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CHAPTER ONE

Analyzing Leftism's Reinventions

No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections . . . has completed its intellectual journey.
—C. Wright Mills, 1959

Language is the means of representative politics, but the represented do not control its production. Analyzing representation thus requires an understanding of the production, and the producers, of political language. Starting from these premises, and taking heed of C. Wright Mills's sociological injunction to attend to the intersection of history and biography, the present account of Western leftism's twentieth-century reinventions centers on singularly significant sites of political language production: the political party and, within it, the party expert.

Broadly speaking, Western left parties entered the twentieth-century socialist and departed in the market-friendly, or neoliberalized, form of the “third way.” The implications of left parties' wide arc from capitalism's critics to markets' advocates are much debated in historical scholarship, but those debates sometimes overlook that there was also a leftism in between: after socialism and before third wayism there was Keynesianism, or what I call economistic leftism. In short, the language of twentieth-century leftism was not once but twice reinvented: in the first half economistic leftism displaced its socialist predecessor; in the second half economistic leftism gave way to neoliberalized leftisms of various sorts (third way, third road, new middle). I seek to explain these two reinventions via a historical, biographically centered analysis of four parties: the American Democrats, the German Social Democrats (SPD), the Swedish Social Democrats (SAP), and the British Labour Party.
I take up this explanatory project with the full acknowledgment that “left” means something very different on either side of the Atlantic. If we date Western leftism’s birth to the French Revolution, the category “left” is well over two centuries old and is distinctively European. By the early 1900s Western leftism’s meaning and practice was hitched to a specific, and relatively new, organization: the mass party, grounded in socialism and linked with organized labor. This novel political organization, which Max Weber termed an “ideological” mass party, was forged in the later decades of the 1800s and thence acquired considerable power.¹ In the United States, however, the party system is older and has a history of systemic “realignments”; shifting axes of differentiation have not always hinged on a left-right distinction.² And, as noted in a long line of scholarship dating, at least, to Werner Sombart’s Why Is There No Socialism in the United States? (1906), the national-level American political scene has never featured a major ideological mass party of the socialist variety.

By the 1920s Americans were well familiar with mass parties of a non-ideological kind. Weber described early-twentieth-century Republican and Democratic parties as “patronage” organizations, “merely interested in putting their leader into the top position so that he can turn over state offices to his following.”³ But, even as Weber wrote, American partisan institutions were being displaced by the rise of Progressive Era voluntary and professional associations and, with them, a new “progressive” politics. These new forces intersected with both of the great American parties, especially on the Republican side; progressivism at that time was neither “right” nor “left.”⁴ By the late 1930s, as progressive forces injected a new expert professionalism into American political institutions, organized labor gained political influence, and the Democratic New Deal coalition coalesced, the Democratic Party became “left” in the public imagination—despite the fact that it had never been socialist or a formal representative of organized labor. And so there was a certain convergence of European and American leftisms. There is therefore good reason to include the American Democratic Party alongside that of European socialist, social democratic, and laborite parties in a study of Western leftism—so long as we also keep in mind that this comparison only makes sense after the Democrats became left.

All of the four parties analyzed in this book have been, in their own ways, crucial to the meaning and transformation of Western leftism. First, all were major electoral contenders in their respective countries for the whole of the twentieth century. The SPD, the original socialist-ideological mass party, was an influential model for mass party formation well beyond Germany from the late nineteenth century; the SPD’s shift from socialist to economistic leftism, which coalesced in the 1950s, was important precisely for this reason. The SAP, meanwhile, was the most electorally successful Western social democratic party in the twentieth century, making Sweden a central reference point in cross-national discussions of the possibilities for social democratic politics. The British Labour Party’s highly labor-driven origins make it a particularly important case for the study of the labor-left party relationship and, despite Britain’s reputation for political conservatism, the Labour Party’s stated policy commitments also remained comparatively radical well into the late twentieth century. The American Democratic Party played a notable part in the definition of Western center-leftism from the New Deal period forward, which is notable especially in light of its peculiar organizational and nonsocialist history. And, last but not least, the Democratic and Labour parties were both leading protagonists in the making of third way leftism, at home and transnationally, at century’s end. All are thus useful entry points into the general explanatory problem of leftism’s variable meanings over time—that is: how and why left parties moved from socialist, to economistic, to neoliberalized leftism.

There are also reasons for my attention to a specific kind of left party—of the mainstream, or center-left, sort. To the extent I take nonmainstream left parties into account—for instance, communist parties that proliferated in the 1910s and 1920s, green parties in the 1980s, or left protest parties that emerged around the turn of the twenty-first century—I do so by placing them in relation to their mainstream brethren (from which, one should note, smaller communist, green, and left parties often emerged).¹ Mainstream parties of the center and center-right—liberal, conservative, and Christian democratic parties; the U.S. Republican Party—also appear in my account insofar as leftism’s reinventions had to do, in whole or in part, with turns of events on the right. Newer parties of the extreme right, which became increasingly prominent in the 1990s, are also considered in relation to goings-on with center-leftism.
But, because my explanatory focus is on how center-left parties spoke, this analysis centers on the contests, collaborations, and social relations that shaped interpretive, or refraction, processes in and among mainstream parties of the left. In this sense the present work dovetails with recent scholarship in the political science of parties that emphasizes (in the political scientist Daniel DiSalvo’s words) that parties’ internal factional struggles are “engines of change” and should be analyzed as such.

This does not mean that I consider non-center-left parties monolithic or unimportant or that I understand center-left parties as hard-bounded entities—far from it. Center-left parties are built on complex social relations that, in turn, occupy but one location in a much broader field of activity. But center-left parties, and the social relations that make them up, also have a special place in Western political history. Originating in Europe in the late nineteenth century, they drove the making of modern party systems not only as forces of democratization but also as innovators of a new organizational technology: the mass party.7 Key to the ideological mass party form was a triple orientation: first, toward knowledge production, education, socialization, and truth-claiming; second, toward representation, agitation, and mobilization; and third, toward office- or power-seeking. Each orientation, in its own way, expressed the historical moment. Ideological mass parties of the left were educators and knowledge producers when there was no mass education; they agitated and mobilized in a world of severely limited voting rights; they provided a means to political careers for the nonwealthy in an age in which aristocratic avocational politicians, with no need for a regular salary, were the rule rather than the exception.8 As such the mass party of the left shaped the formation of parties, politicians, political identities, and the boundaries of politics itself. They are major reasons that one can say, in the words of the political scientist Peter Mair, that “above all else, the twentieth century has been the century of the mass party.”

Beyond left parties’ historical role in the making of mass politics, there are also normative and practical reasons for focusing on parties of the mainstream left. Left parties were built on claims to equal representation in political life, and have always claimed to speak for disempowered and nonprivileged groups. The practical truth of this claim matters a great deal. Normatively, one can argue that democracy is not particularly meaningful if the nonprivileged lack effective representation. Practically, the history of populism and populist movements suggests that underrepresentation of the nonprivileged puts democratic political orders at risk of serious instability. And so how left parties speak, and for whom, has major implications for the representativeness and longevity of democracy as a whole.

My approach to the study of center-left parties is comparative, historical, and biographical. I narrow the general task of analyzing mainstream lefthism by punctuating a long-term, four-party analysis with emphases on three time periods: the 1920s–1930s, 1950s–1960s, and 1980s–1990s. I construct my explanatory puzzle, leftism’s reinventions, not by measuring policies in these periods but by tracking changes in political language—that is, changes in the most basic stuff of representative politics. Embracing the time-tested sociological principle that historical analysis should be able to tell the “big” story and that of actors on the ground, I account for changes in political language via an analysis of both large-scale institutional transformations and the trajectories, positions, and self-accounts of actors who speak for parties: party experts. Party experts are social actors in party networks who orient their activities toward the production of ideas, rhetoric, and programmatic agendas in political life in the effort to shape how both electorates and politicians view and understand the world. For reasons explained further below, I focus especially on European ministers of finance and their advisory networks and, in the case of the American Democratic Party, on economic advisory networks centered on presidential candidates.

My focus on experts arises from a theoretical perspective that takes parties as internally contested networks of social relations that do much more than seek votes, policies, and offices. Parties also seek to naturalize themselves by shaping how we understand the world and our place in it. In this effort, experts play a special role. Party experts may have all sorts of backgrounds—they may be academics, politicians, journalists, trade union researchers, backroom strategists, clergy, financiers, and so forth; for present purposes their distinguishing feature is in their action-orientation: they strive to formulate the language by which parties characterize the world, define programmatic priorities, and communicate with publics. In so doing, party experts become intermediaries between represented groups and elected or office-seeking representatives.
Party experts are, in other words, spokespersons in a double sense: for parties and for those whom parties claim to represent. The extent to which party experts are able to perform this double task is key to parties' capacity to shape people's worldviews, cultivate constituencies' sense of being meaningfully represented, link everyday concerns to policies or policy agendas, and thus organize political life—or, in the terminology adopted herein, parties' capacity to intermediate. For this reason, understanding who party experts are, what makes them possible, and how they see things is especially important.

