

NewPolitics

An Independent Socialist Journal

Vol. XVIII No. 2

Winter 2021

RACE, CRISIS, AND RESISTANCE
KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR

THE GLOBAL CAPITALIST ECONOMY

- **Kim Moody** on the Global Working Class
- **Ana Garcia**, **Miguel Borba**, and **Patrick Bond** on Imperialism and the Global South

THE U.S. ELECTIONS AND BEYOND

Biden Replaces Trump: A Malignant “Normalcy” Is Restored

- **Thomas Harrison**

The 2020 Elections in the U.S.: A Socialist View from Afar

- **Rohini Hensman**

Auditing U.S. Democracy ■ **Michael P. McCabe & Riad Azar**

The Latin American Left

- **Mike Gonzalez** on Politics in the Time of COVID
- **Bret Gustafson** on Bolivia’s Return to Democracy
- **José Laguarta** on Puerto Rico’s Elections

Exchange on Community Schools: Progressive Reform or Trojan Horse? ■ **Dylan Craig and John Adam Klyczek**

- **Lois Weiner** on Unions, Democracy, and the Third Camp
- **Au Loong Yu** on China’s Environmental Destruction
- **Stephen Steinberg** on Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste*

And more . . .

***new* POLITICS**

An Independent Socialist Journal

Editorial Board

Aaron Amaral
Saulo Manuel Colón Zavala*
Daniel Fischer
Phil Gasper*
Thomas Harrison
Michael Hirsch
Nancy Holmstrom*
Dan La Botz*

Kevin Lin
Scott McLemee
Stephen R. Shalom
Bhaskar Sunkara
Lois Weiner*
Emma Wilde Botta
Reginald Wilson
*co-editor

Sponsors

Stanley Aronowitz
Cinzia Arruza
Riad Azar
Elaine Bernard
Tithi Bhattacharya
Jon Bloom
Stephen Eric Bronner
Mari Jo Buhle
Paul Buhle
Jenny Chan
Lynn Chancer
Noam Chomsky
Lorraine Cohen
Mark Dow
Michael Eric Dyson
Barbara Ehrenreich
Barbara Epstein
Sam Farber
Barry Finger
David Finkel
Nancy Fraser

Gabe Gabrielsky
Dan Gallin
Barbara Garson
Richard Greeman
Justin Grossman
William Kornblum
Nelson Lichtenstein
Ravi Malhotra
Deborah Meier
Gwendolyn Mink
Kim Moody
Kai Nielsen
Martin Oppenheimer
Frances Fox Piven
Nancy Romer
Richard Smith
Ronnie Steinberg
Stephen Steinberg
Adaner Usmani
Stuart Weir
Cornel West

Former Editors, In Memoriam

FOUNDING EDITORS

Julius Jacobson (1922-2003)	Phyllis Jacobson (1922-2010)
Sam Bottone (1926-2016)	Betty Reid Mandell (1924-2014)
Joanne Landy (1941-2017)	Marvin Mandell (1927-2017)

NEW POLITICS is published by New Politics Associates, 294 New York Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11216, USA

e-mail: newpoliticsjournal@gmail.com

on the web at: www.newpol.org

NEW POLITICS is indexed in The Left Index and in Alternative Press Index, as well as Political Science Abstracts, the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, and International Political Science Abstracts.

Subscription Rates: *New Politics* is currently published twice a year.

DOMESTIC • For a digital copy only (a PDF mailed to you): One year (2 issues) – \$25; two years – \$35 • For both the print edition, mailed to you in the U.S., and digital copy, emailed: One year (2 issues) – \$35; two years – \$65.

INTERNATIONAL • For a digital copy only (a PDF mailed to you): One year (2 issues) – \$25; two years – \$35 • For both the print issue (mailed to you) and the pdf, emailed – \$70 USD.

©2021 New Politics Associates ISSN (0028-6494)

VOLUME XVIII • NUMBER 2 • Winter 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FROM THE EDITORS	1
------------------------	---

THE U.S. ELECTIONS AND BEYOND

BIDEN REPLACES TRUMP: A MALIGNANT “NORMALCY” IS RESTORED	3
Thomas Harrison	
THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES: A SOCIALIST VIEW FROM AFAR	15
Rohini Hensman	
AUDITING U.S. DEMOCRACY: CLASSICAL LIBERALISM, CONTEMPORARY AMERICA, THE TRUMP YEARS, AND BEYOND	21
Michael P. McCabe and Riad Azar	

RACE, CRISIS, AND RESISTANCE	32
Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor	

CHANGES IN GLOBAL CAPITALISM

WORKERS OF THE WORLD: GROWTH, CHANGE, AND REBELLION	41
Kim Moody	
WESTERN IMPERIALISM AND THE ROLE OF SUB-IMPERIALISM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH	52
Ana Garcia, Miguel Borba, and Patrick Bond	

THE LATIN AMERICAN LEFT

LATIN AMERICA IN THE TIME OF COVID	63
Mike Gonzalez	
BOLIVIA'S ELECTIONS: THE RETURN OF DEMOCRACY AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE	70
Bret Gustafson	
IN PUERTO RICO, THE 2019 UPRISING PRODUCES AN ELECTORAL OPENING TOWARD THE LEFT	74
José A. Laguarda Ramírez	

BELARUS: THE PEOPLE'S FIGHT CONTINUES	81
Hanna Perekhoda	

UNIONS, DEMOCRACY, AND THE THIRD CAMP: COMPARING LESSONS FROM NEW POLITICS AND HERMAN BENSON	87
Lois Weiner	

(contents continued)

**THE TECHNIQUES OF JUSTICE: ORWELL AND CAMUS
ON A HANGING AND THE GUILLOTINE95**
Kristian Williams

**COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: PROGRESSIVE REFORM
OR PRIVATIZATION TROJAN HORSE?**

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS WILL HELP UNIONS AND EDUCATION99
Dylan Craig

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND THE DANGERS OF ED TECH PRIVATIZATION103
Jake Klyczek

REPLY.....107
Dylan Craig

REVIEW ESSAY

A LEFTIST PERSPECTIVE ON CHINA’S ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION109
Au Loong Yu
Review of Smith, *China’s Engine of Ecological Collapse*

FILM REVIEW

THE POLITICS OF HELEN KELLER.....117
Keith Rosenthal
Review of Gianvito, *Her Socialist Smile*

BOOK REVIEWS

ISABEL WILKERSON’S CASTE: THE OCCLUSION OF POLITICAL ECONOMY.....120
Stephen Steinberg
Review of Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*

LOOKING BACK AT MAOISM AND THE GLOBAL LEFT123
Kevin B. Anderson
Review of Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*

CHINA’S WORKERS BATTLE APPLE AND FOXCONN.....128
Nicki Lisa Cole
Review of Chan and Selden, *Dying for an iPhone*

CAPITALISM, ROMANTICISM, AND NATURE131
John Molyneux
Review of Robert Sayre & Michael Lowy, *Romantic Anti-Capitalism and Nature*

A STORY FROM A DEFEATED STRUGGLE136
Alex de Jong
Review of Hillier, *Losing Santhia. Life and Loss in the Struggle for Tamil Eelam*

From the Editors

AS WE ARE PUTTING TOGETHER this issue of *New Politics*, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest crises in its history. The country has lost more than 300,000 people to the coronavirus pandemic, which continues to run rampant. Donald Trump's administration, criminally negligent and outright delusional, not only failed to provide a national plan to deal with the pandemic but produced a steady stream of lies and misinformation, disparaged medical expertise, organized events large and small without masks or social distancing, incited menacing armed protests, and encouraged conspiracy theories that the virus was a "hoax." Congress failed to pass adequate legislation to support the country's small businesses and millions of workers. Its failure and the state governors' erratic opening and closing of businesses and schools—as politicians proved unable to decide between profits and public health—have created a second Great Depression, with tens of millions unemployed, thirty million facing eviction, and fifty million experiencing hunger. Service workers—largely women, Blacks, and Latinx—have suffered more than most others, though Native Americans have been hit even harder. Yet, while poverty is growing, billionaires continue to enrich themselves. This is a national catastrophe.

In the November presidential election, Biden defeated Trump. Yet, while we are greatly relieved that Trump is gone, we recognize that Joseph Biden represents the status quo ante, the policies of the Democratic Party. Those policies, far from benefitting the country's working-class majority, also criminally neglected their deteriorating conditions, allowing Trump and the GOP to exploit their misery, intensifying racism, misogyny, and

gross ignorance. Biden is a neoliberal with a long record of support for the capitalist ruling class at home and its imperial objectives abroad. He disdains the party's left wing as represented by Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and their progressive program. He opposes Medicare for All, opposes free public higher education in all state schools, and eschews the use of the term "Green New Deal" because of his past support for the massive use of fossil fuels and fracking and his friendliness with the owners of energy corporations. We are convinced that any progress under Biden will be the result of militant pressure from mass social movements, including organized labor.

Last spring's anti-racist Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 20 million people, the teachers strikes the year before, and the many job actions and protests by health care and transport workers during the crisis show that we can fight for and win changes. In an extensive interview in this issue, "Race, Crisis, and Resistance in the United States," Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor discusses those developments and the prospects for the future.

Three articles focus on "The U.S. Elections and Beyond," evaluating the significance of recent political developments. Thomas Harrison of our editorial board and Rohini Hensman offer two interpretations of Biden's victory over Trump, while Michael P. McCabe and Riad Azar carry out what they call an "audit" of U.S. democracy and find it failing. Two articles allow us to place U.S. events in the broader world context, one by Kim Moody on the "Global Working Class" and the other by Ana Garcia, Miguel Borba, and Patrick Bond on "Imperialism and the Global South." In addition, Mike Gonzalez

gives us an overview of the Latin American situation, Bret Gustafson examines political developments in Bolivia, and José Laguarta analyzes the recent Puerto Rican elections.

NP Editorial Board member Lois Weiner examines debates in *New Politics* over the years on the question of union democracy and socialism, comparing the ideas of editors Julius and Phyllis Jacobson, who launched the magazine, and Herman Benson, founder of the Association for Union Democracy. And Kristian Williams looks at the issue of capital punishment in the writings of Albert Camus and George Orwell. Hanna Perekhoda analyzes the democratic movement in Belarus. And Dylan Craig and John Adam Klyczek debate the issue of community schools and threats of privatization. Au Loong Yu examines China's destruction of its own environment as well as its threats to the global environment in an essay review of Richard Smith's *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*. Among our other reviews are Stephen Steinberg's consideration of Isabel Wilkerson's important recent book *Caste* and Keith

Rosenthal's reflections on a documentary film on Hellen Keller's socialism.

The coronavirus has been hard on us. We have lost loved ones and friends, we have lost jobs; some have been evicted, many face hunger. We have been frustrated as activists by our inability to meet together, and some of us for reasons of age or underlying conditions have been unable to join the protests taking place. Combating the virus with masks, social distancing, and by avoiding gatherings is vital, and a vaccine must be made available to all, including people in developing countries, free of charge. But stamping out the virus cannot be the end of our struggle. We need to return to the streets to continue the fight for jobs with living wages for all, to stop evictions, to demand food for the hungry, to abolish ICE and defund the police, to protect reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ rights, to prevent environmental catastrophe, and to fight for democracy and socialism. We look forward to throwing off our masks and our inhibitions and marching with our comrades. See you in the streets!

Subscribe Now

Subscription Rates: *New Politics* comes out twice a year. Subscriptions are for one year and two issues, or two years and four issues.

	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>foreign</u>
Individual Digital subscription, 1 year	\$25	\$25
Individual Digital subscription, 2 years	\$35	\$35
Individual Print plus Digital subscription, 1 year	\$35	\$65
Individual Print plus Digital subscription, 2 years	\$70	—
Institutions: Print and Digital subscription, 1 year	\$50	\$70

(digital subscribers will receive a pdf by email)

Payments can be made online at <https://newpol.org/subscribe/> or by sending the following information to NEW POLITICS, 294 New York Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11216, USA: Name, Address, City, State, Zip Code, E-mail address, along with either a check made out to New Politics Associates in U.S. dollars, or a credit card number (Visa, Mastercard, or AmEx) and expiration date.

Biden Replaces Trump

A Malignant "Normalcy" Is Restored

THOMAS HARRISON

THE DEFEAT OF DONALD TRUMP CAME as a deliverance to millions of Americans after four years of political hell. It was greeted by mass spontaneous outbursts of joy and relief. Ridding ourselves of a uniquely malicious and bizarre president is reason to celebrate, but I argue that it is misleading to see the election as a victory of democracy over authoritarianism. Biden's win is the triumph not of democracy but of an oligarchic status quo, itself an increasingly authoritarian system. And I suggest that the conclusions to be drawn from the election point toward a different perspective going forward for the left.

Even though Biden won by more than six million votes, the 2020 election, Naomi Klein observed, "should have been a repeat of Herbert Hoover's loss in 1932. We are in the grips of a pandemic, a desperate economic depression, and Trump has done absolutely everything wrong" (*The Guardian*, Nov. 8, 2020). In those working-class rust belt counties in the Midwest where Biden won, his margin of victory was razor thin, and nationally Trump won the votes of 40

percent of union members. He did manage to take Ohio and came close to winning Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Exit polls showed that a plurality of voters saw the economy as the main issue; Trump won 82 percent of this group. Biden made the election a referendum on Trump's character, and especially on his handling of the pandemic, but without offering a plan to sustain incomes and small businesses until COVID is defeated. Workers felt forced to choose between risking their health or facing economic disaster, which is one reason so many of them voted for the incumbent, who constantly called for "opening up" the economy. Biden's vague, minimalist, cliché-filled campaign—promising to "heal the soul of the nation" (code for bipartisanship)—inspired little enthusiasm. The Democratic platform actually referred to housing as a right and promised "fundamental reforms" to address "structural and systemic racism" and "entrenched income inequality." Biden scarcely even mentioned them in the campaign, and it is safe to predict that an austerity-minded administration and mainstream Democrats in Congress will do virtually nothing to fulfill these promises.

The threat of a coup, not totally baseless but wildly exaggerated, was emphasized by liberal pundits—but also by a great many leftists—to frighten voters into turning out for Biden. Aside from a few instances, far-right thugs did not disrupt voting. More serious were the threats to mail-in balloting. Under Trump's Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, postal delivery was slowed down and mail sorting machines were removed or destroyed.

THOMAS HARRISON is a lifelong revolutionary socialist who serves on the editorial board of *New Politics*. He drafted the statement, "Don't Support Biden, Even Against Trump" (<https://newpol.org/dont-support-biden-even-against-trump>), which was signed by five other editors and posted on the magazine's website. For many years, he was a Co-Director, along with Joanne Landy, of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy. He is a member of DSA and a supporter of the Movement for a People's Party.

Republican governors and state legislatures have made determined efforts in recent years to suppress voting numbers in minority neighborhoods, for example by closing polling places and purging voter lists, but these were not enough to alter the result. Now, however, millions of Trump supporters believe they have been the victims of a gigantic fraud, and this has ominous implication for politics in the coming period.

Trumpism Marches On

Trump may be out of office, but Trumpism—white nationalism, misogyny, conspiracism and paranoia, murderous hatred of “socialism,” and longing for a dictator—will be a powerful force after Biden takes office. A huge mass of right-wingers has always existed in the United States, of course, but in recent years, despair caused by the extreme deprivations of neoliberalism has galvanized them like never before, and since 2016 Trump has provided an icon around which they have rallied and proliferated. Trump himself, even assuming he continues to exert cult-like dominance over these forces, has no consistent ideology, let alone the totalist ideology of a fascist leader. Indeed he lacks the intellectual ability, or the mental discipline, to formulate a coherent program. In the absence of an ideology, Trump’s worshipful followers identify passionately with him personally and with his *narrative*: that America was once “great,” when white men exercised unchallenged dominance, and that only he, as a strongman and a “very stable genius,” has the power to “Make America Great Again.” The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton prefers the term “solipsism” rather than “narcissism” to describe Trump’s psychology. He defines solipsism as “a cognitive process of interpreting the world exclusively through the experience and needs of the self” (Robert Jay Lifton, “The Assault on Reality,” *Dissent*, April 10, 2018).

The malevolent forces that identified with Trump’s solipsistic reality constitute, in

Lifton’s words, “a major segment of our society [that] ignores or defies the principles of reason, evidence, and shared knowledge that are required for the function of a democracy.” The elections were rigged, they insist, the pandemic is a hoax, leading Democrats are running a massive ring of Satanist pedophiles devoted to the abduction, trafficking, torture, sexual abuse, and cannibalizing of children.

A significant part of Trump’s following are Christian nationalists who consider him to be another King Cyrus, the Persian ruler who, though a pagan, acted as an instrument of God’s will when he freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity, according to the Book of Isaiah. Trump too, is a sort of pagan, hardly a proper Christian in any case, but God works in mysterious ways, and he has chosen a powerful instrument to rescue his people from the wicked and ungodly, with their abortions, homosexuality, feminism, and so on. Christian nationalists are thoroughly patriarchal and authoritarian, and they long for Trump to be an autocrat, like King Cyrus.

This gift from God is, of course, utterly amoral. He emerged from the 1980s cesspool of New York City’s leading politicians, gangsters, and business people, especially real estate developers, most of them habitués of the disco Studio 54. (Frank Rich, “The Original Donald Trump,” *New York*, April 30–May 13, 2018, is a superb description of this slimy milieu.) It was a bipartisan but overwhelmingly Democratic crowd. One of the presiding deities was the notorious lawyer and power broker Roy Cohn, former chief counsel for Joe McCarthy, Trump’s personal mentor and a creature described in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* as “the pole star of human evil.” It was from Cohn that Trump learned always when challenged to counterattack viciously and deny everything. In those days, Trump was treated as an entertaining con man—“The Donald,” as he was routinely known in the tabloid press.

Trump is an extreme example of the authoritarian personality, obsessed with

control and obedience, filled with delusions of grandeur and almost limitless pathological aggression. His self, structured around a core of malice, is an “evil self,” and he is able to attract masses of mesmerized admirers to his narratives of blame and fantasies of revenge. Biden, on the other hand, is not a frenzied demagogue. But he is nevertheless a different kind of evil self, one that fetishizes order and stability, which always take precedence over justice and humanity. If a U.S.-dominated world order requires the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, then so be it. (For an analysis of both kinds of evil selves, see Barry Magid, “The Evil Self,” *Dynamic Psychotherapy*, Fall/Winter 1988. Magid’s examples are Hitler and Kissinger.)

As long as neoliberals like Biden offer no solution to social crises and their only clear opposition is the far right, Trumpism will flourish and expand. Moreover, unless an independent left takes the field, the far right—increasingly coterminous with the Republican Party—will attract more and more working-class support. And out of the far right, the elements of outright armed fascism, as yet disorganized, amorphous, and numerically puny, will soon coalesce and take to the streets in force. Murderous white nationalist groups have already deeply infiltrated police forces around the country.

