

**COMBATTING DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS OF HATE:
Racial Capitalism, Structural Oppression, and the Hate-Democracy Binary
at The Center for Popular Democracy**

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The Center for Popular Democracy's vision becomes apparent just by looking at the art displayed and painted across the office. Photos, prints and posters line its walls and because of its layout (imagine a square donut), so you can't help but pass the same ones each day. Sepia figures are painted in the main working space: in the entranceway, a young man swings from a ledge, hand out to fist bump you in comradery, while another shows another man shouting, fist in the air in protest, tan shadow cast long behind him. The centerpiece, though, is the full wall mural at the end of the room. Twenty BIPOC figures of all ages face you, some smiling and cheerily laughing, others solemn, some hopeful. A baby holds two chubby warped fists in the air, eyes sad and confused. They hold up posters that read Viva La Mujer, I can't breathe (in Chinese, French, Arabic, and Spanish), Strike for Higher Pay, We didn't Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us. The Empire State Building peeks behind them as they walk down a street of long stretched skyscrapers. The art reflects the institution's name—it is a center for *popular democracy*, a democracy inhabited by a representative, diverse body, that casts its voice across the nation to stand for progressive change.

I was placed at the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD) by the Bard Center for the Study of Hate because of an interest in direct action and grassroots activism that I had developed during my semester abroad. On its About page, CPD describes itself as an organization that “strengthens our collective capacity to envision and win an innovative pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda.” Through its network of 55 grassroots organizations, CPD provides legal, research, and organizational support to its various affiliates, in interests as broad as it states, believing that “whole people have intersectional identities and need powerful institutions that fight on many fronts simultaneously.” Each individual organization was independent in its leadership and focus, but looked to CPD for support and

communication across the progressive movement. By partnering with local organizations as they tackle everything from environmental justice, to criminal justice, to education reform, to workers' rights, covering a broad swath of social justice domains—it was often difficult to keep track of all of the projects that CPD had a hand in supporting.

During my initial discussions about my internship, I remember sitting at a coffee table in my house, looking through the glassy top at a stray pen I had dropped and was trying to pick up with my toes. Ken, the head of the Center for the Study of Hate reminded Rebecca, my future supervisor at CPD and the director of development, that the work I was to do had to deal with hate in some sense. She affirmed, and noted that my work would be relevant—that in short, at CPD “everything has to do with hate.” Most of my work at CPD was concerned with the development side of the organization, but the office itself (for better or worse) is not very soundproof, and I found myself in close proximity to many of the programming staff and activists working directly on CPD's campaigns.

And so tasked with understanding CPD's definition of hate and their strategies to combat it, I went to the office every day thinking about hate and how to find it within CPD's work—but this proved more difficult than I anticipated. As broad as CPD was in its scope, direct references to hate came up little to nowhere in my initial searches, and the words “hate” and “discrimination” did not appear at all in the strategic vision document at the core of the Center's mission. I knew my fellow BCSH interns were at places like the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Montana Human Rights Network, organizations that deal directly with hate crimes and groups, and many of the introductory texts we read about hate studies began on the premise of combatting hate crimes and discrimination. On the other hand, at CPD hate seemed to take another form: hate was reimagined not just a moment (or pattern) of extremism, but as woven

into the very structures that constitute our country's political system. Hate studies is defined as "Inquiries into the human capacity to define, and then dehumanize or demonize, an 'other,' and the processes which inform or give expression to, or can curtail, control, or combat, that capacity" (Stern 2003/04, 11). What does it look like when hate studies and the organizations combating hate look at not only the individual human capacity to hate, but also the larger structural implications those individuals collectively have on our government and society?

Building collective "people power"

Every day at The Center for Popular Democracy, I sat across a poster that read "Standing Strong Together." Underneath, a faded rendering of a demonstration is printed onto the background, with two young women of color appearing from the chest up, a snapshot of them apparently marching, mouths open in a chant. One of them wears butterfly wings on her back, half smiling as she calls out. They both look ahead, one hand threaded through the other's arm. As much as I have wondered what it means to hold women of color at the center of your political movement, CPD actually manifests that sentiment by having a diverse staff both in CPD itself, and among the affiliates' staff. In their 2017 Annual Report, they talk about their commitment to a diverse population within their own infrastructure through their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiative, as well as through their stats: CPD is 50% led by people of color, the majority of the senior management team are women, and a quarter self-identify as LGBTQ. The staff at large is still majority POC, and broadening out to the CPD Network, 83% of the partner organizations are lead by POC, with 61% also led by women (Center for Popular Democracy 2017, 3).