Left party experts may be of many sorts, but, as I will show in the analysis to follow, the role of economists inside left parties, and the arc of left parties' relationship with professional economics more generally, has a special significance. This relationship was weak or nonexistent in the age of socialist leftism, but at midcentury the left party–economics relationship was strong and interdependent. I will show that, for all of the parties considered here, around 1960 some of the most prominent left party experts were credentialed economists who were distinctively hybrid: they had one foot in left parties and the other in academic economics professions. I call these historically specific experts economist theoreticians. Thanks to their scientific credibility and their institutional in-betweenness, economist theoreticians were able to wear many hats—as strategists and speechwriters, public communicators, and (sometimes) intermediaries between party leadership and a key constituency: organized labor. Their in-betweeness also fostered and reinforced a certain way of seeing the world and their role in it: for economist theoreticians, economic management was of a piece with political consensus-building; their task as economists-in-politics was to keep sound scientific advising grounded in the demands of domestic politics. I call this way of seeing things the Keynesian ethic.

The economist theoretician was not like left party experts before or after him. In Western European countries, before the economist theoretician there was the socialist party theoretician—a journalist and "agitator" who was deeply party-dependent, and was no academic. I will show that, in the 1920s, the party theoretician tended to be at odds with union leaders and credentialed economists alike, who appeared to the party theoretician as intraparty challengers. If we then skip to the 1990s, past the time of the Keynesian ethic-bearing economist theoretician, we find that there were still plenty of left party–affiliated economists, but they were distinctive kinds of economists. The 1990s center-left economist was internationalized, credentialed but not necessarily professionally grounded in the academic world, and had close linkages with domestic and international financial institutions. I call this brand of party expert a TFE: the transnational, finance-oriented economist. Like the economist theoretician, TFEs saw things in ways that accorded with their institutional locations, viewing themselves as interpreters, guardians, and (sometimes) saviors of markets.

TFEs were not “neoliberals,” but as spokespersons for markets they were bearers of a neoliberal ethic. Insofar as TFEs spoke for markets, and not any particular group (trade union or otherwise), they did not perform the domestically grounded strategic and intermediary work that their predecessors did. I will show that the TFE offered more prescription than prescription when it came to problems of representation, coalition-building, and political strategy. This created problems, especially as center-left electoral coalitions fractured and vote margins declined. The arrival of the TFE on the scene fueled left parties’ turn to new experts, especially of a strategic sort, who did the work of linking the defense and advocacy of markets to the representation of, and communication with, constituents, with an eye to winning elections.

The economics–left party relationship in the 1990s was thus important, but circumscribed, relative to the 1960s. The influence of TFEs was mediated by growing ranks of policy specialists (sometimes termed “wonks,” indigenous to the worlds of nonprofit research, especially think tanks) and strategic experts (sometimes termed “spin doctors,” with ties to professional media outlets, consultancies, polling and public opinion research outfits, and so forth). TFEs spoke for markets; specialists spoke for what works; and strategists spoke for what wins. But, as new extreme parties gained appeal, it was by no means clear that TFEs, strategists, and specialists spoke for constituents—traditional or otherwise.

The pages to follow fill out this story, showing how changing party-expert relationships drove the programmatic vocabularies of left parties and, by extension, leftist’s reinventions. As the reader will have gathered, I approach this task using a specific analytical strategy. Much research on party politics focuses on big transformations in parties and
electorates; states and governing institutions; organized labor and social movements; or business, capital, and finance. I consider big transformations too, but I look at them from the inside out by situating the biographical trajectories, proximate struggles, and professional ethics of party experts within broader historical currents. This refraction approach is grounded in a conception of parties as prisms rather than pinballs. Via a refraction approach one can see how big transformations and destabilizing events (for example, the Great Depression, social protest, oil price shocks, or the 1994–1995 Mexican peso crisis) generated new problems, intensified interpretive struggles, and drew in new kinds of experts who struggled to define how parties spoke. This book gives an account of leftist’s reinventions with emphasis on this inside-out, or refraction, story.

One of the advantages of my approach is that, by compelling the analyst to focus on the orientations, situations, and positions of historical actors, everything becomes relational. The hard distinctions that often guide political research—between states and markets, parties and electorates, interests and ideas, or the national and the international—look more fluid from the inside out than from a bird’s-eye view. One can see how social dynamics and relationships inside parties shape, or refract, events and forces beyond them. A result is that, while I recognize that the party-electorate relationship is important, I am able to treat the significance and meaning of electoral “demand” as an interpretive question, determined by forces internal to parties. While I recognize parties as nationally centered organizational animals, I am also able to avoid an analysis that is overly nationally bound. My account’s center of gravity begins in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, attending to the transnationalism of radical and exiled journalists at mass left parties’ birth; it then moves toward the United States and ends with particular emphasis on transatlantic political and professional elites in the globalizing and financialized setting of the late twentieth century. This aligns my analysis with a growing acknowledgment in historical sociology that the boundaries between the national and the trans- or international are variable, and variably important, for understanding historical change.

The remainder of this chapter lays out the framework of the book. In the first section I provide a brief history of Western leftisms in the twentieth century, which expressed the century’s three dominant “isms”: socialism, Keynesianism, and neoliberalism. The second section turns to the problem of analyzing hegemonic political ideologies, or “isms,” highlighting the indispensability of political parties to the endeavor. I make the case for a refraction approach that treats parties as internally contested social terrains in which social actors’ orientations intersect with, and respond to, neighboring fields—economic, political, cultural, bureaucratic. The third section elaborates the historical, comparative, and biographical epistemological concerns that are consistent with a refraction perspective. In the fourth section I present major arguments of the book and contrast them with alternatives. The fifth, and concluding, section offers a brief overview of the chapters to follow.

WESTERN PARTIES, LEFTISM, AND THE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Early 1900s left parties in Western Europe painted a picture of the world with a Marxist brush. Born as mass organizations grounded in socialism and organized labor, left parties told publics a tale of the inexorable but disruptive development of industrial capitalism, the making of the working class, the inevitability of class struggle, and progress toward a socialist future. Advocating not only for basic protections—eight-hour workdays, weekends, child labor laws—but also for the “socialization” of ownership of the means of production, theirs was a specifically socialist leftism.

By the 1960s mainstream left parties’ geographical reach included the American Democrats, who, alongside their European peers, offered an altogether different leftism. Left parties now framed the world in technocratic, economistic terms, assuring publics that they possessed the know-how to intervene in economies precisely, scientifically, and as necessary. For economistic leftism the aim was not socialism so much as full employment; the means was not socialization but scientific economics. In this confident era left parties argued that social problems can and should be resolved with policies that even out distributive inequalities, expand safety nets for the poor, and enhance people’s quality of life, regardless of their income or employment status. They recognized the importance of stable prices and currencies, but saw these as manageable via a combination of scientific know-how and cooperative bargaining.
Analysing Leftism’s Reinventions

Leftism changed, again, by the 1990s. Left parties’ confident assertions of managerial control of the economy gave way to declarations of necessary adaptation to the market. In this era of neoliberalized leftism, left parties’ rhetoric and policy pursuits became more difficult to distinguish from what, historically speaking, people thought of as politically “right.” Surprisingly enough, none other than the most successful social democratic party in the West—the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP)—was one of neoliberalized leftism’s most important innovators. In an open break with the past, the incoming SAP government of 1982 prioritized containing inflation over keeping unemployment low and pursued financial liberalization with the explicit aim of increasing profits relative to wages. By the 1990s it was clear that the SAP’s change of heart was neither temporary nor idiosyncratic. In the United States, the Clinton administration upended the legacy of New Deal liberalism with a “New Democrat” agenda that emphasized work-centric welfare reform, balanced budgets, market-led growth, and smaller government. In Britain a rebranded “New Labour” party abandoned its famous commitment to the common ownership of the means of production and distanced itself from unions. Upon taking office, New Labour empowered the Bank of England as part of a broader effort to depoliticize economic policy-making, summarily ending Labour’s long-standing efforts to rein in the powers of British finance.

And then there was Germany. Once the most influential party of the mass socialist left and the standard bearer of Marxist orthodoxy, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) returned to government in 1998 and, within a year, enthusiastically embraced the Blairite “Third Way.” The SPD-led government hence set off in pursuit of more restricted, work-conditioned labor market and social insurance reforms and defended the low inflation, money-centered orthodoxies of a newly integrated Europe. These kinds of policies and positions were, by century’s end, widespread in the West and were all the more remarkable for their embrace by the political left.

In this brief overview of the twentieth century’s three Western leftisms readers may recognize themes that are symptomatic of the period’s dominant “isms”: socialism, Keynesianism, and neoliberalism. In this sense, leftism’s reinventions are merely specific cases of more general political worldviews. And yet the making and remaking of leftism cannot be accounted for by simply chalking them up to ideologies out there.

Rather, the analysis of leftism’s reinventions requires thinking about where political ideologies come from, how they manifest in the lives and activities of social actors, and how they intersect with politics and parties. I turn to this in the next section.

ON THE STUDY OF “ISMS”

The suffix “-ism” tends to appear when a worldview of temporality and socially situated people about the means and ends of government becomes a widespread basis on which political power is exercised. An “ism,” in other words, is a political ideology. A geographically and politically far-reaching “ism” is a hegemonic ideology—that is, a governing doxa or common sense, or what the French social thinker Michel Foucault described as a logic of the art of government.

The three “isms” that feature in the overview of leftisms just given—socialism, Keynesianism, and neoliberalism—are all essentially the same kind of analytical object: a political ideology with some original association with the orientations of historically and socially situated people. An implication of this understanding of political ideology is that its analysis is never strictly in the province of political sociology—that is, the sociology of power-seeking and political institutions. It is also, avoidably, an object of the sociology of knowledge.

