

# NewPolitics

*An Independent Socialist Journal*

Vol. XX No. 1

Summer 2024

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Reflections of a Student Organizer ■ Aristotle Wu

On the Student Barricades ■ Mathew Foresta

The University Struggle to Unlearn Zionism ■ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

The Abuse of “Antisemitism” Accusations in Germany ■ Udi Raz

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*An Independent Socialist Journal*

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# From the Editors

FOR MONTHS NOW WE, LIKE MANY people around the world, have been horrified and infuriated by Israel's genocidal war on Gaza and the U.S. government's support for it. Many in American society have condemned the Biden administration for its refusal to cut off support for Israel. At the same time, we welcome the fact that Washington—for its own imperial reasons—has continued to supply arms to Ukraine as its people defend their national sovereignty from Russian imperialist aggression, even though the situation for Ukraine remains grim. The contradiction between Biden's support for one people fighting for its freedom and his contribution to the oppression of another could cost him the election.

Unless Biden leaves the race in light of his disastrous performance in the June 27, 2024, debate with Trump, that election will pit Joe Biden against Donald Trump. The former is the embodiment of the Democratic political establishment, and the latter is an authoritarian populist now completely dominating the Republican Party. The GOP has embraced Trump's far-right, quasi-fascist agenda, and his plans to revamp the government in ways that aim to destroy such democracy as we have, and to harm working people, women, immigrants, and racial, sexual, and ethnic minorities. The left candidates—Jill Stein of the Greens and Cornel West of the Justice for All Party—have put forward traditional left platforms; however, concerning international matters, Stein claims Washington and NATO “provoked” Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine, and both Stein and West call on

Ukraine to stop fighting Russian occupation. A third left candidate, Claudia De la Cruz, represents the Party for Socialism and Liberation, a group we consider sectarian. The PSL's version of “socialism” is that of the former USSR and China.

This is a year of many significant elections across the world—in France, the UK, India, Iran, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and South Africa, to name a few. Facing a decaying neoliberalism and the far-right menace, a left alternative is struggling to gain traction anywhere. The situation in France looked particularly dicey after Macron suddenly dissolved parliament and called a snap election. But the New Popular Front—with a platform of redistribution and international solidarity—roused and unified the left, won the most seats, beat Macron, and pushed the far right into third place.

Many issues are being contested in the electoral arena, in the courts, and in the streets. We have been buoyed by the recent strikes and organizing campaigns of the United Auto Workers. There have been more strikes than at any time since 2000, with 458,000 workers walking off the job for a better contract from auto plants to Hollywood studios; from colleges and schools to hospitals and clinics. The 2022 Supreme Court ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*, ending federal protection for abortion, revitalized the reproductive rights movement, both on the ground and in polling places in both red and blue states. And in the face of an intransigent political system, all across the country students have stood up for a ceasefire and the end of complicity with Israel's brutal

war on Palestinians.

Thus, in this issue we feature a section on the movement supporting Palestine, with emphasis on student activists. Aristotle Wu offers an organizer's perspective on the campus encampments and Mathew Foresta provides reportage from the front lines. Ariella Aisha Azoulay offers a critique of how universities are implicated in Zionism, and Udi Raz discusses the misuse of antisemitism accusations in Germany.

Our domestic coverage begins with a symposium on the election. Rebecca Gordon and Natalia Tylim take contending positions, and several *New Politics* editors offer their personal views on how the Left ought to relate to this presidential election.

The loss of *Roe v. Wade* has by no means meant the end of the struggle for reproductive rights, and Marian Jones addresses the many grassroots efforts that are being pursued. Justin Akers Chacón and John Washington present two views on the question of immigration and borders, a topic again being used to manipulate electoral outcomes. These issues along with LGBTQ rights are part of a larger concern with cultural issues, taken up in an essay by Daniel Johnson.

Our analysis of international issues showcases a symposium on labor struggles in China. The contributions were online panels organized by Chinese activists and American socialists. After an introduction on the needed solidarity with labor struggles in China from the vantage point of principled socialist internationalism, the texts look at the general conditions of Chinese workers—how they are organized, repressed, and how they fight back; the particular situation of women workers; a case study of the relation between the Taiwanese-owned giant Foxconn and the U.S. labor movement; an examination of the relationship between China's surveillance state and Israel's repression of Palestinians; and finally a conversation between labor activists on how

solidarity can be realized between the U.S. and Chinese labor movements.

Two other articles focus on international topics. John Feffer writes "In Defense of Ukraine's Right to Self-Defense," addressing some of the most common talking points of Ukraine's opponents. And Dan La Botz analyzes the recent Mexican election, exploring the implications of the victory of Claudia Sheinbaum.

Two important issues of left theory are taken up in this issue. Dan Davison looks at how socialists have related to elections and Michael Löwy explores the relation between Marxism and the climate crisis. Three review essays also address theoretical issues. William Keach analyzes Mark Steven's, *Class War: A Literary History*. Lilia D. Monzó and Cristal B. Flores examine Peter Hudis's new edition of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Tom Wetzel asks us to contemplate "A Planned Economy with No Central Planning Authority," in a review of Robin Hahnel's *Democratic Economic Planning*.

Two other reviews take up timely topics. David Renton discusses Ben Burley and Shene Lorber's guide to fighting antisemitism. And Wayne Price looks at Rachel Maddow's *Prequel*, a history of American fascism.

We end with a poem by Sam Friedman on Moral Rot, a fitting description of our current reality.

We live in very fraught times. Whatever happens in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Lebanon, Argentina, Haiti, the Congo, and Myanmar, and in the U.S. election in November, we must continue to stand up for the victims of atrocity and aggression. We must continue to defend and build organizations with a vision opposed to exploitation and oppression and for freedom and justice. This includes efforts to support the development of a political party for the exploited, the oppressed, and all those who struggle for an anti-capitalist future.

# Reflections of a Student Organizer

ARISTOTLE WU

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**New Politics:** *Why don't you begin by introducing yourself?*

**Aristotle Wu:** I am a socialist student and labor activist based in California. I was a participant in one of the University of California Gaza solidarity encampments, but most of my energy was spent coordinating with other comrades engaged in this work—many of them from YDSA [Young Democratic Socialists of America] and some from SJP [Students for Justice in Palestine]—synthesizing experiences, lessons, and challenges, and figuring out how to tackle them together.

**NP:** *How would you characterize the pro-Palestine movement as a whole? How big was it? How deep was it? What was its organization like? Who participated in it?*

**AW:** This movement, I would say, is responsible for the deepest radicalization of young people that I've seen in my lifetime. People, including both newly radicalized students and more experienced activists, are developing their ideas, commitments, and skills very rapidly.

Some examples of this are that people who were not already politicized around Palestine have been forced to re-examine the world, prompted especially by the intense repression. They have been compelled to ask why liberal, supposedly democratic

institutions, are going to such great lengths to clamp down on free speech and suppress the pro-Palestine movement. From there, it's a short distance to understanding the material interests that are at play, namely, the Zionist lobby, the imperial interests of the U.S. ruling class, and the involvement of the donors who stand behind each school's regents or board of trustees.

For more experienced activists, this is the most dynamic and ideologically broad movement a lot of us have participated in. Sure we might have had experience organizing in places like YDSA, SJP, or JVP [Jewish Voice for Peace]. But this is the first movement or context in which all these groups have been brought together. We are working with people from all different sorts of political backgrounds, which makes democracy and collective decision-making extremely challenging, but much more rewarding.

It's important not to overstate the politicization of this movement. The U.S. student movement is still very much reformulating itself. Some analyses of the movement, and even propaganda from the movement itself, have likened this moment to 1968. It's true that we are linked to the brave struggles of that year through our solidaristic, anti-imperialist spirit, but in terms of experience, organization, and politicization we are much closer to 1960.

By that I mean, it's still the case that very few people in society and on our campuses have experience taking collective action. But, at the same time, we have ma-

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ARISTOTLE WU is the pseudonym of a student organizer with the Gaza solidarity encampments. He was interviewed by New Politics in mid-June.

tured compared to the student movement from, say, a decade ago. Over the past eight years there have been significant political transformations in our scene that have equipped people with meaningful organizational experiences to draw upon. For example, the Bernie Sanders presidential campaigns or the mass strikes by educators and healthcare workers at the end of the last decade, Black Lives Matter protests, and student-worker union organizing or labor solidarity work.

While there is a significant repository of organizational experience to draw on, there are a lot of novelties too. Many tactics this movement has deployed are new for this generation of activists, as well as the fact that even if you have labor or electoral organizing experience, those contexts differ in some really important ways from the rhythm and logic of protest movements. The organizing fundamentals may be the same in terms of how we should think about moving people closer to our politics. But the tactics and other aspects are different. For example: student protests don't have definitive deadlines or election dates; it's not always clear who your next target should be, what makes sense to raise as an intermediate demand, or who exactly falls into your constituency. Unions, more or less, have a defined membership that does not come with ideological criteria. The student movement, however, is organizing on an ideological basis.

What the novelty of the situation has meant more generally is growing pains around building a democratic movement culture that enables the broadest possible engagement and also ample opportunities for participants to develop into leaders in their own right. Overall, this has been a very new and rewarding organizational experience for people. The most meaningful thing is that this movement has provided us a real context to grapple with how to build a

strong movement for Palestine.

To say a little bit about the organization of the movement: this movement seems pretty decentralized at every level—again reflecting the relative inexperience of the student movement. There are so many different organizations participating. And those organizations themselves are decentralized and extremely heterogeneous. For example, some national organizations have very impressive social media accounts with great agitational materials. But I don't get the sense that those national organizations and accounts are able to influence the political life of groups on the ground.

Groups' politics also differ by region, and even within the same region people at different levels of the organization have different experiences and orientations. For example, the leadership of a local group could believe in a certain set of politics, but a lot of the people that are joining these groups right now, who are flooding into organizations like SJP, JVP, or PYM [Palestinian Youth Movement], which are seen as the premier organizations of the movement, are very ideologically open, can be politicized in many different directions, and are ready to get involved and make all sorts of contributions. There are a lot of contradictions to grapple with.

The decentralization of the movement has implications for the leadership and the culture of each encampment, which are contingent upon factors like where the encampment is, the organizational ecosystem of the campus, the historical relationships (or lack thereof) between different organizations. The history of student mobilization also shapes the administrative response. For example, the University of California colleges have been a laboratory of administrative counter-organizing given their administrations' experience with student protest these past few decades. So we've witnessed the UCs adopt a more tactful ap-



proach compared to many East Coast schools, in my opinion. Many of the encampments are led by local SJP chapters as members of broader divest coalitions with many groups based around Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, or anti-Zionist identity. There is significant variation in their politics depending on the location.

As for the principal goals of the movement, the stated demands of each encampment are pretty uniform. It's usually some combination of calling on the university administration to end its political and economic support for Israel, demanding an end to the genocide, upholding free speech, and amnesty for students who have been retaliated against for exercising their First Amendment rights. But if we get more fine-grained about it, I think the organizational goals, strategy, and power analysis of each encampment are pretty different, and they are not always shared across the camp, though most camps have achieved some degree of practical unity. The lack of shared analysis and strategy in most camps reflect the lack of opportunities for democratic deliberation and collective decision making. There are factors that make that challenging—namely, security concerns, such as accidentally tipping off the administration and inviting retaliation, which has devastating consequences as we've seen. So it's not like we should condemn these movements because of that. But greater democracy is clearly a necessity for building up a more



Photo by Mathew Foresta

unified and ultimately powerful movement.

**NP:** *Let's back up one second. We were talking about the student pro-Palestine movement, but that is in and of itself a subset of the broader pro-Palestine movement, so maybe it would be useful for you to say a few words about how they relate.*

**AW:** Yeah, I'm happy to. As you said, the encampments are a subset of a larger movement. And one thing that's really great about this movement is that it is self-conscious of that relationship, the fact that students alone cannot carry this movement to its logical conclusion. One dimension of our impact, as the student movement, is that we've been able to catalyze other sectors of campus and society into motion. For example, in the University of California system, we've seen UAW 4811 take historic strike action around Palestine—in many ways a response to the retaliation against the student encampments that some union members participated in.

There are a lot of tricky questions bound up with the strike, but the major takeaway is that the labor movement has immense structural power that we need to tap into—in higher ed as well as the many

other sectors directly implicated in this genocide. The process of revitalizing and politicizing the other sectors will require a longer process of carrying out the rank-and-file strategy. We also need to develop a collective strategy between the labor movement and other social movements and win political representation for these movements. That will take even more work to realize, but it's important to keep it in mind as a North Star.

As for the politics of the larger movement—of which I think the recent People's Conference for Palestine in Detroit was a decent microcosm—there is a plurality of beliefs and tactics in the movement. Since October 7, for example, we've seen street mobilizations, block-the-boat efforts, boycotts, battles in the media, the uncommitted campaign, student encampments, and direct action targeting individual politicians. Various political differences exist within the movement, but there is also a level of practical unity or openness to the plurality of perspectives. How deep this commitment runs is hard to say. What is clear, however, is that the student movement benefits from the wider pro-Palestine ecosystem and that the success of the student struggle (and any other struggle happening under the banner of Palestine) is ultimately going to be dependent on developing shared goals and an overarching strategy.

**NP:** *What would you say are the strengths of the movement?*

**AW:** This movement seems much more mature compared to previous protest movements, and I think that has a lot to do with the political transformations I cited before, including Black Lives Matter, the Bernie campaigns, the strike waves, and an uptick in labor militancy. In contrast with the dominant politics or tendencies of previous protest movements, the encampment movement has raised clear, communicable

demands. Second, it has militant direct-action tactics and fewer examples of ultra-leftist acts of desperation, though more of these kinds of actions surfaced as the end of the semester drew near and camps struggled to build strategic unity and a culture of democratic deliberation. I think a further positive is the movement's instinct to forge relationships with labor and community groups, although the extent to which we've been able to do external outreach and coordinate our actions is another question.

Another impressive feature of the movement is how disciplined and clear-eyed people have been around charges of antisemitism. It helps that anti-Zionist Jews are core participants and leaders of many of the camps. The messaging has also been extremely clear and consistent: There is no Jewish liberation without Palestinian liberation. Safety and democracy cannot be secured when there is genocide, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid. Unfortunately, the capitalist media is able to drown out a lot of these perspectives. But the good thing is that the camps are not giving the capitalist media or our opponents a lot of ammo to slander us with.

**NP:** *What would you consider to be some of the weaknesses?*

**AW:** There are a host of challenges. Some, I think, are less the fault of the movement and more a reflection of structural constraints we're under. For example, left ties to the labor movement have been further decimated under neoliberalism. We're largely disconnected from the radical traditions of the past, which means we did not inherit as much as we could have by way of mentorship, institutional memory, and the like.

The overarching challenge of the movement, I think, has been the lack of democracy. I think this is less motivated by hardcore sectarianism—although there are

some instances of that—than by the need for security. Security concerns are entirely legitimate, but there has to be a better way of dealing with them. This concern around security culture has motivated some to adopt practices like having no open meetings or going by three different code names (which is a security issue in itself). It has also led to a tyranny of structurelessness, autonomous and isolated working groups in many places and a shortage of tactics that help people develop a sense of how the movement is doing and grow their leadership. In the absence of these opportunities, different theories of change proliferate in the camps, and splinter groups escalate without the buy-in of the majority.

There are many obstacles to building an effective democracy, such as people moving in and out of the camps, students joining the movement at different stages, people having to work jobs during voting meetings, and whatnot. But we need to find a way to build this effective democracy, because it is the condition of addressing most other challenges our movement faces.

Another dynamic is that because this is such a new experience — a lot of us haven't built occupations before — we are very consumed by basic organizational questions like, "How do I keep my camp running on a day-to-day basis? Is someone doing the training tomorrow? Do we have enough food? We need new batteries for our megaphone." At least when we were in the thick of the upsurge, we didn't have enough time to address larger political questions around strategy and political direction.

As we get more experience building and sustaining occupations it will be really important to begin tackling these issues because our movement hasn't won a social majority yet. In many cases, the camps didn't grow much beyond the first couple of days or week. We need to figure out ways to saturate the campus and deal with our op-

ponents. What are the political messaging and tactics that will help us grow? What administrative pushback can we anticipate? How should we deal with that? How much power do we need to win, and how much power do we have right now? How do we escalate on our terms?

We shouldn't assume that just because the movement is highly visible that people will naturally gravitate toward it and get involved. We're organizers. We know that some people have to be convinced. Some people might be supportive, but don't understand why they specifically need to get involved or how to get involved. It's our job to go meet them, using a mix of creative and traditional tactics like dorm canvassing, class announcements, flyering, tabling, holding events with cultural groups, etc.

Other methodological challenges were also in the mix. As I said before, this is such an ideologically broad movement. Most of us have some experience doing democracy within our own organizations where we talk to people who, more or less, share a political perspective. But all of a sudden, this movement took off, and now we're in a swamp of organizations. How do you get people on the same page? How do you facilitate effective meetings that are not just hours of people doing vibe checks? How do you work with others with different political backgrounds to develop and socialize a strategy?

Some historical problems that have plagued the left have also plagued this movement: namely, the lack of political representation. We have a handful of individual tribunes for the movement, especially Representative Rashida Tlaib, but they're not connected to a broader party organization. One implication of that is that our movement is going to be on the defensive, oftentimes fighting Democratic mayors, as opposed to having representatives in the state that are agitating and using their

platforms to grow the movement.

On the question of how to relate to the state, there is not much consensus. One contingent believes that we should refrain from engaging because they believe that being associated with politicians is more of a liability than an opportunity and that the contradictions inherent in electoral work are too difficult to surmount. Meanwhile, others come from the Uncommitted voters movement, for example, or believe that Rashida's platform provides us significant opportunities to broadcast our message and grow our movement. There are various other positions.

Yet another challenge that we've faced is how to approach negotiations. And again, this issue, like every other one, is intimately connected to the question of democracy. When administrations say that they're willing to negotiate, most are not doing so in good faith. Oftentimes, their goal is to back students into a corner, to bring them into back rooms to figure out how to demobilize them, to channel their energy off the streets into the legal realm where things are really confusing and where the administration gets to shape the terms of the discussion.

Of course, we know that the response to administrative maneuvering has to be democratic mass action, keeping up the pressure, and developing a collective strategy, so that when we negotiate with them, we can do it more on our terms instead of theirs. But unfortunately, the infrastructure necessary to win potent concessions and empowering deals isn't robust enough in many of the encampments.

I know of some examples of open bargaining, namely, at San Francisco State University and some other places, that have been really effective. Historically, open bargaining has been a practice and demand of some of the most powerful (democratic) labor unions. The idea behind open bargaining is that every member of the

movement and also the community should be engaged in the bargaining process, not because it's morally good but because it is strategic for building power. Open bargaining is conducted by (a) allowing people to witness negotiations and (b) crucially, having meetings beforehand to collectively determine negotiating strategy, calling caucus meetings in the middle of negotiations if the administration does something unanticipated or there is a big fork in the road that the movement needs to collectively decide on, and also debriefing after negotiations.

Letting people see negotiations is important not only because seeing the recalcitrance and hypocrisy of the administration is incredibly radicalizing, but also because it puts rank-and-file movement builders in a position to critically reflect on how negotiations are going and how to continue building power. (It's hard to think of next steps and a better strategy when you don't have basic info about how the movement is doing and how the administration is responding.)

Having caucus meetings before and during negotiations builds unity between leaders and the ranks about what the strategy is. This is important in at least three ways: (1) Leaders cover their asses because they are acting on a democratic mandate. Right now many camps don't have this practice, so there is very little clarity about what the non-negotiable demands or red lines are. Sometimes negotiators make blunders or decisions that people think are unacceptable. Disagreements then become personalized and the movement turns on itself as opposed to the administration. (2) When you're in a closed room with just a few people, it's easier to feel the pressure of the administration and make rushed decisions. In open bargaining you can read the room, the expressions and sentiments of your comrades. This is a very impor-

tant corrective. (3) Because the strategy is democratically determined beforehand and everyone is brought in to anticipate administrative maneuvering, the negotiators are empowered to recognize the administration's moves and they know when to put their foot down and when it might be acceptable to compromise.

Open bargaining, democratically elected leadership, and clear ways to get more involved and have more political ownership over the movement are not very common. To be clear—democracy isn't a set of rules or tactics. So camps that don't have these practices are not necessarily virulently anti-democratic. The point is that we need to figure out how to build a democratic movement culture that is informed by security concerns and aware of the different experiences and assumptions that different people and organizations bring to the movement, among other factors. As the old slogan from the labor movement goes, "democracy is power."

**NP:** *Do you think that at this point the movement has won the message battle with the broader public? We know that the public now supports a ceasefire. But where does the movement stand in the eyes not just of the people on campus but of the public? Or have the Zionist forces succeeded in winning greater support for their political goals?*

**AW:** That's a good question. I don't have a definitive answer or much of a data-driven analysis. It is a shame that most institutions built around Jewish identity in American society have thoroughly Zionist politics, and there is little space for anything else. For that reason, as well as the size and reach of the Zionist lobby, I'd be reluctant to say that we've come anywhere close to winning the battle of ideas.

But have there been major advancements in the consciousness of ordinary people around Palestine? Totally. Again, it's

hard for me to say because I am so steeped in this movement and the broader left. Mostly what I have is anecdotal evidence. First, it seems extremely difficult for socially conscious, curious college students—at least in certain parts of the country—to avoid sympathetic coverage of the Palestinian struggle, especially on social media. That may not be true of the broader U.S. public. I know of quite a few examples of parents who have voted blue their entire lives, who previously thought that their vote was too precious to waste on a third party or abstaining, but after seeing their kids participating in the camps and getting brutalized by the police, their views have completely changed.

All sorts of people are looking for new frameworks and ideas to help them make sense of what is happening around Palestine. Whether or not they adopt a more anti-Zionist, left perspective is contingent on a couple things, in particular how connected they are to participants in this struggle—whether they be student campers, left political commentators and journalists, or whoever can help them sift through all the conflicting ideas and extract the core historical and political lessons. It's a matter of organization.

**NP:** *You mentioned that the negotiation of agreements sometimes led to demobilization of the movement, but it seems hard to imagine that the movement wouldn't demobilize as the school year ended.*

**AW:** Yes, the end of the semester has been a huge hit to our momentum—though in some ways a necessary one since people can't mobilize forever—and a lot of our interventions have felt like too little too late. During the summer, people have other plans—they're traveling, working, taking a break—so it puts the kind of consistent and invigorating organizing that is only possible in-person out of our reach. It's a race



against time to make sure that the people who were activated during the encampments don't scatter to the winds. With the upsurge in the rearview mirror at this point, this next phase of the student movement is largely about consolidating—cohering the most promising committed activists, synthesizing our experiences and lessons from struggle, learning from our mistakes, and preparing to hit the ground running in the fall. The larger pro-Palestine movement that the encampments have been a part of is finding ways to keep up the pressure through the summer as well.

One problem that became clear as the end of semester drew near was the lack of a shared power analysis. We did not know or agree about how much power our movement had, how much power the administration and the state had, and what to do next.

I think one natural instinct was to see the end of semester as a definitive deadline for us to win our demands. So, for a lot of people, the thinking was to escalate and encourage some kind of final confrontation with the administration, even though we didn't have the forces necessary to win. Many camps had dwindling numbers of people willing to risk arrest. When the cops came, the encampments got swept, people were jailed, and they ended the year demoralized and burnt out.

It's really important that we develop a sense of our power and what's necessary to win because this analysis conditions both our long-range strategy and short-term tactics. Is divestment plausibly on the horizon for us? If not, how do we have a strong show of force at the end of the semester that doesn't compromise our ability to keep growing in the future, especially when things start back up in the fall? How do we create more of a buffer against repression? It's even more difficult to answer these questions when there aren't regular, open meetings and different layers of the

movement working together to develop a collective strategy.

Many participants have also brought up the need to reconsider our tactics for the fall. The encampment tactic seems exhausted in many people's eyes, although there are exceptions in some local contexts.

**NP:** *What was the police repression of the movement and why was it so violent? And how did the students react?*

**AW:** Yes, the repression was intense, disproportionate, heinous, and impossible to construe as anything other than warfare. I can give some examples. Hundreds and hundreds of police, descended on Columbia and City College the night they were simultaneously raided and swept away. At UCLA, a Zionist mob attacked the camp for hours, throwing fireworks at the tents, tearing down barricades, shining lasers in people's eyes, while the cops stood idly by watching. At Emerson, the university had to call in sanitation workers to hose the blood of students off the walls and floors.

I've never seen anything like this before, and what's even more striking is that students have been completely unwavering and resilient in the face of it. Students have risked their degrees, their jobs, and their futures, and won't fully recover from the consequences. But the choice to stand up for Gaza, in view of the consequences, was made willingly. This past week we saw Columbia students start the third encampment on their campus despite suffering the most intense crackdown this movement has faced. The enduring conviction and courage of the student movement is immensely inspiring.

In terms of what the repression reveals, it demonstrates what we knew all along. That is, the institutions that are supposedly for us are not actually accountable to us as students, faculty, workers, the general public, or voters. They are accountable to

the board of trustees and the broader ruling class. When you look up who sits on these boards of trustees, you find a rogues gallery of super-villains. I was talking with a comrade who pointed out that a lot of repression was being carried out under the auspices of a more diverse ruling class with the backing of Democratic Asian and Black mayors in Boston, Atlanta, and New York City. The ruling class may have a new face, but the violence is the same. It speaks to the absolute bankruptcy of neoliberal identity politics that props up people like Barack Obama as the solution to a crisis. But people are increasingly recognizing that this is a crisis of capitalism, of imperialism.

As for why the repression has been so intense, this is a really important question to ask. We've seen divergent responses from administrations. The responses have ranged from negotiations to really hardline repression to radio silence in the hopes that the movement would fizzle out. In some cases, it's been a blend of these tactics. And one thing I noticed—I could be wrong, this is very impressionistic and anecdotal—is that the violence was initially concentrated on the East Coast. I was reading articles and exposés saying sections of the ruling class coordinated to smother the Columbia camp and make an example out of them. I think that's true. That's where the movement first began, and New York City, in many ways, is the political capital of the United States, where so many political disputes and class struggles take place and where the left is most concentrated. So that may contribute to why we saw immense repression there and then.

Other developments are relevant as well. For example, in the California State University—CSU—system, we've seen real concrete victories and really potent concessions around divestment—not complete divestment in most cases, but very significant partial divestment—and that

raises a lot of questions. I attend a large university system, as some other people do, such as SUNY and CUNY in New York. We haven't seen campus-level negotiations advance the divestment struggle in the same way they have at the CSU's. Campus level administration will often say that they are powerless to change the university's financial practices, which is true in some cases. This allows them to feign sympathy for our struggle and say things like "It's not my place to decide how our investments work. That's the statewide board of regents' job."

And so it's really peculiar why we've been able to see such advanced victories at a few of the CSU schools. Some camps are very well organized and coordinated with campus labor. But there are probably many political factors at play in addition to the organizational ones that our movement's rhetoric and messaging centers on. My sneaking suspicion is that these victories are less a reflection of the overwhelming power of students and workers than the distance certain administrations, boards of trustees, and other donors have from the companies we're targeting for divestment. This is just a hypothesis. Our movement should do more research into this and develop institutional support for corporate research.

**NP:** *Earlier you mentioned the recent Detroit Conference. Tell us a little about that.*

**AW:** Sure. The Palestinian Youth Movement with other groups and sponsors organized the People's Conference for Palestine, held in Detroit from May 24 to 26. Detroit has a very large Arab and Muslim population and is home to some of the most important Palestinian activists in the country. About 3,500 people attended the conference, including a large contingent from the student encampments.

While I didn't attend myself, I gathered reports from activists who were there. It was a much-needed gathering that reflected

the ideological breadth of the movement. Some participants said that it was not the best forum for strategic debate and discussion. This is not surprising given that our opponents were definitely there listening in. Plus, it was the first gathering of its kind, with so many different activists, priorities, and experiences to juggle. It's hard to organize an experience that leaves people feeling the unity, as opposed to the disunity of the movement. If this conference was not the most conducive to debate and discussion, hopefully it has created a foothold for these things in the future. And in many respects, it has. Participants were able to connect with other comrades who they can reach out to strategize and work with after the conference.

Because the conference had such an ideologically diverse audience (the composition of the conference leadership and planners being less clear to me), there were a lot of perceived differences, as you would expect. Some people noted a very strong Islamist current that they themselves might not have agreed with. There were also, as I said before, very different instincts around electoral politics. One concrete initiative emerging out of this conference is a campaign against Maersk, the Danish shipping company.

**NP:** *Where do you see the movement going, and what would be your recommendations? What strategy do you recommend for the future?*

**AW:** Well, the campus upsurge is largely over. It is over for most people, except for maybe one or two holdouts where the college uses the quarter system and thus the semester is still going on and people are in finals right now. So the phase of the movement we're in is different from what it was before. It's not about building these occupations anymore. It's about consolidating the gains of the upsurge—making sure that the activists we met through this process stick

with it, processing our experiences and developing a shared sense of which lessons to take away, committing those lessons to institutional memory, and preparing for the next upsurge.

It's hard to say what will come next because the movement is so decentralized. But I think that there's a good appetite to continue organizing in the fall, and that the form the organizing takes will vary much more from school to school as compared with the uniformity of tactics we saw this past semester. Earlier I mentioned various challenges that were common to most of the camps. I think it's important to start tackling those questions before we start prefiguring a strategy.

**NP:** *It seems that Biden is desperate to get a ceasefire before the election, and maybe before the convention. To be sure, the ceasefire will not be a solution that we think is adequate. But if there is some sort of ceasefire in place in September, what impact do you see that having on the resurgence or diminishing of the activism?*

**AW:** My sense is that virtually everyone in the movement believes we need to go far beyond a ceasefire. But the broader layer of people watching us and those who are newly radicalizing might not be on the same page. Our movement hasn't formally discussed what to do. I'm sure different organizations and groups of activists have considered what to do next, but on the whole, there is no consensus around what the next demand should be, which slogans to advance, and which tactics to deploy. It's important that we create more opportunities in, as well as between, organizations to discuss these questions, so that we're not caught off guard and can make the case to people that more is necessary, and we have an inspiring plan to grow. Otherwise, the momentum will decrease or be channeled in a million different directions.



# On the Student Barricades

*The Frontlines of Campus Resistance to Genocide*

MATHEW FORESTA

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IN THIS TIME OF GENOCIDE THERE IS resistance. Not only in Gaza and the West Bank, whose people have never stopped fighting for their liberation, but across the world. From Germany to Mexico the cry of “free Palestine” echoes in defiance of those bent on conquest, vengeance, and atrocity. In the United States, where a seemingly endless supply of money is pumped into the malevolent heart of the Israeli death machine, the vanguard of defiance is the young.

For months there have been marches, petitions, lobbying, and direct actions. This spring saw the tents go up and the barricades erected. The encampments on U.S. campuses represent a strong rebuke of horrors being perpetrated on the other side of the world and the apathy and widespread institutional complicity that enables it. Militant, well-organized, and righteous, this movement pulsates with booming demands: disclosure of institutional investments, divestment from those aiding in the slaughter, and ceasefire.

Disclose, divest, ceasefire now.

Across the encampments the students

and their supporters have been maligned, mocked, and subjected to the violence of both the state and Zionist hoodlums. Their movement persists, unwilling, unable to fade away as those in Gaza face the onslaught. The iron ties of solidarity are unbroken. To understand this movement and moment we must go back. Not to October 7, where the ignorant or malevolent want you to believe this began, but to the true historical roots of the conflict. Those lie deep in Herzl’s idea of disappearing the native Palestinian population, Balfour, the Nakba, the Naksa, and Israel’s uplifting of Hamas. More recently the occupation, expanding illegal settlements, the transformation of Gaza into an “open-air concentration camp,” and the violent suppression of mostly peaceful attempts at change like the Great March of Return all contributed to creating the current genocide.

The student movement knows this, and they will not abide it. They stand in a proud tradition of activism perhaps best compared to the struggle against South African apartheid. A critical piece of that effort was the demand that various entities divest from the apartheid regime. The current pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement has sought to emulate this enormous success despite ferocious pushback that includes statewide bans or penalties in over three dozen states.

It was at Columbia University in

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*Photo of UCLA protest camp by Mathew Foresta*

New York City that the first encampment sprouted up. Proclaiming themselves in solidarity with Gaza and joining in with the existing voices calling for divestment the students demanded a ceasefire and an end to the university's financial complicity. This came soon after university presidents like former Harvard leader Claudine Gay were being hauled before bad-faith Congressional hearings and humiliated before finding themselves out of a job. The students' first attempt at an encampment was torn down by a large number of police who had been called to the campus for the first time since 1968. Days later Columbia president Minouche Shafik was being grilled before Congress. Questions included one from Georgia representative Rick Allen who asked if she wanted "Columbia to be cursed by God." She demurely replied that she did not. It was during this buffoonery that Columbia students rebuilt. CNN revealed that the students tried to negotiate with the university in good faith, even offering concessions, but the powers-that-be would have none of it. A bombshell report from *The Washington Post* shows billionaires exerted extraordinary pressure on New York mayor Eric Adams, Shafik, and Columbia's Board of Trustees to end the encampment. Student negotiators ended talks after what

they claim were threats of the National Guard being called in.

Counter-protesters were constantly gathering outside the university's gates. The mainstream media, having largely fired, reassigned, silenced, or suppressed reporters who showed any concern for Palestinians, pumped out hyped-up stories of protester antisemitism. Strange, given that Jews were an integral part of

the encampment and even held a seder there.

After negotiations broke down student leaders were suspended. In some cases they were given mere minutes to pack up their belongings and leave. The day after these sentences were handed down a group of demonstrators took over and occupied Hamilton Hall—which they renamed Hind's Hall (in memory of Hind Rajab, a six-year-old Palestinian girl killed by Israeli tanks)—recalling actions taken by both anti-Vietnam War and anti-Apartheid activists. The NYPD moved in with force, sending in armed officers with one even "accidentally" discharging his weapon. While a few mistakes were made by the Columbia students, the response was horrifying. The encampment was cleared with all the brutality one has come to expect from American police. Protesters were hit, thrown down stairs, and the cops took down the Palestinian flag in a manner reminiscent of a conquering army.

By the time the encampment was torn down the fires of resistance had already spread across the globe: the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Berlin Free University, Britain's Cambridge, the University of Tokyo, and U.S. campuses

from Georgia to Oregon. Everywhere the students stood up, and in many places they faced what all those who fight for justice face, the iron boot of the state. In Missouri an older professor was slammed to the ground, breaking several of his bones. The University of Texas saw a crackdown so harsh even local camera crews were assaulted by the authorities. At Atlanta's Emory University the police raked students with pepper balls. One young Black woman was held down by large white officers and Tazed. Representative Mike Collins (R, GA) tweeted, "Not sure what y'all are doing up North, but we don't give them the time to encamp. Tazers set to stun!" He was not the only national figure to call for aggression against protesters. Echoing his 2020 calls for a violent crackdown on Black Lives Matter, Senator Tom Cotton (R, AR) implied drivers stuck behind demonstrators blocking traffic should meet them with violence. Senate candidate Steve Garvey referred to demonstrators as "terrorists." Echoing now suspended Israeli heritage minister Amichai Eliyahu, Representative Tim Walberg (R, MI) suggested the Israelis should use nuclear weapons on Gaza.

It was into this milieu that I stepped toward the encampments. A friend in Los Angeles leftist circles asked me to look into the mendacity of Pomona College after they sicced the police on a nonviolent student sit-in. The lies and shady practices of campus figures there are something I will be detailing in another article. Pomona's encampment was situated atop a small mound near the corner of campus. During my interviews, I found many dedicated students with the same demands as those at Columbia. Like their comrades in New York, disclosure, divestment, and a ceasefire were at the top of the list. Often lo-

cal demands also became incorporated. Columbia students, for example, wanted the university to remediate gentrification in Harlem. In the Los Angeles area student protesters are demanding that universities cut ties with the police.

An often-spat piece of slander is that students and those in solidarity with them are ignorant, unable to even name the "sea" and "river" from the famed protest chant. This is not what I found. Many in the encampments spoke to me on condition of anonymity. This is partly because they very wisely distrust a media that has treated them contemptuously. It's also based on a well-founded fear of doxxing. In the fall many Zionist groups acquired trucks with video screens to drive around campuses displaying the names of pro-Palestine students and accusing them of antisemitism. At a February College Council meeting for the Claremont Colleges, of which Pomona College is a member, minutes show one student said "I've done some stuff I'm not proud of. I am responsible by proxy for doxxing students. I was deceived by the Hillel director. There have been 5C [five colleges] alumni taking pictures of 5C students at SJP rallies to be doxxed. There was a video and I was asked to identify the people in it."

One Jewish encampment representative



*Photo of UCLA protest camp by Mathew Foresta*



*Photo of UCLA protest camp by Mathew Foresta*

I spoke with related their experience traveling to the West Bank, and the profound impact of witnessing the situation there. In discussing the long history of Jews in the region and October 7<sup>th</sup> I was told something I think will stick with me for the rest of my life: one atrocity does not justify another.

When I went to the University of Southern California, the situation was surprisingly calm. The campus had just been through a jarring series of events. The recently named Valedictorian, Asna Tabassum, had her speech canceled when pro-Israel students dug through her social media and found she had reposted a slideshow that called for the abolition of Israel and for a decolonized state with rights for both Arabs and Jews. The campus claimed the cancellation was done in the name of security. In the wake of this, the newly formed USC student encampment was raided by police in a very public and violent manner.

No one was supposed to be allowed on the USC campus, but I managed to find my way past an indifferent guard to reach a courtyard where students and their supporters were sitting on the grass, listening to speeches, and holding signs. It was sunny; uninvolved students calmly walked by

or posed in their gowns for photos in anticipation of the upcoming graduation. You'd hardly think this had been the scene of a violent police crackdown.

"There's definitely a real desire of universities to quash any activism in general that doesn't align with their interests, and especially pro-Palestinian

activism. USC has shown they're not hesitant to escalate and call LAPD riot police on their students," said a Jewish representative of the encampment who works with JVP. "The values that underscore our demands are disclose, defend, and divest."

Later, I saw Mark Rayant and his friend Nathan Maryamian standing right next to the protest. Maryamian was wearing a kippah with the symbol of the Israeli Defense Forces on it. The demonstrators were placidly ignoring them. I had heard many claims that Jewish students were deathly afraid of these protests and made to feel threatened. Yet, here were young men right at the source of that supposed fear with one wearing the symbol of the military they know these protesters oppose, and they were safe and sound.

My conversation with them was a strange one. I heard arguments that would be repeated by the Zionists I would meet over the coming days. They questioned the well-established number of Palestinian casualties while claiming it wasn't about numbers. They said people had made statements like "gas the Jews," something I never heard or saw. Rayant said he had been in



fight over his identity. When I asked the Jewish representative of the encampment if this rang true she told me it didn't match her experiences.

Rayant told me of his time in Israel working with Palestinian friends to make prosthetics for both of their people. He told me he had protested Netanyahu's judicial reforms and that he was heartbroken over the death he was witnessing. Still he always absolved Israel of any blame. He seemed far more concerned with the state's reputation than with the lives of the people it was killing, for which he placed all blame on Hamas. He called Tabassum "divisive," and called her repost hateful in spite of its regard for Jewish rights. He claimed calls for Israel's destruction were a threat to him, a statement that would be repeated again and again in criticisms of chants like "from the river to the sea," and "intifada" when to my eyes these are a call for a restoration of Palestinian rights and a civil uprising. Violent resistance, with proper regard for civilian life, I remind you, is permitted under international law. Rayant showed me something that day: the bankruptcy of Liberal Zionism. At its core it's linked with the reactionaries in their defense of the status quo, and their valuing of the state over the lives of the innocent.

The center of Los Angeles organizing had fast become UCLA, my old school. The encampment was between Powell Library and Royce Hall. When I first walked around, the signs hung on the barricades expressed solidarity from Filipino, Polish, Mexican, Chinese, and Transgender people. I met many kind and considerate people there. In the days to come I interviewed a representative. He told me their focus was on stopping genocide. He emphasized the goals of divestment and disclosure, and had no regard for UCLA president Gene Block's claim that it was not in his control.

"When you see a movement like this,

such a human movement, it's impossible not to be inspired," he told me. "Disruption is power. You have to change the status quo to change what you need to change."

He said they were cognizant that the protests were having an impact. "We will not stop until the school divests its money from profiting from genocide."

One student I met made clear that even in a one-state solution they wanted Jews and Palestinians to have equal rights. Another young man there told me he had lost dozens of family members in Gaza. He said only two remained alive. People spoke proudly of videos showing Palestinian children thanking the demonstrators, glad those in Gaza knew they weren't forgotten. The mood that first night was defiant but peaceful. Those of us who were there will always recall the chant: "Peaceful protest, peaceful protest." This would be shouted even when the cops came and ended the encampment.

Unfortunately, agitators soon showed up, and the situation deteriorated.

The counter-protesters were aggressive from the start. Dean Golan Cohen, a student from a neighboring college, would go on a disgracefully inaccurate episode of Dr. Phil to claim he had been persecuted and made to fear the encampment despite a video posted online showing him aggressively challenging protesters to fight. This kind of aggression was not unusual. Nouri Mehdizadeh, who would later be spotted attacking the encampment with his brother, Matin, violently shoved a woman into a tent and walked up to her as if to punch her after she yanked his sign out of his hands. When I tried to speak with him and a group of his buddies one night in an effort to try and calm down the tense atmosphere, I was called a faggot—an especially offensive slur given my bisexual identity. Some pro-Israel folks claimed this behavior was provoked by slurs from pro-Palestine pro-

testers, which I never heard or saw. None of their fellow Zionists ever reproached them for this behavior. I constantly heard disgusting things from them. One called a woman in a hijab a whore and said she should go stand on a street corner known for its sex workers. He told one protester he was only here “because Trump’s not in office.” After hours of this, one protester did throw an inappropriate insult back at him, for which he was immediately reproached by another pro-Palestine demonstrator. One night a bag of rats was released near the encampment. Cars parked, put on their high beams, and blared their horns to keep demonstrators from sleeping. They came for conflict from day one.

Zionist counter-demonstrators constantly challenged the pro-Palestine demonstrators to fights. Pro-boxer David Kaminsky did so while spitting and shouting the n-word at a large counter-protest where Israeli-American Council CEO and former Trump administration official Elan Carr spoke of taking back the nation’s campuses. This demonstration’s financiers included Jerry Seinfeld’s wife, Jessica, wealthy local Zionists, and powerful pro-Israel groups like the ADL. Scuffles occurred, and all kinds of hurtful insults flew. The pro-Israel crowd waved bananas at demonstrators to mock one pro-Palestine protester’s food allergy. Death and rape were wished on those standing in solidarity with the Palestinians.

It was at this action that I met a young woman who gave her name as Billy Salmon. She was proudly waving her Syrian Opposition flag. She said the encampments are a mighty tool in the struggle for Palestinian freedom, and that there’s a big connection between their fight and that of Syrians against Assad.

“I have a free Syria flag because my family is Syrian, and we’ve supported Palestine and the freedom of Palestine since the nineties,” she said.

Over the various nights I became increasingly alarmed that violence was becoming more likely. I tried to have rational conversations with some on the pro-Israel side, seeking de-escalation. To my anger and dismay, some of these same people would end up resorting to violence a few nights later. One conversation sticks out in my mind. A young man wearing an IDF flag as a cape was disturbingly blunt. He told me the price of Israeli security was the denial of Palestinian freedom.

Before it even went this far the hypocrisy and bigotry of the Zionists was obvious. Counter-protesters would claim to feel deeply afraid of the demonstrators yet push into them and get right in their faces. One woman, who cravenly declined to put her name to her hatred, shouted “Where’s Palestine?” to imply it does not exist as a nation or people. When I interviewed her, she claimed the West Bank was “Judea and Samaria” and implied it fully belonged to Israel. Statements and signs like this were not uncommon. It strikes me that this is part and parcel of genocide, to deny a group’s existence.

The media coverage was abysmal. Bad actors falsely claimed they were prevented from going into the library or classes because they were Jewish. In fact, the barricades were moved up and cut off the front doors of these buildings in response to constant threats and harassment from agitators. Jewish people were always in the encampment, playing pivotal roles and holding a seder just as at Columbia. Back and side doors were open until the campus shut them down. Any non-supporter or suspected agitator was barred from the encampment, no one because they were Jewish. The campus was wide open and Jews were never banned, and it was always a mere minute or two detour to walk around the encampment. Still, unethical actors made claims of bigotry that flew across

gullible news outlets, telegram channels, and social media. Rage grew, hatred was inflamed, and it culminated in the attack.

I arrived a few minutes after it started. Demonstrators had already carried a wounded girl away from the center of the mayhem. Enraged counter-protesters, masked up and with melee weapons at the ready, taunted the encampment. I tried to walk among them to document their actions. Lasers and flashing lights were pointed at me, taunts yelled. I could taste violence in the air. I tried to document with my phone, and when I did a firework sailed over my head and into the encampment exploding with a sickening boom. Screams, laughs from the counter-protesters. They were playing the sounds of crying children on a loudspeaker and a song reportedly used to torture Gazan prisoners.

I knew I couldn't stand by and watch this; we were all in grave danger. I'm a human being first and a reporter second. I soon put my press badge in my pocket, went into the encampment, and quickly hid my camera. I resolved to help the demonstrators protect themselves from the onslaught.

The fireworks knocked out and burned people. One demonstrator had her hand shattered by a hammer. People were beaten with sticks. A local Zionist high school student, Edan On, was seen dancing about in a white purge-style mask and assaulting people, an action his mother would later applaud on Facebook. One man was caught outside the barricades and severely beaten. I watched him walking back to safety in the encampment, head bandaged and blood running down his face. The image is



*Photo of UCLA protest camp by Mathew Foresta*

burned into my memory, as are the images of other wounded encampment members laid out on the grass by Royce Hall like a battlefield hospital, most hit with bear spray. Boards and full water bottles sailed over the barricade. A man next to me was hit in the back of the head. I was lucky, though a large traffic cone did hit me in the face. It felt like a hard punch, but I was no worse for wear. Fearing for my life if the barricades were breached, I shoved a piece of scrap metal in my belt, determined not to go down without a fight. Many did the same, though I and seemingly most others did not in the end find need of it.

Despite all of this, the teamwork and courage I saw from the demonstrators was inspiring. Medics, the unsung heroes of that night, helped take the wounded away from the site of combat for treatment. People held up the barricades despite repeated Zionist attempts to rip them down. People passed out food and water as the hours dragged on. When boards were lost to the Zionists, new ones were taken from the scaffolding around Powell to replace them. When large Zionists threatened the flanks, big protesters met them prepared with pipes and sticks in hand. One Zionist grabbed a metal barricade wielding it as if he would



throw it into them. He didn't find the stones to do it. While the Zionists mostly attacked as individuals the demonstrators largely coordinated as a group, plugged holes in the defenses, and listened to calm and precise directions from leadership.

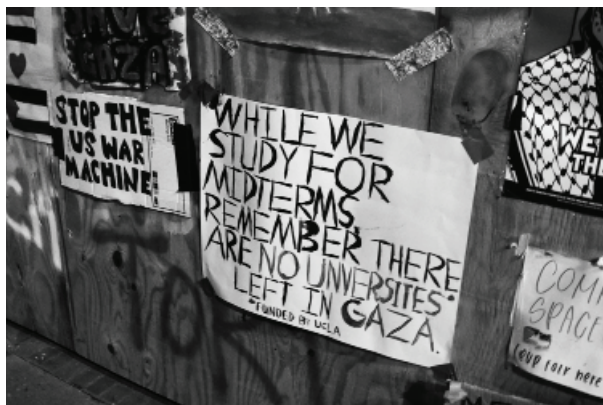
It was this courage, coordination, and care for others that ultimately carried the day. After hours of inaction the police finally moved in and the Zionists retreated. No arrests were made that night.

The Zionists never came through. They didn't take a damn inch and even the hostile media rightly covered them with mostly contempt in the aftermath. They failed.

The next day the police raided and destroyed the encampment. They couldn't protect the students and their supporters from a Zionist lynch mob, but they could break up a mostly peaceful protest no problem. It's just as we say in leftist circles, "we protect us."

The students held out for hours that night. Barricades reinforced and arms linked, they remained until early morning. At one point a police breach of the back of the encampment was pushed back by a wall of protesters and shields—an amazing sight I had never before seen. A non-lethal gun was pointed right at me from point blank range. As flashbangs exploded overhead the police fired potentially deadly rubber bullets into the crowd. Near the end, one officer took the large Palestinian flag in the middle of the encampment and threw it to the ground. Around 200 would go on to be arrested that night. When it was over and many of those remaining were pushed out the back, one demonstrator got on a bullhorn and the chants started.

"It's not over."



*Photo of UCLA protest camp by Mathew Foresta*

"It's not over."

And it is not. Currently successful efforts are underway to identify and hold Zionist attackers accountable. Protests continue despite more police repression exemplified by a mass arrest of demonstrators and clearly marked journalists in a parking garage. Recently, another attempt to rebuild the encampment resulted in one young woman being pulled screaming into a police line just for chanting into a bullhorn. While there has been the occasional misstep or misbehavior from those demonstrating for Palestinian freedom here, it has been far outdone by the violence of the police and pro-Israel goons. Encampments remain in place on other campuses. UCLA's students will continue the struggle even if by other means.

For the genocide continues as Israel attacks Rafah and their destructive yet incompetent army is bogged down by resistance in previously "cleared" areas. The people of Gaza, though suffering, have not been pushed from the land. The students and their supporters see this, and will not stop until these unconquerable people, children of the land, its cities and villages, its deserts and waters and olive trees, are safe and enjoy a just freedom in their homeland. From the Jordan to the Mediterranean. From the river to the sea.

# The University Struggle to Unlearn Zionism

*An Interview with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay*

*Ariella Aïsha Azoulay is a filmmaker, curator, and Professor of Comparative Literature and Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Her books include Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism (Verso, 2019); Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography (Verso, 2012); From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947–1950 (Pluto Press, 2011); and co-authored with Adi Ophir, The One State Condition: Occupation and Democracy between the Sea and the River (Stanford, 2012). Interviewer Linda Xheza writes on photography and immigration at the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam.*

**Linda Xheza:** *In your book Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism you trace the foundations of institutions such as the museum, the practice of photography, and human rights in imperialism. These days I am reading Maya Wind's book Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom (Verso, 2024) in which she demonstrates how Israeli universities are complicit in the oppression of Palestinians. I think it is important to extend the discussion of imperial institutions you consider in your work and ask you about the complicity of Western academic institutions in relation to imperialism. What are your thoughts on the role of the latter in the legitimization of the state of Israel and the dehumanization of Palestinians?*

**Ariella Aïsha Azoulay:** Our universities are part of these other imperial institutions (archives or museums) I'm talking about in *Potential History*. They were formed to normalize imperial plunder of all sorts: material, intellectual, spiritual, cosmic, and moral. Similarly to museums and archives, their *raison d'être* is to divert us from the truth of the colossal imperial plunder that has been part of the world destruction enterprise. These are sites of temptations that attract people with a certain promise of knowledge about the world, while obviously omitting that this knowledge and this world are those imperialism shaped. They acquired this status and power through the destruction of other forms of education and transmission, and thus arrived to impose themselves globally as a key for mobility within this world. The imperial nature is not only of the institution—it is also of many of the disciplines taught within it. The discipline of history is a paradigmatic case since it was fashioned to produce knowledge and narratives that bury what imperial violence destroys and proclaims over.

Palestine, May 1948, is a telling example. The Zionists were in the midst of their attempt to seize Palestine, destroy it, deport its people (by May only half of the total of 750,000 Palestinian expellees had been driven out), and proclaim the establishment of the state of Israel on its ruins. How did historians and the discipline of history

respond to this catastrophe? They started to provide historical narratives in which Israel figured as a given, a sovereign power capable of proclaiming a state and erasing another while neither exists or occurs only in the language. While the Zionists needed a few more years to expel the majority of Palestinians and to achieve on the ground this split reality where they are situated “within” Palestine-turned-into-Israel and thus turning the expellees into “infiltrators” threatening the new state’s sovereignty, for historians this was already *a fait accompli*. They rushed to describe a split hierarchical reality where Zionists were recognized as legally inhabiting “their” country and their actions as part of law and order, while Palestinians, expelled from their country, were depicted as intruders and a threat, identified with the categories that the international organizations of the “New World Order” crafted for people like them. The Zionist narrative of the destruction of Palestine, was invented as a story of liberation of the Jewish people. After the Holocaust this story served the New World Order that the newly founded United Nations heralded. In November 1947, the UN provided the legal basis for this split history in the form of the partition resolution, issued against the majority of Palestine’s population. This resolution, followed by Zionist violence to conquer Palestine, was enough for historians to transfer Palestine to “the past” and relate to Palestinians as the enemies of the citizens of the newly declared state.

Historians’ addiction to documents is toxic. It is also contagious since in a world imperially fabricated, their narratives enjoy a symbolic power coming from their knowledge of imperial facts (written in these documents) and their “right” order in time and space. Documents-based history assists in defeating those formations, forms of life, and aspirations that imperialism seeks to destroy. Historians are trained to relate to

imperial proclamations as manifestations of truth that they amplify and disseminate as obligatory scaffolding for any historical narrative. *Potential History* is the rejection of this orchestrated attack on common *just truths*.

What are those just truths of 1948 sacrificed by history? (a) Palestine was in the process of being destroyed and this destruction could still be stopped and opposed and justice reclaimed. The leaders of Western countries, however, who had interests in the success of the Zionist narrative, supported the continuation of destruction (like we see today in Gaza) until the majority of Palestinians were expelled from their country (a process that took several years) and the invention of a Jewish state in Palestine seemed normal. (b) Many Jewish **survivors** of the European genocidal attack against them were forced to become part of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine (given the lack of other viable options for them as Europe and the United States closed their gates) and to accept a bargain of reconciliation with Europe, which instead of letting them rebuild their communities in Europe, “gave” them a state of their own in Palestine that was not theirs to give. (c) Diverse Jews were forced to leave their worlds behind and embrace the European relation to Arabs and Muslims as enemies, while it was not the Arabs and Muslims who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust—but rather Europeans. This new enmity was achieved quite instantly once the Zionists destroyed Palestine and proclaimed the establishment of Israel against them and their will, including against the will of the Jews who were part of the Jewish Muslim world for centuries. (d) The destruction of the millennia-old Jewish Muslim world in the Middle East and North Africa, forcing the Jews to be incorporated into the myth of a Judeo-Christian tradition invented for them as part of Europe’s absolution of

its crimes.

**L.X.:** *Many university administrators around the world have decided to act against their own students and staff, often resulting in the latter being brutally attacked by the police. What are your thoughts about this?*

**A.A.A.:** I propose to look at what is going on *in* and *against* our universities as a three-pronged movement: (a) against the genocide and the entanglement of our universities in it; (b) against the failure of our universities to fulfill their role in an imaginary contract with certain segments of society that recognize them as sites of knowledge production and actually enables their existence (more than the donors!); (c) against the expansion of a class of administrators whose job is to implement a condition of thoughtlessness in the daily life of the university. I borrow the term *thoughtlessness* from Hannah Arendt, to describe the way the managerial framework that administrators imposed over the years under the umbrella term “reforms” limits the ways students, faculty, and staff can think, ask questions, account for the world, and act and interact with each other and with others. That we are punished for doing what we assume ought to be the heart of our academic work—thinking, i.e., asking what is going on in Gaza and naming it genocide, interacting with the truth-tellers of Gaza, asking questions about the involvement of our universities in the genocide—exemplifies this. Arendt developed this term in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to describe the failure of the capacity to think with and through others and to grasp the meaning of what one is doing through the ways it impacts others. Thoughtlessness is a direct effect of a world imperially shaped, where instead of acting and interacting with others who also act, people are trained and expected to operate technologies and abstain from thinking with others. What

is being marketed today as the advanced technology of AI, where machines think for us, is something that we have been already experiencing for decades through the expansion of this class of administrators whose form of governmentality leaves less and less room for thinking, and thinking through others, without which resistance is eroded and the world becomes destroyed. This condition of thoughtlessness in our universities became even clearer as from the beginning of the genocide not a single university initiated study groups or task forces dedicated to the genocide, seeking to understand the conditions that enable this horrible enterprise of violence to last for so long, to study the concerted effort to gaslight its occurrence while it unfolds in real time in front of our eyes (and not after the fact), or to disaffiliate the institution from it and express solidarity; rather, many of these universities established task forces to punish those of us who dare to think and do it with others. Calling the police into the campuses was not unprecedented or surprising, but a means to terrorize us as we were revolting against the condition of thoughtlessness and acting against the genocide and its normalization.

In this sense, I propose to relate to this movement whose major sites are the campuses as a truth-telling movement, a revolt against thoughtlessness as the condition under which a genocide unfolds in Gaza and we are being commanded to move on with business as usual, while we know that our institutions and many of their programs are funding and are funded by the genocide and contribute to it on many different levels. Hence, I find it necessary to recur to a certain imaginary contract between the society and the university in order to ground our struggle against what those who rule the university are doing and acting as if they have the right to determine what is right and what is wrong. This mass move-

ment of encampments is not (or not yet) a walkout from the university but an attempt to take seriously our role as constituencies of these imperial universities and rehearse what we believe the university should do. This movement foregrounds the cleavage or incommensurability between the commitment of the class of administrators to protect thoughtlessness and the capital these institutions accumulate through their donors, and the commitment of segments of the constituencies of the university (among students, staff, and faculty) to the truth and its telling, i.e., to anticolonial justice. This police violence exercised against the constituencies of the university when they rehearse this contract with society is thus not surprising, but inscribed in the agenda of this class of administrators. Just to make it clear—rehearsing this imaginary contract is not shared governance with administrators whose mission is to trap us under the condition of thoughtlessness—but rather rehearsing a different condition as the outcome of our power as the constituencies of the university without which they will not exist.

**L.X.:** *You have argued that the strike should not be considered as the right to protest oppression, but rather should be seen as a collective opportunity to “unlearn imperialism with and among others.” Is this what we are witnessing at the student encampments? The media often frame these encampments as pro-Palestinian camps, but according to your conception of the strike, it seems to me that what is also equally important is the refusal of the imperial world that is emerging there.*

**A.A.A.:** The biggest achievement of this movement is in its success to disrupt globally and publicly the narrative about Palestine and Israel that the Zionists and the West have imposed since 1948 by using different violent means—including through our universities—and to expose

and amplify the truth about Palestine and the genocidal nature of the Israeli regime. Calling this movement “pro-Palestinian” is a symptom of the condition of thoughtlessness where denouncing violence against one group is being depicted as being pro- this group and not against this violence and the enduring injustice that allows its perpetuation. The demands addressed to our universities to divest from Israel and from arms companies should be understood as part of the actualization of this imaginary contract with the university. If there were not such a contract many of us would not spend many years of our life there and would not try over the years to create a university-within-a-university that allows us to carry on part of what we believe is our mission. It is not surprising though that all the encampments were formed as a university-within-a-university in which people can come together to study, think, and respond to the genocide in Gaza with others, i.e., with the truth-tellers from Gaza who broadcast it daily despite the efforts to eliminate and silence them. I deliberately speak about a contract not only with us who are *in* the university, but with society in which it exists. Otherwise, we won’t see members of the society participating in the actualization of such a contract like the judge in Providence, Rhode Island, who in May found that the 41 students arrested by Brown university are not guilty. His judgment supersedes the failure of the president of the university to act as a president of a university first by commanding their arrest and then by refusing to drop the charges despite the multiple demands from students, staff, and faculty.

**L.X.:** *Last year when I taught your book Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism, some of my students thought that what you argue there is maybe “too radical,” but this year the majority of them are protesting in the streets. Do you think we are now at a historical moment where the*



*imperial shutters are being loudly and powerfully challenged and rejected—perhaps one of the very few times this has occurred to such an extent? How did the genocide of Palestinians manage to form a decolonial coalition with many of us around the world?*

**A.A.A.:** Yes, we are at this important moment when the metanarratives generated and imposed with so much violence in the late 1940s as part of the “New World Order” as a way of ending World War II are collapsing. One paradigmatic example is the truth about the nature of the Israeli regime as a genocidal one, which can no longer be hidden behind the justifications Europe provided as a way of absolving itself from its responsibility for the genocide it perpetrated against the Jews, as well as for the termination of the Jewish Muslim world in the Middle East and North Africa. The state of Israel destroyed Palestine, dispossessed Palestinians of their lands and worlds, and destroyed the diverse forms of life of Jews everywhere. This genocide in Gaza opens up the two questions that the

West invented in the nineteenth century and acted as if they could only be resolved through their fusion—the Jewish question (which should rather be described as the question of the Jews) and the question of Palestine. This fusion enabled the Nakba and the promotion of the genocidal regime of Israel as a Jewish liberation project, which is at the basis of the current genocide in Gaza. It is not a coincidence that the persecution of the growing number of anti-Zionist Jews, protesting against the genocide and against Israel, is especially expansive in France and Germany, who understand the danger of having Jews joining other colonized people in denouncing the European imperial enterprise and the monster it created in the form of the Zionist state as their compensation for the genocide. We anti-Zionist Jews, as well as others in this movement, state it out loud—we will not let any university administrator command us what we have the right to think or what we can say when we see genocide.

## CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



“As your class Valedictorian, I implore my USC classmates to think outside the box—to work towards a world where cries for equality and human dignity are not manipulated to be expressions of hatred. I challenge us to respond to ideological discomfort with dialogue and learning, not bigotry and censorship. And I urge us to see past our deepest fears and recognize the need to support justice for all people, including the Palestinian people.” —Asna Tabassum

“The annual USC graduation tradition grew complicated amid bitter division over the cancelled speech, a wave of campus Palestine protests, a school closed to outsiders for days, and an attempted encampment that led to 93 arrests.” —Los Angeles Daily News

**Asna Tabassum**, University of Southern California 2024 Valedictorian, was barred from speaking at commencement because her activism on behalf of Palestinians had created unspecified “security issues.” Above: Tabassum’s undelivered speech which she redacted and sent to the USC newspaper. She received a standing ovation at commencement after being silenced for speaking up on Palestine.



Interview with Udi Raz

# The Abuse of the “Antisemitism” Accusation in Germany

*Jews Are Deprived of Their Own Identity*

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY INTERVIEWER, BAN GE

*I often encountered Udi Raz in various Palestinian scenes in Berlin. She always wore a kippah with a watermelon pattern, which made her stand out among the numerous keffiyehs and became her distinctive mark. The watermelon pattern symbolizes Palestine because the four colors of “red, green, white, and black” happen to be the colors of the Palestinian flag. After the West Bank and Gaza were occupied by Israel, the Palestinian flag became taboo there, and people began using the watermelon pattern to represent the flag. Today, the comprehensive suppression of voices supporting Palestine in the Western world has revitalized this symbol as an expression of resistance to censorship.*

*Udi is a transgender woman and her preferred pronoun is “she.” She is a member of Jewish Voice for Just Peace in the Middle East, a German-based Jewish pro-Palestinian network. She is also one of the organizers of the Palestine Congress, originally scheduled to start in Berlin on April 12, 2024. The Palestine Congress, initiated by supporters of the Palestinian solidarity movement from around the world, was expected to last three days, with discussions about a Gaza ceasefire, Israeli violations of international law, and Germany’s complicity in the massacre. However, on the opening day, the police cut off the electricity in the conference hall and raided*

*the hall soon after. Major mainstream media in Germany had launched a smear campaign even before the opening of the congress. Mayor Kai Wegner commented on the Palestine Congress on Twitter, saying, “Berlin does not tolerate antisemitism, hatred, and incitement against Jews.”*

*Among those arrested at the congress were two Jews, including Udi. The video of her arrest was highly symbolic. Wearing a kippah, she was escorted downstairs by the police, shouting “Free Palestine” to the public. A woman behind her yelled at the police, “You are arresting a Jewish person!”*

*Since October 7, 2023, Jews in Germany have been “canceled” on charges of “antisemitism” far exceeding their proportion in the population. Today, the abuse of the term “antisemitism” has completely robbed it of its meaning. Anyone who supports Palestine or condemns the Israeli regime may be accused of “antisemitism,” while real antisemitism is shielded.*

*On the other hand, the history of the Jewish Holocaust has gradually become a taboo among groups supporting Palestine. This trauma has been continuously invoked by mainstream politics, becoming an oppressive tool and even legitimizing another massacre. Arabs, who have suffered greatly, sneer at it. Progressive Jewish groups are at a loss as to how to address*

*their hijacked collective trauma.*

*Two days after the closure of the Palestine Congress on April 14, I saw Udi at another resistance movement taking place during the same period—an occupation movement called “Occupy against Occupation” in front of the Bundestag or German parliament. This occupy movement lasted for more than three weeks and was violently evicted on April 26, 2024.*

*In this context, I interviewed Udi Raz on April 17, 2024.*

### **Jews Are the Biggest Victims of “Antisemitism” Accusations in Germany**

**Ban Ge:** *Can you introduce a bit about yourself and your organization, Jewish Voice for Just Peace?*

**Udi Raz:** I came from Israel, which some refer to as Palestine. I personally don’t mind how you name it, what matters is the power dynamics that characterize the living realities of those who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. To me it really doesn’t matter if you call it Israel or Palestine.

I am a board member of the organization Jewish Voice for Just Peace in the Middle East [I will use “Jewish Voice” to refer to the organization], which was established in 2003 in Germany, symbolically in November, as commemoration of Crystal Night, also known as Kristallnacht, the night of the Broken Glass, when the Nazis raided Jewish institutions in 1938.

Jewish Voice was created by a group of Jews based in Germany, as they understood that in the German media, reporting about the reality of those who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is very one-sided. Not only because only Jews are able to speak to claim what reality is, but also because those Jews are Zionists. Very rarely do anti-Zionist Jews have the opportunity to speak up.

Those individuals who created “Jewish Voice” decided to use the privilege that is given to us—ironically by a racial supremacist structure—in order to bring in voices that are even more marginalized than those of our own, specifically Palestinian voices.

**Ban Ge:** *Many Jews have been accused of antisemitism in Germany in recent years, especially after October 7, 2023. Can you share with us your work experience at the Jewish Museum and how you lost your job? The Jewish Museum, along with other Holocaust monuments which can be seen everywhere, constitute the landscape of memory politics in Germany. As a Jew living in Germany, how do you see the landscape of Holocaust memory?*

**Udi Raz:** The Jewish Museum is a huge project. You can spend more than a full day visiting it. For this reason, the Education Department of the museum created guided tours within it that specify certain topics that the Jewish Museum touches upon. One of those topics is Jews in Germany after 1945. This is the topic that I was specializing in when I worked for the Jewish Museum. I worked as a freelancer and the

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Why it is necessary to use categories of division rather than categories of inclusion. I am in favor of getting rid of nationalism or nationalist categories in general.

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Jewish Museum would book me whenever a group wished to visit to deal with this topic. As a Jewish individual who grew up in Israel and came to Germany, I would usually also explain the reason why I decided to come here. I would explain that the place where I came from has experienced a civil war that

is an outcome of a system that is based on injustice. I would give one example referring to the West Bank, where I would make the point that Jews who live in the West Bank are considered citizens of the State of Israel. Accordingly, they are allowed to decide who sits in the Israeli parliament. However, the Palestinian population who live in the exact same geographical area, are not citizens of Israel. Therefore, they are not allowed to decide who sits in the Israeli parliament, or who occupies them. Then I would refer specifically to a report that was published two or three years ago by Amnesty International, which came to the conclusion that this living reality is one of the many manifestations of a broader phenomenon better described as an *apartheid* system.

For the Education Department of the Jewish Museum, the fact that I used the term *apartheid* was too much. They did not care about the fact that I was talking about a given living reality. They were saying: "Yeah, you can talk about the living realities, but just don't use the term *apartheid*." I find that quite revealing, considering the fact that all human rights organizations who studied the same phenomenon came to the conclusion that Israel practices *apartheid*.

There was a big article about me in the *Bild* where they accused me of being an "Israel hater." In fact, I was socialized in a Zionist Israeli habitus. My grandparents on my mother's side migrated from Argentina to Palestine, and the parents of my father migrated from Lithuania. My grandmother survived the Holocaust under German rule in Lithuania, and my grandfather was able to flee in the last seconds to cross the border to the Soviet side where he fought for the Red Army against the Nazis. And then my grandparents found each other again after the war. But the entire family of my grandparents were murdered during the Holocaust by the atrocities of Aryan

Supremacists, namely Nazis. To call me an "Israel hater" completely neglects my own living experience and my own heritage and the fact that my family still live there.

In my opinion, the Holocaust monuments in Germany are another proof that Germany celebrates, first and foremost, Jews who are dead. These dead Jews are the most utilized subject in the public sphere in Germany nowadays, in order to create an idea of Germany as not Nazi Germany anymore. Jews who do speak up rarely have the opportunity to share from our own experiences unless we are willing to engage in the discourse of anti-Muslim racism.

### Why the Term "Aryan" Is Still Relevant

**Ban Ge:** *Then how do you see the phenomenon of "German Guilt"?*

**Udi Raz:** I don't think there is something inherently wrong with trying to come to terms with atrocities that have been committed in the past. But what I find really worrying is that those who are now in power in Germany come to terms with their genocide in the past by promoting and arming another genocide, this time against the Palestinian people.

**Ban Ge:** *You keep using the term "Aryans." Why do you think the term Aryan is still relevant today?*

**Udi Raz:** It's a category that has disappeared with the collapse of Nazi Germany. But on the other hand, the term *antisemitism* has survived until today.

My claim as a Jewish individual is that if we want to talk about antisemitism, we also need to talk about Aryan supremacy because the discourse that allows us to talk about the Nazi logic only when referring to the treatment of Jews is something that I want to call into question. Whenever Aryans accuse me of antisemitism, I remind

them of the difference between me, as a Jew, and them, as Aryans. And I point out that it is a mistake to apply the antisemitism accusation to Jews, but never to Aryans.

I was struggling for the longest time to conceptualize the difference between me and Aryans. I was told they are white Germans. Then the question is, wait, are Jews of European origin white? If I go down the street without a kippah, I pass as white, right? There is no external characteristic that would make me appear as a Jewish individual. Then again, it's the category of national context and not of racial difference. That's why for me it's very important to recall the difference between Aryans and Jews. The question is why in Germany some white people have more access to privileges than other white people who are Jews. Some people use this term *Bio-Deutsch* to refer to what I call Aryans, but for me, this *Bio-Deutsch* implies that there are Germans that are more "German" than other Germans, right? And I want to avoid that.

If the term "Aryan" is not relevant, then why are Aryans still those who are in power? If it's not relevant, how come Jews are still structurally made "other"? If it's not relevant, how come Muslims have been made a problem with the concept of Germanness? To me, the question that must be asked again and again is when there is still a very hegemonic social group in today's Germany, why does Germany claim to be de-Nazified? The point that I want to make is that if a country is designed for only one specific group to feel at home, then this group must be named.

I think it's also quite telling when it comes to the question of the representation of Jews in political decision-making in Germany, because when we look nowadays at how many self-identifying Jews are sitting in the German parliament, the answer is zero. It's important for me to underline

this because we are being excluded. We don't have direct representation within the parliament of Germany as Jews. Second, since 2018 there is a new office that is called the "Commissioner for Jewish life in Germany and the fight against antisemitism." And you find this position, this office on the federal level, on the state level, on the municipal level, and also in the executive bodies of the German state, for example, within the police and the military. More often than not, those who control this office are non-Jews. They self-identify as Christians, as Protestants, Catholic, evangelists.... And those are the people who make decisions for us on whether we are antisemitic or not. They point to us and tell us that we are antisemitic for saying that democracy should be applied to everyone who lives between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. They call us antisemites for speaking about human rights and saying that Palestinians should also enjoy human rights. They call us antisemites

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For the Education Department of the Jewish Museum, the fact that I used the term apartheid about the status of Palestinians in the West Bank was too much.

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when we speak about international law and say that international law should be applied to everyone, including the Palestinians. They call us antisemites when we call for a ceasefire.

And let's talk about the Central Council of Jews in Germany, an institution that is actually recognized by the German government. If you go to their website, you'll see that they claim to speak for all Jews

who live in Germany, claiming they are an umbrella organization of all Jewish communities in Germany. But they mean all Jewish communities in Germany that are organized around synagogues. So the Central Council of Jews in Germany does not represent all Jews, but only those Jews who understand their Jewishness as a religious identity. Secular Jews like me, for example, are completely ignored and excluded from the discourse around Jewishness in today's Germany. Quite ironically, this happens in a state that claims to be a secular state. Jewish Voice is the largest secular Jewish organization nowadays in Germany. We are accused of being dangerous for Jewishness itself, for the German nation, for humanity even. And it's quite telling that we are marked by Aryans as a problem for Germany and for Jews.

So we are talking about the representation of Jews in the Parliament, the representation of Jews in offices that are to actually generate knowledge about Jews. We are talking about who has power to decide for Jews who we are, how we should feel, how we should think, and determine who are our enemies and who are our friends.

## Confronting Antisemitism and Islamophobia

**Ban Ge:** *Germany has also been using memory politics, making Jews and Arabs enemies, for example, assuming antisemitism is merely an Arab sentiment.*

**Udi Raz:** The media often says that Arabs play a central role in the antisemitism that is being brought back to Germany. This narrative completely neglects the fact that most of the antisemites in Germany are actually Aryans. To my knowledge, more than 90 percent of the antisemitism cases that have been registered in recent years have been committed by the far right in Germany. Also, a big population of Jews

in Palestine are ethnically Arabs. The term "Semite" is a category that actually gives so much empowerment, and this is why I want to celebrate it. Arabs by definition are also Semites. I am a Semite. I have much more in common with my Palestinian sisters and brothers than I have in common with Aryans in general.

In recent years, people like me, the anti-Zionist Jews, are being marked by Aryans as antisemites. In my opinion, such an accusation is another proof that those who are in power in Germany are not interested in the protection of Jews as such, but only interested in the protection of those Jews who are also willing to reproduce anti-Muslim racism. And if we think about the anti-Muslim racism that is inherent in the nation-building process of Germany in the last few decades, we can see this phenomenon repeats again and again with different subjects.

We should keep in mind that the Nazis wanted to purify the German nation from the Jews. And indeed, they were very successful in doing so, because from a population of about half a million Jews living in Germany before the Second World War, less than 1 percent of this population actually survived the Holocaust and stayed in Germany or returned to Germany. Most of the Jewish population that used to live in Germany before the Nazis took over Germany either were systematically murdered by the Nazis or decided to leave Germany. So it's quite ridiculous now that Germany claims to come to terms with their genocidal past, not only by promoting another genocide against Muslims, against Palestinians specifically (with arms to Israel and by silencing Israel's critics), but also by explaining again why Germany should remain pure from non-Aryans, namely, from the Muslim population.

I think Germany has never been de-Nazified. It is not necessarily that all

Aryans who live in Germany also believe in Aryan supremacy. But I think most of the Aryans who live in Germany are simply not aware of how severe the situation is for non-Aryans. Because for them, our claims for basic human rights are simply matters for discussion instead of essential values.

**Ban Ge:** *Some more practical disagreements divide Palestinian movements, such as the “one-state solution” or “two-state solution” question. How do you see these issues?*

**Udi Raz:** So the main question of whether there’s to be a one-state solution or two-state solution, to my understanding, indicates to what extent some people are willing to neutralize the idea that a nation should be organized around one ethnicity. We always must ask why it is necessary to use categories of division rather than categories of inclusion. To my understanding, the one secular state solution is the queer answer to the ongoing imbalance and injustice that characterizes the living realities of people between the Jordan River and the Medi-

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It was the first time that I heard, from the perspective of Palestinians, what it was like to live in the Jewish state as a Palestinian individual.

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terranean Sea. So I personally oppose any other idea but a one secular state solution. Furthermore, I am in favor of getting rid of nationalism or nationalist categories in general. I think the Middle East is one of many examples of why nation-states are inventions that do not uphold the living realities of the actual people who live in the geographical area that is divided into nations, whatever this should mean.

## “My Queerness Opened the Door to See the Solidarity with Palestine”

**Ban Ge:** *Can you share your growing-up experience in Israel? What made you an anti-Zionist Jew?*

**Udi Raz:** I grew up in Haifa, and Haifa is known as a city where Jews and Palestinians live together. So it was never a surprise for me that the place where I’m living has more than one name. Maybe Jews would refer to this area as Israel, while the Palestinian population would refer to this area as Palestine. As I grew up, I also learned that I’m queer. Growing up in a heteronormative context, you don’t have a safe space unless you create it for yourself. So in 2007, together with other queers who live in Haifa and other teenagers, we decided to create our own safe space where we would meet once a week. We would just sit together and talk and laugh and cry—whatever teenagers do when they come to terms with their otherness and try to take care of each other. Creating such a safe space was also an invitation for non-Jewish queers to join in. It was never a question of whether one was Jewish or not; the space was intentionally defined for queer individuals. So in the city where not only Jews live, but also Palestinians, it’s not a surprise that Palestinians too joined this safe space. It was the first time in my life that I heard, from the perspective of Palestinians, what it was like to live in a state, in the state of Israel, in the Jewish state as a Palestinian individual.

I learned for the first time in my life that they are subjected to a reality completely different from mine as a Jewish person. Furthermore, I met other Jews who came from the Arab Muslim world or whose family had migrated to Palestine from the Arab Muslim world. I learned so much about the social structure of Haifa through my queerness. It was a door that opened



access to understanding the complexities of the living realities that was shaping the lives of queers.

I was forced to serve in the military, which I perceived as something that was not negotiable. It's something that I'm really ashamed of. Nevertheless, I was trained

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The question that must be asked is when there is still a very hegemonic social group in today's Germany, why does Germany claim to be de-Nazified?

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to be a pilot at first. As a child, it was always a dream of mine to become a pilot. So in a way, I was focusing more on this experience of being a pilot than on the fact that I was also a soldier. But after a year of training, I decided to end my training as a pilot because it was so demanding. You can at any point say that you don't want to continue the training and then you are basically out of the training. I was next sent to serve in the headquarters of the Air Force in Tel Aviv. I was trained to escort Air Force missions from the ground. Some of those missions involved killing people. I remember very clearly that after such missions, the officers were catered with cakes and nice food to celebrate their success. So it was a very surreal experience for me to be there. I felt very uncomfortable, and I said that I was not going to continue in this position. Again, I ended my officer training.

Back then, I was still trying to make

sense out of the reality unfolding in front of me. Shortly after I left the military, I traveled a lot to the West Bank, specifically to a village that is on the border, so to say, between "Palestine 1948" and "Palestine 1967," where the Israeli regime had built a wall, basically cutting the village population from the field that they had worked on for generations. And this became a symbolic place for the struggle against the separation wall. This was one of the first times that I actually understood how severe the situation is for Palestinians who cannot work on the land on which they live. They cannot have food. They cannot have resources. They are cut off from the main resources they had in order to sustain a community.

It took me years to finally self-identify, to fully embrace the self-identification as an anti-Zionist Jew, because I had grown up in a Zionist habitus that neutralized this idea.

I moved to Berlin in 2012, at a time when Berlin had become a city that celebrated diversity and pluralism, a hotspot for leftists from around the world, and also a queer haven. When I arrived in Berlin, for the first time in my life I met Muslim people as equal to me, specifically Arabs, Palestinians. Not only that we were equal, but we all were sharing this experience of being a minoritized group in Germany.

I found much more in common with other minoritized groups here in Germany as a Jewish person than with Aryans. Thus, my encounter with individuals from other minority groups helped me to learn or explore the different characteristics, or the different manifestations of the phenomenon that makes us minoritized groups, vis-à-vis Aryans.

## SYMPOSIUM ON THE U.S. ELECTION

The U.S. Left has long debated how to respond to elections and this year the controversy is more intense than usual. We asked two thoughtful left commentators—Rebecca Gordon and Natalia Tylim—to give their contrasting views on the November election and then we got brief personal comments from several members of the *New Politics* editorial board. Please note that these articles were completed before the June 27 Biden-Trump debate. The arguments advanced regarding Biden and the election more or less still apply if the Democrats replace him with another politically comparable candidate.

# The Lesser Evil Is Still Less Evil

REBECCA GORDON

BACK IN 1996, CALIFORNIA'S communities of color (and women in general) confronted an electoral attack in the form of a ballot proposition outlawing affirmative action programs at all levels of government in the state. Prop. 209 (originally titled, without the slightest irony, the "California Civil Rights Initiative") followed a successful Republican-led campaign for Prop. 187, which outlawed provision of any public services, including education and health, to undocumented people. Although the voters approved it, most of Prop. 187 was blatantly unconstitutional, as was quickly affirmed by the courts. Californians weren't so lucky with Prop. 209.

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Opposition to Prop. 209 was initially quite fragmented, but in 1995 several community organizations put together about \$15,000 to seed a grassroots field campaign with two goals: first, to bring out the vote in marginalized communities against the ballot initiative, and second, to help build political power in those communities. I was lucky enough to play a role in that campaign.

It was far from easy, as our young organizers and canvassers learned, to convince people to vote who were largely alienated from traditional electoral processes over which they believed they had no control, but which nevertheless profoundly affected their lives. So you can imagine that we were not happy when one of the three founding organizations chose for the cover illustration of its October news bulletin a photograph of a brick wall bearing a then-popular graffiti inscription: "If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal."

Of course, for over a century, "they"

had made voting illegal—for women until 1920, and for most African Americans in the South until 45 years later. We celebrated passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, not imagining that in 2013 a Supreme Court majority shaped by three successive Republican presidents would gut its central provisions in its 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision.

Those of us who'd grown up during the Civil Rights movement were more than a little offended at our sister organization's cavalier dismissal of a right people had died to secure. At the same time, we recognized the contradictory and imperfect realities of electoral organizing. We understood that even successful electoral campaigns could sometimes win depressingly little—as little as holding the line on an unacceptable and unjust status quo. Nineteen ninety-six was, after all, the year that congress passed Bill Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, otherwise known as “welfare reform,” the culmination of decades-long attempts to deny women of color, especially African American women, access to the New Deal-era program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. So yes, even winning an election doesn't always get you what you want, or even, as the Rolling Stones might put it, what you need.

### **Can We Afford to Vote Our Consciences?**

All of which brings me to the questions facing the left in the 2024 presidential election. Recently a bunch of folks who worked on that Prop. 209 campaign had an impromptu reunion. It was pure joy to hang out with them and remember a political struggle during which, as my partner and I like to say, we taught a generation of young people to ask, “Can you kick in a dollar to help with the campaign?” For a couple of old white lesbians who, in the words of a beloved Catherine Koetter poster, “forgot

to have children,” those still-committed organizers and activists are the closest thing to offspring we've got. And their kids, including one now in college, who were willing to hang out with their parents' old buddies, are the closest we'll ever have to grandchildren.

After catching up on personal histories, the conversation naturally turned to the state of the world: the wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan, the grinding pain on this country's border with Mexico, and of course the looming 2024 election campaign. It was then that the college student told us he wouldn't be voting for Joe Biden—and that none of his friends would either. The president's initial support of, and later far-too-tepid objections to, the genocidal horror transpiring in Gaza were simply too much for him. That Biden has managed to use his executive powers to cancel \$138 billion in student debt<sup>1</sup> didn't outweigh the repugnance he and his friends feel for the president's unfailing support of Israel's Gaza war. He was unmoved by a few performative scoldings of Netanyahu and U.S. plans to construct a floating aid pier. To vote for Biden would be like taking a knife to his conscience.

It's an understandable feeling. Just as it's understandable that exit polls suggest that 94 percent of Michigan Muslims voted “uncommitted” in February's Democratic Party primary. And that, as the *Washington Post* reported (May 20, 2024), “some Arab American donors and activists are considering not just sitting out the [general election], but working outright to elect Trump.”

Still it's ironic that in the same week that Trump sent Richard Grenell, his former ambassador to Germany and acting director of national intelligence, as an envoy to Arab-American and Muslim organizations, he also sought campaign funds from anti-Palestinian donors. The *Bulwark* says that Trump's campaign is “also ramping

up outreach to major Jewish Republican donors who have yet to contribute, like billionaires Steve Schwarzman and Paul Singer,” and that, “Trump’s ‘emissaries’ are also courting billionaire hedge fund manager Bill Ackman, who helped force the resignation of Harvard’s president for her handling of anti-Israel protests on campus.”<sup>2</sup>

There are no words for the anger I feel this year, to be confronted with a choice between two elderly candidates, one an enabler of an ongoing genocide, and another who promises that if elected, he’ll be more genocidal still. When the International Criminal Court’s chief prosecutor seeks arrest warrants for Bibi Netanyahu and his defense minister, Yoav Gallant, Biden calls it “outrageous.” Trump, on the other hand, has told the IDF that they have to “finish the problem” in Gaza, the problem being, presumably, most of the people who live there. And his ardent supporter in the Senate, Lindsey Graham, has called for nuking the territory.<sup>3</sup>

It might appear that there’s not much to choose between the two when it comes to the Middle East. And in this arena, despite Trump’s reflexive isolationism, it does seem that the post-war two-party foreign policy consensus is still holding.

Given a decision between two terrible options, I’m not surprised that people of conscience would decide to sit this election out. But I’d argue there are important reasons for people on the left to vote for Joe Biden in November. A lesser evil is still less evil, and in this case, substantially less so. I present here a few of the many reasons why I believe this is true.

### Attacks on Working People and Women

By now most readers of this article will be familiar with the Heritage Foundation’s *Mandate for Leadership*, also known as Proj-

ect 2025, a complete schema for a second Trump presidency. Mainstream media has done a pretty good job of covering plans to consolidate executive power, in part by eviscerating the civil service and replacing 50,000 competitively chosen federal employees with political appointees.

Less, however, has been written about Republican designs on working people and the unions some of us are still lucky enough to have. The *New York Times*’s Carlos Lozada did us a favor by working his way through all 887 pages of *Mandate for Leadership*.<sup>4</sup> Lacking his stamina, I recently opted for a deep dive into a single chapter, the one focused on the “Department of Labor and Related Agencies.”<sup>5</sup> Its modest 35 pages offer a plan to thoroughly dismantle more than a century of workers’ achievements in the struggle both for dignity and simple on-the-job survival.

The opening salvo of that chapter is an attack on federal measures to reduce employment discrimination based on race or sex, by eliminating “racial classifications.” In other words, the solution to the problem of discrimination in employment in Project 2025’s view is to ignore the existence of race (or sex, or sexual orientation) as factors constraining the lives of working people. It’s simple enough: if there is no race, then there’s no racial discrimination. Problem solved.

And to ensure that it remains solved, Project 2025 would prohibit the Equal Economic Opportunity Commission from collecting employment data based on race. The mere existence of such information, explains the chapter’s author, means that “data can then be used to support a charge of discrimination under a disparate impact theory. This could lead to racial quotas to remedy alleged race discrimination.” In other words, if you can’t demonstrate racial discrimination in employment (because you’re enjoined from collecting data on the subject), then there’s

no racial discrimination to remedy. Case closed (or rather, never opened).

Project 2025 follows up its attack on racial equity in employment with suggestions for dismantling many of the protections workers gained with the passage in 1938 of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established “minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and child labor standards affecting full-time and part-time workers in the private sector and in Federal, State, and local governments,” according to the Department of Labor. Under their plan, a new Trump administration would seek to replace overtime pay with personal time off (which many workers would never actually be able to use) and replace employee protections with the “independence” available to contingent gig workers, reclassified as contractors. Other proposed measures include:

- Rolling back protections against child labor.
- Amending the National Labor Relations Act to allow “Employee Involvement Organizations” to supplant unions. Such “worker-management councils” are presently forbidden, because they replace real unions that have the power to bargain for wages and working conditions with toothless pseudo-unions.
- Ending the use of “card checks,” thereby making it harder for workers to get their union certified.
- Allowing individual states to opt out of labor protections granted under the Fair Labor Standards Act and the National Labor Relations Act, essentially ending almost a century of federal protections for working people.

What about prospects for women’s lives should Trump win? Joe Biden supports abortion access. Donald Trump, by comparison, is not willing to promise he won’t support prosecuting women who terminate pregnancies.<sup>6</sup> Some of his Republican supporters have set their sights on even further encroachments on women’s humanity, advocating restrictions on access not only to

abortion, but contraception, and Trump has equivocated mightily on this issue. Some, like the GOP’s gubernatorial candidate in North Carolina, have even said they are comfortable with denying women the vote.<sup>7</sup>

## And on Democracy

As president, Donald Trump was often frustrated by legal constraints on his desire to rule by fiat. He has told the world that should he win in November he aspires to be a dictator, and not just “on the first day.” At a National Rifle Association convention in May, he floated the idea of remaining in office for a third term, and perhaps beyond.

It gets worse. Trump is ready to deploy the U.S. military against its own citizens. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, “Trump would reportedly invoke the Insurrection Act—a law that gives the president nearly unchecked powers to use the military as a domestic police force — on his first day in office, so that he could quash any public protests against him.” He has announced his intention to deport as many as 20 million people (many of whom may well be legal residents or even U.S. citizens), and to establish giant deportation camps on the U.S.–Mexico border.<sup>8</sup>

The only thing that kept Trump from doing more harm than he did during his first term was his chaotic and lazy way of working. His attention span was notoriously short, and he could be easily distracted by any shiny object. Much of his daily schedule was given over to “executive time,” an apparent euphemism for watching cable TV and responding on Twitter to whatever he saw there.<sup>9</sup> Things would be very different in a second Trump administration, one designed and implemented by the people behind Project 2025.

Recently, perhaps to reinforce my own lackluster commitment to working for Biden’s re-election, I looked back at some of what I wrote during Trump’s first (and

God willing, only) term, to remind myself just how bad it was. I was surprised to find that over those four years I'd produced almost 30 pieces about living in Trumpland.

I won't summarize that ephemera here, except to remark that I still believe some of Trump's worst crimes were epistemological—crimes, that is, against truth itself. By subjecting us all to a firehose of falsehoods,<sup>10</sup> not least about who won the 2020 election, he successfully undermined many people's confidence that it is possible to know whether something is true. His constantly shifting pronouncements, his prolific use of Orwell's brilliant invention, the memory hole, his disdain for scientific method—all this encouraged people to believe that reality is infinitely malleable. You don't like things the way you find them? Then, in the immortal words of Trump campaign manager and adviser Kellyanne Conway, just embrace "alternative facts."<sup>11</sup> This intentional distortion of reality is a classic authoritarian trick, designed to convince masses of people that, as Hannah Arendt wrote in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, nothing is true and everything is possible.

In a world on fire, we cannot afford four more years of that. This year, the lesser evil is considerably less evil.

Note: Portions of this article have appeared in different form at tomdispatch.com.

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# No Election Can Save Us

*Confronting Genocide and Creeping Fascism*

NATALIA TYLIM

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**N**O ELECTION CAN SAVE US. Call me Orthodox if you want, but it's a truism that socialists would do well to come back to. Elections—even of socialists or working-class militants—are not capable of carrying out a radical or progressive program, nor of pushing back the right wing's agenda, if not rooted and connected to a strategy of nationally coordinated action that is premised on independent class organizing.

If we want transformative change, we need socialist organizations that can contend in the political realm. Yes, this includes participating in elections, but primarily it means workers and the oppressed becoming aware of the power of their own activity and learning how to exercise it. We need to advance a strategy based on the rebuilding of independent institutions, organizations, and unions that can assert a political alternative to the interests of capital and to U.S. imperialism in order for such a left force to finally break through in the United States. Any tactics we use must be in the service of that strategy.

Elections can and are a piece of that strategy of independent self-activity and participation in mass movements and strikes, but we need to be clear what role

they play. The goal of an election should not be to win a particular seat or office, but rather to support the strength of movements and actions of the exploited and oppressed. Sometimes that means winning an election. Sometimes it means using an electoral campaign to amplify demands and help cohere more organizations as launch pads to accelerated actions. This means being prepared to withstand the pressures of electoral activity that often compel campaigns to change or tone down their demands or tactics for the sake of a more viable election. While this could help advance an individual campaign, it is poorly suited to the task of charting a way forward for independent action—let alone an independent party.

We need movements to be able to stand on their own two feet and to be in a position to shape demands and solutions, rather than deferring to elected officials to do that work for us. No politician, even ones that are committed to left causes, can change the balance of forces for us. Only struggle can do that.

There is a very particular liberal *strategy* of lesser evilism that subsumes all questions to the importance of a Democratic, in this case a Biden, presidency. The argument goes something along the lines of: Biden winning is the only thing standing in the way of democracy being replaced by fascism. This strategy narrows politics to the question of who one will vote for, and how hard they are willing to campaign in

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the electoral realm. While this sometimes translates into individual pressure—“if you don’t do this, the worse guy will win, and it will be your fault”—it is more than that. It is a politics that sees voting and participation within our limited political system as the path to standing our ground and preventing things from getting worse. It is built around active campaigning and the dedication of valuable political and human resources to supporting the Democratic Party. This means using the materials and talking points of a party that does not share our goals. It means subsuming demands and arguments to whatever will convince others to vote for Biden—to whatever it will take to win an election.

When it comes down to it, what an individual voter does in the voting booth is the least of our concerns. What we need is a frank discussion about what *strategy* the Left should advance to bring us closer to being a force that can stop the genocide, end police violence, win universal health care...among a million other demands and goals in the interests of the exploited and the oppressed. This is not a moral question, it’s a strategic one. If someone convinces you on a moral level to vote for Biden against Trump, so be it. And on the flipside, there are compelling moral arguments not to vote for Biden. I personally am not above moral persuasion. I didn’t vote for Biden in 2020. I will not vote for Genocide Joe in 2024. But let’s not confuse my individual choice with an argument for what we do and build together. Who someone votes for in 60 seconds on election day has very little to do with how we answer the question of what the Left should do and say, and how we build organizations of the Left that can do and say those things. No individual, regardless of how big their platform is, can play the social and political role that organizations can.

Maybe it feels like the distant past

now, but only eight years ago, in 2016, the question of independent socialist organization was in the air with the Sanders campaign and the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Whatever the relationship (or lack thereof) between Sanders and DSA, the experience proved disorienting, especially when the political terrain inevitably began to shift. In 2020, unlike in 2016, Sanders swiftly bowed out of the election and threw his weight behind the idea that supporting Biden’s leadership was the most important strategy to follow to prevent a second Trump term. In 2024, Sanders and the Squad waited even less time to raise the flag for Biden.

The perceived success of the Sanders phenomenon in popularizing the ideas of socialism, somehow gave way to a *strategy* within a section of the Left that insists the

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Our limited resources and  
energy need to be spent  
fostering the new labor  
networks for Palestine,  
learning the lessons from the  
encampments, developing BDS  
campaigns, and forging national  
networks.

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way to build towards socialism is through a closeness with Democratic Party campaigns. Somewhere along the way the lines got crossed and this led to political confusion and demoralization for many of those previously advocating an independent path. The pursuit of alliances at the level of party politics in the 2016 and 2020 elections cut against the goal of a strengthened independent Left and weakened the potential to collectively build something new. We

missed key opportunities that we need to honestly assess and learn from.

In 2016/2020 many argued, with excitement, that Democrats were looking to a coalition with progressive and left forces to court the youth vote. In 2024, there's no whiff of even that. Biden is pursuing a much more rightward-moving coalition, courting the never-Trump Republicans instead of the Black Lives Matter militants. This, in part, reflects the fact that while the Left missed the chance to break new ground in the previous political moment, the Right has risen to the occasion. And in this scenario, a focus on high politics as the driving strategy for the Left is not only counter to our short and long-term goals, but is also dangerous.

There is something deep and profound happening that is causing terrifying instability in the capitalist system. Liberals want things to stay the same, hold the line, defend the status quo, keep things stable. But that ship has sailed. And working-class people live the impacts of it. It is felt economically as inflation soars and more and more people are unable to pay for housing. It is felt in the backlash to the heights of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. In attacks on trans youth. In the use of police as the tool of social control and in the continued epidemic of racist murders and incarcerations. In the use of military force on the border against families escaping violence and famine in search of a livable situation. It is experienced in the home as the social reproductive burden only grows while access to bodily autonomy is under full-frontal attack. In the bans on teaching about slavery and civil rights in schools. That is the status quo and people live it. Few people's lives have gotten easier because Biden won in 2020.

It is incumbent on our side to be able to present a strategy that distinguishes itself from the liberal defense and normalization

of the system. Our lives will continue to get worse and more dangerous if the only radical alternatives on offer come from the Right (however archaic and regressive, they are radical, and they are organized). One of the frightening things about this political moment is the way the far right have positioned themselves as the anti-system forces, with the Left often appearing to be the most ardent defenders of the bureaucratized institutions of the state. Without a clear left strategy and perspective on offer, the Right at least seems to understand the assignment and grows its influence on that basis.

To be clear, this is not an argument that Biden and Trump are the same or that they represent the same danger. But if we are serious about dealing with the threat of authoritarianism, we cannot ally ourselves with these forces of the state, lest we cede the radical solutions to the crisis to the Right. We cannot afford to be silent about the dangers that also exist under a Biden presidency, or we risk being subsumed into it. Our success in staving off the worst of what Trump represents lies in our ability (or inability) to put forward an alternative explanation and vision, and most importantly to build institutions that ordinary people can join in order to fight for that vision collectively.

Whatever the specific and unique dynamics of the 2024 election cycle, and however clear the need for an independent organization, we keep coming back to the same conundrum: the choices are between two unpopular parties (and not just unpopular, but also hostile and dangerous). This goes straight to the heart of the recurring challenge of the U.S. Left. What does the Left do when every attempt to build a party that can stand for its principles—in other words, a party that is not compromised by capital—has been undermined, squashed, out-organized, or co-opted? This challenge will not be overcome this election cycle.

There are third party options, but let's not pretend that they have the capacity of overtaking the undemocratic system that we live under in 2024. What we *can* do this election cycle, is to commit to building the foundations of organizations that can become the constituent parts of future political breakthroughs. The Palestine movement shows in no uncertain terms the depth and breadth of the radicalization. How quickly the system can be named as an impediment to change—not for the first time in the last four years, but palpable still. How do we finally break free of this impasse that constrains the strategic outlook of the Left and our horizon?

It should be impossible to think about this election in the absence of a perspective around Palestine. How do you stop a genocide? This is a question that anyone with a humane bone in their body has asked themselves many times during the latest escalation of ethnic cleansing. Has a single person thought to themselves: oh, if only Biden wins again, the bloodlust and torture will end? The same Biden who has funded and defended the Israeli state's war crimes his whole career?

The whole world is watching. We are on our feet. Campus encampments have spread. Labor activists have pushed envelopes in asserting the demand for a ceasefire in a union movement that rarely takes political positions. There have been painful-to-watch self-immolations and acts of military resistance. Even as the repression rises, the resolve remains. How does this just keep going? How do we live with the shame of a world that allows an entire people to be targeted and wiped out? Bloodlines and family names erased from the world. Children starved to death, not by scarcity, but by the violence of imperial

and colonial interests.

How do you stop a genocide? And why can't moral outrage be enough? If only it were enough to put our bodies on the line. To bring highways to a halt. To sleep in tents on campuses in the face of repression and retaliation. If moral outrage were enough, Gaza would be free. But as we know, our enemies are powerful. Their actions are not incidental. And if they can't be influenced by moral compulsion, then we'll need to shut everything down. We're not organized or strong enough to do that yet, so we'll have to work backwards from that goal. If we are following a strategy that sees the need for mass disruptive, coordinated action, it is clear that—regardless of who individuals choose to vote for or not vote for on that one day in November—as a movement, campaigning for a Democrat is a poor tactic that runs counter to our goals.

Our limited resources and energy need to be spent fostering the new labor networks for Palestine, learning the lessons from the encampments, developing BDS campaigns, and forging national networks. We must assert, in no uncertain terms, that we have seen who is and is not on the side of liberation. We have seen first-hand how many months of protest it took for leading Democrats (Bernie included) to even consider a “ceasefire” and they still won't consider a permanent one. We cannot let this moment be lost to those who do not stand for what we are fighting for. We need to do what is necessary to free Palestine. What is necessary to free Palestine is intractably linked to our ability or inability to build the Left as an independent force in U.S. politics. It is Palestine, not a vote for Biden, that represents a strategic vision for how a Left in the belly of the beast can be rebuilt.

# Vote to Save Our Basic Civil Rights

FRIEDA AFARY

THE CHOICE IN THE 2024 U.S. presidential election is between Joseph Biden, a liberal capitalist who is soft on Israel's brutal occupation of Palestinians, and Donald Trump, an outright fascist and misogynist. Trump openly promises dictatorship, ending free speech/assembly, imprisoning dissidents, and putting undocumented immigrants in concentration camps.

With Biden, we will still have the right to hold meetings, publish contrary views, and protest. Women will still have contraceptive and abortion rights in the Democratic majority states. We will still have some basic labor, civil rights, and environmental laws and will still be able to protest against Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. The United States



will still send aid to the Ukrainians fighting against Russia's brutal imperialist invasion.

With Trump, any journalist or politician who has stood up to Trump's authoritarianism, anyone who has been active in defense of human rights, Black Lives Matter, feminism, LGBTQ rights, anyone who has been politically involved in solidarity with Palestinians and Jewish peace activists can face arrest, imprisonment, and in some cases death.

The choice is very clear to me. One candidate, Biden, despite his many defects, gives us the chance to continue to publish, organize, protest for human rights, and stay alive. The other, Trump, will silence and kill us.

During the primaries, it was sensible to

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register protest votes to make a statement and to put pressure on Biden to change some of his policies. Now, however, given how close the two candidates are in the polls, given how strong Trump's base is at this point and how his anti-human and authoritarian capitalist ideology has taken over the minds of tens of millions in the United States, it is incumbent upon those who believe in human rights and progressive values to vote for Biden. At this point, not voting at all or voting for a Third-Party

candidate is a vote for Trump.

As an Iranian American librarian, writer, and activist, I keep thinking about how the majority of the people in Iran have suffered for decades because of the terrible mistakes that their "progressive" opposition leaders made in 1979 by allowing a religious fundamentalist authoritarian government to take power. Forty-five years later, the Iranian people have still not been able to rid themselves of this brutal regime.

May 31, 2024

## Don't Just Vote or Not Vote

DAN FISCHER

BY SURRENDERING MUCH OF THEIR organizing capacity and most of their votes to the Democratic Party, unions and progressive organizations have allowed Democratic leaders to take them for granted and focus instead on courting wealthy funders. This has been one factor pushing politicians to the right on economic and other issues since the 1970s. The party that once implemented the New Deal, Great Society, and civil rights reforms has since partnered with Republicans to deliver mass incarceration and mass deportation, free-trade pacts, bank bailouts, the War on Terror, and accelerated fossil-fuel production. Biden has been no exception, presiding over record levels of oil and gas extraction, deportations of migrants, police shootings, and Israeli airstrikes. Still, Trump promises an even more authoritarian and ecocidal

agenda. Because Washington rejects basic democratic reforms such as ranked-choice voting, the left faces an apparent double bind. Do we support the lesser evil and let it continue morphing into the greater evil? Or do we refuse and risk enabling the greater evil's immediate ascent? Such electorally focused questions miss the point for a couple of reasons.

First, the chances of a protest vote or abstention impacting the outcome of a presidential election is nearly zero, especially in the 40 to 45 "safe states" where either Trump or Biden has already locked in victory. Even in the five to ten competitive "swing states," independent votes won't likely tip the scales in Trump's favor, as Howie Hawkins explained in the Winter 2024 issue of *New Politics*, based on recent Green totals.

For those concerned, vote swapping offers an easy solution for swing-state residents wanting to stop Trump. Someone

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who was going to vote Democratic could find someone who was going to vote Republican, and both could agree not to vote for the major party candidates. Or, someone who was going to cast a protest vote could reach out to safe-state Biden supporters and offer to swap votes. A Michigan voter might say to a couple New York voters, “I was going to vote ‘uncommitted’ here, but if you both vote ‘uncommitted,’ then in return I’ll hold my nose and vote for Biden.” Democratic-leaning groups could even create vote-swapping websites to facilitate such discussions. A 2007 ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals confirmed such websites are legal.

Second, grassroots organizing and direct action create more effective change

than voting. Powerful labor and civil rights movements compelled Democrats to implement major reforms in the 1930s and 1960s. In the early 1970s, an independent grassroots compelled even the Republican-run government to end the Vietnam War, raise food stamp and Social Security funding, legalize abortion, and establish the EPA and OSHA. The alter-globalization and Occupy movements, despite their smaller base of participants, spread radically anti-corporate sentiments and influenced some policy shifts away from the free-trade and free-market “Washington Consensus” that triumphed in the 1990s. Whoever is elected, we need to focus on building movements to transform society.

## The Election and Left Responsibility

STEPHEN R. SHALOM

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THERE ARE THOSE WHO ASSERT THAT even in a swing state they will not vote for Biden in November, despite believing that Trump would be far worse for Palestinians, for the left, and for humankind. Asked “What will you say if your vote turns out to be the difference between Biden or Trump winning?” some answer, “It won’t be my fault, it will be Biden’s fault. If he pursued a decent policy on Gaza, he would have

gotten my vote.”

This, I suggest, is a politically and morally flawed response.

You don’t eliminate your responsibility for an awful outcome because others share that responsibility.

Imagine that someone whom you’ve repeatedly warned not to swim in dangerous waters is drowning. You are able to throw them a life preserver and save them, but you refuse to do so, and they drown. Would anyone consider it a morally acceptable response for you to say, “It’s not my fault they died; it’s their fault. If they

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had listened to me, they would be alive now.” Yes, but they would also be alive had you thrown them the life preserver. There are two morally culpable actors here: the stubborn swimmer and you.

Or consider U.S. immigration policy in the 1930s that denied entry to Jews fleeing Hitler. Would any of us accept an argument from the State Department that said, “We were not responsible for the deaths of refugees who could not find asylum; it was Hitler. If he hadn’t ordered his Final Solution, they would be alive now.” Of course, Hitler’s responsibility is undeniable. But it’s also true that despite Hitler’s having given orders for extermination, some of his victims would have survived had they not been barred entry into the United States. Hitler’s responsibility does not remove the blood from the hands of the U.S. government.

In the same way, while Biden’s moral and political responsibility for the horrors in Gaza and any attendant election loss is indisputable, those who refuse to vote for him in a swing state also bear moral and political responsibility if he loses. Had they voted otherwise, Biden would have won, and we would not have a president committed to undermining democracy, reversing climate change regulations, deporting millions, constraining labor unions, providing the rich more tax benefits, further limiting reproductive rights, and increasing

police power.

Two final points.

First, nothing I have said is inconsistent with our continuing to fight Biden’s Gaza (and other) policies or supporting the “un-committed” primary campaigns as a means of pressuring him. Indeed, to the extent that such campaigns encourage Biden to align more with the majority sentiment among voters in favor of a ceasefire, the better his electoral chances in November.

Second, it is true that the risk that third party votes might contribute to a Trump victory is small. But the probability that one’s vote will ever matter are always tiny. Consider, however, that the benefits resulting from the Greens getting an extra 100,000 votes are incredibly small, since there is almost no chance that the party will garner close to the 5 percent of the vote that carries future electoral advantages. On the other hand, a swing of fewer than 100,000 votes in a few states in 2000, 2016, or 2020—if appropriately distributed—would have changed the results of those elections. And this year seems like it will be just as close, with the stakes even higher.

The bottom line is that if one believes that a Trump victory would be a disaster, one cannot avoid the moral responsibility in doing what one can to prevent it. And that means voting for Biden in a swing state, despite his horrendous role in Gaza.

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# The Fightback on Reproductive Rights

MARIAN JONES

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SINCE *ROE V. WADE* WAS overturned, women's rights to abortion and, more broadly, to safe reproductive health care have been under attack. In response, women have organized at the grassroots to build local and state-wide coalitions to resist and defend their reproductive rights. Women's resistance has broad political implications. Reproductive freedom has become one of the central issues of the 2024 presidential campaign and could even decide it.

Recent conservative Court decisions, particularly the 2021 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case, have had a significant impact on the rights of pregnant people, the indigent, and broad health care access. In *Dobbs*, the Supreme Court ruled that the right to abortion is not protected by privacy under the 14th Amendment's Due Process Clause of the Constitution, effectively overturning *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. Because of *Dobbs*'s preemption, many abortion-related lawsuits have been lost, new bans have been passed, and the criminalization of pregnancy is at an all-time high. All of which is causing uncertainty and barriers to care, thus exacerbating health care disparities.

Since the *Dobbs* ruling, numerous court cases have challenged existing abortion

protections, leading to the prohibition of abortion services in many states, with 13 states having trigger laws to outlaw abortion as soon as *Roe* was overturned.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these states, particularly in the South, have a large number of poor women, disproportionately Black and Latinx, who will likely have to travel outside of state to get abortion services. Those who cannot may seek telemedicine to get medicated abortions. However, medical abortions can be more painful, causing severe cramping over a longer period than surgical abortions. A number of states—Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, California, Vermont, and Washington—have shield laws that protect medical providers who may offer abortion services to people living in red states that ban or restrict abortion access in the wake of *Dobbs v. Jackson*. However, these laws may be challenged in court, but for the time being, from October to December 2023, an average of 8,000 people per month in red states received medical abortions from doctors protected by shield laws. Aid Access and the Massachusetts Medication Abortion Access Project operate nationally, while the groups Abuzz and Armadillo, ship to states with abortion bans, but not to every state.<sup>2</sup>

The bans on abortion not only block immediate pregnancy-related treatment but also exacerbate existing health disparities. Abortion seekers are more often than not Black and indigent, and already have

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children. Because of the multiplicity of oppressions that pregnant people of color face, including racial oppression, it is more difficult for them to afford the transportation, social support, and childcare needed to go to a clinic for an abortion. Still, in the United States Black women account for the highest percentage of abortions.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of abortion bans on marginalized communities, particularly women of color, and the efforts of grassroots organizations to promote reproductive justice and equitable health care in a post-*Roe* world are deeply intertwined. These movements have sparked legal challenges, political action, and grassroots efforts to push back against the erosion of reproductive rights. Despite setbacks, the fight for reproductive freedom continues to gain momentum across the country.

Grassroots organizations are playing a crucial role in advocating for the rights and well-being of women of color and vulnerable populations in the post-*Roe* world. Many reproductive rights groups have long been fighting to increase access to abortion, including prominent ones like Planned Parenthood and NARAL; many more have emerged or are ramping up their efforts in the wake of *Dobbs*.<sup>4</sup> Grassroots organizations like The Feminist Front and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice are working to address these disparities and promote reproductive justice.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to working with other groups to provide assistance to reproductive justice groups in the Southwest, The Feminist Front also organizes seminars on reproductive justice and how abor-

tion relates to white supremacy. In 2022, they protested Arizona's Senator Kyrsten Sinema for not defending abortion rights and staged a sit-in in her office.<sup>6</sup>

Issues of economic and racial justice, as well as the rights of immigrants, are central to the work of the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice, which has been concerned about the situation of migrants in detention facilities and fights for legislation that addresses immigration in its entirety. Because of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and multiple anti-immigration policies in Texas, it is very difficult for immigrants to go across state boundaries to have the procedure. Fears about deportation and run-ins with the authorities only make matters worse. By focusing on the rights and welfare of migrants in detention facilities and fighting for fair and inclusive immigration policies, the Latina Institute seeks to tackle these issues from an intersectional perspective.

In response to the increasing restrictions on abortion, grassroots abortion funding organizations have emerged to help individuals afford abortions and the associated costs, such as travel, lodging, and childcare. These funds have played a crucial role in assisting people seeking abortions, particularly in states where access has become more limited. For example, Michelle Colon, founder of Shero in Mississippi, organized volunteers to drive women to Illinois, a journey of at least 10 hours, to obtain abortions. Laurie Bertram



Roberts heads the volunteer-run Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund, which helps individuals access abortion services in Mississippi. Another organization, the Yellowhammer Fund, operates in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Both of these organizations are part of the National Network of Abortion Funds, a crucial network consisting of over 80 abortion funds across the country that help lower-income individuals access abortion services.<sup>7</sup>

The number of individuals providing such assistance is dwindling, however, leaving fewer options for those in need. Fundraising increased for many of these organizations following the *Dobbs* decision, but they are now sounding the alarm that support is weakening as media coverage fades. For instance, there was a danger that, without further funding, the resources of The New York Abortion Access Fund would be exhausted by October 2023. Thankfully, this did not come to pass.<sup>8</sup>

Private medication abortions, which are increasingly popular among abortion rights activists, now constitute over 50 percent of all abortions in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Telehealth services like Hey Jane, Choix, and Abortion on Demand have expanded in states where abortion remains legal.<sup>10</sup> Since the *Dobbs* decision, virtual-only telehealth providers have facilitated 7,461 abortions per month in the first nine months, up from 4,025 per month before.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, underground networks run by groups like Las Libres and Red Necesito Arbortar have emerged to supply Americans with abortion pills from countries such as Mexico and India.<sup>12</sup> These networks provide an alternative for individuals who cannot or do not want to use official channels to access abortion care.

Grassroots formations can only do so much. Recent losses in the realm of reproductive rights beyond the scope of grassroots and underground networks

include legal challenges like the outlawing of transporting a minor for an abortion in Tennessee, the imposition of legal penalties and fines for transporting individuals seeking abortions over state lines in Oklahoma and Idaho, and the enforcement of a six-week abortion ban in Florida, while in Alabama, in vitro fertilization has been prohibited.<sup>13</sup> The recent ruling in Alabama classifies frozen embryos as “human” whether or not they are inside or outside of the womb, causing several fertility clinics to stop treatment. The Alabama Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos can be treated as children under the Wrongful Death of a Minor Act of 1872, stating that they are persons from conception, regardless of being in or out of the womb.<sup>14</sup> This judgment can be traced back to a recent wrongful death lawsuit involving a patient who accidentally destroyed frozen embryos at a clinic. While the right has been advocating for this prohibition privately, they are also cautious about discussing the issue publicly, as they fear it could alienate voters due to its severity.<sup>15</sup> The backlash has been so bad, in fact, that lawmakers in the state are trying to walk back the Alabama Supreme Court’s ruling.<sup>16</sup>

Former President Donald Trump, who has taken credit for *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, recently said abortion laws should be left to states.<sup>17</sup> Trump claimed falsely on Truth Social that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* was universally desired (“we have abortion where everybody wanted it from a legal standpoint”).<sup>18</sup> He’s now saying he believes “the states will determine by vote or legislation, or perhaps both, and whatever they decide must be the law of the land.”<sup>19</sup> He’s also refusing to take a position on a national abortion ban wanted by members of his party.<sup>20</sup>

However, there have been some legal victories in the fight against abortion restrictions. Since the *Dobbs* decision 23

states have raised legal challenges against abortion bans.<sup>21</sup> Two red states, Kansas and Kentucky, had ballot amendments to end the right to abortion, but both failed. Kansas voters rejected a proposed constitutional amendment denying abortion rights, while Kentucky voters rejected a ballot measure denying constitutional protections for abortion, a fight that was led by Democratic Socialists of America and Kansans for Constitutional Freedom, among others.<sup>22</sup> Kentucky, however, has since passed a law outlawing abortion with very few exceptions.<sup>23</sup> Both ballot initiatives were defeated, sending a message to the GOP that their stance on abortion is extreme and at odds with public opinion.

Religious freedom challenges in defense of abortion have also arisen in several states.<sup>24</sup> In Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Kentucky, Utah, and Wyoming, individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds have argued that abortion bans infringe on the free exercise of their religion or violate state constitutional protections against the establishment of religion. Indiana's Court of Appeals has granted a minor victory to individuals challenging the state's abortion ban, arguing it violates a 2015 religious freedom statute, and it upheld the appeal filed by four people and Hoosier Jews for Choice.<sup>25</sup> In Missouri, Christian, Jewish, and Unitarian Universalist leaders sought a permanent injunction against an abortion ban, arguing that state lawmakers who supported the ban were imposing their personal religious beliefs on everyone.<sup>26</sup>

In some states, abortion will remain legal and available because the states have had policies in place prior to the *Dobbs* decision that protect access even in the absence of *Roe*. Since the *Dobbs* ruling, over forty lawsuits have been filed in multiple states, challenging abortion restrictions on the grounds that they infringe on various constitutional rights.<sup>27</sup> For instance, the right to

privacy was cited as a basis for challenging Florida's 15-week abortion ban, using the state constitution's privacy clause as a legal argument. Similarly, in South Carolina, the right to privacy temporarily protected the right to abortion, blocking a six-week abortion ban. However, subsequent bans were

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**Dobbs has had repercussions  
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later upheld after the state legislature passed new laws and new justices joined the court.

In Wyoming, a judge temporarily blocked a ban on the abortion pill, citing the right to privacy.<sup>28</sup> This case is still ongoing, and abortion pills remain legal. Wellspring Health Access (WHA), Wyoming's only full-service abortion clinic, one of the nonprofits that brought suit over the abortion pill, is also separately suing the state to block a law imposing a near-total ban on abortion. WHA sued the state to stop its abortion "trigger ban" and won a preliminary injunction. The judge ruled that the ban could harm the plaintiffs before their lawsuit was resolved.

In response to a lawsuit by the Center for Reproductive Rights, a federal district court in Arizona temporarily blocked a law that gave fetuses, embryos, and fertilized eggs the same rights as Arizona citizens, deeming it "unconstitutionally vague."<sup>29</sup> However, abortion remains illegal in Arizona due to an old law from the Civil War era.<sup>30</sup>



The Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs* has also had repercussions beyond abortion access. Organizations that assist pregnant individuals in Texas are now subject to civil and criminal liability. This has led to a chilling effect on reproductive health care providers in the state, with many hesitant to offer services for fear of legal repercussions. However, a U.S. District Judge issued an injunction to protect Fund Texas Choice from criminalization, ruling that the Texas

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The bans on abortion not only block immediate pregnancy-related treatment but also exacerbate existing health disparities.

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attorney general cannot seek legal relief against providers or practitioners who help abortion seekers travel outside of Texas.<sup>31</sup> This ruling is critical as it stops states from being able to overreach and expand past their boundaries, and it serves as a beacon of protection in the midst of ongoing legal battles surrounding reproductive rights in Texas.

The recent conservative judicial decisions, particularly the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case, have had a profound impact on women's rights and health care access. These decisions have resulted in defeats in abortion-related legal cases, increased uncertainty and more barriers to care, and exacerbated health care disparities. Since many states have enacted abortion bans or restrictions that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, these groups suffer the most from these decisions. This further exacerbates health care disparities, as marginalized communities already face challenges in accessing qual-

ity healthcare. Grassroots organizations and reproductive rights organizations are working tirelessly to address these challenges and promote reproductive justice. Despite setbacks, the fight for reproductive freedom continues, with individuals and organizations advocating for accessible and equitable healthcare for all.

Because of the centrality of abortion to both Biden's re-election campaign and the genocide in Gaza, it is possible that the abortion issue might rescue the Democrats from their current predicament related to the war in Gaza. There are new opportunities and challenges for organizations fighting for reproductive justice in the United States as reproductive justice issues seem to be swiftly becoming a cudgel for Democrats trying to convince an angry electorate to vote for them. How they will use this leverage is yet to be seen. Over 60 percent of adults in the United States think that abortion should be legal within certain limits. However, millions of women in this country still oppose abortion rights. Among those who defend abortion rights, a portion still vote for Trump or advocate not voting at all even though Biden is clearly in favor of reproductive rights.

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# Capitalism, Imperialism, and Global Displacement

JUSTIN AKERS CHACÓN

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ESTABLISHMENT IMMIGRATION politics in the United States have reached a critical departure, inching towards closer embrace between the Democratic Party mainstream and the Republican far right. The bizarre state of bourgeois capitalist immigration politics reached a series of new lows in 2024. After far-right governors Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott began to internally deport refugees to so-called “liberal sanctuary cities” like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles as a form of cruel political theater, Democratic mayors in those cities fell in line in condemning the “immigrant problem” and pursuing punitive measures to curtail and remove refugee populations in their midst.

In March 2024, both Trump and Biden took dueling trips to the border to showcase how they can try to outflank each other from the “farther right” and be more antagonistic towards refugees. The abandonment of inclusive immigrant and refugee rhetoric, and the repositioning towards one singular political voice against migrants and refugees marks a crisis of bourgeois ideology. No longer are there viable solu-

tions to the deep crises of U.S. capitalism and imperialism afflicting society—instead only turns towards expanding the politics of extreme wealth accumulation, state repression, violence towards the vulnerable, and clamping down on the discontented. This politics of degeneration is symptomatic of a larger process taking place within other capitalist nation-states, especially in the imperialist centers of the global economy.

The capitalist politics of displacement and violence have gone international along the seams of the global imperialist system. Neoliberal and neocolonial capitalist restructuring creating extremes of wealth and poverty, trade policy impositions, and international debt inequalities; imperial warfare and neocolonial intervention and occupation, state violence, climate catastrophe, and other forms of political violence are inducing unprecedented dislocation internationally. According to UN estimates, 27.1 million people were made into refugees in 2021, increasing 30% to 35.3 million in 2022, and increasing 330% to 117.2 million more in 2023.<sup>1</sup> It is projected that 130 million people will be displaced by the end of 2024, a nearly 500% increase.<sup>2</sup>

## Crisis of Capitalism and Imperialism Are Driving System Failure Globally

The crisis churning out rising displacement is located in the failings of the capitalist system internationally—both in its economic

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functions and political operations. Capitalism is the predominant mode of production globally and had been initially constructed internationally through European national conquest and accumulation of colonies in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The colonial foundations of international capitalism determined the method of “development” and “under-development” in which the rich colonizing nations accumulated their “original wealth” and made the leap into “first world” capitalism while most colonized and formerly colonized nations languish in conditions of under-development and combined and uneven development.

The condition of becoming a “developed nation” is bound up with this history of capitalism and engendered through violent means of conquest and extraction that have included and reproduce acts of genocide, settler colonialism, enslavement and forced labor, systems of labor repression and control, formalized policies of racial, gender, and national oppression; and state carceral and police repression.

In the construction of the global order through colonialism, international capitalism further elaborated into the system of imperialism, a stage where hierarchies of the dominant and subsidiary colonial powers aligned and formed rival alliances, or empires.<sup>3</sup> Empires formed and developed across the landscape of international capitalism to compete for preeminence in the further accumulation of territory, resources, and labor—and inevitably for the redivision and redistribution of existing colonial holdings through warfare.

Since the era of World War Two, capitalist imperialism has also developed further means to produce “neocolonialism” such as financialization and national debt-shackling, the imposition of “free-trade policies” as a means for economic re-colonization through capital export and predominant foreign ownership, and

through real-time and unprecedented scales of global military intervention, armament, and installation. It is here where we locate the system failures generating displacement on an unprecedented scale.

### Heightening Inequality Within and Between Nations

Twenty-first century capitalism has skewed wealth inequality between nations and within nations to an unprecedented historical level. By 2022 the world’s 10 richest billionaires, owned a combined wealth of \$1.448 trillion, a “GDP” greater than the total national wealth of 182 of the current 197 nations of the world.<sup>4</sup> By 2024, the capitalist system has produced 2,781 billionaires globally, with a total official net worth of \$14.2 trillion. The top 1% now own 43% of all global financial assets. The number of billionaires is growing annually, as well as their individual fortunes, indicative of how they have built their fortunes and expansive control over national economies at the expense of other social classes.

The global rich have taken more nationally-generated wealth than the bottom half of the population in nearly every country in the world. Since 2020, nearly five billion people, 60% of the world’s population, have become poorer.<sup>5</sup> By 2023, 24% of the world’s population, 1.9 billion people, lived in “poverty and dire circumstances.”<sup>6</sup> World Bank estimates show that a total of 324 million extremely poor people reside in 33 countries classified as fragile and conflict affected, where average per-capita incomes are expected to further decline in years ahead.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to wealth distribution between nations, more than two-thirds (69%) of global wealth is held by the “developed nations,” while less than a third can be found in the developing world<sup>8</sup>—although 83% of the world’s population lives in “developing countries.”<sup>9</sup>

The heightening concentration and

expansion of wealth at the top of the class structures in each nation is not the result of “individual hard work,” but rather how capitalists have engineered state policy in their favor and at the expense of the global working classes within the nation state. This includes concocting policies within the framework of “neoliberal structural adjustment” to wage class war through the state to erode working-class programs and protections,<sup>10</sup> weaken union organization,<sup>11</sup> and repress social movements.<sup>12</sup>

This broad array of class war and counter-reform policies have worked to defund and dismantle equitable tax regimes, social and public welfare, labor guarantees and protections, and other protective and redistributive mechanisms that were gained by the working classes in their respective countries during previous epochs of class struggle—and for which the capitalist ruling class was compelled to pay a larger share. This process is then internationalized through the articulation and imposition of neo-colonial “free-trade agreements” (FTAs), most typically emanating from within imperialist nations and blocs and then implanted into other nations through different means of compulsion.

The capitalist phenomenon of opening FTAs, especially in countries of the global south and the formerly colonized countries, is a neo-colonial strategy to forcibly reassert and restore the domination of international capital over subject nations. Through imperialist state agents imposing new trade policies, corporations and investment bankers are enabled to export capital into once protected or restricted economies of the developing, or formerly colonized nations of the world. Through FTAs, international capital opens, implants, and concentrates investment and ownership over key sectors of the economy and leverages their power within these nations to further shape neo-liberal policy development to increase their

profits, remake political parties and systems, and otherwise legitimize neo-colonialism into a new orthodoxy.

The implementation of FTAs has been one of the main catalysts of displacement—especially from the formerly colonized and neo-colonized world to the imperialist centers. As capitalist instruments for wealth accumulation, they require structural changes in law that prioritize the rights of capital akin to the those in the imperial center, provoke mass privatization, induce domestic deindustrialization, reward land and wealth concentration, and foment economic re-organization for export instead in the place of production for local exchange, economic, and consummatory needs. Displacement due to neoliberal and neo-colonial restructuring has had some of its most detrimental impact on Caribbean and Latin American nations.

The number of displaced nearly doubled from 8.3 million in 2010 to 16.3 million in 2022, with many moving into neighboring nations or to the United States.<sup>13</sup> Over seven million people have been displaced from Mexico coinciding with the staged implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, now United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement) since 1994. Nearly four million have been displaced from Central America since 2010 and the full implementation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).<sup>14</sup> Most recently, an estimated 7.3 million Venezuelans have been displaced since 2014,<sup>15</sup> although this phenomenon is more attributable to an economic crisis induced by destabilizing U.S. economic sanctions placed on Venezuela to punish that nation for exiting all U.S.-led FTAs and trade regimes in the region in 2006. Haiti, a long and recurrent victim of U.S.-led invasion, occupation, and imperialist meddling, has seen a new wave of mass displacement in

recent years. By early 2024, 852,000 Haitians had migrated to the United States, and 141,000 in Mexico,<sup>16</sup> especially increasing after the assassination President Jovenel Moïse in 2021, and the subsequent collapse of the nation's governing institutions installed after the U.S. invasion and occupation of Haiti in 2004.<sup>17</sup>

Wherever FTAs have been enforced, sites of struggle and resistance by the popular classes have erupted and flared. State repression of growing social protest and labor movements has taken place in this context, where more authoritarian and repressive measures are deployed against those resisting or opposing these class-based attacks on rights, wages, and programs that maintain or contribute to a standard of living. One study shows that the total number of people incarcerated globally has increased by 25% since 2000, from 9.3 to 11.7 million people, and a third of those are detained without charge or conviction.<sup>18</sup> There has been a marked rise in state violence, political violence, social protest and unrest, and other forms of political crisis.<sup>19</sup> Displacement occurs in the context of how working-class, indigenous, and oppressed communities within capitalist nation-states successfully or unsuccessfully oppose the state policies that harm or undermine their standard of living. This version of “fight or flight” plays out at some stage and in some capacity in each circumstance of displacement and migration.

Spiking inequality and working-class precarity and social and economic dislocation and displacement has been further exacerbated by perpetuating crises in the global capitalist system, and the growing role of states to bailout the capitalist owners of the economic system using the national treasury to fund and prop up whole industries to sustain their profitability—while leaving working-class and poor people to fend for themselves.<sup>20</sup> The dysfunctionality

of the global capitalist system, especially since the Great Recession of 2008-10 has also exacerbated and accelerated tensions and fractures within the international imperialist system. This is driving rival imperial state actors to take more aggressive military action to assert their national, regional, and international capitalist interests vis-à-vis their rival counterparts.

## Colonial War, Inter-Imperialist War, and Displacement

The size and scale of warfare are accelerating in the context of intensifying inter-imperialist conflict and capitalist crisis, reaching 183 documented regional and local conflicts raging in all corners of the globe in 2023. According to a comprehensive study conducted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies:

The intensity of conflict has risen year on year, with fatalities increasing by 14% and violent events by 28% in the latest survey. The authors describe a world “dominated by increasingly intractable conflicts and armed violence amid a proliferation of actors, complex and overlapping motives, global influences and accelerating climate change.”<sup>21</sup>

Colonial and inter-imperialist war accounts for the single largest factor driving displacement. For example, 52% of current refugees worldwide originate from just three countries: Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine. These conflicts are emblematic of how wars of imperialist conquest and re-division are playing out in destabilizing and destroying the capacity for people to be safe and sustained. By 2030, the World Bank estimates that nearly 60% of the world's extreme poor will live in countries affected by “[economic] fragility, conflict, and violence.”<sup>22</sup> This reveals how the current trajectory of capitalist imperialism, expressed through one of its leading institutions, will only intensify the conditions of displacement and migration through war,



invasion, and occupation.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 1991 and imposition of a decades-long brutal sanctions regime, and especially again with the second invasion and occupation of 2003, initiated the destabilization of the entire Middle East. The toppling of the Iraqi government, followed by later military interventions across the region from Syria

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to Libya, generated spiraling waves of war, violence, and mass displacement that have continued to the present. Between 2003 and 2023, over 1.1 million Iraqis remained permanently displaced from their country. Since the subsequent U.S. invasion of Syria in September 2014, a military operation codenamed “Operation Inherent Resolve” to ostensibly fight the Islamic State and to counter rival Russian military intervention on behalf of the embattled Syrian state, an estimated twelve million Syrians have been forcibly displaced from the region.<sup>23</sup> U.S.-led intervention between 2015–2019 to back anti-government forces (and to ostensibly fight the Islamic State) in Libya fueled an on-going conflict that has displaced over one million Libyans.

From 2001 to 2021, the U.S. military invaded and occupied the country of Afghanistan over two decades. During that time, the war escalated within the country between the United States and the Afghan forces of the Taliban and spread to

all regions. The U.S. government’s war against the Taliban was ostensibly fought to “protect democracy” and “human rights,” but occurred in the context of increasing tensions between the United States and its allies and Russia and China. The U.S. invasion in 2001 took place in the aftermath of the defeat of Russia’s occupation and withdrawal from Afghanistan only 10 years earlier; and amid a period of U.S.-led NATO expansion deeper into the borderlands of Russia and China. Furthermore, the colonial regime installed on behalf of the U.S. occupying force proved to be duly brutal and oppressive, engaging in widespread violations against the population and only holding power at U.S. gunpoint. Over the period of the occupation, 5.9 million Afghans were internally displaced or fled the country.<sup>24</sup>

The Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine has created an episode of mass displacement of Ukrainians, especially since the full-scale military assault began in February of 2022. Since then, over 14 million Ukrainians, 35% of the population, have been displaced by the war with about 6.5 million refugees fleeing to neighboring countries and the United States.<sup>25</sup> The invasion occurred amid escalating inter-imperial rivalry, rising tensions, and the irreconcilability between the regional imperial expansionist ambitions of Putin’s Russia and NATO’s imperial expansionism into the Indo-Pacific region as a means to contain Russia and counter China.

On-going U.S.-led funding and military support for Israel has also been a source of recurring violence and mass displacement in Palestine. Palestinians are also one of the largest displaced populations in the world due to colonial war and has been rapidly accelerating in the recent context of wars of imperial re-division. This began with the British and French occupation and re-division of the region after the defeat of

the Ottoman Empire in World War I, followed by the British Empire's sponsorship of the Zionist settler-colonial occupation of Palestine and the U.S.-European imperial invention of the colonial "state" of Israel in 1948. This has been followed by 76 years of on-going U.S. and European-funded and supported Zionist-led genocidal campaigns,<sup>26</sup> ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their lands into the Israeli-occupied territorial fragments of Gaza and the West Bank, and the mass displacement and forced migration of more than six million Palestinian refugees into other nations.

The new imperial scramble for Africa has seen especially the United States, French, British, Russian, and regional allies, fund and back coups, neocolonial wars, and other forms of imperialist intervention and rivalry in different African nations.<sup>27</sup> China has become the largest capitalist investor state operating within the African continent,<sup>28</sup> while Russia has also expanded its influence through economic partnerships and military intervention through proxy mercenary groups.<sup>29</sup> The strategic political and military role of rival imperialist forces and factions have initiated or exacerbated the crises that have also been a major factor of unprecedented displacement of over 25 million people across the continent by 2023,<sup>30</sup> and record numbers of refugees seeking relief abroad.<sup>31</sup>

The mass displacement and migration resulting from the failings of the capitalist system, and the current inter-imperial divisions and conflict driving a new generation of international war, is also expressing itself in the crisis-reconfiguration of bourgeois politics in the imperial centers. Social polarization is driving deeper ideological fissures, the decline of centrism and moderation, and pressurizing substantial shifts to the far-right in mainstream bourgeois politics amid urgent and expedient defense of capital and empire amid significant

threats and challenges. In this mire, far-right and fascist parties and movements are seizing upon the crises to weaponize nationalism against their imperial rivals and ratcheting up white supremacist attacks against migrants and refugees. Even as the migrant becomes the object of scorn for racists and imperialists, their exploitation as labor has increased in significance as the means for capitalist accumulation.

### **The Politics and Profits of Anti-Migration**

The concentration of ownership in the hands of fewer people who have control over ever-larger sectors of the means of production and the financial sector have enabled the capitalist class to leverage and wield greater and more direct power inside the architecture of the state and its political institutions. Nevertheless, amid growing expressions of class struggle and mass protest,<sup>32</sup> the splits and fissures taking place in the global imperial order, and the urgent necessity to prop up the current arrangements and interests of capital, formal politics are being shifted to the right inside capitalist imperialist states internationally.

Within these shifts, the crises of capitalism and attendant weakening of bourgeois ideology have enabled those on the far right of the bourgeoisie and their petty-bourgeois, neo-fascist junior partners to find common ground and push forward into the mix to present their own "solutions." The surge of far-right forces growing through the cracks in liberal and centrist bourgeois ideology amid economic and political crisis is moving whole political systems further rightward and toward accommodation and approximation with the ascendant far rights.

Far-right and fascist political movements and parties are gaining power across the capitalist and imperialist centers, most notably in France, Germany, Netherlands,

and Italy; and are building organizational capacity for social mobilization and political action, orchestrating political violence, and otherwise attempting to reframe a vigorous defense of capital and empire through repression and exclusion of migrants and refugees.<sup>33</sup> In the United States, both Democrats and Republicans have increasingly used the state apparatus to exclude, incarcerate, and deport migrants and refugees,<sup>34</sup> while the most extreme rightwing state governments like that in Texas are now operating independently of the federal government to block and physically harm refugees.<sup>35</sup> Far-right and fascist attacks on migrants (and people perceived to be migrants, especially Latinos) has been climbing in each of the last three years.<sup>36</sup> In Europe, a parallel process is also taking place with an increasing annual rate of deportations (including a new strategy of “third nation” deportations), rates of violence against migrants and refugees, and racist political scapegoating.<sup>37</sup>

The victimization of migrants and refugees also takes place in the context of capitalist crisis and neocolonial and imperialist rivalry and conflict. Displaced peoples are disproportionately classed (or re-classed) as workers through incorporation into the economies of the capitalist and imperialist powers without bestowing citizenship, civil, or labor rights. Displaced workers are also comprising a larger percentage of the working classes in capitalist economies internationally, especially in the imperial capitalist centers due to rising labor shortages.<sup>38</sup> For instance, the foreign-born working class accounted for 18.6 percent of the total U.S. labor force, and disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid and least union-organized sectors of the economy.<sup>39</sup> In Europe, the number is smaller but growing. In 2023, 27.3 million non-citizen migrants were employed in a European Union member

economy, representing a total of 6.1% of the population—a rate that has been increasing annually (with the highest national percentages in Germany, Spain, France, and Italy).<sup>40</sup>

By using the state to keep migrant and refugee workers in a state of social and political vulnerability, the capitalist class can exploit their labor at a higher rate than those integrated as “citizens.” The racist and xenophobic standard of contemporary migration politics are also a tool to foster racial and national divisions within the national working classes, undermining the basis for class consciousness, solidarity, and unity necessary to build or rebuild unions, revitalize and empower labor movements, and group or regroup socialist and anticapitalist political organization.

The historical models of European and U.S. settler-colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism have always depended on maintaining ranks of disenfranchised and vulnerable—and thus more exploitable and disposable—labor across and within borders. If colonialism in its contemporary form can be understood as an arrangement in which the colonizer nation extracts the value of the land, labor, and natural resources of a colonized nation in a zero-sum process in which one side becomes “developed” and the other “under-developed,” so too can we locate a neotype of colonialism within the nucleus of capitalist social relations.

Because of the operational and dependent role of migrant repression as a function of capital accumulation at a time of capitalist crisis and imperialist conflict, there can be no deviation from this pathway inside the ruling bourgeois political parties. The world created by this system is overheating, cracking up, and becoming more dangerous for all of us—but especially so for the enlarging numbers of displaced and marginalized people.

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*We publish here an excerpt from John Washington's book, The Case for Open Borders, published by Haymarket Books in 2023. The Case for Open Borders is beautifully written, with a remarkable combination of a journalist's story-telling talent and a casual erudition, and imbued with a humanistic, internationalist, and democratic politics. He engages with virtually all of the important aspects of the migration and border questions and ends his multifaceted and philosophical book with a list of practical answers to the kinds of questions we in the immigrant rights movement face. John knows these issues well since he is an activist in the movement himself. We hope that our readers will enjoy the book's fifth chapter, "The Political Argument—Never Merely Theater," and then go on to read the whole book and use it as they work for immigration justice.*

## *The Case for Open Borders* The Political Argument—Never Merely Theater

JOHN WASHINGTON

*"An act of hospitality can only be poetic."*

JACQUES DERRIDA

THE MOST CONVINCING CASE—for me—of the urgent need to open borders is that borders kill. Pro-border immigration restrictionists may worry that opening borders—by letting in potential terrorists or allowing unsustainable population growth or unwanted cultural change—will also kill. But excusing current harms (that borders kill) for potential future ones (that opening borders *might* kill, or figuratively kill) is meager justification, especially when there is little to no evidence that strict border controls offer either financial, physical, or national security. But that justification is exactly the basis for militarized border controls. This bizarre logic—guarding the future by killing the

present—is neatly captured in the 2019 film *Terminator: Dark Fate*, one of a series of sequels to the 1984 blockbuster, in which a cyborg soldier anti-hero, in order to avoid the future the cyborgs don't want, carries out "orders from a future that never happened." While chronologically erratic, the series twangs on the same logic of potential fear justifying present violence that pro-border advocates wield. (It's also the same speculative policing and stereotyping that's portrayed in another dystopian sci-fi film, *Minority Report*, based on the 1956 novella by Philip K. Dick. Migrants—as in the movie and novella, in which criminals are policed before they commit their crimes—are pre-policed, and even pre-punished, by

the logic of closed borders.)

In the latest *Terminator* sequel, the monomaniacally murderous cyborg slips into the body of—unsurprisingly—a U.S. Border Patrol agent, taps into a surveillance system, takes on the eye of a drone, and even authorizes the use of deadly force against border crossers in the hopes of protecting the pan-cyborgian future.

People flock to such movies, which draw in tens of millions of viewers and hundreds of millions of dollars—boundary contests being an ancient and reliable source of drama. And while territorial incursion today mostly takes the form of people fleeing poverty, climate disaster, or state-backed or state-dismissed violence, the incursion itself is typically portrayed as the act of violence, not the original and actual act of violence that pushed the people to flee in the first place. Borders, in other words, reframe human mobility to signify it as a threat, invoking the need for military-style protectionism and placing the supposed security of the nation over the security of a person.

The implausible and grossly exaggerated nightmare of a cross-border catastrophe translates into hundreds of billions of dollars spent on anti-migrant matériel, including drones, blanket surveillance, and excessively armed guards trained to chase down and sometimes shoot families searching for dignity or safety. (And while drugs are trafficked across borders, most of them are smuggled through ports of entry, and the most effective method to counter drug trafficking is to stem demand, which is not achieved with anti-tank vehicles or moats.)

*The Terminator's* vision disturbingly echoes the Defense Threat Reduction Agency<sup>1</sup>: “Threats against our country are evolving. Global adversaries seek to destroy our nation’s security. They do not restrict themselves to borders, boundaries, or conventions,” reads one online pamphlet

celebrating the agency’s importance.

Unsurprisingly, nowhere does the Defense Threat Reduction Agency acknowledge the border-busting of the U.S. military’s frequent incursions into dozens of countries where they terrorize, kill, and basically taunt terrorists into being.

Neither terrorism nor fear are stymied by walls, as much as defense contractors and wall builders may want you to believe. The threat of terrorism, however, and its terrifying specter, may very well be increased by wall construction. Not only does the presence of armed border guards and soldiers increase harassment and discrimination against locals; it also provokes the very fear it’s meant to quell.

Terrorists, in fact, want walls; they want to see a nation’s fear displayed. As terrorism researcher Brian Jenkins has commented, “Terrorists like to see a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.”

A study from the Cato Institute found that in the forty-plus years between 1975 and 2017, a total of seven people who entered the United States illegally have been convicted of planning terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Not one of them crossed into the country from Mexico. Not one of their plots were carried through, and not a single person was killed or injured by any of the convicted men. The only known terrorists in the last half century who *did* cross the U.S.–Mexico border—ethnic Albanians from Macedonia—were brought into the country as children in 1984 and were arrested over two decades after their entry for a foiled plot to attack Fort Dix, New Jersey.

The second most convincing case for the need to open borders is that borders are practically untenable. They require not only persistent physical demarcation—border guards, walls, detention centers—but also cultural reification through the politics of fear and othering, as well as nationalist mythmaking and extravagantly violent

schemes to draw and defend borders. That is, borders don't last on their own. They need constant coaxing and sacrifice to last. "Walls rarely work," notes border scholar Reece Jones, adding, however, that they are "powerful symbols of action against perceived problems." The unflappable insistence on territorial integrity—a stance taken by nationalists the world over—supposes that the political map is organized as it should be. Historical forces, however, are and always have been mercurial. A constantly quivering, amoebic, picture-in-motion better represents the actual limits and sovereignty of nation states than any static snapshot.

It's easy (and facile) to think of the map as fixed. The way it hangs on the wall, the staid hunks of motionless countries, the simplistic vision of world order represented by squiggled lines and contrasting colors—as if representing divine decree. We recognize and often think of countries by their territorial outlines: the boot of Italy, the logo-map of the United States, the stamp of Australia, and the unmistakable rough blocks of western Europe. But what does the map really capture, and what does it miss?<sup>2</sup> How closely does territory align with the idea or the actual workings of a nation state? And what about the world's many contested borders, "failed states," or the numerous semi-autonomous regions of the world, such as Somaliland, Iraqi Kurdistan, Zapatista territory in southern Mexico, the territory of Naga people living between India and Myanmar, or the nearly six hundred Indigenous Nations spread throughout territory claimed by the United States? What about the nomadic Romani? Or the stateless people who fall between the cracks of nation states and yet, like the rest of us, live on land purportedly belonging to a recognized nation state?

Besides a few rocky or sandy outposts unclaimed by any country—such as Bir

Tawil, a strip of terra nullius crushed between Egypt and Sudan, or Rockall, a molar shaped, guano-covered splat of stone in the North Atlantic—every other spit, prairie, mountain, beach, and forest on the planet is claimed by one country or another. "Every map is a fiction, *a legend*," writes historian and journalist Frances Stonor Saunders. "It is no more the territory than memory is the past."

And while national outlines may seem relatively stable in the twenty-first century, such global cartographical stasis is an anomaly. Elie Kedourie, in his study on nationalism, writes, "What now seems natural was once unfamiliar, needing argument, persuasion, evidences of many kinds." Such argument, persuasion, and evidences take many forms.

THE MOUSTACHES ARE IMPORTANT. So are the men's flexibility, their long legs, muscled arms, mean mugs.

The infantrymen stand en garde with peacock helmets on their heads, puttees over their boots, Mickey Mouse gloves on their hands. At bugle call, they burst out of stillness to swing their arms like berserking clock hands, high-kicking khaki-covered legs above their heads as they jackknife into formation. Then the gates are swung open. The crowd, sometimes thousands large, hails the spectacle at the Attari-Wagah border gate—two parallel gates, one controlled by each side, India and Pakistan—applauding the brief moment of aperture, then the snapping shut of one of the most contentious borders in the world. Two of the soldiers (one from each nation) twist on their heels and goose-step fast-forward toward the other, dime-stopping when they're level and twisting face to face. Then, clasping hands in three quick, big up-and-down pumps of a handshake, they quickly twist and high-kick away from each other, back to their prospective sides. The gates

swing swiftly shut.

The Pakistan Rangers and India's Border Security Force have performed the stomping pantomime of aggression and reconciliation every afternoon since 1959. You can marvel at snippets of it on YouTube. After the handshake, separation, and gate-slaming, the infantrymen yell "Huz-zah!" and drummers on each side accompany further kicks and heel-slams as two other infantrymen swivel back to the gate, again stomping, kicking, and flaring toward culmination. In near-perfect synchronization, a guard on each side angrily yanks back open the gate. Two other soldiers, chests puffed, feathers trembling—one on each side, each in their respective colors—high-kick into the middle of the road, facing off from about thirty feet away and, in time with a deep tom-tom of the drum, raise their arms, flexing, glaring, practically growling at each other. (It seems laughable, until one recalls that these are two nuclear powers whose shows of force do not always end peacefully.)

Then, with a few more histrionic feather fluffs, the gates are closed, again, the flags are pulled down, the border is reasserted, and the crowd trickles home.

All borders, the world over, bear or disguise such pageantry: it's what a border is. As much as a capitol, flag, or sash—a parade of synchronized goose-steppers or line of tanks—a border wall, or even a border gate, reveals a nationalist fiction based on a mythically constructed present and an often-apocryphal past more than any geographic, cultural, or political truth. "The state border, although physically at the extremities of the polity," writes geographer Nick Megoran of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, "can be at the heart of nationalist discourse about the meaning of the nation."

In the 1930s, King Carol II of Romania proposed digging a 36-foot-deep

moat along Romania's border with Russia. He wanted to fill it with oil and light it on fire to turn the border into a "wall of liquid fire." Over a millennium ago, China began building what would become a 13,000-mile crenellated monster that snaked over mountains and across a huge swath of Asia. The German Democratic Republic, beginning in 1961, erected an Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart and shot anyone who tried to cross it. More recently, Trump wanted a black, hot-to-the-touch, "beautiful wall"—even claiming it would be a gift from those he wanted to keep out. The above-mentioned walls were mostly about containment, about rallying against and even creating a foreign enemy. They all expressed an outward-facing aggression partially disguised as security infrastructure. But that's not how border walls function, or fully function. (George Washington, in calling for a "Chinese wall or a line of troops" to "restrain land jobbers and the incroachment [*sic*] of settlers upon the Indian Territory," understood that a wall served to keep people in, to help achieve governmentality, more than efficiently keeping people out.) As U.S. Border Patrol agents frequently admit, walls obviously slow people down, or redirect them, but they don't stop them. A wall protects the idea of a nation more than the nation itself.

While some walls are indeed more simply about keeping people out, such as the Gaza-Israel barrier, the act of "bordering" is most often a response to indigestion in the belly of the nation. And many borders across the globe have been imposed on nations rather than built by them. Such is the case with the so-called Line of Control between India and Pakistan.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1947, British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe found himself in charge of the fate of a subcontinent. As the freshly appointed head of the Boundary Commis-

sion, Radcliffe was tasked with dividing up the British India territories of Bengal and Punjab—and was given just a few weeks to complete the task. So it was that Radcliffe drew the border so theatrically defended and celebrated at Attari–Wagah.

After three and a half centuries of brutal and exploitative control of the region, with the last ninety years as official imperial overlord of the British Raj, the United Kingdom was officially abdicating colonial rule. Deeply in debt from two world wars, and facing pressure from increasingly militant anti-colonial movements, the UK was ceding official control of the crown jewel of the British Empire to its inhabitants. Radcliffe was left a task over which white colonists had been scratching their heads for a century: how to sort out borderlines in territory that was much less tidy jigsaw and more watercolor blur of ethnicities, religions, and community ties.

Despite the jagged and shifting complexity of relations between people and the territory, Radcliffe and his commission contrived to divide the subcontinent solely on the basis of religion: the so-called “Radcliffe line” would separate a Hindu-majority India in the center from Muslim-majority East and West Pakistan on its wings, with a smattering of independent princely states throughout. Neat division not being remotely possible, what resulted was a labyrinthine confusion of over one hundred enclaves (a portion of East Pakistan entirely inside India), counter-enclaves (an enclave within an enclave), and even one counter-counter-enclave, Dahala Khagrabari, in which a little pocket of India sat in a little pocket of Bangladesh, which sat in a bigger pocket of India entirely surrounded by Bangladesh. (The enclaves were a legacy from Mughal rule, which also imposed its own lacerating lines of control on the land. By 2015, most of the enclaves were abolished.)

The fear and reality of religious violence that immediately followed in the partition’s wake displaced over fourteen million people and killed hundreds of thousands—some estimates range as high as two million dead.<sup>3</sup> And the decades since witnessed a series of wars between India and Pakistan; a genocide and civil war that created Bangladesh out of what was once East Pakistan; and an ongoing, violent stalemate between the two nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, over the status of Kashmir—a conflict that threatens, every few years, to erupt into cataclysmic nuclear attack and counterattack.

After a few weeks, with his carving done, and with the heat of the subcontinent disagreeing with him, Radcliffe returned to England. As poet W. H. Auden described Radcliffe’s time in India:

a bout of dysentery kept him constantly  
on the trot, But in seven weeks it was  
done, the frontiers decided, A continent  
for better or worse divided.

For the two million people dead, and the stability of the region, it was definitely for worse. Perhaps in a show of his own contrition, Radcliffe refused to be compensated for his work (he had been contracted for five thousand dollars), and he later burned all of his notes, referring to what would become known as the Radcliffe Line as “this bloody line.”

The lines violently drawn would be violently redrawn, again and again, not only by border ceremonies but by deadly border enforcement. Today, the Indian Border Security Force deploys 245,000 agents on the Pakistani and Bangladeshi borders. They have a standing shoot-to-kill order against any people jumping the fence, and in the first decade of the twenty-first century Indian border guards shot to death about a thousand Bangladeshis. One notorious case was of a 15-year-old Bangladeshi girl, who was shot after her dress snagged in the

wall's barbed wire. She was left hanging off the wall for hours, as she called for help and slowly bled to death. Just in 2020, Indian border guards killed at least 51 migrants crossing the India–Bangladesh border.<sup>4</sup>

Radcliffe was remarkable for not knowing about the region's history or current reality, not to mention his lack of personal stake in its future. But as an arbiter of international boundaries, he was hardly an anomaly. As a rule to which there are few exceptions, the globe's current borders are the result of imperial horse-trading, wars of expansion and conquest, and ragged lines drawn clumsily through integrated communities. Whether carved up by colonialist patricians trying to cram notions into nation states, or the outcome of aggressive land-grabbing and score-settling, our current system of borders does not take into account local histories, realities, or the needs or will of the people that they divide.

It is in Kashmir where the Radcliffe line stops. The British left that disputed territory for India and Pakistan to resolve on their own, and they immediately went to war over it. Though the conflict was never completely settled, the sides came to a cease-fire and established the still hotly contested Line of Control, which is the current *de facto* border cleaving the region into two, though it is yet to be a legally recognized international border.

If you take the Radcliffe Line and the Line of Control together, the effective border between India and Pakistan is eighteen hundred miles in length, about the length of the U.S.–Mexico border. It is, as writer and activist Suchitra Vijayan writes in *Midnight's Borders*, “one of the most complex, violent, and dangerous boundaries in the world.” The length of it is illuminated by 150,000 floodlights, whose shine can be seen from space, and much of it is mined and heavily fortified. India has imposed severe restrictions on the area—in both of

the contested and heavily militarized states of Kashmir and Jammu—including a years-long curfew and information blockade that began in 2019: blocking landlines, cell phone signals, and the internet. The Indian government clamped down on the region at the same time that they revoked the “special status” agreement, basically wresting more

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control from the states. The move effectively made India a settler-colonial power in Kashmir, Vijayan explains, as Kashmiris remain subject to detention, torture, execution, and disappearance in a disturbing cycle of violence. In this way, India justifies, both implicitly and explicitly, much of the repression with the border itself.

The Line of Control embodies what is inherent to all borders: creating “the crisis it's trying to avoid,” as anthropologist Mohamad Junaid explained to me. When the Line of Control was drawn, “suddenly everything became criminalized, illegal. Movement that had been happening for thousands of years was now illegal.” Even in the last few decades, it was still possible, though difficult or even dangerous, to cross back and forth. Now, it's all but impossible. People are shot, detained, or disappeared. As long as the Line of Control remains, Junaid reiterated, the border “will remain a powder keg.” There are lots of such kegs along the region's borders.

On the other side of Pakistan, the Durand Line, drawn in 1893 by Sir Mortimer



Durand, marked the divide between British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan, as it was then called, cutting right through Pashtun and Baloch land. Three decades later, the Afghanistan government officially annulled the line, and as recently as 2017, former Afghan president Hamid Karzai reminded Pakistan, via tweet, that “#Afghanistan hasn’t and will not recognize the #Durand line”—though it remains the internationally recognized border. Such militarized borders proliferate: head north past Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, which has planted mines along its border with Tajikistan.

On the other side of Pakistan, too, on its edge with Iran, a wall is being raised. Head further east on the other side of Bangladesh, and you’ll run into another wall as the Bangladeshis seek to keep out the stateless Rohingya people, who have traditionally lived in lands now claimed by Myanmar and suffered genocide in 2017. One of the largest refugee camps in the world, the Kutupalong settlement in the port city of Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, is the provisional and precarious home to around seven hundred thousand Rohingya refugees. Its network of camps have seen deadly fires, and, for an extended period in 2021, Bangladesh cut off all internet for the nearly quarter million refugees.

As more borders around the world are raised, hardened, thickened, and sometimes mined, as countries seek to defend their “homeland” from “foreigners,” it’s illuminating to step back and ask a simple question: What is a country?

The colloquial term for a nation state describes an agglomeration of people and government simplified into a few ideas (typically based on self-conceptions of racial or religious community) organized by institutions and laws, and pasted over a territory marked by treaty or wall. “The essence of a nation is that all of its individual

members have a great deal in common and also that they have forgotten many things,” wrote Ernest Renan, one of the early scholars of the nation state. “Unity,” he adds—essential for country-building—“is always brutally established.”

France for the French (or so the common understanding goes), China for the Chinese, America for Americans. “The French,” however, are composed of Celtic, Iberian, and Germanic peoples, as well as, more recently, Arab-Berber, Pied-Noir, Basque, and Fulani, among many other so-called races. “The Chinese” are Han, Uighur, Manchu, Hui, Tibetan, Zhuang, among myriad other ethnic groups. And “Americans”—despite melting pot claims and overt efforts to mask over disparities or suppress cultural difference through forced Americanization (whether Henry Ford’s grading of his employees on their levels of embodying American culture or the brutal and coercive Anglicization and assimilation of Native Americans)—are a wide-ranging, polyglot, poly-religious, poly-ethnic collage of humanity.

Religion is another commonly cited national glue, but examples of so-called mono-religious nations are examples of nations that in fact ignore—more often, suppress—religious and atheistic minorities. The people of India, despite its modern religious conception and its repressive Hindu nationalist ruling party, are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, and Zoroastrian, among many others. Even Italy and Saudi Arabia are religiously pluralistic, and have, often violently, imposed the facade of religious singularity. As Massimo d’Azeglio, one of the pioneers of Italian unification, put it in 1861, “We have made Italy; now we must make Italians.”

Currently, India—often hailed as the world’s largest democracy, and the country that sends more migrants abroad than any other in the world—is engaging in a frenzy of religious nationalism as its police forces

target, detain, disenfranchise, and expel Muslims. In 2018, the far eastern Indian state of Assam—sequestered off from the rest of the country by an isthmus of national territory squeezed between Bhutan and Bangladesh—published a National Register of Citizens, in which they purposely left off nearly four million mostly Muslim people that the head of India’s far-right national party referred to as *ghuspetiyas*, or infiltrators. Anybody left off of the registry had to face a tribunal and bear the burden of proving their citizenship. Writer Siddhartha Deb referred to the move as the “largest mass disenfranchisement project in the twenty-first century.” The policies have been compared to Nazi Germany’s Reich Citizenship Law.

Female Muslims in Assam have a particularly hard time proving their citizenship, as many women marry young, don’t hold jobs, aren’t educated, and are legally disallowed from inheriting property, leaving them without the necessary paperwork to prove their ties to the territory. One attorney who represents those newly rendered stateless referred to Assam’s policies as “manufacturing foreigners.” It is a tidy formulation of what all borders do.

**A**FRICA IS RIFE WITH EXAMPLES of the ungainly and consequential imposition of the nation state on territories that are in constant ethnic, linguistic, and religious flux. Take Angola—though most African states have similar, and similarly brutal, histories—a large multiethnic country in western Africa comprised of Ovimbundu, Ambundu, Bakongo, *mestico*, and other ethnicities, as well as hundreds of tribes that spill over and across the country’s borders, which Portuguese colonizers first established and officialized in the 1885 Berlin Conference. One of the troubling legacies of that colonial history is that the Bakongo people, whose traditional lands

stretched from modern-day Angola into the neighboring Republic of the Congo and Gabon, as well as Democratic Republic of the Congo (where they are a majority ethnicity), are cut through by a crosshatch of borders. The Bundu dia Kongo, a separatist and irredentist movement, meanwhile, is seeking a unified state, challenging what the Congo is, who controls it, and who lives within it. Unsurprisingly, border tensions frequently flare, exposing the anxiety between ethnic consciousness and territoriality.

The story repeats itself throughout the continent: artificial states cutting community ties by imposing borders, pitting ethnic groups against each other as they jockey for national power. There’s a pull, of course, a natural human need to belong together in a coherent and stable community—a need that was historically satisfied by the family, neighborhood, or broader community. In the last 150 years, however, writes Elie Kedourie, “such institutions all over the world have had to bear the brunt of violent social and intellectual change, and it is no accident that nationalism was at its most intense where and when such institutions had little resilience and were ill-prepared to withstand the powerful attacks to which they became exposed.” Kedourie published those words in 1960. In the sixty-plus years since, the institutions he was referring to—traditionally organized religion and family structures—have undergone even more profound revolutions. No wonder the cry for borders in the form of nationalism is growing ever-screamingly louder.

Another argument for closed borders around nation states is based on geography. Landscape, however, has little to nothing to do with the drawing of borders. As historian Rachel St. John writes, the U.S.–Mexico border was created by a “collective act of imagination.” We’ve already seen examples of borders decoupled from

geography in the heart of Africa, and Spanish and British holdings on either side of the Strait of Gibraltar are other exemplary cases of the geographic illogic of bordering. The British still claim a 2.5-square-mile spearhead at the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula, land that was captured by the British during the 1701–1714 War of Spanish Succession, part of a long and bloody balancing act between European empires. Whereas referendums in the past fifty years show overwhelming support for

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the British citizens in Gibraltar to remain part of the United Kingdom, the control makes zero geographic sense. Similarly, about fifteen miles across the same straight, Spain keeps its grip on Ceuta, abutting Morocco on the northern tip of Africa. The small exclave has proven a tempting landing spot for thousands of Africans seeking to reach European territory (even if attached to the continent of Africa). Spain, meanwhile, has walled off the land with high fences topped with razor wire, which hasn't stopped migrants from storming the barricades. Regular, violent, and sometimes deadly clashes between Spanish border guards and desperate migrants bloody that particular line.

Even when borders are marked by natural landmarks, such as rivers, seas, or mountains, they are often denaturalized or “weaponized” by the act of bordering. The Evros-Meriç River between Turkey and Greece—which was dammed, rerouted,

its banks clear-cut, and then speckled with guideposts, detention centers, anti-tank moats, fences, and walls—is one such example of a national boundary marker turned into a militarized hellscape.

What are all these boundaries describing? What are they protecting, or purporting to protect? Indeed, what—to return to the pertinent question—is a nation state?

The legal definition, as established in 1933 at the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, declares the nation state to “possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states.”

A number of internationally recognized sovereign countries, however, don't come close to meeting these criteria, as writer and foreign policy analyst Joshua Keating makes clear in *Invisible Countries: Journeys to the Edge of Nationhood*. Following Russia's invasion in 2014, and again in 2022, Ukraine isn't in full control of large swaths of its territory. And yet it seems abundantly more of a nation state than some of its European counterparts today. Syria's population has been so widely displaced—nearly six million refugees having fled in recent years—that it can hardly be said to have a permanent population. And while Somalia, for nearly three decades, has had no functioning central government, the independent state of Somaliland, which does have a functioning government, remains internationally unrecognized except by Kenya and Taiwan.

Another enduring and oft-cited definition of a nation state comes from sociologist Max Weber, who defines it as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” The *claim* itself is important here. And it is what the scholarship of political scientist Benedict

Anderson has proven: that a country, in many ways, is formed by its own rhetorical insistence. Of particular significance are the novel and the newspaper, Anderson argues, which provide “the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation.”

Trying to refashion so much of the world along national lines has not led to more peace and stability. “On the contrary, it has created new conflicts, exacerbated tensions, and brought catastrophe to numberless people innocent of all politics,” Kedourie writes.

Or, as journalist Francis Wade argues, it is genocide, pogroms, and other “organizing” techniques that continue to be employed by states “in their unending efforts to build more socially and culturally cohesive societies.” “As long as the nation-state remains the defining institution of modern societies,” Wade continues, “those forms of violence will persist as key means of political engineering.”

The problem, as many observers note, is that most nation states do not even remotely come close to resembling the homogenous ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious qualities of a single nation. There is never any simple “us here, them there,” to quote former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak. Consider, to return again to the United States, the wide and often-irreconcilable differences between a rancher outside of Omaha, a white coastal Mainer, a Puerto Rican in Fajardo, a Black kid in Detroit, a stevedore in American Samoa, a Somali American in Minneapolis, a cosmopolitan in Seattle, a white retiree in South Carolina, or a Latino shopkeeper in Brownsville. What do they have in common, except for the fiction of unity? They might all believe in the same “American” principles, such as democracy or a few specific individual freedoms. But let’s go back to the shopkeeper in Brownsville. He prob-

ably has more in common with his neighbor in Matamoros, a stone’s throw across the international line into Mexico, than he does with the kid in South Central or the coastal Mainer. And both the Brownsvillean and the Matamoreño may well believe in the same “American” freedoms. But they are not compatriots, because of an 1848 Treaty that drew the U.S.–Mexico border along the Rio Grande River. The Brownsvillean can travel north for almost two thousand miles, cross five state borders, exploring wildly different cultures, languages, religions, and cuisines, but can’t take twenty steps south without permission and a passport. And if he tried to go south without permission and a passport, he could be arrested, detained, and deported. Of course, the consequences would be much more severe if his Matamoros neighbor tried to go north. He might feel the full weight of the U.S. government on him: arrest, possible prosecution, and long-term detention, which could include solitary confinement and psychological torture before deportation back across the line into Mexico.

Anderson details a similar paradox in the unlikely creation of Indonesia, forged out of tens of thousands of islands, over seven hundred separate languages, and over six hundred different ethnic groups. People on the eastern coast of Sumatra are only a few miles away from their neighbors across the Straits of Malacca, home to ethnically related populations of the western littoral of the Malay Peninsula with whom they share a similar language and a common religion and often intermarry. However, in the founding of Indonesia in 1945, those Sumatrans have come to understand the Ambonese—who live on islands thousands of miles east of them, with whom they have no common language, ethnicity, nor religion—as “fellow-Indonesians,” while, flabbergastingly, the same Sumatrans regard the nearby relative Malays as foreigners.

Concocted nations are little more than agreements of what is agreed upon. They create boundaries that both bind (within) and distinguish (without). So, do they need to be closed in order to function? A quick glance within the Schengen Area of Europe reveals that the answer is no: borders can mark cultural or linguistic difference, they can serve as organizational political lines, but they need not be unpassable, militarized, dehumanizing, or exploitative to do so.

**A**NOTHER POPULAR DEFENSE of borders is that, as Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed, “We don’t have a country without a border.” Similarly, Obama White House advisor Cecilia Muñoz said that “[t]here are policy decisions to be made about who should be an immigrant, and that includes removing folks who don’t qualify under the law. That’s, I think, just the reality of being a nation.”

But how does a closed border legitimize a country? The U.S. border is wide open to goods, money, the well connected, and the wealthy—so why is keeping poor people out important for maintaining a nation state? Though there are no formal financial requirements for Mexicans obtaining non-immigrant visas to enter the United States, consular officers consider a person’s finances and employment before issuing a visa, and poor people almost never get the pass.

In other words, the border is supposed to keep only *some people* out. Compare the triple fencing, watch towers, paramilitary Border Patrol, ground sensors, drones, and billions of dollars spent keeping people out of Southern California to the Derby Line in Vermont at the northern U.S. border, where an opera house is literally divided down the middle between United States and Canada, where the international divide is marked by a strip of black on the floor of the town library’s reading room. You aren’t

legally permitted to enter and remain in the United States from there, but unless you’re looking down, your book-browsing could take you back and forth across an international divide without any notice.

Journalist Michelle García writes of the concept of “border theater,” or what she calls the “collective performance of American identity.” It is, as García writes, “a mythology that holds the nation hostage.” While the mythology is of a cohesive nation, the reality is, in fact, division.

“The mutability of borders,” write philosopher Edward S. Casey and psychologist Mary Watkins in *Up Against the Wall*, “reflects their status as cultural constructions endowed with meaning.” Though it may be hard to remember under the weight of the status quo, if borders have any defining or lasting quality, it is indeed their mutability. Just since the beginning of the twentieth century, the U.S. border has shifted a dozen or so times, taking on the territories of Alaska and Hawaii, as well as numerous tiny island chains, conquering and then releasing the Philippines, and subsuming Guam, American Samoa, and the Virgin Islands. In the previous century, the border was even more jittery. When nativists or jingoists want to “hold the line,” we would do well to remember that the line is shifting and slippery, and that, if history is any guide, tomorrow the border won’t be where it is today.

**I**N FRANZ KAFKA’S PARABLE *Before the Law*, a man from the country approaches “the law” and asks a gatekeeper to permit him entry. “It is possible,” says the gatekeeper, “but not now.” After the man peers into the law through the gate, the gatekeeper warns him: “I am powerful,” he says. “And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper.” From room to room stand other gatekeepers, “each more powerful than the other. I can’t endure even one glimpse of the third.”

The man from the country wasn't expecting this. The law, he thought, "should always be accessible for everyone." Plus, the gate is wide open. After looking at the gatekeeper again, he decides to wait for permission before trying to go inside.

Sitting on a stool by the gate, the man ends up waiting his whole life. As he is fading into death, he whispers to the gatekeeper: "Everyone strives after the law . . . so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?" The gatekeeper replies, "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it."

The parable might seem as impregnable as the law it describes, but it captures something essential about borders: that the border itself generates transgression. "After all, if there were no borders, there would be no migrants—only mobility," notes migration scholar Nicholas de Genova. The gate is simultaneously open and guarded, inviting and yet impassable. This observation echoes one made by Michel Foucault, who writes, "A limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows." State borders are merely and also more than shadows, and their crossings are both entirely natural and radically transgressive. That is, the law of the border provokes what it prohibits.

In a keynote address delivered from the immigrant prison camp of Manus Island for a workshop at Oxford University,

Kurdish-Iranian poet and refugee Behrouz Boochani explains, echoing Kafka: "We are outside of any law. Humanitarian laws and international conventions are routinely and fundamentally broken. At the same time, we are victims of law. It is a new phenomenon, how we are living under law and at the same time outside of law."

"Wherever Law ends, Tyranny begins," John Locke wrote. And it is the border—the crucible of law and rightlessness—where Law and Tyranny meet.

#### NOTES

1. The DTRA is a sub-agency of the United States Department of Defense, which has played a critical role—along with private, for-profit contractor Raytheon—in helping Lebanon and Jordan secure their borders with Syria and Iraq by building infrastructure and conducting training.
2. As Benedict Anderson has it in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*: "A map anticipated spatial reality, not vice versa. In other words, a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent."
3. In a revealing and repugnant episode that lays bare the motivations behind bordering, even as Pakistan and India tried to divvy up their populations along religious lines and the human sorting commenced, Pakistan passed the Essential Services Maintenance Act. The law barred Hindu sanitation workers—the Dalits or "untouchables" who performed society's dirtiest work—from moving to India. In other words, they carved out an exception to be able to exploit needed workers.
4. The United States Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) has an attaché office in New Delhi to help with border policing.



# Culture Wars, Nationalism, and the Politics of History

DANIEL JOHNSON

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CENSORSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES is back. In 2022–2023, PEN America recorded 3,362 book-banning incidents, a 33 percent increase over 2021–2022. As well as ridding public schools of immoral content—including, in addition to “sexually explicit” material, books on physical abuse, health and well-being, and themes of grief and death—the new McCarthyites have worked for the passage of numerous state-level laws censoring teachers and subjects. Since 2021, more than forty state legislatures have introduced “divisive concepts” laws to prevent instruction in U.S. racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. And as of February 2024, more than thirty state bills have targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at American public colleges.<sup>1</sup>

The discipline of history has figured prominently in the right’s efforts to silence critical thought in education. Divisive concepts laws have been motivated largely by hysteria over critical race theory (CRT), which claims that racism in the United States has been historically embedded in institutions and is not simply a product of individual prejudice. Aside from it being demonstrably true that racism pervaded American legal, educational, and political institutions from the country’s founding,

the theory has been around for decades and is therefore far from new.<sup>2</sup>

The recent panic around CRT is attributable to the growing awareness of the history of systemic racism in the United States following police murders of Black Americans and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. A divisive concept often paired with anti-CRT legislation is the 1619 Project, initially a 2019 special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* that was followed by a podcast, educational curriculum, bestselling book, and Hulu TV docuseries. According to issue editor Nikole Hannah-Jones, the project aimed to reframe American history by imagining 1619, the year English colonists in Virginia first purchased enslaved Africans, as “our nation’s birth year,” in a direct challenge to the symbolism of 1776, conventionally associated with American founding.<sup>3</sup>

The conservative reaction to the *Times Magazine* special issue and CRT was predictable. President Trump, a man unlikely to ever have read a work of serious history, claimed the “crusade against American history” would “destroy our nation” and quickly assembled a 1776 Commission, whose report on the supposed crisis was so absurdly pitiful it received little attention even in conservative circles. A number of states banned the teaching of both CRT and the 1619 Project curriculum.<sup>4</sup>

The prize for authoritarian reaction must go to Florida, however, where Gov-

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error Rick DeSantis instituted the most sweeping restrictions on classroom discussions of race and gender in the nation. In addition to barring educators from teaching about sexual orientation and gender identity, DeSantis has waged a war on African American studies programs and the teaching of racism in the United States. In July 2023, SB 266, which prohibits professors from teaching that racism was designed “to maintain social, political and economic inequities,” took effect in Florida.<sup>5</sup> We have arrived in Orwellian territory.

The furor over the U.S. past also spawned a controversy within the historical discipline. Following the publication of the 1619 magazine issue, five established historians published a letter in the *Times* condemning the project’s factual errors—mainly involving Hannah-Jones’s hyperbolic introductory essay—and the “closed process” behind its making.<sup>6</sup> A Twitter firestorm followed, and the historians’ dispute was soon featured in mainstream and liberal outlets like the *Atlantic*, *New Yorker*, and *Harper’s*, to name a few. The American Historical Association (AHA), the discipline’s flagship professional organization in the United States, has been consistently engaged in the controversy and has developed a number of initiatives to help teachers as they find themselves “on the front lines of a conflict over America’s past.”<sup>7</sup>

What has been unquestioningly assumed across the political spectrum, in academic as well as public discourse, is a highly nationalistic understanding of the purpose of historical knowledge. Conservative and liberal interlocutors alike agree that the fundamental *function* of history education is to instill a distinctive civic identity among the country’s youth. For conservatives, history education should confirm a belief in the United States as an exceptional country endowed by God with a mission to spread freedom and democracy

across the globe. Liberals, by contrast, point to founders’ hypocritical commitment to natural rights in theory and slavery in fact, while nevertheless retaining faith in an exceptional “American creed.” In the liberal telling, if Americans could only acknowledge the “origin sin” of slavery and racism we might finally fulfill Thomas Jefferson’s noble proclamation of inalienable rights for all. Conservatives and liberals are in agreement over the fundamental terms of the debate, however: the idea, in Hannah-Jones’s words, that history is a “story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.”<sup>8</sup>

This is bad history and, from any serious left perspective, bad politics. While there is nothing wrong with studying national politics, movements, or cultures, there *is* something deeply problematic about assuming the purpose of historical knowledge is to narrate to ourselves a story about our national self—in this case whether the United States was born in pure goodness or is stained with original sin. Leaving aside its metaphysical (and highly ahistorical) underpinnings, such a view fetishizes the nation and makes a political entity the sole subject of historical interest or worth. History becomes a story of triumph or betrayal, a struggle for the “soul of a nation.” It is not a question of *whether* the United States is an exceptional beacon of democracy, but of *who* is responsible for making it so.<sup>9</sup>

Progressive teachers and scholars should reject such narrow provincialism. History is an inherently comparative discipline that demands knowledge of long-term processes as well as sudden ruptures at a variety of levels, from village or town to regional, national, and global. Making the study of the past a national morality tale flattens history’s complexity and richness and implicitly privileges an electoral and legalist approach to change. Centering “our” history on an *idea*—freedom and de-

mocracy's embodiment in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence—rather than the changing relationship between socioeconomic, cultural, and political processes, is ultimately an exercise in competing idealisms, not history.

It may therefore be useful to step back and examine the origins of the historical profession itself, specifically within the context of public education and the emergence of the nation-state. The nineteenth-century development of public education and the professionalization of history were motivated by a desire to create loyal and obedient citizens, and in the United States these efforts were often related to fears of “un-American” ideas imported by immigrants. (In the case of Native Americans, assimilation through education was a genocidal project to eradicate Indigenous cultures.)<sup>10</sup> The creation of history as the source-based profession we know today was inextricably tied to nation-making and educational indoctrination.

Fortunately, in the twentieth century methods of studying history emerged that transcended national boundaries. People's history, or history-from-below, privileged the experiences and self-activity of working people on the assumption that knowledge of popular struggles in the past might have something to teach us about making a better future. First emerging in the interwar period, methods of history from below gained academic credibility in the 1960s as practitioners shed light on vast areas of the past in a radical humanist project of intellectual democratization.<sup>11</sup> The conservative backlash of subsequent decades included an ideological war on humanities education, however, and the current history culture wars are a continuation of this unfinished struggle. How this war should be waged should be a major concern for socialist educators, writers, and activists.

## Making Nationalist History

All human cultures tell stories about the past, and the writing of history is as old as writing itself. Developments beginning in the late eighteenth century would dramatically transform how history would subsequently be written and taught, however. Revolutionary movements across the Atlantic world created republics in North America, France, Haiti, and Latin America between the 1770s and 1830s. In Europe the emergence of a variety of competing nationalist, liberal, democratic, and socialist ideas would culminate in a revolutionary wave that swept the continent in 1848–1849. Though Europe's “springtime of peoples” was defeated, it was clear that in a new age of capitalist industry new forms of governance would be required.<sup>12</sup>

History would be central to the project of making nations. Romantic nationalists began collecting the traditional ballads and stories of common folk in the interest of making an organic “people” in Europe in the late eighteenth century, while the first academic chairs in history were established in Berlin and Paris in 1810 and 1812, respectively. Between the 1820s and 1890s historical journals appeared in German, Danish, Italian, French, English (in Britain and the United States), and Swedish. A desire to instill a national identity among the masses was also evident in the “invention of tradition”: the parades, holidays, and memorials paradoxically invented to foster a proper sense of the past. The ritual repetition of such “traditions” was intended to inculcate values and norms that would establish continuity with an appropriate, if contrived, past.<sup>13</sup>

The professionalization of history came relatively late in the United States. The AHA was established in 1884; its house journal, the *American Historical Review*, in 1895.<sup>14</sup> The importance of education to nationalist indoctrination was evident

from the country's beginnings, however. Revolutionary elites, steeped in classical political theory and history, emphasized the importance of an educated citizenry to republican forms of government. Early republican patriot elites envisioned women as the nation's primary educators, who would instill proper values of civic virtue and national identity in children (meaning, of course, boys). "Republican motherhood" therefore encouraged women's education while perpetuating a highly gendered ideology of domesticity.<sup>15</sup>

While early advocates for public schools were well-versed in classical republican beliefs in the need for an informed citizenry, the potential for class conflict in industrializing societies was a major stimulus to educational expansion. Horace Mann, the "father of American education," wrote in the 1840s that only schooling could keep laboring people in the United States from degenerating to the condition of British factory workers, who at the time were held in far greater subjection than were their peasant ancestors. Notably, it would do so not by helping common people demand economic and political rights, but by "disarming" the poor of their hostility to the rich. A major benefit of public education would be the prevention of riots and strikes through the opening of "a wider area over which the social feelings will expand," ostensibly making possible a rising tide to lift all boats.<sup>16</sup>

Mann's whiggish and depoliticizing vision was not the only view of education in the early republic. In the early 1790s the radical democrat, anti-Federalist, and teacher Robert Coram called for a national system of education freed from traditional elitist views of learning. Most controversially, Coram attacked European pedagogical methods in favor of Native American modes of knowledge and child rearing.<sup>17</sup> Beginning in the 1820s labor and women's

rights activists demanded universal public education as a matter of fundamental right, democratizing from below conventional genteel visions of schooling.<sup>18</sup>

More than anyone, however, it was Black people who recognized the power of education and knowledge. In his rousing and internationalist 1829 call for Black self-emancipation (a self-published work too radical for white abolitionist printers), David Walker attacked the ignorance in which enslaved people were held by contrasting it with the rich history of African arts and sciences. And, in contrast to mainstream reformers, rather than cite the Declaration of Independence's lofty ideals Walker looked to the recent Haitian Revolution for revolutionary inspiration.<sup>19</sup> The importance of literacy would be a constant theme in slave narratives through the Civil War, and following abolition in 1865 the establishment of schools was a key demand of freed people.<sup>20</sup>

However, as federal and state governments abandoned educational efforts in the South following the failure of Reconstruction, educational thinkers grew more concerned with how to "Americanize" and assimilate growing numbers of immigrants than with demands for a democratic form of education for all. With an era of violent class conflict beginning with the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 coinciding with an explosion of immigration from southern and eastern Europe, educational authorities dreaded a pending assault on WASP economic and cultural hegemony. Commissioner of Education William Torrey Harris claimed that if new immigrants weren't properly assimilated, they would "contribute to the degeneration of our political body and thus de-Americanize and destroy our national life."<sup>21</sup>

The ideology of Americanization conveniently dovetailed with the doctrines of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Frank

Gilbreth, whose time and motion studies sought to improve efficiency through the repetition and systematization of industrial tasks.<sup>22</sup> The inculcation of a proper sense of American identity would coincide with, and contribute to, making industrious and obedient workers. While rare voices, like those of the philosopher John Dewey, argued for a humanistic system of education that aimed at individual and social renewal, Progressives were generally of a technocratic orientation, favoring compulsory education in the interest of technological and industrial efficiency.<sup>23</sup>

With immigrants and Black Americans shepherded into vocational training programs justified through racist and classist devices like IQ tests, humanities education remained the preserve of a tiny elite. As future president (and historian) Woodrow Wilson put it in 1909: “We want one class of people to have a liberal education, and we want one class of persons, a very much larger class of persons, of necessity, to forego the privileges of a liberal education and fit into specific manual tasks.”<sup>24</sup> In 1895 there were only about a hundred full-time college teachers of history across the U.S., almost half of whom were trained in Germany where the modern university was established.<sup>25</sup> Though the Humboldtian model of education sought to integrate research with the arts and sciences across social classes, humanities higher education in the United States would remain the preserve of rich white men.

### Making People's History

Alternatives to mainstream education did emerge in the early-twentieth-century United States. Beginning with New York City's Rand School, Christian socialists and labor activists established schools that sought to raise political consciousness among the working classes. The Communist Party started labor schools in Boston,

New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle in the 1920s and 1930s. Though providing an important source of knowledge for working people (especially immigrants and Black Americans), such efforts would not fundamentally challenge educational norms in the United States.<sup>26</sup>

While the Second International (1889–1916) made the “national question” a subject of discussion for the global left, it was only in the interwar period that professional historians seriously began to question state- and nation-centric models of study. French historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre were brought to a shared belief in the need for a new kind of history by the experience of trench warfare in World War I. In 1929 they founded *Annales*, a journal dedicated to “overcoming disciplinary and national boundaries and promoting a more human, accessible history.”<sup>27</sup> Febvre coined the term “history from below” in 1932 in a comment on the Marxist historian Albert Mathiez, and over the mid-twentieth-century contributors to *Annales* deployed a variety of methods from the humanities and social sciences to produce innovative historical scholarship from a variety of left perspectives.<sup>28</sup>

During the same years that *Annales* was transforming historical practice Europe was descending once again into barbarism, as Bloch and Febvre were painfully aware. In his dedicatory letter to Febvre in *The Historian's Craft*, written in 1941, Bloch wrote that the comrades had long worked for “a wider and more human history,” but in the midst of a new world war their common task was under threat. In this now-classic work of historiography, Bloch derided historians’ “obsession with origins,” a fixation that too often produced histories in the service of value judgments, with history-as-judgment substituting for history-as-explanation.<sup>29</sup> This was an implicit critique

of the nationalist origin myths embodied in Fascism and Nazism with which Bloch was all too familiar. A Jewish member of the French Resistance under the Vichy regime, Bloch was captured in Lyons in 1944. On June 16, as the Nazis' hold on France began to weaken, Bloch was taken from his cell and shot in an open field with twenty-six other prisoners.<sup>30</sup>

The Depression era also saw important developments in history writing in the English-speaking world. In 1935 W.E.B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction*, a work that emphasized the agency of Black people in the United States during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Though now a classic, the work was largely ignored by professional historians at the time. In 1938 A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England* appeared, as did C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins*, a pioneering study of the Haitian Revolution. As important as these key studies were collaborative efforts like the New Deal's Federal Writers Project (FWP), which collected more than 2,300 first-hand accounts of slavery and 500 photographs of enslaved people. The collection remains an essential source base for researchers today, while the FWP and other New Deal projects are themselves evidence of the importance of people's struggles in transforming culture.<sup>31</sup>

The onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s produced a very different educational environment. The liberal consensus of mainstream U.S. politics and culture was reflected in a postwar "consensus school" of history, according to which the absence of a feudal past and a founding Lockean commitment to individual rights and private property distinguished American (meaning colonial English and U.S.) history from that of Europe. When mentioned at all, slavery and Indigenous dispossession were portrayed as mere aberrations in a longer narrative of progress.

Educators at all levels were victims of McCarthyite witch-hunts during these years, with as many as 600 teachers across the country losing their jobs. As programs like "Zeal for Democracy," introduced by Congress in 1947, encouraged the teaching of democracy in explicitly Cold War terms (U.S. democracy vs. Soviet totalitarianism), students were subjected to the psychological terror of films like the Federal Civil Defense Administration's *Duck and Cover* (1952), which instructed children how to respond to a nuclear attack.<sup>32</sup>

Yet out of the prospect of nuclear annihilation and the political apathy of the early Cold War grew new left movements that would dramatically advance the methods of people's history. In the UK the Communist Party Historians' Group (established in 1946) forged British Marxism, like *Annales* less a "school" than an orientation that utilized materialist analysis to provide new interpretations of change over time. Most influential was E.P. Thompson, whose 1963 opus *The Making of the English Working Class* single-handedly redefined the writing of social history. In an oft-cited preface Thompson argued for a relational and experiential understanding of class in highly polemical opposition to reigning structuralist interpretations of class as a "thing" abstracted from culture and consciousness. He famously sought to "rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity."<sup>33</sup>

A new left, and new approaches to history, were also emerging in the United States. The Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and a dramatic expansion of higher education encouraged young Americans to question the absence of workers, women, and people of color from history books. People's history, or new social



history (NSH), paid particular attention to the experiences and struggles of enslaved people, immigrants, and working-class women. The field of professional history was transformed as for the first time academic journals, book publishers, and university departments embraced previously neglected areas of study. It is this rich tradition of activism and scholarship that makes historians like James Oakes apoplectic when twenty-first-century journalists claim to have “discovered” some unexplored element of the past.<sup>34</sup>

The young New Left scholars who transformed humanities study were internationalist in outlook, with Vietnam and other anticolonial struggles in the global South central to their work and activism. Frightened conservatives took note, with rightwing intellectuals noting that it was on college campuses that “Communists, New Leftists, and other revolutionaries” were making especially deep inroads. Writing to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1971, soon-to-be Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell lamented the threats to American capitalism that were germinating on college campuses. Powell outlined a strategy for the funding of conservative think tanks and urged businesses to lobby boards of trustees for the hiring of conservative academics. Similar “action programs” would be created for high schools while staffs of researchers, writers, and speakers with media knowledge would be enlisted to reach the general public through television, radio, and print.<sup>35</sup>

The ending of the postwar boom and the crumbling of the postwar “consensus” between capital and labor coincided with the New Right’s new war of position.<sup>36</sup> These related developments led some analysts on the left to reconsider the phenomenon of nationalism. The Scottish political scientist Tom Nairn began an influential 1976 *New Left Review* article with the blunt claim: “The theory of nationalism

represents Marxism’s great historical failure.”<sup>37</sup> The next two decades witnessed a flourishing of studies on the origins and varied manifestations of nationalist ideologies and movements.

Benedict Anderson influentially theorized that the decline of religion and rise of secular rationalism, together with the expansion of print capitalism (specifically the novel and the newspaper), made possible the creation of nationalist “imagined communities.” While these cultural and economic processes emerged in Europe, it was among educated “creole pioneers” in the colonial Americas that modern nationalism originated.<sup>38</sup> Orthodox Marxists like Eric Hobsbawm, by contrast, placed the origins of nationalism solidly in nineteenth-century Europe, as nationalist ideologies originating from above would be shaped from below by “the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings, and interests of ordinary people.”<sup>39</sup>

While comparative studies of nationalism thrived, the dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of Third Way centrism was accompanied by a postmodernist “cultural turn” in academia that problematized twentieth-centuries verities, liberal as well as Marxist. In the discipline of history, at its best the cultural turn posed important questions to the reductionist assumptions of some social historians while shedding further light on the experiences of previously marginalized populations. These years also saw scholars expand their historical imaginations with regional, transoceanic, transnational, and global frameworks of inquiry. Less positively, the apparent disappearance of any alternative to liberal capitalism led many scholars to retreat into a postmodernist incomprehensibility that masqueraded as political radicalism.

The Great Recession of 2008–2009 exposed the false promises of neoliberal economics, Third Way politics, and post-

modernist relativism. However, it has generally been the right that has capitalized on the political vacuum created by these related failures. Dissatisfaction with the current order in the United States and across much of the world is especially prominent among young people; constructing an inclusive and egalitarian alternative to national populism will be central to forging an emancipatory future.

### **Remaking People's History in the Twenty-First Century**

In off-year elections in 2023, conservatives spectacularly failed to implement a triumphalist vision of the U.S. past and present. Moms for Liberty, the book-banning group formed in 2021 to oppose Covid-19 restrictions like mask and vaccine mandates, was unable to take over local school boards with their endorsed candidates, losing in Pennsylvania, Iowa, Ohio, and Virginia. It turns out that parents support children learning about subjects that might make them uncomfortable and disapprove of banning books and censoring teachers.<sup>40</sup>

Yet according to founder Tiffany Justice, Moms for Liberty is “just getting started.” The subjects of race, immigration, and sexuality enflame the hatred of others among the rightwing base, with “wokeness” a successful, if ill-defined, animating keyword. As important is the long-term goal of delegitimizing public education, an aim suggested by the financial support given to Moms for Liberty by groups like the Heritage Foundation.<sup>41</sup> The response of university administrations and the media to student activism regarding Israel’s genocidal war on Palestinians is yet another indication that education will remain a key arena of struggle for the foreseeable future.

The question for progressive educators, then, is how best to defend humanistic principles of free inquiry and public education as a common good from the right’s

desire to privatize education by demonizing teachers and censoring information. Liberal nationalists would argue that they are providing a more complex, complicated, and therefore accurate, portrayal of the U.S. past. Oppressed groups’ struggles for liberty and equality should undoubtedly stand at the center of history education, and teachers’ right and duty to teach how racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and homophobia have been manifested and opposed should be defended.

Whether teachers and historians on the left should leave unchallenged a functionalist and nationalist vision of history education is a very different question. In the 1960s, Civil Rights and New Left activists increasingly connected domestic policy with U.S. imperialism, and scholarship was crucial in making this connection. It is unfortunate that at a time when demands for racial justice, labor militancy, and student activism are on the rise historians and their organizations have remained in a defensive and nation-centric mode. While perhaps an understandable response to political demagoguery and reactionary legislation, it would be wise for historians to remember the elitist and nationalist origins of their own profession. Such self-consciousness might contribute to making history curricula that embrace a longer and broader past, and that explore struggles for communal and individual rights in a variety of settings and contexts.

In an article published on the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of America, Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted that in 1492 few people in Spain were very interested in the Genoese mariner’s voyage. Of far more consequence was the recent Spanish conquest of Granada in Andalusia, followed by the expulsion or forced conversion of Granada’s Muslim and Jewish populations. However, as Trouillot noted,

the year 1492 had come to function in the nineteenth century as a symbol for nationalist celebrations—in the United States, Spain, Italy, and throughout Latin America. Largely forgotten in public memory was the protracted fall of the Nasrid Dynasty, the ejection of non-Christians from the Iberian Peninsula, and Spain's consolidation of state power in Renaissance Europe.<sup>42</sup>

The next two years will see an explosion of commemorations for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Arguments over the meaning of “our founding” will undoubtedly be prominent in public commemorations and debates. Just as 1492 cannot be understood without the complex backdrop mentioned above, so knowledge of 1776 requires awareness of economic, cultural, and political developments occurring throughout early modern Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Combating the mythicization of history that incensed Trouillot, Bloch, and others requires more than a new origin story. It requires questioning the very nature and purpose of national origins stories.

What should history be if not a national origin story about “who we are as a people”? Some years ago, the great practitioner of history-from-below Natalie Zemon Davis told an interviewer that “the enormous range in ways of living and possible actions” in the past was a source of hope as well as despair. While there is plenty of tragedy and cruelty in history, it is also true that since things were different in the past “perhaps we’re in a position to make them a little different today.” We cannot replicate the past, nor can we use historical models and simply apply them to today. What history offers us is a fascinating and endless set of “ideas, points of views, perspectives, landmarks, indices—possibilities.”<sup>43</sup> We might do well to ask whether the history we teach offers possibilities, or platitudes.

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# Socialist Internationalism and the Chinese Working Class

*An Introduction*

RUO YAN AND ANDREW SEBALD

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IN JANUARY 2014, XU LIZHI penned “A Screw Fell to the Ground,” (一颗螺丝掉在地上), one poem in a collection he wrote during his soul-crushing experience as a Foxconn worker:

A screw fell to the ground  
In this dark night of overtime  
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking  
It won't attract anyone's attention  
Just like last time  
On a night like this  
When someone plunged to the ground.<sup>1</sup>

The poem is just one of several glimpses into the harrowing conditions of Foxconn workers in China. The circumstances were so oppressive that various workers committed suicide, believing it was their last hope for escape. Xu Lizhi himself committed suicide in October of the same year.

Xu's tragic death ironically came at the height of China's world-historic economic rise. Wage growth in China remained constant from 2007 to 2013, even as countries around the world suffered from the 2008 economic crisis. Even the rate of wage inequality, which had been rapidly increasing for decades, began to decline in

the immediate years following 2008.<sup>2</sup> For some left-wing researchers and activists, China's model of development offers the beginnings of an alternative to Western imperialism and capitalism, a bulwark of the global South. The Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, for example, touts the Chinese regime for “combining an ‘industrious revolution’ that is based on a social division of labor and small-scale decentralization with strategic socialist planning.”<sup>3</sup> Debates about China's economic model continue to rage on the socialist left, sharpened in recent years by the rising tensions between the United States and China. However, the experiences of Chinese workers like Xu are rarely centered in these discussions. Seldom is the connection made between the Chinese working class and its position in the present global economy, where China's communist past stands in contradiction to the struggles that the Chinese working class faces on a daily basis. Even on the rare occasions in which working-class voices and organizations are heard, there is little sense of how reforms are often carried out only after the repression, demobilization, or co-optation of independent workers' organizing.<sup>4</sup>

The silencing of the Chinese working class was no sudden disaster, but an escalation of bureaucratic suppression of independent working-class organization

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over decades. Shortly after Deng Xiaoping established four Special Economic Zones in the eastern coastal regions, workers' right to strike was removed from the state constitution in 1982. The ferocious crackdown on Tiananmen Square in May and June of 1989 crushed the last great uprising of Chinese workers, whose demands against the adverse effects of market reforms far exceeded the student protesters' liberal vision. Deng Xiaoping's policy decisions conveyed that China would no longer aim to challenge Washington's imperial liberal order; rather, it would aim to adapt to it and profit from it. Just as workers had been at the center of the resistance for freedom, so they were shoved into the crux of the burden of capital.<sup>5</sup> China's turn to U.S. capital was only enabled by the crushing of Chinese workers' mass mobilization in 1989. By the end of the following year, Huang Wenjun, then commercial minister at the Chinese Embassy in the United States, boasted to the *Los Angeles Times* that "the pace of U.S. investment [in China] has actually accelerated since June," and that "the prospects for U.S. investment in China are very bright."<sup>6</sup>

The party bureaucracy and affiliated elite firms and actors continue to be enriched by constraining the collective power of Chinese workers. While neoliberalism may not have razed China's economy as it did in Russia and other parts of the global South, it ravaged the agency of the Chinese working class in order to meet global demand, saving capitalism when it faced a crisis of profitability at the time it forced vast de-industrialization across Latin America. Political labor organizing in China abruptly halted in the 1990s with the fall of the China Free Labor Union (中国自由工会) in the wake of growing authoritarianism. The assurances of the "iron rice bowl" (铁饭碗) from Mao's era—stable job security for life and other benefits—were robbed from the Chinese workers, while State-Owned

Enterprises (SOEs) withheld menial payment from their furious employees. Workers organized while gaining little success, if any. Labor NGOs emerged as ersatz centers for worker advocacy in the brief period of liberalization, but they would meet fateful ends with the rise of President Xi Jinping's administration. The brutal suppression of the JASIC strike in 2018, and the everyday violence that labor organizers like Meng Han faced marked the logical end of the journey the Chinese ruling class had embarked on since the 1980s: the Chinese economy was catapulted into greatness on the bleeding backs of its once-heralded workers.

This special section presents the texts of five talks on Chinese labor, revised for publication. The series of talks had two key aims: 1) to equip socialists, radical students and workers, the Sinophone diaspora, and other fellow travelers with a basic understanding of the state of the Chinese working class; and 2) to encourage different organizations to develop concrete forms of international solidarity with Chinese workers—grounded on the principle of working-class political independence. The current terrain of internationalism unfortunately is dominated by forces antagonistic to the Chinese working class. Opposition to the Chinese regime is largely led by warmongering liberals (backed by some diaspora and human rights NGOs) eager to stoke Sinophobia and Great Power rivalry to preserve U.S. imperialism. On the other hand, though not at the helm of the imperialist system, the Chinese regime and its proxies are the most direct force of persecution of Chinese workers, keen on surveilling, targeting, and neutralizing any opposition at home and abroad. Worse yet, there is little space for trustworthy outlets to learn about the basic conditions of Chinese workers and labor organizers, independent of state-sponsored media, whether *China*



*Daily* or Radio Free Asia. And so, the international left's basic understanding of the state of the Chinese working class is still far too impoverished. Especially since the heightened repression of the mid-2010s, very few, if any, on-the-ground activists and organizations can safely offer critical analysis of labor conditions in public without threats to personal safety from the state. Because of this, most of the authors of these talks—ranging from long-time Chinese labor organizers forced into exile to overseas Chinese feminists—live abroad and write under pseudonyms. All publicly hosting and endorsing organizations were based outside of China.

“The State of Labor Resistance and Repression in China” and “Gender and the Chinese Working Class” provide a basic overview of what everyday Chinese workers and labor organizers have faced in recent years. These talks index past and ongoing broad changes in the Chinese working class, different modes of organizing, and how they have adapted over the years to shifting economic conditions and modalities of state repression. The next two talks have a more specific focus, featuring examples of sites ripe for developing practical campaigns. The aim is to be as concrete as possible about the avenues for international solidarity. Inspired by Zhengzhou's Foxconn workers' mass protests and overseas Chinese activists' global solidarity campaign in late 2022, “Labor Solidarity Through Supply Chains” unpacks the links between Foxconn and U.S. tech giants like Apple. The talk concludes with some suggestions for how unions in the United States, like the Apple Retail Union and the United Auto Workers, can show solidarity with Chinese workers by pressuring sites of collaboration between U.S. and Chinese capital abroad. “Between Chinese Surveillance and Israeli Settler-Colonialism” centers on the ongoing genocide in Palestine, which features an emergent network of Sinophone

activists across different continents raising awareness of how Chinese surveillance firms, like Hikvision, play a role in assisting U.S.-backed Israeli settler-colonialism. Such technologies, as the talk shows, intertwine with Western forms of policing to discipline and surveil communities beyond Israel, from Uyghur workers in Xinjiang to Black and Brown communities in New York. Last but not least, “History of U.S.-China Labor Solidarity” brings together three veteran labor activists in the United States to share their experiences organizing solidarity work in recent decades, reflecting on past lessons relevant to rebuilding international solidarity in the future.

We designed this set of talks to help build the international socialist movement, but we do not seek to advance one particular organization or ideological tradition. We are members of a caucus in DSA, Bread and Roses, and another socialist organization, the Tempest Collective, who—with the help of other individual DSA members and overseas Chinese activists—organized these talks. We also thank our endorsers, Haymarket Books, *New Bloom Magazine*, Students 4 Hong Kong, Justice is Global, and *Asian Labour Review*. We hope this network of organizations, building across differences and constituencies, models the approach needed to meaningfully rebuild solidarity with the Chinese working class. Just as the socialist left must rediscover its identity anew from the successes and failures of the 20th century, a global solidarity movement with the Chinese working class must be reinvented by gathering diverse militants, unions, and socialist organizations together in collective thinking and struggle. A united front of working-class and socialist organizations, left-wing and labor media outlets, and diaspora collectives would be the mirror image of the internationalism of the U.S.-China ruling class, which jointly maintains the capitalist sys-

tem, even in the face of geopolitical rivalry.

Few avenues remain for the political self-organization of the working class in China, which makes an enlarged role for diaspora and socialist organizations abroad necessary. Because of the state of repression and co-optation, it is difficult to consolidate any movement gains in China despite the constant flashes of militancy: survivor-led feminist struggles against powerful abusers since #MeToo, the returning wave of wildcat strikes, and the short-lived but explosive White Paper movement. However, there is more space to do so among overseas Sinophone communities, which often overlap with struggles back home: the extension of feminist advocacy for survivors within dissident spaces, the global solidarity campaigns around Sitong Bridge and the White Paper movement, and the emergent self-organization of rank-and-file Chinese international workers in higher education labor struggles. Many young overseas activists directly participate in and learn from the struggles of other communities abroad, like the recent upsurges for Black and Palestinian liberation. Thanks to social media and the fluidity of migrant communities, these movement gains can be deepened, shared, and circulated across borders. The responsibility of internationalists abroad is to hold space and provide resources for this exchange.

We hope this series equips readers with the tools to begin this work. Ultimately, working-class internationalism can only be forged in practice beyond these pages. In the face of imperialists of all stripes taking advantage of American and Chinese workers in this deepening new Cold War, the left must provide a political alternative—the struggle demands it.

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# The State of Labor Resistance and Repression in China

JULIE LIU AND ROY LI

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## Julie Liu

TODAY, I WILL PROVIDE A BROAD and simplified summary of workers' resistance in China, especially labor resistance in the low-end manufacturing sector in the post-Covid era. But first I want to give a broad overview of the development of workers' struggles since China's market-driven reforms.

These market reforms, which started in 1978, have radically changed labor relations in the country, forming a new working class and new forms of workers' resistance. Before the reforms, state workers enjoyed lifetime guaranteed employment, as stable wages and other basic living standards were guaranteed by the state. However, because of the widespread privatization ushered in by the reforms, many state workers were laid off, and short-term contracts and informal employment replaced lifetime employment. State employees, many of whom were concentrated around northern China, eventually became among the most important components of workers' resistance in the early days of the reform period.

On the other hand, a new group of

migrant workers has been forming in the southeastern part of China (around the Yangtze and Pearl river deltas), where many new factories have been created. Special economic zones were created along the southeast coast of China, with the government implementing policies to attract foreign investment. As a result low-end manufacturing industries shifted from the global North to China, and millions of workers migrated from the countryside to work in cities, making the southeast coast the main site of migrant workers' resistance. Before the market reforms, the strict household registration (*hukou*) system did not allow peasants to leave rural areas. After the reforms, the system was loosened, though not eliminated, enabling more flexibility for millions of rural citizens to move away to find work. However, even though peasants have been allowed to migrate to cities, they are still excluded from receiving public services and social welfare benefits there.

Next, I will explain the main avenues through which workers' resistance emerged over the past four decades, and why workers have adopted these strategies. Pressured by the competition of global production and the game of "race to the bottom," employers maximize the exploitation of workers with relatively low wages, undesirable working conditions, and extremely long working hours. Employers' control over workers' lives is reinforced by control over their daily reproduction by normalizing a culture

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of workers living in company-run dorms. The expansion of low-end manufacturing industries in China, which prioritizes low-cost production at the expense of workers' rights, has produced a brutal system of labor exploitation. In practice, there is little protection of workers' rights under the Chinese labor regime. The state often protects the capitalist sector for the benefit of the dominating class. The hukou system further legitimizes the exploitation of workers. The only legal trade union federation, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), works more like a bureaucratic arm of the state than a union protecting workers' rights. Generally, the lower-level unions are subjected to managerial control, and higher-level unions subjected to greater state manipulation. In either case, the power of the unions comes from the state, rather than from workers. Though it seems like labor laws in China establish high standards in securing workers' rights, in reality, these laws are very weakly enforced. Also, the promotion of lawsuits as a means to fight for workers' basic rights reduces labor issues to a problem of individuals, rather than something workers should collectively fight for. Without the freedom of association outside of a bureaucratic, top-down union federation, there are few ways for workers to practically advocate for their rights.

So, how have Chinese workers expressed their grievances and resistance? First, many of them simply leave and find another job, resulting in high turnover rates. Second, workers resort to individual lawsuits to protect their legal rights. But for workers, the lawsuits often mean higher time and monetary costs. Third, workers stage wildcat strikes.

Over the decades since the market-driven reforms, China has witnessed waves of strikes in the manufacturing sector. Building on the research of other scholars

and activists, I would roughly divide these strikes into three phases:

- Before 2010, many workers were demanding minimum wage and wage arrears
- Between 2010-15, more workers started making demands beyond what was covered in the law, like higher wages, more space to bargain, and reforms to ACFTU
- Since the 2010s, increasing labor costs and governments' industrial upgrading policies have pressured factories to move away from the coastal area toward the inner part of China or other countries for cheaper labor. The factory relocation resulted in a wave of strikes demanding severance payments and social insurance required by the law.

After 2015, strikes dramatically decreased. Strikes also began shifting from manufacturing around the Pearl River Delta region to service sectors in other parts of the country. In 2023, the number of strikes dramatically increased again (though still below 2016 levels), and we also saw a swing back to workers' militancy in manufacturing sectors again in the Guangdong region.

Based on my analysis of data from China Labor Bulletin—an organization that tracks workers' collective actions in China—over 50 percent of the strikes in the manufacturing sector were triggered by factory relocation or closure. There are a few reasons for this. First, this is a continuation of the wave of factory relocations that started at the end of the 2000s, promoted by the increased labor costs and the state's development strategy. Second, COVID-19 also significantly impacted small suppliers at the end of global supply chains. Companies shifted costs incurred by canceled orders to workers, and triggered mass layoffs without severance pay again. Third, the overall slowdown of economic growth and restructuring of global supply chains resulted in more layoffs, compounded by "industry upgrading" initiatives launched by local governments, which saw intensified

capital intervention and led to the closure of small workshops and factories.

In this wave of factory relocations, employers have a whole series of tactics to exploit the workers. Pressure from the pandemic-era economic slowdown, in particular, encourages bosses to displace costs on to workers: wage arrears, refusing to pay severance (n+1 month under Chinese law) and social security, and cutting wages. Some bosses simply flee and run away to evade accountability. There are also more subtle tactics. Some deny that they are relocating, but in fact they relocate large-scale machinery and significant parts of the factory. They also force workers to voluntarily resign in a number of ways, like transferring them to other regions that the workers don't want, cutting wages, or putting them on extended "holidays." One common tactic that may seem counter-intuitive is to reduce workers' hours to five days and eight hours. This may sound good, but in China, this means that workers' wages would be driven down and they cannot support themselves.

So, how have Chinese workers resisted during this wave of factory relocations and closures in post-COVID China? Workers have adopted various strategies that they have accumulated over past waves of strikes. Workers performed work stoppages, organized protests and sit-ins, blocked factory entrances, and guarded machines. In some cases, workers have also threatened mass suicides from the top of factories to attract public attention, pressure employers to respond to their demands, and compel state labor agencies to intervene on their behalf. Workers have also mounted lawsuits and filed complaints against their employers, appealing to state agencies like the ACF-TU, the Labor Bureau, the Social Security Bureau, and the municipal government.

In this wave of strikes, workers demonstrated resilience by using various strategies to pressure employers and governments to

respond to their demands. However, due to the production contractions and strengthened authoritarianism in post-COVID China, workers' collective actions face new challenges:

- As more companies are forced to relocate inland, workers' actions are becoming smaller in scale with less power.
- Contracted production means that threats of work stoppages are becoming less effective
- There has been an unprecedented suppression of labor activism and lowering of labor standards since 2015. What has been noteworthy in recent labor struggles has been the absence of the participation of labor NGOs and activists, with little to no mainstream media coverage. Workers mainly rely on posting footage of strikes on platforms like TikTok, but those are often swiftly censored or taken down by the authorities.

### Roy Li

I CAME FROM A WORKING-CLASS FAMILY in a southeastern coastal village, and my parents worked as peasants and fishers. My grandparents were also peasant workers. I got into labor organizing during my college years around 2010 and was active in organizing workers in the service and sanitation industry in southern China. I co-founded a labor group with other activists, which was eventually shut down. A few others and I spent some time in prison for our organizing. On that note, I begin my presentation today with photographs of many other Chinese labor activists who have faced repression for their organizing. Some are still in jail or awaiting their sentences, and others have been released.

Julie already covered how the market reforms in China led to the creation in recent years of a huge reserve army of workers composed of many laid-off state-owned enterprise workers and migrant workers. Just one more word about migrant labor:



a majority of Chinese migrant workers are still unprotected by labor contracts. This means that many of them do not enjoy basic labor protections, and it is very challenging for them to resist labor abuses through legal mechanisms.

Poor labor protections, coupled with few legally protected means for organizing, mean that militant workers and labor activists have to think creatively about how to organize. Labor NGOs had been a key component of the organizing infrastructure from the 1990s until quite recently. Labor NGOs in China are non-membership-based labor organizations, equivalent to what one would call workers' centers in the US. They are also mainly founded by migrant worker activists. These emerged because the only legal means for workers' organizing—the ACFTU—is highly dysfunctional and often pro-employer. Workers also find it difficult to raise legal complaints in courts, which are also often in favor of employers. Workers cannot organize independent unions in China. Any new unions must be registered with the ACFTU. The ACFTU is not very meaningful for most workers. In fact, most workers barely know what the ACFTU does, including ones who are registered members. When many workers first join a workplace, employers make them sign documents without explaining what they mean. Union dues are automatically deducted from many workers' wages, and the state union and the employers rarely explain this process. This is why workers 'remain' in the union even though they know that the union doesn't do much for them. At most, ACFTU provides some social welfare programs, especially during the holidays. However, during labor disputes, the ACFTU often does not take the side of the workers. Most workers view the union as part of the government, and during most bargaining sessions, ACFTU sides with the employers against

the workers. All these challenges to labor organizing also emerge in the backdrop of intensified sweatshop working conditions and exploitation under globalization. The idea of labor NGOs was also influenced by discussions at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in 1995. Since the repression of the Tiananmen student and workers' movement, the Chinese state has clamped down on most independent avenues for advocating for workers' interests. Labor NGOs have become a key informal way to mobilize and defend workers, in the absence of other legal means of organizing that are effective.

So, what organizing strategies have Chinese labor NGOs engaged in? Like workers' centers, they provide community services to help empower migrant workers and their families, such as equipping workers with legal knowledge to agitate and file complaints. Before 2015, labor NGOs tried to encourage collective bargaining and strikes among workers to pressure employers. Of course, the government is not happy about labor NGOs and more workers taking collective action, so there are frequent crackdowns on these organizations. Unfortunately, when workers do strike, usually it's either a difficult win or a terrible loss. If the workers win their demands, afterward the employers and state officials usually identify and fire the worker workplace leaders. And if the workers lose, especially with little support from civil society, the government can arrest and physically assault workers by imposing the police, without compromising on any demands and forcing the workers back to the assembly line.

There have been three rough phases of state crackdown on labor organizations. Since their emergence in the 1990s, many labor organizations have faced administrative and bureaucratic attempts by the state to make it difficult to exist and function. Many were not allowed to register even



as non-profits, and some had to resort to registering as business organizations to exist. Similar things happen with other community organizations, especially ones dealing with feminist and other forms of gender advocacy. By the second phase around the late 2000s and early 2010s, labor organizers faced more harassment—both direct and indirect—from the local police. For example, the police might pressure landlords to cease renting spaces to labor organizations.

After 2015, labor organizations faced a new level of widespread criminalization. For example, in December 2015, a dozen labor organizers in southern China were arrested and four of them were given years-long sentences. In 2016, the government passed two laws that further intensified the crackdowns on civil society organizations, especially labor groups. One was the Charity Law that made labor organizations' domestic fundraising attempts even more challenging, as permission from the local government and affiliation with the state-run charity foundation was required to fundraise. Most labor organizers do not have good relationships with local officials for their organizing work, so the state rarely grants permission. Another law, the Foreign NGO Management Law, makes overseas organizations' funding of labor organizations more restrictive. So while all the legal means for workers to voice their grievances continue to be ineffective, the state is also making it harder and harder for labor organizers to persist. To give a sense of the crackdown since 2015, there were about 100 labor NGOs in 2010; today there are probably fewer than ten left. Those organizations would also not identify as being labor NGOs for fear of repression, and the few that persist are transitioning back from agitational organizing to service-oriented efforts as a way to stay running. In 2018, over one hundred Maoist students

who supported workers in the JASIC factory were detained and forcibly sent to "re-education centers." Other independent labor organizers, including myself, continue to face these threats.

I want to conclude with Meng Han's story to give a sense of the repression faced by Chinese labor organizers. Meng is a former worker for a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in the inner province of Hubei. Before the economic reforms in the 1980s, he had a stable job and social welfare. But he was laid off like many other SOE workers in the 1990s and became a migrant worker who moved to work in Guangdong Province. I first met him when he was a dispatch security officer at a public hospital in Guangzhou in 2013, when he and his co-workers did not have a job contract or social insurance and had experienced wage theft for a decade. Meng led a strike for nearly 90 days with two hundred other workers, including other (female) care workers, at the hospital. The administration still refused to bargain after 90 days and some workers collectively threatened suicide from the top of the building to build pressure. Thirteen workers were arrested, including Meng, who was sentenced to nine months in prison, the longest among workers.

After being released from jail in 2014, Meng became a labor organizer to support manufacturing workers. During 2014 and 2015, he supported a group of more than two thousand workers in a shoe factory in a militant action and led them to a big win, costing the local government and the company more than \$17 million. This led to his second arrest in December 2015, and this time he was imprisoned for a year and nine months. From this point on, it became increasingly hard for Meng to keep organizing. Even after his release, every time he posted about labor issues on his social media, his account would be censored and deleted. Authorities would come to his

house to pressure him to be quiet, and he was detained again for a few weeks in 2019. He continued to be regularly surveilled since then. A clip from 2017 showed that local authorities even sent masked thugs to his parent's house to intimidate them to pressure him to confess. It became too difficult for Meng to continue organizing, and he wanted to look for a normal job again, but was repeatedly denied by the local government and companies in fear of his influence on other workers. Today, Meng still remains unemployed and suffers from severe depression, feeling so terrible and frustrated that he can't be involved in the movement or find work.

I don't have many solutions for the future, but I'll end here with a few observa-

tions.

- Wildcat labor struggles during the pandemic have intensified, but continue to remain invisible and unsustainable because of increased censorship and crackdown.
- With the decline of traditional labor organizations, new labor activist trends are emerging in China. There are more forms of digital forms of resistance, like the tech workers' 996.ICU movement. Other sectors beyond manufacturing are engaging in workers' actions, from teachers to public servants. There are more and more people, especially youth, critical of capitalism.
- At the same time, government repression and surveillance have intensified to unprecedented levels. Younger activists are severely monitored, and many are shut out from further organizing quickly.

# Gender and the Chinese Working Class

ZOE ZHAO AND OLIA SHU

## Zoe Zhao

FOR TODAY'S TALK, I WILL FOCUS primarily on the conditions of women workers and Olia will talk more about self-organization and NGOs. Some of the discussion will draw from my own fieldwork

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*ZOE ZHAO is a researcher and activist interested in the intersections between technology, labor, and social movements.*

*OLIA SHU is an activist interested in alternatives to capitalism and theories and practices of decolonization.*

in China during the pandemic.

To understand gender relations in the Chinese working class today, we must first examine how production chains are organized. Beyond large factories, smaller-scale family-based workshops are the main suppliers for big e-commerce platforms in China. In China's e-commerce and fast fashion industry, which are increasingly integrated into the global supply chain with the rise of the two China-based online shopping platforms Shein and Temu, this model of family-based production has greatly intensified rather than weakened.

Temu and Shein's profits are doing quite well. Part of the reason is that they intensify competition between smaller workshops and select the cheapest supplier, which also tends to have more exploitative labor practices.

Many family workshops cluster in urban villages with affordable rent and food

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Chinese women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic labor, face more harassment in the workplace, and are paid less.

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costs, and workers sometimes live close to or even within their workshops. The issue with the family-based workshops is that they are more likely to reflect the existing gendered division of labor in traditional patriarchal families. For instance, within these workshops, women tend to shoulder the tasks of cooking, grocery shopping, and doing laundry for others, while men do more heavy lifting tasks such as operating and cutting “tables” (the large, flat surfaces used in the garment industry for laying out, measuring, and cutting fabric). Studies of garment workshops by Duke’s Nellie Chu have shown that due to common oppression, female workers from different regions are more likely to bond with each other and even develop a sense of solidarity with female factory owners, which is quite different from male workers who are often segregated by their origin cities. Research by Lin Zhang of the University of New Hampshire reveals the marginalization of rural women weavers in e-commerce. They are in the lowest rank of the supply chain and can barely earn any profit.

Typically, feminized occupations pay

less than masculine ones. Many service industries in urban areas, especially those newer ones such as bubble tea shops, attract young female workers who either want to stay closer to the urban lifestyle or are rejected by factories. I saw a job ad in a Shenzhen-based bubble tea shop in late 2020 that indicated 3800 RMB (around \$526) as the starting salary for a new worker, which is much higher than the base salary of Shenzhen Foxconn (2650 RMB)—but does not offer overtime pay like factory work. And so, the actual take-home income and benefits are worse than those of factories. Many service industry workers vent about their working conditions on social media. Beyond describing the laborious nature of the work, they also say that the actual income can be much lower than promised, as small mistakes can result in extra penalties in pay.

Because of the rise of digital platforms and the shrinking pay in both factories and the urban service sector, platform workers, like in food delivery (with over 13 million workers now), occupy an increasingly significant part of the workforce in China, just as in most other countries. In Asia, platform food delivery is primarily a masculine job. However, female delivery workers have increased dramatically and nationally since the pandemic. Around 10 percent of food delivery workers in China are women, and the percentage is higher in large cities. Ping Sun’s research group has estimated that the percentage of women delivery workers increased from 9 percent in 2020 to over 16 percent in 2021. Another interesting fact is that women are usually older than men because many have been laid off from the traditional service industry. Overall, women delivery workers also suffer from an income gap and more harassment from clients and other workers. For these reasons, many do not join online support groups that are self-organized by delivery workers, which are

the main mode of communication among delivery workers in China.

There is also a notable gendered division of labor between onsite and virtual platform economies. Women are significantly more likely to work in virtual industries such as live-streaming and online customer service. Many women workers deem remote work to be a safer option. In my own research, many women acknowledge that rampant sexual harassment is one major factor that leads them to avoid working in onsite service jobs.

Another related trend is the absorption of rural female surplus labor into new supply chains. Women workers returning home to inner provinces such as Henan and Gansu are forming a key part of the data labeling industry that drives global AI production. Local governments promote many of these initiatives as part of poverty alleviation campaigns. With the high demand of global AI companies, this gendered “ghost” work will most likely continue to grow.

The rise of day labor in multiple large cities is one of the most contradictory trends of work feminization over the past decade. Most day laborers are male migrant workers. Many have given up on securing long-term or salary work. Instead, they gather in numerous labor markets, trying to secure gigs for a day or two and rest for the remainder of the week. Numerous video clips on social media, particularly on Douyin and Kuaishou, are about young male workers trying to broadcast their day labor experience.

However, there is an additional gendered dimension of day labor. Despite the higher representation of male workers, female workers are over-represented in labor agencies: they serve as mediators between male workers and hiring corporations. The rationale behind this is that the agency owners believe that women are better at

communicating with men, and also, interestingly, that they could offer an illusion that there are many young women inside factories. One such labor agency is even named “Good Sisters Human Resource”!

China is also suffering from an aging workforce, and so we must also consider gender relations among older workers. The average age of the working population in urban and rural regions is increasing rapidly. A study by Yige Dong, a sociologist at the University of Buffalo, SUNY, on gig manufacturing shows that the percentage of unmarried young workers has decreased significantly. While Foxconn still recruits people under 40 or 45, the proportion of Foxconn’s employees under 30 dropped from more than 90 percent to 48 percent. This is particularly true for factories in the inner provinces, as they attract workers from the same province. It is also more challenging for older workers to go on strike or protest as they have more to lose and more family members to worry about. Older workers face not only deteriorating health and occupational diseases but, more importantly, a hostile job market. Typically,

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female workers over 50 and male workers over 60 are unlikely to be hired.

I will end with some examples of hiring posters that I observed in a working-class neighborhood in Yangpu District, Shanghai, in 2021. A majority of hiring ads ask

only for women under the age of 40–50, and under 60 for men. One was explicitly looking for “women, 18–42 years old.” When I tried to raise the issue of unequal pay and age discrimination at a job agency, I was told that “older women should feel grateful they can still work as nannies and caretakers,” and I was then unceremoniously removed from an online group. One way for older workers to bypass the age limit is to buy fake identity cards on the illegal market. However, many migrant workers look older than their actual age due to years of drudgery, so they are more likely to be questioned by the police.

### Olia Shu

**B**UILDING ON ZOE’S REMARKS, I will mainly discuss the intersection between feminist organizing and workplace activism. Of course, simply looking at women workers will not give us a full picture of gender dynamics in the Chinese working class, but their experiences form a key part of the story when interrogating the dynamics of a capitalist system structured by patriarchy. It is no surprise that women tend to be more marginalized and vulnerable in

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Women are significantly more likely to work in virtual industries such as live-streaming and online customer service. Rampant sexual harassment leads them to avoid working in onsite service jobs.

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their social lives and in the labor market. Chinese women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic labor, face more harassment in the workplace, and are paid

less. While important documentaries and other footage of Chinese women workers’ organizing are available—like *We the Workers* (2017) and *Outcry and Whisper* (2020)—they are seldom discussed in mainstream Chinese media and receive little public attention. They show instances of militant agitational organizing by women workers, but I also want to call attention to different nuanced models of organizing that have become increasingly prevalent as room for mobilization has become more difficult, with more severe consequences from state repression. Only very particular conditions allow for mass protests and other confrontations with the police and employers.

We must also consider the less flashy aspects of organizing by women workers that are crucial in workplace activism today. Older workers guiding younger ones, or workers speaking the same dialect from the same region, often self-organize small groups to support one another. These spaces provide key starting points for workers to figure out and bring up collective grievances and discover the confidence and agency to fight. Workers also use digital media to teach each other and circulate labor laws and other institutional tools. While some supportive lawyers, students, activists, and journalists often receive the most attention after workers’ actions, everyday workers without a platform often face the most direct and harshest retaliation. Many workers are also teaching themselves how to organize and use the law to their own advantage, even though many do not have professional hats.

The Sunflower Service Center for Female Workers is a good example of these kinds of women workers’ self-organizing. A few workers started the center in Guangzhou in 2011, wanting to collaborate to provide childcare and host various recreational and cultural activities. Guangzhou had over a hundred thousand women workers, and

the center hosted many popular cultural events and won attention from local media, even receiving official endorsements for these events. One event invited men and women workers to wear red women's shoes publicly to promote awareness of gender issues in the workplace. Eventually, workers at Sunflower began cultivating more legal knowledge and collective power, and workers at the center were soon advising each other on how to negotiate successfully with companies around issues of wage theft. Word about the center began to spread. At one point, over a thousand workers who had worked at a local toy factory for over 20 years failed to receive their full compensation and social security benefits upon reaching retirement age. They contacted the Sunflower Center, which helped them win an important lawsuit that same year against the company.

Thus, Sunflower began moving from cultural activities toward militant actions in the early 2010s, eventually leading to its repression. Since the toy factory workers' case, it began facing more direct and indirect pressure from authorities and other actors to shut down. At one point, the landlord started shutting off their water and electricity; another morning, organizers discovered that someone had welded their metal door to the frame so they could not open it. Local authorities eventually gave the representatives of the Sunflower Center an ultimatum: either close down themselves or wait for an official notice to shut down. By 2015, they were forced to shut down.

While militant organizing became increasingly persecuted after 2015, some centers for women workers continued to survive and worked through more subtle and creative avenues. Ding Dang, for one, is a co-founder of the Green Roses Center of Social Work, which still exists in Shenzhen today. She was a worker-leader who began to work when she was 14 and had

to drop out of school to work to provide for her family. She moved from her rural hometown of Gansu to the urban center of Shenzhen, where she experienced the plight

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Older workers face not only deteriorating health and occupational diseases but, more importantly, a hostile job market. Female workers over 50 and male workers over 60 are unlikely to be hired.

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of working in large industries, something that later informed her organizing. After reading and learning more about labor and social issues at a workers' center, she identified gender as a key concern that shaped her and other female colleagues' labor conditions. She discovered that six out of the ten members of her friend group at work had faced abandonment by their parents because of their gender. She began to understand that factories liked hiring women because they thought women workers would be easier to manage. She noticed that though many of her female co-workers were usually quiet in public, they shared their thoughts quite openly with each other privately. She continued encouraging other co-workers to find ways to speak out, creating her magazine and other forms of public content.

The Green Roses Center of Social Work that Ding founded hosts activities like a "Mother's Day singing performance" and "Bread and Roses poetry exhibition," centered on women workers, alongside various childcare and mutual aid work for migrant workers to better adapt to city life. Green Rose also effectively uses digital



platforms to reach workers, such as through their public accounts on WeChat, Weibo, or Xiaohongshu.

Indeed, as Zoe mentioned, digital platforms are becoming an increasingly important organizing tool for Chinese women workers. Worker-activists are moving from traditional newspapers, magazines,

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and online blogs to more decentralized models of reporting and expression, such as through social media. Some produce short-form content, while others produce longer newsletters, podcasts, and documentaries—all to find ways to bypass the prevalent state-imposed censorship on Chinese social media. Da Gong Tan, for example, conducts interviews with workers from diverse backgrounds, featuring domestic workers from local factories and international graduate workers in the United States. Audio recordings, the use of pseudonyms, and private email subscriptions are some ways to bypass censorship. Workers' blogs like Spicy Pepper or Jianjiao Bu Luo circulate and comment on relevant statistics, with charts showing for example that birth rates for women are declining or that women are migrating into cities more than men.

Women truck drivers, like Li Xin, have started vlogs on a platform called Kuai Shou to call attention to their working

conditions. Li documents her own life as a truck driver and a mother of two who drives around to work with her husband, and she can only go home once every few months. Such stories gain traction among other drivers and others on social media. So, more and more workers rely on digital platforms to discuss their working conditions. Some cases catch government attention and are co-opted into state narratives that glorify their “sacrifices” without doing much to change workers’ social support and long-term security. Li later became more integrated into official media, participating in a famous singing contest, and had to moderate her content away from agitation, even as she invited other truckers on her platform to share about their working conditions, including a case of a worker dying in a traffic accident. There is not much more she is allowed to safely express, besides the kind of sentiment that she ended with in a recent vlog: “reality is cruel, but life has to go on.”

We must also remember that digital and broader literacy is not entirely common among female workers yet, and so key work for Green Rose and other labor groups is designing different kinds of writing and media literacy workshops. One literacy class teaches women how written characters pictorially correspond to different parts of the body, allowing them to discuss general concepts of wellness, health, and maternal care.

I want to conclude by emphasizing that the precarity of workers’ conditions in China means there is no one-size-fits-all model for organizing workers. Activists must navigate harsh conditions to meet people where they are with limited resources and the constant threat of repression.

# *Labor Solidarity Through Supply Chains*

## Foxconn and the U.S. Labor Movement

ZHANG MAZI

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I AM A CHINESE SOCIALIST, AND A member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Tempest Collective. I immigrated to the United States in the last couple of years. Before that, I worked in the Chinese tech industry for many years, and I hope to draw from that experience in my talk. Today, I will discuss labor solidarity through supply chains, focusing mainly on Foxconn. The focus on Foxconn is meant to be a starting point for understanding the possibilities for organizing across U.S.-China supply chains. We can apply many of these observations to other Chinese companies, and indeed to other global companies as well.

First, what is Foxconn? Foxconn is the largest electronic contract manufacturer in the world, with an annual revenue of more than \$200 billion. Foxconn's headquarters are in Taiwan, but it has factories all over China, as well as in Brazil, India, Mexico, and the United States. So, Foxconn is truly a global conglomerate. And what does Foxconn manufacture? As a contract electronics manufacturing company, Foxconn does not produce anything branded as Foxconn. However, most of the major electronics we know and use in our daily lives bear Foxconn's mark somewhere in-

side them. Foxconn is most well-known as a contract manufacturer for Apple. Your iPhone, your iPad, your Mac PCs, or your other Apple products either have been assembled in a Foxconn factory or have components manufactured in a Foxconn factory. Outside of Apple, various components of Android phones are also produced in Foxconn factories. Your Android phone may be assembled in Vietnam, Thailand, or elsewhere, but the audio or Wi-Fi module inside the phone may have gone through a Foxconn assembly line. PlayStation, Nintendo, and Amazon's whole line of electronic products (i.e., the Echo Dot and its AI assistants), are all manufactured by Foxconn. These are the biggest products that we know of. Besides these company's products, Foxconn manufactures several other electronic products. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of all electronic devices in the world contain components manufactured by Foxconn. That includes routers, IoT (Internet of Things) devices, smart appliances like smart fridges, and even your washing machine might have a Foxconn chip in it. Likewise, 5G chips inside your phones, biotech solutions, TV servers, computers, tablets, cameras, speakers, etc., were probably created in a Foxconn factory at some point.

Since Foxconn is such a giant conglomerate that manufactures so many things, it also employs many workers. Although it is

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*ZHANG MAZI is a Chinese socialist activist based in New York. He is a member of the Tempest Collective and the Democratic Socialists of America.*

a Taiwanese company, Foxconn has its primary manufacturing hub located in China. It was one of the first foreign companies to move to China after it opened up to foreign investment under Deng Xiaoping. Foxconn helped pioneer the entire Chinese manufacturing model: underpaid workers live inside these large complexes, then work in buildings opposite from the dormitories in which they live.

Currently, Foxconn employs more than 800,000 workers in China. That number fluctuates yearly, depending on how well the company is doing, and on their hiring and production quota. Usually, more than half of the workers in Foxconn factories are “dispatch workers.” Dispatch workers are temporary workers who are not directly employed by Foxconn, but are contracted with third-party dispatch labor agencies—which are notorious for regularly flouting labor law. Foxconn subcontracts its human resources and hiring departments to other agencies, and workers sign up with these agencies to work at Foxconn. The benefit for Foxconn is that they get to maintain a flexible labor force. Global demands shift from season to season with electronic devices. For example, iPhone sales may ramp up during Christmas, as everyone in the United States buys the latest versions of iPhones as gifts for all their friends or families, while for other seasons, those sales might go down. So, Foxconn needs to be flexible to meet this shifting demand, which is why more than half of its workers are dispatch workers. However, Chinese labor law mandates that no more than 10 percent of a business’s workers can be dispatch workers. Foxconn has a pattern of hiring substantially more dispatch workers than is legally allowed. Foxconn has been violating that labor law for years, if not decades, to maintain a flexible labor force and to protect itself from all labor responsibilities if a labor dispute happens. If Foxconn owes wages

to dispatch workers, they can blame the problem on the workers’ dispatch agency instead. In that way, Foxconn manages to avoid responsibilities regarding hiring and retaining labor in China.

Aside from the dispatch worker issue, Foxconn also utilizes vocational school students as free labor in China. Some Foxconn factories might have contractual relationships with local vocational schools teaching their students about electronic manufacturing or electronics engineering. Those vocational schools will send their students into Foxconn factories ostensibly as interns, using them as unpaid laborers for Foxconn under the guise of providing job experience. Foxconn puts these students onto the assembly line so they can assemble electronic devices for free. Foxconn workers also experience rampant sexual harassment, bullying, excessive overtime wage errors, and inadequate safety training. In addition, Foxconn does not have a good record of teaching its workers how to safely handle toxic chemicals. And aside from all these things, workers’ suicides are rampant in Foxconn factories. Though the media largely stopped reporting these suicides from 2015 onwards, they are still happening every year.

During COVID-19 and the Zero-COVID policy in China, Foxconn implemented the so-called “closed loop production system” inside its Zhengzhou factory, which is located in central China. A closed-loop production system meant that workers had to work, eat, sleep, and live all inside the factory, 24 hours a day. Workers were essentially not allowed to leave the Zhengzhou factory premises during their contract. Foxconn installed security and barricades to prevent the workers from leaving. There was a lot of overtime, very little rest, and few safety procedures implemented on campus to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In fact, the closed-loop

system exacerbated the transmission of the virus. In late 2022, an internal outbreak of COVID-19 flared up, and because of the closed-loop production system, many workers were getting infected, while Foxconn was covering up these issues. But we learned from workers' testimonies on social media that Foxconn was not providing adequate housing services to them. Because of the conditions, service providers refused to enter the compound to assist these workers. Trash started piling up, all the dorms became extremely unsanitary, and COVID-19 began to spread throughout the compound unchecked. These conditions led to a spontaneous uprising by Foxconn workers; they started breaking down barricades and going to management, with many demanding to leave their jobs. Many of them jumped through the barricades and started walking home, even if it took them a day or two to get there. That was how desperate the situation was. The local government even sent cadres to help fill Foxconn's supply chains, essentially having party members act as scabs, as workers began leaving en masse, with the company refusing to budge on basic demands at first.

Workers also began posting videos of this growing unrest at Foxconn on social media, and the videos went viral. Foxconn called in the local government for help, and the government sent in the police against workers who were just demanding basic human rights, lost wages, and better working conditions. Police dressed in all-white protective suits started beating up workers. This is what companies in China typically do, and this is the *modus operandi* for any labor action in China.

This Foxconn uprising in Zhengzhou eventually snowballed into the A4 movement, which ended China's Zero-COVID policy. The uprising at Zhengzhou Foxconn was followed by a tragedy in Urumqi, where an entire apartment complex under

lockdown due to COVID-19 caught on fire, and firefighters could not get into the building, so residents were asphyxiated and died in what was a preventable disaster. There was a lot of frustration with Zero-COVID policies, where people in big cities, like Beijing and Shanghai, had been locked in their residential compounds for months, unable to access basic necessities. Older residents were dying because they could not leave their homes to get to a hospital for conditions that needed treatment. All the government's hotlines were flooded during that period. All of these frustrations, plus the Zhengzhou Foxconn workers' uprising, led to the brief but monumental White Paper Movement that saw masses of people in the streets all over China. To me, this has been illuminative of the potential power labor has in China, where workers led the charge in this entire moment, and it shows that further down the line Chinese workers can be better organized and take action, and that there is hope that change can take place in China.

So, how can we build effective transnational solidarity with Foxconn and other Chinese factory workers? I use Foxconn as an example, but we can apply the following tactics to different companies and workforces. One way to build this solidarity is by hitting Foxconn where it hurts—by targeting its partners abroad. Foxconn manufactures many products for companies based in the United States, so we can target plenty of sites abroad to pressure Foxconn and amplify Foxconn workers' demands. We can take lessons from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in solidarity with Palestine. Many companies on the BDS list from Palestine are also manufacturing with Foxconn right now. For example, Google, Amazon, Siemens, and Hewlett-Packard all have contracts with Foxconn. Not only can we adopt lessons from BDS to support Chinese workers,

but also combine our movements. Like the ongoing labor solidarity work for Palestine in the United States, trade unions can play a leading role in solidarity with Foxconn workers. Raising the issue of solidarity with Chinese workers in emergent union efforts like the Apple Retail Union, Amazon Labor Union, and Alphabet Workers Union, can also encourage U.S. workers to think more expansively about their organizing horizons. All of these unions can come together and say that they won't tolerate their employers manufacturing with a company that notoriously treats its workers so poorly. Unions in the United States can apply pressure on Foxconn, especially as the space to organize in China is rapidly narrowing because of increased repression.

Lastly, Foxconn's expansion into

electric vehicle (EV) production may be another opportunity, as the United Auto Workers (UAW) is spearheading a drive to unionize EV plants. Foxconn's global partnerships may lead to more opportunities to connect struggles. For one, Foxconn recently bought an EV plant in Lordstown, Ohio. The UAW is quite active in Lordstown, and as we saw with their labor organizing and contract negotiations last year, the UAW has the ability to exert an immense amount of pressure on these car companies. This work is also important to provide a concrete alternative to the rampant anti-China nationalism of some American workers by emphasizing the organic interconnections between U.S. and Chinese capitalists on the one hand, and U.S. and Chinese workers on the other.

## Between Chinese Surveillance and Israeli Settler Colonialism

PALESTINE SOLIDARITY ACTION NETWORK

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AS SINOPHONE ACTIVISTS organizing across multiple continents, we are collectively working on educating our communities on Palestinian resistance and the global solidarity movement, as well

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THE PALESTINE SOLIDARITY ACTION NETWORK (巴勒斯坦团结行动网络) is a grassroots collective of Sinophone activists across continents. It organizes in different spaces of Palestine solidarity organizing, from campuses and trade unions to digital media, to work toward cutting Chinese ties with the genocidal apartheid state of Israel. Follow PSAN on Instagram and X.

as calling attention to China's complicity in Israel's occupation, apartheid, and war crimes against the Palestinian people. Individually, we work in different spaces of Palestine solidarity organizing—on campus, at the workplace, in cities, or via publishing. We aim to provide grassroots education and updates through social media about Palestine solidarity—informing our audience in Chinese about “pinkwashing,” colonial feminism, and other relevant topics. We have been translating poems by Palestinians and creating Chinese-language

weekly overviews of new boycott or divestment actions from grassroots activists around the world. We are also organizing a campaign against Hikvision, a Chinese state-backed surveillance company complicit in the Israeli occupation, especially in the West Bank.

In this presentation, we will look at some of the connections between Chinese and Israeli institutions, though it's important to note that this overview is not comprehensive.

### **Ties Between China and Israel**

There are extensive economic ties between China and Israel. China is Israel's second-largest trading partner globally and takes the lead in Asia. The Belt and Road initiative has significantly catalyzed China-Israel cooperation. Major Chinese companies like China Railway Engineering Corporation, China Ocean Shipping Company, Huawei, China National Chemical Corporation, and ZTE Corporation are actively investing in Israel, while others such as Huawei, Xiaomi, Lenovo, Geely, and SAIC Motor have set up research and development centers in Israel. Specifically for Huawei, it acquired two Israeli technology innovation companies, HexaTier and Toganetworks, in 2016 for \$42 million and \$150 million, respectively. In the electric vehicle industry, in 2022 and 2023, the share of Chinese brands in the Israeli electric car market exceeded 50 percent and 60 percent respectively. Chinese car sales outlets abound in Israel, represented by companies like BYD, Geely, Hongqi, SAIC Motor, Chery, and Hozon Auto. In the field of infrastructure, in 2021, the Chinese company Pan-Mediterranean Engineering Company (PMEC) constructed the Ashdod Port in southern Israel. China State Construction Engineering Corporation constructed Haifa New Port Terminal, a vital node port of the Belt and Road, and the first time that Chinese en-

terprises exported "smart port" technology and management to a developed country. China Railway Engineering Corporation led the construction of the Red Line in Tel Aviv, the first light rail project constructed by a Chinese enterprise in the high-end market of a developed country. The current cooperation between China and Israel involves ports, subways, highways, tunnels and other fields, and the amount of cooperation reaches billions of dollars.

Israel-China collaboration extends beyond traditional industries. For instance, Israel's military laser weapons have found applications in civilian fields such as medical beauty, laser surgery, and laser beauty instruments. The Chinese company Juva Medical (欧华美科) acquired a partial stake in the Israeli company EndyMed in 2014. This acquisition has facilitated the integration of Israeli medical technology into China's domestic home medical aesthetic instrument market. Asia now accounts for a growing share of the market, especially China and South Korea, while a significant portion of South Korean sales are sold to Chinese tourists through the duty-free store channel. Collaboration in the food and healthcare sectors is also flourishing. China's Bright Foods (光明食品) acquired Tnuva, an Israeli food-processing cooperative. Nanjing Xinjiekou Department Store Co.'s (南京新百) operations in Israel include Natalie, Israel's largest private medical care services company, focusing on in-home senior care and telemedicine, along with A.S. Nursing, Israel's fourth-largest in-home care company.

Deep ties also exist between Chinese and Israeli universities and other academic institutions. For example, Tsinghua University and Tel Aviv University established a cross-innovation center and organized summer laboratory training programs at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. Peking University and Tel Aviv University



jointly enrolled doctoral students. Shantou University partnered with Technion to establish the Guangdong Israel Institute of Technology. These collaborations are some examples of Chinese university students engaging with Israeli institutions as if they were neutral, without recognizing that Israeli universities are complicit in the ongoing genocide, occupation, and oppression of the Palestinian people.

## Interconnected Surveillance

We now explore a key method by which China and Israel collaborate to enforce settler-colonialism—through surveillance technology. Amnesty International’s 2023 report, “Automated Apartheid,” identifies how Chinese surveillance technology, through state-backed companies like Hikvision, targets West Bank Palestinians in everyday life and maintains a dehumanizing environment for them. These CCTV cameras alone cannot serve the purpose of surveillance with full efficiency: they are often embedded in a larger network of physical infrastructure, software, and data systems. For example, Hikvision cameras feed information into 狼群 (Wolf Pack), a database exclusively of Palestinians from the West Bank used by Israel, including data on permits, family members, addresses, license plates, and whether they are wanted by the authorities or not.

To understand how Hikvision and other Chinese surveillance companies developed their operations, we must look at the role Hikvision plays in maintaining surveillance and policing in the “Xinjiang” region of Northwestern China. Many of these methods are directly inspired by U.S. and Israeli counter-insurgency, and so we see imperialist states using and developing each other’s techniques. Hikvision’s parent company is the China Electronics Technology Corporation (CETC, 中国电子科技集团公司), a significant player among

China’s central state-owned enterprises and a prominent military contractor.

CETC’s involvement in Xinjiang is substantial. It was responsible for building the Xinjiang-wide Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), 一体化联合作战平台, one of the main systems the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses for mass surveillance in the region. IJOP is supplied by the Xinjiang Lianhai Cangzhi Company (新疆联海创智公司), which is a wholly-owned subsidiary of CETC. IJOP is a system that aggregates and assesses data streams from across the region, tracking patterns in movement and social networks. Specifically, as a Human Rights Watch report (“China’s Algorithms of Repression,” 2019) shows, the IJOP app is used to fulfill three functions: (1) collecting personal information, (2) reporting on activities or circumstances deemed suspicious, and (3) prompting investigations of people whom the system flags as problematic.

Under the government’s “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism” campaign (严厉打击暴力恐怖活动专项行动), Xinjiang authorities have collected biometrics, including DNA samples, fingerprints, iris scans, and blood types of all residents in the region between the ages of 12 and 65. The IJOP app contains facial recognition functionality for checking whether a photo on an ID matches a person’s face or for cross-checking pictures on two documents.

They also collect massive amounts of personal information, from the color of a person’s car to their height down to the precise centimeter, as well as their address, phone number, and school or workplace. In addition, authorities have required residents to give voice samples when they apply for passports.

All of this data is entered into centralized, searchable databases. Collecting these biometrics is part of the government’s drive to form a “multi-modal” biometric portrait

of individuals and to gather more data about its citizens. All of this data can be linked in police databases to the person's ID number, which in turn is linked to a person's other biometric and personal information on file.

Xinjiang authorities consider many forms of lawful, every day, non-violent behavior suspicious, such as "not socializing with neighbors, often avoiding using the front door." The app also labels 51 network tools as suspicious, including many Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and encrypted communication tools, such as WhatsApp and Viber.

When the IJOP system detects irregularities or deviations from what it considers normal, such as when people are using a phone that is not registered to them, when they use more electricity than "normal," or when they leave the area in which they are registered to live without police permission, the system flags these "micro-clues" to the authorities as suspicious and prompts an investigation.

Another key element of the IJOP system is monitoring personal relationships. Authorities consider some of these relationships inherently suspicious. For example, the IJOP app instructs officers to investigate people who are related to people who have obtained a new phone number or who have foreign links. Dataveillance technology helps the Chinese settler-colonial state classify and segment its population. The software automates the detection of watch-listed individuals, placing all populations assessed in a color-coded stoplight system. Automated detection parameters, including discriminatory algorithms such as the "Uyghur alarm," contribute to the systemic ethno-racial profiling of individuals based on the phenotypes of Uyghur faces. IJOP's central system includes multiple sources, including CCTV cameras, some of which have facial recognition or infrared capabili-

ties (giving them "night vision"). The IJOP system also receives information from some of the region's countless checkpoints and "visitors' management systems" in access-controlled communities.

City and town are turned into a maze of digital ethno-racial profiling with the

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Even though surveillance is rampant in Xinjiang, it doesn't stop in Xinjiang; it's a pervasive tool used against any dissenting voices in China.

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help of checkpoints and thousands of surveillance hubs. Muslims are subjected to frequent ID checks and facial scans, as often as ten times per day at the checkpoints, which are built at nearly every jurisdictional boundary, such as shopping mall entrances, banks, hospitals, schools, walled residential areas, and city boundaries.

At some checkpoints, officers asked Uyghur young people to give them the passwords to unlock their smartphones. The officers then look at the spyware app Clean Net Guard, built by state contractor Landasoft. This app automatically scans smartphones registered to Uyghurs, searching through WeChat (the Chinese version of WhatsApp), Weibo (the Chinese version of X or Twitter), Douyin (TikTok), and other apps looking for thousands of flagged images and text associated with so-called extremist groups, Islam, and Uyghur political history.

In some cases, the security workers plug the phones into digital forensics tools built by companies such as the Chinese digital forensics state contractor Meiya Pico. These tools, referred to in Chinese as "counter-terrorism swords," run on Meiya

Pico software that mimicks the systems built by the Israeli company Cellebrite, which is one of the world's largest retailers of digital forensics tools.

This comprehensive, AI-assisted biometric and digital surveillance system that Hikvision supports, serves to bolster the oppressive “reeducation” system that explicitly targets and detains Uyghurs and other indigenous and ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang.

Even though surveillance is rampant in Xinjiang, it doesn't stop in Xinjiang; instead, it extends far beyond the province; it's a pervasive tool used against any dissenting voices in China. This reality is well-illustrated in Jialing Zhang's 2023 documentary, “Total Trust.” The film exposes a digitally-driven authoritarian regime utilizing sophisticated technologies like big data analysis, biometrics, and facial recognition to monitor and control its populace and suppress dissent. Since the “709 Crackdown” in 2015, a nationwide effort to quash dissent, Chinese citizens, including lawyers, journalists, and activists, have faced arbitrary detention, torture, and imprisonment under vague charges of “subversion of state power.” Technology firms collaborate with the government, which enables pervasive monitoring of citizens' communications, online activities, and movements through methods like phone tapping, monitoring chat logs, and the use of apps (especially VPNs), as well as the widespread CCTV coverage, and the mandatory use of ID cards to access public services and public spaces such as public transit and malls.

Hikvision cameras are also present in other parts of the world, from Myanmar to the United States. Hikvision is a multinational corporation operating in more than 190 countries. International exports have expanded to the point that they now account for more than 30 percent of its

revenue.<sup>1</sup> It sells facial-recognition camera systems more cheaply than Japanese and Euro-American manufacturers. The United States has over 12 percent of all Hikvision camera networks outside China, second only to Vietnam (13 percent). In 2016, a Georgetown University study (*Guardian*, 4/8/16) found that police departments were applying facial recognition to databases that were “disproportionately African American,” meaning that cops could use facial recognition software to double down on existing targeted practices.

An Amnesty International citizen-led investigation called “Decode Surveillance NYC” found that New Yorkers living in areas at greater risk of racist stop-and-frisk policing were more likely to be exposed to invasive facial recognition technology. In the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, the research also showed that the higher the proportion of non-white residents, the higher the concentration of facial recognition compatible CCTV cameras.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, S.T.O.P., (a group working against surveillance abuse, also part of the Ban the Scan campaign) found over 15,000 Hikvision internet-enabled cameras used by the NYPD in NYC.<sup>3</sup> This is after the 2018 ban of Dahua and Hikvision from being used by federal agencies. Many municipalities in the United States still use Hikvision cameras despite federal bans on Hikvision devices as a by-product of rising U.S.-China tensions. According to contract data reviewed by TechCrunch in May, at least a hundred U.S. counties, towns, and cities have bought surveillance equipment made by Hikvision and Dahua. They are able to do so because federal actions do not apply at the state and city level.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

The interconnections between these sur-

veillance regimes show that the fight for abolition is global. Our call to divest from Hikvision is not to exceptionalize China's role in this violence, but to provide a rallying point for Sinophone communities around the world to do our part to resist the role of Chinese institutions in Israeli and other apartheid states. Protests are incredibly difficult in China, but Hikvision's transnational presence means we can identify targets to combat Chinese state-backed surveillance entities across the world. So, sign our petition, and organize people to protest at a Hikvision office to begin encouraging people to connect between different forms of state violence—exposing the collaboration between even rival state blocs. In February 2024, pro-Palestine activists demonstrated at a Hikvision office in Vancouver.<sup>5</sup> Let us identify their other distribution sites and demand that they drop Hikvision.

Given the U.S. demonization of China, some may feel concerned about why we highlight China's complicity while Washington is the main country directly supporting the genocide of Palestinians with its weapons. We emphasize that our point is not that the United States and China have an equal responsibility in Israeli genocide. We are deeply enraged by an imperialist world order in which Palestine has never achieved justice, while the United States can continue arming the genocide without being sanctioned. We also understand that all businesses, no matter their country of origin, must cease to profit from genocide and occupation. We target Chinese companies not only because many of us have roots in China, but also because we are the direct object of the Hikvision panopticon because of our organizing at home and abroad.

The fight against neo-McCarthyism and Sinophobia in the West need not mean that we should defend another oppres-

sive state. We hope our campaign against Hikvision, which is in continuity with the larger Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Western and other companies, encourages a critical stance against all imperialisms. Let us look beyond what state officials are saying, and pay attention to the organic connections among people on the ground. Listen to the voices of solidarity between Palestinians and Uyghurs, and encourage these ties against common structures of repression.

#### FURTHER READING

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#### NOTES

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2. <https://banthescan.amnesty.org/decode/>
3. <https://www.stopspying.org/2021-hikvision>
4. <https://techcrunch.com/2021/05/24/united-states-towns-hikvision-dahua-surveillance/>
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# Activists on U.S.-China Labor Solidarity

ELLEN DAVID FRIEDMAN, ALEX T. TOM, AND KEVIN LIN

*Moderated by Andrew Sebald*

**Andrew Sebald:** *Thank you all for being here. Can you describe your experiences with labor organizing in China?*

**Ellen David Friedman:** I am a retired union organizer. I've spent about fifty years working in the U.S. labor movement, but I spent ten years living and working in China. I was drawn by a compelling need to try and understand what was happening in China after Deng Xiaoping's "opening up" began in the 1990s. I spent ten years living and getting involved with the labor movement at many levels. In the United States, I volunteer primarily through the portal of *Labor Notes*, where I'm honored to serve as chair of the board.

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ELLEN DAVID FRIEDMAN has been a labor organizer for about fifty years, including 10 years working in China between 2005-2015, when she was detained by authorities and instructed to leave the country. She has served as the board chair of Labor Notes for about a decade, and provides teaching, training, support, and encouragement to workers attempting to democratize their unions.

ALEX T. TOM is the Executive Director of the Center for Empowered Politics, a movement capacity-building center that trains and develops leaders of color and grows movement infrastructure at the intersection of racial justice, organizing, and power building. He played a leadership role at the Chinese Progressive Association in San Francisco and has over 25 years of experience organizing for social and economic justice.

I traveled to China around twenty-five years ago. I was motivated to go to China because I was an ardent follower of the Chinese Revolution. I had been impressed and intrigued by some of the earliest accomplishments of the revolution, but then watched as history unfolded. I saw terrifying turns in the direction of authoritarianism in China, suppression of the working class, and so on. At that point, I had a background of almost forty years organizing in the U.S. labor movement in various sectors, from manufacturing to public education. I was despondent about what neoliberalism had brought about in this country: the hollowing out of our unions that abandoned

KEVIN LIN is an activist and researcher on China's labor movement, and is interested in building international labor solidarity. Lin is the managing editor of *Asian Labour Review*, which publishes analyses of workers' struggles across Asia. He is a co-editor of *The China Question: Toward Left Perspectives* (Verso, 2022), a co-editor of *China from Below: Critical Analysis & Grassroots Activism* (Gongchao, 2023), and a co-author of *China in Global Capitalism: Building International Solidarity Against Imperial Rivalry* (Haymarket Books, 2024). He is a member of the New Politics editorial board.

ANDREW SEBALD is a community organizer based in Boston. He is a member of the Bread and Roses caucus in the Democratic Socialists of America.





Figure 1: CPA worker leaders and activist members

the idea of worker power, and unions turning in the direction of relying on the state to solve the contradictions of capitalism. I did not consider that a productive direction of progress, so I wanted to see something different.

My experience in China coincided with a period of liberalization under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, when activists from abroad were tolerated to a remarkable degree. I could live and teach at a university in Guangzhou named Sun Yat-Sen University, where I established an International Labor Research Center. It was sponsored for four or five years, supporting exchanges of labor activists. People were flocking to China, particularly to the Pearl River Delta, which had become “the world’s factory.” There were thousands of strikes going on all the time in thousands of factories. It was very compelling, and we were able to turn these moments into researchable topics. There was a brief period when we could both engage in research and exchange with workers directly at the worksite level, from meeting people in their

dormitories at their factories in public places to conducting educational and organizer training. People were coming from all over the world to research this. It was very fruitful and thrilling.

Then, Xi Jinping came to power, and the walls closed in on us. By 2013 or 2014, our center was

closed. We were no longer able to invite foreigners to come. I was picked up by the national security police and told to leave the country. Since 2015, I have been trying to develop avenues for creating U.S.-China labor solidarity under unbelievably restrictive conditions.

**Kevin Lin:** I became interested in labor issues in China between 2009 and 2010. Those years were significant moments in recent Chinese labor history in terms of the scale of workers’ struggles. I was fortunate to be attracted to the labor movement in China when there were militant workers’ struggles.

I finished my undergraduate degree around 2009 and 2010. I read about the latest labor developments in China on a daily basis, from strikes to labor reforms to tragedies. At that time there was rapid development in labor relations and escalations in worker struggles. I was part of a generation of young people who were attracted to the labor movement in China because of those struggles. A transition in consciousness was taking place, where people in China



no longer saw rural migrant workers as mere victims of an oppressive system. This period, between the late 2000s and early 2010s, was when people really changed their attitude from sympathy to solidarity. People in China did not just pity migrant workers, but actually wanted to join them in struggle. That's the kind of solidarity that emerged in this period. It's the kind of solidarity I believe in now, beyond holding moralistic sympathies for people in poor working conditions.

**Alex:** I would describe myself as a movement activist and organizer for the past 25+ years. I was with the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) in San Francisco for over 15 years. The CPA, which started in the early '70s, established numerous branches and chapters nationwide. The CPA was a key force in the Chinese immigrant community in advocating for the normalization of U.S.-China relations, and was a strong supporter of the Chinese revolution. That was a very taboo thing to do in Chinatown, which back then was controlled mainly by the Kuomintang (KMT).

Our community has a history of people-to-people diplomacy that is part of our legacy. It's also important to remember that Chinese workers were also living and

working in the United States, and many of the founders of the CPA were undocumented workers. This is important because we're now seeing the potential of diasporic organizing here in the United States.

Many splits have also materialized in the organization in the past fifty years. One of the biggest splits was about the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Our organization and other CPA branches took a position to support students and workers. Not everyone on the left supported this, but there were definitely people on the left and in mass organizations that did. That split is really important because some believe people-to-people diplomacy is unconditionally supporting the positions of revolutionary governments. But we need to continue to stay grounded and build with whoever represents the conscience of the working people, whether or not they are in power.

When I started at CPA in 2004, I connected with Ellen and then later with Kevin. China was entering the World Trade Organization (WTO), which marked an important milestone for globalization. In 2005, we felt compelled to bring Chinese workers, students, and young people from the United States to protest the annual WTO meeting being held that year in Hong Kong. While many people viewed

the 2000 Seattle protests as the big breakthrough for the anti-globalization movement, for many Asians it was the 2005 protests in Hong Kong. This was the first time Chinese immigrant communities openly criticized and mobilized against globalization. Some perceived this as "China-bashing" within our own community and membership. Of course,



Figure 2: WT-NO Delegation

this changed after we conducted more community education about the working conditions in China and other parts of Asia.

CPA has been around for many decades and has navigated various political conditions and ideological struggles within our ranks. In the end, this is how we maintained our mission and values—striving to represent the conscience of the people. Together, they joined the WT-NO delegation, which included over 40 leaders from Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New York, and other U.S. cities (see Figures 1 and 2).

In the Summer of 2010, CPA organized a memorial vigil in front of the Apple store in San Francisco for Foxconn workers who had committed suicide (Figure 3). Foxconn is the largest electronics manufacturer in the world, and a prime source of Apple products. The conditions in the factory are so difficult for young workers that dozens have attempted suicide, but multiple efforts to raise wages have still not improved conditions.

**Andrew:** *What are the similarities between the conditions faced by U.S. and Chinese workers?*

**Ellen:** After settling in China and grappling with its complex societal layers, I became aware that the *All-China Federation of Trade Unions* (ACFTU) is essentially a government entity rather than a mass organization representing the interests of the working class. Under the pressures of



Figure 3: CPA adult and youth leaders at their memorial vigil in front of the San Francisco Apple store for Foxconn workers

neoliberalism, the ACFTU, despite being enormous and possessing numerous resources, has become a hollow, top-down organization that was totally removed from the needs of its rank-and-file members. For those of us who believe unions should be homes for workers to learn how to fight for the working class, we accept that labor-management relationships are antagonistic. But this idea is completely absent in the ACFTU. When I returned to the United States, I saw similar problems in many of our unions here too. Certainly, not all U.S. unions are hollow, and the recent labor upsurge clearly reveals an undercurrent of democratic reform. However, in the United States and China, union leadership tends to be very top-down, conservative, bureaucratic, and focused on building relationships with politicians rather than their workers. In China, any attempt by rank-and-file workers to independently organize within unions is heavily repressed, and democratically-led unions seem very far away.

**Kevin:** In the last twenty or thirty years, China's economy has been driven by export-driven industrialization. Factories sprung up everywhere in China; rural

migrant workers moved to cities, and low-wage, low-skilled industrialization drove China's economy. The core of China's worker struggle was the industrial working class. This was not the case for the United States at that time. At that point, the country had already deindustrialized over the previous twenty or thirty years. I

recall sitting in meetings with delegations of Chinese workers and activists with U.S. unionists, and the U.S. workers, while expressing interest and solidarity, had trouble relating to the struggles of the Chinese working class because the Americans were mainly in the service sectors. Now, I think there is increasingly less misalignment between the U.S. and Chinese working classes. China is experiencing the beginning of its own post-industrialization, and more young Chinese people are white-collar workers and beginning to work in the tech and service sectors. More Chinese workers are feeling bleak about their futures, similar to what American workers started feeling many years ago.

I believe workers can best build solidarity through shared experiences of concrete conditions. Building solidarity on the basis of moralistic abstractions is not sustainable and does not effectively drive organizing. Now that the U.S. and Chinese working classes are starting to experience similar struggles, an arena is emerging where they can organize together.

**Alex:** I want to build off that with a story of my own. In our WT-NO delegation, we



Figure 4: CPA board Chair Pam Tau Lee passing out leaflets

had workers from Chinatown, one of whom had been a garment worker during the Cultural Revolution. Before our trip, our delegation members held a sense of pride in China. We had expressed a critique of globalization, and they often said we should be more “dialectical” about it. Globalization might have bad consequences, but it was hard not to be patriotic about China’s meteoric rise to the international stage. When they visited China, they only witnessed the rapid development and modernization of their hometowns. Many of the delegation members believed we were lying about the conditions of workers, stating that we had been listening to too much anti-China rhetoric. However, shortly afterwards we traveled to the special economic zone (SEZ) in Shenzhen and they were shocked by how bad the working conditions were. The worker who had worked at a cotton factory during the Cultural Revolution remembered that her minimum wage was a lot higher than at the factories in the SEZ. She was shocked that the wages were so low.

**Andrew:** *Are there other important moments of U.S.-China labor solidarity in the past few*

*decades? How can they inform us about such solidarity in the future?*

**Ellen:** In the 20 years that I have conducted this work, the high point of U.S.-China worker solidarity for me was the Hong Kong Dockworkers' Strike of 2013. A small group of crane operators initiated the strike. While few in number, they were highly skilled, so when they stopped working, everything else stopped too. The strike expanded quickly. In Hong Kong, trade unions were in contention at that time. One was the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Union (HKFTU), which was closely associated with the ACFTU of the mainland and was typically more docile. The other was the pro-democracy Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), which had to dissolve after the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020. Both of these labor federations were present, but the militancy of the dockworkers associated with the HKCTU was so powerful and charismatic that it quickly drew widespread movement support. Students, socialists, and other trade unionists rallied to support the dockworkers. The mobilization of public sentiment of this magnitude was astonishing.

I was in Guangzhou then, so I could go back and forth between Guangzhou and Hong Kong to witness the strike. When I returned to the United States, we organized a speaking tour for the leaders of the Dockworkers Union. They first came and spoke at the Labor Notes conference in 2014; then they participated in a whirlwind tour to garner support from the West Coast dockworkers' unions. It was rather frenetic, but we hit every dock on the West Coast represented by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The ILWU has a longstanding history of internationalist unionism, one of the few U.S. unions with that legacy. The ILWU hosted these leaders for talks in Los Ange-

les, Oakland, Tacoma, Portland, and several other docks. They raised a lot of money to support strike expenses. We also met with several affinity groups and community groups, like the CPA. One could feel that workers' comparable positions, even though their unions were different, enabled them to recognize similar conditions and their power over the global movement of capital. It was very powerful.

I have to say that anything like that is beyond our imagination right now. We must be extremely sober in our assessment and expectations of possibilities of worker-to-worker contact. Right now, anyone who came from China and held a very public position around labor militancy would be in very grave danger when they returned home. Needless to say, they want to avoid exposing themselves to that, so horizons like that are not in front of us at the moment.

**Alex:** Building on what Ellen said, hosting worker-to-worker conversations qualitatively shifted our base in the United States because many workers had been afraid to take a stand. However, after seeing Hong Kong dockworkers or young women workers organize, I heard some of those same people in the United States say, "Wow, if they can do it, we can do it". There is a very important connection when people see struggle and protest in China.

I want to also stress that organizing is still happening in China. However, as Ellen said, having a sober assessment of what is possible in China is important. It could be decades before conditions shift. The way to move forward is to assess the moment and ponder the role of diasporic organizing. There are hundreds of thousands of Chinese internationals in our midst. Some of them have also been part of movements in China, and one of the interventions I have been pushing for within the Asian American community is to embrace those



international students as part of our movements and communities. They need space to build and strategize around political issues: labor, questions of sovereignty and democracy at home, climate, feminism, and so on. But we must create a strategic space for them to struggle, build, and connect with other movements.

**Kevin:** I want to conclude with something a little more abstract. I have been reading two recently published books about this question of solidarity. One is *Struggle and Mutual Aid in the Age of Working Solidarity* (Other Press, 2023) by Nicholas Delalande, which is a history of the First International. The book goes through the historical experience of forging links between the European and American working classes to transcend national borders and build deep relationships with each other. The other book is *Solidarity: The Past, Present, and Future of a World-Changing Idea* by Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Astra Taylor (Penguin Random House, 2024). This book tells us that the idea of solidarity itself is relatively young, as it mostly emerged out of the Industrial Revolution. Of course, communities have been mutually supporting each other for most of history, but the term and modern practice of solidarity is quite a recent phenomenon. It came out of this sense that people are indebted to one another, not just through moralistic or political means, but also economic ones, thanks to the development of capitalism. The idea is that we should be in debt to each other materially to support one another.

This material aspect is important because the First International established

that solidarity is about workers wresting control of the economy from the capitalists and the capitalist state. The book made me think even more about what it means to practice solidarity, and how or where it failed. Solidarity is not only found in visible demonstrations of support; it is also built through everyday deeds of translation, deep understanding of each others' struggles, and long-term relationship building. These are the solid foundations upon which we can build our solidarity.

**Ellen:** You have laid the table nicely for a point I would like to add, Kevin. When facing conditions in which many people live in exile or are living under incredibly restrictive constraints at home, we often think of this isolation as a huge impediment to a material form of solidarity. The most critical form of solidarity is when people continue to develop a set of values and analytic tools to assess reality and commit themselves to a certain intention over time, regardless of the conditions surrounding them at a particular moment. I have seen some beautiful examples of this. At the most recent *Labor Notes* conference, we had people worldwide who have developed democratic unionism in practice—even in conditions of growing authoritarianism. We are seeing a tremendous thirst for radically democratic practice, not just voting, but learning how to conduct themselves with each other in radically respectful ways. This movement of solidarity of beliefs and goals, building across great distances, is going to be an enduring and sustainable form of power as we move forward.

# In Defense of Ukraine's Right to Self-Defense

JOHN FEFFER

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*[The remarks below are from a debate on "The Ukraine War: Where Is It Going?" held in Northampton, Massachusetts, June 12, 2024. John Feffer was given 10 minutes to make his opening remarks.]*

I WANT TO PREFACE MY REMARKS by saying that I'm paid to critique U.S. foreign policy. That is my job at Foreign Policy in Focus at the Institute for Policy Studies. It's been my job basically for 25 years. I have criticized all aspects of U.S. foreign policy. I've taken issue with U.S. policy in the Middle East, in Europe, in Latin America. I've also been an anti-war activist for the better part of my life. I've worked in solidarity with groups around the world, opposing U.S. military bases, U.S. military spending, U.S. military activities. I'm going to return to that particular point at the end of my remarks.

I am not pro war. I *am* pro self-defense. Ukraine did not ask for this war. Russia invaded Ukraine. It broke international law and Ukrainians want to defend themselves. I believe they have the right to defend themselves. But who cares about rights if

you don't have the means to defend yourself, so I support providing Ukrainians with those means. Can I provide those means? No. Can my community? No. Can the U.S. government? Yes; it can play an important role in doing so. In other words, to overcome my usual critique of U.S. foreign policy and my peace activist credentials it requires a pretty high bar, but this effort by Ukraine in self-defense has met that bar.

Most importantly, I work in solidarity with people around the world. I work in solidarity with Ukrainians. Ukrainians support this war continuing by large majorities. The most recent poll in *The Washington Post* (June 11) showed that 73 percent of Ukrainians believe that they can liberate all of the territory that Russia currently occupies, 80 percent believe that Russia will attack them again even if there is a ceasefire and an agreement. In other words, Ukrainians have no confidence that Vladimir Putin will abide by any agreements, and I'll explain a little bit about that in a moment.

This war is not primarily about land. Of course, it seems to be about land. Ukraine wants the land back that was seized; Russia wants to keep that land. But really what motivates Ukrainians to fight is the worst-case scenario and that is that they will come under the rule of Russia. They know what that looks like. They know what has happened in the occupied territories. There has been the execution of prisoners of war in direct violation of the Geneva accords.

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There's been the abduction of children brought to Russia—forced adoptions—that has led to an International Criminal Court indictment and a call for the arrest of Vladimir Putin and the so-called head of his family-and-children policy. There has been the arrest of 28 journalists.<sup>1</sup> There has been the torture and abuse of Ukrainians in those territories.<sup>2</sup> Ukrainians don't want that to happen anywhere else in the country. They are fighting not for land; they're fighting for their lives.

Are they losing at the moment? No, I would say they are not losing. Russia has an unbelievable asymmetry advantage over Ukraine. It can bring in 30,000 recruits per month. Ukraine faces significant challenges in recruiting people. Russia obviously has more firepower as well and with that enormous advantage what has Russia been able to do recently? It has been able to attain a very small amount of additional territory in the Donbas and in the South. Most critically, we've heard about the attacks over the northeast border. Well, they've stalled. The Russians have now dug in fortified positions; they have basically given up their effort to advance toward Kharkiv.<sup>3</sup> So with this great advantage, what has Russia been able to do? Not a great deal. It has of course consistently bombarded Ukrainian territory. Perhaps you saw that *New York Times* in-depth investigation (June 3) about all the churches, schools, and hospitals that Russia has destroyed. Are these military targets? No. They're civilian targets and they've led to civilian casualties as well. These bombardments have also hit Ukraine's energy infrastructure to such a degree that the winter coming up will prove difficult for Ukrainians. I do not want to sugar-coat the situation Ukraine faces: when I say it's not losing, I don't mean it's winning. I just mean it's holding its own.

U.S. assistance in this regard, including the \$60 billion that was recently approved

by Congress, has proven critical in allowing Ukraine to maintain basically a stalemate. Increased delivery of anti-missile systems will go a long way to protecting Ukrainian cities and critical energy infrastructure.

I know a lot of you are concerned about nuclear war. *I'm* concerned about nuclear war. My first job in Washington DC was to work at *Nuclear Times* magazine back when there was a *Nuclear Times* magazine. I, too, am worried about nuclear war pretty much everywhere around the world, and I'm worried about escalation in Ukraine. Why do I think that the situation in Ukraine is not as critical as many people think? Because I believe that Vladimir Putin is risk averse.

Now that might sound strange. The dude invaded Ukraine. Obviously, he entertains risk. But he took that gamble because he thought it would be a cakewalk, he thought he could seize all of Ukraine and that NATO would simply lie down and not resist. Instead he encountered significant resistance. Since that invasion he's proven considerably risk averse. He has not attacked NATO positions. He has not tried to destroy NATO supply lines into Ukraine. He has not expanded the war horizontally by expanding it to other countries—the Baltics or Poland—nor has he expanded or escalated vertically, despite numerous threats that he will use nuclear weapons. The Allies have crossed any number of red lines established by the Kremlin and he has not used those nuclear weapons. My takeaway from this is that Vladimir Putin will not escalate if he meets resistance. If there is no resistance he will continue to push further.

Let me talk about the Budapest Memorandum. Many of you are probably familiar with it. Ukraine once had nuclear weapons, but it gave them up in the 1990s in exchange for security guarantees from the United States, the UK, and Russia. Russia, of course, by invading Ukraine has violated

the Budapest Memorandum. The United States and the United Kingdom have come to the defense of Ukraine as promised in the Budapest Memorandum. If they hadn't done so, what would have been the message sent to the world? The message sent to the world would be "folks, if you don't have nuclear weapons you cannot expect to defend yourself because no one will come to your aid, so the best thing for you to do is acquire nuclear weapons as soon as possible." In other words, I'm convinced that the greater nuclear risk is *not* coming to the defense of Ukraine because it sends the message that other countries must acquire nuclear weapons as quickly as possible.

What about a ceasefire: should we have a ceasefire immediately? Well, I would like to see the war end, as all of us would. I think it is a terrible conflict and it has caused enormous loss of life. The problem is that no one in the region actually supports a ceasefire, at least a ceasefire that would be a compromise. Russia wants to keep all of its territory. Ukraine wants to get that territory back.

Maybe the United States should say "Hey, Ukraine, if you don't go to the table, if you don't negotiate, we might take away your assistance. We will pressure you, we will twist your arm, to get you to the negotiating table with Russia." Now, who actually proposes that? Donald Trump, when he says that he will solve the war in 24 hours. It intrigues me—I'll use that verb to be polite—that some in the peace movement also support that particular strategy. Why? Well, this is the only time I can think of that the peace movement actually supports the U.S. government imposing a solution on another country against the will of that country. I thought the peace movement actually stood with the oppressed, with the people who have been victimized.

That leads me to a final quote from Barbara Smith. Those of you who know

Barbara Smith know that she is a noted Black feminist intellectual who has worked actually very strongly with the Ukraine solidarity movement. This is what Barbara Smith has to say:<sup>4</sup> "Listen to the people who are experiencing oppression and exploitation, listen to the Black person, listen to the Palestinians, listen to the Ukrainians, listen to the Muslims, listen to the queer people, listen to the workers"—and I would add, listen to the people whose lands have been expropriated against their will here in Northampton. Listen to those people. Don't listen to me. Listen to the Ukrainians.

Thank you very much.

*[Another speaker, John Berkowitz, then spoke for 10 minutes. After which John Feffer was given 8 minutes to respond.]*

THANK YOU, JOHN, THAT WAS really very helpful, and I appreciate those comments. I especially appreciate the three baskets of threats that you brought up: climate change, nuclear danger, and of course the risk of greater casualties and suffering on the part of Ukraine. So let me address those three.

The first is climate change. I did a panel with Russian environmentalists prior to the Ukraine invasion, and it was a very hopeful time.<sup>5</sup> The environmentalists said, "Hey, you know for the first time Putin has started to talk about carbon neutrality. We're finally starting to address the question of methane that is a serious problem out in Siberia with the melting of the permafrost. We're getting some recycling campaigns going in certain provinces in Russia. This is not revolutionary stuff, but we think we have got some movement here."

Well, all those folks no longer live in Russia. The environmental movement in Russia has been decimated. All of the progress that Russia more or less made has been eliminated.

In order to prosecute this war, Vladimir

Putin has pumped out as much fossil fuels as he possibly can to pay for the incredible percentage of the GDP that's going to this war. He's put environmentalists in prison. He has bombed renewable energy infrastructure inside Ukraine. I'm not just talking about your usual stuff; he's gone after power plants, coal-fired, etc., but actually solar plants as well. Interestingly, Ukraine has decided that in order to survive it has got to decentralize its energy system. If everything is in a few buckets, then Russia can bomb those—so decentralize. And so Ukraine actually has pushed hard to put in more renewable energy infrastructure. It's much easier to rebuild solar if it's been bombed than it is to rebuild a huge power plant.

In other words, yes, this war does contribute to climate change. There's no question about that and wars do in general, but as far as I'm concerned Russia and Vladimir Putin represent the old order. It's a petrostate. It is committed to pumping out every last drop of fossil fuels. When Ukraine is fighting against Russia, I'm supporting them, not just so that they get their territory back, not just so that they can survive, but because they are opposed to that kind of old order, the petrostate that Vladimir Putin is pushing.

Second, nuclear war. Is there going to be a nuclear escalation? I cannot rule that out. We know that nuclear war can happen through miscalculations. We have any number of examples of that. I don't think it was a smart idea for Ukraine to go after those particular radar installations. It did so not in order to degrade Russia's defensive capability, but because they thought they could eliminate Russia's ability to use its radar installations to target Ukraine. Regarding the one near the border with Kazakhstan, the furthest away, a lot of people said that has nothing to do with the war in Ukraine. But it did cover areas in Crimea and Ukraine has been most successful in its

attacks on the Black Sea Fleet and other installations in Crimea, so it believes that it has reason to attack those radars. But I would agree: not a smart idea. My guess is—though I cannot confirm this—that the Pentagon is sending similar messages to Kiev: lay off those particular attacks.

Will NATO actually send any troops? The French have said that they will send advisers for training capacity. They currently train Ukrainians outside of Ukraine and Macron has said it will send advisers to Ukraine. Ukraine says they've already been sent. We don't have confirmation of that; it might happen. The Baltic countries have said they might do something similar, but again we're talking about serious opposition within countries in Europe to boots on the ground, with the possible exception of the Baltics or Poland. But still, the possibility of that kind of escalation is not likely in my estimation, especially given the stalemate that we're talking about. We're not talking about Ukrainian troops falling helter-skelter back toward Kiev. They're holding their positions. I don't see any major loss of territory that would bring in NATO troops.

A no-fly zone? well we're providing Ukraine with F-16s. They are on their way. Some of them are being held outside of Ukraine because Ukraine doesn't want them bombed by Russia. When it has a sufficient Air Force it may well be able by itself, without the intercession of a no-fly zone, to at least get parity in the air and that's going to be important in terms of any kind of preservation of cities and infrastructure, as well as any possible counteroffensive.

Vilification? This is an interesting question. Are we vilifying Putin? Well, I guess *I* do. I call him a fascist because I have written an article identifying exactly, very technically, according to the definition of fascism, why Vladimir Putin is a fascist.<sup>6</sup> I don't use the term as an epithet; I use it as a descriptor. He has violated international

law. We have to call him out for that. Did we soft pedal our criticisms of the U.S. government when it violated international law simply because we wanted to promote peace or some kind of diplomatic solution. I don't think so. We criticized the U.S. government and justifiably so. We have done so with such characters as Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia. I see no reason why we do not call Vladimir Putin what he is.

Does that preclude arms control negotiations with Russia? Absolutely not! We absolutely have to push for arms control negotiations. We have a history of making a distinction between the government we don't like and the arms control negotiations we do like. We did that throughout the Cold War. I propose that we continue to do so.

Finally, I sympathize with the perspective concerned about the sacrifices that Ukraine has made. These are terrible sacrifices. But these are sacrifices that Ukrainians are taking for themselves. Did we in the progressive movement tell South Africans that they should negotiate with the apartheid government because the sacrifices they were making were in our opinion too much? Have we told the Palestinians that they should give up the idea of a Palestinian State because we believe that they are making too many sacrifices? Of course not. It is the prerogative of the people in the region to decide for themselves what sacrifices they are going to make. It is not up to us. Talk about imperialism! You think that imperialism is only what a U.S. government does. I'm sorry, but we're Americans and imperialism runs in our veins. We have a habit of telling people what we think they should do and I think we should examine ourselves. We should look in the mirror and say "what right do we have to tell people what they should do and—worse—twist their arms to do what we think they should do?" Thank you.

*[Questions from the audience followed. One questioner asked Feffer whether the threat posed by NATO expansion had been a major cause of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.]*

**I** OPPOSED NATO EXPANSION, going all the way back to 1996!<sup>17</sup> I thought it was a stupid idea. But Vladimir Putin doesn't really give a shit about NATO. What does he care about? What were the Euromaidan protests about? Were they about NATO? No, they were about the European Union. What Vladimir Putin really is worried about is Ukraine becoming part of the European Union, that all of the liberties, however constrained, all of the economic freedoms, however constrained, will come to the border of Russia. What is motivating or what motivated all of the [anti-regime] protests in Russia—huge protests over the years—was it a desire for Russia to join NATO? No. Most Russians don't want to join NATO, but they were very drawn to what they saw as an attractive model in the European Union. The fact that Ukraine was on the verge of signing an agreement with the European Union on economic cooperation: that was what motivated Ukrainians to come onto the streets and what ultimately was the greatest fear that Putin had. You would have to be a 12-year-old without any knowledge of geopolitics to think that an invasion of Ukraine would not lead to the strengthening of NATO. Could you expect that invading Ukraine would not lead for instance to the sudden interest on the part of Finland and Sweden—historically neutral countries—to join NATO? Of course.

*[Another audience member referred to the current conflict in Ukraine as a "proxy war." Feffer didn't have a chance to respond to this point in person, so we asked him to submit a written reply for publication.]*

**A** PROXY WAR IS A CONFLICT in which a third party is fighting its primary

adversary through the support of an ally but without direct intervention. The Soviet Union and China thus fought against the United States in Vietnam through their support of the Vietcong; the United States fought against the Soviet Union through its support of the mujahideen in Afghanistan.

Certainly, the United States is supporting Ukraine. It has not directly intervened in the conflict with boots on the ground. And it has increasingly identified Russia as a major adversary.

And yet, the Ukraine conflict is not a proxy war. The United States is not seeking to draw Russia into a “quagmire” in order to weaken it. U.S. military support is designed to prevent an ally from collapsing and, ultimately, restore its territorial integrity. Some U.S. military officials have unwisely talked of the utility of weakening Russia’s military capabilities—for instance, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin’s often-quoted comment that “we want to see Russia weakened.”<sup>8</sup>

But it’s important to focus on the second part of his comment: “weakened to the degree that it can’t do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.” In other words, the United States is not seeking regime change in Moscow, not seeking any kind of Ukrainian seizure of Russian territory, not even looking to weaken Russia in general. The bottom line is that the Pentagon—and the U.S. foreign policy elite more generally—is terrified by the prospect of a weak, chaotic, or collapsing Russia. There is, first of all, the nightmare scenario of loose nukes. Then there’s the horrifying prospect of a power vacuum and a civil war. And, of course, there are political actors inside Russia who could take over from Putin (nationalists and militarists even further to the right) who could present as great or greater a threat to Europe and the international order.

Finally, the formulation of “proxy war” undermines any sense of agency on

Ukraine’s part, as if it were being completely manipulated by the Pentagon, a cat’s paw. But it is Ukraine that is managing its own defense, plotting its own strategies, taking its own risks, often to the displeasure of U.S. military planners. Ukrainians are not fighting to weaken Russia in its superpower confrontation with the United States. They are fighting for a very specific reason: to expel Russian occupying forces.

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Claudia Sheinbaum

# What the Election of AMLO's Protégé Means for Mexico

DAN LA BOTZ

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**B**Y A MORE THAN TWO-TO-ONE margin, on June 2, 2024, voters in Mexico elected Claudia Sheinbaum, a protégé of outgoing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), to the nation's highest office, the first woman and the first Jew to hold the post. She ran as the candidate of AMLO's Morena party. Under AMLO, Morena (the Spanish acronym for the National Regeneration Party) stood on the left of the Mexican political spectrum, a populist party with a leader who spoke in a nationalist voice to the masses, but in an authoritarian manner—though AMLO's administration never had anything like the more anti-democratic character of Daniel Ortega's dictatorship in Nicaragua or of Nicolás Maduro's repressive government in Venezuela. Unlike those countries, where the constitutions were changed to permit the presidents to stay in power, the Mexican Constitution still prohibits reelection to the presidency, though AMLO may seek to continue to exercise power through his successor.

So Sheinbaum's election poses three major questions: Will she be a puppet of

the former president? Will she continue his policies founded on authoritarian populism and increasing militarism?<sup>1</sup> And, finally, has AMLO recreated a new corporatist state that Sheinbaum will perpetuate?

The Mexican federal elections took place in less-than-ideal circumstances. There were by the end of April, some 30 assassinations of candidates, a dozen kidnappings, dozens of other death threats, and scores of violent attacks on political events and candidates. All of this is an expression of the pervasive criminal violence in the country due to the drug cartels that sometimes assassinate candidates who are not to their liking. In the state of Chiapas, rife with violence that AMLO has failed to prevent,<sup>2</sup> in a shocking incident, Sheinbaum herself was stopped at a checkpoint by armed men, one of whom told her, "When you get to power, remember the mountains, remember the poor people. That's all we have to say. We are not against the government; we are here so you see the disaster that is Comalapa." Comalapa is a small town in the Lacandón Jungle on the Guatemalan border that has been the scene of violence. AMLO dismissed the incident as "propaganda."

The fairness of the election also remains in question. In 2022, AMLO's supporters in Congress carried out a "reform" of the electoral system opposed by many sectors

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of society and particularly by human rights groups that warned the reform would make elections less fair. In addition, the new, weaker National Electoral Institute (INA, formerly IFE), had its budget and staff cut largely due to AMLO's governmental austerity program, and became less effective. Though there was little doubt that Sheinbaum would win the election by an enormous margin, the INA's reforms and lack of resources may affect congressional and local races.

There is also AMLO's Trump-like domination of the media, working in the last few months to promote not only himself as usual, but also Sheinbaum's campaign. His *mañaneras*, or morning press conferences, held nearly every morning for six years, were watched with love by 13 million people, about 10 percent of the population. They were also streamed by major media such as UnoTV, Grupo REFORMA, MILENIO, and NMás, often getting 70 million views in a nation with about 90 million adults. On Wednesdays, the *mañaneras* was dedicated to the questions “¿Quién es quién en las mentiras?” (Who's who in the lies?) in which AMLO denounced the media and the reporters that dared to question him and his policies. He called them fake journalists, biased, even “scum journalists.” This in a country where during his presidency 37 journalists have been murdered and five more disappeared, often because they were reporting on the cartels and sometimes on their ties to government officials.

### The Candidates and Coalitions

The left—that is, democratic forces, progressive social movements, and grassroots working people—had little or no role in this election. A small group of far-left political groups, unions, feminists, and LGBTQ activists have created what they call “an Independent, anti-capitalist and

anti-patriarchal Left Bloc,<sup>3</sup> but no left party has been able to achieve ballot status and no far-left candidates were up for election to major offices. Three candidates stood in the election held on June 2. Sheinbaum headed up the coalition called *Suigamos Haciendo Historia*, “Let's Keep Making History.” The second candidate, Xochitl Gómez, heads the “*Fuerza y Corazón por México*,” or “Strength and Heart for Mexico,” made up of three former ruling parties, the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). And, third, Jorge Máñez represents the *Movimiento Ciudadano* or Citizens Movement Party.

We have to say a few words about the several parties that support these various candidates, though they will not be very nice words because there is little good to be said about them. Let's take them up in reverse order, from the weakest to the strongest.

First, we have Jorge Máñez, the smiling, handsome young candidate of the Citizens' Party, a middle-class party that claims to stand for political reform, but Máñez's record belies that. He began his political career in 2010 in the *Nueva Alianza*, New Alliance Party, created by the powerful, ambitious, corrupt, and unscrupulous union bureaucrat Elba Esther Gordillo; his candidacy for the state congress of Zacatecas was also supported by both the corrupt PRI and the opportunistic Green Party. Later he was elected to the Mexican Congress, serving from 2015 to 2024, not noted for anything special, and then became head of the Citizen's Party of which he was the presidential candidate.

Then we have Xochitl Gálvez, a businesswoman, the candidate of the “Strength and Heart” coalition made up of three former governing parties of Mexico. First, PRI, the party that governed Mexico under various names from its founding in 1929

until 2000, a nationalist, developmentalist, corporatist party that reached an accommodation with the bourgeoisie, dominated peasants leagues and labor unions, established a *modus vivendi* with the drug cartels, and ruled through corruption and violence. Second, PAN, the party of the Roman Catholic Church and big business, which governed Mexico from 2000 to 2012. And third, PRD, which originated from a reform movement founded by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas within the PRI, and which later became an independent party in 1989—but within a decade became corrupt. (AMLO who had been a PRD leader left with a good chunk of its members and founded his party, Morena). These three parties making up the Gálvez coalition had become utterly discredited in the minds of a majority of Mexicans who deserted them to support AMLO and Morena. Gálvez played the populist card, claiming that her humble background gives her a better understanding of the common people and she promised to keep all social programs for the poor in place and to improve them. She failed to convince the Mexican people, most of whom saw her as the representative of the corrupt parties of the past.

Finally, we have Sheinbaum, the candidate of Morena, the handpicked successor to AMLO and dependent upon him. To understand her, we must know him. AMLO was for decades the charismatic, authoritarian leader of a populist party. He and his party have a broad base of support among Mexico's working people and the poor, buttressed in part by the social programs he has promoted. Morena is full of ordinary people, peasants, workers, school teachers, and the lower middle classes who have put their faith in AMLO. At the same time, he made it clear over his entire political career and especially during his six years as president, that he wanted to be in the good graces of the U.S. govern-

ment and to promote foreign and domestic capitalist investment. To call AMLO's and Morena's policies social democratic would be a mistake both because there is nothing democratic about him or the party and the social aspect is limited. This is the populist leader and the principal political party that has put Sheinbaum in power.

The other two parties in Sheinbaum's

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For the first time since the 1920s, independent labor unions can achieve legal recognition and workers can engage in strikes.... Can the unions maintain their independence and internal democracy?

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coalition, are both politically corrupt satellites: the Green Party and the Labor Party. Mexico's Green Party (PVEM) is an opportunist outfit that was previously allied with the then-leftist PRD and then later with the right-wing PAN. The Greens have no principles. The Labor Party (PT) has nothing to do with labor unions or socialist politics, but is a small Stalinist sect that once had a base among poor people in Chihuahua. Its thuggish leader Alberto Anaya sent greetings to Kim Jong Un in 2019, saying, "The Korean people's heroic struggle for the country's sovereignty and the dignity of the nation and peace of the Korean Peninsula and the rest of the world serves as a model of all the revolutionaries and the progressive peoples struggling for global independence." Ugh.

Sheinbaum herself has many assets. She is a highly educated woman, trained as an environmental scientist. She is a youthful

and attractive-looking 61-year-old woman, charming in her way, comfortable speaking to the press and to business groups, able to read a speech, if rather stiffly. Though she lacks the common touch, she can take selfies with supporters and gladhand the crowd. She was capable of holding her own, against Xochitl Gálvez in the national debate as each slung mud, accusing the other of corruption.

Antisemitism is pervasive in Mexico, and Sheinbaum has been the victim of it, though she doesn't assert her religion or ethnicity. Mexican Jews work to keep a low profile. Former PAN president Vicente Fox baited her for being both Jewish and a foreigner because her grandparents were Bulgarian Jewish immigrants. Sheinbaum, her eyes on the political prize, responded by saying that her parents were born in Mexico and that she is "100 percent Mexican."

Sheinbaum claims to be an environmentalist, the science in which she has been trained. Yet she has supported AMLO's spending of several billion dollars for the construction of the new Dos Bocas oil refinery, arguing that it will make Mexico energy self-sufficient and provide cheaper gas for cars. Nor did she speak out when AMLO spent billions to upgrade several older refineries. Still, she says she will emphasize green energy alternatives in the future.

Though she has called herself a feminist, she has spent the last six years working with AMLO who has been widely criticized by the feminist movement, particularly for disregarding and even denying the problem of femicide, the high rate of murders of women that persisted during his presidency. And Sheinbaum has had little relationship to feminist activists, proving incapable of communicating with them. During her term as mayor of Mexico City, she came into conflict with the women's movement activists of *Okupa Cuba* who

had taken over a human rights office and radio station on Cuba Street in Mexico City to call attention to the issue of violence against women. Sheinbaum approved the dispatch of the police to evict them.<sup>4</sup>

## Sheinbaum and the Legacy of AMLO

Sheinbaum is fundamentally an apparatchik and politician, a creature of the party and the state who dutifully worked her way up, first elected as head of a borough of Mexico City, later serving as AMLO's secretary of the environment, and then as head of the Federal District, effectively the mayor of Mexico City. She inherits the role as head of the government, but she has not demonstrated any personal charisma and has so far not had an opportunity to govern independently. Some believe that AMLO, with his enormous popularity will continue to be the power behind the presidential throne. Mexicans may think back to the era of Plutarco Elías Calle, who served as president from 1924 to 1928, but then between 1928 and 1934 pulled the strings of three puppet presidents (Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, and Abelardo L. Rodríguez). Will AMLO pull Sheinbaum's strings, or will she be her own person?

In any case, Sheinbaum is inheriting the governmental structures, the bureaucracy, policies, and the successes and failures bequeathed to her by AMLO. The most important development of AMLO's six years as president was the increased militarization of the country. AMLO initially said he would deal with the cartels "*con abrazos, no balas*," that is, with hugs not bullets, but the continued violence that took the lives of thousands led him to create a new national guard, originally made up of 60,000 soldiers that quickly grew to 100,000. This is in addition to the 260,000-member Mexican Army, and about 100,000 sailors and marines, and 500,000 notoriously corrupt

police officers. Under AMLO, the army, the navy, the marines, and the national guard dealt with the cartels, handled immigration, owned and managed banks that distributed social welfare payments, and ran the airports and the new Maya Train.

All of these military and police forces failed to end the violence that has characterized Mexico since former president Felipe Calderón unleashed the drug wars in 2006. Conflicts among cartels and between the cartels and the authorities have since then taken an estimated 300,000 lives in addition to 100,000 or more kidnappings, and there are about 30,000 homicides every year. (The U.S. population of 333 million is more than two and a half times that of Mexico's 127 million, but has about 26,000 homicides per year.)

The cost to the citizens of all this policing has been great. The United States under both presidents Trump and Biden maintained a close relationship with Mexico and its justice system. Yet the U.S. State Department itself reports that,

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings by police, military, and other governmental officials; forced disappearance by government agents; torture or cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment or punishment by security forces; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; restrictions on free expression and media, including violence against journalists; serious acts of government corruption; insufficient investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting persons with disabilities.

Impunity and extremely low rates of prosecution remained a problem for all crimes, including human rights abuses and corruption. There were reports some

government agents were complicit with international criminal gangs, and prosecution and conviction rates were low for these abuses.<sup>5</sup>

AMLO proved unable to eradicate the cartels. Far from it. The drug cartels, one of Mexico's five biggest sources of income (together with manufacturing, tourism, oil, and immigrant remittances), earn profits estimated between \$13 billion and \$50 billion per year and are believed to employ 175,000 people. There are no indications that Sheinbaum will reduce the role of the military nor that she has any other approach to dealing with the drug cartels.

AMLO's failure to deal with the country's violence forms part of a broader failing in terms of human right. Human Rights Watch's report on Mexico in 2023 stated:

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in 2018, has made little progress in addressing Mexico's serious human rights challenges, including extreme criminal violence, abuses against migrants, gender-based violence, attacks on independent journalists and human rights defenders, torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings.<sup>6</sup>

## And the Successes She Inherits?

Sheinbaum also inherits what are seen as the major successes of AMLO's regime. In foreign policy, AMLO's primary preoccupation, like that of all Mexican presidents, was to maintain Mexico's subordination to the United States on the best possible terms. For AMLO this meant a willingness to act to assist U.S. presidents Donald Trump and Joseph Biden in stopping Central American migrants on Mexico's southern border in order to reduce the pressure on the U.S. border. Sheinbaum has said, "The relationship with the U.S. must be one of respect without subordination." If so, she would be the first Mexican president to achieve that, but in reality, it is impossible given U.S. economic domination and

political and military power.

Domestically AMLO focused on encouraging both Mexican and foreign investment in Mexico on completely normal capitalist terms. The United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), ratified during AMLO’s term, provides the framework for \$1.78 trillion in trade between

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Speaking to a group of corporate executives during her campaign, Sheinbaum told them that maintaining Mexico’s attractive climate for business was job number one.

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the three countries in 2022, growing by 27 percent since 2019. While there have been many disputes among the three and while there have been some improved protections for labor, this is a standard capitalist business arrangement and there is otherwise nothing particularly progressive about it. Speaking to a group of corporate executives during her campaign, Sheinbaum told them that maintaining Mexico’s attractive climate for business was job number one.

The most frequently heralded progressive developments for which AMLO has been credited are the social programs, principally payments to the poor. As a candidate, AMLO had promised that he would put “the poor first.” His government abolished many universal government social programs and instead gave cash payments to certain vulnerable groups, particularly the elderly and students under 15 years of age. Money for the poor is distributed through 13,000 banks run by the military. While left governments as part of their concern for working people generally cre-

ate social programs, some view AMLO as cynically using these programs to build support for his party, himself, and now for Sheinbaum. As Vanessa Rubio wrote in *Americas Quarterly* in late 2023,

To cement his popularity, the president has used social programs for clientelist purposes with great effectiveness, along with an appealing (albeit polarizing) narrative and strong disenchantment with the traditional political class. Welfare and pension program spending has tripled, from \$8 billion in 2018 to \$24 billion in 2023. Most resources are allocated to AMLO’s social programs, primarily a basic universal pension, youth education, and training program, “The Young Building the Future” (*Jovenes Construyendo el Futuro*).

But spending for these programs is expected to increase next year, an election year, by an additional 25%, reaching \$30 billion, according to the 2024 budget submitted by the Finance Ministry early in September for Congress’ discussion and eventual approval. While their effectiveness is questionable—the programs reach a lower number of poor households compared to previous administrations, and only 50% are deemed to have an adequate design according to independent evaluator Coneval—these social programs have proven to be a political and public perception success.<sup>7</sup>

AMLO’s administration allocated billions to help the poor, but didn’t always spend all of it. Records of what was spent for social programs were not transparent, making it difficult to really understand their impact. Some fear that such targeted programs contributed to corruption, though the evidence for that was not clear either.

Some programs simply failed. The Young Building the Future signed up a million young people to get jobs but found work for only 15,000. Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina in an article titled “More for the Rich, Less for the Poor” argues that government data shows that—while more



funds than ever are going to social welfare programs—significantly more of that money is going to the rich and less to the poor.<sup>8</sup> And in 2020 Oxfam reported that 60 percent of Mexico's poor were ineligible for three of the main social welfare programs. At the same time, military spending increased and often exceeded what had been budgeted.<sup>9</sup>

Mexico's poverty and inequality are also in large part a result of the existence of a large informal economy made up of businesses or the self-employed. In both cases these are untaxed, unregulated, and not participants in the government's social security institutions that provide workers with health care and pensions. These are men and women who work as street vendors, employees of small shops, or delivery workers directed by apps, among many others. Wages are generally low, but hard to measure. The informal sector represents 29 percent of the total economy, while informal employment represents 59 percent of total employment.

Human Rights Watch assessed the economic situation in 2023 in this way:

The poverty rate has fallen under López Obrador's presidency, from 41.9 percent in 2018 to 36.3 percent in 2022, according to the official poverty analysis agency. However, extreme poverty has remained unchanged and the number of people without access to health care has more than doubled. Analysts have pointed to a major increase in the minimum wage and a near-doubling of remittances from Mexicans abroad as possible contributors to the drop in poverty.<sup>10</sup>

The formal working class—people with regular jobs with legally registered employers—did better under AMLO. His administration increased the national minimum wage from around US\$4.40 per day to approximately US\$5.00. In the border region, closer to the United States where things are more expensive, the minimum

wage was set at US\$9.00 per day.

Still, not all that much changed for the poor under AMLO. Julio Boltvinik, who writes the "Moral Economy" column for *La Jornada*, a paper that has supported AMLO, demonstrated that in August 2023 there were 98 million poor people in Mexico, just as there were when AMLO took office in 2018. And Sheinbaum plans to maintain AMLO's policies.

Taxes are a related issue. AMLO refused to carry out a fiscal reform that would provide more money for social programs and government projects. Mexico has among the lowest taxes in Latin America, and the OECD reports that tax evasion in Mexico has been estimated to be around 27 percent of the total revenue of the main taxes, accounting for 3 percent of GDP. AMLO has not raised taxes on the rich nor done much to end tax cheating, both of which would be good governance if not structural reform.

The other major progressive accomplishment attributed to AMLO is the establishment of what we might call a new regime of labor union legality. And this is important and a genuine advance. When AMLO's term began, almost all of those workers were controlled by a corporatist system of labor relations where the state protected its "official" labor unions, which in turn protected employers from real unions, keeping productivity high and wages low. Most workers could not vote for the union they wanted, could not vote on the contract, and risked their jobs if they spoke up. For the first time since the 1920s, independent labor unions can achieve legal recognition, workers can engage in strikes, and unions have greater protections thanks to the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement. USMCA protects workers' rights to negotiate collective bargaining agreements without fear of state repression. USMCA provides a valuable tool.



Most economists believe the general impact of the new treaty is negligible, but the USMCA Annex 23-A required Mexico to improve collective bargaining and Annex 31-A created the Rapid Response Labor Mechanism.<sup>11</sup>

There is a good deal of debate about whether or not AMLO in his six years in office nearly succeeded in recreating a corporatist party like that of the PRI, that is, a party based on control of both the party and mass organizations such as the labor unions that it controls. AMLO's support for labor law allowed him to incorporate into his political operation reform-minded union leaders such as Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, head of the miners' union, giving Morena a labor contingent of some significance. AMLO will, no doubt, want to see this process strengthened and extended, which would enormously enhance his party's power. If under Sheinbaum the relationship between Morena and the unions strengthens, we could see the recreation of something like the PRI, but on the basis of an even more conservative political economy. The question is whether the unions can maintain their independence and internal democracy.

Perhaps once she sits on the presidential throne, Sheinbaum will become a strong independent leader and become the feminist and environmentalist she claims to be, capable of breaking with the authoritarian populist party and the militarist policies that AMLO has left her. Maybe she will prove to be a genuine progressive, left leader. But this seems pretty unlikely.

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# Why Class-Struggle Socialists Fight Elections

DAN DAVISON

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ONCE AGAIN, THE SOCIALIST LEFT is debating its stance on elections. In most cases, this discussion revolves around three linked questions: (1) should we stand candidates for election and, if so, (2) what electoral strategy should we adopt and (3) how does this activity relate to our broader political strategy? With several internationally significant elections this year, perhaps most obviously the U.S. presidential election, the debate's rekindling is hardly surprising. For those of us on the Marxist left, this controversy intimately connects with larger questions about the state, bourgeois democracy, and class struggle.

As a matter of left-wing common sense, it is easy to agree that socialists should connect electoral and parliamentary activity with extra-parliamentary organizing and mobilization. In other words, many on the left can intuitively agree that socialists should avoid the Scylla of an electoralist approach that views getting left-wingers voted into office as the primary means of achieving political change and the Charybdis of an "ultra-leftist" approach that altogether rejects standing candidates for election.

Still, this general point of agreement tells us very little about *why* class-struggle

socialists contest elections in the first place. Much of this turns on *what* class-struggle socialists aim to achieve by contesting elections, which is important for informing *how* class-struggle socialists should approach electoral campaigning and parliamentary practice.

Therefore, it is worth refreshing the basic aims of socialist electoral and parliamentary activity outlined by key Marxist theorists and revolutionaries, including how these aims relate to the overarching goal of advancing the working-class struggle.

## Gauging the Party and Movement's Strength

Collecting and analyzing voter data might seem far removed from revolutionary activity, but such number crunching allows a party to measure the strength of the different forces at play, including its own. This is important for determining what actions the party has the capacity to take. In his "Introduction to Marx's Class Struggles in France" (1895), Engels notes that the general franchise "informed us, accurately, of our own strength as well as of that of all opposing parties, and gave us thereby a gauge for proportioning our action such as cannot be duplicated, [which] restrained us from untimely hesitation as well as from untimely daring."<sup>1</sup>

Lenin put this basic insight into practice with the Bolsheviks' interventions in the Duma, the toothless parliament that

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the tsarist regime reluctantly established because of the Russian Revolution of 1905. In 1912, the Bolsheviks adopted a platform for that year's Duma elections and the launch of their campaign coincided with

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the publication of *Pravda*, their first legal newspaper. Lenin attentively followed the growth of both the party's newspaper and the party's membership alongside the elections' development. Following the elections, he wrote detailed statistical analyses of their significance, including the votes received by each party.<sup>2</sup>

When the Bolshevik deputies were first elected to the Duma, Lenin sent them a comprehensive questionnaire asking about almost every aspect of the election campaign, such as how many workers supported them, how the different parts of the party platform were accepted, and what questions and arguments workers raised.<sup>3</sup> This information-gathering aspect of Bolshevik electoral and parliamentary activity extended beyond election campaigns and debriefs. In his memoirs on the Bolsheviks' experiences with the Duma, Alexei Badayev recalls how elected Bolshevik deputies were instructed to visit their districts as frequently as possible and generally maintain close contact with their constituencies. Their correspondence "supplied detailed information of what was taking place and in which various recommendations and demands were expressed," which "served as material for our Duma work, was worked

up and summarized in questions to the government and dealt with in our speeches on government bills, etc."<sup>4</sup>

One sees this same emphasis in Lenin's criticism of the Duma fraction's cease-and-desist warning to the organizers of a planned protest at the opening of the Fourth Duma on November 15, 1912. The idea for the protest came from rank-and-file workers in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) and other organizations. When criticizing the Duma fraction, Lenin explained how "a real workers' deputy" would have known how to make inquiries and learned "from the prominent workers ... how matters stood, what the workers *thought* about, and *what the mood* of the masses was."<sup>5</sup> In short, through electoral and parliamentary activity, socialists can gather vital information about the strength of the party and the movement and the conditions in which they are operating.

### Agitation and Propaganda

Of course, it is not simply a matter of measuring the strength of our existing forces: we also seek to *build* these forces by spreading class-struggle socialist ideas throughout the working class. This is another important function of elections that Engels recognized in his aforementioned 1895 Introduction, where he noted that electoral participation "furnished us a means, such as there is no other, of getting in touch with the masses of the people that are still far removed from us, of forcing all parties to defend their views and actions against our attacks before all the people."<sup>6</sup>

In Marxist terms, electoral and parliamentary activity are a means of agitation and propaganda. As per Plekhanov's classic formulation, "the propagandist conveys many ideas to a single person or to a few people, whereas the agitator conveys only one or a few ideas, but he conveys them

to a whole mass of people, sometimes to almost the entire population of a particular locality.”<sup>7</sup>

Again, Lenin understood this well. In “The Election Campaign and the Election Platform” (1911), written the year before the Fourth Duma elections, he stressed that “[t]he Social-Democratic Party must launch its election campaign at *once*.... Intensified propaganda, agitation, and organization are on the order of the day, and the forthcoming elections provide a natural, inevitable, topical ‘pretext’ for such work.”<sup>8</sup>

Bolshevik deputies in the Duma were seen as *workers’* deputies. Since there was no television or radio at the time, and the bourgeois press gave little coverage to the Bolshevik deputies, the Bolsheviks circulated their deputies’ Duma speeches in pamphlets, leaflets, and – most importantly – *Pravda*. A resolution on “Elections to the Fourth Duma,” adopted at the Sixth (Prague) All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP in 1912, provided that the main task of the party in the elections “is socialist, class propaganda, and the organization of the working class.”<sup>9</sup> The main election slogans, known as the “three whales of Bolshevism” after an old myth that the world rests upon three whales, were a democratic republic, the eight-hour working day, and confiscation of all landed estates. All propaganda on the remaining demands of the Social-Democratic minimum program, including universal franchise, state insurance for workers and freedom of association, had to be inseparably linked with the three main demands.

The lessons of the Bolsheviks’ electoral campaigning informed early Comintern (Third International) theory and practice. In “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), Lenin summarized the basic tasks and approach of the new “revolutionary parliamentarism” in a detailed passage worth quoting at length:

I have neither the time nor the space here to describe the “Russian” “Bolshevik” methods of participation in parliamentary elections and in the parliamentary struggle; I can, however, assure foreign Communists that they were quite unlike the usual West-European parliamentary campaigns. From this the conclusion is often drawn: “Well, that was in Russia, in our country parliamentarism is different.” This is a false conclusion. Communists, adherents of the Third International in all countries, exist for the purpose of *changing*—all along the line, in all spheres of life—the old socialist, trade unionist, syndicalist, and parliamentary type of work into a *new* type of work, the communist.... The Communist must learn to create a new, unc customary, non-opportunist, and non-careerist parliamentarism; the Communist parties must issue their slogans; true proletarians, with the help of the unorganized and downtrodden poor, should distribute leaflets, canvass workers’ houses and cottages of the rural proletarians and peasants in the remote villages ... they should go into the public houses, penetrate into unions, societies and chance gatherings of the common people, and speak to the people, not in learned (or very parliamentary) language, they should not at all strive to “get seats” in parliament, but should everywhere try to get people to think, and draw the masses into the struggle, to take the bourgeoisie at its word and utilize the machinery it has set up, the elections it has appointed, and the appeals it has made to the people.... We must work to accomplish *practical* tasks, ever more varied and ever more closely connected with all branches of social life, winning branch after branch, and sphere after sphere *from the bourgeoisie*.<sup>10</sup>

One sees this general spirit in the Comintern’s adopted “Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism” (1920). These provide that “[p]articipation in election campaigns and revolutionary propaganda from the parliamentary rostrum is of particular importance for winning over those layers of the workers who previously,

like, say, the rural toiling masses, stood far away from political life.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, such activity, “which consists mainly in revolutionary agitation from the parliamentary rostrum, in unmasking opponents, in the ideological unification of the masses who still ... are captivated by democratic ideas, look towards the parliamentary rostrum, etc., should be totally and completely subordinated to the aims and tasks of the mass struggle outside parliament.”<sup>12</sup>

### Exposing Bourgeois Democracy and the Other Parties

As that last quotation indicates, the agitation and propaganda functions of electoral and parliamentary activity strongly link with the need to expose the other parties and the bourgeois-democratic system in general, revealing the ruling-class interests they serve and their inability to deliver what the working class requires. In turn, this exposing function closely connects with the demands that socialists should push for in parliament.

In her classic piece on the “Eight-Hour Day at the Party Congress” (1902), Luxemburg skewers the so-called practical-political approach of moderating the party’s demands “in order to force the bourgeois parties to prove they meant their often repeated promises” to deliver on the more moderate reform.<sup>13</sup> In context, she was criticizing the argument for putting forward a Reichstag bill for a ten-hour working day rather than the eight-hour day included in the party’s minimum program. As she goes on to say, “it is exactly by demanding the eight-hour bill that we can force the bourgeoisie to show its good will at least with a more modest reform”: “Even if we are ready to accept *any* installment, we must leave it to the bourgeois parties themselves to whittle down our demands to fit their interests.”<sup>14</sup>

The Bolsheviks’ approach to bills and

election campaigns built on this wisdom. They used these lines of activity to expose not only the tsarist government and political parties, but also the liberals and Mensheviks. Lenin advocated that Bolshevik deputies table the party’s own plainly written Social-Democratic Bills in the Duma and put them to the vote, fully expecting the liberal Cadets and the reactionary Black Hundreds to turn them down. The Bolshevik deputies would then proceed to criticize the Cadet bill ruthlessly and submit regular amendments: “When amendments end we shall abstain from voting on the Cadet bill as a whole, leaving the Cadets to defeat the Black Hundreds, thereby taking no responsibility on ourselves before the people for the poverty and worthlessness of Cadet pseudo-democracy.”<sup>15</sup>

As for the Mensheviks, Ralph Carter Elwood notes that “[b]y constantly harping on the correctness of the six Bolshevik Duma deputies and championing Bolshevik candidates in trade union and insurance elections, [*Pravda*] promoted factional identification which had been conspicuously absent before 1912.”<sup>16</sup> Doug Jenness corroborates this: through newspaper articles, petition collections, and factory debates with Menshevik deputies, the Bolsheviks waged a concerted campaign to solicit workers’ support, which very successfully used the Bolshevik deputies’ positions “to drive a wedge between the masses and the Mensheviks,” pointing out that “the Mensheviks more and more wanted to adapt to the liberals on this or that question.”<sup>17</sup>

Again, the Comintern Theses of 1920 reflect this experience. They provide that, where communists hold a majority in local government institutions, they should “at every opportunity show the limitations placed on really big changes by the bourgeois state power.”<sup>18</sup> Reiterating that the demonstrative draft laws communist members of parliament should regularly

introduce “are not intended to be accepted by the bourgeois majority,” the Theses state that “[e]very communist member of parliament must bear in mind that he is not a legislator seeking an understanding with other legislators, but a Party agitator who has been sent into the enemy camp” and “must use the parliamentary rostrum for the unmasking not only of the bourgeoisie and its hacks, but also of the social-patriots, and the reformists.”<sup>19</sup>

These points link to an observation by Lenin in *“Left-Wing” Communism*: “far from causing harm to the revolutionary proletariat, participation in a bourgeois-democratic parliament ... actually helps that proletariat to *prove* to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be done away with; it *facilitates* their successful dissolution, and *helps* to make bourgeois parliamentarianism ‘politically obsolete’.” In other words, when approached correctly, electoral activity is integral to building revolutionary class consciousness throughout the diverse layers of the proletariat.<sup>20</sup>

### Providing Political Leadership over the Working-class Struggle

The matters of agitation and propaganda for socialism, and of exposing bourgeois democracy and the other parties, connect with the important issue of political leadership. Eminent Marxist thinkers have long grappled with the question of how the party can relate to mass working-class struggle in a way that can provide this leadership. As Luxemburg puts it in *The Mass Strike* (1906), “[t]he social democrats are the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat” and “the task of social democracy does not consist in the technical preparation and direction of mass strikes, but, first and foremost, in the *political leadership* of the whole movement.”<sup>21</sup> This is not to suggest that the party can simply call mass strikes into being by issuing slogans:

a point Luxemburg underscores repeatedly in the pamphlet. Nevertheless, the social democrats “cannot and dare not wait, in a

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fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the ‘revolutionary situation.’” And “should they become, in a *political sense*, the rulers of the whole movement, then they must, with the utmost clearness, consistency and resoluteness, inform the German proletariat of their tactics and aims in the period of coming struggle.”<sup>22</sup>

This basic idea underpins the Bolshevik approach to electoral and parliamentary activity. As Lenin puts it:

The primary task of the Social Democrats entering the Duma is to wrest away from the liberals those democratic elements that are still under their sway; to become the leader of those democrats; to teach them to seek support in the people and join ranks, with the masses down below, to unfurl *our own* banner before the whole of the working class and before the entire impoverished and famine-stricken peasant masses.<sup>23</sup>

Like other aspects of the Bolsheviks’ experience of the Duma, this informed the thought and practice of the early Comintern. Paul Le Blanc observes that, in early Comintern work, “there is considerable stress on the need for [a revolutionary vanguard] to be organically rooted in the working class, which often meant participating in nonrevolutionary organizations and institutions, whether ‘reformist’ trade unions or bourgeois-democratic parlia-



ments, as well as being able to form united fronts with moderate Social Democratic parties and others in the immediate and daily struggles of the working class.”<sup>24</sup>

One sees this in the Theses of 1920,

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Voter data might seem far removed from revolutionary activity, but this allows a party to measure the strength of the forces at play, including its own.

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which provide that “[e]lection campaigns should not be carried out in the spirit of the hunt for the maximum number of parliamentary seats, but in the spirit of the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses for the slogans of the proletarian revolution.”<sup>25</sup> As the Theses go on to say, “Communist members of parliament must use every means at their disposal (under the supervision of the Party) to create written and any other kind of links with the revolutionary workers, peasants and other toilers,” and “[i]n the event of demonstrations by workers in the streets and other revolutionary actions, the communist members of parliament have the duty to place themselves in the most conspicuous leading place at the head of the masses of workers.”<sup>26</sup>

### Creating “the Subjective Factor”

Drawing the preceding threads together, all these basic aims of electoral and parliamentary activity arise from the overarching need to build the working-class’s ability to take political power. This is why the quoted Marxist thinkers and leaders consistently emphasize building the working-class’s socialist consciousness and collective strength (including their confidence in that

collective strength), as well as increasing the mobilization and active participation of workers in struggle. As Luxemburg puts it in her enduring polemic *Reform or Revolution* (1900), parliamentary activity, along with trade-union struggle, “prepares the proletariat, that is to say, creates the *subjective* factor of the socialist transformation, for the task of realising socialism”: it is “vastly important in so far as [it makes] socialistic the *awareness*, the consciousness, of the proletariat and help to organize it as a class.”<sup>27</sup>

As many of the sources quoted in this article underscore, the extra-parliamentary arena is more important than the parliamentary arena and therefore should be prioritized. All the same, one can grasp how, when pursued with the right aims and in the right manner, electoral and parliamentary activity can help bridge the gap between, on the one hand, current, everyday, working-class struggles for reforms and, on the other hand, the need for the working class to seize power and remake society under its leadership. This, in short, is why class-struggle socialists fight elections.

### NOTES

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# From Karl Marx to Eco-Marxism

MICHAEL LÖWY

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REFLECTION ON MARX'S contribution to an ecological perspective has made considerable progress in recent decades. The somewhat caricatured image of a "Promethean" Marx, productivist and indifferent to environmental issues, conveyed by certain ecologists in a hurry to "replace the red paradigm with the green," has lost much of its credibility. The pioneer in the rediscovery of the ecological dimension in Marx and Engels was undoubtedly John Bellamy Foster, with his book *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (Monthly Review Press, 2000), which highlights Marx's analysis of the "metabolic breakdown" (*Riss des Stoffwechsels*) between human societies and the natural environment, brought about by capitalism. Bellamy Foster transformed *Monthly Review*, one of the most important publications of the North American left, into an eco-Marxist journal, and gave rise to a whole school of Marxist thought around the theme of the metabolic rift. The school includes such important authors as Brett Clark, Ian Angus, Paul Burkett, Richard York, and many others. Bellamy Foster

can be criticized for his reading of Marx as a committed ecologist, from his early writings to his later works, without taking into account texts or passages that follow a productivist logic; but the importance, novelty, and depth of his writings cannot be questioned. In reading Marx from an ecological perspective, there is a before and an after to Bellamy Foster.

Close to this school of thought—the young Japanese scholar Kohei Saito's first book, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (Monthly Review Press, 2017) distinguished himself with a more nuanced interpretation of Marx's writings. In his latest book, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), Saito develops and extends his analysis of Marx's writings, criticizing the productivism of the *Grundrisse* and Marx's famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), writings often regarded as the definitive formulation of historical materialism. In the 1859 Preface, Marx sees the productive forces as the main driving force of history, which, thanks to revolution, would be freed from the "fetters" of capitalist relations of production. Saito shows how, from 1870 onwards, in his writings on Russia and in his ethnographic or naturalist notebooks, Marx moved away from this vision of history. According to Saito, in this "last Marx," a new conception of historical materialism is emerging—albeit unfinished—in which the natural environ-

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ment and pre-modern (or non-European) communities play an essential role. Saito also attempts to show, notably on the basis of the *Notebooks* recently published by the new Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), Marx's adherence to the idea of degrowth, but this hypothesis does not find an effective foundation in these writings.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE QUESTION of Marx's contribution to ecosocialism, or, if you like, to eco-Marxism, is not limited to his texts on the relationship with nature—which admittedly remain relatively marginal in his work: there is not a single book, or article, or chapter of a book, by Marx or Engels, dedicated to ecology, or to the ecological crisis. This is quite understandable, considering that capitalist destruction of the environment was only in its infancy and was not at all as serious as it is today. I think there are arguments in his writings that are not about nature, but are nevertheless essential contributions to an eco-Marxist reflection, provided they are rethought in the light of the ecological crisis of our time. Two elements need to be taken into account here: (1) Marx's critique of capitalist hubris: unlimited accumulation/expansion; (2) communism as the "Kingdom of Freedom."

1. Capitalism is a system that cannot exist without an unlimited expansive tendency. In the *Grundrisse* Marx observes:

Capital, in so far as it represents the universal form of wealth—money—is the tendency without limits or measure to exceed its own limit. Any limit can only be limited for it. Otherwise, it would cease to be capital: money in so far as it produces itself.[...] It is the perpetual movement that tends always to create more.<sup>1</sup>

This is an analysis that will be developed in the first volume of *Capital*. According to Marx, the capitalist is an individual who functions only as "personified capital." As such, the capitalist is necessarily a "fa-

natical agent of accumulation," who "forces men, without mercy or respite, to produce for the sake of producing." This behavior is "the effect of a social mechanism of which he is only a cog." So what is this "social mechanism" whose psychic expression in the capitalist is "the most sordid avarice and the most petty calculating spirit"? Here is its dynamic, according to Marx:

The development of capitalist production requires a continuous enlargement of the capital placed in an enterprise, and competition imposes the immanent laws of capitalist production as external coercive laws on each individual capitalist. It does not allow him to keep his capital without increasing it, and he cannot continue to increase it unless he accumulates it progressively.<sup>2</sup>

The unlimited accumulation of capital is therefore the inflexible rule of the capitalist social mechanism: "Accumulate, accumulate! That's the law and the prophets! [...] Accumulate in order to accumulate, produce in order to produce, that is the watchword of political economy, proclaiming the historical mission of the bourgeois period."<sup>3</sup>

Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake, without

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Greed, unlike hunger, has  
no point of satiation; its  
satisfaction does not fill the  
inner void....

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rest or mercy, without limits or measure, in a perpetual movement of growth, a continuous enlargement: this, according to Marx, is the implacable logic of capital, the social mechanism of which capitalists are nothing but "fanatical agents." The imperative of accumulation becomes a kind of secular

religion, a “fanatical” cult that replaces the “law and prophets” of Judeo-Christianity.

The significance of this diagnosis for the Anthropocene of the twenty-first century is obvious: this productivist logic of capitalism, this hubris that demands permanent expansion and refuses all limits, is responsible for the ecological crisis and the catastrophic process of climate change of our time. Marx’s analysis helps us to understand why “green capitalism” is nothing but an illusion: the system cannot exist without accumulation and growth, a growth “without limits or measure,” 80 percent of which depends on fossil fuels. This is why, despite the soothing declarations of governments and international climate meetings (the Conference of the Parties) on the “ecological transition,” greenhouse gas emissions have not stopped growing. Scientists are sounding the alarm and stressing

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Despite soothing declarations on the “ecological transition” by governments and international climate meetings, greenhouse gas emissions have not stopped growing.

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the urgent need to halt all new exploitation of fossil fuels, pending a rapid reduction in the use of existing sources; yet the major oil monopolies are opening new wells every day, and their representative, OPEC, is publicly announcing that they will have to exploit these resources for a long time to come, “to satisfy growing demand.” The same applies to new coal mines, which are constantly being opened, from “green” Germany to “socialist” China.

The fact is that demand for energy is

only growing, and so is the consumption of fossil fuels, with renewables simply adding to them rather than replacing them. “Green” capitalists who want to do things differently will be squeezed out of the market: for as Marx reminds us, “competition imposes the immanent laws of capitalist production as coercive laws external to each individual capitalist.”

In 2023, the average temperature of the planet became dangerously close to the limit of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels—a limit beyond which an uncontrollable process of global warming is likely to be triggered, with increasingly intense feedback mechanisms. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change scientists stress the need for immediate emissions reductions, with the years between now and 2030 being the last chance to avoid catastrophe. Yet the European Union and other governments are solemnly announcing that they will be able to achieve “net zero” emissions... by 2050. This announcement is doubly mystifying, not only because it pretends to ignore the urgency of the crisis, but also because “zero net” is far from being identical with zero emissions: thanks to “offset mechanisms,” companies can continue to emit if they “offset” them by protecting a forest in Indonesia.

Modern industrial capitalism has been totally dependent on coal and oil for three centuries and shows no inclination to do without them. To do this, it would have been necessary to break with accumulation “without limits or measure,” and with productivism, by organizing a process of planned degrowth, with the elimination or reduction of entire sectors of the economy: an approach totally contradictory to the very foundations of capitalism. Greta Thunberg rightly points out that it is “mathematically impossible to solve the climate crisis within the framework of the existing economic system.” This impossibil-

ity is explained by Marx's analysis in *Capital* of the inexorable mechanics of capitalist accumulation and expansion.

Many ecologists blame consumption for the environmental crisis. Admittedly, the consumption model of modern capitalism is clearly unsustainable. But the source of the problem lies in the production system. Productivism is the driving force behind consumerism. Marx had already observed this dynamic. In his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), he observed:

Hence production produces consumption: (1) by providing the material of consumption; (2) by determining the mode of consumption; (3) by creating in the consumer a need for the objects which it first presents as products. It therefore produces the object of consumption, the mode of consumption and the urge to consume. Similarly, consumption produces the predisposition of the producer by positing him as a purposive requirement.<sup>4</sup>

This is much truer in our time than it was in the nineteenth century. Capitalist producers create the “impulse to consume” by means of a vast, immense advertising apparatus that hammers home, day and night, on city walls, in newspapers, on radio or television, everywhere, “without truce or mercy,” the imperative need to consume this or that commodity. Commercial advertising takes over every area of life: sport, religion, politics, culture, information. Artificial needs are created, “fashions” manufactured, and the system induces a frenzy of consumption, “without limits or measure,” of products that are less and less useful, which allows production to expand, to extend to infinity. If, as Marx observed, it is production that produces consumption, then it is the productive system that needs to be transformed, rather than preaching abstinence to consumers. The pure and simple abolition of commercial advertising

is the first step toward overcoming consumer alienation and enabling individuals to rediscover their true needs.

Another dimension of capitalist consumerism Marx criticized—a dimension with obvious current ecological implications—is the predominance of having over being, of the possession of goods, or money, or capital, over free human activity. This theme is developed in the 1844 *Manuscripts*. According to Marx, bourgeois society is dominated exclusively by “the sense of possession, of having.” In place of the life of human beings appears “the life of property” and “in place of all the physical and intellectual senses has appeared the simple alienation of all these senses, the sense of having.” Possession, having, is alienated life: “The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged being.”<sup>5</sup>

This is another form of consumerism: the important thing here is not use, but the possession of a good, a commodity. Its most obvious manifestation is the conspicuous consumption of the privileged classes, which Thorstein Veblen studied in his classic, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Today it has reached monumental proportions, fueling a vast industry of luxury goods: private jets, yachts, jewelry, works of art, perfumes. But the obsession with possessions is also spreading to other social classes, leading to the accumulation of goods as an end in themselves, regardless of their use value. Being, human activity as such, is sacrificed to having, the possession of goods, feeding productivism, the flooding of social life with a growing mass of products that are less and less useful. Of course, the resources needed to produce this mountain of commodities are still, and increasingly, coal and oil....

2. Communism as the “Kingdom of Freedom” is founded on the priority of *being*



over *having*, by reversing the alienated logic imposed by capitalism. Bourgeois political economy pushes this perverse logic to its ultimate consequences: “Self-denial, the renunciation of life and all human needs is its main thesis. The less you eat, drink, buy books, the less you go to the theatre, the ball, the cabaret, the less you think, love, theorize, the less you sing, talk, fence, etc., the more you save, the more you increase your treasure [...] your capital [...] all that the economist takes from you of life and humanity, he replaces with money and wealth.[...]”<sup>6</sup>

Marx included in what constitutes being—that is, human life and humanity—three constituent elements: (1) The satisfaction of essential needs (drinking, eating); (2) The satisfaction of cultural needs: going to the theater, cabaret, buying books. It should be noted that these two categories involve acts of vital consumption, but not the accumulation of goods (at most books!) and even less the accumulation of money. The inclusion of cultural needs is already an implicit protest against capitalism, which wants to limit the worker’s consumption to what is necessary for basic survival: food and drink. For Marx, the worker, like all human beings, needs to go to the theater and the cabaret, to read books, to educate himself, to amuse himself; (3) Human self-activity: thinking, loving, theorizing, singing, speaking, fencing, and so on. This list is fascinating for its diversity, its serious yet playful nature, and for the fact that it includes both the essentials—thinking, loving, speaking—and the “luxuries”: singing, theorizing, fencing, etc. What all these examples have in common is their active nature: the individual is no longer a consumer, but an actor. Of course, we could add many other examples of human self-activity, individual or collective, artistic or sporting, playful or political, erotic or cultural, but the examples Marx chose open

a wide window on the “reign of freedom.” Of course, the distinction between these three moments is not absolute: eating and reading books are also activities. They are three manifestations of life—being—in the face of what lies at the heart of bourgeois society: having, property, and accumulation.

Choosing to be rather than to have is therefore a significant contribution by Marx to a socialist/ecological culture, to an ethic and an anthropology at odds with the fundamental data of modern capitalist civilization, where the absolute predominance of having, in its commodity form, is leading, with increasing frenzy, to the destruction of the planet’s ecological balance.

Important reflections—directly inspired by the *1844 Manuscripts*—on the opposition between being and having can be found in the Freudo-Marxist writings of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. A German Jewish anti-fascist who emigrated to the USA, Fromm published his book *Avoir ou être* (To Have or To Be) in 1976. A choice on which man’s future depends, which compares two opposing forms of social existence: the having mode and the being mode. In the first, my property constitutes my identity: both subject and object are reified (commodified). You feel yourself to be a commodity, and the “it” owns the “me.” Possessive greed is the dominant passion. But, Fromm insists, greed, unlike hunger, has no point of satiation; its satisfaction does not fill the inner void....

So what is the mode of being? Fromm quotes a passage from Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*: “Let us start from the idea that the human being is a human being and that his relation to the world is a human relation. Love, then, can only be exchanged for love, trust only for trust.”

The being mode, Fromm explains, is an active mode, wherein human beings express their faculties, their talents, the richness of

their gifts; to be active here means “to renew oneself, to develop oneself, to overflow, to love, to transcend the prison of the isolated self; it is to be interested, attentive; it is to give.” The mode of being is socialism, not in its social democratic or Soviet (Stalinist) version, reduced to an aspiration for maximum consumption, but according to Marx: human self-activity. In short, concludes Fromm, quoting Marx again in the third volume of *Capital*, socialism is the kingdom of freedom, whose goal is “the development of human power as an end in itself.”

Karl Marx rarely wrote about the emancipated society of the future. He took a close interest in utopias, but was wary of versions that were too prescriptive, too restrictive, in short, dogmatic; his objective was, as Miguel Abensour so aptly reminds us, the transcendence of utopia to critical communism. What does this consist of? In the third volume of *Capital*—an unfinished manuscript edited by Friedrich Engels—we find an essential passage, often quoted but rarely analyzed. The word “communism” does not appear, but it does refer to the classless society of the future, which Marx defines, and this is a highly significant choice, as the “Kingdom of Freedom” (*Das Reich der Freiheit*):

In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange

with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.<sup>7</sup>

The context in which this passage appears is interesting. It concerns a discussion on the productivity of labor. The author of *Capital* suggests that increasing productivity not only makes it possible to increase the wealth produced, but above all to reduce working hours. This would seem to take precedence over an unlimited extension of the production of goods.

Marx thus distinguishes two areas of social life: the “reign of necessity” and the “reign of freedom,” each with its own form of freedom. Let’s start by taking a closer look at the first: the reign of necessity, which corresponds to the “sphere of material production” and therefore of labor “determined by need and external ends.” Freedom also exists in this sphere, but it is a limited freedom, within the constraints imposed by necessity: it is the democratic, collective control of “socialized” human beings over their material exchanges—their metabolism—with nature. In other words, what Marx is talking about here is democratic planning, in other words, the essential proposition of the socialist economic program: freedom here means emancipation from the blind power of economic forces—the capitalist market, the accumulation of capital, the fetishism of the commodity.

Let’s go back to the passage above from the third volume of *Capital*: it’s interesting to note that this text doesn’t talk about

the “domination” of human society over nature, but about the collective control of exchanges with nature: this was to become, a century later, one of the founding principles of ecosocialism. Work remains an activity imposed by necessity, with a view to satisfying the material needs of society; but it will cease to be alienated work, unworthy of human nature.

The second form of freedom, the most radical, the most integral, the one that corresponds to the “Kingdom of Freedom,” lies beyond the sphere of material production and necessary work. However, there is an essential dialectical relationship between the two forms of freedom: it is through democratic planning of the economy as a whole that priority can be given to free time; conversely, the maximum extension of free time will enable workers to participate actively in political life and in self-management, not only of companies but of all economic and social activity, at the level of neighborhoods, towns, regions, and countries. Communism cannot exist without the participation of the whole population in the process of discussion and democratic decision-making, not, as today, by a vote every four or five years, but on a permanent basis—which does not prevent the delegation of powers. Thanks to free time, individuals will be able to take in hand the management of their collective life, which will no longer be left in the hands of professional politicians.

What Marx adds in the third volume of *Capital* to his 1844 argument is the fact that human self-activity—the third moment discussed in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*—requires, in order to flourish, free time, time obtained by reducing the hours of “necessary” work. This reduction is the key that opens the door to the “Kingdom of Freedom,” which is also the

“Kingdom of Being.” Thanks to this time of freedom, human beings will be able to develop their intellectual, artistic, erotic, and playful potential. This is the opposite of the capitalist universe of the infinite accumulation of increasingly useless goods, of productivist and consumerist “expansion” without limits or measure.

Conclusion: beyond his writings that refer directly to nature and to its destruction by capitalist “progress,” Marx’s work contains reflections that have, at the deepest level, an ecological significance, through their critique of capitalist productivism and their imagination of a society in which free human activity is at the center of social life, and not the obsessive accumulation of “goods.” These are essential points of reference for the development of a twenty-first-century eco-Marxism.

#### NOTES

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# The Politics of Armed Resistance

BILL KEACH

“CLASS WAR NOW,” THE introduction to Mark Steven’s engaging and wide-ranging book, asks us to think about the relationship between “class war” and “class struggle.” This question is connected to the book’s striking sense of immediacy: “Ours is the age of class war. We talk about it all the time. Barely a day goes by without ‘class war’ appearing in one headline or another”

(p. 1). Steven’s opening examples are the 2019 *gilets jaunes* (“yellow vests”) movement in France, the 2020 mass protests in the U.S. following the police murder of George Floyd, and recent anti-government resistance in Colombia, Chile, and Haiti. Are these struggles themselves examples of “class war”? Or is “class war” a concept that enables us to see the sustained revolutionary potential of struggles such as these even if they haven’t, in themselves, demonstrated the organized military violence we usually associate with war? “[C]lass war,” Steven writes, “is used less as a technical term and more as an affective catalyst, reframing actions through military concepts and rhetoric without offering so much as a program or practical strategy” (p. 6). Citing passages in Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Étienne Balibar that deploy “class war” in

Class War:  
A Literary History  
MARK STEVEN  
Verso, 2023

this way, he argues that “the revolutionary invocation of class war” “seeks to recruit and to motivate comrades from a state of contradiction into acts of antagonism” (p. 9). This understanding of class war depends, he insists, on an understanding of class that is “flexible enough to include intersecting social relations” of race, gender, sexual orientation, cultural difference. It foregrounds

“[a]ntagonism, in the form of material political combat,” that in practice unites the dominated and exploited across different forms of oppression and exploitation. From this perspective, revolutionary “civil war is itself a social determinant, a quantifiable force of revolutionary becoming” (p. 15).

In what sense can a book with this agenda be called *A Literary History*? Steven’s introductory answer to this question is not as clear as it might be. Each of the ten chapters contains insightful commentary on literary texts that represent and in some cases “actively participated in” particular revolutionary moments. Steven teaches twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature at the University of Exeter and is a skillful, resourceful, critical reader. But his analysis is by no means confined to literary representation or even, as he says, to showing how literature can become “an active participant in the revolutionary process” (p. 19). Instead, the book shows how literary texts contribute and provide access to the broader and more diverse spectrum of revo-

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lutionary history. In no way is it confined to exclusively “literary” representations of this history.

Steven begins his historical sequence of ten chapters not, predictably, with the French Revolution but with the Haitian Revolution, a move that radically foregrounds from the outset intersections of race and class and that anticipates the tenth and final chapter’s focus on militant Black struggle in the U.S. from the 1940s to the present. The opening chapter takes us inside the material conditions that led Toussaint Louverture to insist in February 1802 that “we have no other resource than destruction and flame. . . burn and annihilate everything, in order that those who have come to reduce us to slavery may have before their eyes the image of that hell which they deserve.” Steven writes incisively about the differences as well as the connections between a slave revolution and a proletarian revolution. Louverture, Dessalines, and other leaders of the revolt in Haiti were inspired by the radical republican formulations of the French Revolution but applied them in ways that reflected the absolute denial of human rights to the enslaved: “their violence was not just a mode of attack; it was foundational to their collective being, their commonality as a class” (p. 33). Haitian revolutionaries “emulated and promoted the slogans of the French Revolution” while simultaneously developing their own collective identity” that “weaponized commonality in subjugation, unifying the enslaved into a devastatingly effective guerrilla assault force” (pp. 37–38). “Haiti affirms actual combat” not as the consequence of but “as the forerunner to ideology, and its combat is both locally anti-colonial and systemically anti-capitalist. . . . Haiti’s smoke was visible everywhere within capital’s expanding empires” (p. 43). It was certainly visible in the U.S., where a terrified government

under President Thomas Jefferson refused to recognize Haitian independence from European colonial control.

In the chapter that follows Steven turns not directly to the French Revolution itself but to militancy within the emerging working class in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the world’s most rapidly developing industrial society. In August of 1819 a massive crowd of workers, many of them unemployed and suffering from the depression that followed Britain’s long-running and recently ended war against Napoleonic France, assembled on St. Peter’s Field in Manchester to demand relief from starvation and the right to vote. Although the workers remained peaceful, their anger and sheer number threatened the local magistrates, who ordered a battle-hardened cavalry regiment of 600 mounted soldiers to charge and disperse the crowd. Eighteenth of the protesters were murdered, hundreds were injured. The event soon came to be known as the “Peterloo Massacre,” a sarcastic reference to Britain’s imperial victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo of 1815. When the poet Percy Shelley, living in self-exile in Italy, read about the Peterloo Massacre in an English newspaper, it made his “blood boil.” He responded with a visionary reimagining of the event titled *The Mask of Anarchy* that culminates in an appeal to workers that still summons us today: “Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number. . . . Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you— / Ye are many—they are few.” Steven understands these lines as a “form of revolutionary romanticism” that (quoting Robert Sayre’s and Michael Löwy’s “Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism”) rejects “both the illusion of a pure and simple return to organic communities of the past and resigned acceptance of the bourgeois present” (p. 47). Whether or not this accurately conceptual-

izes Shelley's political position in the poem remains an open question, not least because the poet's own identity isn't included in the relationship between the "Ye" of the workers and the "they" of the ruling-class bosses. Steven goes on to comment on an interesting range of other poems from this period of nineteenth-century class war in which revolutionary violence (the "Luddites" or "frame-breakers") and militant reform (the Chartists) both found their voices.

Having made his way historically into the late nineteenth century with his commentary on British "class war," Steven opens Chapter 3 with the Paris Commune and an account of how the "Marseillaise," the French national anthem originally adopted as the national anthem of the bourgeoisie revolution of 1789, was rewritten for the working-class insurgency of 1871. This chapter tracks the evolution of violent class struggle in France from the Fall of the Bastille in 1789 through the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 to the climactic if short-lived experiment in working-class self-empowerment of the Commune. Curiously, Steven makes no mention in this chapter of *terror* and its derivatives *terrorist* and *terrorism*, all words that derive from the Jacobin "Reign of Terror" of 1793–1794. Steven shows how the evolution of class war in nineteenth-century France is differently represented in the novels of Victor Hugo and Emile Zola. Toward the end of the chapter he stresses the influence of Auguste Blanqui on armed proletarian militancy during the Commune. The chapter concludes with the legendary feminist revolutionary Louise Michel, who transformed the "La Marseillaise" into a "The Black Marseillaise" and sent a copy to Hugo with the claim that it "smelled of gunpowder" (p. 83). Ultimately that same smell also signaled the defeat of the Commune by the forces of bourgeois counterrevolution.

The last of Steven's chapters on nineteenth-century class war, "School of War," is focused on the rise of working-class militancy in the United States from the Civil War through the labor struggles of the 1870s and after. The first great lesson, as W.E.B. Du Bois recognized, came from the political agency of southern slaves whose fight on the Union side constituted a radical new kind of class war. Enslaved Black men were initially "recruited into service for the Union"—that is, in defense of U.S. capitalism—"first working as non-combatant labourers before going on to fill official regiments, entering the field of combat as soldiers in 1862." Once they became Union soldiers, Blacks "recognized themselves as the class on whose labour power . . . military victory would depend, thus presenting a potentially safer route to freedom." Black Union soldiers in effect "went on strike, transferring the labour power of half a million men and women from the Confederate planters to the Northern invaders, for whom they would work no longer as slaves but as wage labourers" (p. 89). As Du Bois argues, the demands of Black Union soldiers "became a general strike against the slave system" itself (p. 90). In this sense the Civil War contained within itself a class war of self-emancipation fought by Black soldiers. From here Steven moves on to look at the violent tactics of multiple interlocking rail strikes in 1877 from a perspective informed by Eugene Debs's 1895 assessment that "a strike is war; not necessarily a war of blood and bullets, but a war in the sense that it is a conflict between two contending interests or classes of interest" (p. 100). Steven illustrates Debs's claim with examples from Jack London's flawed but insightful 1908 novel *The Iron Heel* ("an alternative history of 1877," p. 101), which shows "that a revolutionary class will be doomed to suppression and subsistence if it internalizes a hierarchical division within



its own ranks" (p. 104).

The fifth chapter, "Towards a Red Army," is the first in a sequence of five chapters on class war in the twentieth century. Steven's opening focus is on the January 1918 announcement, two months after the beginning of the October Revolution in Russia, that "[t]he seizure of power by the workers and propertyless persons renders necessary the formation of a new army' . . . raised from peasants and workers to protect the newly founded revolutionary state against capitalism's military confederations" (p. 108). He shows how a critical reading of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1867) contributed to Lenin's formulation of the "principles that would later underwrite the Red Army" (p. 111). "The Russian people," Lenin had written in "Tolstoy and the Proletarian Struggle" (1910), "will secure their emancipation only when they realize that it is not from Tolstoy that they must learn to win a better life, but from the class the significance of which Tolstoy did not understand, and which alone is capable of destroying the old world which Tolstoy hated. That class is the proletariat" (p. 112). Both Lenin and Trotsky saw a dynamic connection between working-class self-emancipation and an army rooted in the battle to defend socialist revolution in Russia and, inevitably, in other capitalist countries around the world. As Walter Rodney argues in *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World*, the Bolshevik revolution was unprecedented in the international influence of its alliance between the proletariat and agrarian peasants. At the same time the revolution in Russia was contested by the old ruling class and its international capitalist supporters in a catastrophic civil war that, when it was finally won by the Red Army in 1922, left the Bolsheviks and their supporters decimated. Steven gives too little attention to this reality in "Towards a Red Army," and to its

historical and political consequences. The point is important because the existence of and organized engagement in class war must eventually be evaluated in terms of its outcome, its degree of success in empowering workers and their allies. Steven's commentary in this chapter on the writer Victor Serge illuminates Serge's efforts to engage his readers in such evaluation through his novels and in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1851). Serge's insights tend to fade away in this chapter's closing pages, however, which surprisingly seem to find no politically decisive difference between the Bolshevik Red Army ethos of 1917–1924 and the later counterrevolutionary militarism of Stalin's program of "socialism in one country."

Chapter 6, "Protracted People's War," begins with this pronouncement in 1949 from Lin Biao, commander of the Chinese Red Army: "The Chinese Revolution is a continuation of the great October Revolution" (p. 128). Steven follows this quotation by saying that the Chinese and Russian revolutions "are radically dissimilar in their approaches to class and war": "Whereas Russia's pre-revolutionary situation was of an absolutism defined by industrial concentration surrounded by rural agriculture, the Chinese revolution took place in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country." Instead of "armed uprisings in the cities" that "spread to the countryside" as in Russia, in China revolutionary forces "won nationwide victory through the encirclement of the cities from the rural areas and the final capture of the cities." This fundamental difference is critical to any understanding of the subsequent fate of socialist revolution in two of the world's most powerful nations. The revolution in Russia was won by a militarized working class in alliance with peasants; the revolution in China was won by a predominantly peasant army in a country with a relatively small and undeveloped proletariat. Steven surveys

eight novels published shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 all of which "foreground the peasantry as the agency of change" (p. 132) and from which "Mao developed a narrative template of class war" (p. 133). According to Steven, that "template" meant that while "the leading force of revolution" was, for Mao, just as it was for Lenin and Marx, the industrial proletariat, the Chinese economy was still "primarily rural" and so "political power belongs to an overwhelming majority of poor and semi-owner peasants" (p. 134). Steven's book acknowledges a fundamental difference between Russian and Chinese class struggle, then, but stops short of drawing out the political conclusions of this difference and their bearing on the future of class war. He ends the chapter by noting that Black Panther leaders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton "adapted" Mao's thinking by "replacing peasant actors in uneven- and un-developed countries with a racialized vanguard of the working poor from the world's imperial core" (p. 149).

Chapter 7, "For Complete Disorder," foregrounds Frantz Fanon's understanding of how "decolonial warfare" in Africa didn't so much arise from as create solidarities between peasants and workers that hadn't previously existed. In Algeria, such warfare against French colonialism generated a sense of national identity "through social forms that are empowered by conflict" and embodied in the FLN (National Liberation Front) (p. 167). "What took place in Algeria," Steven argues, "might be the formation of a new class through decolonial violence, the mobilization of the colonially dispossessed as a revolutionary army." A different kind of decolonial process took place in Cuba in the 1950s, as Steven explains in Chapter 8, "The Armed Nucleus." The title refers to the 1959 revolution against the U.S.-supported dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista launched by ex-lawyer Fidel Castro

and a small group of militants whose ideology was initially more populist than socialist and whose eventual victory was made possible by a form of guerrilla warfare that, according to Steven, "contain[ed] within itself the form of a new sociality" (p. 174). Steven's argument that "guerilla combat" in Cuba "epitomizes class war" leaves open a number of important questions, including the central question of the degree to which either the agrarian peasants or the working class in Cuba actually came to hold state power, as opposed to giving their support to a self-perpetuating leadership headed by Castro and his revolutionary followers. Such questions are posed in the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Régis Debray, as Steven shows. In this chapter these questions are never answered.

Chapter 9, "Fighting after Fascism," begins with Gramsci and the rise of Italian fascism in the 1920s and 30s but quickly moves forward to the post-war period. "Italy's reconstruction preserved fascism within its civil if not its political governance," Steven argues, in terms that are sharply relevant to Italy today, "so any resistance would find itself conjoined with revolution" (p. 200). The climax of that resistance came in Italy's "hot autumn" of 1969, when a massive strike wave that lasted well into 1970 threatened to break the post-war political dominance of the Christian Democrats and to drive Italian fascism into oblivion. Steven traces the rise of working-class militancy advancing under the ideological formations of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, the terrorist tactics of the Red Brigade, and the depressing move to the right toward Eurocommunism of the Italian Communist Party, which was dissolved in 1991. And he explores literary manifestations of the rise and fall of this great wave of working-class militancy in literary texts such as Nanni Balestrini's 1971 novel *We Want Everything*, Alfredo Bandelli's 1973

poem “Ballad of Fiat,” and Elena Ferrante’s more recent and internationally popular feminist novels of Neapolitan class struggle. The decline of that militancy has now reached a point with alarming implications for the argument of this chapter: Steven’s *Class War* seems to have been completed shortly before the election in October 2022 of the neo-fascist Georgia Meloni as Italian prime minister.

In his final chapter Steven resumes and extends the revolutionary emphasis on race and class of Chapter 1. He returns to Du Bois, who was tried and exonerated in 1951 of charges that he was “the agent of a foreign principal.” The chapter’s title, “Army of the Wronged,” comes from Du Bois’s 1952 reflection on his acquittal, an outcome that set him apart from the “thousands of innocent victims . . . in jail today”—so many of whom were Black—“because they had neither money, experience, nor friends to help them” (p. 219). Du Bois understood that incarcerated people of color had come to constitute an “underclass of the imprisoned, around whom revolution should reorient itself” (p. 220). Two decades later Angela Davis recalled Du Bois’s insight during her imprisonment for supplying guns used in Black Panther Jonathan Jackson’s armed assault on the Marin County courthouse. Davis identified what she called the “prison-industrial complex” and emphasized its function in sustaining racism as an intrinsic feature of American capitalism. Other Black Panther leaders, such as Fred Hampton in Chicago, emphasized that their fight against racism was inescapably bound up with class struggle. They understood that their armed defense of Black people against police violence in the U.S. connected them with “the decolonial fighters in Africa, the guerrillas in Latin America, the autonomists in Italy.” This understanding moved the Panthers “from a political program of Black nationalism to

one of revolutionary internationalism” (p. 223). But as Assata Shakur acknowledges in her *Autobiography* (1987), the Panthers had been unable to create the kind of broader mass movement and revolutionary organization necessary to challenge the system of racialized capitalism. Writing in the 1980s from self-exile in Cuba, Shakur argues that neither the Panthers nor their sequel, the Black Liberation Army, were adequate to challenging the system of racialized capitalism in the United States: “you have to have the way as well as the will, an overall ideology and strategy that stem from a scientific analysis of history and present conditions” (p. 236). She “cautions impatient comrades who would substitute military for political struggle”: “[T]he most important factor is that armed struggle, by itself, can never bring about a revolution. Revolutionary war is a people’s war. . . . Armed struggle can never be successful by itself; it must be part of an overall strategy for winning, and the strategy must be political as well as military” (p. 237; *Assata: An Autobiography*, p. 242). Steven ends the chapter by looking at how, in 2020, Black Lives Matter “became a movement of urban revolt” and, in the process of doing so, “went to war against the material forms of racism, but not of racism alone” (p. 240).

*Class War: A Literary History* ends with a “Postscript”: “No War but Class War.” The latter phrase has become a slogan widely available on T-shirts, buttons, stickers, and posters and has its origins in a 1975 British TV series called *Days of Hope*, in which a young working-class enlisted soldier in World War I deserts the British army to fight for socialism instead of for colonial and imperial domination. Steven sees the phrase as “itself a literary form” in which the repetition of “War” exemplifies the “production of difference” as well as of “similitude” and thus “opens up an ideological fracture within the space

of language” (p. 245). You don’t have to be persuaded by this momentary foray into post-structuralist lingo to find the force in asserting that the fight for working-class

self-determination is fundamental to the rejection of war motivated by capitalist exploitation and oppression.

# Intersectional Marxism and the Dialectic

*Interpreting Marx for Our Times*

LILIA D. MONZÓ AND CRISTAL B. FLORES

MANY ON THE RADICAL LEFT ARE increasingly seeking a humanist alternative to the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that has produced immeasurable suffering and destruction. Amidst the fascism ignited within this era’s supra-conservatism, many of us turned to the Democratic Party to ensure Trump’s defeat only to be reminded that both major political parties in the United States have always moved to the tune of capitalist interests.<sup>1</sup> Thus, at this time, especially, we must remain hopeful in order to continue

our struggle to develop a viable alternative to the current system.

This new PM Press edition of Karl

Critique of the  
Gotha Program  
KARL MARX  
PM Press, 2022

Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* offers such a vision and with it the hope for change that we crave. The book contains (1) a new introduction by Peter Hudis; (2) the first-ever English translation

of the version of the Gotha Program that was the object of Marx’s critique; (3) a personal letter Mark wrote to Wilhelm Bracke wherein he indicates that he and Engels “completely disassociate”<sup>2</sup> themselves from the principles presented in the Gotha Program, which are in their view “completely objectionable”;<sup>3</sup> (4) a revised English translation of the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and an afterword by Peter Linebaugh. Taken in its totality, the book provides the context and critical analysis that allow readers to engage with a much more dialectical and humanist Marx than

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has typically been represented. Crucially, it also links Marx's vision with today's socio-political and economic contexts.

