Review of Marc James Léger's *Bernie Bros Gone Woke: Class, Identity, Neoliberalism*. Leiden: Brill, 2022, 297 pp.

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This engaging book explores Senator Bernie Sanders's 2020 presidential campaign, a radical movement that represented a diverse voter base. As such, it had to navigate the complexities of class, identity, and their interrelation. The thesis author Marc Léger seeks to defend is that the campaign ultimately failed in this endeavor. Rather than reassert the centrality of class in socialist politics, he argues, the campaign indulged a dubious politics of division.

Léger in part builds his case through historical analysis. He charts transformations within the American Left and shows how they set the stage for the 2020 campaign's failures. In the 1980s, Léger explains, Reaganism won over working people by replacing class and labor politics with authoritarian populism. The American Left struggled to regain their footing, and so

shifted focus to civil society. That gave rise to a pluralist politics which stressed race and gender differences and was divorced from economic analysis. The contemporary manifestation of this tendency is what many, including Léger, call "woke politics" (e.g., Léger 2022: 42). That is the backdrop against which both Sanders campaigns, in 2016 and 2020, had to operate.

Léger describes how, during Sanders's first presidential run, woke politics were wielded cynically against him. Secretary Hillary Clinton attacked his plan to break up the big banks on the grounds that it would not "end racism." And Robinson Meyer, a staff writer for *The Atlantic*, birthed the titular "Bernie Bro" meme. For those unfamiliar, the meme suggested that Sanders's supporters were largely angry young white men. In actuality, the 2016 campaign earned significant support from women and minorities.

Team Bernie vowed not to fall prey to these attacks in 2020. Unfortunately, they overcorrected. To avoid racialized smears, the campaign tried appealing to the biggest exponents of woke politics: the professional-managerial class. Léger adopts this term from John and Barbara Ehrenreich and adds clarity to it. Professional-managerials are not, as their name might suggest, petty bourgeoisie. They do not own means of production. In that respect, they are antagonists of the bourgeoisie. But professional-managerials are also defined by their role of overseeing "the reproduction of capitalist class relations and culture" (Léger 2022: 37). They are therefore antagonists of the proletariat as well. This, Léger concludes, makes the professional-managerial class truly a class unto itself.

The professional-managerial class thus derives its autonomy from this intermediate position. It therefore has a vested interest in preserving capitalism. This entails curbing the bourgeoisie's excesses through reform and quashing revolutionary potential by obscuring class analysis. The latter, Léger claims, is the purpose woke politics serve in our current milieu. Championed by professional-managerials, woke politics distract workers from that which "best explains the conditions of social life" (Léger 2022: 24). Thus, by catering to those people and their ideas, the 2020 Sanders campaign killed its own radicalism.

Léger's creativity is admirable. Given the topic, he could have easily stuck to the basics of social movement theory. Instead, Léger analyzes the 2020 campaign through a wide variety of theoretical approaches. As an independent academic, his work is highly interdisciplinary — a refreshing departure from the academy's siloing. That said, the book could have benefited from more philosophical rigor. For example, Léger adequately identifies some of the tensions between class and identity politics. However, he provides no satisfying account of their logical or theoretical incompatibility. Doing so would have really tightened his arguments.

Going forward, Léger may want to engage with the work of philosopher Olúfẹmi Táíwò. The Nigerian-American recently published a popular book on elite capture of identity politics. Importantly, however, Táíwò's project is one of reclamation. He does not believe that identity politics are inherently bad. They can, Táíwò argues, be a valuable entry point for building radical coalitions. This view is fairly mainstream on the American Left. Yet Léger fails to address it.

That is certainly one of the book's biggest weaknesses. Léger points to examples of identity politics — which he never defines — in the 2020 Sanders campaign and treats them as proof of professional-managerial capture. But perhaps they were merely honest attempts by a radical movement to recruit members of marginalized groups. Again, this is a mainstream view that Léger does not address.

Another weakness of the book is its many factual inaccuracies. None of them are central to Léger's main argument. But they are noticeable and may irritate a knowledgeable reader. Even an unknowledgeable reader might feel that certain claims just do not sound right. For instance, in the introduction, Léger claims that 57% of Donald Trump's 2020 voters were people of color. But how could that be when the American electorate is majority-white and most whites vote Republican? In reality, according to Cornell University's Roper Center, only about 18% of Trump's 2020 voters were non-white. This mistake matters because Léger uses the incorrect statistic to attack the theory that white aggrievement fueled Trump's rise.

A further weakness of the book is that its critique of establishment liberals sometimes lacks cohesion. Léger's harsh condemnation, while usually valid, may at times strike some as ahistorical. In Chapter 4, he claims that President Barack Obama "commandeered an administration that was worse on most crucial issues than the previous government of George W. Bush" (Léger 2022: 143). Given that Léger is presumably writing for a predominantly left-of-center audience, this claim is controversial and thus requires evidence. But Léger provides none, and so many readers will be left unconvinced.

At other points in the book, Léger appears to give liberals *too much* credit. Also in Chapter 4, he characterizes the choice between Trump and now-President Joe Biden as one of "discrimination [versus] anti-discrimination" (Léger 2022: 143). But Biden has continued many of his predecessor's discriminatory policies — particularly at the southern border.

Lastly, the book's sourcing at times betrays Léger's prowess as an academic. On page 146, for example, he offers a controversial account of how Democrats avoided taking responsibility for rigging their 2016 presidential primary. As his source, Léger cites an op-ed written by former House representative Tulsi Gabbard. Surely the opinion of an oddball

congresswoman with no formal training in historical or political analysis belies evidentiary standards.

Nevertheless, these shortcomings do not detract from what Léger does uniquely well. He is perhaps at his best when criticizing the media. Halfway through the book, Léger demonstrates how corporate outlets did virtually everything they could to prevent a Sanders nomination. He treats the reader to delightful takedowns of establishment personalities like Bill Maher and Conor Frierdersdorf. This interlude is not only intellectually rigorous, but thoroughly entertaining.

Léger displays his wit and charm, chiding Maher as "a mouthpiece for oligarchs" who lacks "an adult understanding of politics" (Léger 2022: 144-5). These roasts are music to the ears of people sick of corporate programming and tired of academia's unwillingness to confront it aggressively. Léger's media criticism is both fun and central to his telling of the 2020 Sanders campaign. In his eyes, it was ultimately a media-backed coup that installed Biden as the presumptive nominee ahead of Super Tuesday.

Overall, this is a quality book and an important contribution to the critical social sciences. Anyone looking to gain a fuller understanding of the 2020 presidential election, as well as the hurdles facing radical social movements in today's America, should read it. Hopefully Léger will consider both the praise and criticism above in the spirit they are given.

References

"How Groups Voted in 2020." Available at: http://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-2020. Accessed July 28th 2022.

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