

Adam Hilton's *True Blues, the Contentious Transformation of the Democratic Party*: A DSA fairy tale about the Democratic Party

Eric London
29 December 2021

Adam Hilton's book *True Blues, the Contentious Transformation of the Democratic Party* was published in 2021 by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Hilton is a supporter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a contributor to *Jacobin* magazine and a professor of political science at Mount Holyoke College. The book is featured in the most recent edition of the DSA's *Socialist Forum*.

"Equality has always been central to Democratic Party ideology and policy," writes Adam Hilton. His book, *True Blues, the Contentious Transformation of the Democratic Party*, is a fairy tale. It takes readers to a land of make-believe where one of the oldest political institutions of capitalist reaction has been transformed into an organ of progressive social change.

For 200 years, the Democratic Party has served as one of the world's most bloodthirsty organizers of capitalist *inequality*. It launched a civil war to defend and expand slavery. It carried out the removal of Native Americans. It robbed Mexico of half its territory. It crushed popular movements of the agrarian poor and orchestrated Jim Crow segregation. It dropped the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it established the Central Intelligence Agency, it has orchestrated coups on every inhabited continent, it has launched wars that have killed millions of people. In the past half century it has abandoned any pretense to social reform. It is a party of, by and for the banks, the military-intelligence agencies and the financial oligarchy.

By presenting this party as capable of a "progressive transformation," the moral of Hilton's fairy tale is that the only appropriate venue for left-wing politics is solidly within the Democratic Party. In a 2018 article in *Socialist Register*, Hilton explained: "Rather than dismissing the Democrats and pinning our hopes on a third party, the American left must rethink which kinds of goals can be accomplished in the realm of American party politics." As he told the DSA's *Socialist Forum*, "I begin from the premise that maybe it's time to accept that we're not going to get one [a socialist party independent of the Democratic Party], and move on from there."

The DSA has prominently promoted Hilton's book because the organization forms part of the Democratic Party and its *raison d'être* is to keep socialist-minded people in "the realm of American party politics."

Hilton's book does, however, provide a factual description of how the DSA and its predecessor, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), were central to internal Democratic Party efforts to remodel the party after the 1968 crisis, when opposition to the Vietnam War, the urban rebellions and the growth of the class struggle exploded in the course of the Democratic nominating process.

In the decades since, the DSA has presented the Democrats' long march to the right as a "transformation," with the Democratic Party always becoming more and more progressive as it wages never-ending war

abroad and oversees higher and higher levels of inequality at home. Though Hilton does not intend it, what emerges from his book is a clearer view of how the DSA has provided a long and essential political service, dressing up one of the most powerful and reactionary imperialist political parties in world history as "progressive" or "left."

Hilton's methodology

In his 2018 article in *Socialist Register*, Hilton explained his methodology: "When Marxists are asked about the nature of the Democratic Party, it is often said that the party is a 'bourgeois party.'" This position, Hilton writes, "is more often used in the pub or at a political meeting than put down and defended in print. And while it makes for good agitprop, its analytic foundations are more problematic."

Hilton arrived at these conclusions by employing "more sophisticated tools than those typically employed by Marxists." These tools include an algorithm he developed in a 2021 paper that allowed him to analyze the words that appear in the Democratic Party platform documents dating back to 1984.

After analyzing what the Democrats have said about themselves for the past 40 years as they eviscerate social programs, deregulate industry and cut taxes for the rich, Hilton concludes: "Over the past 40 years, the party has significantly strengthened its commitment to redistributive public programs" and "has become more inclusive and progressive," not only "in terms of its policy and ideological commitments to economic equality," but also "more generally, across many ascriptive inequalities."

Inequality may have grown massively over this same period, but that is not the Democrats' fault: "Rising economic inequality in the US likely has less to do with any durable shift in Democratic ideology and policy than it does with other contemporaneous developments," which include the "growth of low-wage service sector employment," the "fiscally constrained public-private welfare state" and "Republican extremism." Hilton makes no mention of the fact that these developments are the product of the Democratic Party's actions deregulating industry and finance, lowering taxes for the rich, eviscerating social programs and spending trillions on imperialist war. To Hilton, if the Democratic Party says it is a party of the working man, then it cannot be a bourgeois party.

What is the Democratic Party?

Hilton's "central argument," he writes, is that Democratic Party can be successfully pressured from the left. Hilton places particular emphasis on the changes advocated by the DSA's precursor, DSOC, in support of South Dakota Senator George McGovern's internal party structure reforms in the years following the 1968 party crisis. "After the reforms," Hilton writes, "the authority of the party chieftains was drastically reduced in favor of grassroots activists and primary voters."