Embedded throughout CPD's rhetoric is this sentiment of standing "Strong Together," and this is evident in their approach to their activist work. Aside from their commitments to diversity, their goals are oriented in service to the communities with which they are partnered. And yet, I was at first skeptical of the use of democracy to empower marginalized communities. In so much of the literature about hate that comes out from the non-profit circuit, it is often presented in opposition to democracy. CPD's 2017 Annual Report begins by seating us in their perception of the state of the country:

"The election of Donald Trump was a body blow to our country, our movement, and our values. Foundational commitments to opportunity, democracy, equity and fairness face deep threats, as unprecedented levels of hate and violence endanger the very communities we represent" (Center for Popular Democracy 2017, 1).

CPD sets the stage by contextualizing their year in response to the election of Trump, posing his presidency as a "deep threat" to "opportunity, democracy, equity and fairness." In the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Resource Guide," it outlines strategies for taking action against hate in one's community. In encouraging its readers to act, they suggest that "*[h]ate is an attack on a community's health...* For all their 'patriotic' rhetoric, hate groups and their imitators are really trying to divide us; their views are fundamentally anti-democratic. True patriots fight hate" (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017, 4). It seemed at first that the hate-democracy dichotomy lay at the center of activist rhetoric around hate, and so I was conflicted about what this tension meant for an organization like the Center for Popular Democracy, especially when (even in name) it leans heavily on democracy as a pathway to liberation. Were the two so oppositional when hate in its various forms of systemic exclusion, disenfranchisement, and discrimination were embedded in the structures of U.S. American democracy today?

In order to reenvision their democracy, CPD looks to the people whose voices are often excluded from our political system: many people I spoke to at CPD talked about how the organization draws its actions from what their affiliates are interested in, ranging from highly localized activity to campaigns on the federal platform. Echoing much of the rhetoric I had heard this summer, Kate Terenzi, a staff attorney focused on the educational justice campaigns, termed this coordination and cooperation “people power,” the bringing of people together to enact change. While CPD is invested in the increased participation of POC in positions of leadership, it is not simply transactional:

“The ultimate goal is not a singular piece of legislation, or a person that’s getting elected, or any of that—it’s the shift of power so that our society is led by people, led by communities of color, led by working people, like *that* is fundamentally what we’re moving towards... I think the approach of shifting what it means, what the government is supposed to be doing—and you see that all the time, like Medicare for All, fundamentally shifting what we think the role of government is—not just regulating a private insurance, but saying that people *should not die*, and the government should be required to provide the care necessary. Those sorts of shifts are like talking about shifting what the system is, not working within it necessarily.”

While at the outset it appears that CPD does simply work within the existing systems to implement its values, their concept of “people power” it is not just arguing for a transactional increase in diversity within democracy (yes, a more representational governing body is part of their mission, it is only one part of the process); rather, it is a reenvisioning of what democracy looks like, who it can serve, and how. Just as Kate refers to the fight for Medicare for All, CPD’s vision insists on a fundamental care for everyone, but still maintains an eye towards those who have less access to the systems that supposedly protect them. While the structures of democracy may remain intact, its whole purpose is transformed from its meaning today, becoming not a system for manifesting hatred, but rather a democracy that folds everyone into its reach, not only allowing subsistence and live, but prioritizing a “Freedom to Thrive” in the language of CPD’s

racial justice campaigns. Hate and democracy may not be in opposition now, but CPD's work (and that of other NGOs like the SPLC) insist and fight for them to be absolutely incompatible.

And yet, as much as CPD advocates for this network, it is not one that comes solely out of love for each other. Love in opposition to hate is an important and emphasized aspect of the work but, in line with their emphasis on structural change, the community that CPD is building aims for more material results. Tony Perlstein, the Director of Field Innovations and Organizing who worked on the Corporate Backers of Hate campaign elaborated on how he saw CPD's "people power" as essential to their work:

"It's a solidarity of purpose, not out of altruism. We're not there because abstractly people should be good to each other, you're there because you can't win without the other person, and therefore the solidarity that you build is based on aiding each other, so you overcome the gap, the chasm of perception and feeling through taking action together... you don't overcome Trump, or Michael Cohen, or their mobilization of feelings of hatred and anger by engaging them in a conversation—you know you have interests that are in opposition to each other—and so the way you do *that* is by alternating and building power."