Indeed, the sociology of knowledge has always taken ideology as a sociopolitical effect. Karl Mannheim described the major ideologies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany in these terms: “bureaucratic conservatism” reflected the perspective of Prussian state administrators; “conservative historicism” expressed the viewpoint of German academic historians and dominant bourgeois state leadership; “liberal-democratic bourgeois thought” (or what we might now understand as “old” liberalism) was the standpoint of the new industrial-era bourgeoisie; and so forth. Mannheim took for granted that ideologies expressed the sociostructural locations of their progenitors and that one must therefore locate the origins, background, and positions of the ideologists.

Here Mannheim drew heavily from Karl Marx and Max Weber, both of whom grappled with the major ideology born of the eighteenth century: liberalism. For Marx, liberalism originated in the misrecognized
interests of nonreflexive academics and professionals (the “ideologists”).

17 Weber also located liberalism’s bases in “the ‘liberal’ professions,” marked by possession of “sought-after expertise or privileged education.”

18 Foucault later stressed that the figures who articulated eighteenth-century liberalism were bearers of a hybrid form of expertise: they were grounded in both political economy and public law. Foucault proposed that this duality constituted proof of liberalism’s twofold practical nature: liberal governmentalism imposed a principle of limitation on the jurisdiction of the state that derived from the truth-telling, or “veridiction,” of the market.

19 In all of this there is a basic assertion that “isms” have definite historical, intellectual, and professional origins to which the study of political ideology must attend.

20 This realization, creditable to Marx, emerged from a kind of exasperation with liberal professionals’ lack of reflexivity—that is, their failure to recognize the connection between their position in the world and their interpretation of it. Marx arguably overcorrected for this problem by brushing off actors’ self-understandings as misrecognition or false consciousness, arguing that one could explain the liberal views of “ideologists” by simply uncovering their class location and their relationship to class-based political movements.

21 Marx thus laid an important foundation for the sociology of knowledge by linking ideology to social position, but he dismissed the possibility that there was explanatory value in first-person accounts.

22 Since Marx’s time a more full-fledged sociology of knowledge took shape, even as new “isms” arose: Keynesianism, neocorporatism, neoliberalism. All had intellectual and professional origins; none was reducible to class interests. Alongside the formation of new political ideologies, however, sociological thinking on their origins and nature also shifted. Recent work stresses the relational insight that political ideologies are better thought of as strategic orientations and expressions of contested relations rather than essential categories.

23 The sociologists Neil Gross, Thomas Medvetz, and Rupert Russell, for example, explain American neocorporatism as the contested end product of struggles between free market libertarians, New York City–based anticommunist Jewish intellectuals, and “fusionist” conservative intellectuals.

24 Historical analyses of neoliberalism’s origins tell a similar story of a political ideology borne of relationality and contestation.

25 Updates notwithstanding, the sociology of knowledge’s basic position stand: political ideologies are situated viewpoints that can and should be traced to situated people. But this is only a starting point. From here, the study of “isms” encounters a whole series of problems: how do we conceptualize any given “ism” in a way that facilitates explanatory analysis? If we reject Marx’s dismissal of first-person accounts, then how do we then deal with disjunctures between what people say and what they do? And how do we account for the processes by which political ideology becomes hegemonic, or a widespread basis on which political power is exercised?

Three Problems, Three Remedies

The trouble with the analysis of “isms” can be broken down into three distinct problems: conceptualization, consent, and the relationship between ideology and power.

26 Drawing from sociological thinkers including Marx, Weber, Gramsci, and Bourdieu (with a healthy dash of Durkheim), here I address each problem in turn.

Conceptualization. The task of conceptualization has long been a primary concern of social theory. Classical statements highlighted the necessity of the historicization of the object as a preliminary to any attempt at sociological explanation.

27 To this end, a growing body of recent work mobilizes relational thinking to conceptualize various contested objects, including race, the state, the European Union (EU) and its associated institutions, money, terrorism expertise, think tanks, and political ideology. In all cases, a relational approach to conceptualization eschews essentialism, anthropomorphism, and tendencies to attribute causal primacy to the sheer force of ideas, remaining mindful that worldviews always originate with people, that those people are variably positioned and unequally resourced, and that institution building is at once a historical and a contested social process.

28 In this way of thinking socialism, Keynesianism, and neoliberalism are not singular, essential things but rather contested historical effects of social relations over time. This is not to deny that there is such a thing as a distinctive worldview, or ideology, with intrinsic characteristics: it is true that social democracy is built on the “primacy of politics,”
Keynesianism involves a balancing act between political and economic demands, and neoliberalism elevates markets over politics. But these ways of seeing the world were not born fully formed and then simply installed into the operations of governing institutions. They were developed by historically situated people whose experiences and social situations shaped how they saw things and became central to the exercise of power via definite institutional pathways. For instance: socialism's early formation was inseparable from networks of radical journalists and pamphleteers; its development was always heavily dependent on parties and party-political networks; and its twentieth-century trajectory was hitched to the fate of Soviet Russia. A similar story can be told of Keynesianism—which, as Timothy Mitchell has eloquently shown, had everything to do with the statistical construction of the world as a system of economies in the 1930s amid the breakdown of colonial empire—or, finally, of neoliberalism, which was born at the margins of academic and politics, partly in reaction to Keynes, Keynesianism, and the figure of the interventionist Keynesian economist.

The task of conceptualizing an ideology is thus a deeply historical undertaking. So, also, is the task of understanding how an ideology and its bearers become effective. As we move away from the origin stories of socialism, Keynesianism, and neoliberalism and toward their relationship to politics, one finds many pathways, variations, and exceptions—and, by extension, that ideologies are not singular things and cannot be treated as such. It is in the nature of any form of hegemony that one cannot “explain” it as a whole or treat it as a singular X or Y variable; it is simply not a “forcing cause” sort of phenomenon. What one needs is a way of keeping ideology grounded, linked to people, and situated with respect to centers of politics, power, and policy-making—or, in the phrasing of the sociologists Gil Eyal and Larissa Buchholz, understanding the processes by which bearers of knowledge and expertise acquire a capacity for intervention.

It is precisely for this reason—namely, the need to make a distinction between the production of ideology and the acquisition of capacities for political intervention—that the concept of field comes in handy. The notion of field is roughly analogous to a “game,” in the nonrational-choice sense of the term. Putting the field concept to work requires, however, shifting gears from ideologies to people, events, and processes in which ways of thinking (categories of vision and division, in Bourdieu’s terms; ethics, in Weber’s terms) and doing present themselves. One can then trace those people, events, and processes in place and time, locate them in field struggles (say, over political power, or academic prestige, or state resources), and situate them within intra- and cross-field dynamics—the “spaces between fields”—in order to explain historical change. In the process we can investigate what makes a certain kind of actor, bearing a certain way of understanding the world, possible, likely, and politically consequential. The ultimate aim is to grasp how certain kinds of historical figures acquire a capacity to make their way of seeing things into a more general principle or logic of action—a question that lies, always, at the crux of the move from ideology to hegemony.

Where does relationality come in, exactly—and why is it necessary? Relationality involves seeing social phenomena in terms of social relations and authority struggles therein, rather than as stable essences. In a relational way of thinking political ideologies are born not of consensus but of contestation, expressing the perspective of the victors of struggles over truth and meaning. The products of those essentially cultural struggles—which include not only ways of seeing the world and one's role in it (an ethic, one might say) but also distinctive historical types of ethical actors—come into play. Relationality allows one to see that class-based conceptions of political ideology—that is, the notion that political ideologies are expressions of class interests—are never the whole truth, and that they have the troubling property of imputing motives to actors regardless of their positions, capacities, and self-conceptions.

The effort to keep political ideology grounded, however, tends to run into a difficulty with which the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci was well familiar: the problem of consent.

Consent. To illustrate the problem of consent in the case of neoliberalism one can point to the self-described “left of center” economist John Williamson, coiner of the phrase “Washington consensus,” who is sometimes categorized as neoliberal despite his unfamiliarity with the term and, once he looked into it, his aversion to it. Williamson’s case brings to the fore the trouble with otherwise persuasive accounts of neoliberalism as a class project. For David Harvey, for instance, “advocates of
the neoliberal way” are clearly identifiable, ideologically unified, and strategically placed in “positions of considerable influence in education . . . , in the media, in corporate boardrooms and financial institutions.”38 But can one say that John Williamson is a “neoliberal”? We can only ask this question if we first ignore the answer he has already provided.

The problem of consent is written all over studies of third way politics. Bill Clinton and his third way peers in other countries (Tony Blair of the British Labour Party, Gerhard Schröder of the German Social Democratic Party, Göran Persson of the Swedish Social Democrats, and others) are indispensable to any historical account of the turn to markets in the later twentieth century—but, unless we are willing to ignore third wayers’ self-conceptions, one cannot say that they are neoliberal. Third wayers may have cast themselves as “beyond left and right,” but they still saw themselves as defenders of social justice and right parties as their main competition. Terming third wayism “neoliberal” works as superficial description, but does not explain it.