That 72 million people voted for Trump, more than in 2016, and that he won white voters by 15 points, nearly as many as in 2016, and even made inroads among Black men and Latinx voters, are dreadful facts. But at the same time poll results show strong majority support for progressive policies like Medicare for All, heavily taxing the rich, and massive government stimulus programs. This contradictory picture is the result of the fact that the left, unlike the right, has no political party of its own to shape public opinion, no party that could decouple bigotry from hatred of the establishment and persuade voters that major reforms are achievable.

To change public opinion, the left has

mass mobilizations. Occupy Wall Street, the first wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the Women’s March, the teachers strikes, and above all the immense upsurge following George Floyd’s murder, have enormously heightened popular consciousness of racism, sexism, inequality, and austerity. The problem, however, is that after the mobilizations flare up, they eventually die down, and politicians go back to business as usual. Protest is essential, but it is not enough. People must be able to envision a *political* way forward. In the absence of third-party initiatives, defunding demands, despite their popularity in certain cities, are unlikely to succeed. Even where Democratic city councils seemed to adopt major reforms in policing, as in Minneapolis, these have been quickly cancelled. To survive and grow, a third-party breakthrough would have to be buoyed by a social upsurge, but it is equally true that no social upsurge would be sustainable without an electoral breakthrough.

In a *New York Times* op-ed (Oct. 21, 2019), Michelle Goldberg noted that, after 2017, “as Donald Trump’s sneering lawlessness and stupefying corruption continues to escalate, it’s confounding, to say the least, that Americans aren’t taking to the streets en masse.” Following the huge protests that were a response to the 2016 election, mass demonstrations began to fade out, even as Americans’ outrage and loathing increased. Goldberg reminded us that “Lyndon Johnson was famously tormented by protest chants that could be heard through the walls of the White House,” and she asked, “Why isn’t Trump?” Why wasn’t Trump, like LBJ, met with militant protests wherever he went?

It was a good question. The resistance included the spontaneous demonstrations at airports against the Muslim ban and at immigration detention centers against family separation and children in cages, but mostly people seemed to accept the Democrats’ insistence that the only realistic form of resistance was “voting blue.” Then, however,

seven months after Goldberg's article, came the police killing of George Floyd and the explosion of massive multiracial protests led by BLM. An estimated 26 million people demonstrated in two thousand locations in the United States. Eventually, angry chants were discernible through the White House walls.

Still, during most of the Trump years, the organized left, embodied mainly in Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), immersed itself in the Democratic primary process rather than building a real opposition at a time of maximum anger and disgust. It was a bad choice. Electing a handful of individuals to Congress who call themselves democratic socialists, and a somewhat larger number to state and local government, has put a few good people in office, but it has done nothing to build an *independent* movement. The Squad's constituents vote for them not because they're socialists, but because they're more progressive Democrats than their primary opponents.

In fact, efforts to build a strong movement against corporate neoliberalism have been hobbled by Bernie Sanders' insider strategy. David Sirota, one of Sanders' senior advisers in 2019, reported that he and other advisers pushed Sanders to highlight his differences with Biden. But except for some moments in Iowa and once in the last debate, on Social Security, he didn't ("The Tyranny of Decorum Hurt Bernie Sanders's 2020 Prospects" *Jacobin*, April 16, 2020). As a result, Biden never had to defend his appalling record and could harp instead on his "electability"—an argument most Democratic primary voters in the South and Midwest accepted, even when they supported key parts of Sanders' program. Never, or hardly ever, mentioned by Sanders were Biden's role in helping Republicans pass the Iraq War resolution and the 2005 bankruptcy bill, killing initiatives to lower the price of prescription drugs and prevent profiteering on vaccines developed at taxpayer expense, his refusal

as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee to seriously investigate sexual harassment charges by Anita Hill and other women against Clarence Thomas, his pathological lying, and more. And of course, as soon as Biden won the nomination, Sanders became a "good soldier," suppressing all criticism in the interests of party unity.

"Normalcy"

Biden stands for a restoration of the pre-Trump status quo. While millions, traumatized for four seemingly endless years by a demented goblin, long for what they consider "normalcy," it is worth remembering what "normal" conditions have been for at least the past thirty years, 16 of them under Democratic administrations: profound systemic racism, a cruel immigration policy, de facto school segregation, increasingly unaffordable housing, a brutal upward concentration of wealth, prisons full to bursting, rampant police violence, war after war, and, worst of all, a world hurtling toward climate catastrophe. On all of these issues, the Trump administration represented, to a great extent, continuity rather than rupture. For example, police killings amounted to about one thousand per year under *both* Obama and Trump. The Obama administration deported three million people and militarized the border. Its environmental initiatives—fuel efficiency standards, carbon taxes, tax credits for solar panels, joining the Paris Agreement—were far outweighed by a massive increase in oil and gas production and export, the expansion of fracking and offshore drilling, and the laying of tens of thousands of miles of new pipelines. Trump's dangerous environmental policies, his vicious treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, his encouragement of police violence, all *built* on the Obama-Biden legacy.

Trump's open contempt for democracy and affinity for authoritarian leaders such as Putin, Erdogan, Modi, Duterte, Mohammed bin Salman—even at times Kim Jong-un

and Xi Jinping—were shocking and sinister. But his *policies* did not differ radically from those of his predecessors. Even Obama supported anti-democratic coups in Egypt and Honduras and prosecuted whistleblowers under the infamous 1917 Espionage Act. For about a century, we have not seen a president who openly espoused white supremacy and promoted vigilantism. Woodrow Wilson supported the Ku Klux Klan and made no attempt to disguise his racism, but no other president between Wilson and Trump has so shamelessly exhibited outright bigotry. Trump is certainly uniquely evil, but in a certain way “abnormalizing” him, to use Samuel Moyn’s expression (“The Trouble With Comparisons,” *New York Review Daily*, May 19, 2020), has served to conceal the continuity of American governance, especially in recent times—and to prepare Americans to accept the return of “normal” neoliberal and imperialist brutality under Biden and Harris.

Far from strongly opposing Trumpism, the Democrats have been its enablers. The government spending bill that sailed through Congress at the end of 2019, with the votes of 150 out of 232 Democrats, included funding for the Department of Homeland Security and the border wall, with no restriction on the migrant detention policy. At least the bill’s Democratic supporters could use the excuse that it was a budget that contained necessary items and that passing it was the only alternative to another government shutdown. But there could be no extenuating circumstances to justify Democrats’ support for colossal military spending. Trump’s record-breaking military budget—with Congress actually allocating more than he had asked for—was passed in 2019 with the votes of 180 House Democrats, while in the Senate only four Democrats voted against it, as did an equal number of Republicans.

Democrats objected to Trump not because he’s an imperialist, but because he’s an extraordinarily amateurish and unstable imperialist, one who acts with mindless abandon

and dispenses with the ideological niceties. The Democrats and the foreign policy establishment clashed with Trump over multilateral agreements on trade and the environment, relations with NATO, and his withdrawal of troops from Syria. But since World War II, the U.S. empire itself has been a touchstone of bipartisanship. No Democratic leader would consider dismantling it. On this question, there is no disagreement between the two parties: The United States must continue to be the dominant superpower, policing the world allegedly in the interest of order and stability, but actually on behalf of a cruel status quo that condemns billions to misery and early death. Its monstrous military establishment must continue to be funded lavishly, at the expense of social programs.

On foreign policy, even Bernie Sanders’ record in Congress has been highly equivocal. He supported the congressional resolution giving George W. Bush a blank check to wage war in the aftermath of 9/11. He voted in favor of appropriation bills to finance the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2006, Sanders voted for a House resolution giving support to Israel’s war on Lebanon and also to impose sanctions on the Palestinian Authority.

As for Biden, he has made it clear that his foreign policy will be another exercise in “normalcy”—restoring the global power that this country has exercised since World War II, winning back the respect of U.S. allies that Trump alienated—as well as getting tough on China and thus initiating a new Cold War.

And it is important to recall the foreign policy crimes of the pre-Trump era, among them the invasion and devastation of Afghanistan and Iraq; wars in Serbia, Libya, and Yemen; the program of “rendition” (kidnapping) and torture; Guantanamo and Bagram; the slaughter of thousands of innocents by drones and fighter jets. None of the crimes committed by Trump outside U.S. borders were worse than these “normal” offenses. In fact, it can be argued that the violence and

lawlessness of Bush and Obama were actually worse.

Biden has promised to reestablish Washington's "global leadership," a euphemism for imperial hegemony. Neocon veterans of the Bush-Cheney years, Eliot Cohen and Eric Edelman, have predicted that Biden will be hawkish on Iran. And if the Democrats take control of the Senate, the majority leader will be Chuck Schumer, who opposed the Iran deal. Cohen says that he and Edelman feel "very comfortable" with Biden's commitment to Israel (*Mondoweiss*, Oct. 29, 2020). This too is what is meant by returning to "normal."

The Democrats Are Unchangeable

Speaking on "Democracy Now" (April 10, 2020), Noam Chomsky said, "With a Biden presidency, there would be, if not a strongly sympathetic administration, at least one that can be reached, can be pressured. ... Biden [is] ... kind of a pretty empty—you can push him one way or another." The idea of Biden as a sort of empty vessel is not credible. He is a thoroughly corporate creature whose whole career has been bankrolled by the credit card industry and by other major companies chartered in Delaware, like DuPont. Wall Street knew what it was doing when it heavily backed his presidential campaign. In a remark that distills the essence of Biden's politics, he promised his wealthy funders that nothing would change for them under his presidency.

A hardened neoliberal and ardent supporter of U.S. global power, deeply embedded among the ruling elites, whose interests he has spent a lifetime serving, can he nonetheless be pushed to initiate programs that at least go part way toward addressing the alarming crises now upon us? Confronted by massive pressure from below, comparable to the social unrest and the industrial union movement of the 1930s and to the Civil Rights Movement, ghetto uprisings, and anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s, or by another social explosion like the one that occurred in the spring

and summer of 2020, Biden might be forced to make concessions. But we should not count on it. As a lifelong partisan of austerity and deficit reduction, he would have to do a complete about-face to support the massive public investment and income support needed to address the economic crisis.

And even if Biden is pushed by mass upheaval to support programs that are outside his neoliberal comfort zone, they will be as stingy and as nonthreatening to the profit system as possible. These are desperate times, and they call for radical measures. Medicare for All is the only rational, humane way to deal with COVID and inevitable future pandemics. But in the unlikely event that Congress passes Medicare for All—unlikely because the overwhelming majority of Democratic members of Congress are themselves committed to preserving the private insurance industry—Biden has promised to veto it. In the first debate, he forthrightly declared, "I support private insurance." But worse than that, he has even distanced himself from a universally available public option, which is itself a conservative substitute for Medicare for All, designed to preserve the employer-based health insurance system. Massive unemployment in the current and deepening depression has already left millions without the private health insurance that came with their jobs and will do the same to millions more. Biden's idea of a "public option" is limited to low-income Americans who qualify for Medicaid but live in the 14 Republican-controlled states that have refused to accept the expansion of Medicaid coverage passed by Congress in 2019. So Biden's paltry public option would still exclude the vast majority.

During the primaries, almost all the Democratic contenders paid lip service to some version of a "Green New Deal" (after Nancy Pelosi sneeringly dismissed it as the "green dream or whatever they call it"). But only Sanders defined it as a comprehensive anti-corporate plan to stop fossil fuel production and promote renewable energy and mass

transit, with job guarantees so that workers are not forced to choose between environmentally destructive jobs in coal, oil, fracking, and so on—and unemployment. In view of what is at stake—the UN Climate Report gives us only ten years to make the changes that may prevent ecological catastrophe—the planet’s survival depends on a bold, radical program.

For Sanders and the Squad, a stubborn commitment to working within the Democratic Party and the concomitant pressure to get along with the Democratic leadership constantly undermines their effectiveness in challenging the neoliberal center. When right after entering the House, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined a sit-in by the Sunrise Movement in Nancy Pelosi’s office, Pelosi’s chief of staff declared, “We support every single thing they’re protesting us for.” AOC responded, “That is absolutely true. . . . What this just needs to do is create a momentum and an energy to make sure it becomes a priority for leadership.” The idea that establishment Democrats actually support radical reforms but simply refuse to prioritize them is false and disorients the left. Sanders, after losing his campaign for the nomination, not only supported Biden as the only alternative to Trump, but predicted that Biden will be the “most progressive president since FDR.” Once Biden reemphasized his opposition to Sanders’ main policy proposals—Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, defunding the police—Sanders was forced to shift from making ridiculous prophecies to pleading with left-wing Democrats to “make sure Biden becomes the most progressive president.” The former vice president was urged to move left in order to “make a stronger outreach to young people, the Latino community, and the progressive movement” as a means of strengthening his campaign—advice that, it goes without saying, Biden firmly rejected.

Even after the enormous and inspiring Sanders insurgency, the Democratic Party remains largely unchanged. Pelosi, Schumer, and now Biden are still firmly in charge. As a

result of the efforts of Justice Democrats and Our Revolution—organizations launched by leaders of the Sanders campaign and dedicated to transforming the Democratic Party and electing progressive Democrats to office—the party’s left wing has grown slightly. It is a small but significant presence in a few state legislatures and city councils, especially Chicago’s. But at the national level the Democratic Party’s left is still minuscule, marginalized, and powerless, despite AOC’s media publicity. There are only ten House members who were endorsed by Justice Democrats. The 60 seconds given to Ocasio-Cortez at the Democratic National Convention, combined with the attention lavished on Republican speakers, showed how committed the party leadership is to centrism and compromise, without any real concessions to the left. In the House, the largest ideological group by far calls itself the New Democrat Coalition, with about half the members of the Democratic caucus. Founded in 1997 as an affiliate of the pro-business Democratic Leadership Council, its priorities are “economic growth” and “fiscal responsibility.” In an op-ed devoted to the New Democrat Coalition, entitled “No, the Democrats Haven’t Gone Over the Edge” (*New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2020), conservative columnist David Brooks assured his readers that the party contains “a large, strong center that will keep it in the political mainstream.”

A New Party: Now Is the Time

What if Sanders had chosen to run an independent campaign in 2016? Of course, he would have won far fewer votes. But his votes as an independent would still have numbered in the millions, and he might at least have begun a left electoral alternative to the Democrats. Had Sanders and his supporters broken in 2016, we might have seen the birth of a combative third party, leading mass demonstrations, protesting and disrupting the atrocities of ICE and the Border Patrol—a real opposition instead of the passive and

ineffectual “resistance” of the Democrats. And indeed, the Democrats, faced with a rival on their left flank, would have felt real pressure to stand up more decisively to Trump.

Canvassing for Sanders and other Democratic candidates by DSA and others on the left has diverted energy and resources that could have been used to build a powerful mass movement of protest and disruption aimed at Trump and the Republicans—and also at their Democratic abettors. And running candidates in Democratic primaries continues to reinforce loyalty to the Democratic Party and to the established prejudice that the Democrats are the only viable alternative to the right.

If the organized left is to lead a response both to the new administration and to an increasingly authoritarian and right-wing Republican Party, as well as to fascists, then socialists, especially the reported 85,000 members of DSA, could play a key role. Optimally, building a third party of the left should become DSA’s top priority. Now that Trump has been defeated, and there is less of a perceived imperative to rally behind the Democrats as the only bulwark against the right, it may be possible to convince many socialists to become third-party advocates and builders.

While most of the caucuses in DSA claim to be in favor of an independent workers party *eventually*, that prospect keeps being deferred to an ever more distant future. And meanwhile, most of the organization is steadily sucked into the Democratic Party, becoming just another part of its powerless left wing—recreating the old realignment program of DSA’s earlier incarnation, in which socialists saw themselves frankly as junior, subordinate partners in coalition with liberals. Among the broad left, most of the current discussion is about how to improve work within the Democratic Party, mainly by persuading the “centrist” leadership that they can win with a progressive program (“centrism” is itself a cozy-sounding misnomer, suggesting

moderation and caution, instead of mainline Democrats’ steely corporate neoliberalism).

Until recently, the most influential perspective within DSA has been the “dirty break,” first laid out by Seth Ackerman’s “Blueprint for a New Party,” published in 2016 in *Jacobin*. Ackerman called for DSA to start building a pre-party within the existing Democratic Party, essentially a new party but without a ballot line. “Rather than yet another suicidal frontal assault,” he argued, “we need to mount the electoral equivalent of a guerilla insurgency.” Rightly deploring the strategy of working to elect individual progressives who create a *base* rather than a structure to which they’re accountable, Ackerman envisioned a national organization with chapters at the state and local level, a binding program and electoral candidates chosen by the membership. Its members and candidates would refrain from promoting the Democratic Party or taking posts in its apparatus and explicitly renounce the goal of reforming the party. They would refuse to endorse centrist Democrats. And all this while continuing to contest Democratic primaries and running as Democrats in general elections.

How such an organization could persuade voters to support its candidates on the Democratic ballot line while totally repudiating the Democratic Party remained an unresolved contradiction, however. And, as argued below, the goal of a mass socialist *rather than* a broader radical party is unrealistic under current circumstances. In any case, as the dominant politics within DSA moves away from the dirty break perspective toward a de facto realignment position, there are so far no signs that this pre-party will materialize. Instead, the dirty break has become a cover for indefinitely continuing to function as a left-wing pressure group within the Democratic Party. DSA strongly identifies with candidates and elected officials who explicitly or tacitly support realignment—a better name for it would be “boring from within”—and reject *any* kind of break, clean or dirty.

What about the Greens? Howie Hawkins and Angela Walker ran an honorable ecosocialist campaign, and their message of independence from the Democrats was loud and clear. I was proud to vote for them, but I knew it was a protest vote and nothing more. Dirty tricks by the Democrats kept the Green Party off the ballot in many states, but even without such maneuvers, the panic and loathing inspired by Trump would have driven most potential Green voters into the Biden camp. More importantly for the immediate future, it is highly unlikely that the Green Party has the potential simply to grow, through slow accretion and without significant institutional support, into the mass party that we need, one that can really contend for power on a national scale. To bring that into being, there must be a political campaign within the labor movement and within BLM and the environmentalist, women's, civil rights, and LGBTQ movements. Out of these movements can come the needed critical mass. Labor in particular can contribute serious numbers and resources.

But I want to argue that we should not *wait* for this fight to begin. Large numbers of progressives will break from the Democrats only when there is *already* a new party, standing for a clean break and much bigger than the Greens, for them to gravitate toward. It is the job of those who understand that operating within the Democratic Party is a dead end, and who have abandoned lesser-evilmism, to start building that new party now.

