

Beyond Bernie

Sarah Mason, Robert Cavoors

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 TABLE OF CONTENTS

FROM THE EDITORS	1
BEYOND BERNIE	3
Sarah Mason and Robert Cavooris	
IS A REVOLUTIONARY RUPTURE WITH CAPITALISM POSSIBLE?	11
Tyler Zimmer	
EUROPE IN TURMOIL	
THE YELLOW VESTS: A SOCIAL INSURRECTION	24
Patrick Le Tréhondat	
THE ENDLESS BREXIT CRISIS: AN INTERVIEW WITH NEIL DAVIDSON	30
Ashley Smith	
BREXITERINITY?	39
David Black	
ARTICLES	
GREAT POWER RIVALRY IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY	45
Michael Pröbsting	
TRUMP, SYRIA, AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION	53
Michael Karadjis	
PALESTINIAN YOUTH: THE NEXT STAGE OF RESISTANCE	67
Tariq Kenney-Shawa	
THE TENDENCY FOR THE RATE OF PROFIT TO DECLINE -- AND WHY IT MATTERS.....	79
Edward L. Tapia	
CRYONICS PHONICS: INEQUALITY'S LITTLE HELPER.....	89
Gerald Coles	
ROSA LUXEMBURG SYMPOSIUM	
ROSA LUXEMBURG: A REVOLUTIONARY LIFE	99
Helen Scott	
ROSA LUXEMBURG'S LEGACY FOR FEMINISM	106
Nancy Holmstrom	
ROSA LUXEMBURG AND THE NECESSITY OF ANTI-IMPERIALISM FOR REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM.....	111
Alyssa Adamson	

(contents continued)

REVIEWS

LEARNING FROM THE “RED” STATE WALKOUTS.....	117
Lois Weiner	
review of Blanc, <i>Red State Revolt</i>	
SOCIALIST MEANING IN FEMINIST MOBILIZATIONS	119
Temma Kaplan	
review of Arruza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, <i>Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto</i>	
WHY WE NEED SOCIALIST DISABILITY THEORY AND CRITICAL DISABILITY SOCIALISM	122
Anna McClennen	
review of Malhotra, <i>Disability Politics in a Global Economy: Essays in Honour of Marta Russell</i> , and Malhotra and Isitt, <i>Disabling Barriers: Social Movements, Disability History, and the Law</i>	
ANARCHISTS OF CONNECTICUT.....	125
Paul Buhle	
review of Lenzi, <i>Facing Toward the Dawn: The Italian Anarchists of New London</i>	

From the Editors

PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM vie for our feelings as we survey the world and national scene. We are deeply disheartened by the continuing reports on climate change, driven largely by the coal and oil industries, most recently a report on the catastrophic rate of the decline of living species. Failing to deal with that crisis, President Donald Trump threatens war with Iran, which could once more bring destruction to another Middle Eastern nation and death to tens of thousands. Things look dark ...

... but then the sun shines through the clouds. We cheer the radical upheavals that have overthrown the dictators Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria and Omar al-Bashir in Sudan. And we are both beguiled and bewildered by the Yellow Vest movement in France—hairdressers, plumbers, retirees, and the unemployed—that has for half a year now thrown a wrench into President Emmanuel Macron’s neoliberal machine. And just when we think the climate situation is hopeless, 16-year-old Greta Thunberg leads hundreds of thousands of European youth in school strikes and street protests to demand better environmental policies now.

Here at home, Trump, the Republican Senate, and the Supreme Court are largely succeeding in taking away the rights of immigrants, workers, women, and LGBT people ... but then rank and file teachers, mostly women, rise up and strike in states across the country and win improvements in wages, health care, and working conditions. And as we approach the 2020 elections, Bernie Sanders continues to call himself a socialist—defined as a New Deal liberal—and to call for

a “political revolution,” while the Democratic establishment plots the counter-revolution. Meanwhile some 22 other Democratic Party candidates, from Sanders look-alikes such as Elizabeth Warren, to the boring John Hickenlooper and to the bizarre Marianne Williamson, promise to oust Trump and take us back to the future.

In the context of this current, hyper-charged social and political uncertainty, the present issue of *New Politics* aims at providing some clarity and direction for the left’s forces in the battles to come.

Two articles here discuss American politics, the Democratic Party, and Bernie. Sarah Mason and Robert Cavoors ask what’s beyond Bernie, and Tyler Zimmer raises the important question of whether a revolutionary rupture with capitalism is possible.

In our section on “Turmoil in Europe,” completed before Theresa May’s resignation, Neil Davidson and David Black examine the British political debate over Brexit, while Patrick Le Tréhondat analyzes the Yellow Vest movement in France.

Three articles in this issue discuss other international questions. Michael Pröbsting describes twenty-first century imperialism and argues that it is still about Great Power rivalry. Michael Karadjis discusses Syria in light of Trump’s withdrawal and the Gulf states’ rapprochement with dictator Bashar al-Assad. Tariq Kenney-Shawa directs our attention to the role and position of Palestinian youth in the next stage of resistance.

And we don’t neglect socialist history and theory. Helen Scott, Nancy Holmstrom, and Alyssa Adamson examine different facets of

the life and thought of Rosa Luxemburg. Edward Tapia takes up a classic issue of Marxist economics, the tendency of the rate of profit to decline, and tells us why it matters. And finally, Gerald Coles reexamines and places in historical context the long American debate about phonics in the teaching of reading.

In our book review section, Lois Weiner examines the teachers' strikes in red states. Temma Kaplan takes up the important *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*. Anna McClennen discusses why we need socialist disability theory and critical disability socialism. And Paul Buhle remembers some New England anarchists.

Let our optimism triumph over our pessimism, our hope over our fear, and having read this issue, let's all—at least in our minds—put on our yellow vests and in fact take to the

streets in solidarity with the people of Algeria and Sudan, joining with the teachers, and taking the side of the immigrants, waving our rainbow flags. We can begin by joining the worldwide climate strikes—the children are asking the adults to join them. While it will be a long hard fight, it should also be fun whenever we can make it so. So, we think of writer Lewis Carroll, whose fictional hero took up his “vorpal sword” and, “snicker-snack,” went forth and slew “the Jabberwock.” So we must go forth to slay the Jabberwock of capitalism.

SAULO M. COLÓN ZAVALA

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Beyond Bernie

SARAH MASON AND ROBERT CAVOORIS

LAST NOVEMBER, IN ONE OF THE most hostile rental markets in the world, in a city where a majority of residents are renters, a local rent control ordinance was defeated on the ballot by a margin of 38 percent. In the year running up to Election Day, organizers, including our own local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), were faced with a question of how to build the power of tenants in order to win things like rent control. In the beginning, we pursued a two-pronged approach. We held meetings with tenants from specific developments and talked concretely about the issues they encountered there. Additionally, we engaged in door-to-door canvassing (of renters and homeowners alike) to gather the signatures needed to get rent control on the ballot. However, once the measure, Santa Cruz Measure M, was on the ballot, the temporal demands of the election subsumed all other organizing efforts. Canvassing for votes was king. Looking back, we think this experience may tell us a lot about why we were ultimately unable to pass rent control and build tenant power more broadly.

SARAH MASON is a second-year PhD student in sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is currently conducting a multiyear auto-ethnography on platform-mediated, or app-based, work. She is also the co-chair of the Santa Cruz chapter of DSA and a head steward for UAW 2865.

ROBERT CAVOOR is a member of the Viewpoint Magazine editorial collective and recently served as secretary of DSA Santa Cruz. His writing has appeared in *Historical Materialism*, *Contemporary Politics*, and the *Socialist Register*.

At the national level, the DSA is now facing a similar issue in our approach to another electoral project: the presidential candidacy of avowed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders.

Since 2016, membership in the DSA has exploded, from 5,500 to over 55,000 dues-paying members, grabbing mainstream attention and leading some to start referring to it as the “resurgent left.” Much of DSA’s growth can be attributed to the popularity of Senator Bernie Sanders’ first presidential campaign, which began in the spring of 2015. Within months of announcing his run, “socialism” was Merriam-Webster’s most looked-up word of the year and Sanders-approved policies like Medicare for All entered the mainstream political discussion with great favor. As a new presidential election cycle begins, Sanders remains the most popular politician in the country and, for those age 35 and under, socialism polls more favorably than capitalism.¹

But our organization, the DSA, was divided over whether to endorse his second run. A debate at our regional conference in Los Angeles yielded an even number of voices on both sides of the question. Since then, a poll of the general membership produced a 76 percent to 24 percent result in favor of endorsement, with significant abstention, and in March, the organization’s highest body followed that recommendation to officially endorse the candidate. While the outcome is clear, it’s still surprising that one in four members voted *against* a Sanders endorsement. Is it possible the poll was asking the wrong question?

In the debate, one vocal tendency has argued that popular socialist politicians, and

Bernie in particular, are *the only viable vehicle* through which working-class power can be organized and a socialist program achieved. Those who disagree with the absolute terms of this argument are compelled to take an opposing position. The most obvious alternative to “Yes, endorse!” thus becomes “No.” But the issue is much more complicated, and its reduction to this “for or against” frame is symptomatic of a larger unresolved issue that has been haunting the organization: How do we ground our organizing in a materialist conception of class power? That is, what is the best way to become a part of the struggles that other working people—those who must become the subject of any mass socialist project—are involved in every day?

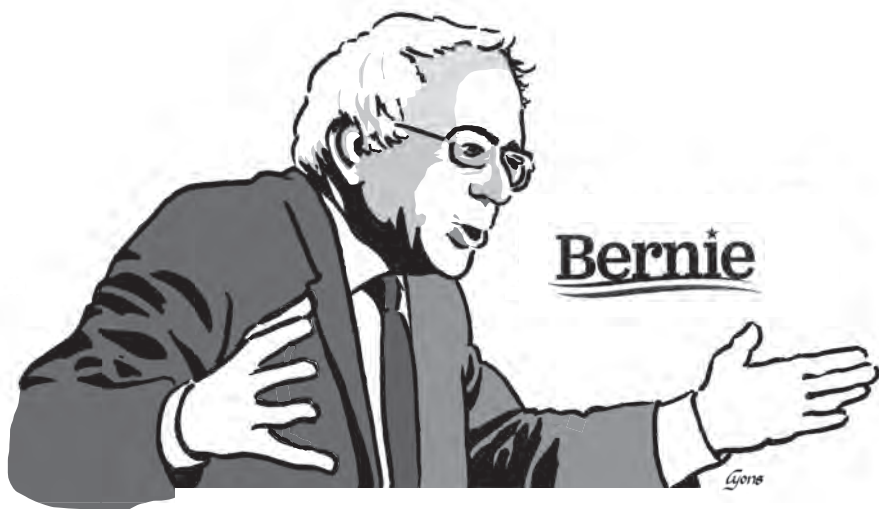
Now that the DSA’s endorsement of Sanders is decided, it’s all the more important to tease out the niceties that have been lost in the debate so far. At stake is what kind of politics will dominate the emergent socialist movement in the U.S. for years to come. Will we end up being an electoral machine and data farm, with socialism a parliamentary project to be carried out in a distant future, many election cycles away? Or can we weave together our workplaces, apartment build-

ings, schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods into a power that subsists here and now, responsive to the ever-changing struggles of the moment?

Making a conscious choice about our future means asking more questions.² What is the strategic goal of supporting Sanders *beyond* and *in relation to* specific policy gains or electoral victories? What will the DSA do to ensure that a Bernie 2020 endorsement not only brings people closer to the organization, but involves them in a kind of politics beyond voting? In what ways does our electoral activity around Sanders increase the power and self-organization of working-class people and their ability to engage in struggle? What forms of political participation are best suited to develop and equip our class with the power it needs to directly challenge the rule of capital? How do the temporal demands of a two-year electoral cycle fit into a broader strategy for overthrowing capitalism? Unless we can answer these, endorsement is a hollow exercise.

In Pursuit of Mass Politics

Some have raised criticisms of Sanders’ record, citing concerns over his support of



SESTA/FOSTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act/Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, legislation that critics say will make sex work more dangerous), his repetition of misinformation about Venezuela, his ambiguous “record of voicing both support for and criticism of the state of Israel,” and his recent vote to fund a border-security package that includes money for fencing and more border patrol agents.³ These are important criticisms that we don’t want to dismiss. But for argument’s sake, let’s accept that even if we significantly disagree with Sanders on these issues, there might be compelling reasons to become involved in the campaign of a self-styled democratic socialist: to connect with his supporters, to push the political discourse to the left, to stay relevant, and so on.

In her statement encouraging an endorsement of Sanders, DSA activist and *Jacobin* assistant editor Ella Mahony writes, “By participating in the Bernie movement, we can multiply our forces, meet and build relationships with people who can run as socialist candidates at every level, plug into Labor For Bernie, work to overcome the separation between labor and socialists, and transform DSA into something rooted in neighborhoods and workplaces of all kinds.” On its face, there’s nothing to disagree with here, but what’s less clear is the step between participating in an electoral campaign and becoming “rooted.”

It’s often argued, for instance, that Sanders provides a platform for the kinds of policies that would constitute the minimum of any respectable socialist program, carrying a message of “class-struggle politics” to all who will listen. From this, the argument implies, workers come to understand their real conditions and can begin to fight back accordingly. We thus hear of the desire to “advance a class-struggle perspective,” to “communicate a message,” and to offer a “positive vision for a radically fairer society.”⁴ These aspirations are fair enough, but the emphasis on spreading ideas appears to suggest, at times, that the

reason why socialism does not yet exist is that people simply haven’t heard of it. Ultimately, the strategic relationship between the spread of socialist messaging and the accrual of working-class power is fuzzy, at best.

Receptivity to socialist ideas did not begin with Bernie. In the United States, the fi-

How do we ground our organizing in a materialist conception of class power?

nancial crisis and Great Recession that began in 2008 and the neoliberal orientation of the Obama Democratic Party surely set the stage. Out of these conditions, the first stirrings of a “class-struggle perspective” in the United States came, most notably, from the Occupy Wall Street movement, which became a national phenomenon. The “positive vision for a radically fairer society” did not spontaneously arise out of stump speeches, but out of historic movements like Black Lives Matter; Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions against Israel; and the Arab Spring—that is, out of the refusal, rebellion, and self-organization of working people themselves around the world. It is one thing to know which way the wind blows, but it is quite another to conclude, as one author recently has, that Sanders is the “storm that *generates* that wind.”⁵

Without recognizing the material basis for the re-emergence of a robust U.S. socialist movement and the power of the working class—something that goes beyond the membership numbers of the DSA—we risk falling into a kind of idealist trap. We might think, for instance, that the growth of the possibilities for socialism is just a gradual accumulation, a linear and continuous accretion of partisans to our cause and resources at our disposal. But, as the Russian revolutionary

Vladimir Lenin once pointed out, politics is more like algebra than arithmetic: Changing variables may even invert the value of an entire equation, turning what was positive in one instance into a negative in another.⁶ Even popular electoral victories in socialism's favor have transformed, suddenly, into its largest

What kind of organization are we building, and how do we get supporters to be a part of that?

defeats, as in Chile after the 1970 election of socialist Salvador Allende.

The twentieth century offers many examples of election-focused parties that were able to increase their membership and voter support without translating that into a revolutionary strategy. Historian of European socialism and democracy Geoff Eley notes,

There are all sorts of ways of using the electoral process as a vehicle, as an instrument, as a platform, as an arena in which you argue the importance of your particular kind of politics—as opposed to the electoral machinery that the Social Democratic and Communist Parties simply became. During the course of the later twentieth century, the whole *raison d'être* of the party became reduced downwards into fighting an election, winning an election, keeping itself in office, or getting back there.⁷

There are potential opportunities in engaging in electoral politics, but there is also the pitfall of using elections and organizational growth as a means of deferring essential strategic questions. To avoid this from the outset, the notion of accumulating support for working-class or socialist politics needs to be put on a material footing: What are the concrete goals of winning people over

to democratic socialism? What kind of organization are we building, and how do we get supporters to be a part of that? What other movements or spaces provide opportunities for working-class organization, and how do we relate to them? What do we need to do to create continuities across the inevitable ups and downs of explosive mobilization? In short, we need a strategy that goes beyond changing minds, spreading a message, or getting votes, however important these may be as part of a larger project.

Our argument on this point is simple: Electoral organizing, as a primary mode of doing politics, is incapable of building the type of power required to fundamentally shift the balance of forces away from the well-organized and well-funded global capitalist class. To be clear, this does not mean that we should not vote, run candidates, or push for legislative reform. But it does mean that we should have a clear understanding of just how far these activities can take us. Moreover, more work is needed to think through how one form of activity—electoral organizing around Bernie Sanders—translates into the kind of mass, militant organizations that we envision.

Political Forms

Lacking an understanding of the limitations of electoral politics and the struggle of ideas, we are likely to just assume that changed minds are permanently changed, and that once we create a spark at the level of ideas, or within the spectacular arena of electoral politics, more radical consequences are sure to follow.

David Thompson, a member of Philly Socialists, recently offered up a compelling analysis of the various tendencies in the DSA.⁸ While his portrayal flattens these tendencies a bit, he offers an important cautionary note about the assumptions that take over when we lack a materially grounded strategy, which is to say, a strategy that is rooted in the activity of the class:

It's almost as if both sides in the debate believe the power is already there in the class, it just needs to be activated, turned on, by the right socialist ideas. The DSA "right" will talk about the "millions who voted for Bernie Sanders" or [about] unionized teachers as if they're sleeping giants—which, potentially yes, but if the liberals keep out-organizing us and winning deeper bases in the class? No. The "left" is less prone to these kinds of "the class is on the march" type statements, but they are also less ready to explain how their approach leads to more working-class power.

We can't assume, in other words, that the socialist masses are waiting in the wings, ready to enter onto the stage of history after watching a few Bernie speeches or reading some articles online. These activities may spark an interest, but Thompson is right that our movement and the power of the working class in general will only grow if we can also create opportunities for people to become active and organize themselves. It is one thing for someone to acknowledge, for instance, that the rent is too damn high, but another for them to link up with their neighbors, form a tenants union, confront their landlord over shitty conditions, organize for rent control, or launch a rent strike.

Thompson is also correct that we're not operating in a vacuum. Strategy means considering the moves of others, thinking about eventualities that are outside our control. One consideration is the jockeying of and within a Democratic Party that is undeniably in flux. If our tasks are different in this election compared to 2016, the conditions will be too. We'll face competition from those seeking to incorporate their own lessons from the last time around to hold the party's reins, or, alternatively, to opportunistically use the discourse of socialist politics to advance their own position.

Compared to the last election, Sanders will be one in a larger and more varied field of candidates. It may therefore be difficult

for voters to distinguish Bernie's view of democratic socialism from Elizabeth Warren's support for Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, and worker participation on corporate boards. If the most obvious referent of both candidates' policies is the liberal New Deal, will it be decisive that Bernie talks about socialism and Warren about "accountable capitalism"? There are important differences between these candidates, and Warren is most likely tacking left on these issues in part because of Bernie's success at publicizing them in 2016, but the real distinctions might not be obvious to the casual voter—certainly not as obvious as those between Clinton and Sanders in 2016.⁹

Another consideration: What if Bernie loses? A Bernie loss could just as easily lead to an expansion of the Democratic Party's Big Tent rather than add a new layer of adherents to the ranks of autonomous democratic socialism. Many media narratives already reduce Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to representatives of the left wing of the Democratic Party. If democratic socialism is to mean more than that, we need to work against this tendency.

Ultimately, to define democratic socialism means not just proposing policies and demands, or offering up new slogans. Political *content* is only half the game. Radical change requires us to think about political *forms*, different modes of doing politics.

Voting and media consumption are, no doubt, major modes of political engagement for many Americans, which is one of the arguments for participating, strategically, in the presidential election process. On the other hand, even at peak U.S. voter participation, nearly one-third of those eligible choose to abstain. This is not to mention the millions of workers in the United States who are not eligible to vote—disproportionately black and brown—either for having been incarcerated or for not having the right passport. And recently Republicans have cut many more from the voting rolls. Unless it's possible to

vote socialism into existence—we think it's not—then our task is to transform the meaning of political participation and activate the excluded and apathetic. Voting and reading, and even canvassing and calling, must give way to organizing in our workplaces and neighborhoods, making demands on our bosses, shutting down freeways, and refusing to be limited by the horizons defined for us by politicians.

Competing Forms of Housing Politics

In California, a sober assessment of recent work on housing issues further demonstrates the need to move beyond an electoral conception of mass politics. Prior to the election this past November, DSA chapters throughout California participated in canvassing for Proposition 10, a ballot initiative that would expand rent control protections for tenants living in some of the most expensive and inhospitable rental markets in the world. Much of this work was coalitional, with groups like Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, or ACCE, a large, multi-issue nonprofit, taking the lead. In practice, it amounted to hundreds of enthusiastic DSA members using voter rolls to target likely voters (who are also more likely to be homeowners), by going door to door, engaging people as atomized individuals, and convincing them to Vote Yes on 10. While this work allowed many tenants to share their frustrations with DSA members eager to lend an ear, it is less clear what kind of lasting capacity was built out of this form of organizing.

With millions and millions of dollars pouring in from around the country to defeat it, Proposition 10 failed. Debates about how to recover our momentum around housing justice have resulted in two distinct conceptions of politics. On the one hand, some have proposed a rewriting of the same initiative, tweaking various parts of it to satisfy the concerns of those swing voters who said they might have supported it, but didn't like

this or that language in the bill. The focus on crafting the “right” legislation, however, misses the point: Our defeat signaled that working-class people—tenants—did not have the capacity to defeat money. So we're faced with the choice: either offer a watered-down version of the initiative (which presumably would have a better chance of passing with “statistically likely voters”), *or* build the tenant power needed to make it pass.

As we described in the introduction, in the city of Santa Cruz our DSA chapter faced a similar set of issues around Measure M, a local rent control measure. When we began campaigning, we hoped the election would jump-start some simmering efforts at organizing a tenants union. The measure would provide, we reasoned, a strong basis for talking to tenants about their housing conditions. We imagined that neighborhood committees tasked with regular canvassing could be the mechanism through which broader tenant organizing could occur.

Unfortunately, the pressures of the election made this “let's do both” approach increasingly difficult. Some, even when recognizing the need for tenant organizing, thought that the specifically electoral aspects of the work needed to come before anything else—writing the measure, collecting voter data, leaving flyers on as many doors as possible, publishing information about the details of the ordinance, and disputing the details that were constantly mischaracterized by a well-funded opposition. On the other hand, how could the campaign make lasting gains if we did not build a strong tenants movement in the process? Even if we had passed rent control, we would have to be ready to defend it when, inevitably, it came under attack in the courts or in future elections. Since we lost the election, we were left with a fractured coalition of activists who had come together specifically around the campaign and no obvious way forward. While we brought attention to the issue of tenants' rights and living conditions, we didn't build power for working

people, for the local socialist movement, or even, for the most part, for our chapter.

What we *did* have were hundreds of anonymous email addresses, which have now been compiled into a list that gets blasted whenever the city council discusses anything related to housing. Contrary to expectations, access to this data has not resulted in the kind of upheaval necessary to thwart the aspira-

If the most obvious referent
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tions of what is now a very well-organized landlord class. This fact is important; many have argued that we should build our own email lists and data while canvassing to ensure that we walk away from these campaigns with something usable. But building an email list is no substitute for building the kind militancy, trust, and collectivity needed to beat back the bosses, the landlords, the white supremacists, and the cops.

Crafting popular legislation that can persuade given constituencies, spending money to publicize simple messages, and using largely unidirectional forms of mass communication is one mode of politics—the predominant approach to elections among capitalist parties today. The alternative, however, is to *create our own constituency*. This is not a question of demographics; it means organizing venues of collective agency that don't require us to play by the rules of game.

One model of tenant organizing that occurred alongside the Proposition 10 cam-

paign was put forward by a group of East Bay DSAers organizing under the banner of TANC¹⁰, which stands for Tenants and Neighborhood Councils. TANC's conception of how to build tenant power differs from the more electorally oriented members of the organization in that they conceive of tenants' power as the ability of tenants to withhold their rent. It might take a lot of work to get to that point, but like workers' ability to collectively withhold their labor, renters, when united, can use this collective threat to win immediate gains from their landlord. The type of organizing that is required to build this capacity is one that can easily lend itself to electoral action, if appropriate, whereas the inverse doesn't appear to be the case.

In Oakland, TANC successfully organized 41 buildings operated by the same landlord and pressured her to change subtenant policy, which required new tenants to earn three times "market rate" rent, even though the rooms being rented were rent controlled. In Los Angeles, the LA Tenants Union also has used the rent strike as a weapon against landlords with some measure of success.

Asking the Right Questions

Clearly, one of the key questions moving forward is, What kind of power do we need to build to increase our class's ability to directly challenge the rule of capital where we live and where we work? Electoral activity, despite what happened in 2016, does not automatically translate into the types of self-organization and self-activity needed to open new fronts for class struggle. Where, for instance, is the class organization that will apply this kind of pressure to ensure that a truly radical Green New Deal is enacted? If this organization does not already exist, how we can throw all of our resources into bringing it into being?

What will DSA do to ensure that our activity around Bernie 2020 amounts to

more than just a mass canvassing operation that steers people back into the spectacle that is Democratic Party politics? What will our organization do to avoid resurrecting the sort of email-listserv politics that characterized the anti-war movement during the Bush era, to avoid DSA becoming a “moveon.org” for the Twitter generation? What sort of political education can we offer to fuel peoples’ new curiosity about socialism? How can we inoculate ourselves against the attractions of opportunistic politicians? These are the questions that should guide our strategic orientation toward whatever activity we engage in, whether that be the Sanders campaign, labor organizing, tenant organizing, anti-racist organizing, or any of the other political projects DSA members are involved in.

In 2016, Sanders called for a political revolution. It was inspiring. But the paradox of a revolution is that it always leaves behind the conditions that spark it. We can take inspiration from the past and use what tools we’ve got in the present, but building a different future is on us. We can’t wait until we have all the answers, of course, but let’s start asking the right questions.

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Is a Revolutionary Rupture with Capitalism Possible?

TYLER ZIMMER

FOR TOO LONG, THE RADICAL LEFT has framed debates about reform and revolution in terms bequeathed to us from an era very unlike our own. At the expense of soberly and concretely analyzing the conditions socialists face today in advanced capitalist societies like the United States, a great many Marxists have stressed the importance of defending the “revolutionary tradition” and of attempting to emulate the success of the Bolsheviks in 1917.

It’s important to note that such a backward-looking posture would have been anathema to the Bolsheviks themselves. To their credit, they insisted on concreteness and steadfastly refused to believe that abstract formulae could be clung to in dynamic moments of crisis and uncertainty.

With this said, I want to deliberately turn away from history and focus on the present. In particular, by examining the conditions on the ground today, I want to address the question of whether the idea of a “revolutionary rupture” with capitalism still has any merit. I will defend the idea of a rupture, but I want to make the case in a way that it is seldom made these days: by eschewing historical experience and focusing solely on capitalism as we know it today. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, I try to show why reform-

ism is unworkable on its own terms. This implies that capitalism cannot be fixed, that it must be replaced root and branch. Second, I present a case for a revolutionary rupture with the capitalist mode of production and defend this account from a series of criticisms leveled against it by Vivek Chibber.¹ Finally, I try to draw some provisional ideas about organizational forms and strategy from the foregoing arguments.

I.

I’ll begin by distinguishing revolutionary from reformist appraisals of capitalism. To be a revolutionary, as I understand it here, is to believe that the capitalist mode of production cannot be fixed, that it must be replaced with a qualitatively different, socialist mode of production. To be a reformist, on the other hand, is to hold that the capitalist mode of production can be fixed from within, that reforms within the framework of capitalism can successfully mitigate its worst aspects.²

For the revolutionary, the long-run interests of workers and the planet are simply incompatible with the continued existence of capitalism. For the reformist, on the other hand, the ideal system would combine progressive reforms—such as redistributive tax and transfer schemes, policies that strengthen trade unions, decommodification of health and education, and so forth—with an economy based on private ownership of the means of production by profit-seeking capitalists.

I believe there are at least two decisive arguments against the reformist position.

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First, reformism underestimates the scale and depth of injustice under capitalism. Insofar as relations of exploitation and domination are constitutive of capitalism as a mode of production, no amount of reform can substitute for abolishing the social relations of exploitation and domination themselves.³

A potentially more damning argument against reformism, however, is that it is practically unworkable *on its own terms*. Reformism relies on the capitalist economy for the tax revenue it needs to fund the welfare state. It also relies on capitalism to provide employment, income, goods and services, and so forth. But capitalism is an inherently crisis-prone system. It inevitably goes through boom-and-bust cycles that temporarily plunge the economy into crises wherein investment grinds to a halt, unemployment soars, and chaos ensues.

Crises are endemic to the capitalist mode of production rather than the unfortunate result of poor business decisions or bad state policy, and so there is no way to rely on capitalism without figuring out a way to cope with crises when they arise.⁴ When they do inevitably arise, however, reformists in control of the state will face an immensely difficult choice. They will be under enormous pressure to do whatever it takes to restart the capitalist economic engine by reestablishing the conditions for profitable accumulation—and this will mean weakening or repealing bread-and-butter social democratic reforms. But if state officials refuse this option and fail to restore capitalist profitability, then tax revenues will drop and there will be no money to fund the welfare state. Either way, it seems, progressive reforms will have to give way.

We must also stress here that economic crises also entail other forms of misery for workers: When unemployment soars, it becomes difficult for workers to support themselves and their dependents. This, too, will put reformist leaders under enormous pressure to do whatever it takes to reignite capitalist profitability.

But reigniting capitalist profitability will require policies that are detrimental to the interests of workers and the oppressed.⁵ This is because reliance on capitalism as an engine of growth means reliance on private investment by the capitalist class. Capitalists, however, only invest on the condition that they can earn sufficient levels of profit on their investment. If this is not forthcoming, they're obliged to simply hoard their capital and wait. So, restoring growth under capitalism means restoring confidence to ruling-class investors—and this, in turn, requires creating a “good business climate” with favorable conditions for profitable investment. This means social democrats will be obliged to impose austerity on workers.

Here's why: From the perspective of capitalists, favorable investment conditions require that labor is plentiful, cheap, and easily exploitable; that taxes are sufficiently low to permit accumulation and reinvestment of profits; and that state regulations and controls on business activity are minimal so as to give capitalists the leeway to achieve optimal levels of profit. If, for example, workers are organized into strong unions that can resist attempts to drive down wages, capitalists will correctly regard this as an obstacle to restoring profitability. They will therefore demand ways of driving down wages. If capitalists are required to pay heavy tax bills to fund the welfare state, this will also (especially in the context of a crisis) obstruct their willingness to invest. In the context of an economic downturn, capitalists will clamor for cheaper labor and lower tax burdens, both of which will have to come at the expense of workers.

What's more, capitalists will not be reduced to begging state officials for these austerity measures. Insofar as they own and control the commanding heights of the economy, they will have the power to discipline state officials by threatening an investment strike. This they already do: Capitalists regularly threaten that if they don't get their demands met, they'll enact massive layoffs, or close down production, or otherwise make

decisions that starve the state and squeeze workers. Succinctly put, the existence of a capitalist class means they can always use their class power to sabotage the economy and make things worse for the masses of the population.

And this is only what will happen if the capitalists “play nice,” which we should never expect them to do. In addition to being economically dominant, capitalists will have every incentive to invest some of their hoard of wealth in attempts to purchase political influence and sway elections in their favor. If the reformists are associated with a labor or social democratic party, for example, the capitalists will fund this party’s opponents and, at the same time, try to buy off and co-opt officials *within* the reformist camp. They will use their wealth to influence mass media, popular culture, religious institutions, university scholarship, and so forth. They will do their best to produce an anti-reformist “common sense” among the masses that can be used as a bulwark against the reformist program.

So, too, will they find it in their interest to try to curry favor with the repressive apparatus of the state (the police and the military). Indeed, because capitalism will have already been in effect for quite some time, they won’t have to try very hard to win over cops and military brass—we can basically assume that these layers will be hostile to the left, committed to existing social hierarchies, and generally supportive of a harsh, disciplinary, “law and order” approach to social movements. Moreover, capitalists will lobby hard for foreign policies and military adventures abroad that maximize their profits and protect their investments. Thus, workers in any given country will rarely have the luxury of only needing to defeat their “own” national ruling class—they’ll be up against a capitalist class whose interests and sphere of influence traverse national borders.

So, too, will capitalists do their best to ensure that unruly workers and disruptive

strike waves can be quickly repressed so that capitalist production can resume smoothly. This they can accomplish through a combination of legislative action, investment in the repressive apparatus, judicial injunctions issued by anti-labor judges, and so forth. And if the situation really heats up, capitalists can be relied upon to sponsor invasions, coups, and military dictatorships to discipline workers and smash the left and the movements.

Imagine it happens like this: A reformist government wins in a landslide and comes to power promising to enact a series of welfare-state reforms that benefit working people. They enact these policies and things look relatively good for a time—until a recession hits. The government resists austerity as long as it can, but at some point it caves and decides it must restore capitalist profitability or face economic collapse and defeat at the polls. When the government betrays its working-class base, workers strike against the bosses and the reformists in an attempt to defend their living standards and the reforms they recently won.

What then? Strikes are economically disruptive and profoundly damage the material interests of the capitalist class. That’s the point of them, in fact. So long as the reformists remain committed to the capitalist mode of production, they have only one choice here: to use the repressive apparatus of the state to break the strike with violence and force workers to return to work. This they must do both because of the disruption caused by the strike and because the aim of the strike was to block austerity, which the reformists already judged was regrettably necessary to get the capitalist economy growing once again.

I note that the somewhat simplified portrait I paint above brackets questions of imperialism, national chauvinism, and racial oppression, among other things.⁶ Once we acknowledge that these toxic ingredients are already baked into the basic institutions of actually existing capitalism, the problems of reformism become even more difficult to

overcome.

From the perspective of revolutionaries, the problems discussed above are central to their belief that capitalist social relations must be replaced entirely. But there's more to the case for a revolutionary break with capitalism than the unworkability of reformism in practice. Capitalist property relations are inherently exploitative: They empower a non-laboring owning class to accumulate massive amounts of wealth on the backs of a nonowning laboring class. Capitalists also dominate workers in the workplace and in politics more generally. To dominate another person is to lord over them, command them, and punish them when they fail to comply.⁷ Insofar as we're committed to freedom, democracy, and equal rights, these problems are intolerable.

II.

So to be a revolutionary is to believe that capitalism must be replaced. But how is this momentous task to be accomplished? The classic Marxist position is that a break with capitalism must occur via a rupture in which the masses of workers rise up, smash the machinery of the existing state, and found society anew. This position has come under intense scrutiny recently. In a widely discussed piece in *Jacobin*, Vivek Chibber makes the case that such a rupture is not what revolutionaries should fight for today.⁸ As he puts it,

Today, the state has infinitely greater legitimacy with the population than European states did a century ago. Further, its coercive power, its power of surveillance, and the ruling class's internal cohesiveness give the social order a stability that is orders of magnitude greater than it had in 1917. What that means is, while we can allow for and perhaps hope for the emergence of revolutionary conditions where state breakdown is really in the cards, we can't build a political strategy around it as an expectation—we can't take it as the left's fundamental strategic perspective.

Today, the political stability of the state is a reality that the left has to acknowledge. ... If this is so, then the lessons that the Russian experience has to offer—as a model of socialist transition—are limited. Our strategic perspective has to downplay the centrality of a revolutionary rupture and navigate a more gradualist approach. For the foreseeable future, left strategy has to revolve around building a movement to pressure the state, gain power within it, change the institutional structure of capitalism, and erode the structural power of capital—rather than vaulting over it.

Whatever else we say about Chibber's argument in this passage, it's clear that he favors a gradualist approach, more rooted in the tradition of Nordic social democracy, over a revolutionary approach rooted in the tradition of Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Lenin. The details, however, are far less clear—in particular it's unclear whether Chibber is arguing that revolution is practically unrealistic, undesirable as an end in itself, or both. It's also unclear whether Chibber means to say revolution should be off the radical left's agenda in the short run (next 4 years), in the medium term (5–10 years on), in the long run (10–15 years or more in the future), or in all of the above.

These details matter. If a goal is simply not worth pursuing, then it's hardly worth debating which strategies might best enable us to achieve it. Likewise, if a goal—however desirable it might be in itself—is impossible to achieve, or at any rate so far-fetched as to be totally unrealistic even in the long run, it's unworthy of serious consideration now or in the future. But, on the other hand, if a goal is desirable *and* feasible in the long run, but impossible to achieve in the short run, it seems extremely unwise to push it to the side and dismiss it as irrelevant to those organizing in the here and now. I want to argue that the prospects for a revolutionary rupture with capitalism are desirable and feasible in the medium to long run. Thus, I

concede that Chibber is correct to say that our tactics and strategy in the coming years should not be based on the expectation of a break in the short run—indeed, he is quite right to describe such a position as “entirely hallucinatory.” Nonetheless, contra Chibber, our strategies in the short run still ought to be informed by the necessity of an eventual rupture.

I begin by showing that the medium- to long-run prospects for a revolutionary rupture are not as dim as Chibber suggests. As I say, however, Chibber is correct that it is unrealistic to think that a revolutionary rupture in advanced capitalist states like the United States is likely in the next five years.

Chibber bases his case for the practical infeasibility of rupture on observations about a number of institutional features of contemporary advanced capitalism that didn’t obtain in earlier periods:

- Modern capitalist states enjoy more legitimacy among the population than they did (at least in Europe) in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Modern states have a more highly developed, self-conscious, coherent, entrenched, technologically sophisticated, and stubbornly determined repressive apparatus than they did in the past.
- The capitalist class today is more coherent and organized and is better able to respond quickly to thwart a revolution than were past ruling classes.

To these I would add a few other salient differences:

- Modern capitalist states also have more experience coping with working-class revolt and have greater means at their disposal to co-opt and demobilize rebellion from below.
- The expansion of the welfare state, however underfunded and incomplete it might be, gives workers a safety net that they wouldn’t have enjoyed in the early half of the twentieth century.
- Mass culture in capitalist society has cre-

ated a “pro-capitalist common sense” that is deeply entrenched, partly constitutive of people’s identities, and intricately interwoven with consumption and everyday commercial activity.

These are formidable obstacles that earlier socialists never had to confront, and Chibber is correct to say that these facts must inform our tactical and strategic decisions in the short run. Chibber is wrong, however, to think that these facts entail that revolutionary rupture is no longer possible in the medium or long term. For the sake of specificity I will limit my remarks in what follows to the situation in the United States.

III.

Let us begin with the legitimacy of the state. Chibber is right to point out that the current crisis is *primarily* one of neoliberal capitalism, not of the capitalist system itself. But it would be a grave mistake to assume that this crisis, in its totality, is simply and neatly confined to neoliberalism. It is not. Though still a small minority of the population, there are millions of people in the United States who are beginning to question not simply this or that version of capitalism, but the system itself. This is partly reflected in the polling data showing younger people to favor socialism over capitalism by a significant margin. Of course, the majority of those who say they favor “socialism” probably have in mind something like classical social democracy (free medical care, education, a robust safety net, and so on). But it’s significant that people identify with the word “socialism” in a country that has relentlessly branded any alternative to capitalism as taboo at best and evil at worst. This implies a serious breakdown in the legitimacy of the regime in place, though that breakdown is fraught with fissures, contradictions, and unevenness. To swiftly conclude that the unevenness implies that the profit system has lost nothing in fundamental legitimacy would be absurd.

And, even for the much larger number of people who say they favor “socialism” because they favor social democratic reform, there is still reason for anti-capitalists to be very optimistic. After all, one of the key arguments for the revolutionary perspective proceeds by way of an *internal* critique of the social democratic reformist positions: Reformism doesn’t work on its own terms and must be supplemented by a break with capitalism to safeguard its own stated objectives. Thus, the social democrats of today could well turn out to be the revolutionaries of tomorrow. Moreover, there is an anti-capitalist logic to many of these social democratic reforms insofar as they propose decommmodification, removing certain basic features of social and economic life from the profit-driven machinations of markets altogether. So, even the mere popularization of social democratic reforms to the system bodes well for the anti-capitalist revolutionary.

What of the legitimacy of the state proper, however? Chibber is correct to say that the U.S. state enjoys a basic legitimacy that is more deeply felt and more widely shared than was true of any capitalist state in Europe in the early twentieth century. But this “basic legitimacy” is hardly a ringing, enthusiastic endorsement on the part of the masses—it largely takes the form of an assumption that our existing state institutions are “natural” or “inevitable” because they are rarely challenged or even questioned.

To be sure, there is a broad consensus among center-left and center-right figures in media, politics, universities, and so on who happily drink the American exceptionalist Kool-Aid and buy the hype about the United States being the “greatest country on earth.” But there is also a massive layer of people—overwhelmingly poor and working-class—who rarely vote or participate in the electoral system, who are deeply alienated from formal politics, who are deeply distrustful of the officials who administer the state. And, even among those who do vote regularly, a variety of polls surveying support for Congress or

the two dominant parties register deep dissatisfaction. Now, it’s true that dissatisfaction and apathy aren’t necessarily energies destined to buoy the radical left. But, all things considered, the variety of factors surveyed hardly constitute an unbreachable firewall against revolution rooted in a deep, widely shared belief in the legitimacy of the existing order.

What of the more highly developed repressive and surveillance apparatuses of modern states? Here Chibber is on firmer ground. The realities of modern military technology mean that the question of violence arises in a form quite unlike the way it confronted earlier generations of revolutionaries. The classical position still strikes me as the correct starting point: Social revolutions from below are not necessarily violent, that is, their *sine qua non* is not the resort to armed struggle but mass resistance to the status quo on the part of the vast majority of the population. The essence of revolution, as Trotsky once put it, is the “forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership of their own destiny.”⁹ A revolution is a mass uprising in which the vast majority of the working population shatters the illusion that the status quo is inescapable, casts aside the institutions and representatives of the old order, and intransigently demands new, radically democratic ways of proceeding.

Still, the question of violence remains. The classic position would have been that if violence should be required, it largely will only be needed as a means of self-defense from counter-revolutionary forces. This is a useful starting point. But the real difficulty concerns what to do if the old ruling class attempts to use state violence to repress the revolutionary movement. The assumption of earlier revolutionaries was that the police would cling tenaciously to the old order no matter what—they simply could not be turned in favor of the revolution and must be delegitimized, disarmed, and disbanded. But the hope remained that large sections of rank and file soldiers could be won over to the revolutionary movement. In a revolution-

ary situation, soldiers will, at some point, be forced to choose sides and determine whether they'll repress the mass movement or refuse their orders and oppose the old order. Thus, the success or failure of the movement will depend to a large extent on which way the rank and file of the military breaks.

The prospect of a mass socialist current within the armed forces might strike many readers as unrealistic. Does this rule out a rupture in the long run? Here I'd like to emphasize the dynamic, educational force of mass struggles for reform under the current system. From where we're sitting today, the might of the military-industrial complex seems so powerful as to be practically invincible. But after significant reductions in military spending, an end to war and occupation abroad, and a profound shift in the political consciousness of ordinary working people toward a broadly socialist worldview, the military machine looks a lot less daunting. So, too, does it look less invincible once we consider the full history of self-organization and resistance by rank and file soldiers in the U.S. military. What's more, I agree with Chibber that the power of capital and the state must be loosened up and weakened in the short run by legislation and reform.

But it's worth noting that even relatively mild-mannered reformist governments of the left have been met with armed right-wing resistance or have faced coups—so, in this respect, revolutionaries aren't alone in needing to cope with the problem of state coercion or paramilitary right-wing violence. The revolutionary wager, however, must be based on a mass movement with enough popular participation, self-confidence, and disruptive potential to carry the struggle through to completion. And so, too, must the movement transcend the framework of the nation-state and frame its task in international terms. An isolated uprising will be condemned to failure so long as it doesn't spread and draw on the solidarity of uprisings elsewhere. The key question here, however, is not one of military

strategy per se: It is whether revolutionary movements can garner enough popular support and generate adequate levels of mass participation in strikes, demonstrations, spontaneous forms of bottom-up democracy like workers councils, and so on.

But the ruling class has many weapons at its disposal besides violence and coercion. As Chibber notes, the ruling class is better organized and has a much more dynamic capacity to respond to threats from below than it did a century ago. However, although it is true that the ruling class's means of responding to threats is more sophisticated, its capacity to quell revolt through co-optation and pro-worker concessions is also quite limited, for two reasons. First, the world economy entered a period of profound crisis in 2007 that was "fixed" through massive state intervention to save ruling-class financial institutions that exchanged toxic private debt for public debt. Though the freefall came to an end, healthy and sustained economic growth has not returned.¹⁰ This means the next crisis will be one in which the previous "solution" of massive state spending to prop up profits will not be an option in the way it was last time around. Thus, we can expect even more severe austerity in response to another recession.

Second, the long period of neoliberal dominance means that the theory and practice of austerity is deeply ingrained among those in the state and the ruling class. Thus, even if reforms to quell revolt would be tactically useful for maintaining long-run ruling class dominance, the ruling class personnel we actually have are not likely to reach for that option. They are more likely to give us more of the thin gruel of austerity and cutbacks. What welfare-state reform measures we're able to win in the coming years will be solely the result of militant struggles against capital. Indeed, to the extent that there is any current ruling-class support for extremely modest welfare-state expansion, it is because of the growing threat posed by the nascent socialist movement and the ongoing strike wave in

the public sector.

Because struggle against the employers will be needed to win any reforms in the near term, we can expect any victories to be confidence-building, not demobilizing or co-opting. Winning Medicare for All, for example, wouldn't demobilize workers but would (in all likelihood) boost militancy and lay the groundwork for even more radical changes in the future.

The suffocating effect of "pro-capitalist common sense" is more troublesome and less easily slayed. But the fact that it is not, even now, so totalizing as to pre-empt any anti-capitalist consciousness is reason to be hopeful. Indeed, if it were insurmountable we wouldn't be seeing the widespread (and still growing) radicalization that's underway today. The theoretical basis for the incompleteness of pro-capitalist common sense derives, in the first instance, from workers' daily experience of exploitation and subordination on the job. This, in turn, inevitably produces conflict and resistance between workers and capital, which brushes against the grain of the platitudes we're fed about the virtues of "free enterprise" and "market efficiency." Thus, what capitalism produces is not seamless, robotic defenders of the system but a legion marked by mixed and uneven consciousness that contains both pro-capitalist and subversive elements all at once.¹¹

A deeper problem, however, concerns the profound sense in which our identity—our very sense of who we are—under capitalism becomes tied up with consumption habits and market activity. Perry Anderson, in his new preface to *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci* (2018), suggests that this obstacle is perhaps the most troublesome for those who wish to transcend capitalist social relations. Does this rule out a mass revolutionary movement aiming to break with capitalism?

Not necessarily. Anderson overstates the magnitude of the obstacle posed by our love affair with consumption. For starters, the goal of socialism is not (in the first instance) to produce *fewer* goods and services, but to

change the social relations of power governing the production and distribution of those goods and services. Thus, the idea that revolutionary socialists must persuade people to "do with less" is largely based on a false premise: Socialism is not opposed to abundance, but aims to make abundance accessible to the masses instead of just the wealthy few. As it is sometimes put, "No luxury is 'too good' for the working class." Marx's vision of socialism was one of shared abundance, democratic self-governance, increased leisure time, and radically decreased toil.¹²

IV.

Here another obstacle to revolution presents itself: If the institutional structure of a post-capitalist society cannot be shown to be both feasible and desirable in advance of a revolutionary rupture, then how could it ever be rational to undertake the considerable burdens and sacrifices necessary to build a revolutionary movement and carry it forward to completion? Worse still: If the institution typically held up as the foundation of post-capitalist societies—economic planning—is fraught with problems or hasn't been sufficiently tried out in practice, then this obstacle becomes all the more difficult to overcome.

According to Chibber, "We have to start with the observation that the expectation of a centrally planned economy simply replacing the market has no empirical foundation. We can want planning to work, but we have no evidence that it can. Every attempt to put it in place for more than short durations has met with failure. The Russian experience is the most elaborate example of that." He continues, "Any discussion has to proceed with a close examination of the Soviet experience, to try to assess if its failure was due to the particular way planning was instituted, or whether the lesson is that a modern industrial economy is just not amenable to planning." For Chibber, this "failure has to be acknowl-

edged, not sidestepped. It won't do to say, as many Marxists do, that 'that wasn't really socialism, so it doesn't count.'"

A full defense of socialist planning is clearly beyond the purview of the present essay.¹³ And I fully agree with Chibber that the burden of proof in debates about post-capitalist economies falls on socialists who defend planning. We need good reason to think that alternatives to the market are both feasible and desirable when compared with the real-world experience we have of market-based economies. The desirability of some state of affairs is moot if it's simply not feasible to bring it about now or in the foreseeable future.

In lieu of trying to give a robust positive case for planning, then, I'll take issue with the way Chibber interprets the failure of Soviet planning. First, with deference to Chibber, I actually *do* think it's crucial to begin by stressing that the Soviet version of planning "wasn't really socialism," provided of course that we specify exactly what that means. Robert Brenner's take on this question is exemplary so I'll quote from it generously to make my case:

Most observers in the West and ruling groups in the East blame the system's problems [on its] reliance on planning—as opposed to the market—believing that planning per se cannot work except in the most ineffective manner.

But these observers fail to see that the effectiveness of either plan or market can only be assessed in relation to the system of social relations in which each functions. The failure of planning under the bureaucratic system must be understood in terms of its system of social relationships.¹⁴

For Brenner, the system of social relations in the Soviet system was one in which a bureaucratic ruling class dominated and exploited a class of direct producers, the working class. As he puts it, it is this "particular form of antagonism of the working class by the

bureaucracy—in the workplace and vis-a-vis the state—that constitutes the central barrier for the system in securing efficient allocation and increasing productivity." To see that this is so, we have only to examine the situation of workers under such a system. "Because they control neither their output (surplus) nor their means of production, working people have no incentive either to improve their labor or to provide the information on their own local production that the planners need to plan and coordinate."

In short, because of the lack of liberty and democracy within the bureaucratic Soviet system, "most workers as well as many bureaucrats and managers find it reasonable to adopt patterns of economic activity that work against the system's efforts to coordinate and develop the productive forces." And it is precisely to the extent that this social system lacked liberty and democracy that it does not deserve to be called socialist. Thus, even though there is much we can learn from the failures (and limited successes) of Soviet planning, it is a serious political error to classify the discontents of the Soviet system as failures of socialism.

If this is correct, the viability of planning as an alternative to the market is not simply a technical question but a political one that ultimately hangs on the feasibility of large-scale democratic self-governance. If we are pessimistic about the feasibility of democratic decision-making on social and economic priorities, then democratic planning is not likely to be seen as a serious option. But socialists base their political project on the idea that, all else equal, we should prefer democratic decision-making over alternatives in every sphere of social life. Thus, unless Chibber would like to walk back the confidence socialists have in democratic decision-making in general, it's unclear to me why we should be so skeptical about its prospects with respect to democratic economic planning in particular.

V.

Still, the question remains: How do we get from capitalism to something qualitatively different? No one is in a position to decisively answer this question for certain right now. But this much is clear: We have to find ways to take advantage of every opportunity to increase working-class confidence and organization, no matter how small or partial it might be. Revolutionaries must be deeply involved in day-to-day struggles for reforms, because they make the lives of workers better but also because they teach workers how to fight. And we've got to actually win some of these reforms in the here-and-now in order to convince people that it's worth it to engage in collective action and challenge the bosses. The case for solidaristic strategies for change can only be won by example. What's more, we need to succeed in decommodifying basic social goods in order to prove that alternatives to the market are feasible and worth fighting for.

But, though necessary for revolutionary change, robust fights for reforms are not themselves sufficient. Another ingredient is needed: layers of organized revolutionary workers who can act independently, in a coordinated fashion, to win the masses to the idea that going beyond capitalism is possible and worth fighting for. This layer cannot be a small sect or party outside the class. It must be a collection of respected working-class fighters who've spent a long time winning trust by engaging in the struggle against capital to win reforms. And these fighters must be prepared for and expect that social democracy will reach a crossroads wherein the choice will be to maintain capitalism at all costs or to maintain pro-worker reforms by going beyond capitalism. This crossroads will arise because capitalism inevitably produces crises that, as we've seen, undercut the capitalist profits that serve as the material basis for delivering social democratic reforms. Those unwilling to go beyond capitalism will then be obliged to impose austerity, break

strikes, discipline rebellion, and do whatever it takes to reestablish favorable conditions for capitalist profit-making. If nobody prepares for this crossroads, it is highly unlikely that a revolutionary transformation can be achieved.

What is it possible to do, however, to prepare for such a state of affairs? There's no easy answer here, and history, to the extent that it will prove useful at all for revolutionaries today, is mostly a guide to what *not* to do. Rather than Russia in 1917, socialists today would be better served to examine the failure to break with capitalism in Chile in 1973, on the one hand, and in Sweden in 1976, on the other.¹⁵ In Chile in 1973, a government sincerely committed to building socialism via the parliamentary road was violently repressed by an employer-backed (and U.S.-sponsored) coup. Many revolutionaries draw the conclusion that Allende should have "armed the workers," but this is too facile an explanation for the defeat of the left in this case. A deeper problem lay with a flawed conception of the state and a flawed strategy for achieving radical change that leaned too heavily on existing institutions to get the job done. Had workers been better able to act independently in a coordinated fashion to defeat the old ruling class, without illusions that the parliamentary road would be open, it might have been possible to achieve a break and lay the groundwork for building new, genuinely democratic institutions to replace those of the old state machinery.

Though very different of course, the situation in Sweden in the 1970s holds similar lessons. During this period, a leftist government with a serious commitment to going beyond capitalist control of the means of production attempted to move toward a break. For reasons that all socialists should study closely, however, the effort was defeated. In the end, the resistance of the capitalist class was sufficient to defeat those who wished to break with private control of the means of production—but this was hardly inevitable. Indeed, the battle may have ended differently

if there had been a bigger, more powerful movement of militants and revolutionaries capable of acting independently of the social democratic party and the trade union federations.

What of the classic Leninist argument that an additional ingredient—a revolutionary party of working-class militants forged in struggle and trained in Marxist theory—supplies the key leavening needed to activate the other elements?¹⁶ The case for some such entity must, at this point, be tentative and deliberately vague insofar as we cannot know, in abstraction from experimentation and concrete experience, exactly what sort of organizational forms might be best suited to facilitating a break with capitalism in moments of upheaval. Nonetheless, a number of general propositions can be defended in light of what we've said above.

First, the failure to break with capitalism in the two cases above, and in others, cannot solely be attributed to strategic failures by actors making decisions in good faith. There is a material basis for doubting that the trade union bureaucracy and the professional politicians who lead reformist parties will have the motivation and epistemic framework to grasp what will be necessary to break with capitalism. These two social groups will, given their location in the system, tend—all else equal—to favor action that preserves their social standing and react skeptically toward more risky courses of action that open up the possibility of losing their position. They will tend to have an undue faith in the effectiveness of the institutions of capitalist democracy. For example, the trade union bureaucracy will tend to favor stable bargaining relationships rather than risky actions that aim to abolish the capitalist property relations on which collective bargaining depends. The professional “politicos” at the helm of social democratic political parties will tend, all else equal, to favor what produces short-run electoral victories and what conduces to their capacity to “govern effectively” within the framework of

capitalist democracy. These aren't iron laws that bind every agent in these social locations against their will. But these institutional contexts do place enormous pressure on these actors that will, all else equal, create a tendency for them to act in a particular way. To the extent that these actors break with this tendency they will be swimming against the stream. Here is where the case for a revolutionary core of working-class activists begins. These activists cannot simply permeate the leadership of the unions and the workers parties and attempt to steer them from above, since they would be subject to the very same pressures as the extant leadership. They must, on the contrary, be rooted in the rank and file of the movements and engaged in the day-to-day struggle of the class—for two reasons. First, this releases them from the conservatizing pressures of officialdom imposed on union bureaucrats and parliamentary politicians. Second, and more importantly, this core of revolutionaries—a “militant minority,” as Charlie Post puts it—must be rooted in, and respected by, a broad layer of working-class activists who are in a position to act independently, when necessary, to push reluctant union leaders and politicians to go further than they'd like to go.¹⁷ This militant minority has to be able to successfully argue for and win broad layers of workers to fighting collectively in the workplaces and the streets to confront the ruling class and thereby force the official leadership of the working-class movement to choose sides between the capitalists and the working masses.

If this crucial militant minority is absent, a number of hurdles for the workers movement are harder to clear. First, the routines of capitalist democracy encourage a certain passivity and deference on the part of the working masses: “Sit back and we, the politicians and union leaders, will fight and deliver reforms for you.” We can expect a certain unevenness and mixed consciousness among workers on this score; on the one hand, this passivity will be part of “common sense,” but

on the other hand there will also be a sense of urgency and militancy that is at odds with this perspective. Which tendency will win out? Only struggle can determine that—and for this reason, the radical left has to be persistent in building organic working-class leaders who are rooted in the class and able to win the masses to independent action when necessary. But—and this is crucial—to be effective, this militant minority needs to be aware of the history of attempts to break with capitalism and needs to be freed from illusions about the effectiveness of capitalist democracy to deliver real, lasting change.

VI.

If this defense of revolutionary rupture with capitalism is successful, what are the strategic implications for socialists today? I wouldn't presume to know what form of organization this militant minority ought to adhere to. We have more examples of what does not work than we do of healthy, democratic revolutionary groupings. Regardless of how they're organized, this much is clear if the above is correct: Revolutionaries must be totally immersed in the socialist movement and in the trade union movement. Propagandizing from the sidelines is a non-starter. What's more, revolutionaries must immerse themselves in struggles for reform in the here-and-now. In this sense, revolutionary strategy converges with Chibber's defense of fighting for "non-reformist reforms." This must be the priority both because reforms improve workers' lives and also, more importantly, because they raise consciousness, teach workers how to fight, and lay the groundwork for more ambitious changes in the future.

So, the divide here between revolutionaries committed to rupture and those, like Chibber, who favor a more gradualist approach will not be one that pits those fighting for reforms against purists who favor "revolution or bust." There will be some divergence, however, when it comes to which strategies

best advance the struggle for reforms. For revolutionaries, the precariousness of reforms under capitalism and the structural pressures on state officials means that a militant, rank and file workers movement is key. Thus, there might be a tendency for gradualists to over-emphasize gaining state power in the short run and underemphasize the importance of building a militant minority within the workers movement that is capable of mobilizing masses of workers to engage in disruptive strike actions in order to impose their will on the employers. On the flipside, however, revolutionaries might be prone to adopting an ultra-left position that overemphasizes extraparlimentary organizing and leaves no space for electoral work to advance the class struggle or win reforms.

In my opinion, the pro-rupture position pushes us to avoid both of these mistaken positions. On the one hand, revolutionaries have every reason to participate in electoral political organizing where and when this can win greater numbers to socialism, increase working-class consciousness and combativity, and build the socialist left. This, after all, is the essential work that must be done to even get close to a context in which a genuine rupture might be possible. Nonetheless, the case for rupture cautions us against being naive or over-optimistic about the prospects of abolishing capitalism through parliamentary maneuvering. So, too, does the case for rupture emphasize that electoral work must be seen as a *vehicle* for building mass workers movements capable of taking matters into their own hands. It is not an end in itself nor is it a substitute for that work. It would be ultra-left and empirically baseless to say that political organizing within the capitalist state is in no way an effective tool for advancing this work. It would be a different kind of mistake, however, to say that it is alone sufficient to move beyond capitalism.

NOTES

1. Vivek Chibber, "Our Road to Power," *Jacobin*

(Dec. 2017).

2. For more on this distinction, see Robert Brenner, "The Problem of Reformism," *Against the Current* (March–April 1993).

3. Nicholas Vrousalis has, in a number of recent articles, given the most rigorous and convincing defense of this claim to date. See, e.g., Vrousalis, "Exploitation: A Primer," *Philosophy Compass* (vol. 13, no. 2, Feb. 2018) and "Exploitation as Domination: A Response to Arneson," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (vol. 54, no. 4, Dec. 2016). That the capitalist mode of production requires domination can be inferred both from the tyrannical authority relations in capitalist workplaces, on the one hand, and from the various ways in which capitalism makes genuine political democracy impossible by systematically privileging the interests of capital at the expense of labor. For a non-Marxist defense of the first claim, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton: 2017). For a defense of the second claim, see Claus Offe and Volker Ronge, "Theses on the Theory of the State," *New German Critique* (no. 6, Autumn 1975).

4. For a defense of this claim, see Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (Verso: 2006).

5. For detailed defenses of this claim, see Robert Brenner, "The Paradox of Social Democracy," in Mike Davis et al., eds., *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook, Volume 1* (Schocken: 1985) and Fred Block, "The Ruling Class Doesn't Rule," *Socialist Revolution* (May 1977).

6. What I mean is this: The feasibility of reforming U.S. capitalism from within becomes even less plausible once we acknowledge that its basic institutions arose in the context of racialized chattel slavery, indigenous expropriation and genocide, imperial expansion and conquest, etc. I've tried to make the case here in a way that brackets these realities, not to downplay their significance, but in order to make the strongest possible case against capitalism. If a counter-factual, non-racist, non-imperialist capitalism cannot be defended from my critique, *so much the worse* for the actual capitalist system we have that is inescapably bound up with racial oppression and imperialism.

7. For a theoretical defense of this claim, see Christopher McCammon, "Domination: A Re-thinking," *Ethics* (vol. 125, no. 4, July 2015).

8. Chibber, "Our Road to Power."

9. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Haymarket: 2018).

10. Robert Brenner, "What's Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America: The Origins of the Present Crisis" (2009), escholarship.org/uc/item/0sg0782h.

11. Chris Harman, "Gramsci, the Prison Notebooks and Philosophy," *International Socialism* (No.114, Spring 2007).

12. G.A. Cohen's Marxism, for all its faults, is exemplary in steadfastly emphasizing this dimension of socialist thought. His 1985 televised lecture on the BBC, "Against Capitalism," remains an accessible and succinct statement of his views on this matter. For a more detailed version, see his *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: 1978), especially the chapter "Marxian Illustrations."

13. For such a defense, however, see Pat Devine, *Democracy and Economic Planning* (Polity: 2010) and Ernest Mandel, "A Defense of Socialist Planning," *New Left Review* (I/159, Sept.–Oct. 1986). For shorter remarks on the matter, see Tyler Zimmer, "On Democracy and Socialism: A Reply to Seth Ackerman," *Jacobin* (Jan. 20, 2013).

14. Robert Brenner, "The Soviet Union & Eastern Europe, Part I," *Against the Current* (ATC 30, Jan.–Feb. 1991).

15. See Colin Barker, ed., *Revolutionary Rehearsals* (Haymarket: 2007) for a collection of essays that reflect on the failure of a number of revolutionary movements in the second half of the twentieth century. The chapters on May '68 in Paris and Chile in 1973 are especially worth reading. On the failure of the Meidner Plan in Sweden in the 1970s, see Jonas Pontusson, "Radicalization and Retreat in Swedish Social Democracy," *New Left Review*, (I/185, Sept.–Oct. 1987).

16. More so than even Marx himself, Lenin's ideas and writings on this question are the subject of intense misrepresentation on both the left and the right. For a useful corrective, see Norman Geras, "Lenin, Trotsky, and the Party" and "Classical Marxism and Proletarian Representation" in *Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism* (Verso: 1986).

17. Charlie Post, "The New Militant Minority," *Jacobin* (June 5, 2015).

The Yellow Vests: A Social Insurrection

PATRICK LE TRÉHONDAT

ON MAY 7, 2017, THE PROPERTY-owning classes of France had smiles on their lips. Emmanuel Macron had been elected president with 63.90 percent of the vote against the extreme-right candidate Marine Le Pen, who had won 36.10 percent. Given his victory, most of the analysts preferred to forget the 23.72 percent of the vote won by Macron in the first round and above all that one out of four voters had not cast ballots (the greatest number of abstentions since 1969). Macron's victory led to the collapse of the Socialist Party after five years in power as well as to that of the classic right-wing party, the Republicans, to the benefit of his party, the Republic in Motion (La République en Marche), which now resembled the former membership of the Socialists and of the classic right. This spectacular political reorganization, linked to the exhaustion of the social democratic model and the crack up of the classical right after its repeated failures (ten years out of power), hardly masked the reactionary nature of the politics pursued by the new power.

From the minute Macron and his party came to power, they reduced taxes on the rich. Retirees saw their pensions heavily taxed. Housing assistance was reduced. Consistent with the power politics of their socialist predecessor, François Hollande, they passed a second labor-law reform that eviscerated

workers' rights. The same with the privatization of the railroads, which had already been decided. Both of those counter-reforms had run into resistance from the workers and their unions, but each time they were defeated. The unions fought, but who could oppose Macron? The way had been opened to a violent, liberal politics. And since no obstacle had arisen, this power rapidly became arrogant. In terms of a social movement, there is no seismograph, and Macron didn't have one either. After 18 months of Macron in power, a large-scale social outburst, unprecedented and prolonged, would upset the plans of the powerful: the Yellow Vests.

We sometimes say that a single drop of water can make a glass overflow. In October 2018 it was a drop of gasoline. In deciding to increase the tax on fuel as of January 1, 2019, and therefore increase the price of gas on the pretext of financing an ecological transition to respond to climate change, the government unleashed the anger of some of the poorest people in the country. France is a country with more than nine



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million inhabitants below the poverty line for whom the use of a car is a vital necessity. The most impoverished layers have, over many years, been driven out of the urban centers by real estate speculation and rising rents. Some businesses also disappeared or moved farther away, taking the jobs with them. Many people moved to small towns and rural areas where one needs a car to get to public services (schools and the post office) and health care (doctors, hospitals, maternity care). If one can't get around by car, one slips down into a lower class. Geographic isolation added to social isolation, so one of the first results of this movement was to break out of this loneliness. The Yellow Vests occupied the traffic circles that exist throughout the country, and a new community was born. A sense of solidarity developed, and a shared social consciousness emerged. This also explains why the Yellow Vest movement hasn't touched the big urban centers (in particular Paris and its suburbs), whose residents suffer less from an increase in the price of fuel since they have more-developed public transportation.

Let's follow the train of events. On October 18, 2017, Jacline Mouraud published a video on Facebook that denounced the tax increase—it was seen six million times, that is, by almost 10 percent of France's 67 million inhabitants. Three days later, a petition, "For the Lowering of the Price of Fuel," launched by Priscillia Ludosky, received two million signatures. On Saturday, November 17, the first day of roadblocks took place. The idea of wearing a yellow vest came from another Facebook user, Ghislain Coutard, who suggested the idea in a video published on social media on October 24. Since 2008, all drivers have been required to have a yellow safety vest in their cars. So beginning in November 2018, the vest became the symbol of the socially invisible people, the flag of a social revolt.

Act 1: Saturday, November 17, as arranged by social media, the Yellow Vests assembled at six in the morning. (Every day that there was a national demonstration,

almost always on a Saturday, was an "act," so, for example, April 6, 2019, was Act 21.) Officials calculated that on that first day, 290,000 demonstrators participated sporting their florescent yellow vests. In reality there were three or four times as many. Everywhere in France the Yellow Vests occupied the traffic circles, day and night, constructing yellow

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shelters as their rallying points. Some of these became meeting places, kitchens, dormitories, and even chicken coops.

The activists' demands went far beyond the question of the fuel tax. They demanded that Macron resign. They insisted on their right to control their elected representatives. They called for citizens' right to initiate referendums. This right, which would mean the possibility of initiating a referendum (with a certain number of signatures) to propose a law, to recall a representative, or to change the constitution, had not been discussed since the revolution that established the Paris Commune in 1871.

We should note that the symbolism of the French Revolution has been ever present in the Yellow Vest movement. The national anthem, "La Marseillaise," is often sung, not as a nationalist melody, but as a revolutionary song. Likewise, the French flag is often carried in the demonstrations. On some traffic circles, effigies of Macron are decapitated, as King Louis XVI was in 1793. Finally, the Yellow Vests have compiled "books of grievances," using a term from 1789.

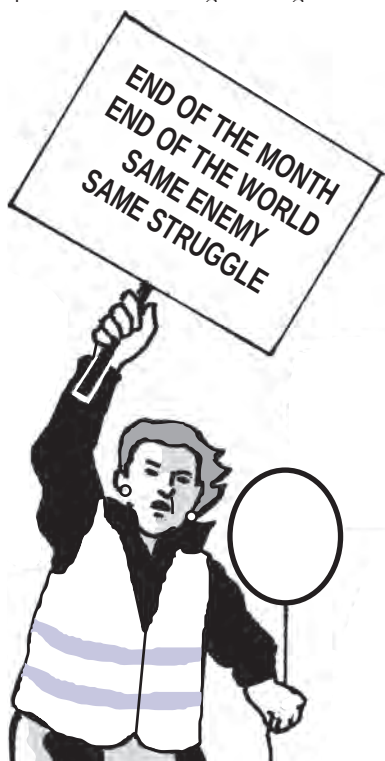
According to polls, initially eight out of ten French people supported the movement; more recently the level fell to six out of ten, that is, still a majority of the population after six months of protests. Faced with the movement, the government stated that it would concede nothing. Repression began to fall on the occupied traffic circles and their yellow buildings, which were destroyed. We'll come back to the repression in a bit.

From the beginning, the movement had made its marches down the Champs-Élysées in Paris a powerful symbol. The bourgeois neighborhoods must understand the anger of the people. On November 24, many thousands of demonstrators strongly resisted the police on the Champs-Élysées. On December 1 and 8, the third and fourth Saturdays of the mobilization, several violent events took place, mostly in Paris, where the Arc de Triomphe and other bourgeois neighborhoods

practically became scenes of urban guerilla warfare. The police were forced to retreat in several places in the Champs-Élysées district. In Paris the police made nearly 270 arrests. But the confrontations weren't just confined to Paris. For example in the Puy-en-Velay (in the d'Auvergne region) the county seat (préfecture) was burned. When Macron went there a week later to see the damage, he was forced to flee under a barrage of insults from the crowd. One of his bodyguards later said, "We were ready to shoot." In Bordeaux, some 2,000 tried to break into the city hall. There were clashes between the Yellow Vests and the police in several cities.

Since the movement began, the government frequently accused the Yellow Vests of being anti-environmentalist because they objected to the fuel tax, which is intended to finance a new program to confront climate change. To all of the slanders, the movement simply responded with its marching chant: "End of the month, end of the world, the same fight." The protestors stated that they were environmentalists who wanted to defend the planet. Soon it was learned that the tax increase was intended to reduce the government's deficit, not to improve the environment. The government began to panic. On the one hand it was no longer sure that the police, fatigued and now fearful, could be counted on to stand up to the determined demonstrators, and on the other hand it was clear that the movement was deep and massive.

Given the urgency of the situation, the Macron government decided on December 10 to grant, with certain conditions, a small increase in the minimum wage, an increase paid for by the government, not by the corporations. The bosses were also asked to give Christmas bonuses to their employees, which some companies concerned about the Yellow Vest movement did, so that two million employees received an average of US\$506 each. Some ask why the Yellow Vest movement turned against the government and not against the bosses. I think that many of



the Yellow Vests, who have seen the inability of the unions to affect the corporations, thought that the government was the weak link in the system. In addition, many of the Yellow Vests don't have a boss (the retired, the unemployed) and fights waged employer by employer had tended to divide the movement.

We should also say a few more words about the unions. At the beginning of the movement, one could see some very isolated racist acts or words on the traffic circles. Seeing those racist acts, the union leaders, particularly the General Confederation of Workers (CGT), the largest labor federation that has historically been led by the left, were surprised by the movement, and they were suspicious, fearing that the Yellow Vests had been infiltrated by the far right, even though there were many union members on the traffic circles. The one exception to this was the *Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques* (Solidarity Unity Democracy, SUD) union. However, as the movement developed, by January 2019 joint activities had begun among the rank and file Yellow Vests and the unions: blocking refineries, blocking other facilities, joint events, meetings and discussions. This was also true for the parties of the left and even of the far left, who also began to join the movement.

While union acronyms and flags were not at first welcome in the Yellow Vest demonstrations, today they are perfectly acceptable. Yet, the presence of the far right in the movement from the very beginning is undeniable. Fascist activists were, for example, very active in the December demonstrations in the confrontations with the police, and sometimes on the traffic circles one could hear racist words or comments in favor of Marine Le Pen, the leader of the right-wing party. But the center of gravity of the movement has always remained the issue of social justice and not the issue of immigration, despite the efforts of the far right. The movement stifled the far right within it.

The Yellow Vest movement has experienced massive and intense repression. Some



figures can give an idea of the magnitude: 2,000 wounded, 23 demonstrators have lost an eye, five have lost a hand. According to the government, some 8,000 people have been arrested and 1,800 have been convicted of various crimes. An elderly woman died in Marseille after police shot a tear-gas grenade into her apartment, while another nine people died in car crashes at the traffic circles occupied by the Yellow Vests. Thousands of Yellow Vests have been clubbed and beaten. Police have fired rubber bullets at demonstrators, using something called an LBD, which fires hard rubber balls at 186 miles per hour. These projectiles have wounded many in their legs and their torsos, not to mention their heads and eyes. Police have also used tear-gas grenades (identified as GLI-F4) with a charge of .84 ounces of TNT. The army was brought out in April 2019 to protect official buildings.

Toward Popular Power?

The occupation of public spaces by a social

movement like the Yellow Vests reminds us of the Occupy Wall Street movement or of the occupation of Tahir Square in Egypt. Since the exploited and the oppressed don't have either an organization or a place where they can give voice to their grievances and make their demands, they take over the public space. On hundreds of traffic circles they created self-organized structures where they are in constant debate. They decided on the actions to carry out.

A new direct democracy is being constructed in which people from various backgrounds are rediscovering class unity. Many women, single heads of households who are raising their children and who find it very hard to make a living, are involved in the movement and have sometimes organized their own events. Many say that by the fifteenth of the month they are broke and have to take out loans, they can't take vacations, and can't provide a Christmas for their children. Other groups involved in these demonstrations on the traffic circles are retirees, poor workers, artisans, and the unemployed. And then too there are the high-school students who protested and were arrested and corralled in December. Most of these people say that they have never demonstrated before and have never belonged to a labor union or a political party, though they show remarkable

political savvy.

Throughout France the level of organization is high. But among the many experiences of self-organized structures, one is particularly rich, that of the House of the People of Saint-

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political collectivity is appearing.

Nazaire. At Saint-Nazaire, a working-class port town of 70,000 people (with about 120,000 in the area), where unemployment has been higher than the national average, the Yellow Vests decided on November 24 to take over an abandoned administrative building and to baptize it the "House of the People."

They created meeting rooms on two floors. In this new place they organized film showings, theatrical events, concerts, and discussions of literature. But the House is above all the place where actions are organized, such as the blocking of traffic circles and blocking of the port, where they join with the labor unions. They have carried out one action after another for four months. For example, one day they painted the bank facades yellow to protest against capitalist pressure on local residents and against bank charges.

Nearly every day the Yellow Vests in Saint-Nazaire hold a general assembly and publish the decisions on Facebook, which permits a day-by-day account of House of the People's actions. As everywhere else, there is a demand for Macron's resignation. But there are other demands, for example, demands for an increase in wages, a lowering of the prices of basic necessities (fuel, water, electricity, housing, and so on), the restoration of the tax on the rich, and measures against tax evasion in order to finance public services and the



energy transition. There are also calls for the egalitarian sharing of wealth; the development of renewable energy; the nationalization of the energy sector, banks, and highways; the right to recall elected officials at all levels; as well as many other social and political demands. These are the demands that one finds throughout France.

The Saint-Nazaire House of the People is also internationalist. On December 24 the House published this message of solidarity with Chilean dockworkers: “The Yellow Vests of the Saint-Nazaire support the Chilean workers of Valparaiso, Chile!!!! They occupied their port for 35 days and finally won their struggle!! **SOLIDARITY WITH THE ENTIRE WORLD!!!!**” They also posted a video of their message being read in Spanish from the first floor of the House of the People. On February 24, 2019, they dedicated an evening to the subject “Rojava [in Kurdish Syria] and the Yellow Vests: A Common Struggle for Democracy?”

In January 2019, the Yellow Vests of Commercy (Meuse) called for an “assembly of assemblies,” a national meeting of the Yellow Vest collectives. “From Commercy, we call for the creation throughout France of popular committees that function as regular general assemblies, places where there is free speech, the right to express oneself, to teach, and to learn.” The call was a success, and the following weekend 75 Yellow Vest collectives met, with some 350 people participating. The final declaration of the meeting read, “We organize ourselves in a democratic way, autonomous and independent. This assembly of assemblies is an important step that allows us to discuss our demands and our action methods. We come together to transform society!” In April, another “assembly of assemblies” took place in Saint-Nazaire with about 800 people representing 200 collectives. The call for that assembly read,

We call upon all regions of the country to collectively fight for the satisfaction of our demands regarding social issues,



taxes, the environment, and democracy. Aware that we have to combat a global system, we believe that we must get out of capitalism. ... The power of the people, by the people, for the people. Don't just watch—join us.

Where is France going? Are the seeds of a new French revolution just beginning to appear? Born out of a fight about an unjust tax, the movement of the Yellow Vests has provoked a long-lasting social and political crisis. Now the entire system has been called into question. A new social consciousness and political collectivity is appearing. In the dynamic of the movement, the Yellow Vests seem more and more to be a new popular power that demands to control the public power of the government and that insists on controlling its own destiny. Behind the demands, a project for a new society has appeared. The class struggle is back in France.

Translated by Dan La Botz

The Endless Brexit Crisis: Interview with Neil Davidson

ASHLEY SMITH

THE BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEM has been thrown into turmoil since the summer of 2016, when a narrow majority of voters supported a referendum in favor of Britain leaving the European Union (EU). The Conservative Party government headed by Prime Minister Theresa May has been negotiating with the EU over the terms of “Brexit” since March 2017, when Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty was triggered, giving the UK two years to leave.

While May reached an agreement with the EU, she failed to get it approved by her fellow Tories, let alone Parliament, despite three attempts. After a couple of short extensions on the deadline for getting it passed, the EU has now granted a delay until October 31. But it is not at all clear that May will be able to reach a deal with her party and the Democratic Unionist Party—the Northern Irish loyalists whose support she relies on to stay in office.

