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Dan La Botz on Marx and the Paris Commune

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From the Editors

IN OUR LAST ISSUE WE NOTED THAT while we were greatly relieved that Trump was gone, we also recognized “Biden represents the status quo ante, the policies of the Democratic Party” and suggested “any progress under Biden will be the result of militant pressure from mass social movements, including organized labor.” Several months into the new presidency, this seems an accurate description if we change “any” to “significant progress.”

Biden has adopted a different economic strategy for preserving U.S. capitalism that some are calling neo-Keynesianism. He favors increased social spending to be paid for with modest tax increases on corporations and the wealthy, if this will strengthen Washington in its escalating contest with Beijing for global hegemony. At the same time, Biden has failed to cut the military budget and, despite extending the DACA program for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the country as children, has maintained a brutal border regime, continuing to lock children up in horrific conditions. He tried to leave in place Trump’s historically low limit on refugees until public pressure forced him to reverse himself.

While Biden has rejoined the Paris Climate agreement and proclaimed grand emissions targets, he has, in the *New York Times*’ words, quietly taken actions that will “guarantee the drilling and burning of oil and gas for decades to come.” Just as under Trump, we will need powerful social movements to win progressive changes on the scale necessary to address continuing crises.

The U.S. conflict with China is taken up in this issue by Sam Gindin, who looks back at the analysis that he and the late Leo Panitch put forward almost a decade ago in

their Deutscher Prize-winning book, *The Making of Global Capitalism*. Gindin considers how well this analysis has stood up.

It is also ten years since the Arab Spring, and we publish two pieces on this topic: an article on Syria by Leila Al-Shami and an extensive interview with Gilbert Achcar on the meaning of anti-imperialism. Other articles dealing with international issues include an article on Bolsonaro’s agenda in Brazil and a symposium on class struggle in Africa.

Trump has departed the White House, but he did not go quietly. He left behind a more politically polarized country and a growing far right. Articles by Enzo Traverso and Cihan Tuğal assess the current state of “twenty-first-century fascism.” And David Renton considers whether banning far-right figures from social media platforms might prove to be counterproductive.

The far right has grown, but so has the radical left. The Democratic Socialists of America now has over 90,000 members. Andrew Sernatinger, a DSA activist, offers his perspectives on the opportunities and challenges it faces in a new political moment.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. We commemorate this with essays by Michael Löwy and Helen Scott. It is also 150 years since the Paris Commune, which we mark with Dan La Botz’s appreciation and critique of Marx’s analysis of what took place.

The issue also includes articles on socialized medicine, academic labor, a personal reflection on prisons, an interview with the singer-songwriter Roy Zimmerman, a discussion of Herman Melville, and two book reviews.

IN ADDITION TO THE ANNIVERSARIES mentioned above, we are celebrating one of our own: this year marks the sixtieth birthday of *New Politics*. Vol. 1, No. 1 was dated Fall 1961, and its front cover is reprinted on the back cover of this issue.

In a statement on “Why We Publish” in the first issue, the editors identified “one area of agreement among all socialists” as their recognition that “a host of difficult and provocative questions crowd in upon us and demand thought.” Hence the need for “a magazine conceived as a forum permitting and encouraging a free play of discussion, controversy, and counterposition of ideas ... free from organizational commitments and inhibitions....”

The time was right. The debut issue, with a press run of just under five thousand copies, sold out rapidly. Interest was especially strong on university campuses. The second issue (Winter 1962) carried a half-page ad for *Venture*, the “official publication of the Students for a Democratic Society”—by no means yet a familiar name, even on the left.

The conventional wisdom of a few years later would counterpose the Old Left of Depression-era radicals with the New Left of which SDS became the standard bearer. While welcoming to the new campus radicalization, the editors and contributors to *New Politics* skewed a bit older. So did its layout, which at no point in the 1960s ever exhibited the effects of psychedelic enlightenment. But from the start it was every bit a Movement publication, with “a devoted, hard-working group of editors who [did] everything from editing manuscripts to licking stamps as part of an unpaid staff,” to quote an appeal for donations from the fourth quarterly issue.

The gap between production costs and revenue from sales and subscriptions meant that *New Politics* ended its first year with a deficit of \$8,000 (equivalent to nearly \$71,000 today). Readers dug into their own pockets, as did the editors themselves, but over time, the quarterly format yielded to a slightly irregular schedule. The journal’s first series (1961–78)

ran to 44 issues. When Phyllis and Julius Jacobson relaunched *New Politics* in 1986, they did so on a semi-annual schedule (Winter and Summer) that has continued, without interruption, for 35 years now.

What’s kept *New Politics* running over the years is a commitment to a basic perspective that informed the project from the start: an understanding that socialism without democracy is no socialism at all, while democracy without socialism cannot be democratic. An editor of and contributor to the journal in its early days, Hal Draper, clarified this point with his essay “The Two Souls of Socialism,” which appeared in the journal in Winter 1966. And every issue we bring out now holds fast to the principle expressed in the “Why We Publish” statement that ran in early issues of the new series:

New Politics allies itself with all those working for peace, social justice, and cultural freedom—with the peace movement, movements for racial and national liberation, with feminists, civil libertarians, progressive trade unionists, and environmentalists.

Our list is longer now. As a look at our website or the print edition will show, the journal responds to the growth of mass movements and the renewed interest of socialist ideas as much as possible. *New Politics* has a political heritage. That and an unpaid staff. If you like what you read, please subscribe, buy copies to distribute, or share our content. If you can afford it, an anniversary donation would also be much appreciated.

WE REPORT WITH SADNESS the recent deaths of two members of the *New Politics* family, both in their nineties. Reginald Wilson, a Tuskegee airman, civil rights activist, and psychologist, passed away last December, after serving on our editorial board for many years. The philosopher Kai Nielsen, a longstanding sponsor of the journal, died in March. Tributes to both can be found on our website.

The Unmaking of Global Capitalism?

SAM GINDIN

IN THEIR CONSIDERATIONS OF global capitalism, Marxists, always methodologically sensitive to contradictions, have emphasized two in particular. One is the incongruity between the *internationalization* of production and the *national* firmament of states. The other is that though the American state has been indispensable to overriding, or at least containing, that contradiction, its declining economic and administrative capacity to do so poses a threat to the viability of the globalization project.

Against this, in *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (Panitch and Gindin 2012), the late Leo Panitch and I argued, almost a decade ago, that prevailing notions of an inevitable inconsistency between the national place of states and the international space of production were too mechanical. And alongside that, we argued that the staying power of U.S. leadership, repeatedly underestimated in the past vis-à-vis challenges from Japan, Europe, and Asia, was now being misjudged again.

To be clear, *The Making* did not deny the persistence of tensions, conflicts, or contradictions in the extremely complex, uneven, and often thorny making of globalization. In fact, it argued that repeated crises were more likely than ever. But this in itself hardly

signaled the demise of globalization; crises come and go. Nor did the book suggest that American power was eternal; rather, the capacity of the United States to reproduce its central role was an empirical question to be examined and re-examined over time. At that conjuncture, however, announcements of the coming erosion of America's position and demise of global capitalism were more wish (or fear, depending on who was responding) than imminent reality.

An underlying problem in the ongoing misreading of the condition of the American empire was an inadequate conceptualization of both the capitalist state in general and the uniqueness of the American state in particular. This was not just a matter of theory; it influenced how we read and appraised the empirical ebb and flow of the new world order. Measures used to assess the economies of 'normal' states had different meanings, sometimes radically so, when applied to the distinctive American state.

But what of the dramatic changes in recent years in the United States, and in global capitalism? Didn't the Great Financial Crisis, originating in the very heart of the American empire, expose fundamental weaknesses in the U.S. economy and expose the failures of neoliberalism in particular? Does this not threaten the perpetuation of the world order the United States was superintending? Didn't the nationalism expressed in the frustrations that exploded in Brexit and Trumpism contradict the future viability of capitalist internationalism? And

SAM GINDIN was the Research Director of the Canadian Auto Workers (now Unifor) for almost three decades and subsequently the Packer Chair in Social Justice at York University for a decade.

what of the stunning rise of China—does this not highlight the continued significance of uneven international development and revive the relevance of interimperial rivalry? Before confronting such questions and considering their implications for left politics, it is necessary to further elaborate on some arguments from *The Making*.

States in the Making of Global Capitalism

Some 170 years ago, Marx and Engels ([1848] 1998) famously spoke of capitalism's inherent drive to "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, make connections everywhere." In the mid-1990s, even some on Wall Street were quoting their prescience. Yet Marx and Engels didn't have it quite right. Their sweeping statement ignored the role of states and the possibility they would become obstacles to a relatively seamless global economy. At the end of the nineteenth century, world capitalism was fragmented into semi-exclusive empires. And in the first half of the twentieth, two world wars and the Great Depression left the world economy in tatters and undermined confidence in the very *possibility* of a global capitalism (even raising questions about the viability of any kind of capitalism, national or international). A global capitalism had to be *made*, and states were both barriers to, and central in, that making.

That states did eventually come to accommodate a global capitalism was not a certainty; it could not be deduced logically. What actually emerged in the decades after World War II was an "internationalization" of states, which came to take responsibility for the establishment of the conditions within their own territories for global accumulation. Property rights were supported independent of nationality, differences in the treatment of domestic and foreign capital faded, and international agreements allowing for freer trade and the free flow of capital were voluntarily signed. All this surmounted the apparent

contradiction between national states and international production: the internationalization of production rested on the shoulders of internationalized states.

This contingency, however, rested on another: the emergence of an American state with the interest *and capacity* to facilitate and oversee this transformation in states. This involved far more than the rise of a new dominant economic power, replacing its predecessor. Rather, a new kind of empire was emerging that characterized itself as a "non-empire." It intended to replace all exclusive empires with a universal global capitalism in which each state would be sovereign, and the interaction of national economies would be governed and regulated not by force or administrative mechanisms but by economic competition through markets.

This second condition, the ubiquity of markets, of course limited the first, state sovereignty. States were allegedly free to follow their own paths, but the range of options excluded, except in special and temporary circumstances, any right to limit the export of their resources, regulate capital flows in and out of their countries, or protect markets for domestic producers—never mind a move to reverse commitments to private property and contemplate an exit from the capitalist world order. Military interventions to "correct" such resistance consequently persisted. Nevertheless, the point of such continuing interventions was historically distinct. Their motivation was not primarily to plunder, to support a particular corporation, or to restore permanent territorial control. It was, rather, to create and sustain a liberal capitalism with formal sovereignty linked to collective market openness.

It was out of the interwar breakdowns that the American state came to confront capitalism's dangerous fragmentation and work toward its material integration, first among the old empires, then in the countries of the global South.

Premature Declarations of Decline

The integration of global capitalism under the aegis of the United States brought great benefits to American capital and, for a time, to its workers as well. But since a global capitalism necessitated the international *dispersal* of production, it came with profound changes in the global division of labor. In the U.S., for example, a net 91,000 manufacturing plants closed from 1997 to the start of the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic, and nearly five million manufacturing jobs disappeared (Scott 2020).

Though this included the devastation of significant sectors and swaths of the U.S. economy, and an accompanying weakening of an already weak working class, it did not necessarily follow that it represented a decline of American productive power. For one, in spite of the loss of jobs, the real value of manufacturing output actually increased by some 20 percent over the same period. Moreover, whether the unequal burdens suffered by American workers were a “contradiction” for American capital depended on the response of the working class. As it turned out, the response of workers was relatively muted—contained by capital, the state, and intensifying competition. Absent working-class disruptions and constraints on how capital could go forward, American capital and the American state were left with the space and time to develop responses.

The critical question is therefore not whether American capital had weaknesses, but whether, given the leeway, it had the resiliency, skills, and creativity to adjust. What U.S. capital demonstrated was that in spite of the very significant shifts of manufacturing abroad, it was able to move on to more *strategic* sectors. Today, U.S. corporations stand at the peak of the pyramid of global high-tech manufacturing and business services (Starrs 2014). The United States remains a leader in the manufacture of semiconductors, telecommunications equip-

ment, aerospace products, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, industrial machinery, and precision equipment, and is dominant in data processing, engineering, accounting,

An underlying problem was an inadequate conceptualization of the capitalist state in general and the uniqueness of the American state in particular.

advertising, legal, consultancy, and of course finance.

Still, aren't the year-in, year-out U.S. trade deficits, largely paid for by inflows of foreign capital, indicators of *some* degree of decline? For most countries, this would indeed be a problem, putting pressure on their currency or forcing austerity measures. But because of the global position of the U.S. dollar, such pressure is not determining for the United States. In fact, rather than signs of weakness, these steady deficits represent a strength: the special access of American business and American consumers to the components and consumer goods supplied by the (undervalued) labor power of workers elsewhere *and* the U.S. special access to global savings as the earnings on exports to the United States (and savings more generally) are recycled back into U.S. financial markets.

The centrality of the U.S. dollar and the pull of the country's financial markets are not a result of it forcing foreign capital to come to the United States. It comes, rather, because it is attracted by the depth of U.S. financial markets; because it helps keep those countries' currencies “competitive” and workers employed (a factor particularly relevant to the Chinese transition out of agriculture); and because of the confidence in the United States as the ultimate defender of property

rights. This confidence is something “earned” and in constant need of reproduction; it is inseparable from the capacity of business, and especially the state, to keep the expectations—and strength—of labor in check. Consequently, an assessment of American decline requires an understanding not only of numeric economic trends, but also of class strength/weakness and state administrative and economic capacities.

The Financial Crisis as Turning Point?

The 2008–2009 financial crisis was a truly structural crisis in the sense that in its midst, no one was sure how, or if, it could be resolved. And with this, intimations of the collapse of American global leadership were omnipresent. For one, the growing predominance of financial markets over the rest of the economy seemed a decisive indicator of a turn from productive activity to the speculation and parasitism of a paper economy. For another, the financial markets were reeling out of control, and this was happening right in the belly of the empire. The massive state intervention introduced to overcome the ominous confusion on display seemed to definitively negate the neoliberal capitalism previously preached by economic and political elites, leaving the future in doubt.

In retrospect, however, the projected end of American leadership didn’t materialize. Let us take a deep breath and consider why. First, it is especially important to come to proper terms with the place of finance in modern capitalism. The hyperbolic contrasts between “speculative” finance and “concrete” goods and services may mobilize populist anger, but they stand in the way of grasping that finance is an integral part of capitalism, not a parallel dark universe on its margins. Part of what makes capitalism such a distasteful social system is precisely that the kind of finance that develops alongside capitalism is so *functional* to the “productive” economy. Industry knows this,

and calls from industry to rein in finance are rare (indeed, we should have no illusions about alliances with “good” manufacturing capitalists against “bad” financial ones).

Consider: the financial system facilitates the hedging of exchange and other risks by global industries, allowing for the acceleration of international exchange craved by multinational corporations. And finance, always central to capitalist restructuring, has become far more so in the context of global competition and global opportunities. In spite of all kinds of dysfunctionalities, finance still remains central to the reallocation of capital to where it is most profitable, helps finance mergers, provides crucial venture capital to new sectors, and has contributed significantly to the internal transformation of non-financial corporations to “rationalize” their allotment of capital across their divisions (Maher and Aquanno 2021). On behalf of

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capital as a whole, finance disciplines states to limit social expenditures, and in its allocation of capital it reinforces restraints on workers’ pay while integrating workers as consumers via debt dependency.

Nor has neoliberalism been swept away. The key here lies in understanding neoliberalism not in terms of a state–market polarization, but around class power and an explicit shift toward strengthening the balance of class forces toward capital. Freeing markets to impose their discipline on workers was part of this, but in order to free markets and then prevent them from getting out of control, *more* state intervention was needed,

not less—albeit a different kind of regulatory intervention. Government obscured this class bias by placing a greater weight, in its management of the macro economy, on monetary policy, as opposed to fiscal policy. While government fiscal policy (taxation and expenditures) operates with a degree of parliamentary transparency and oversight and so tends to degrees of politicization, monetary regulation has an aura of neutral management and is manifested through the U.S. Federal Reserve's efforts, behind mirrored glass, to technically adjust the money supply, affect interest rates, and influence financial markets.

The outcome of the financial crisis confirmed two crucial aspects of American leadership: first, the readiness of the Federal Reserve to act decisively to preserve the American financial system; and second, the American state's consciousness of its international responsibilities. Cognizant of the stress on European financial institutions, the Fed quietly provided foreign central banks with needed U.S. dollars (during the COVID-19 pandemic, this occurred again, but by then it was accepted as non-controversial and done more openly). And though the depth of the financial crisis and its impact on payment systems interrupted some trade flows, the U.S. administration quickly brought the G20 together to confirm the need to continue their full endorsement of the maintenance of freer trade. After a period of great uncertainty and chaos, the effective and indispensable role of the United States in coping with breakdowns was confirmed.

The crisis also served as a reminder, referenced generally earlier, of the role of the working class in either intensifying capitalist crises or tolerating their resolution on their backs. Had there been concerted demonstrations or home occupations to demand the bailout of homeowners, as opposed to the financial institutions, the limits on what the Fed and Treasury could do might have aggravated the crisis. But given the absence of such resistance, the Fed demonstrated impressive

technical skill and creativity—to the end of maintaining the power of finance and its importance to capitalism as a whole—in going where no central bankers had gone before.

Trumpism and Nationalism

Trumpism shifted the debate on economic crises. The rise of variants of right-wing populism was the result not of an existing crisis for capital, but one for workers; “economic decline” could have little meaning without identifying which class was suffering and which wasn't. It was the contrast between the actual economic successes of capital and its related social failures—the depopulation of rural communities, social decay, the permanent insecurity and fear of downward mobility, and ever more oppressive conditions of work-life—that framed this moment. As for the inter-state tensions that a good part of the left had been predicting, what was most fraught, as Donald Trump (and Brexit, among other instances) made so clear, were tensions *within* states.

What was brewing was a “crisis of legitimacy,” and it was open to left as well as right mobilization; indeed, Senator Bernie Sanders' use of such discourse preceded Trump's in the United States, just as Jeremy Corbyn's did Brexit in the UK. The crisis revolved around a growing, if not always clearly articulated, frustration with public institutions: policing that doesn't make communities safer (and often makes them less safe), courts that don't mete out justice, social welfare that doesn't so much support clients as police them, a democracy that is ever thinner, corporations that bleed you dry then leave, political parties that betray their promises once in office.

The subsequent nationalist and xenophobic mobilizations on the right were especially dangerous in the United States because of slavery's ugly legacy, the culture surrounding guns, and the social by-products of a growing sense that the country's status as the world's predominant power was slipping

away. However, an endorsement of this kind of nationalism and a tolerance of economic internationalization are not necessarily inconsistent.

The American state endorsed China's WTO entry in order to more firmly integrate China into the capitalist world order.

In this regard, it is important to note that the legitimization of globalization was not the responsibility of international institutions, nor of the American state's direct integration of other populations into its global project. It rested, rather, with each state's efforts to convince its citizens that if they could be competitive, globalization would offer great opportunities for development and shared prosperity (see Panitch and Gindin 2019). Nationalist sentiments were consequently constituent of the internationalization of economies (a further aspect of the internationalization of the state).

But there was a more important factor here: a contradiction within the right. Much as the right rails against globalization, it has never moved on to systematically challenge the corporate freedoms that are at the root of the economic frustrations expressed. Their practical focus has instead turned to immigration, a diversion that brings no fundamental threat to capital. This reluctance to take on capital was clear in Trump's own response, when he had the chance. The 2018 U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement was a unique opportunity to radically restructure continental trade. But the agreement Trump approved (and championed) was as close to maintaining the status quo as could be, leading to sighs of relief from both the Mexican state and the U.S. auto companies.

Brexit, too, was a stand-in for downward mobility and destroyed communities, each linked by the right to European integration and immigration. As with "Make America Great Again," this came with a nationalist nostalgia for the status Britain once had as an empire. But though the rejection of Europe seemed to strike a concrete blow against globalization, this wasn't actually the case. Among sections of the British elite, the popular frustrations included an opportunity for a *more ambitious* globalization: an escape from European labor and social standards as a competitive step toward the benefits of stronger economic ties with the two giants of globalization, the United States and China. Wanting the best of all possible worlds, practical exigencies also pushed the British state to maintain as many of its economic links with Europe as possible. In Britain as in the United States, the nationalism that erupted and developed did not herald a turn away from globalization.

China as Imperial Challenger?

Although earlier arguments of a "Japanese challenge" (or a "German" or "European" one) fell by the wayside, the stunning rise of China and its unique scale do seem a game changer. But while China is modifying many of the specifics of globalization, it appreciates full well the value of the markets, investment, and technology that the United States-led global order has provided, in terms of the country's rapid economic growth and the legitimization of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). China's leadership is not about to jeopardize these gains by positioning itself as an alternative to the leading role of the American state.

The ambitions of China are better understood in terms of a more constrained goal: the renegotiation of its status *within* the American empire. China's diplomatic agenda has been to pressure the United States to act as a "responsible" world leader following internationally agreed-upon rules, rather

than arbitrary self-interest. Moreover, the Chinese leadership is all too aware that global leadership implies burdens as well as benefits. Among these are the implications of an attempt to shift the position of the renminbi from that of a rising alternative currency to one that might substantively challenge the role of the U.S. dollar. This would require the kind of far-reaching liberalization of China's financial markets that risks undermining a most basic pillar of the CPC's authority and hegemony: its control over China's economic direction.

For all of Trump's performative attacks on China and angst over the military implications of China's high-tech growth, his negotiations with China drifted toward a focus on opening China more thoroughly to American high-tech and finance corporations—that is, to *furthering*, rather than undermining, international economic liberalization and mutual integration.

The promised return of manufacturing jobs to the American Midwest was subsequently added to the list of Trump's deceptions; beyond rhetorical and sporadic appeals, he did not act decisively to force either China or American capital to bring those jobs back. With Trump now gone, things are returning to a pre-Trump “normal.” Geopolitical tensions over China's technological-military advances will persist, as will bouts of Cold War rhetoric; the making of globalization is, to paraphrase Mao, “not a dinner party.” Yet what is most striking is that the mutual interdependence of the two countries—something that didn't exist among earlier rivals—brings a powerful material basis for containing actions that might undermine their mutual interdependence.

There is another dimension of China's entry into global capitalism that needs attention. Sociologists Justin Rosenberg and Chris Boyle (2019) have argued that China's significance is best understood in terms of the development of Leon Trotsky's notion of uneven international development. They

link the emergence of Trumpism and Brexit in 2016 to the massive dislocations in the United States and UK that came with China's explosive rise, which followed the coincident timing of China's industrialization and the deeper liberalization of global capitalism. This is an insightful and creative argument, but it suffers from too readily bypassing the *domestic* roots of the working-class frustrations that preceded the external impact of China (Panitch and Gindin 2021).

The first wave of postwar de-industrialization in the American Midwest and British North East went back to the 1970s, when steel mills and auto plants were being shuttered on a devastating scale. This was well before the great push from China and was driven by specific *domestic* policies (though China did undeniably accelerate the de-industrialization, especially after its 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization). Also, much of the restructuring in the United States into the 1980s and beyond was occurring *within* the United States, with jobs moving to the American South or expanding there. And much of the job loss in the new millennium, especially in critical sectors like automotive manufacturing, was to Mexico.

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In the UK as well, a good number of the job losses were to Europe and other sites beyond China.

Moreover, China's acceptance into the World Trade Organization was not simply an inevitable economic development; it was inseparable from the balance of class forces within states and the decisions made by states.

The American state endorsed China's entry so that American capital could gain greater access to China's economic potentials, and in order to more firmly integrate China into the capitalist world order. China, for its part, went through internal battles within the CPC that led it to aggressively follow a path of internationally led growth, rather than inward-led development (the contingency of which is evidenced by the contrary direction taken earlier by the Soviet Union).

Internationalism Begins at Home

Socialism is, by definition, a universalist goal and can only be completed when it is international in scope. Yet, as Marx and Engels ([1848] 1998) grasped long ago, though the struggle is international "in substance," it is national "in form." "In substance" because defeats in one place add pressures for similar defeats elsewhere, while victories inspire and create space for gains elsewhere. "In form" because struggles in the concrete necessarily take place in particular workplaces and communities and on the terrain of the nation—they are, unlike an ephemeral internationalism, place specific.

Consequently, international solidarity can only emerge out of class strength at the national level. It is in that sense that Marx and Engels went on to insist—as internationalists—that "the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with

class at home, that cannot organize a Walmart or Amazon workplace in their communities and don't cooperate with each other to make critical unionization breakthroughs, cannot possibly cross the barriers of language, history, culture, and divergent legal systems to build solidarity abroad. In fact, an effort to extend the existing enfeebled forms of union structures and practices to the international level, presumably with even greater top-down functioning (because of the logistics of bargaining internationally), would be more likely to lead to the internationalization of *business* unionism than to bring new forms of working-class internationalism.

Moreover, since globalization is primarily made through nation-states, the fight against globalization must necessarily take place through states. It is only by way of states that workers can achieve limits on the corporate freedoms and property rights that undermine workers' conditions and freedoms, or raise questions of democratic planning and equality, and seriously pose internationalist policies like canceling the debts of the global South or transferring key technologies to less developed countries to help meet their own needs. Three examples might further clarify this national–international nexus.

When Syriza came to power in Greece in 2015 with the intent of ending neoliberalism, it desperately needed support from the rest of Europe to overcome the response of European elites. This required much more than symbolic gestures of international solidarity. It necessitated struggles in *each* country over the domestic impact of neoliberalism and the social credibility of the larger European neoliberal project—a nationally based internationalism of common struggles in each state.

In Britain, the left was divided among those who saw Europe for the pro-capitalist project it was and thus welcomed Brexit, and those who saw the fight over Brexit in terms of a reactionary opposition to immigration and therefore rejected it. But, as Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (2020) have convincingly empha-

International solidarity can only emerge out of class strength at the national level.

its own bourgeoisie" (which today includes both the domestic and foreign capital in their own country). There are no shortcuts here. Unions that cannot forge unity across the

sized, the real enemy was not the European para-state but the *British* state. It was the British state that had welcomed neoliberalism, and the British elite that complained that Europe wasn't sensitive enough to the competitive need to lower labor and social standards.

Had there been a socialist base organizing to transform the British state, defying Brussels' rules in the process, Europe might have been exposed as a barrier to the democratically determined alternatives demanded by British citizens, and Britain could have been positioned for a left exit. But that base and the accompanying ideological and organizational capacities were absent. And so it was the right which framed the issue in nationalist-xenophobic terms, while the Labour Party was left in no-man's land, sitting in Parliament trying to resolve a way to both respect and get around the results of the referendum.

A third example was the American left's non-response to freer trade. Unsure of how to maneuver on the terrain Trump had occupied without falling into the nationalist trap of a chauvinist "protectionism," the American left too often retreated from the debate. The only way to escape this dilemma is to frame the alternative in class, anti-imperial, and socialist terms: whose freedom was being protected, whose was threatened, and why should corporations have the right to rob us of our productive potentials?

Only this could have positioned the left as domestic defenders of the working class while actively supporting the rights of migrant labor, more liberal immigration policies, and the right of workers abroad to apply the same limits on corporate power. The left, however, had not yet developed the ideological coherence, unity, and confidence to place such a response on the agenda.

Conclusion

The prime current task of socialists is to build a coherent and confident working class with

the capacities to transform the capitalist state and capitalist society. In working toward this, we must obviously take advantage of every contradiction and opening provided by capitalism. Yet we cannot depend on capitalism to

The real challenge is not to convince the working class that capitalism is to be rejected when it is going badly, but to win them over when it is working "well."

do the heavy lifting for us. To the extent that left strategies rest on capitalism's inexorable collapse, in the absence of that inevitability, the imperative to address "what is to be done" suffers.

Moreover, the real challenge is not to convince the working class that capitalism is to be rejected when it is going badly, but to win them over to efforts to end capitalism when it is working "well." Otherwise, the natural and less risky response will be to look to revive and fix capitalism. Do we really need more examples of capitalism's breakdowns and dysfunctionalities? Or do we need to create the popular capacities and structures that give people the concrete hope that there are ways to fight back, and fight larger, that have a credible chance of changing the world?

We have emphasized that the site for such struggle is the national terrain, and it is only as similar struggles occur in significant numbers of states that the transformation can ultimately occur and be deepened internationally. This is perhaps most effectively demonstrated in the struggle to address the climate crisis. The answer to climate change has to happen on a global scale, but international agreements and actions can only reflect the agenda of climate movements domestically. That private corporations competing for

profits will not and cannot fix the climate is obvious enough. It will take planning, and planning means controlling what you plan. In order to effect such change globally, it is prerequisite that we do so locally, regionally, and nationally.

But the climate crisis adds another dimension: the gap between the *urgent* timescale of the climate crisis and the *practical* timescale for ending capitalism. There is no answer to this other than to fight for reforms now that push the contradictions in capitalism and make clear why capitalism is a barrier to human survival and development. Only this can link the local and the global, the immediate and the long-term, fighting on the terrain of the state and challenging how globalization limits sovereignty. The relevant sovereignty here is not that of capitalist states—since such states have, as Leo Panitch (1993) argued long ago, been the authors of globalization, not its victim—but *popular* sovereignty to transform the world.

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A Memorial for my Marxist Mentor: On Leo Panitch

<https://newpol.org/a-memorial-for-my-marxist-mentor-on-leo-panitch/>

By Jason Schulman

Assad's Pyrrhic Victory

LEILA AL-SHAMI

IT'S DIFFICULT TO RECOLLECT THE euphoria of the early days of the 2011 uprising in Syria against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Reflecting on that time, Syrians speak of the breaking of the “fear barrier”—the suffocating authoritarianism and repression that had silenced them for decades. At the protests calling for freedom that sprung up across the country that spring, there was a carnivalesque atmosphere replete with dance and song. Over time, as land was liberated from state control, Syrians collectively built a creative and vibrant revolutionary culture and planted the seeds for a new democratic society. Syrians both at home and abroad were optimistic for the future. We believed the regime would fall. We thought our just struggle would win.

A decade later, pain, trauma, and despair define the Syrian experience. Much of the territory has returned to regime control. The country lies in ruins. Over half the population no longer live in their own homes, and over six million have fled the country. Many of those who remain live in dire conditions, without housing, livelihoods, or access to basic services. The “kingdom of fear” has been reinstated, not only in the form of continuing state repression, and in some areas continuing conflict, but also as a result of the power struggle between various warlords. Yet, while the revolutionary movement appears subject

to savage defeat, at least for now, it is by no means clear that “Assad has won.”

Assad's tenuous grip on power is maintained by foreign forces. Since the start of the conflict, Russia has provided military aid to the regime, and it was Russia's direct military involvement in 2015 that profoundly altered the dynamics on the ground, at a time when the regime was close to collapse. While Moscow initially claimed to be targeting terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, Russian air strikes prioritized opposition-held areas and repeatedly targeted civilian infrastructure, including hospitals. This intervention, which turned the liberated areas into death zones, saw large swaths of the country return to regime control.

Russia has also been Assad's key political ally, providing the diplomatic weight needed to protect the regime from international accountability. Today, Russian power vastly eclipses that of the United States in relation to Syria, and Moscow has established itself as a dominant player in the region. The economic cost to Russia has been great, but it has been rewarded with lucrative contracts for gas and oil. The Russian company Sroytransgaz, owned by a Kremlin-linked oligarch, has been granted 70 percent of all revenues from phosphate production for the next fifty years, probably amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars or more. (Syria is estimated to have one of the world's largest reserves of phosphates, used for making fertilizers.) The company has also been granted control over the commercial port in Tartus, necessary for its export.

However, it is Iran that poses the greatest

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threat to any hope of Syrian self-determination. In parts of the country, Syrians are now effectively living under Iranian occupation. Tehran, which has backed the Assad regime from the outset, sees Syria as a key part of the so-called “axis of resistance” against the United States and Israel, and as a strategically important link in the Shia bloc that connects

Iran has been the main backer
of the regime financially and
economically.

Iran and Iraq with Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Tehran has supported large numbers of fighters in Syria, arranging for sectarian Shia militias from Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and has established numerous military bases in Syria (some of which are prime targets for air strikes by Israel, which fears an entrenched Iranian presence on its northern border).

Iran has been the main backer of the regime financially and economically. Since 2013, Tehran has provided Syria with credit lines to import fuel and other goods and is a major trading partner. Business forums have been established to improve bilateral economic relations and trade. Just as Russia's reward for its loyalty is Syria's natural resources, Iran's is real estate, which it is buying up in Damascus, Homs, Deir al-Zour, and Aleppo. Iranian companies, often with links to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have been awarded lucrative contracts for reconstruction and infrastructure projects. By cementing its presence economically, Iran ensures that it will maintain influence in the event of a peace deal that calls upon foreign militias to leave.

In these ways, Iran is expanding its presence in Syria and seeks to embed itself in Syrian society in a way that Russia does not.

In an attempt to build a local constituency, it purchases loyalty by paying Syrian youth high salaries (up to \$700 per month) to join Iranian militias, and has established cultural and education centers and mosques to spread Iranian culture and Shiism. In Damascus, people report a noticeable change in demographics in neighborhoods such as Bab Touma and Bab Sharqi, which were previously home to a large Christian community and are now populated by members of Iranian-backed militia. Properties belonging to Syrians displaced by the conflict are now inhabited by militia members and their families. In Hama and southern Idlib, agricultural land seized by the regime has been auctioned off at symbolic prices, and the main buyers are militia members. Shop signs and adverts are often written in Farsi. While many Syrians cannot return to their home country, the regime has fast-tracked naturalization of foreigners to ensure that Iranians and others can become citizens. The forced displacement of communities supportive of the opposition and the re-population of those areas with communities perceived as loyal is part of a deliberate strategy by the regime to change demographics to ensure an obedient constituency in areas it controls. As Assad himself said in a speech in 2015, “Syria is not for those who hold its passport or reside in it; Syria is for those who defend it.” One reason why a political solution has not yet been reached may be that the regime is stalling while it creates “facts on the ground” that will strengthen its hand in negotiations.

As a result of such blatant expropriation and collusion, anti-Iranian sentiment in Syria is at an all-time high. In both Deir al-Zour and the Deraa countryside, protests regularly break out calling for an end to Iranian hegemony and the expulsion of Iranian militias. The alliance between the supposedly secular Arab nationalist Assad regime and theocratic Iran was always pragmatic rather than religious. Yet the increasing presence of Shia Muslims linked to Iran (in a country with a Sunni majority) and its policies (both in Syria

and the wider region) has vastly increased the sense of victimhood among Sunnis—a contributing factor in increasing sectarianism and the rise of groups such as Islamic State.

The desperate socio-economic situation in the country is another factor causing widespread criticism of the regime, even among communities perceived as loyal. Over 80 percent of the population lives in poverty, struggling to make ends meet, and 60 percent are food insecure. The United Nations World Food Programme reports that food prices increased by 376 percent between October 2019 and February 2021. There are shortages of staple foods, medicine, and fuel. People queue for hours at bakeries and petrol stations, and still sometimes return home empty-handed. Electricity blackouts are common and have caused local businesses to close, further exacerbating high levels of unemployment. The collapse of the currency means that the salary of a state employee is now equivalent to around \$20 per month, as opposed to \$400 in March 2011. Many are forced to take second jobs, if they can find them, just to put food on the table. Meanwhile, those with regime connections (and warlords) not only profit off people's misery, but flaunt their wealth and privileged lifestyles, showing off their luxury cars and properties on social media.

The primary reason for this miserable situation is, of course, the full-scale destruction of the country by the regime and its Russian ally, including physical infrastructure, housing, agricultural land, and production facilities. The economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, on which the Syrian economy and banking system is dependent, has seen conditions worsen dramatically. Regime corruption and a rampant crony capitalism that lines the pockets of the well-connected further exacerbate the situation. At the bottom, state employees demand bribes for basic services and merchants inflate the prices of their goods. At the top, regime loyalists or family members of the president are awarded advantageous contracts to construct high-end

residential apartments and luxury malls, when many don't have access to basic housing. The regime's plans for reconstruction will therefore further exacerbate social inequalities and prevent the return of those displaced from low-income backgrounds—those who formed the core of the opposition.

A secondary factor has been the expansion of sanctions since Washington implemented the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. Unlike previous sanctions, which targeted those individuals affiliated with the regime—either political, military, or security figures—these sanctions are more controversial as they also target businesses and sectors dealing in oil, electricity, and infrastructure reconstruction, thus contributing to a shortage of goods and services and negatively impacting the civilian population. While humanitarian aid is exempt from the sanctions, non-governmental organizations have reported experiencing negative effects, as people are now nervous to do business in Syria. In March 2021, 14 Syrian organizations (both in Syria and abroad) released a statement calling on the Syrian regime to end sanctions by engaging in the UN-led political process, ending human rights violations, and submitting to justice mechanisms.

People are both hungry and angry. Protests have broken out against deteriorating

Food prices increased by 376
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living conditions, the prohibitive costs of basic goods, and corruption in regime-held areas such as Sweida, Damascus, and even Latakia (in the regime's heartland). On social media, even regime loyalists have voiced complaints for which a number of them have been arrested under the Cybercrime Law of 2018,

enacted to clamp down on such dissent. These include Syrian state television presenter Hala al-Jarf, who made posts on Facebook criticizing living conditions and shortages of basic goods. Following her January 2021 arrest, she was subsequently released in an amnesty aimed at appeasing regime supporters ahead of the May presidential election. Wissam al-Tair, editor of the hugely popular pro-regime Facebook page Damascus Now, was arrested in December 2018—likely for his criticism of the conditions endured by army conscripts and the fuel crisis—and has not been heard from since.

Indeed, many believe the Assad regime is unable to handle the crisis, even those who can't envisage an alternative. This broad-based mistrust has been compounded by the regime's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its inability (or refusal) to furnish reliable information regarding the number of cases and the shortages of oxygen supplies, hospital beds, and vaccines. Hope for the future is also in short supply.

In the midst of the crisis, the regime held presidential elections on May 26. This charade, designed to give the regime a veneer of legitimacy in an attempt to attract funds for reconstruction efforts, made a mockery of the Syrian people's demands for democratic transition. Presidential candidates were required to have been living in Syria for the past ten years—a rule that automatically excluded refugees and key opposition members in exile. They were also required to have the support of 35 members of parliament, which meant they had to be rubber-stamped by the regime. Syrians living abroad had to go to embassies to vote, which many didn't do for fear of reprisals, and they had to possess a

valid Syrian passport and exit stamp, which many do not have. Those living in the 30 percent of territory that lies outside regime control, including Idlib and the Kurdish- and Turkish-controlled areas, did not participate. The Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northeastern Syria refused to hold elections due to the regime's ongoing refusal to recognize its government. In regime-controlled Deraa, activists and public figures called for a boycott. No mechanisms were established to guarantee people could vote without fear of intimidation by security services, and there was no monitoring by United Nations observers. What was the point of voting anyway, when the result had been pre-decided?

This regime will never be seen as legitimate in the eyes of free Syrians. Assad has regained a form of power in much of the country through brute force, foreign sponsorship, and an absence of international solidarity with democratic alternatives. The regime will not reform itself; it continues to savagely repress any dissent and to carry out war crimes with impunity. It is unable to respond to economic problems or attract funds for desperately needed reconstruction. Most Syrians living outside the country will not voluntarily return while Assad remains in power and do not trust regime assurances of their safety. Areas of Syria outside of regime control remain beset by humanitarian crisis, physical insecurity, and the presence of militias opposed by large segments of the population. What was once a dynamic revolutionary movement has been shattered, fragmented, and exhausted. A political solution to the conflict, a prerequisite for free and fair elections, is nowhere in sight. The future, like the present, looks bleak.

Reflections of an Anti-Imperialist after Ten Years of Debate

AN INTERVIEW WITH GILBERT ACHCAR

Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and has lived and taught in Paris, Berlin, and London. He is currently professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London. His many books include *The Clash of Barbarisms* (2002, 2006); *Perilous Power: The Middle East and US Foreign Policy*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky (2007); *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010); *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (2013); *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2013); and *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (2016). He was interviewed by Stephen R. Shalom for *New Politics* on May 5, 2021.

New Politics: Gilbert, you've recently published a much-discussed article in *The Nation* on anti-imperialism.¹ I wonder if we could begin with you telling us why you wrote the article and briefly summarizing your argument.

Gilbert Achcar: Thank you, Steve. I wrote this article because of the big confusion that exists nowadays on the left on the meaning of "anti-imperialism." I believe that this confusion is primarily a result of the sea change in the global situation that followed the collapse of the USSR. There has also been a change in the type of wars waged in the global South. Imperialist wars against national liberation movements or regimes are no longer the predominant type, as in the first decades after the Second World War. Since the 1990s we

have seen imperialist wars against oppressive regimes such as in Iraq, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. The situation got yet more complicated with what has been called the Arab Spring in 2011. Western imperialist powers — Barack Obama's United States in the first place — appeared as if supportive of the popular uprisings against dictatorial regimes.

So, what does it mean to be an anti-imperialist in this new international environment? That's the issue I tackle in the article, as a result of my long personal involvement in such debates, starting most crucially from 2011 on the issue of Libya, and then later on Syria. My original title was "Their anti-imperialism and ours."² I formulated three basic principles of what constitutes truly progressive anti-imperialism in my view, principles that ought to be rather elementary for anyone on the left, whatever their ideological orientation, Marxist, anarchist, or whatever, provided they adhere to the most elementary principle of a true left, which is democracy. People who agree on these principles can discuss anti-imperialist tactics. Some, however, discard them. I call these people "neo-campists" because they are no longer systematically aligned behind a single specific state or "socialist camp" as were the campists of the time of the USSR, but determine their positions negatively, through kneejerk opposition to anything the US or UK governments do and sympathy for whoever the two governments oppose, including despotic regimes and Russia's rival imperialism. The neo-campists are most often incapable

of engaging in discussion without resorting to invective and calumny. I concluded my article with this observation, and indeed, no sooner was it out than various neo-campists rushed to confirm it.

Now, what are the three principles? The first relates to that most elementary demo-

To be on the left means, first of all, to support the peoples' right to self-determination.

cratic principle that I already mentioned. When it comes to international politics, to be on the left means, first of all, to support the peoples' right to self-determination. That should be the starting point in defining a truly progressive anti-imperialism. Crucially, this starting point is *not* opposition per se to this or that imperialist state. It is rather the defense of the people's right to self-determination: it is because imperialist states, by definition, trample upon this right that they must be countered.

The second principle is that anti-imperialism requires opposition to *all* imperialist states, not standing with one against the others, or ignoring one and its victims and only focusing on the other, whichever it is. On the left in Western countries, there are neo-campists who only focus on U.S. and British imperialism, or Western imperialism in general, and ignore, at best, or even support, other imperialist states, such as Russia. You may find the reverse in Russia: progressives who are very hostile to what their government does abroad and remain silent on, if not supportive of, what Western governments do. Once one rises above the Western-centrism of much of the Western left, one understands that a truly internationalist anti-imperialist perspective is one that opposes imperialism whatever its nationality or its geographical

location, West or East.

