

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to news@portlandobserver.com.

OPINION

Popularity Rises for Democratic Socialism

Making gains at the ballot box

BY LAWRENCE WITTNER

Recently, when 28-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, an obscure, upfront democratic socialist from the Bronx, easily defeated one of the most powerful U.S. Congressmen in the Democratic Primary, the story became an overnight sensation. How, the pundits wondered, could this upset have occurred?

Actually, it shouldn't have been a total surprise for, in recent years, democratic socialism has been making a remarkable comeback in American life. Bernie Sanders, the democratic socialist U.S. Senator from Vermont, won 23 Democratic primaries and caucuses during his tumultuous 2016 election campaign. Indeed, he nearly defeated Hillary Clinton, all but coronated by the Democratic Party establishment for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In addition, numerous candidates backed by a Sanders campaign's successor, Our Revolution, won Democratic Party primaries and election to office in 2017 and 2018.

Other indications of socialism's recent popularity are numerous. They include Gallup polls done in early 2016—one showing that 35 percent of Americans had a favorable view of "socialism" and another revealing that 6 out of 10 Democratic primary voters felt that "socialism" had a positive impact on society.



Polls found that socialism was especially popular among young people, a key factor behind the jump in membership of Democratic Socialists of America from 5,000 in November 2016 to 40,000 today.

Of course, democratic socialism—centered in the idea of democratic ownership and control of the economy—has had periods of growth, as well as decline, over the course of American history. During the first decades of the 20th century, it flourished. By 1912, the Socialist Party of America, led by charismatic labor leader and presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, had succeeded in electing socialists to 1,200 public offices in 340 American cities, including 79 mayors in 24 states. But, within a few years, the party was largely destroyed by government repression (thanks to its opposition to U.S. entry into World War I) and by its bitter feud with the rising Communist movement over the Communists' contempt for political democracy and civil liberties.

With the onset of the Great Depression, the Socialist Party experienced a modest revival, but soon began to fade as the Democratic Party, then in its New Deal phase, began to implement many of the key programs long championed by democratic socialists: collective bargaining rights for workers; minimum wage and maximum hour laws; public sector jobs for the unemployed; a social security system; and heavy taxes on the rich to pay for an array of social services.

Increasingly, the Democratic Party attracted the support of the democratic socialist constituency, including some of its prominent figures—labor leaders like Walter Reuther, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, and A. Philip Randolph, educators like John Dewey, women's rights activists

like Margaret Sanger, and popular writers like Upton Sinclair.

For some decades, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, founded in 1973 by the writer Michael Harrington and other committed socialists—and its successor, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—tried to revive democratic socialism by cutting loose from fruitless third party election campaigns and focusing, instead, on fostering public support for greater economic and social democracy.

On occasion, DSA backed worthy candidates in Democratic primaries. But it had only minimal success. For the most part, the best that DSA could do was to keep the democratic socialist current alive by pulling together socialist-minded activists scattered about in the labor, women's rights, racial justice, and peace movements, and putting them in touch with a small group of sympathetic public officials.

Nevertheless, the rise in American life of a rapacious corporate capitalism, a widening level of economic inequality, and the sharply rightwing policies of many states and the federal government are clearly inspiring a revolt on the Left. As the Sanders campaign and the recent election victories of Ocasio-Cortez and other leftwing candidates indicate, in electoral politics this revolt is finding expression largely inside the Democratic Party.

Although it's too early to know how this revolt will play out, there are signs that it is beginning to alter Democratic Party politics. With a heartily-despised Donald Trump in the White House and with rightwing Republicans now dominating Congress and the Supreme Court, many newly-energized leftwing voters will probably

close ranks with mainstream Democrats in an all-out Democratic Party effort to drive the Right from power.