Today, Hilton writes, the Democrats have "undergone their own profound transformation, remaking themselves into a coalition that, while still rooted in the old New Deal economic alignment, has extended its identity and program to groups and issues previously unimaginable. The party of Jim Crow has become the party of Barack Obama. The party of many religious voters has become the party of reproductive freedom and LGBTQ rights. The party of Cold War anticommunism has become a party that is seriously debating the merits of democratic socialism."

According to this fairy tale, the Democratic Party has seen the error of its old ways, has retained only the progressive social reform component of its earlier history, and, as a result, is now "debating the merits of democratic socialism."

It is telling that Hilton presents Barack Obama as the personification of this progressive transformation. America's first African American president bailed out Wall Street, engaged in permanent and expanding war abroad, spied on the entire world's population, ordered drone assassinations on a weekly basis, deported millions of immigrants and oversaw a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial oligarchy. Hilton and the DSA speak for a section of the upper-middle class which benefited substantially from rising stock values and which views the Democratic Party as in line with their own self-serving fascination with race, gender and sexual orientation.

The roots of DSOC in the crisis of the Democratic Party

In January 1968, the National Liberation Front launched the Tet Offensive and dealt a massive blow to US imperialism and the increasingly unpopular administration of Lyndon Johnson. In the three previous years, urban rebellions had taken place in over 250 American cities. In March 1968, after anti-war Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy placed a strong second in the New Hampshire Democratic primary, Johnson announced he would not seek the Democratic nomination. In April, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. In June, Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles, California, after winning that state's primary. In August, a police riot took place outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, which Connecticut Senator Abe Ribicoff called "Gestapo tactics." The convention nominated Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, who then lost the November election to Richard Nixon.

On the second day of its party convention in Chicago, the Democratic Party established a commission to carry out reforms to the party's structure and primary system. This commission (which would ultimately be led by and named after McGovern) strengthened the power of the professional upper-middle class, reduced the influence of the AFL-CIO on the party and cultivated a politics based on identity, enshrining affirmative action in the delegate selection process. In a 2003 article in the *Boston Globe*, Mark Stricherz wrote:

The McGovern commission also changed the makeup of the party's followers. No longer would nonunionized working-class whites have the same influence in party affairs. As polls have

consistently shown, they don't tend to vote in primary races, while college-educated professionals do. The latter are not only more civically engaged in general than their working-class counterparts, they are more knowledgeable about party affairs. As a result, more upper-middle-class voters joined the party and had more say within it.

In addition, the McGovern commission brought more women in general, and feminists specifically, into the Democratic coalition.

Hilton describes the support given to this initiative by DSOC. He writes: "[T]he period of 1968–1972 witnessed a mushrooming of pro-reform groups and organizations alongside the official party commissions, which often had overlapping memberships and interlocking networks of movement leaders and mid-level operatives. Critical to the scope and direction of the reform movement was the formation of the New Democratic Coalition (NDC) out of the existing McCarthy and Kennedy campaign infrastructure."

The NDC gathered together "prominent Dump Johnson insurgents such as Allard Lowenstein and Curtis Gans, labor-oriented reformers like Paul Schrade of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Michael Harrington of the Young People's Socialist League, civil rights leaders such as Julian Bond and John Conyers, feminist activist Bella Abzug of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and Wisconsin Democratic leader Donald O. Peterson," Hilton writes.

The NDC, with Harrington's active involvement, presented itself consciously as insurance that social opposition would find no expression independent of the Democrats. Hilton writes:

In the wake of Kennedy's assassination and the routing of McCarthyites [Eugene McCarthy's supporters] in Chicago, Schrade had written to the UAW president, Walter Reuther, that the NDC offered some "hope for the desperately needed reform of the Party." In its "Statement of Political Purpose," the NDC announced its intention to navigate a path between subordination within the Democratic Party and the impossibility of launching a successful third party.

Harrington supported McGovern in the 1972 election and founded the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee the next year. Hilton describes that DSOC functioned entirely as a loyal faction within the Democratic Party, promoting some moderate changes to its platform:

The newly formed Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) coordinated the coalition to target its efforts on inserting a full employment plank into the 1976 Democratic national platform. Led by Michael Harrington, author of the famous anti-poverty exposé *The Other America*, DSOC members viewed the platform as a vital arena for activist influence on the party. At the end of 1975, DSOC launched *Democracy 76*, a project that aimed to "have a programmatic impact on the Democratic Party and on public opinion generally." Through its network of some three thousand activists, DSOC orchestrated a campaign to insert the demand for full employment into the platform, irrespective of the ultimate nominee. They ran their own members for delegates, lobbied delegates named to the Platform Committee, and provided testimony before the Platform Committee's regional hearings.