This crisis has thrown Britain’s major political parties into deep turmoil. May is, for all intents and purposes, a zombie prime minister who faces a revolt from within the Conser-

vatives and who could easily be toppled and replaced with a new party leader. The Labour Party has also been deeply divided by Brexit; its Eurosceptic leader Jeremy Corbyn has tried to balance between those who support remaining in the EU, both in Parliament and among Labour’s membership, and others who support leaving.

As a result, British politics and indeed the British state and capitalism are trapped in a deep crisis with no end in sight. Ashley Smith here interviews Neil Davidson about the roots, politics, and trajectory of the battle over Brexit. Davidson is a member of Revolutionary Socialism in the Twenty-first Century across the UK, and RISE — Scotland’s Left Alliance, and is the author of numerous books, including *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Haymarket, 2012) and *We Cannot Escape History: States and Revolutions* (Haymarket, 2015).

Ashley Smith: The EU just gave a long extension to Brexit negotiations until Halloween to give the British government time to come up with an agreement and pass it in Parliament. Why did this happen and what will be the impact of the long delay?

Neil Davidson: The first reason for the delay is the failure of Theresa May and Parliament to vote in favor of any plan. The EU is itself divided between hards and softs. The six-month extension is a compromise between the two—between Germany’s leader Angela Merkel, who is willing to allow an even longer

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time to negotiate some kind of resolution and France's leader Emanuel Macron, who is much more impatient to force a conclusion to the crisis over Brexit.

No one in the EU wants a hard Brexit or no-deal Brexit. At the same time Germany and France, who really run the EU, want to make sure that Britain does not set a precedent that leads other countries to leave. So, they want a deal that is painful but not so painful as to damage the economies of EU members themselves.

They hope to sort out a deal like "Norway Plus," which would allow Britain to remain in the Customs Union but have no power in decision-making over the EU. Basically, they gave Britain the extension time to sort themselves out, agree on a deal, and pass it through Parliament. But, because of the deep divisions within both the Tory and Labour parties, I don't think that they will be able to resolve the crisis by Halloween.

AS: A lot of people, even on the left, think the EU is a progressive formation. What was the EU set up to do, and what is its nature?

ND: The EU developed over many decades since the end of World War II. (I'm just going to call it the EU regardless of earlier forms and names it took.) It was set up for four reasons. First, France wanted to avoid another war with Germany like the three they had fought over the previous seventy years. They wanted to establish rules that would separate economic competition from geopolitical and military competition. That's the element of truth in the idea that the EU has kept peace since 1945.

Second, the United States wanted the EU established as a political and economic complement to the NATO military alliance. This fact should demonstrate that the EU was never an alternative to the United States. In fact, Washington helped set it up to bind Europe together economically and to integrate it with the United States as opposed to with Russia and its satellites in Eastern

Europe. It was part of Washington's Cold War imperial project.

Third, the EU was designed to avoid protectionism within Europe. The United States, Germany, and France thought such limitations on trade were one of the causes of the Great Depression. So, from the very beginning, free trade and globalization were immanent dynamics in the EU.

Fourth, the EU took shape during the postwar boom—the greatest boom in capitalist history—when capital needed outlets for investment beyond the boundaries of individual states at a time when de-colonization meant that this was no longer possible across the Global South in the way it had been before 1945. The EU provided a mechanism for that to take place within Western Europe itself.

Given the illusions many on the left have about the EU, it's ironic that its structure corresponds quite closely to the model of "interstate federalism" devised by Frederick Von Hayek in 1939. Hayek, in many ways the intellectual forerunner of neoliberalism, proposed that economic activity in a federal Europe should be governed by a set of non-

At its core, the EU is a totally undemocratic institution....

Over time the EU has also become a thoroughly neoliberal institution.

negotiable rules presided over by a group of unelected bureaucrats, without any elected governments and irrational voters getting in the way.

That's how the EU is actually structured. The institutions that are least democratic—like the European Commission, the European

Council, the Central Bank, and the Court of Justice—have the most power, while those that are at least nominally democratic—like the European Parliament—have the least.

Thus, at its core, it's a totally undemocratic institution. It's more undemocratic than any of the nation-states that compose it, including Britain. It was designed to prevent social democrats from infringing on the logic of capital in Europe. Its structures make it almost impossible for left-wing reformists like Jeremy Corbyn to implement his program in the EU.

Over time the EU has also become a thoroughly neoliberal institution. After the end of the postwar boom in the 1970s, it eliminated whatever space was open for

Neoliberalism has stopped delivering for a capitalist class that desperately needs solutions to restore growth and profits.

Keynesian policies, adopted neoliberalism, and enshrined it in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. This makes a program of “reform from within” all but impossible today.

With the EU expansion after the end of the Cold War, it went on to establish a highly unequal set of relations between member states. Germany stands at the top, with France, Britain, and Italy below it and in that order. These states dominate the weaker ones like Greece, Portugal, and all those in Eastern Europe. The crisis exposed these structural inequalities. Germany imposed austerity measures on weaker states and their economies, throwing countries like Greece into depressions.

There are many other features of the EU that prove its reactionary nature. It is a deeply

racist formation. Just look at how it bars refugees from entry, leaving them to drown by the thousands in the Mediterranean. And in many ways, especially in its economic relationship with the Global South, it is an imperialist power in its own right.

Thus, the EU is a capitalist institution that's neither democratic nor progressive. It has some basic rules like workers' rights and environmental rights, but they are usually minimal and often weaker than those of individual member states. And its weaker rules on these questions are used to erode stronger ones in more social democratic member states.

AS: What has been the majority viewpoint among the British capitalist class on membership in the EU?

ND: British capitalists on the whole have always been in favor of the EU. They saw it as a replacement for their colonies, which they had used as key sites for investment. After they lost those, they turned to the EU as a new site for investment and trade. British capital remains in favor of remaining in the EU today.

There are two exceptions to this rule at the opposite extremes of that capitalist class. First, many among the smaller capitalists, shading into the petty bourgeoisie proper, support Brexit. They do so because they are negatively impacted by the EU regulations on health and safety, maternity leave, and so on, which they can least afford. These form part of the base of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Tory Brexiteers.

Second, some large financial capitalists also support Brexit. They tend not to be based in the City of London nor are they oriented toward investment in the EU. Instead they are oriented toward Asia, the United States, and the Middle East and don't see the importance of the EU. But these two extremes are dissident wings of the capitalist class. Most of the core of British capital in finance, manufacturing, and service want to remain in the EU.

AS: Why then did the Tory Party, the traditional

party of capital in Britain, opt for Brexit? How have Labour and its party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, positioned themselves on the issue?

ND: The Tory Party is not acting in the interests of British capital in pushing through Brexit. This dereliction of its duty is the result of how ruling-class parties have evolved in the neoliberal era. Usually capitalist parties at least try to run states in the interests of capital as a whole.

They are supposed to come up with a program not in the interests of this or that section of capital. As Adam Smith argues in *The Wealth of Nations*, at the very dawn of the system, capitalist parties and not capitalists should run the state, because individual capitalists tend to pursue their own selfish interests. They don't think about capital's collective interests.

That's why, as Marx and many others argued, capitalist classes, their parties, and their states tend to be semiautonomous. This changed under neoliberalism in Britain. During Thatcher's reign, the Tory Party and a particular section of capital—financial capital—became ever closer, and that began to distort the capacity of the party to represent British capital as a whole.

Moreover, ever since Thatcher the Tory leadership has progressively degenerated in their capacity to think about developing a program to solve problems. They have been recycling the same ideas for four decades. On top of that, since the Poll Tax revolt of the late 1980s, they've not faced real opposition from organized labor, social movements, or even the Labour Party, which fully accepted and implemented neoliberalism until Corbyn took leadership.

The Great Recession changed all of this. Neoliberalism has stopped delivering for a capitalist class that desperately needs solutions to restore growth and profits. But the Tories have not been able to come up with any. As a result, three things have happened.

First, as I mentioned earlier, the capitalist

class has splintered, with the petty bourgeois and a small section of finance capital deciding to call for leaving the EU, even though it's not in the general interests of the class.

Second, the leadership of the Tory Party started denouncing the EU to fend off a challenge from their right by the nationalist and bigoted UKIP. This party had gained in polls and seats in Parliament based on a call for Brexit and attacks on immigrants and Muslims. The standing Tory Prime Minister David Cameron adopted much of the rhetoric of UKIP for narrow electoral gain.

But he did not think through the impact of bad-mouthing the EU and denouncing immigrants, which they were doing just to rally their base and get them to vote Conservative. It led Cameron into a total contradiction when it came to the vote on Brexit. After having denounced the EU, he then advocated a referendum vote to remain.

Third, a lot of Tory politicians are incompetent, ideologically driven, and incapable of thinking through the consequences of their rhetoric and policy proposals. This is a symptom of the decline of the quality of the ruling class—a global phenomenon, but one which for historical reasons is particularly acute in the UK. So, you have a perfect storm of divisions in the capitalist class over the EU, deep discontent in British society with neoliberal austerity, and ideological madness and political incompetence in the Tory Party.

In this context, Cameron made an idiotic decision. After nearly losing a referendum on Scottish independence, which terrified British capital, he then foolishly decided to stage yet another referendum on Brexit. Unbelievably, he thought he could win the vote to remain and sideline UKIP, even though he'd been bad-mouthing the EU for years as responsible for Britain's problems.

We know the results. People angry over conditions in Britain narrowly voted to leave. The petty bourgeoisie voted to do so for narrow self-interest, racist contempt for immigrants, and British nationalist fantasies. Some

working-class people fell for such rhetoric as well. At the same time a section of workers voted to leave as way of expressing their opposition to neoliberalism and austerity, which they associate with the EU.

On the other side, the capitalist class on the whole backed Remain. Other sections of the professional middle class and well-paid workers in places like London, Edinburgh, and Manchester voted to remain for good anti-racist reasons. But they also fell for ideological fantasies that the EU is progressive, anti-racist, and pro-migrant.

Corbyn and the Labour Party were caught in a contradiction. Corbyn stands in the tradition of Tony Benn and others, who long opposed the EU as a capitalist club. But he knows that the bulk of MPs supported Remain, and his base was divided between Leavers and Remainers. As a result, the party mildly supported Remain.

AS: May's failure to get a deal over Brexit and the long delay are likely to precipitate both a general election and a leadership fight in the Tory Party, right? What will happen to them in an election? What will happen in Labour, where Corbyn seems to be under massive pressure from Remainers and Leavers at the same time?

ND: Most of the sane elements of the Tory Party did not want a delay for Brexit, because they were worried it would trigger a general election, in which they know they would suffer one of the biggest defeats in their history. There will be a fight over party leadership in the run up to the elections.

A bunch of buffoons like Boris Johnson will stand for party leader. Four or five hardcore Brexiteers will run, while some soft-Brexit MPs will throw their hat in the ring. It's not clear who will win, partly because of the procedure for elections. First, the party will organize an election among the MPs to narrow it down to two people, and then they put it to the Tory Party membership.

Many of those members are in the extreme wing of the Tory Party; most of them

are over 60 and will probably vote for the most right-wing candidate possible. The more rational elements know that would be a disaster because they know that a right-wing leader would be totally unpopular in the general election.

It has often been noted that this is the worst crisis the Tory Party has suffered since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, which struck down tariffs on imported grain. In fact, it's worse. At least in 1846 it was clear what the two positions were; a minority of Tories were for repeal, against the party majority. In this case, there are no clear-sighted leaders in the party who have even a clue about how to get the bourgeoisie out of the mess they caused.

A lot of Tories are now saying that they are not just a Brexit party, that they stand for many other things. That is a sign that they realize that their position on Brexit is deeply damaging. Their absolute crisis over Brexit should be good news for us.

But the main electoral opposition to them, Labour, is also deeply divided. The Blairites, who are for remaining in the EU, have launched unrelenting attacks on Corbyn for months. They charged him with being an anti-Semite, and they have denounced him for his reluctance to aggressively campaign for Remain.

Their attempt to portray Corbyn as anti-Semitic and their assertion that anti-Semitism is rampant in the Labour Party are of course absurd. They are intentionally confusing Corbyn's support for Palestinian rights with anti-Semitism. In reality, he has a long record of combining opposition to anti-Semitism with support for Palestine.

The charge that Labour is swamped with anti-Semites is just as dishonest. There are of course some anti-Semites in the party, but very few. There have been 673 allegations of anti-Semitism since April last year. Now, even if *all* of these were upheld—and 227 have already been thrown out for lack of evidence or because the accused were exonerated—that

amounts to around 0.36 percent of the party's current membership of 525,000. That should not surprise anyone; anti-Semites don't tend to join left-wing social democratic parties.

Nevertheless, the Blairites, who are the majority of the MPs, weakened Corbyn with these attacks. They will do anything to get rid

Their attempt to portray Corbyn as anti-Semitic and their assertion that anti-Semitism is rampant in the Labour Party are of course absurd.

of Corbyn. So, Labour is deeply divided and it will be very difficult for the party to come up with a manifesto for either the upcoming EU election or a general election.

While the two main parties are deeply divided, other parties are in a better position politically. There are two anti-EU parties, UKIP and Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party, with clear platforms. On the other hand, there are a range of parties supporting Remain, including the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats, and as a result they too stand to gain in any future general election.

AS: What are the dynamics behind the push for a new vote on Brexit? What are the class and social forces behind it? Will it happen, and what would be the likely result of a new vote?

ND: The main backers of Remain and a new vote on Brexit come from the big capitalists, the professional middle class, and sections of the well-paid working class. Each has different visions of the EU. The bourgeoisie wants to stay in the EU or secure a soft Brexit for their class interests and neoliberal project.

They have drawn behind them sections

of middle- and working-class people who have illusions in the EU as a progressive and anti-racist institution. These forces came together in a mass march of hundreds of thousands of people—a million according to the organizers—on March 23 in London. Unfortunately, it was initiated and led by Blairites like Alistair Campbell and Tories like Michael Heseltine, who are on the side of capital.

In reaction to this push for a new vote to remain, Corbyn is trying to maintain a studied ambiguity about where exactly he stands. He supports the least bad Brexit possible, while all the time saying we need a general election, but has so far been silent on the question of a second referendum.

Opinion on the left is divided about a new referendum on whether to stay in the EU. Most people on the radical left think this would be disastrous. It would simply consolidate divisions and open the whole situation to charges from the right of betrayal of the original vote. I could see the case for a vote on the terms of departure from the EU.

But there has not been a serious proposal that could even come to a referendum. May's proposal has gone down to defeat three times already and now has no hope of passage. Corbyn clearly wants a Norway Plus deal, which is the softest Brexit possible. But even on that he's been quite evasive about whether he would put it to a popular vote.

The left liberal press like *The Guardian* support a new vote and claim that there's a majority for Remain. That may be true, but if there is, it is only a small majority for Remain. If another referendum manages only a narrow reversal, it would be catastrophic. It would not resolve anything and would only deepen the polarization and harden it on each side.

AS: What impact will the European elections have on all of this?

ND: The Tory Party is panicking about these elections because they are deeply afraid of losing them just as they would a general

election. So, it may concentrate their minds and compel them to resolve Brexit to stop the European elections from taking place. But they have no proposal and no prospects of

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cutting a deal amongst themselves and their governmental partners.

So, barring some *deus ex machina* that helps them cut a deal over Brexit, they will have to participate in the elections, which they will lose and lose very badly. The most likely beneficiaries of these will be the smaller parties with clear positions on the EU. The SNP will do well, the Greens will do well, and so will the far-right parties, all at the expense of the Tories. Labour too will likely make some gains.

Labour is polling higher than the Tories in general. But Corbyn's individual popularity is relatively low, lower even than that of May. If there were a general election, Labour would win, but it's foolish to make predictions because things are so chaotic.

I think if Labour won it would still have to rely on the support of the Greens and especially the SNP to form a government. And that will produce divisions over the questions of the EU. There is, in other words, no simple political way out of the organic crisis Brexit has caused for the British state, its capitalist class, the Tory Party, and its various rival parties.

AS: How will the fight over Brexit affect the EU?

ND: As I said earlier, the EU is of two minds

on Brexit. On the one hand, they want to punish the British sufficiently scare anyone else away from doing an exit of their own. And they are succeeding in this; even right-wing governments and parties, who are mainly opposed to migrants, have dropped plans for leaving the EU because they do not want to suffer Britain's fate.

On the other hand, the EU doesn't want to be so punitive as to force a hard no-deal Brexit that would affect their economies. So, it is trying to get Britain to accept a Norway Plus deal. They would prefer this result because a no-deal Brexit would cause all sorts of problems, particularly in France where customs would hold up trucks trying to make deliveries in and out of Britain in long waiting lines.

Nevertheless, they don't want to concede too much to Britain that would in any way compromise their neoliberal project. This is accentuated by the long history of EU frustration with Britain, based on the long time it took for British politicians to agree to join in the first place. Some European states, especially France, which under de Gaul criticized Britain for being too close to the United States, are particularly hard on Britain.

So, they will let Britain leave but on terms that preserve the project of the EU and intimidate any other member states from following them. But ironically, they might miss Britain, which the EU used to enact right-wing neoliberal policies particularly during the 1980s. Thatcher would make hard neoliberal demands, the EU would concede to her, implement the policies, and then turn around and blame Britain for them. But this was all a smokescreen. In reality, of course, the EU wanted these policies all along and used Britain as a Trojan horse to get them implemented.

AS: What does this all mean for the neoliberal program of free trade globalization?

ND: Brexit is a sign that neoliberalism is weakening as a regime of accumulation or

possibly coming to an end, not just in Europe but around the world. Protectionism is beginning to revive. Some of this is just rhetorical, but the conflict between the United States and China is a harbinger of things to come. I think we are probably in a transition to a new phase of capitalism.

This transition is going to last a long time. Think about the crisis of 1929; it took until after World War II for state capitalism and embedded social democracy to emerge out of the Great Depression. Or think about the transition to neoliberalism itself. The ruling class first articulated this strategy in the late 1970s, but it took a decade or two for it to be consolidated throughout the world system. So, it will take some time for a new strategy to replace neoliberalism.

I'm not sure what that new regime of accumulation will be, nor am I clear what range of options capitalism has now. We won't know the real form of its replacement for a decade or two. At the moment, you're seeing the ruling classes reviving old strategies from the 1930s, like tariffs.

The process of globalization, which began in 1945 and eventually led to neoliberalism, is now in retreat into regional blocs. The EU is one. China is trying to do similar things. So, the patterns are just beginning to emerge.

We also may see a movement toward protectionism by the economically less developed states in Europe. They may try and do this without leaving the EU through things like nationalization, which can be done at least temporarily. If they try to go further, they will face strong resistance by the top-tier powers like Germany and France.

But this is all speculative. The main point is that Brexit is a signal that neoliberalism is played out as a strategy of accumulation. Capitalists and their states will have to come up with an alternative in the coming years.

AS: Finally, the radical left seems to have been divided, confused, and unable to impact the crisis

over Brexit. Are there any signs of this changing? How should the revolutionary left position itself today?

ND: British politics is highly contradictory right now. On the one hand, there is the unending crisis around Brexit, which frankly the radical left has yet to figure out how to intervene in with any degree of coherence and influence. On the other hand, there are signs of hope, especially the Extinction Rebellion, which has essentially closed down the centers of London and Edinburgh for days, with hundreds of young people arrested.

This action has come on the heels of the massive protests and school strikes against climate change. These have been some of the biggest actions since the anti-war protests in the 2000s. But they are different from those protests and earlier ones. Young people, largely from outside the traditional parties and organizations of the left, are initiating these demonstrations.

The anti-war protests would not have happened without the British Socialist Workers Party initiating them through Stop the

Opinion on the left is divided about a new referendum on whether to stay in the EU.

War. The anti-Poll Tax campaign of the late 1980s in Scotland would not have happened without the old Militant tendency. Today, these struggles are not being initiated and led by left-wing groups.

That indicates that we're coming to an end of a particular way of building revolutionary organization and its relationship with social and labor movements. We've tested that method for half a century but have not managed to succeed. That's one reason why

Kautskyism is making a bit of a comeback, and, although that's not the answer, it's clear that we have to do something differently, because it's not going to happen like 1917 in Russia.

Now, how to do that is a question. We need intellectual clarity about what we're

The process of globalization,
which began in 1945 and
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doing, first and foremost. The approach of the British International Socialists back in the early 1960s is more like what we need to do today. It was about 500 people, it had real analysis of the dynamics of the system, and it was open and fluid and really more "Luxemburgist" than Leninist. So, we need revolutionary organization of that sort.

In the movements we need to gather together people who agree and want to collaborate, regardless of organizational affiliation, around shared viewpoints to push demands on a left government if it comes to power. This is classic united-front tactics, and it might be easier in Scotland than Britain as a whole. But

we have to work together on what we agree on, like anti-austerity, freedom of movement, more democracy, defense and expansion of the welfare state, and so on.

We have come to the end of the process of party building that began in the 1960s. We are in a new phase and there are new movements. Of course, there are similarities with the past, and there will always be as long as capitalism exists; but the left should stop expecting tomorrow to be like yesterday and the day before that.

There are new things happening, like the struggle over climate change. And the most interesting thing today is how these new movements are adopting working-class methods of struggle. Just look at how climate activists, the International Women's Strike, and immigrants' rights groups have all turned to striking as the way to advance their demands.

That's interesting because it means that working-class methods of organizing are developing within the movement, but not as a result of initiatives from the unions or left organizations. It's coming up organically, with people realizing that if you want to have an impact you have to shut down institutions and workplaces by striking. Out of this dynamic, we have to find our way to build new forms of revolutionary organization and parties to fight for transformation of the system into socialism.

Beyond Brexiternity?

The British Crisis and the Left

DAVID BLACK

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

ANTONIO GRAMSCI

BRITISH PRIME MINISTER THERESA MAY is still trying to get her withdrawal agreement with the European Union "over the line" in the House of Commons, having failed to do so three times already. And having failed to make good her promise to take Britain out of the European Union on March 29, she has been granted by the EU an "extension" until October 31, by which time Britain must either leave the EU by means of the agreement (there is no chance of substantial renegotiation), crash out of the EU without any deal at all, or cancel Brexit altogether. None of these three options will achieve any kind of consensus; any of them could happen.

May has promised her panicking Members of Parliament, and party members who want to get rid of her, that she will quit as prime minister once she has delivered Brexit, but she shows no signs of being able to deliver anything. So far, all attempts by Tory MPs to oust her have failed, and it is even possible

that she will still be hanging on this time next year. Also, it now seems unlikely that May can avoid Britain having to participate in the European Parliament elections on May 23—three years after the Leave vote in the referendum.

May's cross-party talks are going nowhere. Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn favors a close alignment to the EU after Brexit along with guarantees to protect consumer, environmental, and labor standards, as well as the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. But May's current survival strategy depends on keeping at bay those in her own party who don't want these things. Corbyn's wish for Britain to remain in a customs union with the EU would overcome the sticky problem of the "Irish Backstop," which is designed to keep an open border in Ireland for as long as the EU and the UK fail to strike a future trade deal. But the Eurosceptics within May's own party fear that the backstop could bind the UK permanently into the customs union, and her Democratic Unionist allies in Northern Ireland are opposed to a customs border falling across the Irish Sea, which would threaten the "unity" of the UK. In Scotland, voters narrowly decided to stay in the UK in the 2014 referendum on independence. But as the majority of Scots voted to stay in the EU in 2016, the Scottish National Party is now calling for a second referendum on indepen-

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dence should the Westminster government actually implement Brexit.

The deadlock currently gripping the British parliamentary process takes the form of a constitutional crisis, in which three forces vie for legitimacy:

1. The “Crown in Parliament” represented by “Her Majesty’s” elected government, which functions as the executive and normally sets the legislative agenda.
2. Parliament as a whole, which has now exercised its ability to repeatedly vote down May’s withdrawal agreement and to assume for itself responsibility for setting the legislative agenda on Europe.
3. The pro-Brexit referendum vote of 2016, which supposedly represents the “will of the people.”

This is an unprecedented crisis, and it seems unlikely that it can be resolved either by a general election or a rerun of the referendum—or both.

The Road to Nowhere

As far as the majority of the Tory establishment and most of big business were concerned, Brexit was never supposed to happen. In his 2014 general election campaign, then Tory Prime Minister David Cameron committed his government to holding an in-out referendum on the European Union. But he did so only because he needed to appease his Eurosceptic right wing and roll back the challenge from the right of Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party (UKIP). Cameron rightly wagered that the Labour Party, under Ed Miliband’s neoliberal leadership, had become too much of a weak imitation of his own party’s fake “compassionate conservatism” to pose much of a threat. Cynically, Cameron also wagered that his “Europhile” Liberal Democrat coalition partners would emerge strong enough to block the referendum promise. Only they didn’t. In the 2014 general election the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed due to revulsion over their five-year

collaboration with the Tories in implementing vicious austerity policies. Labour was also badly mangled, getting a mere 30 percent of the vote and losing nearly all their seats north of the border to the Scottish National Party. Farage’s UKIP got 12.6 percent of the vote and one MP. Cameron’s Conservatives gained 23 seats and an absolute majority.

After Cameron went on to campaign on the Remain side in his referendum and lost, he had no option but to resign. His successor, Theresa May, tried to strengthen her hand by calling yet another general election in 2017, believing that the Labour Party, under Corbyn’s allegedly Marxist leadership, would collapse even further. She miscalculated. The vote for the Labour Party rose to 40 percent, with a gain of 30 seats. The Liberal Democrats continued to flounder; the Scottish nationalists lost a third of their seats, and the UKIP vote collapsed from nearly 4 million to a mere 600,000.

May and the majority of Tory MPs, having made the referendum result a “red line,” found themselves opposed by a sizable minority of Tory MPs who argued that simply “pulling the plug” on the EU without a trade deal might prove to be catastrophic for British capitalism. Certainly, the effect of tariffs on thousands of commodities and services is one of the great unknowns, as are the prospects for London-based finance capital’s continued supremacy in EU financial markets and for businesses wanting to expand their activities in other areas, such as East Asia.

The “Democratic Deficit”

There was much truth in the Remain campaigners’ designation of the 2016 Leave side as crooks, liars, and racists. But the Leavers’ slogan, “Take Back Control,” appeared to many as a positive vision that went unchallenged by the Remainers, who could have asked—but didn’t—when precisely did the “people” ever have “control” free of obstruction by the ruling class? The Remain cam-

paigned found it difficult to sell the benefits of EU membership to millions of people who had never seen them; instead, Remainers opted for the “Fear Factor”: “OK, it’s not that good, but it could get a lot worse.” Although Corbyn has “accepted” the 2016 referendum result and the need for a “soft Brexit,” he is faced with the fact that most members of the Labour Party favor a second referendum essentially to override the result of the first one. The anti-Brexit demonstration in London in March, which mobilized hundreds of thousands of people calling for another EU referendum, contained a lot of Labour voters as well as Greens and liberals.

Whereas the Labour leadership under Corbyn would support a referendum in order to prevent Theresa May’s Brexit deal or leaving without any deal at all, the right wing of the party, led by Corbyn’s deputy leader, Tom Watson, wants Labour to commit unconditionally to another referendum with a Remain option. As things stand, Labour is claiming to be the only party that represents people on both sides of the Leave-Remain question. Claudia Webbe, of the party’s National Executive, argues, “Our number one priority should be for a democratic socialist Labour government to deliver a sustained and irreversible shift in wealth and power in the UK.” The party remains however, as divided as it was when Corbyn was first elected leader.

There was once a consensus on the left (of the Labour Party and those further left) that the “will of the people” expressed through elections to the House of Commons was incompatible with the existing institutions of the European Union and its predecessors. When Corbyn was first elected to Parliament in 1983, as a protégé of Tony Benn, MP (1925–2014), both of them favored leaving the EU because, they argued, the transfer of sovereign powers from the British Parliament to the bureaucracy of “Fortress Europe” would undermine, if not prevent altogether, any attempt by a future Labour government to carry through a left program “For the Many,

Not the Few.” Benn articulated the issue with five questions to be asked of any legislative body: “*What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you use it? To whom are you accountable? How do we get rid of you?*” Anyone who cannot answer the last of those questions does not live in a democratic system.”

For Benn, the issue was sovereignty. But 2019 is not 1983. The economic ties between the UK and the EU are now much stronger and will be painful to break. This phenomenal reflection of the emptiness of all nationalist illusions of socialism in one country is mirrored by the emptiness of its other: the EU. Who now remembers French Socialist European Commissioner Jacques Delors’ speech to the 1988 British Trade Union Congress on the coming of “Social Europe”?

The central sovereign institution of the EU is the European Commission, now headed by Jean-Claude Juncker, former prime minister of Luxembourg, with a well-paid staff of 30,000 bureaucrats. Almost all EU laws and treaties originate with the commission, which also acts as the sole executor of the EU’s budget. The commission is not elected by the citizens of Europe; rather, its members are *nominated* by the European Union Council, which consists of government heads of states. Unlike a national parliament, in which elected members can put forward bills that can then be voted on, the European Parliament can only vote on legislation already approved and submitted by the commission. The 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, stitched together by the European Council heads of state, effectively buried Delors’ social democratic dreams and upheld neoliberalism as the basis of political legislation, beyond the reach of popular choice. The treaty “allows” the European Parliament to put forward legally nonbinding “proposals” to the commission, but the commission has no obligation to accept them. If it rejects them, the commission only has to send the Parliament written reasons for doing so.

The Remainers do not, however, regard the “democratic deficit” as that important. Some argue, rightly, that in or out of the EU the power of international capitalism would prevail; and as every good anti-Stalinist leftist recognizes, socialism in one country is a nonstarter. Remainers argue that such is the growth of xenophobic far-right populism over the last few years, we must now rely on the EU for guarantees of freedom of movement and for protection of democratic rights. Yet the EU does not appear able or willing to prevent some member states—especially Poland, Italy, and Hungary—from carrying out policies that are reminiscent of fascism, and the EU “principle” of “free movement” of labor does not apply to migrants from outside of Europe.

Nigel Farage, whose new Brexit Party would certainly win quite a few seats in the European Parliament, has threatened that his rabble of MEPs will cause chaos there. This however, is probably an idle threat, as the next European Parliament is likely in any case to be stuffed with right-wing extremists and fascists from all over Europe. The European poll is certainly likely to cause even more misery for May. Farage has abandoned UKIP, which he complains has been taken over by far-right extremists and semi-criminals. The Brexit Party candidates list for the prospective European elections includes former Tories, media celebrities, and even “revolutionary communists” turned “libertarians” from *Spiked Online*. On the extreme right, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (also known as Tommy Robinson), a 24-carat fascist street thug, is standing in Manchester as an ally of Anne Marie Waters, who is ex-Labour, ex-UKIP, and founder of the new fascist party For Britain. Many pro-Remain Tory and Labour voters may switch to Change UK, a Macron-inspired cabal of liberal breakaway Tories and anti-Corbyn defectors from Labour.

The fact is, though, that the European elections, as far as most people in Britain are concerned, have never been of much importance. The turnout in Britain for the

last European elections was 35.6 percent, compared with 68.7 percent for the 2017 general election and 72 percent for the 2016 referendum. An important factor in this “apathy” is that the European Parliament is widely seen as an irrelevant talking shop devoid of real legislative power. While the proceedings of the House of Commons feature frequently in the UK media, those of the European Parliament barely feature at all—not least because rarely does anything significant or interesting happen there. Because of the dismal turnout in European elections, and because of the D’Hondt version of proportional representation, a party that gets around 20 percent of the total vote will get a sizable share of the seats even though it might only have the support of 7 or 8 percent of the electorate.

Is “Another” EU Possible?

Sadly, xenophobia has a long history in British—especially English—culture and working-class consciousness. George Orwell wrote 77 years ago,

The traditional English xenophobia is stronger among the working class than the middle class. It was partly the resistance of the trade unions that prevented a really large influx of refugees from the fascist countries before the war, and when the German refugees were interned in 1940, it was not the working class that protested. The difference in habits, and especially in food and language, makes it very hard for English working people to get on with foreigners. Their diet differs a great deal from that of any European nation, and they are extremely conservative about it. As a rule they will refuse even to sample a foreign dish, they regard such things as garlic and olive with disgust, life is unlivable to them unless they have tea and puddings.¹

While British workers have long overcome any aversion to “foreign” food, and the unions are now among the least racist institutions in Britain, xenophobia persists.

The question is, can xenophobia be curtailed by staying in the EU super state? “Hate Brexit, Love Socialism” is a slogan in the left Remain camp. However, Remainers further to the right see “Corbynism” as an unfortunate digression on the road to liberal “progress”; their position is, effectively, “Love the EU, Forget Socialism.” Further to the left is the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25), founded by Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek finance minister on whose country the EU imposed drastic and inhuman austerity measures in 2015. The transnational DiEM25 is running candidates in European Parliament elections in several EU states—though not in Britain—as “European Spring.” Varoufakis, who is an influential figure in Britain as well as the rest of Europe, accepts that the treaties and rules of the EU are “idiotic” and “unworkable.” But at present he doesn’t think trying to change them would do much good. According to Varoufakis’s Keynesian argument, there are trillions of Euros sloshing around in the banking and financial system, which the European Investment Bank could sink into green-infrastructure projects (a European version of the “Green New Deal”). He does not think there is much chance of this happening in the foreseeable future; he appeals instead to the populist politics of “feelings,” meaning, it is important “to get people angry with the establishment, not with the foreigners.” He concedes that none of the measures he advocates would constitute socialism. “But,” he says, “it’s something far, far better than what we have today.” As regards Britain, Varoufakis, who campaigned on the Remain side during the 2016 referendum, now argues, “I think that we should respect the outcome of the people’s vote. I really despise the way that [campaigners for a second referendum] talk about a ‘People’s Vote’ as if the first one was the wrong people’s vote. This kind of toxic language does not suit progressive politics.”²

Varoufakis backs Corbyn’s calls for a fresh general election and adds that the “silver lining” to Britain leaving the EU is

that a Labour government could nationalize industry “more easily.”

Getting the Tories Out?

Labour now has a program for transferring power and ownership from big capitalism to ordinary citizens, which would place a future Labour government on a collision course with fossil fuel companies, property developers, landlords, and finance capitalists. Corbyn and McDonnell are quite aware of this. The propaganda against Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party, coming not only from the reactionary right but also from neoliberals

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inside and outside his own party, is relentless. Added to that, Labour really does have a “problem of anti-Semitism” in its ranks and constituency. Some on the left think that the controversy is being stirred up by so-called Zionists and deny that the problem even exists, while some on the right are intent on weaponizing the denials. To this writer the allegations against Corbyn on this count are ill-founded, although whether he can effectively deal with the issue as a whole remains to be seen.

It is clear that Corbyn’s Labour Party represents to millions of people the only alternative to the Tories’ austerity regime and the only way out of the seemingly endless Brexit crisis. There is currently no aspect of Tory government policy that is not marked by incompetence, corruption, and cruelty. The Tory government has every intention of deepening the austerity measures that have been rolled out over the last ten years since the financial crash. The latest is the much-feared Universal Credit scheme, in which benefits previously paid separately to claimants—such as the housing benefit, child tax credit, and jobs seekers allowance—will be merged. As a result, almost two million people will lose more than £1,000 a year, with those claiming disability benefits worst affected. Currently 3.7 million children are in absolute poverty, and the number is rising. Some four million people are now dependent on food banks, and 1.6 million are destitute, for which they can thank Cameron’s former chancellor, George Osborne, who three years ago imposed a benefits freeze that is still in place.

Theresa May, when she was home secretary in the Conservative-Liberal coalition,

targeted immigrants with what she called a “hostile environment” policy. This consisted of measures designed to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible for people who hadn’t been explicitly given the right to stay. May’s policy was to “deport first and hear appeals later.” The results became clear a year ago when the “Windrush” scandal broke, revealing that the government, having classified Caribbean-born long-term British residents as illegal immigrants, forced thousands of people out of their jobs and homes into detention and deportation. Every other sphere of government is in the same mess, be it the National Health Service, education, environment, or infrastructure; and the monopolization of parliamentary business by Brexit has added to the paralysis.

To add to the national humiliation of the Brexit chaos, Theresa May has invited President Donald Trump for a state visit in June, which will no doubt see hundreds of thousands of people mobilized in protest. Ironically, rolling out the red carpet for Trump might help to keep Theresa May in power for a bit longer, as most of the contenders to replace her are reluctant to be seen feting such a dangerous moron. There is however an important Tory exception: Boris Johnson, Brexit supporter and former foreign secretary, who Trump would like to see in number 10 Downing Street. Such are the morbid symptoms of Britain’s Brexiternity.

NOTES

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Great Power Rivalry in the Early Twenty-first Century

MICHAEL PRÖBSTING

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES of our time is the intensifying rivalry between the imperialist Great Powers: the United States, China, the EU, Russia, and Japan. Diplomatic rows, sanctions, trade wars, military tensions, and, ultimately, major wars now loom as prominent features of the historic period now unfolding. Trade war between the United States and China, tensions in the South China Sea, sanctions between the West and Russia? The prospect of Great Power rivalry has already become the present.

Many on the left fail to grasp the essence of this key development of world politics or to draw the necessary conclusions. The author of these lines has recently published a comprehensive book on this subject called *Anti-Imperialism in the Age of Great Power Rivalry*.¹ In this article I will summarize some of the main findings of my analysis with a special focus on the economic bases of the rivalry between the two largest states—the United States and China.

In the past period, and in particular, the

last decade, we have seen a dramatic shift in the economic and political balance of forces between the major imperialist powers. The old, Western powers—in particular the United States—have faced a decline that's reciprocal to the rise of new imperialist powers—China and Russia. I will demonstrate this by analyzing a number of key indicators.

Production and Trade

As was discussed in an article published in this journal five years ago, China has become the most important challenger to America's status as the hegemonic imperialist power.² China's rise, as well as the decline of the United States, has not evened out nor abated in the interim. Both are in a state of sustained acceleration.

When we look at the basis of capitalist value production—global industrial production—we see that the United States' share decreased from 25.1 percent (2000) to 17.7 percent (2015); Western Europe's share also declined from 12.1 percent to 9.2 percent, while China's piece of the world pie exploded from 6.5 percent (2000) to 23.6 percent (2015).³

Likewise, while the United States' share in international trade declined from 15.1 percent (2001) to 11.4 percent (2016), China's share rose in this period from 4.0 percent to 11.5 percent.⁴ According to the latest statistics published by the World Trade Organization, China's share in merchandise trade in 2017 was 11.5 percent while the United States' was 11.1 percent.⁵

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Such a decline of the old, Western imperialist powers and the emergence of China as a new challenger can be observed not only within the scope of the raw numbers for capitalist value production and trade. We see the same development reflected when we analyze the national composition of leading capitalist monopolies on the basis of corporate data.