The result is an inability to ask helpful analytical questions about how a worldview becomes hegemonic. Some accounts seem to render third wayism an ideological vacuum, emphasizing left parties’ disorientation in a world dominated by the right or casting self-understood left-of-center progressives (like Bill Clinton or Barack Obama) as bearers of “soft” neoliberalism.39 These accounts give at best a fuzzy sense of what, exactly, goes into the making of a “neoliberal” party or political actor. The result is a tendency to present what should be a puzzle (namely, why people who oppose neoliberalism, or have never heard of it, might nevertheless act on the world in ways that conform with neoliberal thinking) as a fact (“third wayers are neoliberal, even if they say they’re not”).

My suggestion, then, is that we take the history, biography, and positionality of people seriously as a means to analysis and explanation. Like Foucault’s dually positioned liberal thinkers grounded in both political economy and public law, the trajectories and social positions of the bearers of third way politics can tell us something about the institutional arrangements that rendered market-friendly ways of seeing things sensible. Attention to biography and positionality allows one to identify differences in the ethics and practical orientations of historical actors in a way that does not simply take self-accounts at face value but also avoids the substitution of labeling for explanation.

By approaching things in this way the long-standing premises of the sociology of knowledge—that is, explaining ideologies with reference to the social situations of their progenitors and enactors—comes back into play. By contextualizing people in their worlds and tracing their trajectories through time, the analyst is forced to see their multiplicity and changeability, not to mention the necessities and probabilities of their worlds.40 By extension, one can see how social actors might become two apparently contradictory things at once (for example, “neoliberal” and “left”). In the process one can preempt what Pierre Bourdieu called the “logic of the trial.”41 Indeed, for Bourdieu, sociology’s “purpose is not to ‘pick’ on others, to reduce them, to accuse them, to castigate them.” Its purpose is “to understand, to account for . . . to necessitate the world.”42

The political ideology—begemony transition: The centrality of parties. So far, I have suggested that the problem of grasping the transition from political ideology to hegemony—that is, a form of power that involves both public authority (consent) and the authority to govern (force)—is partially resolved by conceptualizing “isms” in a field-theoretic, relational way and by attending to history and biography. To this I will add two points. The first is that the analysis of how political ideologies become hegemonic must deal with political parties. The second is that, to do this, parties should also be conceptualized in a relational way, as “fielded” entities that are organized by a triumvirate of actor-orientations: truth-claiming or knowledge production, representation, and power-(or office-) seeking. By extension, parties are constitutionally linked with a variety of fields—political, cultural, economic, and bureaucratic (that is, governments)—and, as such, change over time in ways that refract (as opposed to either “reflecting” or “articulating”) goings-on in worlds beyond parties.

On the first point, that hegemony cannot be studied without placing parties front and center, my claim is neither that parties should be the only objects of analysis nor that they have been completely overlooked. But as one moves from existing literatures on socialism, to Keynesianism, to neoliberalism, the reader is tracked away from explicit concerns
with the political party. The literature on socialism and social democracy, past and present, remains party-centric. But historiographical and social scientific work on Keynesianism moves away from parties, focusing heavily on states, professional economics, and expert bearers of “social knowledge.” Research on neoliberalism takes us even further from parties, attending to intellectuals, economists, think tanks, business interests, international financial institutions, urban political economy, states and governing institutions. Recently, there has been a noteworthy turn to civil society, civic culture, and local partisan dynamics in research on neoliberalism in the United States, but parties are not the central objects of analysis in this work, either. And yet one cannot understand political ideologies' importation into governing institutions without attending to political parties.

As the social thinkers Karl Mannheim and Antonio Gramsci well understood, parties are vehicles of the making of political ideology, venues of hegemonic struggles, and organizational tools through which categories, actors, and ethics are injected into governing institutions. Per Mannheim, arguably the very conceivability of something called “ideology” in Western politics is a party effect. Mannheim identifies the development of parties as vehicles of hegemonic struggles as a process grounded in the history of democratization: at first political ideology originates with the “absolute state,” which “showed that politics was able to use its conception of the world as a weapon.” But then came parties: “with increasing democratization, not only the state but also political parties strove to provide their conflicts with philosophical foundation.” By the 1920s Mannheim speculated that, with the full elaboration of democratic (that is, party) systems, a holistic “political science”—by which he meant the integrated analysis of the whole field of political viewpoints, as opposed to merely a “party science”—had become possible. In short, liberal political orders, broadly recognized by social scientists by the early 1940s as necessarily party-political orders, both produced political ideology and opened up new possibilities for its analysis. And so, for Mannheim, to do “political science” was to study parties as vehicles of ideology.

The link between parties and political ideology that Mannheim emphasized is no longer taken for granted in scholarship on culture and politics. This may be partly an effect of the “freezing of party systems” famously identified by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967), which located the end of a long period of successive waves of social cleavage-driven party formation somewhere in the 1920s. But this “freezing” did not mean that parties are not, still, venues in which political ideologies are formed, struggled over, and translated into policies and programs. The one-to-one relationship between ideologies and party formation became more complex; it did not disappear. And, in any case, in the present moment it is quite clear that Western party systems are unstuck. Given that, it is high time to renew the Mannheimian project of linking the study of ideology with the study of parties.

Having made the case for the centrality of parties to the study of transitions from ideology to hegemony, I now turn to the need for a relational conceptualization of parties as part of a broader, refraction approach to the analysis of parties, representation, and hegemonic change.

**Parties and Political Refraction: Beyond the Party-Society Problematic**

Much current thinking about parties centers on what I call the party-society problematic. According to this problematic, parties change for one of two reasons: they react to the electorate, or the electorate reacts to them. So, to the question of leftist's reinventions over time, the party-society problematic offers two, and only two, sorts of answers: either parties did it or electorates did.

This way of thinking lends itself to a market-like conception of party politics: parties “supply,” voters “demand.” Within the framework the stereotypical “sociological” stance emphasizes “demand side” processes in which shifting demographics and changing social cleavages shape parties and programs. In a more stripped-down version of a demand-driven story, Anthony Downs’s (1957) “median voter” approach posits that parties in a majoritarian, two-party system will converge on whatever appeals to the broadest swath of voters. The happy outcome, either way, is that parties respond to what (most) voters want.

The party-society problematic, however, sets aside the whole question of what goes on inside parties. By assuming that representation (responding to publics) and leadership are somehow separable, it also excludes any consideration of the possibility that one can have parties
and democratic systems without meaningful representation. This way of thinking may work for abstract, ahistorical conceptions of economic markets, but it does not work for the analysis of historical dynamics in democratic politics.

Indeed, a long, distinguished line of thinking about politics takes representation and leadership as component parts of a whole. This conception can be found, for instance, in the early sixteenth-century writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, who famously described the dual necessity of politics in terms of consent and force: to do politics is to “make a nice use of the beast and the man.” Machiavelli was writing before the advent of mass electorates, but later thinkers—notably Max Weber and Antonio Gramsci—found his dual notion of politics equally applicable in the age of the mass party: parties have to represent, and they have to lead; there is no separation between the two. In this way of thinking, representation necessarily implies leadership—or, in other words, leadership is representation. To this we might add that, in democratic settings, parties also seek office—an imperative duly noted by Weber, who saw parties as fundamentally power-seeking organizations oriented toward mastery in and over the state.

The summary picture that emerges, of parties as entities that marry representation and leadership in service of office-seeking, breaks with the party-society problematic, situates parties with respect to states, and reopens the matter of parties’ internal dynamics. The joining of the two halves of the party-society problematic thus brings parties themselves, and contestation within them, back into view.

Breaking with the party-society problematic also attunes us to concerns other than representation-through-leadership and office-seeking: political parties’ deeply cultural nature. As Gramsci well understood, marrying leadership and representation requires a certain capacity to shape how people see things. In other words, just like states, parties cultivate, or seek to cultivate, a specifically cultural or symbolic capacity. Accordingly, Gramsci saw parties as more or less bounded, internally differentiated entities that are compelled to always try to do three things at once: win, represent, and shape how people think. Accordingly, Gramsci argued that the modern party has three elements. First is the “mass element,” which is comprised of ordinary, average people whose participation in the party takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organizational ability. This element is, in other words, made up of groups the party represents—without whom, Gramsci notes, “the party would not exist.” But the first element alone is not sufficient: represented groups “are a force in so far as there is somebody to centralize, organize and discipline them,” without which “they would scatter into an impotent diaspora and vanish into nothing.”

The party must therefore also have a second leadership element—or, in his words, a “principal cohesive element, which centralizes nationally,” pushing the masses’ “power of innovation . . . in a certain direction, according to certain lines of force, certain perspectives, even certain premises.”

Gramsci then insists, however, that parties have a third, “intermediate” element that “articulates the first . . . with the second and maintains contact between them . . . morally and intellectually.” The figures who do this work of intermediation are intellectuals of a certain sort: they are “organic,” grounded in the “mass element,” linking it to the operations and deliberations of party leadership. In other words, parties have in-house experts who, depending on how those experts are positioned, generate conceptions of the world and, in so doing, imbue parties with a capacity to reconcile the tension between representation and leadership.

In light of Gramsci’s thinking we might, then, restate parties’ triple orientations thus: power-, or office-, seeking; representation (which implies, necessarily, leadership); and truth-claiming. For present purposes, however, three modifications to Gramsci’s conception of the party are in order.

