



LUND UNIVERSITY

# The Gospel of Bernie Sanders

*Discourse Analysis for a Radical Democratic  
Politics*

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<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Overview.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Political Revolution in Contemporary American Politics.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Entering the Field.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Aim.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2. Previous Research.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3. Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Gramsci and Hegemony.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>4. Methodology + Data Collection.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>5. Ethical Consideration.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>6. Analysis + Discussion.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Democracy and American Political Spectrum: Liberal, Conservative, and Radical.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Grassroots, The Resistance and Presidential Debates.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Diversity Around A Shared Issue.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Barnstorms and Solidarity Events.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Lived Experiences and Activism.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Conflict, Division, and Vision.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Construction of Common Sense.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Theory and Praxis.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>7. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Epilogue.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>68</b>

**Abstract**

This study aims to contribute to the knowledge of activism, specifically the *culture* of political activism at the level of the individual lived experience. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2014) draws from Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and develops a theoretical framework for how social movements can effectively organize and mobilize for social change. Their framework suggests that social change requires a discourse among a plurality of agents that frames power inequality as oppression. Bernie Sanders' movement illustrates how diversity can mobilize around a shared issue and furthermore provides evidence for the construction of a common discourse. The empirical evidence obtained from fieldwork conducted alongside political activists involved in the Bernie Sanders 2020 Presidential Campaign contributes to filling in the gap between theory and praxis. This paper explores the dynamics of discourse reproduction and cultural hegemony within a contemporary leftist project. In 2015, Bernie Sanders began a movement with a vision so different from contemporary American politics, it is often referred to as a *political revolution*. The campaign is merely a moment within the movement, and this essay shall discuss how the movement is maintained through discourse.

Key words: political activism; discourse analysis; cultural analysis; social movements; grassroots; modern political theory

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**Overview**

This paper is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the objective of this research project and provides background information to contextualize the fieldwork. The second chapter summarizes previous research relation to various aspects of the project. The third chapter addresses the theoretical framework under which this research is oriented. The fourth chapter discusses the cultural analytical methods utilized to produce empirical material. The fifth chapter takes a reflexive ethnographic approach and discusses ethical considerations. The sixth chapter elaborates on the aforementioned theoretical framework and applies the empirical material as evidence. Furthermore, it includes a discussion of the cultural analysis of the research. The seventh and final chapter provides an executive summary of the research, an epilogue, and discusses points of departure for further research. Throughout the paper there are terms with an \* next to them, these terms are briefly defined and discussed in the glossary (p. 63) to help clarify and contextualize.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Political Revolution in Contemporary American Politics

When Senator Bernie Sanders launched his campaign in 2015, he symbolized the polarization of contemporary American politics between the establishment and demand for a political revolution. On the flip side, Donald Trump symbolized a neo-conservative ideology focused on nationalism and how to ‘Make America Great Again’ – but for whom? Right-wing political affinity. Recent scholarship has discussed the resurgence of right-wing politics in western democracies (Davidson & Berezin 2018; Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall & Murdoch 2020) and in the context of American right-wing politics it is referred to as the ‘alt-right’ (Gray 2018). Donald Trump is the epitome of capitalist interests on American democracy – after all, he *is* a businessman running a government. Social movement studies have researched various groups that have been apprehensive of Donald Trump’s presidency; this area of studies is known as *the resistance*. Women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, sustainable efforts, and marginalization of people of color—are concurrently at the forefront of the resistance to his administration. These are some of the issues that makeup Bernie’s platform and supporters. In the words of Nina Turner:

If every major industrialized nation on Earth can make healthcare a right, provide universal coverage to all, achieve far better health outcomes in terms of life expectancy and infant mortality, while spending far less per capita than we do, it is absurd to suggest the United States of America, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, cannot do the same. Don’t let anybody tell you any different! Bernie Sanders has a plan for Medicare For All and a way to pay for it. (interview, 2019).

The polarization of American interests between the current form of government and a political revolution is at the core of Bernie’s movement. Bernie Sanders’ radical leftist movement and Donald Trump’s alt-right movement contribute to the broader debate of capitalism and socialism. The deep partisan divide between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party (GOP\*) is shown through their distinct approaches to the economic impact of COVID-19. When drafting the stimulus package to provide the American public with economic relief, Democrats pushed for a ‘workers first’ approach whereas Republicans supported more financial aid for businesses (Nilsen & Zhou 2020; Mattingly, Foran & Barrett 2020). Even with a global pandemic affecting the livelihood and health of people, conservative American politics prioritizes financial aid for corporations, rendering the American public as secondary. After all, the GOP currently holds majority in the Senate and is Donald Trump’s political party affiliation. When the stimulus package was underway and drafted by lawmakers, Bernie Sanders was the only senator to ensure that an unemployment insurance provision in the bill

would not be removed (Pramuk 2020). Sanders and Trump represent opposing sides of the political spectrum— capitalism and democratic socialism manifested into entire movements.

Slavoy Zizek's lecture in London, November 2019 titled "Rise of Obscene Masters" highlights the effect of Donald Trump's election on the American public and political spheres. He is well known for his approach is of utilizing a psychoanalytical\* lens to discuss politics. However, he does not utilize this approach when discussing the success of Trump's 2016 election. Zizek explains that Trump's 2016 election revitalized the left through his rhetoric. And it is this very rhetoric that has the potential to get him re-elected. Zizek mentions that Trump's most recent publicity clip was "*rhetorically* very good" because the message was communicating to the American public that while the democrats were focused on a legal battle (Donald Trump's impeachment\*), Trump insisted he was working for the American people. Furthermore, Zizek addresses that "this was perceived clearly a month ago by Bernie Sanders who said, this is ruining us" at the time of the impeachment. Here Zizek provides evidence to support the notion that Bernie Sanders does not align with the Democratic Party on every aspect of politics even though he ran with them as opposed to running as an independent. Zizek highlights that Donald Trump's 2016 rhetoric reached the audience and silent majority that the Democrats excluded in their rhetoric. What silent majority? The white silent unemployed people who the democrats excluded in their "establishment." This reflects Sophia Rosenfeld's (2011) understanding of the term *populism*. She suggests that political theorists most often describe the term as:

"... a form of persuasion, available to any part of the modern political spectrum, which depends upon an appeal on behalf of those who feel left out of the political process for a more active public role for those same people. Typically, that means the mass of ordinary folks (the illusory "people" or "silent majority") who believe that those who rule do not or cannot adequately represent their interests." (p. 6)

Similar to Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) work on radical pluralist politics, Zizek points out that the key for the American left to win is through "linking all marginal struggles with a dissatisfied pure white class, *this* is the only winning formula." However, how does a *movement* 'win'? And what *is* democracy? A meta question dating back to the era of Greek philosophers and still relevant today. In the simplest of terms, it means one person = one vote. And these votes are assumed to be representative of "the people." In American terms, its definition varies significantly but in practice only citizens can participate in federal elections. Research conducted by MIT Election Data + Science Lab reports that only 51 – 61% of those who *can* vote actually exercised their right to do so during presidential cycles between 1980 and 2016. Yet this percentage was sufficient enough for Donald Trump to get elected through a base that

reached the silent majority and activated a newfound nationalism, representative of a resurgence in right-wing politics. In contrast to this, the resistance led by Bernie Sanders has fostered a shift in political engagement, enabling diverse agents to become activists and mobilize for social change.

**Background: Entering the Field**

“Today with your support and the support of millions of people throughout this country, we begin a political revolution to transform our country economically, politically, socially, and environmentally.”

–Bernie Sanders, 2015

On May 26, 2015 Bernie Sanders announced his candidacy for president centered around the idea of a political revolution. Although he lost the Democratic Party’s nomination to Hilary Clinton during the 2016 election, his message and support led to a movement that sustained and prevailed during his 2020 presidential campaign, especially in California (fieldnotes, 2019). This is what Nina Turner refers to when she speaks about the “the Gospel of Bernie Sanders”– the impact of his message and ideology as a movement (N.Y.C. Rally, 2019).

My interest in pursuing this project is due to the fact that Bernie Sanders is the only candidate who was willing to say the American public and government, this is *not* working – how can the wealthiest nation in the world possibly represent the constitutional ideal of ‘by the people *for* the people’ if the top 1% owns more than the bottom 99%? I wanted to investigate how ordinary people went from passive to active. Getting involved with his 2020 campaign required some effort, yet I persisted. I submitted two applications: one for an internship at the state level and the second application was a general application for volunteers. I did not receive a response to either application. So, I decided to take my efforts one step further: physically presenting myself to the campaign.

Bernie Sanders’ campaign hosted a variety of events throughout the nation ranging from town halls to rallies, all of which attracted a substantial number of supporters. The rally I attended took place in Santa Monica on a Friday afternoon in July 2019 (see Figure 1). As I was walking in, I noticed that a large number of those attending the event were already in Bernie gear from 2016. When the program commenced, the Los Angeles area director gave opening statements and introduced himself briefly– and this is where I mark the birth of my fieldwork. As soon as he stated who he was, I knew immediately that he was the one I needed to get in contact with in order to get my fieldwork going and gain access to the campaign. In a small envelope, I had both my curriculum vitae and program letter briefly explaining the components and objectives

of the forthcoming work placement. I identified the area where staff members of the campaign were located and made my way over there with my envelope in hand, shaking a little because this was my *moment*. As I made it to the area, there were two individuals that metaphorically represented two paths: one that moves forward with the campaign and one that walks away emptyhanded.

I approached the first individual closest to me, he was a middle-aged white man that was volunteering with the campaign, and I said to him, “Hi my name is Yuli and I am looking to conduct my fieldwork alongside the campaign. Could you hand this envelope to the area field director? It has my university documents.” *Smiling, hoping he can read my sincerity and eagerness*. He glanced at the envelope and then looked at me and said, “No, I am not allowed to do that. All I know is that I am in charge of not letting anyone go beyond this fence.” *Okay—now what?* I felt a cloud of disappointment over my body and was almost ready to accept the defeat and walk away.

And then *something* happened.

Another man, a *Latino*, not too far away from us but also on the other side of the fence, jumped into the conversation and asked me, “*Con quien quieres hablar?*” (who do you want to talk to)? Normally I am not surprised when people speak Spanish to me, especially in my home state of California. I was raised in a Mexican household where my parents stressed the importance of speaking Spanish at home and practicing my English at school. *But why did he speak Spanish to me at an English-speaking event? And why was he so quick to help me?*

I explained to him my story about wanting to get in touch with the area director for research purposes. He looked at me, took my envelope and said, “*Ok. Esperame aqui para que el vea quien se lo manda,*” (wait right here so he can see who it is from). He walks up to the area director, hands him my envelope, and I can see him pointing at me and both he and the director are looking straight at me.

Moments later the director briefly looks at my documents and proceeds to walk in my direction. *I felt my nerves warming up my cheeks and my heart pounding*. He walks up to me and asks me to explain my program and project a little more, and gives me his email so that we can touch base and follow up later. *I could not spell his name correctly because of how much my hands were trembling! That is how excited and nervous I was to begin my research.*

Although my role had not officially started, I still took notes on the ambiance and experience of the rally. My role as both an attendee and researcher contributed significantly to my understanding of the culture of political activism. This preliminary fieldwork gave me a small insight into what motivates people to become engaged in politics and also produced supplemental research questions. More specifically, this experience gave me preliminary insight on the discourse that was constructed specifically around Bernie's presidential campaign. I vividly remember a lot of individuals, of all ages and ethnicities walking into the venue and as I was walking in, a volunteer in a blue Bernie shirt looked directly at me and said "Welcome to the revolution" – *wait, what?* He was saying this to everyone that was walking in, as if this was his way of greeting people. But *why* did he call it a revolution? This is where the fieldwork begins, and my role soon evolved from attendee to volunteer/researcher.



Figure 1: Santa Monica Rally (attendee)



Figure 2: Miracle Mile Barnstorm (volunteer/researcher)

Figure 1 is me at the Santa Monica Rally in August 2019, and figure 2 is me weeks later at a Barnstorm in Beverly Hills. The attire I wore at each event generated different interactions between myself and others attending the events. In my 'normal' clothes, I was approached as a newcomer to the *revolution* and was asked questions about what drew *me* to the movement. When I was wearing Bernie gear, I was assumed to be part of the campaign and was sometimes approached with very specific campaign questions. Both identities (in terms of attire) generated

different interactions and thereby contribute to the research developed. I will touch more on this later.

My role on the ground with the Bernie Sanders' campaign was a duality of researcher and volunteer. I spent a total of twenty weeks on the ground with the Bernie Sanders 2020 presidential campaign in Los Angeles. My fieldwork consisted of attending a wide range of events such as rallies, barnstorms\*, debate watch parties, solidarity events, and office visits. I also conducted a set of both individual interviews and group interviews— all in the format of conversations as opposed to structured interviews. In addition to these interviews, I had several brief interactions and conversations with various agents that also produced empirical material. The interviewees included campaign staff, volunteers and supporters. The material drawn from the fieldwork consists of fieldnotes, event transcriptions, and interview transcriptions. All photographs in this paper are my own.

### **Aim**

The title of this paper is the epitome of Bernie's *radical* ideology manifested into discourse and by extension into activism. The term was originally coined by former Ohio state senator Nina Turner, his 2020 campaign co-chair. Since the launch of his 2016 campaign, Vermont senator Bernie Sanders has symbolized a political revolution in contemporary American politics. He launched a *movement*.

“He’s trying to fix the way our democracy works, particularly around the influence that big money has on our democracy.”

-**Andres** (interview transcript, 2019)

In academia, research has focused on the impact and progress of resistance grassroots groups that emerged since the 2016 election but none have explored the culture of political activism among Bernie Sanders supporters. Further, existing scholarship on social movement organizations has focused on the intersectional motivations for political engagement and the plurality of resistance groups that emerged as a response to Trump's administration, however, little attention is given to the construction of political discourse as a strategy for effective organizing. Through a cultural analytical approach, this research contributes to the field of political activism studies and provides an insight on how discourse is reproduced in social movements. This paper is developed as a result of conducting fieldwork and volunteering alongside supporters and volunteers associated with Bernie Sanders 2020 presidential campaign in Los Angeles, California. The aim is to explore the relationship between political activism and discourse by discussing the following questions:

How does a *movement* win within polarization of American politics?

How is *common sense* generated in discourse among political activists?

What is diversity around a shared issue?

## Chapter Two: Previous Research

Previous research on political activism in the United States has focused specifically on the nationwide protests that emerged as a response to the announcement of Donald Trump as the nation's 44<sup>th</sup> president. This area of study is known as *the resistance* among scholars and researchers of social movements. The work of Andrews, Caren, and Browne (2018) discusses 'the most essential characteristics of protest during the first year of the Trump presidency' and identifies eleven different protest topics (2018, p. 393). Their research gathers protest data for protests that took place between January 20<sup>th</sup> 2017 and January 19<sup>th</sup> 2018 and estimate that across 6,434 resistance events there were a little less than 2 million people in attendance (Andrews et al, 2018). The table below is drawn directly from their work and clearly illustrates the various topics and event sizes.