The notion of "people power" is thus not one of an abstract shared feeling of opposition to hatred—it instead is one of necessity. There is no way of moving toward their radical agenda without "alternating and building power," and in order to do that, to build across "chasms of perception and feeling" that could generate hatred, there has to be a realization of a shared struggle. CPD tries to span across these divides through their intermovement work and the actions they undertake as a coalition, emphasizing that everyone's liberation is contingent on freeing their comrades.

One of the most impactful demonstrations of the network of "people power" that CPD facilitates was their 2019 convening, "Our Vision, Our Future: People's Convention 2019." It was a gathering of all 55 organizations across the CPD network, bringing about 1,500 activists, politicians, and organizers to Detroit for a moment of shared growth and development across our

movements. Over the course of two days, the attendees participated in a series of workshops, actions, and festivities which emphasized celebrating how far we've come as well as a commitment to how far we have to go. We marched along the Detroit riverwalk that ended in the lobby of the convention center where Ausuba, a group of Puerto Rican women percussionists, singers, and dancers, were clad in all white, singing to the masses while brave souls danced in front of everyone gathered. We listened while Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and Julian Castro video-called in and cheered when affiliate representatives challenged them on their platforms. We clapped for Linda Sarsour and Rashida Tlaib as they gave us words of encouragement to continue the fight. We protested in the streets, and celebrated with a block party, we watched as the youth sang and danced in an open mic and screened films like *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*. In taking action (in all of its forms), we shared in our struggle and underlined the necessity of each other's contributions to the collective fight.

People and policies in racial capitalism

While CPD has an understanding of how feelings of hate are cast over the political and cultural systems in the United States, they take a very concrete approach in terms of dealing with this feeling of hate. Tony said of the work at CPD that “we talk [about] a structural approach—hate, in and of *itself*, doesn't mean anything. Hate is an emotion, it's a *feeling*. It's the power to enact that kind of worldview that has an impact on other people's lives.” For Tony, hate was defined as the less tangible feeling that is often used as justification for political movements, but is meaningless without those concrete actions of power growth and power maintenance. CPD goes about addressing hate structurally, through a tactic of identifying, targeting, and taking

action against the *people* who propagate these abuses of power as well as the *policies* that allow them to do so.

Tony led the organization's campaign Corporate Backers of Hate, which targeted corporations whose CEOs and/or board members were on Trump's business council. In doing so, they were attaching faces, policies, and financial decisions to Trump's "hateful agenda," calling out businesses like JP Morgan, Blackrock, Boeing, Disney, IBM, Wells Fargo, and Goldman Sachs. Over time, this campaign has evolved into holding businesses that finance private prisons and immigrant detention centers accountable for their investments, to a large degree of success—so far JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo, Bank of America, SunTrust, BNP Paribas, Fifth Third Bancorp, and PNC have all made public commitments to divest from the private detention industry. I asked Tony about the use of "hate" in branding the campaign name, and he was careful not to overanalyze it. Rather, he said it simply made sense in terms of what made a good campaign tagline, as well as explicitly tied what these people and corporations were doing to Trump's policies of protecting the wealthy.

The Corporate Backers of Hate is a good example of CPD's eye towards people and policies, and the act of tying this feeling of hate in name to structural and individual actors resonates with the framework of "racial capitalism" that CPD operates through. In an article for the Boston Review by Walter Johnson, he points out that W.E.B Du Bois proposed that a new sort of capitalism emerged from the slave trade, one that "relies upon the elaboration, reproduction, and exploitation of notions of racial difference" (Johnson 2018). It goes beyond classical liberal definitions of human rights rooted in Enlightenment values such as freedom of choice and action, which implicitly positions enslaved people as powerless in naming and determining their own dehumanization (who determines when a person's humanity has been

lost? who decides when it has been regained?). Instead, social justice and human rights initiatives within systems of racial capitalism begin by seeing that enslaved people were the capital. This definition of justice as rooted in the history of slavery and racial capitalism has six virtues: taking a perspective from Africa, focusing on the uneven distribution and extraction of resources between classes and geographic areas of the world, rooting present inequalities in past patterns, noting the intersections of gender and sexuality especially in regards to the importance of reproduction in enslavement, underlining a direct relationship and “functional sameness” of race and class, and suggests relating the exploitation of human beings for slavery and the exploitation of nature within capitalism (Johnson 2018).