Global Corporations

Comparing the *Forbes Global 2000* list of the world's largest corporations for the year 2003 with the year 2017, we see that while the United States presently remains the strongest national power, its share has declined substantially, from 776 corporations on the list (38.8 percent) to 565 (28.2 percent). In the same interval, China's share grew dramatically. It now ranks as number two: from only 13 corporations (0.6 percent) on the *Forbes* list to 263 (13.1 percent). Japan's share declined in this period from 16.5 percent to 11.4 percent; Britain's share fell from 6.6 percent to 4.5 percent, and Germany's share sank from 3.2 percent to 2.5 percent.⁶

We see the same picture when we compare the regional composition of the world's top 5,000 companies (by market capitalization) for the years 2000 and 2016. Given the larger number of monopolies, this statistic is even more representative of the dramatic change that has taken place in the power relations between imperialist rivals. China's rise is confirmed again. In 2000, its share among this list of leading corporations was 402 (8.0 percent). In 2016, this share had grown to 1,085 (21.7 percent). North America's share declined from 1,958 (39.2 percent) to 1,519 (30.4 percent). Europe's share shrank from 1,346 (26.9 percent) to 876 (17.5 percent), and Japan's share fell from 659 (13.2 percent) to 437 (8.7 percent).⁷

Another study, published by the UN Conference on Trade and Development, also confirms China's rise as home to many of the biggest global monopolies. It reports

that China's share among the largest 2,000 transnational corporations (TNCs) has grown so massively in the past two decades that by 2015 Chinese firms took 17 percent of all profits in this group of largest enterprises. The UNCTAD report adds, "Interestingly however, the share of Chinese financial TNCs in top TNCs' profit expanded rapidly to more than 10 percent to total top TNCs profits, exceeding those of United States' financial top TNCs in 2015."⁸

These figures prove beyond doubt that China's rise (and the West's decline) is not limited to production and trade. Some left-wing academics have attempted a denial of China's imperialist character by claiming that the Middle Kingdom's status is restricted to that of the global workbench. But this is an old paradigm. China not only produces and trades a significant share of global capitalist value—it also *owns* a large share of it. This is reflected in the substantial portion of Chinese corporations among the world's top monopolies as well as the volume of their profits (in both the industrial and the financial sectors). In other words, Chinese corporations (even if they are formally state-owned) are not "socialist" mega-enterprises but truly capitalist monopolies.

Billionaires

Another example, revealing much about China's supposed "socialism," is the rise of the billionaires. China has become home to the largest number of billionaires, or the second largest—depending on which list one takes—in the world. According to the 2017 issue of the "Hurun Global Rich List," 609 billionaires are Chinese. By comparison, 552 are U.S. citizens. Together they account for half of the billionaires worldwide.⁹ The *Forbes Billionaire List* (which is United States-based while *Hurun* is China-based) sees the United States as still ahead. According to *Forbes*, "the U.S. continues to have more billionaires than any other nation, with a record 565, up from

540 a year ago. China is catching up with 319. (Hong Kong has another 67, and Macau 1.) Germany has the third most, with 114, and India, with 101, the first time it has had more than 100, is fourth.”¹⁰ While the details vary, the underlying trend remains the same: The weight of China’s monopoly capitalists is increasing.

Very similar results emerge from the latest edition of the annual *Billionaires Insights* report, published in October 2018 by the Swiss bank UBS jointly with Britain’s PwC, a financial services firm.¹¹ According to this report, there are 2,158 billionaires in the world and 373 have their home in China. This figure rises to 475 if we add the billionaires living in Hong Kong and Macao (both jurisdictions are part of the Chinese state), as well as Taiwan. This means that about one-fifth of the global super-rich—that is, the monopoly capitalists—live in China! This is not far below the number of billionaires living in the United States (585) and above the figures for Japan as well as the combined totals for all the imperialist powers in Western Europe (414). Furthermore, it was the Chinese billionaires who experienced the fastest wealth growth in 2017 (39 percent). Billionaires in other countries had much lower growth rates (the global average growth was 12 percent). China is also the country with the highest number of new billionaires: 106 people became billionaires in 2017 (although a number dropped off the list from 2016). That comes out to roughly one new billionaire every three days.¹²

It is evident that the Chinese capitalist class has experienced the fastest growth in the world in the past decade. The UBS/PwC report comments, “Twelve years ago, the world’s most populous country was home to only 16 billionaires. Today, as the ‘Chinese Century’ progresses, they number 373, nearly one in five of the global total.”

China’s transformation is also reflected in the growing number of millionaires and billionaires among its parliamentary depu-

ties. The Hong Kong-based daily newspaper *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) recently published a very interesting report about the wealth of China’s lawmakers.¹³ The paper is known as a serious source, and it certainly knows what it’s talking about, as it is owned

China not only produces and trades a significant share of global capitalist value—it also owns a large share of it.

by the *Alibaba Group*, a Chinese multinational technology corporation headed by Jack Ma, one of the wealthiest people in the world.

This article reports that out of the 5,000 delegates in China’s legislature, 93 are dollar-denominated billionaires. (Unfortunately, the report does not tell us how many of China’s lawmakers are millionaires, but the figure obviously must be substantially larger.) These dollar-denominated billionaire lawmakers have an accumulated wealth of US\$504 billion!

The SCMP adds,

By comparison, the 50 richest members of the U.S. Congress had a combined wealth of US\$2 billion in 2016, according to *Roll Call*’s data. Darrell Issa, co-founder of automobile-components maker Directed Electronics and a Republican Representative from California, was the wealthiest congressman that year, with a net worth of US\$283.3 million.

This is without doubt a remarkable figure: China’s 93 billionaire lawmakers have an accumulated wealth of US\$504 billion while the 50 richest members of the U.S. Congress have a combined wealth of “only” US\$2 billion!

The substantially higher number of millionaires among Chinese lawmakers,

compared with the United States, results from the different, historically conditioned, physiognomy of China's ruling capitalist class. American monopoly capitalists are a much "older," longer-existing class. They have established a comparatively stable political and social division of labor. American billionaires don't need to waste time in Congress in order to implement their dictates. They have, at their disposal, trusted politicians who act as loyal executives.

China's monopoly bourgeoisie, by comparison, is a much younger class. It has existed only two or three decades. It is led by a much more centralized leadership. Without this structure, China could not have succeeded in catching up to the older, Western Great Powers. (China's economy, as a whole, is still more backward than those of its rivals the United States, Europe, or Japan.) As a result, China's ruling class has a less-established division of

While Russia is weaker on an economic level, it still plays an important role given its military and political weight.

labor. Business and politics are more directly united at the personal level.

Another measure indicating China's rise is what Chinese economists call "net social wealth." This is the total of nonfinancial assets and net foreign assets. A recently published report by the China-based National Institution for Finance and Development calculates that China's net social wealth reached 437 trillion yuan (US\$63.66 trillion) at the end of 2016. This was equal to about 70 percent of the U.S. total and ahead of all other Great Powers.¹⁴

Capital Export and Military Spending

China and Russia (Russia to a lesser degree than China) are also increasingly becoming major foreign investors. This is confirmed by the latest figures for global capital export. While the United States remains the largest international investor, with 23.9 percent of the foreign direct investment (FDI) outflows in the year 2017, Japan is number two (11.2 percent), and China is number three (8.7 percent)—ahead of all European powers. Russia's figure is lower, slightly less than half of Germany's FDI.¹⁵

When we look at the accumulated stock of FDI outflows, one sees, again, the rapid progress made by China. Despite the fact that China only became an imperialist power about a decade ago, its FDI outward stock equaled the figures of other Great Powers (except the United States) by 2017.¹⁶

We can see a similar development with the investment in technology. Again, the United States remains the world's leading country in terms of investment in research and development (US\$463 billion for the year 2015). However, China is catching up rapidly. Beijing's current five-year plan calls for increasing research-and-design spending to 2.5 percent of GDP, up from 2.1 percent in 2011–2015. As a result, it has now become the second-place country (US\$377 billion). That is more than the entire European Union (US\$346 billion) and two-and-a-half-times as much as Japan's annual spending (US\$155 billion).¹⁷

While Russia is weaker on an economic level, it still plays an important role given its military and political weight.¹⁸ In addition to important monopolies like Gazprom or Rosneft, Russia has a huge military-industrial complex making it the second largest military power behind the United States and ahead of all other imperialist states.

According to the latest study by the Stockholm International Peace Research In-

The United States' Decline and China's Rise Between 1985 and 2018²¹

global share (percent)							
1985		1998/2001		2011		2016/18	
U.S.	China	U.S.	China	U.S.	China	U.S.	China
MANUFACTURING PRODUCTION							
32.4	4.3	25.4	6.3	20.5	16.4	16.3	23.5
TOP 500 CORPORATIONS							
-	-	43.0	2.0	26.0	14.6	25.2	24.0

stitute, the United States has a total inventory of 6,450 nuclear warheads. Russia has even more (6,850). France (300), China (280), and the UK (215) follow.¹⁹

A similar picture can be seen when looking at the list of the world's ten top exporters of weapons. In the year 2016, the global market share of the United States was 33 percent, followed by Russia (23 percent), and China (6.2 percent).²⁰

Furthermore, when analyzing the Great Powers it is crucial to take into account *the dynamic of the development*. The United States, the EU, and Japan are old, declining, imperialist powers while China and Russia are new, rising powers. To illustrate this dynamic, once again, we compare the economic development of the United States and China since 1985. When we compare the development of the United States' versus China's share of world manufacturing production, as well as proportions of the global top 500 corporations, we see the results laid out in the accompanying table.

At the Onset of a New Cold War

Given the historic crisis of capitalism and the massive shift in the power relations between the Great Powers, it is hardly surprising that the growth of tensions between the imperialist states is accelerating. The emergence of the extraordinarily chauvinistic (and bizarre) Trump administration is therefore not just a bad joke of history (the dominant appearance) but, equally, an expression of historical necessity. "Make America Great Again" objectively reflects the desperate efforts of

U.S. imperialism to stop and reverse the advancing decline of its previous hegemonic position. The grotesque personage of Trump merely expresses the failure of the American bourgeoisie to achieve such a goal.

This massive intensification of Great Power rivalry is reflected in the growing global trade war, the cancellation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty by the U.S. administration, the tensions in the South China Sea, the U.S. aggression against Iran, as well as saber-rattling by leading politicians and military figures on all sides.

Let's give a few examples from the recent past. Retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, warned at the Warsaw Security Forum in October 2018 that "in 15 years ... it is a very strong likelihood that we will be at war with China."²² Britain's Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt warned while visiting Iran that a single, small event could spark a World War I-style catastrophe in the Middle East.²³ A former U.S. Treasury Secretary, Henry Paulson, recently warned of the risks of an "Iron Curtain" descending between the world's two largest economies.²⁴ According to Chinese media, President Xi Jinping has told his military commanders to "concentrate preparations for fighting a war," as tensions continue to grow over the future of the South China Sea and Taiwan.²⁵ U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton has stated that the United States is determined to push back China's and Russia's growing influence in Africa.²⁶

Another expression of the increasing influence of an aggressive imperialist perspective is the rise of Peter Navarro in the Trump administration. He is the current White House adviser on trade. Navarro has authored several recent publications that identify China as the main rival of the United States. One of them has the clarion title *The Coming China Wars*. Unsurprisingly, Navarro is a strong advocate of high tariffs against the Middle Kingdom.²⁷

Graham Allison, a former U.S. Assistant

Secretary of Defense, advocates a similar foreign policy. Allison has introduced the phrase “the Thucydides Trap.” He argues that in most cases the confrontation between a rising power and a ruling power has resulted

The United States, the EU,
and Japan are old, declining,
imperialist powers while China
and Russia are new, rising
powers.

in bloodshed. Consequently, Allison has projected the likelihood of a major confrontation between the United States and China.²⁸

Official Chinese media have similar sober expectations about the future relations between the Great Powers. *Global Times*, the international, English-language central organ of the ruling Communist Party of China, published an article that stated that even if China and the United States can avert a trade war in the short term, there is no reason for optimism:

In the short term, due to the win-win nature of trade, there is still room for negotiation in the trade disputes. Nevertheless, in the medium term, the United States has become aggressive toward the rise of China’s manufacturing sector and the narrowing of the gap in high-tech areas. In the long run, amid the concerns over the Thucydides’ Trap, an overall U.S. containment of China is not entirely impossible. In this sense, China will likely face more conflicts with the United States at different levels, and it is essential to be prepared for a protracted war.²⁹

A whole sequence of books and studies have been published that focus on the increasing tensions between the Great Pow-

ers and warn of major confrontations in the foreseeable future. The *Eurasia Group* wrote, for example,

We aren’t on the brink of World War III. But absent a global security underwriter, and with a proliferation of subnational and non-state actors capable of destabilizing action, the world is a more dangerous place. The likelihood of geopolitical accidents has risen significantly, a trend that will continue. At some point, we’re likely to have a mistake that leads to a confrontation.³⁰

In conclusion, we don’t believe that there will be a simple, orderly replacement of the United States-dominated world order by a China-dominated world order. True, the United States and the West, in general, are in decline and, yes, China is rising. However, it is absurd, a kind of bourgeois pacifism, to imagine that a global transfer of power, wealth, and influence would be possible *without* a world war. The decline of the West and the rise of the East mean, in the first place, an *intensification of the contradictions* between competing imperialist interests rigidly identified with, and defended through, nation-state structures. It means more trade wars, more proxy wars, and, eventually, major wars between rivals. The Western capitalist powers will not go down without a desperate struggle over the question of hegemony.

It would therefore be wrong to exclude the possibility that the Western powers could win such a confrontation. However, if the working class does not succeed in overthrowing all of the capitalist bandits in a timely manner, it is also possible that the result of such a world war will be the annihilation of humanity.

NOTES

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Trump, Syria, and Counter-Revolution

MICHAEL KARADJIS

MUCH HAS TRANSPIRED SINCE Donald Trump's announcement last December that the United States was to withdraw its 2,000 troops from Syria. While the "rapid" withdrawal initially suggested by Trump's tweet has not come about, discussion among U.S. rulers ultimately points in that direction for the simple reason that the United States never had any strategic interest in Syria, had been content to subcontract torture in its "war on terror" to Assad's regime, and, with Israel, knew the regime was a reliable border guard able and willing to keep Palestinians or other militants away from the Israeli-occupied Golan line, quiet for 40 years under the Assads.

The United States was only drawn into Syria to fight the Islamic State (ISIS), and so with the latter's defeat, withdrawal from Syria is a matter of time.

The to-ing and fro-ing—from "rapid" withdrawal, to withdrawal four months later,¹ to keeping 200 troops there²—is usually interpreted to mean that Trump's move was purely a personal whim, in conflict with overall U.S. ruling-class preferences.

It is of course true that Trump acts on whim and speaks a lot of gibberish,³ and a

total, overnight withdrawal would indeed be destabilizing. But momentous decisions rarely go into full effect just because one guy, who does not have dictatorial powers, tweets something.

Trump's idiosyncrasies aside, U.S. withdrawal from Syria is entirely consistent with ruling-class interests. As Steven Simon, who served on the National Security Council in the Clinton and Obama administrations, put it succinctly, Trump's "impulsive and uncoordinated move" nevertheless "coincided with strategic imperative, even if the president himself was unaware of it."⁴

A decision to withdraw cannot automatically mean that all U.S. forces, weaponry, bases, aircraft, and intelligence are gone the next day. Between Trump's impulses and the complexities of actually withdrawing, there was plenty of wiggle room for Trump and other ruling-class figures to negotiate a position that takes U.S. interests into account.

Senator Lindsay Graham got Trump to agree that complete withdrawal should only take place once two conditions are met. The first was that ISIS is totally defeated in Syria. However, it was precisely Trump who had long insisted that the "only" reason for U.S. involvement in Syria was to crush ISIS. The assertions that he was selling out to ISIS had no basis in reality; in any case Trump was correct that the United States and its allied Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had driven ISIS from 99 percent of the country.

Following Trump's "withdrawal" announcement, "between December 16 and

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December 29, U.S.-led coalition military forces conducted 469 air and artillery strikes targeting ISIS in Syria.”⁵ The last major towns occupied by ISIS, Hajin and Kashmah, were captured by the SDF on December 25 and January 2 respectively. Meanwhile, the U.S. military established new bases across the border in Iraq, from where it could continue to bomb the last tiny ISIS positions, withdrawal or otherwise.

Graham’s other condition was that “our Kurdish allies are protected.”⁶ Similar statements were made by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton,⁷ warning Turkey not to attack the SDF⁸ (Pompeo spurting out undiplomatically, “Don’t let the Turks slaughter the Kurds”), for which they were scolded by Turkey.⁹ Meanwhile, the Pentagon will allow the SDF to keep U.S.-supplied weaponry.¹⁰

This insistence by hawkish ruling-class figures casts a different light on the widespread initial assumption that the United States was about to sell out the SDF to Turkish ruler Erdogan. Erdogan had been threatening to move into SDF-controlled northeastern Syria to crush its autonomous Rojava experiment, which Turkey sees as a threat, given its conflict with its own oppressed Kurdish minority. Months later, there is little evidence of this invasion; rather, U.S. withdrawal would likely involve a more gradual process of sell-out of the SDF to the Assad regime, as will be discussed below.

U.S. withdrawal would also expose tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in the Rubkan camp on the Jordanian border to Assadist conquest. The U.S. base at al-Tanf, where it had armed ex-rebel groups to fight ISIS, offered some protection to camp residents, although the United States and Jordan were no better at providing food aid than was the Assad regime. The regime has engaged in its time-honored tactic of starvation siege, an ongoing horror barely considered newsworthy in the West.

Of course, none of the commentary on

withdrawal had anything to say about the Assad regime. Assad has simply never had anything to do with the U.S. presence, one way or another.

In fact, Trump’s order to withdraw came several days after his special envoy to Syria, Jim Jeffrey, declared that “it’s not regime change” the United States is seeking in Syria; “we’re not trying to get rid of Assad,”¹¹ he said in a follow-up to his November 29 address to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Syria. There Jeffrey stated that the United States was committed to a political process that “will change the nature and the behavior of the Syrian government ... [but] *this is not regime change, this is not related to personalities.*”¹²

This was hardly the first time the United States declared it was not trying to get rid of Assad; despite the obsession among Assadists and confused leftists with the idea that the United States was engaged in “regime change,” this was never U.S. policy; below are several of the more open declarations from the last few years:

- In 2016, declaring that the United States was “not seeking so-called regime change as it is known in Syria,” Obama’s Secretary of State John Kerry added that the United States and Russia see the conflict “fundamentally very similarly.”¹³
- In March 2017, Trump’s UN representative, Nikki Haley, declared that the Trump administration was “no longer” focused on removing Assad “*the way the previous administration was.*”¹⁴
- The same month, White House press secretary Sean Spicer noted that “the United States has profound priorities in Syria and Iraq, and we’ve made it clear that counterterrorism, particularly the defeat of ISIS, is foremost among those priorities. With respect to Assad, there is a political reality that we have to accept.”¹⁵
- In July 2017, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson clarified that the only fight in Syria is with ISIS and that Assad’s future is

Russia's issue,¹⁶ and he called upon "all parties, including the Syrian government and its allies, Syrian opposition forces, and coalition forces carrying out the battle to defeat ISIS, to avoid conflict with one another."¹⁷

- Following the one-off U.S. strike on an empty Assadist air base after Assad's chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster explained that the United States had no concern with the fact that the base was being used to bomb Syrians again the next day because harming Assad's military capacities was not the aim of the strike; and far from "regime change," the United States desired a "change in *the nature of the Assad regime and its behavior in particular*."¹⁸

- Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's speech in January 2018 focused on the Geneva process for a "political solution." But now the United States no longer expected Assad to stand down at the beginning of a transition phase, as under early Obama, *or even at its end*, as under late Obama; rather, U.S. policy was now to wait for an eventual "free election" under Assad: "The United States believes that free and transparent elections ... will result in the permanent departure of Assad and his family from power. This process will take time, and we urge patience in the departure of Assad and the establishment of new leadership."¹⁹

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Dispute Within the U.S. Ruling Class

Jeffrey's comments were somewhat surprising, as his arrival in mid-2018 was widely heralded as a "toughening up" of the Trump regime's stance on Assad. In reality, this was only really about Iran and in accord with the Israeli and Gulf-state view of separating Assad from Iran by relying more on Assad's other key ally, Russia.

Jeffrey's issue with the regime's "behavior" largely concerned the removal of "Iranian-led" forces from Syria, which he assessed threaten

"our friends in the region, principally Israel." In contrast, Jeffrey stated that "we seek common ground with Russia in order to resolve the conflict in Syria," asking Russia to "join efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing actions and influence in Syria to remove all Iranian-commanded forces from the country."²⁰

The most vociferous anti-Iran voice, National Security Advisor John Bolton, has always opposed removing Assad, believing, like the alt-left and far-right, that this would bring "al-Qaida" to power.²¹ Thus, these Pentagon and security-apparatus chiefs opposed rapid withdrawal not because they want to "topple Assad," but to block Iranian influence.

This helps explain the insistence of Bolton and Pompeo on protecting their "Kurdish allies"; such ruthless neoconservatives care no more about Kurds than does Trump. At one level, this insistence was simply a matter of U.S. credibility, which would have taken a blow if those who had been the U.S. ground allies against ISIS for four years were dumped in a whim. But in the broader context, a "Kurds for Iran" deal is widely touted,²² that is, a deal with Assad ensuring Iranian-led forces are expelled from Syria in exchange for the United States allowing Assad to "reintegrate" northeast Syria.

Trump, by contrast, was jumping ahead (if we assume he was thinking anything); Assad and Erdogan—both now backed by Trump's Russian allies—could gobble up the northeast, based on an understanding that Russia's own rivalry with Iran in Syria²³ will ensure a "wall" against Iranian influence and that a more solidified Assad regime will be in less need of destabilizing Iranian-backed rabble.

Israel and Gulf States Welcome Back Assad

The absence of Assad as a factor in the United States staying or going can be understood more clearly when we look at the stance of key U.S. allies in the region.

According to an article on the Jewish

News Syndicate site,

Prolonged conflict in Syria saw Israel often hold negotiations with the regime in Damascus in order to reach an agreement. ... The (Israeli) Diplomatic-Security Cabinet decided that Israel would not allow an Iranian military presence there. Since then, Israel has invested considerable efforts in preventing Iran and Hezbollah from establishing themselves in Syria, while making sure it [Israel] inflicts minimal damage to the Damascus regime.²⁴

This long-term Israeli position—yes to Assad, no to Iran—was stressed last year as the regime reconquered the south from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) Southern Front. While Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu declared, “We haven’t had a problem with the Assad regime; for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights,”²⁵ and Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot stressed that Israel will allow “only” Assad regime forces to occupy the Golan “border,”²⁶ ultra-right Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman explained that “Israel prefers to see Syria returning to the situation before the civil war, with the central rule under Assad leadership.”²⁷

This strategy of trying to separate Assad and Iran in collaboration with Russia is in line

with the increasingly assertive position of the Gulf, as seen in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—a bastion of regional counter-revolution—being the first to reopen its embassy in Damascus on December 27.²⁸ The UAE has been pushing for this for years; last June 8, UAE Foreign Minister Dr. Anwar Gargash declared, “I think it was a mistake to kick Syria out of the Arab League,” referring to the Syrian opposition as “al-Qaida-based.”²⁹ The UAE move was closely followed by Bahrain, which referred to “brotherly Syria.”³⁰ This was preceded by the visit to Damascus by Sudanese tyrant Omar al-Bashir, the first Arab head of state to visit since 2011;³¹ Jordan’s reopening of its border with Syria, where the two countries will now share a “free trade” zone;³² and the high-level visit to Cairo by Assad’s security chief Ali Mamlouk on December 22,³³ though al-Sisi’s brutal Egyptian dictatorship has been pro-Assad ever since the UAE-backed coup in 2013.³⁴ These states are pushing to have Syria’s membership of the Arab League restored; on March 20, Egypt’s Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, announced that “Egypt doesn’t have any conditions for Syria returning to the Arab League,” adding that “Cairo and Damascus have strong ties.”³⁵

Returning to the Jewish News Syndicate article, a senior Israeli official refused to comment on the decision

by some Arab states, such as Bahrain and the UAE, to reopen their embassies in Damascus, saying only that the rapprochement between Arab states and Syria was “less dangerous for Israel because these Arab states also want to see Iran out of Syria.”

Trump’s “withdrawal” tweet was aligned with this



Leaders of the U.S, Israel, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, and Egypt hoping to pay their respects to the Arab Spring, the Kurds, and the Palestinians.

strategy of states that have been strongly allied with Trump since the onset of his presidency. These same states—UAE, Jordan, Egypt, and Bahrain—also have close ties with Putin’s Russia; the first three welcomed the Russian invasion of Syria in 2015, as did Israel.³⁶

In retrospect, the well-publicized, semi-secret meetings that took place before and since Trump’s election, between Trump and Putin personnel and involving the UAE, Israeli officials, and former Blackwater folk, had a clear logic: push back the oversized Iranian influence by bolstering the Assad regime’s counter-revolutionary “stability” so that it no longer needs so much Iranian rabble to do its fighting. According to David Hearst, writing in *Middle East Eye*, a more recent meeting between intelligence officials of Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia “hatched a plan to welcome Syrian President Bashar al-Assad back into the Arab League to marginalize the regional influence of Turkey and Iran.”³⁷

Or, perhaps, this is not as clear as it seems; rather, use of the rhetoric of pushing back the Iranian “threat” (as if the Iranian contra gangs were a threat to anyone but the Syrian people) may simply aim to justify their main aim anyway, that of bolstering Assad’s victorious counter-revolution, putting what they hope to be the final nails in the coffin of the Arab Spring, which Assad, al-Sisi, the UAE, the Saudis, Netanyahu, Trump, Putin, and the Ayatollahs are united in hating with a passion.

This is more significant now with Assad’s need for “reconstruction” funding, which neither Russia nor Iran will be able to provide enough of. Western countries, meanwhile, are (currently) sticking to the line that the Geneva process of political settlement needs to get off the ground first. The move by the Gulf is a signal to Damascus: Push Iran aside somewhat, and we’re here to provide the funds. A high-level visit by one of the UAE’s largest real estate companies to meet Syrian partners in Damascus underlines this dynamic.³⁸

The wild card is the big state behind the

UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan: Saudi Arabia. Gangland leader Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman cares nothing about either the Syrian or the Palestinian people; it is widely assumed that the more forward-moving states have Saudi backing, with Mohammad bin Salman dropping hints like “Bashar is staying. ... I believe that Bashar’s interests are not to let the Iranians do whatever they want they want to do.”³⁹

However, Riyadh is more tempered due to its special position as head of the Sunni world and because it has more at stake in its regional rivalry with Iran than do its underlings. The UAE has a raging economic relationship with Iran,⁴⁰ and only uses the “push Iran aside” rationale to butter up its Saudi allies; and there are no Shia in Egypt to cause al-Sisi to care about Iranian influence.

“Analysis” That May Have Been Useful Half a Century Ago

Much binary, mechanical “geopolitics” in recent years imagines the moves by some Gulf states to mend ties with Israel as representing a “U.S.-backed axis” opposed to a “Russian-backed” Iran and Assad. Take a breath, dear Manicheans: The same states carrying out rapprochement with Israel are carrying out rapprochement with Assad. The closest to both Israel and Assad is al-Sisi’s Egypt; the race to the finish-line states in both cases include the UAE and Bahrain; the more cautious behind-the-scenes power is Saudi Arabia.

This even includes the less expected: Sudan’s “Islamist” regime that was the first to visit Assad was also moving toward normalization with Israel;⁴¹ three delegations from the pro-Assad Iraqi regime visited Israel;⁴² while the always strongly pro-Iran and pro-Assad Sultan Qaboos of Oman hosted a state visit from Netanyahu.⁴³

Countless left analysts, alongside much of the mainstream media, continue to write

as if they are living half a century ago, even 30 years after the end of the Cold War. It is unclear how such “analysis” purports to deal with such elephants in the room as the raging Israeli-Russian relationship (not only over Syria but also Crimea and so on), Putin and Netanyahu having met at least a dozen times since 2015;⁴⁴ the raging Egypt-Russia relationship (for instance, their deal to build Egypt’s first nuclear plant);⁴⁵ the UAE concluding a declaration of “strategic partnership” with Russia;⁴⁶ the growing Saudi ties with Russia, especially over oil politics;⁴⁷ and the U.S.-Iranian joint-venture regime in Iraq, a key Assad ally.

Forget absurd Cold War fantasies; what we’re dealing with here are not even clashes of “rival empires.” As always, imperial rivalries do explain some of what is going on. But even this remains a sideshow compared to the principle dynamic, the alliance of counter-revolutionary powers to bury the Syrian revolution, symbolizing the burial of the Arab Spring.

Where Does Iran Fit In?

One problem, however, is that Turkey and Iran are also counter-revolutionary powers, yet both are seen as enemies by these Saudi-aligned states who are making up with Assad, as well as by Trump and Israel. Let’s take them one at a time.

Is Iran being made the fall guy because it represents some kind of “revolutionary” threat to imperialist order in the region, due to reverberations going back to 1979? Hardly. The regime’s savage repression of working-class struggle is entirely in tandem with the average U.S.-backed dictatorship in the region. Considering it is the United States that is denying its own companies lucrative investment opportunities in Iran, rather than Iran nationalizing or expelling these companies, the idea of Iran as a “revolutionary” threat makes little sense.

The preference of major European coun-

tries and companies to be fully engaged in profit-making ventures in Iran is entirely logical imperialist policy. Likewise, the Obama administration’s policy of bringing Iran back into the fold via the nuclear treaty and the lifting of sanctions was entirely logical. When Obama explained that “there’s incredible talent and resources and sophistication inside of Iran, and it would be a very successful regional power” if it signed the nuclear treaty;⁴⁸ when, by contrast, he claimed that “the biggest threats” to the Saudis and Gulf states “may not be coming from Iran invading” but “from dissatisfaction inside their own countries”;⁴⁹ when Vice President Joseph Biden claimed the “biggest problem” in Syria was U.S. allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia,⁵⁰ accusing them of pouring “hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons” into the Syrian opposition—all this was logical imperialist policy.

Obama could see that a relatively sophisticated, modernizing capitalist state of 80 million people may be a better bet as an ally in imposing regional “stability” than archaic Gulf monarchies built on sand and oil that could come tottering down. He understood how to separate this reality from toothless anti-American and anti-Zionist rhetoric emanating from Tehran, which he understood to be a product of history and mainly of use for internal Iranian nationalist mobilization and regime validation.

Trump’s reversal of these policies partly stems from a narrow alignment with Iran’s regional Saudi and Israeli rivals, alongside a revived neoconservative need for a traditional “enemy” target to justify warmongering and militarism, which, similar to Tehran’s rhetoric, is also justified by alleged “historical grievance” and largely designed for domestic mobilization. On a larger scale, this reversal may also be related to Trump’s view of China as the major U.S. global rival, given Iran’s key role in China’s mammoth Belt and Road Initiative,⁵¹ stretching across Asia from China to Italy.

Israel reacted to Trump’s withdrawal

tweet by stepping up attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. This was tolerated as always by the Russian air defenses in Syria; the visit at that time by Russian senators to Israel to discuss the “joint struggle against terrorism” was likely part of this process.⁵²

Is this because Iran is a “threat” to Israel? This is one of the most laughable versions of “Iranian threat” discourse; the nuclear-armed First World state has hit hundreds of Iranian-backed targets in Syria (while being careful always to not weaken Assad in the process), while the far weaker Iranian regime has almost never even returned fire, let alone initiated it. Yet Iran “threatens” Israel? Iran doesn’t even threaten the illegal Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan, let alone Israel.

Israel hits Iranian targets because the biggest bully on the block doesn’t like the affront to its power of a bunch of unruly militias running around its “backyard” shouting empty “death to Israel” slogans, not because these, relatively speaking, street thugs are actually a threat to the regional crime boss. As a threat to the Syrian people, their insolence could be tolerated, but with Assad’s military dominance ensured, they are now dispensable trash. Once again, the great Israeli-Iranian enmity is highly symbolic; both use an alleged “existential” threat to bolster their sectarian-based projects at home and project power in the region, *the fierceness of the rhetoric mediated by safe geographic distance*.

In contrast, Saudi geopolitical rivalry with Iran (and both countries’ with Turkey) has a more material reality; these medium-sized powers further their quest for sub-imperial regional domination by using sectarian positioning (if not radical sectarian politics, as often assumed), being heads of the two major schools of Islam. The presence of an oppressed Shiite minority in eastern Saudi Arabia, which Iran attempts to influence, is a further reason for tension.

However, as an outsider to the Arab world, Iran’s only real influence has been gained via such sectarian positioning among

Shia populations within multiconfessional states such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. This tends to lead to sectarian conflict rather than unity against corrupt and repressive rulers. The one and only place Iranian influence was aligned with a potential revolutionary overthrow was among the Shia majority that rose up against the minority monarchy of tiny Bahrain at the onset of the Arab Spring, an uprising swiftly crushed by the Saudis.

Therefore, warnings that Iran will not leave Syria “completely,” and that therefore the Gulf states and Israel are deluding themselves by relying on Assad, reveal fundamental misunderstandings. As another counter-revolutionary state, Iran is a threat to no one except the Syrian people who it has helped brutalize on behalf of Assad. Iran’s real and symbolic rivals do not need all Iranian forces, companies, and influence to leave Syria “completely,” as if Iran were some unique virus. “Victory” in such “wars” of position is gained via the clipping of wings; victory is symbolic, about prestige, about appearance, about influence. The heightened rhetoric of Iranian “threat” in Israeli and Saudi discourse results from a large regional rival, which uses a particular rhetorical flourish, becoming too big for its boots; pushing it back will be their “victory.”

According to David Hearst, the Israeli, Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi intelligence chiefs at the alleged “welcome back Assad” meeting discussed above “did not expect Bashar to break relations with Iran, but they wanted Bashar to use the Iranians rather than be used by them.”

Iran has overreached anyway; it cannot completely dominate Syria, let alone afford the costs of reconstruction, so it will have to be satisfied with some presence and some reconstruction contracts that its Russian rival doesn’t edge it out of. Iran is much more heavily invested in neighboring Iraq, yet even there it is unable to exercise economic domination.⁵³

Turkey, an Outlier from the Counter-revolutionary Dynamic?

Meanwhile, Saudi-allied UAE, Egypt, and Jordan are far more invested in confronting Turkish influence; they view the Sunni-populist Muslim Brotherhood (MB)—connected to Turkey's Erdogan regime, the Qatari Emir, and Hamas—as their key enemy. Their public anti-Iranian stance is mostly for the purpose of maintaining their coalition with Saudi Arabia, which is equally hostile to both Iran and the MB-aligned bloc.

The intelligence officials at the “welcome back Assad” meeting allegedly “considered Turkey, rather than Iran, to be their major military rival in the region. ... The Israelis told the meeting that Iran could be contained militarily, but that Turkey had a far greater capability.” There is some logic in this. Iran's rhetoric is loud in proportion to its hollowness, as explained above. By contrast, by playing the populist card via the MB throughout the Arab Spring, Turkey and Qatar were engaged in what these other conservative states consider a dangerous game among the Sunni masses of Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, and the Gulf.

However, the aim of Turkey and Qatar in playing populism was merely to saddle the Arab Spring uprisings with their conservative MB leadership, in a “softer” counter-revolutionary endeavor than more traditional forms of direct repression preferred by the Saudi-UAE bloc. One example of the Saudi-UAE bloc's style of repression was the bloody coup they orchestrated in Egypt in 2013 against the Turkish and Qatari backed, MB-led, elected Morsi government.

Moreover, despite the rivalry between, and different tactical approaches of, the Saudi-led and Turkey-led blocs, Putin's coddling of Erdogan highlights the fact that Turkey's own direction regarding Syria is not fundamentally different. Indeed it has taken a sharp turn in the last few years, corresponding to an internal realignment of Erdogan's

moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party with its previous opponents on the secular-nationalist right, including the far-right Nationalist Movement Party.

It is true that Turkey is still supporting the Syrian opposition's control of much of northwest Syria. Turkey's aim is hardly to encourage revolution; it simply wants to avert a brutal Assadist conquest that would send hundreds of thousands more Syrian refugees into Turkey, which already accommodates 3.7 million refugees. Nevertheless, at this stage it corresponds to an existential need of the beleaguered opposition.

But Turkey's main interest in its weakened and dependent rebel allies is for use as cannon fodder to help drive the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and SDF out of northeastern Syria, just as many were earlier used in Turkey's plunder and “cleansing” of Kurdish-majority Afrin. From Putin's point of view, Erdogan's support for rebel Idlib can be tolerated as long as Turkey holds the rebels back from any active front against Assad. As Assad takes advantage of the Russian-Turkish negotiated “ceasefire” to pummel the region with massive bombing, which killed 160 civilians and drove 90,000 from their homes just between mid-February and early March,⁵⁴ Putin also double-crosses Erdogan by joining the terror—bombing hospitals, bakeries, and civil rescue centers⁵⁵—while Turkey remains pliant. And by setting the rebels and the YPG-SDF against each other—a dynamic which the YPG itself has also fed⁵⁶—both can be weakened against Assad in the long run.

Indeed, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's oxymoronic statement that Turkey can “work with Assad” if he wins a “democratic election” represents Turkey's own overture to the regime;⁵⁷ and it was recently confirmed that Assad's security chief, Ali Mamlouk, met Turkish intelligence last December.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Turkey's ally Qatar quietly follows the same path of accommodation with Assad as its Gulf rivals,⁵⁹ especially with “reconstruction,” though claiming it will

not restore diplomatic relations.⁶⁰

‘Withdrawal’ a Green Light to Erdogan?

Almost every analyst initially claimed that Trump’s withdrawal announcement was a sell-out of the SDF to Erdogan, a green light to Turkey to carry out its threatened invasion of northeast Syria. This interpretation is understandable; it was preceded by Turkey’s decision to buy U.S. patriot missiles, widely believed to have sealed the deal. While this would contradict Trump’s alliance with the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis, such double-dealing by a large imperialist power would hardly be remarkable.

However, there are indications that this theory had little reality. Since Trump first raised the issue of withdrawal in early 2018, discussion began to be aired of troops from the Gulf replacing U.S. troops in northeastern Syria;⁶¹ around the time, Saudi Arabia provided \$100 million to the SDF-ruled region. In the context of the current Gulf recognition of Assad, this idea takes on a new meaning, especially given alleged discussion of pro-Assad, anti-Turkey Egyptian and Emirati troops taking part.⁶²

In any case, there has been no sign of Turkish invasion, talk of which was arguably more about nationalistic mobilization inside Turkey than any real desire for such a dangerous adventure. The SDF holds a vast area of northeast and central-east Syria; it is not as if Turkey was ever likely to invade as far south as Raqqa, let alone Deir ez-Zor! Turkey would confront widespread resistance trying to occupy such a large region; it is not like isolated Afrin.

However, the initial main theater of interest was Manbij in the north, where U.S.-Turkish dealing had been going on for months. Manbij is the only SDF possession west of the Euphrates River, where Turkey had previously drawn a red line against the SDF. The SDF had already agreed that only

non-YPG elements of the SDF would remain in this Arab-majority city. Being close to the Turkish border, Erdogan’s threats following Trump’s announcement did have an air of reality, so the SDF, feeling vulnerable to U.S. abandonment, called in the Assad regime to “protect Syria’s border.” The regime sent troops to nearby Arima to block a possible Turkish offensive against Manbij.

To this, Erdogan reacted that he had no problem with Assad taking over Manbij, as long as it means the YPG leave,⁶³ which the regime claimed had occurred upon its entry into Arima⁶⁴ (the YPG claims to have already left the city to only Arab members of the SDF in 2016).

This suggests that both the Turkish-backed rebels and the SDF were being played; that Trump’s withdrawal threat merely strengthened Assad’s hand in the region vis a vis the SDF; and that even in the northern border region where one might expect a withdrawal to favor Turkey, “withdrawal” had the effect of browbeating the SDF into caving in to Assad.