Launching a new party would not require massive forces. A little over 50 years ago, a remarkably successful attempt was made by a few hundred radicals in California. A small minority within the Community for New Politics—a semi-independent group spawned by the anti-war congressional campaign of Democrat Robert Scheer—led by members of the Independent Socialist Clubs, re-registered 105,000 voters, almost twice as many as the law required, into a new Peace and Freedom Party (PFP). PFP was organized around

a program of immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and support for the Black Liberation movement. Soon after PFP qualified for ballot status in January 1968, however, the entry of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy into the race for the Democratic presidential nomination heavily dampened the growing enthusiasm for a new party and drew most third-party supporters back to the Democrats. Already, the year before, chances for a strong anti-war ticket had been dashed when Martin Luther King Jr. and noted pediatrician Benjamin Spock turned down a growing movement to have them run for president and vice president, although both had seriously considered it. Still, when the nomination of the pro-war Hubert Humphrey at the Democratic National Convention drove masses of McCarthy and Kennedy supporters right back out, PFP might yet have attracted larger numbers of disaffected Democrats had it made itself into an organizing center for a radical left with broad appeal. Instead, PFP made the mistake of nominating Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver, who preferred an alliance with the Youth International Party, known as Yippies, and their leader Jerry Rubin, who was addicted to pranks and street theater. Their campaign was an unappealing combination of ultra-revolutionary rhetoric and farce—Election Day was proclaimed “erection day.” So it was not independent political action itself, but the particular form it took that doomed third-party efforts in 1968.

The base for a new party already exists: disillusioned Sanders, and even many Warren, supporters (more than 12 million voted for Sanders and Warren), BLM demonstrators, militant teachers and health care workers. Opportunities would seem to be especially promising in the cities, in most of which Democratic rule has been palpably dysfunctional yet unchallenged from the left, where mayors and city councils flagrantly promote the interests of finance and real estate. Suffering from massive poverty, exorbitant housing costs, and decaying social services,

most non-elite urban voters tend to be deeply alienated from local political contests. Turnout in New York City was only 24 percent in 2013, when de Blasio was first elected mayor. There is thus good reason to believe in the potential for mass mobilization around a program of large-scale direct investment in housing, education, health care, and job creation through public works, financed by steep taxes on wealth—even though there are severe legal limits on the power of municipal governments to implement such policies. One area where cities do have the authority to make major changes is police funding. A third-party-led campaign to defund police departments should have particular resonance in Democratic-run cities, such as Chicago, Minneapolis, New York, Seattle, and many others, that have witnessed extreme police brutality.

A new party must appeal to the widest constituency with a broad radical program. A great many on the left have an unrealistic idea of the extent to which Americans today embrace socialism. Certainly, polls show there are far more who consider themselves socialists or “approve” of socialism than at any time since the 1930s. DSA is now, perhaps, large enough to form a democratic socialist party—but not as an alternative to a broader, radical, workers or people’s party. What most Americans understand by “socialism” is essentially a revived New Deal-style left liberalism, as championed by Bernie Sanders, but this represents today a sharp challenge to the capitalist system. Most of those who could be attracted to an independent party of the left are just beginning to reject establishment politics and are not yet prepared to identify themselves as socialists. But they can be won to a fight for radical reforms, such as the Green New Deal; in the course of those fights we should have confidence that they will learn that capitalism as a social system is the enemy and must be destroyed root and branch.

Because Trump-style right-wing populism has succeeded in posing as an alternative

to the status quo, it can be countered only by a genuine, radical-democratic alternative, one that attacks capitalists rather than people of color, immigrants, and queer folk. The bulk of a new party’s supporters would undoubtedly come from the Democrats’ voting base, but it will be necessary—and possible—to attract many workers and nonvoters who are currently pro-Trump. An anti-corporate, anti-elite political movement has the potential to win workers and others away from their racism and xenophobia by engaging them in common struggle with immigrants and people of color against the oligarchy that oppresses all of them.

There was always an independent *logic* implicit in the Sanders campaign, and now it has to be made explicit. However, a broad left party would have to be organized in an entirely different way. The Sanders “movement” was never an authentic movement, but rather a traditional electoral campaign, albeit one with a huge base of active, enthusiastic supporters—but still, a campaign over which Sanders had absolute control, and which was instantly dissolved prior to the Democratic Convention. A new party, by contrast, would have a formal membership democratically deciding on candidates, program, and strategy.

In terms of its politics, this new party would be in many ways a continuation of the Bernie Sanders campaign but with one crucial difference: It would abandon the notion that the Democrats are either some sort of workers party that has gone astray or basically an electoral convenience, a mere ballot line for progressive candidates—rather than an intrinsically pro-corporate, anti-progressive opposing force. To be consistent, a conscious decision to break with the Democrats should entail political hostility to the Democratic *Party*, not merely its leadership, regarding it as an enemy, not a misguided, potentially progressive party that has temporarily “lost its soul.”

A new party could be built initially around a few key issues, starting with Medi-

care for All and the Green New Deal, stopping police violence against Black people, and a major investment of resources to fight the coronavirus. It should embrace the Breathe Act, a bill championed by Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib to divest from policing and invest in alternative, community-based approaches to public safety. It might call for public ownership of the energy and financial industries—but even if it didn't, this agenda would require a full-scale assault on the health insurance and fossil fuel industries and full employment through a massive public works program. Other positions ought to include substantial cuts in the military budget, nuclear disarmament, a noninterventionist and pro-democracy foreign policy. A domestic pro-democracy agenda would call for reforming the electoral system through legislation to make voting rights consistent and enforceable throughout the country, introducing proportional representation, abolishing the Electoral College, and stripping the egregiously anti-democratic Supreme Court of its power to overturn legislation. Contrary to popular belief, disempowering the Supreme Court would not require a constitutional amendment but could be achieved by Congress.

All of this would mean that the party, while not socialist, would stand in clear opposition to the power of the corporate oligarchy and to the two parties that serve its agenda. It would be committed to working people and the fight against all forms of oppression.

Electoralism and Movement-Building

The new party would be a party of *social movements*, with members drawn from the Black, Latinx, environmental, women's, immigrant rights, and LGBTQ movements, as well as a strong anti-fascist movement that will need to be mobilized without delay. Bernie Sanders provided support to social movements, but he did not *represent* them. A new party, on the other hand, would function as an

extension of mass struggles, not an electoral alternative to them. It would see its job as escalating and intensifying social movements, not drawing them off the streets and into the polling places. It could tie those movements together and provide them with a continuous national political voice, enabling them to act not as separate pressure groups, but to combine their forces in a struggle for political power. In fact, it should not be a *primarily* electoral vehicle, but rather use elections as one important arena for raising consciousness and building a political movement, rather than putting people in office. In reaction against the kind of electoralism practiced by DSA, which prioritizes get-out-the-vote efforts on behalf of self-appointed socialist office seekers running as Democrats, some leftists have counterposed electoral activity to movement-building. But a kind of "electoralism from below" as outlined here would have a complementary, mutually reinforcing relationship with movement-building.

While contesting elections at all levels, a new party must avoid any unrealistic expectations of winning in the short run. It will need to build toward running a candidate for president in 2024, but with the understanding that even if the party's candidate were to win only 10 percent of the vote, that would be a major breakthrough. It would represent millions making the extremely difficult decision to abandon their illusions in the Democrats and opt for a genuine alternative.

Given the ferocity of the deepening economic crisis and the inevitably feeble and pro-corporate response of the Biden administration, a new party, once initiated, might grow very quickly. To do so, though, it would have to overcome the crippling fear of the "spoiler effect." To grow it would have to peel people away from the Democratic Party as well as mobilize independents and nonvoters. And since this would weaken mainly the Democrats, it might give a temporary electoral advantage to the Republicans. Especially in swing states, the risk of spoiling elections

for the Democrats is obviously great, but a serious third-party effort could not for that reason forego organizing throughout much of the Midwest. Anything less than consistency would fatally compromise the new party's independence because it would be saying, in effect, that independence only matters when it does not hurt the Democrats.

It could not be a labor party, a party of the organized labor movement. The union leadership, with only a few exceptions, is still too cautious and conservative to break with the Democrats. But it would draw supporters from unions, especially ones with militant locals, like the teachers and health care workers. It should, however, declare itself *in favor* of a labor-based party, urging the unions to break with the Democrats. And, of course, it would act aggressively in support of strikes and other worker struggles. In these ways it could act as a catalyst, pointing the way toward political independence for the labor movement as a whole.

It would stand for thoroughgoing and consistent democracy, at home and abroad. And it would stand against all forms of authoritarianism, whether by corporate elites, cops, and the state security apparatus in this country or by repressive states in Russia, China, Hungary, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India, Israel, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and elsewhere.

From a socialist perspective, a progressive third party is a stage in the socialist project, not an end in itself. It would constitute a new terrain on which revolutionary socialists, as a critical left wing, would strive to win over workers, students, intellectuals, and others.

Since the months leading up to the election, there has been a lull in the protest movements, and it is impossible to predict when they might revive—or when the strikes and workplace demonstrations that broke out during the pandemic might reappear. Continuing police violence will ensure a revival of BLM.

But a new party will not arise naturally from movements; deliberate initiatives by activists can and must be taken so that an organized left political party is in place *when* the new wave emerges.

This is the project being explored by the Movement for a People's Party. MPP began in 2016 as an effort to draft Sanders for an independent run for the presidency. Prominent supporters include Cornel West, former Ohio State Senator Nina Turner, Chris Hedges, Danny Glover, Oliver Stone, and former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura, and it's been joined by a few branches of Our Revolution. The MPP held a virtual convention in August that was viewed on social media by 400,000 people. It plans to formally launch a political party in 2021, to run candidates in the 2022 midterms, and to put up a presidential candidate in 2024. It's not clear how substantial the MPP is at this point, but it looks like a promising initiative that, at the very least, ought to attract collaboration from some elements in DSA. Some of its leading personalities endorse Democrats, which is inconsistent with the MPP's guiding principle of political independence. If it gets off the ground and begins to develop an active membership, that inconsistency could be challenged internally on the basis of the MPP's self-definition.

Biden has promised the ruling class that "nothing will change" for them. He will devote himself to protecting their wealth and power and to preserving the inhuman social system that they rule. Trumpism and the far right can only benefit from the status quo politics of Biden and the Democrats. Unless the left manages, and manages soon, to create a political alternative to these two deadly enemies, we are doomed. And step number one is for the left to break decisively with the Democratic Party and declare its political independence.

The 2020 Elections in the United States

A Socialist View from Afar

ROHINI HENSMAN

WHILE VOTES WERE BEING COUNTED after the November 2020 U.S. elections, despots from around the world—in Iran, Russia, China, Venezuela, and Brazil—crowded over the delay in announcing results.¹ It is easy for rulers in countries where opposition leaders are disqualified, killed, or hounded into exile to mock the time taken to count votes meticulously. However, many of us watching with envy from afar—“envy” because the persecution of minorities, crushing of dissent, domination of the media, and destruction of democratic institutions has gone much further in our countries—have nothing but admiration for the way in which a would-be dictator has been peacefully overthrown.

But what about claims by the Trump campaign that the election was stolen? It is clear to us that there *have* been systematic efforts to steal this election ... by Trump and his diehard supporters. That became evident well before the election when he declared, in the midst of a deadly pandemic in which many feared the risks of in-person voting, that he

opposed extra funding for the Postal Service because mail ballots encouraged voter fraud. At the same time Republican mega-donor Louis DeJoy, who was appointed postmaster general by Trump on June 15, began making changes to the U.S. Postal Service—like a reduction in employee overtime hours and the elimination of postal sorting machines—that would sabotage the timely delivery of mail

It is clear to us that there have been systematic efforts to steal this election by Trump and his diehard supporters.

ballots.² We saw reports of polling locations being shut down and African Americans complaining about the long distances they had to travel in order to vote. With Trump instructing his supporters to come out and vote on election day, and several states counting mail-in ballots only after in-person ballots had been counted, the scene was set for his post-election claim that he had won. He expected the case to go to the Supreme Court and explicitly stated that he was nominating Amy Coney Barrett to the court because he believed she would vote in his favor.³

If this wasn't enough, there is evidence

ROHINI HENSMAN is a writer, independent scholar, and activist who comes from Sri Lanka and lives in India. She has written on workers' rights, feminism, minority rights, globalization, and struggles for democracy. Her most recent books are *Workers, Unions, and Global Capitalism: Lessons from India* and *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism*.

that the Republican Party's voter suppression efforts targeting minorities picked up after Obama came to power in 2009.⁴ Greg Palast has provided plenty more evidence in a book entitled *How Trump Stole 2020*.

There is much that we in other countries can learn from this election. One thing is the importance of paper ballots.

Among his findings were that 16.7 million people were removed from the voter rolls between 2014 and 2016 and that you are 900 percent more likely to have your vote spoiled if you are Black than if you are white.⁵ To an outsider, it seems incredible that Democrats are allowing Trump to dominate the narrative with his allegation that *they* are trying to steal the election when in fact it is he and the Republicans who are doing so. Palast's explanation? As Charlotte Dennett reports, "The Russians-fixed-the-election story line," he writes, "is a lot more acceptable to Americans than explaining that Trump was elected by an endemic racial apartheid in America's voting system constructed by the GOP and made possible by their cringing enablers, the see-no-evil Democrats."⁶ If this didn't work in 2020, it is only because grassroots activists, including laid-off workers, worked incredibly hard to register and bring out voters of color.

There is much that we in other countries can learn from this election. One thing is the importance of paper ballots. They can be checked and recounted if there is any question about their validity or the margin is small. Elections conducted with paper ballots can be rigged, but the rigging is more obvious. Not so with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), which are becoming a favored tool of dictators who want to maintain a façade of democracy. Neither before nor after an

election has it been possible to check every EVM for manipulation, even after random checks have shown that some machines are programmed to give every vote to the ruling party regardless of which button is pressed. Dictators may use crude methods (winning by huge margins) or more subtle ones (winning by slender margins), but the result is the same: They stay in power. Countries that have rejected EVMs on the grounds that they preclude transparency in elections are absolutely right: It is time to make it clear internationally that the integrity of elections using EVMs cannot be guaranteed and that the use of these machines entails a high risk of vote-rigging. Of course, an election can be rigged with any kind of ballots if election officials are under the thumb of the ruling party, and the U.S. electorate is lucky that their election officials have retained their independence.

The other lesson is the way in which, despite hard-fought primaries, everyone opposed to Trump came together to ensure he was defeated, with the Green Party, which helped Trump to win in 2016, failing to gain traction in 2020. In some of our countries, by contrast, a plethora of opposition parties and independents makes it almost impossible to stitch up an alliance. But the wrangling that broke out after the Democrats did less well in the elections than they had expected made it clear that there are at least two factions in the party—commonly referred to as “moderates” and “progressives”—and possibly a third faction on the right that are not easy to hold together. One complaint from the right was that left-wing members of the party had cost it votes by referring to themselves as “socialists”; another, that the party had neglected “meat and potatoes” issues in favor of “cultural issues” like gun control, abortion rights, and the rights of LGBTQ+ people and other people the party “looks after”;⁷ support for Black Lives Matter and the Green New Deal was also blamed.

It was certainly Trump's intention to put people off from voting for Biden by his Mc-

Carthyite accusation that Biden is a Trojan horse for socialists and by his Cold-War rhetoric depicting socialism as totalitarianism. It is true that some socialists apply the term “socialism” to the ultra-authoritarian Stalinist state, and a few support Putin. There is also a more diffuse set of people who think socialism can be introduced by a political party claiming to represent working people rather than being built from below by working people themselves, although there is also a long tradition of “socialism from below.” Today there is a growing consensus that democracy is intrinsic to the definition of socialism, and there are powerful arguments to that effect.⁸ Popularizing this definition would surely be more fruitful than telling socialists to pretend that they are not what they are!

There was a strong reaction against allegations that support for gun control, abortion rights, LGBT+ rights, Black Lives Matter, and the Green New Deal cost the party votes. One objection was that a majority of the electorate supports these measures and that BLM alone brought a million new registered voters for the party. Another objection came from people who strongly contested the claim that the party “looked after” them, when they had won rights for themselves in numerous struggles; they pointed out that for them, these supposedly cultural issues were actually existential ones. They also made the point that support for human rights doesn’t preclude campaigning on economic issues; it is entirely possible—and necessary—to do both. This is surely a matter of principle: A party that abandons human rights and equality issues, even if espousing them costs votes, cannot claim to be fighting for democracy.

The irony is that the same position finds an echo on the left. The language is different—identity politics versus working-class politics rather than cultural issues versus meat and potatoes—but the substance is the same, arguing that “particularist” demands of one section of the working class should be eschewed in favor of “universalist” demands

of the whole working class.⁹ In other words, a demand that doesn’t directly benefit straight cis white male workers is not a demand worth fighting for, even if it’s a matter of life and death for some other section of the working class. Such a stance contradicts the principle of “an injury to one is an injury to all.” People with disabilities and indigenous peoples also suffer specific forms of exclusion and discrimination; are their struggles for social justice not worth supporting?

This position blurs the distinction between demands for human rights and equality on one side, and identity politics—based on the belief that people who have the same ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference all have the same interests—on the other; it ignores the fact that discrimination, exclusion, and violence can result in blocking the access of some sections of the working class to supposedly universal benefits; and it refuses to acknowledge relationships of oppression within the working class. People who have grown up accepting authoritarianism in their families and communities and believing that women must be subordinate to men, ethno-religious minorities to the majority, and that LGBT+ people shouldn’t exist at all, do not automati-

A center-left coalition may
lose to a right-wing party it
earlier ousted is if it is seen as
ineffective.

cally give up these attitudes if they get decent jobs and health care. Indeed, it seems that many white Trump supporters already have well-paid jobs and suffer less from economic distress than from anxiety about the progress of people they feel should remain subordinate to them.¹⁰ Similar attitudes confront socialists in other countries, and they are undoubtedly difficult to tackle, but acknowledging them is

the first step in doing so. Nor does supporting struggles for equality entail putting an intolerable burden on a small number of socialist activists, because there are *already* countless grassroots activists working on human rights and equality issues; all that is required is to work with them rather than pouring scorn on

The U.S. elections demonstrated that “bourgeois democracy” is not a gift of the bourgeoisie and that the right to vote has to be fought for and defended by mass struggles.

them as, for example, Melissa Naschek does on the Combahee River Collective.¹¹

If it’s a mistake to blame progressives—who played a stellar role in ousting Trump—for the failure of a “blue wave” to materialize, some on the left seem equally mistaken in blaming the nomination of Joe Biden as the Democratic presidential candidate for the same failure,¹² given that he polled more votes than any other U.S. president in history. Indeed, his reputation as a moderate might just have tipped the balance in some battleground states and enabled him to get enough Electoral College votes to make it difficult for a Trump-friendly Supreme Court to overturn the results.