**Table 1.** Protest Events and Attendance for Most Common Topics.

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Median Size</i>	<i>Total Attendance</i>
Race	1,279	37	289,072
Immigration	1,131	60	326,665
Healthcare	661	14	41,644
Economy/Spending	644	18	47,040
Gender/sexuality	471	34	110,679
Environment	447	24	275,962
Trump	440	32	100,706
Science	394	200	540,683
Politics	354	50	144,198
Education	139	45	22,622
Gun Control	105	18	6,699

Table 1 (Andrews et al, 2018, p.395).

Their research documents the significance of the first year of Trump's presidency regarding the amount of nationwide protests that occurred very often, however their approach is more quantitative than qualitative. This is useful for my thesis because as I later discuss thoroughly, the topics in table 1 are also topics in Bernie Sanders' movement.

In contrast to Andrews et al (2018), Beyerlein, Ryan, Abu-Hazeem and Pauley's (2018) study focuses on the 2017 Women's March on Washington and also on the organized sister marches that were initiated the day immediately after the election of Donald Trump in support of the national women's movement. Quantitatively, they show the size and outcome of the sister marches and argue that the turnout for the sister marches was large but not sufficiently

documented (2018, p. 426). Qualitatively, they find that “the sister marches that swept the nation on January 21, 2017 demonstrated the power of local communities to mobilize national dissent,” all thanks to the grassroots leadership and efforts of local organizing throughout the country (2018, p. 442).

Fisher, Jasny, and Dow (2018) take a deeper look in to the resistance and explore the patterns of motivations that influenced individuals to partake in the nationwide protest events. Their work assesses and analyzes how intersectionality plays a role in social movements. Intersectionality, as coined by American law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is defined as “a lens... for seeing way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other” in *TIME* (2020). It is the notion that that racial identity, class identity, gender identity and sexuality identity are *not* mutually exclusive identities. Crenshaw (1989) argues that these various identities intersect, thus resulting in different lived experiences and ultimately an intersection of inequality. Although their research supports the notion of intersectionality and provides evidence of intersectional motivations for political engagement, it does not find a pattern between certain protest marches and participant motivations; different participants show up at different marches (2018, p. 463). It also contributes to the study of social movements with regards to researching diversity around a shared issue.

Gose and Skocpol (2019) research and document the emergence and impact of grassroots groups that occurred as a nationwide response to the Trump administration. Their work takes a different approach to the resistance and focuses on select sustained grassroots groups that emerged as opposed to studying the protest events previously mentioned. It focuses on the importance of observing organizations and their ongoing projects and documents “the activities of local groups rather than focusing on professionally run national advocacy organizations” (2019, p. 313). They find that grassroots groups have strong local connections and more specifically their area of focus finds that the characteristics of the leaders of these groups are mostly “middle-class, college-educated white women, mothers, and grandmothers, current and retired professionals in public and private sector occupations” (2019, p. 295). By taking a look into the organizational practices of these groups, their research illustrates the dynamics of political engagement.

Tara Fiorito (2019) researches mobilization around a collective identity specifically in the case of the undocumented youth movement known as Dreamers in the context of the Los Angeles

area. Immigration reform advocacy group *America's Voice* defines a Dreamer as a “young person who qualifies for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act” (2017)—this act allows young people who immigrated to the United States when they were children to pursue a path to American citizenship. Her approach to the study of mobilization around a collective identity argues that the Dreamer identity divides the movement more than it unites it and that it is rather *collective experiences* of the Dreamers that enables their strong sense of political agency. Her work contributes to social movement scholarship by providing a cultural analysis of mobilization around a shared issue and highlighting the impact of shared experiences of marginalization and empowerment in political activism.

In their book *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement* (2018) David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow create a collection of research articles from a wide range of scholars and explore the resistance movement. The collection examines the trajectory of the resistance movement and offers insight on how existing scholarship contributes to our understanding of the resistance as a social movement.

The book is divided into four sections and the first section places Donald Trump and the resistance in a historical context. The second section takes a deeper look into the beginnings of the resistance and illustrates the intersectional motivations for protesting. The third section identifies the various actors and organizations that emerged during the resistance and played a significant role in the shaping of the movement. The final section assesses and analyses the dynamics of the resistance at the organizational level, specifically the structure and strategies for organizing. The book argues that the movement led by Senator Bernie Sanders in 2016 played a crucial role in the rise of the resistance. Although it identifies his 2016 campaign as “a fourth organizational tributary [that] involved different progressive organizations that supported Bernie Sanders as the Democratic nominee,” it does not further explore the culture of the movement (Berry & Chenoweth, p. 77).

Existing literature on Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign as a social movement has taken two approaches: either in conversation with Bernie Sanders (interviewing) or assessing the issues and policies that makeup the campaign and movement. Rabbi Michael Lerner (2016) highlights the significance of Bernie's 2016 campaign style of organization and further provides insights on how to strengthen the movement. In contrast to Lerner's (2016) commentary on Bernie's

movement, Seth Mandel (2016) critiques Bernie Sanders' rhetoric and assesses the challenges in modern political discourse.

Both John Nichols (2018) and Eric Bates (2016) texts address the dynamics and implications behind Bernie's movement. Bates (2016) text interviews Bernie Sanders' about his 2016 campaign objectives and policies and reflects upon the challenges that the movement was facing then and how it continues to move forward. Nichols (2018) interview with Bernie Sanders' does not address the campaign but rather focuses on the issues that are the forefront of the movement and hence documents the discourse of the movement. Greg Gandin's text (2019) focuses on the ideological aspect of the movement and discusses the importance of Bernie's distinction of social and economic rights.

Previous research on political activism and social movements in relation to the resistance has provided evidence for individual motivations, ideological beliefs, organizational strategies, and mobilization efforts. This paper finds that political activism involves a range of agents such as campaign staff, volunteers, supporters and grassroots organizers. Therefore, this essay contributes to the studies of the resistance specifically through a cultural analytical lens.

### **Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework utilized was developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2014). They argue that when revisiting original Marxist categories, they find fundamental differences in discourse which lead to the development of a new approach, post-Marxism. One of the most significant differences is their definitions of *universality*. When applying Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony as the central category of political analysis, the universalistic aspect changes. Unlike the traditional Marxist notion of the proletariat as a universal class which limits it to *class* actors, the universalistic dimension of hegemony allows for a plurality of actors that are not determined solely by class.

The book begins by discussing Rosa Luxemburg's *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906) and assessing her research on the political struggle of the working class. A significant contribution from her analysis is that it "multiplied the points of antagonism and the forms of struggle ... up to the point of exploding all capacity for control or planning of these struggles by a trade-union or political leadership" thus providing evidence to support the notion that postmodern political struggles are a *plurality* of struggles (2014, p. 5). The relation between these struggles is explained by the concept of hegemony.

In Leninist discourse, hegemony is directly associated with authoritarian and negative tendencies of Leninism, it creates a clear separation between the masses and leading sectors (2014, p. 50). However, the most significant contribution from this conception of hegemony is that it requires a politics that is more democratic than before because it expands and diversifies democratic demands. Laclau and Mouffe find that the notion of hegemonic relations was that of a discursive approach in earlier traditions, and thus turn to Gramsci's take on the concept of hegemony which takes a look into the structuring of social relations.

#### **Gramsci and Hegemony**

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian theoretician and political strategist during the early twentieth century. His analysis of the term hegemony broadened the discussion altogether by developing a theorization of the hegemonic link that surpassed the Leninist approach of class alliance. According to Gramsci, moving away from class alliances implies that leadership as merely 'political' is rather limited, thus embracing a "moral and intellectual leadership requires that an ensemble of ideas and values be *shared* by a number of sectors" (2014, p. 57). This form of

leadership is representative of a *collective will* which through ideology forms the unification of a historical bloc. A historical bloc is moral and intellectual leadership require a commonality of ideas and values across various sectors; collective will through ideology unifies a historical bloc. Gramsci's conception of the materiality of ideology argues that:

Ideology is not identified with a 'system of ideas' or with the 'false consciousness' of social agents; it is instead an organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles. (2014, p. 57)

Furthermore, Gramsci views political subjects as complex collective wills who cannot be reduced to nor solely identified by class belonging. Gramsci's theorization of hegemony provides a framework for how complexity can organize around a single aim thus developing a new perspective for understanding ideology beyond a classist reduction. Gramsci views the collective will as a result of the political-ideological articulation of separated forces; furthermore "the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through a multiplicity of dispersed wills with heterogenous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world," in addition, *they do not have a necessary class belonging;* (2014, p. 57). Let us briefly turn to Gramsci's concept of hegemony and discuss what it means.

Gramsci developed various political and cultural theories while imprisoned in Italy during the early twentieth century. In *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* Walter L. Adamson highlights that Gramsci's "greatest recognition as a theorist" resulted from his publication of *Prison Notebooks* that were written during the early 1930s (1980, p.1). The work of Gramsci is within the realm of Marxist theory in that they both discuss ideology and political philosophy in terms of a bourgeoisie and proletariat in an anti-capitalist framework. Gramsci differs from Marx in that Gramsci's thought does not align with the traditional Marxist approach of economic determinism. Rather, Gramsci develops the theory of cultural hegemony which argues that the state and ruling class –the bourgeoisie in Marxist terms– maintains its power over the masses via ideology manifested in *cultural* institutions.

In order for a new group to be established and rise to power, it must establish a new relationship that shapes the ideology and discourse between the ruling class and those being ruled by means of an educational relationship (1980, p. 142). Unlike Marx, who regarded ideology "narrowly as a belief system without being sensitive to the full range of its cultural manifestations," Gramsci's concept of hegemony shines the light on the "wide variety of cultural manifestations

in which ideology appears... and analyzes the complex interconnections between culture and politics” (1980, p. 176). Gramsci proposed that we question and analyze the ways in which our belief systems and status quo have been shaped overtime. By taking a look at established cultural institutions and belief systems, we can understand the role of hegemony in maintaining power inequalities. In sum: Gramsci develops a theoretical framework for discussing how ideas manifested into cultural institutions are what control power and how power derives from consent.

By applying a Gramscian perspective to socialist strategy, Laclau and Mouffe develop a new branch of political theory that explores why Marxism failed, thus developing a new framework oriented towards contemporary society. Traditional Marxism argued that the overthrow of capitalism would occur at a given moment in time, thus rendering the political revolution *deterministic*. Against this, Laclau and Mouffe address the conditions of hegemony and stress that “the dimension of structural undecidability is the very condition of hegemony” (2014, p. xii). Taking into account this condition of social change not being deterministic, they develop a political theory with three main contributions for a post-Marxist socialist project:

1. Social change is not deterministic
  2. Social change can involve a plurality of actors
  3. Social change requires a discourse that enables activists to frame power inequality as oppression
- (UNSW, 2018)

Ultimately, Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework for a project of ‘radical and plural democracy’ contributes to the topic of democratic revolution by extending “democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations” (2014, p. xvi). They argue that conflict and division, namely social division, is necessary for a pluralist democratic politics because it expands the notion of universality and democracy. By widening the field of democratic struggles, the possibility for a universality among these struggles arises, thus the notion of democratic revolution evolves. The use of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony provides a different analytical lens that widens the field of political agents and thus takes a complete alternative approach to socialist strategy for a democratic revolution in a postmodernist era as opposed to the traditional Marxist framework. Although the concept of hegemony plays a central role in Laclau and Mouffe’s political theory, there is another concept that is equally important yet hardly mentioned in their work: the role of common sense.

Itay Snir, Israeli researcher in political philosophy, critiques Laclau and Mouffe's development of radical and pluralist democracy by arguing that the concept of *common sense* plays a significant role in their political theory, even though they do not further discuss it in their book.

Laclau and Mouffe state that:

once we have abandoned the base/superstructure distinction, and rejected the view that there are privileged points from which an emancipatory political practice can be launched, it is clear that the constitution of a hegemonic left alternative can only come from a complex process of convergence and political construction, to which none of the hegemonic articulations constructed in any area of social reality can be of indifference. The form in which liberty, equality, democracy and justice are defined at the level of political philosophy may have important consequences at a variety of other levels of discourse, and contribute decisively to shaping the *common sense* of the masses. (2014, p. 158)

However, they do not discuss the concept of common sense and essentially leave out the role of discourse. Itay Snir's article (2016) discusses the importance of understanding the concept of the construction of common sense and draws from Gramsci's notion of *senso comune*. Snir highlights the significance of Gramsci's concept of hegemony in the realm of Marxist theory and further discusses the role of common sense. He states that:

common sense plays a key role in this move: through this concept Gramsci analyzes the various dimensions – rational and emotional, cognitive and practical, conscious and unconscious – in which both the mechanisms of domination and the political elements that may resist them to operate. According to Gramsci, genuine understanding of politics is impossible without taking into consideration the wide range of human activities inherent to everyday social life, such as language, religion, folklore and tradition, all of which are subsumed in his concept of common sense. (2016, p. 270).

Drawing from Snir's critique and applying it to my fieldwork, this paper analyzes the role of common sense and further illustrates the construction of common sense in a contemporary Leftist project for a pluralist democracy, namely, Bernie Sanders' movement since the launch of his 2016 campaign. A discourse analysis of Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe provides an empirical case for studying the construction of common sense in contemporary socialist projects. I argue that the fight for a political revolution suggests implementing a new hegemony which is developed through the construction of a new common sense generated by a plurality of actors.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology + Data Collection**

At the national level, the campaign headquarters are located in Washington D.C. and at the statewide level, each state has one assigned director. California is slightly different in comparison to the other states. Because of the population size of California being nearly 40 million inhabitants, the state is broken down into five different areas, each having its own area director and field director. The five areas are identified as: Inland Empire + Orange County, Bay Area, San Diego, Central coast and valley, and Los Angeles (fieldnotes, 2019). As an Orange County native, I had little knowledge on the city of Los Angeles, let alone the entire region of Los Angeles. As a volunteer, I attended various campaign events where I met many Bernie supporters and volunteers from all over the greater Los Angeles area, including some from Long Beach/South Bay area. Some of these encounters were brief and others were extended given our constant and mutual involvement with the campaign.