Some small-scale Turkish operation may still take place close to the border, so that Erdogan’s rhetoric does not appear too hollow, but even this could only occur if coordinated with Moscow, which is also coordinating with Assad. This is because, as with other Turkish operations in northern Syria, it will be essential to acquire Russian permission to use Syrian air space (assuming that U.S. forces do actually leave).⁶⁵ This will give Russia ultimate control over the extent of such an operation.

... or to Assad?

And here we return to the idea that U.S. withdrawal would be less a green light to Erdogan to attack the SDF than a more gradual process of sell-out of the SDF to the Assad regime.

Trump’s initial withdrawal tweet even suggests this: “Russia, Iran, Syria & others are the local enemy of ISIS. We were doing there [sic] work.”⁶⁶ In other words, the

Assad regime should be allowed into the east to continue “fighting ISIS.” It was no surprise that Trump’s friends in Russia praised Trump’s decision.⁶⁷ This was soon followed by movement of Assadist forces toward SDF-controlled eastern Deir ez-Zor.⁶⁸

However, some clarification may be in order: How can a U.S. withdrawal favor Assad if the U.S. presence in Syria was never opposed to the regime in the first place? Here we need to understand the U.S. relationship with the SDF. The basis of the U.S. choice of the SDF, rather than Syrian rebels, as its ally against ISIS was that the SDF does not fight the Assad regime (except when attacked); and dropping the fight against Assad was always the key demand the United States had put on FSA units if they were to be armed against ISIS. Other than a few micro-groups, most of the FSA, while actively fighting ISIS themselves, refused to accept such a demand, which would have nullified their entire purpose.

This meant the United States and SDF fought ISIS in the east, in a war almost entirely disconnected from Assad’s war against the rebellion, which largely took place in western Syria. But while the SDF did not fight Assad, neither is it pro-Assad; rather, it is interested in building its own project, the “Rojava revolution,” in its own space, separate from both Assad and the rebels. Thus, the United States was maintaining a region outside Assad’s direct control. However, this was never the ultimate U.S. aim, which was merely to use the SDF to defeat ISIS.

Of course, U.S. calls to protect its Kurdish-led allies, and the continued delivery of arms to the SDF, potentially pose a problem for Assad as well as Erdogan. Currently, however, Assad’s strategy is not to openly attack the SDF—a massive operation which the regime does not have the capacity for at present—but rather to use the atmosphere of the Turkish threat and U.S. withdrawal to “negotiate” with the SDF from a position of strength.

Reintegration with the regime is also the

SDF strategy (and some SDF leaders even want a deal with Assad regardless of U.S. moves).⁶⁹ Essentially, the United States, its Gulf allies, and the SDF leadership are on the same wavelength when it comes to the Assad regime, preferring a “soft reintegration” of the northeast into the Assadist state; to the extent the United States gradually abandons the SDF, and the SDF attempts to negotiate a deal with Assad, the two processes are largely in harmony.

Of course, the SDF hopes to maintain some degree of autonomy for its Rojava statelet. However, Assad is in a militarily powerful position, having largely defeated the rebels; his regime is under no pressure to concede anything. Assad may bargain now, just to stave off Turkey, but even this would involve the reduction of autonomy to such fig-leaf status that the SDF could hardly agree without liquidating its cause. With Assad-SDF negotiations likely to be overseen by Russia,⁷⁰ the flavor of such negotiations is obvious.

In any case, once Assad’s state is more secure and “normalized,” and the opposition in the northwest crushed, he will turn and crush Rojava and any hint of autonomy as well, as he has always promised to.

But why would the United States agree to hand back Syrian territory to the regime? To ask this question reveals basic misunderstandings. Why wouldn’t Trump want Assad to reconquer Syrian territory is a better question; at times, the United States has directly helped Assad do so. The mistake was to assume that the U.S. presence in northeast Syria, in aiding the SDF, had any purpose other than that endlessly stated by U.S. leaders—to defeat ISIS. “That’s it,” as Trump has continually said. The United States had no more interest in helping the SDF build its alternative than it ever had of aiding the rebellion against Assad.

Former Obama advisor Steven Simon explains that the United States needs to persuade the Kurds to “accept that they are not going to get the same deal that their Iraqi

cousins have won from Baghdad,” while the atmosphere of Turkish threat and U.S. withdrawal “will probably convince the Kurds that they have little choice.” Simon adds:

The Syrian regime could provide meaningful incentives, such as integrating the Kurdish forces into Damascus’ chain of command. ... Then, either directly or through the United Nations, the United States will have to talk to the Assad regime on the premise that a restoration of Syrian state authority in northeast Syria, including the re-entry of Syrian government forces, is required to stabilize that part of the country over the long term. To this end, the United States will have to deal with the Russians as well, so there is a coordinated approach to both the Turks and the Syrian regime.

U.S. leaders currently fear the loss of credibility that would result from precipitously dumping their SDF allies in the face of any brutal reconquest by Assad or Erdogan, while also likely seeing the SDF-controlled northeast as a bargaining chip to get Assad to reduce Iran’s presence. Meanwhile, Assad also wants to avoid direct confrontation with the SDF until his other enemies are defeated. But eventually the SDF’s usefulness to both U.S. imperialism and Assad’s tyranny will run its course.

Rebel-Kurdish Division Fatal

SDF spokesperson Jia Kurd explained that an Assad-SDF agreement “will give a big push toward ending the occupation and terrorism in Syria.”⁷¹ One could assume that by “terrorism” the SDF was referring to ISIS, but given that the United States and SDF have driven ISIS from Syria, this designation likely refers to the rebels; the leaders of the SDF from the Democratic Union Party have long referred to anti-Assad rebels collectively as “terrorists” and “jihadists,” while rarely listing the regime as an enemy.

Of course, this talk takes place following the participation of many rebel groups in the

Turkish-led invasion of Kurdish Afrin early last year, leading to an orgy of killing and looting and the expulsion of some 150,000 Kurds from the region, along with those groups’ promise to do the same again if Turkey were to invade the northeast. But then this in turn occurred following the YPG’s alliance with the murderous Russian air force in early 2016, as it invaded and captured the Arab-majority Tal Rifaat-Menagh region north of Aleppo from the rebels, likewise expelling tens of thousands of people and cutting off besieged Aleppo from its hinterland bordering Turkey, sealing the city’s fate.

Moreover, if Putin and Assad eventually do give Erdogan the go-ahead to attack the SDF in some part of northeastern Syria—as implied by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov’s recent referral to the 1998 Syria-Turkey Adana Treaty that allowed for Turkish cross-border raids against “terrorists”⁷²—there is likely to be some quid pro quo in the northwest—such as Erdogan agreeing to further Assadist encroachment into southern parts of Greater Idlib. It would be the ultimate irony to watch rebel (or ex-rebel) troops attacking the SDF in the northeast as part of a Turkish operation while Assad and Russia further slice into the last part of rebel Syria in the northwest.

While the differences between Syrian Kurds and rebels were already apparent in 2011, years of genocidal violence by an overwhelmingly militarily dominant regime, backed by massive foreign intervention and otherwise international indifference, has partially made proxies of the main leaderships on both sides. It is very difficult to criticize from afar. Who can blame the rebels for their alliance with Turkey, which almost alone in the world provided some support to the people facing genocide, while accommodating 3.7 million Syrian refugees, the biggest refugee population in the world? Who can blame the SDF for allying with the United States against such a monstrous enemy as ISIS, especially when faced with extinction in Kobane?

However, the resulting hardening of the division between the Arab and Kurdish populations outside Assadist control has been the death-knell of both, leading them into further dependence on, and the threat of abandonment by, foreign interests, to the benefit only of the regime. The inability of the main leaderships on both sides to present a united front against all the enemies of the popular masses has been a decisive card in the hands of Assad and the regional counter-revolution.

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Palestinian Youth

The Next Stage of Resistance

TARIQ KENNEY-SHAWA

IN THE FACE OF FALTERING CONFIDENCE in the prospects of a two-state solution, Palestinians find themselves once again in a state of limbo, bound by a peace process that has not only failed to award them independence, but has only deepened their suffering and heightened the conflict's intractability. Time and time again, it has been argued that due to the interlocked physical reality, mutual population penetrations, shared natural resources, rights of refugees, the inherently unjust nature of separation, and the deep spiritual and historical ties to the land shared by Palestinians and Israelis alike, sustainable peace can only be achieved through integration. Even if a two-state solution were to be established, Palestinian independence would exist in name only. Whether it be based on a secular democratic structure, a binational framework, or a creative parallel state apparatus, the only path to genuine, lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis clearly lies in extensive levels of cooperation, a reality of coexistence, and the extensive process of establishing mutual recognition.

Today, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has assumed a new position amidst a rapidly changing Middle East and a tumultuous shift in the division of world power; eclipsed by the proliferation of high-intensity armed conflicts throughout the region. From the ongoing Syrian civil war, which has commanded the attention of international policymakers

and aid organizations, to the rising tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which have come to shape key regional alliances and conflict zones, the Palestinian question has largely fallen by the wayside. This convoluted reality has contributed to a crippling impasse that disproportionately impacts Palestinians as their suffering continues, isolated from international and regional focus.

Across the board, conflict-resolution discourse has ignored perhaps the most vital component of a future solution: Palestinian youth. In Palestine and across the Middle East, young people constitute a much larger portion of the population than their counterparts in the West; however, despite their demographic weight, their needs have largely gone unnoticed and their opinions often violently suppressed. The consequences of their marginalization were made clear with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, as thousands of youth across the region found a voice following decades of suppression. In Palestine, emerging from the ashes of the Oslo process, the youth demographic represents a fresh path toward resolution and an opportunity to lead the necessary shifts in conflict discourse. Hence it is vital that future attempts at resolution consider the needs of young Palestinians in order to provide the equality of voice that is necessary in achieving a just, inclusive settlement.

The goal of this article is to examine how the next generation of Palestinians might avoid succumbing to a future of perennial suffering in silence under the status quo, and how instead it might regain attention and reframe the conflict discourse. Thus, we must

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ask: Would the quest for equal rights be better served through a civil rights-based approach with the aim of achieving an integrative solution to the conflict?

At this impasse, in the words of Menachem Klein, “the ball is in the Palestinians’ court,” as they face Israel’s complex, oppressive machine in addition to international apathy. Palestinians face the arduous tasks of regaining global attention to their efforts to balance the asymmetrical relationship on which the conflict has been based for decades and reframing the conflict parameters. This calls for a paradigmatic shift from political agendas that dictate separation to a rendering of Palestinians and Israelis as internal, rather than external, to each other. By removing the aura of separation and the façade of two separate nation-states, the conflict can be framed truthfully as one between a settler-colonial movement and the indigenous population. In this frame, self-determination rather than statehood represents the main concern of Palestinians since “self-determination belongs not to national groups as national groups, but to the legitimate residents of any region whose status is unsettled.”¹ With this in mind, young Palestinians must first address their own fragmentation in a battle against Israeli divide-and-conquer tactics, reevaluate the roles of their own political institutions, and lay the groundwork for a prolonged civil-rights campaign that will cement the one-state reality, abandoning separation for good.

The Role of the Palestinian Authority

Perhaps the most imperative issue for evaluation is the role of the political bodies that currently serve to represent the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Emerging as a product of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was founded to serve as a semi-autonomous government structure with the goal of facilitating the eventual establishment of an independent

Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Palestinians have since viewed the PA as the primary vehicle for aspirations of statehood and sovereignty and the central focal point for institution-building. However, the Palestinian leadership has come under growing criticism regarding issues ranging from internal corruption and inefficiency to their failure to lessen the burdens of occupation, let alone achieve actual independence. A recent poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that a majority of Palestinians actually view the PA as a burden, over 64 percent want President Mahmoud Abbas to resign, and a vast margin have lost faith in the administration’s ability to continue the peace process and establish an independent state.² Some have even abandoned their calls for independence for fear of the substandard political reality that the PA would establish if statehood were to be achieved. While it is abundantly clear that the PA has failed in its central objective of achieving independence, it can be argued that the inherent nature of this form of Palestinian leadership is counterproductive to an integrative solution to the conflict.

The first and most obvious point of criticism lies in the accusations of institutional weakness and corruption that have plagued the PA since its inception. The PA is almost entirely dependent on aid from external sources, ranging from the U.S. government to sympathetic Arab governments and influencers. Between 2001 and 2008, the level of donor aid to the PA increased by 500 percent, reaching a staggering 58 percent of the GDP, a level of dependence that continues to rise.³ While much of the economic growth in the Palestinian territories can be attributed to increases in donor aid, a 2012 World Bank report found that the growth is not sustainable due to its heavy dependence on continued flows of indefinite external funds.⁴ The fracturing of the Palestinian economy at the hands of the Israeli occupation has effectively morphed the Palestinian existence into a hu-

manitarian problem, laying responsibility for sustaining the Palestinian population in the hands of the PA and the international community. The incessant dependence on aid has instilled in Palestinians a sense that they are intruders on their own land, living in submission and dependence, and has “engineer[ed] them into perpetual beggars.”⁵ As a result, the international community’s commitment to relief and charity, rather than assisting in the quest to achieve Palestinian self-determination, has simply allowed the perpetuation and consolidation of the status quo.

Silence and cooperation in regard to the ongoing occupation has been the main condition for continued funding and the central reason the PA is permitted to continue with limited autonomy. Palestinian tax revenue is actually controlled by Israel, which has repeatedly withheld funding from the PA in retaliation for acts of Palestinian resistance that range from violence to attempts to further the case for independence in the United Nations. In March 2015, Israel withheld over \$130 million in monthly tax and customs revenue to punish the PA for its attempts to join the International Criminal Court, a move that would raise pressure on Israel regarding potential war crimes.⁶ With mounting debt, the PA has found itself increasingly unable to pay employee salaries, further increasing its dependence on donor support and exacting a devastating effect on the economy. Due to this high dependence on donor aid and Israeli economic cooperation, Palestinians are further silenced for fear of losing the sustenance they require.

More significant than the institutional and financial weaknesses of the PA is the fact that the governing body fails to adequately represent the entirety of the Palestinian population and actually enhances the occupation, rather than providing an effective channel for resistance. Since its establishment, the PA has failed at representing a majority of the Palestinian population due to its push for an independent state within the West Bank

and Gaza Strip, focusing almost exclusively on programs catered toward Palestinians of the occupied territories. To further compound this, the right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees has been put on hold in today’s negotiations to the point that Palestinian officials have themselves admitted that refugees may never be included in a final deal. Additionally, the PA does not represent the Palestinian citizens of Israel, as they have come to form their own political organizations independently. In effect, not only does the PA fail to represent a majority of the Palestinian population, it furthers the fragmentation of the Palestinian movement and political identity.

Most importantly, the PA has come to serve two central roles that allow for the continuation of the Israeli occupation and the overarching conflict paradigm. First, the PA relieves the occupier from the bulk of the costly and routine responsibilities of conducting a protracted military occupation, while serving as a façade of independent government. It assumes roles ranging from providing goods and services to those living under occupation to establishing an internal security network that cooperates with the Israeli military to prevent resistance from the occupied population. The PA security forces have even been known to forcibly stifle protests against the Israeli occupation and have been accused of carrying out torture and infringing on free speech. A report issued by the Ramallah-based Coalition for Accountability and Integrity found that the security sector received over \$1.078 billion of the overall \$3.86 billion Palestinian budget, a portion of the budget that was larger than the health and education sectors combined.⁷ As a result, the professionalized PA security forces have been dubbed “subcontractors” that allow Israel to maintain the occupation while avoiding direct contact that damages its image abroad. In other words, the “dirty work” is carried out by the PA themselves, further perpetuating Israel’s disengagement

initiative and allowing Israel to selectively extricate itself from the equation, yet maintain overarching control over the entirety of the territories.

Second, the PA effectively shields Israel from the non-Jewish demographic threat, keeping the ever-growing Palestinian population on the “other side” of the divide. By building semi-autonomous political infrastructure and pursuing policies aimed at achieving independent statehood, the PA gave Israel an alternative to outright ethnic cleansing in their attempts to maintain a Jewish majority within Israel proper while simultaneously and gradually expanding Israel’s territory.

In effect, any Palestinian government bent on independence inherently opposes and obstructs the formalization of the one-state reality. This puts the final touch on Israel’s disengagement strategy, all while directing Palestinian resistance efforts to the goal of independence and furthering Israel’s conflict narrative that blurs the internal, asymmetrical relationship that actually defines Israeli-Palestinian relations.

The PA has come to represent an unproductive conduit of Palestinian energy, as anger is channeled through petty internal disputes and accusations of corruption that merely contribute to the continued disintegration of potential Palestinian political clout. Popular frustration has not been effectively translated into mobilization against the Israeli occupation, but rather toward ongoing disputes like the divide between Fatah and Hamas. While resistance was once expressed through grassroots-led actions like the First Intifada, Palestinians now depend on the weak PA and its futile negotiation attempts in hopes of achieving the central goals of self-determination and an end to the occupation. In truth, the PA has come to truly embody aspirations for statehood, thus epitomizing a path doomed for continued failure.

The Future of Palestinian Nonviolent Resistance

With this in mind, it is clear that the only way to shift the conflict discourse away from the failed two-state paradigm and toward an integrative movement for self-determination is by dissolving the PA, forcing Israel to reassume full occupation responsibilities over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Since the dissolution of the PA would represent a tactical component of the strategic shift, Palestinians will have to refrain from establishing institutions or interim autonomous governance in order to force Israel to face two options. The first would be Israel’s consolidation of the one-state reality, which would subsequently pave the way for a protracted Palestinian civil rights movement. The second would be Israel’s termination of the occupation entirely, which, according to precedent, seems highly unlikely. Of course, this would necessitate an agreement with Hamas and all Palestinian political factions in order to ensure that they do not attempt to take advantage of the potential vacuum to expand their powers. Palestinian political representatives will have to focus their leadership efforts on mobilizing the masses through a grassroots campaign for nonviolence. The absence of the PA—and in essence any autonomous government—would effectively render the Palestinian-Israeli relationship increasingly reminiscent of apartheid South Africa, a vital comparison in the process of reframing the conflict paradigm as one between a settler-colonial power and the indigenous population, and a potentially strategic move that the Israeli leadership has been openly wary of.

Although it is important to recognize the disparities between the two situations, in particular the fact that the South African state depended on black South Africans for cheap labor and then denied them the right to vote, the prospects of the Palestinian population falling under direct control of the Israeli government drastically alters the situation.

Will the now-leaderless Palestinians then be able to vote freely in Israeli elections? Or will Israel deny them that right, among others, in an effort to maintain Israel's status as a Jewish state, effectively delegitimizing Israel's widely touted claims of being the "only democracy in the Middle East." With this in mind, the South African experience presents not only an encouraging example of what was once a seemingly impossible reconciliation process, but a model of potentially productive tactics that may be implemented in a strategic push for an integrative solution to the conflict. The civil rights struggle against apartheid in South Africa gained worldwide attention, exposing the injustices of the apartheid regime and gaining vast international support, which proved vital in buttressing the internal civil rights movement that triggered the ultimate fall of the apartheid regime.

For decades, in line with the overarching fear of a demographic imbalance, Israeli leaders have repeatedly noted the threat that a Palestinian civil rights movement within an integrative state framework would be to the future of the Jewish state. In 2004, Ehud Olmert, then deputy prime minister of Israel, commented that "more and more Palestinians are uninterested in a negotiated, two-state solution, because they want to change the essence of the conflict from an Algerian paradigm to a South African one. ... That is, of course, a much cleaner struggle, a much more popular struggle—and ultimately a much more powerful one. For us, it would mean the end of a Jewish state."⁸ Thus the Palestinian demographic advantage is clear, not necessarily as a means of strictly pursuing an integrative solution, but as a vital bargaining chip for civil rights. Faced with a formalization of its status as a clearly undemocratic state, Israel will have to either permanently give up its expansionist ideals by granting Palestinian independence or abandon its status as a democratic state. Choosing the latter would mean enduring a protracted civil rights movement that would

likely end in either a secular democracy or a binational state. If Israel's nondemocratic nature is successfully exposed to the world, the international pro-Israel lobby will find it increasingly difficult to defend Israel's moral position.

It was, after all, the clarity of the cause that made South Africa's anti-apartheid movement so attractive to the world community. The clear, inbuilt framework for injustice and the obvious asymmetrical relationship between the indigenous oppressed and settler-colonial oppressor differentiates the South African anti-apartheid movement from the current Palestinian struggle for self-determination and justice. Despite facing similar discriminatory policies both in the occupied territories and Israel, Palestinians' struggle has historically been more fragmented, complex, and defined by a false narrative of separation. Thus, the Palestinian movement must strive to address its own fragmentation, reestablish a united Palestinian front, and embark on a nonviolent civil rights movement aimed at exposing the one-state reality and Israel's settler-colonial status. At this point, the only viable means of shifting discourse would involve a combination of internal pressure through mass, organized nonviolent movement with a campaign to muster international support. The new Palestinian struggle must be for rights, self-determination, and justice in an integrative solution.

Creating this unified framework would require substantial effort to organize and mobilize the Palestinian population, which for the past decades has remained locked in a simultaneous *mélange* of all three stages of Pallo Jordan's resistance theory.⁹ Many support military resistance in hopes of expelling what they see as a settler population, some back the direct negotiation process, while others have accepted the one-state reality and hope to join Palestinian-Israelis in the call for civil rights and integration. Clearly, only one of these positions recognizes both the permanence of Israeli Jews and the failure of the

separation discourse. Establishing a shared understanding of the need for integration and the one-state reality that already exists must represent the first “order of business” in the push for a shift in discourse. In order to remedy their fragmentation, Palestinians must identify a universal platform based on a discourse that focuses on the pre-1948 Palestinian experience and that underscores the indigenous-settler-colonial relationship. This process must be constructed around an inclusive vision of Palestinian identity, not only uniting Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but including the Palestinian refugee and diaspora population in dialog.

Historically excluded from the peace process, the Palestinian refugee population must play a central role in the discourse shift, as their reality serves as a living embodiment of the Palestinian suffering that began even before 1948 and the Palestinian indigenous identity that must be reclaimed. However, it is paramount to first dispel the “abstract, utopian discourse of return”¹⁰ that frames the right of return within a false narrative of what Palestine once was and can be. For example, an independent Palestinian state will not be capable of absorbing an influx of refugees, and it is equally unrealistic to expect Israelis to accept any number of refugees into their midst, regardless of the integrative solution envisioned. Yet, Palestinian refugees must be accorded rights to a spectrum of remedial options that include the right to return, restitution, and resettlement, as noted in multiple United Nations resolutions and international laws and norms.¹¹ Most important however, is the restoration of functioning representation to the refugee community. In other words, their demands must be placed equally alongside those of Palestinians within Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories as part and parcel of the unified platform for resistance.

Accordingly, Palestinians must prepare for a protracted process of what Omar Barghouti terms “ethical de-colonization” or “de-Zionization,” involving simultaneous

dialectic processes of both reflection and praxis, anchored in international law and focused on the ultimate goal of social and political inclusion.¹² This involves engaging in a process of breaking down the deeply entrenched oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, a practice similar to that which occurred and continues to transpire in South Africa. Here, Palestinians should highlight the importance of recognizing the difference in rights of self-determination between the settler-colonial power and the indigenous Palestinians and ask the question: Are Jewish Israelis entitled to self-determination in historic Palestine as a separate, exclusive community at the expense of the rights of the Palestinians? Recognizing the exclusive, detached settler-colonial rights to self-determination inherently undermines that of the indigenous population. Based on UN General Assembly Resolution 3236, the Palestinian right to self-determination was elevated to the recognized status of an *inalienable* right, differentiating it from the *acquired* rights of the settler-colonial population.¹³ Thus, the exercising of settler-colonial self-determination that actively excludes the indigenous population is not only illegal under international norms and law, but immoral, as it directly denies Palestinians their basic rights. This is not to deny the rights to self-determination of Jewish Israelis anywhere, but rather to begin a discourse that is aimed at dismantling their privileged settler-colonial status.

However, by taking this approach, Palestinians walk a very fine line, as these arguments have understandably been interpreted by Jewish Israelis, as they were by white South Africans, with existential fear. In truth, one of the central factors that contributed to ending apartheid in South Africa was the African National Congress’s presentation of an integrative plan of inclusion, rather than violent exclusion.¹⁴ Against the backdrop of calls for equality, white South Africans had expressed fears of being “driven into the sea”; these mirror the qualms of many Israeli Jews.

Ultimately, Palestinians must incorporate a genuine understanding of the driving factors behind the existential fears that many Israeli Jews endure, not merely for the sake of morality, but for the chance for mutual engagement between moderates of both sides. Thus, much of the potential for success of the next stage in the Palestinian struggle will be dependent on emulating the call for inclusionary reforms that genuinely make Israeli Jews “full partners in building and developing a new shared society, free from all colonial subjugation and discrimination, ... the most magnanimous offer any oppressed indigenous population can present to its oppressors.”¹⁵

Therefore, the path to sustainable peace and internal Palestinian self-determination must be based on three central tenets that clearly mirror those of recent rights-based initiatives like the Boycott, Divestments, and Sanctions (BDS) movement: ending the occupation, ensuring equality through an integrative solution, and recognizing the centrality of the refugee right of return. Reference may also be made to the core principles put forth in the Future Vision documents that were penned by a group of Palestinian-Israeli politicians and intellectuals led by Shawki Khatib, head of the Supreme Follow-up Committee of the Palestinians in Israel and of the National Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Councils. This vision outlined three basic principles including the fundamental rights of Palestinians in Israel, equality before the law, and self-determination and autonomy, calling for a dismantling of Jewish preference and a binational state with equal rights.¹⁶ This platform must be built upon achieving Palestinian unity, the interdependence of individual and collective rights, and the technical and moral need for integration. However, as was the case in South Africa, this can never be achieved through continued appeasement or begging alone.

The use of armed force as a means of attaining their political goals has not only proven ineffective historically for Palestin-

ians, but “pits Palestinians against Israelis in an arena where [Israel] is strongest and the Palestinians are weakest.”¹⁷ More importantly, the use of violence often serves to equate both parties, rather than forwarding a narrative of the oppressed resisting their oppressor and giving the Palestinians the distinct moral high ground.¹⁸ With their demographic advantage, Palestinians must utilize the only means of resistance that has historically proven effective: nonviolent civil disobedience. Through the utilization of an official mass-based civil rights movement inspired by both the South African struggle against apartheid and the First Intifada, Palestinians can work to pressure Israel through direct nonviolent disruptive actions while simultaneously regaining interest and vital support from the international community.

The Role of the International Community

With Israel’s firmly rooted military, economic, and diplomatic superiority, the Palestinians cannot exert sufficient pressure alone, even with an effective mass civil rights movement. This underscores the vital role that the international community and Israelis play as a balancing force in any future stage of the Palestinian struggle. Without foreign intervention through diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and general divestment, the Palestinians simply have little sway. This is the central reason that Prime Minister Netanyahu has been so adamantly against engaging in indirect negotiation processes that include the mediation or support of international actors like the United Nations that aren’t unquestioned protectors of Israeli interest. Instead, Israeli leaders insist on direct negotiations with their Palestinian counterparts, representing the most effective way of taking full advantage of the asymmetrical balance of power and ensuring that any agreement follows Israel’s guidelines.

As a response to Israel’s apprehension

of international mediation, the Palestinian rights movement must be tailored to attract and entice an international audience and build support on current initiatives, like the BDS movement, that are already gaining ground across the globe. Without the PA, the BDS movement will benefit from more visible materialization of the settler-colonial-indigenous dynamic, making the call for blanket boycotts on Israel more applicable. Thus strengthened, the BDS movement will provide the international “wing” of the internally led nonviolent civil rights movement, tasked with raising international pressure on Israel.

The gradual worldwide shift in support for the Palestinians represents an opportune moment to engage in a widespread shift in official discourse. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, liberal Democrats in the United States have adopted increasingly pro-Palestinian stances and, more importantly, millennials have become increasingly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.¹⁹ The U.S. presidential election of 2016 displayed this shift, as Bernie Sanders was able to compete for the Democratic Party nomination despite overtly criticizing Israeli policy and citing the suffering of Palestinians. According to Joel Kovel, “The struggles of the Palestinians themselves to achieve the status of an actual people in the world’s eye have finally borne fruit. And this, combined with the continual demythologizing of Zionist claims, has finally created the condition for the awakening of a collective conscience on their behalf.”²⁰ This presents a unique opportunity for Palestinian youth to exhibit their political activism through the growing channels of expression that have become increasingly available through social media and the spread of easy access to direct information. However, with the Trump administration’s clear, unbridled support of Israel and its expansionist intentions, Palestinians must work to situate their struggle as a fundamental component of the liberal opposition campaign in the United States.

If Palestinians can maintain a platform of nonviolence and visibly endure the brutality they inevitably face, the international community will find it increasingly difficult to maintain support for an openly violent, undemocratic Israel.

The Youth Role

At this point we are confronted with perhaps the most challenging question: Can Palestinians coalesce, form a united front, and then sustain a committed nonviolent movement in the face of continued occupation and violent oppression? To answer this, we can point to the ever-persistent determination of Palestinian youth, who, despite the crippling hardship they face, prove their ability to mobilize and productively channel their political energy on a daily basis. In truth, an uprooting of the status quo in favor of a renewed civil rights-based movement provides the most opportunity for Palestinian youth, who have emerged out of the failure of the peace process ambitious and restless, yet voiceless and disenfranchised. Today, well over 30 percent of the Palestinian population is between the ages of 15 and 29, signifying a sizable portion of the population that has not benefited from adequate political input, much like their counterparts across the Arab region. A recent Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research study found that Palestinian youth between the ages of 18 and 22 are least supportive of the two-state solution and are most intrigued by one-state proposals, especially when faced with a realistic description of what an independent Palestinian state would look like.²¹ In reality, in the age of globalization, the disintegration of political borders, and exposure to the internet Palestinian youth are less interested in their predecessors’ goals of achieving an independent state and are more focused on gaining individual rights regardless of the political backdrop.

Through their frustration and desperation, an increasing number of young

Palestinians have retreated from political involvement and have instead turned to individual struggles. Additionally, a growing number have come to view armed violence as the only means of achieving their political goals.²² This has been most obvious with the recent trend of lone-wolf knife attacks that have been predominantly carried out by young Palestinian teens. These recent outbursts of violence by young Palestinians not only represent attacks on their occupiers, but more importantly symbolize assaults on the status quo. In other words, they show that young Palestinians have already begun abandoning what they see as a failed path and are attempting to take matters into their own hands. With no other alternative or conduit for their political input, their potential energy is lost to desperation.

However, dwarfing these sporadic outbursts of violence and proving the potential for sustained nonviolence have been the ongoing protest movements pioneered by young Palestinians. For more than a year, Palestinian youth have positioned themselves at the forefront of the ongoing Great March of Return, staging regular nonviolent protests along the Gaza border and bearing the brunt of a violent Israeli response that has led to the death of more than 200 unarmed demonstrators, including journalists and children as young as 14.²³ Although Hamas continues its attempts to hijack the movement, tainting the demonstrations with efforts to stage unsuccessful breaches of the border, young Palestinians persist. They continue to confront live sniper fire in an effort that, despite their persistence, will likely change little on the ground.

Another recent example of the ubiquitous determination of Palestinian youth was the recent set of protests in Jerusalem, sparked in response to Israeli occupation measures that included the closure of the Al-Aqsa compound. With little international support, and in the face of an extremely violent response from Israeli forces, the determination

and persistence of young Palestinians forced Israeli concessions in what was, at the very least, a symbolic victory. Equally important was the fact that both Hamas and the PA played little to no role in mobilization, but rather grassroots efforts proved most effective.

Perhaps the most applicable source of inspiration that can be harnessed by today's youth is the First Intifada, a hallmark of Palestinian nonviolent resistance and a vital model to build on. The First Intifada, which began in 1987 and led to the start of the Oslo peace process, arguably represented the most effective means of pressuring Israel both internally and externally, a proof of the ability of young Palestinians to mobilize without a central leadership, and a successful way of drastically shifting the conflict discourse. As anger boiled over, Palestinians took to the streets in huge numbers, without a central leadership or iconic figureheads. They engaged in nonviolent demonstrations, blocked roads, staged sit-ins and strikes, and vociferously and openly expressed their Palestinian identity with Palestinian flags and an overwhelming sense of unity. In fact, the Israel Defense Forces itself actually classified 97 percent of intifada activities as nonviolent.²⁴ As the uprisings continued, they were met with devastating violence from Israeli forces, including beatings (notably, the publicized order by then-Defense Minister Yizhak Rabin to break the arms and legs of protesters), live ammunition, house demolitions, curfews, imprisonment, and torture.²⁵ The violent response resulted in the death of more than 1,370 Palestinian civilians, with tens of thousands severely injured or imprisoned.²⁶

The nonviolent protests and the violent Israeli response thrust the realities of Palestinian suffering and anger into focus for Israelis, causing many to begin to question their own government and its occupation, and even began to gain the attention of the international community, swayed by images of children confronting tanks and heavily armed soldiers.²⁷ These acts successfully displayed

the “vast discrepancy in power between the Palestinian people and Israel’s war machine” and led to a reversal of the narrative that Israel represented the “David” in the fight against the Arab and Palestinian “Goliath.”²⁸ One of the primary indicators of the uprising’s international political impact was the United States’ refraining from its customary veto of UN Security Council resolutions criticizing Israel.²⁹ At home, Israeli criticism of their own government’s disproportionate use of force contributed to the rise of the labor movement’s pro-peace platform and sparked an increase in Palestinian-Israeli solidarity groups. Ultimately, the intifada represented the central factor in actually bringing both parties to the negotiating table, as it ensured that the Palestinian problem could not be ignored.

The intifada also showed the ability of Palestinians to mobilize without a central leadership at the helm and to shift the conflict discourse. The swell of largely unorganized popular action emerged as a grassroots movement and displayed the potential power of Palestinians despite their territorial fragmentation. With the Palestinian leadership in exile in Tunisia at the time, Palestinians proved that they don’t necessarily need a “Gandhi figure” to lead their struggle against Israeli occupation.

By glancing back to the First Intifada as an example of the potential of a mass civil rights-based movement, Palestinian youth can build on the already vast array of nonviolent modes of resistance that they already employ, ranging from peaceful sit-ins to heightened support of the international BDS campaigns. However, as their actions expand, young Palestinians must be prepared to bear the brunt of an Israeli reaction that may be even more intense than previously experienced. With Palestinians calling for equal rights in an integrative solution, the Israeli government will seek to justify a violent crackdown by arguing that the nation’s Jewishness and ultimately its survival

depend on it. Palestinians will be forced to withstand substantial pressure and maintain their dedication to nonviolence in hopes of simultaneously pressuring Israelis as well as gaining sympathy; over 62 percent of Israelis perceived Palestinian resistance during the First Intifada as violent, despite evidence to the contrary.³⁰ This will represent an increasingly difficult feat with the rise of the far-right within Israel and the extensive impact of the disengagement policies. However, if Palestinians can maintain a generally nonviolent stance and absorb the blows of the Israeli reaction, Israel will find it increasingly difficult to defend its self-perceived victim status.

If sufficient effort is dedicated to shifting discourse, mobilizing Palestinian youth, effectively channeling their political energy, and even training them in methods of nonviolent protest, young Palestinians will find themselves in a unique position of influence as they constitute the most vital component of a mass Palestinian civil rights movement. Instead of fighting for leaders and a political process that has repeatedly failed them, a strategic shift will present an opportunity for grassroots organization and an effective, nonviolent channel for their pent-up energy. Palestinian youth have come to realize that their struggle is not for illusive borders and imbalanced political agreements, but rather for liberation from Jewish primacy in Zionism’s ultimate vision of Israel. They will fight for their own civil rights, dignity, and the chance to develop their lives past the limits in which they are contained under occupation and political stagnation. In truth, Palestinian youth are not unfamiliar with assuming the center stage in leading widespread nonviolent resistance against Israeli occupation, and they repeatedly demonstrate their mobilizing prowess. Young Palestinians represent a budding amalgam of frustration and hope, effectively representing the only viable weapon against Israel’s crushing political machine.

Conclusion

The downfall of the two-state solution did not merely emerge with the fragmenting effect of Israel's "facts on the ground," the political gridlock that prevents their removal, and their crippling impact on the viability of a future Palestinian state. Rather, the two-state proposals and the overarching theme of separation have been based on an inherently unjust conflict discourse that ignores the central causes of the conflict and disregards vast swathes of the Palestinian population, ensuring that a "solution" that is based upon these principles will be doomed before its implementation.

By following this one-sided approach to solving the conflict, the current peace process ignores the core roots of Palestinian identity and suffering, simply reconfiguring or repackaging the continuous Israeli domination of almost every aspect of Palestinian existence. More importantly, the continuation of the current two-state approach displays the acceptance of Zionism's unwarranted settler-colonial territorial claim over that of the area's indigenous inhabitants, making the Palestinian right to self-determination subordinate to the recognition of Israel's right to maintaining an exclusively Jewish state. In truth, it is the Palestinian people that have adjusted their outlooks to suit the trajectory of the Zionist project and have lost their claim to sovereignty, self-determination, and collective dignity by settling for separation.

Neither Palestinians nor Israelis will forgo their claims to historic Palestine, and it is just as unlikely that either party will accept the division of what they both see as their rightful homeland. Due to this mutual, unremitting hold, along with the physical reality that exists as a result, a just solution can only be reached through some form of integration that recognizes equal individual rights while simultaneously acknowledging the underlying and undeniable nationalist identities that are so deeply rooted in both

peoples. With alternatives largely undeveloped due to their absence from the official discourse, Palestinians must lead the shift in strategic approach in order to reevaluate the meaning of their struggle.

The Palestinians, resilient as they have been for decades, must recognize that statehood no longer represents a vehicle capable of achieving their aspirations of self-determination and equal rights, which means that the reality of Israel's unjust settler-colonial sovereignty can only be combated by turning the conflict inward. To do so, Palestinians must look to the First Intifada and the South African struggle against apartheid as not only examples of more effective ways of exerting both internal and external pressure on the settler-colonial power in question, but vital ways of reframing and coming to terms with their own reality in order to confront the inevitable upcoming stage of resistance.

In John Kerry's words, "If the choice is one state, Israel can either be Jewish or democratic, it cannot be both."³¹ Israel will be forced to choose either granting equal rights to Palestinians through instituting a one-state secular democracy and creating a binational state, or accepting Palestinian independence with the recognition of the territorial and population integration that will have to accompany it. This proposal is not meant to serve as a definitive "solution" to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but represents what may be the only means for Palestinians to regain interest in their cause, reframe the conflict parameters, and embark on a path toward rights, regardless of the specific political state structure. In essence, this merely lays forth the next stage of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and equal human rights, which will be a protracted civil rights movement with the aim of ensuring that the status quo is not sustainable for Israel in the long run.

However, Israel's most comprehensive success and the factor that continues to serve as a shield against struggles for justice has been

their ability to deeply fragment not only the physical existence of Palestinians, but more importantly, their very identity. In truth, the fate of the next stage of the Palestinian struggle for rights and dignity will be dependent on their ability to unite, transcend their physical and political divisions, and rebuild their shared sense of identity. But after undergoing such a thorough, systematic process of fragmentation through occupation and expulsion, the question is whether a unified Palestinian platform can even be identified and maintained in the face of inevitably severe Israeli repression. Will Palestinians prove capable of overcoming the countless physical and political boundaries that have been constructed at their every turn? Will the oppressed become oppressors themselves? Or will they be forced to fade into silent suffering in the shadow of history, as have so many as the world complacently accepts another casualty of settler-colonialism's unchallenged brutality?