*Critique of the Gotha Program* (hereafter referred to as *Critique*) is Marx's response to the Gotha Program (Program of the Worker's Socialist Party), which articulated a set of principles, characterized as Marxist, of the then newly-formed Socialist Workers Party of Germany. In *Critique*, Marx lays out a scathing challenge to what he regards as misconceptions (perhaps deliberate) of his philosophy. Here, Hudis points out that as much as Marx resisted providing a blueprint for his vision of communism, the dialectical analysis that he employed reveals the positives within the negatives, offering us the opportunity to capture aspects of Marx's vision of an alternative to capitalism that we might build upon and to shed light on the processes that contributed to the development of the so-called communisms that Marx would have repudiated for having turned "into its opposite."<sup>4</sup>

### Challenging Misconceptions and Recapturing the Dialectic

Hudis's incisive analysis of Marx's critique, written from a Marxist-humanist perspective is also an articulation of the dialectic. Hudis not only points out the relevancy and importance of Karl Marx's work, he also examines the consequences of developing an inadequate understanding of capital.

In his introduction, Hudis clarifies some of the most difficult concepts that Marx developed, including Marx's articulation of value as the product of abstract labor and the development of an abstract global socially necessary labor time that determines the value of the commodity and that becomes a force that controls us. He points out that a major source of misunderstanding of Marx's philosophy is equating capitalism with private property. Hudis acknowledges that Marx opposed

private property, but he explains that focusing on private property alone as the defining characteristic of capitalism has led to the nationalized property and planned economies that have given way to dictatorships with almost complete control at the hands of a vanguard party. This, as Hudis points out, does not reflect Marx's vision of freely associated labor, democratic control of the means of production, or an exchange process based on *actual* labor time.

Another important idea that Hudis clarifies is the distinction between wealth and value and the misconception that "labor is the source of all wealth."<sup>5</sup> Marx criticizes the Gotha Program's attribution of all wealth to labor, noting that nature is just as much a source of wealth and this false attribution, Marx states, renders abstract labor trans-historical and therefore a permanent aspect of life.<sup>6</sup> Because the Gotha Program conflates wealth with value, its proponents assume that abolishing surplus value will mean that individual workers will receive "the full fruits of their labor—even though this is clearly a completely impractical perspective."<sup>7</sup> As Hudis points out, this faulty reasoning has led to a continued focus on wealth redistribution, which leaves the social relations of production, that is, the process of value production, intact. This makes redistribution impossible and fails to challenge the alienation that is inherent to value production. Moreover, it allows us to accept the atrocities against life and dignity that the system creates. As Hudis explains, this approach leads to "Humanism, at least in Marx's sense of the word, vanish[ing] from view."<sup>8</sup>

Marx's indignation at the Gotha Program is evident especially in his repudiation of its adoption of the Lassallian "iron law of wages," which rendered the self-activity of the workers, through trade union collective bargaining, superfluous. This was just one example of Lassalle's betrayal of

revolutionary goals in favor of reformism, along with his inability to recognize the agency and capacity of self-activity of the working classes. Indeed, this elitist assumption of the superiority of a vanguard party of intellectuals has been a critical aspect of the one-party dictatorships that have defined twentieth-century socialisms.<sup>9</sup>

Two other important points of the Gotha Program that Marx critiques and that Hudis highlights are the focus on nationalism rather than the internationalism that Marx supported and the false distinction between socialism and communism as distinguishable modes of production, which has been used to justify a statist-command economy and which Raya Dunayevskaya identified as state capitalism.<sup>10</sup> This state-command economy has been falsely presented as a necessary first historical stage in the development of communism. In this false distinction, socialism, as opposed to communism, has been perceived to retain the law of value, thereby, pushing off freedom to an indeterminant future.

Hudis points out that Marx only differentiated communism from socialism in the 1840s in order to distinguish his ideas of communism from the reformist tendencies within the “socialism” of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Louis Blanc. Once these tendencies were no longer prominent, however, Marx begins to use the terms interchangeably. Marx does distinguish between an initial and higher phase of communism/socialism, but these are not

**Abolish Capital,  
abolish the state.  
Freedom and humanity.**



two distinguishable historical stages or modes of production. Rather they express the reality that socialism/communism is a system that is birthed from capitalism and, thus, necessarily emerges flawed and thus requires the development of particular social conditions that will allow for the development of a greater human society ready to embrace new social relations. A state controlled economy has no place within communism/socialism because the key defining feature of the initial phase of communism/socialism is the abolition of



the state as the producers take collective control of the means of production.

In the *Critique*, Marx points out that in abolishing private property while maintaining abstract labor, the Gotha Program egregiously misrepresents his ideas. Elsewhere, Hudis has argued that Marx's great-

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## Hudis clarifies the distinction between wealth and value and the misconception that "labor is the source of all wealth."

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est revolutionary goal was the elimination of the alienation that deforms our species being.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Marx writes about the "metabolic rift" that has occurred through the separation of humanity from nature, specifically through land enclosures but more broadly through a process of production that ignores the dialectical relations between our human selves and nature. As Marx writes in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*: "Nature is man's *inorganic* body—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man *lives on nature*—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature."<sup>12</sup>

Through abstract labor, the commodity, or the product of our human activity, turns against us to control us, thereby turning us into play things of capitalist relations. This is why, for Marx, any revolutionary struggle that sought to reclaim people's dignity and self-determination as human beings was worthy in and of itself regardless of whether the movement declared itself anti-capitalist.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the abolition of

private property alone could not represent Marx's vision but was, rather, merely one step in a broader process of transforming "alienated human relations—in the workplace, between men and women, among different races and ethnicities, and in how we treat the natural environment."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the abstract labor that produces alienation would have no place in Marx's socialism/communism.

While within Marx's vision, abstract labor ceases within the first phase of communism, this does not mean that labor ceases. Indeed Marx argues that labor, based on use values, may actually increase in order to provide for the social fund that secures the needs of children, seniors, the ill, and others who may not be able to contribute. Indeed, as Marx states in the *Critique*, "in a higher phase of communist society . . . labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime desire and necessity."<sup>15</sup>

## An Intersectional Marxism

Peter Linebaugh, in the afterword, hones in beautifully on the need and fruitfulness of reading Marx's works and in particular his *Critique* in light of today's concrete struggles, not because it is timeless but because it provides a stepping stone to build upon. As Linebaugh notes, "we look back to select what is useful from Marx's *Critique*, bearing in mind, so to speak, that Marx looks to us!"<sup>16</sup> Following Marx's emphasis on the self-activity of the working classes, it is critical to recognize that today's revolutionary subjects do not define themselves by class alone, nor even primarily. Linebaugh cites numerous historical struggles, from the American Civil War and the Paris Commune to more contemporary movements such as the Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, and #Me Too, demonstrating that revolutionary struggles develop in the context of particular social conditions. His point is that although we

can point to capitalist social relations as a global system within which particular oppressive conditions predominate, the “real movement” of the people cannot be pre-determined. Rather it develops in response to a host of particularities that include the specific goals, desires, limitations, and collective activity of the people in any given context. As Marx points out in the *Critique* and Linebaugh emphasizes, “Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs.”<sup>17</sup> It is thus crucial, as Linebaugh insists, that we fully understand today’s real movements—who comprises them? how and with what goals?

Linebaugh points out that while Marx’s revolutionary subject was the proletariat, we must consider how today’s sociopolitical and economic contexts have developed a revolutionary subject that defines itself differently. It is thus especially noteworthy that the struggles Linebaugh mentions are focused on specific forms of oppression that have not always centered class relations or have an intersectional quality. Recent labor strikes that seek to improve wages and working conditions for predominantly Black and Brown peoples give credence to his argument.<sup>18</sup> That said, Marxist-humanism recognizes multiple structures of oppression to be co-constitutive, which means that the struggle to end any one oppression will ultimately require that we struggle against all oppressions, including class relations. The dialectic for today allows us to recognize that people experience oppressive conditions differently, depending on their particular social positionings, but intersectional movements can create a collective consciousness among people that have been historically divided. Indeed today’s social movements, often founded or led by women of color, attempt to address intersectionality and thus have garnered support across multiple forms of oppression.<sup>19</sup> Black Lives Matter, founded by three self-identified Queer Black women has

been especially successful in this approach, attending to the diverse social realities of Black men, Black women, Queer Blacks, and also to some extent recognizing the social conditions among Black communities as dialectically related to the capitalist state.<sup>20</sup> Black Lives Matter, as the largest historical movement in the United States, garnering support across multiple forms of oppression and growing into an international movement, has taught us that an intersectional approach has great potential to garner the “revolutionary force and Reason” of today’s masses.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Dunayevskaya’s research into the concrete struggles of the twentieth century led her to the conclusion that the Black masses would be the next vanguard of the revolution.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, one of us has argued that today’s intersectional movements and women’s important roles in these suggest women of color as key revolutionary subjects.<sup>23</sup>

An important caveat to the intersectional dimension of revolution is that we must not fall into the class reductionist assumption that smashing capitalist social relations will automatically end racism, sexism, or other oppressions. As Marx articulated, communism will not develop fully

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Following Marx’s emphasis on the self-activity of the working classes, it is critical to recognize that today’s revolutionary subjects do not define themselves by class alone, nor even primarily.

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overnight but will require an initial phase that would slowly develop into a higher phase. Given that communism would

emerge from a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the initial phase would necessarily be stamped with the flawed social relations that have sustained a system of overlapping human hierarchies and relations of domination for over 500 years. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that a contemporary vision for a viable alternative to capitalism will require that we work simultaneously to end all forms of oppression. So long as white patriarchal domination persists it will continue to perpetuate an ideology of human hierarchy that will lead us back to some form of racial-colonial capitalism. The alternative to capitalism will require that we continually dissolve the prejudices that have defined our current system such that we can begin to recognize the beauty, worthiness, and interconnectedness of all life. In our view this is a truly laudable goal—one worth fighting for no matter how long it takes.

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# A Planned Economy with No Central Planning Authority

TOM WETZEL

IN *DEMOCRATIC ECONOMIC PLANNING*, Robin Hahnel says that his “most important contribution is” having “explained concretely how to reconcile comprehensive democratic planning” with worker autonomy and self-management. As Hahnel said in a Summer 2023 *New Politics* essay: “Early socialists, including Marx himself, were clear that instead of profit-hungry capitalists and the ‘anarchy’ of markets ... the ‘associated producers’ should decide among themselves what to produce, how to produce it, and how to distribute it.”

The belief that a central planning authority was needed is rather a product of the early twentieth century, especially the Bolshevik project of concentrating planning control in a statist central planning authority. Hahnel says the key lesson from the failure of “real world” socialism in the twentieth century is this: *No central planning authority is required!* He puts the situation this way:

While early socialists championed conscious decision-making over impersonal coordination by markets, they did *not* propose a decider. Instead they proposed that the *associated producers decide for, and among, themselves*. And these are not the

same thing at all (p. 294).

*Democratic Economic Planning* is a technical academic work and contains bits of mathematical economics I’m not qualified to judge. Nonetheless, most of his discussion is in reasonably accessible English. Anarchist and Marxist

readers may be put off by Hahnel’s reliance on mainstream economics jargon, but this proposal for a socialist economy is worth making the effort to understand. There is no discussion of strategy for achieving a self-managed socialist economy here. As Hahnel says, this is a “description of the destination, not a flight plan.”

## The Critique of Central Planning

At the time of the “socialist calculation debate” in the early twentieth century, anti-socialists assumed that a planned socialist economy requires a single “decider”—a central planning authority. Hahnel’s extensive study shows that this is a false assumption.

The anti-socialist case against central planning rested on two arguments. First, the amount of information needed for efficient allocation of resources was arguably too large for the central planning agency to marshal. According to Hahnel, the development of computer technology and mathematical programming techniques made this argument moot.

The second anti-socialist argument

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claimed that the central planning authority would be unable to make use of the “tacit knowledge” workers and managers in local facilities have from their skills and experience in doing production. In the Soviet Union central planners used a method called “material balances” as the basis for developing a plan. This relied on information about the actual techniques and resources used in the previous period. Hahnel points out that this method lacks dynamic efficiency because it can’t account for new technical possibilities that might increase efficiency.

To overcome the “tacit knowledge” problem, later advocates of central planning proposed iterative (back-and-forth) techniques to encourage local production units to reveal their real abilities. For example, local units could propose a plan based on maximizing their rate of return or based on a set of resources the central authority would make available. The hope was that the response by local units would reveal their production potential. Thus these would be learning techniques for the central planning agency.

Hahnel argues that a solution for this problem is unlikely under central planning for it would be dangerous for managers of local units to provide an accurate picture of their abilities. If they did, the central planning authority might then require the local units to work to their maximum ability. This would put managers at risk if a glitch led to failure. Thus the actual tendency under central planning is “a cat and mouse game” in which local managers hoard resources and hide their true capacity to ensure they can easily meet their assigned goals. He points out that large capitalist corporations also have this problem to some extent: in cases where divisional or plant managers do not provide fully truthful information to upper levels of the control apparatus.

Hahnel argues, however, that central planning’s main problem is that it is inherently incompatible with worker autonomy and self-management. Central planning, he says, is not simply some back-and-forth communication between the central authority and local units. On the contrary, the relationship is based on command by the central authority and subordination of local units to orders from above. Because the central authority needs to have local units do what it demands, they will also want to appoint managers to control the workforce. Thus in the Soviet Union, the thousand or so enterprises seized by workers and placed under control of worker assemblies and elected worker committees in 1917–1918 were almost entirely converted to control by a managerial bureaucracy appointed from above by 1920. It is easier to hold a single manager accountable to your orders rather than an entire worker collective. Similarly, managers of an industry or facility will tend to appoint supervisors or unit managers to control the workforce. In so doing this structure shapes mass consciousness because workers have no decision-making power. Mass apathy is the result.

W. Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell have recently argued for a democratic form of socialist economy in *Towards a New Socialism* (1993) and other writings. They propose that workers be remunerated in labor tokens according to the number of hours worked. Consumer goods would then be priced according to the number of worker hours it takes to produce them. This is roughly similar to Marx’s proposal in *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Cockshott and Cottrell concede, however, that work “intensity” also needs to be taken into account. So some workers would receive more remuneration per hour as they pack more work effort in a shorter time. Hahnel agrees with Cockshott and Cottrell’s proposal for

worker remuneration but argues their proposal for society-wide decisions for social planning is a form of central planning and is inconsistent with worker self-management. If everyone in the society makes decisions about production and workplaces, then a worker in a workplace has no more say than anyone else in the society.

Cockshott and Cottrell note that supply and demand for goods is never equal and thus “it is only average prices that should equal labor values.” Hahnel comments that to their credit Cockshott and Cottrell acknowledge that while this procedure will yield a production plan for private goods that consumers purchase with their labor tokens, it cannot decide how much public goods or capital goods to produce (p. 313).

Cockshott and Cottrell propose a popular referendum on the division of the social product between private consumption, public goods and services, and investment. Hahnel argues that this is inconsistent with a meaningful level of worker self-management. Any person in the society would have as much say as the workers in a particular facility over what they will produce and what inputs they will have to work with. If the referendum carries, then government officials would, as I explain in *Overcoming Capitalism* (AK Press, 2022), “assign inputs and output goals to the various production groups, which means that workers would be denied effective self-management over their work and workplaces.”

Hahnel also argues that the methods Cockshott and Cottrell propose will not lead to an efficient plan. Their proposal can only take account of the opportunity costs of using labor. But they have no way to accurately estimate environmental costs. Nor do they have a way to account for the opportunity costs of using existing means of production, which are a scarce good.

## Hahnel's Alternative

Hahnel's alternative is based on the separation of planning into two decision-making channels. Through their neighborhood assemblies (“consumer councils”) the general population can participate in developing requests for both private consumption goods and public goods and services. And worker production organizations (“worker councils”) would develop their own plans for what they propose to produce. This is what I call the “dual governance” model. The earliest version of this was guild socialism (see G.D.H. Cole's *Guild Socialism Restated* [1920]). But guild socialism had two serious flaws: (1) Prices were supposed to emerge from face-to-face negotiations between worker councils and councils representing neighborhoods or consumers of services, but there was no procedure to guarantee that prices would be accurate. (2) Moreover, since neighborhood assemblies and worker councils already required time from the participants, additional negotiating sessions between worker and consumer representatives would make further demands on everyone's time.

Hahnel's proposal avoids both of these problems. His model would include no negotiating sessions between worker and consumer representatives because each of the councils would develop its own “self-activity” plans. But how would they know these plans would be socially responsible?

Hahnel's solution is a non-market price system. All organizations that develop plans would use a single society-wide price schedule that includes intermediate and finished goods, material resources, kinds of labor skill, and environmental costs. The price schedule is developed by a staff organization attached to the society-wide governance system. This staff organization then aggregates projected supply and projected demand from all the submitted plans and uses agreed-to pricing rules to generate



the price schedule. But this is not a central planning authority. It issues no demands, targets, or plans. Nor does it “set” prices. Prices fall out of the plans the worker and consumer groups develop.

With no central planning authority, the consumer councils and worker councils have to use the price schedule to stay within budget. After all the entities have adjusted their plans, a new price schedule issues from the changed consumption and production proposals. The idea is that all the entities in the system of distributed planning are “adjusting” to each other. How many of these “rounds” of adjustment are needed to reach a viable plan? In Chapter 9 Hahnel discusses the computer simulations that have been developed to try to answer this question. Results so far indicate that a viable plan would require no more than five to eight rounds. Hahnel suggests that these rounds could occur during the month of December in order to set a plan for the coming year. But would people have the patience for eight rounds of tweaking their plans? I’m skeptical. If they decide to end at fewer rounds, more mid-year adjustments might then be required.

In Hahnel’s treatment of democratic social planning each type of planning will have its own time horizon. In their earlier writings about participatory planning, Hahnel and Michael Albert focus on the development of a production plan for the coming year. This is where planning by the local consumer councils and worker councils comes to the fore. In *Democratic Economic Planning* Hahnel also develops proposals for various forms of planning with a longer time horizon. The long-run planning for new equipment and capacity for production focuses on a time horizon of fewer than ten years. But other forms of planning have an even longer time horizon—planning for long-run environmental protection, development of the workforce

skills that will be needed in coming years, and planning for infrastructure, such as a new subway line or bridge or other facilities that will be used for decades into the future. This is the first time that these long-range forms of planning have been integrated into a participatory planning framework. Hahnel also has a chapter on caring work or “social reproduction” labor. I believe this is the first time this has been added to the participatory planning framework.

How do we know if a production group’s plan is socially responsible? This will show in the year-end results. A production group does not own its means of production; it only has “user rights.” To maintain these rights the production group’s results must produce social benefit equal to, or greater than, the costs of production. If the benefit to cost ratio is less than one, there is a *prima facie* case for disbanding that group. In that case the worker federation for that industry might transfer the group’s resources to other production groups. However, this could be appealed. The industry federation might send a team to find out why the production group is failing. They might propose various solutions, such as investment in less polluting equipment, new training, or sending workers from that group to more successful groups for learning.

For Hahnel, planning activity takes place at different levels depending on how widely people are affected. Thus certain forms of planning will take place at a society-wide level, such as planning for transportation policy or universal provision of free-to-user health care. This is where certain society-wide institutions come into play, such as the National Federation of Consumer Councils, the industry federations, and the National Federation of Worker Councils. The planning at this level would occur through conventions of elected delegates. Hahnel points out that society-wide planning has to take place first, before

local planning. A city population can't make plans for roads or local health clinics without taking account of society-wide transportation and health plans.

The society-wide federations also play an important role for Hahnel in long-term planning and in issues such as planning for infrastructure that will be used for decades. The local consumer councils and worker councils come to the fore in the planning for production in the coming year. If more of the social product goes into investment in the coming year, then less is available for consumption. Hahnel thinks the consumer councils would be more likely to push for more of the social product going to consumption, while the worker councils and industry federations would press for investment in production capacity.

But planning for next year's production cannot happen without first deciding the long-term investment in expanded production capacity, development of needed workforce education, environmental protection, and infrastructure. Thus Hahnel suggests the long-term investment planning might be carried out in November and then the plan for the coming year in December—taking into account the next year's long-term investment requirements. In the long-term planning for infrastructure and production goods, the National Federation of Worker Councils and industry federations would estimate costs, and the National Federation of Consumer Councils would decide how desirable a proposal is. Staff organizations could provide expert advice. Scientists in a "Ministry of Environment," for example, could monitor emissions or have expertise in environmental medicine.

A basic problem for long-run planning is that technologies, consumer preferences, and other conditions in the future are not now known. So planners will need to make intelligent guesses. The effectiveness of

long-run plans, Hahnel explains, can be checked against results at the end of each year. Long-run plans can then be tweaked to adjust for mistaken projections.

In an appendix Hahnel evaluates a series of economic planning proposals—by Cockshott and Cottrell, Pat Devine, Dan Saros, and David Laibman. After detailing

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Anti-socialists assumed that a planned socialist economy requires a single "decider"—a central planning authority. Hahnel shows that this is a false assumption.

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problems in these proposals, he critiques how Marxists think about prices: "To be perfectly blunt, we believe that proponents of different models of socialism who cling to their Marxist roots struggle mightily over the question of prices. . . . Sometimes their Marxist roots lead them to dismiss the importance of getting relative prices 'right' as a fetish of bourgeois economics" (p. 341). Hahnel argues that accurate quantitative estimates of opportunity costs of scarce resources, social costs of producing final goods, intermediate goods, produced means of production ("capital goods"), costs of emitting various pollutants, and social rates of return on investment are crucial for two reasons. First, without accurate estimates productive resources cannot be allocated efficiently. And, even more important, worker and consumer councils (and federations of these) need accurate estimates to plan effectively and in a timely manner. The "reluctance to surrender" to this need for accurate estimates of social costs, in his view, can create confusion and a lack of

clear thinking. To this I will add that anarchists can also have this problem. In *The Conquest of Bread*, for example, Kropotkin vehemently tries to avoid anything that looks like a price system.

### Getting Accurate Estimates of Pollution Damage

Some socialists have assumed that trained economists and scientists hired by the government can accurately calculate damages from polluting emissions. Hahnel says this is “naïve.” Clearly, he explains, “private enterprise and markets have long exerted a bias in favor of . . . activities that have negative external effects and against activities that generate positive external effects. The clearest example, which now threatens civilization as we know it, is the activities that emit greenhouse gases are favored because their negative effects go unaccounted for in market prices . . .” (p. 299). Although the problem of global warming requires international negotiation, Hahnel offers proposals to overcome environmental damage from emissions. These include long-term environmental planning and a “Pollution Damage Revealing Mechanism” (PDRM), which he sees as “most useful for local pollutants, pollutants whose effects are not lethal, and whose effects are relatively well understood.”

A key part of the PDRM is the formation of “Communities of Affected Parties” (CAPs) to deal with pollutants. He doesn’t say how these CAPs would be organized, but he thinks that the resident (“consumer”) councils could put them together. The National Federation of Consumer Councils could also play a key role in the demand and planning for environmental protection at the society-wide level—advised by a “Ministry of Environment.”

In his proposal the CAPs would be able to simply ban pollutants, meaning area residents would have a kind of property right

over the ecological commons. The CAPs may also generate pollution permits for production groups, allowing some emissions of a certain pollutant. CAP members would receive credit for the damages suffered. This form of “sacrifice” would give the CAPs an increase in income. This is Hahnel’s way of implementing the “polluter pays” principle.

How does this lead to an accurate price for pollution damage? As follows. If the price schedule has a damage estimate for a pollutant that is too low, the CAP may not find it in its interest to issue a permit for as large an emission level as the production group requesting the permit wants. And thus in the current round of planning an excess demand over supply for the pollution permit would drive up the price in the next price schedule. If the proposed price for the permit is too high, the demand from production groups for the permit would drop. So as rounds of the annual planning process continue, the price for the pollutant will adjust so requests from the production groups for permission for a level of emissions will equal the permissions the CAPs are willing to grant. The price at that point is the “efficient” price because the estimate of damages will be roughly equal to the benefit from allowing that level of emissions.

Hahnel defines *throughput* as all the material resources used and the damaging emissions produced. He then defines environmental throughput efficiency as reducing the throughput per unit of output. A successful environmental strategy, he explains, is reduced to “kicking the can down the road.” This strategy works continuously to improve environmental throughput efficiency by substituting renewables for non-renewable resources, reducing the output of damaging emissions, and replacing scarce resources with resources that are less scarce. Says Hahnel: “Fortunately—contrary to what many in the degrowth movement

believe—this process of ‘kicking the can down the road’ can be done while increasing economic well-being for far longer than humans care to worry about” (p. 263).

Thus Hahnel criticizes “degrowth” assumptions while throwing the gauntlet down to “ecomodernists” and “climate Leninists”—rejecting their assumption that statist central planning is needed for a solution to the environmental crisis.

From my point of view, a weakness of Hahnel’s overall proposal is that he avoids the question of the state, or what replaces the state. At one point he mentions the “national legislature,” but doesn’t explain what this is. I don’t see why the congresses of the National Federation of Consumer Councils and National Federation of Worker Councils could not form a bicameral legislature. But Hahnel does not discuss issues such as the police, courts, or military. Hahnel notes that in various revolutions in the twentieth century the tendency was for worker control of production to disappear after the initial revolutionary upsurge. This was true of both the Russian and Spanish revolutions. After the Communists wormed their way into control of sections of the police and army in the Spanish Republican state, they began to use these armed bodies to seize and nationalize worker-run industries, such as the arms, telephone, and motion picture industries. I think this is likely to be a problem if the workers do not gain direct, democratic control over the dominant armed power in society in the revolutionary period.

If we think about the outcome if a revo-

lutionary era develops, different socialist ideas and proposals may become dominant in different regions or countries. Pieces of participatory economy might be used in different forms. Hahnel doesn’t really address the issue of variations in self-managed socialism across regions.

Hahnel’s proposal has similarities and differences to syndicalist proposals for economic planning and governance, such as *After the Revolution* (1935) by Diego Abad de Santillan or the program in Rudolf Rocker’s *Anarcho-syndicalism: Theory and Practice*. A basic issue is, What ensures the worker self-managed industries act in a socially accountable way? De Santillan proposed that all industries would be run by worker-controlled industry federations that would be united into regional and federal worker congresses, which he called “Councils of Economy.” He suggested that “the federal council would act as a social counterweight, which, in case of need, would restrict the corporative trade unionism [that] might manifest itself to excess” (p. 83). This is an example of what Hahnel calls “the one big meeting” approach to social planning. I tend to agree with Hahnel that a separate community sphere of decision-making is necessary to ensure socially responsible action on the part of workplace groups—through the community-based planning of requests for provision of goods and services, monitoring product quality, and ensuring protection of the environment against damaging pollutants. Thus we can have both self-management of decision-making in communities and in workplaces.

# Refusing to Be a Model Minority

DAVID RENTON

SHANE BURLEY AND BEN LORBER'S lively new book is an attempt to write a mass-market account of the phenomenon of antisemitism and of the organizing strategies that are needed to prevent it. They use the adjective "radical" in their subtitle, as a short-hand to convey certain features of their argument. Their book is against the increased manifestation of an-

tisemitism in the United States since 2015 and Donald Trump's ultimately successful campaign for the presidency. The book is against antisemitism because antisemitism is a hateful and violent politics—it causes suffering—and because it is an obstacle to the forms of change in which socialists believe. The authors resist the argument that antisemitism is rising. Rather, they argue it is just more obvious. "Antisemitism has not 'reappeared' because, in truth, it never left us—the 'crisis' is simply more visible in political life as exclusionary movements create a new populist narrative that provides alienated people someone to blame" (p. 3).

The authors resist the dominant form of writing about antisemitism in the anglophone world, which has been obsessed for over half a century with the idea that an "old" fascist-style antisemitism is being

supplanted by a "new" and left-wing antisemitism, principally manifested in acts of Palestinian solidarity. Such an approach, the authors respond, is misguided. It works to

conceal such open acts of violence as the 2018 shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue, the worst single act of antisemitic violence in the whole history of the United States. And it serves to promote

the interests of two groups of people each of whom the authors oppose: the political right and the defenders of the state of Israel.

All of that said, while the authors insist that antisemitism's "foundational home is on the political Right" (p. 4), they concede that anti-Jewish racism "can also appear in ostensibly left-wing discourse" (p. 25). They find many left analyses "sorely lacking" (p. 45). What is missing, they argue, is our collective unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility that anti-Jewish prejudice might appear in our friends and allies. They give examples of socialist organizing that have lapsed into antisemitic ways of thinking. They include, as well, both relatively familiar, documented, examples that were widely publicized news stories either in the United States or abroad and smaller examples from local events they have witnessed directly.

The two authors are worth listening to. Lorber was previously a campus organizer for Jewish Voice for Peace. Burley formed a Palestine solidarity group in college, and

Safety through Solidarity:  
A Radical Guide to Fighting  
Antisemitism  
SHANE BURLEY AND BEN LORBER  
Melville House, 2024

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since then has been an organizer and journalist documenting groups like Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer. His book *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* was one of the two best popular guides to the movement unleashed by Trump. More recently, his *No Pasaran: Antifascist Dispatches from a World in Crisis* brought together in a single collection almost all the leading writers of anti-fascism in the United States, looking back on the period 2016–2020 and drawing lessons from that period. Both writers are in their thirties and have been shaped by long periods of anti-fascist activism.

In Britain, where I live, there is a generational split between anti-Zionist Jewish activists whose organizing predates 9/11 and those who came after. A larger majority of the former (myself included) are instinctively secular: our first political homes were in Trotskyist groups or in forms of left-Labour organizing. Among the younger generation are many more people who participate in forms of Jewish religious observance, attend community events, etc. Elsewhere in his writings, Burley has referred to his own deepening interest in Judaism, including its mystical and religious elements. The introduction refers, albeit very much in passing, to “Shane’s own journey into Judaism. . . . The process of writing this book was punctuated by holidays and Shabbat, debates over kashrut, and the memorization of Hebrew prayers—a deepening of Jewish identity that fundamentally changed the way that Shane related to the need for vibrancy and safety for Jews, and all people” (p. 11).

*Safety through Solidarity* is divided into 14 chapters, which address recurring themes of discussion among those confronting antisemitism. Two early chapters offer a descriptive definition of antisemitism and assess its prevalence; others address the overlap between antisemitism and conspiracy theorizing, show the emergence

of antisemitism within mainstream Christian thinking, address how antisemitism can implant itself in anti-capitalism organizing, address the use of antisemitism in Cold War anti-Communist red scares, show how antisemitism is central to white nationalist and Christian Right organizing and explore the relationship between antisemitism and the emergence of Israel, including the significantly antisemitic character of Zionism especially in the pre-1948 period. The final third of the book addresses Jewish memories of trauma, how to get past these memories, and the links between antisemitism and other forms of racism. The authors seek to map out a style of anti-antisemitic organizing that would give meaning to the words “Safety through Solidarity” in the book’s title.

Even this short summary should indicate some of the materials that are influences on Burley and Lorber’s book: April Rosenblum’s pamphlet *The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere: Making Resistance to Antisemitism Part of All of Our Movements* and Jewish Voice for Peace’s collection, *On Antisemitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice in Palestine*.

What I enjoyed most about Burley and Lorber’s book was not one particular argument but rather its style and structure. It is a work of extended journalism rather than history or theory. In their preparation, the authors spent a large amount of time interviewing a wide set of activists across the ordinary dividing lines of generation, religious/secular, and reform-liberal/orthodox Jewish opinion. Quite often the people they interviewed gave accounts that operate at a slight angle to the book’s main arguments. This isn’t a weakness, however. Quite the opposite, it makes the book feel like a family gathering at which all sorts of different positions are being debated and conclusions are reached only after discussion. The journalistic form means that cer-



tain experiences are reflected here that are significantly different from any I had seen in print before. For example, four pages of the book are effectively an extended interview with Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin—who served at the Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, Virginia, and was involved in interfaith organizing before the white supremacist rallies in that city in August 2017—and with half a dozen other Jewish activists from that town. “People were scared,” Schmelkin told the authors, “and the truth is that not everybody was aligned on what exactly to do. . . . We had elderly congregants and people who had parents who were Holocaust survivors. Being out on the front lines was not the answer for everybody” (p. 140).

Another vivid interview is with “James Green,” recently a tenured professor of philosophy at a Midwestern university, who was forced out of his job after taking part in protests against a Confederate monument. Far-right news sources focused on his involvement as a white person in anti-racist organizing concluded that he was Jewish (as he is) and took part in increasingly hostile threats. He was sent death threats, bullets. Far-right protesters camped out at his house and scanned his home with binoculars. The university refused to support him. He fled his home and checked into a psychiatric hospital. Green found himself having to explain to well-meaning reporters the history of the far-right’s antisemitism, which explained why these neo-Confederates insisted on calling him a “kike” (p. 116).

The book is very strong indeed when it applies its central metaphor of safety through solidarity as an answer to the problem of antisemitic violence post-Trump. “Within many establishment communal institutions,” the authors write, “a small but influential pool of major funders has set a center-right political agenda that

doesn’t reflect the rest of us” (p. 302). The authors want American Jews to participate in all sorts of anti-racist and other political struggles. “Today,” they write, “growing movements of progressive Jews are taking to the streets as part of powerful, vibrant justice movements. But establishment Jewish organizations lag behind, offering little more than tepid liberalism and often participating in antisemitism accusation pile-ons against justice movements” (p. 303). When antisemitic attacks occur, they warn, many community leaders can see no better option than to call in the police. But the police are no more the natural friends of Jews than they are of any racial minority. “Putting more police and militarized security in synagogues can make these spaces less safe for Black Jews, in an era when racist policing puts Black folks across the United States at risk of profiling, incarceration, violence, and murder, as well as other Jews of color and disabled and queer Jews” (p. 310).

The authors also do an important job of documenting a few of the most egregious abuses of power by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the best-known campaign against antisemitism in the United States. The authors argue that the ADL has increasingly sacrificed its politics to support for the Israeli state. When the United States opened an embassy in Jerusalem, a unilateral attempt to achieve the normalization of Israel’s standing in the world, representatives of the ADL attended the launch (p. 298). Indeed, since 2016 the ADL has welcomed Donald Trump and downplayed his anti-Jewish bigotry for the sake of what the ADL sees as a more important victory, the entrenchment of pro-Israeli opinions within U.S. politics.

The authors’ treatment of the intersection between the politics of Israel/Palestine and antisemitism in the United States is less consistent. Very few Palestinian voices

appear in the text. More time is spent explaining why American Jews might feel sympathy for Jews in Israel than interrogating whether that sympathy is deserved. Burley and Lorber write, “The majority of the world’s Jewish people currently support Zionism because they relate to Israel, quite understandably, as a life raft in a cruel, stormy ocean” (p. 203). The difficult words in that passage are “quite understandably.” Shouldn’t one of the goals of a radical book be to show that the fear Jewish people suffer is sometimes exaggerated—that there exists a whole media industry out there trying to make Jewish people feel wrongly powerless?

“Most Jews,” the authors write, “did not arrive in the Holy Land as willful colonizers eager to serve as the shock troops of Western imperialism” (p. 203). At this part of their narrative, I do not know which “most Jews” they have in mind—the generation who came as settlers in the 1920s or the generations who have come as settlers since 1982? They refer in different parts of their narrative to Meir Kahane’s far-right activism in the United States and to “Neo-Kahanists” setting state policy since, without ever linking these two moments together or showing how generations who arrived as colonizers and warmongers now lead Israel’s war effort.

The authors criticize some leftists in the United States for their response to October 7, warning against celebrating Hamas. “Unfortunately,” they write, “in the wake of Hamas’s brutal massacre and kidnapping of hundreds of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023 . . . some activists uncritically celebrated Hamas’s overall attack as ‘resistance,’ minimizing Israeli civilian victims into a homogenous category of ‘settlers,’ unworthy of solidarity or support. This callous and unprincipled stance horrified and alienated many Jews, leftists, and members of the general public who were or might have been otherwise supportive of

the Palestine solidarity movement’s goals and aims” (p. 216; also pp. 46 and 206).

I agree that some people wrote and said stupid things. But these are not the only ones misreading what was happening in Palestine. I think, for example, of the effort that was made in December 2023 to criticize the left for “idealizing the Palestinian struggle” and for saying that solidarity efforts in Britain and the United States should be postponed until “forces on the ground” (meaning Israeli groups) began, “organizing to advance democratic politics.” Months have passed, but an active Israeli left has still not emerged or begun mobilizing with sufficient numbers or vigor to put practical obstacles in the way of the war in Gaza.

Justice cannot travel at the speed of the slowest. Part of what is needed to make things change is a polarization within global Jewish politics and the reversal of the historic pro-Zionist majority in the United States as a prelude to the splitting of consensus in Israel. And this issue is not separate from the discussion of antisemitism in the United States. Israel is in the news hourly and daily. In 2018 or 2020 it was possible, just about, to treat the two issues as separate. By 2024, it is impossible to act on antisemitism in isolation from Palestine.

Had the authors given themselves a few more weeks before finishing their book, the latest event in their narrative would not be the Hamas attacks but the examples of Jewish solidarity with Palestine that have emerged since October—the work of groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace and the IfNotNow Movement, whose members have been willing to face arrest in the hundreds to put an obstacle in the way of Palestinian suffering. Aren’t *they* the best contemporary example of safety through solidarity?

# It Might Have Happened Here

WAYNE PRICE

TELEVISION COMMENTATOR Rachel Maddow has written an engrossing book about U.S. fascism. Maddow's book does not discuss the current U.S. political situation and the rise of fascist-talking politicians, but it is an indirect commentary on this deadly situation. As such it provides useful insights while suffering from the weaknesses of liberalism.

Maddow does not quite define "fascism." I would call it a movement to overthrow limited representative democracy, such as exists in the U.S., and to replace it with a one-person, one-party, dictatorship, while still maintaining a capitalist economic system. By the late 1930s, there were explicit fascist organizations in the United States. "A violent, ultra-right authoritarian movement, weirdly infatuated with foreign dictatorships, with detailed plans to overthrow the U.S. government. . ." (pp. xxviii–xxix).

Besides the (Nazi) German Bund and Italian-American Fascists and the Ku Klux Klan, there were also Silver Shirts, the Knights of the White Camilla, the Brown Shirts, the Christian Front, the Ameri-

can White Guard, America First Party, American Nationalist Party, and an effort to get these and other groupings to work together under the American Nationalist Confederation.

Their antisemitic and white supremacist ideology was spread by industrialist Henry Ford. Ford's newspaper reprinted the fraudulent "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and spread its poison widely.

Father Coughlin was a "radio priest" with a vast audience. He too spread Jew-hatred along with anti-unionism and anti-communism widely throughout the country. The authoritarian politician who came closest to national power was Louisiana's Huey Long. Corrupt, charismatic, and demagogic, Long had built a brutal system in his home state and was sure to challenge Franklin D. Roosevelt for the presidency—until he was gunned down in 1935.

U.S. fascism grew out of widespread racism, antisemitism, nativism, certain religious views, and anticommunism. Big business had a history of organizing "volunteer" forces to violently break strikes. But U.S. fascism was also promoted by Nazi Germany. Germans printed large amounts of propaganda that they shipped to the United States to be distributed by fascist organizations and other friends. The Germans paid big bucks to Americans who would do their best to keep the United States out of the world war. Quirky individuals

## Prequel: An American Fight against Fascism

RACHEL MADDOW  
(New York: Crown, 2023),  
416 pp

WAYNE PRICE is a long-time revolutionary libertarian socialist. He has been involved in teachers union struggles, anti-war protests, and ecosocialist efforts. He has written many essays and three books, including *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives*.

went back and forth between Germany and the United States, carrying the good word about Hitler. Maddow goes into interesting detail about some of these U.S. fascists and pro-Nazis.

The bottom-up fascist movement had friends in high places. Their views overlapped with respectable isolationist politicians, especially Southern segregationist Democrats but also Republicans. Friendship with Hitler and the superiority of the white race were already their core beliefs. They too took money from the Germans or their agents. Their support included using their congressional franking privilege to let fascist propaganda—native fascist leaflets and printed-in-Germany pamphlets, for example—go free through the mails. Some prominent isolationist Congresspeople let fascists write their speeches for them—which were then published in the *Congressional Record* and mailed out by the ton for free. Meanwhile, they ran interference for fascists whenever there was a threat of a legal investigation.

Besides the spreading of propaganda and the building of mass organizations, U.S. fascists made various efforts to accumulate weapons (sometimes stolen from U.S. armories). They made various plans for seizing power locally or nationally, some of



which came frighteningly close to action, as Maddow spells out.

Oddly enough though, Maddow does not mention the so-called Business Plot (or the Wall Street Putsch). Big businesspeople were furious at Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, including taking the U.S. off the gold standard. An agent of big capital approached General Smedley Butler, then a popular retired general. He was offered money and troops (including the American Legion). They wanted him to overthrow F.D.R. and establish himself as dictator. Butler exposed the plot to the newspapers and a congressional committee.

The committee concluded: "In the last

few weeks of the committee's official life it received evidence showing that certain persons had made an attempt to establish a fascist organization in this country. There is no question but that these attempts were discussed, were planned, and might have been placed in execution when and if the financial backers deemed it expedient" (in Katz 2022<sup>1</sup>).

Maddow proudly points out the few bold anti-fascist journalists, government agents, and volunteer investigators who uncovered the web of fascist plots. These people, with little reward or recognition, did important work in exposing the fascist network. (She does not mention Carlo Tresca, the anarchist, who fought fascism in the Italian-American community.)

But Maddow does make clear how difficult it was to overcome U.S. fascism. From just before to after World War II, she explains, the powers-that-be did not want to penalize fascist lawbreakers. Their friendly politicians again interfered with trials and committee hearings. Even non-fascists, such as President Harry S. Truman, had ties to the old isolationists and segregationists, which they did not want to disturb. By the end of the war, domestic fascism was no longer an issue, in the opinion of the establishment, so it could be swept under the rug.

Maddow's story ends with the immediate aftermath of World War II. The story of the ultra-right in the United States might have continued into the Cold War, the anti-communist hysteria promoted by Senator McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover, with the collaboration of Truman and the Democrats. This story would also include the John Birch Society, the American Nazi Party, the White Citizens' Councils, and the revived KKK. At the period's beginning, the Communist Party declared that the U.S. was on the brink of fascism and sent its leaders into hiding or exile. As it turned

out, they were wrong, mainly because of the post-war prosperity.

Rachel Maddow does not understand the connection between fascism and capitalist democracy. In general, big business prefers capitalist democracy. This permits factions of the capitalist class to fight out their differences and decide on government policies, without bloodshed. It lets them fool the working population into believing that it is a free people who control the state. But at certain periods of decline and tension, if the bosses feel too threatened, they will switch to support of fascism. In any case, the capitalist class is never totally afraid of fascism (even when they prefer liberal democracy) because it would allow them to keep their wealth and power.

On the other hand, the ruling rich are utterly opposed to any kind of "communism" (socialism, collectivism, anarchism). They fear that such movements would take away their capital, their industries, their factories, their mansions, their private jets, their bought-and-paid-for politicians and police, and so on. This, they believed, should never be allowed to happen. (To working people, there is an enormous difference between the democratic takeover of capitalists' property by workers and the seizure of the capitalists' property by a state bureaucracy, as was the case in Stalinist Russia and Maoist China. But to the capitalists, losing their wealth is the only thing that matters.)

Maddow also takes for granted the viewpoint of those who wanted the U.S. to enter the war. She sees this as the good, anti-fascist, side. No doubt she is right that isolationist politicians—Democrats *and* Republicans—appeared to be unconcerned about Nazism; some were even pro-Hitler. But a great many ordinary U.S. workers and farmers were against getting into another world war for perfectly good reasons. They had seen how one war had led to another.

They were aware that the British Empire, the French Empire, and Stalinist Russia were not fighting for international democracy and freedom.

The most advanced, radical workers knew that the U.S. rulers also did not care about peace and freedom; they wanted to replace Britain as the dominant global imperial power (as was done). Nor was the U.S. state fighting racism, with its segregated army, its Japanese internment camps, and its exclusion of Jewish immigrants. This does not justify sympathy for Nazi Germany nor isolationism. But a perspective of revolutionary internationalism is beyond Maddow's framework. (See Price, 2015.<sup>2</sup>)

U.S. fascism did not "catch on" in the 1930s or 1940s, despite its various "achievements." Unlike the case of ruling classes in Germany, Italy, and Spain, the U.S. ruling class had a mass of wealth—a layer of "fat" so to speak—which these other countries did not have. Despite the Great Depression and the increase in workers' struggles, the U.S. rich were not forced to turn to a terroristic dictatorship. The world war led them to unparalleled levels of profit and world domination, for several decades.

Rachel Maddow, in this fascinating book, sees the danger of American fascism arising from time to time, but driven back by the bravery and patriotism of ordinary U.S. citizens. She calls her account a "prequel," implying that these events foreshadowed the current rise of authoritarian politics in the United States. The vile Donald Trump threatens the foundations of constitutional democracy, supported by one of the two major parties and tens of millions of people, with foreign help (mainly from Russia this time). Once again, there is "a violent, ultra-right authoritarian movement, weirdly infatuated with foreign dictatorships, with detailed plans to overthrow

the U.S. government. . ." (pp. xxviii–xxix).

In 2020, the U.S. ruling class—even in decline—still had enough wealth and stability to reject the need for fascism. Most of big business (also referred to as the "donor class") did not donate to Trump. Most of the military top brass and the leaders of the "intelligence community" did not support a coup. Without the people with money and the people with guns, a coup was not possible. (The year 2020 has been called "the stupid coup.")

But the time may come when the very wealthy might feel threatened by economic stagnation, wars, ecological catastrophes, and other indications of social collapse—and might turn to authoritarianism as a safeguard. They might feel the need to drastically cut the standard of living of the working class even further than today. History has demonstrated the potential for a dangerous fascist movement, even here in "freedom-loving" America (in fact, U.S. fascists present themselves as lovers of "freedom").

The further decline of U.S. and world capitalism may one day lead to a new threat of fascism. If so, it will take more than a small number of honest and brave individuals to defeat. It will take more than relying on the Democratic Party establishment. It will take a mass movement of working people and all those oppressed to beat it back and to create a new and truly democratic, free, society.

#### NOTES

1. Jonathan M. Katz. 2022. "The Plot against American Democracy That Isn't Taught in Schools." *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/coup-jan6-fdr-new-deal-business-plot-1276709/>
2. Wayne Price. 2015. "The Meaning of World War II, An Anarchist View; The Imperialist War and the People's War." <https://www.anarkismo.net/article/28250>



# Moral Rot

SAMUEL FRIEDMAN

---

As I walk through this park  
in a season when flowers bloom beauty  
after a winter with sparkling stars  
and twinkling stalactites of ice  
hanging from every New Year's eave,  
I meditate on the moral rot that blossoms  
everywhere  
in these centuries of capitalist rule.

I think of terminal managers  
who demand mechanics skip on main-  
tenance  
so truck brakes freeze  
and freight drivers and commuters  
scatter bloody  
across a rush-hour road.

Politicians with honest intent,  
who gain votes for construction jobs  
by backing coal-fired factories  
and bombs to slaughter children in Gaza.

Rabbis and college trustees  
who demand students be canned  
for the sin of saying "Ceasefire"  
since the God of Powerful Donors  
etched His Commandments at Sinai,

---

SAMUEL 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, 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](https://imhojournal.org/wp-content/uploads/Friedman-S.-2022.-A-Precious-Residue.pdf).

"Thou must kill Palestinians,"  
so the search for a Final Solution  
seems expedient  
once again.

College textbooks and media editorials  
that teach that greed is  
good,  
profits  
holy,  
and evictions and homelessness  
a sacrament that blesses the poor.

Leftists whose "Marxism" praises  
smart bombs  
that "de-Nazify" children  
in the parks of Mariupol and Kyiv.

Hunting for morality in a world of capital-  
ist rot

And yet, I think of honest people I have  
known  
and how they agonize  
to stay moral  
in a world of rot.

A stalwart Teamster steward asking me  
"Are you a Pharisee or Saduccee?"  
and my responding "huh?"

Another steward almost boasting about the  
lies he put over on the bosses  
in saving an erring worker's job,  
then asking,  
"Did I do right?"

The Teamster Local President who laughed  
recalling the day his anger at injustice  
gave a terminal manager a heart attack  
and he yelled as the sick man lay there,

“Die, you bastard, die!”—and then reminisced

about the many who stood strong  
in their ten week wildcat strike  
and the old friends who proved weak  
and scabbed the line.

The stalwart comrades in our fight against  
endless war  
who supported a march against abortion  
while others said “Hands off our bodies”  
or demonstrated against state-mandated  
motherhood,

My friends who chant “From Ukraine to  
Palestine,  
occupation is a crime,”

or my own attempt to frame a simple truth:  
Never Again for Jews!  
Never Again for Palestinians.  
Never Again for Ukrainians.  
Never Again for anyone. Anywhere.

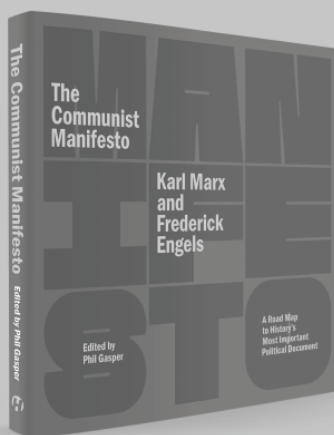
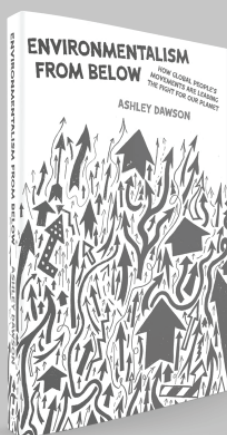
all . . . seeking morality  
within a world of rot,

Rot, rot, rot

while tankies who deem themselves leftists  
join MAGA-types at microphones  
to support Russia’s imperialist crimes,

and Communists some years before I was  
born chanted  
“Unite and Fight!  
For a White South Africa.”

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