The various agents involved in political activism within Bernie's movement can be narrowed down to three categories: staff, volunteers, and supporters. The staff of the Los Angeles campaign office was composed of residents of Los Angeles with diverse backgrounds both ethnically and professionally. The staff hired by the national campaign consisted of 2016 and 2020 volunteers and included individuals with experience in local campaigning and organizing. The volunteers of the campaign ranged from *super volunteers* to regular volunteers. Super volunteers are those individuals who dedicated the most time and effort into the campaign and eventually were hired as field organizers. The supporters of Bernie Sanders are just that—supporters of the political activism but not quite activists themselves. These individuals are those who would show up to one or two events but not actually sign up for more ways to support the campaign other than voting.

The various events I attended consist of campaign rallies, Barnstorms, solidarity events, debate watch parties, and also the night of the California Primary\*. The Barnstorms were executed by campaign staff in collaboration with volunteers and activists from 2015. The agenda for each event was more or less in the format of: opening statements, a brief icebreaker, attendee testimonials, national strategy announcement, announcing the big ask\* and a concluding Q&A (questions and answers). Each part of the agenda included a brief self-introduction of the person speaking and their individual motivations for joining the movement. These introductions became known as *Bernie Stories*, lived experiences that led each person to join the movement. It is important to note that *Bernie Stories* were not only shared during Barnstorm

events, but throughout all campaign-related activities. Every single one of my informants shared their *Bernie Story* with me.

The duration of my fieldwork encompasses the trajectory of the historic East Los Angeles office. I observed and documented the transformation of a seemingly old, slightly worn down, empty space (as shown in Figure 4) into a crowded, sometimes slightly too warm, hub for a multitude of political activists who dedicated a lot of time and effort (as shown in Figure 5) and arguably made the most significant contribution to the state of California's overwhelming support for Bernie Sanders (fieldnotes, 2019). The dedication and passion of the people of Los Angeles are what led to the victory of Bernie Sanders' over the state of California during the presidential primary (fieldnotes, 2020).

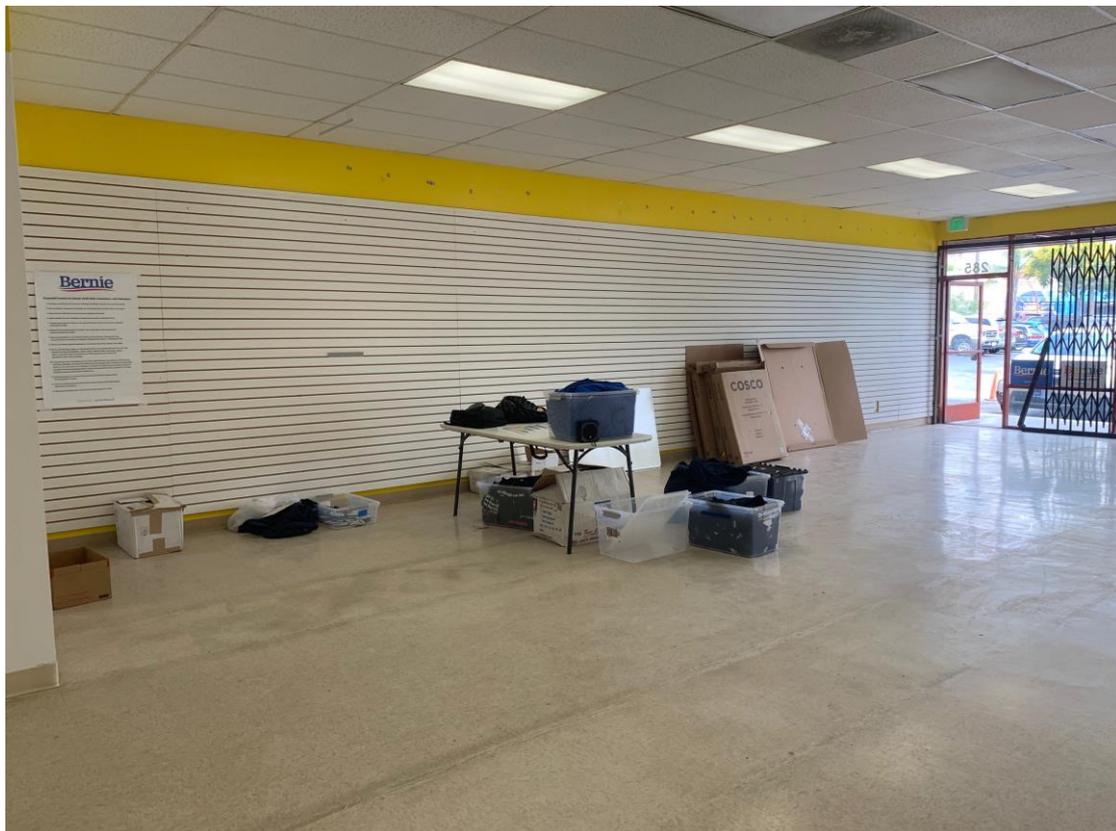


Figure 4: Los Angeles Campaign Headquarters (before officially opening) (September 2019)



Figure 5: Los Angeles Campaign Headquarters, weekend before Super Tuesday (02/29/2020)

Given that I spent a lot of time on the ground with various political activists supporting the campaign, I became familiar with a lot of them and therefore played a role in the shaping of my observations based on these developed relationships, thus my role helped “construct the observations that became [my] data” as highlighted by Charlotte Davies in *Reflexive Ethnography* (2008, p. 5). The methodology utilized to conduct fieldwork consists of participant observations and go-alongs, informal interviews, in-depth interviews, and several group informal interviews. The data produced from this methodology is a collection of fieldnotes and audio transcriptions of every event I attended and of all interviews conducted.

Participant observation method was utilized at each event that I attended, including the days I spent at the office. This method is the act of observing how agents interact and behave amongst each other and also listening to the discourse being utilized and reproduced. By using this method, I was able to gather data on the infrastructures in place among the various agents. By engaging with activists on a regular basis, I was able to gain an understanding of their motivations and reasons for supporting the campaign. The participant observation method was executed through a range of ways. Sometimes I was in Bernie attire which resulted in me being automatically identified as campaign staff or a regular volunteer. This often led supporters to

ask me very specific questions about the campaign that I sometimes did not have an immediate answer to. Nonetheless, having familiarized myself with the campaign staff and volunteers, I was able to point the inquirer in the right direction. These brief encounters with event attendees provided insight on the construction of discourse among political activists. Other times I conducted participant observation in my regular clothes, which led to a different form of interaction. The difference in my attire resulted in different interactions which ultimately shaped the way informants would engage with me. When I was in Bernie attire I was only approached with campaign-related questions and when I was in regular attire, I was asked to share my own motivations for “joining the movement.” In addition, another innovative method of observing was based on go-alongs with campaign volunteers during community outreach meetings.

Margarethe Kusenbach’s (2003) work assesses and analyzes the go-along as a useful strategy for qualitative research. She stresses that “the broader goal of this article is to contribute to a better phenomenological understanding of how individuals comprehend and engage their physical and social environments in everyday life,” hence the use of go-along contributes significantly to being present in the moment that the construction of discourse takes place between various political agents (2003, p. 456). Given that the participants involved in the campaign were a plurality of activists, going along with the campaign to events, community canvassing alongside volunteers, and ultimately being there at all times contributed to my understanding and analysis of the construction of discourse in political activism.

Both Kusenbach (2003) and Ehn, Löfgren and Wilk (2016) agree that interviews are a common and widely used method in social and cultural research. In the case of my fieldwork, I conducted various types of interviews. Some of them were brief informal conversations but nonetheless provided preliminary data for researching the production and use of common discourse among agents. These brief encounters resulted in the accumulation of several small stories that are useful in ethnographic research to highlight the importance of details and little things that provide deeper insights (Ehn et al 2016).

I also conducted a few informal group interviews with volunteers while accompanying them on weekend canvassing. To canvass means “to go through (a district) or go to (persons) in order to solicit orders or political support or to determine opinions or sentiments” (Merriam-Webster). Community canvassing is an activity where volunteers get together at any given

location, be it a park, restaurant, an intersection, or even someone's house— and coordinate door-to-door conversations. The campaign staff in Los Angeles divided parts of Los Angeles into smaller areas called turfs. Each turf had an assigned field organizer who was in charge of delegating tasks to volunteers that signed up for the canvass. Canvassing was typically scheduled during the weekends because this implied that people would be home and therefore increase chances of direct contact (fieldnotes, 2019). Because the weekend implied people would be home from work, this also increased volunteer turnout for canvassing. The canvasses were organized by assigning two shifts of canvassing per day, led by several field organizers. One shift was in the morning from 10:00 to 13:00 and the second shift was in the afternoon from 14:00 to 17:00. Volunteers were asked to RSVP through the BERN app\* so that the campaign could keep track of how many individuals to expect and also so that the campaign could directly contact the volunteers for future support (fieldnotes, 2019). This method of group conversations illustrated how the construction of discourse is generated and utilized. It provided insights on the rapports and networks of agents associated with the movement.

The other type of interview that I executed was that of a semi-structured interview with several informants. Davies defines semi-structured interviews as those which consist of an interview structure not in the format of specific questions but rather in the format of topics and main points that the ethnographer wishes to cover (2008, p. 106). This is exactly how I conducted my interviews with my informants— I selected a set of topics to cover and mentioned them throughout the interview which was in the format of a conversation. By using this method of interviewing, I was able to “introduce new topics and supplementary questions not included on the list” and thereby encouraged informants “to expand on a response, digress, or even go off the particular topic and introduce their own concerns” (2008, p. 106). Furthermore, this style of interviewing allowed the informants to share more of their own personal experiences as opposed to feeling restricted within the parameters of a formal interview with specific questions.

I scheduled the interviews for specific dates and/or times so that the conversations would not interfere with campaign events. These semi-structured interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes to 90 minutes and were audio recorded. All informants were aware of being audio recorded and gave verbal consent for permission to draw from the audio files for research purposes. However, for the purpose of identity protection, all names have been changed to pseudonyms. Davies mentions that audio recording the interviews is a useful way of

documenting the interviews without having to interrupt the natural conversation with constant note taking (2008, p. 126). After each interview, I wrote field notes reflecting on the environment and trajectory of the interview. Alongside taking notes, the audio recordings were also transcribed. See appendix for table of data collection (p. 65).

The result of my fieldwork produced empirical material in the format of audio recordings, interview transcriptions, videos and photographs, and several pages of fieldnotes (both on my laptop and in a journal). I included the locations of each piece of field work conducted because it emphasizes how my ethnographic approach was not in a given setting but rather sporadically in the Los Angeles area. Thus, this clearly demonstrates how ethnography can indeed be “translocal” and “multi-sited” because my fieldwork took place in several sites as opposed to one precise location (Ehn et al, 2016, p. 17).

## Chapter Five: Ethical Considerations

Because of the amount of time that I spent with the campaign, a lot of my informants became friends and acquaintances. I acknowledge that this has an impact on my data collection and research analysis. As previously mentioned, my role contributed to my observational data due to my daily interactions and contact with the campaign staff, supporters and volunteers. By taking a step into my fieldwork and becoming a part of it, I was able to gather firsthand insight and documentation of the construction of common sense among various political activists and agents. Davies (2008) highlights the importance of this type of fieldwork because it is “expressive of a reality that is neither accessible directly through the actions and texts of those being studied nor simply a reflection of the individual anthropologist’s psyche” (p. 6). Because my participant observation method was utilized at every moment I spent related to the campaign, overtime I developed rapport and familiarity with informants, which resulted in more frequent and open conversations. The informants of this project consist of those directly involved with the campaign and those who were also organizing for Bernie Sanders outside of the campaign. The various groups associated with Bernie’s 2020 presidential efforts point to a multitude of groups collectively mobilizing around a shared issue.

It is equally important to address the “complexity of the transcription process” as argued by Mary Bucholtz (2000, p. 1453). The process of transcription can never truly be objective because:

all transcriptions take sides, enabling certain interpretations, advancing particular interests, favoring specific speakers, and so on. The choices made in transcription link the transcription to the context in which it is intended to be read. Embedded in the details of transcription are indications of purpose, audience, and the position of the transcriber toward the text. Transcripts thus testify to the circumstances of their creation and intended use. (2000, p. 1440)

Therefore, the duality of my role as both researcher and volunteer contributed to the amount of empirical data produced from the fieldwork. When I introduced myself, often times I was asked where I was from and usually people expected to hear some neighboring city in the Los Angeles region but were very surprised to find out I was actually *not* from the area. This also has an impact on my data collection and reporting of findings because there were a lot of new terms, reoccurring themes, and common topics that were mentioned and discussed among my informants. I often times had to ask supplementary questions to better understand what they were referring to. For example, several volunteers and supporters of Bernie’s campaign were students at East Los Angeles College, what they commonly referred to as ‘ELAC’ – something

I would have never guessed given my local distance from the area where I was conducting my fieldwork. The following chapter discusses the link between the aforementioned methodology and theoretical framework via empirical material.

## Chapter Six: Analysis + Discussion

To contextualize my analysis, I argue that the construction of common sense within Bernie's movement began during his 2016 campaign. This is when he introduced his ideology of fighting for a political revolution as president of the United States. Jeff Weaver, his 2016 campaign manager wrote "millions of Americans were first introduced to Bernie Sanders and his political revolution in 2015" (2018, p. 1). This is precisely what sets him apart from the other Democratic Party candidates both in 2016 and 2020 –ideological differences, given that Bernie Sanders is well known for being a "longtime independent and "democratic socialist" (Prokop, 2015). Interestingly, his rhetoric of "fighting against the establishment" can be paralleled to Donald Trump's 2016 rhetoric of *also* fighting the establishment, namely the government established in Washington D.C. Although each candidate has ideological differences that are at opposite ends of the political spectrum, Sanders being at the progressive end and Trump being at the conservative end, the *rhetoric* they use is *not so different* when addressing the masses. Because this paper is a case study focusing strictly on Bernie Sanders' 2020 campaign, I will not dive deeper into the discussion of rhetoric parallels. It is, however, an interesting point of departure that could be addressed in future research.

### Democracy and American Political Spectrum: Liberal, Conservative, and Radical

It is important to address that voting in the United States is a multi-step process, to put it briefly:

1. Citizens register to vote before registration deadline (deadline varies by state)
2. Find polling place and cast ballots for popular vote\* (primary election cycles; delegate results; February – June)
3. Political party announces nomination of candidate for presidential election (July – August)
4. Presidential election results based on electoral college\* (November)

Furthermore:

An election for president of the United States happens every four years on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. The election process begins with primary elections and caucuses. These are two methods that states use to select a potential presidential nominee...Caucuses are local gatherings of voters who vote at the end of a meeting for a particular candidate. Then it moves to nominating conventions, during which political parties each select a nominee to *unite* behind. During a political party convention, each presidential nominee also announces a vice presidential running mate. The candidates then campaign across the country to explain their views and plans to voters. They may also participate in debates with candidates from other parties. (USA.gov)

The constitutional requirements for presidential candidates are that he/she must: be a natural-born citizen of the United States, be at least 35 years old, and also, he/she must have been a resident on American soil for 14 years. It is important to note that in the United States, one

person does not equate to one vote. When casting their vote, Americans are exercising their popular vote. This does not determine the winner, but rather the electoral college votes for the president and vice president. This topic of the electoral college is directly related to the realm of democracy and representation. However, this is not the focus of this thesis. Investigating the relationship between contemporary discourse and representation can be a starting point for future research in the realm of *what is democracy*.