The first is a shift in emphasis from parties’ “elements” to a concern with actor-orientations. Following Gramsci’s tripartite conception of the party, this means taking power-seeking, representation, and truth-claiming as orientations rather than essential characteristics. Here parties become networks of relations in which actors are defined by their aims and priorities, or investments, rather than being slotted into hard-bounded categories. Parties, in other words, can be thought of as relational networks caught up in the pursuit of three aims—all essential, none perfectly reconcilable with, or reducible to, the other. This way of thinking defuses the impulse to essentialize, or strictly typologize, party actors: power-seekers can also be invested in representation; truth-seekers
Analyzing Leftism’s Reinventions

...can also be office-seeking politicians; and so forth. With this modification parties are not only relational but also constitutionally anchored to other fields of activity: power-seeking operates via linkages with the state (party-state relations); vote-seeking operates through engagements with constituencies, social movements, and civil society (party-civic relations); truth-seeking involves an orientation toward cultural and expert professions and spheres of activity (party-expert relations). By extension, a conception of parties that joins Gramscian insights with relationality gets us away from a concern with what is “external” or “internal” to parties, orienting us, instead, toward the ways in which party relations intersect with, and are shaped by, neighboring fields.

A second modification engages with the perennial problematic of the intellectual. This involves turning the intermediary role of the party expert into a question: party experts may do the intermediation that Gramsci describes, or they may not. In-line with arguments that the problematic of the intellectual as a social type can be usefully replaced with a concern with how experts acquire “the capacity to make a public intervention,” the problem of party experts is not whether they are “organic” but rather whether they have a capacity to intermediate.

Who are party experts? Gramsci pointed to journalists and newspapermen, but in the present they might include journalists, speechwriters, academics, legislative aides, public relations specialists, consultants, pollsters, think tank “wonks,” and campaign managers. They could be labor representatives, businesspeople, or financiers; they might also be politicians or political aspirants. Recalling our concern with actor-orientations, the important thing is not party experts’ title or category but how they are oriented: they specialize in the production of truth claims, building authority and esteem within party networks on that basis. Stated differently: party experts are the figures who invest themselves in the production of language, conceptions, and truth claims that parties wield in their efforts to pose as rightful representatives and bearers of the power to govern. As such, party experts shape how parties speak, produce parties’ means of representation, address the question of who (or what) is to be represented, and formulate competing logics of government.

Analyzing Leftism’s Reinventions

Party experts are central players in my account of leftism’s twentieth-century reinventions. This focus coincides with, and potentially complements, the present-day “articulation” perspective in political sociology—admirably formulated by Cedric de Leon, Manali Desai, Cihan Tuğal, Dylan Riley, Dan Slater, and others—which holds that parties are proactive forces in the construction and constitution of political identities, driving group formation in public life. Gramsci is clear, however, that articulation requires articulateurs. One of my aims, therefore, is to resuscitate Gramsci’s emphasis on parties’ third element, the party expert, and an accompanying concern with parties’ capacities for intermediation, as a complement to emergent sociological concerns with articulation.

This brings us to a third, and final, modification to the Gramscian conception of the party: the metaphor of articulation does not capture, exactly, the relational conception of parties that I advocate as an alternative to the party-society problematic. I suggest, instead, the metaphor of refraction. A refraction approach to the study of political parties hinges on (1) a relational conception of the party as a social terrain that is (2) riven by three irreducible orientations (winning office, representation, and truth-claiming) and that, as such, is (3) anchored to administrative (state and government), civic, economic, and cultural terrains. In order to resuscitate the Mannheimian and Gramscian projects of linking the study of politics and culture with the study of parties, a refraction approach suggests (4) a particular concern with parties’ cultural infrastructure, including their means of education, socialization, and knowledge production; party-expert relations; and the formation of party experts; and (5) making party experts’ capacities for intermediation an explicit explanatory object.

My call for a refraction approach to the study of political parties is akin to other culturally oriented moves in the study of states and state formation, ranging from James C. Scott’s seminal Seeing Like a State (1999) to the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Timothy Mitchell, Julia Adams, Ann Orloff, Phil Gorski, Mara Loveman, Nicholas Wilson, and others. My approach is distinguished, however, by grounding in relational and field-theoretical thinking, treatment of biographically situated first-person accounts as analytically meaningful rather than anecdotal, and
its basis in the triple-relational conception of the political party described above. With this in mind, in the next section I describe the methodological implications of a refraction approach to the study of political parties in general and leftism’s reinventions in particular.

**METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: ANALYZING REFRACTION**

Leftism’s twentieth-century reinventions are what the historical sociologist Charles Tilly termed a “large process”: a broad, cross-national pattern of change over a relatively long time period. This kind of problem does not conform to what the sociologist Andrew Abbott calls “general linear reality.”

Not, indeed, does the relational conception of the political party laid out thus far lend itself to variable-based analysis. How, then, does one proceed?

Insisting that macro-historical questions do not imply strictly macrohistorical answers, Tilly suggested that one can gain insight into big changes by attending to the specific, the personal, or the “micro.”

Tilly's focus on the relationship between “structures” and the “experiences of real times, places and people” recalls the contextually sensitive, meaning-oriented *verstehen* approach of Max Weber. The notion that experience is necessary rather than incidental to social explanation can also be found in the notion of *praxis* in the Marxian tradition, Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *practice* and *habitus*, and the concerns of John Dewey with *conduct*. Bourdieu, for instance, insists that the task of the sociologist is to learn from, not to override, the practical knowledge of social agents:

> [T]here is a practical knowledge that has its own logic, which cannot be reduced to that of theoretical knowledge; that, in a sense, agents know the social world better than the theoreticians.

Probably the most famous statement on the importance of attending to the experiences of actors comes from C. Wright Mills, who argued that the “task and promise” of sociology was to place people in history—in his words, to grasp “history and biography and the relations between the two.”

There is a noteworthy distinction to be made, however, between the macro/micro language of Tilly and the practice-orientations of Marxian, pragmatist, and Bourdieusian lines of thinking. The distinction is between a *dualist* perspective that joins macro and micro—expressed in the linguistic duo of “top-down” versus “bottom-up”—and a *field* perspective in which the macro-micro distinction is simply *collapsed*. In the words of the sociologists Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, a field-theoretic perspective centers on local or meso-level social orders, wherein the effects of external institutional processes and historical events depend on “the way incumbents and challengers interpret and deploy . . . ‘resources’ in the service of the specific strategic action projects they undertake.”

In other words, as John Levi Martin explains, in a field way of thinking causal force “impinges from the inside.”

My conception of parties as relational terrains, emphasis on inside-out analysis, and metaphor of refraction are grounded in these field-theoretic orientations.

So far the integration of field theoretic concerns with practice and practical knowledge into comparative and historical sociological scholarship remains limited. People’s positions, experiences, and perspectives enrich much historical analysis but usually do not do much explanatory work. This is not for lack of resources: Philip Gorski, George Steinmetz, David Swartz, Gil Eyal, and Gisèle Sapiro, among others, have produced helpful statements on how Bourdieu’s thinking bears on historical analysis. Recent work in world-systems research and on race and intergenerational mobility, notably Bruce Haynes and Syma Solovitch’s *Down the Up Staircase*, moves in promising biographical directions. But, as yet, most comparative and historical scholarship does not mobilize Bourdieu’s notions of *practice* or *habitus* or (more importantly) the intention behind them. Historical and comparative sociology generally treats people’s situations and self-accounts as interesting, but merely anecdotal, indicators of other, more important things.

In contrast, a refraction approach to the study of leftism’s reinventions pays careful attention to historical and economic context but places heavy explanatory emphasis on party-based social actors’ trajectories, self-accounts, relational positions, and proximate struggles. In a refraction perspective parties are more like prisms than pinballs; the social relations that constitute them are determinants of how parties
interpret the world and formulate courses of action. Given the tripartite, relational concept of the political party described above, and the centrality of cultural production, truth-claiming, and party experts therein, an especially important element of party-political social relations are the activities, institutions, people, and resource investments through which parties produce knowledge about the world, educate and socialize publics, and contribute to the making of experts. I refer to the elements of party-political social relations through which parties seek to naturalize certain ways of seeing things as general interpretations of one's experience and political interests using the term cultural infrastructures.

To understand parties' cultural infrastructures I begin, for each party, with an account of its "genesis and structure." Parties' origin stories identify key features of the historical moment—the economic context, the development of political institutions, the geopolitical setting—through the prism of the party, focusing especially on the "formation stories" of (left) party experts. Because I am interested in left parties' economic language, and in order to facilitate comparison, I focus on similarly situated, generationally comparable economic party experts across parties and time periods (more on this below). From this starting point, I adopt a biographical approach that traces experts and party-expert relations through time in order to grasp their conditions of existence, proximate struggles, and historically specific styles, skills, and dispositions—or, using Bourdieu's term, to get a sense of habitus. I am especially interested in how party experts understand politics and their place in it (their professional ethics), how that understanding is shaped by their positions with respect to parties and other institutions, and the implications of those ethics for party experts' capacities for intermediation.

Unlike the micro-macro distinction favored by Tilly, my approach operates on the understanding that there is no hard line between the two. In Bourdieu's usage, habitus is an effect of socialization—or, in the summary of Loic Wacquant, "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act." If habitus is socialized subjectivity, then understanding the habitus of the party expert grants insight into the institutions through which party experts are socialized.

Stated in the terms of the sociologists Daniel Hirschman and Isaac Reed, in the biographical "formation stories" of party experts one can identify institutional developments and organizational cross-relationships that make them possible and that might orient them toward viewing the world in a certain way. One can, in other words, track historical change from the inside out.