The problem is not that the electorate failed to vote for Biden; the problem is that Trump won well over 70 million votes, many more than he polled in 2016. What does this mean? In 2016, Trump was relatively unknown to many voters, although the left should have recognized the threat he posed. In 2020, his white supremacism, misogyny, despotism, dishonesty, anti-science irrationality, and callous incompetence in handling the coronavirus pandemic were known to all. The millions who voted for him, like the millions

who voted for Hitler, may not all be fascists (although some of them are), but if he had won, they would have enabled an increasingly fascist ruler to consolidate his grip on power. And they may yet do so in the future, with his dedicated supporters believing the big lie (that he won the election) repeated umpteen times. In the 1930s, the German Communist Party’s concentration of its fire on the Social Democrats while underestimating the danger posed by the Nazis allowed Hitler to consolidate absolute power. In the United States, a united front between moderates and socialists defeated Trump, but dismantling it now risks allowing him or a surrogate to come back to power. That doesn’t mean reining in socialist activists or holding back on trying to push the Democratic Party to the left—not at all. But isn’t it a case of skewed priorities to concentrate one’s fire on Biden in the midst of an attempted coup by Trump, backed by much of the Republican Party and millions of supporters, some of them armed and dangerous?¹³

Many of us have learned from bitter experience that we can win a battle against a dictatorial far-right regime but then lose to an even more fascist regime if the coalition that ousted the earlier regime falls apart. In some cases, this is inevitable—if, for example, a different far-right party jumps on the bandwagon of opposition to the dictatorial regime. Far more common is a united front between centrists/neoliberals and socialists/social democrats, where tensions are rife and may lead to disintegration. If socialists attack centrists too aggressively, the latter may not vote for the alliance (or vote at all) in the next election; conversely, if neoliberals are given a free hand, voters relying on social-democratic reforms could be so disgusted they don’t vote for the alliance (or vote at all) in the next election. Trying gently but firmly to push the center to the left is the only way to avoid this.

Another reason why a center-left coalition may lose to a right-wing party it earlier ousted is if it is seen as ineffective, and this in

turn is often due to sabotage from remnants of the far-right regime that remain in positions of power. This suggests that the Democrats would do well to remove Trump loyalists from public service posts, go all out to win the two Senate seats in Georgia in order to minimize roadblocks from the Senate, and expand the Supreme Court until it has a liberal majority. The mid-term elections too would be important.

The far right can also weaponize allegations of corruption, which may be deserved but are more likely to be wildly exaggerated or even fabricated. The response has to be absolute transparency—admitting wrong-doing or mistakes if there are any—and constant firefighting against disinformation. It is exhausting, and it feels like such a waste of time when there are more important things to be done, but neglecting this task can lead to a return of the far right.

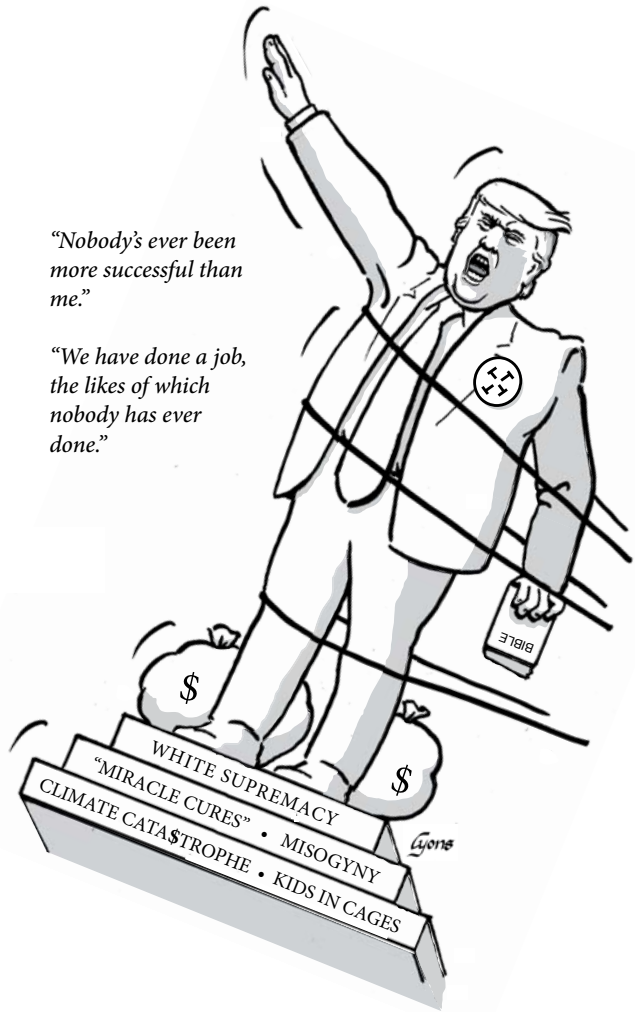
Finally, leaving the crimes of an authoritarian regime unpunished is also a mistake. In some of our countries these include crimes against humanity and massive corruption, but even lesser crimes are worth prosecuting in order to prevent the criminals from coming back to power.

Despite manifold flaws in U.S. democracy, the melodrama after the elections has revealed that election officials and members of the judiciary resisted concerted attempts by the ruling party to make them discount valid votes, testifying to their

integrity—a situation that doesn't exist in many of our countries. A section of the mainstream media consistently made it their business to debunk the ruling party's disinformation, again something we don't see in our countries. Perhaps this is partly because in the United States the investigative and law enforcement agencies cannot simply be used by the executive to threaten, frame, jail, torture, or kill anyone opposing it, as it can in many of our countries. This situation might well have changed if Trump had won a second term, making the

"Nobody's ever been more successful than me."

"We have done a job, the likes of which nobody has ever done."



path back to democracy that much steeper—as it is in many of our countries.

The U.S. elections have demonstrated yet again that so-called “bourgeois democracy” is *not* a gift of the bourgeoisie and that even one of the most basic democratic rights—the right to vote and have your vote counted—*has to be fought for and defended* by mass struggles, otherwise large swathes of the population will not have it. Liberal democracy, even if it is flawed, constitutes the terrain on which struggles against capitalism—defined broadly as private capitalism, state capitalism, and any combination of the two—can be successful. Without it, workers’ struggles are pushed back, not least because their organizations are either swallowed up by the state or crushed. So Trump was right to say that his defeat would be a victory for socialists; it is, because it strengthens democracy. Of course, the idea that under Biden, U.S. democracy will become a shining example for the rest of the world is fanciful. There are still many serious flaws that will not be easy to address. But this is a step forward.

Since capitalism is international, the fight against it has to be international too, and therefore socialists who provide any kind of support for authoritarian regimes in other countries are guilty of pushing back the anti-capitalist struggle in those countries and thereby in their own. Instead, socialists should be providing solidarity in any way they can to pro-democracy activists in other countries. By the same logic, the defeat of Trump in the United States is a victory in the global struggle against authoritarianism and capitalism, and therefore a victory for socialists worldwide: something we can all celebrate, while extending our solidarity to U.S. pro-democracy activists in their struggles ahead!

NOTES

1. Andrew Roth and Tom Phillips, “What a spectacle! US adversaries revel in post-election chaos,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 6, 2020, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/05/what-a-spectacle-the-uss-

[enemies-revel-in-the-post-election-chaos](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/05/what-a-spectacle-the-uss-enemies-revel-in-the-post-election-chaos).

2. “Who is Louis DeJoy? US Postmaster General in Spotlight Ahead of 2020 Election,” *NPR*, Aug. 21, 2020, www.npr.org/2020/08/21/904346060/postmaster-general-faces-intense-scrutiny-amid-allegations-of-political-motives.

3. Noah Feldman, “Trump’s Supreme Court Comments Put Barrett in a Bind,” *Bloomberg Quint*, Nov. 6, 2020, www.bloombergquint.com/opinion/election-lawsuits-trump-s-supreme-court-comments-put-barrett-in-a-bind.

4. Terry Gross, “Republican Voter Suppression Efforts Are Targeting Minorities, Journalist Says,” *NPR*, Oct. 23, 2018, www.npr.org/2018/10/23/659784277/republican-voter-suppression-efforts-are-targeting-minorities-journalist-says.

5. Charlotte Dennett, “How to Rig an Election: an Interview With Greg Palast,” *Counterpunch*, Aug. 21, 2020, www.counterpunch.org/2020/08/21/how-to-rig-an-election-an-interview-with-greg-palast/.

6. Dennett, “How to Rig an Election: an Interview With Greg Palast.”

7. Lauren Gambino, “Democrats left to sift through aftermath of ‘blue wave’ that never crested,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 8, 2020, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/08/democrats-blue-wave-joe-biden-analysis.

8. A good collection can be found in Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael Thompson, eds., *An Inheritance for Our Times: Principles and Politics of Democratic Socialism* (OR Books, 2020).

9. Melissa Naschek, “The Identity Mistake,” *Jacobin*, Aug. 28, 2018, www.jacobinmag.com/2018/08/mistaken-identity-asaid-haider-review-identity-politics.

10. Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “Arlie Russell Hochschild’s View of Small-Town Decay and Support for Trump,” *The New Yorker*, Sept. 20, 2016, www.newyorker.com/news/benjamin-wallace-wells/arlie-russell-hochschilds-view-of-small-town-decay-and-support-for-trump.

11. Melissa Naschek, “The Identity Mistake.”

12. Naomi Klein, “We were told Joe Biden was the ‘safe choice.’ But it was risky to offer so little,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 8, 2020, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/08/joe-biden-risky-candidate-us-election.

13. Julian Borger, “Trump’s coup failed—but US democracy has been given a scare,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 25, 2020, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/25/trumps-coup-failed-but-us-democracy-has-been-given-a-scare.

Auditing U.S. Democracy

*Classical Liberalism, Contemporary America,
the Trump Years, and Beyond*

MICHAEL P. MCCABE AND RIAD AZAR

THE PRESIDENCY OF DONALD TRUMP catapulted the topic of democracy to the forefront of political thought and discussion. This is for good reason: Throughout the past four years, we witnessed the creation of an immigration policy that is tantamount to ethnic cleansing; a president who used twitter and campaign rallies to stoke white nationalist hostility; the emergence of an authoritarian love triangle between the president, cops, and far-right vigilantes; displays of symbolic and literal violence against the press; and most recently a president who, with the support of GOP elites and much of the party's electorate, doubled down on claims of election fraud rather than concede, paving the way for a Biden presidency to be treated as illegitimate by an entire political party. The topic of American democracy deserves our attention today. However, the Trump years do not mark some abandonment of previously rich democratic politics. To the contrary, American democracy has always been weak, and currents of authoritarianism can be traced

back to its founding. Ignoring these truths risks treating the Trump years as a one-off, obfuscating deeply problematic pathologies in our politics that require serious examination if we are to have any chance of manifesting a new politics defined by social solidarity.

This perspective becomes all the more pertinent now as we enter the Biden presidency. Centrist Democrats including former President Obama are already celebrating a "return to normal" in which we can go back to enjoying brunch. The "normal" they long for is one marked by perverse inequities. It is also based on the naïve assumption that our politics going forward will not be punctuated by the vicious ambitions of a Republican Party that has adopted authoritarianism as its *modus operandi*. Indeed, this is no time for brunch, and one of the main goals of this essay is to make that crystal clear.

We begin by briefly exploring the philosophy of classical liberalism, the philosophy upon which the United States was constructed. It is a political system that removes major economic decisions that have a profound impact on our lives from the purview of democratic control. We then take a deep dive into American politics pre-Trump, focusing on the roots of contemporary political culture. We discuss the multiple ways in which democracy has been undermined by a set of institutional arrangements that suppress political voice and preserve undemocratic social hierarchies. After presenting this baseline assessment of U.S. democracy, we review the specific challenges

MICHAEL P. MCCABE is adjunct professor of political science at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. He is a member of Democratic Socialists of America and founding member of the Bronx/Upper Manhattan branch of its New York City chapter.

RIAD AZAR is a democratic socialist activist and political sociologist. His academic research looks at how social networks shape the ways people think and feel about politics and problem solving.

of the Trump years, zeroing in on what we see as the most troubling expressions of a deeply anti-democratic and acutely authoritarian politics that threatens to eviscerate what was an already frail democracy. Due to the timing of our writing, we incorporate into our analysis of the Trump years an assessment of the evolving political dynamics surrounding the presidential election, including the sustained efforts by Trump and GOP elites to undermine its legitimacy and the potential impact these efforts will have on a Biden presidency. We conclude the article with some hopeful comments based on the remarkable explosion in activism and organizing by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Democratic Socialists of America, and other groups seeking transformative change.

Classical Liberalism

An audit of U.S. democracy must wrestle with the philosophical framework that structures the relationship between the state, the economy, and the public. Classical liberalism, rooted in the work of eighteenth-century intellectuals including John Locke and Adam Smith, is embedded in the DNA of the American political project—it is the basis upon which the Constitution was drafted and has, throughout U.S. history, shaped the logic of governance. As an alternative to feudalism or otherwise monarchical government, classical liberalism is rightly viewed in a historical context as a revolutionary approach to political organization. In principle at least, a system of arbitrary lawmaking by self-fashioned descendants of God was replaced by a governing structure in which individual rights were guaranteed and the power of leaders to make laws was dependent upon the public granting them that power—though quite indirectly. The dominance of the state over virtually all social life was replaced by the idea of limited government. Coupled with the equally transformative system of capitalism that emerged alongside it, classi-

cal liberalism ushered in a new paradigm of political organization that remains with us to this day. This, however, does not discount the fact that, contrary to popular conceptions of the “Founding Fathers” as defenders of democratic republicanism, the original United States disenfranchised non-property owners, non-males, and non-whites. The achievements that we collectively refer to as liberal democracy did not occur in 1787, but are part of a two-century struggle of giving rights to white males without property, ending slavery, and giving women and then Blacks the right to vote.

However impressive and freedom-affirming classical liberalism was in the historical trajectory of governing arrangements, the form of democracy it engendered was severely limited. These limits were found not so much in the rights that it affirmed but rather in the narrow boundaries that it placed around areas of social life that were to be subjected to democratic decision-making. Central to classical liberalism was the establishment of a clear divide between “the political” and “the economic.” On the one hand, this was to preserve individual property rights in a capitalist economy. On the other hand, it was to inoculate the state from becoming a Leviathan: the Hobbesian depiction of a state with power over all spheres of life, ultimately starving individuals of their freedom.

Born out of the experience of a world dominated by tyrannical kings and queens, these presumptions were understandable. Yet they largely have shaped the contours of political life in the United States and elsewhere in problematic ways. For although there has been some degree of state control over the economy, by and large economic decisions are delegated to private individuals and corporations.

While many accept this arrangement as both desirable and self-evident, accepting the assumptions of classical liberalism ignores what we see as two fundamental, interrelated truths that are well understood by socialists:

1) the profits of private actors are produced socially, first and foremost through the labor of workers but also with the publicly funded education that prepares these workers to enter the labor force, public investment in transportation systems to get goods to market, and so many other ways; and 2) the interests of private capital—a notably small segment of society—differ profoundly from those of ordinary people. Whereas ordinary people want affordable housing, accessible health care, jobs with livable wages, and a clean environment, capitalists, driven by the market imperative to maximize profit, drive up the cost of housing, insist upon health care as a commodity, outsource production, suppress wages at every turn, and fight to extract every ounce of fossil fuel regardless of impending climate catastrophe.

These contradictions lead to a third truth: Because the interests of capitalists are not only in contradiction with those of the majority of people but are also so utterly destructive, and because their profits are produced socially by the very people whose interests are neglected, it is both reasonable and democratic to bring the economy under democratic control. Any political system that denies the public control over what is done with the profits (as well as the conditions under which those profits are made and the commodities that are produced and distributed) suffers from a serious deficit in democracy. And indeed, it is a deficit that goes beyond philosophical ruminations, as the impacts of this arrangement are on display for all to see in our grossly unequal and environmentally ruinous world.

American Democracy Before Trump

Beyond the constraints imposed by the reigning orthodoxy of classical liberalism, the United States, more so than many other bourgeois democracies including those of every other industrialized nation on earth, has a number of other features that undermine democracy.

To be sure, this is not new. Undemocratic—and in some instances outrightly authoritarian—policies and practices have plagued the American state from its inception. A casual reading of the U.S. Constitution illuminates regulations for the maintenance and marketing of chattel slavery; compromises that severely limit the representation of non-white, non-male, and non-property-owning humans; and the classification of indigenous peoples as undeserving of the ideal conception of humanity that undergirded the European Enlightenment. The most obvious example of this scourge was America's system of slavery, the eradication of which required a civil war. Out of its ashes grew the violent and repressive system of Jim Crow wherein Black Americans were again widely subjugated to forced labor through the clever use of the penal system by white supremacist policymakers. This forced labor was coupled with torture and extrajudicial killings; systematic segregation at the local, state, and federal levels; and political disenfranchisement, among other egregious violations, until notable victories by the Civil Rights Movement, with the passage of two key pieces of legislation—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The genocidal treatment of Native Americans is another gross example of the undemocratic and authoritarian impulses that thread together the red, white, and blue of our national flag. And beyond the very racialized expressions of these tendencies, we must also recall the treatment of women as second-class citizens, their disfranchisement, and lack of legal rights. Then too there were the persistent attacks against organized workers by the state, using the courts, injunctions, the police, the national guard, and the army—and when those failed, the use of paramilitary goons enlisted by private capital to quell workers' attempts to improve their lives and working conditions.

Across the timeline of contemporary American politics, which we date as begin-

ning in the 1970s, it is clear that improvements have been made, especially if we concentrate on the most atrocious expressions of undemocratic and authoritarian politics. However, much remains problematic. Wealth and income inequality have steadily, if not exponentially, increased since the 1970s, as New Deal reforms were chiseled away by politicians more responsive to economic elites than their constituents. Women, politically enfranchised since 1920, continue to make far less money than their male counterparts and to have their reproductive health threatened at every turn. The LGBTQ+ community has in recent years been afforded the right to marry but continues to experience higher rates of violence from the police than the broader public. Workers, no longer threatened by frequent acts of violence, nevertheless have less power today than at any time since the 1930s: Labor unions are undermined by right-to-work laws, a bundle of federal legislation makes labor organizing and striking extremely difficult, and the National Labor Relations Board long ago lost its effectiveness as a shield for workers. And while Jim Crow was dismantled, its logic of racial terror continues to haunt Black, indigenous, and people of color Americans as they experience systematized segregation in housing and education, employment discrimination, predatory lending, carceral warehousing, and modern-day lynching by the police. These examples are among the most obvious expressions of an America that has remained deeply undemocratic and indeed authoritarian through the contemporary era. Many more cases can of course be listed; however, our goal in the remainder of this section is to explore what we see as some of the key undemocratic policies and institutional arrangements that enable these and other pathologies to persist.

Voting, Voter Access, and Corruption

The political left in the United States is

understandably skeptical of voting. In a country where the level of responsiveness to the will of popular majorities and the needs of marginalized communities is low, disruptive protest is often seen as a far more practical approach to “getting the goods.” However, elections still matter, as who occupies government can determine the likelihood of a movement’s demands being met. Working from this assumption as well as from the basic principle that democracy requires a system of voting that is easily accessed, grants universal enfranchisement, and is free of corruption, beginning our assessment of U.S. democracy with a focus on voting is warranted.