At the same time, there is a comparable recognition among establishment Democrats that, unless they welcome the growing number of democratic socialists into their ranks, they have little chance of winning elections. This might well explain why so many leading Democratic politicians have now turned to backing the staples of the Sanders campaign, such as Medicare for all, free public college education, and curbs on corporate power. It might also explain why the Democratic National Committee is busy cutting back the establishment-controlled super delegate system for choosing a presidential candidate.

As a result, just as the Democratic Party largely absorbed America's democratic socialist constituency during the 1930s and 1940 and, in turn, was itself transformed by that process, the same phenomenon might be underway today. For many years, sectarian leftists have railed against the activity of democratic socialists within the Democratic Party, claiming that it has held back a workers' revolution or some other ostensibly glorious occurrence. But this contention seems dubious. Instead, democratic socialist activity within the Democratic Party helped produce the kind of progressive politics and public policy that delivered significant economic and social gains to most Americans in the past. And it might well do so again today.

Dr. Lawrence Wittner, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is Professor of History emeritus at State University of New York/Albany and the author of Confronting the Bomb (Stanford University Press).

'Crazy Rich Asians' a Triumph of Representation

Less one misstep with token gay character

BY JILL RICHARDSON

The new film *Crazy Rich Asians* is a triumph of representation in Hollywood. It's the first film in a quarter century to have an all-Asian cast.

Crazy Rich Asians is wonderful, on so many levels. It's a charming and fun movie with a great cast. For the characters, Chinese culture is not foreign, as Chinese culture is often portrayed in movies aimed at white audiences.

The value of having an all-Asian cast shouldn't be understated.

The film shows diversity in personalities, showing that there's not just one way to be Asian, just as there's not only one way to be any ethnicity. The characters are all Asian, but they're going through universal human



problems that everyone can relate to.

Often Hollywood chooses a white person as the hero or protagonist in the story, and then casts a token person of color or two in a supporting role. For example, the main characters of *Harry Potter* are all white, but he has a black classmate, crushes on a Chinese girl, and asks an Indian girl to the Yule Ball.

For white audiences, this feels normal and right. If you're white, you feel like the protagonist in your own life. The people around you may include people of color, but like everyone else who's not you, they're supporting characters.

It seems like Hollywood only casts more than a token number of people of color if there's a plot-driven reason. *Hidden Figures*, *Selma*, and other films about anti-black racism need black actors to play black characters fighting racism.

The same is true of sexual minorities. And here's where I think that *Crazy Rich Asians* makes a misstep.

If you're writing a film about a gay character coming out, then you need a gay

character. If it's simply a story about an action hero, well... Why would an action hero need to be gay? So they aren't. The action hero is straight.

Otherwise, minority characters play stereotypes: the Latina maid, the Chinese kung fu master, or the nerdy smart Asian kid.

And, coming to my point... the flamboyant, hilarious gay best friend.

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, a character named Oliver plays this role. He's funny, he's flaming, and he provides the main character with fashion help when she needs it.

Just like there's more than one way to be Asian, there's more than one way to be gay. Not all gay men lisp, obsess over fashion, and overuse the word "fabulous." Not all gay women wear flannel and drive Subarus.

When we're protagonists in films, it's because the plot centers on something straight people recognize as gay: coming out, conversion therapy, or same-sex romance.

But just like Chinese people don't ex-

ist for white people's entertainment, gay and bisexual people don't exist for straight people's entertainment.

The character of Oliver is hilarious and entertaining. But it feels to me like a gay version of minstrelsy. Our identities shouldn't be someone else's comic relief.

Lack of representation in Hollywood drives home the point that straight, white people are truly human, undergoing the whole range of human experiences and emotions, and the rest of us are two-dimensional stereotypes.

We play supporting parts in a straight, white world. We're tokens. We're not fully human.

Movies and TV reflect our world, but they also shape how we see it. For people of color and LGBT people, the world of Hollywood doesn't reflect our real world experiences — but it does shape how others in the real world perceive us.

OtherWords columnist Jill Richardson is pursuing a PhD in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She lives in San Diego. Distributed by OtherWords.org.