This approach preempts overly strong assumptions about the priority of any particular unit of analysis—organizations, nation-states, and so forth. An analysis that traces the institutional locations and trajectories of party experts makes no assumption, for instance, that their experiences and trajectories are nationally bounded. It thus allows us to move beyond the party-society problematic and to incorporate growing recognition in historical sociology as to the significance of inter- and transnational forces in the making of social change. At the same time, by centering the analysis on similarly situated figures across parties and time periods, my approach retains the advantages of a comparative perspective. And so, while the story of leftist's inventions that follows centers on national political parties and seeks to generate definite comparative insights, a refraction approach nonetheless preempts reflex tendencies to both false dualisms and methodological nationalism.

In short, a refraction approach involves the study of historical change from the inside out, centered on the formation, infrastructural conditions, and orientations of party experts. The next task, then, is to think carefully about how, exactly, one identifies party experts in the first place—that is, the analytical entry point. I focus on generationally comparable party actors who occupy structurally similar locations in their respective worlds and who become well-recognized experts on matters of economics and finance. Practically speaking, because of the differences between European and American political institutions, I had to approach this in two ways.

First, in the Western European context, I start with the trajectories of left parties' first ministers of economics and finance. From that starting point, I focus on successive finance ministers and ministers-in-waiting, incorporating new advisory networks and institutions as they develop through time. In other words, I begin with finance ministers but then move with the institutions, looking beyond ministers of finance to
the formation and population of new party research arms, offices and advisory positions in finance ministries, new departments and state agencies (like the Department of Economic Affairs [DEA] in Britain), and new advisory bodies (like the Sachverständigenrat, or Council of Economic Experts, in [West] Germany).

I do realize that, for the reader, my focus on a particular figure, in a particular office, may seem a narrow entry point. But I would argue that the parties involved justify the method. The SPD, SAP, and Labour Party are membership-based, hierarchical, parliamentary organizations, in which appointments to powerful offices are drawn from top-level party ranks. In those ranks the position of minister of finance, or minister-of-finance-to-be, has always held a special place. A cross-party comparison that begins with left parties’ first finance ministers thus affords insight into forms of distinction inside the party and institutional arrangements that made certain kinds of party experts possible. This then becomes a historical baseline against which later experts, and their own conditions of possibility, can be compared—and, by extension, through which important changes in parties’ cultural infrastructure can be identified as explanatory objects.

In my analysis of the American Democratic Party, however, I proceed differently. First, because of American parties’ history of periodic realignments, the Republican and Democratic parties of the 1900s cannot be treated as though they are simply organizational continuations of the Republican and Democratic parties of the 1800s. For this reason, one cannot begin with either of the major parties at birth and go from there; instead, I begin with the Democratic Party in the early 1930s, and take special care to document when, where, and how it became “left” in a way that was comparable to center-left parties across the Atlantic.73 A second concern has to do with the figure of the party expert in the American case. American cabinet appointments tell us little about the Democratic Party’s internal hierarchies and forms of distinction if cabinet appointments do not draw from the party’s executive—which they do not, because there is no such thing. Beginning with Democratic Treasury Secretaries in the 1930s would more likely lead into American business and finance than into the Democratic Party. The major American parties certainly have their hierarchies, but they are not bureaucratized membership organizations like their European counterparts. They have always been made up of fluid, relatively weakly bounded factional networks in which professional trajectories depend a great deal on electoral fortunes, committee appointments, and—especially—relationships to presidential candidates.74 And so to identify party experts among Democrats I focus on networks with ties to candidates and political campaigns, and especially those who become presidential advisers on economic questions.75

As with any method, a refraction approach has its strengths and weaknesses. A chief strength is an aversion to explanation by way of conceptual oppositions that falsely impose mutually exclusive ways of accounting for the world. A biographical and historical analysis centered on similarly situated party experts across party and time periods allows the analysis to “travel” across institutions, organizations, and territorial boundaries; to retain the advantages of comparison without falling into the trap of methodological nationalism; and to make actors’ experiences, ethics, and perceptions central rather than marginal to social explanation. An emphasis on experts’ formation stories renders the institutions through which they move, and the techniques and resources they mobilize, analytically central.

Another strength of my approach is that, while the construction of the thing to be explained (leftism’s reinventions) is built on a historical periodization, a biographical and relational view makes it impossible to treat time periods in isolation from each other. By looking at things biographically, one can see how parties and political language change in an intergenerational way, in which party leadership and expert networks in one period shape, and sometimes directly cultivate, the party’s future spokespeople. And so periodization provides a structure to the explanatory puzzle, but it does not wall off one period from the next.

A final strength is an ability to incorporate, rather than simply ignore, the fact that parties, and their politics (“leftism,” “conservatism,” “liberalism”), may well be very different in kind across time and place. Analyzing parties by focusing on how, and through whom, they advertise themselves to electorates and articulate their policies, paired with a specific interest in the trajectories, institutional positions, and worldviews of party experts, makes American and European parties comparable without flattening the differences between them or treating their politics as continuous across time.
My approach also, of course, has certain difficulties and weaknesses. One is that my entry into the worlds of parties is necessarily selective, skewed toward dominant elites. To my mind this is defensible because I am interested in tracking and explaining how parties speak, and those who speak for parties are, by definition, elite. Another is that the fruits of a multiculture refraction approach will inevitably be limited by the cultural origins, resource dependencies, and linguistic constraints of the--in this case, American and English-speaking--analyst. I fully acknowledge both limitations and leave the final evaluation of their impact up to the reader.

Another difficulty is practical, having to do with the standardization of biographical information regarding both deceased and living historical figures. In the case of the deceased, the historical record is adequate to the task. Given that I deal with high-profile public figures, I am able to draw on biographies and, wherever possible, personal memoirs and autobiographies, not to mention public statements, third-party interviews, and secondary scholarship. But I cannot speak with them, and I cannot fully grasp their relationships, experiences, and worldly concerns. Neither can I tell their stories in the rich, interpersonal detail that I would like—or, at least, not in the space of a single book. So the method requires that the analyst make a great number of decisions, big and small, about what to dig into and what to gloss over. This is simply unavoidable. Again, the verdict on the gravity of this concern is up to the reader.

Different difficulties are inherent in the analysis of the living, the most obvious being that reliable historical records on living figures are limited, closed, or nonexistent. This becomes a concern in my analysis of party experts in the 1990s, especially. Given the high profile of many of the living persons involved, interviews are theoretically possible but difficult, and, in my experience, there is little that high-profile public figures say in an interview that cannot also be found in third-party interviews, newspapers, magazines, and in their own published writings. On the upside, modern political operatives are fond of writing memoirs, and, in a digital age, they now have blogs, online CVs and professional bios, well-maintained Wikipedia pages, and personal and professional websites. These can be rich sources of information, especially if one is interested (as I am) in a combination of information on professional trajectories (that is, CV-level information) and personal perspectives.

And so this is how I proceed. In order to typify expert profiles as consistently as possible over time, I prioritized the collection of basic biographical information—birth and death dates, training and credentials, professional appointments. I supplement this information with oral histories, diaries, memoirs, self-authored retrospectives, third-party interviews, professional and political publications, speeches, biographies, and autobiographies, with the singular aim of understanding how party experts emerged and became influential inside parties; what roles they played in interpretive struggles and the production of programmatic language; and whether (or not) they developed capacities for intermediation. For living figures I also draw, with care, from personal websites, professional CVs, and other online sources. I make every effort to situate all this information in time and place, using statistical data on political and economic developments, organizational datasets, news sources, and a very broad range of secondary literatures.

My purpose in the analysis of all first-person statements is not to derive from them objectively factual accounts of events. Rather, my aim is to get a sense of social actors’ comparative trajectories, relational positions, and personal perspectives. In other words, I want to know about experts’ personal senses of the “game”—who their allies and opponents are, the terms they use to make those distinctions, how they understand the world and their position in it, what they strive for, and why.

Finally, in order to understand the 1990s in particular, between 2010 and 2014 I had a series of informational conversations with a handful of figures who have been involved in center-left and third way circles in Europe and the United States. These conversations pointed me in very useful directions, allowed me to confirm that I had correctly identified key party experts, and gave me a better sense of the central movers in efforts to redefine mainstream leftism in the 1980s and 1990s.

At this point we have summarized the general puzzle that drives the book (leftism’s reinventions), the major conceptual and analytical concerns that the puzzle calls forth, and the specifics of a refraction approach to resolving the puzzle. We now turn, finally, to a preview of the explanation itself: what drove leftism’s reinventions?
THE ARGUMENT (THREE WAYS),
AND ALTERNATIVES THERETO

This book develops two broad explanatory arguments. The first is that the relationship between party organizations and experts (the party-expert relationship) is the social basis of leftism’s rhetorical forms (socialist, economistic, neoliberalized) over time. Stated differently: the language produced by left parties expresses a certain perspective on the world, and the central bearers of that perspective are socially situated party experts. We can boil this down to a simple proposition: there is a generic link between the social situation of party experts and the way left parties speak. This is an empirical and causal claim, for which I provide backing in the pages to follow, but it is also grounded in the essentially Durkheimian—Bourdiesuan postulate that the way social agents classify, organize, and describe the world, or agents’ “perceptual schemes,” expresses a shared or similar position in “a given social formation.”