When candidates launch their campaigns, they are promoting their ideas and policies through discourse to increase support and thereby become elected president. Each president represents their own version of government administration based on pre-conceived ideologies. In the context of American politics, the two leading parties are the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Each party has its own general ideology that is transformed into a discourse that enables agents to engage in the political process. Before proceeding, it is of utmost importance to briefly discuss the meanings behind “the left” and “the right” in American political discourse.

Typically, the left is associated with the Democratic Party and the right is associated with the Republican Party. Each side is representative of where an individual stands with regards to perception of how a government should work, but the terms themselves are also situational and change meaning depending on context (Carlisle 2019). Sociologist G. William Domhoff's (2009) research on the left and the right in relationship to thinking, personality and politics thoroughly discusses and analyzes the left-right aspect of American politics. He states that “it is important to make clear that the political substance of what is “Left” and what is “Right” can vary from time to time and place to place due to the histories of different counties” (p. 6). When Americans think of the left-right dimension they are also thinking about it as the liberal-conservative dimension (Domhoff, 2009, p. 5).

In the United States the left is associated with a liberal ideology whereas the right is associated with a conservative ideology. Keywords associated with the left/liberal view: regulation, progressive, egalitarian. In contrast to this, keywords associated with the right/conservative view: traditional, religious, hierarchal. Khan Academy, an American non-profit educational organization discusses the liberal-conservative ideology through examples of issues and I will exemplify a few to help illustrate the liberal-conservative ideology in contemporary American politics.

On the issue of abortion, the liberal view supports the notion of pro-choice whereas the conservative view supports the notion of pro-life, which suggests that the fetus is a human life and therefore cannot undergo abortion. On the issue of gun control, the conservative view often refers the Constitutional Second Amendment right (the right to bear arms), whereas the liberal view supports the notion of regulated gun control. On the economic spectrum, the liberal view supports the ideology of increased taxes and utilizing them for social programs. The conservative view, on the other hand, does not support high taxes and believes that regulation on the market disrupts economic growth. Although each party is generally associated with its particular ideology (liberal/conservative), it is important to note that supporters of each party do not necessarily align with the party on *all* matters. An individual can have an overlap of perspectives, meaning a conservative attitude on one matter but a liberal view on another matter.

Bernie Sanders' ideology is perceived as being far left, *radical* even, yet in the context of Swedish political terms his ideology aligns with the center-left. Bernie often alludes to the Scandinavian countries as models for the ideology he aligns with (fieldnotes, 2019). Within the Democratic Party, there are two sub-views, moderates and progressives. As previously mentioned, Bernie Sanders has never been a part of the Democratic Party and hence distinguishes himself from the rest of the democrats by presenting himself as a democratic *socialist*. His identity as a democratic *socialist* portrays the ideological differences within the American left.

### **Grassroots, The Resistance and Presidential Debates**

The election of Donald Trump as the United States 44<sup>th</sup> president indicated a rise in right-wing politics and led to the emergence of a variety of protests against the new Republican congress. Chenoweth and Pressman (2018) found that during the first year of Trump's presidency, between January 2017 – December 2017, over 8,700 protests were recorded. The article reports similar data as found by researchers Andrews, Caren and Browne (2018). These protests against the Trump administration consisted of grassroots resistance groups. The University of Pennsylvania defines a grassroots movement as initiated by the people at a local level as opposed to at the center of a larger political activity (2011). Furthermore, Bergan (2016) defines grassroots as:

a type of movement ... that attempts to mobilize individuals to take some action to influence an outcome, often of a political nature... the distinguishing features of grassroots movements ... are that (1) they mobilize masses to participate in a politics

... and (2) they are conducted through narrow communications such as mail, e-mail, phone calls, or face-to-face visits rather than broadcast media such as television or radio.

The various grassroots groups that emerged were centered around issues like feminism, environmentalist, criminal justice reform, immigration reform, education reform— leftist projects. This plurality of groups opposing the current administration are referred to as *the resistance* by researchers and scholars in the field of social movements and mobilization, some of which are discussed in the following sections. The resistance against Trump has arguably expanded and influenced more and more individuals to participate in the political process not only at the national level (i.e. only voting during the presidential election) but specifically at the local level, such as organizing for change within communities. These mobilized efforts in protest of the current administration have contributed to the research of social movement organizations and the study of motivations behind political activism.

Clark (2000) reports that the history of debates in the United States traces back to the first “well-publicized senatorial debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in 1858,” however, the concept of presidential debates did not really launch until the 1960s. Presidential debates are precisely that— formal discussions between candidates of the same party that are running for president. The United States government consists of a multi-party system (Libertarian, Green, Independent, etc.); however, the Democratic Party and Republican Party are the most powerful due to overwhelming affiliation with each party. Throughout each election cycle, both the Democratic Party and Republican party host a variety of debates to determine which candidate will receive the party’s nomination on the final presidential voting ballot in November.

Democratic Party candidates must meet a set of strict qualifications set forth by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to participate in debates. In December 2018, the DNC announced the preliminary schedule for 12 debates that were set to begin in June 2019. Six debates were scheduled for June 2019 through December 2019, and the remaining six were scheduled between January 2020 through April 2020. *Ballotpedia* reports that there was a total of 29 candidates that participated in the debates, and Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden are the only two candidates that participated in *all* debates. In order to participate in the debates, the candidates must meet certain qualifications before moving onto the next debate. As the debates go on, the qualifications become stricter and candidates must meet these qualifications by a given

deadline. Ultimately, the candidates must demonstrate public support in the manner of campaign fundraising. *Democrats* website reported that for the first two debates:

...in addition to meeting the filing and constitutional requirements to run for President of the United States, candidates will qualify for the first two debates by meeting criteria that include both polling and other objective measures that reflect a candidate's support, such as grassroots fundraising (*Democrats*, 2018)

The 2020 democratic debates serve as proof that the other candidates adopted his language in attempt to appeal to the masses and ultimately acquire more votes. Bernie Sanders is the one candidate who coined the term "Medicare For All" to reflect his healthcare policy of ending the private healthcare sector and converting it a single-payer policy. This rhetoric has been utilized by other candidates, namely Pete Buttigieg, in attempt to increase support of his campaign. Strauss (2019) reported that back in 2018, Buttigieg made a public statement on Twitter pledging his support of Medicare for All. The Tweet reads:

"I, Pete Buttigieg, politician, do henceforth and forthwith declare, most affirmatively and indubitably, unto the ages, that I do favor Medicare for All, as I do favor any measure that would help get all Americans covered. Now if you'll excuse me, potholes await."

What happened during his campaign cycle? He changed his rhetoric. He centered his platform on the notion that supported a "Medicare For All... who want it" which is a completely different approach to Bernie's policy of transforming the current healthcare system (fieldnotes, 2019). This transition in rhetoric was immediately called out by the supporters of Bernie Sanders. Discourse is something we all utilize every day— be it through language, texts we read or attire we wear, it is the very act of transforming ideas into reality. Buttigieg's change in rhetoric illustrates how populism in America is "defining what the people want and then selling it to them has long been the forte of both merchandisers and politicians" (Rosenfeld, 2011, p. 244).

### **Diversity Around A Shared Issue**

What is diversity around a shared issue in a contemporary leftist project? As previously mentioned, Laclau and Mouffe's parameters for a pluralist democratic politics suggest that effective organizing for social change requires that a plurality of actors *refrain* from mobilizing purely under class. They highlight the importance of creating a narrative that encompasses a plurality of democratic struggles, thereby implying the strength in unity to effectively organize. This narrative is created by constructing a discourse that communicates power inequality as oppression. Bernie's movement illustrates how a plurality of actors mobilize their diversity

around a collective narrative. Not all actors involved in the campaign were American citizens. The participants include both citizens and non-citizens, namely, those who can participate in the political process by voting and those who can participate in other ways.

### **Barnstorms and Solidarity Events**

*Barnstorm* is the term used by the campaign when organizing community outreach events. I attended a total of 6 Barnstorms, all located throughout the Los Angeles County region. The first barnstorm I attended was held in Long Beach. As I walked inside the venue, I looked into the room and looked for an empty seat. The entrance to the venue was located directly next to a stage. The stage was decorated with a large navy-blue banner that said “PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST” and underneath that it said “Bernie 2020.” There were also two flags hanging on the sides of the banner. To the left of the banner was a transgender pride flag and to the right of the banner was a bisexual pride flag. I do not know if the flags were already there or if a volunteer lent them to the campaign. Regardless, the placement of the flags indicates LGBTQ+ support and presence (fieldnotes, 2019). When I looked around the room, the attendees ranged from as young as 10 years old to 65+. In addition, the attire of some attendees was from Bernie’s 2016 campaign— both official campaign attire and also homemade attire as shown in figure 6. (Figure 6: 2016 → 2020)



The room was a long rectangular shaped venue with the capacity to fit approximately 100 people. *And it was packed.* There were not enough seats for everyone, so some people were standing next to the walls. The program agenda was in the structure of staff introductions, a short icebreaker, attendee testimonials and finally the “big ask” (the moment when attendees became volunteers and *activists*). The purpose of the icebreaker is to break some tension in the room and get the attendees and volunteers to familiarize with each other. The audience would have about 5 minutes to share with the person next to them their reasons for attending the event

and motivations for wanting to get active with the campaign. This is when the room went from silent to almost *roaring*. Everyone was engaged— and there was not a single person in sight that was standing or sitting silently.

The person next to me was Emily, a 21-year old Long Beach native. She shared with me her ongoing fight with her health insurance provider and this is what brought her to the campaign. The issue of *healthcare*. After a few minutes, the person leading the icebreaker asked if anyone wanted to share their reasons with the *room*. Looking around, I saw about 10 hands go up.

The first person to share was Josh, who appeared to be in his early 20s. He stated that the spike in tuition costs led him to take out more loans than he ever imagined and is now facing hefty student debt. He compared American tuition costs to those of his friends abroad (referring to Europe) and firmly believed that Bernie Sanders was the only candidate to address this issue and actually have a plan for it. The issue of *student debt*.

The next person selected to share their story was Regine. She appeared to be in her 40s and explained the story about her best friend having developed cancer and *died*, not only because of the illness, but also because of inability to afford medical bills. The issue of *healthcare*. To convey her determination, she stated almost crying, “If I do nothing and Trump gets elected again, I cannot live with myself” (fieldnotes, 2019).

Each person sharing their stories had diverse reasons and issues that led them to joining the movement, or more specifically, to *activate* their reasons into action. Bernie Sanders’ campaign takes on the role of a *moment* within the *movement*— the campaign is not the movement. The movement itself is the unity of plurality of actors mobilizing around a shared issue: power inequality in the United States. Throughout the barnstorms, there was a wide range of testimonials that stem from diverse lived experiences, which are transformed into issues that lead individuals to join the movement. In addition, activists in other issues such as climate change, homelessness\*, and healthcare were also present and supportive of Bernie Sanders.

The solidarity events I attended were not official campaign events, but rather events held by *other* activist groups. The Labor Day Parade and Rally event was an event organized in Wilmington by the local unions (fieldnotes, 2019). The event itself was scheduled from 07:00 in the morning to about 12:00 noon. The parade was organized by the local unions, in efforts

to generate activism and awareness of actual *laborers*. Most of the people attending were of Latin-American heritage, thus illustrating the larger identity of the workers that produce labor for corporations (figure 7). The other solidarity event I attended was held outside of the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) between 09:00 and 11:00 in the morning. Both events included diverse ethnicities but were pre-dominantly Latino. As I was walking through both events, I noticed a pattern of diversity. Not only with regards to diversity in ethnicities and ages, but specifically diversity in *issues* as portrayed through attire and props (signs, banners, flyers). On the following page is an image of the solidarity event at LAX (figure 8).



Figure 7: Latino union member expressing support for Bernie during Labor Day Parade



Figure 8: LAX Solidarity Event

The yellow signs with butterflies state “Immigrants Make LAX Fly” and the butterfly is representative of *immigration* (fieldnotes, 2019). The butterfly is a symbol of migration and departing from home— a story shared by all Latino immigrants, to a certain degree myself included. *Immigration reform, healthcare, protecting workers’ rights*— these three issues are present and conveyed by the *discourse* generated within the event. An underlying factor that all issues have in common is *class*. They are all organizing under the collective narrative of forming a part of the *working class*. So, the question is, is it diversity or is it just class? The barnstorm testimonials point to diversity in issues yet the glue that binds them altogether is expressed through *class* terms, namely, the 99 versus the 1. Thereby supporting the notion that class and race are not mutually exclusive and often intersect.

As previously mentioned, cultural hegemony is the method by which the state and ruling class maintains its power over the masses through ideology manifested in cultural institutions. In the context of Bernie’s movement, the ruling class in the United States is composed of the 1%, often referred to as corporations and/or billionaires (fieldnotes, 2019). These corporations (healthcare industry, military industrial complex, systemic racism etc.) maintain their power over the masses through the notion of *capitalism*. The premise of the movement is that the

American ideal that one must “pull themselves up by the bootstraps” in order to achieve the American Dream is how capitalist ideology has created division and conflict between classes. All barnstorms included a question asking attendees to raise their hand if they were new to the political process, and several people raised their hands at every event. When asked to share their reasons for why they joined the movement, they all reflected a pattern of challenging the status quo. Be it issues of healthcare, workers’ rights, climate change, social inequality and so forth – they all connected through class.

Adrian, a 20-year-old Latino stated “we have an illegitimate president in the White House,” and some applauded and cheered before he could finish speaking and then continued “people of color will never succeed in a capitalist system”– and then everyone in the room stood up and cheered. The venue attracted about 60 people, mostly between the ages of 18 and 65+. The lived experiences of campaign attendees and volunteers point to how the current capitalist system has failed them. Many of the attendees shared that they worked multiple jobs just to make ends meet and therefore losing a day of work directly affected their ability to pay bills on time (fieldnotes, 2019). In addition, many Americans are tied to their healthcare through their employer, so even if their workers’ rights are not fully met, they cannot afford to quit their job because of the *need* for access to healthcare. One of the issues that forms a big part of Bernie’s movement is that of raising the minimum wage to \$15/hour (the current minimum wage in California is \$12-13, depending on the employee amount). In addition, the issue of healthcare plays a significant role in differentiating his ideology from the rest of the candidates. He is the only candidate proposing a complete restructuring of the current healthcare industry (fieldnotes, 2019).

### **Lived Experiences and Activism**

The lived experiences of attendees and volunteers play central roles in motivating individuals to become politically active, especially within Bernie’s movement. These lived experiences are shared through storytelling and thus connect individuals through their struggles. The stories shared by those involved in the movement point to the ways in which the current capitalist hegemony has led to conflict and oppression. Amy Vilela attended one of the barnstorms and shared her story directly with event attendees and volunteers. She appears in the *Netflix Original: Knock Down the House* –a documentary film on the women that ran for positions in congress to address systemic inequalities. Amy’s daughter died at the hands of the American healthcare industry, and this is what prompted Amy to take action and work towards addressing

healthcare reform. She shared that her daughter's life could have been saved by a simple blood test that costed \$1,500, yet healthcare professionals turned her away because her *health insurance was not qualified* (fieldnotes, 2019). This story of the healthcare industry *failing* to help Americans because of monetary reasons is eerily similar for nearly all participants in the movement, to certain degrees.

Laclau and Mouffe's framework indicates that social change is not deterministic. There is no fixed point in time where social movements are bound to happen, but rather they happen over the course of various social inequalities experienced differently. Marie, a 70-year old woman shared her reason for supporting Bernie:

"I love Bernie, I love what he stands for... 10 years ago I read an article about a man who lost his 2 fingers in a construction accident. He went to the hospital, had his two fingers ready to be reattached, and the medical people said, 'well with your insurance, you can have one.' *What?* And I thought, this is ridiculous. This is representative of our insurance, the way it works. You don't get the full-on treatment. I just turned 70, and I've been losing teeth, for a lot of reasons. But to try and get them fixed, that's a real challenge. My insurance doesn't cover really very much of anything. I've been going between hospitals and discount dentists; I didn't have to lose teeth if I had the proper insurance 10 years ago. But I had to wait until social security and medi-care kicked in. That covers *very* little. I'm here because we should not have medical health for profit, at all, ever. That's just wrong. People need help, give them help. It's that simple." (event transcription, 2019)

Bernie's Medicare For All policy creates a single-payer, national health insurance program. It rids all supplemental payments (premiums, deductibles, copays) and expands coverage to include dental, hearing, vision and more. The reality for many of Americans is that they are tied to their healthcare plan *through* their employer. Yet even in these cases, their healthcare plan covers so little that they often times literally cannot *afford* to get sick. Or in cases like Marie's, senior citizens rely on social security for healthcare coverage and even then, it hardly covers anything. Marie had to wait years before she could afford to get her teeth fixed.

As previously mentioned, Bernie's campaign attracted a wide range of participants – including those who cannot participate in the political process through voting. In fact, a good amount of them were *undocumented* which means they were in the country "illegally." I use quotations around the term illegally because I find it important to address the difference between the definition of a term and the lived experience of that term. *Dictionary* defines the term illegally as "in a way that is contrary to or forbidden by law," however, in the context of illegal immigration to the United States, a lot of undocumented individuals in the were taken to the

United States when they were infants and thereby did not immigrate illegally themselves. Many share the similar story of having no recollection of their native motherland thus all they have ever grown up to know is their life in America. To leave out this aspect of the term illegal in the context of the undocumented Californians would be to deny a lived experience. Regardless of how many years they have lived on American soil “many could live out the rest of their lives without any opportunity to become legal residents of this country” as stated by *American Immigration Council* (2019) due to strict immigration laws. But if they cannot vote for Bernie Sanders, then what motivates them to volunteer their time and effort?

I explored this aspect of activism through the go-alongs on community canvassing. As previously mentioned, my dual role with the campaign as researcher and volunteer granted me access to informants that were open to sharing their stories and motivations with me for research purposes. Having familiarized myself with campaign volunteers and staff generated information and empirical material exclusively for my research project. The main reason for conducting my work placement with Bernie’s campaign was because he indicated something *different* in contemporary American politics.

The canvasses I attended were hosted by field organizers that I had become acquainted with as a result of constantly being at the same events. One of the canvasses was in Echo Park, located near Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. I had previously reached out to the field organizer and asked if I could come shadow the canvass, she immediately said yes and also mentioned that she especially wanted to introduce me to certain volunteers that would be willing to share their stories and perspectives with me. I arrived at the meet-up spot and there she offered me a cup of lemonade and introduced me to several volunteers. One of these volunteers was Maria, an undocumented college student volunteering for Bernie.

We were sitting down on the grass, underneath a tree because the sunshine was bright and the sky was blue and clear. Maria identifies as a 20-year old Hispanic female who was born in Mexico but grew up in Los Angeles since she was about 2 years old. I asked about her experience in activism, she stated:

“I mean, I guess this would count as political activism, in *some* way. Volunteering, being part of the campaign— other than that, no. We are a family of 6 and *none* of us can vote. So this is the reason why I’m voting—excuse me— that’s why I’m *volunteering*, because I can’t vote. I can’t legally donate. Can’t do anything besides give my time, so that’s why I do this.” (interview transcripts, 2019).

Maria believes that giving her time and volunteering for the campaign is the only way she can *effectively* participate in political activism because of her inability to vote due to her residency status as undocumented. Furthermore, her motivation for joining the revolution stems from a diversity of issues that mobilize around a shared issue: the fight for a political revolution.

“I had always been liberal, or progressive, however you want to call me, and the policies are just a dream come true. His recent one, criminal justice reform/legalizing marijuana... My main things would be medicare for all, corruption *obviously*, immigration reform, and raising the minimum wage. Those would be my main things. But I also have very specific things, I am very passionate about things like decriminalizing sex work. That seems so random, but was reading through his things and he had it! And I was like [laughs] ugh, Bernie how did you know, [laughs] there’s so many things, like when it comes to legalizing marijuana. I get so sick of seeing how the war on drugs\* has gone and targeted people of color. And now that some states have legalized it, you see middle class white people or corporations profiting off of it. Grrrr. that grinds my gears like you don’t believe... I am not the type to be swayed by *identity politics*. Not that it’s easy, but it happens where you have a minority of some sort used as a token and can’t stand it. So, just because you are a woman, Hispanic, undocumented, Mexican –whatever, does not mean what you say, I will agree with just because we have these overlapping or similar backgrounds. So, if I could vote, I would not vote on my identity. I wouldn’t vote purely for a woman, a POC\*, etc. but my identity very much affects my perspective. So, I would vote on the policies that will affect and contribute positively to the identities that I belong to, to the communities that I belong to.” (interview transcripts, 2019)

By addressing various issues and policies that are of utmost importance to her, Maria points to an intersectionality of issues that makeup her perspective and experience. This is related to her own lived experience as an undocumented female college student of Mexican origins. Altogether, her lived experiences demonstrate intersectionality as motivation for political engagement. Notice how the second issue she lists is ‘corruption, *obviously*’ and by this she is referring to the current system of government. She is pointing to corruption within contemporary American politics.

“...my number one thing is, I don’t trust a word you say if you’re taking dirty money. If you’re taking *corporate* money, if you’re doing high-dollar fundraisers\*– basically if you’re corrupt– don’t waste my time. And Bernie is the only one that is not corrupt; whether it be because he’s not doing the high-dollar fundraisers or corporate PAC money. He’s the only one I will even listen to because he’s had the background, so once you start looking at his record, and start looking at his votes, you can see that it’s because that’s what he’s *actually* for. It’s not because someone *paid him* to do that.” (interview transcript, 2019).

Maria has been a Bernie supporter and volunteer since 2016. When she was sharing her experiences with me, I could visibly read her enthusiasm and excitement for being involved in the movement. Her tone and demeanor when describing what sets Bernie apart from the other

candidates conveyed a sense of genuine trust in the movement and *him*. Maria uses her identity as motivation for actively engaging in political activism by converting her inability to vote into being able to convince those who can. Like Maria, Sofia is also a Bernie supporter and volunteer since 2015, however, her identity as an undocumented resident prohibited her from participating in any activism until she finally became a citizen. Her motivation for joining the movement? Her *lived* experience as an undocumented person in the United States.

“I want to tell you my story and why I’m out here working so hard and mobilizing for my community to go out there and vote for Bernie Sanders. So, I was born in Mexico and I immigrated to the United States when I was little. During that process my family wasn’t detained. We weren’t put in cages\*. Now, we’re coming to a level that it becomes so dangerous for our families and our undocumented folks for crossing the border. And growing up, until the age of 22 – for twenty years of my life, I had to hide in shadows. I wasn’t able to be that activist I wanted to be because my mom was worried ‘what happens if you go to a rally? What happens if you go to a demonstration and get arrested and get deported?’ –so for so long I had to keep quiet. I wasn’t able to go out there and join my fellow activists in going out there and mobilizing our communities. It wasn’t until 2015 that I *actually* received my U.S. citizenship, and that’s when everything completely changed. That’s when I saw one man with a crazy hairstyle up there talking to people and it *completely captivated* me. He not only created a new voter, but he created an activist in me. And it was then, in 2016, that I had the opportunity to not only join a movement of young people, but a movement of people of color, of all types of people that were excited to go out there and shake everything up.” (barnstorm transcript, 2019).

In addition to immigration reform as leading motivation for her participation in the movement, her lived experience illustrates how intersectionality played a role in amplifying her enthusiasm in political activism.

“Growing up undocumented and growing up in a single-parent low-income household, me and my family faced so many barriers. If it wasn’t one thing it was another thing. And at that time in 2016 he was talking about the issues that completely aligned towards our Latino community, our undocumented communities. Like raising the minimum wage, providing healthcare for all, canceling student loan debt, you name it – all these issues directly would increase the livelihood of our Latino community.” (interview transcript, 2019).

When talking about her upbringing, she mentions several issues that overlapped and affected not only her individual lived experience but also that of her family. As previously mentioned, student debt is another issue that drives various agents to join the movement and organize around a shared issue that *coexists* with other issues. She has completed both her Bachelor’s degree and Master’s degree in California which have resulted in accumulation of student debt. Friedman (2020) recently reported that United States student loan debt reached \$1.6 trillion dollars and ranking number 1 in the list is California (\$1.35 billion). This provides statistical

evidence to quantify the lived experience of many California residents. These various issues: *growing up undocumented* and *low-income household, student debt*— illustrate how intersectionality played a role in shaping her affinity for the movement. This diversity around a shared issue developed into an affinity for the movement of fighting for a political revolution.

Gramsci proposed that we question and analyze the ways in which our belief systems and status quo have been shaped overtime. This is exactly what participants in the movement do. They address social inequalities (healthcare, student debt, workers rights' etc) and point to capitalism as the overarching factor that led to the current status quo. My conversation with Liam points to hegemony at work through politics and political discourse. We arranged a meeting at a café in Glendale on a Saturday morning. I opened up the conversation by asking about his history and experience with politics and he started from the beginning, Bill Clinton era.

“At that time, it sounds cheesy, but at that time it seemed like this was a different type of politician. Little did I know, that guy was going to be the founder of neo-Liberalism in our country. I was being *fooled* at that time. And now, hindsight is 2020, that’s a phrase *we* Berners have. I wasn’t aware that I was watching a politician who was gift-wrapped for me to say ‘Oh my gosh, this is fantastic. This is a gift; I get to open this and this guy is a good guy. He’s playing Fleetwood Mac; this is just so new.’ I didn’t realize that it was the beginning of an era where politicians were going to tell liberals what they wanted to hear, so they speak the truths that are kind of, generally everyone agrees with but in a nutshell, because they’re welcoming huge donors from corporations. Well, the lobbyists and corporations—really anyone that they could get their hands on. They were in the era of saying ‘well, we’re going to tell you what you want to hear, but we’re not actually going to be helping out people at large. So, they were posers.” (interview transcript, 2019)

It is no surprise that the rhetoric and discourse utilized by politicians throughout history always consists of saying what the masses *want* to hear. In the words of Laclau and Mouffe, “the party as a political institution can be the organizer of dispersed and politically virgin masses, and can this serve as an instrument for the expansion and deepening of democratic struggles” (2014, p. 164). Here Liam is expressing how cultural hegemony played a role in shaping his beliefs and alignment with Bill Clinton’s platform, and by extension the Democratic Party. The use of Fleetwood Mac, a popular rock band as supportive of the candidate is precisely how hegemony manifests. By using recognized bands to show support for a certain candidate, the campaign was implying that support for Bill Clinton was the *norm*. And in Liam’s case, it *worked*. He was convinced by his previous affinity for Fleetwood Mac that supporting Bill Clinton was the *right choice*. And in retrospect, he realized how the Democratic Party convinced the masses through speaking *general truths* but in actuality they expanded democratic struggles because

they favored corporations *before* people. Liam's motivation for joining the movement stems from his past experiences in a variety of activism efforts.

"There's a group called Answer LA, and the way that I connected with them was that I was against the war in Iraq, so it was basically an 'end the war' campaign and many of us connected through that. A lot of the ideas that are embraced by democratic socialists, or folks that are further left, that identify more as 'I am a socialist' – they are actually saying the same thing that democratic socialists say. Michael Moore says, 'what is a democratic socialist?' Well, it's what the democrats used to be. FDR era, where we were establishing social security, and medicare in a way that provided seniors with healthcare and something to live on as they lived on their years. That's how it used to be." (interview transcript, 2019).

This is the starting point of his engagement in political activism. He addresses anti-war and healthcare as the two main issues that motivated him to become an activist. Add in the realization of political hegemony plus issues, this eventually led him to join Bernie's movement because altogether, his views align with those set forth by Bernie's movement. But why continuously donate free labor to a campaign? What drew him to this specific campaign as opposed to others? I asked if it was specific policies, all policies, or only those in which he has previous experience with that matter most. He laughed and said,

"Absolutely. It's funny you say all of it. Yeah. Across the board with policies. All of it. Cancellation of student debt, Medicare for all, Green New Deal – which is probably the most pertinent thing, globally... All these things matter to me. A big part of it is hard to articulate for me. Just being humane to people and having a heart. When Bernie is asked about religion, his answer is that a lot of times what you're looking at, it's really just all the great religions are saying to us 'can I treat others the way I would like to be treated' – and if you can take that into the realm of public policy? Which, he's really the only guy who does that." (Interview transcript, 2019).

Unlike Maria and Sofia, Liam's motivations for joining the political revolution are not a result of intersectionality but still provide evidence for diversity around a shared issue. Although he can be regarded as a privileged individual in the United States –straight, white male– he too forms a part of the plurality of actors that organize around a shared issue. In addition, his experience in politics reflects the moment when he realized how institutions maintain power and thereby led him to take a stand against this. Against the current hegemonic relationship between political parties and the masses. The aforementioned issues that draw agents to political activism clearly illustrate an overlap of diverse social movements that motivate them to mobilize collectively. The overlap is their commonality of experiencing diverse democratic struggles. The discourse generated from these democratic struggles is through the construction of a common sense. This common sense is reinforced and reiterated within Bernie's movement

through discourse shared by a plurality of agents. I will discuss this further in the forthcoming section on the construction of common sense.