The U.S. system of voting imposes a number of obstacles that interfere with the public’s access to the ballot box. Rather than being automatic, voters are required to register to vote and to do so again and again each time they move to a different jurisdiction. This is especially problematic for lower-income voters who tend to be more transient than other income groups as a result of rising rents, often brought on by the process of gentrification. Not only are they forced to register to vote more frequently than others, they also face being “purged” from voter rolls, only to discover their voter status when entering the polls to cast a ballot. College students who live in dormitory housing, a sizable portion of youth voters, are often barred by state election law from using their dormitory address to register to vote. Instead, they are required far in advance of the election to apply for an absentee ballot. Many states also restrict access to early voting and the use of absentee ballots. This is especially problematic for people whose schedules do not permit them to easily vote on Election Day, which in the United States is a workday. Finally, states around the country have imposed voter ID laws despite the lack of any evidence of election fraud. While a small hurdle for some, for others—especially lower-income and elderly voters—it is quite significant. Obstacles such as these disincentivize and even bar people from participating

in elections and therefore have a negative impact on political voice. But even when these barriers can be navigated, other more egregious voice suppression awaits.

Several million Americans are barred from voting each year due to living in a state that prohibits current and past felons from casting a ballot. In 2020 that number was estimated by the Sentencing Project to have been nearly 5.2 million (Wilkins, *Commondreams*, 10/14/20). Making the issue of felon enfranchisement even more muddied is the current situation in Florida. There, a 2018 referendum enfranchised ex-felons who completed their sentences. However, the Republican legislature then passed a law, upheld by the courts, requiring these ex-felons to pay all court fees and other fines before voting. Going into the 2020 election, who knows how many potential voters failed to cast a ballot, fearing they could face legal penalties (Mower & Taylor, *ProPublica*, 10/7/20). Voter caging is another widely deployed tactic by conservative fraudsters. They send certified mail to voters, and if no certification of receipt is received, those voters are purged from the voter roll. Across the country, these same voting groups have come to expect long lines at the polls due to the closure of voting locations by Republican officials.

The Electoral College, Congress, and the Court

No accounting of the country's issues with voting is complete without noting the role of the Electoral College. Two of the last three presidents, Bush Jr. and Trump, lost the popular vote but found themselves in power due to a system that privileges states' electors over popular majorities, and given the geographic breakdown of the electorate along partisan and racial/ethnic lines, the Electoral College privileges Republican voters over Democratic voters and whites over people of color.

Another feature of the U.S. political system that thwarts the people's will is ger-

rymandering, the drawing of district lines for partisan advantage. While gerrymandering has been a consistent stain on American democracy, mapping software and big data have made it even easier for partisan officials to significantly reduce the voting power of entire electorates. Gerrymandering is among several corrupt tactics used to manufacture elections, and these schemes tend to target low-income and minority citizens.

Gerrymandering aside, the membership of the House of Representatives is based on proportional representation whereby the larger a state's population, the greater its number of representatives. In the Senate, on the other hand, each state, regardless of the size of its population, is granted two seats. This anti-majoritarian model can only be viewed as being democratically sound if we believe that states are living, thinking beings. Of course, they are not, but treating them as such is analogous to the equally convoluted logic of treating corporations as people. This is particularly problematic given the unequal distribution of Americans across the country and the degree to which people of color are largely concentrated in a handful of densely populated states.

Beyond this particular democratic deficit in the Senate, U.S. political institutions, or more appropriately those who inhabit them, are remarkably disconnected from the public they serve. This is not entirely due to the problems with voting, although the disproportionate silencing of poor people and people of color certainly factors in. Indeed, it doesn't help that the key personnel of U.S. institutions, including Congress, come almost exclusively from elite backgrounds, disconnecting them from the material and social experiences of ordinary people's lives. Nor does it help that in the United States elections are privately funded, affording the wealthy and corporate interests the ability to buy their way into the hearts and minds of elected officials. Political scientists Larry Bartels (*Unequal Democracy*, 2008) and Mar-

tin Gilens (*Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69[5], 2005) have performed a great service in their scholarship by revealing the extent to which the preferences of upper-income Americans are privileged by members of Congress. Those with lower incomes are virtually ignored unless their collective preference on an issue happens to align with those of higher-income Americans, and nearly as little representation is provided to middle-income voters (although Bartels shows that Democratic lawmakers grant slightly more representation to middle-income voters and slightly less to upper-income, despite wholly disregarding lower-income voters like their Republican counterparts). Given the ways in which class, race, gender, and even sexual orientation intersect in the United States, this arrangement preserves a social hierarchy that dates to the country's founding.

The U.S. Supreme Court is a reliably conservative and reactionary institution with a particular tilt toward elite interests. While Congress has the “power of the purse” and the Executive Branch has the “power of the sword,” the Supreme Court has no mechanism to enforce its rulings. Therefore, adherence to its rulings depends upon the court's legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In other words, rulings are followed because, on the whole, the court is viewed as an honest, capable, nonpartisan, and apolitical legal body even if its rulings sometimes disappoint.

Throughout history, the Supreme Court has often been on the wrong side of an issue before it was on the right side. It was the Supreme Court that upheld slavery until it did not, and the same is true with any number of other issues including the most progressive components of the New Deal. Indeed, it has often been the case that justices who may prefer a particular outcome in a case ultimately bend when their preference misaligns with public norms. Thus, from a historical perspective, the court has often been conservative and reactionary but ultimately moves in the direction of social progress

when enough normative power exists in the body politic. But in recent decades we have seen a changing dynamic unfold. All six conservative members of the court, including newly-appointed Justice Amy Coney Barrett, are members of the militantly conservative Federalist Society. While we can only speculate about how Barrett will adjudicate, we know from the other five justices that they hold a jurisprudential outlook marked by rigid social and economic conservatism and a clear disregard for responding to widely held public norms and preferences. Notable examples include *Citizens United* (extending First Amendment rights to campaign donations), *Shelby v. Holder* (finding key aspects of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional), and the upholding of Trump's “Muslim ban.”

Trump, Democracy, and Authoritarianism

There has been a strain of thinking that suggests democracy in the United States was strong and robust right up to the point that Trump entered the White House. We hope that the previous pages dispel this line of thinking. Yet for as weak as American democracy has been throughout the country's history, we contend that the Trump years marked a critical juncture, whereby the country's worst anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies were reawakened and placed on display both in the halls of government and throughout much of civil society. Going forward, we highlight the features of the Trump years that most acutely reflect this democratic backsliding.

Press Freedom

It is not uncommon for politicians to criticize the press. In fact, there is a long history dating back to the country's founding of presidents rhetorically attacking and even attempting to censor journalism. However, Trump escalated this tradition in several notable ways that were all the more troubling given the authoritar-

ian mood that his administration injected into our current political moment. Trump frequently referred to the press as the “enemy of the people” and tweeted out cartoons of news outlets such as CNN being violently attacked. He also introduced the rhetorical frame of “fake news” into the conservative political lexicon, which was then adopted by authoritarian leaders across the globe. These actions cannot be viewed as innocuous. In addition to priming his supporters to disregard all reporting critical of him, this rhetoric birthed an environment in which real violence was carried out against the press. In May 2017, now Representative Greg Gianforte, a Republican from Montana, threw to the ground a reporter who had asked him about his health care plans. There was also an escalation in police violence against reporters, particularly during the BLM uprising of the last year. Rather than condemn these acts of violence, Trump offered his praise. At a rally in Gianforte’s state shortly after the attack, Trump remarked, “Any guy that can do a body slam, he’s my kind of guy” (Lach, *New Yorker*, 10/19/18). In response to police attacks against reporters, Trump described the attacks as “a beautiful sight” (Solendar, *Forbes*, 9/22/20). Sadly, Trump’s embrace of authoritarian violence is not limited to the press but instead runs through the entirety of our current political culture.

Violence

Trump’s immigration policy is a clear example of how his administration’s embrace of violence was not limited to rhetoric. Family separations, the imprisonment of small children, and an enthusiasm for returning refugees to the places and situations from which they sought safety will forever be a stain on our country. That such practices continued during the COVID pandemic without any measurable attempt to prevent the rampant spread of the virus through immigrant detention centers speaks volumes to the administration’s

callous disregard for those whom they viewed as the underserving other.

In fact, the Trump administration’s overall approach to the COVID-19 pandemic has been violent, eerily resembling the logic of eugenics. The climbing death toll that now exceeds 250,000 is downplayed, as we are told that we must simply live with a virus that preys disproportionately on the poor, the elderly, those with underlying health conditions, and the frontline workers who largely come from the Black and brown working classes, while celebrating the resiliency of the young and the strong.

Trump has, since his campaign in 2015–2016, encouraged violence against his detractors, even offering to pay the legal bills of rally attendees who fight anti-Trump protestors. He encouraged police officers to rough up criminal suspects and made open threats about having “the bikers” and other “tough” supporters take matters into their own hands. Viewing the law enforcement arm of the state as his own private army, he dispatched the tactical unit of the Customs and Border Protection agency to Portland, Oregon, to suppress anti-fascist activists. At an October campaign rally in North Carolina, Trump endorsed what appears to be the extrajudicial killing of an antifa activist by a U.S. Marshals task force, saying, “We sent in the U.S. Marshals. Took 15 minutes. It was over. Fifteen minutes, it was over. We got him. They knew who he was. They didn’t want to arrest him. And 15 minutes, that ended” (Democracy Now, 10/16/20).

The Trump administration’s embrace of violence has been adopted across large segments of civil society. Not since the 1960s have we seen such widespread violence wielded by the police against social justice protestors. BLM protestors and antifa activists have been subjected to a barrage of police violence. In fact, the New York Police Department is the focus of a recent report by the international rights organization Human Rights Watch (10/7/20) for their brutal

treatment of BLM protestors in New York's South Bronx. This campaign of violence by the police is particularly concerning because it is politically motivated. Whereas cops have always been hostile toward protestors, the widespread support for Trump among police and the organizations that represent them, coupled with Trump's antagonistic and outright violent rhetoric aimed at BLM and antifa, signaled the emergence of a police state that threatened democracy to the core. Furthermore, it was coupled with an explosion of far-right vigilantism among private citizens reminiscent of countries in the advanced stages of democratic decline. It is now predictable that left-wing protests will be met with groups of far-right thugs, armed with assault rifles, military-grade chemical irritants, body armor, and Trump flags. But these vigilantes are not just flexing their muscles in a symbolic display of political masculinity. Since the Unite the Right white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, where social justice activist Heather Heyer was killed in a car attack, there have been more than 100 similar attacks carried out against the left across the country (Hauck, *USA Today*, 9/27/20). Kyle Rittenhouse gunned down three BLM activists in Kenosha, Wisconsin, killing two of them. In the immediate lead-up to the 2020 presidential election, members of a paramilitary organization planned to kidnap the Democratic governor of Michigan, a plan later celebrated by Trump and his supporters at Michigan campaign rallies, where chants of "lock her up," referring to that same governor, reverberated through the crowds (Fritze, *USA Today*, 10/18/20).

The violent actions and rhetoric of Trump and his administration, the fascistic tactics employed by police against BLM and antifa activists, and the reign of terror carried out by far-right vigilantes are reflective of an authoritarian gestalt that has poisoned our politics. Cops are clearly responding to Trump's rhetoric against leftist activists and his support for the police in the face of calls

for their defunding and abolition. The Proud Boys and other paramilitary-style vigilante groups see in Trump a leader who speaks to their white nationalist fantasies and who views them as an arm of his political project. After all, why wouldn't they? When asked during the first 2020 presidential debate to denounce white supremacists, Trump instead told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." And whereas left-wing protestors are met with repression at every turn, the police have acquiesced and even coordinated with far-right thugs hell bent on doing Trump's dirty work. This authoritarian love triangle between Trump, cops, and vigilantes, not seen since the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan, marked a turning point in American politics, raising concerns about the state of our democracy. While it is yet to be seen if this dynamic will persist in a future free of Trump as president, forces such as these rarely fizzle out overnight.

Undermining Free and Fair Elections

Against the backdrop of partisan authoritarian violence was a presidential election that was mired in manufactured scandal for more than a year. In the lead-up to the election, Trump frequently cast doubt on its legitimacy while refusing to commit to a peaceful transfer of power should he lose, insisting that Democrats were attempting to steal it through fraudulent absentee ballots. Regardless of how reckless and baseless the claim, it was echoed by GOP elites, the Justice Department, far-right paramilitary groups, and conservative news media. Adding fuel to the fire, Trump encouraged his own voters to cast in-person *and* absentee ballots to "test the system," and recruited an "army" of "able-bodied" poll watchers to secure the integrity of the election against nefarious Biden supporters—a surefire way to suppress votes beyond the level guaranteed by the tactics discussed earlier, as Biden supporters were forced to weigh the risk of potentially being

killed against the benefit of voting Trump out of office. Thankfully, Trump's supporters did not appear to heed his call to action.

At the time of this writing, Biden has been declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election by all major news outlets. However, the fight by Trump and his allies against the outcome of the election persists. Trump refuses to concede while continuing to make bogus claims of election fraud on an hourly basis. A post-election poll conducted by Politico and Morning Consult suggests that 70 percent of Republicans do not trust the outcome of the election (Kim, *Politico*, 11/9/20). Groups of protestors, in some instances armed, converged on vote-counting centers across the country where absentee ballots were still being tabulated, protesting what they viewed as a fraudulent process. The count was disrupted in Philadelphia when bomb threats against the city's vote-counting center were received (*Independent*, 11/7/20), and calls to throw Biden in jail rang out at a pro-Trump rally outside of Georgia's Capitol (AP, 11/7/20).

Rather than work to uphold the norm of a peaceful transfer of power in which the outgoing party concedes the election results, Republican Party elites also doubled down on claims of election fraud. Those few GOP officials who criticized Trump's post-election tantrum were drowned out by a chorus of support for the president's refusal to concede, led by congressional party leaders Lindsey Graham and Mitch McConnell.

These actions by Trump and his supporters inside and outside of government initially led to widespread concerns over the possibility of a coup, even leading labor unions to plan for a general strike. Happily, these fears are no longer valid, in no small part because of a slew of losses by the administration in the courts and the lack of political will in state legislatures to disregard their state's popular vote and offer up a pro-Trump slate of Electoral College electors. But the fact that so many of us feared the very real possibility of a coup speaks volumes

to how precarious U.S. democracy had become. And although this worst-case scenario has no chance of materializing, the Republican Party's commitment to delegitimizing the Biden presidency before it has even begun will have serious implications.

Politicizing the Bureaucracy

Institutionally speaking, Trump has proven to be remarkably adept at corrupting the federal bureaucracy, politicizing agencies that are designed to be free from partisan tampering. We have no doubt seen past presidents test the boundaries of executive overreach, as evidenced by the Bush administration's attempts to occasionally suppress the Environmental Protection Agency's climate science. However, Trump and his administration have gone far beyond the transgressions of past presidents. Trump has quite literally insisted that political appointees affirm their loyalty to him, and through executive order revamped the U.S. Office of Personnel Management by removing barriers to the firing of civil servants for failing to comply with the executive's political wishes.

Over the past year, the administration has also directed the sweeping dismissal of Inspectors General, whose sole job is to police government corruption. Putting the Bush administration to shame, not only have references to climate change been forcibly removed from government websites and press releases, but EPA studies were also subjected to review by political appointees before their release to the public. As George Packer (*Atlantic*, 4/20) noted, there was a culture of fear that ran through the Justice Department as the office was transformed into the legal equivalent of a ministry of propaganda, whereby career lawyers were pressured to craft vague legal arguments that barely pass constitutional muster in order to facilitate the administration's attacks on marginalized groups including immigrants. Trump also pressured the Justice Department

in recent months to investigate his political opponents. Throughout the investigation of his ties to Russia, Trump attacked the credibility of U.S. intelligence agencies and fired FBI Director James Comey, his successor Andrew McCabe, and then Attorney General Jeff Sessions for their complicity in continuing what he claimed was a witch-hunt. And in the midst of a global pandemic that Trump continually downplayed and even referred to as a “hoax,” his administration interfered with the public messaging of the Centers for Disease Control and fast-tracked unproven COVID treatments. Just days after the 2020 presidential election, Trump fired Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who over the summer publicly denounced the president’s call to send active-duty soldiers into American streets to suppress protests over the police killing of George Floyd. To date, several other high-ranking Pentagon personnel have been ousted and replaced with Trump loyalists. This politicization of the bureaucracy has served as a corrupting force that granted Trump unprecedented power. It has also undermined the legitimacy of bureaucratic agencies, as their activities, research, and public guidance, once believed to be the products of apolitical experts, are now viewed as tainted by partisan interests.

Party Transformation and Its Impact Going Forward

What is in our view most troubling about the Trump years was the widespread buy-in that the Trump administration’s authoritarian political disposition received across the GOP electorate and among party elites. We have seen Republican elected officials consistently lend their public support to the Trump administration, defending executive actions, advancing Trump-led legislative packages, and outright endorsing or otherwise legitimizing Trump’s overtly fascistic rhetoric. Even in those rare instances where party leaders first expressed reservation over

a particular Trump policy, hostile tweet, or public embrace of white nationalism, tepidity was soon replaced with either overt support or efforts to verbally massage Trump’s actions to make them appear in line with democratic norms. As noted above, we are now witnessing this same pattern of support for Trump’s refusal to concede to Biden and his sustained claims of voter fraud.

Recent scholarship also reveals a Republican Party electorate that holds profoundly authoritarian viewpoints. A recent study by Larry Bartels (*Proc. Natl Acad. Sci.*, 117[37], 2020) is instructive here. Using a cross-sectional survey to gauge the views of self-identified Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, he found the following: A few more than half agree that “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it”; more than 40 percent agree that “a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands”; nearly 50 percent agree that “strong leaders sometimes have to bend the rules in order to get things done”; and just under 75 percent agree that “it is hard to trust the results of elections when so many people will vote for anyone who offers a handout.” Notably, the majority of respondents who did not “agree” said they were “unsure” rather than “disagree.”

The combination of GOP elites lending consistent and strong support to an overtly authoritarian regime and a base within the electorate that widely embraces authoritarian tendencies including political violence and corruption suggests that our already weak democracy is in a deeply precarious state. Unfortunately, we lack historical data that can reliably indicate if these viewpoints are unique to the Trump years, but we do know that hostile attitudes toward immigrants and an “insider/outsider” viewpoint in which immigrants, Blacks, and Muslims are grouped in the “outsider” category, were strong motivators behind a vote for Trump in 2016 (Richard C. Fording & Sanford F. Schram, “Why

Trump Won: Outgroup Hostility as the New Ethnocentrism,” American Politics Workshop, CUNY Graduate Center, 2018). The important takeaway here is that U.S. politics is polluted by a deeply authoritarian mood that extends beyond the Trump White House.

It is reasonable to assume that the Republican Party will persist as a hotbed of authoritarianism following the end of the Trump presidency. Whether Trump remains as a political voice upon leaving office is largely irrelevant. The party’s electoral base is increasingly hostile toward democracy and deeply sympathetic to the principles of white nationalism. These views will continue to be nurtured by Republican elites who, with few exceptions, have adopted Trump’s style of politics, and by an ecosystem of far-right news media, social media, and web forums. We must anticipate how these forces will likely interact with a Biden presidency that they already view as illegitimate. Every Democratic Party-led policy initiative will be fought with vigor, making the special election in Georgia for the state’s two Senate seats a crucial focus in the weeks ahead. And protests by the left, aimed at pushing the Biden administration to advance the Green New Deal and progressive policies like Medicare for All, may very well be met with the same level of police repression and far-right vigilantism as we have witnessed throughout the Trump presidency. Especially troubling is what an ineffective Biden presidency could provoke. Should Democrats fail to gain a majority in the Senate, if even one of Georgia’s two open seats goes to a Republican, gridlock will define the next two years (or four if the Democrats fail to achieve majorities in both houses during the 2022 midterms). This scenario of a “do-nothing” Biden presidency could incite rage among Republican voters who will blame Democrats for their real or perceived unmitigated problems (think COVID relief, extension of unemployment benefits, and so on), paving the way for a more capable authoritarian presidential candidate than Trump in 2024. Thus, the left, and in-

deed anyone committed to democracy, must anticipate these scenarios and work to prevent them from coming to fruition as we continue to organize, protest, and engage in strategic electoral work.

A Reemerging Left

As believers in the words of the protest chant “We are unstoppable, another world is possible,” we would be remiss to conclude an essay on the extensive deficits in American democracy without also noting that a very different politics is achievable. Especially where political institutions are unresponsive to the wants and needs of ordinary people—workers, minority groups, women, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized populations—social movements provide voice to the voiceless. The progressive victories of the past cannot be fully explained without noting the pivotal role that disruptive protest played in forcing them into reality. History also informs us that the strongest antidote to authoritarianism and the creeping threat of fascism is mass mobilization. In other words, protest matters ... a lot. We are inspired today by the reemergence of a political left that is equally militant and politically sophisticated, unafraid to take to the streets and emboldened to run candidates who proudly call themselves socialists. Organizations like Democratic Socialists of America have become major political players across the country, and the BLM movement has been uncompromising both in terms of its tactics and its transformative demands, including the defunding and ultimate abolition of the police. These are but two examples of burgeoning revolutionary forces in the United States that have the potential to not just mitigate the country’s deeply embedded pathologies but also to usher in a socialist politics based on the principle of social solidarity. It is according to this assessment that we do not believe we should fall into despair nor become complacent under a Biden presidency, but organize!

Race, Crisis, and Resistance in the United States

An Interview with Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR is an Assistant professor in the Department of African American Studies at Princeton University. She is author of *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, published in 2019 by the University of North Carolina Press, longlisted for a 2019 National Book Award for nonfiction, and a 2020 finalist for the Pulitzer in history. Taylor's book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* won the Lannan Cultural Freedom Award for an Especially Notable Book in 2016. She is also editor of *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combabe River Collective*, which won the Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ nonfiction in 2018. Taylor is a columnist for the *New Yorker*.

New Politics board member Phil Gasper interviewed Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor in October 2020. The interview was subsequently transcribed and edited for length.

Phil Gasper for New Politics: *So, 2020 has been a roller-coaster of a year. It began with Trump surviving his impeachment trial, then the outbreak of the worst global pandemic in 100 years, which in turn resulted in a massive economic crisis. But the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on Memorial Day led to what has been called the biggest protest movement in U.S. history, with Black Lives Matter marches across the country protesting police violence and racism. On the left, there are significant differences about how to understand the relationship between racism and capitalism, between race and class. These have surfaced recently in debates*

within the Democratic Socialists of America. Can you talk about the general issue?

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: So, that's been the perennial debate within the American left, I think we can say, for more than the last 100 years. What should the attitude of the left be towards racism? At one point, the "Negro question" was how it was framed. And, you know, I think the reason why it's such an important question is because of the cynical way that race has been manipulated by the ruling class, those who are at the helm of our society, to produce a particularly favorable outcome for themselves. Whether that is championing white supremacy as an explicit political program in the South, or whether that is manipulating competition over scarcity of resources outside of the South as a way to divert attention away from why there is scarcity in the land of plenty—to set, essentially, poor and working-class people against each other. So, it makes this question of race and racism an enormously important political question, because it has been wielded so successfully by those who are in power to maintain the status quo.

And there's a history that I think that we can look to that shows the limitations of pursuing just universal programs. I think we can look at the New Deal. I'm teaching a class on race and inequality this semester, and I just used an essay that Adolph Reed wrote for the *New Republic* about understanding that the New Deal is not inherently, or not universally, racist, so that we should [not] just condemn the New Deal and say that it offers

no insights into public policy in the United States.¹ The article is an important rejoinder to those who would just dismiss that body of legislation as categorically insufficient to the needs of African Americans. In one sense, that categorical dismissal doesn't actually help us understand how African Americans went from voting almost exclusively Republican before the New Deal, to voting almost exclusively Democrat after it. If it had no consequences in the lives of Black people, it's hard to imagine how that transformation happened. So, I think that we can say that, even though it was written in such a way to write out Black people, the benefits were so enormous that it was impossible for Black people to be completely excluded from them. And the benefits were enough to convince African Americans that perhaps they should align themselves with the Democratic Party and not the Republican Party.

I think we can also look at what Ira Katznelson has written. He wrote a book called *When Affirmative Action Was White*² that looks specifically at the New Deal and the GI Bill. But he begins the book with the question, how do we understand how people who were relatively close to each other in material conditions in the 1930s end up in two completely separate worlds by the beginning of the 1960s? You can't say that Black and white workers in the 1930s were in the same financial position before the New Deal. But, certainly, the chasm was not as exaggerated as it would be thirty or forty years later. After many white workers enjoyed the benefits of the New Deal and the GI Bill, that chasm got much wider—so much so, that Black people have to riot and burn cities down in order to get the state to recognize the enormous levels of deprivation in Black communities. And so, he says, we have to look at how the benefits of the New Deal and the GI Bill were distributed over time that led to the foundation of what white people would see as the American Dream by the 1960s, and for Black people would lead to what Malcolm X described as

an American nightmare. So, the point is that universal programs can have a trickle-down effect for Black people just by the sheer size and scope of them. But is that enough, in and of itself, in a thoroughly and completely racist society, to have the same uplifting impact for Black people? And I just think that there is an enormous bevy of historical evidence that says universality in and of itself is not enough. And this was the whole reason why affirmative action, also in the 1960s, became a powerful political current, because it was understood that if you don't explicitly create opportunities, benefits, programs that are directed at Black people, Black people will get left out.

I think even today, if you look at something like Social Security, where it absolutely is available to most workers—there are certain caveats for teachers, but for most workers across the board—but what you get paid is dependent on your lifetime of earnings. And so, if you are Black and had been subjected to job discrimination, racist wage differentials, then that also gets reflected in this universal program that you may have access to but is afforded you in a different way. So, I think that we have to take seriously the demands of Black people that there be particular programs instituted to make sure that African Americans don't get left behind. And I think politically, as a question for the left, the way that racism so deeply shapes American society, it really is impossible to imagine building a genuine multiracial movement without taking up the specific grievances of Black people, which cannot just simply be reduced to questions of class. There are particular ways that Black people experience oppression that affect the rate of exploitation that they experience as a disproportionately working-class population. And it is literally impossible to imagine a genuine movement that reflects the demands or aspirations of Black people for self-determination, some sense of freedom, without actually taking up the specific ways that Black people are oppressed in the United States.

NP: *A term that is being used a lot lately is “racial capitalism.” Does this concept help to shed light on these issues? If there’s racial capitalism, can there be non-racial capitalism? Or are these two systems linked together so closely that one must always consider them as part of the same system?*

KYT: This is an interesting question that I’m trying to think through. I don’t use the term “racial capitalism” in my work. Everyone says the last book that I wrote, *Race for Profit*,³ about race and real estate, is a work of racial capitalism. And yet I don’t use the term anywhere in the book, even though Michelle Alexander has a blurb on the front cover with “racial capitalism” in it. In some ways, “racial capitalism” has become like “neoliberalism,” which is this incredibly elastic term whose meaning is in the eye of the beholder. And it’s never clear if people are actually talking about the same things. So, I just read something a couple of days ago that described racial capitalism by referencing Cedric Robinson’s book *Black Marxism*,⁴ saying here is where we see race and capitalism first described as co-constitutive and this work has been a useful intervention, blah, blah, blah. And it’s like, no, that’s actually not what Cedric Robinson is writing about. He in fact says something very different: that race pre-dates capitalism, that race is the shaping factor, trans-historically and socially.

But I think that what has happened is that it’s become this term, that I’m sympathetic to, that people use to try to draw attention to the close relationship between race and capitalism in the United States and its formation and to explain this history and how we understand the centrality of racism to American society and to American capitalism. But I do think that it’s important to be precise. I should also say, in that same vein, that racial capitalism came to be, I think in the last ten years, an intervention, at least in the academy, in [discussions of] new studies about capitalism and slavery that just omitted race, that claim that race wasn’t really a factor or

that it was secondary, marginal, and that this is really about a kind of analysis of political economy. And so, the arguments around racial capitalism that I think come into fashion and then very quickly become popularized are in response to that. And people look back to Du Bois and Eric Williams⁵ to try to make a more complicated argument about race and capitalism, but understanding that race is very much a part of what comes out of these economic relationships and conditions and can’t just be seen as a kind of peripheral thing that you can either talk about or not. So, to that end, I’m sympathetic with why it has come back into usage and the ways that people are trying to use it.

On the other hand, I see there’s still use in understanding a distinction between racism and capitalism. And, you know, this is the way that I write about these issues—that race comes out of capitalist relations as a way to rationalize and justify various unequal relationships. I also think that the kind of narrow focus on this thing we refer to as “racial capitalism” can miss the ways in which capitalism divides people in all sorts of ways. It is an economic system where wealth and resources are concentrated at the top of society, and part of the way that the top of society manages the inevitable inequality that develops out of that relationship is through the incitement of oppression. And, you know, it sounds simple but it’s complicated and it’s complex, the notion of divide and conquer. But I’m not sure how else we understand how such a small group of people is able to maintain control over vast numbers of people, even as they suffer incredibly through hardship and as a result of this kind of inequality.

So, capitalism divides people along the lines of the invented category of race. And all these categories are invented—religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation. These are all bases upon which people had been divided in the United States. It happens along the lines of race, but you know, there’s the example that Marx himself used about

Ireland and England, where you can have just as vicious caricatures and demonization of people who look exactly like you, and thus you are forced to find some other fault line to divide people along.⁶ And so there it's religion. So, I think that the narrow focus on racial capitalism ignores a more general dynamic and tendency for capitalism itself. And it also speaks to the hegemony of the United States as this framework that, even if it circulates on the left here, then becomes this kind of dominant way that we look at the world to the exclusion of other forms of oppression elsewhere. And that's the power of being in the most powerful country in the world. But it distorts the way that we understand how this system functions globally.

NP: *Let's talk a little about what's happening in the United States right now. I began by mentioning these incredible and unexpected protests that we've seen in the second half of 2020. At a point when we were in lockdown and this health crisis was raging, it seems the most unlikely time for a mass protest movement to emerge. It's also been very multiracial. And right now—we're talking in October—the level of protests has dropped, but they are still continuing in many cities around the United States, so it's very long lived. What are the roots of this? What can you say about the origins and the size of the protests?*

KYT: Well, I mean, the first thing I can say is that it was very shocking. In April, I remember I wrote this thing in the *New York Times*—are we going to have to figure out new ways to protest?⁷ I think I used a line like, “What can you do when there's nothing to be done?” Or, “What can be done when there's nothing we can do?” And part of that was just like the shock of the pandemic itself. And, you know, it was still at a point where no one really knew anything about what its consequence would be. But, you know, I think that there was something about the effects of the pandemic, the particular effects in Black communities, and I think that there's a way that these sorts of things are typically hid-

den. Because all these disparities exist all the time. The Black life expectancy, the way that Black people receive health care—you know, all of the things that have been highlighted by the pandemic, they exist all the time. But for the first time they were being highlighted in terms of the impact of the virus in Black communities. And I think that people were forced to deal with that—and it's certainly the case now, the extent to which we continue to talk about poverty and deprivation in the face of the pandemic, but also this economic crisis. You know, some of it has to do with the fact that Trump is president. There's much more of a willingness to talk openly about hardship in the United States—whether that is to embarrass him, whether it's because it's an election year—in ways that have been impossible to talk about it when Democrats are in power. And so, I think that that is also a part of it.

But there's a way that those factors, being an active part of a public discussion, then intersect with the insanity of watching this public murder of George Floyd. And I think in the same way it was impossible to calculate in Ferguson what is the actual last straw? What is the tipping point where people are no longer willing to just, you know, protest quietly? What is it that tips this over into an uprising? And it's impossible to calculate, but there was something about the brutal public nature of this killing, with this cop who looked like he could have been watching a football game while this Black man is begging and pleading for his life in the midst of an epidemic that is just killing Black people left and right. And I think, you know, there was something about the combination of those two things that, similar to Ferguson, if we don't do something, then what is the value, what is the meaning of Black life in this country? Because this also came on the heels ... The Breonna Taylor situation was not quite as public, but we had all watched Ahmaud Arbery just shot down like a dog in the streets in Georgia, and the two white men who were

involved with that suffered no consequence. They're not even arrested. It's a situation that defies comprehension. And I think that the tension that had obviously been building around the uncertainty of the pandemic just clashed with the public killing in a way that was unpredictable but not surprising.

I think that the longevity [of the protests] speaks to the absolute cynicism that people have about the possibility for substantive change to actually occur—because people saw four or five years ago out of the Ferguson uprising, then Baltimore, there's a focus on body cameras, there's a presidential commission, there are all these things that don't actually change anything. And, you know, the protests began to wrap up then, but the police killings continued to go on. This time around, even though I don't think—especially in June—that this was the result of some organizing prowess, I do think that the political experiences of people who had been active in Black Lives Matter over the last several years enabled them to very quickly put forward political demands and political framing that helped to give some cohesion politically and to shape the objectives of protesters. And I think that some of those were kind of writ large nationally, but on the ground, local organizers were able to inject their own frameworks and demands in ways that gave people a reason to continue to mobilize.



Dana Morgenstein

I think the whole issue of defunding the police was a brilliant intervention, because it immediately connected the issue of police abuse and violence to this larger issue of the failure of the state in so many ways to respond to all of these other crises. And the immediate question everywhere was why do the police get all the resources while we have all these other problems here? Why are the police so able to quickly coordinate their attacks on protesters, but there's no cohesion, there's no coordination, when it comes to dealing with the issues of the virus? And I think that the clarity of those sorts of questions that were relevant to every single municipality that had a protest is part of what continued to keep the protests alive.

Of course, in addition, there's the sheer insanity of police. I mean this was, in some ways, like a national awakening, probably, for white people about what Black people have always known—that the police are completely out of control. And you can see that for yourself. It's on the news every night: Police in Buffalo pushing over some 75-year-old man and sending him to the hospital. Police in New York just attacking people for absolutely no reason. Peaceful protests in Philadelphia attacked with military-grade chemical warfare. This was the nightly news for weeks, and that, in and of itself, became part of the objective of continuing to protest.

And then there were ways that that morphed into other political issues in a place. So, I live in Philadelphia, and some of the organizers here immediately used the cover of the riots and uprising to stage an occupation of public property and to set up encampments for homeless people, to draw attention to the housing crisis here. And they describe that as a Black Lives Matter action because most of the homeless in Philadelphia are African American. And they were successful. They held an occupation for 126 days and forced the city to do unprecedented things to resolve this conflict because the city, on three separate occasions, announced that they were going to sack the encampment and they couldn't do it because they were afraid it would open a new front in the protest movement here locally. So, in the end, they decided to transfer title of fifty properties, to create a community land trust, to these organizers. There were two encampments—one had a 150 people in it. They found housing for all those people.

So, it didn't just stay narrowly focused on issues of police. And defunding the police, even though it was panned by Democratic Party strategists—Karen Bass said this was the worst slogan ever created⁸—actually opened up a world of different possibilities and created the conditions for the protest movement to continue, because it wasn't just focused on a specific case or a specific inci-

dent. It made connections between the local economy, local distribution of resources, and the police as the most well-resourced public institution in every city in the United States.

NP: *You mentioned the background of the unequal impact of the pandemic on communities of color. And then in the wake of the health crisis, we get this massive economic crisis as well, which has also had a hugely disproportionate impact. Can you talk about that—what the economic impact has been and how that connects with this political moment and the kinds of demands that are being raised?*

KYT: Yeah, I think there's something interesting with that because even with the insufficient CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act), which was passed in April, it showed a few things. One, it showed that this discussion about deficits is nonsense, that the U.S. government can pull \$2.2 or \$3 trillion out of thin air to satisfy what it perceives as an enormous amount of need. And even in its insufficiency, where a disproportionate amount of that rescue goes to corporations, even the meager amount that was inconsistently distributed to ordinary people actually prevented a massive slide into poverty. It raised some people out of poverty—people who were getting more from unemployment than they were actually making in wages. It showed what was possible. It showed what the U.S. government is actually capable of, and it showed what public aid can do to not just save people's lives in an immediate sense but also in terms of stabilizing the economic situation.

But just as quickly as it showed that, the willingness of Congress to just let that lapse and, with it, to allow people's livelihoods to completely disintegrate was just another log on the raging fire that is destroying the legitimacy of American institutions and, I think, the state itself, in the eyes of ordinary people, which I think is part of the political consequence that looms on the horizon. And, you know, the U.S. government was most re-

sponsive when millions of people were in the street burning cities down. It's not responsive when left to its own devices to actually come up with credible solutions to the hardship that people are experiencing. And you know, there's a lesson to be learned in that for what has to happen to actually improve the situation of regular people in this country, when the political channels that we are told are established for that just cease to function. So, that is the way that the economic situation can grab a hold of the political framework and turn it upside down and raise different kinds of questions.

As far as the impact of the economic crisis, it's tremendous—it's part of what is, I think, fueling a deep-seated radicalization in this country. Usually the U.S. says, you know, we don't have classes, this is a country where classes are fluid, everyone has social mobility. And the situation with the pandemic has really unmasked that, where you have rich people able to buffer themselves with the bodies of low-wage Black and brown workers—middle-class people to a lesser extent, because even if you are able to work at home, it doesn't resolve the issues of childcare, doesn't resolve the unequal burden that women face and the expectation that they will do this remote work but also continue to maintain a household with no additional assistance. And, you know, the struggles around hazard pay and access to PPE [personal protective equipment] and all of these things really laid bare the class nature of American society that, again, is almost always hidden or distorted or just goes undiscussed, and brought it straight to the surface of our society and made it an inescapable feature that had to be reckoned with.