In 1976, the Democratic Party nominated conservative Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter as its nominee. The platform accepted a version of DSOC's full employment amendment, leaving Harrington to declare the platform "was probably the most liberal in the history of the Democratic Party." It would pave the way for the election of a president who hiked interest rates to suppress workers' wages, deregulated the airline industry, made the preparations that Ronald Reagan later put into practice in his attack on the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strikers and tried (and failed) to suppress the 1977-78 strike of coal miners.

Nevertheless, DSOC remained dedicated to blocking the development of an independent movement outside of the Democratic Party. Hilton cites a 1977 call by DSOC's *Democracy 76* for its network "to reconstitute itself so that it could build a movement that would call upon President Carter to live up to the Democratic Party Platform." DSOC then rebranded *Democracy 76* as *Democratic Agenda*. Hilton notes:

Democratic Agenda sponsored a range of educational and mobilization activities under the banner of Full Employment Week in the fall of 1977, culminating in a Full Employment conference in Washington and a "mass lobby for jobs" outside the DNC [Democratic National Committee] headquarters. Harrington addressed the crowd: "All of us voted for Jimmy Carter and some of us were involved in the platform process. It says right on the cover of that platform that it's a contract with the people. ... Well, we are here to collect on that contract."

DSOC sponsored various resolutions to the DNC platform in the lead-up to the 1980 election, some of which were accepted and some were rejected. DSOC formed part of a coalition, "an ensemble of progressive organizations and advocacy groups" which, Hilton acknowledges, "had deeply institutionalized links with the party."

The Democratic Party today

In his interview with the DSA's *Socialist Forum*, Hilton similarly explains that *True Blues* shows "this party is more reflective than it used to be of the many progressive voices and identities that came into mainstream politics over the last two or three generations. I'd argue that the Democratic Party has become more progressive over the last 15 years or so." In *True Blues*, Hilton describes the Obama administration as follows:

[I]n the face of the new partisan constraints on his legislative agenda, the president galvanized public support, asserting that "where Congress won't act, I will." His subsequent "We Can't Wait" campaign circumvented congressional inaction by pressing ahead with programmatic changes through the executive agencies under his direct control. While this decision was undoubtedly motivated by the available means to act as a prime mover in American politics, publicly the president justified his action as a necessary tactic for making good on his commitments to promote the public interest. Less than a year later, Obama's presidential initiatives listed over forty-five directives, ranging across a wide spectrum of policy making, but focused largely on health care, labor law, and environmental protection, among others [and] many

of these initiatives placated the demands of key Democratic groups.

How differently the affluent upper-middle class remembers the Obama administration. To the working class, these were years of foreclosures, declining wages, rising healthcare costs and social austerity, a period of such social decline that Donald Trump was able to posture as a "man of the people." In the 2016 election, for the first time in history, Democrats won more votes than Republicans among wealthy voters. It has abandoned any pretense at social reform, instead developing a strategy of identity politics, fueling division based on race, gender and sexuality.

In his 2021 article, Hilton presents President Joe Biden as a reluctant hero: "As a candidate for the Democratic nomination, Joe Biden initially promised wealthy donors that 'nothing would fundamentally change' if he were elected. However, pressure has been building for a bold federal response to America's myriad crises, including inequality. While it remains to be seen how a Biden administration responds to pressures from the progressive wing of the party, the coincidence of the coronavirus and its attendant economic disruption has apparently already shifted Biden's perspective on what must fundamentally change."

These are not the delusions of an individual but of a whole social layer. Democrats in federal and state office backed the CARES Act, handed out trillions to the banks and corporations, and forced workers to work and children to go to school in the midst of the pandemic, which has killed over 800,000 in the US and over 5 million worldwide. The Democratic Congress just passed a massive \$700+ billion defense bill while Biden ends the eviction moratorium, cuts unemployment benefits and suppresses wages amid rising inflation. It is a party that represents the CIA, the Pentagon and all the agencies of American imperialism. It is no more likely to be transformed into a progressive party than the Republicans, because they serve the same capitalist class.

The absurd character of Hilton's argument is further revealed when he explains that the Republican Party is *also* not a bourgeois party and is instead an arena for the class struggle: "From a strategic point of view," he wrote in his 2018 *Socialist Register* article, "the existing major political parties in the US should be considered as sites of class struggle." Both parties, he says, "are open to leverage." Still using the plural, Hilton writes that "the decentralized structure of American parties poses a puzzle for those inclined to dismiss them as simply bourgeois institutions."

This is nothing but blind promotion of the two-party duopoly that belongs to the world's wealthiest ruling aristocracy. That the DSA promotes this Democratic Party propaganda because it *is* the Democratic Party, nothing more.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact