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NewPolitics

An Independent Socialist Journal

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From the Editors

THE FAR-RIGHT IS ON THE march in America, attacking democracy and fundamental rights and making it more difficult for the world's majority to live in peace and dignity.

One year ago, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* to overturn *Roe v Wade*, which had guaranteed federal abortion rights, even though according to a Pew poll over 60 percent of Americans supported such rights. Other rulings have undermined environmental protections, separation of church and state, and gun regulations.

Now the court has lost even more credibility because of justices' corruption. Clarence Thomas accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of gifts and financial assistance from billionaire Howard Crow. Crow funds a rightwing group, CCI, that submitted briefs on eight varied cases before the court, and Thomas took Crow's position on all of these. And similar reports have emerged about Samuel Alito.

All of this is another reason justifying the left's longstanding call for democratizing or abolishing the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court's attack on rights and liberties from the top is accompanied by other attacks at all levels of American society. The Republicans have been undermining the right to vote through gerrymandering and exclusion of voters from the rolls, restricting trans rights, invading school and city libraries to ban books, and outlawing classroom discussions on race and gender issues. All the while, students, queer folks, land defenders, and reproductive rights activists have been fighting back at every turn.

In this issue, in our section on struggles in the United States, Dan Fischer discusses Cop City protests in Atlanta. Phil Gasper interviews Jesse Hagopian of the Zinn Education Project on the rightwing attack on education and the fight back. Shane Burley interviews anti-fascist activists. And Kevin Van Meter in "Searching for the American Worker" takes us back to the late 1940s and 1950s to look at how the leftwing Correspondence group attempted to understand workers' experience in American industry.

We look at international left politics as well. James Buckwalter-Arias has organized a symposium of five articles on "Cuba's Critical Left." One of the authors, Alina Bárbara López Hernández, was detained on Wednesday, June 14, 2023, and remains under house arrest. We stand in solidarity with her and support her right of free expression. Also, José Laguarta discusses "The Puerto Rican Radical Tradition" through its many iterations. And Rohini Hensman interviews Kavita Krishnan, former head of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, on the party's attitude to Russia's war on Ukraine.

We are as always interested in new developments in capitalism and their critique, as well as discussions of the alternatives to it. So, in this issue we have Michael Albert examining the dangers of artificial intelligence, David Matthews writing on the mental health consequences of capitalism, and Robin Hahnel asking the question, "What do those who are fed up with capitalism propose to put in its place?" in an essay entitled "Beyond Capitalism: A Participatory Economy."

We next turn to a Marxist classic. As

part of a major project to collect and make available for the first time in English *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, Peter Hudis and Sandra Rein have edited Volume IV, *Political Writings 2, On Revolution (1906–1909)*. Robert Ovetz reviews the recently published volume and we reprint from it an excerpt from Nicholas Gray's new translation of Luxemburg's seminal essay, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions."

We have two review essays, one on labor and one on international affairs. Kim Moody's review, "In Search of Worker Strategy: Seams, Chokepoints, and Organization," discusses *Labor Power and Strategy* by John Womack Jr., edited by Peter Olney and Glenn Perušek. And Carl Mirra's review essay examines the misleading and wrongheaded arguments in the influential *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict* by Medea Benjamin and Nathaniel Davies.

In our culture section we have articles on music and film and some poems. Jonah Marvin's "Unravelling 'Arrhythmia'" reviews Alexander Billet's *Shake the City: Experiments in Space and Time, Music and Crisis*. Dan La Botz reviews the Netflix series "Transatlantic" about Marseilles in 1940–41 as Europeans fled Nazism. On the eightieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, we publish poems by Sam Friedman.

As always, we have several book reviews. Frances Fox Piven reviews Stephen Steinberg, *Counterrevolution: The Crusade*

to Roll Back the Gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Promise Li reviews Gilbert Achcar's analysis of *The New Cold War*. Guy Miller looks at Gordon Mantler's examination of Harold Washington and the Democratic machine in Chicago. Dawn Paley and Brian Whitener discuss *The Impasse of the Latin American Left* by Franck Gaudichaud, Massimo Modonesi, and Jeffery R. Webber. And Betsy Zucker reviews *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs* by Suzanne Gordon, Steve Early, and Jasper Craven.

Just one more word. Our Champion of Justice for this issue is Tecumseh, the Shawnee chief who attempted to unite the American Indian tribes in order to stop the U.S. expansion and conquest of their territory. Some traditions claim that his mother was a Muscogee from the woodlands of Alabama and Georgia where the Cop City fight for the land is taking place today. Like the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, he defied the odds in mounting a fierce resistance against powerful and murderous imperialist forces. Similarly, the courageous people of Ukraine are confronting the criminal aggression of a far more powerful enemy; yet unlike the Warsaw Ghetto insurgents and the warriors of Tecumseh's confederacy, they stand a chance of winning. It is to Ukraine's just war against Russian aggression—and to all struggles for justice, from Cop City to reproductive rights—that we extend our solidarity and deepest hopes for victory.

Stop Cop Planet, Save the Surreal World

DAN FISCHER

MARCH 5, 2023: APPROACHING a construction site for Cop City, officially known as the “Atlanta Public Safety Training Center,” roughly 300 masked forest defenders cut through the fencing and chanted with conviction, “We are unstoppable, another world is possible.” Throwing rocks and fireworks, they caused cops to retreat. The crowd burned down several construction vehicles and a trailer, undoing about a month’s worth of work and causing at least \$150,000 in damages.¹

March 8: Reversing their ancestors’ route on the Trail of Tears, an official Muscogee delegation returned to Atlanta’s Weelaunee Forest. They announced to the city’s authorities, “You must immediately vacate Muscogee homelands and cease violence and policing of Indigenous and Black people.”

It can feel surreal watching such inversions of the common-sense social reality where police chase protesters and settler elites evict natives.² Building on the communal and sometimes jubilant militancy of the Standing Rock and George Floyd uprisings, the Stop Cop City movement effectively declares: to hell with your thin blue line, your economy, your authorities. Such authorities include Atlanta’s Black mayor Andre Dickens and his Democratic

administration, as well as the leaderships of the city’s historically Black colleges. Referencing his school’s funding of Cop City, a student denounced Morehouse’s complicity in “a system that does not serve Black people.”³

Among the crowds occupying city streets and among the Weelaunee Forest’s tents and treehouses, signs declare commitments to police abolition, decolonization, anti-fascism, radical ecology, and total liberation. “Stop the metaverse. Save the real world,” declares a banner hanging between two pines. The message went viral, ironically, and why not? What could be more worth defending than an urban forest? What could be more worth stopping than the metaverse, that comprehensive virtual reality concocted by profit-hungry, surveillance-friendly social media executives?

However, for those caught in the rhythms of capitalist time, centered around working or surviving among the unemployed “industrial reserve army,”⁴ we often experience the “real world” as precisely the social reality responsible for threatening Atlanta’s forest. *Hollywood Dystopia* is Shadowbox Studios’ murky plan to destroy more of the forest, apparently for a massive soundstage complex. *Cop City*, a \$90 million police compound, would be the country’s largest academy of militarized repression. It’s being built despite 70 percent of public comments in 2021 expressing opposition, despite the immediately adjacent neighbor-

DAN FISCHER is a member of the New Politics editorial board.

hoods across city borders not being given a say. Cop Planet is the world of transnational capital's "mass social control, repression and warfare,"⁵ where—for example—Georgia's cops receive training from hypermilitarized Israeli police.⁶ It's the brutal reality where U.S. police kill people every single day, where Atlanta cops murdered Rayshard Brooks in 2020, and where Georgia troopers murdered Tortuguita, a Venezuelan gender-nonbinary anarchist, in the forest this January.

An anarchist newsletter reports that the slogan "Against Cop City and its World" can be heard to "echo throughout Atlanta and across Turtle Island."⁷ Attacks on Cop City's contractors and financiers—such as Nationwide, Brasfield and Gorrie, Atlas, Bank of America, and Wells Fargo—have been accompanied by communiques that express opposition not only to Cop City but also to "the world that needs it." Forest defenders insist their struggle is far more than merely a local campaign or protest movement, but a flashpoint for dismantling social authority more broadly, even globally. As more people join efforts to protect the forest, moderate elements deliver a watered-down message. Still, the commitments to decentralization and autonomy remain at the strategic core and thwart corporate or liberal attempts at co-optation. After the March 5th crowd sabotaged a month's work of construction, the police complained, "This is not a protest. This wasn't about a public safety training center. This was about anarchy." Quite a few of the forest defenders would likely agree, actually.

Bringing together movements for radical ecology, decolonization, and police abolition, the Stop Cop City struggle connects these issues to powerful working-class striving for a world beyond alienation. No wonder the feds are so intent on spreading bogus "terrorism" charges. If humanity is going to reverse runaway global burning

and ecological collapse, then we'll need some help from the trees, the wild, the strange and dreamlike. Stop Cop Planet, save the surreal world!

Black Power, Land Back

As the Weelaunee Forest continues to self-rewild, volunteer researchers have been making sure that local history doesn't get lost under the vibrant canopies. The region's circular council houses built in 500 CE, able to hold hundreds of people, suggest that the Muscogeans' consensus-based decision-making councils are among the world's oldest institutions of self-governance. Oral histories suggest that up until Europeans arrived, the region's societies, including the Muscogeans, were gender egalitarian.⁸ After Indian Removal ended millennia of indigenous stewardship, the land became a slave plantation, and then a prison camp from roughly 1920 to the 1980s. Of the many inmates held at the "Old Atlanta Prison Farm," one was Kwame Ture, then known as Stokely Carmichael. He'd popularized the slogan "Black Power" during his leadership in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1967, police arrested Ture and two associates under a loitering law, for failing to obey an officer's orders to "move on."

In Atlanta, heirs to Ture's Black Power philosophy explicitly emphasize ecology. For example, Community Movement Builders (CMB)'s main programs include defending the Weelaunee Forest and running the Welch Community Garden. CMB concludes its 10-point platform with "Sustainability":

Due to the endless pursuit of growth and profit-seeking, capitalist development has destroyed the environment, created destructive climate change, and engineered global warming. These issues directly and disproportionately impact Black/Afrikan people globally, causing disruptions to our food sources and environmental

conditions that destroy our communities. Therefore, we demand food sustainability systems and new community development practices that are not only safe but also enhance the quality of all life, the environment, and the planet.⁹

As community organizer Jackie Echols explained to *Daily Show* comedian Roy Wood Jr., the construction of Cop City in a predominantly Black neighborhood follows a pattern of disproportionate impacts known as environmental racism. “The folks that are affected are Black, and powerless,” she explained, “That’s the definition of environmental racism.”¹⁰ In fact, decades of organizing and scholarship on environmental racism have long pointed to a potential merger of Black power and deep-green liberation. Still, it’s hard to think of an example where there’s been such a thorough and effective alliance between the Black Power movement, the Indigenous struggles for “Land Back,” and the predominantly white movement for a deep-green anarchism.

Black educators of the Weelaunee Coalition, which formed in January 2022, organize bike rides and celebrations in the forest, explicitly in solidarity with the tree-sitters and blockaders who broadly come from milieus connected to the Earth First! (EF!) tradition. These are the forest campers that Wood called “the Georgia Ewoks” and the authorities smear as “outside agitators.” A majority are white, about half are queer, and almost all of them are in their twenties and early thirties. As Atlanta locals and tree-hugging dropouts rave together all night in the forest, DJs blast varieties of rap, techno, punk, and noise pop.

While the biggest stars out of Atlanta’s rap scene haven’t spoken out about Cop City, smaller acts have vigorously supported the resistance and even played free shows in the forest. Their songs often contain radically green messages, such as when Raury raps about the state’s central role in



Tortugueta (Manuel Esteban Paez Terán)

destroying “this burning Earth”: “I got news for you man/ Your so-called constitution/ Will advocate the mass pollution.” There’s recognition, in other words, that the status-quo institutions, from legislatures to courts, are designed to serve the globally growing and hence unsustainable economy.¹¹ A policed planet is necessarily poisoned and plundered, an endangered Earth, a Gaia in the gallows.

Perhaps the most important musical events have been the stomp dance ceremonies run by returning Muscogee folks. Abundia Alvarado, an organizer with Atlanta’s queer, Indigenous and Latin group called Mariposas Rebeldes, explained:

I went to Oklahoma and reached out to a *Mekko* (leader) of one of the ceremonial grounds. I informed the Mekko of what was happening and opened an invitation for him and his grounds members to come. They agreed to visit Weelaunee and to perform a stomp dance exhibit there, so we quickly started to raise funds and hosted them during National Day of Mourning (so-called Thanksgiving) [2021] for an historic Stomp Dance. That dance was very well attended, the most well attended event of the Save Weelaunee movement to date. It was a

beautiful night with clear and crisp skies, the Mekko gave a very powerful speech about Muscogee stewardship of the homelands and a blessing for the people fighting for the forest.¹²

Alvarado explains that the forest defenders have been in dialogue with Muscogee people, “discussing what Land Back and rematriation mean to them.” From such conversations, some Atlanta residents have sought to learn from and with Indigenous communities about how to practice “radical stewardship” and how to interact with the Earth as a “sacred web of abundance.” In a recent zine, the Weelaunee Web Collective has elaborated:

Radical stewardship is fundamentally a spiritual way of being. When we allow ourselves to fall deeper into the Sacred Web of Abundance [SWoA] around us, we see how each moment of connection with the earth is a ceremony: we harvest pecans and sing the glory of the pecan tree, we bury the dead bird on the side of the road and mourn a life taken too soon, we speak with the chanterelles growing along the river and ask how we might be nourished by their bodies, we see the cycles of life and death happen again and again around us in seasons and know that we too must live now and will someday die, our body weaving itself back to SWoA—but while we breathe into this world, each connection weaves us tighter into the interconnected world, into abundance.¹³

Such reconnection with the Earth involves a fundamental transformation of everyday life and a striving for freedom from alienated labor. In fact, one of Stop Cop City’s most important contributions has been to bring a refusal of work to the forefront of anti-policing struggles. To truly understand the role of the police, it’s helpful to turn to loitering, the crime that Ture was charged with back in 1967 before he’d go on to become Honorary Prime Minister of the Black Panther Party.

The rise of modern policing, in the

fifteenth century, propelled the nascent capitalist system’s enclosure of common resources and thus the imposition of wage labor and other types of alienating work such as intensified housework, colonial exploitation and enslavement.¹⁴ “The founding principle of police,” notes social theorist Mark Neocleous, “is the idea that every citizen-subject *ought to work*; or, more explicitly, that every citizen-subject ought *to be put to work*.” In this context, “the greatest ‘crime’ was thought to be idleness itself; ‘disorderly’ is more often than not a euphemism for ‘workless.’”¹⁵ The modern police, in other words, serve a society arranged around the imposition of work.

In Praise of Loitering

Key to Stop Cop City’s anarchic praxis, there’s an effort to build and experience, as much as practicable, communal life beyond compulsory work. A forest defender going by Hummingbird has described the forest campsites as “an anti-workspace” where, without a manager in sight, “you do what you’re called to do and you try to figure out how to help others feel like they have the capacity to help in the ways [that] feel good to them.” Tortugueta used to say, “I’m in the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World]! I think that nobody should work!”¹⁶

This defiantly idle spirit can be seen in the following recommendations by the Fayer Collective of Jewish anarchists in Atlanta:

Quit your job. Cut holes in fences. Forgive everyone everything—except the agents of “progress,” who squeeze the world into a grid and don’t care who or what they crush. Befriend your neighbors: human, plant, and animal. Trade the mechanical time of clocks for the living time of the sun, the moon, the seasons. Sabotage all that sabotages your life. Block the roads. Destroy work, by flood or by fire. Steal everything that should be free, which is to say: everything. Don’t get caught. Learn what you desire and seize

it, even if at first the pleasure frightens you. Breathe deeply, love frontally, attack anything that tries to deny you that power. Start now.¹⁷

Another forest defender describes quitting their job and sojourning to Atlanta. “It seems simple. Work is hell. The forest is beautiful. The goal of protecting what sustains us and destroying what destroys us is the most important thing.”¹⁸

Workers’ dislike of work isn’t anything new, and it’s often been a major theme in popular media. Atlanta-based Linqua Franqa mockingly raps, in character as a financial elite: “Blatantly bury you under the interest, wasting your life indentured, / 8 to 5 and then some, / Just to pad our pockets with the payments we invented, / Breaking your resistance isn’t an accident it’s exactly as it’s intended.”

Still, antiwork themes have been a taboo subject in many leftist spaces. Almost any U.S. union, nonprofit or political party is likely to demand a near-term *expansion* of full-time employment rather than a reduction. It’s true that at the rank-and-file level, there has often been some interest in the potential for economic degrowth to allow a much shorter workweek.¹⁹ However, a glance at the words of the leaders and official organizational statements reveals that even environmentalist nonprofits have centered productivist demands for a growth-based Green New Deal and full-time job creation.

For antiwork strategies to become more self-sustaining and widespread, communities need to build the infrastructure to make quitting, striking, and grassroots reconstructing accessible to folks who aren’t, say, twenty-something, single, and childless. The good news is that, even at this stage in unfolding eco-disaster, we still live on a planet of abundance. There’s more than enough food grown to feed humanity, there’s sufficient solar and wind technologies to power a degrowing soci-

ety, and there’d be plenty of land if people substituted beans for beef and so on. When imagining a post-capitalist future amidst natural abundance, the Weelaunee Web Collective points to Atlanta’s gift-economy festival organized by the Mariposas:

Capitalism has brainwashed us into believing in the myth of scarcity. But we *already* live in abundance. The Dandelion Fest demonstrated this. Dozens of people came together to share food, medicine, plants, and clothes, plus their talents on the open mic. It felt like many other queer outdoor markets in Atlanta—except you didn’t leave spending \$50. Soon, people were asking us when we were going to put on the next festival—it had become a staple of Atlanta’s DIY scene.

Tortugutia’s union, the IWW, is one of the few that has taken antiwork ideas quite seriously. Members in the 1960s and 1970s turned to the surrealist tradition of work refusal exemplified by the Paris Surrealist Group’s 1925 declaration of “war on work” (*guerre au travail*).²⁰ Part of the surrealists’ appeal entailed their ability to untangle and challenge the work ethic, common sense, and mental conservatism generally.

Unshackling the Mind

Unlike Hollywood’s or the Metaverse’s “spectacular” or “hyperreal” mergers of reality and image, a surreal approach confronts the psychological bases of colonialism and oppression, from deep alienations and inferiority and superiority complexes, to internalized authoritarianisms and mechanistic cosmovisions. Martinique surrealist Suzanne Césaire emphasized that at the surrealist movement’s dawn, “the most urgent task was to free the mind from the shackles of absurd logic and so-called Western reason.”²¹ The same mental shackles today exist as an undialectical logic of a common sense which tells us: Even as the climate changes, basic social structures must stay the same; even as the Earth burns,

social relations must remain icy cold.

In the *Daily Show* segment, Wood incredulously asked the forest's blockaders, "Y'all get massages? You do yoga, meditate, stretch and deal with your inner — like therapy." This sort of collective self-care can be vital for those engaged in a high-stakes struggle. Being around trees can boost mental health as well, as can the time off the screen and engaged in face-to-face community building. The most important therapy may be the engagement in direct action itself, as a way of breaking the spell of the ordinary and supposedly inevitable. Césaire's description of surrealist praxis, as "living, intensely, magnificently," could describe the intense lifestyle of the forest defenders. This is the mindset that a Wee-launee blockader expressed:

This resistance is not only absolutely necessary, but it's a lot of fun, and it frequently feels really good to resist something that is just so ontologically evil. No compromise in defense of Mother Earth, no compromise in defense of our lives, no compromise in defense of our freedom or autonomy.²²

Césaire claimed that pursuit of the surreal "will aid in liberating people by illuminating the blind myths that have led them to this point." These myths take root in a system of policing much broader than people dressed in blue. The word "*policie*" emerged in fifteenth-century France, and the interchangeability of "police" and "policy" reflected how today's "hard cops" partner with the "soft cops" populating the welfare state's bureaucracies. Even such supposedly noble professions as social workers and teachers exist at the forefront of soft policing, frequently involved in surveillance, standardization, regulation, reporting.²³ As the CMB's platform explains, "Currently, our public school system serves as a propaganda machine for the capitalist, imperialist state and trains our children to be exploited worker-participants within

these systems, rather than developing our youth into self-directed thinkers with autonomy over their future."²⁴

It's heartening, therefore, to see some of Atlanta's teachers refusing this prescribed role as soft cops and instead bringing kids into the forest to learn from the anarchists and abolitionists. Highlander School's founder Rukia Rogers explains, "We went to a Muscogee stomp [dance ceremony]. We planted seeds, took tours with tree defenders—they showed how they got into the tree houses. Then we told the students there was a plan to destroy it."

Terror and Dreams

Rogers reports being devastated to hear of the cops' murder of Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, who went by Tortuguita ("Little Turtle") in the forest: "I remember Manuel leaning into me in this wellness tent in the woods. I was in a bad place. They were the most beautiful soul. Totally chill."²⁵

Crackdowns had taken off in December, with police and SWAT teams raiding the forest to make arrests and distribute felony charges of domestic terrorism, with possible sentences of 35 years. By early May, forty-two people had been given these extreme and clearly unwarranted charges. In one case, the so-called terrorists' offense was merely putting flyers in mailboxes in the neighborhood of a cop involved in killing Tortuguita on January 18.

That morning, Georgia State police raided the forest again and, in the span of eleven seconds, pierced Tortuguita with 57 bullets. Cops fired so heavily that they hit one of their own in the leg. "You fucked your own officer up," an officer can be heard saying in the Atlanta police footage of the shooting's aftermath. The police narrative, that Terán fired a gun at them first, is unlikely to be true. Tortuguita apparently possessed a gun but didn't fetishize its use. They'd even recently told journalist David

Peisner:

We get a lot of support from people who live here, and that's important because we win through nonviolence. We're not going to beat them at violence. But we can beat them in public opinion, in the courts even.²⁶

Had Tortugueta fired, they'd have merely been acting in self-defense. The clear aggressors are the officers who invaded the cherished forest in order to attack and arrest a bunch of youths and dropouts camping in the woods.²⁷ All on stolen Muscogee land, no less. Historically, guns have provided vulnerable communities an important means of self-defense.²⁸

However, guns' presence in any struggle raises some quandaries. For one thing, civilians can be at least as prone to misusing guns as are cops. When police murdered Rayshard Brooks in 2020, neighbors took over the site and ran it as a cop-free zone for twenty-three days. Then on July 4, a demonstrator shot at a car and killed eight-year-old passenger Secoria Turner. Yes, it should be acknowledged that, prior to Turner's death, the presence of guns was key to keeping away the cops away. At the same time, guns also kept away many potential participants, including many Black, brown, and white parents who didn't want to expose their kids to danger.²⁹

For that matter, even the use of fireworks and Molotov cocktails introduces issues deserving careful deliberation. However inspiring the March 5th sabotage may have been, could there have been some truth to fire officials' warning that "flames could have spread into forest fires threatening the neighboring community"? In any case, it appeared that way to some potential sympathizers. Eco-anarchists might therefore wish to publicize, in their communiqués and report-backs, whatever fire-safety training and precautions they are employing. It's worth stressing that decades of U.S. eco-anarchist arson haven't physi-

cally harmed any humans or forests so far.³⁰

Lost in some of the jargony debates, for example, between proponents of "composition" and "decomposition" and over "memetic resistance," there has often been too little discussion of community. It'll take popular communal structures of de-escalation, rehabilitation and reconciliation to confront the violence that's committed by people in or out of uniform. As the abolitionist slogan goes, "Strong communities make police obsolete." Atlanta-born reverend Martin Luther King, a one-time gun owner, also dreamt of beloved community overcoming "the unspeakable horrors of police brutality." Already there are alternatives to 911, like Atlanta's Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative which offers access to support, housing, and other resources.³¹ What if the spread of liberated zones transformed Atlanta into a Cop-Free City where neighbors, armed or not, could keep each other safe?

The End of Their World as They Know It

When imagining strong community building, we could also look at CMB's strategy of establishing "liberated zones" where residents "are in near-complete control over their political and socio-economic destinies because they control the institutions."³² In various ways, their approach reflects the IWW's commitment to forming the "new society within the shell of the old" as well as the various communes and cooperatives affiliated with North America's Symbiosis network. As such projects spread, they could offer food, shelter, and care to people who want to leave their jobs and explore communal and insurgent forms of living.

Perhaps teenage students will coordinate a School Strike to Defend the Forest. Maybe teachers and staff will join them, and parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and neighbors as well, until we can speak of a

mass strike. Driven by their dislike of work, workers might look forward to learning to survive collectively off the clock. Insofar as they're willing to return, they may insist on self-management, shorter hours, and greener methods.

A calendar might be distributed where one could find multiple Dandelion Fest-type events every day. People could swap skills like how to refurbish an old computer, grow food veganically, or use a 3D printer. Community workshops might pop up where anyone can go and manufacture stuff out of recycled and foraged materials. The online Dual Power map run by Black Socialists in America could be almost overrun with projects on every single block. Community theater productions and indie film screenings might provide refreshing alternatives to the copaganda and dystopian futures envisioned by blockbuster studios like Shadowbox.

If Atlanta is sometimes called a "city in the forest," that's nothing compared to how it might look when church and mosque groups start planting trees in the middle of busy roads, and fill car tires with soil and seedlings. Freed for a time from capitalism's rhythms of work and school, residents might explore and party in the Weelaunee Forest at all hours.

During the daytime, a council of Muscogee delegates might convene a network of study groups to produce a seven-generations plan for protecting and restoring the forest and the broader web of abundance. Various residents could look at how Indigenous and revolutionary societies have managed to confront violence without establishing a specialized police force.

In 2021, authorities predicted that Cop City would be built in the next two years. A couple years later, completion is nowhere in sight. Contractor Reeves-Young has dropped out. The movement has delayed Cop City so far, and each year they keep

some trees standing is a year that the forest can continue to cool the air and sequester carbon, and can continue to provide space for recreation, ceremony, adventure, and reconnection. The people of Atlanta, and their supporters globally, are defending the Earth from the world of Cop City, Hollywood Dystopia, the Metaverse, the very world of alienating labor that requires police enforcement.

NOTES

1. An Atlanta-based forest defender, who goes by Saturn, explained by email that the damage likely cost well above this reported amount: "Considering an entire main construction trailer and machinery was completely destroyed, as well as the costs of repair all the damaged silt fencing, another local contact and I have decided that the APF would of course submit a conservative estimate of the damages cost partly due to how much info the spokesperson would have when commenting on the incident, as well as their strategic motivation for minimizing the costs of the damage done."

2. "An Historic Action in a Forest Outside Atlanta," *Unicorn Riot*, March 18, 2023. "Opposition Grows to Atlanta 'Cop City' as More Forest Defenders Charged with Domestic Terrorism," *Democracy Now!*, March 9, 2023.

3. Jessica Bryant, "AUCC and Morehouse College Students, Faculty Speak Out Against Atlanta's 'Cop City'," *Best Colleges*, February 6, 2023.

4. Marx used this term with reference to capitalists' reliance on unemployed populations to bring down wages and discipline proletarians.

5. William Robinson, *The Global Police State* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

6. Anna Simonton, "Inside GILEE, the US-Israel law enforcement training program seeking to redefine terrorism," *Mondoweiss*, January 5, 2016.

7. The slogan derives from "Against the Airport and its World," used by France's Zone à Défendre struggle. Night Owls, "Night Owls #4: Winter's Embers," *It's Going Down*, April 11, 2023.

8. Bruce Bower, "Indigenous Americans ruled democratically long before the U.S. did," *ScienceNews*, September 6, 2022.

Kay Givens McGowan, "Weeping for the Lost

Matriarchy” in *Daughters of Mother Earth: the wisdom of Native American women* edited by Barbara Alice Mann (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 53–55.

9. Community Movement Builders, “Liberated Zones.”

10. Wood jokingly replied, “That’s when trees call you the n-word, right?”

11. Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022).

12. Abundia Alvarado and Dan Fischer, “Stopping Cop City and Reconnecting with Abundance,” *New Politics*, January 14, 2023, <https://newpol.org/stopping-cop-city-and-reconnecting-with-abundance/>.

13. Weelaunee Web Collective, “Defending Abundance Everywhere: A Call to Every Community from the Weelaunee Forest,” *Crimethink*, March 2, 2023.

14. Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, *No More Police: A Case for Abolition* (New York: The New Press: 2022), 143–144.

15. Mark Neocleous, “Theoretical Foundations of the ‘New Police Science,’” in *The New Police Science*, edited by Markus Dubber and Mariana Valverde (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 24. Policing of the “workless” can especially be seen in the criminalization of houseless people through street sweeps, tickets, citations, and arrests over behaviors like sleeping, loitering, seeking donations, and loitering. See National Coalition to End Homelessness, “Is Being Homeless a Crime?,” June 1, 2021.

16. Leandro Herrera, “They gave their life to Stop Cop City,” *Tempest*, March 13, 2023.

17. Fayer Collective, “Shmita Means Total Destroy,” *Jewish Currents*, January 30, 2023. By insisting that everything should be free, the Fayer Collective leans toward an anarcho-communist direction shared by many past Jewish anarchists including Emma Goldman. By contrast, the parecon approach, proposed in this issue by Robert Hahnel, maintains a role for work-based remuneration.

18. Jack Crosbie, “The Battle for ‘Cop City,’” *Rolling Stone*, September 3, 2022.

19. Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan, *The Future is Degrowth*, 232–237.

20. Abigail Suzik, *Surrealist sabotage and the war on work* (Manchester University Press, 1998), 2, 15.

21. Suzanne Césaire, “Surrealism and Us” (1943), in *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, edited by Daniel Maximin, translated by Keith Walker (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 34–38.

22. Unicorn Riot, “Defending the Atlanta Forest,” *Unicorn Riot*, October 9, 2022.

23. Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*, 143–144. Neocleous, “Theoretical Foundations,” 35–36.

24. Community Movement Builders, “Liberated Zones.”

25. Charles Bethea, “Tots vs. Cop City,” *New Yorker*, January 30, 2023.

26. David Peisner, “The Forest for the Trees,” *Bitter Southerner*, December 13, 2022.

27. This was all well before the March 5 arsons and property damage. There had previously been much smaller acts of vandalism against machinery in the forest.

28. See *Setting Sights: Histories and Reflections on Community Armed Self-Defense*, ed. scott crow (Oakland: PM Press, 2018).

29. Anonymous, “At the Wendy’s: Armed Struggle at the End of the World,” *Ill Will Publications*, November 9, 2020.

30. These fires have probably killed insects and rodents, but even this isn’t taken lightly. Eco-sabotage guides (e.g. warriorup.noblogs.org/guides) instruct great caution to avoid harm to animals.

31. Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*, 149.

32. Anarchists will hope that successfully liberated zones could also eliminate the “market system” and “state governing apparatus” that CMB thinks can be bent to serve communal needs in the short term.

Fighting the Right-Wing Attacks on Education

AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSE HAGOPIAN

Jesse Hagopian is a high school teacher in Seattle, an editor for *Rethinking Schools* magazine¹, an organizer with Black Lives Matter at School², and serves on the leadership team of the Zinn Education Project³. Jesse is the author of the forthcoming book from Haymarket Books, *Teach Truth: The Attack on Critical Race Theory and the Struggle for Antiracist Education*, editor of *More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High Stakes Testing* (Haymarket Books, 2014), and the co-editor of the books, *Teaching for Black Lives* (Rethinking Schools, 2018), *Black Lives Matter at School* (Haymarket Books, 2020), and *Teachers Unions and Social Justice* (Rethinking Schools, 2021). You can connect with Jesse on twitter, @jessedhagopian, or his website, www.IAmAnEducator.com. Phil Gasper spoke with him on behalf of the *New Politics* editorial board on May 11, 2023.

PG: Hi Jesse, it's great to talk with you. You've been a radical educator for many years and have experienced some of the highs of organizing and some of the attacks on public education and educating around the history of racism and the history of other forms of oppression and inequality in the United States, which seem to be ever present. But it seems like over the past few years, there's been an intensified attack on public education, particularly by Republican governors and legislatures in states like Florida and Texas and others, and an intensification of attempts to restrict what students have access

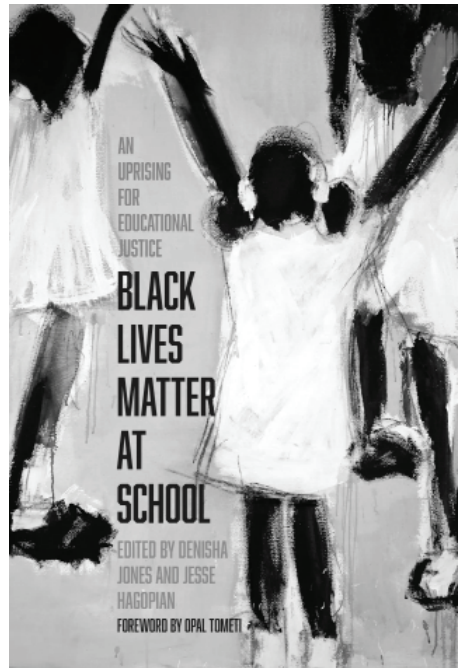
to, banning books, banning curriculum, etc. So, can you talk a little bit about that—maybe put it in some historical context? What's been happening over the past few years and your longer experience with this in the U.S.?

JH: There absolutely has been an intensification of the attack on anti-racist pedagogy, on black history, on truthful accounts of how structural racism functions in the United States. And this attack on what the Republicans have labeled Critical Race Theory (CRT) is ironic because Critical Race Theory argues that structural racism can be embedded in the law, even when the law doesn't specifically mention race. So, we know that black people were prohibited from voting across the South under Jim Crow segregation and yet there wasn't a law that said black people can't vote in the South. But there was a whole web of policies and practices that nonetheless functioned to prohibit African Americans from voting.

The attack on Critical Race Theory is also ironic because one of its central tenets is that any advancements towards racial justice will be met with a white supremacist backlash. And you can clearly see that this attack on Critical Race Theory is a response to the 2020 uprising for black lives. You have to remember that that was the largest protest in U.S. history. *The New York Times* cited studies showing somewhere around 20 million people participating in these protests, in every state

of the country.⁴ Anti-racist books were at the top of the bestseller lists. In fact, the definition of racism was changed by the protests when Merriam-Webster actually added a passage to their definition of the term that included structural racism, to move beyond understanding racism only as interpersonal.⁵ And all of these things terrified the right who were very scared of the change in consciousness in the United States. And you can tell a scared racist because they don't want to engage you in a debate, they just want to legislate away your right to speak or teach the truth. And that's what we're seeing. Christopher Rufo packaged everything that scares the right in this country with the term Critical Race Theory. He went on Fox News and challenged President Trump to take on Critical Race Theory. And when Trump saw that segment, he suddenly turned his focus to using that phrase, Critical Race Theory, as the new strategy for the Republican Party.

So, I think that there are several things that are really undergirding this, this attack on anti-racist education right now. I mean, most obviously, it's being used by the Republican Party to motivate their base to go to the polls, as an election strategy. We're seeing the ways that the right is claiming that white students are being shamed in their history classes and that white parents need to protect their kids from learning about black history. And this is their strategy for mobilizing voters for the upcoming presidential election. But I think it's a lot deeper than that. I don't think it's only about mobilizing voters for the election. I think another primary reason for the attack on anti-racist education has to do with the drive for neoliberal privatization of our schools. You can clearly see from comments from Christopher Rufo, the Manhattan Institute, and so many other of the right-wing, billionaire-funded think tanks that are encouraging parents to withdraw their



kids from the public schools because they're being shamed by Critical Race Theory, and to instead enroll in charter schools and private schools, or advocating for voucher programs that will siphon money out of the public schools and allow parents to send their kids to private schools—a scheme that was originally born in resistance to the Brown versus Board of Education Supreme Court decision to desegregate the schools.

But I also think that the drive to eliminate Critical Race Theory, black studies and ethnic studies, and any other form of educational resistance to white supremacy, is motivated by a drive for epistemicide—the idea of annihilating whole systems of knowledge.⁶ And I think that the process of colonization in this country has always required the colonizers to attempt to eradicate systems of knowledge that allow people to understand ways to resist their oppression. When the conquistadors came over and attacked the Mayans, one of the main things they did to attempt to erase Mayan

culture was they collected every text they could find produced by the Mayans and lit a match and burned all the books. I think there are there are four Mayan books that survived that bonfire.⁷ That was an act of epistemicide to destroy whole systems of knowledge. But there have been many instances throughout U.S. history as well. I think you have to understand that when the first laws were passed in South Carolina in 1740 to make it illegal for black people to be literate, one of the goals was to erase the knowledge that black people had about their homeland and how to resist oppression. And during Reconstruction, when the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists burned down 600 black schools, they were attempting epistemicide to erase systems of knowledge that can empower the oppressed. And during the McCarthy era, when they fired thousands of teachers who were discussing ideas about our economic system, about racism. They were attempting to eliminate systems of knowledge that could help students resist. And it's happening again today.

PG: That's an amazing history and some of that is new to me. Now, you said that the recent phase of attacks is clearly a response to the 2020 protests that began with Trump, although not very successfully to begin with. Trump tried to launch the 1776 Commission in the fall of 2020, which was an attempt to rebut the 1619 Project in the New York Times, which traces the significance of slavery and racism in U.S. history from the date when the first enslaved people were brought to North America. But the 1776 Commission flopped. Professional historians laughed at it because it was obviously so full of holes.⁸ But pretty quickly the right regrouped and now the onslaught is in full fury, as it were. So, what did they do and why have they been successful, to the extent that they've been successful?

JH: I think the history in 2020 of how this

crusade against CRT started is really important to detail because when Christopher Rufo first introduced this attack on Critical Race Theory, there was a flurry for a couple of months of the president and Fox News and the broader right attacking Critical Race Theory, and then it went dormant for a little while. And then Trump was voted out of office and Biden was elected. And many liberals at the time believed that this was the end of the attack on Critical Race Theory. They assumed that we would go back to the consensus that existed around education reform for a long time. There has been a bipartisan consensus that we should privatize education and defund the schools and give that money to private charter operators and vouchers. There has been a bipartisan consensus that we should reduce the intellectual and emotional process of teaching and learning to a single test score and then use that score to punish schools and teachers and children. There's been broad bipartisan support for some of the worst corporate reform. I think many Democratic Party establishment figures believed they could just return to that era. And it was a gross miscalculation, because they didn't oppose very rigorously any of the attacks on anti-racist education. So, you have some of the most shocking bills being passed in state after state that are literally requiring teachers to lie to students about American history, to lie to students about slavery and the impact of structural racism on this country.

PG: They say that structural racism doesn't exist, right?

JH: It doesn't exist and if you get caught teaching it, there are consequences. And despite these dystopian laws being passed, you saw hardly a peep from Democratic Party establishment figures. It allowed this movement of the right to grow, and it created space and legitimacy for some very

harmful ideas to flourish. And that's really because I think that many of the extremely wealthy Democratic Party politicians whose campaigns are funded by billionaires don't have much of an interest in educating America's youth to understand the way that capitalism was born out of the transatlantic slave trade and the way that the transatlantic slave trade created systemic racism. And then the way that systemic racism persists through today through many policies that are enacted by both parties that maintain mass incarceration in our country, inequitable school funding, and so many other manifestations. And so, because establishment figures in both parties really don't have an interest in educating youth about how to undo structural racism, there was a lot of space open to the right to advance these anti-truth laws, and they took advantage of it. I mean, they have billionaires like Charles Koch, who was helping to fund this movement. And they bought Astroturf organizations like Moms for Liberty and tried to sell this as a spontaneous uprising of parents, when it was clearly funded by Republican Party operatives and extremely wealthy right wingers.⁹ And, you know, Moms for Liberty's definition of liberty is really astounding. They see no irony in the name of their organization when they put a \$500 bounty—what they called a bounty—on the heads of teachers in New Hampshire for the first person who caught a teacher teaching about racism in the classroom.¹⁰ And they've been documented leading just vile harassment campaigns against educators and school board members in Florida and elsewhere. So, I think that's a lot of why there was space for this to grow. The wealthy funded this and their strategy for growing it across the country.

PG: And it's also given space for the far right to grow. They've often spearheaded these attacks on school boards. Under the cover of fighting for liberty they're pushing a far-right agenda.

It includes not just attacks on teaching about racism, but also this huge onslaught on trans kids and on the trans community.

JH: That's absolutely right. I mean, the Proud Boys were showing up to school board school board meetings and intimidating and threatening educators to such a degree that the Attorney General even had to issue a statement declaring an emergency for the safety of educators.¹¹ And they have, as you said, expanded their attack from targeting black students and black education to also attacks on LGBTQ+ students and education. And they are using the playbook of the McCarthy era right now, pretty precisely. Just as in the McCarthy era they combined the Red Scare with the Lavender Scare, today they're combining the attack on Critical Race Theory with the attack on what they call gender ideology. During the McCarthy era, thousands of teachers across the country were fired under suspicion of being communists, but many educators were also fired under suspicion that they were queer. And there was a specific, nasty campaign that occurred in Florida against LGBTQ+ teachers, led by a committee known as the Johns Committee that was originally established to attack the NAACP and civil rights organizing.¹²

PG: This was in the 1950s?

JH: Yeah, in the '50s. And then the Johns Committee expanded its mission to harassing LGBTQ+ teachers as well. This is a history that everyone needs to know to understand what's happening today. These Florida officials led this homophobic crusade against queer school teachers that resulted in their interrogation, firing, and the revocation of their teaching certificates. These educators were forced to appear before committees, usually composed only of men, from the office of the superintendent to law enforcement and members of the Johns committee that was established

in 1956. I'm trying to remember exactly how many teachers, but a lot of teachers came under suspicion, especially women who were unmarried, who came under suspicion of being lesbians and were fired. And this is exactly the kind of divide-and-conquer witch hunt that they want to bring back today to stifle our social movements. Because people need to remember that the biggest strike wave in the U.S. happened after World War II. And there were also incredible movements for racial justice that were taking off in this post-war era. And the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare were about suppressing those social movements, just the way that this attack on CRT and "gender ideology" is about suppressing the Black Lives Matter movement and the growing LGBTQ+ movement today.

PG: So, the attacks are not going to stop anytime soon. And we can't really look to the Democratic Party establishment to organize resistance to this. As you said, the underlying privatization of public education is something which they have gone along with over the past 20 to 25 years. There was very little difference between Obama's education policies and George W. Bush's education policies. And, similarly, Biden has not made this a priority in any way. But there are examples of people resisting and fighting the book bans and these attacks. Can you give some examples of that and talk about what we should do to respond to this right-wing attack.

JH: When the right-wing attack on truthful education about race and gender and sexuality was first launched, while the establishment Democrats were nowhere to be seen, groups like the African American Policy Forum sprang into action with their #TruthBeTold campaign¹³ and immediately started tracking where these anti-history laws were being proposed and helping to organize people against them. And then the Zinn Education Project, where I work,

launched the first National Day of Action on June 12th of 2021.¹⁴ And it was an incredible outpouring of solidarity. It was co-sponsored by Black Lives Matter at School.¹⁵ And the action drew hundreds of educators and their supporters who gathered at historic sites in more than 20 cities to publicly pledge that they would teach the truth about racism and oppression and highlight the histories of their communities that would be prohibited in the classroom under these new educational gag-order laws.

So, there were incredible events across the country. In Waterloo, Iowa they went to a series of sites that have been impacted by segregation and employment discrimination in the '50s and '60s and taught students and parents and educators about how structural racism functioned in their city. In Memphis, they did an incredible walking tour to highlight the history of white supremacy that was being whitewashed with these educational gag orders. They went to the site where Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Confederate General and the first Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan, had run a market to sell enslaved people. And the march organizers pointed out that their school, Memphis Grizzlies Prep, was located on that downtown lot that was once operated by Forrest. And this is the history of their own school that is going to be eliminated if educators can't talk about structural racism, structural violence. And then that August, the Zinn Education Project and Black Lives Matter at School and the African American Policy Forum partnered for another weekend of action. Even though the major Democratic Party institutions and liberal organizations were scarcely seen, there were still many hundreds of teachers all over the country, and parents and students, who were rallying. And now every year, on that June anniversary, we've had successive national days

of action to #TeachTruth. This will be our third annual coming up this June 10th and its promising to be the biggest ever, because now the national unions are onboard. The National Education Association is playing a larger role this year and helping to support. And there are over 30 endorsing organizations. And that's been an important development to help change the narrative and have people see that the real grassroots effort around education is coming from teachers and parents and students across this country.

There have been some incredible stories of students leading walkouts. There was a student in Florida who wanted to join the Dream Defenders call to oppose these anti-truth laws, and he was threatened with suspension by his principal for helping to organize a walkout of his school. And yet, as he organized and the pressure built, he was able to carve out space and forced the administration to grant him time to lead a walkout. There have been high school and college students across the country who are refusing to submit to these laws. And it's really inspiring to see the potential of this growing national campaign to reclaim our education. I really think we're at a crossroads in this country right now, where we could go back to the era of the Red Scare, when paranoia and fear gripped American society and people were terrified of raising their voices to challenge injustice because of the dire consequences. Or we could emerge into an era like the Civil Rights and Black Power movement that gave birth to the ethnic studies struggle that finally burst through that stultifying conformity that was imposed by McCarthyism, and made space for black students, indigenous students, and students of color to learn their history in schools and campuses across the country. And I think whether we return to an era like the McCarthy era or we defeat this right-wing attack and usher in a new

era of social movements depends on the organizing that we do right now.

PG: That example that you mentioned, which starts with grassroots organizing, often by individuals who just take the initiative and local groups and so on—these are the genuine grassroots organizations—they can then put pressure on the big organizations like the teachers' unions to get involved. And that's very important, because they have the resources, they have the money and the networks and the membership, because the NEA has got about 3 million members, I think, something like that. That makes a real difference. But it's going to take that grassroots initiative, I would say. So that's a fantastic example.

What about more broadly? Can you comment a little bit on the wider fight against racism and various forms of oppression in the U.S. right now? We had that peak in 2020 of the Black Lives Matter movement, but we're obviously not at that point in terms of the struggle today. What I see is an increasing polarization. The far right, which is a very small minority, is financed and well-organized and enabled to have an impact much bigger than its numbers would suggest. But at the same time, there's also been a radicalization on the left, and young people in particular have got quite critical views of the way that U.S. society works and what needs to happen. So, given that polarization in these two different directions, where do we stand in terms of taking on some of these broader issues—in education, but more broadly as well?

JH: Well, the right-wing believes that the growing social justice consciousness amongst youth is the product of radical educators. And there are definitely radical educators doing important work to educate youth about structural racism and inequality. But the greatest teacher to young people about inequality in America is American capitalism itself, which has thrown 40 million people into poverty in the world's rich-

est country. You have a situation where a handful of billionaires have as much wealth as the bottom half of humanity. You have a student debt crisis that's causing young people to have to mortgage their futures to get an education. Mass incarceration has resulted in having more black people in prison, on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850, just ripping black families apart across the country. So, the conditions of young people's lives are teaching them that this system is intolerable and doesn't work and it is pushing many to look for answers for how this society can maintain such intolerable levels of inequality.

One of the answers that young people are discovering is that the police play a major role in maintaining this level of inequality. And they see when they protest against injustice, like the brutal murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and so many others, that the police come and brutalize them. And they learned that the state has a coercive apparatus that's used to maintain this inequality. They're also learning now that the other way that the state tries to maintain this level of inequality is by regulating the education system to stop young people from questioning the inequality in the first place. So, all of these events, I think, are leading many people to draw radical conclusions about the need to transform society. And I think that social justice educators can be there to support youth in helping them to draw those understandings, and also to organize in their unions and in their community organizations to fight for a society where the wealth that we all create is used to build stronger communities, healthy children, rather than used to build prisons and police forces that punish communities of color or bomb people around the world. I think it is polarizing because the right knows that this system is teaching so many people about its limitations.

PG: And even when it's not the police who are the perpetrators, the way that the system operates is just so blatant. I'm thinking of the killing of Jordan Neely recently on the New York subway. A young black man, homeless, who's choked to death by another passenger. And we don't know the full circumstances, but we do know that this young white man who killed him was not detained and as we're speaking right now, hasn't been charged. I don't know if he will be charged with a crime at some point. But you can't even imagine that happening if the colors of the people involved here were reversed. If it had been a black guy who had choked to death a white guy on the New York subway, the response would have been so different.¹⁶

JH: That's absolutely right. And young people are seeing this on a regular basis. This is a horrific miscarriage of justice. And it isn't just that this racist system trains people to believe that black lives don't matter enough that they can choke them to death on the subway, it's also that the system then protects those who murder black people. And it isn't even just that. Not only does the system encourage white people to kill black people and then shield them from consequences, but then it wants teachers to lie to kids and tell them that that didn't happen and erase that from history. If you think that's hyperbole, you need to check the news story that came out yesterday that showed that Florida banned 35 social studies textbooks, and then pressured a whole host of other publishers to censor content in their textbooks. And one of the passages that was completely removed from a Florida textbook detailed the Black Lives Matter uprising of 2020 and suggested that George Floyd's murder had something to do with the impetus for that uprising. And so now students in Florida will no longer learn that George Floyd existed, that his death helped inspire the largest protests in U.S. history.¹⁷ This is all being thrown down

the memory hole, because they're scared of what happens when kids learn the truth about how their racist system functions.

PG: Well in a sense that shows too that, as you say, they're scared of the sense of justice that so many young people come to, pretty much by themselves. You just have to live in this society to start to see the way that it works. So, I don't think these efforts are going to be successful in stopping that radicalization from continuing. But what's so important is that people find ways to organize and to work together and build solidarity across different struggles as well, because that's how they win—it's divide-and-rule, it's demoralizing people, it's making you think that you can't have any effect on what's going on in society. And if you can do that, then a very small number of people can continue to exploit and steal the wealth of the society and keep the majority subordinated. So, I'm hoping that the radicalization we see is going to move in the direction of better organization as well.

JH: I completely agree. They rule through divide-and-conquer and fear. Florida recently passed a bill that now makes it a felony for a teacher who's caught with a contraband book about race or gender or sexuality in the classroom, that carries up to five years in prison.¹⁸ So, they are calculating that their campaign of terror will lead to the submission of educators and social movements. And I think they are badly miscalculating because there certainly will be another uprising. And when that next uprising occurs, I think that people will not be content with just repealing the educational gag orders prohibiting teachers from teaching about structural racism. I think that they will be demanding ethnic studies programs in every public school across the country, black studies programs, gender studies programs, queer studies programs. I think that they will be demanding the redirecting of funds from police and from

tax breaks for the wealthy to educate our youth and provide the wrap-around services that our families need to be whole and healthy. And I think that in this period before that uprising occurs, people would do well to defy the educational censorship laws and learn the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other organizations like it that banded together youth in a movement against the structures of racism in this country. They founded the Freedom Schools and led the Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, where the final exams were not some meaningless standardized test, but organizing other people into the struggle or registering people to vote. And education in this context takes on a whole new power and meaning. And I think many young people are ready for that, are beginning to get organized. And my hope is that these kinds of national organizations will emerge in the coming period that can help guide the next uprising to achieve many more of the goals of those in the struggle for social justice.

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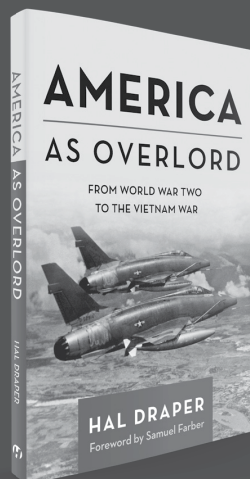
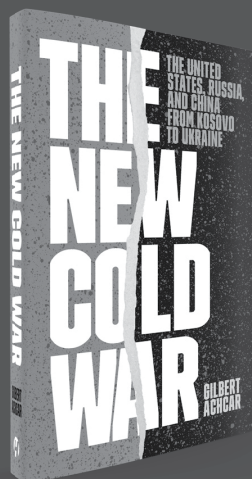
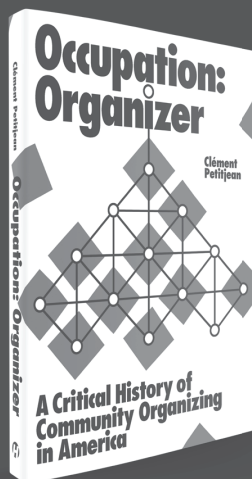
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The Lessons of Anti-Racist Action

SHANE BURLEY

WHILE THERE ARE VOLUMES OF books on political theory trying to parse out the lessons of various social movements, antifascism has a certain simplicity to it. “We Go Where They Go” was the slogan for the antifascist network Anti-Racist Action (ARA), which grew throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s in an effort to stop the growth of white nationalism and other far-right actors who were threatening marginalized communities across North America. While tactics and strategies would change between chapters and locations where their young membership was organizing, one thing would remain constant: If the Nazis arrived somewhere, then antifascists would as well.

A new book on ARA was named after this well-known statement of unity, *We Go Where They Go* (PM Press, 2023), the idea that fighting fascism requires, more than anything, the commitment to intervening whenever fascists show up. ARA emerged from the same youth cultures and neighborhoods where far-right groups like the White Knights, White Aryan Resistance, or even the Ku Klux Klan were organizing, vying after disaffected white teenagers. ARA

began as an effort to defend music venues and hangouts against the street violence of neo-Nazi gangs, evolving into a more politicized project that got an entire generation of radicals involved in organizing. For those watching the explosion of “antifa”-styled militant antifascist groups near the birth of Trumpism and the alt-right, ARA can be seen as an ancestor in that lineage, holding lessons for those building a new antifascist methodology today.

The authors of *We Go Where They Go*, Shannon Clay, Lady, Kristin Schwartz, and Michael Staudenmeier, built a sprawling history that quotes dozens of former members and utilizes zines, articles, flyers, and other primary sources in an effort to demystify what made ARA special and its impact. These conversations about ARA are ongoing, which is why I spoke with three of the authors, Shannon Clay, Lady, and Kristin Schwartz, as well as artist and organizer Gord Hill, who wrote the book’s Foreword, about what this history meant to them, what lessons we can take from ARA’s experience, and how that model of community self-defense is perhaps even more relevant today.

Shane Burley: How would you describe ARA to those who are less initiated?

Kristin Schwartz: It was a network of grassroots youth groups that confronted neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and the extreme right across mainly the U.S. and Canada in the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, and even today. It emerged from the fight

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over the presence of the far-right in the subcultures of the time and was originally based among people in those subcultures and then became broader. As it became more formalized, it was bound together by the four points of unity, which laid out the general principles of general affiliation to ARA. Those being, we go where they go. Whenever Nazis or racists are in public, we're there. We don't believe in ignoring them or staying away from them. Never let the Nazis have the streets. The principles of ARA included direct action and confrontation and a non-reliance on the state, the cops, or the courts; solidarity with other antifascists; and a broad anti-oppression statement, which became more focused through the 1990s to be explicit about supporting reproductive freedom.

SB: For those who were in ARA, how did you get involved in ARA and organizing in general?

KS: I had just finished university and came home to Toronto and had had a taste of organizing at school with a focus on challenging racism, whether it was racism in education or foreign policy (the first Gulf War). I wanted to do something locally, so I called all the anti-racist groups in town, and it ended up being ARA that had a role for a young white person with not a lot of organizing experience.

Lady: It was the late 1990s, and I ran into Columbus ARA members doing Copwatch. Growing up I was never taught to trust the police. Where I lived, I only saw police in SWAT gear doing home raids. The idea of concerned folks monitoring and recording police actions to make them accountable got me interested. I participated in Copwatch first, and that was my entry into the ARA Columbus chapter.

Gord Hill: I began antifascist organizing in the late eighties in Vancouver, Canada. At the time we were dealing with remnants

of the KKK and then neo-Nazi boneheads going into the early nineties, mostly under the banner of the Aryan Nations and Aryan Resistance Movement. From this emerged a bonehead organizer, Tony McAleer, who set up a phone line called the Canadian Liberty Net. In 1993, McAleer attempted to host an event with Tom Metzger of the White Aryan Resistance, but working in a large coalition we were able to mobilize several thousand anti-racists. We also learned the location of the planned event and were able to shut it down. That was the last public event fascists tried organizing for several years, and following this there was a decrease in fascist organizing overall in the city.

SB: What kind of campaigns would you do in your local chapters? What did the organizing look like?

KS: The reason this all started was the far-right was actively trying to recruit young people from the skinhead scene. They were going to the subcultures, the far-right was, and trying to pluck people out and recruit them. The people in those subcultures said no, they didn't want their scenes taken over by these goons.

Unfortunately, the racist skinheads got a huge boost in the mainstream media. It was an enormous publicity boost for them, so journalists have to be aware of not giving them more of a platform, because it really amplified their importance. It served as a recruiting tool for them that they were on Oprah and Phil Donahue and were punching out Geraldo.

Shannon Clay: The one ex-Nazi I spoke to who was from Pennsylvania said those appearances were the "fucking marketing of the year."

That's when the word skinhead became synonymous with racist. So the people who were in the non-racist skinhead culture were pissed. Which is why when I write

articles, I make sure to put racist skinhead in quotes, or to say that they are a racist.

Lady: So the campaigns in Columbus were Copwatch, and those were pro-active. This is something we struggled with a lot locally, talking about how to not just be reactive. We wanted to be proactive, too, so Copwatch was a big campaign for us.

Some of the reactive things were like flyering a neighborhood after we'd find out somebody's name who was a white power person, who maybe had put out racist music or published on a Nazi blog. We'd go door to door and ask businesses to put up signs if there was a hate crime in the neighborhood. We would also counter neo-Nazi and police messaging through wheatpasting, graffiti, zines and other print, like local newspaper op-eds, and door knocking.

Nazis would announce a rally and we would show up at their spot to directly confront them, which was the exact opposite of what the liberals were saying was best to do. They wanted to not give the racists attention and hold a peace rally on the other side of town. We were bouncing around: they announce, we go, they announce, we go. We also had campaigns of tabling at music shows and subculture events. We also went into high schools to talk. In the nineties, you'd have a school teacher (maybe history), they might invite someone from the KKK and someone not from the KKK. So we would be the "not KKK" people.

McNamera (who's quoted in the book) was the person in Columbus who set it up. He would argue that we weren't actually debating them. We would be on a different day, we'd ask to be after the Klansman. The education with the high school students we considered a campaign.

KS: Toronto came together because there was one particular group that was vying for mainstream credibility, the Heritage Front. They were trying to get their phone number out everywhere and were trying to build a

membership. They wanted to run for elections and shift the political debate. It was at a point when the mainstream Conservative Party had imploded for other reasons, so there was an opportunity. So we had one big group we were addressing.

Whenever Nazis or racists are in public, we're there. We don't believe in ignoring them or staying away from them.

We had our own points of unity before the network existed, which was "we will expose, oppose, and confront organized racism and the far-right agenda through education, mass action, and support of broader anti-racist struggles." In the beginning, it was a lot about exposing the Heritage Front. One of our big slogans was "the Heritage Front is a Nazi Front." They were pitching themselves as mainstream, just standing up for white people. All of this sounds very familiar—at that point they were following the David Duke model. They were all extreme right; it was a former KKK organizer who was an admirer of Hitler. They were soft-peddling their hate and trying to pitch themselves as advocates for white people, as if they were a discriminated-against group.

Our initial campaign was to say that the Heritage Front were fascists and that they shouldn't have a platform. My conclusion out of it is that the way we won was by making their more militant side more obvious and showing them to be fascists by provoking them. All their leadership ended up arrested because we ended up pulling them into fights. And I don't even know if that would be relevant today. Back then, by showing them to be that way, that

made them unsuccessful in their mission to mainstream their ideas. I don't know if that would work today in the U.S.

SC: That reminds me of an extremely relevant parallel today with the Proud Boys. The Proud Boys don't exactly soft-peddle themselves, but they do, for example, have the occasional member of color and confuse people with their politics. But their real politics become obvious to liberal observers when the Proud Boys are getting caught in street fights with antifascists.

Lady: You used to be able to go to an anti-Nazi rally and a local might come up and say they like what those white nationalists are saying, and I would do a calculation based on their age and say, "Hey, your dad or grandad fought these Nazis in World War II!" But we are now generations removed from that.

SB: Gord, I know you were in a separate anti-fascist group during this period. What was your relationship to ARA?

GH: We worked closely with ARA Toronto and would visit Toronto somewhat frequently during these years, but we didn't face the same level of fascist organizing as Toronto was experiencing at the time, so we never set up an ARA chapter and most of our antifa work was pretty informal. I produced numerous images and posters for ARA Toronto as well as their newsletter, *On the Prowl*.

SB: How did ARA relate to the larger organized left? Did you have much of a relationship with antifascist groups coming out of the 1980s, like the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee or ideological groups? Did you organize in coalitions with other groups?

Lady: In the book we talk about how SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) in Cincinnati formed a relationship with John Brown. I distinctly think about the International Socialist Organization

(ISO) and how Columbus ARA didn't get along with any authoritarian communist groups. The Ohio State campus was one of the largest in the nation, and you'd have a ton of these groups pop up. We wanted to steer clear of these authoritarian communist groups because I didn't want to be confused for them, in part because I had a much easier time selling ARA to regular Ohio folks.

But the times that I did actively mingle with groups like the ISO was on the front lines defending abortion clinics. As far as interacting with pro-choice groups, we had my local ARA chapter who actively said we were a pro-choice group and worked with clinic escort folks who organized autonomously from the clinics themselves. Those were the pro-choice groups that we interacted with to build that larger mobilization, this one cause, this single issue. So it was much easier then to identify who we weren't, and we were fixated on that piece of differentiating ourselves from authoritarian communists. We were billed as a working-class youth movement with help and guidance from our older peers.

KS: At the beginning of ARA in Toronto, those socialists were all in ARA. I guess they had reasonable experiences with the more anarchist-oriented people who were the leading group, but it didn't last that long. The International Socialists got voted out by a two-thirds majority, and the other left groups left at the same time. We continued to work with them, but they had a different orientation than us. They wanted to organize in a style that much of the general public would feel immediately comfortable with, so as not to be too militant looking. They believed the solution would be a working-class labor movement, and ARA was more oriented towards the subcultures we came out of.

When I really look back, ARA worked a lot, in Toronto, with other groups as

things were happening—a lot of work on racist policing and police violence, and we were there for the coalitions. We even got invited by the city's anti-racism committee, and we would go to the meetings and participate. We had some credibility in them because we knew what was happening on the streets.

Lady: We would go to those too, but we were uninvited.

KS: For me personally, I really prioritized outreach to build relationships with the Black community. There were other people who had strong relationships with different indigenous initiatives. We were very above ground. Toronto ARA was embedded in the activist world.

Lady: Kristin, you reminded me of some of the Black-led groups that we participated with. In Columbus, there is a lot of energy against police brutality and to protest Columbus Day. There were members of the American Indian Movement in Columbus at the time, so we would organize with AIM, but it was just on their coattails. No leading role, we just supported whatever they were planning. We worked with the October 22nd Coalition, the national day against police abuse, doing Copwatch. And there were local groups led by folks of color, but we were much more supporting and taking a backseat role unless it was a Rock Against Racism show or an art event.

SB: How did ARA approach clinic defense and pro-choice work, both locally and as the network?

Lady: In the book we explain that there was a debate about abortion in the network. It's insulting that it was even a debate, but it wasn't a large one. So we added a point of unity. Some chapters were heavier in organizing the pro-choice stuff than others, but you couldn't be in ARA if you didn't believe in reproductive justice and freedom.

We had a lot of far-right groups to

combat where I was in the Midwest, and my pro-choice work was directly clinic defense. We would find anti-choicers that were harassing clinics. We learned about it either because we needed an abortion ourselves, someone we know did, or an escort from the clinic would contact us. So we were used as a team of people because the police wouldn't or couldn't do anything. There are laws today that draw a line on the ground for protesters to be in. At the time there were far-right groups protesting clinics—and I don't mean holding signs, I mean throwing things at people and physically assaulting them. People were getting hurt. So not only were they not able to get medical care, but they were getting hurt. So we were called in by escorts to work with them to

You couldn't be in ARA if you didn't believe in reproductive justice and freedom.

stop these goons from standing around and peppering the streets with their violence against the patients going in. It wasn't a campaign so much as it's a point of unity and we believe in it, so we were asking our ARA chapter how we can do community defense around this point of unity.

KS: We had two incidents where extreme anti-choice U.S.-based organizations were doing things in Canada. Missionaries to the Preborn was organizing a speaking tour of multiple cities around Ontario, and it was our network that made sure they got challenged. They were pissed. They said this was terrible, that they had never seen anything like this. I don't think that they came back. Their hosts were the Campaign Life Coalition; they are far-right, too, but they put out a more mainstream anti-abortion

message.

The other was Human Life International, the Catholic anti-abortion organization. They had been protested by a radical coalition in Montreal in the early 1990s and then in Minneapolis when they had their conference there, and later they were having one in Toronto. So we had a tussle with them and, in that case, that got a lot of mainstream attention because they had a lot of quite extreme people involved with them—people who were really linked to a guy who was suspected of being a sniper who was shooting abortion doctors.

The 1990s was the peak of violence against abortion providers. They were so frustrated—the political context is they weren't making any headway legislatively—so they turned towards more extreme measures.

SC: From a more zoomed out view, my understanding is that some of the early anti-racist skinheads who were fighting the Nazi skinheads and also the Klan were also occasionally involved in clinic defense. It then got introduced to ARA at the network level by Minneapolis. Katrina spoke to us about how, basically, after having kicked out the Nazi skinheads, they looked around their city and the people who really fit the definition of fascism to them were these radical anti-choice people. Because, of course, there is a lot of overlap between white supremacists and radical anti-choice people, not only in worldview, but literally in the same networks.

And so it was Minneapolis who looked around and saw this reality and started doing reproductive justice work as a continuation of their existing antifascist politics. And then they introduced the resolution at the network level in 1996 or 1997, saying that if we are going to oppose fascism then we should care about reproductive justice. The people trying to restrict reproductive justice are fascists, basically.

Lady: We would do some of the same things people do now, but it was low-tech. We had one camcorder in the chapter, and it was huge! You could not hide that fucking thing. So you'd film them. You'd figure out their names. And then you'd find dirt on them—for example, that they had an anti-gay camp they sent queer kids to.

So we would out them for this stuff, just the same way as you would Nazis. This period was the rise of the fake clinics, which is what we would call it, these “crisis pregnancy centers.” They started putting them

When confronted with a mass fascist mobilization, the most effective response would be a mass antifascist movement.

on billboards. We were freaking out and trying to expose these fake clinics for what they were. So we would stand in front of these places with leaflets for people thinking about going in. We would say, “Hey, do you know what this place is? We just want you to know, it's your choice, but this is not going to provide you health care and there is no doctor here.” So we were definitely exposing that. They would put these fake clinics into buildings right next to Planned Parenthood. They could outright buy these buildings because they had a ton of funding.

SC: There was also, importantly, an overlap with the tactics ARA could do. Because both in their existing Nazi and Klan work, and clinic defense, they are both a street-level politics. You are physically there and physically opposing the other side. It was already in their wheelhouse.

SB: I am really interested in the negotiation between becoming a mass organization or

building a mass movement and then the sort of closed-shop and security-minded model of many antifascist groups. How did you balance the need for building a mass movement and the safety concerns, and requirements, of the group?

Lady: That's a super good question and I think there is a big difference today that you might need to carve out in people's minds. Unlike now, most ARA chapters were semi-public. Security culture was encouraged and some of us insisted on it, and there were plenty of folks that were just plain bad at it. We're talking about word of mouth, emails, hanging flyers, and no discrete cell phone photos. So if you are snapping photos you had a big ass camcorder, like I mentioned. Today, I think there are some trappings of social media where personal information is much more widely available. We didn't debate the whole mass movement versus closed cell dynamic in ARA that much, but as I got older and helped form more politically focused groups, this is a question we had. You can't call for mass action if you're not willing to accept a diversity of tactics and a diversity of ideologies. That's really hard, and I don't have an answer to it. This didn't come up for a lot of us then but as I grew politically and got older it did. Because you need to think about getting the masses into this. The media also were not our friends, and we weren't good at talking to the media.

KS: Our chapter was different in that respect. We did talk to the media. We always had a media crew that were actively strategizing about it; we sent press releases and everything. I think we shot for a bigger profile, and if more people who are hearing about us are hearing from us directly, that's going to help us make our case.

Lady: Toronto was good at controlling your own narrative. You were telling your own story. We looked up to the North as a role model for us on that.

KS: The reason is that the anarchists who

started the chapter were all involved in publications. So telling the story to the mainstream media was not crazy different from telling it to yourself. I heard about ARA from people who were on a community radio station and I called in afterward. We had a community radio show, community radio. It was something that a young person coming into the group might do as one of their first things, they go and participate in the radio show. So that's addressing the public. People are doing that now on social media, so the message is not getting out to everyone in the same way.

SC: To a certain extent, ARA had a strong enough base in cultures where a certain amount of physicality could be acceptable; they could get into a street fight without alienating the mass base they were realistically recruiting from, such as youth scenes. The other thing I am reminded of was a person from Detroit I spoke with. I asked him if they wore masks, but he said that no, they didn't mask up, but they didn't really have to because they didn't have to not have their identities known, because you aren't going to get caught on a record. So, he said, even without masking up or taking proactive measures, they were able to be much more anonymous than you're able to be today.

Lady: Your question is about mass orientation and mass movement. I don't know that we spent so much time talking about the need for it, but we participated in it. In Cincinnati, Ohio, when Timothy Thomas was killed in 2001, we all rushed to participate in what we felt was a mass movement. Kind of like the Breonna Taylor protests more recently. We would participate in these rise-up moments locally. But from a subculture that was very much about rejecting the mainstream, that's a hard question to answer, because at that age I was not worried about getting everyone to do this or we would lose. Instead, it was like the

moment is now and we need to do this now with as many people as we have.

I believe a major factor in the shift to a “closed-shop,” “security-minded” model had to do with post-9/11 Patriot Act laws. People went to jail for longer stints. We moved from there into a period where the fascists were more underground. So it was like small cells worked against each other, ours and theirs. During this time where you have smaller closed groups, unfortunately, toxic personalities were able to dominate. We need to get back to the public tactics of door knocking, flier hanging, alerting the community to fascist groups’ activities and whereabouts, and thwarting their efforts—and I mean real-life boots on the ground action, not just a Twitter echo chamber. Everyone who opposes fascism has a place in our movement. Does that mean that you openly talk about physically fighting or doing illegal things? Hell no. Today, as it was back then, those types of actions and decisions are best left up to individuals and I can neither condemn nor condone such actions. This should not hinder a larger group’s efforts to kick Nazis out of our spaces.

GH: Well, it’s pretty complex in some ways, and until militant tactics become more common, it will be difficult to build a mass movement that engages in militant direct action. So you can have mass movements, but the militant factions will not necessarily be the dominant ones, and as we’ve seen throughout history there will always be internal conflicts between more militant groups and those that are more liberal or reformist in nature. But we know the effectiveness of militant direct actions against fascist movements, and so does the state, so we’ll always have to deal with state repression, and security and counter-surveillance tactics are vital tools in dealing with both fascists and state repression. I think a mass movement helps antifascist organizing be-

cause it mobilizes larger numbers of people which in turn amplifies the types of tactics, strategies, and resources available to the movement, and certainly when confronted with a mass fascist mobilization, the most effective response would be a mass antifascist movement.

SB: What do you think is the legacy of ARA today, and what impact has it had on current antifascism and movement spaces now?

SC: I don’t think ARA would have a complete monopoly on it, but it is the first group I know of that did what is now a very familiar model of organizing. It laid the groundwork for what antifascism looks like as far as a confrontational movement with connections to youth counter-culture. Plenty can be said to problematize it as well, but I think it’s important that youth counter-culture is a breeding ground for whatever radical politics we still have in North America. It says something that when I go to an inter-city gathering of radical politics, what we still have in common is punk rock. ARA was bigger than punk rock but had those ties to youth culture.

It established a really successful model of grassroots, youth-driven, unfunded, militant organizing that was based in youth counter-culture. It laid the groundwork for modern antifa with the obvious and important distinction that antifa is so much more closed off and anonymous now, perhaps because we now live in an age of mass surveillance.

GH: It’s hard to say what long-term impact ARA had. Certainly in Toronto the group was effective in countering the far-right threat and contributing to the decline of the largest fascist group, the Heritage Front. I think ARA helped build a militant antifascist movement at the time and also contributed to a more widespread militancy throughout the anarchist movement at the time. For example, some of the earliest at-

tempts to form black blocs came from ARA mobilizations. ARA also helped develop better security and counter-surveillance tactics throughout the larger movement, and I think some of the veterans of ARA also helped organize some of the more recent antifa groups.

KS: There were a lot of white folks in ARA. It wasn't a white group, and there were many chapters that were diverse and folks of color helped build the network, but there were still a lot of white folks. But I don't feel like we knew how to address that. But we just tried to do the work we were doing in our corner and make a contribution, as opposed to the larger left that often tries to impose its whole vision on society. And we said our focus would be on being against racism, and later against the Christian right, and it's important to do that as white people. And I think that was a different way for activists to behave.

There are many critiques you could make of ARA, but I think it was part of a transition on the left. Now, that has been formalized in the Showing Up for Racial Justice model, with white people having their own group and focused on moving resources from white people to radical folks of color and a formal accountability culture. The SURJ model is different, but we were kind of a bridge between what was available at the time and those groups now.

I hope people understand this work is worth doing. Knowing your enemy is important and the intelligence work matters. Don't just go after them as individuals, but understand their strategy and what they want to achieve so you can interrupt it.

SC: What I would like the antifascist movement to learn from ARA is that there is more room than we currently allow for

public-facing, or less outright anonymous, activism. I really don't want to finger-wave at individuals who feel like they need to protect their anonymity. I think that ARA shows that there is room for some more public-facing work and mass work. It said a lot to me that some of the people who I interviewed, who absolutely threw down, talked about how ARA's biggest success in shutting down the Klan was not from fist fights but from when they brought out ten thousand people into the street to drown out the Klan.

Lady: I hope this book will have an impact and that the pro-choice Chapter 6 we did will have an impact to draw parallels today. There are still clinics, but they are disappearing and we have less and less access. I hope people will learn and see that the same tactics we were using then we can still use today. I think changing people's minds now is going to be key in terms of antifascists wanting to do the work, getting them to see that these anti-choice groups present the largest fascist threat in their lifetime. Also, remembering when Richard Spencer got punched ... there's definitely things you can do!

As someone who does need to protect my anonymity in some sense, I am still very active in my neighborhood, even if they know me by a different name. Get away from your screens and go talk to your neighbors, go to communities, and get vocal about what you believe. Learning when to be anonymous and not be anonymous, that takes a lifetime to learn. But you can still do serious work while keeping your family safe. We are going to have to get into the streets to make change happen. There is a lot of room for everyone.

Searching for the American Worker

KEVIN VAN METER

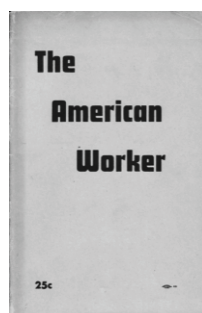
IN 1947 A “LITTLE” PAMPHLET APPEARED, declaring, “The worker has to work. There is no alternative but to produce in order to provide even the bare necessities of life.” It was printed on half sheets with an unassuming white cover. A dark blue, simple, yet prominent typeface offered three words, each on their own line, the main two at the center of the board, the first slightly toward the left edge: *The American Worker*.

A smudged printer’s mark and “25 cents” appeared below. Recently, I asked an archivist if they could examine an original copy to see if they could discern any words inside the union bug beyond “Trades” on the left, “Council” on the right. They replied, “Even with a magnifying glass it is impossible to read. The only words that I can see are ‘New York.’”

No authors were listed on the cover nor in the table of contents. One would have to thumb through to page 41, at the conclusion of the first part, titled “Life in the Fac-

tory,” to encounter the section’s author, Paul Romano; the surreptitious J.H., to whom the “Preface” is attributed, only identified Romano by his last name. The author of the second part, “The Reconstruction of Society,” might not be readily recognizable to those on the left in America or Europe, or who are active in the labor movement, or labor scholars, or devotees of such ephemera. But it should be.

“Ria Stone” was the party name of Grace Lee, who added “Boggs” after marrying autodidactic autoworker James “Jimmy” Boggs in 1953. A Chinese American luminary and Detroit community activist, Grace was born in 1915. As she said repeatedly toward the end of her life and in the superb documentary *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*, she was who she was because of “being born female and born Chinese.” For the next hundred years she saw herself as belonging to our society “and responsible for changing it.” While she held a doctorate in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College, no academic institution would employ her. Generations of labor, civil rights, black liberation, and feminist organizers turned to Jimmy and Grace for guidance—including Martin and Malcom.



KEVIN VAN METER is a union organizer and author of *Guerrillas of Desire: Notes on Everyday Resistance and Organizing to Make a Revolution Possible* (IAS/AK Press, 2017). He is currently writing his next book, *Reading Struggles: Autonomist Marxism from Detroit to Turin and Back Again* (AK Press, 2023). Van Meter can be reached via his website: www.readingstruggles.info, and you can join the search for *The American Worker* on Twitter @AmericanWork47.

In the 1940s she lived in a rat-infested basement apartment in Chicago, worked in a defense plant in Brooklyn, and translated—for the first time into English—a selection from Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Published in 1947 as *Three Essays by Karl Marx, Selected from the Economic Philosophical Manuscripts*, the pamphlet was produced via mimeograph, with full letter pages and an off-blue cover. It professed, “We publish ... in this modest form because we are determined to break through the vast conspiracy of silence that surrounds [the essays],” and contained Marx’s previously unnoticed, or possibly undiscovered (at least in English) concept of alienation.

The American Worker never sold thousands of copies, even with three known reprints and two popular translations. It was never required reading for those from below and to the left, even as it influenced a generation of militants in France and Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, then here again and in Canada in the 1970s, and since. Its most recognizable author—Grace Lee Boggs—mentions it as a footnote and that only toward the end of her life. Phil Singer, writing under the name Paul Romano, remains a mystery.

But what *The American Worker* does speak to is the politics of authorship and representation, complexities of identity and power, with neighboring pamphlets focusing on then-unaddressed matters of youth, housework, and black liberation. What is more, it is still speaking, 76 years after initially appearing, to what workers are thinking and doing, then as well as now.

“What the Workers Are Thinking and Doing”

“This little pamphlet,” begins the opening remark, “concerns itself with the life of the working class in the process of production. Its purpose is to understand what the work-

ers are thinking and doing while actually at work on the bench or on the line.”

What are workers thinking and doing at work? It was a novel inquiry for 1947 and unfortunately still so in 2023. *The American Worker* begins by providing intimate, all-encompassing, and actual details about the functioning, power relationships, and autonomous nature of workers’ struggles in an auto factory—from the workers’

What are workers thinking and doing at work? It was a novel inquiry for 1947 and unfortunately still so in 2023.

perspective. Then this is followed by an extrapolation of the first part, bounded by Marxian concepts and historical-philosophical considerations.

Combining articles in this manner foreshadowed how, in the years to come, many would recognize the intelligence—or “general intellect,” to use another Marxian phrase—of working-class people themselves. What would also become apparent is how little academics and so-called official working-class organizations (trade unions, political parties, nonprofits, progressive religious groups, foundations, lefty publications, and the like) understood, and still understand, of everyday life, working life, and class struggle.

Romano’s contribution “is directed to the rank-and-file worker, and its intention is to express those innermost thoughts which the worker rarely talks about even to his fellow-workers. In keeping a diary, so to speak, of the day-to-day reactions to factory life.” Said diary was kept at the behest of the Trinidadian Marxist author

of *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, C.L.R. James. Romano “hoped to uncover the reasons for the worker’s deep dissatisfaction, which has reached its peak in recent years and has expressed itself in the latest strikes and spontaneous walkouts.”

Replace the gendered language, substitute the signifier “factory” with office cubicle, social-service nonprofit, hospital, supermarket, warehouse, farm and field, kitchen, coffee shop and bar, school, home, app and online platform. All these workplaces, except the last two, existed in 1947, although they played a relatively minor role in the economy. Rarely were they acknowledged as sites of struggle by labor leaders, political pundits, or captains of industry even as they were vital for maintaining the accumulation of wealth.

As long as we live in a society “in which the capital mode of production prevails,” as long as work is still the central organizing force of our lives, and as long as work is defined by a deep dissatisfaction with the product produced and the process of production, and isolation from those we work with and even from our own being, then innermost thoughts must be shared, diaries kept.

Grace commented that to read “Romano’s description of the life in the factory is to realize with shocking clarity how deeply the alienation of labor pervades the very foundations of our society. ... The importance of Romano’s document is that it never for a single moment permits the reader to forget that the contradictions in the process of production make life an agony of toil for the worker, be his payment high or low.”

No replacements nor substitutions are needed here. These are imminently present reflections on how workers are alienated, how this alienation extends beyond the workplace and working day to every aspect

of our society, how workers are necessary to produce all the goods and services for our society to function, yet their role in the process of production is paradoxical. Besides, alienation persists even with a “fair days wage” or more “generous” compensation—“generous” from the perspective of a capitalist, but still theft from the perspective of a worker.

The American Worker offers a “counterposition.” It is the inversion of the assumption made by much of the left that capitalism is the primary actor, that the working class is *always* secondary and reactive. It is the reversal of the dominant perspective, of a particular reading of class relations, toward acknowledging that the daily experience of life in the factory is one of misery and toil, then as well as now. And this is its lasting contribution.

“No Other Way of Getting a Hearing”

The authors, whom we have encountered, and the publishers, to whom we will be introduced shortly, produced *The American Worker* to inquire into the conditions of the working class that toiled in the auto sector in the United States in the years following World War II. Correspondingly, the pamphlet was an intervention into this sector and adjacent sectors, one that sought to empower the workers themselves. Moreover, the centrality of the auto industry to capitalism in the mid-twentieth century is analogous to cotton under slavery, sugar and rubber under colonialism, land under the enclosures, and possibly finance or tech today. The pamphlet, especially in the late 1940s, was to its progenitors the most effective means of communication.

“A pamphlet is never written primarily to give entertainment or make money,” prophetic author George Orwell argues in his introduction to *British Pamphleteers*. “It is written because there is something that

one wants to say *now*, and because there is no other way of getting a hearing.” The immediacy of such an inquiry and intervention is only secondary to the simple fact that an anonymous autoworker and Chinese female intellectual could not get a hearing in any other way.

The humble pamphlet has played an oversized role in American history, from the essays of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine to striking slave narratives and abolitionist treatises, from antiwar and antinuke screeds to feminist and queer zines. What began amongst these pages has led to revolutions, wars of liberation, massive social movements, and the emergence of new and subversive identities.

A pamphlet is a means, a method, a material object, and it is a social document. *The American Worker*, Grace reflected in the second part, “is a social document describing in essence the real existence of the hundreds of millions who constitute the basis of our society. The cultural life and philosophy of every society has always been determined by the life of the working class at its base. But except in periods of revolution, the world is wont to forget this.”

What began amongst these pages has led to revolutions, wars of liberation, massive social movements, and the emergence of new and subversive identities.

In 1947 the world struggled to remember and to forget. *Three Essays by Karl Marx* and *The American Worker* appeared two years after Orwell wrote “You and the Atom Bomb,” popularizing the term “Cold War.” It appeared the year that India and

Pakistan won independence from Britain and Jackie Robinson first played major league baseball. It appeared the year that the International Monetary Fund was founded and the most anti-union, anti-worker legislation in American history passed in the form of the Taft-Hartley Act. What was remembered in the factory was purposely forgotten in the corridors of power, and a new class offensive from above, from capitalism’s perspective, was launched.

Nevertheless, the “real existence” and “cultural life” of our society must be laid bare. In the Cold War era, *The American Worker* attempted such a task and is part of a long, still unfolding, chronicle of such interventions.

“The Class to Whom the Future Belongs”

In 1880 Karl Marx published a survey of 101 questions titled *Enquête Ouvrière*, seeking “the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviors sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are a prey.” In 1938 *The New International*, a “monthly organ” of the Socialist Workers Party, of which Grace and her cohort of revolutionaries were members at the time, republished the questionnaire from the French as *A Workers’ Inquiry*.

C.L.R., along with Raya Dunayevskaya, who was born in the Russian Empire and once served as Leon Trotsky’s secretary, were the intellectual heads of this regiment. Although Grace has often been relegated to a tertiary role, the three are more accurately revealed as a triumvirate. As Grace with “Ria Stone,” C.L.R. wrote under “J.R. Johnson,” Raya as “Freddie Forest.” Wielding party names resulted in the moniker Johnson-Forest Tendency. The

group around the three utilized “Tendency” while still members of various workers parties, which was changed to Correspondence Publishing Committee shortly thereafter, when they became a fully independent entity.

Marx’s confidence in the working class, its ability to understand life inside and beyond the factory gates, and that “they alone,” “only they,” can provide healing remedies for social ills, is reflected in the political and practical approaches of Johnson-Forest and Correspondence. Grace referenced Marx’s survey in a footnote in the later pages of *The American Worker*: “See, ‘A Workers’ Inquiry’ by Karl Marx in which 101 questions are asked of the workers themselves, dealing with everything from lavatories, soap, wine, strikes and unions.”

Workers’ inquiry cleaves into two different approaches: that of the questionnaire and that of first-person narratives in the style of *The American Worker*. Both methods seek to present the “exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class—the class to whom the future belongs—works and moves,” as Marx reflected on his contribution.

Such knowledge begins with direct experience and was recorded in diaries. As Grace wrote in *Living for Change: An Autobiography*, “Phil Singer, a young GM worker, was always talking about the frustrations of the rank-and-file worker in the plant. C.L.R. proposed that he keep a journal of his experiences.” Excerpts of what was to become the final pamphlet were first published in an internal bulletin, and this “rough draft” was circulated among members of the Tendency and to the workers to whom they were in regular communication. Johnson-Forest printed and circulated *The American Worker* without acknowledging their parentage or providing any contact information to allow further correspondence in the 1947 edition, or at

least the three copies I have examined. This has allowed the pamphlet to function both as a stand-alone document as well as one of the most robust expressions of the positions and politics of the group.

In addition to a newspaper and, eventually, full-length books, Correspondence published three additional pamphlets in quick succession: the journey of Si Owens, writing as “Matthew Ward” and then “Charles Denby,” from the American South to the North in *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker’s Journal*; an account of youth “delinquency” and student strikes in *Artie Cuts Out*; and *A Woman’s Place*, on housework, credited to Marie Brant and Ellen Santori, party names of Selma James and Filomena D’Addario respectively. Appearing between 1947 and 1953, these were their interpretation of workers’ inquiry and were produced using a “collaborative approach.” How collaborative were these projects? How did power operate between those involved, between workers and intellectuals? These two questions have been appropriately raised by scholars and admirers alike.

Often, the complexities of authorship and attribution were difficult to disentangle at the time, even more so 75 years later. J.H. was Johnny Zupan, a militant and a member of Johnson-Forest, who, according to Martin “Marty” Glaberman, “came to Detroit during the war, got a job at Ford . . . , and very quickly became a steward and a committeeman.” However, to whom do we credit “Life in the Factory”? To Romano or Singer, to Grace and Marty, to the militants of Johnson-Forest, to a collaboration between them?

The anonymity and independence are part of the pamphlet’s enduring allure, while the relationships that extended outward from Johnson-Forest toward militants in auto factories and other industries in different places, at other times, is part of its lasting influence. One introduction

declared, “The name Romano will stay in the history of proletarian literature.”

“The Way in Which This Pamphlet Is Making Its Way in Europe”

“The merits of this small pamphlet are much more profound,” declared the foreword to “L’ouvrier américain,” which appeared in the first issue of the French journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* two years after it appeared in English. Romano’s contribution was serialized in the first issue through its the fifth–sixth double issue; the section authored by Grace appeared in its seventh and eighth issues. In their “eyes, it is not by accident that such a sample of proletarian documentary literature comes to us from America, and it is also not by accident that it is, in some of its deepest aspects, the first of the genre.”

Between the publication of the English edition and the French translation, Grace traveled to Europe, following an earlier journey by Raya. While there, she met with a cohort similar to her own. A year later the French group would launch *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and draw upon *The American Worker* for its own inquiries and to construct francophone “proletarian documentary literature.” It is difficult to grasp the immense influence the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group had on European workers movements and the worker–student movements that peaked during the May 1968 uprisings in Paris.

In Italy similar movements were stirring, and “L’operaio americano” appeared amid the pages of *Battaglia Comunista* in febbraio-marzo of 1954. The Italian forward read, in part, “It is the America of the factory: an unknown America whose history is made of strikes, exploitation, and proletarian misery. The protagonists of this story are the workers, and Paul Romano is a worker who writes about the life of the workers.” Romano’s protagonists shared their stories for the struggles on the factory

floor and in the streets. As autonomous workers’ actions circulated in the automobile plants of Detroit, Michigan; Linden, New Jersey; and Boulogne-Billancourt, France, similar struggles were occurring in the Italian automobile capital of Turin.

The American Worker pamphlet resonated with French militants, intellectuals associated with Italian *operaismo* (translated as “workerism”) and student movements in both countries, and reverberations can be felt in autonomist movements across Europe. European interest in the pamphlet always surpassed the attention it received in America, as Raya reflected in 1954: “The way in which this pamphlet is making its way in Europe (it has been translated into Italian and there will soon be a German translation), the way in which it is being received, is nothing but a sign of what is vital and what is important in American life.”

Raya was elated that the octogenarian Dutch astronomer and “council communist” Anton Pannekoek wrote to share how “pleased” he was with the pamphlet. Pannekoek was the main theorist of a Marxian current that advocated direct democratic control of workplaces and society via workers’ councils rather than by a party apparatus, dubbed council communism. But her enthusiasm was inflated, as no German translation appeared, and the pamphlet was never republished, from what I can tell, in the United Kingdom or elsewhere on the continent then or since.

Because the movements of the 1960s and 1970s circulated, emerged, and re-emerged, so did pamphlets containing first-person narratives and novel ideas. As a result, Facing Reality, the group led by C.L.R. and Marty after Correspondence, reprinted the original in 1969 without modification beyond adding their moniker and Detroit address, and apparently without fanfare. The same year, *Life in the Factory* was published as a stand-alone pamphlet by the

Boston-based New England Free Press. It is likely that the Free Press edition appeared because of the personal investments of one of its printers, Don McKelvey, who also reprinted works by Jimmy Boggs, Marty, and others. Notably, the press made its money as the first publisher of the women's liberation classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

Then, in 1972, Marty brought out his own version, under Bewick Editions, named for the street on which he lived. This was done, as with the 1969 editions, to introduce the pamphlet to a new generation of militants, and an introduction was added:

The pamphlet appears as two contributions side by side—that of a worker and that of an intellectual. This was viewed at the time that the pamphlet was first published as a necessary weakness. The fusion of worker and intellectual into one totality (as in a popular working-class press) had not been achieved by any Marxist group. But at the same time that *The American Worker* was evidence of that separation, it was also evidence of the attempt to overcome that separation, if only in the formal placing of the two articles side by side.

Although Marty commented on the separation between workers and intellectuals, which is based in the division between mental and manual work under capitalism and unfortunately exacerbated by left politics, he seemingly forgot his own identity—that of a worker-intellectual who was employed on the assembly line and as a machinist, became an organizer and activist, read political economy and philosophy, and wrote vital contributions on working-class life and politics. Brooklyn born and a socialist in his youth, as an octogenarian he would drive hundreds of miles to teach “Marxism or Socialism” to militants in Toronto and Youngstown as well as to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit. Marty, as many others of his generation and our own, represents the “overcoming [of] that separation.”

By the mid-1970s, Canadian radicals in New Tendency obtained copies of the pamphlet as a result of Marty carrying them across the border, and they appeared on the bookshelves of those who would go on to launch the International Wages for Housework Campaign and the journals *Zero* and *Midnight Notes*—members of whom now make up the intellectual avant-garde of contemporary American revolutionary movements. Marty produced sufficient copies in 1972 that they are still in circulation and easy to come by, via the book trade.

However, neither of the 1969 versions nor the 1972 edition with Marty's introduction mention Romano, who he was, and what became of him.

“Paul Romano, a GM Worker”

Romano's identity remains elusive. In the thousands of pages of correspondence between C.L.R., Grace, Marty, Raya, and their compatriots, Romano isn't mentioned. He doesn't appear in their voluminous published works or innumerable interviews. Details are scant in autobiographies, both published and languishing as manuscripts, and subsequently biographers have had little to draw upon.

In her 1998 autobiography, *Living for Change*, Grace identified Romano as “Phil Singer, a young GM worker,” and two years later she referred to him in an interview as “Paul Romano, a GM worker, [who talked] about both the positive and negative of the plant.” Romano, in the pamphlet itself, offered that he was in his “late twenties” in 1947, and I assume that he worked at the Linden, New Jersey, General Motors plant. Other scholars and commentators have been similarly vague on details.

Close examination of “Life in the Factory” doesn't provide much fodder either; however, it does afford other avenues for inquiry. According to Romano, “The rough

draft of this pamphlet was given to workers across the country. Their reaction was as one. They were surprised and gratified to see in print the experiences and thoughts which they have rarely put into words." Then, how was the draft circulated and how were the workers reactions recorded?

In the July 31, 1947, edition of the Internal Bulletin of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, a "Phil Romano"—not Paul Romano, not Phil Singer—first appeared, with, "I want to give my ideas ... as a rank and filer." Then, in the September 4 edition, Grace offered, "The following article will appear as a supplement to the forthcoming pamphlet by Phil Romano on the American worker today."

With bulletins appearing weekly, two editions later in the September 29 copy, the pamphlet was announced via advert: "Watch for the forthcoming pamphlet - Now On The Press: The American Worker!" Within the pages of this issue Phil Romano appears apparently for the last time. Reminiscent of his words in the forthcoming pamphlet, he declares, "My point of departure is always the worker on the machine at the very point of production." Thus concludes a debate on the "trade union question," where Phil Romano aggressively criticizes, and rightfully so, an intellectual figure in the Tendency in which he was part. Is this possibly the reason for his subsequent absence?

Although, why would the Tendency circulate drafts of the pamphlet, supposedly via the bulletin, to collect reactions from workers but then not identify themselves or provide contact information in the pamphlet itself? Why advertise the pamphlet within an internal bulletin with limited circulation and not within the larger party formation they would join a few weeks later, or within the larger left and labor movements of the time?

With this way foreclosed for the mo-

ment, another avenue of inquiry is the writing process itself and which of these figures, or the others we have encountered, is or are in fact the author or authors. Romano reports that he kept a diary that served as the source material for the pamphlet. Other worker-authors in the Tendency's orbit were given a shoe box, where notes were kept until they were assembled into a final form. Others still used the "full fountain

Who typed these words? How
veracious was the verification?
How was the relationship
between workers and
intellectuals mediated?

pen" method as suggested by Raya. Upon C.L.R.'s death, Marty reflected that this method meant "Workers were interviewed, their words typed up and brought back to them for verification, and published as small articles or letters to the editor." Who typed these words? How veracious was the verification? How was the relationship between workers and intellectuals mediated?

It has been suggested in whispers between devotees that Marty and Grace wrote the text, drawing on the diary itself. Textual analysis implies the same. Neighboring pamphlets suffer from similar irregularities. However, the Tendency was a collective endeavor, where even single-authored works received considerable input and contributions from other members. The use of party names, while a security measure against state repression, also allowed for a flexibility of authorship. Besides said flexibility, collaboration allowed a resource-deprived Tendency of minor Marxian figures to produce material still relevant decades hence.

Or possibly answers lie in the archives that contain materials not yet fully examined. These answers are too important to leave to the “gnawing criticism of mice” or the fading memories of those still living.

Possibly the most productive avenue remaining is biographical. Phil Singer the individual becomes Phil Romano in the bulletin and then Paul Romano, a GM worker, in *The American Worker*. While there is no Phil or Paul Romano in the census record that would match the provided description or possible dates of birth, two Phil Singers appear: one out of Chicago that would be far too old; another a “truck driver,” according to the 1940 census, from the Brownsville neighborhood just bordering Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York, born around 1917, meaning he was in his late twenties at the time the pamphlet was published.

Knowing some of Marty’s history—born in 1918, grew up in the Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn on the border of Brownsville, a red diaper baby who joined the local circle of the Young Peoples Socialist League at thirteen rather than get bar mitzvahed—further draws our attention to this second Phil Singer. Phil lived at 1848 Pitkin Avenue, just a 15-minute walk from Marty’s childhood home on Saratoga Avenue. The surrounding districts were a hot bed of socialist and Jewish radicalism. Phil was a year older than Marty, both sets of parents were Russian-Jewish immigrants. Phil died young in early 1968, leaving behind three children.

Was Paul Romano a collective being forged from the diary of Phil Singer and

the minds of C.L.R., Marty, and Grace? Did Phil have a falling out with his comrades in the Tendency? Did he retreat into personal life or adopt a different political line? Could there be a record of Phil in a dusty archive, on a membership list along with Marty? Or might one of his children have a vague memory of their father, truck driver turned GM worker?

Searching for *The American Worker*

Now, we find ourselves searching for *The American Worker* 76 years after it first appeared, after its authors, conveners, many of its publishers, and some of its adherents have passed into the historical record. So, it is in said record that we must continue our search before rummaging through living memories of class struggle.

Might we find Phil Singer? Might we find that Romano is a collective being, born of the factory with working-class parentage and raised on heterodox Marxism and a reconstructive vision of society?

What about the “innermost thoughts” and diaries “of the day-to-day reactions to factory life” of workers today? How can *The American Worker* guide those organizing in Amazon warehouses, Starbucks cafes, and essential services? How can it aid those who experience “agony in toil”?

While the search for *The American Worker* is about the pursuit of the identity of one of its authors, the politics of authorship and representation, and the complexities of identity and power, it is likewise about the movements that it has touched and influenced and all the movements it could.

Symposium

Marginalized Discourse: Voices from the Critical Left in Cuba

Collected, translated, and introduced by James Buckwalter-Arias, with contributions from Alexander Hall Lujardo, Lisbeth Moya González, Alina Bárbara López Hernández, Lynn Cruz, and Raymar Aguado Hernández

EDITORS' NOTE: *On Wednesday, June 14, 2023, Alina Bárbara López Hernández, one of the contributors to this symposium, was detained and taken to the police station in Matanzas, Cuba where she was interrogated for more than twelve hours. She was detained by State Security because she refused to appear for an unlawful citation to be "interviewed," which is a method for threatening and pressuring citizens not to exercise their constitutional rights to freedom of expression and peaceful protest. At the time of this writing Alina Bárbara is under house arrest or "reclusión domiciliaria."*

Introduction

JAMES BUCKWALTER-ARIAS

TOO MANY OF US ON THE international political left who live outside of Cuba have not listened carefully enough to our homologues on the island—that is, to those on the political left who live and work and write outside the structures of political power. Many of us have been too willing to defer to Cuban voices that speak from positions of power, too willing to trust that these voices constitute an index of a collective will, too willing to identify revolution, government, and the Cuban people as parts of a coherent whole—even when our homologues in Cuba urge us not to do so.

While important exceptions abound, too many on the political left have been

willing to concede that all dissent in Cuba emanates from the political right, that it is sponsored and orchestrated from abroad. There is, to be sure, a well-endowed media campaign against the Cuban government funded by the United States, authorized by the Helms Burton law, and administered by organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy and the United States Agency for International Development. Millions of dollars do indeed flow every year from the United States to oppositional groups in the United States and Cuba. It does *not* follow from this, though, that all dissent in Cuba is generated by these extraterritorial “democracy-building efforts,” and if we make this assumption, if we ignore those voices that official Cuban discourse disparages and that U.S. funding organizations ignore, we deny political agency to many ordinary Cubans.

There *is* of course a Cuban political left that is critical, dissenting, disenfranchised, silenced, or ignored, that is *inconforme*, activist, sometimes but not always nakedly dissident, and that has no reliable media platform either within Cuba or beyond—

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neither in the foreign-funded “independent” Cuban press nor in the “progressive” U.S. press. There is a pluralist Cuban left, a constellation of voices with no central organization, no organized political apparatus. The voices included here, then, do not speak for a single, coherent left. They simply articulate some perspectives from the political left as the authors themselves define the category.

When “progressive” publications in the United States and other industrialized nations fail to translate and disseminate the voices of those who are struggling to articulate a rigorous, sustainable discourse from the left—under much more difficult and dangerous circumstances than we can imagine—we effectively concede the realm of critique to the far right. We concede, in effect, that the only alternative to the existing Cuban model is Western liberal democracy, the *Pax Americana*, a wholesale capitalist restoration. We implicitly concede that the only voices authorized in Cuba to counter U.S. intervention are those speaking for the Cuban government itself. But the Cuban government’s primary objective, like that of all governments everywhere, including liberal democratic governments, is first and foremost that of self-preservation. This should surprise no one. So, it is with the voices of the disenfranchised, both at home and in Cuba, that we must actively seek to engage.

The progressive press in the United States has tended to counter hardline regime-change discourse with a combination of revolutionary apology and anti-imperialist discourse, but in so doing it excludes voices that reject the ideological binaries that have structured debates—this rejection being a philosophical imperative that Alina Bárbara López Hernández underlines in her reflection below. The progressive media exclude the voices that are best positioned to criticize *both* the

authoritarian and repressive government at home *and* the hostile, interventionist government to the north, excludes the intellectuals who are most keenly aware of the limitations that their own government places daily on their own work, on their ability to function in professional settings, and indeed on their personal safety and freedom, and are much more aware than we possibly can be in the United States of the distortive mechanisms of U.S. funding and its economic incentives for writers and artists on the *archipiélago*—a dynamic Raymar Aguado speaks to in his text.

When the subject is Cuba, these writers have an irrevocable epistemological advantage, but too often we listen to U.S. leftists speak *about* Cuba—including its high-profile celebrities—rather than to the people who articulate leftist, anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal or anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist, LGBTQ discourses from *within* Cuba. In this way the progressive media reinscribe a neocolonial dynamic in which U.S. intellectuals on the left arrogate the authority to speak about Cubans for an English-speaking readership or viewership to the detriment of those on the island who speak from outside the halls of power, most often in Spanish. The object of this piece, then, is to contribute to *visibilization* or *audibilization* of a small number of Cuban intellectuals who are not being widely read in English, to call for the translation and dissemination of longer pieces by these and other Cuban intellectuals in this category, and to contribute in this way to a more collaborative, *solidario* decolonizing project.

The following texts grew out of informal conversations in Havana, Cuba, in December 2022. Afterwards the contributors wrote brief reflections on the relationship between the critical left in Cuba and the international left. I translated these reflections to English.

The Historical Burden of Actually Existing Socialism

ALEXANDER HALL LUJARDO

THE TRIUMPH OF THE Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, represented the inauguration of a process that guaranteed for specific segments of the population the exercise of rights previously denied to them. In this way a new social contract was established that embraced, in a short period of time, the construction of socialism as an alternative to the existing capitalist order that had been inaugurated with the formation of the republic in 1902.

The theater of the Cold War and the hostility of the United States government toward the incipient revolutionary process propelled the Caribbean nation toward the Soviet Bloc, on the one hand, and prompted it, on the other, to support guerrilla movements and other groups of rebels organized against the oligarchical capitalism in other peripheral, underdeveloped Latin American nations. The Cuban posture was consistent with the Marxist ideal of a world revolution, as the island sought regional and hemispheric support against the political and economic isolation that its neighbor to the north subjected it to after the triumph of 1959.

Nonetheless, from the first years after the triumph of the revolution, there emerged clear practices of political censorship in various cultural spheres—film,

theater and dance, the visual arts, poetry and literature. In this way the repression or “paramaterization” (setting parameters) of numerous forms of artistic expression with critical or confrontational elements became evident. The autonomy of the university was also severely restricted by the authorities and subjected to political regulations that kept some would-be students out of the classroom, often reproducing multiple forms of discrimination along lines of race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation.

In these years the government actively promoted a state-centric unification and a hyper-institutionalization of the party-as-government (1965) while imposing a state monopoly on communications media and production (1968). Democratic mechanisms like public protest were suppressed, the direct election of national leaders was eliminated, and the legitimacy of peaceful dissent in the workplace was subjected to tight control via the criminalization of the strike. All of these measures, together with additional mechanisms of control and politico-social instrumentalization, were justified by pointing to the exceptional circumstances, of indefinite duration, generated by U.S. hostility.

The political establishment thus gravitated toward the bloc of nations that had implemented models of “historical” or “actually existing” socialism. These regimes were characterized by the absolute administrative control of economic activities by the state. This economic model led to a

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generalized reduction in levels of productivity and the long-term slowing of economic growth, the scarcity of consumer goods, the systematic deterioration of industrial infrastructure, and basic restrictions on individual liberties, all in the name of egalitarian ideals and an ideologically driven ethos of forced collectivism.

At the same time, since salaries were unable to meet the basic needs of employees and basic resources were diverted into the informal economy for private gain, corruption proliferated. The problem was compounded by an absence of investment in the diversification of industry that was required to alter the model of monoculture and hyper-dependence on the sugar industry, a model that had formed the basis for economic and technological underdevelopment.

In spite of the undeniable gains in the social sphere driven by increased investment in sports, culture, health, and education, the country was characterized by the general absence of individual liberties, sublimated by the charisma of a populist leader, a status incarnated in the figure of the Secretary General of the Communist Party. In keeping with this model, the juridical and constitutional culture of citizenship deteriorated due to the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of responding in a consistent way to the interests of the popular classes.

To the detriment of workers' rights, the government effectively co-opted the trade unions. Worker autonomy was undermined during the period 1961-1975 with the large-scale dissolution of worker cooperatives, which were added to the long list of state properties. These profound changes took place in a political environment characterized by authoritarian management by the party leadership, which imposed a centralized, party-line, bureaucratic framework. This new frame-

work led to a sustained militarization of the economy in the entrepreneurial sector, with the dire consequences generated for the vast majority.

The prevailing Marxist orthodoxy was characterized by an imitation of the philosophical postulates imported from the Soviet Union (1961-1990), combined with a nationalist metanarrative that rendered vital sectors of anti-hegemonic resistance invisible. The revolutionary character of Marxist theory was subverted, in fact, by vulgar, dogmatic principles of the party-affiliated ruling class (which reproduced, in fact, political domination, economic exploitation, and social impoverishment). Peculiarities of the national landscape were ignored in favor of the homogenizing framework that the new ruling class adopted as the state ideology, in accordance with their own economic interests.

From State Socialism to the Neocapitalist Oligarchical Transition

The profound crisis that Cuba underwent during the so-called Special Period (1990-1994) plunged the nation into the era of its greatest material difficulties. The arrival of this precarious environment, generated by the collapse of the so-called "socialist camp," affected all levels of the Cuban economy, prompting a third migratory wave to the United States. This exodus, characterized by a high percentage of poorer Cubans of color, occasioned a strong disdain, xenophobic and racist, among the Cuban bourgeoisie long-established in South Florida, revealing exclusionary impulses in their "democratic postulates."

The debacle of 1990s Cuba reinforced the historical dependence of the island on foreign powers, extending in this manner the colonial condition that its communist leadership had not escaped in establishing asymmetrical economic relationships with its allies in Eastern Europe. In this sense,

the Cuban leadership silenced for more than forty years the criticisms levied by internationalist revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara, criticisms levied from a radical Marxist militance that held the island's economic autonomy as the sole guarantee of national sovereignty.

The reconfigurations produced in this Special Period as a result of governmental policies aimed at "confronting the crisis" led to numerous concessions to private capital, both local and foreign. These measures generated new dynamics that were immediately evident at the national level, given the peculiarities that governed the insertion of Cuba into the world economy according to the "rules of the game" established by the Western powers.

The democratization of the political regime was never part of the ruling class imaginary, which remained incapable of understanding that despotism has disastrous results on productivity. At the same time, the afore-mentioned transformations—the concessions to private capital—prompted a resurgence of racism, an increase in inequality, and the "oligarchization" of the existing model by the ruling class, which made use of its overwhelming dominance over the politico-economic sphere.

The Leftist Libertarian* Alternatives to the Gordian Knot of Cuba's Crisis

The Cuban government has leveraged its supposedly revolutionary character to deny recognition to other organizations or groups in Cuba that self-identify as leftist. The ruling political class has obstructed the very possibility of an autonomous existence for even nonconfrontational anti-capitalist,

feminist, anti-racist, anarchist, or ecosocialist groups, simply by identifying them with the opposition. These collectives are in fact the stewards of political propositions far removed from statist and institutional cen-

Critical leftist groups in Cuba have bumped up against a fossilized institution, which claims a socialist narrative, maintaining in this way its privileges and control.

tralism that tends to suffocate self-managed initiatives either through cooptation or direct repression.

These various groups representing *other* alternatives (popular, socialist, decolonizing, and sovereign-democratic alternatives) constitute a significant portion of Cuban civil society, and their very existence contributes to the rethinking of public participation in terms of innovative mechanisms for the redistribution of power, the redistribution of wealth, and participatory deliberation in decision-making for various social groups.

The *critical* leftist groups in Cuba have continually bumped up against the wall of a fossilized institutional machinery, which claims for itself full authority over an ultimately inauthentic socialist narrative, maintaining in this way its own privileges and its mechanisms of totalitarian control.

Such a governance structure renders unviable any and all alternatives intended to amplify the popular bases for democratic radicalization emphasizing reparative justice, the decolonization of knowledge and power, the reversal of high levels of environmental pollution, and the end of the labor exploitation to which the Cuban working

*Libertarian in this usage comes from the Spanish *libertario*, which is a term rooted in anarchist and Marxist-humanist ideas and practices of human and social freedom.

class is subjected under the existing social relations of production, which are typical of state capitalism.

A scenario of social liberation demands the mass mobilization of a citizenship fully conscious of the ever-greater concentration of wealth among the traditionally hegemonic sectors. Such a scenario aims to establish economic structures capable of generating wealth in an egalitarian, ecological, dynamic, and sustainable manner.

The libertarian ideals of a popular socialist alternative synthesize the emancipatory, decolonized, counter-hegemonic essence of a critical Cuban left characterized by an anti- or post-capitalist ethos. They do so in order to consecrate the values of a democratic socialism as a counterproposal to the hegemonic monopoly of an authoritarian, Stalinist militance that arbitrarily pulls the levers of power in Cuba.

Cuba and the World

LISBETH MOYA GONZÁLEZ

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE international left, Cuba is contested terrain. The influence of the Cuban Revolution in the development of progressive discourse in Latin America is unquestionable. The solidarity of the global left with the survival of the Cuban Revolution, right up to the present day, is also unquestionable. One of the greatest dilemmas for those of us who dissent from within the Cuban left, then, is how to dissent from within a system historically besieged by imperialist powers?

The majority of those of us on the political left in Cuba who dissent have understood that the Cuban Revolution does not respond to the motto of “continuity” that the current government employs so insistently in its propaganda. What the

Cuban Revolution proposed in its earliest stages has been continually degraded, leaving present-day Cuba mired in poverty, lacking in democratic freedoms, and with a government willing to go to any lengths to maintain itself in power.

Dialogue with the international left is always a challenge for those of us who work within Cuba to bring about political change. It is a challenge because on so many occasions, from a paternalistic perspective, foreign leftists strive to protect the myth of Cuban socialism and they associate all types of dissent with the historical project of the political right and with imperialist designs, or with echoes of the Cold War and the media campaigns that bear down on the “Revolution.” I write “Revolution” with a capital R and in quotations here because this abstract concept—half charismatic leaders and martyrs, and half political and social exploits—is the ghost so venerated by much of the international left.

I consider it a grave tactical error to attempt to understand Cuba in terms of

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its particular political system rather than as a nation inserted into a world system. The historical experience of comparable political models shows that socialism in one country will be asphyxiated from without by its enemies or overthrown from within by its “leaders” and bureaucrats. Cuba is alone in so many respects, and the international left, whether from positions of power or not, has been its principal ally. But to imagine Cuba as a bastion of democracy and social justice, treating it as a souvenir or an idealization of utopia, does the country no more favors than to demonize it and portray it as a barracks.

In recent years, many of those on the international left have awakened, and I dare to say that most of the Trotskyist groups, with the particular characteristics and the spirit of dissent that characterize them, have been pioneers in their comprehension of the reality facing Cuban leftists and have worked in a conciliatory spirit to establish ties. I have always expected realistic appraisals of Cuba from leading leftist intellectuals in critical historical moments, and although in response to the unprecedented popular protests of July 11, 2021, some have expressed concern and offered support from the sidelines, many others have either observed in silence or expressed open support for the Cuban government in spite of acts that are indefensible from any political perspective, like the acts of police brutality or the harsh sentencing of political prisoners. In view of this, I ask myself how many years any of those activists or intellectuals, who in their own countries protest and write freely on social media, for example, might have been sentenced to in Cuba.

Establishing a dialogue among leftists both inside and outside of Cuba is fundamental. The left cannot survive in isolation because it has too many enemies. In Cuba, those of us who dissent from the left have the revolver of the Cuban government

pressed to our temple, as well as that of the political right and that of the utopian international left. This dialogue is essential, then, as a basis for organizing strategies with greater range. Cuba really could be that “utopian island.” The first step in that direction is to stop idealizing it and to start working in earnest to make it so.

In truth, the dialogue between groups on the international left and Cuban civil society began long ago, and this dialogue has been possible in spite of the watchful eye and even the threats of the Cuban government. The event on Trotsky and Trotskyism held in Havana in 2019 opened the doors to many parties, intellectuals, and political tendencies, principally with those Trotskyists who have maintained contact and who have consistently been supportive of the critical Cuban left. Some of these groups are more closely aligned with the Cuban government, as in the case of *Corriente Marxista Internacional*; others, like Marx 21 and Erick Toussaint, among others, are much closer to the critical Cuban left that has been systematically repressed by the Cuban government.

For Cuban civil society, in all its ideological range, the arrival of the Internet in

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Cuba was crucial. Having a virtual space, independent and accessible, favored the growth of visible political platforms of many varieties. Currently there exists a network of digital magazines, pages, or press outlets of the critical Cuban left, which

would have been unthinkable just years ago. Among these are *Comunistas* blog, *La Tizza*, *Tremenda Nota*, *La Cosa*, *Ciudadanías*, *Yo sí te Creo*, *Ágora*, *Socialistas en Lucha*, *Reclamo Universitario* ... among many other spaces, which contribute to the plurality of political debate on the left.

A debate with the political left in the United States is of crucial importance because this is the country that has, from the outset, exercised the greatest hostility toward the Cuban project. The economic sanctions levied by the United States are an impediment to Cuban development, independent of the economic and social model Cuba adopts. This debate and this solidarity between the political left in Cuba and the United States is vital for both groups because when the United States finally has normal political relations with Cuba, we will already have taken a significant step

toward genuine democracy and justice.

In some sense Cuba is already part of the United States because Cuba is not limited to the archipelago; it is also the diaspora, so many of whom reside in the United States. The problem facing the island nation demands a conciliation of its civil society, a calming of the hatred felt by so many in the diaspora who abhor the entire political left because in the early years of the “Revolution” their wealth and property were expropriated or because afterwards they suffered the consequences of authoritarianism. It is worth asking ourselves whether in fact this authoritarianism, this deformed political system, was birthed by the political and economic pressure from the United States. I would venture to affirm that U.S. political pressure is the mother of the Cuban dictatorship. The case of Cuba is that of the serpent that bites its own tail.

The False Dilemma Fallacy

ALINA BÁRBARA LÓPEZ HERNÁNDEZ

DISCURSIVE ENVIRONMENTS AROUND with logical fallacies, falsehoods posing as rational arguments in order to manipulate interlocutors. One of these is the “either-or” fallacy, or the false dilemma fallacy, frequently used in political debates because it is effective in persuading people

to choose between two alternatives.

In general, the people proposing the alternatives are keenly aware that they are suppressing viable options, which is why this fallacy is also referred to as the “excluded middle.” In Spanish this is sometimes referred to as the “*callejón sin salida*,” or dead-end fallacy, since the people being asked to choose between alternatives can feel trapped in an unresolvable contradiction. Consider two examples of false dilemmas: “Either you are with us, or

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you are against us,” as George W. Bush said in September 2001. Or, this cornerstone of official discourse on the island: “Either you are in favor of the Cuban government or you are in favor of the U.S. blockade.”

The most recent false dilemma of Cuba’s official ideological apparatus involves two supposed alternatives: a sectarian, Stalinist left opposed to change and entrenched in superseded formulas, on one hand (represented by the group Telegram de La Manigua, Revolución pa’ rato, and certain individuals in this movement, like Rodrigo Huamachi), and on the other hand an “inclusive” left, open to dialogue, that strives to empathize with other options considered revolutionary (represented by the group La Comuna as well as other projects and platforms that include Pañuelos Rojos, the website Cubadebate, or even the television program Con Filo, and individuals associated with these projects).

The “excluded middle” in this case is enormous, since it comprises practically all types of dissent in Cuba, all of which are designated with absolute impudence as “counter-revolutionary,” in spite of the fact that many among the discredited camp are openly and emphatically part of what should be called the “critical left.” The manipulation in the official discourse is so self-evident that one is astonished to find many people actually believing that they are witnessing a battle between opposing points of view. Obviously, the objective of the official stratagem is to win over public opinion for the least bad, or “less evil,” of these two options.

The Apocryphal Left

When on September 11, 1789, a group of delegates from the National Assembly in France gathered for a vote, assembling—as it happened—to the left of the dais, they were there to challenge the absolute right of the king and to vote for a monarchy

limited by popular power. There were no organized political parties at that point, merely political tendencies.

To be on the political left does not mean, then, to wear a T-shirt with a slogan, an image of Che Guevara, or a quotation from Karl Marx. Nor does it mean wearing red handkerchiefs, using inclusive language, or assuming a performative attitude in public spaces. Leftist militancy is not con-

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ferred by one’s own proclamation nor by a media campaign. Being on the left means positioning oneself against the established political powers who ignore matters of social justice and hinder the exercise of rights among the majority who have had those rights stripped from them.

Long before the word “left” designated a political posture, and even to this day, those rights have been won from below: plebeians versus patricians, peasant struggles for land, rebellions of enslaved people fighting for their liberty, universal suffrage, division of powers, worker struggles, opposition to child labor, eight-hour workday, women’s suffrage, movements against racism and homophobia—without exception, these have been struggles against and victories over established political power.

If your unconditional loyalty is to a political power that subjugates the citizenry, discriminates, and impedes the exercise of economic, political, and social rights, then

in such a case you are not *on the left* at all, however much you claim to be. It makes no difference if the power we square off against is an absolute monarch, or a conservative government, a military dictatorship, or an authoritarian political party, be it capitalist, socialist, or communist.

It is not necessary to be a Marxist in order to be a leftist. By the same token, calling oneself a Marxist guarantees no safe passage to the political left. In the twentieth-century experiments of so-called “real socialism,” the bureaucratic class designated itself as leftist but constituted in reality a privileged group that supplanted the popular will. When a group in power—secured as an emergent new class—strips Marxism of its scientific method, reducing Marxism to its ideological dimension and transforming it into a state ideology, then Marxism ceases to be a revolutionary current and becomes a mechanism of domination. It is here that we have arrived in Cuba. This state ideology assumes a counter-revolutionary character, and it must be denounced.

The implosion of socialism, in both Europe and in Cuba, demonstrates that the inability to wage struggles from below effectively overburdened the social and economic evolution of these projects and compelled these political experiments to return to the path of authoritarian capitalism. One-party bureaucratic socialism renders impossible the development of a genuine left because necessary socialist criticism is replaced with an apocryphal left whose mission is to sustain the newly empowered class in its dominion over society at large.

In other words, the false dilemma—the *gato por liebre*, or the pig in the poke—they want to sell us is simply unacceptable. Neither of the two options that, as they assure

us, compose the revolutionary camp is in fact “on the left.” This much was made very clear when Michel Torres Corona, on the show *Con Filo* (a sort of Mouth of Sauron of the ideological apparatus), showed a video clip of a Raúl Castro speech in which he clearly delimits the so-called “diversity”: the sole ruling party. This is the *only* thing that is beyond discussion as far as the power structure is concerned. Only people who recognize the legitimacy of one-party rule can be recognized by the ruling elite as genuinely *on the left*.

The two options presumably at odds employ the argument of the first uncaused cause, assuming uncritically the necessity of the existing Cuban political system and accepting the will of the party as fundamental to its existence. For this reason, these are false “lefts” that have done so much damage to the cause. They have brought about a situation in which the very people defending social justice and advocating for popular rights fail to recognize themselves as part of the left, because they conclude that people in power are “on the left” and they therefore turn away from it as the devil turns away from the cross.

If we allow the people in power to continue with this false-flag strategy, presenting themselves as “unity within diversity,” this strategy could go a long way. As a friend recently told me, in a short time they could form two parties in order to create an impression of pluralism, just as the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo did in 1942.

Please, don’t disrespect our collective intelligence. You would have to be naive indeed to imagine that the rest of us are naive as well. We are saturated with false lefts and false dilemmas, but in this “callejón,” or dead-end, there is indeed a way out.

The Cuban Reality

LYNN CRUZ

MANY DISSIDENTS IN CUBA have felt looked down on or underappreciated by what we might call the international left because clearly the Cuban government defines itself as leftist. But it turns out that in Cuba most people were never really communist as much as they were *fidelista*, where the revolution was the goddess, and the high priest of the church called Cuba was named Fidel Castro. This explains why, in speaking to the faithful, Fidel didn't give speeches as much as he delivered sermons. The new Cuban left or the critical Cuban left should, in my opinion, always keep this dynamic in mind, since it is so central to the process Cuba has lived for more than sixty years now. To fail to understand how we are perceived from outside would be naive. And to ignore the enormous international impact of the Cuban Revolution would be to lack objectivity. Clearly politics requires that we choose sides—you're either on my side or you are against me. Just that simple. In this play of opposing camps, we have lost precious time because the external opposition, especially the right-wing exile community in South Florida, apparently wants all of the power for itself, while the power in Cuba wants every bit of it too. The opposite poles end up resembling each other, and the conflict generated by the belief in or the hatred towards Fidel Castro begins to appear eternal.

At the same time, though, we live in a world in which the market has the last

word. The left ends up devoting itself to struggles on behalf of minorities, and the right, for its part, to Protestant churches and pro-life campaigns. This all ends up being extremely reductive. Now, for example, in Europe there are movements of young ecologists who propose to recycle clothing or who draw attention to the danger of becoming a world in which food supplies will not be sufficient for everyone. These developments call on us to think of Cuba in the context of what is happening in the rest of the world. Here resides the importance of the look from the outside, the external gaze—but without romanticizing. In these moments, the Cuban people find themselves before a cadaver of the revolution in its *fidelista* incarnation. Given the example of Russia and the other formerly socialist countries, it would be naive to anticipate a fall that transforms the revolution into a thing of the past. We have seen these experiences in the form of phantasms. It would be better to look for the causes or roots of the experience. Yes, there has been light but also long shadows across these past 63 years. In order for the country to heal, there must be a public apology to the many people harmed by this historical experience.

It is important to understand that the Cuban reality is subject to a factor that conditions everything, and this factor is the improvisation required by the structural crisis that impedes development. In recent years there is an accumulated debt that keeps the government in check and causes them to act out of fear. Any decision rooted in fear will lack objectivity. For example, the construction of luxury hotels in the most important centers of power like La Habana

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Vieja, Miramar, and el Vedado—massive inhuman edifices in a city that lacks sufficient water. We have lost a valuable opportunity here, ignoring the ecotourism that would foster contact with nature. At the same time, we witness the abandonment of the sugar mills and the sugar industry at large. Farmers encounter obstacles to obtaining fertilizers, the necessary tools and equipment, and decent wages. The worst thing that is happening in Cuba is the combination of a Stalinist system for the most disadvantaged and a neoliberal system for those at the top. At times one gets the impression that the decisions are undertaken with only the macroeconomy in mind, while the social projects for an aging population are neglected. This all runs counter to the official discourse, then; they are not thinking of the country as a whole.

The war that Putin launched in Ukraine with NATO on the other side, as well as the Covid pandemic, have rendered visible that we can no longer speak of a Russian economy, or a U.S. economy, or a European or Chinese economy because really there is one global economy. The laws that govern the global market affect all of us. How, then, to disconnect from a world that is more and more interconnected? Today more than ever, we need to understand the social experiment that the October Revolution undertook as well as the echoes this event left in the Cuban Revolution. There is no economic system other than capitalism, but we might strive for the variety of capitalism with social justice that we see in the Nordic countries, which are not perfect but seem to me to be more humane models.

The Cuban Left, More Critical and Decolonized

RAYMAR AGUADO HERNÁNDEZ

THE CONTEMPORARY CUBAN political climate is so adulterated with labels and slogans that we find ourselves in a pitched battle between extremes that do not recognize themselves as such. The typical epithets, characterized by occlusions and narrative voids, resist any discursive efforts to demonstrate weak elements in the arguments. The rigid schematism fosters segregation and dogma in a language

game whose object is to prejudice certain political positions by means of fallacies only loosely connected to the reality they claim to refer to.

From its peculiar triadic vantage of party/state/government, the political establishment in Cuba pigeonholes all dissenting individuals with delegitimizing and offensive adjectives. These designations, typically accompanied by a tagline about mercenarism in the service of imperialism, effectively solidify the authoritarianism of the ruling caste that undermines the collective right to a plurality of political positions. In this manner, the government increases

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physical and psychological repression, ideological coercion, and the desperation of the citizenry.

After the widespread protests of July 11, 2021, this hermetic and repressive order was greatly fortified. There were thousands of arrests and cases of police brutality—normalized in the days following the protests—a new penal code that criminalized dissent was enacted, and many activists were pressured or forced into exile. While it is true that these repressive measures existed before the protests, they did not get nearly as much coverage in the days before the Internet and the proliferation of independent media outlets in Cuba.

For its part, at the other extreme, there are conservative groups enclosed in a bubble of elitism and exclusivity that frame their politics in terms of pro-capitalist and liberal narratives, with an agenda devoted to discrediting any perspectives from the political left that question, dissent, or confront the high-handed and dehumanizing histrionics of imperialism.

In this camp we find people who refuse to recognize subaltern identities, sexual nonconformity, or vulnerable segments of the population and whose media coverage manipulates and disparages this important activism. In this way they reveal their ultraconservative ideology, denying and attacking these subaltern communities even as they attempt to discredit their struggles.

These conservative groups reproduce structures of domination similar to those of the government they oppose, pigeonholing as pro-government anyone whose political orientation accords with Marxist principles, with a decolonizing project, with transfeminist discourse, and so on. Any political position calling for unity, for sustainable development, for equity, or for integration and social justice becomes a target of their attacks, which tend to be confrontational or aggressive, lacking in

any theoretical grounding, and with ethics grounded in accordance with the dictates of capital and aligned with the economically privileged groups.

It is no secret that far-right groups in the United States, including the U.S. government itself, devote millions of dollars to the oppositional groups in Cuba that undermine progressive discourse. In a very real sense, then, these groups have the same level of media power as the Cuban government—possibly more—and they use this power to reproduce a politics of hatred and exclusion with caustic formulas, Miami being the epicenter of these efforts.

In the Cuban context, the very idea of what constitutes a leftist position has been effectively sequestered by the factionalism that I discussed above. For more than sixty years, the Cuban political establishment proclaims itself to represent the left and even to embody the revolution itself, employing Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara as icons of this international movement.

Today, however, with the social advances that the revolution and the citizenry achieved now largely buried, and with the political establishment constituted as a centralized, single-party state, totalitarian and dictatorial, the concept of the political left as something co-substantial with the government in Cuba is promoted chiefly by intellectuals, artists, and political scientists serving the regime, by individuals who enjoy, moreover, political and economic benefits, legal impunity, and the support of communications media monopolized by the government.

At the same time, pro-government groups and movements that emerged as a response to the November 27, 2020, sit-in outside the gates of the Ministry of Culture building and to the popular uprising of July 11, 2021, carry out, at the behest of the government, an apologist campaign

that promotes the false image of unity and solidarity of Cuban youth with the vertical political structure.

While these individuals enjoy a freedom of action, with public events, open letters, meetings with the president and high-ranking officials, institutional recognition, privileged professional positions, opportunities for publication in official media platforms, and more, the more critical groups suffer harassment, censorship, expulsions from the workplace and educational institutions, defamatory campaigns, illegal citations from State Security (Seguridad del Estado), and repression and exile as punishment for their critical posture, even when this posture is framed in Marxist terms, from a leftist perspective committed to social justice—that is, in accordance with principles that the Cuban government claims to honor.

Among the principal challenges to a reasoned analysis of the Cuban left are the various individuals and collectivities outside of Cuba who validate the official Cuban government discourse. Numerous political parties, academic associations, intellectuals, and researchers on the left identify the Cuban political project as “socialist” or “leftist” even as many rigorous economic and political studies demonstrate the totalitarian character of the state, which in economic terms embodies a state capitalist model grounded in self-serving notions of legality.

It is broadly understood that the Cuban Revolution, at least in the last three decades, lost its character as a social revolution of, for, and by the *humildes* (the disenfranchised or the subaltern), transforming itself into a fiefdom, the property of an elite few who govern the country according to their own interests. A clear example of this is the existence of the entrepreneurial entity GAESA (Grupo de Administración Empresarial) which, subordinated to the FAR (the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias), administers and centralizes enormous

capital under the aegis of the Cuban military and the ruling caste, while the Cuban population suffers high levels of poverty.

Data published by the ONEI (Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información) in September 2021 shed some light on this issue. According to this data, 0.5 percent of new public capital investment has been devoted to education and 1.0 percent to health and social assistance, in marked contrast with the 42.3 percent devoted to building and hotel construction. In view of these data, the misuse of public funds becomes evident, so much so that a simple tour of Havana will reveal luxurious five-star hotels in the same neighborhoods where dwellings, state centers, and urban buildings are collapsing.

Official government propaganda and its supporters outside of Cuba promote a false view of the national situation, thereby extending and reinforcing erroneous ideas that do a great deal of harm to people on the island, including the leftist opposition. In so doing, they inadvertently strengthen oppositional narratives from the political right, and, in portraying the exercise of Cuban political power as just, legitimize the myth of socialism in Cuba.

The perspective of outsiders who don’t fully understand the reality on the island and who support the policies of the current government is unjust to the hundreds of political prisoners, to censored journalists, to Cubans living in exile, to the millions of Cubans living in precarious economic conditions, in extreme poverty, to the thousands of people who experience hunger in Cuba, who are unhoused, who do not enjoy decent labor conditions or adequate salaries, to the people killed by police—let us always remember the murders of Zidane Batista and Diubis Laurencio—to the millions of Cubans who live under the bootheel of an oppressive totalitarian political system whose legal system deprives us of the right to demand our basic rights.

Mapping the Radical Imagination

A Relational Genealogy of the Puerto Rican Left Since the 1990s

JOSÉ A. LAGUARTA RAMÍREZ

In memory of Frank Velgara Valentín

WHILE THE GENEALOGIES OF pro-independence socialism in Puerto Rico—up to the 1970s or so—have been widely studied, in the present it is often treated as a closed tradition. Its heirs in the present—those who most openly continue to embrace its imaginaries—are simply ignored in the media and academic literature or, if considered at all, seen as hopelessly marginal remnants or tragically naive attempts to revive outdated political projects. When unexpected events, such as the 2019 Uprising that unseated the “unincorporated” territory’s colonial governor,¹ disturb this picture, they are quickly reincorporated into dominant liberal narratives about an astute people wisely skeptical of utopian dreaming, who are momentarily pushed too far by corrupt leaders, or by the burdens of incomplete (but, presumably, completable) citizenship. In edgier analyses, such rebellions are generally seen as *auto-convocado* (self-convened) episodes in which radical traditions are framed as backdrop and not much else.²

Meanwhile, those efforts whose imprint on such processes cannot easily be ignored are celebrated for their newness, creativity, and originality, with little to no

regard for the trajectories that shaped the individual and collective biographies of their protagonists. For example, scholars reflecting on the 2019 Puerto Rican Uprising often recognize the role played by certain political and social organizations that held the smaller demonstrations at the start of the process, which quickly snowballed over the next few days. Attention is typically focused on relatively “new” groups such as the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* (*Colectiva*), *Jornada se Acabaron las Promesas* (*Jornada*), or the *Centros de Apoyo Mutua* (*CAMs*). (English translations of Spanish-language names are given in tables 1 and 2, below.) Sometimes, the work of such groups in laying the groundwork for the Uprising during the almost two years following hurricanes Irma and María’s devastation of the territory in September 2017 is recognized as well.³ It is rarely, if ever, acknowledged that these groups were founded and led by activists with long careers in other radical organizations—some of which are still active. Thus, the dynamics of interaction of the complex organizational field of Puerto Rico’s radical left since the onset of the ongoing and multifaceted crisis of colonial hegemony⁴ remain largely unexplored.

Writing on *El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueña*—a pro-independence and socialist organization of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the 1970s and 1980s strongly influenced by, and with connections to, radical Black and Third

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World movements, as well as by radical groups within Puerto Rico—Rose Muzio chose “radical imagination” to capture the way the group’s political identity and vision were shaped through its relatedness with existing traditions, as well as with its time and place.⁵ It is in this sense that I seek to examine the Puerto Rican radical left of the past quarter century (taking 1996—the year federal tax exemptions for U.S. corporations in Puerto Rico under Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code began to be “phased out”—as the point of departure for the conjuncture): as a continually reselected and reinvented political *tradition* that, while undoubtedly still marginal within the territory’s larger political landscape, is absolutely crucial for understanding unexpected historical events like the 2019 Uprising and other ongoing transformations whose course—like the burrowing of Marx’s famous “mole”—is far from decided.

Based on my ongoing research—including conversations and interviews with founding and leading members of the Colectiva, Jornada, the CAMs, and other organizations—I seek in this essay to sketch a relational and genealogical map of the Puerto Rican radical left since the late 1990s. By radical left, I mean anti-capitalist and anti-colonial organizations whose praxis is rooted primarily in social movements (as opposed to electoral politics and armed struggle—though as I discuss below, there are important historical linkages with both) *and* a significant part of whose discourse and/or tactics are confrontational. My discussion therefore focuses on “direct action” social movement organizations, as a distinct typology that also differs from mass membership social movement organizations and from those engaged primarily in more institutional activities (such as advocacy/lobbying, education, or service provision)—though there are often significant overlaps.⁶

Contextualizing the Radical Left

As is well known, Puerto Rico’s electoral field in the late twentieth century was structured according to the three historical “status options”: commonwealth, statehood, or independence. The pro-commonwealth status quo Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) and the pro-statehood Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP) dominated, alternating power every four to eight years, with the smaller, social-democratic Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP) in third place.⁷ Directly to the left of the PIP within the pro-independence field, the Marxist-Leninist Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (PSP) ran candidates in the 1976 and 1980 elections, but, faced with meager results and the crisis of the international socialist bloc, throughout the 1980s some of its leaders promoted the idea of a puertorriqueñista alliance with the PPD in order to stem the growth of the pro-statehood movement. This notion proved seductive to many erstwhile independentistas, contributing to a dwindling of already reduced support for the PIP during the 1990s.⁸ When the PSP officially disbanded in 1993, many of its prominent figures spearheaded new political initiatives, which later merged into the Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano (MINH), an organization known for its support of PPD candidates during the early 2000s and 2010s.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the PSP, PIP, and smaller left organizations actively sought—with mixed success—to initiate, join, and lead social movements, especially labor unions and among high school and university students, but also in community organizing, including significant environmental justice and squatter, or “land rescue,” movements.⁹ Puerto Rican “second wave” feminism emerged during these years, as did gay and lesbian rights efforts, not always receiving space in the agendas of the left.¹⁰ Explicit critiques of racism within Puerto

Rican society itself (as opposed to U.S. racism, which has always been prominent in independentista narratives) also began to be articulated more forcefully.¹¹ Although not appearing until the early 1990s and not explicitly pro-independence or part of the radical left, *Colectivo Ilé* should be mentioned here as the first—and for a long time, only—organization specifically addressing issues of race and racism within the territory.¹²

The role of the Puerto Rican diaspora has been important. Much has been written about radical political organizing among Puerto Rican diasporic communities, from the Nationalists and Communists in the 1930s and 1940s,¹³ to the Young Lords, the U.S. chapters of the Puerto Rico-based PSP, and *El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueña*, among others in the late 1960s through 1980s.¹⁴ One of the most important armed-struggle, pro-independence organizations in Puerto Rican history, the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN)*, recruiting almost exclusively from the diaspora and operating within the continental United States in the 1970s and early 1980s, emerged from the milieu of Puerto Rican community organizations in the Chicago area.¹⁵ In one form or another, all of these left a lasting imprint on Puerto Rican community and social movement organizing in the United States, and vice versa.

They also made a lasting imprint on later radical politics inside Puerto Rico, especially as a crucial transmission belt of new modes of thinking and practice for radical politics in general and especially in terms of sexuality, race, and diaspora itself.¹⁶ To cite just two contemporary examples, the agitprop collective *AgitArte/Papel Machete* (which has an extended network of collaborators and consistently produces work around issues beyond Puerto Rican communities, including climate justice

and prison abolition) and *Colectivo Ilé*—mentioned above—were born in the state of Massachusetts in the 1990s, which has its own important history of Puerto Rican community organizing, often overlooked by a literature focused primarily on New York and Chicago.

In turn, radical politics in the territory has made its mark on the diaspora. When I first arrived in New York City in the late 1990s, groups like the *Vieques Support Campaign* and the *Prolibertad Freedom Campaign* maintained strong ties to the *Frente Socialista (FS)*; see below), its member organizations, and other groups in Puerto Rico, while practicing active solidarity with U.S. struggles, such as the campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal. These relationships continue in the present. For example, one of the most recent radical left protest organizations to emerge in the Puerto Rican diaspora is *Boricua Resistance*, with chapters in Chicago (where it was founded) and New York. *Boricua Resistance* is also part of the *Puerto Rico Is Not for Sale* campaign, a U.S.-based solidarity network of individuals and organizations that also includes *Jornada* as well as several more established Puerto Rican groups from the diaspora.

In Puerto Rico, many activists throughout the 1980s and 1990s turned away from status-centered politics to prioritize their involvement in local movements. In their attitudes toward electoral politics—motivated by the need for legislation and funding to support their local projects—some also gravitated toward “softer” critiques and tactical support of the PPD. In the analysis of the radical left, especially the younger, emergent generation, these choices explain the behavior of some union leaders and other activists under PPD, as opposed to PNP, administrations. For instance, one contrast that came up repeatedly in my conversations was that between, on the one hand,

the vociferous condemnation of the 2005 University of Puerto Rico (UPR) student strike and the 2008 teachers strike—both of which took place during a PPD administration—and on the other hand the broad consensual support for the first phase of the 2010 UPR student strike, which took place during a PNP administration.

The 1980s had also seen the near-total disarticulation of the Puerto Rican clandestine, armed-struggle organizations, with FBI arrests of dozens of members of the FALN and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Puertorriqueños—Ejército Popular Boricua, popularly known as the Macheteros, which operated primarily in the territory (with a few actions, such as the spectacular 1983 heist of a Wells Fargo armored car in Hartford, Connecticut, taking place on the U.S. mainland). In 1990, Machetero leader Filiberto Ojeda Ríos escaped house arrest, only to reappear when tracked down by the FBI and allowed to bleed to death after a shootout in 2005. Both in the territory and the diaspora, a good deal of left activism during the 1990s, and until the release of the last remaining FALN prisoner, Oscar López Rivera, in 2017, revolved around the release of the political prisoners.¹⁷

Mapping an Ecosystem

Within the complex tactical and ideological space between the ex-PSP/MINH and the armed revolutionary groups, there have coexisted, from the 1990s to the present, a series of “revolutionary” or radical, but non-clandestine, organizations—often resulting from splits from the PIP or the PSP or from abandonment of the armed struggle during the previous decades. No longer seeking to control social movements, as was common in previous decades, these groups nonetheless have hoped to radicalize them by helping grassroots participants make connections between their local grievances and

the systemic forces of colonial capitalism.

This is the immediate organizational field I am concerned with here—what Agit-Arte/Papel Machete founder Jorge Díaz half-jokingly calls his group’s “ecosystem”—in which interacting and interrelated organizations mutually influenced one another, sometimes nurturing each other’s ranks.¹⁸ In this milieu, vigorous debates, dissidences, and splits were common, sometimes giving way to new groupings and orientations that nonetheless continued to exist in relation to, and dialogue with, pre-existing ones.

In 1989, an initiative of the Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores (MST)—itself the product of a fusion between three groups from various Marxist tendencies and shaped by a number of debates in the early-to-mid 1980s on topics ranging from authoritarianism to identity politics—led to the formation of a Socialist Front (FS) with the expressed intent of forming a pole of attraction to keep revolutionary socialist politics alive in a time of ideological crisis for the global left. The FS, which first came to be as an ad hoc committee to mobilize left opposition to an ultimately unrealized status referendum, did not support electoral parties or candidates. Although in theory, their stance on the electoral question was not one of principle, many of its member organizations called for active nonparticipation in local elections, seen as functioning to legitimize colonial capitalism.¹⁹

The FS and its member organizations were to play a critical role in two mass movements taking place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In turn, these movements served as a crucible for the emergence of a new generation of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist activists and groups. The first was the 1998 Huelga del Pueblo (People’s Strike) in support of telephone company workers already on strike against the sale of the public utility; the Huelga del Pueblo was made possible, to a large degree, by a

broad coalition of labor, social, and civic organizations that the FS was instrumental in promoting.²⁰ The second was the movement to shut down the U.S. Navy's base and live-munition bombing range on the inhabited island of Vieques (a part of the Puerto Rican archipelago). Viequenses and their allies had faced off against the Navy since the base's construction in the 1940s, their resistance reaching a high point in the late 1960s to the 1970s, when protesters forced the Navy out of the nearby inhabited island of Culebra. When a civilian security guard was killed by a stray bomb dropped from a Navy plane in April 1999, the movement was reignited and ultimately succeeded when the base was permanently shut down in 2003.

Most accounts of that movement have highlighted the importance of a media-savvy strategy featuring hundreds of demonstrators—including numerous celebrities and politicians—visibly crossing the base perimeter to be immediately arrested with little to no resistance.²¹ At least equally important, however, were the direct costs inflicted on the Navy by more confrontational tactics, including the cutting down of miles of perimeter fence by demonstrators and incursions into the bombing range during live-fire exercises by “human shield” brigades hoping to force the maneuvers to halt.²² Shunned by many within the broader movement, these tactics were supported by the FS, and the MST was particularly active in organizing brigades, several of which made it back out without arrests despite the harshness of the terrain.

These tactical differences echoed earlier fissures within the labor movement during the ultimately unsuccessful 1998 People's Strike, which was called off by the conciliatory leadership of the phone workers union.²³ After the strike, debates continued between those espousing a radical critique of neoliberal globalization (and the capital-

ist colony's place within it) and those seeking varying degrees of alliance, leverage, or accommodation with local and U.S.-based politicians and employers.²⁴ These quarrels often echoed existing debates over collaboration with the PPD on questions of local autonomy and culture, as well as ongoing debates over tactical questions, which continued to deepen throughout the Vieques movement and thereafter. At stake, in essence: whether to increase opponents' political and economic costs through confrontational tactics or appeal to less radical publics through conciliatory tactics.

In the early 2000s, the FS consisted of the MST; the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT); Taller de Formación Política (TFP); Refundación Comunista; and two youth/student organizations, the Unión de Juventudes Socialistas and the Juventud de Izquierda Revolucionaria, linked to the MST and the PRT, respectively; along with a large group of unaffiliated socialists. Beyond the FS, there existed a number of other independent leftist groups, such as the Organización Socialista Internacional (OSI), the storied but declining Federación de Universitarios Pro-Independencia, and the radical environmentalist Amigos del MAR (Movimiento Ambiental Revolucionario). Various short-lived initiatives that emerged at the time also had a lasting impact on the radical landscape, including the feminist organization Masfaldas, the popular education youth group La Nueva Escuela, the Frente Estudiantil, and the Comité Contra la Homofobia y el Discrimen (CCHD), which signaled the rebirth of a militant LGBTQIA+ movement.

The year 2006 is often identified as a turning point in Puerto Rico's recent history, given the introduction of a flat sales tax and the end of the Section 936 phaseout, destined toward the repayment of the territory's “extraconstitutional” debt—the first

Table 1. Major Anti-Colonial Organizations in Puerto Rico, 1990s-2005			
Acronym	Spanish Name	English Name	Description
AgitArte	AgitArte	Agitation/Art, "To Agitate You"	Nonprofit agitprop collective, founded 1997, Lynn, MA (arrived in PR 2000).
CMI†	Centro de Medios Independientes	Independent Media Center	Also known as Indymedia PR. Local platform of global alternative media network Indymedia.
FUPI	Federación de Universitarios Pro Independencia	Federation of Pro-independence University Students	Close (but never formally tied) to PSP before 1993. Status unknown (social media inactive since c. 2015).
EPB-M	Ejército Popular Boricua-Macheteros	Boricua Popular Army-Macheteros	Clandestine, armed revolutionary socialist. Status unknown (believed inactive since at least 2005).
MINH	Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano	National Hostosian Independence Movement	Progressive. Supported PPD candidates, 2000s-2010s.
OSI†	Organización Socialista Internacional	International Socialist Organization	Originally local chapter of U.S. Trotskyist organization of the same name. Later separated.
PIP	Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño	Puerto Rican Independence Party	Social-democratic electoral party.
PSP†	Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño	Puerto Rican Socialist Party	Marxist-Leninist mass party. Ran electoral candidates in 1976, 1980. Disbanded 1993.
Frente Socialista			
JIR†	Juventud de Izquierda Revolucionaria	Revolutionary Left Youth	Youth wing of PRT.
MST	Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras (name expanded 2016)	Socialist Workers' Movement	Fusion of groups from various revolutionary socialist tendencies.
PRTP-M	Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Puertorriqueños-Macheteros	Revolutionary Puerto Rican Workers' Party-Macheteros	Split from PRTP-EPB in 1985. Status unknown.
PRT†	Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores	Revolutionary Workers' Party	Split from PRTP-M in 1998.
RC†	Refundación Comunista	Communist Refoundation	Marxist-Leninist, anti-revisionist. Declared itself "refounded" PC in 2010 (see Table 2).
TFP	Taller de Formación Política	Political Education Workshop	Trotskyist, local affiliate of Mandelist Fourth International. Now exists as tendency within MVC (see Table 2) called Democracia Socialista.
UJS	Unión de Juventudes Socialistas	Union of Socialist Youths	Youth wing of MST.

† No longer exists.

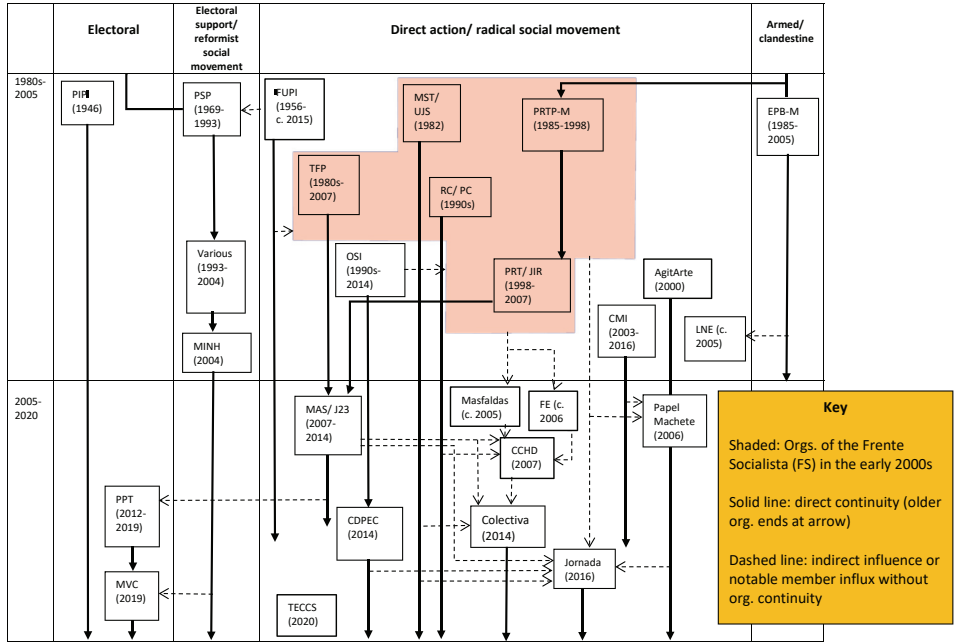
Table 2. Major Anti-Colonial Organizations in Puerto Rico, Founded Since 2005			
Acronym	Spanish Name	English Name	Description
Former Frente Socialista			
FS	Frente Socialista	Socialist Front	Continued as independent organization after 2005.
J23†	Juventud del 23 de Septiembre	September 23rd Youth	Youth wing of MAS.
MAS†	Movimiento al Socialismo	Movement towards Socialism	Broad democratic socialist.
PC	Partido Comunista	Communist Party	Marxist-Leninist anti-revisionist. "Refounded" 2010.
Other			
Papel Machete	Papel Machete	Machete Paper	Popular education street theater group (part of AgitArte network)
Amigos del MAR	Amigos del Mar – Movimiento Ambiental Revolucionario	Friends of the Sea – Revolutionary Environmentalist Movement	Broad radical environmentalist
FE†	Frente Estudiantil	Student Front	Socialist, UPR-based broad front.
LNE†	La Nueva Escuela	The New School	Popular education youth group. Strong EPB-M influence.
Masfaldas†	Masfaldas	More Skirts (inspired by Argentinian comic book character Mafalda)	Broad radical feminist, UPR-based.
CCHD†	Comité contra la Homofobia y el Discrimen	Committee against Homophobia and Discrimination	Militant LGBTQIA+ rights, UPR-based broad front.
Post-2014			
Colectiva	Colectiva Feminista en Construcción	Feminist Collective under Construction	Radical trans-feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist.
CDPEC	Centro de Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural	Center for Political, Educational, and Cultural Development	Anti-colonial, anti-capitalist mutual aid.
Jornada	Jornada Se Acabaron las Promesas	Promises Are Over Campaign	Broad anti-capitalist, agro-ecologist.
PPT†	Partido del Pueblo Trabajador	Working People's Party	Non-status, broad left electoral party.
MVC	Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana	Citizen's Victory Movement	Non-status, broad left electoral party.
TECCS	Trabajadores y Estudiantes Comunistas por el Cambio Social	Communist Workers and Students for Social Change	Marxist-Leninist anti-revisionist.

†No longer exists.

of many “emergency” austerity measures purportedly justified by the “debt crisis.”²⁵

However, for many of my interviewees, the *previous* year, 2005, is more significant for

The Puerto Rican Left Since the 1990s



Mentioned in text but not included for reasons of space: Amigos del MAR. Chart by José A. Laguarta Ramírez

the reemergence of the territory's radical left along with the rise of a series of grass-roots movements, simmering in the wake of the Navy's withdrawal from Vieques. Combined with the stimulation of community organizing by "neocommunitarian" programs put in place by the previous PPD administration, and a series of lesser-known legal victories, this led to the proliferation and emboldening of community-based grassroots movements.²⁶

In the spring of 2005, students at the flagship campus of the UPR, in Río Piedras, went on strike. The strike's confluence with various ongoing environmental justice, beach access, and anti-displacement movements brought student radicals from the UPR—many of them with personal and political roots in the Vieques movement—into closer contact with community-based grassroots organizations. It also allowed groups and individuals on the periphery of the FS and other longstanding or-

ganizations greater interaction within the radical left, which itself was further energized by the extrajudicial killing of Filiberto Ojeda Ríos in late September.²⁷

The founding of AgitArte's street-theater troupe, Papel Machete (whose name, in part, honors the fallen Machetero leader) is illustrative of this moment. In 2005, AgitArte had been operating as a grant-funded nonprofit popular-education project in Caimito (a poor, historically Afro-Puerto Rican community facing displacement and environmental degradation) for three years when it ran out of funds. A community leader from Caimito brought the group to Santurce No Se Vende, an anti-gentrification campaign then underway in the heart of San Juan. Although that fight was ultimately unsuccessful, it was there that AgitArte members learned and honed the papier-mâché puppet and mask-making techniques that became Papel Machete's signature style. They also

met members of the Centro de Medios Independientes—the local platform of the global, online, alternative-media network Indymedia, founded in the wake of the 1999 alter-globalization protests in Seattle; Centro de Medios Independientes had been launched by local activists in the aftermath of Vieques.

From those interactions emerged the idea to “do something different” at the next International Workers Day demonstration. Composed of members of the original AgitArte nucleus as well as newcomers from Indymedia, Papel Machete performed its first street theater piece on May 1, 2006. That day’s demonstration in the financial district—held in the midst of a government shutdown caused by a stalemate over the amount of the proposed sales tax, which was flatly rejected by the left and more militant unions—ended in confrontation with the police, marking a re-emerging tactical modality (which had in fact been present at May 1 demonstrations since at least 2004) that would be seen again, much more forcefully, in 2017 and 2018.²⁸

Shortly after the end of the 2005 UPR strike, the MST and UJS left the FS, claiming irreconcilable differences over how the “broad front” was operating. In 2000, the youth of the different member organizations had formally proposed that the fusion of the various groups be accelerated. Despite the fact that this proposal did not prosper, the FS was de facto operating as a single organization in ways that—MST members argued—diminished democracy and gave some groups advantage over others.²⁹ Just as importantly, leaders believed the time and energy spent on these quarrels were better spent on rank and file labor organizing. A slate led by members of the MST’s teachers caucus had recently been elected to the union leadership of the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR), which at the time represented

the entirety of the public school system’s bargaining unit, and the possibility of a system-wide strike was fermenting.³⁰

The strike happened in 2008, and in retribution, authorities revoked the FMPR’s status as the sole bargaining representative under Puerto Rico’s public-sector union law. The FMPR has suffered many transformations since then (to which I cannot do justice here). Today, it is only one of several teachers organizations. However, it has remained the most consistently vocal and militant rank and file union in the territory, spearheading ongoing campaigns against school closures and pension cuts, as well as a combative and successful push in 2022 for the largest pay raise in the history of the public school system. While the current leadership does not consist of MST members, some are former members and others were part of the MST-led platform that led the 2008 strike. MST members who are teachers are still part of the FMPR rank and file.

The MST’s exit did in fact accelerate the demise of the FS as a broad front (it still exists today as a small, single organization). Not long thereafter, the TFP, along with the PRT and Juventud de Izquierda Revolucionaria, and some unaffiliated youth in the FS orbit, fused into the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), which also left the FS. The MAS later became the driving force behind the Partido del Pueblo Trabajador, which failed to surpass 1 percent of the vote in the 2012 and 2016 elections. In 2019, the Partido del Pueblo Trabajador disbanded to become part of the electoral coalition behind the new Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, capturing a significant share of the vote in 2020.³¹ A tendency within the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, composed primarily of former TFP members, is today known as Democracia Socialista.

In 2010, students at the UPR went on strike once again. The UJS, the OSI, the

MAS's youth wing, Juventud del 23 de Septiembre, along with the CCDH (which was more of a broad front than an organization) all played important roles in the strike, which followed mass mobilizations in 2009 against austerity measures premised on debt repayment and authorizing the layoff of up to 30,000 public employees. When calls for a general strike to stop the layoffs fell flat, the student movement took the initiative and struck, in the hopes of jump starting a national movement. Despite the broad support generated by the first phase of the strike, the jump-starting effort fell flat as well. The far more confrontational second phase of the strike generated the usual tactical objections, even amongst those who had enthusiastically supported the first phase.³² In the spring of 2017 (just months before the hurricanes), UPR students once again attempted—and failed—to spark a general insurrection against the debt repayment regime imposed in 2016. Their months-long strike nonetheless generated huge participatory assemblies and served as a crucible for that year's massive and combative May 1 demonstration.

Shifting Gears

According to my interviewees, by 2014 the Puerto Rican radical left had entered a period of profound introspection. For many of the post-Vieques generation, it was now clear that the wider movements of the older generation would not recover their lost militancy. Students, who had been the backbone of the radical left during this period, no longer had enough time to dedicate to activist work after repeated tuition hikes and other institutional changes. At the same time, many were graduating into, and becoming parents in, an extremely hostile labor environment. Like hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans during this period, many were forced to migrate, as had hundreds of thousands in earlier decades. In

quick succession, the organizations of the radical left were dramatically transformed: Some disappeared, others turned to electoral politics or mutual aid projects, still others stubbornly persisted in diminished form. It is then that the “new” organizations that have been protagonists in recent events made their appearance.

The OSI—after over two decades of existence—disbanded, with many of its members going on to form Centro para el Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural, which founded the first *comedor social* (social mess hall) for hungry students at UPR Río Piedras—the pioneering initiative of what would become the CAMs.³³ The Caribbean transfeminist Colectiva, founded by women activists from several of the organizations discussed here who were fed up with what they saw as enduring sexist attitudes and insufficient attention to issues of gender, cisnormativity, and race, emerged around the same time. The Colectiva has been at the forefront of emphasizing the racial and gendered aspects of colonial capitalism in Puerto Rico and has served as a link to broader transnational struggles, leading a number of impactful campaigns and playing a key role in mobilization during the 2019 Uprising.³⁴

In 2016, after Puerto Rico's governor declared the territory's \$74 billion public debt “unpayable,” the U.S. Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA; “promise” in Spanish), which among other things created an unelected, unaccountable seven-member Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (known locally as *la Junta*), to be named by the U.S. president and with the power to review and overturn all local financial legislation, to propose “adjustment plans,” and to initiate a local bankruptcy process. Opposition to PROMESA and the Junta took various forms, most visibly in the eventual emergence of Jornada.

Erroneously identified by some as having an anarchist bent—probably given its aesthetic and tactical similarities with “black blocs”³⁵—Jornada is in fact a militant, broadly anti-colonial collective that combines confrontational tactics with an agro-ecological ethos. (The group counts numerous farmers among its members and is directly linked to the *Movimiento de Agroecología Popular de Puerto Rico*.)

Incorporating highly performative elements into its repertoire, Jornada has also been closely tied to *AgitArte/Papel Machete* from the start, with the wooden shields used by Jornada in its first demonstrations built at *AgitArte*’s workshop/headquarters and various *Papel Machete* members also active within Jornada. *Papel Machete* has also created and performed a number of new street theater pieces around PROMESA. Following hurricanes Irma and María in 2017, Jornada, *AgitArte*, and CDPEC worked together closely to set up a network of mutual aid centers around the territory, which operated for about a year following the storms.³⁶ These, in turn, played an important mobilizing role during the 2019 Uprising and in many cases served as the basis for the much-touted horizontal spaces of participation known as *asambleas de pueblo* (people’s assemblies), which popped up in squares and other public spaces throughout the territory toward the end of the Uprising.³⁷

Although these groups seem to represent new strategic approaches to radical organizing—grounded in nonprofit funding; explicitly feminist, anti-racist, and queer/trans liberationist praxes; ecosocialist projects; and/or anarchist principles such as mutual aid and *autogestión* (community self-management)—they are very strongly rooted in, and continue to be a part of, the radical ecosystem described above. They were founded by radical activists such as former OSI spokesperson

Giovanni Roberto (CDPEC), former MAS and CCHD member Shariana Ferrer Nuñez (Colectiva), and Jocelyn Velázquez (Jornada)—who began her activist career in (and maintains a working relationship with) the FS. In conversation with me, all three openly discussed their personal and political trajectories at length, reaffirming their own (and their organizations’) enduring anti-capitalist and anti-colonial commitments.

Nor have the older organizations and forms of organizing entirely disappeared or become irrelevant. A well-established, “old-style,” mass-membership social-movement organization, the FMPR, played a significant role in the 2019 Uprising, supporting all of the early demonstrations. The arrest, on corruption charges, of Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, who was responsible for the school closures against which the FMPR and other teachers groups had already been mobilizing, was one of the Uprising’s various detonators. One of the earliest demonstrations that grew to unexpected size during the process was originally a march against pension cuts convened by the Retiree Chapter of the FMPR. As mentioned above, even in the midst of the Junta’s colonial austerity regime, the teachers unions recently achieved a significant victory.

Of the *asambleas*, only the *Asamblea de Pueblo de Bayamón* (a city within the San Juan metropolitan area) remains active, at the forefront of mobilizations against LUMA Energy, the U.S.-Canadian private consortium to which Puerto Rico’s power grid has been leased since 2020. The *Asamblea de Pueblo de Bayamón* is actively supported by the MST as well as by a “new” group that adheres to an “old” political identity and ideology, calling itself *Trabajadorxs y Estudiantes Comunistas por el Cambio Social*.

A Puerto Rican Radical Tradition

The long-term political impact of the work of all the organizations described above is evidenced, at least in part, by the 2019 Uprising and by major shifts in the 2020 elections.³⁸ As I have shown, the “new” groups typically acknowledged as having played key roles in the uprising are in fact part of a broader field with a long genealogy. Even though these groups often emerged as the result of conflicts and dissatisfaction with the ideas and practices of their immediate past, no tradition simply dies off when dissidents and those who have felt silenced break away. In many cases, those who break away feel that theirs is simply the best way for the radical tradition to move forward. However, those broken from often survive, and they don’t do so unscathed. For better and worse, in political networks, all actors are transformed by their interactions with one another and with their spatio-temporal milieu.

In this essay, I have not even begun to scratch the surface of the complexities of such dynamics and interactions, nor have I documented the rich diversity of political imaginaries that are part of the tradition—all of that is necessarily part of a longer-term project. However, acknowledging the existence of this tradition in its changing complexity over several decades—as I have tried to approximate here, in a level of detail not previously attempted—is indispensable to understanding the dynamics of what I am calling the Puerto Rican Radical Tradition.

NOTES

1. In late July 2019, Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced that he would resign without completing his term. That month, the 889-page transcript of a conversation or “chat” via messaging app between Governor Rosselló and his closest advisors had been made public, in various installments, over the course of several days. The full text of the chat was leaked just a

few days after the arrests of Education Secretary Julia Keleher and others on corruption charges. In the text, Rosselló and his inner circle made disparaging and often violently sexist and homophobic comments about political rivals, critics, and the general public, including callous and cynical remarks about the thousands who died as a result of infrastructure collapse and mismanagement in the wake of Hurricane María. Rosselló defiantly insisted he would not resign and only did so after two weeks of sustained mobilization, which included nightly confrontations between police and protesters at the gates of the governor’s mansion, as well as a series of mass demonstrations, including the largest public gathering in the territory’s history. For more detailed summaries, see, for example: Rafael Bernabe, “The Puerto Rican Summer,” *New Politics* (No. 68, Winter 2020), and Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Duke University Press, 2021), 3-10 and 130-138.

2. Zambrana, 132. A thorough examination of the term “self-convened” and its usages in academic and some activist circles in Puerto Rico is beyond the scope of this essay. I should note, however, that I find it largely unhelpful. While poetic, it simply restates, in micropolitical terms, what is self-evidently true of all collective action, especially if unexpected: That beyond a certain threshold of scale, it becomes “contagious.”

3. Zambrana, 132. See also: Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, “Against the Mythological Machine, Towards Decolonial Revolt,” *Theory & Event* (vol. 24, no. 3, 2021), 808.

4. On the crisis: Rafael Bernabe, “Puerto Rico: The Organic Crisis and the Alternatives,” Aug. 23, 2019 (newpol.org/puerto-rico-the-organic-crisis-and-the-alternatives/).

5. Rose Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity: Puerto Rican Political Activism in New York* (SUNY Press, 2017). While Muzio’s use of the term is explicitly influenced by C. Wright Mills’ notion of the “sociological imagination,” it also evokes numerous authors’ writings on the Black radical imagination and tradition, including: Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1983]); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2022 [2002]); and Ruth W. Gilmore, *Abolition Geographies: Essays Towards Liberation* (Verso, 2022).

6. Such overlaps are powerfully illustrated by a quick survey of the initiatives supported

through the María Fund, set up in the wake of the hurricanes specifically to finance grassroots and community-based organizing efforts: www.mariafund.org/ourwork.

7. Much of the history in this section is discussed in César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007). On the independence movement specifically: Rafael Bernabe, *Obstinate Star: A History of the Puerto Rico Independence Movement* (Haymarket, forthcoming).

8. Ayala and Bernabe, 310–311.

9. Jorge Colón Rivera, et al. *El proyecto de explotación minera en Puerto Rico (1962–1968): Nacimiento de la conciencia ambiental moderna* (Huracán, 2014); Deborah Berman-Santana, *Kicking Off the Bootstraps: Environment, Development, and Community Power in Puerto Rico* (University of Arizona Press, 1996); Manuel Valdés-Pizzini, “Historical Contentions and Future Trends in the Coastal Zones: The Environmental Movement in Puerto Rico,” in Sherrie L. Bayer and Barbra D. Lynch, eds., *Beyond Sun and Sand: Caribbean Environmentalisms* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 44–64; Liliana Cotto-Morales, *Desalambraz: Orígenes de los rescates de terreno en Puerto Rico y su pertenencia en los movimientos sociales contemporáneos* (Editorial Tal Cual, 2006).

10. Ayala and Bernabe, 235–237. Alice Colón-Warren and Idsa Alegría-Ortega, “Shattering the Illusion of Development: The Changing Status of Women and Challenges for the Feminist Movement in Puerto Rico,” *Feminist Review* (vol. 59, 1998), 101–117; René Esparza, “‘Qué Bonita Mi Tierra’: Latinx AIDS Activism and Decolonial Queer Praxis in New York and Puerto Rico,” *Radical History Review* (vol. 140, 2021), 107–141; Frances Negrón-Muntaner, “Can You Imagine?: Puerto Rican Lesbian Activisms, 1972–1991,” *CENTRO Journal* (vol. 30, no. 2, 2018), 348–377.

11. Ayala and Bernabe, 256–258.

12. Hilda Lloréns and Bárbara Abadía-Rexach, “In Defense of Black Life: A Brief Cultural History of Anti-Racist Efforts in Puerto Rico,” in Bernd Reiter and John Antón Sánchez, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Afro-Latin American Studies* (Routledge, 2022), 448–456.

13. Ayala and Bernabe, 113–115, 131–133, and 147–148.

14. Muzio; Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (University of North Caro-

lina Press, 2020); José E. Velázquez, Carmen V. Rivera, and Andrés Torres, eds., *Revolution around the Corner: Voices from the Puerto Rican Socialist Party in the United States* (Temple University Press, 2021); Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Temple University Press, 1998).

15. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race, and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

16. On the role of Puerto Ricans in ACT-UP (including the formation of a Puerto Rico chapter in the early 1990s): Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2021). See also Ayala and Bernabe, 235–237.

17. Ronald Fernández, *Prisoners of Colonialism: The Struggle for Justice in Puerto Rico* (Common Courage Press, 1994); Michael González Cruz, *Nacionalismo revolucionario puertorriqueño, 1956–2005: La lucha armada, intelectuales y prisioneros políticos y de guerra* (Editorial Isla Negra, 2006); Michael González-Cruz, *Militant Puerto Ricans: Migrants, Armed Struggle, and Political Prisoners* (independently published, 2020).

18. José A. Laguarda Ramírez, “Crisis Projects: 25 Years of AgitArte in Puerto Rico and the Global Diaspora,” www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/interventions/crisis-projects-25-years-of-agitarte-in-puerto-rico-and-the-global-diaspora.

19. On the MST: José A. Laguarda Ramírez, “Struggling to Learn, Learning to Struggle: Strategy and Structure in the 2010–11 University of Puerto Rico Student Strike, 2016,” academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1359/, 69–79. On the FS: Carlos Quirós-Méndez, “A 31 años de la fundación del Frente Socialista,” rumboalternativo.net/2021/11/a-31-anos-de-la-fundacion-del-frente-socialista-en-puerto-rico/.

20. Ayala and Bernabe, 296–297 and 311.

21. Katherine McCaffrey, *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico* (Rutgers University Press, 2002).

22. Gazir Sued, *Vieques: Crónicas desde la desobediencia* (La Grieta, 2001).

23. Rafael Bernabe, “Puerto Rico’s La Huelga del Pueblo,” *Against the Current* (no. 76, Sept.–Oct. 1998), againstthecurrent.org/atc076/p1796/.

24. Ayala and Bernabe, 297–299; Conferencia Sindical, *Entre la huelga del pueblo y la Cumbre Social: el movimiento obrero puertorriqueño en la encrucijada* (San Juan, 2007 [2001]).

25. José Atilés-Osoria, "Exceptionality and Colonial-State-Corporate Crimes in the Puerto Rican Fiscal and Economic Crisis," *Latin American Perspectives* (vol. 47, no. 3, 2020), 49-63.
26. Liliana Cotto-Morales, "Commentary: Social Movements, Crises, and Mobilizations," *Latin American Perspectives* (vol. 47, no. 3, 2020), 129-137. On neocommunitarianism and community organizing: Janialy Ortiz Camacho, "Transitar entre la práctica gubernamental y la política: desarrollo y conflicto en la Comunidad Especial Juan Domingo, Puerto Rico," 2017, www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/401431. On community legal victories in the early 2000s: Haydeé Colón, "Historia de Chiclana," www.moralespr.tripod.com/chiclana_.htm, and Cándida Cotto, "A Rare Happy Ending: Piñones Versus the Developers," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (vol. 40, no. 6, 2007), 30-34.
27. For visuals of Ojeda Ríos's funeral procession and others illustrating the mood in response to his killing (not necessarily limited to independentistas): Residente Calle 13, "Querido F.B.I." youtu.be/WkEy_aeFcec.
28. On May 1, 2006: Hugo Delgado Martí, "Primero de mayo combativo," www.bandera.org/obreras-991/. On May 1, 2017 and 2018: Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, "Celebrating May Day in Puerto Rico," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (vol. 51, no. 3, 2019), 301-305.
29. Quirós-Méndez; Laguarda Ramírez, *Struggling to Learn*, 78-79.
30. On the 2008 teachers strike: José A. Laguarda Ramírez, "Teachers' Strike Stops Classes in Puerto Rico," *Labor Notes*, Mar. 27, 2008, labornotes.org/2008/03/teachers-strike-stops-classes-puerto-rico.
31. José A. Laguarda Ramírez, "In Puerto Rico, the 2019 Uprising Produces an Opening to the Left," *New Politics* (no. 70, Winter 2021), 74-80.
32. Laguarda Ramírez, "Struggling to Learn," 158-169.
33. Marisol LeBrón, "People Before Debt," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (vol. 48, no. 2, 2016), 115-117. Jacqueline Villarubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez, "Centros de Apoyo Mutuo: Reconfigurando la asistencia en tiempos de desastre," *CENTRO Journal* (vol. 32, no. 3, 2020), 89-117.
34. Fernando Tormos-Aponte and Shariana Ferrer-Núñez, "Intersectional synthesis: A case study of the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción," in Sharon A. Navarro and Lillian P. Saldaña, eds., *Latinas and the Politics of Urban Spaces* (Routledge, 2021), 53-66.
35. See, for example: Zambrana, 132. Jornada's members typically dress in black and use black-and-white Puerto Rican flags. This version of the flag has come to broadly symbolize resistance since 2016, when an artists' collective responded to the signing of PROMESA by painting over the traditional red and blue, in an existing, well-known installation consisting of the flag painted on the wooden doors of an abandoned building. To public speculation, the collective replied in an open letter that the color change represented not mourning, but resistance. Julieta V. Muñoz Alvarado, "Monoestrellada blanca y negra: 'No es luto, es resistencia,'" www.80grados.net/monoestrellada-blanca-y-negra-no-es-luto-es-resistencia/. It is worth recalling that black and white were also used by the Nationalist Party on its own flag (a white Maltese cross on a solid black background) and the uniforms of its "cadets" in the 1930s.
36. Laguarda Ramírez, "Crisis Projects."
37. On the asambleas: Jacqueline Villarubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez, "Puerto Rican People's Assemblies shift from protest to proposal," Aug. 20, 2019, nacla.org/news/2019/08/22/puerto-rican-people%E2%80%99s-assemblies-shift-protest-proposal.
38. Laguarda Ramírez, "In Puerto Rico."

Ukraine and the Indian Left

An Interview with Kavita Krishnan

ROHINI HENSMAN

KAVITA KRISHNAN, A MARXIST feminist who had been for three decades a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, a member of the Politbureau, leader of its women's wing (the All-India Progressive Women's Association) and a prominent spokesperson of the party, suddenly quit these posts and the party itself in early September 2022. Many admirers were unclear about what had happened and why, although from her subsequent statements and articles it became clear that the reason was a disagreement with the party's position on the war in Ukraine.

On April 10, 2023, she was interviewed by Rohini Hensman on her departure from the party and her differences with it.

Rohini Hensman: As the spokesperson of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation and of its women's wing AIPWA, you had the privilege of being widely reported when you took positions that were shared by many socialists and feminists. Can you explain what made you resign from this position?

Kavita Krishnan: The differences with the

CPIML, to which I had belonged for three decades, came to the fore following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. I did not actually intend to resign from leadership positions in the party or AIPWA. To begin with, I had been sure that there was room in the party to openly debate the approach to the Ukraine war, and to acknowledge and analyze the growing convergence between anti-democratic political projects as articulated by Putin, Trump, Xi Jinping, Modi, and many others. It became clear that my confidence was misplaced when the party told me I couldn't remain a party leader if I wrote anything expressing my views on this subject, whether in the party magazine or outside it. I had assumed that I could remain a party member—and did not in fact realize I had lost my membership until two days after the fact.

The party leadership's position was that the invasion of Ukraine was a remote event, requiring nothing but a token statement condemning Russia's invasion and stating solidarity with Ukraine—while emphasizing the alleged United States and NATO role in creating the conflict and then perpetuating it.

They also said the left cannot "identify with" Ukraine and advocate for its victory as we did with Vietnam (or even Afghanistan or Iraq). The reason? The latter were resisting the U.S., which is the foremost imperialist power. We could not advocate for an outright defeat for Russia at the hands of Ukraine, because such a defeat

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would weaken Russia as a “multipolar” power challenging U.S. hegemony.

Their position was that “regardless of the internal character” of the governments of Russia and China, the left must welcome them as powers that enable a “multipolar world.”¹ Any wider discussion of this question, they felt, was a distraction from the “national priority” of resisting Modi’s fascist policies in India.

RH: So, what were your arguments for why the left should support Ukraine in the ongoing war, including supporting their request for arms?

KK: I had argued that we should support any resistance to injustice, regardless of what relationship that state had to the U.S., and that our solidarity should be for the survival and victory of struggling people resisting injustice—not for the survival of despotic states whose only merit is that they are not the U.S. I was very distressed that instead of countering Putinist disinformation that flooded the public sphere in India, the party was rehabilitating such propaganda even in its own publications.

For instance, an editorial in our weekly publication said that in annexing Crimea in 2014, Putin was “retaliating” for the “toppling of the elected Yanukovich regime” by the U.S.² This was published, overriding my strenuous efforts to present facts on the Maidan revolution. I was eventually allowed to write a single signed article on Ukraine in our party magazine³—but it was made clear that this opportunity would not happen again.

RH: Internationalism is a key tenet of revolutionary socialism. How do you respond to Indian left parties terming the question of Ukraine an “international” one, and therefore not a priority for the left in India?

KK: My central argument with my party was in fact that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was not a remote issue—its outcomes would have profound consequences for In-

dia and the world, indeed, for the survival of the planet. Events since have only affirmed the validity of my concerns.

Let me explain. We know that Narendra Modi’s rise was paralleled by the rise of businessman Gautam Adani, and that any analysis of Modi’s politics is inseparable from an analysis of his crony capitalists, foremost among them being Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

The Hindenburg report has revealed that Adani’s business empire stands on a foundation of brazen fraud. The Adani empire had transactions with VTB, the Russian state-owned bank popularly called “Putin’s piggybank.”⁴ A member of parliament from the Congress Party, Jairam Ramesh, drew attention to VTB’s role in a deal reportedly supervised personally by Putin and Modi, where four Indian

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public sector units paid an inflated price for a 49.9% stake in a subsidiary of Russian energy giant Rosneft, which bought up a Gujarat-based oil refinery from Essar for at least twice as much as it was worth. He commented on “a suspicious pattern in which public sector units overpay a Russian firm for an oil asset, which, in turn, overpays a politically-connected private Indian firm for another energy asset.”⁵

Former U.S. President Donald Trump and his associates have also been investigated for conflicts of interest arising from their dealings involving VTB and another

Russian bank Sberbank, associated with Russian oligarchs.⁶ A Chinese businessman is closely involved in the dubious transactions of members of the Adani family and business empire, and implicated in Adani's coal procurement scams as well as allegations of Adani's violation of UN sanctions to sell petroleum products to North Korea.⁷ There is another company, Elara Capital, with links to Mauritius and London, including Jo Johnson, a British MP and brother of former PM Boris Johnson, who is a co-owner of an Adani defense firm.⁸

In India, opposition parties have predictably framed their questions about Modi crony Adani's transactions involving individuals and state-owned entities in Russia, China, and North Korea in terms of the implications for India's national security, as well as for public sector assets including banks, which in turn affect the savings of ordinary Indians. At the time of this interview, Indian Left parties have conspicuously avoided any acknowledgement of Russian, Chinese, or North Korean linkages with the Adani scam, only mentioning Elara Capital, linked with London and Mauritius and the UK's Conservative Party.⁹

Another close crony of Modi's is the tycoon, Mukesh Ambani. Since the invasion and the sanctions imposed by the United States and its European allies on Russia, India has become one of the biggest buyers of Russian oil.¹⁰ Who in India is actually profiting from these transactions? According to a report, "Nearly three-quarters of cheap Russian oil is bought by private refiners, [Mukesh Ambani's] Reliance Industries and Russia-controlled Nayara Energy."¹¹ Essentially, these companies make millions laundering Russian crude which they then sell to the United States and European countries that imposed the sanctions in the first place.¹²

Fossil-fuel oligarchs are at the heart

of authoritarianisms worldwide, and these in turn are the reason the earth is hurtling to destruction. Modi's power rests on his two cronies Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani: both fossil-fuel oligarchs, one profiting from the invasion of Ukraine and the other with deep links to dubious Russian and Chinese financial entities.¹³ Russia is a fossil-fuel oligarchy, with Putin the biggest oligarch of them all. Authoritarian rulers, politicians, business tycoons, and oligarchs—including those in the U.S., Russia, Europe, Saudi Arabia, China, and India—are part of a global financial and political web with fossil fuels at their center. There is growing evidence of cooperation among far-right and authoritarian forces as part of a shared political project to discredit and dismantle the very concept of some minimum democratic values and standards that are universally accepted in principle.¹⁴ The foremost ideologue of this project is Russian fascist Aleksandr Dugin.¹⁵ It is startling to find that Dugin as well as American and European far-right figures invoke the same moral panic over "Kaliyuga" (the overturning of caste/gender hierarchies and the resulting miscegenation—mixture of castes—of which unnatural and monstrous beings are born) that has a prominent place in Hindu-supremacist ideology.¹⁶ Dugin has global connections, including to Chinese state universities and think-tanks, American far-right politics, a liberal Indian journal as well as Hindu supremacists.

How does the Indian left explain the rise of the global far-right and its relationship with the rise of Modi? They say that "global capitalism is mired in deep crisis and uncertainty and it is seeking a way out of this crisis through war and fascist consolidation and thorough undermining of bourgeois democracy";¹⁷ that "the current phase of fascism has emerged in a context of global neoliberalism;"¹⁸ that Adani and

Ambani are “homegrown billionaire capitalists ... deeply integrated with imperialism” and an expression of crony capitalism “which Vladimir Ilyich Lenin had defined as the economic essence of the imperialist stage of capitalism.”¹⁹

Are these timeless generalities adequate to describe, let alone explain the political economy of the rise of global authoritarian and far-right politics, and its relationship with the political economy of Hindu supremacist politics in India? I find it incredible that the CPIML and other Indian left parties should speak of the “national priority” of fighting fascism in India, while shutting their eyes and stopping their ears to any specific, concrete evidence that sheds light on the political economy of fascism in India, for fear that it might challenge formulas from a century ago that they hold dear.

RH: You do not, then, agree with those who say that this is a proxy war started by the United States and NATO using Ukraine to rebuild their hegemony, and therefore support for Ukraine is actually support for unipolar U.S. imperialism?

KK: For me, the invasion of Ukraine was the catalyst that brought long-simmering concerns and questions together with a blinding clarity, and I could suddenly see them as they are, with all their interconnections, shining a light on exactly how our world has changed.

Geopolitics (especially in its Realist avatar of “polarity” that has become common sense on the political Right, Left, and Center) is a distorting lens which prevents us from seeing political changes in the world. It is marked by the growing convergence of global and Indian anti-democratic projects (and their leaders and ideologues), projects backed by fossil-fuel oligarchies across countries and continents, that threaten the very survival of our planet. This ought to be

our primary concern, rather than to protect an imaginary “multipolarity.” Most of the global left, across the range of its diverse streams, is speaking a language of “multipolarity” which is hard to distinguish from

Fossil-fuel oligarchs are at the heart of authoritarianisms worldwide, and these in turn are the reason the earth is hurtling to destruction.

that shared by global despots like Putin, Xi, and Modi, and their ideologues like the RSS (the right-wing Hindu supremacist paramilitary organization) and Dugin, and their anti-democratic projects.

The burden of these despotic arguments is that minimum standards and values of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties are the ideology of a tiny but powerful Western elite, which they set up as “universal” and with characteristic imperialist arrogance seek to impose on the majority of people in the Western countries as well as the rest of the world. The majority, they claim, in Western countries as well as the rest of the world are waging a freedom movement to throw off the yoke of values imposed by an elite liberal “unipolar” and unilateral clique—values which defy the god-ordained laws of nature and the natural hierarchical order. Such resistance is punished by the Western elite with “cancel culture,” which in the case of “civilizational states” takes the shape of sanctions and finger-wagging on democracy and rights. But, they claim, the world will surely liberate itself from liberal hegemony dictated by unipolar Western power—and establish instead a multipolar world.

Prominent figures on the Indian and

international left make arguments that are disturbingly similar.

In the April 2020 issue of the Indian journal *Seminar*, Aleksandr Dugin wrote that “The multipolar world order [is] based on the principle of plurality of civilizations against the false pretensions of so-called ‘universality’ of ‘western values’ and ‘inevitability’ of the western way of progress and development.” He also described Modi’s rise as a multipolar triumph.

China’s President Xi Jinping wrote, “The United States and other Western countries ... package values of freedom, democracy, and human rights as ‘universal values’ and promote them globally to confuse people.” (*People’s Daily*, September 02, 2021)²⁰

In a Joint Russia-China statement issued in Beijing on February 4, 2022, a short while before the invasion of Ukraine, President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin said,

[We] call on the international community to respect cultural and civilizational diversity. Every nation has its own unique national features, history, culture, social system and level of social and economic development, human rights should be protected in accordance with the specific situation in each country and the needs of its population.²¹

S Jaishankar, BJP leader and Minister for External Affairs, Government of India, said, “Each country approaches issues of democracy, governance and human rights from their history, tradition and societal context. We do not believe the efficacy or the quality of democracy should be decided by others” (Washington, September 28, 2022).²²

Vijay Prashad, a prominent figure on the international left, said in a talk posted on YouTube on September 30, 2022,

Why is the U.S. so threatened by the idea of multi-polarity? It’s extraordinary, this kind of messianic sense that U.S.

values need to be spread around the world because they are superior to all other values. This idea that other people cannot govern themselves, that the U.S. must generalize its values all over the planet—this arrogance comes from this evangelical belief that U.S. values are better, and everybody must conform to the U.S. system. Multipolarity [is a] threat to this U.S.-dominated “rules-based order” as they like to call it.²³

The statements above come from persons that identify as “left” as well as those who identify as “right.” They all make arguments that are disturbingly similar. They argue that minimum standards and values of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties are just the ideology of a tiny but powerful Western elite, which they set up as “universal” and with characteristic imperialist arrogance, seek to impose on the majority of people in the Western countries as well as the rest of the world. Rulers should get to define “democracy” and “human rights” in keeping with values specific to their country or civilization, rather than answer to a “rules-based order” where the rules are based on the values of the United States.

In short, despots like Trump in America, Putin in Russia, Xi in China, and Modi in India describe multipolarity as their prerogative to determine and enforce the internal character of their nations and spheres of influence, regardless of any broad “universal” standards of democracy, rights, and liberties. And the left feels obligated to protect “multipolar” regimes (a euphemism for regimes seen to be hostile to the U.S.) “regardless of their internal character.”²⁴

RH: What is your response to people on the left who criticize your position as one that has abandoned socialist goals in favor of liberal democracy, such as the “universal standards of democracy and human rights” which you defend?

KK: The minimum standards of democracy, rights, and entitlements—and the legal obligation of states to comply with those standards—were never gifted by “enlightened liberal” states and their ruling classes. They were wrested from those rulers by courageous people’s movements. Most people are attracted to left movements precisely because they have rightfully earned ethical credibility for their courage in defending justice even when such positions challenge majoritarian prejudices or passions as well as draconian state power, and doing so knowing that it will result in persecution.

The left has a paradoxical relationship with these standards. Socialists have been inseparable from many of these movements in many parts of the world, and have as a result suffered persecution ranging from political witch-hunts, criminalization of their very ideas, incarceration and execution for thought crimes, political assassinations, all the way to mass massacres of people for the crime of being socialists.

But states that have ruled in the name of socialism have rejected these standards as

There is a growing convergence
of global and Indian anti-
democratic projects, backed
by fossil-fuel oligarchies across
countries and continents.

counterfeit, serving only to give capitalism a liberal mask. Claiming to be answerable not to these liberal pretensions but to a higher form of socialist democracy, these states proved to be among the most illiberal in modern history, notorious for political witch-hunts, criminalization, incarceration, execution, and massacres for thought-crimes or other equally arbitrary pretexts.

Left movements that disavow Stalinism have distanced themselves from the anti-democratic legacy of socialist states, arguing either that such states were never truly socialist or that such crimes were aberrations and mistakes, doubtless unfortunate and indefensible, but which cannot take away from the superior performance of such states on other democratic criteria—such as welfare measures for their citizens, support for colonial and post-colonial countries, or resistance to U.S. imperialism.

I think that both these arguments are disingenuous. Whether or to what degree such states were or are truly socialist is something socialist parties may argue over. But such arguments are something internal to socialist movements, and cannot in any way be the metric for defining or assessing such states.

We must assess and judge socialist states just as we assess and judge any other state. I think it’s time we get rid of the question about which system or which form of state affords a better life and thus a better democracy to people. It’s time to stop arguing about which form of state is more democratic. States are not where we should look for democracy. No form of state or government or economy is equivalent to democracy.

Democracy is not a form of state, fixed in form: it is a fluid process in which people argue, disagree, work together, to identify and fight for ever better democratic goals. So, the yardstick I favor to judge a country or society is: how free are people to fight for greater democracy? How free are people to set democratic goals for their society (disagreeing and arguing and making compromises and decisions in a messy and disorderly process) and fight for those goals?

A state that calls itself “socialist” may “provide” food, clothing, shelter but suppress and criminalize the right to organize, protest, dissent; it may disallow an inde-

pendent press, judiciary, and opposition. Citizens in a capitalist state that calls itself a “liberal democracy” may be unable to actually avail themselves of the rights recognized by their constitution—the right to vote, stand for elections, organize, and have their voice be heard in the free press—because they are disenfranchised and dispossessed by structural inequality, poverty, oppression, and hunger.

Democracy is not a form of state: it is a fluid process in which people argue, disagree, work together, to identify and fight for ever better democratic goals.

Both states may have policies of mass incarceration and surveillance that are overtly or covertly racial.

Trying to measure which form of state is more democratic is pointless because the premise of such an exercise is false: it implies that we are willing to be satisfied with the state’s own standards, and aim to defend that state or form of state. People who do not have to worry every day about food, clothing or shelter ought to be more free to organize, protest, question the state; in fact, to be the opposition without which no country can call itself a democracy.

People’s struggles have forced capitalist states to formally recognize bare minimum standards of democracy, rights, and liberties; and this formal recognition is all that “liberal democracy” is. The thing is, people’s struggles count those formal recognitions (universal adult suffrage, desegregation, the eight hour day, the right to unionize, protections from racial and caste-based

dehumanization, for instance) as wins—because these give them stronger grounds to demand that the state be accountable to those standards.

China joins Russia in discrediting those bare minimum standards and refusing to acknowledge these as “universal standards.” A report by a think-tank associated with the Chinese state, titled *Pursuing Common Values of Humanity — China’s Approach to Democracy, Freedom and Human Rights*, says that “the Western notion of democracy characterized by competitive elections between multiple parties and the separation of three powers—executive, legislative, and judicial” results in “social disorder, political turmoil and repeated setbacks in economic and social development.”²⁵ China, the report states, favors a model where democracy is defined as “good governance”—i.e. “where government, in the process of decision-making, should always keep in mind the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people, solicit and listen to the opinions of the people, serve the people.” In China, the report states, “happiness is the ultimate standard of human rights.” The report reproduced the Eight “Whether or Not” Criteria on Democracy listed by Xi Jinping: the rights to dissent, protest, organize, and challenge the government are absent from these criteria.

Some on the left like to describe the USSR—and China—as “state capitalist” and not socialist. The party to which I had belonged recently summed up its critical assessment of China with this comment: “the Chinese claim of building socialism with Chinese characteristics is increasingly becoming a euphemism for what should be described as capitalism with Chinese characteristics.”²⁶ These timid formulations seem to imagine they are daring ones. And they are just as absurd as claims that attack the concept of “healthcare for all” as

a harbinger of totalitarian rule.

The truth is that China is “capitalism with totalitarian characteristics.” Basic democratic standards in capitalist democracies have been won by “political turmoil” and “social disorder”—that is, by people’s struggles. And it is these turbulent and disorderly struggles that continue to defend these hard-won democratic standards, rights, practices, and institutions that far-right and authoritarian forces are intent on demolishing. China’s outright rejection of these standards does not just disqualify it as a “socialist state,” it disqualifies it as a democracy, and qualifies it to be termed a totalitarian tyranny.

RH: Would you like to say anything about how you see your future, now that you are no longer in CPI(ML) Liberation?

KK: I am not certain of how I see my future. But I do see my present with great clarity. Ideologically and politically, I am, as always, committed to struggles for a more just and democratic world. And I believe that anyone who shares this commitment, must with the greatest urgency defend universal standards and values of democracy. Not because these standards and values represent the highest human aspirations—but because they are the *minimum* democratic qualifications. The acknowledgement of these minimum standards and values as “universal” has been wrested from the powerful by the struggles of the powerless all over the world. It has not been imposed by a coterie of “Western elites.” There is no ceiling or cap on democracy—and if we reach for the sky, we must at the same time defend the democratic ground under our feet—*ground that we won*—from those that are rapidly eroding it.

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Assessing and Regulating Artificial Intelligence

MICHAEL ALBERT

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) CAN be defined as machines generating human-like outcomes for tasks that we humans do with our brains.

AI began roughly six decades ago as a scientific research program meant to enlarge our understanding of human mental processes. To that end, it failed. Over time, an engineering aspect rose to prominence to accomplish tasks that matter. To that end too, results were spotty and limited for decades. Then about 25 years ago some steps began succeeding, and about seven years ago, an innovation opened new prospects, and into the present various incarnations of what's called neural networks and large language models have dramatically changed the scene.

The pace continues. What is tumultuous news one day is replaced with new tumultuous news in months, weeks, or even days. We wonder, what is happening, why is it important, and what ought leftists concerned to build a better world do about it?

As I write, machines paint pictures,

compose music, diagnose diseases, and research and prepare legal opinions. They write technical manuals, news reports, essays, stories, and perhaps even novels. Machines code software and design buildings. They ace an incredible diversity of exams. Right now, in most states, machines could pass the bar exam and become lawyers. For all I know they have probably passed medical licensing exams as well. Machines now provide or will soon provide mental health counseling, elder care, personal support, and even intimate companionship. Machines converse, find patterns, design products, and solve complex problems (like protein folding). You can now feed an AI an entire book, not just a short prompt, but say 75,000 words, and in seconds ask it for an outline or summary, or for other reactions. Next week, what will it be? You can feed it 100,000 or 200,000 words and get a translation in minutes? Similarly, you can now feed in 6 hours of audio, and get a transcription. And, hot off the wires, perhaps most consequentially, AIs can now collaborate and even prompt one another.

Prompt an AI for an article on some topic, perhaps inflation or Covid, written in some style, perhaps humorously like Jon Stewart, and almost instantly you get what you asked for. Prompt an AI to undertake some kind of major project—solve the current housing crisis in California or end global warming—and AI can break the large-scale project into an agenda of

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component tasks. Then it can undertake the various tasks including prompting other programs and AIs for help when needed. More, when a step proves impossible for your favorite AI and its helpers, it will try to develop a new approach, change its agenda, and proceed anew until success. Note, once it embarks on the big project that you assign it, this new feature means it has considerable autonomy. It can prompt itself. It can prompt other AIs. It can use other programs. A few years back, that kind of thing was thought to be ten, twenty, or more years off. Now it is here. As you read this article, who knows what new things AIs will be doing?

Some say AI news is all hype. They say AI is feeble. It is failure prone. But the current version of AI is barely an infant. And in any event, how many humans can create very complex pictures, compose music, read and summarize reports, and write and program better than even today's fledgling AIs, much less do these things in seconds? Very, very few.

Does current AI make mistakes? Definitely, including many humdingers. Then again, so do humans. And in any event, what matters is AI's trajectory, not its current status. Anecdotes about weird failures made yesterday are amusing. Assessments of next year's likely abilities are a wholly different matter. Criticizing today's occasional blunders is like laughing at a baby gurgling while ignoring that this particular baby can age years in minutes. I suspect GPT-2 wouldn't have known a legal bar exam from a broom. GPT-3 took a bar exam and scored in the bottom 10 percent making lots of mistakes that legal scholars likely laughed at. A year later GPT-4 scored in the top 10 percent. Who's laughing now?

Maybe we should watch the trajectory. Maybe we shouldn't get stuck on a snapshot of a gurgling moment. Perhaps we shouldn't ignore that the AI's bar exam results were

not compared to random humans plucked off the street. They were compared to law school graduates. What will GPT-5 score next year? And what will happen to its number of errors, however many it is still making, when a stone's throw down the road one neural net will routinely send results to a second neural net or to a fact checker program to grade, and then the first will correct errors reported back by the second and only then deliver its updated results to us? Will it be better than 99 percent of law students? Will all its current silly and easily fact-checkable errors disappear?

I hypothesized about the above scenario with those same words a couple of weeks prior to writing this essay. I did so to try to put anecdotal stories about AI hallucinations in context. A couple of scholars saying AI is all hype told me it would be years if ever before we saw such a self-checking capability. Now I can watch a YouTube video of an OpenAI tech officer displaying exactly that process with a version of GPT-4 still not public. It should be clear that we ought to examine the trajectory, not laugh at snapshots of gurgling moments.

So, what is this new AI that is no longer knocking at our door, but already conversing with us from within numerous programs we use?

The big picture is that AI achieves human-like outcomes for lots of tasks we do with our brains. More, it does this incredibly faster and often much better than us. And far from having plateaued, at least so far AI does more things better each month, even each week, at what is at the moment an incredible pace of innovation followed closely by proliferation into mass use. Yes, this is all just profit-seeking firms struggling to stay ahead of other profit-seeking firms, each using the breakthrough, breakneck technical assets of AI today to have their own still more profitable assets tomorrow. Indeed, these facilities have

almost overnight grown from unique and mind-boggling lab adventures to tools dispersed for personal or group use by anyone anywhere via applications available worldwide including search engines, social media platforms, word processors, text-to-picture tools, text-to-video tools, text-to-software tools, prompts-to-text platforms, and so on. These are all within your reach, wherever you may be. If this proliferation stays unregulated, will the growth of capacity and dispersal of access continue for years? Or will the former hit a wall and very soon slow and stop? Will the latter be regulated? No one knows. But the giant investments say both capacity and dispersal will proceed.

How should we who seek another world think about what is happening? Should we even bother thinking about it? After all AI is just a technology that we use or not, like any other technology. You can use a hammer to build. You can use a hammer to destroy. You can use an AI to build. You can use an AI to destroy. The technology isn't the issue. The capitalist context in which it emerges and is used is the issue. For a hammer this is true. For biological or nuclear weapons, not so much. What about for AI?

AI used for good might help with a cure for cancer or Alzheimer's. It might help with procedures to reverse global warming and avert resource depletion. It might take over rote, tedious, dangerous tasks to free human time for human creativity and loving. AI, we are told, might enlighten and uplift. Truth or hype? We don't know for sure yet.

AI used for ill, however, will without doubt magnify surveillance. It will spew lies and manipulate so massively as to make Trumpian machinations to date seem minuscule. It will guide warfare, subvert elections, and sell garbage piled upon garbage. All that, even if it doesn't take over. Truth or hype? It is all already happening.

More subtly, even when used with good intent, even when popularly pursued and welcomed, AI can have some very serious unintended consequences. It can replace workers, or just make each worker

Thousands of central actors inside AI firms are scared enough to issue warnings. And even so, we know that markets are unlikely to heed them.

in certain realms way more productive, leading not to a shorter work week for all, but to pink slips and growing unemployment for many, while in turn weakening the bargaining power of those still employed, leading to increased exploitation for them too. Less obviously, in a society of loneliness and fragmentation, AI as day care worker, therapist, personal assistant, agenda planner, teacher, composer, and writer may introduce and tout itself as a wondrous aide for humanity that hungers for its powers, even as over time it usurps functions that make humans who we are. Excluding us from those functions, it may leave us less human. It may increasingly replace human conversation and even human intimacy with machine variants.

The above three paragraphs could each be hugely expanded, but let's not belabor what ought to be obvious. There are positive and perhaps even remarkably positive possibilities. There are negative and perhaps even remarkably negative possibilities. Which will it be?

Can we look into the innards of large language models and neural networks to see what's coming? Can we find the answer there? Actually, what we would see there

is a huge collection of numbers, let's call it a trillion numbers, arranged in complex patterns. When you prompt GPT-4 your words too are translated into numbers. The trillion numbers in the AI act on your relatively few prompt numbers. The AI spews out a result. Or it spews out an agenda of steps that it then undertakes. No one can predict exactly what it will spew at us. We can't, nor can its creators. No one can even say, in advance, what new "emergent capacities" it will display each time we increase the number of numbers it has, or tweak their relations, or speed up the hardware. Yes, in the past it made sense to say computer programs were just doing things that human programmers gave them the instructions to do more quickly and more accurately than people could do those things but not in a qualitatively different way. Now even the programmers have no idea what the programs will do. So, no, we

What matters is AI's trajectory, not its current status.

can't find the answer inside the machine. To find the answer we must look at the institutions within which AI is utilized and at the ends to which it is put. And we know about those institutions—overwhelmingly they are corporations, government, and for that matter communities and even families that all manifest or suffer the pressures of class, race, gender, and power dynamics in our abysmal societies.

So we come to what matters for policy: What are the short- and long-run consequences that are already happening or that without regulation are highly likely to happen? What's potentially good? What's likely bad?

First, I should acknowledge that there is a big unknown lurking over this entire essay and how we assess AI. That is, will it keep getting more "intelligent" or will it hit a wall? Will more nodes and numbers and clever alterations continue to diminish errors and yield ever more functionality? Or, will there come a point with the neural network approach—perhaps even soon—when scaling up the numbers provides diminishing returns? We don't know what is coming because it depends on the degree to which AIs can or will keep getting more powerful.

So what is potentially good and what is likely bad about AI? At one extreme, and in the long run (which some say is only a decade or two, or even less), we hear from thousands of engineers, scientists, and even officials who work with, who program, and who otherwise utilize or produce AI, nightmare predictions about AI enslaving or terminating humanity. Really responsible, capable, informed people are now routinely worrying that these material entities will dominate all humans, if not eliminate us.

At the other extreme, from equally informed, involved, and embedded folks, we hear about AI creating a virtual utopia on earth by creating cures for everything from cancer to dementia to who knows what, plus eliminating drudge work and thereby facilitating enlarged human creativity. Sometimes, and I suspect pretty often, the same person, for example the CEO of OpenAI or a chief tech officer at Google, not to mention mad Musk, says both outcomes are possible and we have to find a way to get only the positive result.

In the short run, we can ourselves easily see prospects for false voice recordings and phony pictures and videos flooding not just social media, but also mainstream media, alternative media, and even legal proceedings. We can see prospects for massive, ubiquitous intentional fraud, individual or mass manipulation, mass

intense surveillance, and new forms of violence all controlled by AIs that are in turn controlled by corporations that seek profit (think Facebook), by governments that seek control and power (think your own government), or even by smaller scale entities (think Proud Boys or even distasteful individuals) who seek joyful havoc or group or personal advantage. The dismal picture includes AI-generated porn starring you with your own family unable to tell it isn't you. It includes AI-generated speeches by candidates that no one can tell aren't real. Think Trumpian dirty tricks and lies but vastly smarter and vastly more effective. If an AI can help find a chemical compound to cure cancer, it can no doubt help find one highly effective at killing people. And less ominously, you can have a personal assistant that makes Siri and Alexa look as dumb as a toad.

And then there is the question of jobs. It very much appears that AI can or will soon be able to fully do many tasks in place of humans or at the very least be able to dramatically augment the productivity of humans doing those tasks. Top-level programmers report that by using GPT-4 they can already double their output. Law firms report similar and even greater gains. How long until AIs translate better than translators? The good side of this is attaining desired economic output with fewer labor hours, and thus, for example, potentially adopting a shorter work week with full income for all, or even with more equitable incomes. The bad side of this is that without sustained pressure corporations will instead keep some employees working as much as now, but with twice the output. They will pay those retained employees reduced income, and pink-slip the rest into unemployment.

Consider, for example, that there are roughly 400,000 paralegals in the United States. Suppose by 2024 AI enables each

paralegal to do twice as much work per hour. Suppose paralegals in 2023 work 50 hours a week. In 2024, do law firms retain them all, maintain their full pay, and have them each work 25 hours per week? Or do law firms retain half of them at 50 hours a week and full salary, while firing the other half? And then with 200,000 unemployed paralegals reducing the bargaining power of those who still have a job due to fear of being replaced, do the law firms further reduce pay and enlarge required output and the work week of those retained, while they fire still more paralegals? With no effective regulations or system change, we know profit-seeking will rule, and we know the outcome of that. And this is not just about paralegals, of course. AI can deliver personal aides to educate, to translate, to deliver day care, to diagnose and medicate, to write manuals, to maintain financial records, to conduct correspondence, to make and deliver product orders, to compose music, to write stories, to create films, and even to design buildings. It will be amusing to hear the Beatles, Elvis, Joplin, Fitzgerald, and Sinatra sing new songs, but will it be good for future music and for potential musicians? Try to imagine the havoc in the industry from that, or from when Apple or whoever uses AI to create new AI "artists" crowding out human artists? With no powerful regulations, with profit in command, is there any doubt about whether AI will bring something nearly utopian or impose something highly dystopian? The above enumeration could go on. In the past week, and as far as I am aware not even contemplated a month before, there is a firm now training AI in managerial functions, financial functions, policy-making functions, and so on. Or, if there isn't, might there be next week? Minutes ago, I listened to a 71-year-old Paul McCartney singing one of his recent songs, morph into an AI-created young McCartney singing it, morph into

young John Lennon singing it. Next week, what? With what consequences?

Before moving on from crystal balling the future, we might also consider some unintended consequences of trying to do good with AI. Short of worst-case nefarious agendas, what will be the impact of AI doing tasks that we welcome it to do but that are part and parcel of our being human? Let's even suppose AIs do these functions as well as we do, as compared to just well enough for corporations to utilize them in our place. I repeat these questions because attention to this issue seems utterly absent, even in the cacophony of pundit pronouncements about AI. It is quite similar to the way that concerns that social media might dull our wits and produce antisocial attitudes was absent from most assessments of Facebook and Twitter until they were long since ubiquitous—except AI may be to social media what big bombs are to little bullets.

Day care for children? Companion care for the elderly? Psychological and medical counseling for the ill? Planning daily agendas for us all? Teaching us all? Cooking for everyone? Intimate conversation for the lonely? Sounds promising, doesn't it? But if AIs do these things what happens to our capacity to do them? If AIs crowd us out of such human-defining activities, are they becoming like people, or are we becoming like machines?

Try conversing with even current AIs. I would wager that before long you will move from referring to it as "it"—meaning just a massive pile of numbers—to referring to it as he or she, or literally by its name. On Discord, just months into the AI tsunami, Chatbot Clyde showed up. AI everywhere? That's our trajectory. AIs teaching, counseling, care taking, note taking, agenda setting, drawing, designing, medicating, and what all—and you do what? Are you uplifted and liberated from prior responsibilities as you

watch movies that AIs make? As you eat food that AIs prepare? As you read stories that AIs write? As you do the few errands left to you, but which AIs organize? Even assume (against what we know of our capitalist economy) that income is handled well. Even assume that remaining work for humans is allocated well. You want something, you ask an AI for it. Clyde or Bard or whatever delivers. Some will say that is fantastic. My private slave. Oh boy! If AI development doesn't hit a wall, this appears to be the non-nefarious utopian scenario. And I guess it does look utopian to the eyes of some beholders, but to my eyes it looks highly dystopian. This all feels quite like the way social media promised great things and then partially as unintended consequence and partially as welcomed evil, social media did quite horrible things, except that in this analogy AI's trajectory of harm looks to me like social media on steroids cubed.

So what do we do? We need to invoke ecology's "precautionary principle." Facing innovations that have potential to cause great harm, we need to emphasize caution. We need to pause and review before we leap into proliferation that may prove disastrous. We need to take preventive action in the face of uncertainty. We need to put the burden of proof on the proponents of a risky activity. We need to increase public participation in decision making. Boiled down, we need to look before we leap.

To conceive a sensible response to the emergence of steadily more powerful AI doesn't require genius. We should pump the brakes. Hard. As even people in the industry have advised, but with little serious follow-up, and as even governments have advised but not yet required, we need to at least opt for a moratorium. During the ensuing hiatus, we need to establish regulatory mechanisms. We need to set rules. We need to establish means of enforcement able to ward off dangers as well as to

advantageously benefit from possibilities. How about this for a simple take on one aspect. We already outlaw with very seri-

If AIs crowd us out of human-
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ous consequences producing counterfeit money, and/or passing it on. The prospect of fake money struck banks and the rich in general and governments too as seriously dangerous. So, they imposed serious regulations. The prospect of false AI products masquerading as real threatens to make a shambles of elections. That upsets some people in power, though it is welcomed by others. It upsets me and you too, I bet. How about severe penalties for false news and indeed for AI products that are not clearly labelled as such?

This isn't rocket science. Suppose a third of the engineers involved in building a new airplane, like those involved with AI, said there was a ten percent chance the plane would crash. Would you climb in, buckle up, and celebrate the miracle of your hoped-for journey? Or would you jam on the brakes?

A moratorium is simple to propose—

indeed, one and by the time you read this I bet two or more, have already been proposed, domestically and internationally. But this has occurred without serious follow-up that I am aware of—despite that in our world, a moratorium will be hard to achieve. In our world, owners and investors seek profits regardless of wider implications for others. Pushed by market competition and by short term agendas, they proceed full speed ahead. Their feet avoid brakes. Their feet pound gas. And off we go on a suicide ride. Yet unusually and indicative of the seriousness of the situation, hundreds and even thousands of central actors inside AI firms are concerned/scared enough to issue warnings. And even so, we know that markets are unlikely to heed them. Indeed, even those urging caution are unlikely to retain good sense. Investors will mutter about risk and safety, but they will barrel on. And the thousands of central actors will in most cases, other things equal, succumb to the pressure.

So, can we win time to look before corporate suicide pilots leap? If human needs are to replace competitive, profit-seeking corporate insanity regarding further development and deployment of AI and how we use AI, or, for that matter, regarding the deployment and use of everything else corporations impose on us, we who have our heads screwed on properly will have to make demands and exert very, very serious pressure to win our demands.

Mental Illness as a Capitalist Disease

DAVID MATTHEWS

CAPITALIST SOCIETIES ARE PLAGUED by a wave of poor mental health, yet an accurate understanding of its prevalence is uncertain. A significant number of mental health issues are hidden because of under-reporting, predicated upon the perception they are not as serious as physical health issues. Additionally, there exists fear of stigma and discrimination if there is admittance of feeling mentally unwell, while there are perceptions of little support if individuals present themselves to health services with a mental health problem. Moreover, questions prevail concerning the reliability of the diagnostic process, with identification of mental illness underpinned by observation of symptoms based upon professional interpretations. Consequently, a detailed understanding of the pervasiveness of mental health issues under capitalism remains elusive. Of the data which is available, however, it is clear that mental illness is a common characteristic of capitalist societies.

Evidence from the World Health Organization estimates 1 in 8 people, globally, experience a mental health problem, with 301 million and 280 million respectively

suffering anxiety and depressive disorders.¹ Mental illness constitutes a significant cause of the overall global burden of disease, with depression estimated to be the second leading global cause of disability. Within the advanced capitalist nations themselves, for example, an estimated 1 in 6 individuals, in England, experience a common mental health problem, such as anxiety or depression, each week.² Since the mid-2000s mental health outcomes in Britain have worsened, with suicide rates increasing.³ In the United States, up to 19.8 percent of the population have a mental illness, with rates varying from 16.3 percent in New Jersey to 26.8 percent in Utah.⁴ While the real rate of mental illness is arguably higher in all capitalist nations, the data which is available nonetheless indicates that mental illness is a problematic characteristic of capitalism.

Mental Illness and Biology: A Capitalist Narrative

Under capitalism biological explanations dominate understandings of mental health. Although a framework dating back centuries, the disease model of mental illness in its current form has its origins in the 1970s, fueling the growth of biological psychiatry. It is asserted that mental illness is influenced by genetics, while prominent mental health problems, such as depression and schizophrenia, are biochemical in nature, the result of neurotransmitters, a position

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more widely known as the chemical imbalance theory. Reflecting biomedical values, influential interventions are predicated upon medical principles, with drugs argued as essential to rectifying the etiological cause.

Championing a biomedical schema, mental health professionals have done so in search for the same professional status as their physical health counterparts. Mental health professionals, particularly psychiatry, embraced a disease model to assert their professional knowledge base. For Robert Whitaker, a disease model “served psychiatry’s guild interests”⁵ Yet, despite the dominance of a biological framework, it has been seriously contested. “None of the situations we call mental disorders,” Joanne Moncrieff has asserted, “have been convincingly shown to arise from a biological disease.”⁶ Genome research has failed to provide conclusive evidence of any genetic underpinning to mental illness, while there exists a deficiency of substantive research supporting biochemical arguments. Despite the claims of professionals, the biological basis of mental illness must be considered, at best, speculative.⁷

Capitalist Stagnation and Ideology

As the disease model of mental illness initiated its ascendancy in the 1970s, it is no coincidence that this coincided with neoliberal capitalism establishing its hegemonic authority, with an understanding of mental illness as a biological phenomenon reflecting an evolving capitalist context. For Marx, capitalism could be defined by its inherent need for continuing economic growth. “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets,” Marx proclaimed.⁸ To produce surplus value and compete with rivals, all capitalist enterprises must continually expand, increasing their financial returns after their investment. Yet, advanced capitalism, as reflects the economies of North

America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, since the decline of the post-war boom, has been characterized by stagnation. Opportunities for investment are less than the quantity of investment capital available. Investment subsequently declines and existing output, produced from previous rounds of investment, is underutilized, resulting in the growth of surplus capital, goods, and productive capacity, including labor. The existence of surplus limits the incentive for new investment as the potential to identify demand for future output is considered restricted if that which has already been produced has not been absorbed by the market. Within this context, the recent history of advanced capitalism has been one of gradual stagnation, with capitalist enterprises engaged in an urgent identification of new outlets for investment.

Not immune from a climate of stagnation, commercial medical operations have worked over the last four decades to identify new means of accumulation.⁹ As a method of stimulating economic growth, the disease model of mental illness has been very attractive, with an inherent correspondence between the principles of this model and the commodities of the pharmaceutical industry. As such the industry has actively encouraged the expansion and solidification of this knowledge base. Managing drug trials through funding, and analyzing outcomes, including withholding negative results, the purpose has been to create favorable data supporting the disease model which assists the creation of new markets. Additionally, the industry has influenced how its products are presented, employing industry individuals to write positive reviews and encouraging academics, often using financial incentives, to put their name to this work.¹⁰ Overall, as James Davies proclaims, pharmaceutical corporations have been able “to literally create an evi-

dence base...to legitimise their products.”¹¹ Moreover, the pharmaceutical industry has had influence on regulatory bodies, which has been characterized by a revolving door of personnel between industry and regulator, resulting in a more liberal regulation of the pharmaceutical market.¹²

In a further effort to expand production, the pharmaceutical industry has been at the center of broadening the medical base upon which mental illness is evaluated. During the past forty years medicalization has contributed to increasing the number of psychological experiences identified as problematic, with the threshold for determining whether an individual has mental health issues lowered to capture an expanding number of subjective conditions. As an increasingly narrower definition of “normal” has prevailed, this has stimulated a growing reliance upon drugs to return an individual to a perceived state of normality. Rather than reflecting the growth of objectively existing mental health issues, medicalization reflects the manipulation of knowledge for the purpose of economic growth.

The direct link between the pharmaceutical industry and the expansion of the

Under capitalism biological explanations dominate understandings of mental health. The disease model of mental illness has its origins in the 1970s

disease model, significantly reflects the industry’s role in commodifying subjectivity, identifying experiences of the psyche as opportunities for accumulation and attaching a value to them. As such, the construction of a medical narrative to explain an increas-

ing number of subjective experiences for the purpose of enhancing accumulation exemplifies the extent to which capitalism can infuse science. Capitalism provides an instrumental framework within which scientific knowledge is pursued. As Richard Lewontin argues, science is “directed by those forces in the world that have control over money...as a consequence, the dominant social and economic forces in society determine to a large extent what science does and how it does it.”¹³ The biological basis for mental illness, promoted strenuously by the pharmaceutical industry, has been predicated upon capital’s appropriation of scientific knowledge to support commodity production. Yet, just as importantly, science has been utilized for ideological purposes.

Individualizing Mental Illness

With medical science assuming a pre-eminent framework through which to make sense of mental health, an overwhelming consequence is to construct mental illness as an individual issue. Biology’s dominance acutely reflects neoliberalism’s concern with the self, with both causes and solutions to mental illness centered upon the individual. The growth of the pharmaceutical industry and its output is symbolic of intervention methods which target the individual. Moreover, away from medication, the popularity during the twenty first century of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), the principles of which are to modify the way individuals think about issues to support their accommodation to their experiences, is yet another illustration of the individualization of mental illness. The consequence, Joanna Moncrieff correctly argues is that, “locating the source of problems in individual biology—blaming the brain—impedes exploration of social and political issues.”¹⁴

Mental illness as an individual biological phenomenon assumes a vital ideological

function under capitalism, with the intimate relationship between mental health and social conditions largely obscured. Diagnoses and explorations for the cause of mental illness start and end with the individual. Attention is on the individual who needs correction to adapt to, and integrate within, society. This focus occurs at the expense of recognizing the significance of social and economic conditions for determining the experience of mental health and distribution of mental illness. In this context, an individual's mental health issues become privatized with their body viewed as the source of their mental illness, rather than accepting the significant role society plays, specifically a society established upon capitalist values. Capitalism must be understood as a significant determinant of mental illness. As Iain Ferguson asserts "it is the economic and political system under which we live—capitalism—which is responsible for the enormously high levels of mental-health problems which we see in the world today."¹⁵

Frederick Engels and the Misery of Capitalist Life

Throughout the works of Marx and Engels sporadic reference occurs regarding matters which are commonly understood today as mental health issues. Marx made a vital contribution with his concept of alienation, yet it was Engels who focused on the relationship between the conditions of capitalist society on an everyday basis and the impact of this for mental well-being. Living under conditions of severe exploitation, oppression and poverty, there existed, Engels asserted, a desperate misery pervading working-class life. For large swathes of the labor force, he argued, life oscillated dramatically between fear and hope, constantly encountering economic insecurity which denied them contentment and stability, with many members of the

labor force not "permitted to attain peace of mind and quiet enjoyment of life."¹⁶

Life was one in which unemployment and destitution was always one accident, or death, away. The whims of a *laissez faire* system meant whether an individual would experience an evening meal was left to the precariousness of the market. Conditions of acute uncertainty of existence had dramatic consequences for the mental

Biology's dominance acutely reflects neoliberalism's concern with the self, with both causes and solutions to mental illness centered upon the individual.

state of the working-class. The extent to which the impermanence and misery of life blighted mental well-being was such that Engels proclaimed suicide "has become fashionable...and numbers of the poor kill themselves to avoid the misery from which they see no other means of escape."¹⁷ Destructive behaviors pervaded the labor force, including alcohol abuse, which today is considered a mental health issue. Such behaviors, Engels emphatically argued, in no way could be considered as arising from the voluntary actions of individuals. Rather, this behavior was directly the result of the working-class being exploited—"[t]hey who have degraded the working man to a mere object have the responsibility to bear."¹⁸

Presenting a picture of a working-class riddled with despair, anxiety, and hopelessness, the analysis of Engels provides an essential basis upon which to build an anti-capitalist understanding of mental health, as it situates the emergence of poor mental well-being within the framework of capital-

ism and the social relations of exploitation and oppression. In doing so the basis of a materialist understanding of mental illness is established.

Labor and Discontent

Capitalism significantly determines and shapes the nature of our subjectivity. Principally, the organization and operation of the capitalist system does not allow for the optimal mental well-being of the individual to develop, with a contradiction between the needs of capitalism and the individual. Central to the misery of many under capitalism is labor. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx vigorously argues that individuals need to be freely expressive, both physically and intellectually, through labor. Workers should be able to relate to the products of their labor as expressions of their inner creativity. However, under capitalism, labor is an alienating experience. The overwhelming majority under capitalism have no choice but to engage in wage-labor for survival,

As a method of stimulating economic growth, the disease model is attractive, with a correspondence between this model and the commodities of the pharmaceutical industry.

having to submit themselves to a process which has little meaning for them. Work is commonly a monotonous and grueling obligation.¹⁹ The passions and energies of the labor force, rather than directed towards fulfilling acts of creativity, are instead consumed by practices which are defined as

useful only by the standards of capitalism. The consequence for labor, as Herbert Marcuse argues, is “while they work, they do not fulfil their own needs and faculties but work in *alienation*.”²⁰

The experience of alienated labor can breed varying mental health issues, ranging from poor mental well-being such as regular feelings of dissatisfaction and boredom, to recognized mental health conditions. Reflecting the intensity of exploitation as a determinant of mental illness, in Britain, over the course of the last two decades, there has been an increase in work-related stress, anxiety and depression, amounting to 2,480 cases per 100,000 members of the labor force. In 2021 mental illness constituted 50 percent of all work-related ill-health issues. Common causes include tight deadlines, too much responsibility and a lack of support from management. Similarly, in the United States, 71 percent of all employees typically feel stressed or tense during the working day. Reasons for this include poor wages, long working hours and little opportunity for career advancement.²¹ Therefore, as the first two causes particularly indicate, exploitation is central to poor mental health at work.

Away from diagnosed mental health issues, the labor force of many advanced capitalist nations is blighted by an intense general dissatisfaction. In 2019, 1 in 3 British workers were unhappy at work, with 45 percent looking to leave their current place of employment. Of those who wanted to find a new job, the most cited reason was to enjoy their work, followed by enhanced pay, and job satisfaction. While these last two reasons clearly express a widespread recognition of the intense levels of exploitation and oppression which inflict the labor force, the fact that most people want to leave their job because they do not enjoy it exemplifies the detrimental consequences for mental well-being of failing to develop meaningful

connections to work. In the U.S. a similar sense of dissatisfaction prevails, with evidence suggesting that in 2022, 60 percent of U.S. employees felt emotionally detached from their work and 19 percent were miserable because of work.²²

Stifling creativity, work under capitalism acts as a significant barrier to obtaining positive mental well-being. Alongside causing the growth of diagnostically recognized mental illness, work is critical to the development of an often-underlying despondency, with individuals developing a sense of disempowerment, having no alternative to engage in wage-labor but unable to identify meaningful work. This sense of unhappiness exists as such a prevalent phenomenon under capitalism that it has become a collective subjective experience. Except for severe mental-health disorders, many forms of mental distress that develop in response to labor, such as deep dissatisfaction, are taken for granted and not considered legitimate problems, being thought of as inevitable and a normal response to work. As such, the degradation of mental well-being becomes normalized. The result, as Erich Fromm argued, is a socially patterned defect.²³

Consumerism and Need

Compensating for feelings of discontent stemming from work, a common palliative is consumerism. Unable to experience meaning in their work, individuals often resort to searching for it in what they purchase. Many members of the labor force focus upon consumption for personal fulfillment, with material goods consumed less for their use value and more for their symbolic value. The purchase of an automobile, brand of clothing, or technological equipment, among other goods, commonly pivots on what the product is supposed to communicate about the consumer. Under capitalism, consumerism constitutes an

integral means through which individuals construct personal identities. Individuals emotionally invest in the meanings associated with consumer goods in the hope that whatever intangible qualities items

The construction of a medical narrative to explain subjective experiences for the purpose of accumulation exemplifies the extent to which capitalism can infuse science

are said to possess will be conferred upon them through ownership. For capitalism, however, consumerism constitutes a vital source of economic growth, absorbing surplus and stimulating future investment. Subsequently, efforts to mask feelings of dissatisfaction and misery emerging from the labor process, through consumerism, has the advantage for capitalism of generating increased economic demand. Moreover, attempts are made to encourage acceptance among the labor force that they need a particular item by generating a false need, and conversely stimulating further feelings of discontent as a result of not currently possessing the item, with fulfillment said to come from its consumption. Rarely, however, is satisfaction truly achieved. What is being consumed is an artificial idea, rather than a product which conveys upon our existence true meaning.

The negative mental health consequences of consumerism are apparent. Prioritization of materialistic values and goals conflicts with interpersonal relationships. Accepting materialistic goals is recognized as a barrier to developing meaningful relationships, with individuals who do so

having an increased chance of experiencing loneliness, while married couples who are materialistic exhibit lower marital quality.²⁴ Moreover, countries with greater inequali-

Detailed understanding of mental health issues under capitalism remains elusive. Of the data available, it is clear that mental illness is common of capitalist societies

ties of wealth, significantly those where neoliberalism has been particularly influential, tend to have higher rates of mental health issues. Such countries are more likely to emphasize consumerist values, with large sections of the population accepting these norms but unable to obtain the possessions they observe more wealthy members of the population having acquired.²⁵ The result can be anger, frustration and status anxiety, as success and failure are perceived to pivot on ownership of consumer goods.

Social Change and Mental Well-Being

While the influence of biology as a preeminent cause of mental illness can potentially be justified in certain individual cases, the hegemonic position that it is the primary cause must be rejected. Biology does indeed constitute a factor, and cannot be dismissed entirely, but its role must be understood as part of a wider dialectical process. The body, with its organic structure, is located within the world. Individuals through their corporeal existence have always shaped the world around them. Yet, in this very process, individuals change themselves through their interactions with the external world. There

exists a dialectical interaction between the corporeal being of the individual in the world and their biological condition, on the one hand, and the social organization they are part of, on the other. It is through this dialectical interaction that poor mental well-being evolves.

Accepting that mental illness arises from the interaction between biology and society, the predominant factor within this relationship must, however, be accepted as that of society. The prevalence of social patterns to mental illness, particularly those influenced by class divisions, as initially exemplified by Engels and which continue up to the present day, acutely illustrates the negative consequences of capitalism, its social relations, and the prevailing experiences of oppression and exploitation which arise from these relations, for mental health. For positive mental well-being to triumph an alternative anti-capitalist social organization is required. Rather than a society which corresponds to the economic imperatives of capitalism, for the growth of optimal mental health a society is required which corresponds with human needs.

Enhanced mental well-being is predicated upon abolishing the exploitation of wage-laborers, empowering members of society with democratic economic control and providing opportunities for meaningful work. Such labor often corresponds with the provision of goods and services which encapsulate need values, rather than exchange values, such as providing housing, education, health care, leisure, art, and environmental spaces. A society is required whose economic system is underpinned by the provision of need through collective organization, it opposes production for production's sake to return a profit which stimulates alienation; it shatters the meaningless pursuance of materialism in a vain search for fulfillment and it combats a pervasive acquisitive individualism.

A society where work has meaning, the fulfillment of human need is central, and solidarity between its members prevail, is the foundation for the growth of positive mental health.

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Beyond Capitalism: A Participatory Economy

What do those who are fed up with capitalism propose to put in its place?

ROBIN HAHNEL

EARLY SOCIALISTS, INCLUDING MARX himself, were clear that instead of profit-hungry capitalists and the “anarchy” of markets, those they referred to as the “associated producers” should decide among themselves what to produce, how to produce it, and how to distribute it. Moreover, these early socialists believed that once freed from the yoke of capitalism, the “associated producers” would not find it terribly difficult to figure out exactly how to go about doing this. For the most part, they did not foresee serious problems and assumed instead that once humans were no longer divided into different classes with opposed interests, we would proceed without difficulty to finally fulfill our economic needs sensibly.

But that was a long time ago. That was before the International Working Men’s Association, founded in London in 1864, split between “anarchist” and “statist” factions in 1872; before the Second International was established in 1889, only to split into a Second “Social Democratic”

International and a Third “Communist” International in 1919; before Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, anarchists, and Social Revolutionaries in Russia argued over what kind of economy to create after the revolution; before the Workers’ Opposition, Trotskyists, and Stalinists within the Bolshevik Party argued over economic policy; and before Stalin emerged victorious from this power struggle to launch a draconian version of authoritarian central planning during the 1930s, which survived various attempts at reform, more or less intact, well into the 1980s.

That was also before social democratic political parties in Western Europe decided after World War II that a mixed economy, tamed markets, and a welfare state were not just parts of a transition to a qualitatively different socialist economic system, but all that socialism should ever mean; before the Communist governments in one Eastern European country after another, and finally in the Soviet Union itself, were replaced in the early 1990s by governments that substituted capitalism for central planning; and finally, before the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties also abandoned central planning in favor of a statist version of capitalism, leaving only Cuba and North Korea today with communist parties that preside over an economy where a central planning agency decides what public enterprises will produce.

In short, a great deal of water has passed

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under many bridges since early socialists imagined that the “associated producers,” once they were freed to do so, would manage and coordinate their work with minimal difficulty, and this history explains why most people today take it for granted that socialism is a proven failure. *This is why anyone who still believes in socialism must explain precisely how and why what we champion in the twenty-first century will be qualitatively different and better than what went under the name of socialism during the twentieth century.* We must convince a public with every right to be skeptical that we socialists have truly learned important lessons and finally have our act together.

But learning lessons is seldom simple or straightforward. There is a great deal of disagreement among those who advocate for socialism about what exactly we should propose. Many now claim that only a social democratic version of capitalism is feasible and argue that an altogether different economic system is a pipe dream. Others propose to replace capitalism with one or another version of “market socialism.” Still others respond to the ills of over-centralization with visions of “community-based” economies. And a few continue to argue for more democratic versions of central planning.

I and other advocates of the model known as a “participatory economy”¹ believe *all* these responses to the intellectual crisis of socialism miss the mark and that instead, socialists need to return to our roots and explain how the “associated producers,” together with consumers, can plan their own interrelated economic activities democratically, efficiently, and without unrealistic demands on people’s time and energy. However, in light of socialism’s many failures, rosy rhetoric and generalities will no longer suffice. If we hope to convince a skeptical public today, socialists must provide concrete proposals for how all the

different kinds of economic decisions that need to be made in a modern economy can be made and explain why these procedures will generate outcomes that are far superior to what any form of capitalism can yield.

We believe that while the vision of early socialists of worker councils and federations planning together with consumers was essentially sound, concretely how to go about this was neither as simple nor as obvious as early socialists presumed. We believe it no longer suffices for advocates to speak only of high-minded values and goals and describe in sweeping generalities what socialists would put in place of capitalism. While we believe that what we have presented is consistent with the vision of early socialists, we also believe that the history of socialist failures over the past hundred years has made clear that *the devil can be in the details*. If we are to avoid future disasters, and if we hope to convince a public with good reason to doubt that we socialists finally know what we’re talking about, then a great deal of careful, matter-of-fact thinking in advance about socialist economic institutions and decision-making procedures is needed.

In two recent books,² my co-authors and I respond to various criticisms of the participatory economy model that have been raised over the years and address important issues that we had not previously discussed. For the first time, we discuss (1) results from computer simulations to test the “practicality” of annual participatory planning, (2) how reproductive labor might be organized and rewarded to overcome gender biases, (3) how investment planning might be organized to maximize participation, and updated to improve efficiency, and how three different kinds of long-run development planning might also be organized: education planning, environmental planning, and strategic international economic planning. In this

article I summarize the argument of these books, briefly highlighting the major features of this alternative to capitalism and then explaining how it deals with some serious problems that other post-capitalist proposals fail to address adequately.

A Participatory Economy in Brief

The key features of the model known as a “participatory economy” are:

- Self-governing worker councils and neighborhood consumer councils, together with federations of these consumer and worker councils.
- Jobs restructured—or “balanced”—so everyone performs some empowering tasks and any who work at less-desirable jobs are compensated for doing so.
- Income determined by the effort and sacrifice people make at work as judged by their co-workers, together with allowances for those too young or too old to work and for those who are disabled, along with provisions for those with special needs.
- *The absence of markets or a central planning authority.* Instead, the interrelated activities of different worker and consumer councils and federations are coordinated through a participatory annual planning procedure, a participatory investment planning procedure, and several different participatory long-run development planning procedures.

All economic activity has opportunity costs and social costs. (Opportunity costs are the losses of potential gains from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen.) A unique feature of the participatory annual planning procedure is that with the aid of ever more accurate estimates of the opportunity and social costs generated during the planning procedure, worker and consumer councils can formulate, revise, and agree upon their “self-activity” proposals themselves.

While we propose that investment and development plans ultimately be subjected

to discussion, debate, and either a vote by the national legislature or a popular referendum, the procedures we propose for creating and modifying these plans are unique in two important ways: (1) Which federations and ministries are called upon to provide the information needed for drawing up these plans is determined by a careful examination of who has best access to that information and what their motivation is likely to be. (2) The inevitable errors in the estimates used in creating multiyear plans can be deduced by results from subsequent annual plans, so that investment and development plans can be modified.

Reconciling Democratic Planning and Autonomy

We believe our most important contribution is demonstrating concretely how to reconcile democratic planning with worker and consumer autonomy. We believe this was the Achilles heel of attempts to create socialist economies during the twentieth century, a problem that must be resolved if there is to be a future for socialism in the twenty-first century. In *Democratic Economic Planning* we explain in detail how annual participatory planning can be conducted without a central authority, allowing worker and consumer councils to manage themselves while requiring all to do so in socially responsible ways. We explain how a social, iterative procedure combining autonomy with social responsibility can achieve outcomes that are efficient, fair, and environmentally sustainable. And we provide evidence from computer simulations of the annual planning procedure suggesting that the number of times worker and consumer councils and federations would have to submit, revise, and re-submit “self-activity” proposals before a feasible plan is reached is not too burdensome, but is indeed quite practical.

Authoritarian planning discourages

worker and consumer participation because it disenfranchises them. But poorly designed systems of democratic planning might also discourage worker and consumer participation. There is a serious danger that democratic planning can discourage participation on the part of ordinary workers and consumers by requiring them to engage in too much negotiation with others, especially if most negotiations are conducted by representatives, and quantitative information necessary to make informed decisions quickly is lacking.

But perhaps more importantly, if worker and consumer councils have no *autonomous* area of action regarding their *own* work and consumption activities, but must instead engage in seemingly endless discussion, debate, and negotiations with others in many different planning bodies about what they want to do, then ordinary workers and consumers may well lapse back into apathy.

In this case, ordinary workers and consumers would no longer be formally disenfranchised as they are under authoritarian planning. But if procedures for involving all who are affected are cumbersome and clumsy, if necessary information for informed decision-making is lacking, and if processes rely primarily on representatives, all this may become a practical barrier to participation that only the most dedicated and determined workers and consumers will be willing to fight through. In other words, democratic planning when poorly organized can become just another bureaucratic maze from the perspective of ordinary workers and consumers, leading to what the socialist feminist economist Nancy Folbre warned can devolve into a “dictatorship of the sociable.”

Participatory planning is carefully designed so worker and consumer councils can decide what they want to do, as long as they do not misuse productive resources

that belong to all or take unfair advantage of others. It is designed to help worker and consumer councils demonstrate to one another that their proposals are socially responsible by generating the information necessary to make such judgments quickly.

To know if neighborhood councils' consumption proposals are fair, I need to know the social costs and benefits of producing the goods and services requested.

It is designed to avoid unproductive and contentious meetings where representatives from different councils haggle over what those in *other* councils will do. And except in rare cases where more deliberation is needed, it is designed so decisions about approving councils' “self-activity” proposals can be made very quickly. The participatory planning procedure will take a number of rounds before proposals are confirmed as fair and not wasteful of social resources and before excess demands are eliminated and a feasible plan is reached. But results from simulation experiments reported in *Democratic Economic Planning* suggest that the number of iterations required need not be excessive. Our annual participatory planning procedure is far more practical and robust than some critics have suggested.

Broadly speaking the goal is to arrive at an economic plan through deliberative democracy. But deliberation can take two very different forms: Deliberation can be about competing comprehensive plans and can take place at meetings attended by only a few representatives from differ-

ent councils, to then be voted on by those representatives or in a national referendum. Alternatively, deliberation can be over what each worker and consumer council wants to do itself and can take place among members of each worker and consumer council, who formulate and revise their own “self-activity” proposals, knowing they will only be approved by others if they are demonstrably socially responsible.

The difference between these two ways of carrying out deliberative economic democracy cannot be overestimated. While the first conception of deliberative democracy may be more common among those who have historically advocated democratic economic planning, it has three disadvantages: (1) Only a few people from each council benefit from the deliberations—those sent as representatives—who then bear the burden of trying to convey their deliberative experience to those they represent. (2) Members of a worker council never formulate proposals for what they want to do themselves. Instead, their representatives, together with representatives from other councils, formulate and pass a proposal about what all must do. And (3) meetings of representatives proposing different comprehensive economic plans do not generate quantitative estimates of opportunity and social costs, without which sensible discussion of the merits of different proposals and plans is severely hampered, if not impossible. Our participatory planning procedure on the other hand empowers ordinary workers and consumers, not representatives, to formulate and revise their own work and consumption proposals, and it generates estimates of opportunity and social costs that are as accurate as can be hoped for, allowing everyone to easily judge whether different councils’ proposals are socially responsible.

Most importantly, rounds in our planning procedure are *not* rounds of increas-

ingly contentious meetings between representatives from different councils debating the merits of different comprehensive economic plans without the information necessary to make informed decisions. Instead they are meetings *inside* worker and consumer councils to formulate and revise their *own* proposals about what the members of each council want to do themselves, with clear guidelines about what is required to win approval from others. Unlike other models of democratic planning, (1) councils never have to engage someone else’s ideas about what they should do; (2) only in rare and special circumstances do councils have to plead their case for what they want to do in meetings with others; and (3) there is always a clear agenda for any meetings required to adjudicate special appeals.

Opportunity Costs, Social Costs, and Social Rates of Return

Unfortunately, the importance of procedures that can be relied on to generate reasonably accurate information necessary for making informed economic choices is often lost on activists who have little or no economic training. While an aversion to putting prices on things is understandable in the context of capitalism which, in the words of Oscar Wilde, “knows the price of everything and the value of nothing,” unfortunately, without reasonably accurate estimates of opportunity and social costs and social rates of return on investments (the social benefit that will result from any particular investment), it is impossible for anyone to participate in planning sensibly and in a timely way. If we want ordinary people to participate, we must not only give them voice and vote in our planning procedures, but we must also give them easy access to the essential information they need to arrive at sensible decisions quickly.

Unless I know the opportunity costs of scarce resources and categories of labor

required by a work proposal, unless I know the social costs of producing the intermediate inputs needed, and unless I can compare these costs to the social benefits of the outputs the workers propose to deliver, how can I decide if a work proposal is socially responsible? If it is a work proposal my workmates and I are preparing for ourselves, I need to know this in order to ascertain whether we are proposing to do something that is socially responsible. I also need to know this to determine whether our work proposal will be approved by others or will be turned down, forcing us to launch an appeal. If the work proposal is one that another council has proposed, I need the opportunity and social costs in order to know if their proposal is socially responsible.

The same holds for consumption proposals. To know if my own neighborhood council's consumption proposal is fair, or if other neighborhood councils' consumption proposals are fair, I need to know the social costs and social benefits of producing the goods and services requested. With this information, except in rare cases that can be appealed, everyone can quickly see if consumption proposals are socially responsible. On the other hand, without reasonably accurate estimates of opportunity costs, social costs, and social benefits, there is no way to make these decisions.

We do not believe that any of the other formal proposals for how to conduct comprehensive, democratic, economic planning in the literature have successfully dealt with the problem of how to generate reasonably accurate estimates of the opportunity costs of using scarce productive inputs, be they different categories of labor, different "services" from the natural environment, or different capital goods—"stocks" of which at any point in time are scarce and should be allocated to wherever they are most productive, useful, and generate the greatest

increase in social well-being. Our proposals will also generate reasonably accurate estimates of the social costs of producing goods and services, including the costs of emitting different pollutants. And finally, our proposal generates reasonably accurate estimates of the social rate of return on investment in capital goods, education, infrastructure, and environmental protection and enhancement.

Obtaining these estimates is important for two reasons. First, without such estimates it is impossible to know how to allocate scarce productive resources efficiently, which most economists readily acknowledge. But what may be even more important is that without them it is impossible for worker councils, consumer councils, and federations to participate sensibly in economic decision-making without undue imposition on their time. Unless they are provided with reasonably accurate estimates, workers cannot know if their own proposals are socially responsible; consumers cannot know if their proposals are socially responsible; and nobody can know whether or not to approve or disapprove the "self-activity" proposals of others. However, *with* reasonably accurate estimates, worker and consumer councils and federations will be able to engage in socially responsible self-management without a central authority, without resort to markets, and without excessive burdens on their time.

Addressing Concerns About Impracticality

Some critics have been concerned that annual participatory planning is impractical because it cannot be done at the appropriate level of detail and because needed adjustments cannot be made when unanticipated situations inevitably arise. Ironically, perhaps the most common objection people have raised to our proposal over the past thirty years arises

from a simple confusion about what a *comprehensive economic plan* is and is not. It is *not* a detailed plan of the kind that David Schweickart, Seth Ackerman, and initially Erik Olin Wright assumed, and which Schweickart ridiculed as “nonsense on stilts.” Comprehensive annual planning is done using coarse categories, such as “shoes,” not refined categories such as “size 6 purple women’s high-heeled shoes with a yellow toe.” There is no need to arrive at an annual plan for how much of every good to produce down to that level of detail. Coarse categories are turned into refined categories when the plan is carried out during the year, as producers become aware of which kinds of shoes are being purchased. And when unforeseen events arise during the year, a number of options for making adjustments are available.

As memory recedes of real-world twentieth-century centrally planned economies, apparently it has become difficult for many to imagine how comprehensive economic planning is even possible. While details and adjustments were often handled poorly by centrally planned economies of the twentieth century, those experiences certainly demonstrate that comprehensive economic planning is not a practical impossibility as some today presume. In any case, *Democratic Economic Planning* explains not only how the details that producers need are provided during implementation, but also why consumer preferences will be taken seriously in a participatory economy, even if they were not in twentieth-century centrally planned economies, and how plans can be adjusted during the year in light of events that were not foreseen when the plan was created and agreed to. There are reasonable questions critics have raised about the wisdom of our proposals—objections that we have acknowledged and responded to as best we can. But dismissing any kind of comprehensive economic planning as

simply impossible is not one of them.

A more legitimate concern is that participatory annual planning may prove impractical because it would require worker and consumer councils and federations to engage in too many iterations—rounds of proposals, rejections, revisions, and new proposals—to reach a feasible plan. Market systems do not have to prove that they are a practical possibility. Nor, for that matter do authoritarian, or centrally planned, systems have to prove they are possible, since they functioned for many decades in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, and in Cuba still, *whatever their many defects and failures may be*. But in no place has anything like the annual participatory planning procedure we propose ever been deployed, so the only way to test its practicality is to use computer simulations to see how many rounds, or iterations, of proposals and revisions would be required to reach a feasible and efficient plan.

We reported on results bearing on the practicality of our annual planning procedure in Chapter 9 of *Democratic Economic Planning*. The most indicative result was that in forty “experiments,” with thirty thousand separate worker councils, thirty thousand consumer councils, and one hundred products, it took on average only 6.5 iterations to reach a feasible plan, and in no case did it take more than 9 iterations. Nor did changing the number of councils or number of goods seem to increase the number of iterations required. In short, the number of iterations required appears to be what worker and consumer councils and federations could easily do in the month of December, yielding a comprehensive annual plan ready to go on January first of every year. The source code and algorithm are available online,³ as are the data files for the large-scale experiments we conducted.⁴

Integrating Long-Run and Short-Run Plans

We need both short-run (one-year) and long-run plans. Obviously, the results from long-term plans are needed by those creating annual plans. Before we can do annual planning, we need to know how much of each capital good has to be produced this year to support long-term goals. We need to know how much must be allocated to the educational system to train and teach various skills to the present and future workforces. We need to know what resources must be allocated today to provide future environmental protection and enhancement.

What is less obvious is that the results from annual planning can be used to identify mistaken assumptions in the creation of the longer-term plans, so that these longer-term plans can be modified to reduce losses in well-being. When investment and development plans are first made, there is no alternative to formulating *estimates* of what consumer preferences will be, and what technologies will become available, in the future. However, as these estimates will be inaccurate to some extent, investment and development plans will fail to maximize social well-being because they will call for either too little or too much investment in general, and too little or too much investment in different areas.

Our most important contribution to the literature on investment and long-term planning is that we demonstrate how the results from annual plans after the first one *reveal* where errors were made when investment and development plans were initially created. And then the long-range plans can be revised in light of this new, more accurate information to mitigate welfare losses. Clearly, the revised investment or development plan cannot do as well as an initial plan based on accurate estimates; we cannot undo the damage done by inaccurate

estimates before they are caught. But the revised plans can nonetheless perform better than permitting initial long-term plans to proceed uncorrected.

This is very important. Once it is conceded that as a practical matter economic planning cannot be done in one single operation covering many, many years, but must instead be done via separate procedures—that is, once we recognize there must be an annual planning procedure, an investment planning procedure, and various long-term, development planning procedures—then one must deal with the problem of how to integrate these different planning procedures with one another. If this could not be done, the case for economic planning would be greatly weakened. But because we are able to demonstrate how different planning procedures covering different time frames can be integrated, the case for economic planning is very much strengthened.

Our proposals for investment and development planning also address two issues that many others ignore. While it is fine and good to propose that the division of output between consumption and investment be determined democratically after ample debate, (1) What is to be done about the fact that future generations who will be affected by these decisions cannot vote? And (2) how can anyone vote sensibly about how much of present output should be devoted to investment rather than consumption unless they know how productive investment will be, that is, how much future output will be increased by investment in more capital goods, more “human capital,” or more “natural capital”?

Our proposed answer to the first dilemma is what we call the “generational equity constraint.” Depending on how productive investment proves to be, how damaging environmental deterioration proves to be, and how much higher consumption per capita

proves to increase well-being, it may be that investment plans which seem to be efficient nevertheless either (1) leave per capita consumption for early generations too low compared to per capita consumption for later generations, or (2) leave per capita consumption for later generations too low compared to per capita consumption for earlier generations. To prevent either from happening, we propose that there be a limit set on the percentage by which consumption per capita can differ between any two adjacent years. The limit would be set by the present generation, but our proposal provides built-in incentives to ensure that the present generation will be an honest broker on behalf of future generations. The present generation will not want to choose too high a percentage, because then they will be disadvantaging themselves by deferring too much current consumption to support the investment that generates greater consumption growth in the future. Nor will they want the percentage to be too low, because this would limit the growth in the current generation's consumption over their own lifetimes. Thus, this constraint protects the interests of future generations who cannot be present when investment plans are drawn up and agreed to.

Our answer to the second problem is to carefully consider *who* should be delegated to estimate the various terms in the efficiency conditions for investments in capital goods, human capital, environmental protection, and infrastructure. For each kind of investment plan, we consider both who is best suited to judge how large some future benefit or cost will be, and who might be motivated to either over- or underestimate some benefit or cost.

- For investments in capital goods, we propose that the National Federation of Consumer Councils, assisted by its research and development department, would be the body that would estimate changes in future consumers' utility

functions. And we propose that the National Federation of Worker Councils, with input from both its research and development department and industry federations of worker councils, would be the body that would estimate changes in future production functions.

- For investments in human capital, we recommend that delegates to industry federations of worker councils work with officials in the Ministry of Education to estimate both the production benefits and the social costs of more education. We propose that delegates to the National Federation of Consumer Councils, together with officials from the Ministry of Education, estimate the long-term personal benefits from education. And we recommend that the national legislature, in consultation with the Ministry of Education, be charged with providing planners with estimates of the political "capacitation" benefits of additional education.

- In the case of environmental planning, we recommend that delegates to the National Federation of Consumer Councils estimate what environmental economists call the "use value" and "existence value" that people will place on changes to the natural environment in the future, and that the Ministry for the Environment work with industry federations of worker councils to estimate the effects of investments in environmental protection and enhancement on production—where often what we need to know are the effects of declining stocks of environmental assets on future production.

- We view the National Federation of Consumer Councils as best situated to estimate the value to households of changes in infrastructure, while industry federations of worker councils are the best judges of how much improvements in infrastructure will cost, as well as how much they will increase future production.

Once each kind of investment plan is created, and adjusted if necessary to be consistent with the generational equity constraint, we propose that it be debated and voted on by the national legislature

or put to a national referendum and then adjusted in light of new information that subsequent annual plans reveal to mitigate welfare losses, as already explained.

Reproductive Labor

All human activity consumes material inputs and generates material outputs. And all human activity reproduces or transforms those who participate in the activity. So any dividing line between “economic” activity and “reproductive” activity is necessarily arbitrary. Nonetheless, the primary purpose of some activity is to transform material inputs into more useful material outputs, while the main purpose of other activity is to nurture, care for, educate, or socialize—that is, to “reproduce”—a population of human mortals.

How to conceptualize reproductive activity and its relation to other kinds of human activity is important but can be contentious. Without diving deeply into this debate among mainstream feminists, radical feminists, Marxist feminists, and socialist feminists, it is useful to say a few words about our approach and use of language. Most importantly, we make no assumption about the relative importance of economic activity versus reproductive activity, or the importance of what we call the *economic and reproductive spheres of social life*, except to assume that they are both important. We believe it can be useful to refer to reproductive activity as “reproductive labor” to emphasize that it often requires sacrifices, and is in that sense burdensome, and that it often takes place in workplaces in the formal economy, where human activity is usually called “labor.” However, we see no need to emphasize the importance of reproductive activity by calling it “labor,” because we assume that reproductive activity is just as necessary as economic activity, and their relative importance depends on the overall social formation and must be

determined empirically.

A large feminist literature highlights the unequal distribution of costs and benefits of reproductive labor and points out that this is a crucial part of inequality that is often overlooked. Socialist feminists argue that not only has capitalism historically discouraged caregiving, and penalized those who provide it, but capitalism has also undermined values that promote caregiving, such as empathy and solidarity, and weakened cultures that encourage us to consider collective well-being as well as our own. They argue that by penalizing caregiving, capitalism has gradually eroded social cohesion as well as the health and overall well-being of our communities. And they argue that by excusing men from most caregiving, it has encouraged them to be less empathetic than they might otherwise be. Drawing on insights from this literature, in order to stimulate discussion about *positive solutions*, in one of the chapters of *Democratic Economic Planning*, Savina Chowdhury, Peter Bohmer, and I propose concrete policies to organize and reward reproductive labor in a society with a participatory economy.

There is every reason to believe that absent structured intervention, reproductive activity that takes place along with economic activity in worker councils in the participatory economy would continue to suffer from a gender bias with two adverse consequences: (1) If women continue to perform more than their share of caring and socialization labor in worker councils, women might continue to be compensated less than they should be. (2) If men continue to perform less than their share of caring and socialization labor in worker councils, men will be under-exposed to positive “human development effects” of caring labor, which tend to sensitize people toward the well-being of others and develop a caring culture of solidarity.

We propose four concrete policies to avoid these predictable outcomes in workplaces in a participatory economy.

Women's Caucuses: The first is to empower women's caucuses in worker councils to challenge any kind of gender bias in their workplace. If a women's caucus believes that the committee in charge of restructuring jobs has combined tasks in a gender-biased way, or that there was gender bias in the job assignments, or that gender bias has affected workplace effort ratings, or any other aspect of life in the workplace, then the women's caucus is empowered to not only raise their criticism and trigger a motion to reconsider, but more importantly to issue a temporary "stay" order against the offending practice until a full review of the policy can be completed. Moreover, if after this full review a majority of worker council members vote to retain the policy that its women's caucus deems offensive, we propose that the women's caucus have the right to appeal that decision, with the approval of the women's caucus of an appropriate regional or industry federation of worker councils, to the appropriate regional or industry federation of worker councils itself.

Formally this procedure amounts to kicking a decision up the federation ladder if the women's caucus and full membership continue to disagree. We understand why this solution is worrisome. However, we see no other way to remain true to the principle of democratic rule. Moreover, we feel there is reason to hope that active use of this process can provide the kind of "soul-searching" debate and reconsideration needed to overcome gender biases, which date back millennia. In any case, we welcome debate on other options.

Balance Jobs for Caring Labor: The second proposal is to balance jobs not just for empowerment and desirability but also for the degree to which they involve caring labor. Historically, reproductive labor has

been feminized—linked with femininity as biological determinists argue that women are inherently better suited for these tasks than men. Balancing jobs for caring labor can help overcome this stereotype and teach men that they too can be caring, empathetic, and solicitous of the well-being of others.

However, neither of these first two policies addresses occupational and industry gender segregation. Will most nurses continue to be women and most carpenters continue to be men? Will most members of worker councils that provide housecleaning services continue to be women and most members of worker councils that provide home repair and lawn maintenance continue to be men?

Consider an occupation that is majority male. If the proportion of females admitted to an educational or training program for this occupation is lower than the proportion of qualified females who applied, and if this difference is statistically significant, we have *prima facie* evidence of discrimination in the admission process. Or, consider a worker council that is majority male. If the proportion of females hired as new members is lower than the proportion of qualified female applicants who applied, and if this difference is statistically significant, we have *prima facie* evidence of discrimination in the hiring process.

Anti-discrimination Legislation: Presumably an active women's movement, including women's caucuses in all places of employment, will investigate suspected cases of discrimination, insist on internal reform, and, failing that, file anti-discrimination complaints through the legal system, seeking both remedy and compensation for victims. So our third recommendation is robust legislation outlawing discrimination in hiring, with serious penalties for violators, which active gender caucuses can help enforce aggressively. We recommend that

caucuses for people of color, indigenous groups, the LGBTQ community, and people with disabilities be similarly empowered in all places of employment, and we support extending anti-discrimination legislation to designate all groups who have been historically discriminated against as “protected classes.”

However, feminist research has conclusively demonstrated that discriminatory hiring, which can be addressed by anti-discrimination legislation, is not the only way gender bias can be perpetuated. All too often the applicant pools themselves display a gender bias *for which there is no biological explanation*. We propose that people be free to apply to whatever educational and training programs they wish and for membership in whatever worker council they want. However, this does not mean we should do nothing if applicants for different jobs continue to be disproportionately one gender or another.

Affirmative Action: Fortunately there is a remedy that does *not* violate the principle that everyone should be free to apply to whatever educational programs and workplaces they wish. Where evidence of historic bias is strong, we recommend *gender quotas* for educational programs and hiring. To be clear, this means sometimes requiring that the fraction of females admitted or hired be higher than the fraction of female applicants. We anticipate that such measures, popularly known as affirmative action programs, will be necessary to overcome historic gender biases.

It is impossible to predict to what extent gender bias will still plague a society when its citizens decide to replace capitalism with something like a participatory economy. However, given how resilient gender discrimination has proven to be, it would be unrealistic to assume that such a society would be immune to it, which is why we propose that the above measures be applied

in a participatory economy.

Reproductive Activity in Households

With the exception of mandatory public education for children between the ages of five and eighteen, we believe people should be free to choose how much reproductive labor to do themselves in their households, as opposed to having it done by others in the public economic, healthcare, or education system. How should reproductive activity performed in households be monitored and compensated?

It may not be possible for men to carry half of all fetuses through nine months of pregnancy, but it is certainly possible for men to share the burdens of housework equally with women. Of course, the problem is how to get men to do it!

As discussed, when monitored by active women’s caucuses armed with the power to issue “stays,” job balancing committees in worker councils can do a great deal to eliminate gender bias in traditional job structures by combining tasks in new ways, so that every job contains tasks previously performed almost exclusively by women, thereby guaranteeing that men will also have to do some “women’s work.” In other words, just as committees that combine tasks into jobs can balance jobs for empowerment (to promote economic democracy) and desirability (for economic justice), they can also balance jobs for caring labor as well. Similarly, anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action programs, backed by powerful women’s caucuses, provide effective ways to challenge gender bias in hiring, firing, assignment, and evaluation in a participatory economy and in the public education and healthcare systems as well. But there are no caucuses within households to empower women, nor do anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action programs reach inside households.

This implies that organized social pressure must be even more intense if men are to be induced to do their share of housework. Where can organized social pressure come from?

Women's caucuses in neighborhood councils should provide moral support for women who would otherwise be isolated in their struggles to convince male partners and housemates to do their fair share of housework. Women's caucuses in neighborhood councils can also confront men who are particularly wayward. Women's caucuses in neighborhood councils can organize cooking and cleaning classes for men who fail to participate in these tasks for lack of necessary skills rather than lack of desire. And women's caucuses in neighborhood councils can also make sure that consumption furthers gender equality when decisions are made about private versus public goods, and kinds of public goods. But we do not believe it would be wise to empower women's caucuses in neighborhood councils to issue stays or dictate behavior within households as we have proposed they be able to do in public settings.

Admittedly, this is a difficult issue. Just as we had to reconcile combating gender discrimination with the principle of democratic rule in public settings, here we must reconcile combating gender discrimination with the principle of protecting people's privacy within households. And again, we welcome further debate on this subject.

Conclusion

Critics argue it is not our place to dictate to those who will follow us what they must do. Some even accuse us of being anti-democratic for doing so. But the point of making concrete proposals is not to dictate to anyone. Nobody should doubt that future

anti-capitalist movements will make their own decisions about how to proceed when they have the chance. Instead, the point is simply to make concrete proposals so they can be dissected, analyzed, and criticized, and thereby provide higher quality "pre-thinking" for those who will, of course, decide what to replace capitalism with when opportunities arise.

Critics also argue that there is no time to "build castles in the air" while campaigns to oppose the many ills of a neoliberal capitalism desperately need all the volunteers they can get, in particular when cataclysmic climate change looms ever nearer on the horizon. While we agree that most of our energy must be devoted to strengthening various reform campaigns, nurturing different living experiments in equitable cooperation, and reducing climate change before it is too late, we also believe that—particularly in light of past failures—it is important to improve the quality of debate about exactly what anti-capitalists would put in place of capitalism. It should not be that hard to walk and chew gum at the same time.

NOTES

1. Michael Albert and I first proposed this model in *The Political Economy of Participatory Economics* (Princeton University Press, 1991), and *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics for the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: South End Press, 1991).

2. *Democratic Economic Planning* (Routledge, 2021) is addressed primarily to economists, while *A Participatory Economy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2022) is addressed primarily to political activists.

3. The Clojure and Clojurescript code may be found at <github.com/msszczep/pequod-cljs>; a version of the original Netlogo instance of Pequod may be found at <github.com/msszczep/pequod2>.

4. The files are downloadable as gzipped Clojure data files at www.szczep.org/depxperiments.

Revisiting Rosa Luxemburg's Writings on the 1905 Russian Revolution

ROBERT OVETZ

THE NEWEST ADDITION OF THE planned seventeen volumes of the writing of Rosa Luxemburg, including thousands of pages that have only recently been identified and have never been available in English, is a critical contribution to our understanding of her life and work. Considering that an estimated 80 percent of her writings have never been published in English, this immense lifetime project—launched by Peter Hudis in 2007¹—should be celebrated. The newest volume on revolution is one that includes many insights into Luxemburg's thinking about the 1905 Russian Revolution and its relationship to the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and labor movement politics as well as her thinking about mass strikes, revolution, reform, and

the roles of parties and unions in the revolutionary struggle.

I advise against the temptation to skip the introduction and proceed to other selections in the volume. Editors Peter Hudis and Sandra Rein provide critical insight into Luxemburg's political projects, activities, and then-newly developing theory of revolutionary struggle

The Complete Works of
Rosa Luxemburg Volume IV,
Political Writings 2:
On Revolution (1906–1909)
PETER HUDIS AND SANDRA REIN
(EDS.)
London: Verso, 2022

between 1902 and 1909, with an emphasis on 1906 which composes about half the book. This is intentional, because, as they explain, Luxemburg was engaged in party building in Germany as a leader of the militant wing of the SPD, as well as the formation of the revolutionary Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (later the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania in exile) and her solidarity work with the Russian Revolution.

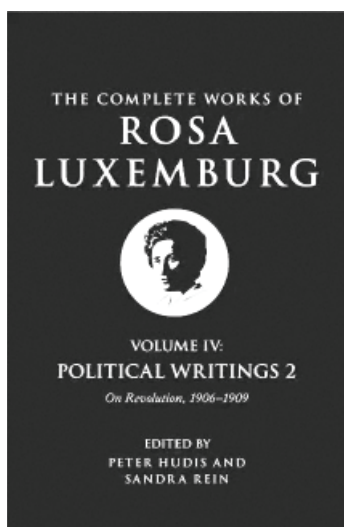
This context is vital for understanding how she came to theorize about the role of revolutionary leadership in fomenting the mass strike, the function of unions to manage and control them, and the self-organization of the working class and its ability to circulate the struggle across the boundaries of industrial sectors, language, ethnicity, job classification, and national

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borders. I have read “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions” several times before but reading this new translation (after reading the introduction) provided the missing historical foundation.

Because it is available in the still widely read Pathfinder Press Collected Works edition and is available online, “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions” is perhaps her best known and widely-read work available in English.² But while that translation trods along, this new translation by Nicholas Gray sings. Her turns of phrase and the color of her writing come through in this translation so vividly even for the most knowledgeable reader that it is worth rereading for that alone. Whatever might have been lost in previous translations appears here to illustrate the vigor with which Luxemburg was writing from the first prospect of a revolutionary wave of struggle that could neither be called into existence nor suppressed by dictates of any party or union. Foreshadowing the Mexican Revolution that would begin a few years later, the prospect of overthrowing capitalism by self-organized class struggle now appeared near-immediately achievable. Reading this new translation, even if one is familiar with the earlier version, will deliver delicious rewards for the effort.

These new texts also help us to understand how Luxemburg came to the idea of the mass strike after exploring the differences between the political and economic strike in her earlier writings. Luxemburg was struggling to understand how class struggle can extract concessions from the



ruling class, such as “bourgeois” rights of speech, assembly, and protest, which are a precondition for revolutionary struggle but not ends in themselves. What comes out vividly in these selected passages is her attempt to struggle with the two questions of whether it was necessary to pass through bourgeois democracy and capitalism first before transitioning to socialism and whether the political struggle must proceed the economic

struggle. It is apparent that Luxemburg is struggling mightily with these accepted notions within the European left and whether the 1905 Russian Revolution provides sufficient evidence to repudiate them.

During this period Luxemburg wavers and had not yet fully embraced one or the other. That would come at the end of her life when she and Karl Liebknecht supported the arm attempt to spark revolutionary struggle. This tragically brought about her demise when her former Social Democratic allies have the Freikorps assassinate her. In 1905-7 she sees political and economic mass struggles as distinct yet interwoven with one another, even going as far as to say neither must precede the other but that they must happen together. It is this germ of an idea that will ultimately settle the question for her whether a revolutionary elite must first seize the state on behalf of the working class, the core premise of Leninism that she will move away from in later years.

Luxemburg is emboldened by the seeming economic struggles which carry with them the possibility of political reform that opens up the space for further expanding the economic struggle into revolutionary directions. In the many strikes she recounts

in “The Mass Strike” it becomes clear that what is most promising about them is not that their demands were won in the short term only to be wretched away soon after, but that the workers combined the demand for less work and more pay through disruptive self-organization on the shop floor and their capacity to spread the struggle across entire regions and national borders within days. For Rosa, the role of the revolutionary is not to delude themselves into thinking they can call this sort of activity into being but to always be ready to intervene when the working class launches the struggle in order to support and amplify what the workers are doing themselves.

Many of the volume’s other selections, such as “Critique of the Workers Movement,” “Why Does the Revolution Not Break Out,” and “The General Strike and German Social Democracy,” do not provide the kind of detailed analysis offered by “The Mass Strike,” but—at last in English—document how Luxemburg’s ideas germinated and matured until they reached a theoretical threshold. What this volume illustrates in great detail, is that she did not do this in the abstract, merely as a theoretician, but in the heat of struggle as she intervened to situate the importance of the 1905 Russian Revolution to the workers’ movement elsewhere in Europe, especially in Germany and Poland.

Although in the end Luxemburg miscalculated and supported the Spartacist uprising in Berlin in 1919, which led to her assassination, her writings on revolution

during these four years help us understand how she both saw the interrelationship between the class struggle and the struggle for political freedom. They trace her early steps to rejecting both reformist social-democratic and vanguardist top-down parties such as the Bolsheviks as well as union disciplining of rank-and-file workers in favor of self-organized workers’ struggles. By 1909 these the fissures were beginning to show and would only grow over time. Despite Luxemburg’s unproductive hostility towards anarchists, which the editors remind the reader is factually misrepresented, her specific theory of revolution taking form at this time is the result of observing, engaging with, and reflecting on the working class acting *for itself*.

This volume of *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg* is not a book you will read from cover to cover, but keep as a resource to turn to as the fire of class struggle swirls all around us. It can then provide a serene source for making sense of it all and what might come next to move the struggle into revolution.

NOTES

1. *Verso blog*, Rosa Luxemburg, “Work in Progress: Interview with Peter Hudis,” March 4, 2021, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5013-rosa-luxemburg-work-in-progress-interview-with-peter-hudis>.
2. Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, Pathfinder, 1970, pp. 153–218, <https://www.pathfinderpress.com/collections/rosa-luxemburg/products/rosa-luxemburg-speaks#tab-2>.

From *The Mass Strike*, *The Political Party*, and *the Trade Unions*¹

ROSA LUXEMBURG

New Politics thanks Verso Books for permission to publish Parts V and VI of Luxemburg's pamphlet *The Mass Strike* from *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg Volume IV: Political Writings 2, "On Revolution" (1906-1909) (Verso, 2022)*.

V

THE QUESTION THAT NOW ARISES is that of the extent to which the lessons that can be drawn from Russian mass strikes are applicable to Germany. Completely different social and political relations obtain in Germany and Russia, and likewise there is a wide divergence between the history and status of the respective workers' movements in the two countries. At first sight, it might appear that the internal laws of mass strikes in Russia as registered above are merely the product of specifically Russian relations that do not hold in the case of the German proletariat. There exists the tightest of internal connections between the political and economic

struggles in the Russian Revolution; their unity is given expression in the period of mass strikes. But is this not simply a consequence of Russian absolutism? In a state in which all forms and expressions of the workers' movement are prohibited, where the simplest strike is a political crime, every economic struggle must logically turn into a political one.

Moreover, if the converse is true—namely, that the very first outbreak of political revolution entailed a universal settling of accounts between the Russian working class and the entrepreneurial class—this is, in turn, the simple consequence of the circumstance that the Russian worker had the lowest standard of living up to that point and had never engaged in any kind of regular economic struggle over the improvement of his condition. To a certain extent, the proletariat in Russia had first to work its way out of the harshest of conditions, and it is no wonder that it took to the task with youthful audacity as soon as the revolution had introduced the first breath of fresh air into the asphyxiating atmosphere of absolutism. And finally, the stormy revolutionary course of the Russian mass strikes, as well as their predominantly spontaneous, elemental character, can be explained, on the one hand, as following from the political backwardness of Russia and the necessity of first overthrowing Oriental despotism,² and on the other, as a consequence of the lack of organization and schooling of

ROSA LUXEMBURG (1871–1919) was a Polish-born Jewish revolutionary and one of the greatest theoretical minds of the European socialist movement. An activist in Germany and Poland, the author of numerous classic works, she participated in the founding of the German Communist Party and the Spartacist insurrection in Berlin in 1919. She was assassinated in January of that year and has become a hero of socialist, communist, and feminist movements around the world.

the Russian proletariat. In a country in which the working class has at its disposal thirty years of experience in political life, a 3-million-strong Social Democratic Party, and an elite troop consisting of 1.25 million unionized workers, political struggle and mass strikes cannot possibly have the stormy and elemental character that they do in a semi-barbarian state taking the first leap out of the medieval era and into the modern, bourgeois order. Such is the generally accepted conception among those who would infer the degree of maturity of the social relations of a given country from the wording of its drafted legislation.

Let us examine these questions in sequence. First of all, in terms of historical dating, it is perverse to claim that economic struggle in Russia only began with the outbreak of the revolution. In actual fact, strikes and wage struggles had increasingly been the order of the day in Russia proper since the beginning of the 1890s, and in Russian Poland³ even since the end of the 1880s; these movements ultimately achieved *de facto* civil rights. Although brutal police repression often ensued from such struggles, the latter were nonetheless a daily phenomenon. In Warsaw and Łódź, for example, a significant general strike fund was already in existence in 1891, and the enthusiasm for labor unions in these years even generated the “economic” illusions that would be so rampant a few years later in Petersburg and the rest of Russia.⁴

Likewise, there is much exaggeration in the notion that proletarians throughout the tsarist empire had without exception the living standards of paupers before the revolution. The stratum of workers in large-scale industry in the urban centers that was most actively and ardently engaged in the economic as well as the political struggle had a material standard of living that was scarcely beneath that of the corresponding layer of the German proletariat, and, in



Rosa Luxemburg

some occupations, the same level of wages was to be found in Russia as in Germany—with wages in Russia in some instances even outstripping those of workers in corresponding industries in Germany. Similarly, there was scarcely a significant difference between the two countries with regard to working time in large-scale industrial enterprises. Thus, notions of a supposed material and cultural helotry on the part of the Russian working class are pure fiction. Given a little reflection, the mere fact of the revolution itself—and the prominent role played by the proletariat within it—ought to suffice to dispel such conceptions.

With paupers, no revolutions of such political maturity and lucidity are to be made, and the industrial worker at the forefront of the struggle in Petersburg, Warsaw, Moscow, or Odessa is far closer to his Western European counterpart in cultural and intellectual terms than is reckoned by those who regard bourgeois parliamentarianism and standard labor union practice as the only—and indispensable—cultural

schooling for the proletariat. The modern large-scale capitalist development of Russia and the intellectual influence exerted over a decade and a half by Social Democracy—during which time it has galvanized and directed economic struggle—have both had a significant cultural effect on the proletariat, even without the external guarantees provided by the bourgeois legal order.

The contrast becomes even less marked if we look a little more closely at the actual standard of living of the *German* working class. In Russia, the great political mass strikes have from the first instant roused the broadest strata of the proletariat and hurled them into febrile economic struggle. In Germany, on the other hand, are there not entire dark zones within the topography of the working class—areas until now scarcely penetrated by the warming light of the labor unions—entire, broad strata of workers that have until now made no attempt at all, or only unsuccessful attempts, to raise themselves up out of social helotry by means of ordinary wage struggles? Take, for example, the destitution of *the miners*. Even within the peaceful, leisurely working routine in Germany, amid the cool atmosphere of its parliamentary monotony—just as in other countries, even in that labor union El Dorado, England—the wage struggle of the miners manifests as virtually nothing other than tremendous eruptions, as mass strikes of a typical, elemental character. This simply demonstrates that the antagonism between capital and labor here is too acute and too enormous for it to allow itself to be dissipated through peaceful, scheduled, partial labor union struggles. However, this destitution of the miners, in all its volatility, which forms a most vehement cyclone even in “normal” times, ought to erupt immediately and inevitably into a tremendous economic and social struggle in Germany with every

large-scale political mass action on the part of the working class, with every larger jolt that disturbs the momentary equilibrium of everyday social life. Consider further the misery of the *textile workers*. In this case, too, the bitter outbreaks of the wage struggle that sweeps through Vogtland every few years—outbreaks that for the most part end without result—offer only a faint intimation of the vehemence with which the large, agglomerated mass of the helots of cartelized textile capital ought to explode during a political convulsion, during a powerful and audacious mass action on the part of the German proletariat. Take the further examples of the destitution of *the workers of the putting-out system, the assembly workers, or the electricity workers*—all these are akin to the eye of the storm, in which it is all the more certain that tremendous economic struggles will erupt with every political turbulence in Germany; the less frequently the proletariat in these branches takes up the struggle in quiet times, the more unsuccessfully it struggles each time, and the more brutally it is compelled by capital to return to the yoke of slavery, gnashing its teeth all the while.

Now, however, entire broad categories of the proletariat come into consideration that, in the “normal” course of events, remain altogether excluded from any possibility of engaging in a calm economic struggle to improve their situation, and that are barred from any exercise of the right of association. The example par excellence to be cited here is that of the abject poverty of the *railroad and postal employees*. For these state employees, Russian conditions obtain in the heart of the parliamentary constitutional state of Germany—i.e., Russian conditions like these prevailed prior to the revolution, during the untarnished splendor of absolutism. The Russian railroader already towered above his German counterpart with regard to his economic and social freedom

of movement during the great strike of October 1905. The Russian railroad workers and postal employees conquered the right of association *de facto* by storm, and although lawsuits and disciplinary action hailed down upon them, nothing could take their internal solidarity from them. It would be an entirely false psychological prognosis, however, to assume, as is done by German reactionaries, that the slavish obedience of the German railroad workers and postal employees will last forever, that it is a rock that cannot be eroded. If the German union leaders have also become so accustomed to the prevailing conditions that they can survey with gratification the successes of labor union struggle in Germany, undisturbed by this ignominy that is almost without precedent in Europe, the latent, pent-up resentment among the uniformed state slaves will inevitably seek to vent itself in the context of a general uprising of industrial workers. And when the industrial vanguard of the proletariat attempts to seize further political rights or to defend the old ones through mass strikes, the great contingents of railroad workers and postal employees will, as a natural necessity, be compelled to focus on their own particular ignominy and to finally rise up in order to emancipate themselves from the extra portion of Russian absolutism that was specifically established for them in Germany. The pedantic conception, which aims to expedite large-scale popular movements according to a schema or formula, regards the conquest of the right of association for railroad workers as the necessary *precondition* that would first “permit any thought” of a mass strike in Germany. The actual and natural course of events can only be the reverse: It is only a powerful, spontaneous mass strike action that can engender the right of association for German railroad workers and postal employees. And those tasks that are insoluble under the prevail-

ing conditions in Germany will suddenly discover their feasibility and their solution under the influence of, and pressure from, a general political mass action on the part of the proletariat.

Finally, consider the largest and most important case: the misery of *agricultural workers*. If British⁵ labor unions are exclusively tailored to industrial workers, this is a phenomenon that can be understood in terms of the specific character of the British national economy and the reduced role of agriculture in economic life as a whole. In Germany, a labor union organization—no matter how brilliantly developed—that merely encompasses industrial workers and that is thus inaccessible to the entire great army of agricultural workers will only ever give a faint, partial picture of the situation of the proletariat as a whole. In turn, it would be a calamitous illusion to believe that rural conditions are immutable and fixed, that neither the tireless work of enlightenment undertaken by Social Democracy nor even the entire internal class politics in Germany serve to continually undermine the external passivity of the agricultural worker, and that the rural proletariat would not also rise up during any given large-scale general class action taken for whatever purpose by the German industrial proletariat. Such an uprising can naturally only manifest initially as a turbulent general economic struggle, as tremendous mass strikes by rural workers. Thus, the image of the alleged economic superiority of the German proletariat over its Russian counterpart is altered very significantly if we shift our focus from the index of unionized branches of industry and crafts to those large groupings of the proletariat that stand entirely outside the union struggle or whose particular economic situation cannot be forcibly made to fit inside the narrow framework of the everyday guerrilla warfare waged by the labor unions. In so doing, we see one enormous sphere

after another in which the intensification of antagonisms has reached its outer limits, with explosive material galore ready to be detonated and a series of vast regions that contain a great deal of “Russian absolutism” in its most naked form, and in which, in economic terms, the most elementary settling of accounts with capital is yet to be undertaken.

All these unsettled accounts would inevitably be presented to the ruling system within the context of a general political mass action by the proletariat. Of course, an artificially arranged one-off demonstration by the urban proletariat, a mass strike action executed merely through discipline and following the conductor’s baton wielded by the party executive, might leave the broader strata of the population cold and indifferent. Only a real, powerful, and ruthless action of struggle by the industrial proletariat—an action born of a revolutionary situation—would be guaranteed to cause a reaction among deeper-lying strata and to draw along into a turbulent general economic struggle precisely all those who in normal, peaceful times stand beyond the daily union struggle.

Yet if we return to the organized vanguard of the German industrial proletariat while on the other hand retaining a focus on the goals of the economic struggle as striven for today by the Russian workforce, we find that the latter are endeavors that the oldest of the German labor unions would have no reason at all to view with condescension, much as one might regard the worn-out shoes of childhood. Thus, the most important universal demand of Russian strikes since January 22, 1905—the eight-hour day—certainly does not represent a standpoint that the German proletariat has already surpassed; on the contrary, it constitutes in most cases a beautiful, yet distant, ideal. The same is true of the struggle with the “landlord’s standpoint,”

the struggle for the introduction of workers’ committees in all factories, for the abolition of piecework, for the abolition of the putting-out system of labor in handicrafts, for the full implementation of the day of rest on Sunday, and for the recognition of the right of association. To be sure, on closer inspection all of the objects of the economic struggle of the Russian proletariat in the current revolution are also highly relevant for the German proletariat, touching as they do nothing but sore points in terms of the worker’s existence.

From this it follows, above all, that the purely political mass strike—the preferred mode of operation—is also in the case of Germany nothing but a lifeless theoretical schema. If it is true that mass strikes—in the form of a resolute political struggle by the urban workforce—will ensue by natural means from a powerful revolutionary ferment, they will equally naturally flip over into an entire period of elementary economic struggles, just as they did in Russia. The fears of the labor union leaders—that the struggle over economic interests could be simply sidelined and smothered during a period of turbulent political struggles, of mass strikes—are founded upon a school-child’s notion of the course of things, a conception that hovers in midair. On the contrary, in Germany as well, the revolutionary period would transform the character of labor union struggle and reinforce it to such an extent that today’s guerrilla war by the labor unions will be child’s play in comparison. And on the other hand, the political struggle would also constantly gain fresh impulses and new forces from this elemental economic mass strike cyclone. The reciprocal interaction between economic and political struggle that forms the internal driving force of today’s mass strikes in Russia and simultaneously constitutes the regulating mechanism, so to speak, of the revolutionary action of the proletariat—

such an interaction would ensue equally naturally from those in Germany, too.

VI

IN THIS CONNECTION, THE QUESTION of organization also assumes an essentially different aspect in its relation to the problem of the mass strike in Germany.

The position taken by some labor union leaders with regard to this question usually amounts to no more than the following: "We are not yet strong enough to risk such a hazardous trial of strength as a mass strike." Now, this point of view is untenable, insofar as it is an insoluble task to determine by means of a calmly considered arithmetic calculation when the proletariat would be "strong enough" for any given struggle. Thirty years ago, the German labor unions had 50,000 members. This was evidently a number that, according to the yardstick outlined above, ruled out any consideration of a mass strike. Fifteen years later, the unions were four times as strong, and had a combined membership of 237,000. If, however, today's union leaders had been asked at the time whether the organization of the proletariat was then sufficiently mature for a mass strike, they would surely have responded that this was not the case by a long shot, and that the unionized workforce would first have to number millions. Today, there are more than a million organized labor union members, but the views of their leaders are unchanged, and apparently could remain so ad infinitum. The tacit assumption here is that the entire working class in Germany, down to the last man and the last woman, must first be affiliated to labor unions before these can be deemed "strong enough" to risk a mass action—an action that would in any case probably turn out to be "superfluous," according to the old formula. This theory is completely utopian, however, for the simple reason that it exhibits an inter-

nal contradiction and is beset by vicious circularity. Before the workers can engage in any direct class struggle, they must all be organized. Yet the relations, the conditions, of capitalist development and of the bourgeois state entail that in the "normal" course of things, without turbulent class struggles, determinate strata—and in fact these form the majority, the most important, the most downtrodden strata of the proletariat, the strata most oppressed by capital and the state—cannot be organized at all. We see, even in Britain, that all that has been achieved by a whole century of relentless labor union work without any "disturbances"—disregarding for a moment the period of the Chartist movement—without any "revolutionary romantic" deviations or distractions, is the organization of a *minority* of the better-situated strata of the proletariat.

On the other hand, the labor unions, like all organizations of struggle of the proletariat, cannot maintain themselves in any other way than through struggle—and, more precisely, not only through struggle in the sense of *The Battle of Frogs and Mice*⁶ in the stagnant waters of the bourgeois-parliamentary period, but also in the sense of the turbulent, revolutionary periods of mass struggle. The rigid, mechanical-bureaucratic conception will only recognize struggle as the product of organization that has attained a certain level of strength. On the contrary, however, the living, dialectical development gives rise to organization as a product of struggle. We have already witnessed a superb example of this phenomenon in Russia, where a proletariat that was barely organized—if at all—created a comprehensive network of incipient organizations within a year and a half of turbulent revolutionary struggle. Another example of this type is provided by the German labor unions' own history. In 1878, labor union members numbered

50,000. According to the theory of today's labor union leaders, such organization was, as noted above, far from being "strong enough" to engage in an intense political struggle. Yet, as weak as they might have been at the time, German labor unions *did* take up the struggle—namely, the struggle against the Antisocialist Law—and not only proved themselves "strong enough" to emerge victorious from this struggle, but also saw their strength increase by a factor of five as a result: Their combined membership following the repeal of the Antisocialist Law in 1891 mounted to 277,659. It is true that the method with which the unions prevailed in the struggle against the Antisocialist Law did not correspond to the ideal of a peaceful, beelike, uninterrupted expansion; first, they were reduced to ruins in struggle, only to soar up out of the next wave and be reborn. Yet this is precisely the specific method of growth corresponding to proletarian class organizations: to test themselves in struggle, and to emerge from the struggle having reproduced themselves within it.

On closer inspection of German relations and the situation of the various strata of workers, it is evident that the coming period of turbulent political mass struggles will not entail the dreaded impending demise of German unions; on the contrary, it will afford new, unforeseen perspectives of a rapid, spasmodic expansion of its sphere of power. Yet the question has another side to it. Any plan to undertake mass strikes as serious political class action with organized workers alone is generally an utterly hopeless one. If the mass strike is to be successful, or rather, if mass strikes are to be successful, they have to become *popular movements*—i.e., they have to draw the broadest strata of the proletariat into the struggle. Already in the parliamentary form, the power of the proletarian class struggle does not depend upon the small organized core, but upon

the broad surrounding periphery of the revolutionary-minded proletariat. If the Social Democratic Party were to attempt to contest an electoral campaign with only its few hundred thousand organized members, it would condemn itself to oblivion. And if Social Democracy tends toward the recruitment, as far as is possible, of almost the entire great reserve army of its electors into its party organizations, after thirty years of experience of Social Democracy, the mass of voters has not increased through the growth of the party organization; instead, the reverse is true: the fresh strata of the workforce won over through each electoral campaign form the fertile soil in which the seed of organization can be subsequently sown. Here, too, it is not merely the case that the organization provides troops for the struggle: On the contrary, the struggle also supplies new recruits for the organization, and does so to an even greater extent. The same tendency that can be identified in parliamentary struggle evidently applies to a far higher degree to direct political mass action. While it is true that the Social Democratic Party constitutes, as the organized core of the working class, the leading vanguard of the entire working population, and that it is precisely from this organization that the political clarity, the strength, and the unity of the workers' movement, all flow, the class movement of the proletariat should never be conceived of as one of an organized minority. Each truly large-scale class struggle must be based on the support and involvement of the broadest masses, and any strategy for the class struggle that did not reckon with such involvement, that were merely tailored to neatly executed marches by the small contingent of the proletariat that is quartered in barracks, would be condemned in advance to being a dismal fiasco.

Mass strikes or political mass struggles cannot be sustained alone by those who are

organized, nor can they be quantified on the basis of veritable leadership emanating from a party headquarters. However, what is decisive here—as in Russia—is neither “discipline,” nor “schooling,” nor indeed the most meticulous prior calculation of the requisite levels of support and financing, but rather class action that is truly revolutionary and resolute, namely action that would be capable of winning over and sweeping along the broadest strata of the disorganized, but—given their mood and situation—revolutionary, proletarian masses.

The overestimation and false evaluation of the role of the organization within the class struggle of the proletariat is usually complemented by the underestimation of the disorganized proletarian mass and its political maturity. It is only in a revolutionary period, in the tempest of large-scale, rousing class struggles, that the entire educational effect of rapid capitalist development and of Social Democratic influences upon the broadest strata of the population first reveals itself; by contrast, charts detailing membership of organizations and even election statistics in quiet times merely yield a faint idea of this effect.

We have seen in Russia over the last two years that a large-scale, general action by the proletariat can arise out of the most minor partial conflict between the workers and the entrepreneurial class, out of the slightest local brutality on the part of the organs of government. Everyone regards this as natural, because in Russia there is “the revolution.” Yet what does this mean? It signifies that class sentiment, class instinct, is alive to the highest degree among the Russian proletariat, such that the latter experiences each partial issue concerning any given small group of workers as a general matter, as a class issue, and thus the whole proletariat reacts in lightning fashion to the dispute. Whereas in Germany,

France, Italy, or Holland, even the most intense labor union conflicts do not elicit a general action by the working class, the slightest affair in Russia raises an entire storm. As paradoxical as it might sound, however, this implies nothing other than that class instinct is currently infinitely stronger among the young, unschooled, dimly enlightened, and even more feebly organized Russian proletariat than is the case among the organized, schooled, and enlightened workforce in Germany or any other Western European country. And this is no particular virtue of the “young, unspent East” in contrast with the “lazy West”: It is rather a simple result of immediate revolutionary mass action. In the case of the German enlightened worker, the class consciousness that has been implanted within him by Social Democracy is a *theoretical, latent* one: In the period of the rule of bourgeois parliamentarianism, it cannot as a rule be activated as direct mass action; in this case, class consciousness consists in the ideal aggregate of the 400 parallel actions in the various electoral districts, the many partial economic struggles, and the like. In the revolution, where the mass itself appears in the political arena, class consciousness becomes *practical and active*. Thus, a single year of revolution gave the very “schooling” to the Russian proletariat that thirty years of parliamentary and labor union struggle could not give by artificial means to the German proletariat. Admittedly, this vibrant, active class sentiment of the proletariat in Russia will also significantly fade, or rather be transformed into a concealed, latent one after the conclusion of the period of revolution and the establishment of a bourgeois-parliamentary constitutional state. Yet the reverse is equally certain: In a period of powerful political actions in Germany, a vibrant and effective revolutionary class sentiment will grip the broadest and deepest strata of the proletariat, and will

do so all the more rapidly and forcefully, the more extensively the Social Democratic organizations have performed their educational task up to that point. This educational work and the agitational and revolutionizing effect of contemporary German politics as a whole will express themselves in the circumstance that all those cohorts that, in an apparent state of political stultification, currently remain insensitive to all attempts at organization by the Social Democrats and by the labor unions will, in an earnest revolutionary period, suddenly obey the flag of Social Democracy. Six months of a revolutionary period will accomplish the work of schooling these currently disorganized masses that a decade of popular assemblies and distribution of leaflets would not have been able to achieve. And when relations in Germany have attained the degree of maturity for such a period, the most disorganized and backward strata today will naturally form the most radical and tumultuous element in the struggle, as opposed to being merely dragged along by it. If it should come to mass strikes in Germany, it is virtually certain that it will not be the best organized—the printers, for example—but rather the worst organized or those that are completely disorganized—the miners, the textile workers, perhaps even agricultural laborers—who will develop the greatest capacity for action.

In this way, we reach the same conclusions with regard to the actual tasks of *leadership* and the role of Social Democracy vis-à-vis mass strikes in Germany that we drew previously in our analysis of the processes in Russia. That is, if we abandon the pedantic schema of a demonstrative mass strike of the organized minority, a mobilization artificially contrived by order of the party and the labor unions, and turn our attention instead to the vivid image of a real popular movement that has emerged

with elemental force from the extreme intensification of class antagonisms and the political situation, it is evident that the task of Social Democracy consists not in the technical preparation and direction of the mass strike, but first and foremost in the *political leadership* of the whole movement.

Social Democracy is the most enlightened, most class-conscious Vanguard of the proletariat. It cannot, and must not, await in fatalist fashion, with folded arms, the onset of the “revolutionary situation”—it cannot wait for such a spontaneous popular movement to fall from the sky. On the contrary, it must, as always, anticipate the development of events and seek to *accelerate* them. It cannot do this, however, through suddenly and indiscriminately issuing a “call” for a mass strike at what might be the right or the wrong point in time, but rather, and above all, by making clear to the broadest proletarian strata the inexorable onset of this revolutionary period and by clarifying the internal *social moments* that lead to it and its *political consequences*. If the broadest strata of the proletariat are to be won over for a political mass action on the part of Social Democracy, and if, conversely, Social Democracy is to seize and retain effective leadership during a mass movement and to gain control over the entire movement *in the political sense*, then it must be capable of implanting its *tactics* and *goals* within the German proletariat with the utmost clarity, coherence, and resolution in the period of the coming struggles.

NOTES

1. This text was first published as a pamphlet in 1906 as *Massenstreik, Partei, und Gewerkschaften* (Hamburg: Verlag von Erdmann Dubber). Shortly after her release from prison on July 8, 1906, Luxemburg traveled to Kuokkala, Finland, where she engaged in extensive discussions with Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks, including Grigori Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and Alexander Bogdanov, on the significance of the 1905 Revolution; as Zinoviev later put it, she was “the first

Marxist who was able to evaluate the Russian Revolution correctly and as a whole"; see J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), p. 357. It was during this period in Finland that she composed the *Mass Strike* pamphlet, which had been commissioned by the Executive Committee of the Social Democratic Organization of the Federal State of Hamburg, and by the Executive Committees of the Social Democratic Associations of Altona, Ottensen, and Wandsbek. This original edition is based on the printed manuscript dating from 1906. It is translated by Nicholas Gray.

2. It was common among European Marxists of the time (including Russian ones) to refer to tsarist absolutism as a form of "Oriental despotism," in part due to the alleged influence of the Mongol invasion and occupation of large parts of southern Russia from the thirteenth century onward.

3. Russian Poland (Congress Poland) refers to the Kingdom of Poland, a state established in 1815 by the Vienna Conference. Existing until 1915, the Kingdom of Poland was connected by personal union with Russia and subjected to tsarist rule.

4. [Footnote by Luxemburg] Comrade [Henriette] Roland-Holst thus commits a factual error when she states the following in the prologue to the Russian edition of her book on the mass strike: "The proletariat (in Russia—*R.L.*) had become acquainted with the mass strike virtually since the emergence of large-scale industry for the simple reason that partial strikes had proven impossible under the political repression of absolutism" (*Neue Zeit*, 1906, No. 33). The reverse was in fact true. Thus the rapporteur of the Saint Petersburg Labor Union Combine made the following declaration at the beginning of his report to the Second Conference of Russian

Labor Unions in February 1906: "In view of the composition of this conference, I do not need to emphasize that our labor union movement has its origins neither in the 'liberal' period of Prince Svyatopolk-Mirsky (in 1904—*R.L.*), nor in the events of January 22, as is asserted by some; the labor union movement has far deeper roots, and is inseparably bound up with the entire past history of our workers' movement. Our labor unions are merely new organizational forms for the purpose of directing the economic struggle that the Russian proletariat has waged for decades. Without going too far back in history, it can be said that the economic struggle of the workers of Saint Petersburg has taken on more or less organized forms since the memorable strike of 1896–97. Favorably combined with the leadership of the political struggle, the leadership of this struggle becomes the affair of the Social Democratic organization formerly known as the Saint Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, which transformed itself into the Saint Petersburg Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party after its conference in March 1898. A complex system of factory, district, and suburban organizations was created; these represented innumerable threads that connected the headquarters to the masses of workers, allowing it to react to all of the needs of the working class by producing leaflets. This established the possibility of supporting and leading strikes.

5. *Englischen* in the original.

6. *Batrachomyomachia*, or *The Battle of Frogs and Mice*, is an ancient parody of the *Iliad*; its authorship has not been conclusively established. Marx often used the phrase to refer to the endless feuds between radical sects, especially of those in exile.

In Search of Worker Strategy

Seams, Chokepoints, and Organization

KIM MOODY

“**W**HEREVER THINGS CONNECT, that’s where they’re materially weakest.... It’s hard to tear fabric woven whole, like Christ’s cloak, all of one piece; it’s much easier to tear it where there’s a seam,” argues John Womack Jr. in *Labor Power and Strategy*. And so it is in the processes of the production of goods and services from the raw materials to the final product. As Womack puts it more specifically, “And wherever you put things together, there’s a seam or a zipper or a hub or a joint or a node or a link, the more technologies together, the more links, the places where it is not integral” (26). It is at these many points that workers have unique power to halt, delay, and/or disrupt production, profits and accumulation.

This is the theme of *Labor Power and Strategy* edited by labor veterans Peter Olney and Glenn Perusek. This short but idea-packed book is composed of a long interview with John Womack Jr. conducted

Labor Power and Strategy

JOHN WOMACK JR.
(Peter Olney and Glenn
Perusek, eds.)
Oakland: PM Press, 2023

by Olney, former organizing director of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), along with critical but “comradely” responses by ten other labor activists and academics. Womack is a Harvard professor and an expert on the Mexican revolution. It was this that led him to study the

structure of Mexican industry in the state of Veracruz, where he found the key points of disruption that to him helped explain the behavior of Mexican industrial workers during the revolution. He would also draw on the works of such divergent scholars as industrial relations expert John Dunlop and Italian sociologist Luca Perrone.

While *Labor Power and Strategy* is not the first book to take up the matter of choke points particularly in relation to logistics,¹ what makes this volume both unique and important is precisely the focus on these points of disruption that characterize virtually any type of extended production process from factories to warehouses, hospitals, hotels, packing plants, or supermarkets. As Glenn Perusek points out in the introduction, most discussions of organizing have focused on the “political-social aspects of organizing” (10). Among these, mapping the workplace, building morale through activities, making house visits, and accruing votes for an NLRB election. Womack calls

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for a deeper look at the sources of workers' power within the production process as a whole.

This power of position in production includes not only what goes on in any given workplace but in the connections between production sites all the way to the final sale or for that matter between different firms—the hubs, nodes, links, the roads and rails and ports we often summarize as logistics. As Womack reminds us:

Through this new round of capitalist expansion, “globalization,” going back to the 1970s, most big companies (little companies too) have been into subcontracting, “downsizing,” “outsourcing,” vertical integration. But that only increases the importance of logistics, the industrially and technically strategic transportation and communication necessary for all these transactions (45).

This means that “any product that moves now, anybody who moves, goes through more connections in chains and networks than a generation ago” (46). Thus, transportation and communication “are in the direct grind of production so that in manufacturing the supply chain is now not only the first link in the productive process or the last link, delivery, but also a series of intermediate and intermittent links in the chain, the steps between the fixed stations of transformation” (35). This applies to services as well, all of which depend not only on the delivery of materials but on sequential or simultaneous steps in provision of almost any service. In other words, the points of vulnerability to worker action have multiplied and are by now nearly universal. At the same time, capital and its systems of production and movement seldom stay the same. Even here, however, Womack insists: “But I want to emphasize here that when the company makes a change in the means or organization (inevitably both), it actually opens a window for workers to get into it...can imbed themselves into

it...so that they soon know better than the company's engineers how the whole system functions.” (38).

All of this brings to mind Eric Olin Wright's and Beverly Silver's concepts of “strategic workers” or power that flows mostly from the workers' skills and “associational” power based on organization and solidarity. Womack acknowledges this, but unlike most earlier attributions of worker power to particular skills or market power, including Harry Braverman's epic analysis, he insists:

In all due respect for Braverman, I argue not about skills but about positions, and I think any modern production is inevitably a combination of technologies, old and new, a combination of divisions of labor. Workers can break that combination, to their benefit (146).

This distinction between the strategic power of skills and that of position is key because as one of his “mentors,” John T. Dunlop, argues, from the very skills that give some workers strong bargaining power “a pure craft union may result.”²² The workers who have power by virtue of position may or may not be skilled, but it is the position that matters. And this position is part of an interconnected process so that solidarity and inclusion also matter. Skills are not central. Womack gives the example of the (supposedly) low-skilled janitors in a high-rise office building: “...without janitors and maintenance workers a big office building is very quickly an impossible place for office workers to do their jobs” (56).

Origins of the Concept of “Positional Power”

Dunlop was a well-known mainstream academic and practitioner in industrial relations. No radical, he seems an unlikely source of workers' strategic ability to disrupt production. As Womack points out, however, Dunlop saw first-hand the

disruptive power of wildcat strikes as an administrator for the National War Labor Board during World War Two. His job, of course, was to minimize such actions, not to encourage them. By the end of the war Dunlop saw the growth of unions in part as a reflection of this disruptive power. In 1949, he wrote "Successful organization has

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required that workmen occupy a *strategic* position in the technological and market structures." While this might involve skilled workers, he went on to argue, "The term strategic, however, is not identical with skill. It means sheer bargaining power by virtue of location and position in the productive process."³ This insight was repeated briefly in his major 1958 work, *Industrial Relations Systems*, but essentially buried in his "systems" analysis with its triad of managers, workers, and government and its emphasis on the creation of rules to govern collective bargaining. The "Commentary" he added to the 1993 edition didn't even mention strategic position.⁴ It disappeared as part of mainstream and even much of left industrial relations thinking.

According to Womack, his other major influence was the Italian sociologist Luca Perrone, who argued "that a measure of the 'disruptive potential' of workers derived from their position within the hierarchy of

the system of economic interdependencies is the most appropriate way of tapping structural power."⁵ As Perrone died at an early age in 1980, this and a subsequent work were edited by Erik Olin Wright. The thrust of these two articles, however, was not on positional power within the production process or even in logistics, but on the impact of strikes in strategic industries on other industries. To quantify this Perrone used the Italian Central Bureau of Statistics' (Leontief) "input-output" tables. The results were not what he had expected as they showed some impact on wages, but little on the propensity to strike. This was, perhaps, because the potential power of those workers meant the mere threat of a strike was enough to produce higher wages.⁶ This level of analysis never became part of either mainstream or left industrial relations analysis. It was, however, one source of the concept and term "positional power."

The intellectually curious Womack did not cease his investigation of strategic or positional power in academic sources. In what he characterized as a "polemic" meant "to provoke a debate" on sources of worker power in the fields of labor history and the debates over organizing strategy, he drew on a vast amount of the history of organized labor and the political left. This 257-page work, written in 2006 and as yet unpublished in English, is indeed provocative and too long to summarize here. What is perhaps most important for this discussion is that it brought into one comparative study some of the earlier efforts at strategic thinking and practice by radical union activists: notably the works of William Z. Foster in the 1919 steel strike, Farrell Dobbs and Vincent Dunne in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strike, and some of the main strategically-minded organizers of the 1936-37 General Motors' Flint, Michigan sit-down strike.⁷ I

say some because in the case of the GM sit-down Womack's unfortunate reliance almost solely on accounts focusing on the central place of Communist Party activists in the strike missed the role of other radicals. This is particularly the case of Socialist Party members Roy Reuther, Genora Johnson, and Kermit Johnson. As even CPer Bob Travis acknowledged, it was Kermit Johnson who devised the strategy for occupying the Chevy 4 engine plant that tipped the balance of power to victory in 1937.⁸ Still, Womack's "polemic" is a breathtaking as well as controversial and otherwise impressively well-documented history of strategic thinking and the lack of it in academia and the workers' movement of the last century or more.

While this kind of strategic thinking has been all too marginal on the labor left in the last few decades, there have been some more recent pioneers. Olney, who co-edited and conducted the interview in this volume, is one of them. In the late 1990s he put forward a William Z. Foster-style multi-union plan, known as the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project (LA-MAP), for organizing the long string of factories along LA's Alameda Corridor. While he actually lined up a number of unions to launch the project, they all eventually bailed out on the basis of short-sighted "cost-benefit" analysis. More recently, he also tried to get his own union, the ILWU, to reprise its historic, if short-lived "march inland" to organize the growing warehouse industry in Southern California's Inland Empire. This too failed to get union approval due to cost and bureaucratic caution.⁹

Another under-recognized strategic thinker was the late Jerry Tucker. He is perhaps best known as leader of the New Directions reform movement in the United Auto Workers (UAW) from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s. While he was still a UAW district director in 1981, Tucker

developed an "in-plant" or "inside" strategy that drew precisely on positional power. As Tucker put it, "We began focusing, looking for key departments," often using the workers' inherent knowledge of the weak points in the production process. He first implemented it with success at the Moog auto parts plant in St. Louis. He went on to employ the inside strategy at LTV, Bell Helicopter, and elsewhere in the early to mid-1980s.¹⁰ In the mid-1990s, Tucker again applied the inside strategy during the long struggle at Staley in Decatur, Illinois, but this time the company countered with a lockout.¹¹ In his *In These Times* obituary of Tucker, David Moberg noted that Tucker also called this strategy "running the plant backwards." Significantly, as he wrote, it was a strategy "for workers as a group."¹² That brings us to another closely related aspect of positional power: the centrality of the "primary" or "informal work group" in the exercise of power.

In the article in which Dunlop spelled out the potential of positional power to disrupt that he had seen during his time as an administrator with the War Labor Board, he also observed, "No working community is ever completely unorganized. Any group of human beings associated together for any length of time develops a community in which there are recognized standards of conduct and admitted leaders...."¹³ These are the natural or organic leaders spotted and developed by effective organizers. This also described the primary or informal work group which had been the focus of the 1920s study of work at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant conducted by management theorist Elton Mayo. For Mayo and Dunlop, the primary work group was a problem for administrators and managers. For union activist Stan Weir, it was an opportunity to expand workers' power.

Stan Weir was a socialist who had worked during the war as a merchant sailor

and after as an auto worker, teamster, and dockworker. In these jobs he saw the work group in action and sought to draw out its radical potential. Drawing from his experience as a merchant sailor, in 1973 he wrote:

But I later came to see that the informal social groups that developed on a ship at sea are in the main created by the formal and official division of labor which operates the ship; that is the informal and formal work groups are identical so that the social and technological powers of the seaman are merged, thus revealing to them the importance of their role and enlarging the consciousness of their strength.¹⁴

From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s Weir was a mentor to many of us who joined what became the International Socialists and planned to “industrialize”; that is, take jobs in one of several industries we saw as strategic such as auto, steel, trucking, and telecommunications. In “U.S.A.—The Labor Revolt,” published in 1967 and directed at the new generation of radicals, he wrote of the rank-and-file rebellion of the 1960s, by then “plainly visible.”

In thousands of industrial establishments across the nation, workers have developed informal underground unions. The basic units of organization are groups composed of several workers each of whose members work in the same plant-area and are thus able to communicate with one another and form a social entity. Led by natural on-the-job leaders, they conduct daily guerrilla skirmishes with their employers and often against their official union leaders.¹⁵

Then, as now, production processes and work saw changes. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was automation and the introduction of new machinery by a more aggressive generation of managers that threatened established working conditions. As Weir pointed out, “During the transition period the employers use their authority to introduce new work rules that

will further increase the pace of work.” But just as Womack sees such periods of change as an opportunity, so “For the most part,” Weir wrote, “the revolts involved workers’ counter-attempts to introduce rules that will slow or maintain the old pace of work.”¹⁶ Clearly, bringing together a method of analysis that includes both positional power and the functioning of informal work groups in today’s evolving conditions would enrich our understanding of workers potential power and of the tasks involved in rebuilding, expanding, and reforming organized labor in the U.S.

Is That All There Is? What About...?

By now the reader is probably thinking: Wait a minute, as important as all this is, there is much more to unions and workers’ power as a class than that in the workplace or even along the supply chain. This is where the ten “comradely” responses to the Womack interview in *Labor Power and Strategy* come in. Not surprisingly, several responders raise some of the broader questions that almost naturally come to mind. Labor historian Jack Metzgar, for example, takes Womack to task for what he sees as Womack’s “dismissal of “associational” power as secondary...” and his underestimation of the importance of solidarity as a source of change (95). For one thing, more often than not, even the exercise of positional power requires cooperation beyond the immediate group, as Tucker’s “running the plant backwards” demonstrates.

Additionally, while “positional power” does not imply the problem of craft exclusion often associated with skilled workers, there is a potential downside. As Nelson Lichtenstein points out, this sort of power can also have a negative effect. Looking at the many wildcat strikes that broke out after the UAW won recognition at GM in 1937, he writes, “They proved immediately advantageous to workers who were strategi-

cally located in the production process, but they could destroy solidarity among the larger group, especially when a strike in one department produced a layoff in another.”¹⁷ Similarly, Olney points to the potential problem of “self-satisfied sectionalism” among workers with strategic power (39). The antidote to this, of course, is building the organization and solidarity across the production process.

Katy Fox-Hodess, who has extensively researched the power of dockworkers in Latin America, warns there is “no Magic Bullet” inherent in their strategic position. As she argues “associational power” is not automatic and often depends on the state of organized labor as a whole in a country. She writes,

Trade unionism in ports tends to be weak in countries where trade unionism is generally weaker as a result of sociopolitical conditions. That is to say, the lack of associational power available to these workers precludes the possibility of them exercising strategic power effectively, or in many cases, at all (84).

As she points out, there is an additional problem for those workers like dockers whose positional power impacts the broader economy. “Because technically strategic workers have the power to send disruptive ripples far beyond their immediate workplaces,” Fox-Hodess writes, “they find themselves in conflict with both capital and the capitalist state again and again” and “the more strategic the industry, the more likely it is that the capitalist state will intervene” (85-87). That was the experience of ILWU members in 2002 when George W. Bush invoked the Taft-Hartley Act to halt their actions. More recently, one has only to think of the Biden administration’s intervention to deny the nation’s railroad workers the right to strike as most of the U.S. labor movement stood by in silence to see the truth of this proposition. The need for broader labor and community solidarity

actions to counter the state can be decisive.

Bill Fletcher Jr. adds the importance of the struggles of oppressed groups. This is not simply a moral question. Fletcher

In the 1950s and 1960s it was automation and the introduction of new machinery by a more aggressive generation of managers that threatened established working conditions.

points to the changes in the workforce, some due to new technology, that particularly impact workers of color and women. The result, he argues, is not higher productivity, which has collapsed in many areas in the last decade or more, but “an increase in low-skilled, low-paid employment at one end, and higher-skilled, higher-paid employment on the other end. Though for fewer workers” (71). Fletcher further makes a point that is too often ignored. He writes, “Race and gender are not identity questions. They speak to a specific set of contradictions and forms of oppression that are central to actually existing capitalism” (74).

Fletcher’s interrelated insights on race and oppression into the nature of work and its distribution are highly relevant to the matter of who has positional power today. While workers of color have long composed a disproportionate part of the lower-paid workforce in healthcare, accommodations, food, and other services sometimes seen as less strategic, their proportions in such key industries as manufacturing, transportation, and warehousing, where stagnant wages and poor conditions have reigned

for years, have risen significantly in the last two decades. While the proportion of women has changed less in some areas, they now compose 35 percent of the warehouse workforce and continue to dominate in the increasingly strategic area of healthcare, as well as in education where the teacher rebellion has shown a high degree of “political” strategic power.¹⁸ The intersection of race, gender, and positions of power in these and other industries must be part of our understanding of working-class power.

Why Positional Power Matters Today

The near disappearance of the use of positional power in most daily union practice as well as in the industrial relations literature was, I believe, primarily a result of the rise of business unionism which became dominant in the industrial unions that set the bargaining patterns during and after World War Two. This was manifested as leaders surrendered the workplace to capital through “management’s rights” and “no strike” clauses in the contract. Shop stewards were transformed from worker leaders to shop floor lawyers. The job of the shop steward was no longer to lead on-the-spot actions, perhaps at strategic points, when necessary to redress grievances in a timely fashion like the “quickie” strikes of the 1930s and early 1940s. Rather, stewards were to interpret and enforce the contract through the official grievance machinery—a multi-step legal process in which strikes are forbidden by most union contracts. Furthermore, the issues considered legitimate were limited by what the contract spelled out as well as by the “management’s rights” clause.

Effective stewards, of course, did (and do) their best to stretch or go beyond what is “allowed,” using collective means wherever possible as several handbooks on workplace grievance tactics attest. More

often than not, however, the immediate sources of power for stewards and workers are by-passed by standard grievance processing. When legal strikes do occur, typically as the old contract expires, they tend to close the entire facility so that sources of power in the “seams” *within* or *between* workplaces are obscured. Weir’s attempt to reintroduce the primary work group as a focus of union action and Tucker’s to “run the plant backwards” were pushing against a strong current.¹⁹ And so, I suspect, will be Womack’s observations on the power of position.

It is hard to imagine the revival and growth of organized labor in the U.S. without the organization of Amazon. And it is hard to imagine that without a focus on workgroups, positional power, and direct action. Perhaps not surprisingly, I first ran across the concept and term of “positional power” in two articles analyzing Amazon’s tech-driven labor processes by New York University researcher Nantina Vgontzas.²⁰ Vgontzas’s argument, however, was that Amazon’s artificial intelligence-driven technology basically negated the workers’ potential positional power. Despite her perfectly good advice on how workers could deal with this collectively, my own research led me to believe that there were “seams,” “nodes,” and points of connection between the elements of automation where workers could disrupt the rapid flow of products at the heart of the Amazon business model no matter what the artificial intelligence (AI) instructed.

I have written about this elsewhere, but basically all the points of the movement of goods between the automated conveyor belts, heavy package lifters, and roving robots inside the facilities and the trucks and vans that move things between them depend on the direct labor of human beings.²¹ These include truck drivers, loaders, and unloaders; stowers; pickers; packers, label-

ers, trouble shooters (there are lots of tech glitches); and others who number in the thousands in Amazon's largest fulfillment centers. Some are directed, as Vgontzas correctly observes, by AI, but often cannot "make rate" as "required," indicating that

If Amazon is to be unionized,
the strike and other direct
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building the power needed

even the slickest AI combined with surveillance can't force the movement of humans or goods by itself.²² Moving goods still requires basic machinery and workers—and workers can fail or disobey. The same is true in the smaller, but strategically key sortation centers where among other points of connection "robotic platforms deliver rolling carts to workers for loading onto trucks."²³

I count 20 strikes at U.S. Amazon facilities in 2022.²⁴ They are all minority strikes of short duration, much like the "quickie" wildcats of 1937 and during the war that Lichtenstein wrote about. I don't know how much disruption they caused, but many of them won small gains of one sort or another in short order, indicating some impact. In the UK, the general union GMB is currently organizing a major Amazon fulfillment center in Coventry through a series of minority strikes each of which has brought in more members. The union estimates an eight-day strike at the target facility alone costs Amazon £2 million.²⁵ Clearly, we need to know more about the precise impact of worker action in the dense network of cash flow-producing motion at Amazon, which is increasingly becoming the model of capitalist transformation.

If Amazon is to be unionized, the strike and other direct actions on the job—like running the sortation center backwards—will be key to building the power needed to bring Amazon to heel. As *Labor Notes* staffer Dan DiMaggio notes in his response, although in the wake of the spectacular teachers strikes of 2018-2019—which Womack acknowledges—there have been more works on strike strategy and organizing, "any serious revival of the strike will require workers and their organizations to grapple with the questions that Womack raises in this discussion and in his book on strategic position and working-class power" (78-79). For young radicals taking jobs in today's key sectors and "old hands" alike, *Labor Power and Strategy* is a good place to start "grappling" with these important questions.

NOTES

1. For example, Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness, *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), *passim*; Kim Moody, *On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 59-69; Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 76. This ground breaking work on logistics is more concerned with security than the choke points *per se*, but is essential reading for understanding contemporary logistics.
2. John T. Dunlop, "The Development of Labor Organization: A Theoretical Framework," in Richard A. Lester and Joseph Shister (eds.) *Insights into Labor Issues* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 180.
3. Dunlop, "The Development of Labor Organization," 179.
4. John T. Dunlop, *Industrial Relations Systems* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1958 and 1993), 1-41, 75-76, 82.
5. Erik Olin Wright and Luca Perrone, "Positional Power and the Propensity to Strike," *Politics & Society* 12(2) (1983), 233; Luca Perrone, Erik Olin Wright, and Larry T. Griffin, "Positional Power, Strikes, and Wages," *Ameri-*

can Sociological Review, June 1984.