Since July, when the benefits of the CARES Act expired, those contradictions are becoming even more clear. We have millions of people on the verge of eviction. The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] has this bizarre moratorium that describes eviction as a public health crisis, but it expires in January. So, is it a public health crisis now, and then it's not

a public health crisis January 2? The Trump administration told landlord associations, property owning associations, that they can proceed with evictions, that the Justice Department will not intervene. Evictions have been happening throughout this. As we know, Trump is pushing this Supreme Court hearing to get his third judge on the court to get rid of Obamacare, the ACA [Affordable Care Act], in the middle of a pandemic. American workers got one check (some did: there are 30 percent of workers who never received a check) for 1,200 or 2,400 bucks—if you have a couple of kids, throw \$1,000 in there—when people's lives have been completely destroyed.

So, you could go on and on about the economic consequences of the pandemic and how it's playing out in the lives of ordinary people. You see it in the schools, the issue about whether to open the schools or not. And what has been lost in this discussion is how the federal government essentially told school districts around the country to reopen on last year's budget, even though all these new issues were created, [like] the need for buildings to be refurbished and to be retrofitted to build new ventilation systems. The federal government said, "Fuck you. No. We're not paying for anything." And so that has meant that here in Philly, all the rich private schools are open. They've got tents. They spent tens of thousands of dollars for Plexiglas and for PPE. So, the rich white kids are going to school.

In the public schools, which of course are 90 percent Black and brown, you get this remote thing that you can't go in the buildings. Last year, Philly had a crisis of asbestos in its public-school buildings, let alone ventilation. There's an elementary school a few blocks from my house. It doesn't have any windows. There are no windows in the building. So, for public schools, you can't go in the building, and remotely, 15,000 of the kids don't have access to the Internet. Other kids don't have a computer. So, they get these computers, and some of them sold them over the summer so

they could have money. So, the idea that the U.S. doesn't have a class issue or that we're all on the same footing—things that the left probably takes for granted [are false]—this has been an eye-opening experience for millions of people, even though much of it gets blotted out by the spectacle of Trump and the way that the media just chases after every hiccup that comes from him.

There's a similar dynamic with the election. If Trump is the evil, then the election is the cure, and the granular effects of what is happening have been lost in the larger discussion. Or it's so fragmented and local that it's hard to cohere a big picture of the utter devastation that is happening. What does it mean to say that this is the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression? It's hard to absorb that when it's all about Trump's latest antics at a debate, or "What's your plan for November 3? How are you going to vote?" I hope Trump loses, absolutely. But if anyone thinks that that's the end of the story, then it's just evidence of how people are missing the huge picture of what is happening underneath. And it's not just the economic devastation; it is the erosion of any kind of trust in the political institutions in this country. I think that there's going to be a massive turnout for the vote and that Trump is going to lose—I mean, I might be wrong, because they're doing all the dirty tricks, but I think that's the sentiment. But it's mixed with this utter cynicism that our government can't function except to put another right-wing lunatic onto the Supreme Court. Then it's a well-oiled machine. Then, you know, Dianne Feinstein's hugging everybody, and this is the best-run hearing I've ever been to. A well-oiled machine when it comes to that. But for all of these basic things that have to do with the fragility of human life, it just doesn't function at all. And the most effective thing that people have been witness to, in terms of getting the state to at least recognize the humanity of people, has been these protests and demonstrations. I think that that creates

the conditions for not just a kind of continued political volatility but people will draw some political conclusions about what that means.

It's a longer discussion because then it raises the question about what is the left in the United States? What is it doing? Because I think that we've seen that radicalization creates the conditions for being open to new explanations and new politics and new strategies, but the left doesn't have a franchise on that. The right-wing offers explanations as well and offers its own version of an alternative. And so, I worry about the kind of fragmentation of the left, the lack of any coherent strategy or cohesion. There are lots of people who are doing things, but they almost seem to have no connection to each other—whether it's in Black Lives Matter, whether it is in the housing movement, whether it is the relationship between low-wage workers of color at Amazon, who were at the vanguard of activism last April, to these struggles that are happening now. So, there are many different things that are happening, but it's hard to see how they cohere, how they are in related to each other. What creates a mass movement and not just protests and demonstrations and organizing? What is it that actually brings this together, not into one single thing, but into something that has more relationships, conversations with each other, than it currently does? And, you know, it's early, but it's also very urgent and dire right now.

NOTES

1. Adolph Reed, "The New Deal Wasn't Inherently Racist," *New Republic*, Nov. 26, 2019. newrepublic.com/article/155704/new-deal-wasnt-intrinsically-racist.
2. Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (Norton, 2006).
3. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).
4. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd edition (Chapel

Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

5. See, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (Free Press, 1999). First published in 1935. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). First published in 1944.

6. Karl Marx, letter to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, April 9, 1870, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43 (International Publishers, 1988), 473-476. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70_04_09.htm.

7. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, "Are We at the Start of a New Protest Movement?" *New York Times*, April 13, 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/opinion/protest-social-distancing-covid.html.

8. "Rep. Karen Bass: 'Defund Police' Is Probably One of the Worst Slogans Ever," *Washington Post Live*, June 15, 2020. www.washingtonpost.com/video/washington-post-live/rep-karen-bass-defund-police-is-probably-one-of-the-worst-slogans-ever/2020/06/15/5d235d87-c438-4d10-874e-d03544283fc4_video.html.

CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



— Langston Hughes, poet, activist, novelist, columnist, playwright of the Harlem Renaissance

Excerpts from the 1936 poem
LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's,
Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

Workers of the World: Growth, Change, and Rebellion

KIM MOODY

THE WORKING CLASS OF THE twenty-first century is a class in formation, as one would expect in a world where capitalism has only recently become universal. At the same time, Marx himself reminded us long ago, in speaking of the development of classes in England where they were “most classically developed,” that “even here, though, this class articulation does not emerge in pure form.”¹ The working *class*, of course, is much broader than those who are employed at any one time. Relying only on workforce figures obscures important aspects of the broader working-class life, including its reproduction. Nevertheless, those in and out of employment form the core of the working class, once seen as a male domain but today nearly half composed of women. Furthermore, both space and research limitations dictate that this article will focus on the employed and near-employed sections of this global class. With these caveats in mind, we look first at the growth of the global working-class labor force in the twenty-first century.

The contemporary driving forces be-

hind this dynamic have been the uneven globalization of capitalism generally with the simultaneous rise of multinational corporations following World War II; the falling rate of profit that began in the late 1960s, drove capital beyond its older boundaries, and produced recurring crises; the opening of the former bureaucratic “Communist” economies to capitalism; and more recently, the deepening of global value chains (GVC). The last mentioned have been developing for some time but in the last couple of decades have shaped economic growth and change in many developing economies by pulling the formerly unpaid homework of reproduction, petty commodity production, and pre-existing domestic supply chains into the sphere of the value-producing chains of multinational capital. This has dislocated some industries and jobs in the developed economies but has mostly resulted in expansion into new areas. So, for example, although the share of world production in the developed countries has fallen, both the United States and the EU produce more added value today than twenty or thirty years ago.

Growth of the Workforce

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the world labor force grew by 25 percent from 2000 to 2019. Those “employed” for an income grew from 2.6 billion to 3.3 billion over those first two decades of the twenty-first century, also by 25 percent. Of those “employed” in ILO terms, 53 percent were wage or salary earners, up

KIM MOODY was a founder of *Labor Notes* and is the author of several books on labor and politics, including *On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War* (Haymarket Books, 2017). He is currently a visiting scholar at the University of Westminster in London and a member of the University and College Union and the National Union of Journalists.

from 43 percent in 1996; 34 percent were considered “own-account” workers, up from 31 percent in 1996; 11 percent “contributing family” workers, down from 23 percent in 1996; and 2 percent employers, down from 3.4 percent in that year.²

Obviously not even all of the non-employers in this ILO count are working class. Many are salaried professionals or managers of various sorts, others are small-business owners, street vendors, and so on. Here it is likely that about two-thirds, or a little over 2 billion, of those considered employed by the ILO are working class. These working-class employed workers are not just those in the wage and salary sectors, however. Many of those considered “own-account” or self-employed workers, as well as “contributing family” workers, are in fact locked into the capital-labor employment relationship via the expanded and deepened domestic and global value, or supply, chains that have characterized capitalist growth for some time. “Own-account” or self-employed workers are often simply misclassified by employers to dodge taxes, benefits, and responsibility for these workers. Women are far more likely than men to be informally employed.

This informality, however, is a legal definition of workers outside of most forms of state regulation of employment. By this definition, most workers in Marx’s time were “informal.” As Ursula Huws puts it concerning various forms of unpaid labor of reproduction or of “unproductive” (of surplus value) individual service provision, “The history of capitalism can be regarded synoptically as the history of the dynamic transformation of each of these types of labor into another, with (as Marx predicted) the overall effect of driving a higher and higher proportion of human labor into the ‘productive’ category where it is disciplined by, and produces value for, capitalists.”³

Thus, the World Bank notes that “home-based” workers, who are disproportionately female, make up a considerable proportion

of the lower end of global corporate value (supply) chains. Furthermore, studies of the impact of such supply chains show that a huge involvement of “informal”-sector workers classified as “own-account” or “contributing family” employees in South Asia, Africa, and across the developing world are commonly incorporated into GVCs.⁴

These corporate-dominated supply chains don’t just connect developing economies to multinational corporations. They reconfigure the local economy and workforce to corporate needs. Even if the majority of workers in a country are not directly connected to a corporate value chain, the levels of informality, wages, pace of work, and gender balance are set for most workers by the dynamics and speed of the multinationals’ “just-in-time” GVCs. As Bhattacharya and Kesar point out, the growth of capitalist manufacturing in India has increased the informal sector because it is cheaper to source from formerly petty commodity producers and to deal with household workers, where the women provide both (poorly) paid labor and the unpaid labor of reproduction that reduces the cost of each worker. Far from being “pre-capitalist,” such informal employment is a product of universalizing capitalism.⁵

GVCs grew from about 45 percent of world trade in the mid-1990s to almost 55 percent in 2008, before falling somewhat to about half.⁶ As a result, the fastest growing sectors have been those associated with the infrastructure and operation of these GVCs. According to ILO estimates, employment in transportation and communications grew by 83 percent, and that in construction by 118 percent, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, faster than any other major sectors. In terms of direct employment, these sectors are composed largely of male workers. Nevertheless, an important result of the growth of GVCs has been the rise of women, from 40 percent of the employed workforce in 2000 to almost half (49 percent) in 2019, while in manufacturing that depends

on these value chains, women increased from 41 percent to 44 percent by 2019.⁷

In addition, more and more workers have also been drawn “inside the knot” of capital’s social relations of production, as Huws puts it, via the growing commodification of both public services and the previously unpaid labor of social reproduction, that is, via the capitalist organization of services previously performed by the state for wages or in the home or community without pay. Disproportionate numbers of these workers are women, who compose two-thirds of workers in education, health care, and social services globally.⁸ An indication of this trend is the rapid increase in “market services,” from 20 percent of employment in the ILO’s definition in 1991 to 31 percent in 2018. Another is the decline of “public capital” and assets as a share of national wealth in all of the leading industrial countries to less than 10 percent for most.⁹

When looking at the recomposition of the working class in the developed countries, it is common to point to the rise of services and the decline of goods production, assuming this amounts to a diminution of the working class. In fact, the line between the two is largely an obfuscation of how value is created by the global working class in contemporary capitalism. Service production is also increasingly dominated by giant corporations and involved in GVCs, with its share of value-added trade rising from 31 percent in 1980 to 43 percent by 2009. It is important to bear in mind that goods production is essential to the provision of services and vice versa. There are no services performed without “things” and there are no goods produced without the input of “services.” The labor involved in both is meant to produce surplus value. The use value of the commodity it produces is secondary. While global service sector employment has grown by 61 percent in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the international industrial workforce has increased by 40 percent.¹⁰ This relative difference in growth

is partly due to the continuing rise of productivity in global manufacturing at a faster rate than the world economy as a whole, rather than a diminution of industrial output.

Indeed, even in this period of slower growth, worldwide manufacturing value added, far from disappearing, grew by 123 percent in current dollars, or about half that in real terms, from 2000 to 2019. Overall, contrary to the notion of a “post-industrial” world, the manufacturing workforce grew from 393 million in 2000 to 460 million in 2019, while the industrial (manufacturing, construction, and mining) workforce grew from 536 million to 755 million over this period. This does not include workers in transportation, communications, and utilities, who are also essential to goods production and composed an additional 226 million workers by 2019, up from 116 million two decades earlier. Together this industrial “core” amounted to 41 percent of the world’s non-agricultural workforce as of 2019.¹¹ In other words, *the industrial workers of the world, to borrow a phrase, remain a massive core of value production and the working population.* Their global distribution, however, has changed.

Geographic Dispersion and Inequality

The growth of the world’s production and, therefore, its working-class workforce, however, was not evenly spread across the globe. While the developed countries still produce the largest share of manufacturing value added (MVA), the developing countries have increased their share from 18 percent in 1990 to about 40 percent in 2019, while that of the industrialized nations fell from 79 percent to 55 percent over that period. The EU share dropped from 33 percent of world MVA output in 1990 to 22 percent in 2018, while that of Asia rose from 24 percent to 37 percent over that period. China alone rose from about 5 percent of world MVA output in 2000 to 20 percent in 2018. Recently,

much of Asia's increased share of MVA went just four countries: China, India, Indonesia, and the Republic of Korea. Employment followed suit, with the industrialized nations' share of manufacturing jobs dropping from 30 percent in 1991 to 18 percent in 2018.¹² In the twenty-first century, the growth of "informal" work, that of goods production, and the growing role of women in both have occurred primarily in the developing world.

At the same time, economic, political, and war-related dislocation and dispossession have produced a growing international migrant population. The number of people living outside their home country has grown from 173,588,441 in 2000 to 271,642,105 by 2019, an increase of 57 percent. Most of these migrants were of working age, and 48 percent, almost half, were women. About 111 million were classified by the International Organization for Migration as migrant workers in 2017, returning remittances to their homeland of \$689 billion in 2018.¹³ At least a half billion people receive these remittances, contributing significantly to the social reproduction of the global working class and thus lowering labor costs to international capital. As Ferguson and McNally have pointed out, missing the role of migrant labor "loses sight of international processes of dispossession and primitive accumulation, which, among other things, generate *global reserves of labor-power* whose cross-border movements are at the heart of the worldwide production and reproduction of capital and labor." Thus, an additional 111 million workers move in and out of the ILO's static figures on employment, and the process of class formation, particularly in important centers of production like the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.¹⁴

Capital as a whole has done extremely well by the geographic changes, technological advances, reorganization of production and the labor process, and even the crises of the system as a whole. Overall, in most developed and in developing economies, whether real wages fell or rose, the *share* of labor income

in GDP fell from the mid-1970s, with some ups and downs, to 2019. Hence, that of capital rose. As an indication of this, the share of national income of the top 10 percent rose, while that of the bottom 50 percent fell, in all the major economies.¹⁵ Poverty remains a central feature of labor in developing nations despite claims of its reduction achieved largely by manipulating the definition of poverty. Even in Europe, once the pinnacle of the welfare state, social-democratic theorist Wolfgang Streeck notes, "What follows will analyze the trajectory of European social policy over the *longue durée* as it has mutated from a projected federal social-democratic welfare state to a program for competitive adjustments to global markets."¹⁶ In short, the working class has lost out everywhere.

Much of this increased inequality was due to the relative decline of unions and the subsequent wage stagnation in the developed economies, the continued increases in manufacturing productivity across the world, and the increasing incorporation of low-wage formal and informal workers in developing countries into the world's production systems. These trends have contributed to increased rates of exploitation everywhere. As political economist Anwar Shaikh argues, "The overall degree of income inequality ultimately rests on the ratio of profits to wages, that is *on the division of value added*."¹⁷ Boosting this ratio for capital were advanced methods for the surveillance, measurement, quantification, and standardization of work that ultimately impact workers everywhere.

Technology and the Control of Labor

For hundreds of millions of workers across the globe, labor remains primarily a draining physical effort seemingly removed from the high tech regime of automation and digital management that has come to intensify work. No matter where or how a worker is employed, however, their speed and effort are

driven by this digital measurement and direction of work all along the vast “just-in-time” corridors of capital that now span the world.

What has changed most in the nature of work in the last two decades is the degree, penetration, and application of digital technologies that monitor, quantify, standardize, modularize, track, and direct the work of individuals and groups.¹⁸ These build on, but transcend, the efforts of Taylorism and lean production to quantify, fragment, standardize, and thereby control individual and collective labor, regardless of what product or service it produces. The digitalization of much work-related technology means work can be measured and broken down into nanoseconds, as opposed to Taylor’s minutes and seconds, and given a precision absent from lean production’s simple elimination of “waste” via “management-by-stress.” It also means that every aspect of work becomes quantified. Simplification via quantification enables speed, and speed demands quantification. Stress can be measured but not emotion, the effects of professional training, or the tacit skills of all workers.

All of this applies to services already transformed in the twentieth century from domestic service and jobs performed by local tradesmen or small firms to corporate providers, then reorganized along lean lines, and now digitally driven—from call centers to hotels to building maintenance. Today’s digitally driven measurements also apply to professional work in fields such as health care and education. Data is harvested from workers and then used against them in these fields as in a factory or warehouse. So, teachers are measured by student grades (allegedly the teacher’s product) on standardized tests based on “standardized knowledge,” and they are forced to “teach to test.” Meanwhile hospital nurses can be tracked by GPS and directed by algorithmic Clinical Decision Support Systems that recommend standard treatments. Or, in both cases, they can be replaced by less qualified and less costly work-

ers performing standardized tasks. Because these are mostly women workers performing “emotional labor,” the emotional content of the job is taken as an unacknowledged freebie for capital—the unpaid aspect of labor of social reproduction performed on the job rather than in the home.¹⁹

Amazon is the most-cited exemplar of digitally driven workers for good reason. A recent study of an Amazon fulfillment center in California described the context in which employees work: “In order to choreograph the brutal ballet that ensues once a consumer clicks ‘place your order’ for next-day delivery on Amazon Prime, the company leverages its algorithmic and technical prowess within its massive network of communication and digital technology, warehouse facilities, and machinery, as it numerically ‘flexes’ its workforce up and down in sync with fluctuating consumer demand.” In identical facilities across the globe, the work itself is guided by scanners and hand-held or wrist-mounted computers that track, time, and guide workers to the correct product. Workers are allowed thirty minutes a shift of “off task” time, that is, time when they are not in motion. In addition, they are pushed by Kiva robots who also pick products.²⁰ It is the prototype of work everywhere unless worker resistance curbs it.

Another dimension to today’s workplace technology is seldom mentioned: Like the global workforce itself, that in the Amazon warehouse is multiracial and multinational. As the international Black Lives Matter upsurge of 2020 underlined, race and racism, while particularly deeply entrenched in the United States, are worldwide and embedded since the days of slavery and colonialism. Racism under capitalism is not only a means of dividing working-class people but of imposing working-class status on those racial or ethnic groups whose “life chances” are limited by racial or ethnic barriers. It is a force in class formation. Hence African Americans are disproportionately working class and poor. While capitalism may have

inherited racism from the era of slavery and colonial conquest, it has nevertheless allocated work and workers on unequal racial, ethnic, gender, and national bases for generations.²¹ Like management practices in general, the technology that sorts out workers by occupation, rank, skill, attitude, and so on bears the marks of that heritage.