While CPD itself does not explicitly attach itself to these six tenets, racial capitalism is an essential component of CPD’s political stance. I first encountered the concept in one of the weekly all-staff calls, where all of the offices and people working remotely tune in to discuss logistics as well as a weekly assigned reading led by a staff member. Connie Razza, the Chief of Campaigns and Policy, brought in two readings about racial capitalism: one that she had written for Demos and the other was Johnson’s article. Everyone voiced an admiration for Connie’s ambitious topic for the hour-long staff call, but also noted that a short discussion was not enough, and that this concept was central to CPD’s work—indeed, racial capitalism appears throughout CPD’s strategic vision, and to gloss over it would be an injustice to the weight of the concept itself. Racial capitalism maintains that the histories and developments of capitalism and racism are inseparable, and instead locates the path to justice in the Black radical tradition, or “in the democratic practices and revolutionary thought of black people living under conditions of racial capitalism” (Johnson 2018). In bringing in marginalized voices through the Black radical tradition and centering racial capitalism in their activism, CPD makes visible the connections

these between race and capitalism, between what is usually felt as a feeling of hatred and the material inequalities that exist across race and class. The sheer breadth of CPD's work across movements speaks to this goal of dismantling racial capitalism and their commitment to being an "intersectional organization that fights on all fronts" for "people with whole identities" shows how everyone's struggle is connected: this shared struggle and the necessity of "people power" is essential to the progressive movement's success.

Growing pains, learning moments

While CPD looks outward in its methodologies for addressing the systemic injustices many people of color and people in the working-class face, many of the impactful learning moments I had were also from the internal opportunities that the organization provided for its interns and employees. Just as there were weekly staff calls, there were also special events for staff to take opportunities to learn, and designated budgeting for their own individual professional development agendas. On my first Friday in the office, there was a Fightback Fireside Chat with Alex S. Vitale, the author of *The End of Policing*. Many people in the office and from the local CPD network came to ask questions and listen to Prof. Vitale speak while Kumar Rao, the Senior Staff Attorney for Racial Justice, prompted him with questions and facilitated dialogue, grounding ourselves firmly in the stance that advocated for increased budgeting for community resources, not for increased policing (again, racial capitalism at work). The following week, the Development Team hosted a Fundraising Bootcamp for the network with two women of color, high-power fundraisers for organizations like Women Move Millions and Planned Parenthood of America. They spoke on their feelings of inauthenticity in the white space of philanthropy and how to understand how deeply awkward it is to discuss money in the

U.S. American climate. They also underlined the importance of money itself: “the movement needs money.” This gave me a more global perspective in my role as a development intern and how CPD, despite being an organization against the problematic products of capitalism, occupied a world where it dominated. Even at happy hours and lunches, staff discussed what their work meant to them as well as the importance of their own personal and professional political work.

CPD is an organization that grew very rapidly, especially after one of the executive directors, Ana Maria Archila, confronted Sen. Jeff Flake in an elevator with regards to his support for the nomination of Justice Brett Kavanaugh. And while that growth has surely expanded its reach and power, sometimes that growth reveals its stretched seams. After Elizabeth Warren’s video time at the People’s Convention, people whooped and cheered, but cutting through it all was the sound of a woman yelling: “There is indigenous erasure here! There is indigenous erasure happening here!” She continued to shout, referencing Warren’s history of overemphasizing her Cherokee ancestry to advance her career. Jennifer Epps-Addison, one of the executive directors of CPD, welcomed the activist on stage, inviting her so that she would not have to shout from the sidelines, instead giving her space on stage to voice her grievances directly to the community. The activist, an indigenous Birddogger (someone from CPD’s Birddog Nation initiative which trains individuals to show up to public town halls and press politicians in person on their policies) proceeded to speak about her own time at an Ivy League school where white students often invoked native ancestry to forward their own accomplishments, and how it made her feel. She also tied this in to CPD’s general lack of indigenous movement work: while CPD did support indigenous groups, its rhetoric was of mostly Black and Brown injustice, and it did not have explicitly indigenous activist organizations within its network. The air was tense, but everyone clapped in support of her bravery to make her

opinion known. As she left, Jennifer spoke saying *this* is what it meant to build a community and to grow together: it would not always be pleasant and easy, but that was why the work had to be done. The CPD executive directors made an announcement later that morning that they were going to host a roundtable with indigenous activists in the network to ask how best to proceed, and the final decision was to not rush the work and to make a more intentional and concerted effort to integrate indigenous movements into the network and language of CPD.