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The War in Ukraine

Making Sense of a Senseless Book

CARL MIRRA

I MET 73-YEAR-OLD ZOYA APOSTOLIUK in July 2022 at her home in Irpin while conducting oral history interviews in Ukraine. This affable woman, who relied on a medical cane to walk, had to climb mounds of rubble to enter her home because it had been destroyed by Russian artillery. She recounted how Russian tanks terrorized her town as well as nearby Bucha and Hostomel. Irpin is a short drive to the capital, Kyiv, that Russia attempted to conquer in February/March 2022, but failed in part because of the courageous, resilient people in these suburban enclaves.¹ Zoya was composed throughout our interview. She cried, however, recalling a story about her Russian friends calling her and her neighbors “Banderites” [Nazis].

It is at once obvious that Zoya is not a far-right Banderite. Her relatives were in the throes of Russian disinformation. As we shall see, similar misinformation

is offered in the recent book by Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies, *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*. They mention “neo-Nazis,” “right-wing nationalist,” “extreme right,” and “neo-fascist” to describe Ukrainian politics at least 51 times in a 182-page book, or on average once every three and a half pages. The Right Sector and Svoboda are mentioned at least 25 times. The only

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NICOLAS J. S. DAVIES
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Zoya Apostoliuk at her home in Irpin destroyed by Russian troops.

C. Mirra

other political party mentioned is Servant of the People, noting it as the title of Zelensky's television program and political party. This foregrounding of right-wing extremists throughout this book obfuscates the historical record and typifies the authors' penchant to substitute caricature for nuanced analysis.

Another way the authors obscure history is by their staggering assertion that the United States, Britain, and Eastern Europe are the "most hard-core proponents of Ukraine's non-negotiable—although *non-existent—territorial integrity*" (italics mine, 179). To classify Ukraine's territorial integrity as non-existent is to propel one of Russia's most contemptible imperial narratives. In December 1991, more than 92 percent of Ukrainians voted to reaffirm its independence, including approximately 80 percent in Luhansk and Donetsk as well as some 54 percent in Crimea.² Russia is also a signatory to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine surrendered its nuclear arsenal, but was provided assurances to uphold its internationally-recognized territorial integrity.

Methodology or U.S.-Centric Polemics and Russian Apologia?

Taken together—that Ukraine is dominated by Nazis and that its territorial integrity is non-existent—illustrate that this book is not only detached from the local expertise and experience, but it—unintentionally or not—favors Russian disinformation narratives.

The text is largely unconcerned with the nuances of regional geopolitical dynamics. The authors do not mention any methodological approach or conceptual framework, leaving themselves open to the charge that they have written polemics disguised as a fair-minded attempt to "search for the truth" amidst the "blizzard of propaganda" so as to "help the people of

Ukraine to restore peace to their country and their lives" (13). Few Ukrainians will find solace in Benjamin and Davies' framing of Ukraine as dominated by far-right extremists, lacking territorial integrity, with a population that is "unwittingly caught in a perfect storm" between Russia and the West.

The authors' U.S.-centric framework prioritizes U.S. strategy over detailed analysis of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Benjamin and Davies leap over Moscow's irredentist motives, and find themselves stumbling uncomfortably into apologia for Russian imperialism. Despite repeated disclaimers that Russia's invasion was illegal and "indefensible," what follows is in fact a defense of Moscow. "We disagree," they write, "that Putin was using NATO as a pretext for his imperial plans.... Without NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders and its history of aggression, we doubt that Russia would have invaded Ukraine" (99). Herein is what legal scholars call the doctrine of provocation, or the "provocation plea" to obtain a reduced punishment.³ It holds that the wrongdoing of another party (the victim) serves as a partial excuse or justification for a violent offense in such a way that it lessens the perpetrators' moral and legal culpability. It argues that the perpetrators' wrongdoing was necessary to an extent. Benjamin and Davies try to guard against the sensitive topic that their arguments serve as Russian apologia. Katrina vanden Heuvel, who contributed the preface to the book, suggests that she, the authors, and others who argue that NATO played a "precipitating role" in Russia's invasion are victims who have been "marginalized, slurred, even demonized" (6).

Stating that one is attacked for holding a position does not clarify one's defense against charges of making excuses for Russia. The only clarification offered is that the partial provocation argument is instead



Tens of thousands of Ukrainian families, like that of Pavlo Okseniuk, pictured with his twin brother, traveled to Maidan in 2013. "There are Nazis everywhere in the world, but like in Ukraine, they are a minority. ...Bandera is not a hero...he's a person who annoys the Russians because he fought against them."

"informed analysis." What exactly constitutes informed analysis? What explanatory model is employed to distinguish between "informed analysis" vs. justifying the invasion? What makes "informed analysis" distinct from a partial provocation plea? The only "explanation" provided is an endnote that cites a lecture from realist scholar John Mearsheimer, who does explain his framework. It includes that the U.S. "is principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis" and presents an "existential threat" to Russia. Benjamin and Davies likewise assert the United States and NATO were "instigators" of the "broader geopolitical conflict" (19). To assert a party "instigated" a conflict and cite Mearsheimer's judgment that the party most responsible for the crisis is Washington is to provide a justification. Nowhere do the authors clarify how one party is simultaneously the "principal" cause of an event, yet not in any way being blamed for causing the event. In this way, the book appears to lack transparency regarding its intent.

In short, this book is not an informed analysis with a coherent methodology. It lacks nuanced vocabulary, contains decontextualized assertions, and employs

sweeping generalizations. Three broad thematic fallacies impede the book's credibility. These are that Ukrainian politicians and citizens are undermined by the outsized influence of Nazi extremists; the Ukrainian people are "unwitting" pawns in great power competition, and that Ukraine's territorial integrity is questionable. The book is not a serious work of scholarship, and regional experts are likely to find it superficial.

The remainder of this review will take up some of the "key" questions that Benjamin and Davies set out to clarify. Length precludes going through each one of the book's many misrepresentations.

What Happened in 2014?

The complex events of 2013–2014 entailed a popular uprising known as Maidan or the Revolution of Dignity. It led to the ouster of Ukraine's president Viktor Yanukovich, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and Moscow's instigation of open warfare in Donbas.

Benjamin and Davies' portrayal of Maidan exemplifies their tendency for decontextualized caricatures. They claim that the far-right group, Svoboda, "took a leading role in the Maidan protests and the overthrow of the Yanukovich government" (30). While "a broad-based movement" with crowds of up to 800,000 protested at Maidan, it was Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok, who "declared a revolution was taking place" (33). And, "in reality the final execution of the coup against Yanukovich owed much to Ukraine's extreme right, the transition to power in Kyiv was not a revolution," but a rotation of oligarchs (43).

Of special importance is that Benjamin and Davies, self-identified progressives, make no attempt to explore the diverse perspectives at Maidan, especially the role of left movements. It was indeed a mass movement against Yanukovich's corruption and

militarized police violence. The regime's violent attack on protestors brought out parents, college students, whole families, and ordinary people who rallied around the slogan, "We will protect our children." A leading ethnographic study of Maidan observes that Yanukovych's authoritarian rule and brutality motivated people to take part in Maidan, "and in bringing leftists' ideas to the forefront of the protests, where they were accepted and even embraced by a significant majority of protestors."⁴ Leftist groups challenged not only Yanukovych's corrupt regime, but also more generally the maldistribution of wealth. They also debated whether the desired agreement with the European Union would provide economic liberation. In fact, progressive forces asserted that "We provide the content of Maidan!" Benjamin and Davies' centering of Maidan around right-wing figures (or masterminded by Washington) not only silences these left voices that attempted to highlight their "content," but also minimizes the agency of hundreds of thousands of people disgusted with Yanukovych's rule.

In spite of the violence, Maidan was also, in the words of scholar Yaroslav Hrytsak, "full of love," a "revolution with a human face." Benjamin and Davies appear unable to look at Ukrainian faces and avoid an examination of the "content" of Maidan, having failed to even mention that it was called the Revolution of Dignity. The narrative instead features an assemblage of undignified extremists, "foot soldiers" who carried torches and praised Stephan Bandera. In this way, Benjamin and Davies strip Maidan of its dignity, a dignity related to deeper values rooted in a desire to finally forge a more democratic society that breaks free from the lingering fatalistic, distrusting Soviet mindset. In his work with the *Nestoriv'ska groupa* (Nestor Group), Hrytsak asserted that revolution

was "imminent" in Spring 2013 based in part on the World Values Survey that indicated a shift in Ukrainian mindsets. There was a "high priority," according to the survey, on tolerance of others, and "rising demands for participation in decision-making in economic and political life." Sociologist Victoria Bryndza's declaration that because of Maidan "we have changed," adds complexity to this values orientation.⁵ Fatalistic thinking was gradually yielding to a new generation with a more participatory, democratic orientation. War, of course, impedes this transition insofar as it imposes a survival state and threat-based mindset.

However, *The New Ukrainian School*, Ukraine's conceptual principles for education reform, complements and extends the values that Benjamin and Davies overlook at Maidan and in Ukrainian civil society. Official education reform measures seek a "pedagogy of partnership" to foster trust between teachers, students, and parents with schools organized around respect for human rights and democracy. In short, Benjamin and Davies' portrayal of Ukrainian society through the lens of far-right movements as the driver of Ukrainian politics obscures this process of democratization. Benjamin and Davies' foregrounding of far-right militants risks legitimizing Russia's storyline about Ukraine needing "denazification," a narrative that contributes to ongoing conflict. It is surprising that the peace-minded authors missed the opportunity to illuminate the democratic movements at Maidan that sought a more equitable and harmonious society.

Was There a Coup?

Something similar occurs with the description of Yanukovych's removal. Recall that the impetus for the protests was that Yanukovych rescinded his commitment to the European Association Agreement in November 2013 because Russia was pressuring

him to join the Eurasian Customs Union. Eventually his iron-handed crackdown on protestors led to much of the population desiring his removal. Benjamin and Davies again blur the faces of millions of Ukrainians and try to turn our attention to how U.S. officials allegedly choreographed and staged a coup.

The evidence for this coup, we are told, is an intercepted phone call between then U.S. assistant secretary of state Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt. Nuland “was deeply involved in the coup against Yanukovych” (71). It was odd, the authors believe, that their “regime change” plot included then Vice President Biden whose “behind-the-scenes” dealings remain “largely unexplored.” But there was no secret operation, nor was there anything unusual in Nuland mentioning Biden on the call. His interactions with Yanukovych were announced publicly by the U.S. government and featured in global news reports for months. Benjamin and Davies set the stage as if a clandestine, cloak-and-dagger operation was launched in the phone call. Its contents reflected very well-known, publicized events at the time.

The intercepted phone call between Nuland and Pyatt discussed supporting Yatsenyuk as prime minister and may seem suspicious at first glance. A closer look at the timeline dispels the myth. First, Yatsenyuk was one of three opposition leaders who were for months negotiating with Yanukovych, so there was nothing exceptional about the phone call mentioning him. The call occurred on January 27. A couple of days earlier—*before* Nuland’s call—Yanukovych had already proposed that Yatsenyuk serve as his prime minister. This agreement was reaffirmed during overnight negotiations February 20–21 in the presence of the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Poland and Russia’s

representative. In fact, President Obama called Putin later on February 21 (as did Yanukovych during the negotiations that agreed that Yatsenyuk should serve as PM), and the Russian leader agreed to “working with the opposition.” An alleged agreement was reached in which Obama was to deter protestors from Kyiv and Putin was to convince Yanukovych to pull back police forces. Putin claims Obama betrayed him and somehow “allowed” protestors to overthrow Yanukovych, but also admitted that he did not keep his end of the bargain.⁶ “I told [Yanukovych] don’t withdraw the security forces,” but he did anyway and fled, according to Putin.⁷ The truth is that politicians and police from Yanukovych’s Party of Regions’ began defecting in large numbers. The real cause of Yanukovych’s downfall, of course, was the massive protests against his corruption, repressive laws, and police violence, not only at Maidan but also in the east, including among some separatists as we shall see. Consider, for example, that months before Yanukovych fled, stickers appeared throughout Maidan that read, “I’m not leaving until Yanukovych resigns.” The “only thing that could stop the protest movement is the dissolution of parliament,” a participant’s diary read on Thursday, February 20, reflecting the political atmosphere at the time.⁸

A Kremlin policy paper in summer 2013, months before the first protestors arrived at Maidan, recognized this internal political climate against Yanukovych. “With a negative attitude of the vast majority of voters,” the document states, “it will be extremely difficult for Yanukovych to retain power.” Yanukovych is “fueling anti-Russian sentiment,” and so “we will have to wait for the collapse of the current regime and prepare for the next ‘orange’ coup.” The measures needed include the intensification of “all round pressure” on Yanukovych by influencing television executives, parlia-

ment, clergy, scientific and cultural centers “without giving any reason to present this activity as the hand of Moscow.” And, “the personnel basis of this sociopolitical structure can be the regional leaders of Southern and Eastern Ukraine.”⁹

Benjamin and Davies unwittingly juxtapose Nuland with Sergey Glazyev, who they imply exposed how Washington was funding the Ukrainian opposition (38). It is with great irony that the authors fail to mention that Glazyev was also the subject of a leaked phone call. Glazyev is a former member of the Russian parliament, the Duma, from the nationalist Rodina party, and presidential adviser to Putin from 2012-19. The Glazyev leaks and “separatist” testimony uncover that the presidential advisor was funding pro-Russian separatists and inciting protests among the personnel of Southern and Eastern Ukraine. Related leaks mention the document above that Glazyev apparently had a part in drafting. In the leaks, the Glazyev tells a member of a newly formed separatist group, whose leadership included people from the neo-Nazi Slavonic Unity group, to seize government buildings because “you will be supported.”¹⁰

Among the personnel Moscow instigated was Pavel Gubarev, who would soon become people’s governor of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR). Consider first that Gubarev chastised Yanukovych who “was hated and despised not only in the Western parts of Ukraine, but also in the southeast.” Benjamin and Davies see only U.S. influence and rightwing extremists in their U.S.-centric analysis of the “coup,” thus ignoring the complex factors that led to Yanukovych’s removal. No attention is paid to worker grievances in the east and the spike of protests in Ukraine long before Maidan, or even Russia’s recognition of such contextual realities.

They also oversimplify the causes of the war. Gubarev added that “only

a handful of fighters” were available in March 2014. “We did not understand,” he continued, that we needed “to behave as in war.” In this moment of hesitancy, Gubarev received a call from Glazyev who informed him that “he supported our actions in the anti-fascist struggle.” It “breathed new strength in me”; Gubarev was now ready to behave as in war.

“Why did civil war break out in eastern Ukraine in 2014?”*

Russia’s pre-war penetration of “separatist” groups was a contributing factor in the 2014 war. This infiltration is evidenced in the Glazyev Tapes, Surkov leaks, and Frolov leaks, which exposed the aforementioned Kremlin policy paper and Glazyev’s involvement with it. Vladislav Surkov was Deputy Prime Minister of Russia from 2011-2013 and assistant to the President overseeing Donbas policy. He shamelessly stated that there is no Ukraine, only “Ukrainianism,” a “mental disorder.” The Surkov leaks unveil Russia’s covert operation of bribing and threatening journalists and law enforcement, staging protests and influencing cultural and religious organizations. The leaks also display some of the foreign policy motives that complicate simple formulations like “civil war.” The authors use the term “civil war” as if unaware that it is a contested descriptor. For Ukrainians the term is incendiary; for Russia it is deployed as a rhetorical weapon to maintain the fiction that it is not a party to the conflict, a stance that has undermined the possibility of a durable conflict settlement. It is also controversial because Russia’s infiltration of Ukrainian society blurs the line between the pro-separatist movement’s actions and Moscow stirring up discontent. The inattention to Moscow’s involvement with separatists is odd for a book that purports

*in Benjamin and Davies’ words

to “clear up” the “history of Ukraine leading up to this crisis” (19).

In a section “From Regime Change to Civil War,” they write that the leaders of “Russian-speaking” eastern Ukraine adopted a resolution in Kharkiv in February 2014 “questioning the legality of the steps taken by the rump parliament in Kyiv” that was a “sign of what was to come” (42). Readers are led to believe an autonomous independence movement acted alone in formulating the statement. But, even the Russian media offered a more accurate picture, reporting that Alexei Pushkov, head of the Russian state Duma International Affairs committee, and Mikhail Margelov, head of the Federation Council International Affairs Committee, were present, and “together” they drafted the resolution. Meanwhile, the governor of Kharkiv told reporters “we are not preparing to break up the country. We want to preserve it.” And with all the talk of extremists, the authors somehow fail to mention that roughly a week or so later a Russian citizen from the neo-Nazi group Russian National Unity (RNE) raised the Russian flag at the Kharkiv regional administration building.¹¹

Additional Russian external forces that propelled conflict include Konstantin Malofeev, a wealthy businessman with close ties to the Kremlin and far-right ideologies. He provided financial support to the separatists. The Surkov leaks reveal that Malofeev supplied a list of preferred separatist leaders to Surkov, which included Igor Girkin, a Russian citizen and a former officer of the Russian security services (FSB). Shortly after, Girkin was appointed as the Defense Minister of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic, along with others from the list who received positions. With all their fuss that Nuland “handpicked” the “post-coup” government (while ignoring that Yanukovich had already made that pick), there is a conspicuous absence of

exploring Moscow’s picking the statelets’ leadership.

In January 2014, Malofeev and Girkin traveled together to Crimea before Russia’s annexation in March of that year. According to Malofeev, there was widespread discussion of uniting with Russia, and he “recommended” Sergey Aksyonov to lead Crimea, who was subsequently appointed as the head of the Republic of Crimea in April 2014. Russian journalists reported that Girkin participated directly in the annexation alongside Russian forces that Putin initially called “little green men” in an attempt to conceal Russian involvement. Russian journalist Oleg Kashin, who calls the Crimea crisis both an “annexation” (see below) and an “historical justice,” describes the interaction of these operatives as Moscow’s “public-private partnership.”¹²

Girkin soon arrived in Slavyansk, Donetsk, with the aim of replicating the “Crimea option.” However, like Gubarev, he realized that the situation in the region was relatively peaceful. In a now notorious admission, Girkin stated that his forces “triggered” the war because “no one wanted to fight.” Alexander Borodai, a Russian citizen and Duma member, who calls himself a “Russian imperialist,” was Malofeev’s public relations consultant. He became the first Prime Minister of the DPR. In the summer of 2014, Borodai disclosed that presidential aid Surkov “always provides the Donetsk people’s republic with serious support.” In Girkin’s assessment, “Surkov enjoys the trust of Putin.”¹³

There are two concerns here. The first is that the authors’ use of the phrase “civil war” lacks nuance and requires examination of both the scholarly debates about the term and how Moscow’s meddling impacts its usage. The second is that Benjamin and Davies fail to investigate the ideological underpinnings of the Kremlin’s strategic aims in the east. The Surkov leaks help to show

that Russia planned to re-establish the 18th century notion of Novorossiia (New Russia) in Ukraine. The plan failed because Ukrainians in six of the eight oblasts identified as being in the New Russia project displayed almost no desire to unite with Russia. It was only partially successful in the remaining Donetsk and Luhansk areas. As a result, Moscow amplified its hybrid war tactics, seeking a frozen conflict by means of destabilization through federalization in Ukraine. A grasp of these strategic maneuvers is also necessary for analyzing the peace negotiations because it informs Russia's aim to use a conflict settlement to pursue its war strategy. (If federalization allowed a Russian-controlled piece of Ukraine to block actions by the Ukrainian government, then Kyiv would essentially be subject to Russian domination.) One might argue that all states attempt to achieve their war aims at the negotiating table. However, when that strategy aims to permanently impair, if not destroy, Ukraine's sovereignty, special attention must be given to how it potentially undermines a durable conflict resolution. Benjamin and Davies' nearly complete inattention to Russia's ideological and strategic dynamics hinders their classification of the war and evaluation of negotiations as we shall see below.

“What role did the United States and Russia play in those pivotal and complex events, which the Western corporate media deceptively abbreviate as ‘the Russian annexation of Crimea?’”*

Here again the framing of the issue misleads, and consequently produces erroneous interpretations. The authors employ vague, unsubstantiated claims to create the impression that they are uncovering

how readers are being duped. In this case, the trickster is the Western corporate media. The Western media, however, is not deceptively abbreviating when using the word annexation. They are following the terminology of Ukrainians, the UN, and even Russian news reports. “In the Ukrainian collective consciousness,” writes Natalya Humenyuk who collected oral histories in the occupied peninsula, “Crimea is a wound, the beginning of war,” and a “lost home” that signifies the “pain of annexation.” The Moscow-based *Gazeta.ru* (newspaper) among others describes the Crimea annexation as, well, an annexation.¹⁴ A UN General Assembly press release announcing the body's vote against Russia's illegal annexation used precisely that term. The international condemnation of the annexation made Russia uneasy with its use. Benjamin and Davies' casting of annexation as a corporate media deception is inconsistent with international usage but consistent with Russian officials' dislike of the term.

The book contains little detail regarding Crimea and offers broad generalizations, perhaps owing to their thematic fallacy that Ukraine's territorial integrity is nonexistent. For example, they observe that in a January 1991 Crimea referendum “more than 94 percent of its people voted for independence from Ukraine.” But, “when the Soviet Union finally broke up later that year, Crimea's parliament agreed to join Ukraine, overriding the expressed will of a large majority of its people, until the issue finally came to the fore again in 2014” (26). The authors hurdle past the December 1991 referendum when roughly 92 percent of Ukrainians voted for independence. In fact, 54% of voters in Crimea and more than 80% in Donetsk and the east also voted to declare Ukraine an independent, unified state. It is the authors who override the will of the Ukrainian people in ignoring that

*wording that of Benjamin and Davies

Ukrainians voted in favor of independent statehood, including a majority in Crimea.

Do Benjamin and Davies believe that Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia? By definition annexation is one state illegally seizing the territory of another. If not, why are the authors' questioning the word's suitability as a signifier? Why is there no discussion of Crimean Tatars' thoughts on the matter? There is insufficient detail to fully comprehend the authors' point in objecting to the term if they believe Russia's invasion was illegal. It is worth noting here that even Yanukovych declared that Crimea must remain part of Ukraine. Putin in 2008 commented that, "There are complicated processes going on in society in the Crimea. There are problems of the Crimean Tatars, the Ukrainian population, the Russian population, the Slavic population in general, but this is Ukraine's domestic political problem."¹⁵ Where do the authors stand with respect to Crimea's territorial integrity if annexation is a deceptive abbreviation for Russia's conquest of the peninsula?

What Is Minsk II and Why Did it Fail? "Who and what is holding up peace talks?"*

While Russia's annexation of Crimea was still underway, Stephen Cohen, a now-deceased former professor of Russian Studies at New York University, was asked by a television reporter if Putin's military intervention was wrong. Cohen snapped back that "we don't know that Putin went into Crimea," and then accused Ukraine of disinformation. Perplexed, the reporter pressed Cohen as to whether he was claiming Russia did not intervene. Cohen explained that Russia had a naval base in Crimea so "had every right to be there." Russian troops might be "milling around" the peninsula but only to protect buildings.

Of course, Putin would later admit to deploying Russian forces. Not only did Cohen provide camouflage for Putin's attempted cover-up of an illegal military intervention, he deflected attention from it by insinuating it was Kyiv's "disinformation."¹⁶ Nonetheless, Benjamin and Davies are "especially indebted" to Cohen's "brilliant analysis" in formulating their own analysis (183-84).

Much like Cohen's appalling defense of Putin's lie, Benjamin and Davies largely disregard Russia's deceptions concerning negotiations and place blame on Ukraine. For one thing, Minsk II was negotiated after defeat at Debaltsevo, which many legal scholars argue is a violation of Article 52 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (invalidating treaties procured by the use or threat of force). As a result, parts of the agreement appear to advance Russia's war aim to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty through an attempted alteration of its laws. Equally concerning is that Russia maintained that it was not a party to the conflict, a fiction that Cohen was upholding above, and one tacitly reinforced in Benjamin and Davies' assertion that Ukraine "greatly exaggerated the role of Russian military forces" and OSCE monitors only reported "isolated support" (66). This is another assertion refuted by the record: the OSCE, only months after Minsk II



C. Mirra

The author interviewing Oleksandra in front of her apartment building destroyed by a Russian missile. Asked what she thought of conceding Crimea or parts of Donbas as peace "experts" like Benjamin and Davies insist, she answered, "tell them to study history"; then she exclaimed, "please help Ukraine. We are fighting for our freedom."

*in Benjamin and Davies' words

was signed, condemned Russia's "unilateral and unjustified assault on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," while the Coalition of Soldiers' Mothers in Russia estimated that thousands of Russian troops had been deployed based in part on the deaths of their military sons.¹⁷

Related to this is the authors' belief that Zelensky "reversed the order of steps" in the Minsk II agreement. However, the agreement was vague, confusing, and contradictory, and few can agree on its sequencing. It called for the withdrawal of all foreign formations, and holding elections according to OSCE norms and Ukrainian law. The presence of foreign troops violated those norms, making it impossible to conduct a proper election. So, if Russia's troop presence was "greatly exaggerated," as Benjamin and Davies allege, perhaps those foreign forces troop levels were low enough that Putin's unreasonable claim about not being a party to the conflict was plausible. This sort of vague insinuation risks serving the foreign invading army's absurdist claim that it was somehow not involved in all this and had no obligations under Minsk. Putin maintained this fiction as late as 2021. He somehow said with a straight face that "The Minsk agreements do not state that Russia is a party to the conflict, we never agreed to this and we never will."¹⁸ Are Russian troops just "milling about" in Ukraine as Benjamin and Davies' expert source would have us believe? Or, are they part of the foreign formations that refuse to withdraw and thereby undermine the implementation of the peace protocols?

They cite Cohen to support their contention that peace negotiations also failed because Zelensky was "confronted" by "extremists" and "abandoned his peace efforts" (65). I have previously debunked this narrative. The implication here is that Zelensky backed away from his peace mandate and followed the far right's no

concessions stance. The problem is that his platform actually insisted on no territorial concessions, a view supported by the vast majority of Ukrainians, but attributed only to extremists because caricature substitutes for facts.¹⁹

Returning to Minsk, no sooner than the ink dried on the protocols, the pro-Russian separatists brazenly violated its provisions. Alexander Zakharchenko (who replaced Borodai as PM because the latter's Russian citizenship was a reminder that the moniker "civil war" was untenable, and that Russia was indeed a party to the conflict), openly announced several violations as reported in Russian news media. Zakharchenko refused to allow Ukrainian border guards to re-establish control of the border and broadcast that elections would be held according to "local law" in direct violation of Minsk.²⁰

Benjamin and Davies also repeat the cliché that former British PM Boris Johnson and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin "effectively killed" peace talks in April 2022. A simple timeline calls this narrative too into question. *Before* Johnson's April 9 and Austin's April 25 visits with Zelensky, the Russians had already effectively killed the spirit of negotiation. Russian state-run media reported that the Duma's CIS/Eurasia Affairs committee announced that Putin would "never sit down...with such a bastard" as Zelensky. Russia also selected oligarch Roman Abramovich, under U.S. sanction, in late March as a mediator. He delivered a personal note from Zelensky to Putin on possible peace terms, and the Russian leader replied, "tell them I will crush them."²¹ Against this backdrop, Zelensky was already suspicious about opening talks with Putin who had also stubbornly refused reasonable assurances regarding NATO in 2021 (see below). Benjamin and Davies do point to a reputable Ukrainian newspaper as the source for the claim that Johnson

told Zelensky not to negotiate and pursue military victory.²² But the journalist who wrote that story disputes this interpretation. Johnson was merely offering advice to Zelensky, who already was suspicious of Putin because Russia had claimed there were no troops in Crimea, that it wouldn't invade Ukraine, and so on. One of the currents in this book is that Western diplomats are prodding Zelensky to skirt negotiations, a conclusion that again requires ignoring timelines and regional contexts as well as Russia's colonialist and combative attitude toward Ukraine.

Why did Russia Invade Ukraine? How Important Were Provocations by the West?

As noted, the authors make clear that they believe NATO provoked the crisis. Elsewhere I have detailed how the NATO-provoked-Russia-narrative is contradicted by paired examples of NATO expansion and aggression vs. Moscow's response.²³ That the Russian arms industry sold NATO countries, including the United States, arms and military helicopters and performed joint exercises only two months before Maidan also complicates the simple provocation storyline.

However, if we look more closely at the claim that Putin was trying to negotiate and his hand was forced because Washington was dangling Ukraine's entry into NATO in the Kremlin's face, we see this too is unsubstantiated. The *Moscow Times* reported in September 2021 that Biden "showed no sign of moving on requests to open NATO" to Ukraine. Zelensky wished to discuss Ukraine's chances of joining NATO, the media outlet noted. However, "Biden made clear he considers Ukraine far from ready to join." The door remains open, yet Ukraine does not meet "the daunting conditions for membership."²⁴

Moreover, German chancellor Olaf

Scholz characterized Russia's insistence during negotiations in the lead up to Russia's invasion that NATO prohibit Ukraine's membership as "strange" to even "raise the issue" because accession discussions were non-existent and were not on the table. The German leader also told reporters that he told Putin that Ukraine would not enter NATO "in the next 30 years."²⁵

Despite these assurances that Ukraine would not join NATO for decades, if at all, Putin responded that the parties must "resolve this issue right now."²⁶ In other words, NATO must immediately do what Putin demands. Somehow a key NATO country's statement that Ukraine was not entering the Atlantic alliance does not temper Benjamin and Davies' insistence that Putin was provoked.

Conclusion

The book ends with a predictable lack of nuance. The authors state that the war was driven by the imperial ambitions of "leaders on all sides," yet they fail to explore the particularities of Russian imperialism. This is a significant conceptual flaw because that exploration would uncover the internal ideological factors (regional dominance, fears of a Moscow Maidan, restoration of Russian prestige, power, and territory from the "catastrophe" of the USSR's collapse) that exist independently from Western behavior. Readers will learn more from this book about U.S. intervention in Iraq, than about Moscow's imperial strategy and consciousness, especially with respect to Ukraine. Consider that Russia's original conflict settlement negotiator deems Ukraine a mental disorder, whereas Putin believes that "the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians" has "no historical basis."

Putin's imperial discourse was echoed in one of Russia's leading news outlets during its attack on Kyiv. Deluded policy-

makers and pundits believed victory was in reach. “Did someone in the old European capitals,” *RIA Novosti* cynically pondered, “seriously believe that Moscow would give up Kiev?” Now that “Ukraine has returned to Russia,” Putin has fulfilled his mission to restore the empire’s “historical space.” A week later state-controlled media announced that “Ukraine is impossible as a nation-state....[It] is an artificial anti-Russian construction.”²⁷ It is no wonder that a majority of Ukrainians believe Russia is seeking to destroy it. This eliminationist ideology, which is prevalent in Russian discourse, is unexplored in Benjamin and Davies’ account. Yet, they find the space to tell readers that “annexation” is a misleading abbreviation for Russia’s seizure of Crimea, while Ukraine’s territorial integrity is “non-existent.” Surely, it seems reasonable to question the sincerity of their declaration that they want to “help restore peace to the people of Ukraine.”

This book offers no new, original research on the war or the region, while proferring discredited interpretations. There are freshly published works available from regional experts, such as Serhii Plokhyy’s *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (2023), that make it pointless to read Benjamin and Davies’s poorly researched commentary that the authors admit was hastily assembled “in a record two months.” They clearly needed more time to “make sense” of the war and catch up for their lack of regional expertise.

NOTES

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Transatlantic

Dramatic, Beautiful, and (Perhaps a Little too Much) Fun

DAN LA BOTZ

TRANSATLANTIC, THE SEVEN-EPIISODE Netflix series, portrays an especially intense moment in European history in the early days of the Second World War. In the gorgeous port city of Marseilles, France, at first in the sumptuous Hotel Splendide, then in the magnificent if dilapidated Villa Air-Bel, two wealthy, privileged Americans, Varian Fry (Corey Michael Smith) and Mary Jane Gold (Gillian Jacobs), are working for the fragile Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), struggling to save refugees from the Nazis. Thousands, rich and poor, many of them Jews, are fleeing to Marseilles. Among their charges are some of the continent's most distinguished artists, intellectuals, and revolutionaries, including Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, André Breton, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Lion Feuchtwanger, Jacques Lifschitz, Arthur Koestler, Wilfredo Lam, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Alma Mahler, Golo Mann, Max Ophüls, Victor Serge, and Franz Werfel.

The series, based on the novel of the same name by Julie Orringer, depicts the work of Fry and Gold as they attempt to procure visas and ship berths for the illustrious refugees. They wheedle and cajole to get visas from the American consul, whose real name was Hugh Fullerton, but

is here called Graham Patterson (Corey Stoll). The real consul, much like his boss Cordell Hull and the Roosevelt administration, had little interest in helping Jews escape Europe to America. In the series, Patterson—an arrogant, conservative, and vapid careerist—is chiefly interested in retiring from the diplomatic service and getting a job with IBM. Fry and Gold have to evade the French police chief (Gregory Montel) who is working ever more closely with the Nazis. Luckily the protagonists are aided by vice consul Hiram Bingham, who though not authorized to do so, provides them a slew of American visas. In the Hotel Splendide, they have the assistance of two Black employees from French colonial Africa. Whether in the often carnivalesque atmosphere of Villa Air-Bel, filled with Surrealists, in the oppressive prison Camp des Milles, or in shoot-outs on the highway, we are presented with an engaging fictionalized account of that moment in Marseilles.

People from all over Western Europe who were fleeing the Nazis in 1940 had been poured into a funnel, at the bottom of which was Marseilles; its small opening was sometimes clogged, sometimes flowing into the Mediterranean, which usually led to survival and freedom. France itself had been conquered by the Nazis in June 1940. In the South of France, administered by the collaborationist Vichy government of Marshal Philippe Petain, the Nazis had not yet

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imposed their totalitarian regime, leaving some possibility for daring action. In Marseilles, one could still get a ship to Portugal and from there to the Caribbean and the United States, Mexico, or South America. The passage to salvation was periodically blocked by foreign governments, whose ambassadors and consuls refused to issue visas; by shipping companies that declined to take on passengers; and by the Vichy government, whose police cooperated with the Nazis as they rounded up Jews, Communists, and other “undesirables.” This all lasted until the South of France too was taken over by the Nazis, who closed the port in 1942. But in that year and a half, Fry and Gold and their crew saved some 2,000 lives.

Not surprisingly, the story told in *Transatlantic* has been told many times before in novels and films. Babelio, which publishes lists of books on certain themes, lists four dozen memoirs, histories, novels, all in French, under the heading “Passage to Marseille 1940-42”—and that doesn’t include the books in other languages or any of several films. Some earlier novels cover much the same ground as Orringer’s *Transatlantic*. Communist author Anna Seghers (née Anna Reiling) published the excellent novel *Transit* in 1944, portraying the refugees as broken, ruined, and their situation tragic. It is a book still well worth reading. Jean Malaquais, a Polish Jew born Wladimir Jan Pavel Malacki, an author admired by Leon Trotsky for an earlier novel (*Les Javanais*) published *Planète sans visa* in 1947, perhaps the most realistic fictional account of the refugees in the port. More recently, Rosemary Sullivan published *Villa Bel-Air: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille* which, much like *Transatlantic*, is well researched, and mixes tragic and comic elements. But it was Orringer’s popular American novel *Transatlantic* that creator and producer Anna Winger, the writer and producer of *Unorthodox*, chose as the basis

for her mini-series.

Winger’s series goes beyond some other literary and cinematic accounts in several ways. Politically, it depicts not only Fry, Gold, and the ERC, but also the beginnings of the anti-fascist resistance, while anticipating what will become the post-war anti-colonial struggle by the peoples of the French colonies in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Caribbean. These are important political additions to the way the story has sometimes been told.

Psychologically, the film touches our emotions in many ways. We become concerned about individual migrants, such as leftist philosopher Walter Benjamin (Moritz Bleibtreu). Orringer’s and Winger’s account goes further than others have in portraying Varian Fry’s actual closeted homosexuality through a fictional relationship with the character Thomas Lovegrove (played by Amit Rahav, whom some may remember as the groom Yanky Shapiro in *Unorthodox*). That’s well done and admirable. The series elicits concern for Mary Jane Gold who is pressured to have sex with the awful American consul if she wants his help for

Psychologically, the film touches our emotions in many ways.

the ERC. And we feel sympathy for her as she falls in love with the idealistic German Jew (and future renowned economist) Albert Hirschman (Lucas Englander). We commiserate with Paul Kandijo (Ralph Amoussou), who falls in love with Lisa Fittko (Deleila Piasko), the guide who takes people across the Pyrenees into Spain, but whose husband is in a nearby prison. And we worry for Paul, his brother, and others as they attempt to free prisoners being sent

off by the French authorities to German camps.

Unfortunately, while the historical moment is great, as so many others have recognized, the writing, by Winger and a half dozen others, is sometimes disappointing and perhaps because of the directors (Stéphanie Chuat, Véronique Reymond, and Mia Meyer) the acting is quite uneven. Gillian Jacobs as Mary Jane Gold doesn't seem quite right at first, though she seems to gradually grow into the role after a couple of episodes. Carole Stoll who plays the American consul has been nominated for awards in other roles, but here gives a broad performance and is unconvincing. Similarly, though less bad, is Michael Corey Smith's portrayal of Varian Fry, which seems artificial. Gregory Montel, a terrific actor whom we know from "Call My Agent," gives a performance of a French police chief that verges too close to Peter Sellers' Inspector Jacques Clouseau. On the other hand, Amit Rahav's portrayal of Thomas Lovegrove is restrained and sensitive, and Ralph Amoussou's part as Paul Kandijo wins us over. In some cases, the problem is not the actors but the characters who seem to have been gotten wrong by the writers. Victor Serge (Emanuel Salinger), the courageous revolutionary and brilliant writer, is made out to be rather an old fool, though he was far from it. Still, whatever their individual strengths and weaknesses, the eighteen actors who make up the ensemble give creditable performances and as a whole keep our interest.

The film's splendid cinematography takes advantage of Marseilles' beauty, the Mediterranean light, and extraordinary settings: the Fort Saint-Jean, the posh Hotel

Splendide, and especially the romantic ruin of the Villa Air-Bel. The Villa becomes the setting for the Surrealist artists' storytelling, games, and parties, all created by the film crew's creative artists and costume designers. All of this is engrossing, charming, and sometimes quite funny.

We see famous artist and intellectual refugees in this film, but we get little insight into the thousands of others waiting in the port. What the film seems to miss might have been found in the books of Anna Seghers and Jean Malaquais; that is, the poverty of many of the refugees, their hand-to-mouth existence, the daily search for a visa and a ship berth, and pervasive sense of fear. Yes, we see police arresting people, some violent attacks, and prisoners being taken off to the camps. Yet, those scenes don't fully convey the terror of the period. Maybe that's because, as Winger says in *Making Transatlantic*, an account of the production that follows the seven episodes, she thinks of the series as a "screwball melodrama" in the style of films of the 1940s. Perhaps that's why we never feel the dread and desperation that most of these refugees felt.

The work of Varian Fry and Mary Jane Gold and their colleagues was heroic, and we have to be glad to again be reminded of that cause, brought to a mass audience of millions. Though the lens is a little too rosy when, even in bright and beautiful Marseilles, it should be more a smoky gray. As the filmmakers note in *Making Transatlantic*, they created the film just as Russia invaded Ukraine, giving it a particular poignancy as millions of refugees are seeking safety from an authoritarian, imperialist power once again.

Unravelling “Arrhythmia”

JONAS MARVIN

IT'S THE SUMMER OF 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has violently torn through the global community. George Floyd has been murdered by racist Minnesotan cops, and millions have turned out to protest. Marching down the streets of post-industrial Detroit with stereo in tow and techno music blasting as accompaniment, a multiracial crowd chants, “No justice, no peace, fuck these racist ass police” to the tune of Bruno Furlan’s “Line Five.” A handmade placard declares, “Techno is Black! Police are Wack! Ravers 4 Racial Justice!”

This moment of human beings making the streets theirs and asserting their right to live and be free resonates throughout Alexander Billet’s wonderful new book, *Shake the City: Experiments in Space and Time, Music and Crisis*. Commencing at the birth of capitalism, Billet lucidly conveys the interactions between the “movement” of a song (extracting it from its self-contained status as a piece of music) and social “movement” in the streets: those hard-fought struggles for political, social, and economic justice that constitute the motor force of human history. For Billet though, the relationship between these two “movements” is perpetually being transformed, redefined,

and severed by the dominance of capital and the commodity-form. Capitalism’s prerogative of making a buck out of anything that moves cannibalizes music, turning the threat it *may* pose to the structures of

power into a cultural form that amounts to mere venting against the everyday oppression of the system-at-large, thereby reenforcing the system’s predominance.

Unlike Michael

Denning’s exploration of world music and anti-colonial insurgency in *Noise Uprising*, or Mark Abel’s analysis of music and time in *Groove Music*, the battleground for this book is space and the city—the site of our alienation from work, from domestic life,

This moment of human beings making the streets theirs and asserting their right to live and be free resonates throughout Alexander Billet’s wonderful new book.

and (saddest of all) from each other. Billet never flinches from just how daunting and all-consuming the corporate control of music has become. Drawing upon Frankfurt School icon Theodor W. Adorno, *Shake*

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the City takes seriously his assertion that popular music is a “deceitful fetter on the imagination,” reproducing the rhythms of industrial production and socializing us into

Billet never flinches from just how daunting and all-consuming the corporate control of music has become.

the conditions of our own exploitation. This state of affairs did not dissolve at the onset of neoliberalism. If anything, it intensified.

Drawing on French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, Billet claims that we live in a state of “arrhythmia.” The places we call home are sick because we are sick, “coercively saddled with an anxiety that never abates.” We are indebted, paid a pittance for long, arduous, labor-intensive jobs, and routinely forking out a large sum of our pay packets in order to keep a roof over our heads. The possibilities latent within the city, “this massive concatenation of potential and human imagination,” are dampened at every turn. Instead of human flourishing, we are “ushered through” this cacophony of domination. The algorithms of Spotify, Apple, and even TikTok marshal us away from the freedom to choose and into particular, more profitable soundscapes. “Lo-fi Study Beats” serve to smooth out the edges of a hostile environment that was never made for us, and the racialized history of powerful, white record executives disenfranchising black musicians and lining their own pockets is generalized across the music industry in the age of big-tech streaming platforms.

Yet the story isn’t one-sided. Whilst the city is structured in a way to enable the uninterrupted flow of capital and the pro-

duction of value at the expense of the majority, new “movements” arise to challenge this, or eke out a place amidst the hostile noise. Even in rustbelt Detroit, plagued as it is by unemployment, poor housing, and decline, the former landmarks of the Motor City, such as the abandoned Packard plant, would become venues of Techno’s birth, producing “the experience of a shared rhythm,” externalizing the imaginations of its participants through this “collective touchstone.” In seventies New York, the emergence of Hip-Hop as a musical form reckoning with racialized inequalities, citadel disintegration, and an incipient process of gentrification would eventually undergo its own process of corporate absorption and massification. But the sediments of its history as a culture of block parties, cyphers, and speaking truth to power still live on within its orbit. In English cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, music has become an arena of battle, as the proponents of a real estate revolution decry the music and collective joy of urban nightlife in favor of gentrification and privatizing the city.

Late night noise in non-residential locales, it turns out, isn’t so desirable for the neoliberal city’s new class of wealthy proprietarians. And more powerfully, as SmokedPoets, street poet and presenter of

Shake the City is a tribute to the cultural resonances of the class struggle.

the *Guerilla* radio show, conveyed to me, we see numerous examples of oppressed peoples appropriating the violent rhythms of their oppressor, such as Palestinian Drill artists using the sounds of drones and shells as a challenge to the colonial occupation

of their land. Adorno may still be sneering from beyond the grave, but there remain "resources of hope" that could one day wipe that expression off his face.

Billet's *Shake the City* is a tribute to the cultural resonances of the class struggle. Any social movement worth its salt cultivates its own soundtrack. Sometimes, as with the chants of "Oh Jeremy Corbyn" to the White Stripes' "Seven Nation Army," the rhythm provides a convenient rallying cry, setting a movement's ambitions to a popular tune. Often, the music sounds a clarion call, an insistence on the value of life against the barbarities of racial violence, as with the ringing out of Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" throughout the first round of Black Lives Matter protests in 2015. The scores of nineteenth-century Jewish workers who would carol "Hey hey, daley politsey" ("Hey hey, down with the police") in the face of state persecution and murderous pogroms exemplify the creativity of the

street fighter. And on other occasions, such as Lethal Bizzle's "Pow" and the student protests that rocked Britain in 2010, the music opens a pathway into grasping what Raymond Williams called the movements' "structure of feeling."

Shake the City captures all of these dynamics and then some. Billet's debut book is a work of cultural criticism par excellence. The late Marshall Berman once wrote in the pages of the *New Left Review* that those of us who want to radically change the world for the better should pay greater attention to the "signs on the street." Billet calls for us to listen seriously for the sounds of the street. Eager to construct a "Marxism with a soul," *Shake the City* traverses the entrance of a disalienating subject desperately trying to impose the imprints of its brittle but determined emancipatory potential onto the space of capitalism. Let's hope a new chapter in this story is written soon.

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Warsaw Ghetto Cycle: Poems

SAM FRIEDMAN

In 2007, at the conclusion of the International Harm Reduction Conference in Warsaw, several Canadian friends and I walked to the part of the city where the Warsaw Ghetto had been. Over the course of a couple-hour walk, during which I reacted quite emotionally to being at the site of vast atrocities and courageous struggles, I wrote the first draft of this Warsaw Ghetto Cycle of four poems. Over the ensuing months, I showed this to my sister, Paula Friedman, who is herself the author of many books and poems, and received many insightful ideas for edits from her.

These poems have previously appeared in Sam Friedman, Grief and Rage: An American Jew's Poems on Palestine. Central Jersey Coalition against Endless War. 2015.

I. The walk to the unknown relatives

Here—right here—
this street of apartments,
wide tesserated sidewalk,
a park alive with light.

SAM FRIEDMAN is a lifelong activist and revolutionary socialist. He works as a public health researcher. He is a member of the Ukraine Solidarity Network, Jewish Voice for Peace, the Tempest Collective, People's CDC, and the Central Jersey Coalition against Endless War. Among his books are *Teamster Rank and File* (1982) and *A Precious Residue: Poems that ponder efforts to spark a working class socialism in the 1970s and after.* imhojournal.org/wp-content/uploads/Friedman-S.-2022.-A-Precious-Residue.pdf.

Here—right here—
this where to which you were escorted
by gray-clad soldiers
whispering of homes and parents,
over-worked bayonets at play.
Here—right here—
your Judenrat decreed:
“submit, don't think, obey”—
these poor appointed leaders bewildered,
though perhaps of pure souls,
before a soul-searing choice
no Solomon would propound.
Here—right here—
where many rode obedient
these steel-hard rails
into soil unknown.
Here—where some rebelled,
scratched fear in Nazi hearts,
and died.
Here—right here—
is the there where
you do not live,
never resided,
but died to write
hope
you would never see.

II. Abomination

Here,
the monument to ghetto heroes,
sculpted amid shell-flattened rubble
after the War.
Desperate-eyed men of stone
hold guns in rock-firm hands.
A woman agonizes, her breasts bare,
arms stretched upward,

holding a baby whose fingers grasp the sky.
 Only men wield weapons, bear guns;
 this sole woman seems misplaced,
 not really there,
 not real here,
 her rifle erased,
 her here-born, here-died heroism
 ground rubble
 underneath the chisels of men
 who did not live, did not die,
 here.

III. Bunker Monument, Mila 18, Warsaw

Kneeling on the fallen bunker,
 fingers lightly touching
 this buried soil
 of rebelling kin, long ago slain,
 tailors,
 bakers,
 tympanists,
 waitresses,
 rabbis,
 socialists,
 Zionists,
 communists,
 desperadoes all,
 heroes all,
 late-comer students of history's laws
 learning the guns of revenge—
 I get the message:

Continue the struggle,
 end this system, this industrialized
 death,
 where nurses and typists must learn
 the gun,
 musicians' fingers thrust
 the knives of hate.

Continue the struggle
 until you join us
 in death.

IV. Umschlagplatz

Under a gray-barked tree
 whose limbs scratch at the heavens
 like a baby grasping sky, or

the deeds of the Communards,
 I stand, behind this confining marble wall
 fashioned like the tear-washed sides
 of an enclosing boxcar
 in a sun-sered city where Jews misled
 by their Judenrat—reluctant leaders
 traumatized, terrified,
 traduced by responsibility—
 waited lonely among their nearest,
 and whispered rumors
 of destined fates
 unknown.

Under this living tree
 of many years, many tears, I pledge
 my grief and my anger to undying struggle
 against the reborn Nazis and imperial
 Judenrats of liberal moderation,
 in all their guises and incarnations.
 I pledge my mind, my aging body,
 my hopes,
 to the struggle, to stretch our aspirations
 wide as the tree's limbs and deep as its roots,
 to storm the heavens,
 to rewrite our ends.



Zivia Lubetkin, 1914 – 1978, the only woman on the High Command of the Jewish Combat Organization that led the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and one of only 34 Warsaw Ghetto fighters to survive the war.

Recognizing the Counterrevolution!

FRANCES FOX PIVEN

WE HAVE NEEDED THIS BOOK. Stephen Steinberg has produced a brilliant overview of the decades-long campaign by business and the organized right to reverse the victories of the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement. Steinberg is, I think, well suited to this task by his life-long study of the American system of racial oppression, especially the oppression of African Americans, and by his passionate opposition to that system.

What makes this book so valuable is the force of its argument about how the counter-revolution gains by moving relentlessly from one civil rights rollback to the next, culminating in the ongoing Republican campaign to limit voting rights, especially the voting rights of African Americans. Think of the daring of that campaign. Instead of adapting their agenda to attract a diversifying electorate, the Republican Party, confronted by unfavorable demographic trends, especially a burgeoning left-leaning youth vote, launches a parallel campaign to construct an obstacle course that will make it more difficult for those targeted segments of the

electorate to vote because they are unlikely to vote for the right.

But while this development is staggering for what it reveals about the vulnerability of democracy in the United States, it is not actually new. Indeed, the political history of the United States can be told as a centuries-long series of struggles over democratic rights and especially over the core element of a democratic polity, the widespread and secure access to the franchise. Many of the institutional

arrangements that have recently been singled out by commentators for their distorting effects on democracy, for example, the Electoral College, the U.S. Senate, and the Supreme Court, originated in efforts by American elites, especially the slaveholding Southern planter class, to limit the reach and impact of democratic representation, most notably in the House of Representatives, the “People’s House.”

Steinberg directs us to see a similar contest driving many of the policy initiatives of the past fifty years. This time the forces of reaction have been directed not at democratic publics as a whole, but at African Americans and at the historic advances achieved in response to the campaigns of the Black Freedom movement that erupted in the 1950s. The highpoint was reached in the 1960s with the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the

Counterrevolution: The Crusade to Roll Back the Gains of the Civil Rights Movement

STEPHEN STEINBERG
Stanford University Press,
2021, 221 pages

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Voting Rights Act of 1965. But there were other perhaps less spectacular achievements that improved the lives of Black Americans. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), for example, a program that provided cash assistance to poor single mothers and their children, expanded, and the discretion of program operatives to refuse aid was limited by a series of court decisions. Other programs that provided food assistance and health care also grew in response to Black unrest.

But these victories prompted the beginning of what Steinberg calls “counter-revolution.” Republican leaders took advantage of the growing white backlash to campaign with what became known as the “southern strategy.” In 1968, the Democrats lost the presidency, and during subsequent Republican regimes the counter-revolution escalated. Affirmative action initiatives intended to improve Black employment and educational prospects were reversed. And when Bill Clinton, a Democrat, gained the presidency, he championed the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that inaugurated the trend toward mass incarceration. Two years later, Clinton was promising “to end welfare as we know it,” which he actually did in 1996, when the liberalized AFDC income-maintenance program was replaced by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act, imposing new work requirements and time limits on aid.