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The Tendency for the Rate of Profit to Decline—And Why It Matters

EDWARD L. TAPIA

THE LAW OF THE TENDENCY for the rate of profit to decline has been the focus of an immense and ongoing debate since the publication of Volume III of *Capital* in 1894. In what follows, I shall not attempt to investigate the diverse and plentiful literature on the debate, nor the particular interpretations, since those interested can immerse themselves at length with the articles and books written on the subject. Rather this article presents a brief theoretical outline of the law itself, with the intention of highlighting its political significance to overcoming the logic of capital. This presentation will demonstrate that Marx saw the tendency for the rate of profit to decline not only as a descriptive law of political economy but the material foundation for the creation of socialism.

I.

In Part I of Volume III of *Capital*, Marx introduces the concept of cost-price by showing us that what a commodity costs in the mind of the capitalist and what a commodity actually costs are two separate categories that require further delineation. According to Marx, the cost of a commodity for a capitalist is measured by the expenditure of capital, while the actual cost of a commodity is measured by the expenditure of labor. This distinction is what Marx calls cost-price, which from the

vantage point of the capitalist forms the “inner value” of a commodity, serving the function of preserving total capital investments. Cost-price represents a “false semblance” of value that mystifies the actual source of value in commodities, giving capitalists the impression that all parts of capital are equal sources of valorization. Since capitalists are unable to distinguish between the materially distinct elements of production, the variable component of capital is merely seen as capital spent on wages instead of playing a distinct role in the formation of a commodity’s value. But in the process of production, it is living labor-power itself that forms the basis of a commodity’s value.

This process is further mystified by the very nature of an economy dominated by capital, whereby the sphere of production constitutes a transitory moment that soon passes into the sphere of circulation (Marx 1981). In other words, from the standpoint of the capitalist, the sphere of production represents a crucial moment, that is, the source of profits or surplus value originating from the workers’ unpaid surplus labor, which costs the capitalist nothing. However, at the same time, any inkling of this knowledge is obscured in the sphere of circulation, which appears to be an equally valid moment when the surplus value is realized with the sale of the commodity. This process presents the illusion that the surplus value embedded in commodities is not simply realized by the sphere of circulation, but actually derives from the sphere of circulation itself, in a movement

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that is independent of production. This helps shed light on why capitalists are unable to identify the effects of technological advances in production that displace labor. Given that in the mind of capitalists variable capital

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simply appears as capital spent on wages, they are inclined to treat living labor-power as an extra expenditure that can be replaced with improved methods of production to reduce the price of individual commodities and sell a greater mass of commodities.

The cost of commodities for the capitalist therefore stems in part from the objectified labor that is actually paid for—the variable capital expressed as the price, or value, of labor-power in the form of wages. On the other hand, the capitalist's profit stems from the excess value or surplus labor added to the commodity above the necessary labor, that is, the time required for the reproduction of labor-power. Thus surplus value or profits simply consist of this unpaid excess value embodied in commodities over the total sum of necessary labor. In contrast, Marx draws the important distinction between the mass of profit as the form of appearance of surplus value and the rate of profit as surplus value measured against total capital. By working out the relationship between surplus value and total capital, that is, capital invested in means of production or constant capital, to that which is invested in labor-power or variable capital, Marx was able to overcome the limits of Smith and Ricardo in observing the tendency of the rate of profit to decline

as the immanent law of political economy (Mattick 1966).

Yet Marx never reduced the rate of profit to an indeterminate seesaw that sways back and forth until crises ultimately bring the system to a halt. To the contrary, Marx made the critical insight that tendencies toward equilibrium and away from equilibrium form a contradictory unity of opposites that produce crises (Dunayevskaya 1981). Nevertheless, in following Smith and Ricardo, in Part II of Volume III of *Capital*, Marx highlighted that capitalist economies are characterized by a tendency toward an equalization in the rate of profit across industries. As Fred Moseley shows us, Marx was in general agreement with Smith and Ricardo's assertion of an equalization in the rate of profit and with their emphasis on so-called natural prices as long-run equilibrium prices around which actual market prices fluctuate. However, Marx's decisive break with Smith and Ricardo was in their failure to explicate the specific determinations of these long-run equilibrium prices that equalize profits across industries. Thus Marx accepted the idea of profit-equalizing center-of-gravity prices but sought to develop his own theory of how they are determined.

In doing so, Marx explained that competition among capitals within different spheres of production results in the formation of a general (average) rate of profit that distributes the total social capital in such a manner that prices of production—cost-price plus average profit—do not coincide with the value of commodities (Rubin 1928). If commodities sold at their values as assumed by Smith and Ricardo, then the unequal organic compositions of capital would cause the rate of profit across industries to be unequal. As Marx writes in Chapter 8 of Volume III of *Capital*,

Capital withdraws from a sphere with a low rate of profit and wends its way to others that yield higher profit. This constant migration, the distribution of capital between different spheres according to where the profit rate is rising

and where it is falling, is what produces a relationship between supply and demand such that the average profit is the same in the various different spheres, and values are therefore transformed into prices of production. (Marx 1981, 297)

Moreover, prices of production are governed by the law of value insofar as a reduction or increase in the labor-time socially necessary for production makes the price of production rise or fall (Marx 1981). But Marx notes that prices determined by labor-time, that is, prices of production, are not actual market prices but instead long-run equilibrium prices around which actual market prices fluctuate. What actually determines market prices are the laws of supply and demand that in turn cause the value of commodities to deviate from their price of production. The commodities whose individual value stands below the market price will realize an extra surplus value or surplus profit, while those whose individual value stands above the market price will be unable to realize a part of surplus value (Marx 1981). However, under the pressure of competition, capitals tend to progressively conform to the average, regardless of their organic composition, out of necessity to survive in the marketplace. In addition, fluctuations of actual market prices around long-run equilibrium prices are the very means by which the proletariat is more directly brought under the regulation of the law of value in an economy dominated by capital (Moseley 1997).

It has been shown that competition equalizes the rate of profit across industries to form an average rate of profit, which explains how the values of commodities are transformed into prices of production. This whole process occurs through a continual transfer of capital between spheres of production that produce rising and falling profit rates, which tend to balance the rate of profit to a uniform level across industries (Marx 1981). But what competition ultimately mystifies is the value that regulates and determines prices

of production. Marx demonstrates how this phenomenon appears to contradict both the determination of value by socially necessary labor-time and the fact that surplus value derives from unpaid surplus labor. As Marx writes, “in competition, therefore, everything appears upside down” (Marx 1981, 311). These grounds underline the tendency for capitalists to continually expand constant capital relative to variable capital, which results in a decline in the general rate of profit. Hence capital’s endless drive for self-expansion is what motivates the tendency for dead labor, that is, constant capital, to consume living labor-power, that is, variable capital. Since capitalists strive for the lowest cost-price and the highest profit, they are inclined to introduce new labor-saving technologies as an effort to gain an edge over their competition by reducing the labor-time necessary to produce a commodity.

The tendency for the rate of profit to decline, therefore, arises from the shifting value relations of capital expansion, that is, from a relative decline in variable capital in comparison with constant capital. In other words, this decline is relative and does not originate from the absolute amount of labor or surplus labor set in motion by capital but rather from its relative decline in relation to constant capital. Thus the tendential fall in the rate of profit is just another expression of the self-valorization of capital and the increasing productivity of labor. Here is what Marx states, in Chapter 13 of Volume III of *Capital*,

The progressive tendency for the general rate of profit to fall is thus simply the expression, peculiar to the capitalist mode of production, of the progressive development of the social productivity of labor. This does not mean that the rate of profit may not fall temporarily for other reasons as well, but it does prove that it is a self-evident necessity, deriving from the nature of the capitalist mode of production itself, that as it advances, the general average rate of surplus value

must be expressed in a falling general rate of profit. Since the mass of living labor applied continuously declines in relation to the mass of objectified labor that it sets in motion, that is the productively consumed means of production, the part of this living labor that is unpaid and objectified in surplus value must also stand in an ever-decreasing ratio to the value of the total capital applied. But this ratio between the mass of surplus value and the total capital applied in fact constitutes the rate of profit, which must therefore steadily fall. (Marx 1981, 319)

According to Marx, capital invested in means of production, that is, constant capital, is generally advanced faster than capital invested in labor-power, that is, variable capital. The tendency for capitalists to constantly expand means of production over living labor-power is rooted in the drive to increase the productivity of labor—to increase surplus labor-time over the time necessary to reproduce labor-power. Since surplus value is rooted in surplus labor-time, the decline in labor-time relative to the growing mass of means of production leads to a decline in the rate of profit, because the rate of profit is measured against total capital. This process creates an “eternal hunt” among capitalists to revolutionize technology in an attempt to secure extra profits, however the application of these new technologies are eventually generalized by competition and the game must begin anew (Grossman 2017). Because labor-power is the ultimate commodity of capitalist society, the only source of its value and surplus value, these constant revolutions in technology reproduce the problem at an ever higher level.

On the other hand, Marx argues that just as everything is presented “upside down” by competition, so too is the tendency for the rate of profit to decline. What brings about a decline in the rate of profit is also coupled with a simultaneous increase in the total mass of surplus value and profit appropriated by

social capital. Marx calls this apparent contradiction a “double-edged law” inherent to the production and accumulation of capital itself. This two-fold law is expressed by an increase in the productivity of labor and higher organic composition of capital corresponding to it, which sets in motion a smaller amount of living labor in each individual commodity and a greater total mass of commodities. Thus the price of individual commodities or a specific group of commodities falls due to less living labor being absorbed into each commodity and an increase in the total quantity of commodities produced. Therefore, the decline in the rate of profit, and the increase in the mass of surplus value and profit, are different sides of the same coin, insofar as both are expressions of the increasing productivity of labor.

It should be noted that since the rate of profit is measured against total capital, Marx also identified that fluctuations may occur arising from the sphere of circulation, principally from changes in the turnover time of capital. Marx explained how a reduction in the turnover time of capital—the sum of production time and circulation time—or in one of its component parts raises the mass of surplus value appropriated insofar as a smaller portion of capital remains idle, whether in the form of money capital, circulating and fixed capital, or the finished but unrealized commodity capital. Hence any reduction in the turnover time of capital also has the effect of increasing the rate of profit. For example, technological innovations made in telecommunications, railroads, or canals shorten the circulation time of commodities and subsequently the amount of time it takes to realize surplus value. But most importantly, the process to accelerate the turnover time of capital is mediated by competition among capitals to produce commodities with the least amount of labor-time socially necessary, on average, as revealed by competition on the world market. At the same time, Marx held that the rate of profit may increase or decrease, while surplus value remains constant due to fluctuations in

the price of raw materials. This is possible precisely because the rate of profit is measured against total capital and not simply as an expression of surplus value. Since raw materials form a major component of capital subsumed by constant capital, variations in their price have a significant impact on the rate of profit irrespective of surplus value and wages. Furthermore, raw materials form part of circulating capital and do not impart their value to the finished product, therefore they must constantly be renewed with the sale of each commodity, in contrast to machines that transfer their value to the finished product and depreciate over time. Therefore, fluctuations in the price of raw materials can slow down or inhibit the reproduction process of capital if the price realized by the sale of a commodity no longer suffices. This whole process rests upon the existence of a credit system, competition, and free trade to ensure the continual flow of capital, whereas import duties or tariffs would bring about an increase in prices. This explains why historically it has been the preoccupation of capitalists to abolish import duties or tariffs.

But Marx nonetheless affirmed, irrespective of an increase in the mass of profits or an increase in effective demand, the rate of profit will inevitably fall and this cannot be obviated by temporary counteracting factors. The immanent contradiction Marx places at the center of his analysis is not the market, but when capital has become an end in itself and comes into conflict with living labor-power at the point of production. In Dunayevskaya's view,

The innermost cause of crises, according to Marx, is that labor-power in the process of production, and not in the market, creates a value greater than it itself is. The worker is a producer of overproduction. It cannot be otherwise in a value-producing society where the means of consumption, being but a moment in the reproduction of labor-power, cannot be bigger than the needs of capital for

labor-power. That is the fatal defect of capitalist production. On the one hand, the capitalist must increase his market. On the other hand, it cannot be larger. (Dunayevskaya 1981, 42-43)

Dunayevskaya also highlights the fact

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that Marx observed the search for markets as being motivated by the search for higher profits, not an inability to realize surplus value in the sphere of circulation. In reality, surplus value is often not realized by effective demand since capitalists simply convert a portion of surplus value into constant capital by absorbing it into means of production without the need to first sell it to a buyer (Hudis 2014). Hence Marx never viewed effective demand as a critical determinant to the accumulation of capital since the only means by which capital can expand is through the continual mastery of dead labor over living labor-power. Marx drew no direct connection between production and consumption. "Capitalist production creates its own market—pig iron is needed for steel, steel for machine construction, etc.," writes Dunayevskaya, therefore surplus value is realized among capitalists themselves. "The capitalists are their own best customers and buyers" (Dunayevskaya 1981, 35).

There is no question, therefore, that Marx identifies the tendency for the rate of profit to

decline as the underlying cause of the crises of capitalism. A crisis occurs not because of an overaccumulation of capital-surpluses in commodity, money, or productive capital—as argued by Paul Sweezy, Samir Amin, or David Harvey. The market is often largest right before the crisis occurs. But low profit rates cause capitalists to decrease their investments, and the ensuing stagnation immediately appears as an overaccumulation of capital (Dunayevskaya 1981). Therefore, the tendency for the rate of profit to decline manifests itself as an inability to realize surplus value, a contradiction between production and consumption. However, beneath the phenomenal appearances of the crisis, Marx highlights that value and surplus value can only come from variable capital, that is, living labor-power in the process of production, which is now at a smaller portion in relation to total capital. In short, there is no doubt that crises produce an overaccumulation of capital, but the crisis itself is due to the fact that the accumulation and the expansion of production had outrun profitability.

Thus the crises of capitalism can only be understood through the real movement of capitalist production, that is, the general tendencies of the accumulation process and the long-run tendency for the rate of profit to decline. But Marx also noted several counteracting tendencies that included: (1) more intense exploitation of labor, (2) reduction of wages below their value, (3) cheapening of the elements of constant capital, (4) the relative surplus population, (5) foreign trade, (6) the increase in share capital.

Nevertheless, these counteracting tendencies are simply temporary, while the crises of capitalism are not only recurrent but inevitable. This is because, as Marx writes,

The true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself. It is that capital and its self-valorization appear as the starting and finishing point, as the motive and purpose of production; production is production only for capital, and not the

reverse, that is the means of production are not simply means for steadily expanding pattern of life for the society of the producers. The barriers within which the maintenance and valorization of the capital value has necessarily to move—and this in turn depends on the dispossession and impoverishment of the great mass of producers—therefore come constantly into contradiction with the methods of production that capital must apply to its purpose and which set its course toward an unlimited expansion of production, to production as an end in itself, to an unrestricted development of the social productive powers of labor. (Marx 1981, 358)

The capitalist mode of production is therefore grounded in an irreconcilable contradiction between use value and value, between the self-valorization of capital and the ever increasing productivity of labor corresponding to it, which produces recurrent crises from the unlimited expansion of means of production over living labor-power. The crux of Marx's argument is that although labor-saving technological innovations increase productivity, they also simultaneously displace living labor and therefore reduce the amount of new value added in production.

II.

What political significance does this have for today? First, it suggests that there is a need to abolish value production, through the creation of freely associated social relations of production that transcend abstract labor and socially necessary labor-time. But this can only be fully realized once the self-expansion of capital as an end in itself is negated and we enter, as Marx put it, “the true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself” (Marx 1981, 959). Second, the effort to overcome capitalism must emerge from the existing social forces at play in society that will bring alive the dialectics of liberation for today and the movement toward a new human

society. This, of course, is at the inner core of Marx's theory of the breakdown of capitalism, namely, the foundation for building socialism is established through the conflict between labor and capital in the process of production. For Marx, as Dunayevskaya points out, "the organic composition of capital produces, on the one hand, the decline in the rate of profit, and, on the other hand, the reserve army of labor. The inability of capitalism to reproduce its only value-creating substance sounds the

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death knell of capitalism" (Dunayevskaya 1981, 45).

Therefore, Marx did not simply view the tendency for the rate of profit to decline as an important law of political economy but the fundamental means by which the subjective forces of capitalism transcend value production. It directly follows from Marx's analysis that the collapse of capitalism and the establishment of socialism arise from the internal contradictions of production, the opposition between capital and living labor, the gravediggers of capitalist society. On the other hand, since underconsumptionists shift the crucial problem of capitalism from the sphere of production to that of circulation and effective demand, they tend to obscure Marx's basic premise that labor-power is

the ultimate commodity of capitalist society. The conflict between labor and capital in the process of production therefore fades into the background, and the necessity of proletarian revolution enters into the dustbin of history. If the source of the problem is something other than value production, then the solution is something incapable of overcoming value production, for instance, the equitable redistribution of wealth and value, the democratization of international financial institutions, or the nationalization of industries and state planning.

The problem of identifying the sphere of circulation and effective demand as the critical determination of capitalism is illustrated in the work of David Harvey—a world-renowned geographer and leading Marxist theoretician. In his latest book, *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason* (2018), Harvey argues that political struggles situated at the moment of realization—for instance housing mortgages, rent strikes, or even the distribution of government services and taxes—reflect the new centers of resistance in modern capitalism. The thrust of Harvey's argument stems from the idea that the accumulation of capital depends on the realization of surplus product, that is, the movement from production to realization is the key point determining the overall circulation of capital. Thus any disruption or slowdown in the realization of surplus product results in the loss of value, what Harvey characterizes as "anti-value" or simply the devaluation of capital. Harvey applies the same line of reasoning to the sphere of production insofar as capital that remains idle in the production process is not capable of circulating and is thereby "negated as capital." Hence, for Harvey, capital must be constantly in motion, and the inability to realize surplus product constitutes the immanent barrier to the accumulation of capital.

Despite some of the theoretical weaknesses of David Harvey's understanding of capitalism (which I briefly discuss below), he

correctly asserts that an alternative to capitalism must be grounded in overcoming the law of value. However, at the same time, Harvey writes in *The Enigma of Capital*, “Socialism aims to democratically manage and regulate capitalism in ways that calm its excesses and redistribute its benefits for the common good. It is about spreading the wealth around through progressive taxation arrangements” (Harvey 2010, 224).

Furthermore, Harvey writes,

Under socialism, the production of the surplus is typically managed either through active interventions in the market or through the nationalization of the so-called ‘commanding heights’ (energy, transport, steel, and even automobiles) of the economy. The geography of capital flow is controlled by state interventions, even as international trade quietly flourishes through trade agreements. (Harvey 2010, 224)

From the examples cited above, it is clear that Harvey reduces the concept of socialism to a mere program of Keynesian redistribution in which the law of value continues to operate. This is because Harvey locates the central contradiction of capital not in production but rather in the market, from the lack of effective demand and the inability to realize surplus product, and not in the endless self-expansion of capital at the point of production. Although it is clear that Harvey has the redistribution of value in mind when referring to socialism, his writings at times demonstrate a more solid grasp of Marx’s concept of value, in particular, his book *The Limits to Capital* (1982), an important work of political economy. We can see, for example, Harvey clearly recognizes that abstract labor is the substance of value, while socially necessary labor-time is the measure of value in a society dominated by the logic of capital. Harvey, of course, also insists that anti-capitalist politics and activities must be oriented toward an unalienated existence, that is, “the active and conscious negation of

the capitalist law of value in individual and collective lives” (Harvey 2017, 89).

It is therefore worth highlighting that Marxist economist Michael Roberts exaggerates when he claims that Harvey reduces the creation of value to the sphere of circulation and exchange. Harvey does not contend that value is created in the market rather than having existed prior in the sphere of production. If Roberts’ claim were true, it would mean Harvey believes that labor is only rendered abstract upon the realization of surplus product in the market. But as I have already underlined, Harvey’s argument is not that the creation of value itself depends on the realization of surplus product, but rather the main factor determining the overall accumulation of capital is the level of effective demand sufficient to buy surplus product. Apart from this, Roberts’ latest critique of Harvey does properly emphasize the problems with viewing the rate of profit as indeterminate to crises and shifting the hotspots of class struggle from the point of production to circulation and distribution. Such an approach, especially Harvey’s focus on the sphere of circulation

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and effective demand, carries with it specific political prescriptions. By positing the sphere of circulation and effective demand at the center of his analysis, Harvey abstracts from the way in which constant capital forms the only means through which capital can expand on a continual basis.

In this respect, though Harvey recognizes the tendency of capital to self-expand limitlessly, he fails to see it can only do so by reducing the relative proportion of living labor to dead labor at the point of production (Hudis 2014). Ultimately, Harvey's underconsumptionist analysis is what constitutes the basis of his Keynesian political prescriptions. The domination of dead labor over living labor, which Marx identified as the distinctive feature of a capitalist society, is completely obscured by Harvey. Since Harvey's argument places the relationship between the market and effective demand where the relationship between labor and capital belongs, he slips into the error of identifying socialism as the redistribution of value. In so doing, Harvey is forced to pose an external factor, the struggle between consumers and capitalists in the marketplace, as the source of crises and resistance in capitalism. As Marx shows us, the law of value can only be eliminated by the conflict between labor and capital in the process of production, and only freely associated labor can strip the fetishism from commodities. The production of value and surplus value is the fundamental characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, not the circulation and distribution of surplus value. Thus the dialectic as a movement of liberation and methodology is completely lost, as Harvey places those struggles that are outside the process of production at the center of his analysis.

To be clear, Marx's critique of political economy is deeply rooted in the perverse and inverted relationship between dead labor and living labor at the point of production—from the fetishism of commodities in which social relations assume the form of relations between things to the tendency for constant capital to expand at the expense of variable capital. The constantly rising organic composition of capital results in two things: the concentration of means of production into ever larger industries and the centralization of capital into fewer hands as more-profitable

capitalists subsume less-profitable capitalists. This process also involves the progressive de-personification of the private character of capital and the greater de-personalization of the social connections that bind associated producers together. Marx argued that insofar as the private control of production by individual capitalists becomes increasingly more untenable, it points toward "communal social conditions of production," as the alienation of producers becomes greatly more accentuated (MECW 1991, 144). Marx held both sides together in a dialectical relationship and did not affirm one over the other but pointed to the possibility for the dissolution of this contradiction, as the growing mass of people in society are deprived of the conditions of production.

On the other hand, Marx held that the full development of human freedom as an end itself can only emerge out of the realm of necessity as its basis. Marx argued that in any mode of production, human beings must mediate their laboring activity with the material world in order to satisfy and reproduce the necessities of life (Marx 1981). But as the development of the realm of natural necessity expands as a result of an increase in wants, so too do the forces of production increase to satisfy them. Yet Marx maintained that human freedom begins when

socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it [labor in material production, realm of necessity], though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite. (Marx 1981, 959)

Marx therefore clearly identified the satisfaction of basic needs as the ultimate foundation for the free development of indi-

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vidual powers as an end itself. But the actual necessity of revolt that forms the precondition for the development of human freedom arises from the fact that value production is set toward destroying society through the endless self-expansion of capital. In this sense, Marx held that the struggle over wages, working hours, and conditions reflects an inseparable part of the movement toward overcoming the logic of capital, even when the focus is not explicitly linked to the specific goal of abolishing capitalism.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to show that Marx's theory of the tendency for the rate of profit to decline merits renewed attention in light of today's struggle to transcend the logic of capital. I am certainly not the first to call attention to this important factor of Marx's critique of political economy. But with the emergence of a new generation of anti-capitalist activists across the globe, I think Marx's concept of capital as a process of self-expanding value can be of real service to individuals seeking an alternative to capitalism. The rate of profit declines not because of a mere change in the technical composition of capital, that is, the ratio between means of

production and labor-power, but changes in the organic composition of capital, that is, the value composition of capital as it relates to its technical composition. This is because the organic composition of capital is explicitly linked to the value relation shaping capitalist society. As Marx shows us, in capitalism, means of production and labor-power constitute products of capital, that is, values that must yield a profit in order for capital to accumulate on a continual basis. But since capitalism is driven by the tendency for a growing portion of dead labor to consume living labor-power, capital cannot yield sufficient surplus value and the accumulation of capital runs up against definite limits that create the possibility for the development of a higher form of production.

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Cryonics Phonics: Inequality's Little Helper

GERALD COLES

“WHY ARE WE STILL TEACHING reading the wrong way?” Why are “more than 60 percent of American fourth-graders not proficient readers?” asked Emily Hanford, an American Public Media correspondent, in the *New York Times* (October 26, 2018) and on public radio under the title, “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Taught to Read?”¹ The answer? Simple! It’s the lack of “explicit, systematic phonics instruction,” a method backed up by “scientific research.” Poverty is an “excuse” educators have long used to explain reading failure and, in turn, low academic achievement. Unfortunately, says Hanford, many educators don’t know the science and, in some cases, even if they know it, actively resist teaching phonics, thereby setting up millions of kids for school failure.

Other corporate media immediately rallied. A *Wall Street Journal* article explained why schools in New York City and elsewhere have low literacy rates:

[These schools] just pay lip service to the importance of daily phonics lessons in early grades, or don’t know how to instill the basics. The stakes are high. Children who can’t read by third grade find it very hard to catch up. Most New York City public-school students don’t meet targets. Despite the “landmark

report” of the 2000 National Reading Panel ... many schools haven’t fully embraced phonics.²

Forbes magazine (self-described “Capitalist Tool”), asked and answered “Why Johnny Still Can’t Read—And What to Do About It.”³ Said *Forbes*, “As many as half of all children won’t learn to read unless they get systematic instruction in what are called foundational reading skills, including phonics.” If only the advice of Rudolf Flesch, author of *Why Johnny Can’t Read* (1955), hadn’t been ignored in the mid-1950s!

Similarly supportive of Hanford’s critique was the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a politically conservative education think tank. Inspired by Hanford’s critique, Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow at Fordham, quoted a teacher who complained about learning nothing about phonics and the science of reading in her graduate studies. Following her example, he wrote the dean of his graduate school of education, complaining that he had been similarly shortchanged.⁴

Hanford’s critique and advice used the schools in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as an exemplar of the academic success that economically poor students can achieve when schools employ reading instruction “rooted in research that shows any child can learn to read if taught the right way, regardless of poverty.”⁵ But no worry, phonics and similar “early reading skills” provide the sure road to academic achievement.

Phenomenal Phonics

The explanation that phonics and related

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basic reading skills in the early grades is the answer for overcoming the impact of deficient socio-economic conditions on students' academic achievement is an old story that begins in the post-World War II years. By the 1950s, U.S. schools had, for decades, been an institution that "scientifically" sorted and tracked students, a process that just happened to be constructed according to varying social classes and skin colors. In turn, sorting and tracking was associated with unequal reading achievement that, in a stellar example of circular reasoning, was presumed to validate the sorting in the first place.

A major challenge to sorting by skin color (and, implicitly, by students' economic conditions) was the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954, which concluded that unequal school resources, based on skin color, produced unequal educational outcomes. However, for Rudolf Flesch, author of several books on how to improve writing, thinking, and speaking, the implications of the landmark decision had no place in his explanation of varying literacy outcomes. The year after the *Brown* ruling, Flesch's best-selling book asked and answered "why Johnny can't read." No, the cause wasn't related to the 1950s poverty rates of over 50 percent of black families and 20 percent of white families.⁶ As he explained in *Johnny* (1-12), deficient literacy outcomes were a consequence of "word learning" instruction (such as "Dick and Jane" instructional texts), combined with an absence of phonics instruction. Flesch criticized educators who attributed the causes of reading failure and, in turn, academic underachievement, to a variety of environmental causes. "Wrong," he insisted, the absence of phonics instruction was the obvious cause of underachievement but was an idea that had "never yet entered the mind of anyone in the world of education." In fact, reading educators reviewing the book⁷ noted that phonics was being taught in schools, but Flesch's critique prevailed in numerous explanations of why the schools were failing

students and the nation.

Phonics Arises to Play a Second Role

By the mid-1960s, despite the inclusion of phonics in the early grades, many students continued to have reading problems, especially black students, whose official overall poverty rate was over 30 percent.⁸ The Johnson administration responded with its "War on Poverty" education and anti-poverty legislation, but the impact of this relatively insufficient response on educational outcomes was modest.

At the same time, as part of the 1960s political activism, alternative modes of schooling, such as free schools and open classrooms, emerged, challenging top-down, narrow, pre-established curricula and constrained classroom participation for students. The alternatives included more student-generated topics, more cooperative learning, and more critical views of the social order. Book titles such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Compulsory Mis-Education*, *The Open Classroom*, *Deschooling Society*, and *Free Schools* reflected various challenges to conventional schooling.

One response to the political activism was *The Crisis of Democracy*, published in 1975 by the Trilateral Commission, an organization of global business and political leaders who put the "problem" squarely: The nation was gripped by an "excess of democracy" contributing to "democratic distemper." Many educators echoed these concerns and initiated attacks on the education alternatives. Central in this response was the employment of purported "scientific" studies, particularly in reading education, that compared literacy and other academic outcomes of conventional classroom schooling with those of educational alternatives. Although the studies claimed to prove that conventional classrooms demonstrated superior academic outcomes, follow-up studies revealed that the outcomes were comparable. But those follow-ups did not appear before top-down instruction again

prevailed. Within this reversion, faithful phonics contributed to the creation of classroom learning that reins in students' thinking and teachers' power.

Best articulating the counterattack was Harvard reading professor Jeanne Chall, whose 1967 book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, argued that reading instruction had to be grounded in a tightly controlled, phonics-first, skills-emphasis pedagogy. Chall introduced her educational model by asking, "How in essence do readers change as they advance from *The Cat in the Hat* to the financial pages of the *New York Times*?" Her answer: use preprogrammed, skills-intensive instruction, orchestrated by a middle-manager teacher who ensured that students' thinking would not stray. Not until Stage 4 (the high school years), Chall explained, would multiple viewpoints enter the curriculum. Yet even here, thinking would be proscribed. Students could think about a variety of perspectives, though not yet their own. That would be left for the college years—if a student went to college. As educator Ira Shor documented a few years lat-

er in *Empowering Education* (1992), the curriculum issues were not fundamentally about the loss of phonics and skills in the classroom, and similar seemingly apolitical instructional issues, but about controlling teacher power and student thinking. Nonetheless phonics and skills did help win the day!

The 1980s began with a severe economic recession, followed by an economic expansion. However, thanks to a "trickle down" policy often referred to as Reaganomics, the wealth of the expansion went largely to the already wealthy.⁹ Reflecting the maldistribution of wealth was an overall child poverty rate around 22 percent, but almost 50 percent for African American children and about 33 percent for Latino children.¹⁰

Yes, the Reagan administration did recognize the nation was "at risk," but not because of the upward flow of wealth. Rather, the administration issued a 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, describing the danger created by an array of educational deficiencies, especially evident in high rates of illiteracy, across the U.S. Who was responsible? America's



Why phonics isn't the answer

* Actual Phonics texts

schools, of course! What to do was answered two years later (1985), with *Becoming a Nation of Readers*,¹¹ whose pedagogical conclusions placed ever-reliable phonics as the centerpiece of “verified practices.” How phonics and related skills instruction “should be done” was the key question. Nowhere in the report was there a discussion of the impact of children’s socio-economic context on literacy and educational achievement.

However, not all educators were buying it.

Despite the demise of previous alternatives to conventional education, an alternative emerged within classrooms that claimed to be a more effective way to teach literacy and nurture more thoughtful, critical students. It was *not* a teaching approach that could singularly overcome the effects of poverty, although many educators did suggest that, but it was more effective for learning to read. Called “whole language,” it employed a linguistic and cognitive theory that conceptualized learning to read as a process using predictable, meaningful texts and, as needed, phonics. Whole language fostered literacy-rich classroom learning that promoted student involvement in deciding what to read and think about, rather than learning through prescribed, prepackaged reading programs.

From the perspective of those concerned about an “excess of democracy” in the classroom, there was good reason to worry that whole language was a Trojan horse pushing open the gates of critical thinking. Indeed, for many educators, whole language could provide an opportunity to put a “democratic surge” back into classrooms. For example, reading educator Carole Edelsky insisted that whole language should be explicitly about creating pedagogy that “opposes social stratification and promotes an egalitarian social order.” To create “a curriculum aiming for justice and equity” there must be “a deliberate, active search for materials that try to promote [these aims], for projects that could reveal the less-dominant sides of issues, for resources that feature voices not usually

heard.” Although not all those identifying as whole-language teachers employed this social-justice perspective and classroom practice, the viewpoint Edelsky articulated was a sufficiently prominent part of whole-language writings and teaching to concern dominant political-economic power.

Counterattack, One More Time

The counterattack to whole language took the form of a sequence of federal reports and education mandates designed to promote lockstep reading education that would serve as a template for all subsequent schooling. Phonics, not surprisingly, was the little drummer leading the way. For example, at the end of the George H.W. Bush presidency was a congressional Republican policy paper, with the rhetorical title, *Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Educational Malpractice?*¹² Given the obvious answer to the question, the paper, not surprisingly, served to justify the 1990 Adult Literacy Act, which included a provision for funding phonics instruction. The chair of the Republican Policy Committee hailed the paper and provision, asserting, “Research shows phonics is the most effective way to teach people to read”—even though the paper supported no such conclusion.

Nonetheless, whole-language pedagogy continued to expand through the 1990s, a growth that contributed to the major federal-level legislative counterattack No Child Left Behind (NCLB) during the George W. Bush administration. The president assured the nation that the legislation was “based upon the science of reading, ... something that works.” (At the same time, he rejected a policy for reducing carbon emissions, insisting the science was “still incomplete.”) In turn, his secretary of education, Rod Paige, assured the nation that “phonics-based reading instruction” was the “gateway to learning,” especially for “every [economically] disadvantaged child.”

For Bush, reading achievement became the chief answer to academic and life success

across social class and race. “I remember a lady in Houston, Texas, told me,” Bush was fond of repeating, “Reading is the new civil right, and she’s right. In order to make sure people have jobs for the twenty-first century, we’ve got to get it right in the education system.” Parallel with the enforcement of the “new civil right” under NCLB, the overall child poverty rate began, during the Bush years, at about 16 percent and climbed to about 21 percent; for African American children the poverty rate advanced from 31 percent to 35 percent.¹³

And what did the little helper and its word-skills friends contribute?

Many Children Left Behind

Propelling the skills-heavy reading instruction mandated in NCLB was the 2000 *Report of the National Reading Panel*. Convened by Congress, the panel concluded, after a purportedly exhaustive review of the research on beginning-reading instruction, that phonics and direct-skills instruction was the necessary, scientifically proven pathway to academic success. In *Reading the Naked Truth: Literacy, Legislation, and Lies* (2003), I reviewed all of the “scientific” studies cited in the National Reading Panel report and documented how the panel repeatedly misinterpreted and misrepresented the findings in study after study. The following are just a few examples:

- The boost in reading associated with early phonics instruction did not last beyond kindergarten.
- The overall data in the studies reviewed actually contradict the report’s conclusion about the “better reading growth” in skills-emphasis classrooms.
- Systematic phonics teaching was not superior to whole-language teaching in which phonics was taught as needed.

And the outcome of NCLB reading instruction? A decade later, national reading-achievement test results revealed there were no gains in fourth-grade reading scores,¹⁴ a result, I wrote at the time, that would “not

surprise anyone who has followed the policy assault on reading education these last 15 years.” Literacy expert Stephen Krashen added that students learning to read through the NCLB Reading First program’s skills-heavy instruction did better than comparison groups in tests of decoding in first grade, but this achievement did not lead to superior scores on reading comprehension tests in later grades.¹⁵ Neither did a later iteration of the skills-heavy beginning-reading instruction produce better results. Assessment of the Common Core State Standards policy, initiated under the Obama administration, found that neither on fourth- nor eighth-grade reading tests were there significant test-score differences between 1992 and 2017!¹⁶

Defrost and Awake

Since 2018, teachers have been striking across the nation because of an unabated decline in educational conditions. Reduced school funding has led to a decrease in teachers’ salaries relative to cost-of-living and in the number of supportive staff (librarians, nurses, and school social workers) along with an increase in damaging educational conditions, such as large class size and school infrastructure deterioration. Concomitantly, child poverty has remained deplorably high, with 43 percent of children living in low-income families.¹⁷

Can phonics really be expected to triumph when poor children are more likely to be affected by housing instability, hunger, poor nutrition, and an array of health issues, such as vision impairment, hearing problems, lead exposure, and iron-deficiency anemia? Although poverty is not an inexorable cause of educational underachievement, as educational researchers such as Richard Rothstein (*Class and Schools*, 2004) and educational historian Diane Ravitch (*Reign of Error*, 2013) document, poverty is the single most reliable predictor of school success or failure.

Given the 60-plus-year history of repeatedly thawing and putting in motion

the little-solution-that-could, then seeing it fail, a person could reasonably conclude that phonics-is-the-answer-for-overcoming-the-effects-of-poverty-on-academic-achievement would be laid to rest in peace. However, as the renewed demand in the corporate media for heavy phonics instruction reveals, no burial is in sight.

Phonics/Word Skills Versus Whole Language

In the current unthawing of phonics-is-the-answer, whole-language teaching has once again been targeted as the chief reason for poor children's underachievement in literacy and academics. In making this argument, Emily Hanford and the reading professionals she quotes offer a misrepresentation of whole language that would require a separate article to correct. For instance, whole language was not a movement aimed at freeing classrooms of phonics. Nor did whole language proponents think phonics might "actually be bad for kids, might inhibit children from developing a love of reading," or that "phonics wasn't necessary because learning to read was a natural process that would occur if they were immersed in a print-rich environment." Simply put, whole language taught phonics as needed for students' larger engagement with reading, which involved connecting students with books related to their interests, lives, and communities; encouraging voluminous reading in books available in classroom and school libraries; emphasizing comprehension grounded in discussions of books; combining reading and writing; and connecting literacy development to other areas of the classroom curriculum (art, social studies, science, drama, current events). Within a comprehensive, meaning-emphasis, integrated curriculum, literacy is pervasive, and various literacy skills, such as phonics, are taught as needed. Yes, there have been whole-language advocates who eschewed phonics instruction, regarding it as a major encumbrance in learning to read,

but this kind of orthodoxy did not characterize the understanding contained within the wider whole-language approach.

As someone who has used a whole-language approach for teaching both young beginning readers and adults with serious literacy problems, my experience underscores that the need for phonics varies among beginning readers, from near none for some, some phonics for most, and "a lot" for a small percentage. Using a whole-language approach would mean addressing various reading abilities and propensities, but doing so requires both teacher competence *and* the classroom conditions for addressing students' varying needs.

How Much Phonics Should Be Taught?