This postulate suggests that, by explaining party experts’ conditions of possibility and social locations, we can also explain the discursive parameters that leftism, as expressed by left parties, takes over time.

What, then, drove the initial formation of the left party expert between the late 1800s and the 1920s? The first and most basic condition, of course, was the formation of left parties. In Western Europe the mass party of the socialist left was born of struggles against the state that featured, from the cultural field, members of the growing occupations of “agitation” and radical journalism and, from the economic field, labor movements. Early, European-style left parties emerged at the intersection of socialist cultural terrains and workers’ movements and, in the process, put in place the conditions of the first left party experts: the party theoretician. Notably, partly because American mass parties preceded the consolidation of a centralized state in the United States, the conditions of the party theoretician across the Atlantic were absent.

In order to understand leftism’s reinventions after about 1930, the crucial thing to understand is why party experts’ profiles and social locations changed between the 1930s and the 1960s and again between the 1960s and the 1990s. Here two historical developments are key: first, the rise of an alliance, or interdependence, between professional economists and left parties by the early 1960s; second, the weakening, or reconfiguration, of that alliance thereafter.

Stated in the broadest conceptual terms, both the rise and fall of economics-left party interdependence had the same underlying cause: interfield tension. This argument also has roots in an old sociological proposition: namely, the Weberian argument that social development can be seen as a history of the proliferation of social orders (or fields), which are riddled with both intra- and interfield tensions. The argument, in short, is that interfield tension drove leftism’s reinventions by remaking party-expert relations, driving the formation of new kinds of party experts, and shaping the trajectory of intraparty definitional struggles.

This argument can be elaborated theoretically, historically, and heuristically. For theoretically inclined readers, I first elaborate in the language of field theory. For the nontheoretically inclined, I then tell essentially the same story in a more concrete, historical, inside-out way. Finally, for the visually inclined, I present my argument heuristically.

Causal Account: The Theoretical Version

In a field-theoretic language, the general driver of the rise and fall of interdependence between left parties and professional economics was interfield tension: first, between the political and economic fields; second, between the political and cultural fields.

In the first reinvention, starting in the 1920s and 1930s, growing tensions between the political and economic fields drove mainstream economics and political leftism into a historically novel alliance. The specific character of interfield tension involved what I call a Polanyian moment, or an intensification of Polanyi’s “double movement”: an opposition between protection-seeking and market-advancing forces, brought to a head by economic crisis, in which old ways of doing things break down and new political-economic arrangements become possible.

In field theoretical shorthand, this can be characterized as a tension between the economic and political fields. In the worlds of parties, this interfield tension, or Polanyian moment, generated deep intraparty struggles in which authoritative economic knowledge was both a means and a site of contestation. In the worlds of universities and academic
professions, it also drove intergenerational contention (that is, contention between older-generation academics and their younger-generation progeny), redirected the concerns of young economists-in-the-making toward questions centered on the structural causes of poverty, inequality and unemployment, and drew young economists into both administrative agencies and party networks.

Party theoreticians initially preempted the influence of younger-generation economists, but as they were drawn into, and became more powerful within, party elites, a new, interdependent relationship was born between professional economics and left parties—one that worked, in part, via the research departments of organized labor. This relationship made possible the economist theoretician, who ported a professional ethic that married economic analysis to political strategy—that is, a Keynesian ethic. As an intermediary between government, parties, organized labor, and a well-regarded academic profession, the economist theoretician's capacity for intermediation was, historically speaking, relatively high.

But the fact of interdependence—that is, a situation in which left parties relied on Keynesian economists to formulate and scientifically legitimate their agendas, while Keynesian economists, in turn, relied on left parties to validate, consecrate, and make effective their particular brand of economics—generated a new interfield tension: between economics (a cultural field) and the political field. This tension, like that between the economic and political fields in Polanyian moments, had to do with distinctive authority bases, or logics: inhabitants of cultural fields are prestige-seekers whose credibility depends on their reputations as objective, credentialed scholarly professionals, but the inhabitants of political fields are power-seekers whose credibility depends on the ability to wield political influence. In this sense, to be an "economist" and a left party expert is not likely to be a durable state of affairs. Rather, recognition of economists' political investments will tend to render the economics-politics relationship a matter of professional contention, and recognition of politicians' fealty to economists' truth claims, rather than represented groups and political allies, will tend to undermine their political power.

These tensions fueled what the sociologist Cristina Mora calls a "cross-field effect."85 Economics became more politicized and internally contentious, creating new openings for dissenting economists—some neoliberal, some not—who challenged Keynesian notions of the roles and responsibilities of economists-in-politics and shaped the making of a younger generation. In the US, another cross-field effect was the forging of novel relationships between professional economics and parties of the right. With the onset of economic and political instabilities from the late 1960s, economics' politicization and the rise of new professional ethics fueled a turn away from domestic politics and toward international and financial concerns. As the sociologist Marion Fourcade and others have shown, late-twentieth-century economics became a much less nationally grounded affair, acquiring distinctly transnational and financialized orientations.86

Transformations in economics reformatted—or, in a sense, retrofitted—the cultural infrastructure of left parties, giving rise to a new sort of left party expert: the transnationalized, finance-oriented economist (TFE). The TFE, as a bearer and guardian of the truth of markets, had a relatively low capacity for intermediation, tending to offer market-centered prescriptions that did not necessarily appeal to left constituencies, and thus generated strategic dilemmas for left parties. For this reason, the complement to the rise of the TFE was the proliferation of new kinds of experts—policy specialists and strategists—in left party networks who did the work of reconciling economic initiatives with electoral communication and figuring out workable, market-friendly reform strategies in nonmarket policy domains. This helps to explain why neoliberalized leftist featured not only a new market-centrism but also an intensification of politics-by-public-relations and an embrace of market- and work-friendly social welfare reforms.

Causal Account: The Historical Version

In the early 1900s the premier left party experts in Western Europe were socialist party theoreticians. Party theoreticians became intellectuals not because of academic recognition, university employment, or working-class experience but rather via involvements with newspapers, weeklies, journals, community institutions, and educational activities that were housed within, or were intimately connected with, left parties. Rudolf Hilferding of the German SPD, Fredrik Thorsson of the Swedish SAP, and Philip Snowden of the British Labour Party were all born between the mid-1860s and mid-1870s, came of age alongside the cross-national
formation of mass socialist parties, and were recognized economic experts—but they had no formal training in economics or political economy, and were not academics. They also did not rise to intellectual prominence via labor movements. Rather, they established themselves as party experts through active participation in the formation and activities of socialist societies, clubs, associations, news outlets, and party-based theoretical journals—that is, a historically specific cultural infrastructure that emerged in reaction to industrial change and political repression. In the United States, where mass parties were not socialist and had, until recently, dominated American political institutions, Hilferding, Thorsson, and Snowden had no clear counterpart.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, however, a growing conflict between balanced budget, gold standard orthoadoxies and democratic demands (in particular, for social insurance and unemployment protections) situated party theoreticians at the center of deepening political contention. Socialisms notwithstanding, party theoreticians generally had little to offer beyond fiscally conservative orthodoxies. The standoff that ensued fueled the recruitment of younger-generation, university-educated experts into the fray—in particular, socialist-friendly young men with training and credentials in what were then becoming more autonomous and statistical economics professions. Examples of these young recruits include Ernst Wigforss and Gunnar Myrdal in Sweden, Hugh Dalton and Hugh Gaitskell in Britain, and Gerhard Colm and Heinrich Deist in Germany. In the United States, figures with similar generational profiles—for example, Lauchlin Currie, Leon Keyserling, and Seymour Harris—became integral to the emergent, New Deal, liberal faction of the Democratic Party.

When one looks beneath center-left parties’ “Keynesian” turns between the 1930s and the 1960s (the timing varied), one finds, invariably, that new kinds of hybrid experts—partly party men, partly academic economists, sometimes linked with the research arms of organized labor—were writing programmatic language, informing campaign speeches, participating in the making of new organizational and administrative niches for technically trained economists in politics and government, and speaking to publics on behalf of left parties. In a very real sense, this period was defined by ties between mainstream economics professions and center-left parties, borne by economist theoreticians who spent their professional lives moving in between academia, organized labor, states, and left parties. Reflecting that position, economist theoreticians’ professional outlook centered on the necessity of marrying economic analysis to political strategizing, communication, and consensus-building; the ethic of the economist theoretician was to fit sound analysis and policy prescriptions to electoral and strategic realities, providing a living link between science and politics.

But the formation of the economist theoretician gave rise to both political and professional opposition—which, in turn, fed back into left parties. A clear example of this cross-dynamic can be found in the opposition between the American economist theoretician Walter Heller, the chairman of JFK’s Council of Economic Advisers, and the Chicago-based, neoliberal economist Milton Friedman. In the mid-1960s the two men opposed each other not only on technical economic questions but also on what economists-in-politicals should do: for Heller, the economist’s task was to reconcile economic analysis with political necessities in a discretionary way; for Friedman, the economist’s task was to define rules rather than exercising discretion, reworking political institutions in a way that sets free the morally superior, impersonal, law-like forces of the market. In Friedman’s conception of the economist, in other words, there was no discretion—there were only the dictates of the science of markets. This opposition was symptomatic of a broader professional opposition that reached well beyond the United States and that was rooted in the recognition of economists and publics alike that Keynesian economics had a leftward tilt. This recognition fed professional struggles that contributed to economics’ internationalization, the generation of new theories that backed claims as to the futility of Keynesian demand management, and a deepening orientation to business and finance. The result was a new kind of left party-affiliated economist, the TFE—figures like Lawrence Summers in the United States, Ed Balls in the United Kingdom, and Klas Eklund in Sweden. The TFE remained left-affiliated but saw the world in a more market-centered way than his or her predecessor, played an important role in the interpretation of the meaning of economic instabilities in the 1970s, and contributed to the delegitimation of Keynesian economist theoreticians.