The third principle addresses exceptional cases. There might be exceptional circumstances where intervention by an imperialist power is crucial in preventing a massacre or genocide, or in preventing a popular democratic uprising from being bloodily suppressed by a dictatorship. We have seen such cases in recent years. But even then, anti-imperialists should dispel any illusions, and advocate zero trust, in the imperialist country. And they should demand that its intervention remain limited to forms, and bound by legal constraints when they exist, that do not enable the imperialist power to impose its will or determine the course of action.

This third principle explains why, in the cases of Libya and Syria, even though Western governments pretended to be on the side of democratic change against the dictatorial reactionary regime, I have been opposed to direct intervention. The only exception was at the very beginning of the UN-authorized No-Fly Zone over Libya, when I explained that, for the sake of preventing a foretold massacre, I *could not oppose* the intervention in its initial phase. I explained a thousand times that I never said that I *supported* the intervention—but, as we know, there are none so deaf as those who will not hear. All I said is that I couldn't oppose it, which is not the same as saying I favored it, except to those who don't know the difference between abstaining and supporting, or who prefer to deliberately ignore it because their only way of arguing is by distorting the views of those they disagree with.

The population of the second city in Libya, Benghazi—legitimately fearing for their lives, with the Libyan regime moving its far superior forces toward the city, and the dictator, Gaddafi, vowing to crush them—implored the UN for protection. Even Moscow and Beijing could not oppose this: they both abstained at the UN Security Council. But once the immediate danger was over, I stood against the continuation of NATO bombing,

which went far beyond the UN mandate. My attitude became the same as the one I have held on Syria from the very start, which is to support the delivery of defensive weapons to the insurgents in order to protect the population. I would not support the delivery of weapons to an organization such as ISIS, of course, since it is as oppressive as the regime, if not more so, but I certainly support the delivery of weapons to the Kurdish forces in Syria or what used to be the Free Syrian Army before it fell under full Turkish control starting from 2016.

I am opposed to the presence of U.S. troops on the ground, even in Kurdish-dominated northeast Syria, which is where they are stationed at present. I am actually opposed to all five occupations in Syria—in chronological order: Israel, Iran and its proxies, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. Five states have troops on Syrian soil. I oppose all these occupations and support the right of the Syrian people to democratic self-determination, not the right of the murderous regime to bring in accomplices to help it massacre its own people, which is what some neo-campists support.

NP: *Let me explore the three principles a little more. Critics may say something like: But what about regime change? Doesn't the United States have a program of regime change around the world—in Ukraine, in the Balkans, in the South China Sea, and Xinjiang province? Shouldn't we be opposed to that regime change program?*

GA: “Regime change” is a phrase that was used by the Bush administration. As far as I know, it hasn’t been used since then. The phrase used by the Obama administration in the face of the Arab Spring was “orderly transition.” And that’s very different from “regime change” à la Bush. The latter means occupation of a country in order to change its type of government, usually under the pretext of bringing democracy. This is typical colonial-like domination that must be resolutely opposed—even if it were about North Korea,

an appallingly totalitarian state. But “regime change” wasn’t the Obama administration’s line. Some on the left lag behind reality, always fighting the last war. U.S. imperialism’s methods and doctrine did change in the light of the Iraqi debacle, as they had previously changed after Vietnam.

“Orderly transition” might be regarded as the true Obama doctrine: it meant that no existing state should be dismantled. The state apparatus should be kept intact, instead of allowing the kind of dismantlement that the U.S. occupation implemented in Iraq, which has come to be regarded in Washington as the main reason for the subsequent debacle of the U.S. occupation. What Obama favored everywhere in the Middle East and North Africa was a compromise between the old regime and the opposition, opening the way for a transition that preserved the state’s continuity. He put pressure on Egypt’s military in 2011 for this kind of transition. He tried to steer Libyan events in that direction, but failed completely, as the state there got completely dismantled. He sponsored the Gulf monarchies’ mediation to obtain that outcome in Yemen. And that’s what he advocated for Syria, openly stating in 2012 that he supported “the Yemen solution” for that country. What was this “Yemen solution”?

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other.

It was a compromise between the head of the regime and the opposition, mediated by the Gulf monarchies: The Yemeni President stepped down, handed the presidency to the

Vice President, but remained in control of major levers of power in the country. That's the "solution" that Obama favored in Syria.

Now, what has been the most important intervention of the Obama administration in Syria? To answer this question, let us compare its attitude toward the Syrian opposition to the way the United States dealt with the mujahideen who fought the Soviet occupa-

In Libya, to prevent a foretold massacre, I *could not oppose* the intervention in its initial phase, which is not the same as saying I favored it

tion in Afghanistan. Washington supported the Afghan mujahideen, along with the Saudi kingdom and the Pakistani military. It is well known that it armed them with anti-aircraft missiles, Stinger missiles. Compare that to Syria. Not only did the United States *not* deliver any such weapons to the Syrian uprising—even in 2012, when it was still dominated by what could be described as a democratic opposition. But it even forbade all its regional allies from delivering such weapons to the Syrian insurgents. Turkey produces Stinger missiles under U.S. license, but it wasn't allowed to deliver a single one of them to the Syrian opposition—nor were the Gulf monarchies. *That* was the crucial intervention of the United States in the Syrian conflict. And that is what allowed Bashar al-Assad's regime to remain in place. It allowed him to maintain a monopoly of air power, which enabled his regime to even drop barrel-bombs from helicopters—a most indiscriminate and devastating type of bombing. Helicopters are an easy target for anti-aircraft weapons, and yet, how many helicopters have you seen shot down by the opposition in Syria? Hardly any.

The reason for this U.S. intervention was, first, Israel's opposition to the delivery of anti-aircraft missiles to the Syrian opposition, and second, Obama's fear of creating the conditions for a rout of the Syrian regime's forces that would have led to state collapse in the manner of what happened in Libya.

Thus, the Obama administration in fact helped Bashar al-Assad much more than it did the Syrian opposition. Iran understood this and upgraded its intervention in Syria through its proxies starting from 2013, confident that Obama wouldn't do anything serious to prevent it or to step up qualitatively his support to the opposition. Obama confirmed this in 2013 in the way he backtracked on the famous chemical weapon "red line." Then in 2015, Russia intervened massively in its turn. So, you have two reactionary states, Iran and Russia, intervening in the Syrian conflict on a much more massive scale than any Western power. There is no way anyone could claim the contrary, lest they completely distort the facts. Add to this that the main armed U.S. intervention in Syria, including deployment of troops on the ground, was actually on the side of the only leftwing force engaged in the Syrian conflict, which is the Kurdish movement. That's something that neo-campism cannot fathom.

NP: Russia is a lesser imperialist power. But somebody might tell you: If there is a lesser imperialist power and a greater one, doesn't it make sense to focus our attention on stopping the greater imperialist power?

GA: Well, that's the logic of the lesser evil, the object of a long history of debates. However, let us consider what one means when speaking of a lesser evil. Not that it is lesser in size, but that it's less dangerous, less vicious, less "evil" than the other. Thus, a dominant liberal capitalist force could be construed as a lesser evil than a weaker fascist one. In that light, I really don't think that Russia is in any way a "lesser evil" than the United States. Russia crushed the Chechen people within its own

territory between 1994 and 2009 in ways that are certainly no less brutal, if not more brutal, than what the United States did to Iraq during that same period. Both were huge crimes. Moreover, the Russian government is far more authoritarian and undemocratic than the U.S. government. U.S. imperialism can be stopped by mass action. Russian imperialism doesn't allow any mass opposition to build up. So, there are several issues that make the characterization of Russia as the "lesser evil" void of meaning. And even though the Russian economy is dwarfed by those of the

I am actually opposed to all five occupations in Syria.

United States, and China for that matter, the Russian military is a much bigger part of the global military balance than the Russian economy is of the global economy, and it is increasingly aggressive in projecting its power abroad.

Look at what Russia is doing today in my part of the world—excuse me again for turning it to my part of the world and not looking at everything from the perspective of New York or London. What is Russia doing today in the Middle East and North Africa? It has played and is still playing a key role in shoring up the Syrian regime, one of the most murderous dictatorships in the region, and it is itself responsible for a good deal of the destruction and killings and carnage that have occurred in that poor country. The Russian intervention consisted mainly in aerial and missile bombing and when you know what such bombing can do—in the name of fighting ISIS, U.S. bombing in limited parts of Syria led to terrible devastation, especially in the city of Raqqa—you can imagine what was done by Russian bombing on a much larger scale, over all the territories that were under

opposition control when Russia began its direct intervention in 2015, up to the present.

Since then, Russia has also been intervening in Libya, along with the Egyptian regime of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, and the United Arab Emirates, the region's most reactionary states with the Saudi kingdom. Russian Wagner troops—which are even less “private” than their U.S. equivalent, the former Blackwater—have been intervening in Libya to support former CIA asset Khalifa Haftar, who has grouped around him forces ranging from remnants of the old regime to Salafists to combat the reconciliation government backed by the United Nations. Vladimir Putin has also been fully supportive of Egypt's Marshal Sisi, from the very moment that he organized his coup, long before Trump named him his “favorite dictator.”

So, if we look at the role of Russia in my part of the world, it is certainly no better than that of the United States. In Syria, it's definitely much worse: there, the main actions of the United States by order of importance have been fighting ISIS, supporting the Kurdish movement for that purpose, and supporting sections of the Syrian opposition, whereas the main action of Russia has been fighting the Syrian opposition to shore up the Assad regime.

NP: *Let's go back to the Libyan case. How would you describe the opposition to Gaddafi at the beginning of the uprising? Was it a jihadist opposition?*

GA: Definitely not. It was a motley group of people with a wide range of ideological orientations. Keep in mind that Gaddafi seized power in 1969 and that the uprising against his rule occurred in 2011. That makes more than 40 years in power! The government in Libya was brutally repressive, no opposition whatsoever was tolerated. In 2003, it shifted abruptly into collaboration with Washington and its “war on terror.” In that context, it engaged in “extraordinary rendition” arrangements with Western governments, under

which they would hand over to the Libyan government jihadi oppositionists that they held. Among those was one of the figures that would emerge later on in the uprising, a man who sued the British government for having rendered him to the Libyan government.³ So, there were indeed some jihadists, who had been fighting the government and were regarded by Washington and its allies as terrorists. But they were only one component of a vast conglomerate of oppositionists that included different kinds of people: democrats, liberals, Muslim Brothers, and even a few leftists – the same mix that occupied Tahrir Square in Cairo, but with less dominance of Islamic forces than in Egypt.

The first election that took place after the fall of Gaddafi in 2012 was characterized by a high participation rate, a true one since people weren't compelled to vote as in the sham elections of the past. And the big surprise was that Islamic forces received only a minority of the votes. The majority was dominated by liberals. This proves that the 2011 uprising was not dominated by jihadists. In fact, one of the key early figures of the uprising was Abdel Fattah Younes, who had been one of Gaddafi's close companions since 1969 and was regarded as Libya's number two. He sided with the uprising when the fighting started and got assassinated a few weeks later. The other prominent figure, a man who emerged as the chairperson of the Transitional National Council, was the minister of Justice, judge Mustafa Abdul Jalil, a man who may be described as liberal Muslim. But the opposition was very heterogeneous, of course. In an uprising against a long-standing dictatorship, it is only normal to see the full spectrum of opposition currents uniting against the regime. This is what happened in Libya, as elsewhere.

NP: *Some people say that Libya was better off under Gaddafi. How do you respond to that?*

GA: If things had been so good under Gaddafi, there wouldn't have been a popular

uprising. The claim that Libya was better off under Gaddafi ignores the fact that it is a country with limited population and a high oil and gas income, with a GDP per capita of 12,000 USD in 2010, with oil and gas representing two thirds of the economy and almost the totality of exports—the clearest indication of the regime's massive failure to develop the country. The Libyan population should have been far better off than it was in 2011 when the uprising exploded. Libya is a country where you had huge regional disparities. The regime was privileging some parts of the country, those to which its own loyal constituencies belonged, and neglecting others. It squandered a lot of the country's income in crazy weapons purchases (mainly from Western countries from 2004 on) and military adventures.

Now there are indeed some people who bring up figures such as per capita GDP, literacy rates, life expectancy and Human Development Index, to tell you that Libya was better than other African countries. But this is a very specious comparison. Why not compare Libya to the Gulf monarchies, which have similarly small populations and huge oil and gas income? Some of them achieved better figures than Libya. Let me read to you from this 2011 report by the International Crisis Group entitled "Making Sense of Libya":

Given a population of a mere six million, many Libyans believe their country ought to resemble Dubai. Yet, years of poor planning, insufficient and piecemeal development and pervasive corruption (coming atop the crippling effects of prolonged international sanctions), have left parts of the country in a state of considerable neglect. Resentment at this is particularly strong among easterners, who rightly or wrongly believe the government has favoured other parts of the country and deliberately disadvantaged their region. Despite the country's economic wealth, many Libyans work at least two jobs in order to survive (of

which one typically is in the state sector, where wages for the most part remain pitiful). Housing shortages are acute, with an estimated 540,000 additional units needed. As public opinion generally has seen it, most of the economic opportunities that have opened up since 2003 ... have remained in the hands of a narrow elite. In particular, they have been seized by Gaddafi's own children and extended family, all of whom have accrued large fortunes across a range of businesses from the health, construction, hotel and energy sectors. These popular perceptions were recently reinforced by the disclosure of Western diplomatic assessments. According to U.S. diplomatic cables as released by WikiLeaks, Gaddafi's children routinely benefited from the country's wealth; one noted that it had "become common practice" for government funds to be used to promote companies controlled by his children and indicated that their companies had benefited from "considerable government financing and political backing". In this sense, Libya has been akin to a large pressure cooker waiting to explode.⁴

Another argument that I often hear is that had NATO intervened in Syria, the country would have been like Libya today. Well, I can tell you this: There is no single Syrian who would not wish and pray night and day for their country to be like Libya today. I mean, Libya's situation is nothing compared to what happened in Syria: the scale of the massacres, the devastation, the displacement, etc., are incomparably more horrendous in Syria. After two years of newly acquired political freedom, Libya fell into a new civil war starting in 2014, fueled by rival foreign interventions, but it remained a low-intensity war compared to those of Syria and Yemen.

NP: *Let me go back to one of your initial principles, the one about the exceptional case when massacre is impending. Is this an argument for humanitarian intervention?*

GA: The concept of "humanitarian intervention" is flawed. Nobody would oppose a truly "humanitarian" intervention, such as sending troops to help after a massive earthquake. No anti-imperialist could oppose such an intervention because that would be completely absurd. I never used the phrase "humanitarian intervention" except to criticize it as a hypocritical pretext for imperialist interventions. When imperialism intervenes in a conflict, it's never for humanitarian reasons and I've never ever subscribed to any illusion about that, but have consistently denounced what Noam Chomsky has called the "new military humanism."⁵

The exceptional cases I'm talking about are when, for reasons of their own, imperialist powers side with a popular uprising against a despotic regime, the latest such instance being the uprising against the military takeover in Myanmar. In such cases, if the popular movement decides to bear arms to defend itself from an ongoing slaughter, I support their right to get defensive weapons from wherever they can get them, even if only from imperialist powers. I even support demanding that Western governments provide such weapons. But I do not support direct intervention, be it by bombing or by dispatching troops to be deployed on the ground, all the less when this is done in violation of international law. However, if there is no other alternative to prevent an imminent large-scale massacre, I must abstain until the threat is eliminated. Abstaining means that I wouldn't demonstrate against the intervention, as a few people did on March 19, 2011 in New York and Washington while the population in Benghazi was joyfully applauding what they perceived as their rescue. But nor would I demonstrate in support of the intervention: I would rather warn those who are rescued against having any illusions about the real intentions and designs of their momentary rescuers. That is what I did in 2011 when the intervention started in Libya. The city of Benghazi was threatened by the regime, the population of

Benghazi implored the United Nations for intervention, the Security Council voted on a resolution authorizing this intervention, and Moscow and Beijing consented, albeit by abstaining rather than voting yes. That is what I explained in the March 19 interview⁶ that you did with me, and nothing else. And yet, all hell broke loose in some circles of the anti-imperialist left in the U.S. and the UK, from the usual neo-campists to even some radicals who were yet to “learn to think.”⁷

For me, the original side to this debate was that it revealed the Western ethnocentrism of most of my detractors. They simply could not put themselves in the shoes of the people of Benghazi or of any part of the Arab region shaken by the 2011 revolutionary shockwave. They saw everything from the vantage point of the U.S. or its British poodle and were only interested in countering whatever their government did regardless of what was happening on the receiving end. They attacked me because they couldn’t fathom that I react politically more in unison with the Arab part of the world to which I belong (when it is directly concerned, that is) than with Britain where I happen to reside and work—my work being focused on the Middle East and North Africa. To give you but one example, on March 19, 2011, the very same day that we held our interview, the Lebanese Hezbollah—which is not exactly known to be a great friend of the United States—was holding a mass meeting in Beirut’s southern suburb, in solidarity with the Arab peoples. That was before the Syrian uprising shifted Hezbollah’s position. Here is what the party’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said about Libya in his long speech:

In Libya, people rose up as they did in Tunisia and Egypt. A group of young people started in Benghazi and were met with bullets and killing. People came to their support and the revolution spread from city to city, with demonstrations and civil disobedience. They were countered with bullets, planes, and tanks. War

was imposed on the peaceful and civilian popular revolution. ... Like you all, we saw on television planes, and tanks, and canons, and Katyusha multiple rocket launchers, aligned in a way that reminds us in Lebanon of the 1982 invasion and all Israeli wars. This war that is launched today by the Gaddafi regime on the Libyan people is the same type of war as those launched by Israel on Lebanon and Gaza. ... Whoever can provide help of whatever sort to this insurgent people must provide help so that they stand up and resist in the face of destruction and massacres.

Our revolutionary brothers in Libya and our Arab peoples must know that America and the West have given the Libyan regime enough time to crush the revolution, a lot of time spent in talks and meetings. But the Libyans were steadfast, they resisted and fought, and embarrassed the world by their steadfastness and resilience. ... To be sure, the situation in Libya has become very complicated with the start of the international intervention that might involve Libya in the game of nations, and this requires from the revolutionaries that they deploy their vigilance and patriotism in which we have high confidence.⁸

Note that Nasrallah actually blamed “America and the West” not for intervening, but for having been late in intervening! He was much less critical than I had been on the same day when you interviewed me. Shortly after, once the threat was over, which was achieved after a few days of intervention destroying much of Gaddafi’s planes and tanks, I clearly stated that I was against the continuation of bombing because it was obviously no longer needed to rescue any population, but had become merely an attempt by NATO to interfere in the Libyan situation and take control of it. Here is what I explained on March 31:

Opposing the no-fly zone while offering non-plausible alternatives, as many

groups of the sane and true left did with the best of intentions, was unconvincing. It put the left in a weak position in the eyes of public opinion. Opposing the no-fly zone while showing no concern about the civilians, as some fringe groups did, was immoral — not to mention the attitude of those reconstructed or unreconstructed Stalinists who are upholding Gaddafi as a progressive anti-imperialist and dismissing the uprising as a US-led or al-Qaeda-led conspiracy (while resorting to Stalinist-style slanders in discussing the position of those on the left who sympathized with the Libyan uprising's request for protection).

The no-fly zone request by the uprising should not have been opposed. Instead, we should have expressed our strong reservations on UNSC resolution 1973, and warned of any attempt to seize it as a pretext in order to further imperialist agendas. As I said the day after resolution 1973 was adopted, “without coming out against the no-fly zone, we must express defiance and advocate full vigilance in monitoring the actions of those states carrying it out, to make sure that they don't go beyond protecting civilians as mandated by the UNSC resolution.” Our usual presumption against military interventions of imperialist states was overruled in the emergency circumstances of massacre impending, but these emergency circumstances are no longer there at present, and protecting the uprising can now be achieved in a much better way by supplying it with weapons.⁹

The other case similar to that of Libya in 2011 is when you had the surge of ISIS in 2014, crossing the border into Iraq and spreading over a huge territory on which they carried out horrible crimes, including the genocide of Yazidis in Iraq and an attempt to do the same to Kurds in both Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish-controlled city of Kobani in northeast Syria got threatened by ISIS. Washington intervened and started bombing the self-proclaimed “Islamic State.”

Should anti-imperialists have been marching in Washington and London chanting “Stop U.S. intervention in Syria”? The United States was airdropping weapons to the Kurdish forces. Should anti-imperialists have opposed this? I don't believe so. At the time of most urgent necessity to prevent a Kurdish defeat that would have opened the way for ISIS to

Not only did the U.S. *not* deliver Stingers to the Syrian uprising—it even forbade its regional allies from delivering such weapons to the insurgents.

invade Kurdish-controlled territories in Syria, one couldn't oppose the bombing. Once the immediate danger was over, the continuation of the bombing should have been opposed, combined with the demand to provide the needed weapons to those who were fighting ISIS, especially the Kurdish and allied forces in both Syria and Iraq.

To sum up, under exceptional circumstances when there is no available alternative to prevent a large-scale massacre, intervention by imperialist powers may be a “lesser evil” as long and as far as needed to eliminate the threat. Arming a democratic uprising against a much better-equipped despotic enemy is a necessity from a truly leftist internationalist perspective. Internationalists should demand that their governments, even imperialist governments, deliver defensive weapons to the progressive side in a civil war (remember the Spanish civil war!¹⁰). At the same time, we should advocate to those who require such aid complete mistrust in the United States and any imperialist government whatsoever. And we should oppose any form of intervention that would tie their hands and subordinate them to Washington, Moscow, or anyone else.

NP: But if I were part of a group that was facing massacre and I were offered aid and the aid came with strings, I might say these strings are rotten, but I'd rather succumb to these rotten demands and impositions than get massacred.

GA: And I would completely understand that. But my role from the outside would be to tell you: I understand your position, I understand that you are left with no choice, but I warn you of the real aims and goals of those who are providing you with what you badly need, and I urge you to do your utmost in order to maintain and preserve your full autonomy.

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Ecological Imperialism and Jair Bolsonaro's Agenda in Brazil

SABRINA FERNANDES

AS THE CLIMATE CHANGE CRISIS worsens, due both to lack of appropriate radical action and the maintenance of capitalist business as usual, ecological concerns have become more widespread. Environmentalism comes in many shapes and forms, and some types of discourse have become more mainstream over the years. Campaigns to protect animals and forests and care for the planet make their way into movies, social media, and political speeches. This is generally positive, since one obstacle to change is strong anti-environmental propaganda. However, the majority of mainstream environmentalism tends to focus either on change through individual action or on the very limited approaches put forward by mainstream nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other institutions. These proposals fail to deal with the root causes of the crisis and neglect the level of urgency required to avoid worst-case scenarios. The scale of change necessary to actually curb climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and water pollution is that of systemic action, but these more macro approaches are often perceived as the jobs of heads of state, or even as projects best pursued through alliances between countries and corporations willing

to go “greener.” This is environmentalism with a neoliberal face, or better yet, a myriad of empty promises that can be packaged and sold as solutions so that governments and corporations can look more responsible—even as widespread fossil fuel extractivism and destructive vegetable and animal agriculture continue unchecked.

“Business as usual” means that richer countries can pledge to become more “sustainable” and will even invest in important ecological transition areas, such as in the expansion of renewables and electricity-powered public transportation. At the same time, countries that sit at the margins of capitalism and may be considered as “developing” or “underdeveloped” face particular obstacles to ecological transition. The majority of green-technology alternatives are developed in the Global North and tend to be protected by intellectual property rights that make them hard to acquire in the Global South, even though the mineral resources required to build batteries and solar panels often come at the expense of poor communities in Latin America and Africa, and the electronic waste generated by the capitalist system’s rule of planned obsolescence is shipped to large landfills in South Asia.

This scenario exposes two contradictions connected to the idea of development under capitalism, both of which have to do with the unequal relationship between the countries at the center of capitalism and those at the periphery. A system of dependent capitalism ensures that countries rich in natural resources

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in the Global South continue to offer these resources cheaply, with a special role played by multinational corporations and special trade deals, only to have to import industrialized goods at a much higher rate later on. It also means that those in richer countries that benefit from such an arrangement are likely to try to influence local politics in the South and even to make use of state power to ensure that oil keeps flowing, thus maintaining the usual path of “progress” while extractive resources are also taken to feed those countries’ demand for food, clothing, and even the means of ecological transition.

Imperialism, too, comes in many shapes and forms. It may involve direct intervention in coups d’état, wars, and assassination attempts. It can also influence local political economy such that the natural resources required to keep up the paths of development in the North—both the conventional fossil fuel-dependent one, and neoliberal environmentalism—continue to be extracted and traded. Extraction designed to enrich other countries and corporations amounts to “ecological imperialism,” which sociologists John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark describe as a system “whereby the extraction of resources has often devastated poor countries, which have been faced with the expropriation (appropriation without equivalent or reciprocity) of the ‘free gifts of Nature to capital’ to be found in their territories, along with the ecological costs of extraction.”¹

It is very convenient for richer countries to maintain a system of industrial extractivism in the South. That way, they secure prime access to the minerals necessary for capitalism to green itself, without hurting the chances of the same old corporations to enrich their shareholders through access to oil and other nonrenewable sources of fuel. Both dirty and “green” capitalism are sustained. This is why it is common for countries in Latin America to feel pressured to privatize national energy and oil companies, and to allow foreign mining in

their territory. Because U.S. support for coups in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil is connected to access to natural resources in the region, it is no wonder that Jair Bolsonaro is now in power, and that the Brazilian national oil company, Petrobras, is at risk of falling further into the hands of private capital. This makes Brazil a key area of focus, and one that highlights the importance of the country’s radical ecological movement.

Brazil: Authoritarianism at the Service of Ecological Imperialism

The case of Brazil under Bolsonaro helps to illustrate how authoritarian governments in the Global South see ecological concerns as impediments to capitalist growth. It is symbolic of how the Latin American right wing has no project of development in the region and would rather cut deals with foreign capital to ensure the local elites get rich while multinational corporations and financial institutions get even richer. Recent leftist experiences in Latin America, known as the Pink Tide, focused on resource extraction in partnership with the capitalist class as part of their developmentalist perspective. An authoritarian far-right government like Brazil’s, however, is willing to go to extremes in the destruction of nature to ensure record-high growth for agribusiness and access to sacred indigenous territory for mining companies, with no regard for local consequences.

Bolsonaro has shown willingness to bend rules, change laws, and remove legal enforcement and accountability measures, as well as facilitate access to land and biomes as natural resources to be exploited by foreign companies. Moreover, Bolsonaro’s approach has been defined by disregard for violence against indigenous and traditional communities, easier access to arms for illegal miners and large landowners, criminalization of social movements and environmentalists, and a push toward industrial extractivism with foreign participation.

Bolsonaro was elected in 2018 after a period of renewed anti-leftism in Brazil, which also contributed to the U.S.-backed coup against the government of Dilma Rousseff and the undue and illegal conviction of former president Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva. Lula was Bolsonaro’s main adversary, and without him in the race, the path trailed by *bolsonarismo* to the presidential office became easier. Since his election, the quality of life of Brazilians has decreased. The liberal right supported Bolsonaro for his commitment to the same austerity measures that currently strangle social programs and impact the state’s capacity to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Brazil was already in an economic crisis prior to the pandemic, and the recovery has been slow, with high unemployment rates and large numbers of Brazilians trying to make ends meet with low-level informal jobs. Widespread hunger is back, and food insecurity is now part of the daily life of half of the population. The destruction of nature adds to this scenario, which is sometimes perceived as a matter of Bolsonaro’s “incompetence”—as if he lacked only the ability and intelligence to run a country like Brazil. This reasoning, however, distracts us from drawing the conclusion that the apparent disregard for lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, high rates of deforestation, and the continuing problems with violence in Brazil are part and parcel to the political project led by *bolsonarismo*. It is about ensuring that the state serves, as much as possible, as a facilitator to local and foreign capital, while Bolsonaro’s base relies on him to promote conservative values and measures. For this task, the robbery of nature is key and the destruction of the livelihoods and culture of the peoples involved in protecting Brazilian biomes becomes a necessary task.

The Bolsonaro government is not simply lazy when it comes to environmental issues; rather, it promotes an openly anti-environmental agenda. During his electoral campaign, Bolsonaro repeated old racist statements about indigenous peoples and

traditional black *quilombola* communities. He also declared that he would not settle any indigenous territorial claims or agree to agrarian reform. This posture attracted support from the large-landowning class, which is also represented in Congress by the *ruralista* caucus. The caucus promotes pro-agribusiness

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policies that relax environmental regulations and facilitate access and usage of dangerous agrochemicals.

Currently, the anti-ecological *bolsonarista* agenda relies on a special tripod of ecological degradation: guns, virus, and soy. If colonialism was built on “Guns, germs and steel”, as Jared Diamond suggests, the far-right has slightly updated the tools for plundering people and nature in the 21st Century. The first of these is seen in the use of violence, a disregard for workers’ lives, the criminalization of struggle, and the role the military has played in the government, as well as Bolsonaro’s efforts to facilitate gun ownership. During the pandemic, Bolsonaro issued presidential decrees that relaxed gun controls and facilitated access to firearms. A sport shooter can now own up to sixty firearms, and a hunter thirty. Bolsonaro’s decrees would also permit teenagers 14 years and older to shoot firearms in a sporting context, and individuals to carry up to two guns. In the end, these latter initiatives were vetoed by the judiciary because they go against the Brazilian Disarmament Statute.²

But Bolsonaro’s pro-gun ideology goes beyond placing firearms in the hands of in-

dividuals in a country where gun violence is already alarming. It promotes the militarization of everyday life, with support for police violence, more arrests, and increasing rates of imprisonment in inhumane conditions, all under the motto that “a good criminal is a dead criminal.” The Armed Forces are well entrenched within the Bolsonaro government, leaving open the question of whether they are part of the coup that already took place in 2016, or might participate in another yet to come. This has awakened complicated narratives around democracy and authoritarianism. Brazil still mourns the period of the military dictatorship, but the Bolsonaro government brought back a discourse that praises torture and censorship, while promoting historical revisionism by referring to the 1964 coup as a revolution.

The presence of the armed forces in government runs as deep as the Ministry of Health. General Eduardo Pazuello, who was minister of health between May 2020 and March 2021, helped to promote pandemic denialism, discredited medical approaches, and slow and contradictory action on vaccine purchases. Generally, the federal government has taken little to no action when it comes to actually fighting the pandemic. It is only now, in April 2021, pursuing vaccination, and Bolsonaro continues to blame governors and mayors for getting in his way, even though vaccine, where it is available, has arrived only on account of autonomous action by those same governors and mayors.

The “virus” in the tripod mentioned above is, of course, COVID-19. Its role emerges clearly in the argument by Ricardo Salles, Bolsonaro’s minister of the environment, that the government should take advantage of everyone’s “distraction” by the pandemic to impose the destructive *bolsonarista* agenda. By the end of April 2021, Brazil had surpassed four hundred thousand official COVID-19-related deaths, with no serious effort by the federal government to turn the situation around. On the contrary, Bolsonaro

laughs at accusations of genocide and the instrumentalization of necropolitical power by his government, encourages anti-vaccine and anti-mask behavior, and has managed to sustain, somewhat successfully, the myth that a lockdown would hurt workers, thus relieving himself of the responsibility of providing for the people during periods of intense social distancing. Indeed, the pandemic has been a fruitful scenario for Bolsonaro in which he can advance his agenda without fear of a response in the form of mass mobilizations.

Minister Salles, who was handpicked by Bolsonaro, took leadership of the ministry in spite of his conviction on counts of environmental fraud during his time as part of the São Paulo state government. Salles’ administration is known for its intimidation tactics against public servants who demonstrate concern for environmental protection, and its concerted efforts to stall crucial remedial action while slashing budgets, including those earmarked for the fight against climate change. Salles is now under investigation for alleged links to a scheme involving millions of dollars of illegally sourced wood. Together, Salles and Bolsonaro endeavor to promote lies about their environmental record to international audiences, at the same time that they continue to dismantle environmental protections. In an April 2021 speech at Joe Biden’s climate summit, Bolsonaro pledged to make Brazil carbon neutral by 2050, coinciding with a request from Salles for \$1 billion a year in foreign aid to protect the environment. Yet at the time, four hundred employees of the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), had already denounced Salles for freezing all action connected to environmental law enforcement at the agency. It is not uncommon for Bolsonaro to lie at such events, and in the past, he has even claimed that the bad press his government receives on environmental issues is itself the result of lies by NGOs and environmentalists that want to attract foreign funding for themselves.

There is also what can be called “the Bolsonaro effect” on nature. Ever since he took power, his anti-environmental agenda has signaled to illegal miners and landowners that environmental crimes will not be taken seriously. This has led to an increase in deforestation by 222 percent between 2018 and 2019, and crises such as the fire in the Amazon in 2019 (which began with a “day of fire” celebrated by Bolsonaro supporters), and a loss of 30 percent of the world’s largest tropical wetland area, the Pantanal, in 2020, under similar circumstances. Registered cases of violence against indigenous communities also doubled between 2018 and 2019.

This adds an important layer of context to the great growth and profit experienced by agribusiness in Brazil between 2020 and 2021. Here, the last element in the tripod, “soy,” represents not only the country’s most exported commodity, but also the key role played by extractive industry in transferring natural goods from Latin America to richer countries. Agribusiness is doing quite well in Brazil. The country’s gross domestic product from agribusiness reached a record high of 24.31 percent growth in 2020, a year that also saw record growth in the sale of coffee, cacao, and sugarcane. Soy is the most exported good, and it also generates the most wealth for Brazilian agribusiness.³ But soy and other crops are grown with extreme quantities of agrochemicals; Russia, for one, has recently complained about the level of glyphosate in the soy it has imported from Brazil.⁴ It is estimated that 20 percent of the soy grown in regions of Amazonia and the Cerrado come from deforested areas.⁵

When soy is exported in bulk to satisfy the wants of agribusiness and the financial market, the super exploitation of labor in the Global South is accompanied by an unequal ecological exchange: the depletion of freshwater and soil nutrition, deforestation, and threats to indigenous territories. This combination of effects ensures that Brazil plays a key role in the global commodity chain, which has

long contributed to the transfer of raw materials (natural wealth) from poor countries to rich ones.⁶ If gold taken from Latin America and Africa during colonization ended up in bank vaults and churches in Europe, today soy from Brazil feeds livestock in China and the European Union, while lithium from Chile and nickel and cobalt from Brazil are used for renewable technologies in the United States, which continues to import petroleum from Ecuador to maintain its growing demand for energy and other resources.

These three elements—guns, virus, and soy—comprise the tripod of ecological degradation under Bolsonaro, and are the logical outcome of a doctrine that treats commodity exports and foreign ownership of natural resources as signs of development. Nature is only valued in the form of natural resources, and if it is to be valued in conservation, then it is up to the population (and corporations!) to join “adopt a park” programs and other initiatives that shift the responsibility from the state to individuals and the market. The other option is to request millionaire donations from other states, in exchange for “conservation,” but there is little chance that these conservation funds will translate into concrete, responsible action by the Ministry of the Environment. Like the elements of colonialism embodied in the “guns, germs, and steel” tripod, Bolsonaro’s project is about controlling the population, eliminating resistance, and reaping as much from nature as possible.

Anti-imperialism from the South to the North

The rise of the far right has mobilized individuals and organizations throughout the world to show support for the opposition in the countries affected. But besides keeping informed about what happens under right-wing governments such as Sebastián Piñera’s government in Chile, Bolsonaro’s in Brazil, and Rodrigo Duterte’s in the Philippines,

it is of crucial importance that those living in richer countries and the so-called liberal democracies understand and denounce the ideological and economic linkages between authoritarian governments that act against the interests of people and nature.

One example is seen in the case of the Amazon rainforest. Currently, large portions of the Brazilian Amazon are under threat from fires, illegal logging, and general deforestation. It is common knowledge that while this problem has been created in Brazil, it has global consequences. The Amazonian rainforest is not only a key center of biodiversity, but influences climate patterns across the continent. Forest loss is directly correlated with the intensification of climate change. Thus, we routinely encounter international calls to save or protect the Amazon. The majority of these calls are well intended and reflect a deep concern not only for global climate consequences but also for the ways attacks on the Amazon simultaneously target indigenous and traditional communities in the region. The problem occurs when approaches aimed at identifying the root cause of forest loss tend to single out local governments, ignoring the ways that the Bolsonaro government is not simply anti-ecological, but also tied to a network of powerful actors—local and abroad—that stand to gain from deforestation.

It is easy to pigeonhole environmental struggles in the Global South as the results of bad electoral choices or mistaken ideas about development, but when we connect this widespread destruction to extractivism and commodity creation as dynamics of dependency rooted in capitalism, the responsibility of countries at the center of capitalism becomes clearer.

Scholars Arghiri Emmanuel and Samir Amin helped to popularize the theory of unequal ecological exchange in the 1970s, although its underpinnings can be also found in Karl Marx's discussion of agriculture and soil fertility. When taken into account, it re-

quires that we examine the flow of materials behind something as simple as a particular pattern of deforestation. If there is illegal logging, where do the logs go? If forest loss is due to mining, where are these minerals sent, and where do they gain industrial value before their by-products are sold at a much higher price back to underdeveloped countries? When forests burn to make room for soy monocrops that will be exported to feed livestock elsewhere, how do we consider the many local losses that compound the global ecological crisis? It seems that when losses are both local and global, the interests of ecological imperialism—which is truly anti-ecological—have a way of impacting the most vulnerable everywhere, be it in the center or at the margins of capitalism.

Although work on unequal ecological exchange (also called ecologically unequal exchange) tends to also look for calculations of such unequal transfers, when it comes to matters such as biodiversity loss or impacts on a biome that cannot be easily reversed, it is much harder to quantify. Nonetheless, there are ways of assessing the magnitude of the impact. This level of loss constitutes what Karl Marx called an “irreparable rift” in “social metabolism” in relation to nature, a tendency toward a “metabolic rift” that is central to the capitalist mode of production and its accompanying system of extractive practices around nature that treats natural elements simply as “free gifts.”⁷ Therefore, we are dealing not only with a system that takes from nature at rates and amounts higher than it is possible to give back, but one that translates what it takes away into a chain of value that is organized according to patterns of development, the international division of labor, and colonialism.

This ecological imbalance has a fundamental relationship to the economic inequalities that surround exchanges between countries. As the Amazon is destroyed, it is not enough to simply look at Bolsonaro and hope that the Brazilian people choose differ-

ently (and are allowed to do so) in the next elections. It is also definitely one-sided to assume the best approach would be to simply impose sanctions on Brazilian businesses (as involved as they may be in environmental destruction), especially if one does not take into consideration the flow of goods that create an international market so compelling for Brazilian agribusiness that large landowners are willing to burn forests, drench crops in agrochemicals, and even murder indigenous leaders and environmentalists to gain access to territory. Approaches that locate responsibility only locally neglect the role unequal ecological exchange plays in the destruction of one place as a means to meet demands in another. They also tend to neglect the ways imperialist influence is responsible for many of the destructive dealings in the Global South.

The support Bolsonaro received for his association with Donald Trump contributed to the Bolsonaro effect; indeed, Brazil's current inaction on climate change was modeled after Trump's own climate denialism. In fact, Ernesto Araújo, who was foreign minister under Bolsonaro until March 2021, would promote conspiracy theories about globalism and "cultural Marxism," among other narratives that would together indicate the government's subordination to Trump and rejection of international accountability.⁸ In 2019, Brazil's minister of mining and energy traveled abroad to attract the interest of foreign companies, and Brazil even sponsored an annual fair hosted by the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada.⁹ Canadian mining companies are known for the scale of their operations in Latin America, including Brazil. In fact, Canada's Belo Sun is among the companies to benefit from Bolsonaro's intervention to permit gold mining in indigenous territories.¹⁰ The success of these Canadian companies abroad is also due to support by the Canadian state, helping to facilitate investment and navigate spaces of political opposition to predatory mining.¹¹

And when it comes to oil, imperialist influence is transparent. There is documentation of the involvement of the U.S. Department of Justice in the Operation Car Wash (Operação Lava Jato) investigation in Brazil, which began in 2014 and would ultimately undermine the operations of Petrobras, the national oil company, as well as lead to the undue prosecution, condemnation, and imprisonment of former president Lula.¹²

Even China needs to be considered for the role it played in the decline of natural wealth in Latin America; for while its demand for Brazilian commodities (including in the energy sector) may not follow the interventionist approach of Western imperialism, it nevertheless contributes to a pattern of unequal ecological exchange.¹³ Add to this the presence of multiple tools of financialization in Brazil's commodity sector—from futures trading to investment packages that can generate rewards from crops grown in stolen land—and the complexity of connections that sustain the web of ecological destruction in the Global South becomes close to overwhelming. This is why it is so important for anti-imperialist efforts to not only be rooted in the affected countries, but also to extend to the places where large corporations and imperialist states orchestrate these profitable initiatives.

In the United States, this demonstrates the limitations of calls for a Green New Deal, so long as they remain constrained to its borders. It is unacceptable—politically or ecologically—to promote transitions away from carbon in one place while its economy continues to fund the destruction of nature elsewhere. Worse yet, what can be said for dreams of a solar-powered society in Europe when the mineral components for panels and batteries are extracted from Africa and Latin America? When ecological imperialism and unequal ecological exchange are taken into consideration, it is impossible to deny that any legitimate concern for what right-wing governments such as Bolsonaro's are doing

in their countries also requires an inward examination of the demand for raw materials and the foreign policies of the Global North. Thus, it becomes essential that people in the Global North examine the role of their governments and local corporations in the destruction of other ecosystems, and also how aspirations toward an “imperial mode of living”¹⁴ in the North are sustained by unequal ecological exchange.

The center-periphery system determines where wealth and impact concentrate in the world; and for a very long time, the development of the richer countries has meant that underdevelopment and high costs are borne by poor countries. A consideration of these forces has to take ecology into account, all the more so when it comes to those involved in discussions and actions surrounding ecological transition. When a country like Brazil, whose territory is key to the recuperation of ecological losses, is devastated by an anti-environmental far-right government, analyses and political proposals need to include those who have benefited (and stand to benefit even more) from this destruction. It means, ultimately, that ecological transition demands we adopt the vantage of the South. Such a perspective must posit alternatives to development that break the dynamic of unequal ecological exchange and challenge the way ecological imperialism takes resources, both for “business as usual” and to green part of the world at the expense of another.

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Perspectives on the DSA Convention

ANDREW SERNATINGER

EDITORIAL NOTE: *We will be publishing further commentary and other perspectives on the Democratic Socialists of America on our website, both before and after the organization's online national convention at the beginning of August.*

THE 2021 DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS of America (DSA) Convention, scheduled to take place online from August 1 to 8, will be the third convention since the organization's rebirth and massive growth in 2016. (Revealingly, between 2013 and 2017 the median age of DSA membership dropped from 68 to 33.)¹ After a year that has seen the COVID-19 pandemic, a presidential election, and a national uprising against racism, what's at stake at this convention? I'll give a little history and context, and then lay out my perspective on several important dynamics.