With respect to the issue of which is "better," the National Reading Panel report (considered by phonics-first educators to be their gold-standard research document) found, as I noted above, similar literacy-achievement outcomes when comparing phonics-emphasis and whole-language (or what was categorized as "whole-language") instruction. In my review of the panel's report, I discussed the studies' often-questionable categorization of a teaching approach as "whole language," but putting that aside, I see no reason to doubt the results. Commonly missing from the disputes over "whole language versus phonics" was the recognition that the former required *more* resources because it did more. Whole-language teaching and learning needs small class size to promote discussions, close observation of students' literacy needs, linkage of reading and writing, integrating reading with other parts of the curriculum, more books and other media promoting literacy and literacy-related projects, and substantial classroom and school libraries. Requiring these resources suggests that in a comparison of "phonics versus whole language" within community, familial, school, and classroom conditions of poor children,

the literacy outcomes of phonics might be relatively better because a whole-language approach *could not be sufficiently* implemented. Recognizing this does not, of course, mean that “phonics first” would be successful; it would simply mean that neither would be. Poverty—across community, family, schools, and classrooms—always is a strong determinant of literacy outcomes, regardless of the instructional approach!

Resurrection

As I noted at the beginning of this article, the new insistence that phonics-heavy reading instruction can provide the pathway to academic success, regardless of the poverty afflicting students, spotlights the beginning-reading program in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Reporting on the instruction in Bethlehem, journalist Emily Hanford insists that hundreds of scientific studies have “shown over and over that virtually all kids can learn to read,” if they are taught to read with a method in which “explicit, systematic phonics instruction” is central.

The 60-plus years of the resurrection and failure of phonics to overcome the impact of poverty on educational achievement leaves the question of the “science” purportedly supporting phonics. Can it be that phonics instruction does indeed have substantial scientific evidence favoring it, but it has not been deployed properly in the classroom?

It’s not apparent what “science” Hanford has in mind, but having written about the research on reading, learning disabilities, and dyslexia since the late 1980s, beginning with my first book, *The Learning Mystique* (1987), what’s clear about this so-called “science” is that much of it is contrived evidence to “prove” pre-existing conclusions. For example, Hanford is much taken with the research on dyslexia, which has searched for neurological dysfunction in beginning readers. However, she fails to consider the decades-long confusion in this research of correlation and causa-

tion. That is, the brain functioning of poor readers (“dyslexics”) is different from that of competent readers, but that is largely because of a difference in competence. Similarly, for example, readers able to read Czech will show brain functioning different from those who cannot, but that is not reason to brand the latter as “czechlexic.” (See my essay on the deficiencies of this research in “Brain Activity, Genetics, and Learning to Read” in *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, Joanne Larson and Jackie Marsh, eds., 2012).

Hanford frequently references the “science” on the side of heavy-phonics-and-skills-instruction-for-reading-success, but offers nothing about the evidence on the other side of the dispute. Neither does she explore the purported “scientific evidence” the George W. Bush educators used to push through the mandated skills-based instruction, purportedly based on “the findings of years of scientific research on reading,” that subsequently failed children who were victims of it. (For a thorough review of this bogus “evidence” see my *Reading the Naked Truth*).

The Program and Evidence for Reading Achievement

In the newest version of “with phonics ‘poverty [can be taken] out of the equation,’” the spotlight has been on schools in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where a program called Step by Step Learning (SBSL), begun in 2015, has been used to orchestrate early classroom reading education that purportedly has produced laudable reading test results.¹⁸ For example, the literacy skills “benchmarks” of kindergarten students increased from 47 percent in 2015 to 88 percent in 2017, with benchmark scores projected to reach 92 percent in spring 2019.

As I noted above, follow-up studies on the effects of early phonics programs have failed to find long-term benefits on reading achievement. Therefore, I wrote to two administrators in the Bethlehem schools,

asking for information about the students' reading ability in later grades. Neither replied to my request. Consequently, I used the publicly available Pennsylvania reading/language arts tests results, which provided scores for Bethlehem schools. By these measures, the reading achievement for students in SBSL early-reading program either stayed the same as students who had not used the program in previous years or else made only very modest improvement.

For example, students in Bethlehem's Fountain Hill Elementary School are 65 percent Hispanic, 11.5 percent African American, and 15 percent white.¹⁹ Poverty may be gauged by the 88.7 percent who qualify for free or discounted lunch. In academic achievement measured by test scores in 2018, Fountain Hill ranks 1,342 out of 1,530 Pennsylvania schools. The benefits of the SBSL program? Students who started school before the SBSL program began were in third grade in 2016. Among them, only 35 percent met the state's reading/language arts standards. In 2018, among third-graders who had been taught with the phonics program, 44 percent met the standards. This 9 percent increase is commendable but far from demonstrating that the phonics program can "take poverty out of the equation."

In Marvine Elementary School, where 91.7 percent of students qualify for free or discounted lunch and which ranked near the bottom of test scores among Pennsylvania schools, results of the SBSL program were similarly bleak. In 2018, among third-grade students who had been in the program, only 43 percent met the reading/language arts standards. Looking at the scores of fifth graders, who started school before SBSL began, 36.4 percent met the standards, again revealing a very modest benefit of the SBSL program.

In contrast, there is Hanover Elementary school, where only 15.6 percent of students qualify for free or discounted lunch. There the impact of students' economic circumstances

was clearly in the opposite direction: About 85 percent of its students—virtually the same percentage as lunch standards—met the reading/language arts standards both *before* and after the introduction of SBSL program. Similar parallels between the beginning reading skills program and literacy outcomes can be found for all other Bethlehem schools.

Based on the research on phonics in previous decades, cited in the *Report of the National Reading Panel*, these results should not be surprising. The conclusions of one study on phonics and similar word-level training represents the overall findings on intensive phonics instruction: Benefits for "reading comprehension were not significant" (*Reading the Naked Truth*, 92). A recent analysis by literacy researcher Jeff McQuillin drew similar conclusions from a large-scale study in England.²⁰ Once again, "phonics instruction has a modest effect on initial literacy levels, but little to no impact on reading achievement in later grades."

Little Helper or Little Help?

Can beginning reading skills really be expected to be the pedagogical answer in a city which, among large Pennsylvania cities, has seen income inequality increase the most since 2013, where heads of families were likely working more than one job to meet family expenses?²¹ How much can phonics and friends accomplish in schools where 60 percent of students qualified for free and reduced-price lunches in 2018, an increase from about 50 percent in the 2013–2014 school year?²² Why, given Pennsylvania's corporate wealth, are such questions and expectations even posed?

A vivid snapshot of the poverty facing Bethlehem students and their families was captured in the observation of the head of one social-service organization: "Food pantries used to be for emergencies. Now it's becoming more and more a part of the tactic to survive." People are working more jobs, and more family members are working. Decidedly not a fac-

tor in the income rise is the state's minimum wage, which has remained constant.

Surely the Bethlehem school district's administrators and teachers have been doing the best they can with these conditions, but how much can educators do when the 2019-2020 school budget process began with a deficit of \$11 million, incurred in large part because the state required that school districts pay charter-school tuition, which for Bethlehem last year amounted to more than \$29 million.²³ One fiscal response—accepting early retirement of many senior teachers and replacing them with less-experienced, lower-paid teachers—helped contain the deficit, but concomitantly reduced teacher expertise.²⁴

The economic conditions faced by the state's schools and families have been strongly fashioned by a corporate focus on profits. Thanks to business-friendly politicians, corporate tax cuts and limited tax rates for the rich have been abundant. From 1972 to 2018, the contribution of corporate taxes to the state's general tax revenues has diminished from 30 percent to 15 percent. The Pennsylvania policy organization WeThePeoplePA calculates that

corporate tax cuts have increased four times since 2003-2004, from \$796 million to \$3.9 billion per year. [The legislature] has also shifted a growing share of state taxes to middle-class Pennsylvanians, exacerbating an unfair system in which ordinary Pennsylvanians pay up to three times as much of their income in taxes as the richest 1 percent.²⁵

A potential major source of taxes could come from natural gas extraction (fracking), but although Pennsylvania is the second largest natural-gas producing state, the legislature has refused to impose a severance tax on extracted gas.²⁶

Sidestepping Poverty?

Can poverty and inequality be taken “out of the equation” in creating literacy and academic success? From Rudolf Flesch

onward, the deplorable, unsubstantiated, simple-minded answer is supposed to be “yes, if a phonics-and-reading-skills-heavy early-reading program is employed.” However, as the current rendition reveals, just as over the past 60 years, the answer once again is “no, that’s not why Johnny can’t read.”

The actual long-term questions regarding academic achievement posed by those responsible for economic inequality are: Can we retain the majority of our profits, offer workers and their families insufficient wages, pay little or no taxes to fund schools, and, at the same time, obscure the educational consequences of these decisions? Can we rely on the claim that it’s ineffective beginning-reading programs, not poverty, that are blocking poor youngsters from future educational achievement? Can we, the uber-wealthy, not get blamed? The answer, so far, seems to be that as long as there are professional helpers to resuscitate cryonic phonics, the answers are “yes.”

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ROSA LUXEMBURG'S LEGACY

Rosa Luxemburg was a brilliant Polish/German revolutionary socialist theorist and political activist. Thoroughly committed to socialism from below, she believed in the necessity of radical class struggle principally in order to build the experience and capacities of the working class: "The struggle for reforms is its means; social revolution, its aim," as she put it. Luxemburg held that a genuine socialist revolution could only come about by "the great majority of the working people themselves." A strong internationalist and anti-imperialist, she opposed World War I and warned that the alternatives were stark: "socialism or barbarism." Her understanding of the inherent barbaric tendencies of capitalism were never more relevant than today.

In honor of the centenary of her murder, a symposium on Rosa Luxemburg's legacy was organized by the Will Miller Social Justice Lecture Series at the University of Vermont. The following three articles are based on lectures at that symposium.

Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary Life

HELEN SCOTT

ROSA LUXEMBURG'S LEGACY IS VERY live, very relevant, and very contested. One of the ways to understand this particular political valence is to see her not only as an exceptional individual, which she surely was, but also as a figure who crystallized the social forces of her historical moment. And her far too short life, not quite half a century, spanned an era in Europe that saw the rapid development of industrial capitalism, with all its attendant

horrors: imperialism and war, appalling conditions for workers, rapid and unsettling social transformations, devastating displacement of people, widespread poverty and hardships. But it also witnessed the unprecedented rise of mass socialist organization among the new working class. This global movement came closer to overthrowing the entire system and replacing it with socialism than any force in any other time in human history.

Luxemburg thus lived in a terrible time, but also one of great hope and possibility. And it is this sense of immense potential that Luxemburg represents: She embodies the best of that mass collective force for social change, and in doing so, continues to represent a threat to the establishment, even as she speaks to individuals and movements engaged in the struggle for a more just world. Although her life was cut short, her achievements were many, and I can't possibly do justice to them

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in this short space. But I will try to provide an overview and to flag some of the key moments and political contributions.

Luxemburg's early life, in Poland under

Luxemburg embodies the best of that mass collective force for social change, and continues to represent a threat to the establishment.

the occupation of Russian tsarism, was shaped by the combined worst of old feudalism and young capitalism. She faced the oppression experienced by all Polish people, whose language and culture were restricted. Additionally, the Jewish community, of which she was a member, was further persecuted and denied basic civil rights. She suffered from a lifelong disability due to a mistreated hip complaint of her childhood. And she was a woman, at a time when the public political realm was overwhelmingly dominated by men. Many poisonous misogynous attacks were directed against her from the establishment and also from some in the socialist movement.

She was alert to class inequality and had no tolerance for oppression or discrimination of any kind. She was also opposed to all kinds of sectionalism or cultural nationalism—the idea that only those suffering a particular oppression can understand or challenge it—because she saw inequality and chauvinism as integral to capitalism and therefore damaging to all sectors of the working class. She advocated a politics of solidarity.

Even while still at school, she joined the illegal socialist movement. She was a superb student, but she was denied the gold medal that she should have been awarded due to her 'rebellious attitude toward authorities.' When her activities became known to the authori-

ties she had to escape Poland, and she was to remain outside her country of birth for most of her life. She went first to Switzerland and the University of Zurich, which was known as the "alma mater of young radicals," and went on to earn a PhD in economics—unheard of for a woman at this time. In the alternative school of socialist politics, she helped organize in exile the clandestine revolutionary group Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, which resembled, and at many points worked closely with, the Russian Bolsheviks.

Luxemburg went next to Germany in order to join the SPD (Germany's Party of Social Democracy). So in her life she was actually a leader of socialist movements in three countries—Germany, Poland, and Russia—as well as the Socialist International, which was the world-wide federation of socialist groups.

The SPD was the largest party in the Socialist International, and it was rapidly transforming at the turn of the century. Brutally suppressed under the regime of Bismarck, and subject to the anti-socialist laws that were in place between 1877 and 1890, in 1891 the newly legal party established the twin goals of the so-called Erfurt Program, named for the town where it was drawn up. These were the "maximum program," which was socialist revolution, and the "minimum program," which meant reforms in the here and now.

In the context of a politically conscious working class, the SPD grew dramatically in the following decades, both in sheer numbers and in influence in the formal political establishment. In 1881 the party won 6 percent of the votes in the Reichstag (the German equivalent to the House of Representatives); in 1903 it held more than 30 percent. By 1912 it was the largest party, and by 1914 it had more than a million members. These were impressive achievements, but the institutional growth also had a paradoxically conservatizing impact. As the party grew, so did its investment in the system and its financial coffers, and sections of the leadership became

more focused on getting votes and burnishing their official reputation than on struggles for liberation. A permanent bureaucracy developed, a body of people who were well paid, largely separated from the members, and accustomed to being part of the establishment.

These were the conditions that led to a distinct tendency known as revisionism, reformism, or opportunism. An eminent member called Eduard Bernstein had become a spokesperson for this wing. He (rather prematurely at the turn of the twentieth century) argued that capitalism had resolved its crises, wars were a thing of the past, and a revolution was no longer necessary because all social problems could be solved through gradual reforms and change “from within” the system.

Rosa Luxemburg showed up in 1898, a total outsider—a woman, a Pole, a Jew, physically small, walking with a limp—and became the most outspoken revolutionary opponent of revisionism. She responded to Bernstein in a stunning series of articles that were later published as *Reform or Revolution* (1908). This work remains essential reading for those engaging in contemporary political debates about the reformability of capitalism.

One of my favorite passages gives a flavor of her wonderfully figurative rhetorical voice. She compared the reformists to earlier “utopian socialists” such as Charles Fourier, who advocated socialism through cooperatives, known as phalansteries:

Fourier’s scheme of changing, by means of a system of phalansteries, the water of all the seas into tasty lemonade was surely a fantastic idea. But Bernstein, proposing to change the sea of capitalist bitterness into a sea of socialist sweetness, by progressively pouring into it bottles of social reformist lemonade, presents an idea that is merely more insipid but no less fantastic. (*Reform or Revolution*, 65)

She argued that, far from choosing a different path to socialism, the reformists had actually jettisoned the goal of social transformation altogether in favor of making



peace with the system.

Reform or Revolution argues that capitalism is built on exploitation and oppression—they aren’t optional but integral to the system. So too is class domination embedded in the economy—it isn’t something that is legislated and therefore it can’t be abolished through laws. And the political and legal systems are not neutral, but rigged in favor of the propertied classes. Socialism is about the establishment of a new society, one that no longer rests on capitalist accumulation and wage labor—and revolution is the only way to secure a world without class domination and oppression.

Luxemburg did not, however, downplay the importance of immediate political struggles. She argued that socialists should make use of all available rights in order to win reforms that are crucial and valuable in themselves, because they may help alleviate suffering and defend against further attacks. But she held that these struggles are just as

important as means to the end of overthrowing capitalism. She thus had a very dialectical understanding of the interplay between the processes. (In this and following quotations, “proletariat” is a synonym for the working class, the oppressed majority, that was widely used during this time.)

Democracy is indispensable to the working class, because only through the exercise of its democratic rights, in the struggle for democracy, can the proletariat become aware of its class interests and its historic task. In a word, democracy is indispensable not because it renders superfluous the conquest of political power by the proletariat, but because it renders this conquest of power both *necessary* and *possible*. (*Reform or Revolution*, 93)

In other words, the movement should employ, defend, and extend whatever rights and freedoms are available, without being under the illusion that they will “tame” capitalism or on their own lead to socialism.

Luxemburg won the debates with Bernstein, but the forces of reformism nonetheless continued to grow in the party. The

Rosa Luxemburg—a woman, a Pole, a Jew, physically small, walking with a limp—became the most outspoken revolutionary opponent of Bernstein’s reformist revisionism.

next major battle that this produced came in 1905, when revolution broke out in Russia in what came to be known as the “great dress rehearsal” for 1917. Luxemburg traveled to Russia at great personal danger in order to play a leading role. In fairly short order the revolution was crushed, and Luxemburg

along with Lenin and countless others spent a period in prison. But the momentous events of 1905 gave a sense of how much could be achieved from the mass concerted efforts of workers. When she was able to return to Germany, Luxemburg went on a speaking tour that brought the lessons to the public, and she distilled these in her book *The Mass Strike* (1906).

This work was also an intervention in debates about the trade union movement, and it too speaks to contemporary labor politics. The German trade unions had been going through the same tremendous growth as the party, and as for the SPD, this brought both many successes but also conservatism. Some among the permanent bureaucracy now espoused “safe,” “bread and butter,” economist unionism, arguing that unions should steer away from controversial political issues and distance themselves from socialism. Like the SPD reformists, they feared radical action that could escape their control, rock the boat, and offend the establishment. They too now saw the building of the unions as an end in its own right, rather than a means to defend workers’ rights in the present while helping the struggle for a new society in the long term.

Luxemburg saw in the Russian revolution of 1905 a counter-model. First, she observed that revolutionary struggle flows fluidly between the “economic” and the “political”: Political demands turn to wage demands and vice versa in quick succession. Second, mass strikes achieve more in days than can be accomplished in years or decades of carefully planned union and parliamentary organizing. And finally, even when the particular strike or movement is defeated, and even if some of the gains are rescinded, the struggle itself does something that can’t be taken away:

The most precious, because lasting, thing in this rapid ebb and flow of the wave is its mental sediment: the intellectual, cultural growth of the proletariat, which proceeds by fits and starts, and which offers an inviolable guarantee of their

further irresistible progress in the economic as in the political struggle. (*Mass Strike*, 134)

This speaks to the mass strike wave that is sweeping the United States today, the “Red for Ed” teachers’ strikes. All of Luxemburg’s lessons can be seen here: the movement between political and economic demands; the rapid achievement of victories that have seemed unthinkable for decades; and the political education that happens in the process of struggle, which is lasting and feeds into future movements.

Of Luxemburg’s many important contributions, one of the most central was her principled internationalism. She opposed nations and borders, and argued that workers share bonds of interest and solidarity far greater than anything they have in common with their respective ruling classes. Stemming from this was her rejection of nationalism, chauvinism, racism, and discrimination. She also saw how imperialism and militarism are integral to capitalism, and campaigned against all forms of imperialism and war.

At the outbreak of World War I, most of the leaders of the Second International betrayed the principle of international solidarity on which they were founded and lined up with the war efforts of “their own” ruling classes. When the leadership of the SPD, including her one-time close comrade Karl Kautsky, voted to support the war, Luxemburg condemned their actions with searing irony, referencing Marx’s famous slogan, “Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains”:

For the proletariat there is not one vital rule, as scientific socialism has hitherto proclaimed, but rather there are two such rules: one for peace and one for war. In peacetime the class struggle applies within each country, and international solidarity vis-a-vis other countries; in wartime it is class solidarity within and the struggle between the workers of the various countries without. The

global historical appeal of the *Communist Manifesto* undergoes a fundamental revision and, as amended by Kautsky, now reads: Proletarians of all countries, unite in peacetime and cut each other’s

Luxemburg saw in the Russian revolution of 1905 how mass strikes achieve more in days than can be accomplished in years of carefully planned union and parliamentary organizing.

throats in war! (“Rebuilding the International,” 202)

Despite this crushing betrayal, however, Luxemburg did not collapse but rather joined with other revolutionaries to build a new movement that carried forward the principles of internationalism and anti-imperialism with the slogans “end the war by strikes” and “the main enemy is at home.”

Luxemburg spent most of the war in prison, and her letters from a series of increasingly bleak cells are moving testimony to the human spirit under extreme duress. They show that her revolutionary drive came from great compassion, powers of empathy, and respect for humanity and all life, including animals and the natural world. She always maintained a vision of an alternative and saw the potential in life, even at the bleakest of times.

Her *Junius Pamphlet* (1916), written in prison, remains one of the most powerful anti-war statements of all time. It is almost impossible not to see today’s crises in Syria or Yemen in her description of a world at war:

Business is flourishing upon the ruins. Cities are turned into shambles, whole countries into deserts, villages into cemeteries, whole nations into beggars,

Marx and Engels—revolutionary socialism, by its very nature, must be connected to an internationalist struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

churches into stables; popular rights, treaties, alliances, the holiest words, and the highest authorities have been torn into scraps. ... Shamed, dishonored, wading in blood, and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands. Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteousness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics—but as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity—so it appears in all its hideous nakedness. (*Junius Pamphlet*, 262)

When she was released from prison she threw herself into the German revolution, a tremendous mass movement that ended the war and, with the revolutions underway in Russia and globally, held out the prospect of deep social transformation. She helped to found the German Communist Party and continued to agitate and organize.

Meanwhile the reformist wing of the SPD had come to power, and as Luxemburg predicted in her critique of reformism, the leaders now played a counter-revolutionary role, defending the establishment against the working-class movement. In January 1919 the revolution was dealt a massive blow, with the massacre of workers in Berlin on the orders of the Social Democratic government. The vicious Noske Guard, the core of what would grow into fascism, arrested Luxemburg and her close ally Karl Liebknecht. They were interrogated, beaten, and murdered. Luxemburg's body was weighted and thrown into the canal, not to be found for several months.

When reaching this part of Luxemburg's

biography it is hard not to be overwhelmed with heartbreak and despair. But even within this devastating moment, Luxemburg provided future hope. Her final essay, "Order Reigns in Berlin," draws out the lessons of January 1919 with stunning clarity and points a way forward:

The leadership failed. But the leadership can and must be created anew by the masses and out of the masses. The masses are the crucial factor; they are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were up to the task. They fashioned this "defeat" into a part of those historical defeats which constitute the pride and power of international socialism. And that is why this "defeat" is the seed of the future triumph. ("Order Reigns in Berlin," 378)

As this indicates, Luxemburg was to the end a brave revolutionary fighter who stood up to tyranny, and first and foremost, she was an activist, always rooted in working-class struggle. For this she won the lasting respect of the rank and file of the socialist and labor movements. Unlike the right wing of the SPD, who ended up running the system their party was founded to challenge, Luxemburg never became isolated from the ordinary working-class men and women in the broader movement. Instead, she drew from it and gave it permanent expression in her written work.

Finally, Luxemburg characterized the alternatives facing humanity as that between "socialism or barbarism." A century later we see the barbarism of capitalism on a daily basis: in the criminalization and incarceration of men, women, and children seeking refuge from war and poverty; in the continued dis-possession of colonized people; in the relentless attack on working-class lives and working conditions in "rich" and "poor" countries alike; in the pervasive sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression that impact all areas of life; and in the ecological devastation facing our planet.

But so do we see heroic struggles and resistance from workers and oppressed people globally: Palestinians standing up against the Israeli state, mass uprisings in Sudan and Algeria, opposition to the resurgence of fascism, the #MeToo movement breaking the silence around sexual abuse, teachers in “Red for Ed” fighting for their students’ lives. The current renewed interest in socialism offers the potential to build isolated struggles and connect them to a broader movement. We are also witnessing a resurgence of interest in Rosa Luxemburg, as exemplified by the Verso *Complete Works* project, which is publishing a wealth of material previously unavailable in English (Hudis 2014). This is a welcome development, because the legacy of Luxemburg, with its record of victories, losses, mistakes, and profound insights, has an important part to play in the daunting but essential project of social transformation.

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CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



Clara Zetkin, German Marxist theorist, socialist activist, women’s rights advocate, anti-fascist, and friend of Rosa Luxemburg

“When the men are silent, it is our duty to raise our voices in behalf of our ideals.”

“The capitalists speculate on the two following factors: the female worker must be paid as poorly as possible and the competition of female labor must be employed to lower the wages of male workers as much as possible.”

“For reforms ameliorate the situation of the working class, they lighten the weight of the chains labor is burdened with by capitalism, but they are not sufficient to crush capitalism and to emancipate the workers from their tyranny.”

“The workers have nothing to gain from this war, but they stand to lose everything that is dear to them.”

“The proletariat will be able to attain its liberation only if it fights together without the difference of nationality and profession. In the same way, it can attain its liberation only if it stands together without the distinction of sex.”

Rosa Luxemburg's Legacy for Feminism

NANCY HOLMSTROM

MANY PEOPLE WHO KNOW something about Rosa Luxemburg would be surprised to hear the name of this talk: They know Luxemburg as the author of the brilliant pamphlets *The Mass Strike* and *Reform or Revolution*; they know that she debated with famous leaders of the Social Democrats and with Lenin(!); maybe they know her theoretical work *The Accumulation of Capital*, with its powerful claim that capitalist accumulation both depends on noncapitalist relations (so “primitive accumulation,” as Marx called it, is ongoing) but at the same time needs to destroy them. This point incidentally has been elaborated by David Harvey under the name “accumulation by dispossession.” But what did Luxemburg write about women? How can she have a legacy for feminism? At a conference sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation some years ago, I was on a panel with a similar title, and one speaker said she didn’t think Luxemburg was a feminist.

Certainly Rosa Luxemburg is a model for feminists of all times in her passionate com-

mitment both to understanding the nature of our oppressive system and, most important, to changing it. Certainly her life was an inspiration for feminists in that she pursued her political and her personal life without concern for what women were and were not supposed to do. Rejecting bourgeois standards of sexual morality she had passionate love affairs. Her letters, by the way, are a great source of information about her personality and personal life as well as her political thinking.

But what exactly did she contribute *theoretically* and politically to an understanding of *women’s position* in capitalism—that is, to the question of how sexism and capitalism are related and how we can combat them both. Some might think she was not a feminist because they equate her view on sexism and capitalism with her view on national liberation. Although she was Polish (and a Jew), she was quite uninterested in struggles for national liberation for Poland. She thought genuine national liberation was impossible under capitalism, and hence her focus was on building the working-class movement against capitalism. National liberation would take care of itself after the revolution. Some Marxists take this position regarding sexism. However, I do not think this was Luxemburg’s position.

If not, then what would she have to say about theoretical debates among socialist feminists today? Was she even a feminist in this sense? And on the practical political questions facing feminists today, does Luxemburg’s work give us any guidance? These are the questions I address here.

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This article is from a lecture given as part of the series Murdered But Not Silenced: Rosa Luxemburg for the Twenty-First Century at the University of Vermont, April 6, 2019.

Luxemburg wrote next to nothing about women and was not active in the women's movement. This does not prove she wasn't a feminist, nor even that she was not interested in women's issues. Think of all the things that are not central to our work but that we care about deeply. Obviously women's issues were not her primary area of interest, but why should they have to be? We can have a division of labor. I believe that Luxemburg does have a legacy for feminism, and when we think about what it is, there is no reason to focus only on writings directly related to women and gender. Her absolute commitment to socialism-from-below, expressed in her debates both with Social Democrat leaders and with Lenin, and in her pamphlets, particularly *The Mass Strike*, where she stressed the importance of working people's self-activity for the development of experience and capacities, saying "The most precious, because lasting, thing in this rapid ebb and flow of the wave [of struggles] is its mental sediment: the intellectual and cultural growth of the proletariat"—these positions were what drew me to her in the first place, and there is NO political area of work to which this is not fundamental. This then is a crucial part of her legacy for feminism.

But turning back to women's and gender issues, it was Clara Zetkin, Luxemburg's close comrade and friend, who was better known for her work with working-class women, including forming groups that were similar to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s and that made Lenin distinctly uneasy. August Bebel, who wrote *Women and Socialism* and other works on women, thoroughly believed in women's equality and was supportive of Luxemburg. He and other male leaders of the Social Democratic Party urged Luxemburg to get more involved with the question of women's emancipation (and who knows what she would have contributed if she had?), but she resisted. She and Clara saw this as an attempt to get Luxemburg off their backs since she was to their left. Though

the two friends worked in different areas, they were closely aligned in Social Democratic Party politics, and I know of no evidence that Luxemburg disagreed with Zetkin's work with women. On the contrary, in some of her last letters of November 1918, she asks Zetkin for an article on women for their Spartacist newspaper, saying the issue "is so important now, *and none of us here understand anything about it.*" And then she asked her to edit a women's section of the Spartacus paper, saying "It is such an urgent matter! Every day lost is a sin."

Based on this correspondence and on her short writings on women's issues, it should be abundantly clear that Luxemburg was a Marxist or socialist feminist as we use the terms today. (In *The Socialist Feminist Project*, which I edited in 2002 and which explains that I see socialist feminism not as an artifact of the 1970s but as an ongoing project with a history. Hence I included a section called "Foremothers and Fathers.") First I will say very briefly how I characterize a socialist feminist, some of whom are Marxists and some are not, and then try to say where Luxemburg would stand on the debates among us.

All socialist feminists see class as central to women's lives, yet at the same time none would reduce sex or race oppression to economic exploitation. And all of us see these aspects of our lives as inseparably and systematically related; in other words class is always gendered and raced and vice versa. The term "intersectionality" has come to be used for this position. Luxemburg certainly held to this perspective, as she recognized some kinds of oppression as common to all women and others varying by class and by nation.

It was the special needs of working women that were Luxemburg's priority, but she also supported positions some might see as merely bourgeois demands, such as women's suffrage and the end to all laws that discriminated against women. In this she agreed with August Bebel, who said, "Working-class women have more in com-

mon with bourgeois women or aristocratic women than do working-class men with men of other classes.” Luxemburg advocated these universal legal rights both as a matter of principle and for pragmatic political reasons. Bringing women into politics would help combat what she called “the suffocating air of the philistine family” that affected even socialist men, a provocative statement even today. Legal equality in her view was a necessary condition for women’s emancipation, but true emancipation would require the end of capitalism and women’s economic independence from men. She said, “In the view of many vulgar men and the bourgeois civil law, whoever owns bread rules the house. ... The history of the family pattern is indeed the history of women’s enslavement.” Thus women need equal pay, equal work, and social support for family. Luxemburg also supported suffrage on the pragmatic political grounds that it would build the ranks of the social-democratic forces. These positions were actually in advance of the bourgeois women’s organizations of the time. On one occasion, she critiqued social democrats willing to compromise on women’s suffrage to make an electoral alliance with liberals. The most radical of socialists were oftentimes also the best feminists.

Coming back to theoretical debates among feminists today, within the broad definition of intersectionality there are differences regarding how we should understand these kinds of oppression and how they are related. *Some* socialist feminists see capitalism and sexism (usually called “patriarchy”) as two distinct, though intersecting, *systems* with equal explanatory importance. (Other systems to account for racial and ethnic oppression are usually part of the picture, but I will ignore that here.) Just as capitalism is constituted by relations of oppression and exploitation between capitalists and workers, patriarchy is a system in which men oppress women. Some also say men *exploit* women, which they explain in different ways. This is known

as a dual-systems position. *On the other hand, other Marxist-socialist feminists* believe there is only one kind of oppression and exploitation that, in the current period, really constitutes *a system with full explanatory powers*, and that is capitalism. However, other distinct kinds of oppression, like sexism (or racism), play more or less important roles *within the framework of that system* at different times and places.

One system or two—or more—is a highly abstract theoretical question. But it is often connected to a practical political one: What kind of political organizing should take priority? Should it always be class issues, labor struggles, and other economic issues not differentiated along gender lines? Or is it legitimate from a socialist point of view to give equal importance to distinctly women’s issues? Dual-systems theorists will invariably give equal political importance to organizing around class and sex (or race) issues. Why would they not?

On the other hand, what political implications should be drawn from the one-system theoretical position, which I accept? In my opinion—and I want to stress this—it does not follow that struggles around sex (or race) oppression should necessarily have a lower political priority. Socialist feminists try to integrate the two, whatever their views on the abstract question of one or two systems. For example, contemporary socialist feminists support the legal right to abortion, like liberal feminists, but they combine that with the right to birth control, medical care, childcare, better and equal pay (certainly more than \$15 an hour)—all the things necessary to give working-class women a genuine choice over their reproduction. They use the terms reproductive rights, or reproductive freedom or reproductive justice, preferred by black feminists. Luxemburg, I am pretty sure, assumed the one-system position, giving theoretical primacy to capitalism as a framework in which other kinds of oppression operate. On the practical political question, I would like to think she would have the flexible position

regarding political priorities that I describe.

In her 1912 “Women’s Suffrage and Class Struggle,” which I’ve included in the “Foremothers” part of my book, Luxemburg makes an important theoretical argument relevant to current debates. She writes the following:

Only that work is productive which produces surplus value and yields capitalist profit—as long as the rule of capital and the wage system still exists. From this standpoint the dancer in a café, who makes a profit for her employer with her legs, is a productive working woman, while all the toil of the woman and mothers of the proletariat within the four walls of the home is considered unproductive work. This sounds crude and crazy, but it is an accurate expression of the crudeness and craziness of today’s capitalist economic order.

I have used this quote more than once to clarify the meaning of “(un)productive” in capitalism and also to distinguish oppression from capitalist exploitation. Some feminists are very offended by the Marxist position that housework is unproductive labor, and some argue for “wages for housework.” But as the quote from Luxemburg makes clear, designating housework as unproductive is hardly an insult, nor is it sexist. A carpenter who works for the government is equally unproductive in capitalist terms, though both, obviously—and very importantly—are productive in a general sense. It’s crucial to understand what “productive” means in capitalist terms, vis-a-vis the production of surplus value, because it is *this* that makes the capitalist system tick. There is more to be said about what’s called the domestic labor debate, which is how to understand nonwaged work in capitalism. However, one important point is that even in 1912, Luxemburg wrote, “millions of proletarian women ... produce capitalist profit just like men—in factories, workshops, agriculture, homework industries, offices, and stores. They are productive therefore in the strictest economic sense of society today.” And today

women are the majority of the proletariat in the developing world. So there is no need to equate “women’s work” with nonwaged work in the home as some do. Luxemburg used this fact of women’s labor-force participation as an argument for suffrage; it showed that patriarchal conceptions of women’s proper role had simply become ridiculous.

I agree with Luxemburg on this theoretical point and on its importance. However, I think we must be careful not to overstate its political importance. Even if housework were productive of surplus value it wouldn’t follow that organizing housewives should be a priority for socialists. Compare guards in private prisons who produce surplus value. Though exploited by capital, they certainly would not be promising candidates for socialist organizing. On the other hand, while public sector workers are *not* productive in this sense, they are a key sector for labor organizing today, as they should be, given the attacks on the public sector. Where socialists should put their best energies depends on many factors, and we need to be alert to changing conditions.

Though not a valid criticism of Marx, the stress by feminists on the importance of nonwaged labor done largely by women is undeniably valid; indeed that is the labor that makes all other labor possible. Marxist-socialist feminists, particularly those espousing what has come to be called social reproduction feminism, have attempted to develop a complete story of labor in capitalism, some waged, some not. Their conception is of a single system of species reproduction, always involving a division of labor, but one that takes different forms related to changes in the capitalist economy. Neither the relations of production nor of reproduction are given by nature but are the result of gender and class struggles. Feminists in the United States have made demands to support caregiving as a public good, as it is in many countries with stronger social-democratic traditions. Even there, however, neoliberalism, a response to the ongoing crises of capitalism, has led to

cutbacks in every field of social reproduction. Thus socialist feminists should make these crucial demands, but they should be recognized as transitional demands in the sense that they are not all winnable securely under capitalism, but rather point us toward a different society. A society that gave equal value to nonwaged caring labor would be socialism, not capitalism.

In a socialist mode of production dedicated to the satisfaction of need, not profit, the constraints of this “crude and crazy” economic system of capitalism would not apply. On the contrary: What drives the two systems is different, so what counts as productive and unproductive would be different. Instead of “productive” being defined in terms of what produces profit, it would be defined in terms of what produces well-being. Hence all the nonwaged caring labor that is done “for free,” out of love, that is necessary in all societies, would be recognized as the essential productive labor that it is. And consider the scientific and creative work that is not done because it is not profitable but would enhance our lives in manifold ways—unproductive in capitalist terms but productive in socialism. On the other hand, much of the labor that is “productive” in capitalism would be rightly recognized as unproductive, for instance making weapons and endless plastic junk.

Luxemburg’s stress on the meaning of “productive” labor in this crazy capitalist system also helps to explain why capitalism is leading to the destruction of our planet and why we need to build a society based on production for human needs, not profit. On the eve of World War I, Luxemburg famously said the choice is clear: it’s socialism or barbarism. Today this has a whole new existential meaning: It’s ecosocialism or death, in the words of Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson. For capitalism is—for better and

for worse—an economic growth machine. The world economy now produces in less than two weeks the equivalent of the entire physical output of the year 1900, and global economic output now doubles every twenty-five to thirty years. China’s transition to a global capitalist economic power and its lack of democratic controls threaten ecological apocalypse. The basic problem lies in the conflict between the individualist rationality enforced by the competitive market system and what is rational from a social point of view. Each firm is compelled to act to maximize its own individual interests, and it goes on and on, though the results are catastrophic. One would think that self-destruction would be a refutation of this individualist model of rational economic behavior, but it is too deeply rooted in capitalist ideology for mainstream economists to give it up. Organizing around this issue has to be central to everyone today.

LASTLY, WITH REGARD TO POLITICAL organization, what can Luxemburg tell us? Certainly she had a lifelong commitment to socialist organization, much as she stressed that spontaneity from below was critical. However, she also argued for a working women’s organization independent of the bourgeois women’s movement, so working women could better fight for their specific needs, while at the same time supporting universal women’s interests—an intersectional approach. More controversially on the left, she also supported women’s independent self-organization *within the working class and even among socialists*, encouraging Zetkin to found a women’s section of the Spartacus League. This position, I would point out, is ahead of many on the left today.

So in conclusion, there is a great deal that Luxemburg’s life and work can offer to contemporary socialist feminists.

Rosa Luxemburg and the Necessity of Anti-Imperialism for Revolutionary Socialism

ALYSSA ADAMSON

TODAY PROMINENT POLITICAL leaders are calling themselves socialists, but even if the terms “socialist” and “democratic socialism” are being used, it is often unclear what exactly is meant by these terms and what kind of political projects they embody. In this essay I will turn to the work and life of Rosa Luxemburg to outline what internationalism and anti-imperialism have to do with socialism and how her critique of bourgeois political economy can deepen our understanding of socialism. I will conclude alongside Luxemburg that any socialism eliding questions of imperialism is not revolutionary and actually opens the door for reactionary and fascistic forces to gain power.¹

Imperialism, Capitalism, and Militarism

For Luxemburg—and we should add Marx and Engels—revolutionary socialism, by its very nature, *must* be connected to an internationalist struggle against capitalism and imperialism. What made possible the development of industrialization and modern capitalist nation-states was the expropriation

of wealth, land, resources, and labor that began with fifteenth-century colonization. Moreover, it is these ongoing practices of dispossession, extermination, exploitation, and imperialism that to this day allow our so-called national economies to run. Because imperialism and capitalism are organically related, one cannot be a legitimate socialist in the eyes of Luxemburg if one supports imperialist ventures—including supporting militarism and war to further national capital accumulation.