TFEs’ new authority inside left parties strained the relationship between center-left political elites and organized labor. The TFE tended to
offer prescriptive, market-centered economic advice—for instance, prescribing deregulation and strict monetary policy amid an oil-price-induced inflationary crisis—that was removed from, and sometimes at odds with, center-left politicians' strategic concerns and consensus-building needs. In recognition of this irreconcilability, center-left aides and strategic advisers (for whom the 1970s was a formative experience) created new centers for the production of politically relevant, center-left (or "progressive") expertise. Meanwhile, ever-closer electoral margins prompted greater demand for a specifically strategic brand of expertise—that is, experts specialized in winning, or "spin." From the 1990s forward, as the role of the economist-in-left-politics became more specialized, circumscribed, and market-centered, the prominence of policy specialists and strategic experts grew. The neoliberalization of center-left politics thus acquired two of its more notable complements: a proliferation of political experts and policy specialists and a turn to politics-by-public-relations via the mobilization of private political consultants.

Causal Account: The Heuristic Version

A heuristic diagram of my general explanatory account is given in Figure 1.1.

The figure indicates major differences across historical periods in the left party–expert relationship, how the locus of party experts changed over time, the interfed tensions that drove reinventions, and the characteristics of party experts in each phase. A particularly important inflection point in the arc of the story is the formation of interdependence between left parties and economics from the 1930s to the 1960s—an important, but arguably underestimated, feature of what is sometimes termed the "Keynesian era." It was because of interdependence that cross-field effects became possible, such that what happened in left party politics mattered for economics and what happened in economics mattered for left party politics.

Alternative Accounts

To my knowledge, the general puzzle of Western leftism's twentieth-century reinventions has never been formulated as an explanatory problem. As a result, I am unable to delve into how my argument squares, or doesn't, with other accounts.

There are, however, specific accounts of leftism's midcentury, economic reinvention, most notably the “end of ideology” thesis—in which mass consumerism, the growth of the middle class, and the decline of the industrial working classes wrought a generalized decline of “ideology” (a term implicitly conflated with Marxist socialism) in mainstream politics. The fundamental problems with this account, to my mind, are dual: a faulty conception of Keynesian-inflected economic leftism as, by definition, nonideological and a problematic understanding of
party change as a mechanistic process in which external forces (demographic and economic change) exert a unidirectional “push” on parties. I have outlined my own understanding of ideology above, and I delve further into the end of ideology claim in the following pages—especially in Chapter 4.

There is also a heterogeneous body of work on the third way phenomenon.89 The terms of the debate on the third ways, however, often veer toward the normative, engaging implicitly or explicitly with problematics of blame, ideological capitulation, or betrayal—or, alternatively, defensive claims that the third ways remained “true” to social democratic principles and traditions. A more helpful line of analysis focuses on the discursive parameters of third wayism, and how they varied (or not) relative to leftisms past, but this line of work is not always clear on what, exactly, drives variation.90

There is, of course, a huge literature in the social sciences that deals with the broad question of how and why parties change.91 None of that literature addresses the specific puzzle that drives this book. But it does suggest at least four, general sorts of accounts that can be applied to the question of leftism’s reinventions: electorate-driven, economics-driven, elite- (or party-) driven, or driven by intraparty, interfactional struggles. My general response, to all of these accounts, is twofold. First, all are true in a way, but they rely on a faulty conception of the political party. Second, a refractive approach does not reject but rather incorporates these modes of explanation, on a sounder conceptual footing. I elaborate on this in Chapters 7 and 8.

PREVIEW OF THE REST OF THE BOOK

The next chapter focuses on establishing the main explanatory puzzle: leftism’s two reinventions. It uses a content analysis–based index of party programmatic trends to document the central puzzle of the book: leftism’s two reinventions. Chapter 3 then develops an origin story of the formation of the left party expert that begins at socialism’s Western European cradle. Starting from the late 1800s, I track the making of socialist leftism in Germany, Britain, and Sweden through the consolidation of mass parties of the left. I emphasize that left parties were not just power- or office-seeking organizations with a working-class, or trade union, arm; they were also entities that invested considerable time and resources in the creation of a specifically cultural infrastructure and the pursuit of knowledge-producing activities—including journalism, economic analysis, educational and community activities—with the aim of cultivating socialist and social democratic ways of seeing the world. Symptomatic of left parties’ early infrastructural development was the formation of a particular kind of in-house economic expert: the party theoretician.

Chapter 4 gives an account of the transition from socialist to economistic leftism between the 1920s and the 1960s in Western Europe. I show how, amid interfield tensions in a Polanyian moment, party theoreticians tangled with, and were eventually displaced by, credentialed and university-affiliated economists—some, especially in Western Europe, with strong ties to the research arms of organized labor. The outcome was the formation, varying in timing and strength, of economistic leftism, which was built on a historically novel interdependence between left parties and professional economics. Indigenous to the new party-economics connection was a new kind of Western European, left party expert: the economist theoretician. I develop a similar analysis of the American Democratic Party in Chapter 5, tracing how and when it became “left” in the 1930s and thence, like European center-left parties, became a bearer of economistic leftism, and host to economist theoreticians, by the 1960s.

Chapter 6 offers an analysis of how the mid-late century, left party-affiliated economist theoretician saw politics and his role in it (the Keynesian ethic). It highlights the historical institutional arrangements that made economist theoreticians possible, and in which the Keynesian ethic was grounded, and how those arrangements changed from the 1960s forward. In particular, I consider how neoliberalism as a specifically intellectual project enters into the story of a move from Keynesian to neoliberal ethics, and the ways in which new alliances between economics and the political left drove a reorganization of fields of political expertise—especially of a leftist sort. I emphasize how the rise of a new economics of the right fed into the politicization of economics in general, younger-generation economists’ interpretations of the economic events of the 1970s, and the professional delegitimation of the economist theoretician. Despite the ongoing leftward lean of Western economics
professions, by the 1980s mainstream economics became a producer not of economist theoreticians bearing Keynesian ethics but of TFEs bearing neoliberal ethics. Last but not least, I also discuss two important sites for the making of new party experts: a new network of think tanks and other organizations key to the production of a "progressive" expertise and the proliferation of political consultancies.

Chapter 7 shifts back to parties, focusing on the making of the American New Democrats. I link the collapse of the Keynesian ethic to Democrats' frustrations with economists' politically insensitive and strategically counterproductive prescriptions in the 1970s, and then I show how that experience fed into efforts to remake Democratic theory and practice in the electorally dismal years of the 1980s. Until the arrival of the Clinton administration, people behind those efforts were many and diverse—strategic aides, policy specialists, politicians, financial elites—but economists, and particularly academics, were notably absent. I show, finally, how transnational- and finance-oriented economists (TFEs) and New Democratic experts jointly shaped the making of American neoliberalized leftism during the first Clinton administration. Chapter 8 extends the analysis of leftism's second reinvention to Sweden, the United Kingdom, and (West) Germany, showing how tension-driven changes in the party-economics relationship shaped neoliberal transitions in Western European leftism. I emphasize that, because of the transnationalization of economics and transatlantic exchanges between experts and political elites, changes in Western Europe were not independent from the American experience—and, perhaps most interestingly, these exchanges helped to remake Western European leftism in a distinctly "progressive" way.

Finally, in the conclusion, I summarize, clarify, and consider present-day symptoms and implications of neoliberalized leftism. A core question this whole analysis raises is whether today's center-left parties have the infrastructural capacity to meaningfully represent the poor, disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and financially anxious groups that have always been leftism's most important constituencies—and, by extension, whether they can truly cultivate not only progressive policies but also progressive political identities.

CHAPTER TWO

From Socialist, to Economicistic, to Neoliberalized Leftism

Since in the realm of politics the only knowledge that we have is a knowledge which is limited by the position which we occupy, and since the formation of parties is structurally an ineradicable element in politics, it follows that politics can be studied only from a party viewpoint.

—Karl Mannheim, 1936

This chapter establishes the book's explanatory puzzle: Western leftism's two twentieth century reinventions: first from socialist to economicistic leftism (between the 1920s and the 1960s), second from economicistic to neoliberalized leftism (between the 1960s and the 1990s). Following Karl Mannheim's directive to join the study of ideology with the study of parties, I map out three qualitatively distinct ways in which left parties characterized the world over time, focusing especially on economic language. The main empirics used in this chapter are mainstream political parties' election-year programs and manifestos.

The analysis proceeds in two parts. The first part takes a look at election-year programmatic excerpts of the SPD, the SAP, the Labour Party, and the Democratic Party around 1920, 1960, and 1995. Locating these parties historically, I show that, in the non-American cases, programmatic rhetoric clearly shifted from socialist to economicistic, and then from economicistic to neoliberalized, ways of characterizing the world. I also show that Democratic Party rhetoric was decidedly non-socialist, and in no clear way "left," around 1920, but by about 1960