The Ghost of Conventions Past

A first convention in 2017 had the enthusiasm of a group of people finding each other—delegates at that time refashioned parts of the organization that were unsuitable to the emerging new socialists, voting to leave the Socialist International, ending the positions of honorary chairs, and embracing Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) tactics in support

of Palestinian liberation.

In 2019, two issues framed the convention: the centralization-versus-decentralization conflict around the distribution of DSA resources and role of the national organization, and DSA's relationship to elections. For the former, the result was status quo. Most of the organizational changes that made it to the convention were either voted down or shelved—the bulk of bylaw changes to the structure of DSA were placed at the end of the convention agenda and were not heard for lack of time. (Thirteen proposals for bylaw/constitution changes were “referred” and never taken up.) The most polarizing issue was over distribution of funds in a proposal that would give a flat stipend to every chapter regardless of size (“Pass the Hat”), which split the delegates but ultimately failed.

Electorally, the new experiences with socialist electoral campaigns, particularly the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the so-called Squad to the U.S. House of Representatives, left a lot of questions about how DSA should position itself toward electoral campaigns, and its vision for political parties. The convention passed two resolutions that gave political direction: R15, stating that the DSA would not endorse any Democrat other than Bernie Sanders in the 2020 election; and R31, “Class Struggle Elections,” framing how socialists should relate to elections in the here and now while affirming the intention to build an independent workers' party. Importantly, R31 abstained from setting hard limits or introducing binding criteria at either the chapter or national organizational level.

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A Different Political Conjuncture

Things are different today than they were at the last two conventions. The organization is nearly five times as large as it was in 2017. DSA has “matured,” with an established operation and a “DSA way of doing things” that’s identifiable in its own right.

The backdrop for the last two DSA conventions was resistance to Donald Trump and the anticipation of a second Sanders campaign. The “big tent” in DSA could coexist in light of broad agreements on the importance of the Trump moment and the Sanders campaign. The particulars of those agreements have been in constant negotiation, but at the end of the day, socialists in DSA could belong to the same organization because there was a kind of external regulation that helped it come together. In 2021, that is gone: Trump is no longer president. Sanders lost. In the Biden era, what is DSA?

Politically, that is *the* question of the 2021 DSA Convention. Until now, DSA has operated in a context where Republicans dominated the federal government and activists took a largely defensive posture, rejecting the political agenda coming down from the top. In a peculiar way, that was a favorable set of circumstances for the formation of a young socialist organization because the lure of reform and “power” was largely absent. Now, with Joe Biden in office—rejecting any move to defund police, dangling a few carrots, and with the general support of the new left electeds like Ocasio-Cortez—all of these questions about the Democratic Party and the capitalist state are very much alive.

There is now enough history to start evaluating the performance of politicians in DSA’s orbit, the method of campaigning used by DSA chapters, and progress made on developing independent institutions. It’s just that there isn’t a consensus on how DSA members think that’s shaken out. This plays out in a few arenas: what standards DSA uses to endorse candidates, who has to abide

by them (only those candidates who want a national endorsement, or local ones too?), and what our general perspective is toward the Democratic Party.

On this last question, there’s been a shift in DSA’s theoretical leanings—or at least, those of its leadership and functionaries.² The “dirty break”³ seemed to hit its high-water mark at the beginning of 2020, and many of its advocates are now walking back their positions,⁴ or even embracing lesser-evilism.⁵ The revisions have led to an indefinite deferral of the question of the break, if not outright hostility.⁶ The Bread and Roses caucus, which was the major proponent of the dirty break, now largely seems to agree with its previous opponents in the Collective Power Network caucus about what practical activity looks like—namely, in the Democratic Party for the foreseeable future. It’s a significant political shift, largely tied to the new conjuncture.

The question of purpose isn’t limited to electoral politics and the Democrats. In the summer of 2020, the largest sustained protest movement in U.S. history arose following the police murder of George Floyd. Millions of people participated in multiracial protests in nearly every city in the country, as well as many small towns. How does this influence DSA’s political and strategic priorities? Many delegates have been quick to distinguish themselves as pro-Black Lives Matter in response to the prevalence of a kind of “class first” reductionism, but there are relatively few resolutions that raise the question. It’s likely that at least one of the three resolutions advanced (reparations, prison abolition, multiracial organizing) will pass, though it’s less clear how that will shape a *strategic* view about what to prioritize and a theory of change.

A last question concerns the politics of anti-imperialism in DSA. DSA’s politics historically followed social democratic leanings of founding member Michael Harrington: namely, anti-communist opposition to state socialist projects. New DSA members rejected such a conservative approach, but there’s been

a tense battle over direction in DSA's International Committee. The IC was rehabilitated beginning in 2019, with members added by application and appointment. Two questions are being brought to the 2021 convention: (1) that of the structure and democratic functioning of the IC; and (2) that of DSA's internationalist orientation, generally "campist" or "anti-campist", referring to alignment with perceived geopolitical "camps".⁷ This pertains to DSA's view and *organizational relationships* with Latin American "Pink Tide" governments, along with Cuba and Venezuela, and whether or not the organization views China as socialist or as leading an "anti-imperialist" block. Six proposed resolutions address these issues, twice as many as there are resolutions about Black Lives Matter. This would suggest that there's more at stake here than meets the eye.

Caucuses

There's no way to talk about DSA's internal politics without discussing caucuses. Caucuses existed in an infant form in 2017, with the Praxis and Momentum slates, but really established themselves in 2019 in advance of that year's convention: Bread and Roses (B&R), Collective Power Network (CPN), Socialist Majority Caucus (SMC), and Libertarian Socialist Caucus (LSC). Caucuses generally comprise dozens or hundreds of members, and don't come close to representing a plurality of the organization. And yet, caucuses dominate politics in DSA.⁸ How do we make sense of them?

On their own terms, caucuses are said to be political organizations within DSA, uniting members with similar politics and, according to them, raising the level of debate and education in the entire organization. In 2021, this conception appears an idealized one, given that we find the big three caucuses (B&R, CPN, SMC) agreeing with each other on major organizational and strategic questions and proposing multiple joint resolutions

to the convention.

Over the last five years, DSA has grown faster than its supporting infrastructure. For members joining the organization who wanted to navigate DSA locally and especially nationally, caucuses stepped in as mediating organizations. Caucuses have access to information and connections in the organization that can expedite initiatives and guide others who share their sensibilities. This in itself isn't a bad thing. But it poses a problem when this access becomes exclusive and leveraged over those who are not members of caucuses. In the case of the big three, all of them had significant connections to leverage: CPN and SMC were both founded by former DSA national staff members. B&R leaders had a history as DSA members prior to the big bump in 2016, with many of them organized in what was then the Left Caucus. Because DSA doesn't have strong internal mechanisms to help members navigate the organization, this information becomes a prized commodity and gives serious power to the caucuses relative to rank-and-file members.

Caucuses exist to shape the organization and generally aspire to take leadership positions. The big three caucuses have political differences that can be significant, but they all share this orientation and frequently serve together on national leadership bodies. There exists a tension between putting out political positions (which not everyone will agree with) and maintaining power in the organization. Most caucuses seem to have resolved this in favor of the latter—often it's hard to tell what the caucuses think because they don't come right out and say it. Caucus publications are sporadic and often don't address substantive issues. Most major DSA chapters are dominated by one caucus,⁹ though sometimes a second one is present. Often, they write the rules to keep themselves in power.

Caucuses aren't going away, and they'll continue to play an outsize role in determining the politics of DSA. They have tended to operate primarily as permanent leadership

vehicles rather than political bodies, primarily leveraging their connections and hoarding information rather than acting to clarify political positions and introduce serious debate—most of the decisions in DSA are made by leadership bodies, and whatever debates happen there don't reach the membership.

Organizational Democracy

This raises questions of organizational democracy. DSA's structure has not been reformed since its growth in 2016, with the original Harringtonite model left intact. The 2019 convention passed more resolutions than DSA could act on, and all the decisions about what happens next go to the National Political Committee. What goes on in the NPC is incredibly opaque, and it's often led to cynicism among members about the relevance of national DSA in light of two prior conventions where proposals that were voted up have had no movement. An indication of this may be that only half as many resolutions have been submitted in 2021 (38) compared to 2019 (85), and only a third as many bylaw/constitution changes. DSA produces little in the way of reports or evaluations, and where they do appear there aren't mechanisms for members to determine new policy nationally. From the perspective of most members, the national and local may as well be on different planets.

The 2021 convention will have to take up the question of how members can participate in the national organization and the question of enforcing decisions that are made democratically. Most members have learned that what happens at the national level is not determined by them and largely won't affect them, so they've divested. The only way to reverse that sentiment is to give them ownership of what happens. There are proposals for establishing intermediary bodies between the local and national levels, for creating a binding national referendum process, for standardizing election procedures, and

for considering the role of staff by electing the national director (a position now held by Maria Svart). There are only eight proposed bylaw changes this year, so it's unlikely that they'll be shelved again. We'll see which, if any, changes are made.

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Twenty-First-Century Fascism: Where We Are

ENZO TRAVERSO

OVER THE PAST DECADE, the world experienced a surge in far-right movements. The ghosts of the 1930s seemed to be reawakening and a neo- or post-fascist wave extending its shadow over multiple continents. It reached its peak between 2016 and 2018, with the elections of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in the United States and Brazil and, in between, the clash between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron in France. Many far-right parties entered EU governments, and some “exceptions” came to an end, with the appearance of *Alternative für Deutschland* and *Vox* on the stage of German and Spanish politics, and the expansion of Italy’s *Lega Nord* under Matteo Salvini. Authoritarian, nationalist, and xenophobic governments emerged everywhere, from Vladimir Putin’s Russia to Narendra Modi’s India and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey. The world was turning dark: neofascism, post-fascism, right-wing populism? The debate over what to call it remained open, but everyone understood that fascism was now more than a realm of historical scholarship; it was once again a question on the contemporary agenda.

Most observers, including me, thought that a new economic crisis would dramati-

cally accelerate this general tendency, and that we should be prepared for a horrible new scenario. The crisis took place: since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the planet into a global recession. But at the same time—thankfully—our calamitous diagnostic did not prevail. Of course, we remain in the middle of a global crisis, far-right movements have not disappeared, and several outcomes are still possible. Nonetheless, it is now clear that the seemingly inexorable dynamic of fascization has experienced a significant setback. The most evident sign of this change came with Trump’s defeat in November 2020.

If we look at this heterogeneous and contradictory landscape from a general perspective, not limited to a single country, the pandemic appears as the matrix of two global tendencies: a biopolitical turn and a potentially authoritarian turn. While speaking of a matrix is probably inappropriate, since these tendencies certainly preexisted, there is no doubt that the pandemic powerfully increased and accelerated them. The biopolitical turn is quite evident to everyone: governments enormously developed their control on populations, taking care of our lives—literally our physical bodies—as biological objects to be managed and protected. The future of the global economy depends on the effectiveness of these health policies, first among them a quick, large, and effective vaccination campaign. We support or criticize our governments according to their capacity to implement these health policies. But there

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is a second dimension of the problem, one that affects us no longer as biopolitical objects but rather as juridical and political subjects, as citizens.

This second dimension is a potentially authoritarian turn that lies in the transformation of our governments into “states of exception,” into political powers that radically limit our public and individual liberties. Of course, we accept lockdowns and restrictions ordered in the name of collective safety, but we gradually realize that these policies are changing our lifestyles, our ways of working, our forms of socialization and interaction, and that they are dramatically increasing the class differences of our societies. It is not true that we are equal in the face of the virus, since we are selectively exposed to it according to our social and economic status, and also according to our national belonging. There is no doubt that the global South is much more affected by the pandemic. This means growing inequalities at every level, and more inequalities, in turn, mean more authoritarian powers. In China, the pandemic was neutralized through despotic measures worthy of Orwellian rule. In several European countries, lockdowns and restrictions were introduced by applying anti-terrorist laws and corresponded with a significant increase in police violence.

In such a context, far-right movements may appear as good candidates to lead the authoritarian turn toward the state of exception. But, crucially, they do not offer any serious credentials to manage the biopolitical turn. As “good shepherds,” Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Le Pen and Salvini are not credible at all. In the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s terms, one could say that nobody looks at them as the embodiment of an effective “pastoral power.” This is a significant difference between the current far-right movements and classical fascism, and this goes far beyond many other cleavages related to our different historical contexts. In the 1930s, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and Francisco Franco promised a future and appeared as an effective

answer to the economic depression against exhausted liberal democracies that embodied, in the eyes of many people, the vestiges of a collapsed political order. Of course, this was a dangerous illusion—the effort to end unemployment by rearming and waging war led to catastrophe—but until the Second World War, their propaganda worked well enough.

This is not the case of their heirs. Trump’s, Bolsonaro’s, Modi’s, Le Pen’s, and Salvini’s answers to the pandemic consisted simply of denial, incomprehension, incompetence, and inefficiency. The first year of pandemic expanded the awareness that we are facing a global emergency requiring global answers. The traditional far-right recipes—nationalism, a return to conservative values and to national sovereignty, and the search for scapegoats—did not work at all. In Italy, Salvini, the charismatic leader of the nationalist and xenophobic Lega, had become used to organizing mass meetings at which he denounced the terrible diseases afflicting his country: immigrants, refugees, and of course Islam. Preaching hate had proven quite a popular exercise, and he topped the polls. A few months into the pandemic, however, when the country was the epicenter of the European outbreak and hospitals were overwhelmed, people heaped praise on the Albanian, Tunisian, and Chinese doctors and nurses who came to help their Italian colleagues.

This is the sign of a setback, not of a defeat or an irreversible decline. We are in the middle of a transitional process whose outcomes are still unknown and remain open: either a twenty-first century New Deal able to face climate change and to reverse the transformations produced by forty years of neoliberalism, or a far-right turn that will throw our planet toward predicted catastrophe. In the present context, both outcomes are perfectly possible.

In the twentieth century, fascism was a project of “regenerating” the nation, which it viewed as a homogeneous ethnic and racial

community. If this is the core of fascism, it would not be wrong to define the current far-right movements, despite so many obvious differences, as the inheritors of classical fascism. Of course, the fascist lexicon has changed, and its “imagined community” possesses new features, or rather new myths. It designates a supposedly original purity to be defended or reestablished against its enemies: immigration (“the great replacement”), anti-white racial invasions, feminist and LGBTQI corruption of traditional values, Islam and its agents (terrorism and “Islamic leftism”), and so on. The premises for the emergence of this neofascist wave lie in the crisis of hegemony of the global elites, whose ruling tools, inherited from the old nation-states, appear obsolete and increasingly ineffective. As the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci explained, revisiting Niccolò Machiavelli, domination is a combination of repressive apparatuses and cultural hegemony that allows a political regime to appear as legitimate and beneficial, rather than tyrannical and oppressive. After several decades of neoliberal policies, the ruling classes have enormously developed their wealth and power, but they have also undergone a significant loss of legitimacy and cultural hegemony. These are the premises for the rise of neo- or post-fascism: on the one hand, the growing “descent into savagery” of the ruling classes and, on the other, the general authoritarian tendencies that their domination engenders.

A definition of fascism as a project of “regenerating” the nation grasps a fundamental element of historical continuity, but it is probably insufficient. Viewed through historical lenses, fascism was more than a form of radical nationalism and a racist idea of the nation. It was also a practice of political violence, a militant anti-communism, and a complete destruction of democracy. Violence, especially directed against the left and communism, was the privileged form of its political action, and wherever it came to power—either legally, as in Italy and Germany, or through a military

putsch, as in Spain—it destroyed democracy. From this point of view, the new movements on the radical right have a different relationship with both violence and democracy. If they pretend to defend “the people” against the elites and to reestablish order, they do not wish to create a new political order. In Europe, they are more interested in implementing authoritarian and nationalist tendencies within the EU than they are in destroying its institutions. This is the posture of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland, as well as of Le Pen and Salvini in France and Italy—two leaders who ultimately accepted the euro. The Italian Lega recently entered a coalition government led by former European Central Bank director Mario Draghi, a figurehead of neoliberalism and the financial elites. In India, Brazil, and the United States, extreme-right leaders came to power and developed authoritarian and xenophobic tendencies without calling into question the institutional framework of their states. Not only were Bolsonaro and Trump unable to dissolve parliament; they finished (or are finishing) their mandates facing several impeachment procedures.

The case of Trump, the most widely discussed in recent months, is particularly instructive. His fascist trajectory appeared clearly at the end of his presidency, when he refused to admit defeat and tried to invalidate the election result. But the folkloric “insurrection” of his partisans who invaded the Capitol was not a failed fascist coup; it was instead a desperate attempt to invalidate an election by a leader who had certainly broken with the most elementary rules of democracy—which makes it possible to depict him as a fascist—but was unable to indicate a political alternative. No doubt, Franco and Pinochet would have considered the “uprising” of January 6 as the undertaking of pitiful amateurs. The Capitol events incontestably revealed the existence of a mass fascist movement in the United States—and further, a fascist movement organized through a network of

armed militias. Nonetheless, this movement remains a long way from conquering power, and its immediate consequence was putting the Republican Party into a deep crisis. Trump had won the elections in 2016 as a candidate for that party: a coalition of economic elites, upper-middle classes interested in tax cuts, defenders of conservative values, Christian fundamentalists, and impoverished white popular classes attracted by a protest vote. This coalition can certainly be re-created.

As the fascist leader of a movement of white supremacists and reactionary nationalists, however, Trump does not stand much chance of being reelected. Moreover, the fascist movement behind him should be understood in its proper context. As opposed to the fascist militia in Italy (the Blackshirts) in 1920–25 or the Nazi SA in 1930–33, which expressed the fall of the state monopoly over violence in postwar Italy and Germany respectively, the Trump militias are a poisoned legacy of American history, the history of a country in which individual weapons are considered as a feature of political freedom. As frightening as it can be, this is not the sign of a collapsing state. In the 1930s, the European industrial, financial, and military elites supported fascism as a solution to endemic political crises, institutional paralysis, and, above all, as a defense against Bolshevism. Today, they support neoliberalism. In the United States, the “establishment” can support the Republican Party as a customary alternative to the Democratic Party, but the Pentagon would never endorse a putsch of white supremacists to impede Joe Biden’s election to the executive. In Europe, the establishment is embodied by the EU and firmly opposes all those populist, nationalist, and post-fascist movements that claim a return to “national sovereignties.”

Classical fascism was born on a continent

devastated by total war and grew up in a climate of civil wars, within states deeply unsettled and institutionally paralyzed by sharp political conflicts. Its radicalism came out of a confrontation with Bolshevism, which gave it its “revolutionary” character. Fascism was a utopian ideology and imaginary, which created the myth of the “new man” and national greatness. The new far-right movements lack all these premises: they come out of a crisis of hegemony that cannot be compared with the European collapse of the 1930s; their radicalism contains nothing “revolutionary”; and their conservatism—a defense of traditional values, traditional cultures, threatened “national identities,” and a bourgeois respectability opposed to sexual “deviancies”—does not possess the idea of futurity that so deeply shaped fascist ideologies and utopias. This is why it seems to me more appropriate to depict them as post-fascist rather than neofascist.

Does this mean that there is no fascist danger? Not at all. Indeed, looking at the present with a historical lens, this possibility cannot be excluded. The dramatic rise of far-right movements, parties, and governments clearly shows that fascism can become an alternative. But while the possibility of a new post-fascist age certainly remains, it is important to note that the economic crisis engendered by the pandemic did not reinforce it. The far-right pretension to embody an “anti-systemic” alternative, therefore, probably appears less convincing today than it did five years ago. In the last analysis, however, the future of the radical right movements will not depend exclusively on their own internal evolution, ideological orientation, and strategic choices; nor will it depend on the support they could get from the global elites. In the end, it will depend on the capacity of the left to sketch an alternative.

Can a Disoriented Storming of the Center Lead to Organizational Maturity?

CIHAN TUĞAL

WHY WAS THE AMERICAN FAR RIGHT, the least organized among advanced capitalist nations, able to mount the (apparently) most threatening attack on the institutions of liberal democracy? The European far right, after decades of organization and ideological development, could not have even dreamt of storming a parliament in any Western European nation. How was this possible in a heavily weaponized and surveilled Washington, DC?

The ability of movements to impact institutions usually depends on their resources, organization, networks, and ideological coherence or motivation. With the possible exception of networks, the American far right had the least of these when compared to their European counterparts.

Was the American far right's apparent success the result of a possible Trump effect? No post-1945 Western democracy has so far witnessed four years of presidency by an allegedly far-right figure. His support might have changed the dynamics, and organized an erstwhile scattered and incoherent far right.

I will evaluate whether the far right is undergoing a radical change later in the essay,

but it was not the transformation of the far right that made the Capitol invasion possible. The far right's (so far lacking) organizational or strategic wisdom was not a factor in this drama. Certainly, there was a lot of planning in the lead-up to the insurrection.¹ But, concocted as it was by dispersed, organizationally inexperienced groups and individuals, that planning could never amount to a Trumpist coup. One of the most interesting details about the invasion is that some top leaders of the far right sat it out. Along with Trump himself, *InfoWars* host Alex Jones, white nationalist podcaster Nicholas Fuentes, and far-right personality Ali Alexander incited the invasion and helped organize the march to the Congress, but all refrained from entering the building.² This suggests that these figures meant the invasion to be a show of force, a warning shot, without really believing it would result in a usurpation of power. The question is not so much what this invasion did for the far right in January 2021, but what it will do for it in the coming months and years.

Decaying Institutions

Collaboration by institutions—not far-right organization, ideology, or strategy—is the most immediate cause of the Capitol siege. This collaboration was spurred by the growth and weakness of the American left,³ and the ease with which Republicans could falsely frame the increasing visibility of Black Lives

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Matter (BLM), Antifa, and Bernie Sanders as “impending socialism.” Even though American far rightists are under-organized and dispersed, they are well funded; they are also egged on by institutions, and build on a fear of the left shared across the liberal-conservative divide.

These factors both enabled and crippled the far right under the Trump presidency: the same factors that permitted the institutions to open the doors of the Capitol to the far right perpetuated the latter’s lack of organization and vision, and intensified its already-existing adventurism. Far rightists didn’t even feel the need to build organization, ideology, or strategy, given how much influence they were able to yield during these four years in the absence thereof—a fact that further reinforced their disregard for organization and ideology. (And, as I discuss below, it is exactly this calculus that might be changing.)

We should underline the following, again and again: such adventurism could not have

come anywhere near even a public “spectacle” or “farce” (as an editorial in one left-wing journal called it),⁴ had the institutions not allowed it. The Capitol siege was more a sign of decaying institutions than of radical right-wing prowess.

How did institutions collaborate? All the intelligence and repressive apparatuses of the state were aware that far rightists were geared up and ready for violent action. They paraded, with arms, for several weeks before the invasion. It had been clear that the police forces would be overwhelmed on the day of the vote count. For example, the municipal DC police (not the Capitol police) had already been swamped by armed protestors during protests in November and December.⁵ Despite this accumulating knowledge and awareness, no action was taken to prevent the violent protestors at the gates.

Police officers, most of whom fought the invaders outside the building (i.e., in the presence of mass media), fraternized with them

once they were inside. Police officers let the invaders steal some senators' files. Fraternalists included even officers who were hurt or injured. Even though many soldiers individually participated in the Capitol siege, we cannot say that the military, as an institution, shares the stance of the American far right in the same way. The collaboration by the police forces, therefore, is much more explicit, and presumably based on some shared ideology.

The game changer, however, was the inaction of repressive institutions that are perceived to be more centrist (such as the military), or even occasionally closer to conservative Democrats (such as the FBI). The inaction of the repressive and intelligence institutions cannot be explained away as incompetence; indeed, we know from the BLM protests how willing and "competent" they can be. It is quite unlikely that intelligence is trailing behind in monitoring the plans, intentions, and activities of the far right: there is every indication that the FBI and other agencies have deeply infiltrated all effective movements.⁶ When the repressive apparatus does not prevent something as massive as an invasion of the Congress, therefore, ignorance or incompetence do not constitute full explanations.⁷

In addition to the panic caused by the leftward shift in the political scene, one reason for the unwillingness to intervene was the presence of pro-Trump figures in some key positions. The Pentagon officials who stalled the deployment of the National Guard comprise a mix of Republicans and nonpartisan military commanders.⁸ So, the inaction during the Capitol siege was not a party, but a "state" indecisiveness. During the congressional hearings of March 3, the Pentagon's official explanation regarding restrictions put on the National Guard on January 6 was—wait for it—"lessons learned" from 'May and June 2020,' when the National Guard's heavy-handed response to protests 'drew public concern.'" The American state has effectively declared that it did not crack

down on fascists because its harsh repression of the left had raised eyebrows! In other words, the military's Capitol inaction was, at least partially, an official boycott. It was most probably meant to alert the public that they are needed for democracy's survival. This boycott did not happen out of sympathy with the far right's cause (unlike in the case of police collaboration), but out of the fear that the growing left wave might marginalize them.

In the post-Capitol era, mainstream media have also helped build up a "sense" (rather than an explicit narrative) that repressive apparatuses were too severely criticized throughout the 2020 BLM protests. Security and intelligence forces therefore ended up suffering from undue restrictions, mainstream media argued, which allegedly tied their hands during the Capitol invasion.¹⁰ The handling of both the invasion itself and its aftermath, in short, became the mainstream's weapons against a perceived left-wing threat to institutions.

HOWEVER, THERE ARE SIGNS that the Capitol invasion might change the very dynamics discussed above. The shift from a pro-police to an anti-police stance among some groups, too, hints that the American far right might be at the threshold of a radical transformation.

The latter in itself, to be sure, does not necessarily mean that from now on the far right will be more organized and ideologically

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coherent. But its leaders might draw lessons from the Capitol siege to make such a change possible. The Capitol drama has shown two

things: that the institutions lack the will to weather a right-wing storm; and that in the absence of solid fascist organization, such a storm results in nothing more than chaos. Coupled with a growing anti-police stance, an organizational solidification would herald a new age in the United States.

Reorganization of the Far Right

The rise of the so-called boogaloo movement, which has quite different dynamics than earlier militias,¹¹ attests to the growing anti-systemic sentiment among right-wing activists. The movement derives much of its strength and dynamism from denial: much like left-wing Nazis in the interwar era, and their contemporary counterparts such as the National Bolsheviks in Russia, it diverts attention away from its core agenda by insisting that it is neither on the right nor on the left, but simply against the government and the police. This deflection not only attracts more adherents, but clouds public debate and state

The institutions lack the will to weather a right-wing storm; but in the absence of solid fascist organization, such a storm results in nothing more than chaos.

response. For instance, the Department of Homeland Security backs the self-presentation of the movement,¹² arguing that it is neither leftist nor rightist.

The boogaloo movement is inspired by the paramilitaries of the 1980s, and militias of the 1990s, but its activists find the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, and other patriot militia groups too passive. An observer paraphrases their perception of these other

groups thus: “They just sit around with their guns all the time, acting like they are tough, and they never do anything.”¹³ The boogaloo activists, by contrast, desire to do serious harm to the government, even overthrow it—regardless of who is in office, including Trump.

Boogaloo activists explicitly put on their agenda that they want to harm police officers. In May and June 2020, they killed or aimed to kill police officers in several U.S. towns, but the larger aim of their murders of both civilians and police officers is to incite an all-out civil war.¹⁴ In response, mainstream social media institutions kicked them off of their platforms. While migrating from one social media platform to another, they organized mostly on the anonymous bulletin board site 4chan.

Boogaloo activists joined BLM protests and sought to push them in a violent direction.¹⁵ One might think this was sheer provocation of the kind that had allowed the FBI to sabotage the left in 1968. But the boogaloo activists have a different agenda than former anti-leftists, whether of the civilian or official variety.

The social media channels of the movement have been home to internal debates regarding white supremacy and whether they should support the BLM protests, since the latter are, after all, anti-police protests. Nevertheless, some analysts are quite suspicious of claims (especially those of the leaders) that they stand with the BLM protestors, seeing this as another tactic in the boogaloo activists’ game of deflection.¹⁶ Debates around the intentions of the individuals involved aside, the net effect of the rise of the boogaloo movement has been to pull the American far right in a much more anti-police, oppositional direction. Participation in BLM protests has served not simply to confuse the public regarding its agenda, but as a training ground for armed, mass movement-based anti-government action.

The reorientation of the Proud Boys is also indicative. The Proud Boys were always

more prone to violence than other far-right groups.¹⁷ However, unlike the “boogaloo boys,” they perceived their violent actions as reinforcements of police violence (especially against the radical left), not an alternative to it. This started to change only recently—arguably in December 2020, when the Proud Boys clashed with the police on several occasions.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is too early to tell whether this will turn into a stable, ideological anti-police stance mirroring that of the boogaloo movement.

The Road Ahead

The Capitol invasion might inspire the much more organized and ideologically mature European far right to take similar action, which would have devastating consequences. Copycat actions in European capitals might unfortunately induce more immediate institutional change. As for the United States, we need to carefully follow the broader far right, and see how much the anti-police stance of the boogaloo and the shaky anti-system stance of the Proud Boys will transform the broader culture.

That transformation depends not only on the course of action far right leaders take in the coming era, but also on responses from the Republican Party and the repressive apparatuses of the state. The more establishment conservatives and centrists are mired in a partially irrational fear of impending socialism, the more organized fascism will become. Luckily, the left-wing drift of the Biden administration, though still far short of a New Deal-like transformation, takes the wind from the sails of the far right—albeit in an unexpected way. Ironically, even though a major factor that feeds fascism is the growth of the left, the only sustainable resolution for the Democrats is to double down on their left turn.

Trump came to power by promising high-quality jobs and welfare to the white working-class marginalized by free trade, and

he lost the election when he couldn't deliver. If social movements can push the current administration to live up to its infrastructural, welfare, jobs, minimum wage, and unionization promises, that would prevent the far right from becoming an electoral threat in the foreseeable future. The Republican Party would have to reorient itself to be able to compete in any fair election, and the anti-left bias of the repressive institutions would lose its mainstream legitimacy.

Extremist business families might support fascism even more ferociously in such a scenario. But the mass base of the far right would gradually melt away. Fascism could then only limp, with its left leg seriously crippled. Such a thorough transformation of the United States would highly circumscribe what the far right can accomplish in Europe, too. The radicalization of the Democrats' evolving agenda, therefore, would contribute to preventing fascism's maturation.

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Deplatforming: The Risk of Success

DAVID RENTON

FROM SPRING 2020 ONWARD, anti-fascists secured a series of victories by calling on social media platforms to remove right-wing online platforms. Although this approach has been successful, under circumstances that will be hard to replicate, it also has deep flaws, and reliance on it tends to reinforce unhealthy top-down dynamics within the left.

Let us start, though, with the victories. In a February 2020 article, Shane Burley, one of the sharpest observers of the U.S. right, noted some of the examples that had already taken place. The white nationalist *Daily Shoah* podcast had been removed from Twitter, Facebook, and the iTunes podcast app. The *Daily Stormer*, another neo-Nazi website, was banned by the domain registrars GoDaddy, Google, Namecheap, and Cloudflare. And while the personal YouTube account of alt-right figurehead Richard Spencer was “somehow” still trucking, Burley wrote, it was plainly doomed. (Indeed, his page was taken down just four months later.) “Deplatforming,” Burley wrote, “meaning removing certain figures and groups from the mass platforms that they share with the rest of us, was a death sentence for key players in the Alt Right.”¹

In June 2020, Unilever announced that it would cease to advertise on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, blaming the prevalence of “divisiveness and hate speech” on

these platforms. Over the following weeks, YouTube banned former Klan leader David Duke, while Reddit deleted the user-created board “The Donald.”²

In November 2020, former Trump adviser Steve Bannon called for FBI director Christopher Wray and the infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci to be decapitated and their heads posted outside the White House as a “warning.” In response, Twitter banned Bannon.³ Then, following Trump’s role in summoning his supporters to march on Washington in January 2021, the former president became the highest-profile casualty of deplatforming, losing his Twitter audience of 89 million people.

If we focus on winter 2020 and 2021 and ignore the preceding decade, then the equation is straightforward: the social media companies were willing to stop hateful voices who had brought them bad publicity. Their interventions whittled down the right’s potential audience and made it harder for fascists and their allies to organize. In this piece, I critique that premise: the idea that, in the words of another anti-fascist writer Joe Mulhall, “deplatforming works.”⁴

Why was this tactic suddenly so successful, when over the previous ten years it had produced only meager results? For a long time, whistleblowers emerging from within social media companies had been complaining that while their employers knew their sites were promoting hate, they had made the calculation that it was better for their bank balances to tolerate the far right. A 2018 episode of the documentary series *C4 Dispatches* showed the training Facebook gave to its staff,

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in which employees were shown images of a toddler being beaten by a man and a girl kicking another young woman unconscious. The show described how Facebook staff were encouraged to see such violent images as means to drive viewer engagement.⁵ As one early investor in Facebook, Robert McNamee,

Insofar as the left prioritizes deplatforming over other anti-fascist strategies, we contribute to a political culture that is polarized around values rather than about power.

explained, right-wing extremism was “the crack cocaine of their product—the really extreme, really dangerous form of content that attracts the most highly engaged people on the platform.”⁶

Each time Trump took to Twitter, he drove traffic to the site—along with those of the newspapers and television companies that reproduced screenshots of his latest insult. For Twitter’s owners, he was giving his own time freely to boost their profits. One prediction was that if Trump had to leave Twitter, the company’s value would fall by \$2 billion.⁷ As it turned out, this was an underestimate. After deplatforming Trump, Twitter’s shares fell by \$5 billion.⁸ Thus, businesses gained more from hosting Trump than they could by challenging him.

The platforms relied on a thriving economy outside the computer screen, with real-world companies seeing Facebook, Twitter, and others as previous generations might have a busy urban street: as an opportunity to plaster advertising messages. Therefore, there was always the possibility that if enough advertisers spoke out, the math could turn against the right. And this was precisely

what happened in summer 2020, spurred on by the campaign Stop Hate for Profit, which drew in some nine hundred corporate supporters, including Coca-Cola and Ford, who urged the social media platforms to tighten up their rules.

But the victories that were won were only possible in the favorable context of the dying days of the Trump administration, under pressure from Black Lives Matter protests. Deplatforming was an attempt by the companies to relate to a much broader social movement: the uprising in America against racism following the police murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. By the start of July 2020, some 20 million people had participated in BLM protests.⁹ The movement was of such breadth that it forced the owners of social media to do “something,” in the same way that sports franchises had to permit their stars to take a knee, or that universities took an anxious look at the names of their historic buildings, or that book publishers began to reassess their backlists.

On the left, we believe that the far right lacks the resources to host itself, and is dependent on the goodwill of the social media platforms. But there have already been examples of far-right celebrities whose complaints of censorship and invocation of the morality of self-defense have stirred sufficient sympathy to build their audience outside those platforms. For instance, conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer was banned from Twitter in November 2018 after denying the citizenship of Muslim politicians, interrupting a New York Public Theatre performance of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to denounce “violence against the right,” and boasting about her refusal of Uber rides from “Islamic immigrant” drivers. Loomer was removed from social media, but this only raised her profile. In August 2020, she secured the Republican nomination for Congress in the Palm Beach district of Florida;¹⁰ and while she ultimately lost to the incumbent Democratic candidate, she won over 150,000 votes.¹¹ Similarly, Twit-

ter's March 2018 ban on another prominent anti-Muslim activist, Tommy Robinson, led to some of the largest far-right street protests in all of British history.¹² So, while a ban is rarely in the interest of any of these figures, it nevertheless provides an opportunity for the right; and where the right takes up that chance, it can magnify its audience.

Over a longer timescale, the right may yet succeed in gaining a platform of its own. It might do so by building up its existing social networks on services like Gab or Parler, until they reach the point where they are mass media providers, capable of competing with Facebook or Twitter; or, it might seek to rebuild its audience on encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram. After all, as early as January 2021, Telegram was claiming to have 500 million users worldwide, leaving Twitter, with a mere 350 million, far behind.¹³

The conflict between left and right is a struggle marked by repeated bursts of political creativity, with each side capable of adapting to hostile circumstances. It thus follows that no single strategy is guaranteed to be effective permanently; indeed, experience has shown that the best any anti-fascist tactic can achieve is a few years of relative success. From that perspective, we should anticipate that the right will retaliate to online deplatforming with strategies of its own. If, as of spring 2021, deplatforming appears to work, it is unlikely to seem quite so effective in five or ten years' time.

This brings me to a final question: whether the left should be trying to deplatform its opponents, or whether the strategy contains hidden costs to our side. The left and the right are never simply fascist or anti-fascist, but combine multiple other causes. What we achieve in one moment of struggle can have all sorts of unintended consequences elsewhere.

One of the most censored forms of political speech has been pro-Palestinian activism. So zealous has Facebook been in prohibiting such speech that campaigners responded with

a hashtag, #FBCensorsPalestine.¹⁴

In September 2020, Facebook temporarily closed accounts of activists who had shown support for the campaign led by indigenous people in the Wet'suwet'en territory against the construction of a 416-mile hydrofracturing ("fracking") gas pipeline through British Columbia. Two hundred people were told that they had "infringe[d] or violate[d] others' rights or ... violate[d] the law."¹⁵

In late 2020, Facebook and Instagram began to refuse links to anti-fascist and anarchist pages, including tIt's Going Down, CrimethInc., and the German site Enough Is Enough. Facebook accepted that these groups were not "dangerous organizations," nor did they "organize violence." However, their supporters had shown "violent behavior," and on that basis, it was appropriate to "restrict [anti-fascists'] ability to organize on our platform."¹⁶

Social media platforms are intensely undemocratic. There are no elections to decide the composition of Facebook's board of directors, or that of its governance or oversight committees. Its members hold their positions for as long as they retain the support of the group's founder, and the company's corporate structure gives him a lifetime majority in any contested decision.¹⁷

In 2020, the wealth of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg passed \$100 billion, almost all of it held in company stock. Since the company went public in 2012, Facebook's stock value has been growing at the rate of roughly \$50 billion a year, earning Zuckerberg a personal wealth bonus (an effective income) of about \$8 billion a year. Part of the reason his wealth has been able to increase at this rate is that his company has opted out of the tax system: it only declares a small proportion of its annual earnings as profits. Of the money it chooses to declare as profits, almost all is then routed through offshore tax havens, principally Bermuda, Ireland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.¹⁸ If somehow his wealth could be frozen tomorrow, and Zuckerberg simply

never earned another cent in his entire life, his wealth of \$80 billion would be as much as the average American worker could reasonably expect to earn in the next two million years—a duration roughly equivalent to that of human existence on this planet. In the face of wealth concentration on this scale, the left cannot be silent

Insofar as the left prioritizes deplatforming over other anti-fascist strategies, we contribute to a political culture that is polarized around values, rather than the debate we want to have about power and class. We fail to build our own movements, our own democracy.

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Medicare for All Is Not Enough

The Two Souls of Socialized Medicine

MARTHA SONNENBERG

ACUTE SOCIAL DISTURBANCES and crises, because they change the nature of everyday human experience, often lead to changes in social and political consciousness. Following the ravages of the Black Plague in the 14th century (1347–1350), people across Western Europe saw the inability of priests to intervene for their protection. Old certainties and beliefs about religious orthodoxies were overturned. People lost faith in the status quo, and this led, eventually, to a more humanistic and secular worldview, typified by the Renaissance. Class relationships were also upended. Across the continent, there were many political rebellions, the most well known being the Ciompi Revolt of 1378, in Florence. The Ciompi were wool carders and weavers, but the name referred generically to all the poor workers and artisans whose successful uprising enabled them to take over Florentine government for four years.¹

Today, the overwhelming morbidity and mortality of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its consequent social and economic devastation, has similarly dispelled the illusion of American exceptionalism and has revealed the inability of the current capitalist system to protect people's health, livelihood, and their right to a fulfilling life. For the first time in decades, the word "socialism" enjoys a new

popularity. Younger activists, in particular, are showing a positive orientation to socialism.

Most dramatically and viscerally, the pandemic has exposed the failures of the American healthcare system: its inequity, its crippling bureaucracy, its fragmented and chaotic use of resources, its abuse of its own healthcare providers and workers, its inability to provide care to those who most need it, and its complete and dependent cohabitation with the insurance industry. It is not surprising, therefore, that despite the many years of propaganda against "socialized medicine," the American public, and healthcare providers, have become increasingly cognizant of these failures and consequently more open to options they might previously have rejected, including Medicare for All, or universal health insurance. Even the ordinarily apolitical *New England Journal of Medicine* published an article that discussed Medicare for All as a reasonable option.² There are distinctions between universal health insurance and Medicare for All, but for the purposes of this article, I use the terms interchangeably.

The progressive left has seen this change in thinking as an opening to promote and build a movement for universal health insurance. For instance, an article published by the Sanders Institute—a think tank formed in conjunction with Senator Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run—declared: "Medicare for All can be the health wing of the broader justice movement.... In demanding guaranteed healthcare through Medicare for All, we are demanding a more just and humane

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society.”³ This same impetus can be seen in a 2019 article published in *Jacobin*, in which Benjamin Fong and Christie Offenbacher write: “Medicare for All is more than just a matter of fixing our broken healthcare system. And it’s more than just a good policy. It’s the perfect fight to pick with our ruling class—one that can unlock the power of a mass working class movement in the United States.”⁴

Of course, there is no question that universal health insurance would be an enormous improvement in the American healthcare system—“Everybody in, nobody out,” in the words of the late Dr. Quentin Young, a longtime supporter of universal health insurance.⁵ It would cover every resident in the United States for all medically necessary services, including physicians, hospital care, long-term care, prescriptions, and mental, dental, and vision care. It would go a long way toward eliminating the racial, ethnic, and geographic inequities in access to healthcare. It would eliminate the interference of the insurance industry in medical care that so often causes conflicts between medical ethics and the profit-oriented demands of the insurance industry or corporate employers. And by separating health insurance from employment, universal health insurance would eliminate the premiums and out-of-pocket costs inherent in employer-sponsored plans.⁶ It would enable unemployed workers full access to healthcare and enable workers to leave jobs without fear of losing health insurance.

It is precisely *because* there has been such a change in the public’s understanding of the failures of the current healthcare system that we now see the potential for the left to expand its own vision of the changes we actually need in healthcare, *beyond* universal health insurance. Indeed, we have an opportunity to look more deeply into what socialized medicine might actually be, and how it might be realized.

The Limits of Medicare for All

Medicare for All is socialized health insurance—a unified system of public financing—and it does not pretend to be anything other than equitable *access* to care; it maintains private clinics, private physician practices, and private hospitals.

So while Medicare for All may be a necessary first step toward change in healthcare, it cannot challenge the quality, or current culture and class basis, of the way contemporary healthcare is delivered. On its own, Medicare for All is not sufficient to bring about the transformational creation of a healthcare system that can truly provide compassionate and quality care for patients, meaningful and safe work for healthcare workers, and a national public health service that can provide a safe and healthy environment for society as a whole.