Other issues that are central to Bernie's movement are those of improving working conditions and raising the minimum wage. This idea is reinforced by the notion that income inequality is the result of living in a capitalist nation which thereby results in power inequality. Adam is a 27-year-old New York City native who joined the movement in 2015 and has played a role in diverse social activist movements. When discussing his activist experiences, it is interesting to note that he was not directly involved with the campaign during his 2015 efforts. His relationship to the campaign developed as a result of being involved in *other* activist groups.

I had never heard about him. I consider myself to be a leftist, I grew up in the punk scene and I was in a punk band. And my friends and I all believed in feminism and a kind of *working-class politics*... It was an unformed political perspective at that time. (interview transcript, 2019).

Adam's identity and experiences provide another example of diversity because although his pre-existing political perspective was not grounded with a movement, it amplified his motivation to become part of this particular movement. He shared with me that after Trump was elected, he joined the Democratic Socialists of America. The 2015 campaign left him with motivation to continue working as an activist, so he looked for organizations to be a part of. He experienced hardship at his former workplace and attempted to organize a union with his fellow coworkers, but that was instantly dismantled by the employer. Adam shared with me a moment in his life when he experienced a corporation exercise hegemony through the workplace.

"A couple of years went by and the conditions at our job were really worsening, week to week. We started out with a healthcare plan; we had a \$40 per week healthcare stipend, it was called a health reimbursement account, and it paid for my premium. We got bonuses, holiday bonuses, training bonuses and slowly those things were cut. There was a program of austerity, as we see in our country, with our government. No matter what party is in control. And I was just watching these things happen to my coworkers and me. And then they took our healthcare away. I haven't really had healthcare since then... I quickly decided this is worth fighting for." (interview transcript, 2019).

He then reached out to his network of fellow activists for advice on how to organize a workers' union at his workplace.

"...I was thrilled that they thought it was a good idea and wanted to meet with some of my coworkers. We had an organizing meeting, developed an issues program, and then I got 70% of my coworkers, along with the organizing committee. Now that the workplace democracy plan is on the table, with Bernie's workplace democracy plan, all you have to do is sign up a majority of your coworkers and you're a union. It didn't happen that way at the time. My boss hired one of the top 3 union busting law firms,

and they brought in a disgusting xenophobic, racist, homophobic, sexist consultant company. They were bringing in awful right-wing operatives to terrorize my coworkers and me, and convince many of them to vote against their own interests, and they succeeded... They did intimidate some of my coworkers. And really it only took one conversation, and then it spread like wildfire. They sent the message, 'oh you want to be an actor? Oh, but you're supporting the union drive, interesting.' And that's all it took. They didn't want to see themselves as the working class and the reality is a lot of them will continue working these dead-end jobs for the foreseeable future. Especially with things getting even worse. More and more jobs aren't providing a living wage or the means to match up to the standard of living." (interview transcript, 2019).

When Adam tried to organize at his former workplace, the employer immediately stepped in with an institution that assisted in keeping the employer above the workers and dismissing their demands. The union busting law firm represents the interests of the employer, and by extension the interests of maintaining power within the company. The law firm helps hegemonize the employees as subjects to the employer. So, who wins in the end? Corporations. *Capitalism*.

His Bernie story is a collection of lived experiences that collectively contributed to his passion and dedication to the movement. This shows how a network of actors from diverse movements mobilize around a shared issue and thereby show how political activism extends beyond campaigning. In all categories is a diversity of experiences and backgrounds that organize around a shared issue: to fight for a political revolution. This diversity around a shared issue is translated into a shared narrative that states *we are the 99%*. Multifarious agents collectively organizing and working together to fight for a political revolution suggests implementing a hegemony which is developed through the construction of common sense.

### **Conflict, Division, and Vision**

In addition to the aforementioned diversity of actors engaging in the movement, there were also additional supporters of the movement that were *not* directly associated with the campaign but were organizing around the same issue. These supporters consist of those who were affiliated with organizations outside of the official campaign, but were still organizing around the same issue: fighting for a political revolution. Some of my informants were a part of this group of political activists who were briefly associated with the campaign but not all the time due tension that arose between the newly established 2020 campaign and 2016 grassroots efforts (fieldnotes, 2019). I will further assess this relationship in the final analytical section which discusses theory versus praxis. Or in MACA terms "taking people seriously and not literally" to investigate the epistemological relationship between theory and lived experience.

These informants identify themselves as *thee grassroots*— namely, those whose efforts in support of Bernie Sanders’ political revolution date back to the beginning of the movement in 2015. What sets them apart from the grassroots linked to the campaign is that *this* particular grassroots identity led to the development of an activist group and organization known as the Bernie Sanders Metro Squad, or simply the Metro Squad from this point forward. The Metro Squad emerged around the same time when the campaign was hosting its Barnstorms. It was organized by volunteers who were initially involved with the campaign but later refined their affiliation and efforts with the Metro Squad far more than the official campaign (fieldnotes, 2019).

One of my informants, Steven, identified as an “OG Berner” (OG acronym for *original*) who I met during my first solidarity event with the campaign (Labor Day Parade) and I later learned was an active member of the Metro Squad. Although his experience with the campaign was brief, merely a *moment*, he is still part of the movement. My conversation with him lasted over an hour and it was mostly him expressing how his beliefs and experiences constituted his worldview. Similar to my other informants, he believes capitalism has manifested throughout American consciousness through hegemonic instruments. More specifically, the current two-party system that runs the government.

“I love Bernie, and yet there’s certain things that I don’t necessarily agree with Bernie. I do think he should run as an independent. I believe that the two party, oligarchy duopoly that both parties are entrenched in, is doing a disservice to this country and the planet because they’re all paid for by corporations that dictate their policies.” (interview transcript, 2019).

Although the issue is that the current system of government is run by corporations and private interests, there is a reciprocal relationship between activism Bernie’s movement. Supporters and participants in his movement reveal the joys and excitement about being engaged in the political process. A byproduct of activism is the network of friendships that are made through organizing around diverse issues. Steven mentioned that:

“In Los Angeles there’s definitely a core group of people that consistently and very passionately show up at a lot of different events, not just necessarily anything to do with Bernie. Anything that has to do with making this world a better place. Whether it’s detention camps\*, whether it’s for Standing Rock\*, Black Lives Matter\*, healthcare – there’s definitely a group of people, to see that network of people, they’re the same people that I knew back when Bernie ran in 2016 that have carried on over the last few years.” (interview transcript, 2019).

Our conversation pointed to a multitude of motivations for believing in the movement and I can honestly say that in retrospect, it was obvious that it *mattered* to him. Getting Bernie elected

mattered significantly to all informants, and the overlapping reason was because they each felt that when Bernie spoke, he was speaking *directly to them*. More on this in the forthcoming section on the construction of common sense.

Ultimately, my conversations with participants in Bernie's campaign and overall movement reveal how they each had different points in their lives when they decided it was time to go from passive to active. Rather than sitting by and watching each election cycle move forward, their lived experiences and activism history led them to partake in other activist efforts and the movement. The informants display various issues that synergize when they organize *collectively*. The plurality of democratic struggles influenced the various participants to collectively organize in the same hegemonic project. Laclau and Mouffe's aspect of *social change requires a plurality of actors* uniting their democratic struggles into one collective is clearly depicted through the multifarious informants' stories. The aforementioned issues that motivated informants to join the movement no longer exist as mutually exclusive, but rather as a *collective*, thereby expanding the "chains of equivalence which extend to other struggles" and together in Bernie's movement they "have all become equivalent symbols of a unique and indivisible struggle" (2014, p. 166).

"It's sad to say that we have a leadership in this country that is based on hate: hating on immigrants, hating on women. When in reality we know, that our greatest *strength* is our *diversity*. Look around you." (barnstorm transcript, 2019)

Diversity in democratic struggles and by extension in identities, is indicator of a plurality of actors uniting together on chains of equivalence and collectively mobilizing around a shared issue. The issues of immigration, healthcare, climate change and so forth collectively unite under a shared narrative, resulting in a movement. Furthermore, the "construction of a new 'common sense' which *changes* the *identity* of the different groups, in such a way that the demands of each group are articulated equivalentially with those of the others" is conveyed through the shared identity of representing the working *class/99%* (2014, p. 169). The hegemonic project is to develop a collective and common sense derived from their lived experiences which is manifested into a new hegemony that communicates their democratic struggles as power inequality in a capitalist society. Although they all shared different lived experiences that motivated them to turn their struggles into activism, they used similar *discourse* when talking about these issues. This provides insight to how the construction of common sense is developed among a plurality of agents.

### **Construction of Common Sense**

There is no fixed point at which the construction of common sense begins, it was simply present throughout the entire duration of my fieldwork. The issues discussed, the testimonials that were shared – every single interaction among agents contributes to the construction of common sense. It is an *ongoing* behavior – discourse is not simply developed overnight. It is an ongoing process of conversations that are based on a similar ideology that are expressed through discourse. Before executing a discourse analysis, it is important to briefly discuss the term discourse. Ethnographer Laura Bisailon (2012) compiled an analytic glossary specifically tailored for political activist ethnography. She defines discourse as:

...socially organized activities that circulate among people and through institutions. We all participate in discourse, through our actions, discourses are brought into being. Looking at how people participate in discourse, how they talk about what they do, what texts they circulate, and what is reproduced in people's labor, is of utmost analytic interest in institutional and political activist ethnography. (2012, p. 610)

As previously mentioned, Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework includes the construction of discourse as a necessary condition for a pluralist politics but they do not further develop this condition. They believe that "meaning cannot be fully idiosyncratic, and conclude that it must take place in a discourse that tries to make it *common*" (Snir, 2016, p. 275). Snir (2016) addresses a key question in Laclau and Mouffe's framework for a pluralist politics, *if pluralist democratic politics amounts to replacing one common sense with another, does this not mean that this politics merely substitutes one hierarchal structure for another?*

To tackle this matter in question, he suggests that the very concept of common sense as found in their theory, should be reinterpreted through application of Gramsci's notion of *heterogeneity* in combination with a distinction between good sense and common sense (Snir 2016, p. 276). He reports that:

"for Gramsci, good-sensical elements originating in authentic, *everyday* experiences may coexist with ideological influences from other periods or social groups, which reflect *diverse* worldviews. This means that common sense is not a systematic, unified whole, but rather an eclectic combination of fragmented beliefs, opinions, languages and other practices that are not necessarily compatible creating an incoherent, heterogeneous field." (Snir 2016, p. 276).

This ideological difference reflecting diverse worldviews is conveyed by the diversity of agents involved in Bernie's movement. As previously mentioned, the diversity around a shared issue is a direct reflection of multifarious lived experiences. Both Adam and Liam expressed their own ideological worldviews that were from different periods, namely FDR, Bill Clinton era,

and the Occupy Wall Street movement— but nonetheless point to different ideals from past periods that constitute their own individual understandings of common sense and good sense. “In other words, political action should use common sense against good sense to transform common sense from within and constitute a fully comprehensive and coherent proletarian consciousness: *common-sensus* must become *con-sensus*” as stated by Snir (2016, p. 276). This is supported by Adam’s perspective of the entire movement and structure of the movement.

“Besides Occupy Wall Street being a moment of like—I feel like the big lesson about it is that you need an organization. You can’t just have a horizontal kind of structure where all ideas are given the same value. You need to move towards building consensus and have a collective and democratic process to determine a program and a plan of action, and a set of priorities. So, none of those things happened with Occupy Wall Street. What also happened with Occupy Wall Street was that there was a lot of assault and terrible things that were going on. To me, I really value it as a moment in the “1% versus the 99%” in some respects, but again, it didn’t seem—it wasn’t clear to me that this was something that could become something else. Something more meaningful, or powerful.” (interview transcript, 2019)

The discourse utilized by Adam exemplifies Laclau and Mouffe’s parameters for an effective leftist hegemonic project. He addresses the importance of collectively organizing as opposed to spontaneously emerging as social movements with equally but mutually exclusive value. The proletarian consciousness in the movement implies a multitude of democratic struggles that altogether group under the commonality of representing in the working class. A common sense developed among a collective group of people implies an intersectionality of experiences and ideas that manifest into a discourse. As stated by Snir:

“the peasant, factory worker, feminist and environmentalist do not need to speak the exact same language or to take part in the same common sense in order to cooperate and constitute an anti-capitalist hegemony; it suffices that each partially understand some of the others to form a *heterogeneous* network of all whose parts participate in the same hegemonic project” (2016, p. 277)

The common sense developed within Bernie’s movement is precisely a complex of diverse democratic struggles (immigration reform, climate change, income inequality, etc.) that are constructed into a *common discourse* that is utilized within political activism. Adam views the movement as:

“It is a multi-racial working-class movement. On a more simple level, it’s a movement for change. And it’s not a movement to get the bad guys out or stop bad actors or weed out corruption, or save the day. It’s a movement to change our entire system. Our entire way of economic and political life. Through organizing, I have had so many conversations with people that, [he pauses and takes a breath] we’re really all

struggling, and we all have solidarity with each other. And we just need to continue spreading that solidarity.” (interview transcript, 2019)

Adam’s involvement in the movement shows how the construction of common sense develops while he is interacting with others. By sharing his views with others while also listening to their own stories, and linking them to the campaign, he is constructing common sense. When he reflects on his conversations with others who are not at the same level of political activism, he concludes that a plurality of agents with diverse struggles are united by their solidarity in the movement. He states that “the movement is solidarity, which is the opposite of individualism” which points to a heterogeneity and common sense synergy in the format of collective discourse. The issues talked about are connected by their shared feelings of oppression and marginalization. More specifically, it points to the plurality of actors embedded in the network of diverse struggles but connected through their solidarity. Like Adam, Steven’s description of the movement demonstrates how the construction of common sense is generated through Bernie’s rhetoric. He states that:

“If we’re going to survive on his planet, there’s no one that needs to be at helm other than Bernie Sanders. It’s not like I’m trying to instill fear or this doomsday kind of thing –but really, it’s that dire, it’s just that important. Not only his own vision but what he’s doing to help empower and pass that baton and that torch to help lift everyone up, and say again ‘Not me. Us’ that is going to take this ground swell of people to actually turn the whole ship around. There’s nobody else that I see that has the integrity and track record but the vision to actually lead us. To actually dismantle and change this unconscious and unfettered capitalistic system.” (interview transcript, 2019).