This moment was monumental in articulating my feelings about CPD: the organization going through a process of growth and shared struggle against the structures of hate, and it certainly was not an easy one. At my final weekly staff call, we discussed an article called “The Nonwhite Working Class” on *Slate* that talked to the Black population of Youngstown, Ohio, whose population has often been touted as the white working-class group that swung from voting Democrat to Donald Trump. The discussion moved to a need to address the specificity of the progressive movement aims (for example, the use of umbrella terms such as “POC” and “Black” to cover huge swaths of people, and which groups to specifically target for support, financial or otherwise), and Abeni Bloodworth, the Deputy Director of Development questioned why we centered whiteness in the questions we were asked in discussion. For Abeni, money equals power in the United States, and at so many of the big NGOs with a lot of money, less than 2% were led by people of color. She continued, saying that Black people have been marginalized to being activists, teachers, and are not given the opportunity to actually direct where the capital goes. Everyone agreed, pointed again toward racial capitalism and the discrimination embedded within the United States, and took away a need to be articulate and specific about what CPD aimed to do. The discussion was merely a starting point, an opening for imaginings of progress and what that looked like. CPD is trying to do something entirely different than what has been

done before in building its coalition, and while we all have broad notions of progress, and even the more concrete targets of the people and policies of racial capitalism, it still has a ways to go.

“Everything has to do with hate”

Despite this understanding of hate as embedded within the systems CPD works so hard to fight against, in interviews with my interlocutors at CPD, there was a tenuousness, an uncertainty to if they were helping me to craft an argument around hate: *I'm not sure if I'm an expert, I hope I was able to help, I'm not sure, I'm trying to think of the best way to help you.* It seemed a given that hate undergirded all of the systemic oppression that CPD fought so hard to combat, but there seemed a distance between the feeling of hate and the very tangible people and policies that CPD worked to identify. Hate, in its colloquial understanding, still seems to carry with it a connotation of feeling without substance, and in using language that instead centered systems of oppression rather than intangible feeling, CPD drew the connection between hatred and the inequality that is prevalent in this country, yet still there was a distance.

At Rebecca's suggestion, I spoke with Shaul Kelner, a professor of Sociology and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt, about a workshop she attended where he compared the Anti-Defamation League's Global 100 Survey to the Movement 4 Black Lives' understandings of prejudice. As displayed on the website for the Global 100 Survey, the questions show a number of typical anti-Semitic tropes (i.e. Jews having more loyalty to Israel than their home country, having control over the media and financial markets, talking too much about the Holocaust). Shaul took issue with this because of its focus on feeling in comparison to the structural approach that M4BL takes:

The statements...you recognize them as *memes* that are essentially anti-Semitic memes... It is a set of attitudes, these attitudes are *factually* wrong, they are *hateful*, they are

morally wrong. But basically, it's not about political structures, it's not about power, it's not about systemic oppression, it's not about historic oppression and the way those systems can carry forward even among groups that have been liberated to some extent... There's a real fundamental disconnect between this way of thinking about it and other ways of thinking about it that are much more attuned to the political dimensions, that it's rooted in power, it's rooted in structures, it's rooted in economics.

Shaul's words resonate with the dissonance between feelings and systems of hate that so many of the CPD staff voiced. Hate often occupies this dual set of interpretations (of structural and ephemeral) that many at CPD understood, but had uncertainty about defining. This disjuncture of definitions is one that extends beyond CPD into the struggles of other NGOs and other movements, as Shaul points out through his own studies. As much as I struggled to reconcile the relationship between hate (which felt ephemeral to me) and the structural approach that CPD had, it was just as Rebecca said that "everything has to do with hate." Hate occupies two modes of understanding at CPD: both a hesitancy around its relevance and an understanding with regards to its deep permeation throughout U.S. American structures. Hate studies steps in to bridge this gap between structural and individual definitions of hate, and attempts to widen understandings of hate to encompass those that are less rooted in the psychological notion of feeling, and more in the systemic ways hatred is manifested.

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