When we look at the quality and the culture of the current healthcare system, we begin to appreciate the significance of what Medicare for All does *not* address. First, it misses the class-based medical hierarchy of healthcare, wherein the corporate employers are at the top, controlling the infrastructure and management of its institutions. Below the corporate level are the physicians, answerable to their employers but leading the delivery of care, primarily by issuing orders to be filled by nurses. Alongside, and sometimes below, the nurses are the support caregivers, the physical therapists, the nutritionists, the case managers, and various technicians. And at the bottom are the transport workers, kitchen staff, and custodial workers. This hierarchy leads to fragmentation of patient care as each group sees itself as separate from the others, with no need to coordinate care or recognize and communicate observed problems. Patients suffer from this fragmented and hierarchical system: it can lead to delays in care and services, to adverse effects from multiple medications, and to other errors in treatment.

Secondly, Medicare for All misses the

effects that the pressures of privatized and profit-driven care have on healthcare workers at all levels of the hierarchy. From doctors to custodial workers, increasing numbers of people feel demoralized, disrespected, and devalued, leading to an increase in burnout, chemical dependency, depression, and suicide.

Thirdly, Medicare for All does not address the wide variability in the quality of care provided by individual doctors. While many physicians conscientiously practice evidence-based medicine, others maintain old habits of care that may be outdated, insufficient, or outright dangerous, or get their information about medications from drug company salespeople's promotional pitches and advertisements, rather than from peer-reviewed research.

And finally, Medicare for All cannot address health issues beyond the purview of individual care—those more collective issues that affect the health of society as a whole, including issues of air quality, water safety, environmental protection, energy sourcing, transportation, food safety, immunization practices, problems of chemical dependency, pandemic preparation, and cohesive and strategic implementation of pandemic mitigation. The current public health system is weakened both by chronic underfunding and by the fragmentation of its multiple departments, agencies, and services. This conglomeration of entities provides no consistent public health infrastructure, and no consistent policy or messaging.

All of these issues must be addressed if we are to achieve new possibilities for healthcare. The sole focus on Medicare for All narrows our thinking about what we, as socialists, might envision as socialized healthcare.

What Is Socialized Medicine?

Conservatives have a long history of attacking universal health insurance as socialized medicine. This attack has deep roots in the United States. In 1945, the American Medi-

cal Association mounted strong opposition to the national health insurance plan proposed by President Harry S. Truman, despite his assurance that healthcare delivery would remain in the private sector. In response, AMA president Dr. Morris Fishbein said:

This is the first step toward the regimentation of utilities, of industry, of finance, and eventually of labor itself. This is the kind of regimentation that led to totalitarianism in Germany ... no one will ever convince the physicians of America that the bill is not socialized medicine.⁷

A few years later, the AMA was joined by McCarthy-era anti-communists. The threat of German totalitarianism was supplanted by the threat of Soviet-style Stalinism as the subject of fear mongering; red-baiters quickly suffocated any mention of national health insurance. Today, such condemnation of national health insurance as socialized medicine has become a mantra for the right, led most recently by Donald Trump.

The left, too, has sometimes associated Medicare for All with socialism. Fong and Offenbacher, in the *Jacobin* article referenced above, equate Medicare for All with “socialist policy,” further stating that the “Medicare for All system will be all the evidence we need to convince millions of people in America that democratic socialist politics is not only possible but also materially beneficial.”⁸

Thus, both the right and the left have subscribed to the conventional notion of socialized medicine, referring to government or state ownership and control of *access* to care, *control* of hospitals and care facilities, as well as the *employment* of physicians and other healthcare workers. The British National Health Service (NHS) is frequently cited as an example of socialized medicine.

I am proposing that we begin to look at socialized medicine not from this conventional perspective, but rather from that first articulated by scholar-activist Hal Draper in his 1966 article “The Two Souls of Socialism.”⁹ Draper famously viewed socialism in

terms of “socialism from above,” and “socialism from below.” Socialism from above involved the imposition of plans, programs, positions, and policies to be handed down to (presumably) grateful masses, and over which those masses had no control. Socialism from below, on the other hand, involved social changes, plans, and policies that were realized through the agency and self-activity of those affected by those changes. To engage in socialism from below was for people to be actors in the making of their own history.

In terms of healthcare systems, socialized medicine from above would be consistent with Medicare for All (or the British NHS), as a primarily financial plan dispensed from above for the benefit of those below. Even when we consider the possibility of a unified, nationalized, and comprehensive public health system that addresses the collective health issues mentioned above, most current models (e.g., those in Denmark, Italy, and Finland) are based on control from above. No matter how beneficial they may be, all these healthcare systems hand down plans and policies from experts, managers, administrators, and bureaucrats to the people affected by these plans and policies. Journalist Laurie Garrett, in her comprehensive look at global public health systems, articulates the essence of socialized medicine from above, presenting it in its most benevolent form:

Public health is a bond—a trust ... between a government and its people. The society at large entrusts its government to oversee and protect the collective good health. And in return, individuals agree to cooperate by providing tax monies, accepting vaccines, and abiding by the rules and guidelines laid out by government public health leaders.¹⁰

Envisioning Socialized Medicine from Below

Socialized medicine from below cannot be laid out as a definitive program. It must de-

velop as a process over time, as people making change begin to feel empowered to create that socialized medicine. We can begin to envision how socialized medicine from below might evolve if we look at how people are surviving and living their lives in these times. Then we will also see the possibilities of liberation that are often hidden in the cultural crevices of their lives.

Community Activism

We can look to history for some clues about what socialized medicine from below might entail. Without accepting the authoritarian aspects of Maoism, we can appreciate the significance of China’s “barefoot doctors.” In the 1960s, China’s rural areas still had almost no medical care. The barefoot doctors were peasants, chosen by their fellow peasant farmers, to get three months of basic medical and paramedical training, after which they would go into rural areas with their own understanding of how peasants lived their lives. At times working alongside physicians, the barefoot doctors would provide basic medical services, preventive care, immunizations, sanitation, and health education.¹¹ They educated their patients on these subjects, but they also educated themselves about the conditions of rural life and consequently played an important part in the modernization of healthcare in rural China.

Another historical example is the Black Panther Party’s programs of free breakfasts for children and free health clinics, which began in the late sixties. The free breakfasts addressed the nutritional needs of the community, while the free clinics brought preventive care and screening for genetic disorders such as sickle cell anemia, prevalent in their communities. Community activists, alongside nurses, doctors, and medical students, staffed the free clinics and empowered other members of the communities to provide these services. Significantly, these free clinics had roots in the civil rights movement, and gave rise to the Medical Committee for Human

Rights. The Black Panthers brought to their communities a working model of how self-determined activity could advance public health.¹²

Of course, the power of community-centered activism has more contemporary examples, too. After Hurricane Sandy struck the U.S. Atlantic coast in 2012, community partnerships emerged to address health issues of low-income and immigrant workers. In speaking of her experience working with these partnerships, Dr. Sherry Baron said, “Focusing on the community and developing workplace exposure reduction programs with community partnership has been very successful in reaching a whole group of workers that we haven’t ... reached in the past.”¹³

My own experience as a physician during the height of the AIDS epidemic was that initiatives undertaken by patients from the gay community had significant impact on their care and on the subsequent behavior of doctors and hospitals. First of all, the patients corrected doctors who, reproducing an idea then conventional among the medical community, listed homosexuality as a medical problem. It was not a “problem” their patients explained; it was their life. They also demanded that they be referred to not as “victims” of AIDS, but rather as “people with AIDS,” thus asserting their agency in their relationship to the healthcare system. Further, patients’ loved ones refused to accept death as separate from life by demanding that the medical environment help them orchestrate a “good death,” insisting that hospitals allow friends, lovers, and family to be present at the bedside. This opened the door for the medical community to re-examine how it dealt with death.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted more examples of grassroots efforts to create new methods of bringing healthcare to communities. For instance, in New York, the Bronx Rising Initiative empowered the healthier members of a neighborhood or community to make sure that the elderly,

the disabled, and the immune-compromised got COVID-19 vaccine appointments. These community initiatives thus created their own solutions to the deficiencies in the government’s vaccination implementation plan.¹⁴ These community initiatives have pushed the United States government to address the inequities of vaccine distribution by developing ways to bring the vaccines, and the administration of vaccines, to underserved communities.

Workplace Activism

Strikes are the most well-known examples of workplace activism. And during the pandemic, we have witnessed a wave of strike activity and work stoppages by healthcare workers. These actions are unique in that they have often crossed the hierarchical and class lines of the medical system: we have seen doctors, nurses, nursing home staff, emergency room staff and technicians, and mental health staff, as well as dietary and housekeeping staff, involved in these actions. All of these groups are acting for better and safer working conditions, the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and increased staffing, and are at the same time loosening the hold of hierarchical differences among them.

But strikes are not the only kind of workplace activism. Many of the workplace actions carried out so far have deployed new strategies and new motivations as they pushed for change, including the use of internet links to reach their communities, organization of community mask sewing, creation of message boards to offer shared knowledge and emotional support, and provision of options for free meals and even hotel rooms and laundry, so that workers would not have to worry about the possibility of bringing the virus home. Some nurses have even taken control of their shift changes—a direct challenge to managerial authority. As one nurse put it, “We collectively pitched in to make sure that if someone needed a day off or

a last minute shift change, we helped one another. It was an unspoken understanding that we took care of each other.”¹⁵ Nurses, in particular, are increasingly assuming more active roles in patient care, rejecting the subordinate role imposed upon them by the traditional hospital hierarchy. In addition to direct confrontation, nurses may use various informal power strategies to challenge the authority of the physician. These strategies have included workarounds to hierarchical directives, such as getting another professional, family, or clergy to raise the issue with the doctor, or playing into the doctor–nurse “game” by disguising the objection such that the physician still feels in control.¹⁶ Nurses have used these techniques to advocate for patients by pointing out diagnostic findings missed by the doctor, or by questioning doctors’ orders by raising potential errors. All of these aspects of on-the-job creative tactics demonstrate a kind of worker self-activity that has been recognized for some time, but the political potential of which is underappreciated. As the Marxist historian Martin Glaberman wrote for *International Socialism* in 1965: “Workers, immersed in the cooperative labor processes in the factories, form the groups and organizations, usually informal, to correspond to their needs ... Workers find more sophisticated techniques to exercise a measure of control over the more sophisticated instruments of production.”¹⁷

These examples, both historical and contemporary, show the agency of people to make changes in their lives, whether at work or in their communities. Indeed, as Hal Draper put it, “socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion.”¹⁸ These types of self-activity are the seeds from which self-emancipation and socialized medicine from below can evolve.

Looking at socialized medicine from this perspective also has implications for our politics: namely, in how we develop strategies for change, and in how we view our relationship with the people affected by that change.

In short, the question is: How do we view our own political activity? Does that activity consist solely of mobilizing people in support of a policy (or to educate and build our membership), or does it extend to empowering people already participating in transformative change, and enabling them to develop confidence in their own ideas and abilities? While mobilization may be necessary to achieve short-term goals, it does not necessarily empower people for the longer term.¹⁹ Much of what has been written about Medicare for All invokes the strategy of mobilization rather than that of empowerment. Fong and Offenbacher articulate this mobilization-oriented strategy:

The best means of expanding our ranks from the thousands to the millions is by demonstrating that not only does socialist policy work, but that it very rapidly makes a lot of people’s lives noticeably better ... Medicare for All does not by definition offer opportunities for local community building and engagement. But we are not currently suffering from a lack of opportunities for political participation.²⁰

On the contrary, I argue that we *are* suffering from the lack of opportunities for political participation, and are therefore missing the opportunity to learn important political lessons from the activity of real people in their communities and their workplaces. Socialized medicine from below requires the participation, engagement, and empowerment of people who can provide both creative challenges to the healthcare system and new ideas about what that system could be.

The efforts to build the groundwork for Medicare for All and to envision socialized medicine from below are not mutually exclusive. But we need to do *both* if we are to participate in the transformation of the U.S. healthcare system. That transformation must lead to a healthcare system that can not only provide equitable access to healthcare, but also democratize and socialize its delivery, chal-

lenge the hierarchy of the healthcare system, and allow *all* members of the healthcare team to contribute to the care of people. That transformation must also ensure the safety and well-being of its workers, engage with and learn from the patients and the communities it serves, and support the continuing creativity of people to make healthcare better. We can mobilize and educate people about Medicare for All, but let us also *be educated* by the seeming small acts of rebellion and imaginative actions by healthcare workers, patients, and community members by which they develop the confidence and skills necessary to realize socialized medicine from below.

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“Conscious Linkage”

The Proletarianization of Academic Labor in the Algorithmic University

ROBERT OVETZ

HIGHER EDUCATION “REFORMERS” are fond of mocking higher education faculty as the “sage on the stage,” while pushing to transform us into the “guide on the side.” Such language is illustrative of the continuing effort to transform higher education faculty from teachers to deliverers of skill-based “competencies” in the completion of tasks along a “guided pathway.” Preceded by various forms of “distance learning” by mail, video, and other forms (Noble 2004), the attempt to deskill teaching in higher education is hardly new. As Karl Marx observed of the automaton and the worker in the *Grundrisse* (1857–58), technology is being used to transform the academic worker into a “conscious linkage” of the machine.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of educational technologies, or “edtech,” into not only the administration of higher education, but also teaching itself. As self-isolation and quarantines have suppressed the transmission of the virus, the turn toward remote work using new learning management system (LMS) and teleconferencing technologies also threatens to sweep away many of the barriers to the

spread of another epidemic: the digital automation, deskilling, and proletarianization of teaching in higher education. Though this project has been underway for the past decade, the pandemic has created the ideal circumstances for edtech venture capitalists, textbook

Academic workers ‘co-produce new labor power’ of new waged workers who ‘will in turn be employed to produce value.’

publishers, LMS companies like the owners of Blackboard, Canvas, and Classroom, and online education (OLE) advocacy groups to extend their reach into colleges and universities (Ovetz 2020). Similarly, widespread reliance on teleconferencing platforms such as Zoom has rapidly sped up the reorganization, and rationalization, of the academic work of higher education.

The mass collection of online data (Marachi and Quill 2020) has expanded the use of predictive data analytics to surveil, self-discipline, and increase the productivity of the academic labor of students and faculty. To counter these dangerous developments, faculty and other academic workers must shift our organizing tactics, strategies, and objectives. Indeed, organized academic workers are the only protection against the rapidly

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spreading virus of online education.

The Rationalization of Academic Labor

The accelerated reliance on conferencing platforms like Zoom, and LMSs such as Canvas that drive OLE, is not a neutral process. The emergence of OLE coincides with decades of relentless neoliberal assaults on higher education to increase the efficiency, productivity, and "work readiness" of students. The result has been a strategy of adjunction, austerity, privatization, and entrepreneurization, and an effort to shift rising costs to students and their families through skyrocketing tuition and fees, paid for by massive personal debt. These external factors place relentless pressure on higher education to become a more effective producer of self-disciplined labor.

For the past few decades, neoliberal edtech "disruptors" have been pushing the "unbundling" (i.e., breaking up into component parts) of higher education—at the levels of systems, institutions, non-academic services, and instructional and professional roles—into separate "primary" (teaching and research) and "support" activities (administrative services). Today, all but the professional and instructional components have already been largely unbundled, leaving teaching and other academic services such as counseling, advising, financial aid, tutoring, library support, LMS tech support, and admissions as current targets for rationalization. Moreover, we now see relentless pressure to unbundle teaching itself through the expansion of OLE and integration of telecommunications and artificial intelligence (AI) in the form of grading chatbots. And this is only one example among many of the effort to physically unbundle higher education from a place-based site of learning to a virtual delivery of skills competency.

The current, second phase uses the technologies of OLE, including LMSs, AI,

and teleconferencing technologies to rationalize academic labor and subtly shift the assessment of the *comprehension* of content knowledge to the measurement of *proficiency* in task completion.

The rationalization of faculty labor essentially seeks to break up and redistribute its three key elements—design, delivery, and assessment of teaching—into as many as nine components no longer under the control of faculty. Higher education researchers Sean Gehrke and Adrianna Kezar (2015) describe this unbundling of teaching as "the differentiation of instructional duties that were once typically performed by a single faculty member into distinct activities performed by various professionals, such as course design, curriculum development, delivery of instruction, and assessment of student learning." This has only been made easier by the near-complete dismantling of the three pillars of faculty academic labor—research, service, and teaching—through the transformation of the majority of faculty into contingent, "just in time" adjuncts like myself. Now mostly contingent, faculty labor is being proletarianized.

The accelerated reliance on conferencing platforms is not a neutral process. The emergence coincides with decades of relentless neoliberal assaults on higher education.

"Unbundling" is in itself a problematic term that mystifies and deflects from the intended strategy of those that use it. Instead, The Analogue University (2019) suggests we understand the rationalization of teaching as a strategy to *discipline and better control* faculty academic labor, in order to produce a greater number of unwaged, self-disciplined

students, while ensuring the productivity of waged labor. Productive, self-disciplined students are destined, as labor power, to meet the growing demand for precarious "platform"

We need to expand faculty
intransigence and rigidity
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or "gig" work organized around algorithmic management.

OLE is misleadingly advocated as a cost-effective method of delivering "equitable" "access" to higher education. However, the American Council on Education has found insufficient evidence of the purported "cost savings" used to justify OLE, once fixed technology and staffing costs are included. A 2020 study by Education International found that LMS companies are preempting opposition to the high capital costs by covering the start-up costs in exchange for half or more of students' fees. In fact, OLE is increasingly populated by a growing proportion of poor and non-white students for whom support services are automated, outsourced, inaccessible, inadequate, or lacking, amounting to what Michelle Alexander called a kind of "new Jim Crow" that we can also see in higher education (Ovetz 2015).

Tactical Defiance and Strategic Rigidity

OLE is the latest strategy in a decades-long program of corporate pressure to make students more efficient, productive, and "work ready" while forcing them onto "guided pathways" to speed them through higher education. The rationalization of academic

labor is the flip side of platform/gig work where the worker is remotely managed by the algorithmic "black box" that functions as the relentless gaze of the panopticon (to use the French philosopher Michel Foucault's term). Such "dataveillance" (Williamson 2020) subjects the worker to the ubiquitous potential of always being seen, without knowing when they are actually actively monitored. All the while, this Odin's eye continues to generate a relentless data stream, detailing their every move.

In this way, the labor of faculty and students are closely interconnected. As David Harvie (2006) argues, teaching faculty's labor is intended to produce disciplined student labor power for exploitation in the capitalist system. To the degree that faculty refuse to discipline and students refuse to be disciplined, teaching becomes unproductive to capital and ruptures the circuit of the reproduction of labor power.

Understanding this productive relationship of higher education in capitalism helps connect struggles over the faculty's paid academic labor with those of students' unpaid labor of schoolwork and of many students' (similarly contingent) service jobs. Thus, the effort to identify the commonalities of precarious academic labor between the supermajority of the professorate and students is also the first step toward the recomposition of the power of all academic labor.

These connections need to be informed by an analysis of the role of higher education in capitalism, in which faculty academic workers, according to Harvie (2006), "co-produce new labor power" of new waged workers who "will in turn be employed to produce value and surplus value." Harvie uses a class analysis that makes explicit how reforms such as "datafication," OLE, and performance measurements are each "a concrete expression of capital's social drive to enhance the quality of human labor power" while driving down the costs to reproduce it. The shift to OLE, datafication, and other

performance-based measurements, such as student opinion surveys of faculty, are in reality a shift to continuous assessment and control of work both inside and outside of higher education.

Rather than situate our understanding of higher education in its productive relations, we have instead continued to mourn worsened academic working conditions, overcrowded classes, the lack of available courses, the rise in tuition, fees, and housing costs, and the push to online-ify more and more of higher education, against the wishes of faculty and students. The predominant strategy has been to attack the neoliberal program that channels the tax burden downward while increasing the costs to students, recouped by ever-expanding debt that they must work to repay.

But this strategy has failed us for decades, and it is likely to continue to do so until we carry out a workers' inquiry (Ovetz 2020) of the current technical composition of what Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie (1999) call "academic capitalism." Such an inquiry will inform new tactics, strategies, and objectives that can be circulated among a growing number of academic workers. Because there has been little attempt to assess the current composition of academic labor to

Online education is the latest strategy in a decades-long program of corporate pressure to make students more efficient, productive, and 'work ready.'

date, the outcome is as yet uncertain. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and global online-ification, OLE has now become central to the struggle over academic labor.

Academic workers need to identify new forms of tactical defiance and strategic rigidity (Ovetz 2017; 2022, 233-237) that can develop into various forms of organization and refusal, complementing the organizing

Academic workers 'co-produce new labor power' of new waged workers who 'will in turn be employed to produce value.'

of adjunct faculty. For example, at the level of governance, faculty have immense power to diffuse, disrupt, or slow online-ification by "rebundling" academic labor such that faculty remain in charge of design, delivery, and assessment of their own unique, yet limited, OLE courses.

Academic worker struggles can no longer ignore the threat of rationalization. A vivid illustration of the way in which algorithmic management has been deployed against organized faculty and student academic labor is seen in Mariya P. Ivancheva et al.'s 2020 study of South Africa. During the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student strikes in that country in 2015–16, administrators used OLE systems to keep universities open. South Africa was thus a local trial run for the global shift from in-person teaching to OLE that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, a shift that was nearly instantaneous in the Northern Hemisphere during spring 2020, when academic workers' organized struggles underwent severe decline. Organizing technical non-teaching staff, such as course designers who build and service the algorithmic management infrastructure, is critically necessary to avoid a repeat of such defeats.

As long as academic governance bodies and faculty unions still retain powerful roles in campus governance, numerous tactics could be used to expand faculty intransigence and

rigidity to slow down the process of online-ification and proletarianization. Edtech ideologues admit that deeply entrenched faculty resistance (Young 2018) is the greatest threat to further expansion and openly call for removing faculty control over OLE either by breaking shared governance and faculty unions or coopting faculty through stakeholder engagement and professional development. Faculty should be escalating their tactics and deploying strategies to make this potential impediment a reality.

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Nigeria: #EndSARS, Workers' Power, and War

KUNLE WIZEMAN AJAYI

IN OCTOBER 2020, MILLIONS in Nigeria marched for two weeks in a revolt that shook the world. From Badagry to Yola, youth and workers rose in unity against the barbarism of police brutality and bad governance. Raising radical slogans and social media hashtags, and mobilizing spontaneous rallies, the rebellion was the most democratic movement in the history of Nigeria.

The present shape of Nigeria's ruling-class oppression goes back to the mid-1980s, with the imposition, by the military junta of Ibrahim Babangida, of a comprehensive Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). The SAP was a state campaign to implement the harsh and anti-welfarist conditions required by the loans taken from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Workers and youth have resisted the SAP, which has led to a drastic reduction in government sponsorship of social infrastructure like education, healthcare, housing, and job creation. SAP is why most industries in glass, textiles, agriculture, automobile, and so on, were decimated by privatization and other neoliberal policies that transfer public wealth into private pockets, such as public-private partnerships. The business empires of a few billionaires are then bolstered through monopoly, hoarding,

and other diabolical policies, while millions of people live in abject poverty.

The country's legacy of police brutality is the kernel of these decades of oppression, as epitomized by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force. Following the unit's founding in 1992 amid a rash of kidnappings and robberies in the city of Lagos, SARS officers, often dressed in plainclothes, were ostensibly tasked with the investigation and prosecution of individuals suspected of "violent crimes." The covert unit has since been implicated in a long and sordid history of abuse and brutality against civilians, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, extortion, blackmail, and forced disappearances; it has also been widely viewed as facilitating election rigging for the ruling parties. Popular resistance against the unit began with the birth of the #EndSARS movement in 2017, when youth activists began to organize mass mobilizations via social media. In spite of the alleged implication of some of these youth in cybercrime rings, the movement gained momentum when its founders were joined by other groups of activists at protests in the Lagos neighborhood of Ojota, which led to a rally at several nearby media outlets and police stations. Soon, agitation against the criminal tendencies of SARS officers became widespread as citizens testified publicly about illegal harassment, torture, and extortion by the police. By August 2019, some activists who had been part of the 2017 and 2018 #EndSARS protests had organized the

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#RevolutionNow campaign.

Subsequently, the ruling class, after pulling all its weight to win reelection for President Muhammadu Buhari in 2019, embarked on a sweeping campaign to authorize anti-people policies, including deregulation, the devaluation of the Nigerian naira, and refusal to require a meager 30,000 naira minimum wage. Buhari's government also harshly suppressed two general strikes, in May 2016 and September 2020. These followed seven earlier general strikes, the last of which was in January 2012, against the removal of fuel subsidies, which involved workers in over 45 cities and towns across Nigeria.

Today, as workers' power grows, from nurses' and doctors' to lecturers' strikes, many sleep with one eye open, as the hydra-headed horrors of violence and war rear their heads through both state and individual acts of terror. The Boko Haram war has shed the blood of thousands and turned citizens into "internally displaced persons" overnight. Hundreds of villages and towns are currently controlled by the insurgents. Bandits whose specialty is mass kidnapping, including recent abductions in the town of Kankara and at the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in the state of Kaduna, have been terrorizing residents across the country.

Popular responses to these developments have taken two forms: first, self-determination (secessionist) groups, like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation agitators; and second, the #RevolutionNow movement, which has been the most consistent in sustaining struggles and has deployed strategies that have had a great influence on the wider #EndSARS movement, as well as on worker and youth struggles more generally. #RevolutionNow is also firm in its principle of the unity of all the oppressed.

Below, I will examine both the rise of this revolutionary movement and its demands for self-determination, while dissecting the twin faces of state and individual terrorism that

strengthen the arms of war. The two souls of revolution—youth revolts, like #EndSARS, and the rise in strikes that build workers' power, like the Judiciary Staff Union's shutdown of the courts in May of this year—must unite in order to give birth to a new Nigeria that rises from the ruins of the old.

Workers' Power Without a General Strike

In 2019, there were several major protests led by #RevolutionNow—campaigning alongside civil society groups like Concerned Nigerians, Enough Is Enough, and others—against the shrinking of public spaces. On August 3, two days before a planned #RevolutionNow national protest, democracy activist and former presidential candidate Omoyele Sowore was arrested, gestapo-style, by government security forces. Protests continued from August 5 until December 24, when Sowore was finally released. The Coalition for Revolution continued mass mobilizations from January 2020 until the one-year commemoration of the August 5 uprising, when protests were held in 14 cities and towns, including Abuja and Lagos, where over one hundred protesters were arrested and released within 48 hours.

As soon as comrades were released from the mass crackdown on August 5, planning for the next mass actions on October 1, Nigeria's Independence Day, began. In Abuja, protests took place at two venues, Unity Fountain and Berger.

Alongside 27 others, I was arrested around 9:30 a.m. at Unity Fountain by a group of more than 50 armed members of the government's COVID-19 task force. They came in four vans, jam-packed like sardines, while the protesters observed social-distancing precautions and wore face masks. Nevertheless, they attacked, seizing our masks and beating and torturing us, while threatening to kill us if we did not stop the agitations for revolution. Forty-one other comrades from the city of Gwagwalada, who had joined the Berger pro-

tests, were also targeted; after being beaten, they were brought to join us at Eagle Square, where we were being detained. In Lagos, protests were held at Ikeja Underbridge, with hundreds of protesters braving the violence of the police. About 15 comrades were arrested and beaten. Such brutality against the protests occurred all over the country.

The federal government has been openly appealing for peace, but the same government continues to conduct massacres of peaceful protesters.

However, by October 1 the momentum had grown so much that the federal government had to cancel all Independence Day celebrations, with widespread mobilizations for mass actions underway—including on the part of self-determination groups like the Yoruba Nation agitators.

On the day itself, it was only the #RevolutionNow campaigners who stormed the streets. In Lagos, about a thousand protesters marched from Ojota to the neighborhood of Maryland. Actions took place in 26 other cities and towns, including Benin, Port Harcourt, Yola, Kano, Bauchi, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ore, Osogbo, and Abuja. On the heels of a betrayal of the people's trust on the part of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), which had undemocratically called off a general strike scheduled for September 28, the October 1 protests finally broke the state's hold on the opening of public spaces.

The current leaders of both national labor organizations have close ties to the state and tend to make more excuses for state actions than do government officials themselves. The general strike of April 2016, for instance, was

intentionally sabotaged by the labor bureaucracy as they compromised with the Buhari government. State councils were mobilized in lackluster fashion while cowardly statements were made over the airwaves, demoralizing workers. The Joint Action Front and United Action for Democracy, leading radical groups in 2016, had been weakened through inactivity on the part of their leadership, as well by as the loyalty of many key activists to so-called class collaboration with the “progressive bourgeoisie” in the All Progressives Congress, one of Nigeria's two main political parties. Neither group, despite many efforts at revival, has yet recovered from these missteps.

However, workers keep going on sectoral strike upon strike, from nurses and doctors to the current judiciary workers' strikes over financial autonomy of the executive branch of government, which have continued for a month as of this writing. In May, the Kaduna chapter of the NLC led a five-day workers' strike in Kaduna State, where Nasir el-Rufai, a proud fascist, is governor. Labor has repeatedly brought state operations to a halt and fought off state thugs who are being sponsored to violently attack demonstrations.

But the bureaucracy still has considerable power, and it has shown that it can successfully suppress agitation for a general strike within the labor movement. In fact, many of those who participated in the #EndSARS protests were workers who would have loved their unions to formally join the movement and call a general strike. This must be why by October 18, agitation for a youth strike began at the barricades, especially in the Alausa district just north of Lagos, which was the organizational center of the revolt.

#EndSARS: 14 Days That Shook the World

As noted above, October 1, 2020, was a watershed, following the labor bureaucracy's cancellation of the September 28 general strike. Confidence among activists was largely

restored; as video of SARS brutality in Sapele trended globally, youth organizers began to plan a major intervention through the #EndSARS campaign. But, after only two of the campaign's agenda setters on Twitter proposed actionable tactics, Omoyele Sowore of #RevolutionNow took up the baton with

There are two ways forward
in the current situation: to
break up Nigeria, or to make
revolution.

a proposal to occupy police headquarters all over the country; at the same time, Runtown, a well-known songwriter and producer, proposed a protest rally and march on Lagos Island.

By October 6, while 31 protesters who had been arrested during the #RevolutionNow protests on October 1 were being released, Sowore led a protest of thousands to police headquarters in Abuja. A small group of youth led by Rinu, a Twitter influencer and student activist, surrounded the Lagos Police Command with mats and music. About ten #RevolutionNow comrades joined them, and proceeded to hold a vigil at the Police Command. By the second day, protesters moved to the Lagos State Assembly Complex in Alausa, where hundreds of protesters joined. On the third day, Rinu and others in the leadership met with the Lagos State Assembly speaker Mudashiru Obasa and other legislators. Some agreements were drafted. Then, the leaders proceed to call off the protest—without consulting with the hundreds of protesters still dancing and singing outside.

Meanwhile, a young street musician named Small Doctor led over two thousand protesters from the Lagos suburb of Agege to a major roundabout in nearby Allen, where they merged with a group of hundreds led

by Juwon Sanyaolu of #RevolutionNow. Together, the two groups moved toward Alausa. On their arrival, a congress was called, moderated by Sanyaolu. Thousands agreed to continue the actions “until the president responds,” given that the State Assembly has no constitutional power to dismantle SARS. Protesters also agreed to block the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway, hold a festival, and return for an evening congress.

By evening, the police moved in to stop protesters from another vigil, citing fears of chaos and the rumor that the protest was about to be hijacked. #RevolutionNow comrades immediately intervened, ultimately prevailing in the debate with the police over their right to hold another vigil. Organizers proceeded to set up committees on security, discipline, and the provision of food. The open debates with the police and among the protesters were aired live on social media, as well as covered by the Sahara Reporters news agency and the BBC.

By the second morning, thousands had joined the protests at Alausa, at which point a culture of congresses and democratic engagement and debate became the norm. For two days, the protesters debated whether the occupation should have leadership or demands. Many cited lessons learned from the betrayals of the labor bureaucracy and previous protests; accordingly, the first proposal, regarding the creation of leadership roles, was rejected. But the second proposal, to craft a list of demands, was accepted. So, at an afternoon congress on October 9, led by Sanyaolu, the following five demands were issued:

- 1) The immediate release of all arrested protesters
- 2) Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families
- 3) The formation, within a period of ten days, of an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reported police misconduct

4) The implementation of psychological evaluations of all disbanded SARS personnel prior to any redeployment, to be verified by an independent body

5) An increase to police salaries to provide adequate compensation for their role protecting lives and property.

The Buhari government did not immediately respond to these #5for5 demands. With help from singer-songwriter Davido and others, they were then presented to the inspector general of police. Over the next few days, the government made no concrete promises, and the revolt continued to grow all over the country. A congress in Alausa on October 13 saw the addition of two other demands, calling for the resignation of the inspector general and President Buhari, and the hashtag #EndBadGovernance began to trend widely. By October 17, over 253 barricades had been mounted all over Lagos, even in far-flung neighborhoods.

Days earlier, state-sponsored thugs had been unleashed on protesters in the neighborhoods of Alausa, Lekki, and Oworoshoki. Protesters in Ketu, in particular, were the target of inter-cult attacks, while the police never intervened. Ruling party leader Bola Tinubu, along with President Buhari's advisor Itse Sagay, had written on October 18 that the Buhari government should employ force to quell the protest. Many prominent former activists, including Debo Adeniran, Jiti Ogunye, and others, supported this position. Lagos State governor Jide Sanwo-Olu was also holding meetings with former activists and military and police leadership about how to stop the protests. In Abuja, thugs engaged protesters, burned their cars, and even threatened them—all live on air, while the police watched.

The #EndSARS protesters were aware of the credibility of such threats. The first martyr of the movement, Jimoh Isiaka, a student at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, had been felled by police bullets in Ogbomoso

on October 11. All barricades of the #EndSARS nationwide held candlelight vigils and rallies in his honor. He was but one among numerous protesters who would be killed for their participation in the movement in the days to come.

A youth strike was declared at the Alausa barricade congress on the night of October 18, and by 5 a.m. the next morning, all workplaces were closed, given that transit routes were shut down. Only the protesters, in their millions, had free movement. The strike began to place increasing pressure on the working class, and activists called on the NLC and TUC to make it official by declaration. This was not to be.

By the morning of October 20, rumors began to circulate that the army was deploying soldiers to quell the protests. Radio jingles telling parents to withdraw their children from the barricades filled the airwaves. State propagandists and social media influencers started blackmailing the revolt. Jiti Ogunye called it “anarchy” on Facebook, while civil rights campaigner Segun “Segalink” Awosanya (another former supporter of #EndSARS) called it an “insurrection” on Twitter. Meanwhile, activists at the major barricades held meetings and made plans to strengthen their security committees.

By 5:30 p.m. on the twentieth, three vans with 15 soldiers stormed the Alausa barricade. We were not caught totally off guard, as we had been warned by those at the Allen occupation, where the protesters had swarmed the soldiers before they could attack. In shock, soldiers had pleaded with the protesters, claiming they had come to secure peace. While they left, news filtered in that in the same manner, three vans of soldiers had attacked the Lekki barricade, where they had shot and killed a number of protestors. DJ Switch, a well-known musician and supporter of the #EndSARS movement, aired the attack live.

A congress was called immediately. Most argued that we had to continue despite the

killings. The security committee started serious discussions and activities. By 7:45 p.m., the police vans withdrew, but they began to make new preparations, and to block newly arrived protesters from joining the vigil. Moreover, the police succeeded in shutting off the streetlights, meaning the barricade now depended on the headlights of nearby cars to see. A few minutes after 8 p.m., seven vans with about 45 soldiers suddenly sped in from the expressway.

Over a thousand protesters were still sitting on the ground, angry and vigilant. The security committee confronted the soldiers immediately. This time, the soldiers acted more fiercely, jumping down from the vans and taking shooting positions, led by an officer wielding a pistol. A mass of protesters swiftly converged, forming a ring around the soldiers, whom they outnumbered twenty to one. Gbenga Komolafe of the Federation of Informal Workers, also a co-convenor of the Coalition for Revolution, stood behind us as the engagement with the soldiers continued. He described the mood thus: “I have never seen soldiers armed to the teeth and ready for action get so jittery ... they were practically shivering.”

Cornered, the officer approached us and spoke to the coordinators: “You guys think you are powerful. I must clear this place. It’s orders from above.” We shouted back at him! His troops then retreated, and we followed close behind until they got in their vans and moved farther away.

The security committee started the evacuation of all the protesters at the Alausa barricade. But as it was underway, police and soldiers attacked, unleashing a hail of bullets and tear gas. Two protesters were shot, as witnessed by injured comrades who were hiding. But the evacuation was still largely successful.

At Lekki, however, a full-scale massacre was being conducted by soldiers and police, supervised by governor Sanwo-Olu himself. In the time since the protest, a judicial panel

of inquiry has seen all the evidence from that night of bloodshed, but no one has much confidence in the panel. Justice, in the view of most of the youth, lay with the 2020 second wave of protests #EndSARS Season 2.*

After the massacre, many angry youth reacted by storming government establishments, including courthouses and police stations. More than twenty stations were burned in Lagos alone. Palaces and houses belonging to ruling-class elements—including the king of Lagos, Rilwan Akiolu, and Bola Tinubu—were attacked and looted. While these attacks were uncoordinated and poorly managed, the items emerging from these residences led to a great revelation: state governments and politicians were stealing and hoarding relief shipments intended to allay the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic! By comparison, the “great lockdown” had been enforced for nearly three months without citizens being given access to any of these supplies. In fact, #RevolutionNow campaigners had led a massive “pots and pans” protest online in April 2020 demanding access to healthcare.

The largest uncovering and mass rescue of COVID-19 relief was in the city of Jos, in Plateau State, where hundreds of thousands were pictured helping themselves to foodstuffs that had been withheld from the people. Lagos politicians were repackaging the COVID-19 relief supplies as “stomach infrastructure,” handed out to party members and supporters during birthday celebrations and other events.

The Lekki massacre halted the #EndSARS revolts, but it never broke the movement. As I write, the hashtag #EndSARS continues to trend. Illustrating the resilience of the movement, activists initiated #Oc-

*Bamidele Fatunde, “EndSARS Season 2: ‘No Going Back,’ Organisers List Reasons,” *NG Times*, February 11, 2021, www.ngtimes.net/2021/02/endsars-season-2-back-organisers-list-reasons.html.

cupyLekkiTollGate on February 13, 2021 at the city's new toll plaza, against the plan of the Lagos government to start charging drivers to enter the city. Forty-six protesters were arrested, beaten, and tortured, yet the movement prevailed: as of this writing, the toll plaza remains closed.

There was, however, one thing that was missing in the #EndSARS revolt: general strikes by workers. After all, it was at the outset of the youth strike that the #EndSARS revolt became most effective. The state responded by drowning the protests in blood, from Lekki to Abuja. Even journalists were not spared. Pelumi Onifade, a 19-year-old reporter with GBUA TV was murdered for filming the recovery of pandemic relief supplies. Earlier, Onifade had broken news of the horrible event where a member of the House of Representatives, Abiodun Bolarinwa, shot sporadically at protesters in the Abule Egba neighborhood in Lagos, killing three, on October 21, 2020.

The Impact of War

As noted above, a series of sectional wars and upheavals are taking place across the country, from Boko Haram to bandit attacks, and most recently attacks by unknown gunmen. The federal government has been openly appealing for peace, but, as we have seen, the same government continues to conduct massacres of peaceful protesters, among other terrorist acts.

Boko Haram has taken over a quarter of Borno State while also holding on to several villages across the northeast. It is now very clear that the intent of Boko Haram (and ISIS) is to conquer the northeast (or even the whole country) and turn it into an "Islamic nation." Over time, the epidemic of violence it has unleashed has weakened the Nigerian army—an effect only exacerbated by the fact that generals and officers in the army are more interested in the multi-million-dollar bounties involved than they are in defeating the insurgents. Numerous exposés have

shown that the military is compromised and shattered. As General Tukur Buratai and other service chiefs have been forced out by President Buhari, it has been discovered that

State governments and politicians were stealing and hoarding relief shipments intended to allay the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic!

billions of dollars budgeted for ammunition have been looted. Nevertheless, the same Buratai and others have now been appointed "presidential ambassadors."

Today, battles are ongoing between the state and Boko Haram; bandits and farmers/peasants in the northwest and central Nigeria; herders and farmers in the southwest; and the state and IPOB/Eastern Security Network (ESN) in the southeast. In all of these conflicts, from north to south, it is working people who suffer the most. The Buhari government continues to fuel these crises with its own ethno-religious agenda, perpetuation of state impunity, and fascistic policies. Meanwhile, the expression of grievances on the part of the people increasingly leads to uprisings that demand revolution or secession. While those in favor of secession focus more on the lack of public safety and government impunity, #RevolutionNow campaigners believe in the need for a total overhaul of the system. They continue to campaign against police brutality, just as many more-liberal organizations have continued to mobilize against police brutality.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Revolution Is the Answer

There are two ways forward in the current

situation: to break up Nigeria, or to make revolution. Both will only happen under conditions approaching those of open warfare. The ruling class from north to south is united against both secession and revolution. They would prefer a coup, or a crackdown from the top. But if faced with the choice of either secession or revolution, the rulers would prefer secession.

Secession of the eastern state of Biafra would most likely lead to a civil war, which

There was one thing that was
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would favor local members of the ruling class. Many so-called “baby tyrants” would emerge, and conditions countrywide would deteriorate to resemble those in Somalia or South Sudan, where the situation, in popular street parlance, is described as “yam pepper scatter scatter!” In fact, many of the self-determination agitations are secretly backed by politicians eyeing the presidency in 2023. Those secessionist agitations serve as instruments to strengthen mass support in those regions. Yoruba Nation agitator Sunday Igboho recently proclaimed the obvious when he urged Bola Tinubu, the former Lagos governor and national leader of the ruling party, to agree to be president of the

Yoruba Nation. Southeastern governors are equally united against IPOB and its military wing, the ESN. The governors promptly launched a counterinsurgency outfit, code-named “Ebube Agu,” that collaborates with government soldiers to confront IPOB/ESN.

However, the safest and the most harmonious solution is revolution. In the wake of #EndSARS, which struck fear into our thieving ruling class, a united action of all the oppressed is the way forward. In fact, the IPOB garnered its greatest support so far by joining the #EndSARS revolt.

The African Action Congress is the most consistent and largest revolutionary party involved in #EndSARS. There is a need for the party to work assiduously toward uniting all oppressed workers and youth under the banner of the #RevolutionNow campaigns, led by the Coalition for Revolution. In the north, the task is to build resistance against not only Boko Haram and the bandits, but also the neoliberal and pro-terrorism policies of the northern oligarchy. In the south, there is a dire need to intervene concretely to bolster support for workers’ strikes and unite them with youth agitations like #EndSARS.

What is needed is for the working class that organized the January 2012 uprising against the removal of fuel subsidies to collaborate with the #EndSARS movement. If these two boiling points burn together to produce the fire next time, a new Nigeria will be possible.