For every event that I attended, I created a word bank in my notebook to highlight the topics that were more frequently discussed among volunteers, supporters, and staff. Within these word banks were also the issues that were more commonly discussed between agents. The word banks revealed patterns of ideas, terms, and experiences that contributed to the construction of a common sense. The commonality of experiences directly related to the issues of the movement result in a discourse that is generated by all agents within the movement. Their experiences are connected through their mutual feelings towards the status quo: fighting for a political revolution that addresses democratic struggles as byproducts of capitalism. The table below summarizes the word banks from my notebook and illustrates the issues that are at the core of this common sense generated within the movement. The descriptions are brief summaries of the issues as found on the official campaign website.

Table 3. **Most Common Issues in Los Angeles Political Activism Discourse**

Issue	Description
Climate Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commit to reducing emissions globally through transforming energy system to 100% renewable energy</li> </ul>
Medicare For All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a single-payer, national health insurance program</li> </ul>
Immigration Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinstate and expand DACA*; rid inhumane deportation programs</li> </ul>
College For All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guarantee tuition and debt-free public colleges to all; cancel student loan debt</li> </ul>
LGBTQ+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pass bills to prohibit discrimination; ensure health insurance for LGBTQ+</li> </ul>
Housing For All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End housing crisis by investing in new affordable housing units; protect tenants through implementing national rent control; end homelessness</li> </ul>
Women's Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt equal pay for equal work; guarantee access to contraception and the availability of a safe and legal abortion</li> </ul>
Criminal Justice Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End for-profit prisons; abolish the death penalty; reverse criminalization of communities; ensure law enforcement accountability</li> </ul>
Legalizing Marijuana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vacate and expunge all past marijuana-related convictions; ensure revenue from legalized marijuana to be reinvested in communities most affected by the War on Drugs</li> </ul>

Source: <https://berniesanders.com/issues/>

Although these issues are only a handful out of a long list of issues associated with Bernie's campaign, they are at the center of discourse used in the Los Angeles area of the movement. They were mentioned consistently throughout the duration of my fieldwork. Included in this list are the issues that all interviewees directly resonated with. The table thus reflects an overlap of issues shared amongst my informants. These issues stem directly from their own lived experiences and thus become a part of the discourse. The sharing of stories and motivations for joining the movement construct a common sense that agrees with the goal of creating a movement that transforms the current political sphere. The discourse produced by agents involved in the movement is an integral part of the movement because it produces new common sense that is shared and co-created by participants and supporters of the movement. The construction of common sense is conveyed through the collective narrative shared by agents. At one of the canvassing events I attended, I had a brief conversation with three of the

canvassers regarding their association and experiences with the movement. Sam, a 26-year-old white male, highlighted the importance and significance of the term “we are the 99%”

“...framing it as the working class as opposed to the middle class is really important because that *is* that 99% thing. If you don’t own enough that you don’t have to work in your entire life, then you *are* part of the working class, and you have the same struggles—just to different degrees. So, we all need to be together.” (interview transcript, 2019).

This framing of the collective movement as “the 99%” is often interchanged with the framing of “the working class” to communicate the collective narrative shared by the plurality of activists and agents. It constitutes part of the discourse developed within the movement because it is used by all levels of activists. Snir (2016) highlights the implication of common sense as pluralistic and collective. The construction of common sense in Bernie’s movement is the discourse generated and utilized as a powerful political tool. How so? By bringing to the forefront a diversity of democratic struggles and discussing the failures of the current status quo. Since their emergence in 2016, the grassroots played a crucial role in the discursive field of the movement. They proliferated the movement through discourse that enabled a diversity of agents to mobilize around a shared issue. The following section further discusses the impact of grassroots organizing in contemporary leftist movements, an actor and term that is never mentioned in Laclau and Mouffe’s book but helps illustrate the epistemological implications of using ethnography.

### **Theory and Praxis**

This section will draw on the aforementioned empirical material to discuss how the movement disproves a part of Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework when studied through a cultural analytical lens. While it does satisfy the general parameters of their framework of:

1. Illustrating how social change is not deterministic
2. Involving a plurality of actors
3. Generating a discourse framing power inequality as motivation for activism

It disproves one key point: that a contemporary leftist project mobilizing around *class* will not be sufficient for social change. They are correct in revisiting the works of traditional Marxist conception of the working class and addressing that a modernist society is composed of a complexity of agents thereby resulting in a plurality of actors involved in social change, as demonstrated by Bernie’s movement. However, they address that the two antagonisms, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, are insufficient for enabling activism in social change. A cultural analysis of Bernie’s movement demonstrates how a plurality of actors mobilize around

a shared narrative, but the shared narrative *does* convey the two antagonisms only in different terms. In the case of Bernie's movement, the two antagonisms that arise from power inequality are referred to as "*the 1% versus the 99%.*" In the context of the United States, the bourgeoisie is the 1% – the top 1% that represents the wealthiest, most powerful individuals in America (fieldnotes, 2019). The 99% is the term utilized to represent the remaining diversity of actors that make up the working class. However, in the context of Bernie's movement, only a select *few* of the 99% are interpellated by this call to action. Only those who *align* with the ideology of the movement.

The multifarious motivations that enable actors to mobilize for social change generate a discourse that utilizes the two antagonisms as representation of their collective struggles. They frame their power inequality as oppression through the collective narrative that they represent the working class. Bernie's movement enabled a multitude of actors to mobilize around a shared issue. The discourse utilized and generated within the movement encompasses a range of lived experiences that together create a common sense. This provides evidence for Snir's (2016) argument that Lalclau and Mouffe should further develop the importance of construction of a common sense in their theoretical framework for a pluralist democratic politics.

The group interview that I conducted was after a canvassing event in the afternoon. I was sitting down on the grass with Ivy, Sam and Philip and we each had a cup filled with lemonade. They shared their personal motivations for joining the movement and each had different levels of experience in activism. Ivy was a 20-year-old Latina college student who had never been involved in any sort of activism. Sam was a 26-year-old white male originally from the San Diego area and had been an activist since 2015. Philip was also a 26-year-old white male who had previously volunteered for Bernie's campaign in 2015. I asked them about their perceptions on the outcome of their efforts, and by extension the outcome of the movement.

**Philip:** we want a political revolution.

**Ivy:** we're not just fighting for ourselves; we're fighting for everyone. It's a class war. We're in a class war. There's a lot of differences we have in terms of the lives that we've had because of our background, race identity—but we have very similar experiences because of the class that we're in.

**Philip:** that's right, that's everything.

**Ivy:** We have no power when it's just us, but when we're together: again, it's the 99 versus the 1.

**Philip:** All we have as a class struggle is our numbers and working together, and solidarity.

**Sam:** I think Bernie's the only candidate willing to even talk about class struggle. This conversation addresses both diversity and class. Are diversity and class mutually exclusive? In this case, diversity around a shared issue is *expressed* through classist terms. It can be said that Laclau and Mouffe developed a theoretical framework that is centered around the notion of *power in numbers*. This phrase simply means that there is strength in unity within diversity. Bernie's movement is the epitome of a contemporary leftist movement that enabled a plurality of activists to collectively mobilize for a radical democratic politics. Another key difference between theory and praxis is that Laclau and Mouffe's theory never mentions the impact of a strong grassroots *base* on a contemporary hegemonic project.

“...the advantage that we have is that we have folks that are *so* committed, who in 2016, built a movement, mostly, without even the support of the campaign. These were grassroots organizers, who put people together in mass and built a movement, and they kept that movement alive to 2020. So, when Bernie announced, we hit the ground running. \*snaps finger\* We were able to *mobilize* immediately. The opposition doesn't have that organizing power, they don't have that passion, that dedication. Imagine, from 2016 to now, folks kept their groups together, they kept their groups together, they kept their organizations together. Some of them went off and concentrated on other things, but guess what they did, they owned their skills. They became stronger.” (barnstorm transcript, 2019)

The grassroots that emerged in support of Bernie Sanders back in 2015 played a key role in the development of a discourse among a plurality of agents. This is something that was recognized by the campaign when it relaunched during the 2020 election cycle (fieldnotes, 2019). After attending a debate watch party, I was invited by staff and volunteers to stay a while and chat. About eight of us walked across the street to the office and gathered around in a circle. To emphasize the relationship between the grassroots and the campaign, I will not include the names of the informants and will use the titles of *grassroots* and *campaign* instead, and letters to indicate when a different person is speaking.

**Campaign A:** this is *our* office. This feels like this our office at the end of the day. It's not state's, it's not national's, it's not Bernie's – this is the grassroots office.

-random side comments about tacos and debate watch turnout-

**Grassroots A:** don't keep us in suspense, are you happy? [with the turnout of people at the debate watch party]

**Campaign A:** Absolutely. You guys know me by now, if I wasn't. My point being, this is the most incredible team in the country. I get choked up [takes a breath and wipes a tear] – this was so significant. At the national level for Bernie Sanders, this is demonstrating the grassroots. This is the one thing they don't talk about in polls. That it's sort of an “x factor” – everyone knows that, our opposition knows that, our rivals know that. But that's the one thing they never measure, right? They don't measure how intense the grassroots is. How intense the Berner movement from 2015, 2016 to now. This is why we have the capacity that we have because of all of you that were holding down the fort. And then the new Berners, it's giving motivation for the new Berners to

come in. And you guys are the leaders of the new Berners and examples of the new Berners.

**Grassroots B:** we support each other.

**Grassroots C:** We had several significant community leaders that once they knew that when you tell people the campaign is asking and hoping to make this one big, and there's surprises in store, if you give them enough to let them know this is what's being asked, there's a certain contingent of the Bernie people that will up and move, for sure.

**Campaign A:** It's significant because we feel that. Look at Bernie's polling in Texas with Latino –[Grassroots (in agreement): mhm yeah, right.] we feel that in the streets. Those of us who are in the field. We see that in Wilmington, we see that with our communities. Because there's a commonality of the stories that we're all sharing, there's a rebellion that we have. This is consistent with Bernie's democratic socialist movement.

**Grassroots B:** I remember in 2016 we did some work around here and it wasn't that hot. Now that we went, the people that went with us in our team, man, everyone loves Bernie. And they know Bernie. We're setting everything for the entire state of California. They're looking at us, you know what I mean? We're in this together.

Although I did not say much during the group conversation, I observed and listened to the experiences of all informants that led them to the movement. The collaboration between the grassroots and campaign reflects a synergy amongst a plurality of activists mobilizing for a political revolution.

**Campaign B:** One thing about tonight that I'll say, is that we had very little to no support from our national team. It was a timing issue too, but to be able to get all these networks going – I saw all of you guys getting on it and being super supportive. It is an unparalleled movement. There is nothing else on the ground like the Bernie Sanders movement.

**Grassroots D:** We're just starting.

**Campaign B:** People have already been so gracious in offering stuff for the office. But I think one of the things you all need to know is that the Bernie Sanders campaign is a grassroots campaign and because of the enormity of that grassroots he has the resources. That's the movement also, right– the resources that are behind this campaign.

Being able to accompany them to the campaign office just days after receiving the keys to the space allowed me to develop an insight on the relationship between grassroots and the campaign. I realized that the grassroots base of the movement that had started in 2015 was an integral part of the entire project not only in the beginning, but throughout the entire process. This is reflected in the conversation between the campaign and grassroots. The strong grassroots support of the movement is what kept the movement going *during* the absence of the campaign, thereby showing how political activism for bringing about social change extends beyond the boundaries of a campaign. The campaign was merely a *moment* within the movement. Laclau and Mouffe argue that “it is only from the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination that

the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality” (2014, p. 143). But *how* is this discourse generated and maintained to construct an effective hegemonic project? Through the grassroots, a *united* base.

**Grassroots C:** I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t have all my heart in this.

**Grassroots D:** I’m meeting a lot of people. I’m just thankful every time I meet a local and have vision for the future. [campaign: that’s organizing, right?] I’m very excited, I met two other people so things will be happening. And I love this spot.

**Grassroots C:** Having this event after doing about 9 Barnstorms felt like a celebration. I think it’s really important to remember the passion and the labor that we all bring to this. Folks that have been showing up again and again and again at the events— it’s been so incredible. We can always count on the senator to provide the inspiration to keep going for the next couple of weeks. He says the things that remind of us of what we’re fighting for. We’re fighting for each other. It’s not necessarily that we have this lofty goal of putting one of our own in to the White House, but about bringing it back to the people and making it the people’s White House. We do that because we see each other struggling, we see each other fighting. I’m so grateful for the campaign staff [in the room] coming from party organizing and labor organizing, brining that next level style of organizing to those of us that are grassroots organizers, who are self-taught organizers. The opportunity to level up, it’s really a beautiful thing to witness the ways in which we can lift each other up.

This shows how grassroots organizers played a significant role in Bernie’s democratic socialist movement. They illustrate how a plurality of activists engage in mobilizing around a commonality. This commonality stems from their lived experiences that are expressed through discourse and ultimately shape the heterogeneity of common sense, which “equips ordinary people with a powerful tool in political struggles” (Snir 2016, p. 277). Research by sociologists Van Til, Hegyeshi and Eschweiler (2006) highlights the impact of grassroots’ ability to transform ideas into reality. Their work finds that “grassroots participation drives the movement. No matter how strong, appealing, or sensible an idea may be, it needs people to think about it, talk about it, and act upon it if a movement is to advance its goals of changing society” (Van Til et al. 2006, p. 372). This is precisely what Bernie’s grassroots support did. His movement illustrates the power of grassroots organizing and discourse as a ‘powerful tool.’ Research by Gaby and Caren (2016) also supports the notion that discourse has a profound effect on a movement’s trajectory.

This section has analyzed and assessed two ways in which Bernie’s movement points to disruptions in Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework. Bernie’s democratic socialist movement goes against Laclau and Mouffe’s argument that a contemporary pluralist democratic politics should refrain from mobilizing under classist terms. By uniting their democratic struggles, the plurality of actors illustrates diversity around a shared issue. This

shared issue is communicated through the collective narrative of fighting for a political revolution by means of representing the 99% or the working class. Although the campaign ended, the movement did not. This is the difference between organizing and mobilizing. Organizing is when a group of individuals get together and have conversations about their different struggles but find solidarity in unity and remain within the *same* network of agents. This is different from mobilizing because mobilizing suggests attracting *more* and *new* individuals to participate in the political process by any means and thereby expanding the movement. In addition, Laclau and Mouffe's parameters for creating a common discourse never address *how* it is actually developed in practice. The findings from my fieldwork point to a strong grassroots base as a necessary part of the movement. The two aforementioned findings provide evidence for filling in the gaps between theory and praxis. Although the theory provides a general framework for a contemporary leftist project, it leaves out significant concepts. This paper provides evidence for how a new common sense is developed and reproduced in modern progressive political activism, thereby contributing to the knowledge of activism studies through an ethnographic approach.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Ultimately, Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign is a clear example of a contemporary Leftist project for a pluralist democratic politics within the parameters of Laclau and Mouffe's theory. It is important to address that the fieldwork conducted with the campaign works as a case study and does not provide an overall representation of the movement. During my fieldwork I encountered various external organizations that also supported the movement led by Bernie Sanders, but were not an official part of the campaign. This is because there are certain guidelines and restrictions for groups non-affiliated with the campaign. The official campaign is one of various groups that form a part of political activism. However, the discourse generated in Bernie's movement is the epitome of a plurality of agents collectively organizing around a *common sense*. The paper produces knowledge for the field of discourse reproduction in contemporary leftist projects. In addition, it contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding intersectionality and solidarity through class identity.