This was not just about race. Each of these policy shifts also generated opportunities for profit that attracted interest-group support. Efforts at improving schools morphed into efforts to replace public schools with for-profit charter schools, for example. Efforts to “deconcentrate poverty” became efforts to get rid of public housing in favor of gentrified developments that provided far less below-market-rate housing for the people displaced. Still, the

opportunities for profit created by these reform initiatives were intertwined with the fact that the victims of the policies were largely Black people and that it was the achievements of the Black Freedom movement that were being reversed. By highlighting the political deployment of racial animus, Steinberg helps us to see these developments as features of the simmering race war that characterizes American politics.

But while racist rhetoric certainly accompanied these initiatives, the shifts in policy targeted not only Black people. Steinberg does not say this, but what was unfolding behind the screen provided by the fractiousness of race politics was a huge business mobilization to roll back the policy initiatives of both the New Deal and the Great Society. It was as if business interests had simply been biding their time, waiting for the politically propitious moment and the issues that would cloud the class content of the business campaign. Racism provided the shield that made the neoliberal turn possible.

Steinberg does us a service by highlighting the similar agenda behind the policy changes that weakened civil rights accomplishments. But for me, the high-points of Steinberg’s book consist of his discussion of the rationales offered by some academics and neoconservative intellectuals for the rollbacks of civil rights advances. To put it bluntly, when the political opportunities emerged, social scientists and other intellectuals dug into their academic toolboxes to find the theories and language that justified reversing the gains won by the Black Freedom movement. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz come quickly to mind because they are famous, and they are famous in part because they were such successful opportunists, handmaidens of the counter-revolutionary movement of their

day. But lots of less well-known intellectuals joined the fight as research opportunities and federal largesse for projects that justified the counter-revolutionary trend became available.

The clear and simple pattern in these rationales was captured at the time by William Ryan, who wrote a critical and angry book called *Blaming the Victim*. The title says it all. It is true that poverty and social exclusion have bad effects on people. They can sap them of ambition and energy, create the stresses that erode family life, discourage longer-term planning in favor of more immediate satisfactions, and so forth. But it is too easy to reverse the causality, to argue that it is the lack of ambition, frayed family relations, and the pursuit of immediate satisfactions that *causes* poverty and exclusion. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in fact wants to have it both ways. Once upon a time, he argued, individual and family pathology were

caused by slavery and Jim Crow. But now, the pathologies caused by economic and social circumstance perpetuate themselves. In other words, what we call the culture of poverty reproduces itself without poverty. The solution can no longer be to merely eliminate the economic and social conditions that cause poverty. Rather a system of authority capable of directly changing the behaviors and ideas of the poor has to intervene.

The perspective is chilling. It tells us why Black Power is necessary not only to protect the future of Black people, but to protect the future of democracy. Steinberg ends his book with a call for restoring the advances made by the Black Freedom movement, such as affirmative action. Will that be enough? Given the explosion of wealth inequality and the power of resurgent capital, maybe not, but it would be a step in the right direction.

From Kosovo to Ukraine

PROMISE LI

GILBERT ACHCAR's *The New Cold War* is a welcome addition for socialists to understand how we have found ourselves in the midst of heightening geopolitical tensions today. Achcar has long been a politically astute commentator on inter-

national politics and has written a number of useful interventions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹ Whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, his contributions express a crucial ethos essential

The New Cold War: The United States, Russia, and China from Kosovo to Ukraine
GILBERT ACHCAR
Haymarket Books, 2023

to Marxism but increasingly neglected by socialist writers on internationalism today: In the face of global contradictions and developing inter-imperialist rivalry, Marxists must discover independent political alternatives for the working class and support the right to self-determination of oppressed peoples on the ground against

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the imperialism of large nations. Achcar's political clarity on these issues has invited outrageous attacks and even falsifications of his positions from others in the anti-war left, like the lie that Achcar endorsed the U.S. imperialist invasion of Libya.²

In *The New Cold War*, Achcar takes a step back from conjunctural interventions to contextualize the development of global events that led us to this point. Contrary to those who smear him for his supposed imperialist support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Achcar provides in this book a deeply thorough critical analysis of NATO's activities after the fall of the Soviet Union—and of how its machinations have contributed to the destruction we see today in Ukraine. Particularly useful is his keen awareness of the diverse conditions that undergirded NATO's uneven development from the 1990s to the present day. The implication here is that to truly understand the forces and effects of imperialism, we must also understand that imperialism's development is often contingent on a multitude of factors, not guided by a coherent plan.

More importantly, while Achcar's understanding of NATO contextualizes Russia's decisions, it leaves no room to excuse Putin's Russian revanchism. The long chapter on Russia details how NATO's and Russia's actions function as haphazard reactions to each other's last play, rather than expressing the clear development of any long-term strategy. As Antonio Gramsci once remarked, military plans cannot be "elaborated and finalized in advance down to the last detail; only the nucleus and general design can be worked out in advance, since the particularities of the action depend, to a certain extent, on the moves of the enemy." Likewise, this interplay is "a vicious cycle of actions and counteractions"—though one that sees neither Russia nor NATO in permanent or stable positions

of power in an uneven dynamic (232). Any developments in the world economy and geopolitics can unleash unforeseeable consequences, and the tensions between Russia, China, and the United States have been far from predetermined. Achcar recalls the strife within the Clinton administration between the doves and hawks in the 1990s and how, for a period of time, Putin even expressed interest in joining NATO—only to be stalled and rebuffed.

The clear calculus present on all sides is how each power can best preserve and augment its share of the imperialist world system. Achcar's chapter on China, which details the rise of China in the world economy as well as its shifting relationship with the United States through the decades, tracks how this shared logic can lead to unexpected developments in geopolitics. Tension during the Tiananmen Square Massacre eventually gave way to engagement between the United States and China, especially with China's entry into the World Trade Organization. This policy of engagement now shifts closer to one of containment, as the U.S.-China rivalry fires up. Once again, none of these paths was predetermined: Achcar even suggests that "if it had not been pushed by Washington into Moscow's arms, Beijing might well have prioritized its relations with the United States over those with Russia, given its incomparably greater economic interdependence with the former" (277). Each nation seeks to preserve its own growth and security in the capitalist world system, though the contingencies of geopolitics create barriers to any straightforward political strategy, with each state increasingly triangulated in this New Cold War.

This brings us to another key intervention of the book: defining the New Cold War itself. Achcar's keen historical overview of the United States, China, and Russia in the global economy demonstrates

the central principle that characterizes this state of tension. He argues in the introduction that the core of the “Cold War” concept describes not a competition between ideologies, but

a concept of the age of industry and total war, when military technology developed in parallel with increasingly rapid general technological progress leading to an ever-increasing cost of the “arms race”—a concomitant concept belonging to the same historical age. In that specific meaning, “cold war” designates the active preparation for a real war, with the economic implication of maintaining war readiness with a constant effort either to secure potential superiority over the adversary or to preserve an equilibrium of military force. (19)

This formulation provides a useful entry point to uncover a consistent through-line in geopolitics in our period, which has often been riddled with contradictions and contingencies that Achcar outlines. Despite an unprecedented level of global economic interdependence, especially between the three main actors in the New Cold War, readiness for war has indeed become a common goal. “Anti-China” hysteria has increasingly functioned as a political consensus in the U.S. Congress to justify the military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, just as the need to assist Ukrainian self-defense has become an excuse for lawmakers to call for the unrestrained increase in military funding. China continues to step up its performative military maneuvers in Taiwan’s vicinity, and, more recently, Hong Kong’s deputy police commissioner for national security instructed new police cadets to “maintain a sense of crisis in daily work, even though the society is relatively peaceful recently.”³

Nonetheless, what should socialists make of other aspects of today’s complex geopolitics that are not reducible to readiness for war between these three great

powers? Achcar begins to outline in his book something like a Marxist view of the international relations between sovereign actors by underscoring the contingencies of these institutions, actors, and events. But an even deeper materialist perspective on geopolitics would take into account the increasing agency of mid-sized and smaller states in also shaping the parameters and development of this New Cold War. Lula’s ambition to discover a middle path between Russian aggression and the United States’ unfettered military consolidation may foreshadow the growing importance of other actors in shaping the development of ongoing international conflicts. Israel and, more recently, Saudi Arabia solicit economic and political resources from both the United States and China, while exploring new modes of collaboration in the Middle East as Saudi-Houthi talks on ending the war in Yemen show signs of progress. Seth Schindler and Jessica DiCarlo argue in their introduction to *The Rise of the Infrastructure State*⁴, a collection of research essays they recently edited, that “Beijing and Washington may indeed compete to integrate territory, but they also must constantly adjust plans in accordance with the spatial aspiration of other governments, elite interests, political rivalries, and demands from civil society in host countries” (3). And thus, a useful line of inquiry building on Achcar’s narrative can entail further foregrounding the irreducible role of other actors and institutions in shaping how the New Cold War may continue to develop.

Still, Achcar’s analysis, precise in its evaluation of the interplay of effects between policymakers, offers a clear perspective on the topic, especially for a broad audience. As for the socialist left and other mass movements, Achcar’s study may benefit even more from engaging how mass movements and grassroots political institutions can shape the development of geopolitics,

influencing the decisions of political and economic elites around them. For example, how would a study of the New Cold War be deepened if we factor in the multitude of wildcat strikes in China, especially against inhumane zero-COVID lockdown policies that were crucial to the security of Chinese bureaucratic elites' hold over their supply chains at the height of the pandemic? In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Leon Trotsky writes that the outcome of "economic contradictions and social antagonisms" mainly depends on "a struggle of living social forces" on an international scale.⁵ A full Marxist theory of geopolitics would thus consider not only the international relations between sovereign institutions but also the materialist basis for such interactions in the form of living social forces that determine their development.

Factoring in the role and capacity of social movements leading up to the New Cold War can also illuminate new directions for ongoing movements to provide clear internationalist alternatives. Especially so, as a key recommendation that Achcar offers in the final chapter may leave readers wanting: ensuring that "states must respect the code of conduct constituted by the UN Charter and international law" (320). The idea of making demands on the UN is nothing new within left-wing movements and is gaining new traction in recent discourse. A strong contribution by Trent Trepanier to the Democratic Socialists of America's publication *Socialist Forum*, on Taiwanese self-determination, calls for rallying behind "a democratized and empowered United Nations" as a key plank of internationalism⁶; similarly, Ukrainian socialist Taras Bilous has also called for "the left ... to struggle for a democratization of the international security order" by reforming the UN.⁷ But policy fixes within the UN and calling on sovereign states to respect its fundamental principles provide no sustainable solution

for international conflict *in itself* without a strong independent mass movement with a clear platform for change against the capitalist system. In other words, calling to reform the UN is not *necessarily* a dead-end, but socialists must be clear that such a demand can be effective *only insofar* as it is informed by a larger program of action, grounded on quickening mass action that can ultimately break with all bourgeois institutions.

Trotsky, in the 1904 essay called "The Proletariat and the Revolution," warns that we must not allow the "pent-up feelings" of the masses to find expression in "the illusion of legality." Instead,

[t]he vanguard of the Revolution ought to wake from indolence all other elements of the people; to appear here and there and everywhere; to put the questions of political struggle in the boldest possible fashion; to call, to castigate, to unmask hypocritical democracy; to make democrats and Zemstvo liberals clash against each other; to wake again and again, to call, to castigate, to demand a clear answer to the question, "What are you going to do?" to allow no retreat; to compel the legal liberals to admit their own weakness; to alienate from them the democratic elements and help the latter along the way of the revolution. To do this work means to draw the threads of sympathy of all the democratic opposition towards the revolutionary campaign of the proletariat.⁸

In such a fashion should socialists approach bodies like the UN—not abstaining from it as a useful site of struggle but tactically making use of it as a venue in which we can allow the masses to understand the limitations of bourgeois institutions. A path forward beyond the New Cold War must entail a variety of strategies and organizations; reforming the UN may be one such tactic, but it only has power when situated in a broader transitional program that links existing social movements and a

longer-term revolutionary vision of social transformation. Achcar's brief concluding words on the necessity of "building a strong global movement for the related purposes of fighting climate change and achieving disarmament" begin to point toward such a longer-term program for action (309). But it would be even more effective if the decisive importance of social struggles was foregrounded as the motor of change that can lead to (though not guarantee) a path for the working classes beyond the New Cold War.

The strength of Achcar's *The New Cold War* lies in its incisive clarity in objectively narrating how this new era of inter-imperial tensions developed—without losing sight of the legitimacy of self-determination struggles against all imperialist countries in the New Cold War. Such a balanced clarity is needed as a principled position of supporting self-determination struggles in a new era of inter-imperialist rivalry has come increasingly under fire by propagandists of the U.S., Chinese, and Russian regimes. For one, *Washington's New Cold War*, by John Bellamy Foster, John Ross, and Deborah Veneziale and published by *Monthly Review* around the same time as Achcar's book, offers a one-sided and propagandistic view that crudely and dishonestly overlooks the responsibilities of China and Russia in shaping this era of inter-imperialist rivalry. It is worth reading mainly as a timely, negative contrast to the strength of the analysis shown by Achcar on the exact same topic. Achcar's *The New Cold War* deftly arms internationalists with

the historical knowledge needed to develop new strategies to build the international working class in a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry. What these strategies may be, however, remains only to be discovered beyond the pages of *The New Cold War*—in the existing conjuncture of struggle as it develops day by day.

NOTES

1. E.g., "Supporting Ukraine—Without Writing a Blank Check," *The Nation*, February 16, 2023. <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/supporting-ukraine-without-writing-a-blank-check/>
2. Achcar has responded to this claim: "Letter to the editor: Libya," *International Socialism* 2: 134, Spring 2012. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2012/isj2-134/achcar.htm>
3. "Deputy Commissioner of Police encourages police officers to maintain Hong Kong's stability and safeguard national security (with photos)," The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Press Releases, April 22, 2023. <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202304/22/P2023042200366.htm>
4. Bristol University Press, 2023.
5. Ch. 3, Socialism and the State. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch03.htm>
6. "Taiwan and Self-Determination as a Core Principle," *Socialist Forum*, Winter/Spring 2023. <https://socialistforum.dsusa.org/issues/winter-spring-2023/taiwan-and-self-determination-as-a-core-principle/>
7. "A letter to the Western Left from Kyiv," *openDemocracy*, February 25, 2022. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/a-letter-to-the-western-left-from-kyiv/>
8. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch02.htm>

Rage Against the Machine

Chicago Democratic Politics and their Contradictions

GUY MILLER

A STATUE CALLED A MONUMENT to the Great Migration stands at the entrance to the historic Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago. Created by African American artist Alison Saar, the statue depicts a Black man with a suitcase in his left hand, his right hand pointing north. This represents a testament to the millions of Black Americans who fled the Jim Crow South and risked everything for a new life in Chicago.

The parents of Harold Washington (who served as Chicago's mayor from 1983-1987) were two such people. Harold—as he is known almost universally in Chicago—was born in Cook County Hospital in 1922. He was practically born into the Democratic Party. The son of a Democratic Party precinct captain, he spent more than thirty years as an active cog in the Chicago Machine.

By contrast, newly elected Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson's roots are in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). It was the 25,000-member CTU that largely delivered his mayoral campaign. The CTU

spearheaded the “ground game” for Johnson that knocked on over half-a-million doors, made well-over a million phone calls, and sent over two million text messages.

The Multiracial Promise: Harold Washington's Chicago and the Democratic Struggle in Reagan's America is a fitting title for Gordon K. Mantler's 354-page book. The Reagan years of federal

cut-backs and deindustrialization form an essential backdrop for understanding urban America in the 1980s. Drawing the lens back a little further, the story of Chicago and its rough-and-tumble politics between the early 1960s and the late 1980s can only be told through the constant interplay between race and class, and between independent politics and the Democratic Party.

Both World Wars accelerated the great migration north. The lure of jobs and the escape from Jim Crow segregation were powerful magnets. Added to that, in the post Second World War years, there developed new technologies in agriculture, especially improvements in the cotton-picking machine manufactured by Allis Chalmers, that reduced the need for Black labor in the South. This postwar wave of Black migration mostly affected Chicago's West Side, and less so the older Black settlement on the South Side.

The Multiracial Promise:
Harold Washington's
Chicago and the Democratic
Struggle in Reagan's America
GORDON K. MANTLER
The University Press of North
Carolina, 2023

GUY MILLER is a lifelong Chicagoan and a retired member of the United Transportation Union (UTU).

White flight from the West Side was abetted by systematic block-busting, red lining, and the racist scare spread by greedy realtors looking to turn a quick profit. My family lived in the heart of the West Side, Monroe and Washtenaw, just four blocks from where Fred Hampton was murdered in 1968. (One of the last white families remaining, we moved out in 1956).

Many white-flight families took advantage of the GI Bill, which was designed to favor white veterans. The bill and its benefactors fueled the suburban exodus, building new homes in new subdivisions. My family only made it to a halfway stop: the Northwest Side. Our new neighborhood was blue collar, ethnic, and racist. Its other defining feature was The Machine, specifically the Mayor Richard J. Daley-run Democratic Party Machine.

The folk wisdom of the Northwest Side of my youth in the late 1950s and early 60s was that there were three professions you had to respect: parish priests, corner bartenders, and precinct captains. To this day I still respect bartenders.

Tip O'Neill famously popularized the saying, "all politics is local." Simplistic, yes, but there may be a grain of truth to it. Back in those years, your Precinct Captain functioned as a portal to the outside world. Parking tickets? Don't worry, your precinct captain will take care of it. Need a stop sign on your block? Your Precinct Captain will talk to the Ward's Alderman. Junior needs a job with Streets and Sanitation? Sometimes all it would take would be a short conversation with the Ward's Democratic Party Committeeman. There were two preconditions: be white, and be a registered Democrat. It took decades for this system to begin to unravel.

The story of Brandon Johnson's election as mayor of Chicago in April 2023 contains many differences from Harold Washington's forty years earlier, but there

are also a few similarities. Both victories' origins are in the Chicago Public Schools and the fight there for quality education. Johnson's trajectory begins with the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012, and Washington's, more indirectly, with the game-changing school boycott that began in 1963. Here is how Mantler begins his analysis of the school boycott: "Increasingly, historians now point to the massive school boycotts of 1963 and 1964 as a key turning point in the city's civil rights history—a reminder that the quality of schools animated many movements in the north."

The Black population of Chicago had mushroomed in the early 1960s, but the number of school buildings in Black and Latino communities had not. As a result, Black and Latino students were forced into double-shift schedules: one shift in the morning with a second set of students in the afternoon. Another attempted solution was the infamous "Willis Wagons," named after School Superintendent Benjamin Willis. Essentially, Willis Wagons were trailers plunked down in playgrounds and parking lots of public schools. Improperly heated in winter and sweltering each summer, cramped all year-round, they served as a constant insult to students of color.

Attendance policies were carefully rigged to entrench segregation in Chicago schools. In 1962, the Chicago chapter of the Urban League found the class size in African American schools was 25 percent larger than in comparable white schools; at the same time expenditures per pupil in these schools were 33 percent less.

Although as many as 225,000 students walked out on designated "Freedom Days," the movement was—at least on the surface—a defeat. Benjamin Willis was retained as School Superintendent, despite having submitted his resignation, and Willis Wagons remained. But the will to organize and fight back was something new in

Chicago politics. Grassroots organizations, such as The Woodlawn Organization and the Chicago Committee on Urban Opportunity, gained experience and respect in the community in the months-long fight over racist school policies.

One of the leaders of the struggle was Al Raby. Twenty years later Raby wound up being Harold Washington's campaign manager. And, just two years after the boycott, in 1966, Raby was instrumental in bringing Martin Luther King Jr. to Chicago, for what turned out to be a star-crossed attempt to bring the Civil Rights movement north. Dr. King's foray into the racist hotbed of Chicago was known as the Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM).

In Mantler's saga of how urban coalitions were built in the Reagan era, there are two important takeaways from the CFM experience: one, the extent of racist resistance to open housing, and two, the reluctance of local elected Black politicians to challenge the Daley Machine. Mantler writes, "King and the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) misjudged many other dynamics at work in Chicago, from the intensity of white ethnic hostility to civil rights, to the influence of pre-existing Black resistance networks amid a waning Black submachine." The consummation of the marriage between independent community organizations and electoral politics was still a decade in the future.

As the 1960s advanced, a new, more militant, no compromise zeitgeist began to make itself known in left movements. Both nationally and in Chicago, nothing more captured this tone than the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Starting in Oakland, California in 1966, by 1968 the Panthers were a presence on Chicago streets. What made the Chicago Panthers a threat to the powers-that-be was not so much their stance on self-defense—although that

stance was never abandoned—but their emphasis on the importance of multiracial coalition building.

In the two years before his assassination by Chicago Police working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation in December 1969, Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton seemed to be everywhere. Hardly a week went by when I didn't see him at a demonstration or a political meeting. By the time of his murder, Hampton was barely of legal drinking age. Even then Chairman Fred, as he was affectionately known, had a political sophistication beyond his years. Mantler writes: "As one of the founders of Chicago's original, multiracial Rainbow Coalition with other young activists, Hampton was in the words of one scholar, 'trying to reimagine the social contract.'" It should be noted that this Rainbow Coalition, unlike its later incarnation in the Jesse Jackson years, was envisioned as an independent, action-oriented formation, not a gimmick for elections.

In the decades following Hampton's execution, not every former member of the Black Panther Party retained their revolutionary politics. Another prominent Panther of the late 1960s was Bobby Rush. Rush identified as a Democrat in 1974, and later served thirty years as a U.S. Congressperson, announcing his retirement in 2022. (In the recent mayoral election, Rush endorsed corporate shill and school privatization maven, Paul Vallas).

In the 1960s, the Panthers' example inspired two Chicago youth gangs to politicize and think of themselves as revolutionaries: the Uptown-based, mostly Appalachian transplants, the Young Patriots; and the Puerto Rican-based Young Lords. Much of the Young Lords territory was centered around the now heavily gentrified DePaul University area. Both the Lords and the Patriots were targeted early on by the FBI's COINTELPRO (Counterintel-

ligence Program) and both groups were infiltrated by Chicago Police's notorious Red Squad. (Coincidentally, without knowing it, I moved into the apartment that had previously belonged to Manuel Ramos, an unarmed Young Lord, killed by Chicago police. Manuel's crime? He was trying to break up a fight).

Police surveillance and repression, especially of the Panthers, intensified throughout 1969, and reached a climax on December 4 of that year with the assassination of Hampton and fellow Panther Mark Clark. The raids were ordered by Cook County State's Attorney and Democratic Machine stalwart, Edward Hanrahan, aided by the FBI. The murders signaled the end of the dream of a racially inclusive movement independent of the Democratic Party. At the same time, they planted the seeds for an unprecedented challenge to that Machine.

Since the Democratic Party Machine took over Chicago politics in 1931, its endorsement meant automatic victory in the city and the rest of Cook County. But the cold-blooded killings of Hampton and Clark were a bridge too far for much of the Black community, and more importantly in Mantler's telling, for hand-raising politicians in the Black submachine.

Despite facing a Grand Jury indictment, Ed Hanrahan won the Democratic primary in 1972. Hanrahan's reelection was expected to be a sure thing in the general election, but that was not to be. Less than 20 percent of Black voters pulled the lever for Hanrahan. Bernard Carey, a little-known Republican, became the new Cook County State's Attorney. Lu Palmer, a Black journalist and activist, captured the shocking nature of Hanrahan's defeat, "The Black community came together in a way that I've never seen before." It would take eleven more years until these seeds bore fruit with Harold Washington's election,

but they were planted here.

The chapter of *Multiracial Promise* that charts the expanding Latino role in Chicago politics is called, "We Were Invisible" and is exactly the way to describe the lack of Latino presence in Chicago politics up to that point. William Rodriguez, a Socialist Party member of Spanish descent, was elected Alderman in the 15th Ward in 1914, and that was pretty much it for the next seventy years.

The situation was no better downstate in Springfield, the Illinois' capitol. In 1977 there were 177 representatives in the State legislature; but not one of them was Latino. That same year, Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, Rudy Lozano, Linda Coronado, and other Mexican American community leaders made the trip to Springfield to lobby against discriminatory legislation. The experience transformed the activists, "We came back with a clear understanding of how voiceless and powerless and invisible we were.... And we began the conversation about how do we participate in electoral policies," is how Garcia summarized the lessons of their trip. Thus, the second leg of the Washington coalition began to take shape.

Up to this point, much of Chicago's burgeoning Mexican American community abstained from electoral politics. Mantler cites three causes of this tendency toward abstention: gerrymandering—no City Council district drawn after the 1970 census was more than one-third Latino; as many as half of Chicago's Mexican Americans were not U.S. citizens; and, the entrenched Daley Machine was, to many, simply another version of the stranglehold of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* party (PRI) in Mexico.

There was a parallel development in the Puerto Rican community. Former Young Lord's leader Cha Cha Jimenez, in 1974, ran for alderman in the 46th Ward against machine candidate Chris Cohen. Jimenez

won a surprising 39 percent of the vote. That was enough to re-energize the concept of a Rainbow Coalition on the North Side, and set the stage for an alliance with the so-called Lake Front Liberals.

Mantler's thesis in *The Multiracial Promise* is that a three-part formula was needed to beat the Machine and elect Harold Washington. Absolutely essential was winning 80 percent of the Black vote. Next, inroads into the Latino community were required, in order to win half, or near half, of its vote. Finally, it was important to at least make a showing among white liberals. A series of unexpected events between 1976 and 1983 turned this into a reality.

On December 20, 1976, rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, Richard J. Daley proved to be mortal. His successor, Michael Bilandic (one of five Chicago mayors from the Bridgeport neighborhood) couldn't get the streets plowed after a snowstorm in 1979, and paid the price. This led to Jane Byrne, who spent her whole term seemingly inadvertently insulting the Black Community, mainly due to a tin ear and ill-advised appointments.

In the 1983 mayoral election, Richard J.'s son, Richard M. Daley and Jane Byrne split the white ethnic vote in the primary, allowing Washington to squeak by with a plurality of 36.3 percent. But the Machine was not about to concede the general election six weeks later. Here Mantler deserves a long quote:

Jane Byrne's actions epitomized the duplicity and desperation Washington's opponents showed in the days and weeks after the primary. It was already too late for an independent to file for the general election. Ed Warren, the Socialist Workers Party candidate for mayor and an African American, reportedly rejected an offer of \$1 million and a city job to be replaced by a high profile white candidate on the SWP ticket. (156)

The other alternative was for the Ma-

chine to support the Republican candidate. This was equivalent to the College of Cardinals supporting the Archbishop of Canterbury for Pope. Nonetheless, that is exactly what happened. Bernard Epton, a nondescript Republican, made it a horse race, losing to Washington 668,176 to 619,926.

The thirty-five years since the Harold Washington era have seen a partial restoration of the Machine. However, the twenty-two years of Daley the Lesser, then eight years of Rahm Emanuel, and finally the single term of Lori Lightfoot, saw the emphasis shift from ward and committeeman patronage to corporate driven interests being mostly in charge. Given this reality, the campaign and election of Brandon Johnson was something few saw coming.

The results of the 1983 "ugly election" broke down to a Black Democratic progressive winning 52 percent of the vote and a white Republican winning 48 percent. Forty years later, the primary system has been replaced by an open, non-partisan election. None of the nine candidates received the required majority to win that primary, requiring a two-candidate run-off election. The April run-off was uncanny in its similarity to 1983: 52 percent for the Black progressive Johnson and 48 percent for the white right-winger Paul Vallas, both identifying as Democrats.

So maybe things haven't really changed much. Then again, maybe they have. The stadium where the White Sox play sits in the middle of the 11th Ward, in the neighborhood of Bridgeport. It is a neighborhood that for years was dangerous for outsiders after dark. Yet ten days following the Brandon Johnson victory, I was walking through its streets to the ballpark. I found myself walking behind another fan wearing a "Brandon is Better" t-shirt. Unremarkable in 2023, suicidal in 1983.

For a non-native Chicagoan, Gordon

Mantler demonstrates a solid grasp of the city's neighborhoods and the ins-and-outs of Chicago Democratic Party politics. I start from different premises and come to different conclusions than Mr. Mantler, particularly in that I do not consider the Democratic Party a vehicle for transformative change. Nevertheless, I found his

book a valuable contribution that describes how electoral coalitions are built, and how they degenerate. With forty-four pages of endnotes and an ample twenty-page bibliography, *Multiracial Promise* is a useful tool for scholars and activists alike.

The Limits of State-Centric Analysis of the Latin American Left

DAWN MARIE PALEY AND BRIAN WHITENER

IN *THE IMPASSE OF THE LATIN AMERICAN Left*, scholars Franck Gaudichaud, Massimo Mondonesi and Jeffrey R. Webber set out to “weave together an overarching portrait of the phenomenon of progressivism in twenty-first century Latin America” (5). This is an ambitious book. It attempts to periodize, set out a political-economic framework, and analyze intellectual currents and does so for a timespan of over

two decades. It does this in a region of more than 650 million people in over forty countries and hundreds of Indigenous nations. Though this sprawling scope may be its greatest weakness, the book sometimes displays great clarity and a powerful synthesis of the politics in the region.

The Impasse of the Latin American Left

FRANK GAUDICHAUD,
MASSIMO MONDONESI,
JEFFREY R WEBBER
Duke University Press, 2022

DAWN MARIE PALEY is a journalist and author of *Drug War Capitalism* (AK Press 2014) and *Guerra neoliberal. Desaparición y búsqueda en el norte de México* (Libertad Bajo Palabra 2020). She's a member of the editorial board of *New Politics*.

BRIAN WHITENER is an associate professor of Spanish at the University at Buffalo and the author of *Crisis Cultures: The Rise of Finance in Mexico and Brazil* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

The Impasse of the Latin American Left begins with an exploration of the neoliberal state programs and the “plebian revolutions” that arose in their wake. This is what preceded the taking of state power by “progressive” governments, here focusing on Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador. All three authors have published previously on these countries, and it is clearly their area of expertise. Originally published in México in 2019, the English translation has been slightly updated, but fails to meaningfully interrogate the policies

enacted by Andrés Manuel López Obrador in México, or consider key elections over the past couple of years, as in Chile, Honduras, and Colombia.

The authors characterize progressivism in Latin America as resulting from a "... plebian upsurge of popular rebellions [that] helped to usher in a crisis of neoliberal hegemony in the early 2000s, which eventually found formal political expression in a series of electoral victories for left as well as center-left parties" (5). This progressive political expression then became hegemonic in the region, but its composition was far from homogenous. *The Impasse of the Latin American Left* classifies this diversity as such: Brazil and Uruguay were "center-left, social-liberal;" Argentina and Nicaragua "left-wing populist;" Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador "oscillated between popular nationalism, anti-imperialism and neo-developmentalism;" while México and Colombia remained neoliberal and conservative (6). According to the authors, there were common progressive elements across governments that formed part of the so-called Pink Tide. They argue that "a shifting blend of co-optation, symbolic reward, and the institutionalization of movements characterized, to different extents, all the progressive experiences of this era" (6). They offer incisive critique of this impasse, citing the inability of progressive governments to make meaningful change due to the class structures of these societies.

The high period of progressivism, they write, took place in step with the commodities boom between 2003 and 2011, allowing for significant redistribution and poverty reduction tied to increased rents from extractive capitalism (7). But "few signs are evident of genuine advances having been made at the high mark of progressivism in the political realm" (6). The book goes into some detail analyzing the way progressive governments were able to increase revenues

from (often expanded) extractivism, without "engaging in any ambitious project to increase taxes on the incomes and assets of the ruling classes" (38).

The Limits of Centering the Parliamentary Left

Gaudichaud, Mondonesi, and Webber rely heavily on the work of Argentine economist Cladio Katz to set up the importance of social, peasant, Indigenous, landless, and labor mobilizing in helping to break the neoliberal consensus, often through direct action, occupations, and large-scale protest: "The difficult relationship among popular movements, parties, the state, and progressive governments is key to understanding this period," they write. "In general terms, we can see a moment in which numerous movements have been strongly institutionalized, and often a co-optation and bureaucratization of a considerable part of their leaders" (45).

The authors explore the gradual marginalization of the social movements that brought Evo Morales to power in 2004; the dislocation of Argentina's *piquetero* movement; the split in the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina during Kirchner's rule; and the division of labor under both Ignacio Lula de Silva and Hugo Chavez Frías. Perhaps most strikingly, in Rafael Correa's Ecuador, the denunciation of social movements crystallized in a process of criminalization. "Don't believe all the romantic environmentalists; whoever opposes the country's development is a terrorist," Correa stated on national TV in 2007 (48).

Impasse provides a useful synthesis of attempts to institutionalize elected progressives. South American governments marginalized, repressed, and even incarcerated unruly elected officials who refused to play along with deepening neoliberalism and the destruction wrought by extractivism (see also Salazar Lohman, 2016). The book

positions movements as occurring before and leading up to the election of progressive governments, which might explain why it falls short in exploring the depth and scope of social movement organizing *during* progressive administrations and following successful election campaigns. This is not an uncommon problem in left writing about progressive governments. “If we take the time to examine the difficulty of making visible the lineages of non-state centric and anti-patriarchal struggles, we understand that it occurs not because of absence of experiences, but because of the repeated exercise in producing forgetting,” note Huáscar Salazar Lohman and Diego Castro in the introduction to their edited volume *América Latina en Tiempos Revueltos* (2021, p. 23).

A significant problem with *The Impasse of the Latin American Left* is that instead of developing a narrative that allows us to understand the balance of forces at play—especially forces to the left of governments that failed to put their most radical promises into practice—*Impasse* consistently relies on economic, parliamentary-focused explanations of political life. Under progressive governments, according to this book, social, Indigenous, campesino, student, and other movements traditionally associated with the left are explored only to the extent that they interact, support, or obstruct governance, but not as protagonists with their own emancipatory visions and practices.

In addition, the authors do little to tease out the anti-patriarchal content of struggles, or the often overtly heteropatriarchal tendencies of progressive governments. For example, feminist movements against violence and for reproductive rights emerged with a great deal of force in 2016 in the Southern Cone, spreading throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. These movements, which have deepened their revolutionary challenges to how time

and labor are organized (Paley, 2022) are given only superficial attention in *Impasse*.

Closing Ranks, Critically

While *Impasse* is astutely critical of progressive governments, the concrete gains they achieved, and the means they used to co-opt or marginalize movements, consistent threads of loyalty to this once hegemonic project also emerge. On a political level, this tension—how deep a critique of progressivism is warranted—runs throughout the book.

Early on, after an extensive discussion of the limits of progressive governments, the authors declare, “The task now is not only to think in terms of ‘post-neoliberalism’: more broadly, the end of the present crisis makes up part of the global crisis of capitalist civilization” (73). Readers might be surprised that the final chapter, which deals with critiques of progressivism, finds the authors charting a middle course between critics and supporters of progressivism. They see the period covered as one of “passive revolution,” or a “series of political projects that became significant but limited processes of transformation, with a conservative undercurrent, directed from above and by means of demobilizing and subalternizing political practices...” (129). This leads them to argue that progressive governments were in fact authentically “revolutionary” (130) in their anti-neoliberal redistributive social programs, but at the same time, conservative in how they controlled movements and failed to modify fundamental capitalist social, political, and economic relations.

Gaudichaud, Mondonesi, and Webber are critics of progressive leaders, but not partisans of autonomist, Indigenous, environmental, or feminist positions. Therein lies the tension. If the task of the present is to go beyond “post-neoliberalism” and take up the “global crisis of capitalist civiliza-

tion,” it seems difficult to do so without taking these more radical positions seriously.

Impasse of the Latin American Left misses an opportunity to think seriously about the limits of the uprisings and movements that progressive governments helped neutralize. Unfortunately, instead, we find digressions such as: “By contrast, we must give an account of the limitations of the popular movements that enabled the processes of passive revolution to take place, which we can sum up, paraphrasing Gramsci, as sporadic, rudimentary, and inorganic subversivism without a unified popular project” (135). Certainly, there is room here for elaboration, and for the inclusion of the perspectives and an exploration of the practices of participants in social movements. The authors also argue that movements integrated willingly into the construction of progressive governments. This type of argument occludes the substantial numbers of individuals and collectives inside and outside these movements, who for years fought—and, in many cases, continue to fight—this very institutionalization.

For example, the 2019 political crisis in Bolivia—a signal moment in understanding the contradictions and continuity of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), state construction, and communal organizing under Evo Morales—is given only the most cursory treatment. Though the authors are careful to point out Morales’ errors, they blame a disorganized coalition of right-wing politicians, the police, and the army for the “*coup*.” There is no mention of broad based (and quickly co-opted) protests against election fraud, or of the power vacuum created by high level resignations by members of the MAS (see Paley, 2022b).

Apología and Reciclaje

Shifting to the present, Gaudichaud, Mondonesi, and Webber describe México’s entrance into progressive government un-

der Obrador as ushering in a “notable drop in all forms of state repression” saying it is “still too early to determine how his administration will be at quelling the violence associated with the ‘War on Drugs’ in that county, but early signs are not promising” (66). While somewhat optimistic, this statement may have passed muster in early 2019. By 2022, when the book was released in English, it was patently false.

During the first four years of his administration, López Obrador has presided over the continuation of the “security” strategy of his predecessors, with disastrous results. He has also expanded the role of the Secretary of National Defense into the construction and maintenance of civilian infrastructure, including four airports, various sections of the new train in the Yucatán peninsula, and the country’s ports. The imprecision of the authors in dealing with countries outside of their area of expertise may be connected to the evident influence of the work of elder scholars of the left, in particular, of the aforementioned Katz. Chapter two is based in large part on Katz’s *Neoliberalismo, Neodesarrollismo, Socialismo* (2016). Katz is part of a generation of non-Mexican left scholars who gave a wide berth to the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party’s (PRI) authoritarianism, in part due to the party’s continued relationship with Cuba and other internationalist gestures. *Impasse* recycles Katz’s politically conservative perspective on violence in México and elsewhere eliding state responsibility and instead suggesting “... youth have sought refuge in the burgeoning narco-economy, where they often end up contributing—in one sense or another—to soaring homicide statistics” (84). Perhaps it is worth examining Katz’s perspective on this in more detail. He writes: “The narco-economy has become a refuge of subsistence for [social] sectors who are pushed to the margins. The region has the highest homicide rates in the

world. Criminality grows together with the social fracture and the obscene promotion of the consumption and pleasures that the wealthy enjoy” (Katz, 2016, 43).

Katz’s conclusions regarding the impacts and the motivations of the war on drugs show his distance from México, where—especially since the disappearance of forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa teacher training college in Guerrero in 2014—activists, victims, and social movements have highlighted state forces as central actor in the violence traced through hundreds of thousands of homicides, disappearances, and forced displacements. But Katz resorts to a familiar liberal script of victim blaming, wherein state forces are omitted and those on the margins—people who chose criminality in part due to a desire to climb socially—are responsible for the violence.

Impasse authors do not go as far as Katz in this regard, but the reflection of Gaudichaud, Mondonesi (who teaches at the National Autonomous University of México), and Webber on this issue and others are limited due to their overreliance on dated work done at great remove from México’s political context. This is even more surprising amid a growing body of critical interpretations about the violence in México that is being elaborated by journalists and authors working in English and Spanish.

The strongest moments of *Impasse of the Latin American Left* are also in some ways the weakest. An example of a strength becoming a weakness is the scope of the book. While the amount of material presented is impressive, obvious unfamiliarity with

recent events and goings on in countries outside the realm of the authors’ expertise leads to unfortunate missteps.

The authors are astute, attentive, and experienced readers of Latin American politics and well-versed in critiques of Pink Tide governments and the literature on their limitations. However, too often the book centers the critiques while shearing them of their significance. Indigenous, environmental, anti-capitalist, and autonomist critiques of the progressive cycle find their way into the text, but an elaboration of their politics and theoretical presuppositions unfortunately does not.

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A Progressive Analysis of Veterans and Veterans Affairs

BETSY ZUCKER

"If you can't afford to take care of your veterans, then don't go to war."

SEN. BERNIE SANDERS, SEPT 15, 2019

CONGRESS PASSED A BILL MASSIVELY expanding eligibility for disability compensation and health care benefits to veterans in August of 2022.¹

This bill was to address those whose health was harmed by burn pit fumes and other toxins while serving abroad. Soldiers had complained for years about health problems caused by these types of noxious fumes, but until recently, the vast majority of their claims had been rejected. This isn't a small problem: over 3 million veterans may have been exposed since 1990.

It took years of activism, with veterans camping out on the U.S. Capitol steps and the eventual involvement of comedian Jon Stewart before the "Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022" (PACT) was passed, allocating billions of dollars, including an aptly named "Cost of

War Toxic Exposures Fund (TEF)."²

How and why did millions of veterans get exposed to dangerous toxins, leading to potentially serious health problems? To understand this, read *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs*, a brilliant new book by authors Suzanne Gordon, Steve Early, and Jasper Craven. They write, "(t)he disconnect between

Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs

SUZANNE GORDON, STEVE EARLY, AND JASPER CRAVEN
Duke University Press, 2022

patriotic celebration of veterans and how returning soldiers are actually treated has a long history in the United States." (2) You'll learn that the burn pit exposures are just the latest in a devastating litany of environmental and other workplace hazards experienced by service members.

The authors bring extensive research, a strong progressive analysis, and powerful advocacy to this expansive review of veterans' issues. Gordon is a senior policy analyst with the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute (VHPI); Early's expertise includes labor and workplace issues; and Craven is an investigative journalist who also serves on the VHPI with Gordon.

Our Veterans uncovers the dangers to which service members may be exposed

BETSY ZUCKER spent fifteen years as a nurse practitioner at the VA. She's a labor and health care activist, and a board member of Portland Jobs with Justice. Her experience serving veterans has made her a big fan of VA health care as a model for the transformation of American health care, and a strong advocate for veterans.

during their enlistment, the difficulties they experience after discharge, and the corporations which line up to profit from them. The book also covers other important topics, among them: the implications of the all-volunteer army, and its changing demographics; the outsized role of military contractors; the military-industrial complex and its revolving door in Washington; the politics of veterans' advocacy organizations, old and new; veterans as politicians; the high quality of VA health care; and the privatization and outsourcing pressures now impacting the VA. It's an engaging read.

With the ending of the military draft in the United States in 1973 and the increasing outsourcing of military functions to contractors, fewer Americans have friends, neighbors, or family members who are serving—or are themselves veterans; yet there are over 16 million veterans, and increasing numbers of post-9/11 veterans have service-connected disabilities and depend on VA benefits.

Soldiers as Workers in A Toxic Workplace

Significantly, the authors view soldiers as workers, and evaluate their working conditions through an occupational health and safety lens. The public often thinks of veterans' injuries as the unavoidable dangers of combat. Sometimes that's the case. However, in a chapter titled "A Toxic Workplace," we learn that although the military is an inherently dangerous industry, many of the health problems which follow soldiers home might have been prevented or mitigated with reasonable workplace protections.

A case in point is the burn pits. For decades, the armed services and military contractors on bases abroad chose massive burn pits for waste disposal, rather than safer methods. They burned everything from tires to computer equipment to medi-

cal waste and more, often using jet fuel, a known carcinogen, as an accelerant. Service members' complaints about the harmful effects of toxic fumes were ignored. With the passage of the PACT Act, Congress has finally recognized the enormity of toxic burn pit exposures, and acknowledged the health problems they cause.

These dangerous fumes would probably never have been allowed in U.S. civilian settings. In the United States, there are at least nominal OSHA and EPA guidelines in place and a company risks penalties for illegal emissions and dangerous conditions. If a civilian worker is lucky, their job may even have a union contract and a way to fight an unsafe workplace. And ultimately, even without a union contract, if a job is lousy or overtly unsafe, a person can often walk away. That's not the case for soldiers. Refusing a job assignment near burn pits is not possible and complaining to the boss is useless.

Lifelong health problems have followed veterans home from other dangerous exposures as well: Agent Orange; various Gulf War exposures; depleted uranium; radiation; and more. Sometimes, dangerous exposures even happen stateside, such as long-standing water contamination at North Carolina's Camp Lejeune. In most cases, it has taken years of advocacy for Congress to acknowledge these serious health consequences, and compensate veterans. Disability coverage for Vietnam vets affected by Agent Orange for instance didn't start until 1985, years after their exposures.³

Service members also experience other kinds of injuries, and *Our Veterans* offers numerous examples of injuries exacerbated by inadequate safety equipment. "Hearing problems (hearing loss or tinnitus)...are the most prevalent service-connected disability among veterans,"⁴ yet the gear which soldiers use is often inadequate to protect

them from these lifelong disabilities. Similarly, poor quality helmets put soldiers at increased risk of traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) from IED blasts.

Depression, anxiety, and PTSD occur frequently among post 9/11 service members. *Our Veterans* cites a 2021 study that “four times as many men and women who have served in the US military have died by suicide than were killed in post 9/11 wars.” (51-52) Stresses from frequent deployments, bullying, chronic pain, physical exhaustion, combat, and high rates of sexual harassment, and military sexual trauma (MST) all put service members at risk; as does a military culture in which these stressors are all too common, and in which soldiers avoid asking for help or expressing vulnerability. The bottom line is, yes, the military is inherently more dangerous than civilian life, but many of the disabilities which follow veterans home might have been prevented if their health and safety were prioritized. And their disabilities, caused during military service, become the VA’s responsibility after they are discharged.

The Transition from Service Members to Veterans: Who Profits?

It is well understood that private contractors profit enormously by furnishing supplies and services to the Department of Defense. Less well known is the fact that private corporations also profit from public funds dedicated to veterans services, sometimes with little accountability. Corporations profit from GI bill tuition payments, hiring subsidies, and health care services. For example, GI bill tuition payments are a cash cow for for-profit schools, an industry rife with “fraud, waste and deception” compared with public and non-profit schools and universities. In recent years, for-profit schools have received nearly 40 percent of total GI Bill tuition payments, while often

providing little of value. (89) And health care corporations are increasingly positioning themselves to provide veterans services for a pretty penny.

Unlike the situation for officers or career military members, it’s not uncommon for working-class enlistees to discharge with few transferable skills, regardless of what recruiters promised. Some large corporations, including Amazon and Walmart, like to wrap themselves in the flag, touting their recruitment of veterans—even when the jobs they offer may not provide a real living wage or path to a viable career. These companies can claim a federal tax credit for each veteran they hire,⁵ profiting with public funds, and likely helping themselves and their bottom line more than the veterans. (99)

On the other hand, federal employment with the U.S. Postal Service or the VA does offer veteran preference in initial hiring, and a career pathway: civil service positions and union membership, with decent wages, benefits, and protections. The U.S. Postal Service even offers credit for military service when veterans are hired.

Who Takes Care of Veterans? And Why is the VA, a Model Healthcare System, Being Threatened by Piecemeal Privatization?

In an irony not lost on the authors, the always-fully-funded DoD bears no ongoing responsibility for veterans, either administratively or financially. This responsibility is punted to the VA. Due to changing guidelines established by Congress, not all veterans are eligible for VA health care. However, veterans with service-related disabilities are eligible for VA care, and an astonishing 41 percent of post-9/11 veterans have lifelong service-related disabilities.

As the largest integrated health care system in the nation, the VA provides publicly funded, comprehensive, coordinated

health care by salaried clinicians: socialized medicine, in other words. It is a mission-driven, rather than profit-driven public health system, in which approximately 30 percent of employees are themselves veterans. Staff are civil servants, largely union-represented, and their unions often join with veterans groups to advocate for veterans' issues. Although it is often a surprise to the public, the VA provides excellent health care, a finding confirmed in numerous independent studies⁶ and described at length in Gordon's previous works, including *Wounds of War: How the VA Delivers Health, Healing, and Hope to the Nation's Veterans* (2018) and *The Battle for Veterans' Healthcare: Dispatches from the Frontlines of Policy Making and Patient Care* (2017).

Yet, the VA health care system is seriously threatened by incremental privatization, a threat which has been increasing since the passage of the VA MISSION Act in 2018. Persistent understaffing is rampant, and becomes the rationale for increased outsourcing of care to private providers. There are now over 75,000 vacancies nationwide, and a recent survey of VA employees⁷ reports that 96 percent feel that their facility needs more frontline clinical staff, and 77 percent say there are vacant positions for which no recruitment is occurring.

As VA outsourcing increases, federal funding for veterans care is diverted to private providers (a familiar scenario), cost and fragmentation of care increases, and there is less public accountability for the quality or timeliness of care. The coordinated system is hollowed out. And with the influx of veterans expected with the passage of PACT, there likely will be even more pressure on the VA to outsource care.

The authors of *Our Veterans* mention yet another possible reason contributing

to the persistent understaffing of the VA, and remind us why it is so important to challenge that process, whether or not we are veterans:

As Paul Sullivan, a Gulf War combat veteran and former deputy secretary of the California Department of Veterans Affairs, points out, "The forces against quality healthcare for all Americans know that a fully funded and staffed VHA would set a shining example for the national healthcare they bitterly oppose." (17)

Our Veterans illustrates the dangerous impact of the U.S.'s massive military on many service members. It also shines a light on the many ways in which corporate greed and privatization are encroaching on our public resources, including the resources to robustly support our veterans when they come home.

NOTES

1. Jessica Dean and Ali Zaslav, "Senate passes long-sought bill to help veterans affected by burn pits," CNN, August 2, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/02/politics/senate-vote-burn-pits/index.html>
2. "FACT SHEET: President Biden's Budget Honors Our Nation's Sacred Commitment to Veterans and Military Families," March 9, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2023/03/09/fact-sheet-president-bidens-budget-honors-our-nations-sacred-commitment-to-veterans-and-military-families/>
3. "VA Begins Paying Benefits for New Agent Orange Claims," November 1, 2010. <https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-begins-paying-benefits-for-new-agent-orange-claims/>
4. https://www.research.va.gov/pubs/docs/va_factsheets/HearingLoss.pdf.
5. <https://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/vocrehab/WorkOpportunityTax-Credit.pdf>.
6. https://www.veteranspolicy.org/_files/ugd/23193b_37a804e421c746afaf34b515a66dc0bd.pdf
7. https://www.afge.org/globalassets/documents/generalreports/2023/03/vhpireport_v2.pdf

CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



Tecumseh, Shawnee leader and warrior born around 1768 in what is now Ohio, traveled widely to unite tribes in a confederacy against White expansion into tribal lands west to the Mississippi. Tecumseh's enemy, General and future US President William Henry Harrison, called Tecumseh, "one of those uncommon geniuses which spring up occasionally to...overturn the established order of things." This was the largest multi-tribal confederation formed in America, and might have resulted in an independent Indian state. White treaties with individual tribes, destruction of tribal cultures, the unstoppable flood of white settlers, and constant warfare undermined the confederation. Tecumseh committed his warriors to the side of the British in the War of 1812, and was killed in battle. The confederation collapsed with his death.

"We gave them forest-clad mountains and valleys full of game, and in return what did they give our warriors and our women? Rum, trinkets, and a grave."

"Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the clouds, and the great sea, as well as the earth? Did not the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?"

"A single twig breaks, but the bundle of twigs is strong."

"Someday I will embrace our brother tribes and draw them into a bundle and together we will win our country back from the whites."

"The whites have driven us from the sea to the lakes. We can go no further ... unless every tribe unanimously combines to give a check to the ambition and avarice of the whites they will soon conquer us apart and disunited, and we will be driven from our country and scattered as autumn leaves before the wind."

"I would not then come to Governor Harrison to ask him to tear up the treaty, and to obliterate the landmark, but I would say to him, 'Sir, you have the liberty to return to your own country.'"

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