South Africa

“The Masses Are Not Protected”

Post-Apartheid Symptoms of Morbidity

TREVOR NGWANE

SOMETHING IS DYING IN SOUTH AFRICA, and everyone's focus is on trying to save it. Few are paying attention to what is struggling to be born. That is the nub of the crisis of post-apartheid society. In Antonio Gramsci's words: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”¹

Apartheid died. Many people throughout the world helped defeat this crime against humanity when they participated in one of history's greatest solidarity movements. Well done! But sadly, I must inform you that the job is not yet complete. The pain and suffering associated with apartheid continues. The new generations who inherit the gains of the past find that with them come continuities of oppression and exploitation.

What was apartheid in essence? Racial capitalism. Well, the ruling class continues to own and continues to rule. On August 16, 2012, thousands of miners in Marikana went on strike fighting for a living wage of R12,500 [US\$500] per month. The post-apartheid ruling class saw red. The state police shot and killed 34 of the strikers. The message was clear. Anyone who wants to end the system

that guarantees the exploitation of black cheap labor in South Africa's gold, diamond, and platinum mines must be willing to wade through a river of blood.

Nevertheless, people must be allowed to remember the greatness of the anti-apartheid movement and our role in it. We must remember the excitement and joy of the struggle of the 1980s. We must remember the spirit of youth in the Caribbean who fantasized about crossing the oceans to take up arms in support of the oppressed black people in South Africa. Workers in the United States and Europe taking boycotting action to stop the transportation of apartheid goods. We must remember what it meant to survive, share, struggle, and the gains made as we forced the regime and the capitalist class to make concessions. We must remember what it was like to feel that we were making history, that we could win real victories. All this made us braver and more determined to fight for a better future for all. For socialism.

But South Africa did not become that different future, the alternative to capitalist barbarism. Racial capitalism continues. And with it the symptoms of morbidity that Gramsci talked about. One of these symptoms is corruption, what is popularly known as “state capture” in the country. The other is the crisis of everyday life of the working class and the poor.

Corruption Soap Opera

In 2016, Advocate Thuli Madonsela, then the

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country's Public Protector, issued a report that has since left South Africa gripped in a frenzy and obsession with corruption. It was titled: "State of Capture: Report on an investigation into alleged improper and unethical conduct by the President and other state functionaries relating to alleged improper relationships and involvement of the Gupta family in the removal and appointment of Ministers and Directors of State-Owned Enterprises resulting in improper and possibly corrupt award of state contracts and benefits to the Gupta family's businesses."²

After reporting on the shenanigans of the then president of the country, Jacob Zuma, she recommended that a judicial state commission into state capture be established to cast the net wider and conduct further investigations. The country's Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo has been conducting daily public hearings on national television for the past three years or so. Revelations and developments from the commission dominate public discourse with the image of the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party, and of Nelson Mandela, probably irreparably tarnished.

Literary outpourings have accompanied the obsession with state capture, with books exploring its sensational aspects becoming bestsellers. The latest offering has a somewhat deeper take: Ebrahim Harvey's *The Great Pretenders: Race and Class Under ANC Rule* (Jacana Media, 2021)

The revelations by witnesses at the Zondo Commission may sell books and enliven dinner table talk, but ultimately they are disappointing. A lasting impression is that the country, despite the idealism and dreams of the anti-apartheid struggle, is run by greedy comrades with grubby hands and groggy brains. Looting and stealing, self-enrichment, abuse of office, lies, even murder; all these and more are the ingredients of the unpalatable broth that is brewed by the ANC partly as a result of its policy of Black Economic Empowerment.

In the political dispensation negotiated between, on the one hand, the apartheid state and the capitalist class, and on the other hand, the ANC and the national liberation movement, it was ostensibly agreed that in exchange for political office, creation of a black middle class, and helping a few aspirant black bourgeoisie to join the corporate sector as bosses, private (stolen) property would be protected in the "new South Africa." This deal is what Chris Hani, the popular leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP) who was assassinated in 1993 on the eve of liberation, reputedly warned the ANC about. He asked: "Comrades, do you want to dance with the hyena? It will chop off your hand." It seems the capitalist hyena is intent on chopping off the ANC's head.

It is not as if the daily hearings at the Zondo Commission are changing anything. The stealing and looting continues. Private sector price gouging is the order of the day. Covid-19 afforded the hungry comrades-turned-hyenas another avenue to pilfer. ANC-connected business people suddenly set up companies selling personal protection equipment (PPE) at inflated prices to the state, some of whose quality did not meet minimum standards. On May 26, 2021, Zweli Mkhize, the Minister of Health, announced that a R150-million (US\$10,884,212) communications contract awarded to Digital Vibes by his department had been irregular. Investigative journalists had established over several months that the minister had hidden ties to the communications consultancy, which was inflating prices, including charging millions of rands for scheduling Mkhize's media briefings during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chris Vicks, a journalist who set up COVIDComms, a voluntary communications operation to help spread the message about Covid-19, is starting to get over his anger "at how public money was chowed in the midst of a pandemic. But I still can't get my head around the fact that the money that was chowed was meant to save lives, to

empower people in such a way that they could prevent infection and avoid transmission. It wasn't money to market margarine—it was money to prevent sickness and death." Some of the lives of the 55,874 dead from Covid-19 could have been saved.

How much time are they going to spend discussing who is capturing the state in the Zondo Commission? The capitalists do not need to capture it. Because it is not just a state, standing outside of history and politics. It is a capitalist state. They have already captured it. Since the days of colonialism and apartheid, it has been a state serving the capitalist class, facilitating profit-making, protecting private property.

Crisis of the Working Class and the Poor

Ordinary people see the rich and powerful looting and stealing all around them. They see them talking about it on TV. Meanwhile, ordinary working-class life is a life of crisis. Everything is a crisis: jobs, housing, services, education, income, food, healthcare, security. Every day is a struggle. For the nine million people who live in shantytowns, there is no respite. As S'bu Zikode, leader of their movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo ("The People of the Shacks"), puts it: "Our bodies itch every day because of the insects. If it is raining everything is wet—blankets and floors. If it is hot the mosquitoes and flies are always there. There is no holiday in the shacks."

On TV, revelation upon jaw-dropping revelation are aired daily about how the state electricity company, Eskom, was mismanaged and disorganized by looters connected to the state president. Meanwhile, some black working-class communities, such as Sun Valley, Soweto, and other townships and villages, live up to nine months without electricity with the state doing nothing to help them. Instead, the victims are more likely to be blamed because of the user-must-pay mantra, which—in the light of Eskom's debt crisis—justifies less or

even no service at all to the poor.

When the World Bank's latest report states that: "South Africa remains a dual economy with one of the highest, persistent inequality rates in the world, with a consumption expenditure Gini coefficient of 0.63 in 2015," it is not just numbers. It is real living human beings paying the price for the capitalist economic crisis in South Africa, made worse by Covid-19, corruption, and state neglect. Black grannies living in darkness in the height of winter. Children inhaling paraffin and charcoal fumes because there is no electricity in the house.

Bourgeois Morality

The masses daily confront the contradictions of bourgeois democracy and the hypocrisies of bourgeois morality. The latter denounces some forms of corruption. Thus, it is fine to make profits, that is, to steal through ownership of private property. It is not fine to steal by grabbing the handbag of an old lady. It is fine that millions die because they are denied medical care. It is fine when millions are denied electricity when they cannot pay. But it is not fine when corruption starts to mean that law and order are undermined. Or when corruption starts to mean that there is economic inefficiency—so that when the middle class pays, they do not receive the goods. And when the middle class works hard, their savings disappear because of government decisions. It is at that point that the issue of corruption becomes a crisis.

The capitalist state epitomizes this contradiction. The public sector is not just the public sector. It is the public sector under capitalism—corrupted, commodified, commercialized. The public sector has been turned into a center of distribution of public money to the hands of the capitalist class. Some of it as profits, some of it as crude corruption.

In South Africa, as in many other parts of the world, bourgeois democracy has not

satisfied the needs of the working class. The freedom of bourgeois democracy is limited. But with the defeat of apartheid, the political freedom that is being claimed is that of bourgeois democracy. The latter comes historically with limitations. They are essential to it. It is an inherently restricting impoverished political form and view of freedom. It comes with the imperative of protecting private ownership of the wealth. This means acceptance of exploitation and oppression. Protection of private property leads to continued poverty, requiring suppression of the struggle of those trying to put an end to exploitation. As such, bourgeois democracy is a diseased, limited, discriminatory, oppressive, and inadequate freedom. It is a million miles less than the freedom that human beings have imagined in the course of their struggles for freedom.

Capitalist Crisis

There was a time in history when capitalism was young, lively, and growing. That time has passed. Today's generations must live with a system in crisis. There is and has been for a long time a rolling capitalist crisis. The 2008 crash was an aspect of it. The truth is, capitalists and capitalist governments cannot resolve their crisis. And the social force that has the power to institute an alternative economic order, the working-class movement, is not organized politically to resolve that crisis through the seizure of power.

It is primarily a crisis of profits. The predicament is how to manage the crises of everyday life. From the capitalists' point of view, it is a problem of how to impose the costs of the crisis on the working class. From the capitalist states' point of view, it is how to maintain law and order in a system that is increasingly failing to deliver on its promise of political rights and economic prosperity for all.

As the capitalist system loses its vitality, so does bourgeois democracy. It gets increasingly exhausted, limited, distorted.

We have seen struggles for democracy such as in the Arab Spring and struggles for the deepening and extension of democracy such as by the Occupy Movement. This includes various other protest mobilizations in the world, not least in South Africa, which at one time claimed to be the "protest capital of the world." The South African experience in this regard provides a lesson and a vantage point from which to see and understand what happened in other countries.

Despite its many protests, the South African protest movement did not challenge for state power. The protesters made demands, but it was as if the government would always be the government; the ANC would always be the governing party; there would always be a capitalist government. There was hardly a hint of "regime change." There was no popular mobilization around the call for the government to fall. There was no vision of an alternative government. A new political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, formed in 2013, projected itself as such an alternative, but its leaders have not cut their political umbilical cord with the ANC from which they split. As such, the authenticity of their ambitious claim and revolutionary aspiration are questionable.

The South African protesters were eclipsed by even more vigorous protests from other parts of the world thus losing in the "protest capital of the world" championship stakes. The power of these protests saw regimes fall, such as Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia. The call was for "free and fair elections," and indeed, there have been the elections of bourgeois democracy in these countries. In Egypt, the military staged a coup against the democratically elected government and the mass movement was unable to stop this. In sum, the political questions of social and economic power were hardly posed let alone answered. The dictators resigned without alternative popular structures of power being instituted. There was no seizure of power by the masses. Social media, apps,

and smartphones played their role in the mobilizations, but they could not govern. And so, we saw revolutions without taking power. Indeed, revolutions that ceded power.

The process of forcing governments to resign without popular structures in place meant that the result was “free and fair elections” with the repressive structures of the state left untouched. In other words, these were classic political revolutions that saw power changing hands at the top but the same social structure remaining in place. Even when the armies stood with the masses, they only promised not to shoot the protesters but had no intention of handing over their guns to them. When the revolutionary fervour subsided, some of them were ready to shoot.

In the United States last year, we saw George Floyd making history. His death spearheaded the greatest mobilization of protest in the United States if not in the world. Some of the movement’s banners and demands were or implied direct attacks on American racial capitalism and its reliance on racism and class suppression to maintain law and order. The situation raised the question of power but was hardly asked by the vast majority of the protesters. Since politics tolerates no vacuum, this was replaced by the call “Trump must go!” Booting this douchebag out was good but not good enough.

As the working class and the poor are realizing in South Africa from the truth of their own lives, the problem with the ANC is not just this leader or that leader. Jacob Zuma is gone, but the crisis continues. Nor is it just a problem in this place or in that place. It is a problem everywhere all the time, because the ANC is a capitalist political party. It is acting to protect the capitalists. And protecting capitalists means that it is acting against workers. And when working-class organizations such as the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) are supporting the ANC, they are supporting a capitalist political organization even against workers.

There is a pattern in the world where mass anger is directed against neoliberalism. And there are attempts to revive social democracy, or bring social democratic solutions. But what does this mean in the context of a rolling capitalist crisis, which capitalism cannot resolve? It is not about defence and incremental gains. It is about a different way of resolving the crisis of bourgeois government. The masses are not protected. Everyday life is still filled with every problem. It becomes part of a struggle to deal with the exhaustion of bourgeois democracy, of sustaining capitalist governance.

Struggle for Power

June 16, 1976: Students in Soweto staged a mass uprising against the apartheid regime. Inspired in part by the U.S. civil rights movement, their slogan was “Black power!” Those were brave youngsters facing and fighting a murderous enemy. They showed us what is possible and, like George Floyd, the many who died among them watered the seed of liberation with their blood. In the midst of barbarism, there is a moment of possibility.

Underneath the morbid symptoms of a dying capitalism, two things never change: the need for a comfortable, safe, healthy life and everything that makes that possible; and the fact that everything that can make that possible already comes from the hands of the working class. Workers are the producers. The problem is only this: Everything is not organized and controlled and planned to meet the needs of the people; it is organized and planned and controlled to provide profits to bosses. In South Africa, in the Caribbean, the United States, China, everywhere, it is the same.

The needs are there, and they provide a basis for developing a unifying set of demands. When the struggle seems to stall, it does not mean the possibilities are not there. It means that the obstacles are also there. Workers are never just left alone to draw

strength from each other. There is a class enemy that is fighting back. In South Africa, bolstered by the anti-working class policies of the ANC government, it is a class enemy who is getting more arrogant and more confident. The problems of everyday life, which were intolerable, are getting worse.

The struggle against apartheid reminds us that, as much as we struggle with the immediate issues of everyday day life, we have to take the lesson of history, repeated again and again in place after place. The struggles of everyday life will be pushed back without a vision of building a different power. It cannot be about forever forcing those in power and government to do what they would not do. It cannot be about sidestepping power. It cannot be about ceding power. It must be about taking power.

We cannot take power from the capitalist class in the absence of the organized working class, of organized labor. It can only happen if the organized working class is there—confronting and answering the questions of power. In South Africa, it sometimes seems easier to substitute the energy and militancy of unemployed youth for the struggle to draw on the energy and militancy that can and must come from workers with jobs. Substitution is a political problem. It ends up compounding the difficulties of mobilizing workers with jobs.

Part of the obstacle in the way of mobilizing organized workers is the crisis of confidence: Ordinary working-class people have been forced to the belief that there can never actually be real solutions. They have been stripped of the confidence that fundamental change can happen. An acute part of that is a lack of confidence that they themselves and their class can be the agents of real solutions. For workers there can be no solution as long as the power and wealth lies with the capitalists.

And, the solution is the re-organization of economic and political life under working-class control. Such clear knowledge and vision gets buried beneath the muck of bourgeois thinking. Capitalist agents oppose this on the grounds of (capitalist) realism. They tell workers to forget dreams and to be realistic. And even if they dream, they are only allowed a dream that is infested, diseased, and small.

These are problems that must be addressed and cannot be solved by taking workers for granted. They need patience, respect, and understanding of what is forced onto workers every day. And what was forced on them historically, going back to the days of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. They need to rebuild the confidence that there actually is this power—the power of workers. They need confidence that workers have this power in their own hands. The power to struggle not just for wages and conditions, but for everything.

Not to have to struggle for every gain and then to struggle again for it tomorrow. Not to struggle in one place without moving forward in another. But to struggle together for political power—so that workers together can govern the whole of society. That ordinary working-class people can come up with a plan to produce what people need for comfortable safe lives. What is waiting to be born is a workers' plan under workers' control of production, not for profit for the bosses, but to meet workers' needs.

NOTES

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (International Publishers, 1971), 276.
2. "State of Capture: Full text of Thuli Madonsela's report," politicsweb.co.za/documents/state-of-capture-full-text-of-thuli-madonselas-rep.

Will Africa Be the Last Oil Frontier?

LEE WENGRAF

“Our continent cannot keep supplying the Global North. We can’t.”

INA-MARIA SHIKONGO, Fridays For Future Windhoek

A MAJOR STRUGGLE OVER RESOURCES is unfolding in southern Africa. In the wildlife preserves of the Okavango Delta—home to 200,000 people and spanning parts of Namibia and Botswana—a Canadian oil company is drilling for oil over the fierce opposition of indigenous people, activists and environmental experts. The company, Reconnaissance Energy Africa—known as ReconAfrica—has a plan objectionable to virtually everyone except its investors and Namibian and Botswanan government partners who have granted permits for exploratory tests: it promises to unleash untold levels of pollution, destruction of water supplies and farmland, permanent harm to animals including endangered species and the eviction of residents from their land. ReconAfrica’s rush for what they are calling “largest oil play of the decade” is nothing short of devastating, profit-fueled extraction, with strong echoes of Africa’s colonial past.

Yet Big Oil is on the ropes. Pushed by

mass resistance and calls for climate justice, oil, gas and mining companies are facing an unprecedented crisis. Environmental activists have long denounced extractive industries for their climate-destroying capabilities, demanding a transition to sustainable energy sources and that fossil fuels be left in the ground. Since the passage of the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015, calls for governments and multinational corporations to take urgent action have accelerated. As this article was going to press in June 2021, a series of major statements and rulings compelling a curb on fossil fuel production have shaken the industry to its core. In this context, with the contradictions of destructive extraction laid bare, how can we understand this aggressive push by ReconAfrica into one of the largest protected wildlife regions on the globe? Part of the answer lies in the “solutions” on offer. Claims of a path to “net zero” put forward by major firms such as BP and Shell paper over a global contradiction: achieving net zero on their terms means that ordinary people of the Global South will pay the price as nations of the Global North “export” their carbon footprints. This struggle cannot be seen more clearly than in the fight for the future of Okavango.

ReconAfrica: Drilling at Any Cost

In 2014, representatives of a Canadian “junior” oil company called Reconnaissance Energy Africa signed a lease to a 13,000 square

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mile, 8.75-million-acre area approximately the size of Belgium, in Namibia and Botswana. According to the company's website, they hold a 90% interest in the 6.3-million-acre Namibian section, with the national oil company, NAMCOR, holding the remaining 10%, and a full 100% of 2.45 million acres in adjacent Botswana. ReconAfrica secured extremely favorable terms from the Namibian government: a 5% royalty fee and 35% corporate tax. If the oil exploration is commercially viable, the Company is entitled to a 25-year production license. After a series of delays, ReconAfrica obtained permits to explore, raising enough capital to drill three exploratory wells with an IPO of \$23 million in 2020 and beginning drilling in January 2021, in Kawe, Kavango East, in an elephant habitat. The company has long predicted a major find, up to 31 billion barrels of oil¹. Upon the April 15 announcement that "the first of a three well drilling program, provides clear evidence of a working conventional petroleum system in the Kavango Basin," their stock prices surged. Company statements brim with enthusiasm for this "last great oil find" with geological conditions ostensibly similar to the Texas Permian basin. "We know we have discovered a new sedimentary basin. It's up to 35,000 feet deep and it's a large and very expansive basin. Every basin of this depth in the world produces commercial hydrocarbons. It just makes sense," ReconAfrica co-founder Craig Steinke told *CNN*.² Drilling in the second well was underway in Mbambi, also in Kavango East, as *New Politics* went to press.

It's difficult to overestimate the destructive potential in ReconAfrica's plans. Investigative journalists, area residents, and activists have accumulated a vast body of evidence of the dangers to Okavango, demolishing the company's claims to adequate safety measures. As a result, resistance to the drilling plan is growing. *National Geographic* launched a series of articles in the fall of 2020 condemning the immense threats posed to the wildlife, livelihoods, and environment in the region.

Among the most serious is the potential for water contamination in an area with scarce water supplies. The Okavango is a wetland fed by an inland delta, the region's major water source. As the magazine describes, "any contamination to the aquifer will be all but impossible to contain and clean up."³ ReconAfrica's license to explore lies adjacent to the main river of the Okavango Delta and exploratory drilling is being carried out 160 miles upstream. Critics of the project have raised serious concerns about the lack of analysis in the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of the impact on ground and surface water, especially given the vast amount of water that drilling requires. The dangers posed to the water supply actually affect roughly half the population of Namibia, a mainly arid country, as the Okavango River supports the water security of more than one million people.⁴ Namibia has already experienced frightening degrees of warming, at a rate outpacing that of other regions.

The *National Geographic* series has laid out in painful detail the danger posed to the area's wildlife: "The Okavango region is home to the largest herd of African elephants left on Earth and myriad other animals—African wild dogs, lions, leopards, giraffes, amphibians and reptiles, birds—and rare flora....including important migratory routes for the world's largest remaining elephant population.... Wild animals use the entire region, which is why Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have created the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, or KAZA for short. Bigger than Italy, it's the largest conservation area on the continent. ReconAfrica's licensed areas overlap with this huge international park."⁵ The region is also home to six wildlife conservancies and is typically described as "the largest terrestrial transfrontier conservation area in the world."

Shockingly, while Recon Africa has a license to explore, as critics have pointed out, not all required permits were obtained for the testing of the wells. The company

has made a series of promises and claims that have failed to materialize: they pledged to line pits for the safe disposal of well-water yet photos clearly show that that promise has been broken. ReconAfrica claims that they are using water that is “organic” and “100% safe to the environment” for drilling yet waste from drilling fluids is extremely hazardous and potentially radioactive. Namibia’s Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform has stated that the company wasn’t consulted on permitting.⁶ Likewise, as activist Ina-Maria Shikongo of the organization Fridays For Future Windhoek pointed out, permits were never granted for the road-building to the second drill site conducted by ReconAfrica, despite the immense pollution and noise disruption to residents and wildlife caused by the construction. These serious questions notwithstanding, the drilling of boreholes has gone ahead. “It’s called greenwashing,” said Shikongo describing company misrepresentations in an interview. “This should be a crime.”⁷

The danger that the company could frack in the Okavango looms large. ReconAfrica has not received a license to frack from the Namibian government, and earlier references to the possibility of using “unconventional methods” (i.e., fracking) have disappeared from their website. Now, company spokespeople insist, fracking is off the table. Yet a number of senior executives made their reputations by fracking, such as CEO Scot Evans, formerly of Halliburton. Drilling operations are headed up by none other than the geologist credited with developing the fracking method, Nick Steinsberger, described by an industry publication as “one of the men who made the American shale boom happen.” In an interview, Steinsberger captured the hubris of drilling at any costs that characterizes the project: “I am honored to have been responsible for completing the first 25 horizontal shale wells ever drilled in [Texas’s Barnett] shale patch. This is indeed where modern-day fracking began. Now,

I’m hoping for something just as exciting in Namibia’s Kavango Basin.... I could have gone pretty much anywhere, but we all want something big. The next big find. And they don’t happen very often these days—at least

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not onshore. We’re looking for the next American shale boom, and Africa’s got the most potential.”⁸ South African geologist Jan Arkert believes, however, that fracking will be required to extract the oil from the oil, and that harmful emissions will inevitably be released into the atmosphere.⁹ Despite the dangers, company representatives joyfully declare the potential for 120 billion barrels of oil equivalent, numbers potentially “laughable because they are so high.”¹⁰

But it’s not only the exploratory glee that mimics the tone of colonial adventurers of over a century ago. ReconAfrica public relations spin comes with promises for the people of Namibia and Botswana and supposed improvements in their way of life, including jobs. But as with many extractive projects, drilling is not labor-intensive so the project is not expected to lead to many new jobs, and the skilled jobs onsite are mainly held by workers from Canada and the United States. In fact, jobs for residents in the region have been mainly limited to short-term manual labor and in some cases, workers have been fired after a brief stint and pay withheld; according to Shikongo, when the labor commissioner went to investigate, he himself was slapped with a lawsuit by the company. In fact, ReconAfrica has taken pains to emphasize their ostensible “strong social license” and eagerly talk up their

efforts at community engagement through a series of public meetings in the region. But as a number of accounts have described, their outreach was fraught with problems: public notices were only distributed in English, a language not spoken by a majority of the residents, and the sessions themselves, limited due to COVID-related restrictions, only included a small number of people.

The company's behavior has been so egregious that a lawsuit has been brought by the family of Andreas Sinonge in Mbambi whose farm is located near the second borehole. According to *National Geographic*, over 600 working farms lie within ReconAfrica's exploration area, some irrigated with water from the Okavango River.¹¹ Intending to bring the company and several government ministries before the Namibian High Court, they argue that they never consented to the drilling and that ReconAfrica is squatting illegally. "The law is clear in its intent. Communal land is not to be turned over to private companies for the sake of profit-seeking. We already had land rights and were in occupation of that piece of land by the time Recon came and started drilling for oil and gas extraction. We were forcefully and

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unlawfully evicted from our land," stated the filings.¹² Other reports assert that the area wasn't included in the original EIA¹³ and "[r]eports of bullying of community leaders who have spoken out against oil drilling have surfaced."¹⁴ The right to "free, prior and informed consent" and "the right to say no" are recognized global principles for local residents

in the face of community-destroying extraction, and ReconAfrica to date has, in practice, trampled on this fundamental notion.

Indigenous Resistance and Community Organizing

In the face of this corporate aggression, the indigenous San people of the Okavango have mobilized and spoken out in protest. A statement to the Namibian and Botswanan governments from the San people explained that:

We note that as the custodians of this land for thousands of years, and the rightful current inhabitants and custodians of this land, we have never been consulted, nor have we given the go-ahead to any entities to prospect for oil and gas in this our lands. We depend on the presence of the animals for food as well as to attract tourism from which we derive an income. In this way we will be prevented from hunting and gathering food, collecting medicine and performing our cultural practices and sacred rituals—in short it will prevent us from being San.¹⁵

They argue that the area should be protected under UNESCO commitments to the "cultural landscape" accompanying its designation as a World Heritage Site. Further, they continue, the exploration violates the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the commitments to protect the environment enshrined in the Namibian constitution. As a result of protest against the violation of the site, ReconAfrica was compelled to accept an exemption for the Tsodilo Hills of the UNESCO-designated area, a victory but a small section of the exploration area.

Activists have been moving into action both locally and internationally. Fridays For Future Windhoek, Frack Free Namibia and Botswana, the Kavango Alive activist network, and Saving Okavango's Unique Life (SOUL) among others have grown their resistance over the past year through a series of marches on UNESCO offices, the Parlia-

ment, and government ministries. In April 2021, on Earth Day—and on the heels of U.S. President Joe Biden’s Leaders Climate Summit—protesters in Windhoek delivered letters to the U.S. and German ambassadors. The letter read in part:

We are gravely concerned with developments in northern Namibia, specifically in the region of the Kavango Basin, where the fossil fuel industry’s desperate last gasp of air threatens to destroy one of Africa’s last lifelines and home to a truly magnificent and unique ecosystem. ReconAfrica, a petroleum exploration company headquartered in Canada, is currently engaging in oil and gas exploration in the Kavango Basin, the watershed of the famed Okavango Delta. This very delta, home to the last great herd of African elephants, recently confirmed to be dangerously close to extinction, is protected by US Public Law...known as the “Defending Economic Livelihoods and Threatened Animals Act” or the DELTA Act [asserting U.S. commitment to conservation in the region]When President Biden said yesterday, “We have to move. We have to move quickly to meet these challenges,” surely this meant stopping even the slightest damage to one of the world’s most delicate and magnificent surviving eco-systems, especially in the name of dirty energy!

The struggle to save the Okavango is gathering steam internationally, with a March 2021 protest by Extinction Rebellion at ReconAfrica’s now-shuttered Vancouver office and mobilizations in South Africa, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. A petition drive calling on Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has gained wide support.

In the face of activist assertions of their right to say no, the regional governments have instead insisted upon their “right to explore.” Notwithstanding strong environmental protections in the Namibian constitution, and the fact that both Namibia and Botswana are parties to the Paris Agreement, aspirations

for resource nationalism on the part of both have remained firm. In a joint government-company press release, Namibian Minister of Mines and Energy Thomas Alweendo extolled the initial drilling results as a “great period for the people of Namibia,” hinting at hypocrisy in the idea that the Global South should be denied any developmental potential extraction offers. Meanwhile, activists critical of the government’s actions are branded as “outsiders” and hostile to the opportunities on offer for indigenous people, said Ina-Maria Shikongo. ReconAfrica, for their part, has welcomed the government as “one of the friendliest regimes for explorers.”¹⁶ An investigative piece by the *Globe & Mail* has revealed close ties between a company consultant and Namibia’s President Hage Geingob.¹⁷

Extraction in Africa and the “Net Zero” Era

The oil industry is in a race against time. The calls for net zero emissions and curbs on fossil fuel exploitation have created contradictions where the world’s oil companies face urgent demands to transition to sustainable fuel sources, at the same time as oil is becoming profitable again. During the pandemic, prices crashed globally because of a glut in supply, even dipping into negative territory in the early stages of the crisis. Today, a new oil boom could be around the corner, with prices creeping upwards. But even in the downturn of 2020, consumption still averaged 91 million barrels a day — more than the world consumed daily in 2012.¹⁸ The world’s largest banks have provided \$3.8 trillion to fossil fuel companies *since 2016*, when the Paris Agreement took effect;¹⁹ global banks provided \$750 billion in financing to coal, oil, and gas companies in 2020 alone.²⁰ At the same time, costs for a “sustainable transition” are enormous, where energy investment will need to rise to \$5 trillion a year by 2030 to achieve net zero from \$2 trillion today.²¹ These tensions exert contradictory pressures on the fossil fuel

industry in a number of directions, a product of a wider capitalist economy inextricably tied to competition and profit: how to invest in new technologies while maintaining a way to profit through extractive industries. These tensions are currently unfolding on a global scale, with the struggle over the “transition” and who will pay setting companies on a competitive crash course. Likewise global powers claiming the mantle of “net zero” aspirations are embarking on a new period of “green imperialism.” These are the dynamics of the “sustainable transition,” and activist forces and the left must understand this new terrain as one we are compelled to fight on.

ReconAfrica is on a no-holds-barred drive to extract profit for as long as that window of opportunity remains open. And because of mounting pressures on the industry, their tendency to cut regulatory corners, as reported by environmentalists and activists—no matter the cost to communities and wildlife—will only intensify. On the one hand, a small, “junior” oil company like ReconAfrica cannot go it alone: as the company itself has stated, they will need the bigger

Oil companies face urgent demands to transition to sustainable fuel sources, at the same time as oil is becoming profitable again.

resources of an oil major to step in and pull off the exploration success they claim lies in the Okavango. Given these pressures, when *National Geographic* revealed on May 21 the existence of a whistle-blower Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) complaint against the company—citing more than 150 instances of false and misleading statements to investors—the news was shocking but not entirely surprising. In response, ReconAfrica

hurriedly filed 22 amendments with Canadian securities regulators and lashed out at the magazine for running “false” statements and a “hit piece.”

On the other hand, in the “net zero” landscape, Big Oil needs “wildcatters” like ReconAfrica: small companies willing to take risks in “unexplored” territory, who can continue to deliver a return on investment in fossil fuels in less heavily-regulated regions of the world. In this context, oil majors might be more compelled to sell off their assets to producers more willing to buck the pressures towards “greening” their enterprise. In late May, 2021, an avalanche of change—from stockholder rebellions at Shell, Exxon, and Chevron to a ground-breaking court ruling in the Netherlands compelling Shell Oil to slash emissions by 45% by 2030 compared to 2019 levels—are only the latest developments for high profile companies like BP and Shell who had already made “net zero” commitments.

The fossil fuel industry is fighting for its future in Okavango and other extraction “hot-spots” across the continent. Extraction continues under the guise of these “new finds” by companies like ReconAfrica opting to violate regulations and human rights. With historically weaker regulatory enforcement, countries of the Global South will be likely destinations for these “last great discoveries.” As Francois Engelbrecht of the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa explained to CNN, “The big risk is that the global North makes the transition, and that Africa becomes the dumping ground for the world’s fossil fuel technologies — the last place where this kind of energy is being pursued.”²² A 2020 study, for example, found that European oil exported to Nigeria exceeded EU pollution limits *by as much as 204 times*.²³ Ina-Maria Shikongo describes the stakes well:

You cannot be talking about cutting emissions on your side of the planet but then you are coming to release 1.4 billion tons of CO2 on our side....How is it that you can literally put [jeopardizing]

our lives before this company? People need to understand that reaching these targets globally, [what that looks like] is that companies are coming to Africa to cause more emissions and it's not fair. More climate refugees will be created, more crimes against humanity, and for what? So we can continue feeding this greed. It's slavery on another level, it's a continuation of colonialism. The transition has to be about saving lives, so everyone has a fair share. We have all of the raw materials but we live in poverty, but it's an imposed poverty.²⁴

Conclusion

On May 18 the International Energy Agency (IEA), an organization representing rich countries, dropped a bombshell declaration in their "Net Zero by 2050" report: all new fossil fuel extraction needs to halt after this year to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, and investors must not take on any new projects.²⁵ In this unprecedented call for change, the IEA insisted that current targets are insufficient to avert the climate emergency. "The number of countries which have pledged to reach net zero has grown, but even if their commitments are fully achieved, there will still be 22 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide worldwide in 2050 which would lead to temperature rise of around 2.1C by 2100"²⁶—well above the 1.5 C aspirational goal of the Paris Agreement.

While Big Oil and governments of the Global North advocate for market-based, "net zero" so-called solutions to the crisis, front-line struggles underscore the actual stakes: the oil industry—super-majors and "junior" operators alike—will not leave the fossil fuel world stage quietly. Fortunately the global resistance continues to grow, accelerated in no small part by struggles like the one in Okavango that is helping to reshape the terms of this fight beyond its borders. The coalitions knitted together to stop ReconAfrica in Namibia and Botswana both put the worst, most outrageous abuses on full display in

southern Africa and likewise provide strength and insights for the wider movement. As Ndaundika Shefeni of SOUL remarks, "As opposition grows across the region and world, unlikely alliances are forming of spiritual leaders, cultural organizations, conservation charities and grassroots community groups."²⁷

These are the forces that will most decisively stop extraction and avert a climate emergency, on terms to meet the needs and interests of ordinary people, including those currently in the cross-hairs of profit-fueled extraction. And this is the strategic vision embraced by activists across the continent and beyond, some fighting for decades, as they continue to challenge disastrous oil exploration, from Nigeria's Niger Delta region—the site of drilling for three-quarters of a century—to the new East African Crude Oil Pipeline planned to run through Uganda and Tanzania, home to world-famous wildlife preserves. As Nigerian environmental activist Nnimmo Bassey puts it, "Now is the time for ReconAfrica to spare Okavango, the people of Namibia and Africa the avoidable harms which will result from their mindless pursuit of profit at the expense of the people and planet. Anything less will be nothing other than willful climate and ecological crimes."²⁸ The global movement will not let them get away with it.

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Marx's Commune

An Appreciation and a Critique

DAN LA BOTZ

The article below is part of a longer essay on the Commune the first part of which will be published on the New Politics website.

THE PARIS COMMUNE OF 1871 only lasted from March 18 to May 28, just 72 days, yet it is one of the most celebrated events in socialist history.¹ It is a legend. But, what was it? And what is it for us today? A model for socialists? A heroic failure? A negation of the state? Or the first workers' government?

Karl Marx, then a member of the leading council of the International Working Men's Association (or First International), gave the Commune his wholehearted and passionate approval. He also wrote the most famous contemporary account of the Commune, his magnificent essay *The Civil War in France*. Though the Commune had not been organized by and was not led by the International, though its leadership was largely in the hands of ideological rivals, the Blanquists and Proudhonians, though the workers' government failed to take the decisive action he thought necessary to defeat the capitalist class, and even though he recognized early on that the Commune was doomed to defeat, Marx did not hesitate to give it his complete support, to vindicate it, and to insist that the International support it; after it was crushed,

he did not cease to defend its reputation and to commemorate it. He did so simply because he believed that the Paris Commune represented a democratic workers' government, the first such government ever. He was absolutely right to do so. Yet it is also the case that, as we will see, he failed to take up some of the Commune's serious problems. What issues did he decline to comment on? And why did he avoid them?

Marx writes in *The Civil War in France*, his principal interpretation of the Commune,

The Commune was formed of the municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.²

In Friedrich Engels' introduction to Marx's essay, written on the twentieth anniversary of the Commune, he remarks that it was "the really democratic state."³

Marx praises the Commune's progressive measures: its abolition of conscription and the standing army, National Guard made up of the citizens in arms, confirmation of foreigners elected to the Commune, election of representatives and voters right to recall them, payment of workingmen's wages to Commune officials, separation of church and state, end of subsidies to the church, and nationalization of church property. He also mentions the destruction of the Vendôme

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Column, the monument erected by Napoleon I that was widely viewed as a symbol of chauvinism and militarism.⁴ And he listed all of the labor measures as well, from the abolition of night work for bakers to an end to fines and withholding of wages, as well as turning over closed factories to the workers themselves.⁵

While all of those were important, Marx writes, "its true secret was this. It was essentially a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor."⁶ It is that sentence that has captivated the imagination of all succeeding interpreters of the event: the notion of a workers' government that could emancipate labor. As he writes in another passage, "The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence. Its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people."⁷ For Marx, the Commune clearly represented an example of a profoundly democratic workers' government.

Marx Passes Over Some of the Commune's Problems

In writing on the Commune, Marx was under certain constraints that placed limits on his analysis. First, he wrote as a member of the First International's leadership council; consequently, he had to write in terms of the positions recently agreed upon at the International's last convention, positions that reflected the consensus among the loyalists of Joseph-Pierre Proudhon, the British trade unionists, and Marx's own followers in the group. He was thus writing not as Marx but



as spokesperson for the International.

Second, while Marx was absolutely right to defend the Commune's democratic structure, he chose not to discuss some of its significant weaknesses. We can easily understand why he might have done so. First, while it was not published until June of 1871, *The Civil War in France* was written in April and May, before the Commune had been crushed by the Versailles army sent by Adolphe Thiers. No doubt Marx focused on defending the Commune because he knew it would face a vicious attack by the Versailles government, and because he believed it would in all likelihood be defeated. Marx was, naturally, concerned with the strategic questions facing the Commune, which he may have believed took precedence, in the moment, over questions of principle. In any case, reading Marx's account, it is clear that he avoids certain issues on which he had long had strong views.

Women's Suffrage

For one, Marx, who generally took progressive positions on women's rights, failed to mention that the Commune's "universal suffrage" was in fact universal *male* suffrage. Half the adult population was excluded from the vote: the women. Also, since women were excluded from the National Guard, the largest and most important organization of the Commune, they could not vote in the Federation

of the Guard either. During the period of the Commune, women did not express a desire for the vote, but we know that some women had demanded the vote in the French Revolutions of 1789 and many more in 1848; and we know, of course, that women's full political participation is essential to any genuinely democratic socialist society, as Marx agreed. For even though Marx failed to mention the female vote, he was already an advocate of women's political participation. And it is not surprising he would be, since it had for years been a major issue.

Women's political equality was, of course, not a new question. Olympe de Gouge's "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen" had been published in 1791 in France during the Revolution, while Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" was published in England in 1792; both had called for political equality and women's suffrage. During the Revolution of 1848, French women had demanded the right to vote, and attempted to do so. In May of 1867, John Stuart Mill gave his speech "On the Admission of Women to the Electoral Franchise" to the House of Commons of the British Parliament, whose debates Marx followed closely.

In the 1860s, Marx had already argued for women's equality in the International Workingmen's Association, which accepted women members. Marx himself made the motion for the formation of women's branches.⁸ Elisabeth Dmitrieff, who left London for Paris to join the Commune and organized the Union of Women, was in fact sent as an agent of the International. We know from his letters that Marx was already a believer in women's political equality. For example, in a December 12, 1868, letter to his comrade, Dr. Louis Kugelmann, Marx wrote:

Tell your wife I never suspected her of being one of Generaless [*sic*] Geck's subordinates. My question was only intended as a joke. In any case ladies cannot complain of the *International*,

for it has elected a lady, Madame Law, to be a member of the General Council.⁹

Joking aside, great progress was evident in the last Congress of the American "Labor Union" in that among other things, it treated working women with complete equality. While in this respect the English, and still more the gallant French, are burdened with a spirit of narrow-mindedness. Anybody who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment. Social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex (the ugly ones included).¹⁰

We can see that Marx, despite his joke in poor taste, believed in women's "complete equality" well before the Commune.

Not that long after the Commune, Engels wrote to his friend Ida Pauli,

When we get to the helm, women will not only vote, but also be elected and give speeches. The latter is already happening here in the school administration, and last November I gave all seven of my votes to a lady ... What makes the ladies on the local school boards stand out is the fact that they talk very little and work a lot, on average each as much as three men.¹¹

Knowing the views of Marx and Engels in this period on the question of women's political equality, one has to assume that the two made a conscious decision in their contemporaneous and even in their later writings on the Commune not to take up the issue of the lack of women's suffrage in the Commune. Yet one has to think that it is precisely in a moment of such radical change in Paris that it was possible to raise such an issue, and that had women won the vote, that might have made the movement more democratic and perhaps more radical. And after the Commune had been defeated, there was no reason not to go back and point out that it had failed to enfranchise half the

adult population.

Other Democratic Questions

While the Commune was a government of the working people, it also had some other serious limitations that Marx did not discuss. Take the question of the Commune's meetings, which were held *in secret*. The justification for this was, as Communard Paschal Grousset put it, that they were "a council of war." Several Communards, however, criticized this stealthy practice and demanded, to no avail, that the meetings be public. Only after April 18 were the proceedings of the meetings published in the *Journal officiel*.¹² Marx praised the Commune for publishing a record of its activities,¹³ but surely its publication was no substitute for open meetings that could be observed and made subject to popular control. As historian Jacques Rougerie writes, "The secrecy that surrounded the deliberations of the Commune could hardly have been accepted by the Parisian people who demanded 'direct' democracy and the control of the elected by those who elected them."¹⁴

Insiders also complained that the Commune engaged in endless and pointless discussions, in which its members were so often at odds with each other that business could not be conducted. To deal with this problem, the Commune elected a new Executive Committee made up of the heads of the various commissions, but this meant decisions were still made in closed meetings, just by an even smaller number of people.¹⁵

Another issue is the question of the repression of civil rights. As Rougerie observes, "The Commune experienced a real drift toward repression and that is surely the least sympathetic side of this popular adventure."¹⁶ Raoul Rigault and other Blanquists took charge of the Commune's police force. Blanqui said that Rigault had "the soul of a policeman." Rigault and his men viewed everyone with suspicion, and they took as pris-

oners the archbishop, the judge of the court of appeals, several priests, and others. Note that they were simply held hostage, rather than charged and held for trial. The police also pillaged churches and some wealthy people's homes. As for freedom of the press, Rigault's police shut down thirty newspapers, most of them conservative, but also *The Commune*, which was edited by Jean-Baptiste Millière, a leftist critic of the Commune's errors.¹⁷ Prosper Olivier Lissagaray had a somewhat different critique of the Blanquist police, charging them with being ineffective: "The culpable heedlessness, which the people have paid for with their blood, was the salvation of criminals."¹⁸

The Commune proposed to be a moral revolution, and Rigault's police immediately put up signs that read "Death to Thieves." They arrested people for public drunkenness, stopped public gambling, shut down houses of prostitution, and when those women then turned to street walking, arrested 270 of them in one month.¹⁹ Clearly most of those arrested would have been working-class and poor people. The worst action of the Blanquist-led police force was the pointless massacre of their hostages in the last days of the Commune, which imitated rather than rose above the pernicious example set by Versailles.

