by AIPAC and other players in the Israel Lobby. Demonstrating the breadth and clout of pro-ceasefire, pro-Palestinian rights politics by winning this test of strength will have a big impact on administration policy, the 2024 election campaign, and the long-term fight to change the Israel-Palestine policy of the Democratic Party.
7. The focus will then shift to the general election and the Presidential contest in particular. Because Biden has been adamant in enabling the genocide in Gaza, there are influential voices rooted in important constituencies who are saying they cannot in good conscience vote for Biden. The key strategic question is what outcome in 2024 provides the best conditions for a path to changing US policy on Israel-Palestine. Under a Trump presidency that path would be completely blocked. Trump will green-light Israel to do whatever it wants—indeed, Netanyahu’s commitment to continuing the war is in part an attempt to stay in power until a Trump victory (which he will do his best to bring about). Trump’s trajectory is to make Palestine solidarity work in the US functionally illegal, to round up and deport or put in concentration camps large numbers of immigrants regardless of their legal status; and do the same for left activists.

In contrast, the Palestine solidarity movement has a foothold within the Democratic Party—all 50-plus ceasefire advocates are Democrats—and presidential victory by any Democrat, even Biden, would increase rather than decrease their influence. Sentiment in the Democratic voting base has been moving in a pro-Palestine direction, and the constituencies which are either currently supporting or in motion toward supporting Palestinian rights will mostly be throwing down hard to beat Trump, whom they perceive as an existential threat. These constituencies (labor, the major women’s, LGBTQ, gun control, environmental organizations, etc.) would have far more political space to operate in under a Democratic than a MAGA presidency.



Debates on the Left

There are differences over how to understand and relate to influential progressives—most notably Bernie Sanders—who are in favor of or open to putting conditions on US aid to Israel but who do not call for a ceasefire.

There is disagreement about working or voting for the Democratic nominee to beat Trump. There are parts of the Left who oppose voting for *any* Democrat for President as part of their disagreement with the entire Block and Build framework. Within the orbit of those who operate in general with a Block and Build approach (whether or not they use those terms) there are many working hard for a ceasefire who are simultaneously working on defeating Trump or plan to pivot to that priority after the primary season is over, no matter who the nominee is. Others say they will not vote for Biden if he is the nominee.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the prospects for winning the US government to press for a ceasefire? Who are the key political forces for and against? How has public opinion and the balance of forces in the US on Israel-Palestine changed in the last decade or two?
2. AIPAC, Christian Zionists, and other right-wing forces are backing and financing challenges to pro-ceasefire congresspeople. How are these shaping up? What impact do you think the outcome of those contests can have on US policy regarding Israel-Palestine and the fight against MAGA? Are there ways available for you and people/groups you work with to play a role in these fights?
3. What are the stakes for Palestine solidarity in the general election? What do you think the stance of progressives who are working hard for a ceasefire ought to be in that contest?



Appendix

Resources for a Deeper Dive into Left Strategy

These readings are recommended for those interested in exploring in-depth approaches to left strategy that inform and/or are generally aligned with the Block and Build perspective.

- Bill Fletcher, Jr., “[The Modern Tecumseh and the Future of the US Left](#),” MRonline, June 17, 2021.
- Harmony Goldberg, “[Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony, War of Position, Historic Bloc](#),” Grassroots Power Project, October 23, 2017.
- Robert Greene II, “[The Unfulfilled Promise, Peniel Joseph’s History of the Three Reconstructions](#),” *The Nation*, February 22, 2023 (and consider checking out the entire book).
- Michel Podhorzer, “[Weekend Reading](#)” series on Substack, all installments of the series are useful.
- Carl Davidson, [Toward a New Narrative: How Good History Makes for Better Strategy and Tactics](#).
- Jason Stanley, [How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them](#), available in paperback, e-book, or audiobook formats, Random House, May 2020.