Luxemburg was uniquely attuned to these issues both because she had an “outsider” perspective on the German empire as a Jewish Polish woman, and also because she watched the SPD (Democratic Socialist Party of Germany) deviate from its initial anti-imperialist stances and finally vote for war credits supporting World War I. The rightward swing of the SPD can be tracked in part by its assimilation in the German state. Anti-socialist laws in Germany pushed socialist organizing underground from 1878 to 1890. August Bebel, who was staunchly against German imperialism, would work to bring together the Social-Democratic Workers Party of Germany with other socialist groups to found the SPD in 1890, when the anti-socialist laws were finally repealed. But now that socialists were able to engage publicly in German electoral politics, what this involvement meant and what it would look like was a new and serious question. In the end, the electoral strategy of the SPD would

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force it to reverse its position on German imperialism and militarism to avoid opening itself to more state repression or alienating itself from the German working-class voter who would support a war. We can't forget that the military is largely seen as a "job provider"; in the United States today the military is our largest employer.

While Luxemburg was a member of the SPD, she frequently disagreed with party leaders' conceptions of socialism and their tactics to build it in Germany. If imperialism has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in capital accumulation and assuaging the crises of capitalism, then it must be kept front and center within socialist politics. Germany at the turn of the twentieth century was becoming a colonial power, even if

Luxemburg homed in on the lie of politicians and academics who talked about the "national economy" as if modern countries had closed and self-perpetuating economies.

it was late to the game compared to other European countries. There was a specific crisis in Morocco that spurred Luxemburg to clash with SPD leaders on imperialism as a central issue. The so-called 1911 Agadir crisis occurred when French troops occupied Morocco. In response, Germany sent a gunboat to protect the country's trade interests, which then triggered Britain to back France as they worried about further German encroachment. The event was a scramble over colonial and imperial control of Morocco, and Germany was pressed by its own financial crisis to make sure it was

not going to lose out. Eventually France and Germany negotiated a redistribution of their colonies, with France taking all of Morocco.

Luxemburg wanted to have a conference with the International Socialist Bureau to assess the specific situation, but the SPD refused to hold such a conference. Luxemburg wrote a scathing report of their reactionary attitudes in her pamphlet *Concerning Morocco*.² There she named the SPD's hypocrisy: While it was willing to support anti-colonial Moroccan uprisings, even supporting protests in *other* countries around the issue, the SPD was too worried about the coming elections to make any public statement about German militarism and imperialism. In particular, she criticized SPD support of the Sultan of Morocco, who was just a puppet of imperialist demands: "Bernstein [a major leader of the SPD] only noticed in the [act to condemn French invasion of Morocco] the equal right of all trading nations in Morocco, and he quite strangely overlooked the fact that, besides European traders, there is still another factor, which also has, as it were, 'certain rights': the native people, the tribes of Morocco, who are now rebelling."³ The party executive in Berlin wrote in response to Luxemburg, "If we were to commit ourselves firmly too soon and to stress the Moroccan Question at the expense of all questions of *domestic policy* in such a way that an effective electoral slogan could be used against us, then the consequences cannot be anticipated."⁴ Luxemburg responds,

We have heard so much about the "splendid situation" in which we are approaching the Reichstag elections, and at the same time we have been warned repeatedly against spoiling this "situation" by some imprudent action; previously this was the struggle for universal suffrage in Prussia, and now it is the agitation against the hubbub surrounding Morocco. ... The best way of throwing away the advantage of this "situation" would be to begin to consider all party life and all tasks of the class struggle simply from the perspective of

the ballot-box.⁵

Taking a strong position against German imperialism could have helped educate the public on these issues and demonstrate the resolve of a *revolutionary* anti-imperialist socialist party. But the SPD was already caught up in focusing on what would make them more likely to achieve electoral wins. The fact many Germans would support imperial military efforts for reasons of “job security” was not lost on the SPD. Analogously today, our politicians rarely condemn imperialist military actions on the campaign trail and tend to prioritize a “national job” perspective rather than an internationalist economic perspective.

Party leaders in the SPD avoided talking about issues of imperialism, saying that they were “foreign” affairs while the party needed to stay focused on “domestic” issues. However, Luxemburg points out the myopia of this position, writing,

The duty of Social Democracy is not to reassure public opinion, but to do the very reverse, to rouse it and warn it against the dangers lying dormant. ... *We can only count on the resistance of the enlightened masses.* ... They say that we should restrict our agitation exclusively to matters of domestic policy, to questions of taxation and social legislation. *But financial policy ... and the stagnation of social reform are organically bound up with militarism, naval policy, colonial policy, and with personal rule and its foreign policy. Any artificial separation of these spheres can only present an incomplete and one-sided picture of the state of our public affairs.*⁶

Here we see Luxemburg highlighting the necessity of “enlightened” mass support, meaning that the masses must be politically educated for self-determination, as it is they who should be the motor of party decisions. A major part of the progressive value of an organized socialist party is that it operates as an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist edu-

cational organ. She shows that the ultimate success of the party lies in “the resistance of the masses,” and *not* in attempting to co-opt bourgeois electoral power, because she is clear on the *organic unity* of financial policy, colonial policies, militarism, and capitalism. The idea that socialism can be “voted in” without radically altering the ways in which we think about social and economic justice, or our ways of living and reproducing our social conditions—which both then and now rely on the exploitation of much of the world—is not only incorrect but works to further obfuscate the real issues.

Anti-Imperialism and Luxemburg’s Critique of Bourgeois Political Economy

In her *Introduction to Political Economy*, written for the SPD political education school, Luxemburg aimed to make political economy comprehensible for the average person—cutting through the jargon and exposing the mystifications of economics by the academics and politicians of her time. For her, a basic understanding of political economy can and should be had by everyone. This is important for the very reason that we all contribute to and are controlled by economic forces—including our need to find some type of work and source of income. Luxemburg homed in on the lie of politicians and academics who talked about the “national economy” as if modern countries had closed and self-perpetuating economies that were not closely bound to the workings of many other places. What she writes about Germany in 1909 is probably even more true today. Nearly all the products we buy and use are made or resourced in places other than the country where we live: “To make our life and work possible ... we have almost all other countries, peoples, and parts of the world working for us, and we work in turn for all these countries.”⁷

While exchange of goods is probably as old as humanity, the exchange of goods

globally—on the scale it exists today—is clearly a much more recent phenomenon. The first thing Luxemburg will point out is that these new relations of dependency between countries are highly *asymmetrical*. They were forged by colonial dynamics of conquest, empire building, and economic expansion resulting in extreme disparities of capital accumulation in colonial metropolises at the expense of their colonies. At the time of Luxemburg’s writing, Great Britain received from its largest colony, India, 1,000 million marks, and in exports another 1,200 million marks-worth of goods. Luxemburg writes, “The ‘surplus’ is nothing more than the economic expression of the colonial exploitation of India by British capitalism.”⁸ While the British tried to hide behind the idea of “aid” and “loans” for “alleviating poverty” and “improving infrastructure,” Luxemburg is quick to point out the hypocrisy of offering so-called aid that is primarily used to make India’s exploitation easier for Britain rather than to better the lives of Indians. Given the

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structure of colonial capitalist relations, there can be no such thing as “humanitarian” aid if the country being granted this aid is in its dire situation because of active underdevelopment, and labor and resource exploitation, by the very country offering “aid.” These goods or finances “are not sent for exchange, but for the production of profit.”⁹ What we find primarily exchanged is not even concrete “goods” but

rather *capital*, which doesn’t serve to “fill ‘certain gaps’ in other countries’ ‘national economies,’ but quite the reverse—opening up gaps, rifts, and splits and acting like gunpowder to transform these ‘national economies’ sooner or later into heaps of rubble.”¹⁰ Loans from colonial metropolises doubly exploit currently or formerly colonized territories by monopolizing trade and collecting interest on debt repayments—and the irony is that the funds used as loans are manifestations of capital first accumulated by the expropriation of the very countries that they are being given to at a higher cost.¹¹

For a contemporary example of this imperialist capitalist hypocrisy, we can turn to the history of France, the United States, and the political-economic conditions in Haiti. As W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James have aptly argued, the Haitian revolution not only sought to end colonial rule and slavery in Haiti, but it also set off a chain of events leading ultimately to the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Haitian revolution was a landmark moment in the attempt to concretely develop our modern ideals of freedom and democracy, promised but not achieved in the previous English, French, and American revolutions. While I won’t go into all the details of why the Haitian revolution wasn’t able to maintain all that it had promised, we cannot overlook the fact that its greatest obstacle to achieving democratic freedom lies in the economic exploitation by neocolonial powers through debts.

The revolution ended in 1804, but by 1825 France sent warships to surround Haiti, demanding “reverse slave reparations” for all the revenue French slave owners had lost post-revolution; this amounted to 150 million francs. On threat of military invasion and another war, Haiti was forced to agree to these “reparations,” and the United States stepped in to make sure Haiti paid back these “debts” or the new republic would not be allowed sovereignty or international respect by Europe. With the military threat of destruc-

tion by Anglo-European, capitalist, former slave countries, Haiti, after 122 years, would finish paying back its “debt” to French slaveholders in 1947. However, as probably many of us have experienced with student loans, Haiti, would pay back much more than 150 million francs in interest and debt-servicing fees. France and the City Bank of New York, or as we now know it, Citibank (who eventually bought Haiti’s debt from France), would collect the equivalent of \$21 billion from Haiti just for dismantling its slave economy.¹² Regardless of what liberal philanthropists say about their “charity,” whatever resources colonial nations offer to former colonies are only given to enable further exploitation.

We could extend this analysis to the role of the Clinton Foundation in Haiti, which collected over \$13.3 billion dollars after the 2010 earthquake only to have minuscule amounts (.06 percent) go to local organizations. The main project of the foundation has been the construction of a \$300 million garment factory in 2012 called Caracol Industrial Park, which was a subsidized deal with the U.S. and Haitian governments.¹³ More than 1,000 Haitians lost their land for the building of this factory, which would produce clothing for Old Navy, Walmart, and Target.¹⁴ The Clintons claimed they would create 100,000 jobs, but only 8,000 ever materialized. And these jobs are extremely low waged at \$5 a day—far below the amount needed to basically survive in Haiti, which requires at least \$10–20 per day.¹⁵

Conclusion: Luxemburg, Democratic Socialism, and Fascism

Luxemburg’s method of analyzing international economic relations, cutting through the misinformation of liberal and conservative politicians and economists, is still very relevant for understanding the developments of our time. Her holistic understanding of organization, struggle, and radical self-determination through revolutionary po-

litical education and democratic institutions enabled her to challenge the imperialistic tendencies of her contemporaries. Taken to

I hope that we follow in the footsteps of Luxemburg by taking always an internationalist position against imperialism.

its most radical conclusions, her work points toward a globally oriented democratic society organized from below against capitalist imperialism. Luxemburg would eventually break with the SPD and form an organization that tried to better connect with these principles—first as the Spartacus League and eventually the Communist Party of Germany. Luxemburg’s murder would be organized by the very forces she was fighting within the SPD around issues of imperialism and anti-Semitism. We would not be wrong to draw connections to the ways that socialism was being constructed and popularized at that time and its later transition to National Socialism.

The German revolution that brought to a head all the contradictions of Luxemburg’s work, life, and death resulted in the Weimar Republic, which attempted to integrate socialist demands within a bourgeois, liberal, capitalist framework. But even the most progressive aspects of the Weimar Republic would only last 14 years before a fascist coup. While I will not try to reduce the very complex historical phenomena that lead to the mainstreaming of fascism in Germany, I will say that the way we frame and argue for socialist demands is incredibly important to the way they will get taken up by those in power. Either we construct socialist politics as fundamentally internationalist and anti-imperialist or we narrowly focus on “domestic

issues” and the immediate interests of certain U.S. citizens and the interests of our nation at the expense of others. I hope that we follow in the footsteps of Luxemburg by taking always an internationalist position against imperialism and that we are not confused by the words of those who only want to preserve and augment U.S. hegemony in the name of the U.S. working class. I close with the words of Luxemburg:

One cannot gauge phenomena such as modern imperialism with “law” and “morality.” ... The inseparable connection of imperialism with capitalist development ... is what we must teach the working class to understand. And consequently, the working class must draw the conclusion that imperialism, war, plundering countries, haggling over peoples, breaking the law, and the policy of violence can only be fought against by fighting capitalism, by setting social revolution against global genocide. Looking *within* imperialist policy for remedies and solutions to its conflicts, wanting to oppose its *Strum* and *Drang* by trying to scale things back to past conditions, is not proletarian but petty-bourgeois policy, a hopeless policy that boils down to a constant defense of the imperialism of yesterday against the imperialism of today.¹⁶

NOTES

1. The focus of this essay is how the positive contributions of Luxemburg’s theorizing of socialism can be useful for us today. There are other aspects of her work, like her abstract analysis of national liberation struggles, that are much less helpful, and many others have dealt with these shortcomings. For example, see Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982); and Eric Blanc, “The Rosa Luxemburg Myth: A Critique of Luxemburg’s Politics in Poland (1893–1919),” *Historical Materialism* (Vol. 25, Issue 4, 2018), 1–34.
2. Published in *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, July 24, 1911.

3. Rosa Luxemburg, “Petty-Bourgeois or Proletarian World Policy?” (August 19, 1911) in Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, trans., *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I* (Haymarket Books, 2011), 469.
4. Rosa Luxemburg, “Concerning Morocco,” Marxist Internet Archive (2004), www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1911/07/24.htm.
5. Luxemburg, “Concerning Morocco.”
6. Luxemburg, “Concerning Morocco.” (emphasis mine)
7. Rosa Luxemburg, “Introduction to Political Economy,” in Peter Hudis, ed., *Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg Volume 1: Economic Writings 1* (Verso, 2013), 99.
8. Luxemburg, “Introduction to Political Economy,” 112.
9. Luxemburg, “Introduction to Political Economy,” 114.
10. Luxemburg, “Introduction to Political Economy,” 115–6.
11. “Public loans for railroad building and armaments accompany all stages of the accumulation of capital: the introduction of commodity economy, industrialization of countries, capitalist revolutionizing of agriculture, as well as the emancipation of young capitalist states. For the accumulation of capital, the loan has various functions: (a) it serves to convert the money of non-capitalist groups into capital, i.e. money both as a commodity equivalent (lower middle-class savings) and as fund of consumption for the hangers-on of the capitalist class; (b) it serves to transform money capital into productive capital by means of state enterprise—railroad building and military supplies; (c) it serves to divert accumulated capital from the old capitalist countries to young ones.” Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Agnes Schwarzschild, trans. (London: Routledge, 2003), 400–401.
12. www.theroot.com/as-haiti-burns-never-forget-white-people-did-that-1827454590?fbclid=IwAR2Qarv4c_qidka8R6Drfy4T-8jviD6ZxQ50wd-KlQgHdyu08yt_inpHdS0o.
13. www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37826098.
14. www.actionaidusa.org/work/land-grabbing-in-haiti-the-caracol-industrial-park/.
15. www.actionaidusa.org/work/land-grabbing-in-haiti-the-caracol-industrial-park/.
16. Luxemburg, “Petty-Bourgeois or Proletarian World Policy?” 470.



Learning from the “Red” State Walkouts

LOIS WEINER

RED STATE REVOLT IS BASED ON Eric Blanc’s “on the ground” reporting for *Jacobin* on the 2018 walkouts of education workers in Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Arizona. He aims to tell the stories of the walkouts and their leaders, providing a “behind the scenes” look at the organizing as well as presenting the political take-away for labor and the left.

Blanc captures the excitement strikers and the public felt at these unexpected mass job actions in Republican strongholds. He explains facets of this movement, including some that he previously reported, others new. An insight he nails in this book that is especially vital as activists try to extend lessons to other labor work is that framing the walkouts as being exclusively about salary obscured teachers’ fight for the dignity of their work and their personhood: “Like most labor battles, these strikes were about winning respect as much as anything else. More often than not, fights around pay are simultaneously struggles for basic human dignity; economic

demands are rarely *only* economic.” Another strength of the book is Blanc’s close-up view of how key leaders shaped the movement—and vice-versa. Much of this background information is new, and Blanc does a service by compiling it in this volume.

These strengths emerge from Blanc’s method of gathering information: meeting “the local organizers,” ex-

plaining his mission of writing about the job actions, and doing strike support. “Ultimately, I spent the bulk of my time organizing national solidarity for the strikers and talking politics with the core teacher activists over nightly beers” (12). While the stories Blanc tells are rich in detail about individual activists, the interviews are primarily with radicals and socialists. This is problematic because activists not affiliated with socialist or radical groups played a significant role in building the movement in various regions, a reality apparent in the Facebook page discussions. As Blanc himself discusses, many walkout participants voted not only for Trump in the 2016 election but for the Republicans in the state legislatures against whom they were protesting. How exactly did Blanc locate the activists with whom he hung out and had beers? Did he try to connect with teachers who self-identified as “conservatives” and

Red State Revolt

ERIC BLANC
Verso Books, 2019.

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perhaps weren't interested in having beers in the evening? How did their perspective differ—if it did? These questions illuminate a key weakness in the book: Blanc often makes unsupported claims based on his political assumptions (most of which I share) without acknowledging he does so. One glaring example is his assertion that “nonwhite teachers in these states were undoubtedly just as committed as their white colleagues to the fight for better pay, working conditions, and school funding” (68). Why “undoubtedly”? We know from a significant body of educational research that African American teachers often see their work and political commitments differently from their white counterparts. Systemic racism in schools—and on the job—is often on their radar but was not taken on by the movements in these states. Further, Blanc's statement that “proactive anti-racism among white educators was certainly not commonplace” (65) significantly understates the problem. Race was a salient factor in all the “Red” states, with the exception of West Virginia, which is rural and 96 percent white. The walkout in Oklahoma was moored in Tulsa and Oklahoma City,

both urban, both highly segregated. And in Arizona, the importance of alliances with the Hispanic community evolved as activists grew politically. The earliest photos on social media of the Arizona walkout were of Anglo teachers, a problem movement leaders corrected when it was flagged. So while this book mentions race and racism, and in so doing corrects a significant omission in coverage of the walkouts, it does not grapple with racism's pervasive influence on schools and teachers' work—or the left's unwillingness to name its importance from the start.

Blanc posits that U.S. unions, having rejected strikes and grassroots organizing, need these stories of the walkout to encourage more militancy. His book provides that needed narrative and welcome encouragement. Still, the ruling class has learned from these walkouts, and so must we. That learning requires both objectivity and critique in analysis, more than this book gives readers. The walkouts showed stunning resistance to neoliberalism's project of destroying public education and teachers unions. The complete story needs to be told. Perhaps that's the next book.

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Socialist Meaning in Feminist Mobilizations

TEMMA KAPLAN

FEMINISM FOR THE 99% CALLS attention to women's mobilizations that are sweeping the world and argues for their revolutionary, anti-capitalist potential. At the same time, this compelling homage to the *Communist Manifesto* flips the focus from a classic notion of a proletariat (sometimes historically presumed to consist largely of working-class men) to a new configuration that includes women of all races and ethnicities around the world. Emphasizing the way levels of human dignity join with relations of production to shape the 99 percent, the authors attempt to explain how international capitalism is being challenged, and ultimately how it may be overthrown, by "a broad-based global insurgency."¹ Although some may scoff at the seeming presumption of such an argument, I find it breathtaking.

Arguing for the increasing centrality of working-class and peasant women and their allies to capitalist transformation, this book marks a major shift from many other Marxist critiques. In the authors' desire to "overcome familiar, stale oppositions between 'identity

politics' and 'class politics,'" they argue that ongoing movements are beginning to constitute a worldwide configuration (56-57).

Those of us who share a life-long commitment to social movements in the hopes that they could be brought together to bring about some form of democratic socialism will be happy to see this program once again brought to life. In fact, in at least one workshop on environmentalism

as far back as the Hairu encampment of the 1995 Fourth United Nations World Conference of Women in Beijing, activists explored the possibility of confronting certain global polluters through coordinated action by suing them in some countries, striking against them in other countries, and mobilizing to shame them in still other places. Although the environmental workshop's plan never emerged as a coordinated movement, the "Water War" in Cochabamba, Bolivia, from late 1999 to April 2000, united indigenous market women and truck farmers with local union activists and young people of both sexes to demonstrate against Bechtel's privatization of SEMAPA, the regional water company. California activists provided additional support when they demonstrated in front of Bechtel's corporate offices in San Francisco to publicize how the company's Bolivian subsidiary even prohibited gathering rain water while it demanded a 200 percent return on investment to repair the water system. The government's support of

Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto

CINZIA ARRIZZA, TITHI
BHATTACHARYA, and
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Verso Books, 2019

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Bechtel's subsidiary provoked armed struggle that ultimately drove Bechtel out. These and other instances of such mobilizations illustrate that many of what we sometimes used to call socialist feminists have long joined or even led local movements.

Feminism for the 99% rightly calls attention to the contemporary mobilizations of women that are increasingly developing around the world. Although the current wave of resistance may be said to have begun with the mobilizations and strikes following the 2008 financial crisis, according to this book, they first achieved recognition with the 2017 commemoration of International Women's Day. Not to split hairs, it might be argued that mass strikes of this kind have a long history on the left dating back to the Socialist and anarchist launching of May Day in 1890, Woman's Day in 1909, and International Women's Day in 1910. This strategy of demonstrating the united force of workers and women has a long history on the left and gave rise to revolutionary action as far back as the "mass strikes" that Rosa Luxemburg considered in the book of that title.² In a somewhat backhanded compliment, we might say that *Feminism for the 99%* recalls the spirit of her arguments, particularly her notion that it is "not the best organized workers ... who will develop the greatest capacity for action, but the worst organized or totally unorganized."³ Roughly summarizing, Luxemburg attempted to explain how somewhat "spontaneous" mass uprisings helped advance the cause of socialism to counter political parties' tendency toward becoming bureaucracies. With contemporary social movements in mind, it might be argued that women's, queer and gay rights activists', and teachers' mobilizations also offer critiques of capitalist values and, in the process, bring about activities for social reconstruction that they, their elected officials, and broad-based social movements can pursue.

Beginning in February 1917 in Petrograd, Russia, when poor and working-class

women's demands for bread and peace generated a revolution that neither the Bolsheviks nor Mensheviks thought wise to pursue, and contrary to V.I. Lenin's later admonition to German Socialist Clara Zetkin that working women in Germany in the 1920s avoid talking about their personal problems and stick to discussions about working conditions, contemporary women's movements have often made personal demands a part of their claims for social transformation. Although the celebration of May Day and International Women's Day generally died out in the United States until the reinstitution of our International Women's Day in 1969 or 1970, both lived on in one form or another elsewhere in the world.

Less a history of women's social movements than an investigation of the possible turning point we may have reached between 2016 and 2018, Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser's account refers to the massive October 2016 uprising against the banning of abortions in Poland and the far-reaching demonstrations in Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Mexico, Uruguay, and Honduras against the vicious rape and murder of 16-year-old Argentine Lucía Pérez at the end of October 2016. The authors argue that the new movements challenge social and economic conditions ranging from provision of education to the availability of water and sanitation; to control over the forces of ethnic, racist, and sexual violence; to integrating migrants from across borders, and that the movements spread to Spain, Italy, Brazil, Turkey, Peru, Chile, Mexico, the United States, and dozens more countries (6).

It may be just a matter of taste, but the book, while confronting various theories of social change and critiques of capitalism, seems most compelling when it examines the complexities of building women's alliances across class, race, and ethnicity, not just in the United States but around the world. The critiques of capitalism and the failures of feminist and other reform movements to act against the economic and social institutions

that undergird capitalism couldn't be more convincing. But the book is most useful for the questions it raises about the movements that aspire to create new forms of social justice and the difficulty of overcoming racial and ethnic differences that too often divide us.

Take for example the #MeToo movement. The white women who united against Harvey Weinberg and the other Hollywood, media, and business executives who molested and raped them have captured interest and found adherents almost everywhere. Yet according to Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, "the first statement of solidarity with the women in show business came from immigrant farmworkers in California: They immediately recognized Harvey Weinstein not simply as a predator, but as a powerful *boss*, able to dictate who would be allowed to work in Hollywood and who would not (32-33)."

Others have emphasized the importance of social media, especially the accident of history that provided Alyssa Milano with the hashtag #MeToo. According to *Time* magazine's extensive "Person of the Year 2017" report, someone familiar with the term "MeToo" shared it with Milano. She sent out a tweet asking those who had experienced such abuse to reply "#MeToo," and, overnight, she received 30,000 responses. It was Tarana Burke and young Black, Brown, and indigenous teenagers whom she helped organize who first used the term "MeToo," in 2006, to describe their abuse. Although the more elite white women who gained the attention of the media readily hoped to make alliances with poor women of color, a bad taste remains. As the 45-year-old activist Burke told an audience in Detroit in late 2018, "This is not about awareness. It's about action." She cautioned her audience to recognize that "with #MeToo being as big and loud as it is, we don't need more awareness. This is about what happens after the hashtag, after the hoopla. This is about the work."⁴

It is to the credit of Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser that they insist that "*nothing that deserves the name of 'women's liberation' can be*

achieved in a racist, imperialist society."⁸ But, while identifying the cause as "capitalism," they are ready to acknowledge the courage of ordinary women from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America who face the challenges of climate change, declining supplies of water, exploitation and sexual harassment on the job, lack of medical attention, and repression by the guardians of national borders. If the authors' efforts to be comprehensive sometimes underestimate the importance of local, possibly reformist, struggles such as those waged around the availability and cost of clean drinking water in places as varied as Cape Town, Detroit, Philadelphia, or the Central Valley of California, their manifesto is not responsible for highlighting all the struggles for survival now taking place. This is not to dispute the ultimate value of revolutionary transformation, but to insist on the transitional need under capitalism to achieve immediate relief from life-threatening challenges.

If there is one complaint I would lodge it is that in distinguishing revolutionary anti-capitalism from ordinary reformist efforts, as any polemic is bound to do, this manifesto, if anything, underestimates the revolutionary achievements of "ordinary" feminists of all races and cultures all over the world. But its sterling achievement is to recognize how feminism, as a constantly regenerating movement, has succeeded in including women of all races and classes, in all social settings, in the long-term struggle for social transformation.

NOTES

1. Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2019), 57.
2. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Union*, 1906. www.Marxists.org/archive/Luxemburg/download/mass-str.pdf.
3. Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, 51.
4. Rochelle Riley, "#MeToo Founder Tarana Burke Blasts the Movement for Ignoring Poor Women," *Detroit Free Press*, Nov. 15, 2016.

Why We Need Socialist Disability Theory and Critical Disability Socialism

ANNA MCCLENNEN

THE MODERN CONCEPT OF disability—in-deed, the conception of disability itself, as there was no identical concept before modern times—is a by-product of capitalism. Capitalism spawns disability both as the primary producer of impairment (through industrial workplace accidents, the physical and emotional toll of exploitation, and the effects of widespread toxic contamination on congenital development) and as its conceptual primogenitor.

Yet there is a distressing dearth of scholarship at the intersection of socialist theory and critical disability theory. Some critical disability scholars, but not enough, draw out the historical materialist underpinnings of disability. Even fewer socialist theorists have examined how recognizing the relationship between capitalism and able-ism increases

our understanding of both.

Ravi Malhotra and Benjamin Isitt have contributed to closing this gap with two anthologies: *Disability Politics in a Global Economy* (henceforth DPGE) and *Disabling Barriers* (henceforth DB).

The concept of normalcy, which arose in the late 1800s, is only definable

in the negative: It is impossible to specify a meaning for “normal” beyond “that which is not abnormal.” The conceptual and political work is done by creating a refuse heap of abnormality—for which disability is just another term—and throwing everything into it until “normal” has been whittled down to serve the functions for which it is required.

But what are those functions? Who benefits? Marta Russell, one of the most influential scholars to combine critical disability theory and socialist theory, posed the question “Whom does the concept of ‘normal’ serve?” (my paraphrasing) and argued, incontrovertibly, that the answer is “capitalism.”

Fundamentally, what “disabled” means in the modern era—that is, within and under capitalism—is to be unfit for work: to be

Disability Politics in a Global Economy: Essays in Honour of Marta Russell

RAVI MALHOTRA, ED.
Routledge, 2017

Disabling Barriers: Social Movements, Disability History, and the Law

RAVI MALHOTRA AND BENJAMIN ISITT, EDS.
University of British Columbia Press, 2017

ANNA MCCLENNEN is a philosopher and critical disability studies scholar who teaches in the Critical Thinking Program at Borough of Manhattan Community College. She is currently writing a memoir about disability rights and the U.S. carceral regime.

a worker who is unable to sell their¹ labor. As Russell has argued (including in the essay that Malhotra added as an appendix in DPGE), the social expendability of and lack of supports for people whose labor is not marketable shores up capitalist extraction of profit by using fear of destitution as a means to drive workers to accept exploitative work conditions (DPGE, 234). To be clear, disabled workers are unable to sell their labor not because they are unable to engage in work at all, but because for them to do so would require various accommodations. Because employers perceive accommodations as a decrease in worker efficiency or as an increase in the cost associated with employing them, disabled workers are viewed by employers as undesirable so long as there are workers available who do not require accommodations. Further, the case can readily be made that capitalism uses the concept of disability—similarly to the use of gender and race—to drive a wedge between workers. For “able-bodied” workers who fail to reflect on the contingent and transient nature of their status, the rejection of disabled workers can appear, superficially, as a welcome reduction in competition for work.

Furthermore, important scholarship details the creation and expansion of an “industrial care complex” in the modern era in which disabled bodies become commodities that generate vast profits for health care and service providers such as the nursing home industry. And emotionally impaired bodies are fuel for the mass carceral state and its industries: In the United States, the carceral system is the largest provider of mental health treatment for poor people (Liat Ben-Moshe and Jean Stewart, “Disablement, Prison and Historical Segregation: 15 Years Later,” in DPGE, Chapter 5).

These are reasons why socialist theory is incomplete unless it engages with the role of disability in capitalism. But critical disability theory is similarly doomed to incompleteness if it does not engage with the role of capitalism in disability.

Socialist theorists, regardless of nuances of interpretation, share a common understanding that in a capitalist political economy, work—both the availability of jobs (the opportunity to earn money from one’s labor) and the act of labor itself—exists for the benefit of the employer rather than the employee. Advocacy for or discussion of disability rights in the workplace that is not grounded in socialist theory, however, falls short because it sneaks in the presumption of, or the aspiration to, a view of work as existing for the benefit of workers. Notions of a “right to work” for disabled people, or of a “right to accommodations” that enable them to make use of their productive capacities, are fundamentally at odds with the structure of capitalism. In capitalism, no one has a “right to work.” No one has a right to either the emotional or financial benefits associated with using their capabilities to make a social contribution. You get that opportunity only if employers want to purchase your labor in the marketplace. And what it means to be disabled is that you have been deemed unfit to work by employers in that marketplace.

This conundrum is made apparent in various papers in both volumes. For example Matthew Smith, in “The Duty to Accommodate Drug and Alcohol Addiction in the Workplace” (DPGE, Chapter 4), argues for workplace accommodations that take into account the difficulties faced by workers who are recovering from addictions. These include the likelihood of relapses and the need for subsequent rehabilitation after an initial rehabilitation has enabled them to return to work. The enlightened and supportive approach that he advocates pushes back against the very core of capitalism. It can certainly be dressed in “capitalist-aspirational” language of retaining excellent employees who struggle with addiction, but the reality is, why would an employer bother unless forced by law? They would not when there are any number of equally excellent, addiction-free potential employees out there begging to be exploited

in the same job. And such laws will not be enacted within a capitalist political economy in the way that Smith advocates, because they challenge the very structure of capitalism. The policies Smith advocates require a structure in which people are entitled to work. Smith does not connect these dots in this paper, but by examining the accommodation of addictions in the workplace and by arguing that being in recovery from an addiction does not make a person unfit for work, he sheds light on where socialist theory and critical disability theory need to come together.

Two of the papers included are examples of a more fully intersectional theory: Zach Richter's "Autonomism and the Disabled and Abled Working Classes" (DPGE, Chapter 9) and Eric Tucker's "Compensating Work-Related Disability" (DB, Chapter 9). Both authors situate their arguments within specific versions of socialist analysis rather than glossing over such nuances.

Although the majority of the papers in these anthologies are not based equally in socialist theory and critical disability theory,

they are an invaluable step in the right direction. Critical disability studies and socialist studies are both marginalized in academia, which is an obstacle to bringing the fields together. By creating a space for their contributors to publish, Malhotra and Isitt are doing their part to push against that barrier.

Sunaura Taylor argues that we have the right not to have our value determined by our productivity as workers,² and I agree. I would build upon that, however, to argue that in a just world, "disabled worker" would no longer be an oxymoron. When a community or society dismisses or refuses the participation of its disabled members, it throws them out—it throws them away. But in a just world, no human being is refuse.

NOTES

1. My use of *their* as a gender-neutral, singular pronoun is intentional.
2. Sunaura Taylor, "The Right Not to Work: Power and Disability," *Monthly Review* (Vol. 55, Iss. 10, March 2004), 30-44.

Anarchists of Connecticut

PAUL BUHLE

THE COMPLEX HISTORY OF working-class anarchism and syndicalism in the United States has been understudied. A good part of the problem is language. German, Spanish, Finnish, and Yiddish sources have been utilized by a handful of scholars, but mostly decades ago. The scholars of Russian, Hungarian, and other immigrant groups with such tendencies have not yet appeared.

The Italian immigrants, whose fondness for these ideologies and whose actual participation in giant strike movements in the first two decades or so of the twentieth century perhaps outnumbered all others, have perhaps finally found their scholars. This work casts a wider understanding of ethnic radicalism at large.

For instance, Kenyon Zimmer's *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America* (2015) was a major contribution to the field. Andrew Cornell's *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* (2016), based largely if not entirely on English-language sources and treating mostly non-immigrant anarchists, has added to our knowledge of the field generally.

Clearly, we need further work. Intimacy is important in the study of radicalism that was

often based in scattered communities, unlikely to belong to any cohesive national movement. Located in a small geographic area little known for its radical activity, *Facing Toward the Dawn* has a large thematic scope. Who were the too-soon forgotten Italian-American anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, an explosive section of working-class population mostly during the

1910s and an enduring radical influence here and there within the American labor movement into the 1940s? How did they understand themselves and their activities, far from ethnic political centers like New York and Chicago, where great figures like Carlo Tresca and Arturo Giovannitti could be seen on the dais, but closer to dramatic events like the Sacco and Vanzetti trial and subsequent execution?

In a fascinating passage, the author of this book recalls the memories of Trotskyists of the 1940s going door to door in blue-collar neighborhoods around the New London region of Connecticut. They came across dozens of aged militants eager to spill their hearts out to any young person who would listen to their stories. This is an all too common saga. The U.S. left has been historically discontinuous, for many reasons, from repression to cultural assimilation and geographical mobility. Old rank-and-filers are left behind, sympathetic toward the next phases of activity but feeling disconnected and alone.

The radical story here demands a little

Facing Toward the Dawn: The Italian Anarchists of New London

RICHARD LENZI
Albany: SUNY Press, 2019

PAUL BUHLE *founded the Oral History of the American Left at New York University and interviewed many old-timers during the 1970s and 1980s.*

social-economic background that Lenzi, himself a retired industrial worker in Connecticut, provides with lucidity. In boom years between recessions, the sea-going commerce of late nineteenth-century New London was shifting toward modern industrialism, reckless of the immigrant public. Whole sections of the Fort Trumbull neighborhood were flattened under misguided development plans, but much remained. Here, new immigrants swarmed, relocated from a hotbed of nineteenth-century Italian radicalism, the Marche on the Adriatic coast east of Tuscany. They would be joined by fellow Italian immigrants from particular districts of southern Italy, close to Naples and Sicily. Deeply impoverished, provided poor sewage treatment or other public services, these new Americans brought visionary ideals with them to combat the evils experienced by the newer communities.

They also brought techniques of organizing among people largely illiterate or barely literate. Folklore, ceremony, and theater were joined to the use of radical newspapers read aloud by leading community figures.

The Italian Socialist Federation, among ethnic socialist groups uniquely aligned with the Industrial Workers of the World rather than the Socialist Party, offered a rallying point and orator-organizers famous in the population. Luigi Galleani, with a reputation for stirring a labor riot by the sheer power of his voice, competed with other anarchist notables like Enrico Malatesta—soon to return to his homeland. These passed through town or (like Galleani) made residence for a while, one sparkling personality followed by another.

It is a marvel of Lenzi's research into the Italian-language newspapers of these groups, with their local reporting of activities, and also into the English-language papers of towns small enough to notice and care about such activities, that he is able to follow not only the high-octane stars but the local activists, male and female, who often moved from town to town seeking jobs while also spreading the

word ... and avoiding repression.

Sadly, a fair share of Italian radical energy went into anarchist and quasi-anarchist groups fighting each other for ideological reasons that seem to us today arcane at best. We forget that anarchism had as many followers as Marxist-style socialism in many places, definitely including Italy, until the early twentieth century. For these immigrants, certain that a revolution could be made, the differences seemed crucial and oddly related to the realities of Italian-American life.

To take one example: The building trades of almost every kind, but definitely granite-carving, were Italian specialties. Vibrant anarchists thus easily became contractors but also members of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) building trades unions that were well known in other places to be deeply exclusionary and deeply conservative. How did the anarchist contractors, and also tavern owners, confectionary store entrepreneurs, and barber shop owners, deal with their own contradictions? They seemed to believe that their personal success made their agitational efforts possible: They could support the movement, help pay for traveling agitators (and give them a home to stay in), finance legal assistance to those pursued by the authorities, and so on.

Their relation with the U.S.-born community around them, little inclined toward radicalism and often inclined toward patriotic outbursts, was something else. In some ways, it was best to draw aside, to reinforce their insular status. On the other hand, their insularity looked from the outside like conspiracy, and as World War I reached the United States, severe repression began. They were easy to locate.

Whole sectors of the Italian-American left were effectively wiped out. The followers of Galleani were said to go underground, rumored to continue as groups formally or informally scattered across the country. Lenzi does not say so, but a sufficient number in Chicago existed to publish a Communist daily

newspaper during the 1920s, then dissolving amid sectarian infighting and confusion. They had another great defect, as old-timers told me: The activists were already middle-aged men by the 1920s, their wives and children remained unconverted, and the children would largely assimilate, abandoning even the idea of being on the left. Still other erstwhile Italian-American unionists, bitterly anti-Communist, became part of a conservative bloc within the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. The last editor of *Giustizia*, the ILGWU newspaper, bragged to me about being an eager collaborator with CIA projects to send large chunks of cash to the Christian Democratic anti-Communists of Italy in the late 1940s.

This was never the whole story. Italian-American communities rallied for the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti. Carlo Tresca led an anti-fascist movement that touched many

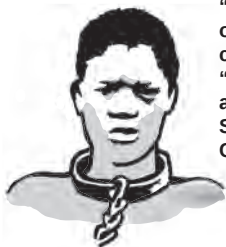
of the aging comrades. And the social clubs initiated by the anarchists continued, generation by generation, perhaps keeping alive the idea of “free thought” among frequently conservative, that is to say, priest-dominated, social and political circles. The world of Vito Marcantonio, Popular Front U.S. representative with a wide following in East Harlem, could not survive the shifting ethnic base of his community, but he inspired many Italian-Americans and, by bringing Puerto Ricans into his movement, created a bridge that did not survive the Cold War but remained a vivid memory afterward. Artist Ralph Fasanella, one of the followers of Marcantonio, will perhaps stand in memory for others forgotten.

Facing Toward the Dawn is an important book, an act of recovered memory, that says much about regional life at the dawn of the twentieth century, when the future seemed more open than it does now.

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