Another example of this drift toward a police state was the formation in May 1871 of the Committee of Public Safety. It was named, of course, for the original Committee of Public Safety established in 1793 during the French Revolution and responsible for overseeing the Terror, during which three hundred thousand were arrested, seventeen thousand were officially executed, and another ten thousand were unofficially killed or perished in prison. The motion to create a Committee of Public Safety divided the Commune into a majority of Blanquists, Jacobins, and Proudhonians, who were in favor, and a minority, mostly made up of Internationalists, who were against. Gustave Lefrançais, a member of the minority, wrote

of the Commune debate on the Committee of Public Safety that it divided into,

the pure revolutionary party, composed of Jacobins and Blanquists, differentiated only by the fact that the former wanted the dictatorship of a group, while the second group wanted the dictatorship of a single person, to clear the terrain before proceeding to the reconstruction of a new order of things ... the socialists [on the other hand] were absolute adversaries of the notion of an authoritarian government; they were convinced that the social revolution could not be carried out until the existing political institutions had given way to new institutions having as their foundation communal autonomy.²⁰

The final vote to establish the Committee of Public Safety in early May was 45 to 23. The minority was made up, says Rougerie, of the “authentic socialists,” mostly members of the International. The minority issued a statement saying:

By a special and specific vote, the Commune of Paris, has abdicated its power, transferring it into the hands of a dictatorship which it has named Public Safety ...

We, like the majority, wish to carry out the political and social renovations, but unlike their way of thinking, we make our demands in the name of the voters whom we represent, with the right to answer alone for our acts before the voters, without having between us the authority of a supreme dictatorship, which our mandate neither permits us to accept or to recognize.²¹

The democratic socialists of the International rejected and repudiated the authoritarianism of the Commune's majority. The internationalists, believing in socialism from below, refused to accept the idea of a new society octroyed from above.²²

After being reorganized on May 10–11, 1871, the Commune's Committee of Public Safety was made up almost entirely of Jacobins and Blanquists. On May 15, the majority

of the Commune leadership declared itself to be the “revolutionary fraction” and proceeded to purge the minority. That is, the authoritarians purged the democratic socialists. The conjunction of the Jacobins' nostalgia for the great bloodletting of the 1790s and the Blanquists' predilection for police work never really got off the ground, since all attention had to be directed toward the military defense of Paris against Versailles.

We should note that in *The Civil War in France*, Marx himself never used the term “dictatorship of the proletariat.” He only used it to describe the Commune at the October banquet on the seventh anniversary of the founding of the International Workingmen's Association. Scholar-activist Hal Draper argues that in using the term as a descriptor of the Commune, Marx never meant the use of special dictatorial powers, but simply the workers' democratic institutions.²³

In *The Civil War in France*, written when Paris was under attack, Marx did not discuss these differences between the authoritarian majority and the democratic-socialist minority, though certainly he was well aware of them, being in regular contact with various representatives of the International in Paris.²⁴ During what was no doubt a moment of vulnerability, he did not want to discuss the Commune's internal divisions. Today, we have no reason to overlook them. We should, I believe, place ourselves on the side of the minority who opposed creating a dictatorship over the Commune's elected representatives.

Could the Commune Have Been Saved?

Marx's strongest critique of the Commune, in fact, concerns a moment that preceded its formal declaration: the failure of the Central Committee of the Twenty Districts to attack Versailles before Thiers had concentrated his military forces there. Marx writes:

In their reluctance to continue the civil war opened by Thiers' burglarious at-

tempt on Montmartre, the Central Committee made itself, this time, guilty of a decisive mistake in not at once marching upon Versailles, then completely helpless, and thus putting an end to the conspiracies of Thiers and his Rurals.²⁵

Marx views this failure to strike at the opportune moment as one that permitted Thiers to strengthen his forces and launch another campaign against Paris in April. In fact, the Blanquists had put forward a motion for an attack on Versailles, but it was rejected by the majority of the committee.

While Marx's criticism is correct, one has to ask: What would then have happened had the Paris Commune carried the revolution to Versailles? Had it done so, Paris would have been spared immediate attack by Versailles, but surely the bourgeoisie would have organized, either under Thiers or another government and army, to undertake the crushing of the armed working people of Paris. The bourgeois government would have attempted to reach an accommodation with German chancellor Otto von Bismarck and have tried again to get him to invade Paris. The creation of another army would have necessitated the continued suppression of the communes springing up in other cities and winning the continued support of the rural population for the Thiers government. So, this question takes us to another, that of the peasantry who formed two-thirds of the French population. Could the Commune have survived by winning over the peasantry?

Marx, in his 1852 essay "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," had, in what became a very famous passage, discussed the French peasantry as it was at that time:

The small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse. The isolation is furthered by France's poor means

of communication and the poverty of the peasants. Their field of production, the small holding, permits no division of labor in its cultivation, no application of science, and therefore no multifariousness of development, no diversity of talent, no wealth of social relationships. Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient, directly produces most of its consumer needs, and thus acquires its means of life more through an exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. A small holding, the peasant and his family; beside it another small holding, another peasant and another family. A few score of these constitute a village, and a few score villages constitute a department. Thus, the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homonymous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.²⁶

And what are the political implications of this? He draws them out:

Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power which subordinates society to itself.²⁷

This was the basis of the political power of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III); the peasants had received their land from the French Revolution, which they identified with his uncle Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon I), and therefore they transferred their loyalty to him.

Had the peasantry changed enough by 1870 that it could be won over to working-class leadership, to a labor party, to deeper reform, and possibly to a new revolution?

Things had changed some. France had been building railroads since 1852, and by 1870 the basic framework of the national railway system was already in place. Railroads made possible the commercialization of the peasants' crops, tending to create greater inequality in the countryside, a growth in the number of large farmers, a reduction of some peasants to agricultural laborers, and the migration of some laborers to the cities. The larger farmers tended to lead the smaller ones, while the Catholic Church provided the cultural glue to keep the peasantry together as a bloc.²⁸ The question is, could the Commune have reached these peasants and won them to support the democratic, social Republic?

Marx argued in *The Civil War in France* that indeed the Commune could have won over the peasants with fundamentally economic arguments regarding taxes and tithes. He writes:

The Commune ... in one of its first proclamations declared that the true originators of the war would be made to pay its costs. The Commune would have delivered the peasant of the blood tax—would have given him a cheap government—transformed his present bloodsuckers, the notary, advocate, executor, and other judicial vampires, into salaried communal agents, elected by and responsible to himself. It would have freed him of the tyranny of the *garde champêtre*, the gendarme and the prefect; would have put enlightenment by the school master in the place of stultification by the priest.²⁹

Indeed, Marx goes so far as to claim that “three months communication of Communal Paris with the provinces would bring about a general rising of the peasants.”³⁰

Marx's view that the peasantry could be won away from conservative political parties (Bonapartist, Royalist, and Liberal) in just a few months of propagandizing by the Commune seems overly optimistic. The countryside's new wealthy farmers, its bourgeoisie, and its officials, though a minority, would have waged their own propaganda war to turn the peasantry against Paris' usurious bankers, landowners, and other elites, and especially against the socialists and communists who wanted to socialize property and redistribute wealth, including the peasants' land. The bourgeoisie would have rallied against the atheists, who wanted to destroy the church. It seems a stretch of the imagination to think that in a few months, or even in a year or two, the Commune could lead a national uprising of the peasantry in a country where the peasants *already owned their own land*—for three or four generations, in fact. Moreover, peasant incomes—whether of landowners, tenants, or laborers—had improved somewhat under the Second Empire. Bumper crops and integration into the national economy, thanks to the railroads, had led to a general prosperity; and while some were still quite poor, in general the peasants had become “a kind of middle class.”³¹ Could this new “middle-class” peasantry have been won to a worker-led revolution?

If Marx is right about the potentiality of the Commune to lead the peasants, and if a new revolutionary government could have been established, then the next fight would have been with the great powers of Europe, which, just as they did in the 1790s, would join together to crush the Parisian workers. Prussia is already at the gates of the city. England could land forces in Dunkirk. The Low Countries could invade from the north. Could the Commune, now a national workers' and peasants' movement, have survived?

Would there have been the necessary international solidarity? Would an international revolutionary wave sweep the continent, such as had taken place in 1848, and would happen again in 1918? The odds seem long, given that between 1848 and 1918, the Paris Commune was the only major revolutionary workers' movement in Europe. Not until the period from 1905 to 1910 do we see Europe-wide radical democratic and socialist movements. All of this is very speculative, of course, and doesn't detract from Marx's analysis, but it does lead us to wonder whether the Commune, even had it attacked Versailles, as Marx thought necessary, could have been saved and could have succeeded in the longer term.

Smashing the State

Marx believed that the experience of the Commune taught the workers' and socialist movements many things, but the most important was the idea that workers could not take over and use the capitalist state, but rather that the state would have to be smashed and a new democratic workers' state created in its place. In April 1871, Marx wrote to Louis Kugelmann:

If you look at the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to *smash* it, and this is essential for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting.³²

What was the state to which Marx referred? It was, in his words, "the centralized state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature."³³ In other passages, Marx refers to this as the "parasite state," which lives off of the society that it oppresses.

As we know, the Parisian workers had not actually had to smash this state because much of the state bureaucracy and the army

had been removed to Versailles. The old police force had remained behind to deal with the situation, but with Paris in rebellion, it quickly became clear that it could not. As Rougerie wrote, by February, "all authority in Paris was gradually dissolving." It was this crumbling of the state in Paris that made it possible for the Parisian workers to create their own democratic state institutions such as the Central Committee of the Districts, the Federation of the National Guard, and then the Commune, as well as a new police force.

The Central Committee and the Commune passed resolutions abolishing the standing army and reorganizing the old police, and they created new commissions to replace the old bureaucracy, but they did not smash the state; in Paris, by then, there was little state to smash, because it had fled to Versailles. As we know, the state subsequently returned to Paris to retake power.

Could the Commune Have Led to Socialism?

Marx argued that the Commune "intended to abolish class-property," the cause of exploitation. He asked the Commune's bourgeois critics, who argued that communism was impossible, "What else, gentlemen, would it be but Communism, 'possible' Communism?"³⁴ Engels in his 1891 introduction to *The Civil Wars in France* elaborates, writing:

By 1871, large-scale industry had already so much ceased to be an exceptional case even in Paris, the center of artistic handicrafts, that by far the most important decree of the Commune instituted an organization of large-scale industry and even of manufacture which was not only to be based on the association of the workers in each factory, but also to combine all these associations in one great union; in short, an organization which as Marx quite rightly says in *The Civil War*, must necessarily have led in the end to communism.³⁵

Does it really seem likely that the Commune might have led to communism? In fact, large-scale industry did *not* exist in Paris at the time, except in a handful of enterprises;³⁶ the unions *did not*, at the time, accomplish the creation of a “great union”;³⁷ and, it is not at all clear that the momentum existed to establish a socialist society that would have ended in communism.

While Marx and Engels may have believed that the Commune’s thrust would lead to communism, if pressed, they would have had to admit that, in fact, it had *not* abolished private property in the means of production and had only seized a few national enterprises like tobacco, and that only a few workplaces had been abandoned by their owners. He may be right that, had the Commune had more time and had it become a successful national movement, it would have established a socialist society, “possible Communism.” It does not seem, however, that this was possible. What both the study of the Commune’s history and a review of Marx’s analysis suggest is that the Commune’s great achievements were fundamentally democratic and not socialist.

Marx himself was actually not nearly as sanguine as Engels. In a February 1881 letter to Dutch socialist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis regarding populist governments, Marx stated:

Perhaps you will refer me to the Paris Commune; but apart from the fact that this was merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could it be. With a modicum of common sense, however, it could have reached a compromise with Versailles useful to the whole mass of the people—that only thing that could be reached at the time. The appropriation of the Bank of France alone would have been enough to put an end with the terror to the vaunt of the Versailles people, etc., etc.³⁸

Marx had, to his credit, defended the revolutionary workers of Paris when they

rose up against the bourgeois government of Thiers, but upon reflection almost a decade later, he saw no possibility of socialism or victory. Seizing the Bank of France would have given the Commune a negotiating chip with which to reach a peaceful resolution of the conflict, saving thousands of lives and allowing the Parisians to fight another day for their social republic, for their Commune. Political theorist Stathis Kouvelakis suggests that this represented part of a more general rejection of the notion of armed revolution in favor of a parliamentary struggle for power in republics such as England, France, and Germany, reserving force for the fight for democracy and socialism under authoritarian governments.³⁹

Socialists today should learn from both the successes and failures of the Commune. We should emulate the democratic achievements, the creation of organizations of workers to take over and run institutions, and we should strive to reproduce and extend that sort of democratic accomplishment. The Commune created a workers’ administration, but a real workers’ state never fully emerged. The Commune—unlike the Russian Revolution of October 1917—never had the opportunity to face the more difficult challenges of establishing a democratic collectivist state and society that might open the way to communism.

Perhaps Marx, as spokesperson for the International, could not speak in his own voice. And no doubt he was also concerned not to criticize the Commune while it was under attack and, he feared, about to be crushed. So he hesitated to discuss some of the Commune’s problematic issues. Today, 150 years later, we have no reason not to discuss them; in fact, we have a responsibility to do so.

NOTES

1. In writing this essay I have relied principally on three books by Jacques Rougerie: *Paris Libre 1871* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1971); *La Commune et les Communards* (Paris: Editions Gallimard 2018); and

1. *La commune de 1871*, "Que sais-je ?", no. 581 (Paris: PUF, 2019). On women in the Commune, I have turned to Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Baricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Indiana University Press, 2004). See also interview with Mathilde Larrère, "They Were All the More Monstrous Because They Were Women, They Transgressed Everything," *International Viewpoint*, March 27, 2021, available at internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7085; and video interview with Larrère, March 30, 2021, available (in French) on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_q3T1x_VIw.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Writing on the Paris Commune*, Hal Draper, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 73. (Hereafter: Draper edition.)
3. Friedrich Engels, "1891 Introduction to *The Civil War in France*," available at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/postscript.htm.
4. Draper edition, 73–75.
5. Draper edition, 81.
6. Draper edition, 76.
7. Draper edition, 81.
8. Hal Draper, "Marx and Engels on Women's Liberation," *International Socialism*, S1, no. 44 (July/August 1970), 20–29, available at www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1970/07/women.htm#n62.
9. Harriet Law, a Marxist, was an advocate of women's suffrage.
10. Karl Marx, *Letters to Kugelmann* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 83.
11. Friedrich Engels to Ida Pauli, February 14, 1877, in *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol. 34 (Dietz Verlag 1973, 253, available at marxwirklichstudieren.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/mew_band34.pdf).
12. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 37.
13. Draper Edition, 83.
14. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 37.
15. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 38.
16. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 47: "Par ailleurs—la situation l'exigeait-elle à ce point ?—la Commune connut une réelle dérive policière, et c'est la côte assurément le moins sympathique de cette aventure populaire."
17. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 47–48.
18. Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, Eleanor Marx, trans. (Atenas Editores Asociados, 2016), 255.
19. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 48.
20. Gustave Lefrançais, *Étude sur le mouvement communaliste à Paris en 1871* (Neuchâtel, 1871), 189–90, cited in Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 255–56, 406n.
21. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 287.
22. According to Stathis Kouvelakis, Marx agreed with neither of the majority nor the minority.
23. Hal Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin* (Monthly Review, 1987), 1–41.
24. Stathis Kouvelakis, "On the Commune," part 1, *Verso blog*, March 29, 2021, www.versobooks.com/blogs/5039-on-the-paris-commune-part-1. Kouvelakis argues that Marx and Engels, even though they were not in Paris, should be considered participants in the Commune.
25. Draper edition, 67.
26. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," (1852), in *Die Revolution* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1937), available at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/.
27. Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire."
28. Alain Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire, 1852–1871* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 108–10.
29. Draper edition, 79.
30. Draper edition, 80.
31. Plessis, *Rise and Fall of the Second Empire*, 108–10.
32. Marx, *Letterx to Louis Kugelmann*, p. 123..
33. Marx, "Third Address," May 1871, at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm.
34. Draper edition, 76–77.
35. Draper edition, 31
36. Rougerie, *Paris Libre 1871*, 9–13.
37. Unions played a role, but the Chambres des Métiers were more important. There was no "one big union."
38. Karl Marx to Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, February 22, 1881, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 337–39.
39. Stathis Kouvelakis, "On the Paris Commune," part 3, *Verso blog*, April 3, 2021, www.versobooks.com/blogs/5044-on-the-paris-commune-part-3.

Either-Or: Rosa Luxemburg and Internationalism

MICHAEL LÖWY

AT MANY POINTS THROUGHOUT its long history, the labor movement has confronted a choice: either support nationalism, “national defense,” and war, or fight for internationalism: “Proletarians of all countries unite!” This fateful choice has determined the course of history at many decisive moments.

Few figures in the socialist movement were as committed to the internationalist program as Rosa Luxemburg. She was Jewish, Polish, and German, but her one and only “motherland” was the Socialist International. It is true, however, that this radical internationalism led her to take questionable positions on the national question. For instance, concerning Poland, her native country, she not only opposed the call for Polish national independence, raised by the “social-patriots” of Józef Piłsudski’s Polish Socialist Party (PPS), but rejected the Bolshevik support for Poland’s right of self-determination (including the right of separation from Russia). Until 1914, she would base her views on “economistic” arguments: because Poland’s

economy was already integrated in the Russian one, Polish independence was a purely utopian demand, shared only by reactionary aristocratic or petty-bourgeois layers. She would also conceive nations as essentially “cultural” phenomena, therefore proposing “cultural autonomy” as the solution for national demands. Missing in her approach is precisely the *political* dimension of the national question, emphasized in Vladimir Lenin’s writings on the issue: the *democratic right* of self-determination.

Yet in one article, at least, she dealt with the issue in a much more open and dialectical way: the 1905 introduction to the collection *The Polish Question and the Socialist Movement*. In this essay she makes a careful distinction between the legitimate right of every nation to independence—“which stems from the elementary principles of socialism”—and the *desirability* of this independence for Poland, which she denies. She also insists that national oppression is “the most unbearable oppression in its barbarity” and can only provoke “hostility and rebellion.”¹ However, some years later, in her 1918 notebook on the Russian Revolution—which contains very valuable criticism of the Bolshevik curtailments of democracy and freedom—she once again rejects any reference to the nation’s right of self-determination as “empty petty-bourgeois phraseology.”²

Most discussions of Rosa Luxemburg’s internationalism—including some written by the author of these lines—deal mainly, and sometimes only, with her questionable thesis

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on national rights. What is missing here, however, is the *positive* side of her views: her outstanding contribution to the Marxist conception of proletarian internationalism, and her stubborn refusal to give in to nationalist and chauvinist ideologies. In the following pages I will briefly try to summarize this contribution.

GEORG LUKÁCS, IN HIS CHAPTER on “Rosa Luxemburg’s Marxism” in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), argues that the dialectical category of totality is “the true carrier of the revolutionary principle in science.”³ He saw Luxemburg’s writings, especially her *Accumulation of Capital* (1913), as a striking example of this dialectical approach. But the same thing can be said of her internationalism: she analyzed, discussed, and judged all social and political issues from the viewpoint of totality, that is, from the perspective of the interests of the international working-class movement. This dialectical totality was not an abstraction, an empty universalism, or a conglomerate of undifferentiated beings; indeed, Luxemburg knew well that the international proletariat was a human plurality composed of people with their own cultures, languages, and history; their conditions of life and work were also very different. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, there is a long description of the forced labor in the mines and plantations of South Africa: nothing equivalent could be found in German factories. But this diversity, she argues, should not pose an obstacle to common action. In other words, for her, as for Marx and Engels, internationalism meant “Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!”—the *unity* of the workers from all countries against their common enemy: the capitalist system, imperialism, imperialist wars.

This is why Luxemburg refused, soon after her arrival in Germany and entry into the ranks of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), any concessions to militarism, military credits, naval expeditions, and so on. While the Social Democratic right

wing—including Wolfgang Heine and Max Schippel—were willing to negotiate agreements with the government of the kaiser on these issues, she openly denounced such capitulations, supposedly justified by the “need to create jobs.” Historian Peter Nettl, in his useful, if limited, biography of Luxemburg, is very much mistaken when he considers her internationalist opposition to such concessions as an “arid and formal exercise,” based on the belief that unemployment is a necessary stimulant for class struggle.⁴

For Luxemburg, internationalism was *not*, like for so many other socialists of her time, limited to the European countries. Very early on, before most other socialist leaders, she was an active opponent to the colonial policies of the European imperial states, and she did not hide her sympathy for the struggles of the colonial peoples. This included, of course, German colonial wars in Africa, such as the brutal repression of the Herero uprising in South West Africa (1904). In a public speech in June 1911, she explained:

The Hereros are a [N]egro people, which has lived for centuries in their homeland ... Their “crime” was that they did not give in to white slave-drivers ... and defended their land (Heimat) against foreign invaders ... In this war too the German weapons were richly covered with glory ... The men were shot, the women and children ... pushed into the burning desert.⁵

In a piece from 1902, “Martinique,” she denounces the crimes of Western colonialism in the Antilles, Madagascar, the Philippines, and, above all, China, where France, England, Russia and Germany “united in a great league of nations” to murder and plunder the country. She does not forget U.S. imperialism, recalling how “the sugar cane Senate” in Washington sent “cannon upon cannon, warship upon warship, golden dollars millions upon millions, to Cuba, to sow death and devastation.”⁶

While Luxemburg condemned German

imperialist pretensions in North Africa—the so-called Morocco incident in 1911, when Germany sent warships to Agadir—she described French colonialism in Algeria as a brutal attempt to impose bourgeois private property against the ancient clan communism of the Arab tribes.⁷ In her lectures on political economy at the school of the SPD in 1907–1908, she emphasized the connection between the modern communism of the proletarian masses in the advanced capitalist countries and the “ancient communist survivals that put up stubborn resistance in the colonial countries to the forward march of profit-hungry” imperial domination.⁸ And in her most important economic essay, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), she argues that capitalist accumulation on a global scale is not only an early stage but a permanent process of violent expropriation:

The accumulation of capital, seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon, not only in its genesis, but further on down to the present day. From the point of view of the primitive societies involved, it is a matter of life or death; for them there can be no other attitude than opposition and fight to the finish ... Hence permanent occupation of the colonies by the military, native risings and punitive expeditions are the order of the day for any colonial regime.⁹

There were very few socialists who at that time not only denounced colonial expeditions but *justified colonized peoples’ resistance and struggles*. This attitude reveals the truly universal nature of her internationalism—even if, of course, Europe was at the center of her attention.

Luxemburg saw, clearly enough, the rising danger of a European war, and never ceased to denounce the war preparations of the Imperial German government. On September 13, 1913, she ended a talk she gave in Bockenheim, a town near Frankfurt, with a solemn internationalist statement: “If they think we are going to lift the weapons



of murder against our French and other brethren, then we shall shout: ‘We will never do it!’” She was immediately charged by the public prosecutor with “calling for public disobedience of the law.” At the trial, which took place in February 1914, and Luxemburg gave a fearless speech, attacking militarism and war politics, and quoting a resolution from the 1868 Brussels Conference of the First International: in case of war, the workers should call a general strike. The talk was printed in the socialist press and became a classic of anti-war literature. She was sentenced to one year in jail, but only after the beginning of the war, in 1915, did the imperial authorities dare to arrest her.¹⁰

WHILE MANY OTHER SOCIALISTS and Marxists in Europe supported their own governments in August 1914, at the beginning of World War I, in the name of the “defense of the fatherland,” she immediately tried to organize opposition to the imperialist war. Her writings during these first crucial months make no concessions to the aggressive official “patriotic” ideology, while developing

increasingly critical arguments against the miserable treason of the SPD leaders to the principles of proletarian internationalism.

To explain what he calls her “growing hatred” of the SPD policies, Nettl points to a “strong personal element”: “the eternal, ill-suppressed impatience and frustration of émigrés like Rosa Luxemburg with the ponderous and ‘official’ Germans.” Unfortunately, this “personal” explanation is not very useful. For, as Nettl himself acknowledges, opposition to the war among the SPD was not limited to foreign “émigrés,” but included several authentically German figures, among them Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, and Clara Zetkin.¹¹

In fact, the motivation for Luxemburg’s indignation against the social-patriotic capitulation of August 1914 was not “émigré impatience,” but a lifelong commitment to internationalism. Jailed several times for her anti-militaristic and anti-nationalistic propaganda, she summarized her principled standpoint in an essay from 1916 entitled “Either-Or” (“Entweder-oder”), published as a clandestine pamphlet by the Spartacus League: “The fatherland of the proletariat, the defense of which must take precedence over all else, is the Socialist International.” The time for half measures and hesitations was over: it was *either-or*. “Either open and shameless betrayal of the International ... or taking the International in sacred seriousness, so that she becomes ... a bastion of the world socialist proletariat and of world peace.”¹²

Given that the Second International had collapsed under the impact of what she called “social-chauvinism”—substituting for “Proletarians of all countries unite!” the proposal “Proletarians of all countries, cut each other’s throats!”—Luxemburg issued a call for the creation of a *new* International. In her proposal outlining the basic principles for this future International, she emphasized: “There can be no socialism outside the international solidarity of the proletariat and there can be no socialism without class struggle. The

socialist proletariat cannot renounce the class struggle and international solidarity, either in war or in peace, without committing suicide.”¹³ This was, of course, an answer to the influential theoretician Karl Kautsky’s hypocritical argument that the International was a tool for times of peace, but unfortunately inadequate to address a situation of war—an idea that served as justification for his support of German “national defense” in 1914.

“Either-Or” includes a personal statement, in the form of a moving confession of Luxemburg’s most cherished ethical and political values: “The international fraternity of the workers is for me the highest and the most sacred thing on earth, it is my guiding star, my ideal, my fatherland; I prefer to give up my life, than to become unfaithful to this ideal!”¹⁴

Luxemburg was prophetic in her warnings against the evils of imperialism, nationalism and militarism. A prophet is not someone who miraculously predicts the future, but one who, like Amos and Isaiah, warns the people of the catastrophe that lies ahead, *unless* collective action is taken to prevent it. Among other prognostications, she warned that there will always be new wars, as long as imperialism and capitalism continue to exist:

“World peace cannot be secured by such utopian or basically reactionary plans as international courts of arbitration composed of capitalist diplomats, diplomatic agreements concerning ‘disarmament’ ..., ‘European federations’, ‘middle-European customs unions’, ‘national buffer states’ and the like. Imperialism, militarism and wars will not be abolished or damned as long as the rule of the capitalist classes continues uncontested.”¹⁵

She warned against nationalism as a mortal enemy of the workers and of the socialist movement, and as the breeding ground for militarism and war. “The immediate task of socialism,” she wrote in 1916 “shall be the intellectual liberation of the proletariat from the domination of the bourgeoisie as manifest

in the influence of nationalistic ideology.”¹⁶ In the “Fragment on War, the National Question and Revolution” (1918) she worries about the sudden rise of nationalist movements during the last year of the war: “at the nationalist Blockberg it is today the Walpurgis night” (a reference to the German mythological witches sabbath). These movements are of very different natures, some being the expression of less developed bourgeois classes (like in the Balkans), while others, such as Italian nationalism, are purely imperial-colonial. This “present world-explosion of nationalisms” contains a colorful variety of special interests, but is united by a common interest flowing from the exceptional historical situation created by October 1917: to fight the threat of the proletarian world-revolution.¹⁷

What she meant by “nationalism” was not, of course, the national culture, or the national identity of different peoples, but the ideology that makes “The Nation” into the supreme political value, to which everything else has to be submitted (“Deutschland über alles”).

Her warnings were prophetic, in so far as some of the worst crimes of the 20th century—from the First to the Second World War (Auschwitz, Hiroshima) and beyond—were committed in the name of nationalism, national hegemony, “national defense,” “national vital space,” and the like. Stalinism itself is the product of a nationalist degeneration of the Soviet State, embodied in the slogan “Socialism in a single country.”

One can criticize some of her positions in relation to national demands, but she clearly perceived the dangers of national state politics: territorial conflicts, “ethnic cleansing,” oppression of minorities. Of course, she could not have predicted genocides.

TODAY, THE ISSUE OF INTERNATIONALISM has again come to the fore. Capital globalization has imposed its power on a world scale, to a degree unprecedented in history, promoting obscene degrees of inequality,

and leading to catastrophic consequences to the environment (climate change). Through its institutions – IMF, World Bank, WTO, G-8 – it has achieved a united bloc of the capitalist ruling classes, around neoliberalism and deregulation. The subaltern classes are lagging behind, fragmented and dispersed, and without efficient forms of international organization.

The main sign of hope is the new international movement for global justice, which is sowing the seeds of a new internationalist culture. The convergence of socialists, trade-unionists, feminists, ecologists, workers, peasants, indigenous communities, networks of direct action in the common struggle against corporate – i.e. capitalist – globalization, is an important step forward.

Rosa Luxemburg’s heritage cannot give all the answers, but it can suggest some important lessons for this movement:

I) The enemy is not “globalization,” or just “neoliberalism,” but the world capitalist system itself.

II) As long as this system prevails there will be new wars, new imperialist interventions, new ethnic purges.

III) The alternative to global capitalist hegemony is not “national sovereignty,” the defense of the national against the global. It is to globalize, i.e., internationalize, resistance.

IV) The capitalist system breeds nationalism, xenophobia, racism, as well as fascist or semi-fascist forms, which make up a mortal danger for democracy and socialism.

V) The alternative to the empires is not a “regulated,” “humanized” form of capitalism, but a new, socialist and democratic, world civilization.

Rosa Luxemburg’s internationalism is particularly relevant in the 21st century for an issue which in her times was practically unknown: the ecological crisis. Climate change knows no national borders, it is a global issue

which can be dealt with only on an international scale. This has been well understood by an improbable heir to Luxemburg, the young Greta Thunberg, who called for a successful global school strike which mobilized millions of young people around the planet.

Climate change is the greatest threat to life in human history. Some bourgeois governments (Trump, Bolsonaro) deny climate change and, in the name of the “national interest,” energetically promote fossil fuels; others (Europe, the U.S. under Biden, and Canada) pretend to take some measures to reduce their carbon emissions, but without any effective result. All are committed to the rules of the market and of capital accumulation, acting according to the needs of “competitiveness” of their national economies.

To paraphrase a well-known passage by Walter Benjamin: either we stop, by pulling the revolutionary emergency brakes, the train of modern capitalist industrial civilization, or it will continue its suicidal course toward an abyss: ecological catastrophe. Here, too, the time for half measures is over. It is either-or, *entweder-oder*.

NOTES

1. Rosa Luxemburg, *Internationalismus und Klassenkampf. Die polnische Schriften*, Jürgen Hentze, ed. (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1971), 192, 217.
2. Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Russische Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, [1918] 1963), 60.
3. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik* (Berlin: Malik Verlag, 1923), 39.

4. Peter Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 296–97.
5. Rosa Luxemburg, “Unser Kampf um die Macht,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, [1911] 1972), 537. The German extermination war against the Hereros is now widely considered as the first genocide of the twentieth century.
6. Rosa Luxemburg, “Martinique,” in *Reflections and Writings*, Paul Le Blanc, ed. (Humanity Books, 1999), 125–26.
7. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge, [1913] 1951), 384.
8. Rosa Luxemburg, “Introduction to Political Economy,” in *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, Vol. 1, *Economic Writings I*, Peter Hudis, ed. (London and New York: Verso, [1907–1908] 2014), 163.
9. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 371.
10. J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, abr. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 321–22; Rosa Luxemburg, “Militarismus, Krieg und Arbeiterklasse. Rede vor der Frankfurter Strafkammer” (February 24, 1914), in *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1955), 499.
11. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, abr. ed., 373.
12. Rosa Luxemburg, “Entweder-Oder,” *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, [1916] 1951), 550, 543.
13. Rosa Luxemburg, “Either-Or,” in *Selected Political Writings*, Robert Looker, ed., W.D. Graf, trans. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 225, available at www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1916/04/eitheror.htm.
14. Luxemburg, “Entweder-Oder,” 542.
15. R. Luxemburg, “Either-Or,” p.224.
16. R. Luxemburg, “Either-Or,” p.226.
17. R. Luxemburg, “Fragment über Krieg, Nationale Frage und Revolution” (1918), in *Die Russische Revolution*, pp. 82, 85.

Capturing “the Spirit of Struggle”

Rosa Luxemburg on Literature

HELEN C. SCOTT

ROSA LUXEMBURG HAS BEEN the subject of numerous works of literary fiction in the century since her death, including *Karl and Rosa*, the final book of Alfred Döblin’s multi-volume *November 1918: A German Revolution* (1950); *Rosa*, the first in Jonathan Rabb’s Berlin trilogy (2005); and Kate Evans’ graphic novel *Red Rosa* (2015). She also makes occasional appearances in a broad and diverse range of global literature. The 1931 Japanese proletarian novel *Yasuko* by Takiji Kobayashi, for example, contains this exchange between two factory workers:

But Yasuko, her cheeks flushed, spoke passionately of the things she had been thinking about. In the end she said, “I can’t remember her name, but there’s a woman who devoted her life to workers and peasants and who’s famous throughout the world. Here’s what she says.” Yasuko closed her eyes for a moment to recall the phrase. Her lowered long lashes were beautiful. “She says, ‘We must not live like trampled frogs!’”

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Okei unwittingly raised her eyebrows.

“Ah, I remember now!” exclaimed Yasuko. “She’s the great woman revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg.” (150)

Shortly after, Yasuko reflects further:

Looking at it from a different perspective, this work was extremely difficult and required a great many sacrifices, as the union man had said countless times and as was written in the books she had borrowed. Rosa Luxemburg, the woman who had spoken about trampled frogs, had been thrown into prison dozens of times for her work and was finally beaten to death with rifle butts. It was a noble sacrifice for the sake of the exploited and hungry working people of the whole world. Her life was unforgettable, especially for the women of the working class.

The letters that Rosa Luxemburg had sent from prison to her comrades on the outside were collected and published as a book in Japan too. The union man had brought her a copy and urged her to read it. Each evening after her work ended, Yasuko climbed up to her attic room to read it, and she had finished it within three days. It astounded her most of all that Rosa was a *woman*, just as she was. (151–52)

In keeping with Luxemburg’s habitual consultation of narrative fiction for historical insights, we can learn a great deal about her from these literary representations. Yasuko’s account, albeit romanticized, touches on the keynotes of Luxemburg’s global legacy.

Born and raised in Russian-occupied

Poland, Luxemburg left at the turn of the twentieth century in order to build the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). This was the largest organization in the Second International, the mass socialist network that represents a high point in working-

Luxemburg's writings on literature include formal literary analysis; lengthy discussions of a wide range of contemporary texts and performances; and innumerable references to classical and contemporary works.

class struggle. A formidable intellectual, she made lasting contributions to Marxism: she launched a revolutionary critique of reformism in the pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution?* (1899), expanded upon Marx's economic analysis in *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), and developed a critique of imperialism and militarism as inherent aspects of capitalism. In *The Mass Strike* (1906), Luxemburg affirmed the revolutionary power of working-class self-activity and traced the inextricable connections between the economic and political at times of heightened struggle. In 1914, when most of the leaders of social democracy abandoned internationalism and supported their respective national war efforts, Luxemburg organized the anti-war opposition, which grew from a minority current to a mass movement of workers and soldiers over the next four years. In all of this she interrogated the economic and political, but also social, cultural, and human dimensions of capitalist exploitation, colonialism, and war. For this work, she was hounded by the state and suffered a series of prison sentences, but also won lasting respect from the socialist movement

and workers globally.

Luxemburg combined class analysis with a sharp awareness of all vectors of inequality and discrimination, drawing on her own experiences as a Jewish Polish woman who lived with a disability. From the beginning of her career in the SPD, even when she was still young and new, she was willing to stand up against the established leaders, parliamentary representatives in particular. Unlike many in the reformist wing of the party, Luxemburg was in constant action, staying close to the mass movement in the workplace and in the streets throughout her life. Popularly known as "Red Rosa," she was a talented public speaker with a sharp sense of the potency of image, figure, and sound. One of my favorite passages, from a letter of 1898, captures her visceral sense of the political implications of language:

I'm not satisfied with the way in which people in the party usually write articles. They are all so conventional, so wooden, so cut-and-dry ... Our scribbles are usually not lyrics, but whirrings, without color or resonance, like the tone of an engine wheel. I believe that the cause lies in the fact that when people write, they forget for the most part to dig deeply into themselves and to feel the whole import and truth of what they are writing. I believe that every time, every day, in every article you must live through the thing again, you must feel your way through it, and then fresh words—coming from the heart and going to the heart—would occur to express the old familiar thing. But you get so used to a truth that you rattle off the deepest and greatest things as if they were the "Our Father." I firmly intend, when I write, never to forget to be enthusiastic about what I write and to commune with myself. (quoted in Frölich 1972, 56–57)

Her writing and speeches are distinctive for their emotional intensity and figurative innovation.

As Yasuko reflects in the novel, Luxem-

burg's life was "unforgettable, especially for the women of the working class," and she became and remains a point of reference for the left across the world. The probable source of Yasuko's quote about trampled frogs is a 1917 letter Luxemburg wrote from Breslau Prison to her friend Luise Kautsky (translated into Japanese in the 1920s), in which she wrote: "Dearest, don't be despondent, don't live like a little frog that's been stepped on!" (Adler et al. 2011, 452).¹

On her release from prison at the end of World War I, Luxemburg threw herself into mobilizing for the German revolution, but her life was cut short by the forces of counterrevolution. In January 1919 she was detained, beaten with rifle butts, and shot, her body dumped unceremoniously in the Landwehr Canal in Berlin. Her murderers were soldiers of the Noske Guard, precursors of the Nazis, and they were doing the bidding of right-wing leaders of the social democratic government who were intent on reining in the revolution and restoring the capitalist order.

In her extraordinary life, Luxemburg played a leading role in several socialist organizations (often in three different countries at the same time); maintained a prolific publication record in a range of journals and newspapers, in addition to writing numerous books and pamphlets; engaged in endless rounds of public speaking, in venues ranging from party conferences to the mines of Upper Silesia; and put in a lengthy tenure as a loved and respected teacher at the party school.

And yet within all of this, Luxemburg



also had a lot to say about the arts. Her writings on literature include formal literary analysis; lengthy discussions, in her letters, of a wide range of contemporary texts and performances; and innumerable references, in her articles, essays, and speeches, to classical and contemporary works. These reveal her familiarity and affinity with a broad and diverse body of texts from the classical to the contemporary, and in several different languages. She did not develop an explicit literary theory, but taken together, her epistolary and formal cultural commentary provide valuable insights for literary analysis: they draw a portrait of literature's capacity to express, through powerful affect, underlying structural social contradictions; and they remain deeply aware of, and sensitive to, the specificity of the aesthetic realm and the particular qualities of each individual work. In his 2009 assessment of Luxemburg's literary criticism, social scientist Subhoranjan Dasgupta foregrounds this insistence that works of art must be judged on their own terms, calling it "one of the basic tenets of enlightened Marxian aesthetics ... because artistic engagement or literary production

always enjoy a high degree of autonomy" (8). Furthermore, creative literature and the arts more broadly occupied a significant location in Luxemburg's life's work and can be understood as central to her dialectical materialism and to her vision of human liberation.

Despite their rich potential, Luxemburg's discussions of literature have not previously received much attention, especially in the English scholarship. Verso Books' publication of her *Complete Works* will make it easier to correct this omission. This ambitious, ongoing project is translating the German and Polish archives into English and making them available in a projected seventeen volumes. One of those future volumes will be focused on culture. Those that have already been published indicate the centrality of literary allusions and references to her work.

Even in the economic writings, Luxemburg quotes Boccaccio, Dante, Molière, Schiller, Defoe, and her favorite, Goethe. For example, she quotes a poem by Goethe in a discussion of the reproduction of capital: "The reproductive schema does not purport to present the moment of inception ... instead it grasps this process in full flow, as a link in 'existence's never-ending chain.'" And in the middle of a complex explanation of surplus value, she reaches for a line from Goethe's *Faust*: there is "still 'a leftover to be carried painfully'" (2016, 389). Luxemburg sometimes refers to fiction to illuminate historical conditions, and at others to crystalize political insights.

In using literature in such ways, Luxemburg is within a long-standing Marxist tradition. Indeed, she sometimes evokes an earlier literary allusion from Marx, in order to suggest a connection between different moments of revolutionary struggle (as in her reference to Ferdinand Freiligrath in Volume 3, 51). It is also apparent that literature was a significant part of the radical working-class subculture of her own day. Luxemburg (2020, 342, 389) describes the first issue of the journal *New Life* during the 1905 Russian revo-

lution. The issue included a satirical sketch by the writer Evgeny Chirikov, "The Eagle and the Hen," which supplied a parable for the shifting relationship between the working class and liberals. She later refers to the arrest of Chirikov during the suppression of the revolution, confirming that many of these writers were also themselves revolutionary activists. Luxemburg thus routinely draws on the political potential of literature even as she explores the unique possibilities of the aesthetic realm in its own right.

The letters, collected in a new English edition by Verso in 2011, contain not only references and allusions but also more sustained discussions that reveal important aspects of Luxemburg's broader approach to literature. Take, for example, her comments in a November 1917 letter to her close friend Mathilde Wurm, written from prison, on *Simplicius Simplissimus* (a seventeenth-century picaresque novel by Hans Jacob Christoph von Grimmelshausen, the second part of which provided the inspiration for Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*). Here, it is a given that creative fiction can provide unique insight into socio-historical forces. Luxemburg writes of the novel: "It is a vast and powerful portrait of the Thirty Years' War era, a picture of the barbarization of society in Germany at that time" (443).

Literature is also noted for its visceral emotional impact. Luxemburg (2011, 443) advises her friend "not to read it just now, [because] it would perhaps depress you very much." But while literature may evoke despair, it can also provide an escape from the world, a form of self-medication, especially at times of acute personal pain. She continues:

I just read it all at one sitting only in order to numb myself and be distracted, because I have been struck a heavy blow: Hans Diefenbach has fallen. I know that life will go on, that one must continue and remain firm and courageous and even cheerful, I know all that—and will soon be done with [grieving] it, all by myself.

This moving passage was composed at a moment of intense personal and political loss, soon after she learned of the battlefield death of her beloved friend and comrade Hans Diefenbach, amid the catastrophic slaughter of World War I. The event is especially distressing in light of Luxemburg's rich correspondence with Diefenbach, which includes frequent exchange of thoughts and feelings about literature.