Rosenfeld (2011) points out that "democracy requires for its success both the promotion of common values and the very notion that there is something out there called 'common sense' that has an important role to play in political life" (p. 256). The common sense among my informants is that capitalism and corporate interests will never serve the interests of the American people, it only serves the interests of a small group of people. In their perspective, the government administration is in need of deep, systemic transformation. Identity politics will never truly represent democratic equivalence. Their lived experiences and commonality of struggles of living in a capitalist nation has led them to say *enough is enough* – the system must be transformed. And they manifest this belief into action through transforming the system from the inside. But how? Through launching a movement built on the premise of solidarity and direct participation.

The movement is precisely that – inspiring the American public to participate in all levels of democracy, not just every four years during presidential election cycles. The grassroots in Los Angeles is made up of diverse activists who are not only active in campaigning, but also additional activism efforts. This ranges from attending local city council meetings and voicing their concerns to actually running for positions in local government to change the system from within. The strong grassroots base in Los Angeles is what led to Bernie's overwhelming support in California (fieldnotes, 2019). The construction of common sense through a Gramscian lens helps further develop Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework. In addition,

the grassroots are at the core of uniting a plurality of activists and extending the movement through one conversation at a time. They build unity through solidarity.

Almost *all* of my informants are currently participating in local activism efforts. Some of this activism ranges from helping combat homelessness to delivering food for families currently facing financial hardship as a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis (fieldnotes, 2020). All of them have been actively participating in the ongoing protests addressing police brutality in America. This diversity in activism efforts reflects the plurality of actors who reflect a pluralist democratic politics but also how the network of actors *still* continues to organize activist efforts in attempt to mobilize the masses. Although Bernie's campaign is over, the movement continues. All agents – the ones who cannot vote but still volunteer, the ones who are organizing local community outreach programs, *are* the movement. Their role with the campaign was merely a moment within the movement.

### **Epilogue**

When I returned to Los Angeles in February 2020 for the purpose of conducting more fieldwork, it was for the reason that I firmly believed I would gather important pieces of data during the time when all of the California campaign efforts would be reflected in the number of votes. After Super Tuesday, the Los Angeles Bernie team was given the task of relocating to New York City to help organize and mobilize there. Bernie's overwhelming success in California was seen as a direct result of the efforts put in by the Los Angeles area. The team had about one week to pack up and clean up the East Los Angeles office and head for New York City by car. A cross-country road trip. And what happened, literally in the middle of the road trip? A term we *all* know too well by now, COVID-19, the infamous corona virus. "We had not heard anything from national until we finally get *the call*. He called and pretty much said, *wherever it is you are, stop and go home. Go back. Do not continue to New York.*" And just like that, the team of 3 cars that was headed towards New York was sent back to California. It was a matter of days before COVID-19 became a global topic thus forcing everyone to react in one way or another. Bernie Sanders reacted by suspending his campaign to do precisely what he believes in: fight for the American people. In his closing remarks during his campaign suspension speech he states that:

As we are all painfully aware, we now face an unprecedented crisis. Not only are we dealing with a coronavirus pandemic, which is taking the lives of many thousands of our people, we are also dealing with an economic meltdown that has resulted in the loss of millions of jobs. Today families all across our country face financial hardship unimaginable only a few

months ago. And because of the unacceptable levels of income and wealth inequality in our economy, many of our friends and neighbors have little or no savings and are desperately trying to pay their rent or their mortgage or even put food on the table. This reality makes it clear to me that Congress must address this unprecedented crisis in an unprecedented way that protects the health and economic well-being of the working families of our country, not just powerful special interests. As a member of the Democratic leadership and the United States Senate, and as a senator from Vermont, this is something that I intend to intensely be involved in over the next number of months, and that will require an enormous amount of work. Which takes me to the state of our presidential campaign... Today I'm announcing the suspension of my campaign. –Senator Bernie Sanders, April 8 2020

After announcing the suspension of his campaign, Bernie Sanders shifted his campaign resources into COVID-19-related aid. No other candidates have taken action steps related to the pandemic. This illustrates the reasons why almost all Bernie supporters truly believe in him and most importantly, they *trust* him. Trust in a politician is imperative for political engagement. Bernie's track record combined with his rhetoric interpellates his supporters to activists.

“...so once you start looking at his record, and start looking at his votes, you can see that it's because that's what he's actually for.” – **Maria**

“...we *are* Bernie Sanders. Everybody, in here supports Bernie because he's talking to *you*. he has brought the issues of the working people, the community, to the table.” – **Ricardo**

“...Bernie prides himself as a democratic socialist, and that kind of *means* everything. He believes that as a *human*. The reason *he* resonates, *his message* resonates with us, is because he connects with us on a human level.” – **Alex**

“...the senator has been fighting for economic, social and racial justices his entire life. I don't think there's a better person for the White House than him.” – **Daniel**

“I started doing my own research on him and realized oh my gosh, he's *consistent*.” – **Ana**

“...when Bernie speaks and talks about the current status quo, I feel like he's speaking *directly* to me.” – **Katie**

Genuine trust in Bernie Sanders is what sparked individuals to become supporters of the movement and also *participants* in the movement. This feeling of directly resonating to Bernie Sanders was felt by *millions* throughout the United States. In fact, Bernie's campaign broke the record for individual contributions made to a presidential campaign in the history of the United States (fieldnotes, 2020). Back in 2015, Berenson (2015) reported that “Bernie Sanders has broken the fundraising record for most contributions at this point in a presidential campaign, surpassing 2.3 million donations.” What happened in 2020? His campaign reached

over 5 million individual contributions – more than any other presidential candidate in the history of the United States (Villa 2020). If this is not sufficient enough evidence to support the notion that he launched a movement – I do not know what else will suffice.

It is important to bring up the aforementioned note of *tension* I noticed between the official campaign and the grassroots. Although their combined efforts led to Bernie's overall success in California, I still noticed tension between the two groups. This tension could be related to the underlying mistrust of the democratic party, and by extension mistrust of *established* democrats involved in Bernie's campaign. In addition, the question of democracy in contemporary politics could work as a point of departure for future studies. Is true democracy an illusion? A good amount of my informants revealed to me that if they did not see Bernie Sanders on the presidential ballot in November, they would not vote or write in his name. They were expressing their beliefs and trust in the candidate *and not the party*. This could also work as another topic for future research. How does affiliation and support of a candidate affect a party? Can ideological differences find harmony? Questions of how trust in government and politicians influence political engagement could be explored in future ethnographic studies.

On a final note, this paper is developed as a result of my fieldwork and engagement with Bernie's movement situated in Los Angeles. My role as a researcher and volunteer provides a duality of perspectives: one as studying the movement and one as *part* of the movement. Although this suggests that the writing and arguments are based on my own experience – this is a foundational aspect of conducting cultural analysis. If we are to produce cultural analytical material, it is imperative that we acknowledge our role *within* the culture because objectivity is impossible and can lead to misinterpretations or misrepresentations. Nonetheless, this paper is a brief summary of the impact and experience of the grassroots base that strengthened Bernie's movement.

The campaign may have ended, but the movement prevails.

## Glossary

**Barnstorm:** Barnstorms are “mass meetings where attendees will learn about the strategy to win the nomination for Bernie and get plugged into the work needed in California to win in 2020” (fieldnotes, 2019). In other words, Barnstorms are community outreach events organized by the campaign in order to attract more volunteers and by extension more voters.

**BERN App:** app utilized by the campaign to assist volunteers in data collection of voters; the database links citizens to a national voter database; the app was a resource for more information relating to the campaign such as scheduled events and information about the issues related to Bernie’s policies

**Big Ask:** this is when the campaign asks the event attendees to become *active* within the campaign by either signing up to host events, scheduling a phone-bank, or signing up for community canvassing

**Black Lives Matter:** ongoing movement that addresses police brutality and systemic racism

**California Primary:** March 3, 2020, announcement of voter turnout that determines how many delegates each candidate will receive; candidates must receive at least 15% of votes in order to receive any delegates

**Delegates:** chosen at the local and/or state level who pledge to support a certain candidate at the national convention; delegate count is different per state, some states divide them proportionally to the percentage accumulated, other states perform a ‘winner takes all’ which means that the candidate with majority percentage of votes receives all of that state’s delegates; parties announce their selected candidate for nomination at national conventions

**Detention Camps:** refers to the areas where immigrant detainees are held; Stone (2020) reports that most of the detainees are refugees seeking asylum, yet they have been separated from their families and are in tight, unsanitary conditions – many of them have never even been convicted of a criminal offense

**Donald Trump’s Impeachment:** formal process by which the President was held accountable for suspicion of committing offences while in office; Nancy Pelosi led the fight against President Donald Trump and together with other government officials, she drafted two articles of impeachment; one for seeking help from Ukraine for purposes of re-election; the second for obstructing Congress; Donald Trump’s case made it to the Republican-majority senate, where the final decision for impeachment was made;

**Electoral college:** process of voting where *electors* vote for President and Vice President; there are a total of 530 electors and 270 votes are required for Presidential election; each state has the same number of electors as there are members in congress: one for each member in the House of Representatives plus 2 senators (retrieved from archives.gov)

**GOP:** acronym for Grand Old Party – refers to the Republican Party

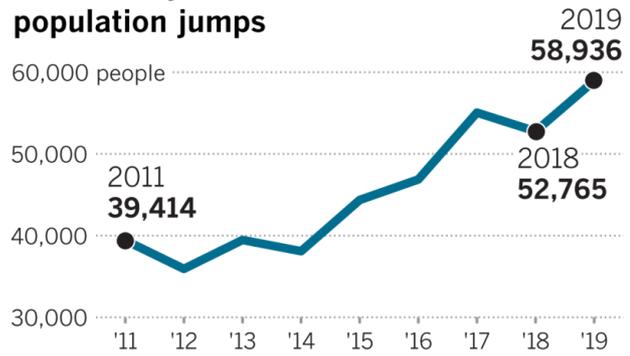
**High Dollar Fundraisers:** refers to candidates who receive thousands of dollars in a single donation by wealthy individuals or corporations;

**Homelessness:** major issue in Los Angeles, about 5% of the population (10 million in LA county in 2019)

**Popular vote:** votes directly cast by each voter (retrieved from ourwhitehouse.org)

**Psychoanalysis:** Zizek's understanding of political belief drawn from Lacan's understanding of psychoanalysis (<https://www.iep.utm.edu/zizek/>)

### L.A. County homeless population jumps



Source: Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority

Los Angeles Times

**'Put in Cages':** refers to Trump administration procedure for handling asylum seekers; the policy separates children from their parents; al Jazeera (2019) reports that in 2019, the United States held 69,550 migrant children in custody

**Standing Rock:** reference to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests

**Super Tuesday:** March 3<sup>rd</sup> – final day to cast ballots in the states of: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia

**War on Drugs:** phrase used to reference American government-led initiative that was intended to stop illegal drug use, yet in practice people of color were primary targets and suspects, resulting in hefty criminal punishment; "Marijuana use is roughly equal among Blacks and whites, yet Blacks are 3.73 times as likely to be arrested for marijuana possession." (ACLU 2013)

## Appendix

### Table of Fieldwork

<b>Date</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Location</b>
July 26, 2019	Campaign rally	Rally for Bernie Sander; preliminary fieldwork	Santa Monica
August 25, 2019	Long Beach Barnstorm	Community outreach event; participant observation	Long Beach
September 2, 2019	Labor Day Parade & Rally	Solidarity event; participant observation	Wilmington
September 4, 2019	City of Industry Barnstorm	Community outreach event; participant observation	City of Industry
September 7, 2019	Miracle Mile Barnstorm	Community outreach event; participant observation	Los Angeles
September 8, 2019	Santa Clarita Barnstorm	Community outreach event; participant observation	Santa Clarita
September 12, 2019	Debate Watch Party	Participant observation & brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
September 28, 2019	East Los Angeles Barnstorm	Community outreach event; participant observation	East Los Angeles
September 29, 2019	Los Angeles Barnstorm	Community outreach event; participant observation	Jefferson Park, Los Angeles
October 2, 2019	LAX Solidarity Event	Solidarity event; participant observation	Los Angeles
October 4, 2019	Office Grand Opening	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
October 15, 2019	Debate Watch Party	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
October 18, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; student; volunteer	Highland Park
October 18, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; student; volunteer	East Los Angeles
October 19, 2019	Organization and Leadership Seminar	Seminar for existing Bernie supporters; participant observation;	East Los Angeles
October 22, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; student; super volunteer	East Los Angeles
October 23, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; staff	East Los Angeles

October 23, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; staff	East Los Angeles
October 23, 2019	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
October 24, 2019	Organization and Leadership Seminar	Seminar for existing Bernie supporters; participant observation;	East Los Angeles
October 24, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; volunteer; activist	Hollywood, Los Angeles
October 24, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: New York native; activist; volunteer/staff	East Los Angeles
October 29, 2019	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
October 29, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; student; staff	Los Angeles
October 30, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; social worker; volunteer	Downey
October 30, 2019	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
October 31, 2019	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
November 2, 2019	Community Canvassing	Go-along; participant observation; brief informal interviews	Echo Park, Los Angeles
November 3, 2019	Community Canvassing	Go-along; participant observation; group interview	Koreatown, Los Angeles
November 6, 2019	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; activist; volunteer	Orange County
February 22, 2020	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
February 25, 2020	Debate Watch Party	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
February 28, 2020	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
February 29, 2020	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
March 1, 2020	Los Angeles Convention Center Rally	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	Los Angeles

March 2, 2020	Office Observations	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	East Los Angeles
March 3, 2020	Super Tuesday; California Primary	Participant observation; brief informal conversations	Los Angeles
March 13, 2020	Semi-structured Interview	Informant: Los Angeles native; activist; volunteer	South Bay, Los Angeles
March 14, 2020	Semi-structured Interview	Informants: Los Angeles natives; professor; activist; volunteers	South Bay, Los Angeles

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