Such exchanges also illustrate her recourse to literary fiction at times of adversity. In a July 1917 letter to her friend Sonja Liebknecht (the second wife of Karl Liebknecht, with whom Luxemburg co-founded the Spartacus League in 1918), Luxemburg describes her reaction to a particular verse from Goethe that was running through her head:

It was only the music of the words and the strange magic of the poem which lulled me into tranquility. I don't know myself why it is that a beautiful poem, especially by Goethe, so deeply affects me at every moment of strong excitement or emotion. The effect is almost physical. It's as if with parched lips I were sipping a delicious drink that cools my spirit and heals me, body and soul. (qtd. in Dasgupta 2011, 6–7)

This passage typifies Luxemburg's sharp awareness of the capacity of literature to engage the senses and impact us emotionally in ways that bypass intellectual processes.

These lines—themselves characteristically figurative—indicate that literature's emotional force derives not only from the explicit content or subject matter, but also, and in some cases solely, from its linguistic and formal qualities. This is Luxemburg responding, in 1909, to a depressed friend who had turned to the works of Alexander Pushkin for comfort during a crisis:

When I was in a situation similar to yours I submerged myself in Krasiński, a Polish poet who you probably do not know. His verses, in their content, are the most trivial rubbish made up of Catholic

mysticism, but in their sound they are the purest music, and I was enraptured by them. I read them mostly for their tone and color. (2011, 272)

This attention to the linguistic, imagistic, and audible is a consistent thread running throughout the commentary, along with

Even in the economic writings, Luxemburg quotes Boccaccio, Dante, Molière, Schiller, Defoe, and her favorite, Goethe.

strongly held and not infrequently scathing critical judgement.

Luxemburg frequently observes that literature is unsuccessful when its content overwhelms its form, or when its explicit social purpose interferes with its artistic integrity. In a 1917 letter from prison to Diefenbach, she writes of her “great, if cool, respect” for the nineteenth-century German dramatist Friedrich Hebbel, but ranks him below other favored playwrights: “He has a lot of intelligence and beauty of form, but there is too little life and blood in his characters, they are to a great extent merely signboards, though cleverly thought out and subtly refined, merely vehicles illustrating particular problems” (2011, 379). In contrast, she expresses “a great love” for the Austrian dramatist Franz Grillparzer, recommending one of his pieces with high praise: “The purest Shakespeare in conciseness, aptness, and popular humor, along with a tender, poetic, touch that Shakespeare doesn't have” (2011, 379).² At the same time, Luxemburg had no patience for formal experimentation that is void of meaningful content. In a letter to Sophie Liebknecht from November 1917, she denies being “predisposed against the modern poets,” mentioning several that she enjoys, but

confesses: “It is true that in all of them I take somewhat amiss the combination of perfect form with the absence of a grand and noble philosophy. This cleavage between form and substance produces in me an impression of vacancy, so that the beauty of form becomes a positive irritant” (2011, 450). As you can see, she could be a ruthless and cutting critic.

The commentary on Grillparzer suggests another general lesson: long before the formalist objection to the “intentional fallacy” or the much-vaunted postmodern “death of the author,” Luxemburg maintained that the text exists as a separate entity from the person who produced it. The following lines from the letter praising Grillparzer illustrate this, while

Literature was a significant part
of the radical working-class
subculture of her own day.

also showcasing her trademark irreverent and searing humor—in this case leveled not only at the author, but also August Bebel, a much-lauded leading figure in the SPD and the Second International: “Isn’t it laughable that in person Grillparzer was a dry-as-dust government official and quite a boring fellow. (See his autobiography, which is in almost as poor taste as Bebel’s)” (2011, 379). This separation of artist from artwork is habitual, although, in contrast to the formalists and postmodernists, the author as a material fact is often central to Luxemburg’s assessment of a work’s historical and political roots and consequences.

Despite, or maybe because of, the obvious value she placed on creative literature, Luxemburg could be quite caustic about literary criticism. But she did herself produce some formal literary analysis over the span of her life. The examples that are currently avail-

able in English include an assessment of the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz, first published in the newspaper *Leipziger Volkszeitung* in 1898; a review of Franz Mehring’s biography of Schiller, which ran in the SPD journal *Die Neue Zeit* in 1905; the essay “Tolstoy as Social Thinker,” which first appeared as an article in *Leipziger Volkszeitung* in 1908; and lastly, “Life of Korolenko,” an extensive assessment of the Ukrainian-born Russian author and human rights activist Vladimir Korolenko. This latter work was written in Breslau Prison in 1918 and published posthumously in 1919 as the introduction to Luxemburg’s German translation of the author’s *History of My Contemporary*.

These pieces, one of which was among the last things she wrote, demonstrate that despite her distrust of the career critic, she did take the analysis of literature seriously. They also include some magnificent examples of writing that showcase Luxemburg at her rhetorical and political best.

The 1898 assessment of Mickiewicz is exemplary. Rory Castle’s (2018) biographical research into Luxemburg’s early life finds that her mother loved this poet, and that Rosa grew up reciting his odes by heart. In this essay the emotional connection is palpable, even while Luxemburg historicizes and contextualizes the poetry. She sets the stage by explaining the rapidly transforming conditions of Poland in the decades following its partition among Russia, Prussia, and Austria at the end of the eighteenth century. In the Russian-occupied areas, the old nobility retained their ruling position: “The ancestral seats of the nobility are still the centers of intellectual and literary life. The magnate is still the patron of the arts, and art, meaning literature, is still either a leisure-hours pastime for the “well-born” dilettante, whether sword-bearing or soutane-clad, or else a form of courtiers’ toadyism” (2009, 2). She argues that this class was only capable of a derivative literature that looked to France, where a “powdery, stilted pseudo-classicism” reigned:

"And all that got transplanted to Poland was washed-out copy of that pseudo-classicism, its hallmarks being a smooth, still, hollow form and a total lack of individuality, inner feeling or deep thought" (2009, 12).

But revolutionary change was underway, to be expressed in 1831 in a popular revolt against tsarist Russia. The ensuing challenges to the old order gave rise to a pristine class stratum: a "new intelligentsia" that produced literature not for leisure or the court, but as a profession. These writers looked not to Classicism but to Romanticism. This is Luxemburg's account of the ensuing clash:

Classicism versus Romanticism: such was the antithesis which, with its roots in art and literature, reached its climax in economics and politics and was soon to reverberate in the clashing swords and rattling gunfire of rebellion. But if victory on the battlefields of Grochów and Praga went to the representatives of the established order—the Russian government—they yet had to draw the short straw on the battlefield of the spirit. While the classicists could offer only shelf upon shelf of a grey mass of mediocrities and soulless manipulators of form, Romanticism, overnight as it were, conjured up whole constellations of glittering young talent from the womb of society, and, as the most brilliant star of this dawn twilight, the mighty genius of Adam Mickiewicz arose in the firmament of Polish literature. (2009, 13)

Not only is this formidable figurative writing in itself—so much is conveyed in the paradoxical "dawn twilight" alone—but it also delivers a trenchant analysis of the reciprocal push and pull between socio-historical forces and cultural developments. One of the striking aspects of this passage is the observation that the opposition appears *first* in arts and literature, and *then* is realized in the economic, political, and social realms. Another is the perception that social developments are readable in the very structural, *formal* qualities of literature. And the last is the recognition

that even when the movements that give rise to them go down to defeat on the stage of history—as did the 1831 revolt—traces of those aspirations continue to animate cultural works.

Literature's revolutionary resonance is a topic to which Luxemburg frequently returns. In her "Life of Korolenko," she argues that the great movement of nineteenth-century Russian literature "was born out of opposition to the Russian regime, out of the spirit of struggle" (1918, 342). Her review of Franz Mehring's biography of Schiller notes that "the spread of Schiller's poetry across the proletarian layers of Germany has, without doubt, contributed to its intellectual elevation as well as its revolutionizing, and to that extent it has, in a way, played its part in the work of the emancipation of the working class" (2009, 17).

Literature, then, may both be generated by and contribute to revolutionary social change.

But Luxemburg rejects any attempt to claim authors or their work as socialist and or revolutionary per se. She writes scathingly of Polish socialists who "try at all costs to derive evidence from Mickiewicz's writings for his socialist views," noting acerbically that "this is not an attractive enterprise" (2009, 15). Elsewhere she writes: "Nothing, of course, could be more erroneous than to picture Russian literature as a tendentious art in a crude sense, nor to think of all Russian poets as revolutionists, or at least as progressives. Patterns such as "revolutionary" or "progressive" in themselves mean very little in art. (1918, 345) The relationship between revolutionary social forces and artistic developments is far more indirect, mediated, and contradictory; and it plays out regardless, and often in spite of, the views of the author, as we have already seen with reference to the unfortunate "dry as dust" Grillparzer. Dostoevsky was "an outspoken reactionary," and "Tolstoy's mystical doctrines reflect reactionary tendencies"; yet "the writings of both have, nevertheless, an

inspiring, arousing, and liberating effect upon us" (345). The reason for this is to be found in the literature itself: "With the true artist, the social formula that he recommends is a matter of secondary importance; the source of his art, its animating spirit, is decisive" (1918, 345).

As this passage indicates, Luxemburg demonstrates the principle that each work of art must be evaluated on its own terms, independently of the author, and not treated schematically as a political treatise. This is not to say that the author is unimportant. Her account of Russian literature points out that many of the greats were not only novelists but also journalists and activists, some of whom used their literary criticism to fight repression and promote progressive ideas. She notes that Korolenko's committed opposition to the authorities, and in particular to anti-semitic, racist, and xenophobic scapegoating, eventually led him to abandon poetry for journalism.

But there is a powerful recognition that something about the artistic process itself is distinctive and decisive, operating on a level that is independent from the political realm. Luxemburg positions the Russian novel as a genre that offers unique insight into underlying social structures: she writes of the "great and well-rounded view of the world ... sensitive social consciousness ... the restless search, the brooding over the problems of society which enables it to observe artistically the enormity and inner complexity of the social structure and to lay it down in great works of art" (1918, 346). Here and elsewhere, the suggestion is that the literary *fragment* can provide insight into the social *totality* of human relations, albeit in highly mediated and ever shifting ways.

Some comprehension of these processes is offered in her account of the marginalized and the oppressed in the great works of nineteenth-century Russian literature: their focus, in her view, is the impact of social inequality on the human spirit, and "the tragedy of the triviality of the average man." Those with the least social power—the "criminal,"

the prostitute, the disabled, the beggar, the peddler, the child, the minority—in this world of fiction take center stage: "Turgenev, Uspensky, Korolenko, and Gorky took up these 'stranded' folk, the criminal as well as the prostitute, with a broad-minded realism, as equals in human society, and achieve, just because of this genial approach, works of a high artistic effect" (1918, 349).

Luxemburg traces these qualities back to the reigning conditions of class struggle: the "opposition to the Russian regime ... the spirit of struggle ... explains the richness and depth of its spiritual quality, the fullness and originality of its artistic form, above all, its creative and driving social force. Russian literature became, under czarism, a power in public life as in no other country and in no other time" (1918, 342).

This appreciation of the liberating potential of literature coexists with the clearest understanding that literature, and all culture, is a product of class society and could not exist without the exploitation of the producing class, who are yet largely excluded from its enjoyment. Luxemburg's 1908 discussion of Tolstoy's writing on art is illuminating on this question. Tolstoy's commentary is historically bounded: the subject here is "high art" before the mass culture of modernity, but the implications are nonetheless germane. For Tolstoy, Luxemburg writes, "art—contrary to all aesthetic and philosophical scholastic opinions—is not a luxury product for releasing feelings of beauty, joy or the like in beautiful souls, but an important historical form of social communication, like language between people" (2009, 24). Proceeding from what Luxemburg calls this "genuinely materialist and historical criterion," she summarizes Tolstoy's argument:

The whole of existing art is, with very few small exceptions, incomprehensible to the great mass of society, that is to say, to working people. Instead of concluding from this with the customary view that the great masses are intellectually coarse

and need to be “raised” to understand contemporary art, Tolstoy reaches the opposite conclusion: he declares existing art to be “false art” ... ever since society has been split into a great exploited mass and a small ruling minority, art only serves to express the feeling of the rich and leisurely minority. (25)

Luxemburg has great admiration for this, noting that “there is a real revolutionary radicalism when he smashes the hopes that reduction in working hours and improving education among the masses will create understanding of art,” seeing instead that “art ... is necessarily based on the oppression of the masses and ... it can only be sustained by sustaining this oppression” (25). She contrasts Tolstoy’s materialism with the idealism of the reformists in the SPD: “The writer of this is every inch more of a socialist, and an historical materialist too, than those party members mixing with the latest artistic crankiness who want, with thoughtless zeal, to ‘educate’ Social Democratic workers to an understanding of the decadent daubings of a Slevogt or a Hodler” (25).³ Luxemburg detects an error, however, in Tolstoy’s static understanding of class: failing to understand the fluidity of class society, and lacking any sense of the proletariat as agent of change, Tolstoy thus belongs with the “great utopians of socialism” (26).

In the 1903 essay “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism,” Luxemburg tackled head-on this question of the class ownership of culture: “In every class society, intellectual culture (science and art) is created by the ruling class; and the aim of this culture is in part to secure the direct satisfaction of the needs of the social process, and in part to satisfy the mental needs of the members of the governing class.” While in earlier periods, emergent ruling classes could develop new artistic and scientific cultures to assist their aspirations, the proletariat—a “non-possessing class”—cannot follow this path: “It cannot in the course of its struggle upward

spontaneously create a mental culture of its own while it remains in the framework of bourgeois society. Within that society, and so long as its economic foundations persist, there can be no other culture than bourgeois culture.” She continues, “Notwithstanding the fact that the workers create with their own hands the whole social substratum of this culture, they are only admitted to its enjoyment

Despite her distrust of the career critic, she did take the analysis of literature seriously.

insofar as such admission is requisite to the satisfactory performance of their functions in the economic and social process of capitalist society” (1970, 110).

The oppressed cannot create their own culture under the conditions imposed by capitalism and are largely excluded from the enjoyment of the existing arts. But culture is nonetheless deeply important to the project of emancipation: “The utmost [the working class] can do today is to safeguard bourgeois culture from the vandalism of the bourgeois reaction, and create the social conditions requisite for free cultural development” (1970, 110). This notion of the oppressed as protectors and inheritors of culture infuses Luxemburg’s commentary. So too does the recognition that literature can carry traces of the aspirations and struggles of the exploited. In her scornful rejection of attempts to claim Adam Mickiewicz as a socialist, Luxemburg affirms the value of his poetry for the working-class movement: “The enlightened proletariat is surely intellectually mature enough to love and honour this great poet for his poetic genius without needing an inducement for the unclear mystical-utopian social imaginings of his period in decline. The

class whose goal is the renewal of the world can have no such narrow horizons" (2009, 16).

As discussed earlier, Luxemburg argues that Schiller's poetry has "in a way played its part in the work of the emancipation of the working class," but this is qualified:

Schiller's role in the intellectual growth of the revolutionary proletariat in Germany is not so much rooted in what he himself imported into the working-class struggle for emancipation through the content of his poems, but rather the reverse: it consists in what the revolutionary working class deposited in Schiller's poems based on its own world-view, its striving and its feelings (2009, 17).

This process is multi-stranded and takes place at sites of both production and reception: previous moments of class struggle found their way into Schiller's poetry, and contemporary movements create readers who are able to make use of it now.

Luxemburg's position is close here to that developed by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s: Benjamin famously avowed that "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," but he also looked to culture for glimpses of "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (quoted in Löwy, 95). Like Benjamin, Luxemburg uncovers the barbarism behind the cultural treasure, revealing the history and continuity of exploitation and expropriation that make it possible. And, also like Benjamin, Luxemburg nonetheless finds therein traces of the traditions of the oppressed.

All of this is apposite to contemporary literary debates. The current renewed interest in Luxemburg has started to expand into post-colonial studies, my primary field, and can be seen in publications such as *Rosa Luxemburg: Capitalism, Imperialism, and the Postcolonial*, a 2018 special issue of *New Formations* that considers the contemporary global relevance of Luxemburg, and the 2021 collection *Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg*, an exploration of her significance for current feminist, anti-racist,

and decolonial struggles.

While the full significance of Luxemburg's cultural writings has yet to be registered, her recognition of the paradoxical push and pull of creative literature speaks to contemporary debates in the context of both a resurgent far right and mass movements against systemic racism. In her new book, *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction*, Arundhati Roy identifies the specific literary qualities that can offer alternatives to the "fake histories" associated with right-wing ideology:

The foundation of today's fascism ... rests on a deeper foundation of another ... more sophisticated set of fake histories that elide the stories of caste, of women, and a range of other genders—and of how those stories intersect below the surface of the grand narrative of class and capital. To challenge fascism means to challenge all of this ... fiction is uniquely positioned to do this, because fiction has the capaciousness, the freedom and latitude to hold out a universe of infinite complexity. (Roy 2020, 150)

Roy rejects any tendentious or instrumental approach—"fiction as exposé, or as the righter of social wrongs ... fiction that is a disguised manifesto or written to address a particular issue or subject" but looks rather to the novel's ability to "recreate the universe of the familiar" (150–51).

Luxemburg's analysis continues to provide insight into these contested and contradictory forces. As one would expect from such a formidable dialectician, she traces the multifaceted relationships between historical and cultural developments, unearthing the violent roots of literature, *and* insists that each work is more than simply the sum of its socio-historical parts, but must be appreciated on its own terms, according to the particular elements of genre and form. Balancing materialist contextualization with a sharp recognition of the aesthetic, the sensual, and emotional affect, Luxemburg thus offers an alternative to the pitfalls of idealist

literary criticism—in which textual analysis takes place in a vacuum without reference to the structural inequalities that are the precondition for cultural production—and ideology critique—which reduces literature to anthropology or unwitting political testimony. And while insisting that socialists do not need political cover to appreciate art, she points to the ineffable potential for literature to imagine possible alternatives, to capture and nurture “the spirit of struggle.”

A version of this essay was presented as a lecture for the UW–Madison Havens Wright Center for Social Justice on October 29, 2020. This was developed from a talk at the International Rosa Luxemburg Conference in Chicago in April 2018 entitled “Like a flash from eternity”: Rosa Luxemburg and Post-colonial Literature.”

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NOTES

1. Thanks to James Holstun for first drawing my attention to this passage, to Peter Hudis for helping me to trace the quotation to the letter, and Rida Vaquas for contextualizing the translation history of Luxemburg in Japan and her status in the Japanese proletarian novel.
2. In the letter, Luxemburg refers to this work as Judith, but the editors of *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* point out that in fact, “Luxemburg was referring to the fragment by Grillparzer entitled Esther” (2011, 379n664).
3. Max Slevogt was a German impressionist painter; Ferdinand Hodler was a well-known Swiss painter.

Learning about Prisons

A Personal Reflection

BILL LITTLEFIELD

EVEN BEFORE I'D BEEN INSIDE A PRISON, I was sympathetic to the circumstances of some people who are incarcerated.

I'd twice interviewed former professional boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who spent almost twenty years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Mr. Carter acknowledged that at the time he'd been arrested, he was no model citizen. But the contention that he'd murdered three people in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1966 was dubious from the outset, and eventually he was set free.

How could anybody spend almost twenty years in prison without becoming bitter? I asked Mr. Carter that, after he told me that he had no resentment. He said something to the effect that by embracing bitterness, he would only diminish his own life. His resentment would have no impact on those responsible for the injustice that had been perpetrated on him: the law officers, the judge, and the men who'd lied on the witness stand, among others. Mr. Carter's bitterness would likewise have had no impact on the system that had made so likely his wrongful conviction and incarceration.

Instead of surrendering to bitterness, he chose to devote himself to helping other incarcerated citizens who were not guilty get a fair hearing. During the final years of his life, he was often successful in that effort. Many

of those with whom he worked were released.

It was easy to sympathize with Mr. Carter. Indeed, how could anyone *not* feel bad for a man who has been unjustly deprived of his liberty for twenty years by a system too ready to assume his guilt on the basis of his race and his background?

It was easy to admire Rubin Carter's attitude and his determination to see justice done for others, one case at a time. He was an inspirational figure. It was gratifying to learn of his success.

Similarly, I found it natural and easy to sympathize with men and women who'd been incarcerated for long periods of time for what seemed to me relatively insignificant "crimes": possession of marijuana, for example, or petty theft when the circumstances suggested that the perpetrators were stealing to feed themselves or their families. Wasn't a system bound to provoke doubt, if not outrage, when it kept millions of people poor, homeless, uninsured, and hungry, and then locked some of those people up for becoming convinced that there was no way to live under those circumstances without hustling in one way or another?

Then there was self-defense. Why would a woman who'd been repeatedly threatened and beaten up—even raped or shot or stabbed—be charged with an assault she committed while trying to save her own life?

I thus had sympathy for a lot of the people in prison. But I felt that sympathy at a distance, and as certain as I was that lots of incarcerated people had been unjustly deprived of their rights and their liberty, and that the

BILL LITTLEFIELD *worked for many years teaching English at Curry College and as a commentator and sports journalist for public radio.*

judicial system's flaws made incarceration of minority and poor citizens especially likely, I also figured that the folks who had been legitimately convicted and locked up for killing somebody probably deserved the long sentences they'd gotten.

I no longer feel that way.

Since the fall of 2018, I've been a teaching assistant in the Emerson Prison Initiative. This program provides college courses, including a pathway to an Emerson College bachelor of arts degree, to men incarcerated within the Massachusetts Department of Correction system. As it happens, all the men with whom I've been working have been convicted of serious crimes. I haven't learned that by asking them about their records. I've helped them with their writing, and some of them have written about what they've done. In the context of class discussion, some of them have talked about their backgrounds, and what they've learned about themselves, and what they'd like to do next. A big part of being a teaching assistant is listening, no matter what the specific subject matter might be.

They're all serving very long sentences, some of them up to life in prison.

Almost all of my students were very young when they committed the crimes for which they were sentenced. Several of them—perhaps most of them—were first arrested and incarcerated for less serious crimes when they were in their early or middle teens. Some of them grew up in circumstances so dangerous, violent, and damaging that they have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress based on what they suffered as small children.

These men have grown up in correctional institutions, where people who've broken laws are supposed to have the opportunity to address and "correct" whatever attitudes led to their illegal behavior, hence the term "correctional institution," rather than "house of punishment."

Adolescents and young adults in homes where parents and other adults are using, manufacturing, and selling drugs are at a sig-

nificant disadvantage. Children who embrace gang culture, whether because that's what they want to do or because that's what they feel they must do to survive, are much more likely to be arrested than children who have other opportunities to socialize.

But adults who are incarcerated have this in common with adults who aren't incarcerated: they're all different people at thirty-five or forty than they were at sixteen or seventeen, or even eighteen or nineteen. The study of the brain has established that as adolescents,

I also figured that the folks who had been legitimately convicted and locked up for killing somebody probably deserved the long sentences they'd gotten.

we're all operating with unfinished guidance systems.* It's a fact that merits consideration, whether or not the former adolescents under consideration are in prison.

Whether incarcerated or not, adults who have been addicted to alcohol or drugs as adolescents have the opportunity to learn they can live without addiction. This, too, is an important consideration.

Perhaps some incarcerated individuals don't change. But my experience with the men with whom I've worked for the past several semesters has convinced me that some do change, and that education, and the opportunity education provides for self-reflection, can accelerate that change. The men with whom I've worked have studied not only literature, social science, history,

*See, for example, the Juvenile Justice Program of the Massachusetts General Hospital's Center for Law and Brain Behavior, clbb.mgh.harvard.edu/juvenilejustice/.

and public speaking; they have also learned about restorative justice. Some of them have been recruited to speak to groups of students about their experiences, thereby helping those students to avoid the terrible decisions my

Some do change, and education,
and the opportunity education
provides for self-reflection, can
accelerate that change.

students made when they were in their teens and early twenties.

The men with whom I've worked train service dogs. They work at jobs in the prison at the same time they are carrying challenging academic loads. They depend on each other and their professors and teaching assistants, and they quickly learn how to take advantage of the support they are offered. They are grateful for that support and express that gratitude often. They are respectful not only of their professors and teaching assistants, but of each other. They help each other learn. They encourage each other. They are better at that than any group of students I've known, and I've been teaching for more than forty years. One afternoon about a year ago, one of the students in my study hall angrily left the class, having announced his intention to drop out of the program. I was concerned, but two of the other students told me it would be okay.

"Don't worry, Bill," one of them said quietly. "We'll talk with him."

The angry student's classmates apparently reminded him of what he'd be tossing away if he didn't take advantage of his educational opportunity: next week the student was back in class.

Some of the men with whom I've worked study the law and help others in the com-

munity to secure their rights under it. They think creatively about how to improve the current system.

But their sentences—twenty-five to life, thirty to life—hang over these men. I think to many of them it feels extraordinarily difficult to establish that they have earned the opportunity to function freely in the community. Some of them have mentioned that they feel it takes only one inmate abusing the opportunity provided through parole or work release to convince some citizens that there should be no such programs.

I've heard several incarcerated men and several of the folks who work with them say, "How would you like to be judged forever on the basis of the worst moment of your life?" It's a thought-provoking question. It's perhaps just as legitimate to ask whether programs that provide for the re-evaluation and release of prisoners should be judged by the behavior of the few individuals who fail to take advantage of those programs.

Some of the people with whom I've discussed my experience inside prison have asked me if I've been "conned by the cons." I don't think that's the case. I have brought an open mind to my work in the prison. I have listened, and I have learned that the men with whom I'm working are just people. They feel much of their behavior is "criminalized" and that they are often infantilized.

I believe that the men with whom I've worked deserve to have their circumstances reviewed by open-minded people with the authority to release them from prison, having recognized that through various opportunities provided during their incarceration and despite various profound obstacles necessarily built into the fact of incarceration, these men are not the same people they were when they were arrested, convicted, sentenced, and incarcerated, at a time many of them were barely out of childhood. The twenty-five-to-life or thirty-to-life sentence, the actual length of which depends heavily upon the vicissitudes of state parole boards, feels to me counter-

productive to the idea of “correction” for any man or woman. It’s more likely to encourage despair than rehabilitation. But sentences like that are especially grotesque when the recipient is an adolescent or a young adult. Before I began working with the Emerson Prison Initiative, I had not thought about that, but ever since, that feeling has become more and more powerful, the conviction more and more certain.

I’ve only had the opportunity to work with a dozen or so men in prison. But it’s significant, I think, that when the Emerson Prison Initiative began, over one hundred men applied for the few available slots. I wish all of the applicants could have the opportunity my students have now. I recognize that to generalize from the number of students in my

study halls is perhaps dubious. Certainly it’s not statistically valid. It’s what I have to go on.

My point here is that I’ve come to believe these men should have access to an efficient, open-minded, compassionate system that recognizes that a man incarcerated at eighteen or twenty will be a different person ten or fifteen or twenty years later, and that this no-longer-young man need not be locked up for another decade or two, let alone for the rest of his life. Implementation of this attitude, like the existence of programs to enable incarcerated individuals to pursue their educations, would reflect a commitment to justice as well as the exercise of mercy and common sense. It is these values, rather than ongoing punishment, that need to inform any decent system of corrections.

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Satire and Healing

A Conversation with Singer/Songwriter Roy Zimmerman

JACK SHALOM

Jack Shalom spoke to Roy Zimmerman on February 4, 2021. This is an edited version of their conversation that first aired on Arts Express with Host Prairie Miller on WBAI FM in New York City.

Jack Shalom: *Roy Zimmerman has been described as “Lenny Bruce meets Stephen Sondheim in Brian Wilson’s living room.” Roy is a master satirical political songwriter as well as a damn fine musician. I’ve been listening and laughing at his sharp wit for years. Hi, Roy.*

Roy Zimmerman: Hi there, Jack.

JS: *Roy, you not only write your own melodies, but you also do song parodies, and your song about The Donald, “The Liar Tweets Tonight,” has something like 11 million views on YouTube so far.*

RZ: Well it was an amazing, amazing occurrence over the course of the campaign season that my wife, Melanie Harby, and I came up with that parody and put the video out there. We did four different iterations of “The Liar Tweets Tonight” because it became so popular.

All four of these videos have amassed about 120 million views over all of social media, which sounds like a lot until you realize that, you know, the dumbest YouTube video

has a hundred and thirty million views.

The Liar Tweets Tonight

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkU1ob_IHCw

(“The Lion Sleeps Tonight” words and music by Solomon Linda. Parody lyrics by Ede Morris, Roy Zimmerman, Melanie Harby)

*In the White House, the mighty White House, The Liar Tweets Tonight
In the West Wing, the self-obsessed wing,
The Liar Tweets Tonight*

[Chorus, repeat 2x:]

*Vote him away, vote him away, vote him away,
vote him away
(Don Exotic, Lyin’ King)
Vote him away, vote him away, vote him away,
vote him away...*

JS: *Before COVID hit, you spent years touring to every state in the Continental US, which is pretty remarkable. I don’t think there are too many Americans who can claim that they’ve done that. What did you find that stood out for you?*

RZ: Well, it became our modus operandi to do loops around the country, and we were always looking for the most progressive people every place we went, but that of course included all the least progressive places in the country. We were heartened to find that the progressives are there. There are people doing wonderful progressive work where you might least expect it, or where it might be the most difficult.

JS: *Is there some secret place to find them. Where’s the first place you go?*

RZ: Well, a lot of the shows that we did were

JACK SHALOM is the co-host of Arts Express, heard on WBAI 99.5 FM NYC and Pacifica stations across the nation.

at Unitarian Universalist churches — you know, huddled in the basement with their arms linked — and in some cases they're in Democratic Party groups, certainly union halls, and local groups of the Indivisible movement that have sprung up since the Trump era.

Socialist!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXJgM2Z8n8k>

How many Socialists we got here tonight? Come on, let's see a show of left hands. You drive here on a public street? Socialist. You go to a public school? Socialist. Y'ever visit a public library? Why? I'll tell you why...

*'Cause you're a Socialist! like Ulysses S. Grant
Yellowstone National Park — y'ever been there?*

*Yeah, you're a Socialist!
Like Teddy "Pinko" Roosevelt
That guy was talking about universal health care.*

*You're a taxatin', appropriatin', regulatin',
nanny- state-in' Socialist!*

Y'ever mail a letter? 'Course you have...

*'Cause you're a Socialist!
Like Dwight D. Eisenhower
He built highways between the states.*

*Yeah, you're a Socialist!
Like Richard "Red Diaper" Nixon
He put food stamps on people's plates.*

*You're a taxatin', appropriatin', regulatin',
nanny statin' Socialist!*

How many Socialists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Too many. Four to requisition the light bulb, four more to process the requisition in triplicate, eight to manufacture the light bulb, three to supervise the manufacturing and procurement process, seven to warehouse the light bulb for an indeterminate length of time, four to deliver the light bulb to the WRONG ADDRESS, four more to redeliver the light bulb, six to receive the light bulb and one to SCREW IT UP. Forty-seven.

How many Capitalists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Two. One impoverished nation will-

ing to exploit its malnourished population and rape its natural resources to manufacture, package and ship the light bulb to Walmart... and me.

You know why that's funny? That's right...

*'Cause you're a Socialist!
Like Ronald W. Reagan
Earned Income Tax Credit*

*Yeah, you're a Socialist!
Like George Double-U-S-S-R Bush
That guy wrote the book on government interference.
'Course, he never read it.*

*You are a taxatin', appropriatin', regulatin',
nanny-statin',
Stalin-huggin', Castro-kissin', Marx-fellatin',
spawn o' Satan Socialist!*

Every last one o' ya!

(Words and music © 2009 by Roy Zimmerman)

JS: *How did you get into songwriting?*

RZ: It kind of drafted me. In junior high, I just began writing songs. It was a natural thing for me to do to respond to what was happening. So all the songs that I was writing were about what was happening around me, and it wasn't long then before I drifted into political waters.

JS: *What kind of household did you grow up in?*

RZ: I grew up in a conservative household, very much so. So I would love to have any of your listeners explain to me how I turned out to be like I am; I still don't understand that, but I am happily who I am, that's for sure, and I'm doing the work that I think I was intended to do.

JS: *But somehow in junior high school you gave yourself permission to write these satirical songs.*

RZ: Yeah. Tom Lehrer was a big influence, too. I was discovering Tom Lehrer about a decade after he was putting those records out. It was contraband, that was the big attraction of it. It was something I had to sneak, so sneaking satirical songs became a

secret high for me.

JS: *For those who don't remember Tom Lehrer, or perhaps were born too late, he was the author of such hits as "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park," "Pollution," and "The Vatican Rag." Did you ever meet Tom Lehrer?*

RZ: Yes, I got to sit down with him in his living room one afternoon while I was touring years ago. Very approachable, and a great person to talk with, not just about songwriting, but things in general.

JS: *After listening to a selection of your songs, it certainly becomes evident that not only are you an ingenious songwriter, but you're also a master of musical genres from folk to pop to Broadway to the Beatles to gospel to doo-wop. How did you get your musical education?*

RZ: Well, thanks for noticing that. First of all, the attempt is always to find the musical style that best suits the satirical purpose of the song. So that's part of the fun of it, copying the production chops and so forth that make that song more effective satirically. I do have a degree in music composition. My wife Melanie and I have been writing these songs for a long, long time, so we have a good deal of fun. It's just coming up with: What is the feeling, what kind of song are we after?

JS: *When you got that degree in musical composition was it with the intention of writing these kinds of songs?*

RZ: I knew I wanted to write songs. In fact, I was already writing songs. I wanted to write theater songs, which is kind of what these are. There's a character behind each song. Really, if you're doing satire well, you're never speaking from your own point of view, you're speaking from the point of view of somebody who you disagree with — which is the trouble in listening to it! Sometimes you want to get behind the character. The song and then the satirical point become more obvious.

JS: *Yes, Roy has a Conservative Girlfriend*

(<https://bit.ly/3wu30Z0>)

RZ: For instance!

JS: *For instance!*

JS: *That's interesting that you talk about it being a theatrical form because I really get the impression that even more than the folk scene, you were studying the Great American Songbook, like E. Y. Harburg and Lorenz Hart.*

RZ: I love those songs. I mean those songs are so amazingly well constructed and they're so unafraid to be clever. And they all have a point of view as well. Even though it may be just a flat-out love song, it's set in a certain place, with a certain character, with a certain point of view.

JS: *Yes, absolutely. Do you have a sense of how many songs you've written?*

RZ: I have a sense of it. It's over a thousand. I stopped counting. At some point it was too many to compile, let's put it that way.

JS: *Is songwriting for you a discipline, a job that you do every day, at a fixed time, or do you wait until inspiration hits?*

RZ: It comes in spurts; there are fecund periods and unfecund periods. There'll be a spate of three songs forming themselves at once, then a spate of the other parts of this job that we have to do. The hustle never stops, so you got to keep doing the online shows, you got to keep putting the message out there on social media. There's a lot of business involved in that.

JS: *And you put together these videos. I imagine you must have invested quite a bit of time in putting together these virtual sing-alongs. I was wondering, how do you get everybody to sing in the same key and the same rhythm? Or is that tweaked in the audio?*

RZ: Well, it's a little tweaked. But mostly we just send out a guide track. So if somebody writes us that they'd like to be part of it, we

write them back with a little guide track. That's an MP3 that they can have earbuds in and sing along with, so they're in the right key and in the right tempo

JS: *Can you write a song anywhere? When you're on the road are you able to write songs?*

RZ: Yes. My suggestion for any songwriter listeners of yours would be—if you don't do this already—have a way to codify your ideas whenever they come to you because inspiration is fickle. And I can't tell you how many times I've been humming a song to myself and thinking "Oh, this is great, this is great," and then you get home and you have to make lunch or whatever, and by the time you finish with lunch, you've forgotten the idea. So have a way to write it down, have a way to record it, so that you can go back to it, and go, like, "What was that? Oh, yeah. It was great."

JS: *You've been on the road so long. I'm always curious about this with musicians: What kind of family challenges are there when you're on the road so long?*

RZ: Well on the road, it's very difficult because you never see your family, you know, except Melanie and I see each other.

JS: *How did you generally get around from place to place? By car?*

RZ: Yeah. We just drove our MINI Cooper around the country. We called ourselves the Satire Delivery Service. You know, like FedEx or UPS? Fed-UPS is what we called ourselves.

JS: *Ha! That's a good line. And now a Roy Zimmerman song about health care.*

Dear Number 1036924053887

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAJ98iCMQeM>

*The cost of healthcare in America is rising and
I don't know how much higher it can go*

*But there's a prescription
To make it all better
Laid out in this letter
From my HMO:*

Dear Number 1036924053887

Have you considered suicide?

It's a health care plan you prob'ly haven't tried

Enclosed please find a tab of cyanide

For your perusal

*You're getting to an age where your potential
need for medical*

Attention, even intervention isn't hypothetical

So, do it quick

*And solve the nation's health care crisis by not
getting sick*

Die now

Buh-bye now

Before you get one hemorrhoid older

So long

You're no longer a

Cost-effective policy holder

Won't you help us file your folder

In the shredder

By being just a little bit deader?

Dear Number 1036924053887

Before you take another breath

Consider the advantages of death

We've enclosed a lethal dose of crystal meth

For your convenience

*And when you're dead and buried, you'll be
covered, thank the POTUS*

*And if you've killed yourself already, disregard
this notice*

So, pretty please

Remember, don't jerk, just squeeze

And make it easier to write these policies

*For insurees who never sneeze, contract disease,
get injuries, need EKG's, have tricky knees, can't
stomach cheese or get some wheezy little cough*

It's up to you

103692...

Knock yourself off

Signed, your kindly HMO

(Words and music, © 2008 by Roy Zimmerman)

JS: *Dare I ask you, what songs did you write
that you think to yourself, I really did something
extra special there?*

RZ: There are songs, certainly, that I'm proud of. Not even necessarily because of what we did, but because of the response that they bring out in people. Because we've come to realize that these songs aren't sung at people, they're sung because of people, and that came from the touring, all the people we talked to, all the people who are doing great work.

What ministers to their needs? People have needs. They have emotional needs that arise around political issues. Some of these needs are to laugh, you know, and to take it a little less seriously, to get some perspective on that — that's what the satirical songs are for. But some of these needs are to help deeply-felt trauma. Truly. I mean the Trump years were traumatic for so many people. He was a walking trauma trigger. There are people whose needs are met in some ways better by music than by conversation or talking heads or whatever else they might turn to. Music has a way of really getting behind that emotional response.

JS: *I was thinking today about some of my favorite songwriters, and who it was you reminded me of. And for some reason, John Prine kept coming up. And I said no, Jack, that's ridiculous, he's nothing like John Prine. But what I think I'm responding to is that you and John Prine engender such a response in the audience, and it seems you both fill some important emotional need.*

RZ: I love that comparison, and obviously I love John Prine, and we're so sorry to see him pass. The things that I would be most thankful for in the comparison, I guess, are one, he's not afraid to take a big left turn in a song. A song starts off about one thing and turns into its own completely different thing. That's amazing. And, two, to draw an incredible amount of information into a short line, a short ostensibly simple line, like "Daddy's got a hole in his arm where all the money goes." Oh my God!

JS: *Isn't that great? Well, but those are my favorite kinds of songs of yours. My favorite two*

songs of yours are "Thanks for the Support" and "DWB." And those are both songs that start off a little humorously, but soon the audience is going "Uh-oh, maybe I shouldn't have laughed so soon," because then the songs turn deadly serious and hit you in the gut.

RZ: Yes, thank you for that observation. That is exactly right. How else can you deal with subject matter that's like what those two songs deal with?

JS: *Can you talk a little bit more about the circumstances around writing each of those songs, starting with "Thanks for the Support"?*

RZ: "Thanks for the Support": there was a rhetorical support that the Bush administration was showing for the young men and women who were sent over to Iraq in that incredible misadventure. It was just cynical talk with all that "support," and all the SUV's driving around with yellow ribbons, and so forth. The irony of that song is bitter. It's a satirical song and I've often said that satire is the form of comedy that isn't funny. Because you're dealing with subject matter where you're drawing these very stark juxtapositions between what is said and what is done. So that was what the impetus was for that song.

Thanks for the Support

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuXorDsGvt0>

You've got that yellow ribbon stuck on your H-2

Thanks for the support

Memorial Day weekend you threw a bar-b-que

Thanks for the support

I can feel the love seven thousand miles away

And I'm a patriot, as I was trying to say

When you cut me short

Thanks for the support

I was gunning for Osama, and you sent me for Saddam

Thanks for the support

Now I'm sitting down to dinner - it's another can of Spam

Thanks for the support

You say complete the mission, and I say count on me

'Cause I don't even know what mission there might be

To abort

Thanks for the support

You sent me here a third time, and my house was repossessed

Thanks for the support

Now my wife is in a trailer, but she sent a kevlar vest

Thanks for the support

*And I think of her only every time I bleed
And someday we will meet again at Walter Reed*

The resort of last resort

Thanks for the support

And you hired those mercenaries who make eight times what I do

Thanks for that

And you dropped in on Thanksgiving with a turkey and a camera crew

Thanks ... giving

Now you're giving guns to the ones who shot at me

The tank is full, but the strategy might be down a quart

Thanks for the support

*I 'preciate the stopgap, and I 'preciate the Surge
Thanks for the support*

Another twenty thousand voices to harmonize this dirge

Thanks for the support

And to the Democratic Congress who could have brought me home

Who must have come down with a new Gulf War Syndrome

Of some sort

Thanks for the support

And if I die tomorrow, won't you ship me home at night

Thanks for the support

And if I have a funeral, make sure it's outta sight

Thanks for the support

*In the final seconds you've got a plan to win
Cut those taxes and let Jesus put one in
From half-court*

Thanks for the support

Thanks for the support

(Words and music © 2008 by Roy Zimmerman)

RZ: That song started out much funnier. As Melanie and I reworked that song, you know, we realized that we should take it in a different direction. And again, not just us saying this to people, but hearing this from people. That's the attempt, anyway, to write a song that ministers to that emotional need.

And the same with "DWB." If you want to write a song about Black Lives Matter from the point of view of an admittedly Left Coast white suburban snowflake like myself, what is the best way into that subject matter that truly allies you with the cause, the real cause of that? I found myself increasingly frustrated and angry and confused about the response of America to Black men, in particular, being killed on the streets.

JS: *We should point out that the song wasn't just written yesterday. It wasn't just in response to George Floyd.*

RZ: No, certainly not. It goes back to Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner and before that. So there are references in there to all of those things. But I tried to keep it broad enough to make the phenomenon the thing we're talking about, not only a particular incident.

DWB

<https://bit.ly/3ff9hlu>

*I pulled you over
'cause you were speeding
Do you know how black you were going?
I had you clocked at fifty miles per black
In a forty-five blacks per hour zone*

*I'll be right black
When I've run your license
Just sit black and re-blax*

Step out of the vehicle, son

*Come with me
Gonna book you on a DWB*

*You put your hands up
So, naturally
I thought you had a gun up there
Hidden somewhere in mid-air*

*And you said, "Don't shoot"
You tried to flee
Which I took as an attack
And shot you five times in the back*

*I chased you down 'cause
You had a pocket knife
I thought you might be joining the Swiss
Army*

*Or stealing Skittles
Or passing twenties
Or otherwise compromising Western Civil-
ization*

*Oh you can't breathe
No you can't breathe
You can't breathe, you can't breathe*

*That's what they all say
Come quietly
I'll book you on a DOA-WB*

(Words and music, © 2014 by Roy Zimmerman)

RZ: The other point about that, Jack, that relates to the theatricality of the songs, is that we believe that a song should go someplace and that's not, say, what a pop song calls for. I mean, you can write a great pop song and you've expressed a single thought well over the course of three and a half minutes, but these songs—and theatrical songs in general—should end up in a different place from where they started: they should get funnier, they should get angrier. They should take you someplace that you weren't when you began the song.

JS: *What a wonderful lesson for songwriters. That's fantastic. Is there anything else you'd like to add, Roy?*

RZ: Yes, I want to add a word about Anne Feeney who passed away the other day. We lost her to COVID-19 unfortunately. She's was an amazing spirit, an amazing activist, an amazing songwriter, and a real light in this world. And so I want to just mention that she covered a song of ours called "Defenders of Marriage" (<https://bit.ly/3oPTOMc>), a song written now twenty-something odd years ago about marriage equality. Well, there's a question that often comes up: Does your satire change anybody's mind? Well, you know, nobody wants their mind changed—but it did happen, and it's amazing when it does. Anne often used to tell a story about changing minds with that song. Somebody was really razzing her during her performance of it, not accepting the song's premise. But a couple of months later, he came up to her and said, "You know, I've thought about your song, and it changed my mind." So we loved hearing that.

JS: *That's wonderful. Anything else?*

RZ: Just please go to our internet website <https://www.RoyZimmerman.com> and check out these new virtual shows. You can sign up for the mailing list, which is a good way to know about new songs that we're doing and new videos that might involve your participation. You could actually send in a video clip and be part of this juggernaut that we call virtual singing videos.

JS: *Fantastic. Well, Roy Zimmerman, COVID-19 or not, Donald Trump or not, I suspect you'll be around for a long while more. As you once said, "As long as there's poverty, war, bigotry, ignorance, greed, lust, and paranoia,... I've got a career!" It's been a pleasure speaking with you. Thanks so much, Roy.*

RZ: You bet, Jack. Thank you very much.

American Gothic; or, What Melville Can Teach Us

DANIEL JOHNSON

THE GOTHIC IS EVERYWHERE in popular culture today. Our novels, films, series, games, and music are saturated with uncanny phenomena intended to arouse dread and horror. Though still often associated with the supernatural (and notoriously difficult to define with precision), the true horror of the gothic lies in its transgression of established social boundaries: by revealing the terrors hidden or repressed in everyday life, it exposes past or present wrongs. The form emerges most forcefully in times of anxiety and conflict, meaning that in the current conjuncture of deep structural inequality, ecological crisis, and pandemic the genre will undoubtedly continue to flourish.

Twenty-first-century expressions of gothic horror have not been limited to mainstream cultural productions; left critics have also deployed images of monstrous terrors. Books like Chris Harman's *Zombie Capitalism* and David McNally's *Monsters of the Market*, which appeared in the aftermath of the Great Recession, portrayed the crisis as the logical result of a predatory and decaying economic system. Concurrently, the late Mark Fisher, author of the influential essay "Exiting the Vampire Castle," argued in *Capitalist Realism* that "the most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract

parasite, an insatiable vampire, and zombie-maker; but the living labour it converts into dead labour is ours, and the zombies it makes are us."¹

Some have even argued for a "gothic Marxism."² Although there is no gothic Marxist party or program (at least not yet), its proponents claim the gothic form is uniquely suited to help comprehend the terrifying nature of our alienated, postmodern world. As advocates point out, Marx frequently used phantasmagorias, vampires, werewolves, and other gothic images in his exposition of the hidden workings of capital. Yet, as Fisher suggests, the horrors of capitalist society are not only inflicted from above; we are complicit in our own oppression. The gothic trope of doubling, most famously deployed by Robert Louis Stevenson in his novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), dramatizes the psychic horror of realizing that we have become monsters ourselves. The ogres that capitalism makes are not only megalomaniacal ghouls like Jeff Bezos and Peter Thiel—though they and their fellow billionaires are certainly hideous. The estrangement produced by our atomized, commodity-obsessed society makes zombies of us, naturalizing the exploitation of our labor and deadening us to the possibility of change.

The gothic is, therefore, far from inherently progressive. Moral contradiction and a dim view of human nature are elementary features of the genre, and the gothic's tendency toward indeterminacy—if not

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reaction—was evident from the genre's late eighteenth-century founding. The presence of the French Revolution in early gothic novels was recognized by contemporaries; among them was the Marquis de Sade, who claimed in 1800 that gothic fictions were "the necessary fruit of the revolutionary tremors felt by the whole of Europe" in the previous decade.³ It is no coincidence that the 1790s saw the novels of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis become wildly popular in England and the new United States. Yet while their villains were typically tyrannical aristocrats and corrupt clergy, these early gothic authors were far from revolutionary. The works that helped establish the genre responded primarily to middle-class anxieties, as suggested by the novels' competing representations of crazed and degenerate elites, on the one hand, and bloodthirsty plebeian mobs, on the other.

Even "Jacobin" gothic novels like William Godwin's *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1817) were as fearful of revolutionary masses as they were of mad despots. While *Caleb Williams* attacked England's entrenched social hierarchy, the eponymous character's "total revolution" produces a dangerous "hurricane of passions" within.⁴ Godwin's philosophy, moreover, rejected popular political organization in favor of gradual reform led by an enlightened few. In David McNally's reading, *Frankenstein* is not about the excesses of Enlightenment rationality or Shelley's familial issues (Godwin was her father; her mother, the famous feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, died soon after her birth). Rather, it is about human alienation in a world devoid of communal belonging. Yet Shelley, too, was unable to countenance radical transformation from below. "Like her father," McNally writes, "hers are a politics of enlightened gradualism driven by publicly spirited members of the middle class intent on mediating between the rulers and the mob."⁵

The American "dark romantics"—Edgar

Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville—also demonstrate how the gothic can puncture myths and reveal that which was repressed. In contrast to writers in nineteenth-century Europe, however, the trio of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville confronted a U.S. culture dominated by a nationalistic optimism in which democracy, economic development, and westward expansion heralded not decay but progress. Even critics of American slavery and expansionism, intellectually embodied in the transcendentalists, were believers in an innate human goodness destined to be fulfilled in Young America. At a time of evangelical-dominated reform movements and a widespread belief in social and spiritual perfectionism, the dark romantics probed a grimmer side of humanity, and in the process, they challenged fundamental tenets of U.S. ideology.

Popular gothic works of today owe a major debt to the classics. But is the early gothic of more than antiquarian interest? Like all cultural productions, nineteenth-century fiction reflects the time in which it was written. In our cynical postmodern age, we greet the notions of human perfectibility and the essential goodness of humanity with amused condescension. Even Donald Trump—a grotesque gothic monster if there ever was one—and his deluded followers believe that the greatness of the United States lies somewhere in the distant past. At the same time, as the continuing rule of authoritarians across much of the world shows, questions of democracy, equality, and justice remain as pertinent as ever. Is there a role for the gothic in forging a left cultural front today?

IN HIS SHORT LIFE (HE DIED IN 1849 at the age of forty), Edgar Allan Poe pioneered a number of literary genres, including the detective story and what would become science fiction. But it is his gothic short stories for which he is best remembered. Tales like "The Black Cat," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The

Masque of the Red Death" (the latter set in a world destroyed by a pandemic) remain terrifying—and immensely enjoyable. From the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Vincent Price to James Earl Jones' reading of the poem "The Raven" on *The Simpsons*, Poe has remained an influential, if peculiar, figure in American culture.

The horror of individual madness and perversity, rather than the terrors of oppression in society, help explain Poe's longevity. His emphasis on interiors and claustrophobic spaces, altered states of consciousness, and descents into madness that culminate in a shocking act of violence transcends time and place. Moreover, at a time when popular fiction was steeped in reformist moralizing, Poe disapproved of didacticism in literature. Indeed, his literary criticism, which earned him the nickname "Tomahawk Man," was most scathingly deployed against transcendentalists, and especially the movement's leader, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In contrast, Poe's own fiction was rooted in a deep pessimism and an acute awareness of the evil of which humans are capable. This view contributed to Poe's deeply conservative, if rarely overt, politics.

One of Poe's last stories, "Mellonta Tauta" (Greek for "things of the future"), is a science fiction-horror-satire that provides rare direct evidence of Poe's disdain for democratic rule. Dated April 1, 2848—April Fool's Day a thousand years in the future—the epistolary story's narrator is "Pundita," whose reflections are recorded while flying through the sky in a futuristic balloon. In a letter to an unknown addressee, Pundita mockingly recalls the "ancient Amriccan" experiment in self-government: "Did ever anybody hear of such an absurdity?" The notion that "all men are born free and equal" was repudiated by "the laws of *gradation* so visibly impressed upon all things both in the moral and physical universe." The only analogy that could be found for republicanism in 2848 was the case of "prairie dogs," which demonstrated that "democracy is a very admirable form of

government—for dogs."⁶

Though novel in terms of genre and uniquely illustrative of his politics, "Mellonta Tauta" is not one of Poe's major works. Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), has by contrast been

If the gothic can help expose the exploitation and alienation that oppresses us today, the question remains how to move *beyond* the strictures of our grim present.

the subject of much critical attention, ranking tenth on the *Guardian's* 2013 list of the one hundred best English-language novels. A sea adventure involving a stowaway protagonist, mutiny, murder, shipwreck, cannibalism, captivity, and the supernatural, *Pym* contains some of the most memorable scenes of horror in nineteenth-century literature.

The novel's horror is also heavily dependent on racist stereotypes. A leader of a mutiny aboard the *Grampus* is a Black cook notable only for his bloodthirstiness. A less one-dimensional non-white character is the Native American Dirk Peters, one of the mutineers who ultimately saves the life of the main character, Pym. Yet Peters' humanity is attributable to his white father, while his savagery clearly emanates from his Indian-ness. This barbarism is reflected in Peters' appearance: less than five feet tall, his limbs are "of Herculean mould," his hands are inhumanly large, and his head is "deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald." Peters' mouth extends from ear to ear, with protruding teeth wholly uncovered by his lips, making for a comically grotesque gothic figure.⁷

Pym's most racist characterizations in-

volve the indigenous inhabitants of the southern Indian Ocean island of Tsalal, where the characters land after being rescued by the *Jane Guy* of Liverpool. Though initially friendly,

While probing the depths of
human depravity with lyricism
and wit, Melville's fiction
directly confronted slavery and
capitalism.

the “jet black” natives are in reality “the most barbarous, subtle, and blood-thirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe.”⁸ Poe’s representation of the islanders of Tsalal not only tapped into deep-seated white fears of racial others, but also reflected apprehensions then at the forefront of the U.S. popular imagination. *Pym* was published as sectional tensions over slavery were on the rise, and in the aftermath of a rebellion in Virginia led by the enslaved preacher Nat Turner. It also appeared at a time when tens of thousands of Native Americans were being ethnically cleansed from ancestral territories east of the Mississippi River, following Congress’s narrow passage in 1830 of President Andrew Jackson’s genocidal Indian Removal Act. The year *Pym* was published, 1838, saw the infamous “Trail of Tears,” during which the forced removal of approximately 16,000 Cherokee to present-day Oklahoma led to the death of at least four thousand human beings.⁹

The celebrated novelist and essayist Toni Morrison once claimed that “no early American writer is more important to the concept of African Americanism than Poe.” For Morrison, the author of *Pym*’s representations of Black people as “dead, impotent, or under complete control” function as a contrast to, and meditation on, whiteness, creating a “haunting” presence in early American lit-

erature.¹⁰ Yet Poe’s racism was one symptom of a more general view of humanity. In Poe’s world people were irrational and cruel, and no amount of Christianity, let alone democracy, could save humanity from its violent primal impulses or its capacity for self-destruction. However, this knowledge did not lead him to sympathize with those who suffered from others’ irrational hatreds. Poe disliked people in general, and held the reading public in contempt. The logical conclusion of this gothic vision is that social and political reforms are futile attempts to alter an order whose hierarchies are natural, and therefore necessary. Poe’s fiction forces us to confront our own capacity for evil. Yet his gothic is also a reactionary one, whose anti-democratic racism is still with us.

WHEREAS POE’S GOTHIC imagination probed the individual’s propensity for violence and self-destruction, that of Nathaniel Hawthorne explored the oppressiveness of human institutions. Often set in colonial Massachusetts, Hawthorne’s historical fiction was decidedly more “American” than was Poe’s. Hawthorne’s obsession with early New England stemmed largely from his family history: his great-great-great grandfather, John Hathorne, was a Puritan judge in the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692–93, during which more than two hundred colonists were accused of witchcraft; twenty, fifteen of whom were women, were executed.¹¹

Novels like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* brought long-standing New England pieties into question. At a time when many viewed New England as the cradle of American religious liberty and the vanguard of republican revolution, Hawthorne emphasized Massachusetts Puritans’ intolerance, repression, and hypocrisy. His heroines—most famously *The Scarlet Letter*’s Hester Prynne—have endeared him to some liberals, though whether Hawthorne or his fiction should be considered feminist is an open question. (In 1855 he lamented that the

American reading public was given over to “a mob of scribbling women,” and that women generally write “like emasculated men, and are only to be distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly.”¹²

An illustrative example of Hawthorne’s use of the gothic form to critique a triumphalist story of the U.S. founding is the short story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” The protagonist, a rustic New England youth named Robin, is in search of his wealthy uncle in an unnamed colonial city (obviously Boston). Of humble circumstances as the youngest son of a clergyman, Robin hopes that his wealthy kinsman will help establish the youth in the world. The narrative presents a series of characteristically detailed scenes that wear at Robin’s youthful optimism—a common theme in Hawthorne’s work. For some reason, whenever Robin inquires of townspeople as to his kinsman’s whereabouts, he is met with contempt and mockery. In a particularly vivid passage, set in a tobacco-filled tavern populated by sailors and artisans consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, Robin observes a devilish man, whom he had spied earlier in conspiratorial conversation with some “ill-dressed associates.” When Robin asks the innkeeper if he knows of Molineux, he is threatened with being sold into servitude and is physically ejected, after which he is ridiculed by plebeian revelers.¹³

Passing a gothic church on one of the city’s crooked and winding streets, a dejected and despairing Robin asks a shadowy figure if he knows where he might find his kinsman. When the man steps into the moonlight, Robin realizes it is the demonic man he has repeatedly seen in the town. The man, possessing an “infernal visage,” informs the youth that the major will pass by in an hour. At the appointed time, Robin hears a riotous uproar approaching, and finally sees his tarred-and-feathered kinsman being carried through town by a mob, led by none other than the diabolical man. Molineux, it turns out, is a Royalist gentleman under attack from the

mob in revolutionary Boston. Though ignorant of the political conflict between colonies and the mother country, Robin instinctively joins the sportive “contagion” that has been “spreading among the multitude” and laughs louder than anyone at his kinsman’s humiliation.¹⁴ The story is thus a critique of the “contagion” of democracy that took root in British North America in the 1770s.

Written in late 1828 or early 1829, “My Kinsman” was also a commentary on contemporary U.S. politics. Scholar Lance Newman has persuasively argued that Hawthorne’s demonic mob leader is in fact a representation of Andrew Jackson, while Molineux is John Quincy Adams, who lost the presidential election to Jackson in 1828. Describing the leader’s features, Hawthorne writes that the forehead bulged “out into a double prominence, with a vale between, the nose came boldly forth in an irregular curve, and its bridge was of more than a finger’s breadth, the eyebrows were deep and craggy, and the eyes glowed beneath them like fire in a cave”—a visage that, for Newman, is unmistakably Jackson’s. Similarly, Molineux’s dignified bearing resembles that of the genteel Adams, one of a dying aristocratic breed in the new republic.¹⁵ Read in this way, “My Kinsman” is a lament on the excesses of popular rule under demagogic direction, with Jacksonian democracy the inevitable consequence of the nation’s mobbish founding.

There were many reasons to dislike Andrew Jackson, and Hawthorne was far from being the only New Englander to worry about “King Andrew” and the new menace of popular politics. Yet Hawthorne departed from other New England intellectuals in his failure to criticize American policies toward Native Americans or the institution of slavery. In fact, in 1852 he wrote a campaign biography of the pro-slavery, expansionist presidential candidate Franklin Pierce; for his efforts, he was rewarded by his old college friend with a consulship in Liverpool. As sectional tensions escalated in the aftermath of the

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Hawthorne wrote to a friend that he had “not ... the slightest sympathy for the slaves; or, at least, not half as much as for the laboring whites”—which is to say in both cases, very little.¹⁶ After the outbreak of the Civil War a decade later, Hawthorne anonymously wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* that John Brown, the radical abolitionist executed in 1859 after attempting to foment a slave uprising in Virginia, was a “blood-stained fanatic.” “Nobody was ever more justly hanged,” Hawthorne wrote.¹⁷

It is fitting that the essay was published in the *Atlantic*, then as now a beacon of centrist intellectual elitism. For were Hawthorne alive, he would undoubtedly belong to the Democratic establishment, repelled by vulgar Trumpism but equally frightened by the rebirth of socialist politics. Nevertheless, Hawthorne’s gothic revealed the hypocrisy of American founding myths. While these included criticism of naive belief in the exceptionality of U.S. liberties and tolerance, they also included a deep suspicion of the very ideas of democracy and human equality.

HERMAN MELVILLE, WHO HIMSELF wrote a poem about John Brown called “The Portent,” was enamored of (and possibly in love with) Hawthorne. His magnum opus, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), was dedicated to the older novelist, and his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses” demonstrates a deep admiration for “this sweet Man of Mosses.”¹⁸ Yet Melville’s fiction was as aesthetically and politically far from Hawthorne’s melancholy as it was from Poe’s misanthropy. Indeed, what Melville crafted might paradoxically be called a gothic humanism. While probing the depths of human depravity with lyricism and wit, Melville’s fiction directly confronted slavery and capitalism. Though he was equally compelled by humanity’s capacity for evil, Melville sympathized with the struggles of ordinary people in a way the other dark romantics never did.

This sympathy resulted in part from

personal experience. Though Melville’s father came from a wealthy New York family, he filed for bankruptcy in 1830. After laboring as a clerk, salesman, farmhand, and teacher, the young Herman turned to the sea for work in 1839. A series of adventures based on his maritime experiences brought him literary fame in the late 1840s, but over the course of the 1850s Melville’s writing grew increasingly dark and prolix. The novels sold poorly and were generally panned by critics—including *Moby Dick*. Between 1857’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* and his death in 1891, a misunderstood and disillusioned Melville wrote no novels (though he did publish poetry) except for the novella *Billy Budd*, which remained unfinished at his death. Not until a revival in the 1920s would Melville enter the American literary canon.

Moby Dick, recognized only relatively recently by critics as a gothic masterpiece, was based on Melville’s experience working on a whaling ship in 1841. The physically grotesque (badly scarred, one-legged) Captain Ahab, obsessed with killing the elusive white whale that took his leg, epitomizes madness in pursuit of revenge and domination. *Moby Dick* is an ambiguous monster; whether the white whale is a maliciously intelligent beast or simply a creature obeying the laws of nature is a fundamental, if unanswerable, question. Is *Moby Dick* symbolic of nature’s indifference to humanity, or of the inscrutability of God’s ways? That some things, in this case the nature of the whale, are unknowable is precisely what Ahab cannot tolerate: “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.”¹⁹

While *Moby Dick* represents the ineffable, sperm whales in general—though vast, enigmatic, and sublime—have been reduced to mere commodities by the whaling industry. The graphic depictions of whales’ death and dismemberment at the heart of the book dramatize an unquenchable human desire for profit and the subjugation of nature. Even an

old, diseased, and lame whale “must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all.”²⁰

The world of Ahab’s whaler, the *Pequod*, is an atmospheric social microcosm (although one where women are absent, as in much of Melville’s work): here, the authoritarian captain rules over a multiethnic maritime proletariat. The narrator, Ishmael, is an ordinary wage-working seaman. And, in contrast to the work of Poe or Hawthorne, non-white characters are portrayed as sympathetic and noble figures. A famous passage from early in the epic encapsulates Melville’s gothic humanism-from-below:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God!²¹

Though Melville (or Ishmael—it’s often hard to tell who is speaking) takes pains to humanize harpooners, carpenters, and blacksmiths, the victory of the dark gothic vision is evident in the workers’ ultimate seduction by the tyrannical Ahab. In the end, the *Pequod*’s mariners are reduced to simple “machines,” always conscious that the “old man’s despot eye was on them.”²²

However, Melville’s most trenchant social criticism can arguably be found in his short fiction. From the novella *Benito Cereno* (a fictionalized account of a 1799 rebellion of enslaved Africans on the Spanish *Bachelor*’s

Delight) to the proto-surrealism of “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” Melville’s short works from the 1850s

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde dramatizes the psychic horror of realizing that we have become monsters ourselves.

are among the most socially conscious fiction of the era. But it is his 1853 “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” that most innovatively indicts capitalism at a formative historical moment, and still speaks to us today.

Few characters in all of literature are more enigmatic than Bartleby. Like Moby Dick, Bartleby is inscrutable. Yet, far from a majestic sperm whale, Bartleby is a working-class copyist in a Wall Street lawyer’s office. His gothic transgression is social, involving an abrupt refusal to work one day, when he responds to a command from his boss (the narrator) to examine a copy with the simple, “I would prefer not to.” The response becomes a refrain to any and all of the increasingly bewildered boss’s commands, and the notion that workers actually have “preferences” soon unwittingly infects Bartleby’s coworkers—though nowhere is the idea of worker solidarity or collective action broached. Rather, Bartleby’s haunting singularity, together with frequent biblical allusions to the Christlike figure betrayed by transactional Christians like the lawyer-narrator, dominate the story.

The boundary that Bartleby crosses is also spatial and temporal. Bartleby, we learn, refuses to work but also never leaves, taking up residence in the office. Bribes from the lawyer prove futile, and eventually the boss simply moves to another New York location—abandoning the ghostly young man. Eventually Bartleby is arrested as a vagrant

and placed in the Tombs, an infamous New York City jail, where his refusal extends even to the consumption of food. When the narrator visits, Bartleby greets him with cold indifference: “‘I know you,’ he said, without looking round—‘and I want nothing to say to you.’” The lawyer’s attempt to rid himself of

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guilt by giving money to the jailer to provide Bartleby with food fails, for the young man is soon found sleeping “with kings and counselors.”²³ The final transgressive act is the ultimate refusal—that of life itself. And though we have glimmers of Bartleby’s motivation, in proper gothic fashion we are left uncertain as to who Bartleby really was.

IN HIS 1953 STUDY OF *MOBY DICK*, written while imprisoned on Ellis Island in McCarthyite America, the Trinidadian socialist C.L.R. James claimed Melville was a prophet of the twentieth century. For James, the novel’s representation of the whaling industry’s labor process and the lure of the megalomaniacal Ahab presaged modern bureaucracy and totalitarianism’s “leader principle.”²⁴ Melville’s gothic thus exposed the exploitation, prejudice, and alienation endemic to modern life. And it is perhaps no accident that the Melvillian revival during which James wrote occurred in the same decades that some of the great American authors of the twentieth century—Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Carson McCullers, Ralph Ellison, and Harper Lee—

were writing socially critical gothic novels. In today’s world of social isolation and economic and environmental catastrophe, Melville’s dark vision is as relevant as ever.

But if the gothic can help expose the exploitation and alienation that oppresses us today, the question remains as to how we might move *beyond* the strictures of our grim present. An analogy with science fiction is useful here. In a recent defense of utopianism, the novelist Kim Stanley Robinson argues that science fiction operates by a kind of double action, like the glasses one wears in 3D movies. He terms one lens of science fiction’s aesthetic machinery “proleptic realism,” a vision of the future that could conceivably come to pass. The other, dystopian, lens presents a metaphorical view of our present that, in its heightened representation of a nightmare world, more resembles surrealism. Today, we are inundated with the dystopian surrealist lens, while the proleptic realist imaginary is largely absent. Dystopian works, Robinson argues, are “fashionable, perhaps lazy, maybe even complacent, because one pleasure of reading them is cozying into the feeling that however bad our present moment is, it’s nowhere near as bad as the ones these poor characters are suffering through.”²⁵

If, like dystopian fiction, the gothic can expose contemporary evils, is there a mirror image of the genre analogous to Robinson’s “proleptic realist” science fiction? Gothic stories and science fiction both grew out of romanticism, a literary reaction to Enlightenment rationalism and to a political economy based on private profit, wage labor, and mass production. Like the gothic and science fiction, there is nothing inherently radical about romanticism. There did develop, however, a romantic socialist tradition that, in criticizing the present by looking nostalgically to a pre-capitalist past, also found ways to imagine different futures. Though most famously associated with the fiction of William Morris, much left-wing fantasy and science fiction of a utopian orientation—the works of Ursula

K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy, and Robinson himself come to mind—might be included in this tradition.

Left cultural critics should give more attention to the gothic's ability to defamiliarize the horrors that pervade everyday life. But we also need an alternative imaginary, a romantic socialist vision that looks to different ways of being and knowing to help us envision a more humane future. While we still need clear-sighted analysis of the world as it is, we also need what sociologists Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have called "critical unrealism"—a revived romantic anti-capitalism.²⁶ If the gothic continues to expose contemporary forms of oppression, a critical unrealism that imagines a new world of liberation might constitute the gothic's own double. In addition to gothic phantasmagorias, we must have utopian fantasies. The forging of a left culture demands it.

NOTES

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15. Lance Newman, "Nathaniel Hawthorne, Democracy, and the Mob," in *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 45–53.
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18. Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2786.
19. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Penguin, 1994), 167.
20. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 345.
21. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 123–24.
22. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 500.
23. Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," in *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2648, 2650.
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Making Black Neighborhoods Matter

NICOLE FABRICANT

LAWRENCE BROWN'S BOOK, *The Black Butterfly: The Harmful Politics of Race and Space in America* looks at the long history of intentional harm and damage done to Black communities caused by white supremacist practices, policies, and budgets. Brown uses redlined Black neighborhoods as his unit of analysis in order to understand the deep roots of urban apartheid but also to map strategies, approaches, and recommendations for structural change. While he charts the national scenario, he hones in on the city of Baltimore.

Brown is a holistic scholar utilizing history, the archives, quantitative and qualitative data sets from public health and urban planning, and police budgets. He brings these skill sets together in a masterful narrative well-written and highly accessible to organizers, undergraduates, and people who live and work in the neighborhoods of the Black Butterfly. Brown coined the phrase "Black Butterfly and the White L," and it refers to the racialized geography of the city of Baltimore:

The Black Butterfly:
The Harmful Politics of
Race and Space in America

LAWRENCE BROWN
Johns Hopkins Press, 2021, 408 pp.

the systemic disinvestment of Black neighborhoods in West and East Baltimore shaping a butterfly on the map and the White L of

the white and gentrified areas, which enjoy and benefit from accumulated advantage. Graffiti artists like Nether and Chris Wilson painted a black butterfly. A hip-hop artist named Sun Zulu made a song titled, "The Black Butterfly,"

where the Baltimore Center Stage had a butterfly series. As Brown described it, "It's artists that really push the concept. Nether, he put on top of a building alongside the corridor of I-83 the 'L' and the 'Butterfly' in big white letters on this bright, brick building." As Lawrence Brown stated, "You couldn't miss it. Driving on I-83, I was just mind blown. That's when I was like, okay, this is really going somewhere. People are taking it and running with it, and I was really excited by that."

When I asked Brown how this project came out of his own political journey, he replied, "The roots began with the Black freedom struggles. The history I discuss in the book all began with the struggle to survive and the will to thrive and to try to make a way out of no way. The impetus for the book is really a *sankofa* which is a West African word for 'looking back in order to move forward' I'm looking back so I can then look at where

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we need to go.”

The book is organized as a playlist of sorts coming out of Brown’s love for funk music: Track 1: The Trump Card Track, Track 2: This is America, Track 3: The Negro Invasion, Track 4: Ongoing Historical Trauma, Track 5: Black Neighborhood Destruction, Track 6: Make Black Neighborhoods Matter, Track 7: Healing the Black Butterfly, and Track 8: Outro, Organize. The book is designed according to eight strategies needed to implement a robust racial equity approach and walk the reader through the steps of reflection, analysis, and actions needed to develop thriving Black neighborhoods. The outro is written for activists as they push for racial equity.

The historical and political economic context in Track 2: This is America places contemporary trauma tied to urban apartheid inside the history of slavery where Black people were auctioned off, purchased, sold, traded, rented, leased, and ripped out of their parent’s arms. Each moment of Black freedom is met with “whitelash” or white resistance to Black progress. The first whitelash was to the abolition of slavery and was followed by white supremacist violent massacres at the hands of former Confederates in 1866. Southern states passed Black codes to curtail Black freedom. He says, “White redemption was America’s violent reprisal of Black reconstruction.” (39)

The legal codification of white supremacist redemption resulted in the ratification of American apartheid. What was to come was deep racial segregation in education, transportation, propaganda in pulpits, and disseminated in newspapers, which fueled violence and dispossessions. No matter where Black people tried to escape the clutches of Jim and Jane Crow, they could not escape the violence visited by white supremacists.” (45) American apartheid was “white supremacist terrorism,” racial segregation in nearly all public spaces, land dispossession, exploitative labor arrangements including convict leasing and sharecropping, and racial cleansing or

Black expulsions from sundown towns.

The second American whitelash was during the rise of Black power movements and their demands for freedom and economic justice, met with the U.S. government’s security apparatus known as COINTELPRO. This FBI program coordinated with local police to neutralize and kill Black leaders deemed revolutionary and framed as a “threat to national security.” The last or third American whiten-

You cannot make Black lives matter without making black neighborhoods matter.

ash has to do with the violence following the election of President Barack Obama (2008) and the first Black Lives Matter uprisings (2014–2017). The rise of the Tea Party and the emboldened white supremacist groups reborn on the heels of Obama’s presidency led to the election of Donald Trump in 2016; “the champion of the Third American whitelash in both domestic and foreign policy” (58)

From this national scenario, he hones in on Baltimore where “no large metropolitan area can better illustrate the salience of structural violence better than Baltimore, which gave birth to urban spatial apartheid.” (63) Baltimore reveals the sophistication of structural violence deployed by city ordinances, real estate practices, mortgage lending, code enforcement, municipal budgets, zoning laws, urban planning, urban renewal, and urban development. Track 3: The Negro Invasion tracks urban apartheid, Baltimore style. This chapter charts the history of racial covenants and the fears of Black people moving into all-white neighborhoods.

As soon as the Negro appears, the white man moves away (63). A fabricated war against “negro invasion” consumed white Baltimore as Mayor James Preston became a

national champion for government-enforced racial segregation. Public health measures became a way to justify Baltimore apartheid. From covenants to residential redlining to block busting to white supremacist violence, we get a brutal history of the architecture of systemic racism. This all evolved into “urban renewal” in the 1950s and white flight, which justified bulldozing down projects and running highways through Black communities.

He writes about the importance
of organizing strategies to stop
segregonomics and apartheid
budgeting, hyperpolicing, and
resource withdrawal.

At the end of the chapter, Brown states, “America and its hypersegregated cities cannot move forward without acknowledging the fundamental aspects of the spatial war that characterized how Black people and communities would be treated according to the law” (103).

Track 4 looks at the ongoing historical trauma and utilizes Lakota scholar Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart for thinking about American apartheid as a form of historical trauma that results from damage inflicted on the affected entity, threatening health and viability. From the negro invasion to contemporary forms of “segregonomics” (Rooks, 2017) or the ways in which the private sector has profited from racial and economic segregation particularly within the school system. Brown argues that American apartheid and racial segregation operates through multiple and interlocking systems such as the criminal justice, finance, community development, real estate, housing, food, transportation, etc. The consequences are devastating; the flip side of concentrated poverty is concentrated

wealth where the White L benefits from tax breaks, well-resourced schools, community centers, and even state of the art medical facilities. Track 5 subsequently tracks Black neighborhood destruction from root shock (or systematic shocks) to housing precarity to homicides and urban uprisings. Racism-based trauma led to the uprisings, which then expanded hyperpolicing and the expansion of the carceral state and thus more trauma.

This deep-seated historic and contemporary trauma sets the stage for Track 6, which outlines, why we must make Black neighborhoods matter. As Brown articulates, “Yeah, it all boils down to a simple ecological truth... which is really the thesis of my book. It’s that *you cannot make Black lives matter without making black neighborhoods matter*. That’s the public health challenge as well. *You can’t make Black health matter when black neighborhoods are polluted*, inflicted with toxic lead exposure that poisons the minds of Black babies, Black toddlers, Black infants.” As he describes it in the book, “Flowers in a garden need sunlight for proper growth and development.”

He lays out the beginning of a system-wide change by addressing 1) the ongoing historical trauma with a racial equity lens, equity does not mean equal; it means “corrective action (more resources need to be allocated to redlined areas because it takes more to equal the outcome)” (184); racial equity within schools, i.e., allocating \$290 million more to Baltimore City Public Schools and \$3 billion in capital to repair and rebuild infrastructure in redlined Black neighborhoods, suspending all public school closures in Black neighborhoods, and funding a community-driven process for culturally relevant and abolitionist curriculum in lieu of common core; 3) racial equity in community development, which includes centering racial equity in community development by passing a community reinvestment act and supporting Black-owned cooperatives; 4) racial equity in housing and ending homelessness by keeping people in their homes, providing foreclosure

and eviction funds, reinvigorating public housing, building autonomous transitional housing, and implementing housing first; 5) racial equity in public health; 6) racial equity in public works e.g., public transportation; 7) racial equity in tax policy. At the conclusion of the chapter he states, “racial equity is not a vision or fantasy or utopia. It is a concrete process for creating and manifesting bright futures” (224).

In Track 7: How to Heal the Black Butterfly, Brown argues that we need a racial equity social impact bond of \$3 billion to begin to bolster racial equity in Baltimore and to address pressing social issues from lead paint remediation to infrastructure for transit to infrastructure for social workers and counselors to funding the Baltimore Office of Equity and Civil Rights.

“Afrofuturistic ecological thinking is needed to imagine and envision thriving Black neighborhoods” (252). Afrofuturistic ecological thinking generates a scientifically seasoned faith, which allows practitioners to know that planting the seeds today will bring forth beautiful flowers (healthy people) in due season if nutrient rich soil (i.e., budgets, policies, and practices), abundant water (budgets and funding) and ample sunlight (accountability and participatory democracy) are put

into place. We need to tend to these deep symbolic, psychological, structural wounds in order to heal.

Brown’s magnificent toolkit lays out a plan for how to radically restructure the systems, practices, and policies that have been put into place over the past 100 years stunting the growth and development of Black communities. In the last track, or the outro, he writes directly to organizers about confronting urban Democrats and the importance of organizing strategies to stop segrenomics and apartheid budgeting, hyperpolicing, and resource withdrawal. “Let a new America rise. Let a new America be born. Let every city and county engage in deep reflection and then implement the five steps of the racial equity process” (266). In order for this new America to rise, we all have to have body, soul, and intellect in the struggle for building a more equitable world. As Brown says, “Let’s all work to turn Baltimore into the Wakanda that it really is and should be.”

RESOURCES

Brown’s website: theblackbutterflyproject.com.

Brown’s toolkit for teaching the book with some digital archival material that educators can use: www.academia.edu/45021195/The_Black_Butterfly_Discussion_Guide_for_Book_Clubs_and_Educators.

Marxism and Art

DEBORAH ROBERTS

IN HIS MOST RECENT BOOK, John Molyneux provides a well-researched overview and analysis of the visual arts in Western society, written from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism. Molyneux was a longtime member of the UK Socialist Workers Party and is currently involved in Ireland's People before Profit. He is a former lecturer in art history at the School of Art, Design, and Media at the University of Portsmouth, and is editor of the *Irish Marxist Review*.

This very knowledgeable writer has produced an enjoyable and useful history that covers many countries and periods, from Renaissance Italy and the Dutch Republic to contemporary Europe and America. Of particular interest is Molyneux's definition of art as a distinct field of creative human labor: he considers it to be the opposite of work as it operates in class society, and particularly under capitalism, characterized as it is by alienation, commercialization, and commodification of the labor process, what is produced by it, and what happens to those products.

The book is aimed at people who are interested not only in art, but in the ways it is interwoven with politics, and it shows much about society and human interaction, both at work and more generally. The open-

ing chapter, "What Is Art?," explores the distinction between alienated and unalienated labor, and explains why art belongs to the

latter category. Art, he argues, is "made by free, creative labor in a world dominated by the opposite ... the general tendency of capitalism is to destroy

all creativity in labor, not only in manual labor on production lines and in factories, but also in mental labor, in white-collar work" (3). Moreover, "art is work created by unalienated human labor and characterized by a fusion or unity of form and content. Furthermore, there is a connection between these two elements ... Generally speaking, it requires unalienated labor to achieve such a fusion of form and content" (24).

Molyneux examines in depth a range of artists and works of art, from Michelangelo's *David* and *The Dying Slave* to Rembrandt's *The Jewish Bride*, Picasso's *Guernica* and *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Jackson Pollock's "drip" paintings, and a great many others. Throughout the book, he focuses not on the artists' personal lives and creative predilections, but on "the nature of the labor they employed," following Marx's 1844 proclamation that "the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labor" (16).

In defining art, Molyneux is interested principally in the "capitalist or bourgeois era: that is, roughly from the beginning of the Renaissance (in Europe) through to the global present." He expounds upon this point:

The Dialectics of Art

JOHN MOLYNEUX
Haymarket Books, 2020, 300 pages

DEBORAH ROBERTS is a longtime activist and socialist living in Chicago.

It is clear that something we would now call art has existed since at least the Upper Paleolithic period (that is, cave paintings, dating back over thirty-five thousand years) and that every human society or culture of which we have evidence was engaged in activities (painting walls, making music, dancing, storytelling, etc.) we would now be likely to call art. (10)

The author also emphasizes that labor is as deeply alienated today as it was in the past. Alienated labor, he reminds us, is an essential feature of capitalism because the accumulation of wealth on which the system depends cannot be effected without the separation of workers from autonomy over their lives and the extraction of their labor power by a system controlled by others.

In acknowledging the shortage of qualitative graphics in this book about visual art, the author provides a helpful direction:

This book is packed with references to specific works of art, particularly as examples illustrating historical and theoretical arguments. Ideally I would have liked similarly to pack the text with images of those works. Unfortunately this was not possible without inflation of the price of the book beyond what either I or the publishers consider acceptable. I would remind readers, therefore, that virtually every work referred to in this book is easily accessible online on any computer or smartphone. (xv)

The analysis develops through discussion of well-known artists; in addition to those mentioned above, he discusses Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, and Tracey Emin (to whom he devotes a whole chapter). Molyneux also fully credits the many thinkers, artists, and activists who have influenced his work and his approach to art as employed here, including John Berger and his 1972 BBC TV series *Ways of Seeing*, which, along with its companion book, is among the most influential examinations of art ever. This work, and others by Berger, use

oil paintings, drawings, and photographs to show how art reflects our society and history, and have forever changed how we view art.

Molyneux's exploration of the work of Tracey Emin—a prominent artist in various media, including film, neon text, painting, drawing, photography, and sculpture—is a case study of how art can challenge its conventional definitions. He notes that Emin “is currently the most famous contemporary artist in Britain, and a woman. I don't think this has ever happened before” (153). Even though Emin's politics (Tory) are the opposite of the author's, he defends her artistic efforts as important contributions that express changing social relations, especially those of “young working-class women and men” (168).

The final chapters of *The Dialectics of Art*—“How Art Develops” and “The Dialectics of Modernism”—emphasize modern art in Europe and America and offer more insights to and evaluations of artists and their works, complementing Molyneux's “lifelong engagement with art.” Among the strongest elements of the book is its emphasis on the historical and political foundations of many of the artists and the centrality of their work to contemporary art. Here, I must acknowledge that it will be impossible for me to look at any of the discussed paintings again without my view having been shaped and guided by Molyneux's crucial insights. In particular, as Trotsky put it in *Literature and Revolution*:

the history of modern art is a history of rebellion from below followed by incorporation into the establishment . . . Every new tendency in art has begun with rebellion. Bourgeois society showed its strength throughout long periods of history in the fact that, combining repression and encouragement, boycott, and flattery, it was able to control and assimilate every “rebel” movement in art and raise it to the level of official “recognition.”

The book's concluding section discusses the “social turn,” or socially engaged art, of recent times, as well as the climate change

crisis, which the author argues endangers the future of humanity and thereby the future of art itself (235). This danger is a long-term outgrowth of an economic system “owned and controlled by a tiny minority of the population” (236). Molyneux argues that human beings can and must change these oppressive conditions and realities:

Only in a society not based on the alienated labor of the majority will free artistic production become the property and practice of all. Until that is achieved,

art will take its place in the quest and fight for human freedom, if not on the frontline—which will be occupied by the masses in struggle in the workplaces, the streets, and on the barricades—then as an important ally and essential supplier of spiritual nourishment as necessary in its way as boots and medicine. (237)

For those interested in social change and the importance of art as a challenge to the alienating core of capitalism, *The Dialectics of Art* is an excellent place to start.



The graphic is a black rectangular box with white text and a stylized background. At the top, the word "ANNOUNCING" is in a simple sans-serif font. Below it, the word "SPECTRE" is rendered in large, bold, 3D block letters with a halftone dot pattern. Underneath "SPECTRE", the word "JOURNAL" is in a smaller, clean sans-serif font. A horizontal line separates the title from the body text. The body text is arranged in two columns. The left column contains a quote from Antonio Gramsci and a statement of commitment. The right column contains a statement about socialist movements and a call to action with a website URL.

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Writing from a fascist prison cell in the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci observed that “the old is dying but the new cannot yet be born.” We inhabit a similar moment today. And we make one unflinching commitment to our readers: *Spectre* will mobilize its meager but precious resources to hasten the birth of the new. We will devote all our efforts to assist the growth of

socialist movements dedicated to attacking the virus that is capitalism and curing it with the democratic rule of the people in their own interests and those of our lifeworld.

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CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



Berta Cáceres, Honduran indigenous leader, defender of the rights of the Lenca people, anticapitalist and socialist environmental activist, and co-founder and coordinator of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras. Cáceres was assassinated in 2016 after years of threats against her life.

“Let us wake up! Let us wake up, humankind! We’re out of time. We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only assure our own self-destruction.”

“As long as we keep capitalism, our planet won’t be saved because it’s the complete opposite to life. We need to end capitalism to save the world and humankind.”

“Our Mother Earth, militarized, fenced-in, poisoned, a place where basic rights are systematically violated, demands that we take action. Let us build societies that are able to coexist in a dignified way, in a way that protects life. Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of this Earth and of its spirits.”

—Berta Cáceres in her *Goldman Environmental Prize* acceptance speech

“The army has an assassination list of 18 wanted human rights fighters with my name at the top.”

“They fear us because we are fearless.”

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