Artificial intelligence and algorithms are programmed by human beings raised in this historic context, who more often than not possess many of its age-old, often unconscious assumptions while at the same time using data necessarily based in the past. As one analyst put it, “The past is a very racist place. And we only have data from the past to train Artificial Intelligence.”²² A mathematician’s argument about the racial outcomes of AI programs used by police to “predict” high-crime areas applies in every aspect of life: Racially biased data “creates a pernicious feedback loop” reinforcing racial stereotypes and, hence, worker allocation and racial “life chances.”²³

One of the more outrageous examples is that of facial-recognition technology, which is used by employers and police departments and which routinely fails to distinguish dark complected individuals from one another.²⁴ It is scarcely an accident that most of the poorly paid, overworked workers in that California Amazon warehouse are Latinx or black. Racism, after all, is one of capital’s weapons of class struggle now embedded in its technology. The same applies to gender and sexism. For example, the Clinical Support Decision Systems imposed on nurses are based on clinical studies that “systematically excluded women and minorities.”²⁵

Labor and the Control of the Corridors of Capital

The technology, employment patterns, and flows of goods, services, and capital that characterize domestic production and shape the world of labor, rest, in turn, on a deepening international material infrastructure for

moving products and value throughout of the world. These material corridors of capital consist mainly of familiar roads, rails, shipping lanes, ports, pipelines, airports, and traditional warehouses. But they now include massive urban-based logistics clusters of facilities and labor, miles of fiber-optic cables employed widely only since the late 1990s, data centers that are even newer in application, and warehouses reconfigured for movement rather than storage and transformed by technology. This mostly embedded infrastructure is created by and dependent on the labor of millions of workers who build and maintain it. If technology imposes controls, the dependence of infrastructure on continuous labor inputs provides workers with their own potential control—the ability to slow down or stop capital’s relentless movement of value and, hence, the process of accumulation.

Marx saw transportation and communications as part of value production.²⁶ So, the tens of millions of workers across the world in these embedded repositories of fixed constant capital, and in the trucks, trains, ships, planes, cable stations, and data centers that move commodities, data, and finances across this infrastructure, are production workers as much as those in factories or sites of service delivery. They make the circuits of capital function and provide much of the speed at which those circuits turn over. It is over and through these paths of transportation and communication that these circuits of capital move with Marx’s familiar formula, M-C-M’, being sequentially and simultaneously repeated millions of times a day. The speed at which this happens determines the potential profit.²⁷ And, of course, driven by global competition, speed and “just-in-time” delivery have become major features of contemporary production and logistics.

This is as true of those working in the movement of data, information, and money as those driving on a road, steaming a container ship, maintaining a pipeline, or working in a factory, that is, all those workers who are

merging living labor power with accumulated dead labor to produce value. None of this infrastructure, nor the capital equipment that runs over and through it, comes to life without the hand and mind of labor. Even the most automated system requires constant maintenance and repair. For example, as of early 2020, Amazon's 39 supposedly fully automated data centers in the United States and Ireland employed ten thousand workers to keep them humming.²⁸

What is called "the cloud" or cyberspace is nothing more than an extended material complex of fiber-optic cables, data centers, transmitters, and computers. As a *New York Times* article argued, "People think that data is in the cloud, but it's not. It's in the ocean." Actually, it's also on and under the land as well as under the sea, following paths originally laid in the mid-nineteenth century for telegraph cables. Today's fiber-optic cables carry 95 percent of internet traffic. The whole connected material system and its parts are highly vulnerable, and breaks or disruptions are frequent.²⁹

The system is laid and repaired by workers on cable ships, those in cable stations around the world, workers employed by national telecom companies, and those in the proliferating number of huge data centers that, as James Bridle put it, "generate vast amounts of waste heat, and require corresponding quantities of cooling, from acres of air conditioning systems."³⁰ All of which, in turn, require human labor to run. At every point in this seemingly immaterial movement of data and money there are workers of various kinds and differing skills without which there would be no motion. There is no digitalization without human manipulation.

In a period of relatively low levels of capital investment, countless billions have been poured into the extension and deepening of this infrastructure. Looking at a somewhat broader measure of infrastructure, Price Waterhouse Coopers estimates that \$1.7 trillion was invested by private sources

in infrastructure from 2010 to 2017, in a sector in which government investment often plays the major role.³¹ New cables are laid regularly, harbors and canals dug or dredged, new cross-continental rails embedded, more airports constructed, and old ones expanded.³² As large as these new investments are, they represent only the initial cost and labor input. As Akhil Gupta argues about the many new infrastructure projects around the world, "As soon as the project is completed, and officially declared to be open, it starts being repaired."³³ That is, the "dead" labor involved in infrastructure requires the constant input of living labor over its entire functioning "life."

A major force of this infrastructure expansion has been Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013. This has funded, largely through loans, a network of super highways, rail lines (three from China to Europe), ports, and airports that "spreads into the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and deep into Africa" as well as the Middle East and Europe. By 2015 China had set aside \$890 billion to spend on 900 projects.³⁴ By 2019, it was "focused on energy, infrastructure, and transportation with an overall potential investment estimated at about \$1.4 trillion—a scale never before seen," according to analyst Daniel Yergin.³⁵ Such ventures mean the employment of huge numbers of workers across the vast spaces of Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, who bring these projects to life and, through collective action, can shut them down as well.

An Era of Rebellion: Class or Multitude?

All of this has occurred in a period of economic turbulence and recurring crises, a climate crisis that can no longer be ignored, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these has contributed, to one degree or another, to a dramatic upsurge in social activism, strike action, and mass mobiliza-

tion in opposition to the status quo. Almost everywhere these strikes, mass demonstrations, and mobilizations have resulted from economic change, dislocation, and distress sometimes exacerbated by war. But they have been political in that they were mostly directed at governments and the neoliberal policies and accompanying corruption that have inflicted pain on the majority of people across the globe. The international upsurge that began with the Arab Spring 2011, and continued and even accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, has been far too massive to be described in detail here. Rather, I will try to analyze some of its major characteristics and the role of the working class in this general upsurge.

According to an analysis of “civil unrest” in 2019 by the risk-assessment firm Versisk Maplecroft, 47 countries, or almost a quarter of all nations, saw major civil disruptions in 2019 alone. This count shows these protests sweeping every region of the world other than North America.³⁶ However, it missed some important actions in North America, including several large strikes, the huge Black Lives Matter upsurge, and the July mass street mobilizations and strikes in Puerto Rico.³⁷ Adding to this “civil unrest” were new, highly visible mass mobilizations and on-going demonstrations in 2020 in Belarus, Thailand, and Russia’s far east; mass strikes in Indonesia; as well as the Black Lives Matter upsurge across the United States and much of the world.³⁸

Many of these mobilizations were started by students or activists of various class backgrounds, so the question of just what role working-class people and organizations played in all of this “civil unrest” needs to be addressed.

David McNally has analyzed “the return of the mass strike” in considerable detail. Looking at mass strikes since the 2008 recession, he writes in 2020,

Across the decade since the Great Recession, we have witnessed a series of enormous general strikes (Guadeloupe and

Martinique, India, Brazil, South Africa, Colombia, Chile, Algeria, Sudan, South Korea, France, and many more) as well as strike waves that have helped to topple heads of state (Tunisia, Egypt, Puerto Rico, Sudan, Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq).³⁹

In addition, there have been mass strikes of various sizes around the world, often linked to issues of social reproduction, including the 2018-2019 teachers strikes in the United States. As McNally emphasizes, the mass strike has also been adopted by the women’s movement, notably in the International Women’s Strikes that swept 50 nations in 2017 and 2018 in the name of the “feminism of the 99 percent.” Some mass strikes, he reports, have occurred in the midst of broader mobilizations in streets and squares across the world, such as those in Hong Kong, Chile, Thailand, Ukraine, Lebanon, and Iraq.⁴⁰

That working-class action has been at the center of the upsurge can be seen in a few general figures. The European Trade Union Institute calculates that between 2010 and 2018 there were 64 general strikes in the European Union, almost half of them in Greece.⁴¹ More broadly, the ILO, looking at just 56 countries, estimates there were 44,000 work stoppages between 2010 and 2019, mostly in manufacturing. The ILO author notes, however, that given data limitations, the number of strikes “could be far greater than 44,000.”⁴² In China alone, the *China Labour Bulletin* counted some 6,694 strikes between 2015 and 2017 in a wide variety of industries. Lu Chunsen estimates 3,220 strikes by manufacturing workers in China from 2011 to May 2019, despite the precarious nature of work, the mass internal migration to the cities, and the government’s ban on strikes.⁴³ Here we see a clear example of the merging of informal migrant workers with the formal workforce—and their subsequent actions.

We know that unions played important roles in many of the recent struggles, even where middle-class leaders put themselves in

front of the masses. In Belarus, for example, an interview on the BBC with a union leader revealed he was one of the top leaders of the rebellion. Furthermore, participants report that the demonstrations were “expanding into a wider working-class movement involving widespread workplace mobilizations.”⁴⁴ In a detailed analysis of the Arab Spring, Anand Gopal notes that while unionized workers played a key role of most Arab rebellions, in the initial stages of the Syrian upsurge the fragmented working-class masses came first from the shanty towns and that “the movement’s rank and file consisted of precarious, semi-employed workers who simply did not possess the structural power to threaten the Syrian elite.”⁴⁵

In other words, much of the mass base of 2011 came from both the organized working class and the informal workers in most Arab countries, many of whom, as we saw above, would have been at one time or another drawn into the GVC of multinational capital working in the oil fields, on the pipelines, on the Suez Canal, and in the many ports of the Middle East and North Africa. Gopal argues that their very precariousness and informal employment means they had little power. Yet, in many developing countries, such workers have organized themselves in their neighborhoods and through national trade unions, informal workers’ associations, migrant worker organizations, and cooperatives, as well as in workplaces, to storm the streets and squares as workers have done for generations.⁴⁶

The seemingly mixed-class appearance of many of the mass strikers and demonstrators was also a result of the “proletarianization” of educated people, such as teachers and nurses, whose jobs had been standardized and subjected to tighter management by the processes described above, as well as the descent of many educated “millennials” into working-class jobs. Here, the lines of class appear blurred, but the social destiny of the majority of this generation and the next is

clearly working class. Some of these show up in strikes of “platform” workers, or delivery and other workers, newly discovered as “essential” to social reproduction in the context of the pandemic, which is likely to accelerate this social transformation.

What seems clear is that whether or not students played an initiating role, and middle-class professionals and politicians co-opted leadership roles, the mass base of most rebellions of the last decade was working class in composition, and that to a considerable extent they employed the traditional weapon of the mass strike. This was the case whether or not they were union members or held permanent employment, much like the masses Rosa Luxemburg analyzed in the 1905 Russian Revolution, whose strikes “display such a multiplicity of the most varied forms of action.”⁴⁷ This whole period has been an example of working-class self-activity with both economic and political demands.

Yet, nowhere did the strikes or mass mobilizations seek political power for the workers themselves or a program approaching socialism. Nowhere were the working class or mixed classes in transition organized for such goals. In some cases, there did not appear to be recognizable leaders. Yet, the participants were organized in “a multiplicity of the most varied forms of action” and organizations, often through networks enabled by social media.

The difficulty in analyzing the potential of this era of rebellion is compounded by the uncertain impact of the three crises of capitalism, and in particular the effect of the pandemic, on a variety of industries and the GVCs. Such speculation is for another article. The most useful understanding of the potential of the current upsurge is best described by McNally, who writes, “The new strike movements are harbingers of a period of *recomposition* of militant working-class cultures of resistance, the very soil out of which socialist politics can grow.”⁴⁸ Whether this recomposition will help produce a general working-class upsurge is impossible to

predict. But as United Electrical Workers representative Mark Meinster writes in *Labor Notes*, “Working-class upsurges often happen in the context of deep social changes in society as a whole, such as abrupt and widespread economic dislocation, a profound loss of legitimacy by ruling elites, or abnormal political instability.”⁴⁹ That just about describes the situation labor faces across the world today.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume III* (Penguin, 1981), 1025.
2. International Labour Office, *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2020* (ILO, 2020), 19; International Labour Organization, “ILO Modelled Estimates: Employment by Sector: Annual”, Nov. 2019, MBI_33_EN(2).xlsx, ilostat.ilo.org/data/; International Labour Office, *Global Wage Report 2008/09* (ILO, 2008), 10.
3. Ursula Huws, “Social Reproduction in Twenty-First Century Capitalism,” in Leo Panitch and Greg Albo, eds., *Socialist Register 2020* (London: The Merlin Press, 2019), 169.
4. The World Bank, *Report 2020*, 88; Snehashish Bhattacharya and Surbhi Kesar, “Precarity and Development: Production and Labor Process in the Informal Economy in India,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* (Vol 52, Issue 3, 2020), 387-408; Kate Maegher, “Working in chains: African informal workers and global value chains,” *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* (Vol. 8, Issue 1-2, 2019), 64-92; ILO, *Interactions Between Workers’ Organizations and Workers in the Informal Economy: A Compendium of Practice* (ILO, 2-19), 13-14.
5. Bhattacharya and Kesar, “Precarity,” 387-408.
6. World Bank, *Report 2020*, 19.
7. ILO, *World Employment*, 19; ILO, “ILO Modelled Estimates,” Nov. 2019; Bhattacharya and Kesar, “Precarity,” 387-408; Maegher, “Working in chains,” 64-92.
8. Ursula Huws, *Labor in the Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age* (Monthly Review, 2014), 149-181; ILO, “ILO Modelled Estimates.”
9. World Inequality Lab, *World Inequality Report 2018, Executive Summary* (World Inequality Lab, 2017), 11; ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2019* (ILO, 2019), 14.
10. World Bank, “Employment in Industry (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate),” data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.IND.EMPL.ZS; World Bank, “Employment in Services (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate),” data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.SRV.EMPL.ZS.
11. World Bank, “Manufacturing Value Added (\$US current),” data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.IND.MANF.CD; World Bank, *World Development*, 27; UNIDO, *Industrial Development Report 2020* (United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2019), 150; ILO, “ILO Modelled Estimates.”
12. UNIDO, *Report 2020*, 144-149; BDI, *Global Power Shift*, Nov. 11, 2019, english.bdi.eu/article/news/global-power-shift.
13. International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2020* (International Organization for Migration, 2019), 3, 21.
14. Susan Ferguson and David McNally, “Precarious Migrants: Gender, Race and the Social Reproduction of a Global Working Class,” in Leo Panitch and Greg Albo, eds., *Socialist Register 2015* (Merlin Press, 2014), 1, 3.
15. UNCTAD, *Trade and Development Report 2020* (UN Conference on Trade and Development, 2020), 6; World Inequality Lab, *Report 2018*, 5-8.
16. Wolfgang Streeck, “Progressive Regression: Metamorphoses of European Social Policy,” *New Left Review* (118, July/August 2019), 117.
17. Anwar Shaikh, *Capitalism: Competition, Conflict, Crises* (Oxford, 2016), 755, emphasis in original.
18. Huws, *Digital Economy*, 94-96.
19. Institute for Health and Socio-Economic Policy, *Health Information Basics* (Institute for Health and Socio-Economic Policy, 2009), 4-7; Lois Weiner, “Walkouts Teach U.S. Labor a New Grammar for Struggle,” *New Politics* (No. 65, Summer 2018), 3-13; Will Johnson, “Lean Production,” in Shawn Gude and Bhaskar Sunkara, eds., *Class Action: An Activist Teacher’s Handbook* (Jacobin Foundation, 2014), 11-31; Huws, *Digital Economy*, 34-41.
20. Jason Struna and Ellen Reese, “Automation and the Surveillance-Driven Warehouse in Inland Southern California,” in Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese, eds., *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy* (Pluto Press, 2020), 90-92; James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (Verso, 2018), 114-116.
21. For example, see David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (Oxford, 2012).
22. Bridle, *Dark Age*, 144-145.
23. Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (Penguin, 2016), 87.

24. Bridle, *Dark Age*, 139-144.
25. Institute for Health, 4-7.
26. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin Books, 1973), 533-534; Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume II* (Penguin Books, 1978), 226-227.
27. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 517-518.
28. Datacenters.com, "Amazon AWS, maps and photos," www.datacenters.com/providers/amazon-aws, (accessed 4/20/20).
29. Alan Satariano, "How the Internet Travels Across Oceans," *New York Times*, March 10, 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/03/10/technology/internet-cables-oceans.html. Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Duke University Press, 2015).
30. Bridle, *Dark Age*, 61; Starosielski, *The Undersea Network*.
31. PwC, *Global Infrastructure Investment: The role of private capital in the delivery of essential assets and services* (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2017), 5.
32. For examples of harbor and canal dredging and construction mainly in the Middle East see, Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (Verso, 2020).
33. Akhil Gupta, "The Future in Ruins: Thoughts on the Temporality of Infrastructure," in Nikhil Anand, et al., eds., *The Promise of Infrastructure* (Duke University Press, 2018), 72.
34. Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 89-114.
35. Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (Allen Lane, 2020), 181.
36. Miha Hribernik and Sam Haynes, "47 countries witness surge in civil unrest – trend to continue in 2020," Maplecroft, Jan. 16, 2020, www.maplecroft.com/insights/analysis/47-countries-witness-surge-in-civil-unrest/; Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "One in four countries beset by civil strife as global unrest soars," *Guardian*, Jan. 16, 2020, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jan/16/one-in-four-countries-beset-by-civil-strike-as-global-unrest-soars.
37. Rafael Bernabe, "The Puerto Rican Summer," *New Politics* (No. 68, Winter 2020), 3-10.
38. Dera Menra Sijabat and Richard C. Paddock, "Protests Spread Across Indonesia Over Job Law," *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/world/asia/indonesia-protests-jobs.html?action=click&module=Latest&pgtype=Homepage.
39. David McNally, "The Return of the Mass Strike: Teachers, Students, Feminists, and the New Wave of Popular Upheavals," *Spectre* (Vol. 1, Issue 1, Spring 2020), 20.
40. McNally, "Mass Strike," 15-27.
41. European Trade Union Institute, *Strikes in Europe*, April 7, 2020, www.etui.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Strikesmap_20200407_1.pdf.
42. Rosina Gammarano, "At least 44,000 work stoppages since 2010," ILO, Nov. 4, 2019, ilostat.ilo.org/at-least-44000-work-stoppages-since-2010.
43. Yu Chunsen, "All Workers Are Precarious: The 'Dangerous Class' in China's Labour Regime," in Panitch and Albo, eds., *Socialist Register 2020*, 156.
44. Ksenia Kunitskaya and Vitaly Shkurin, "In Belarus, the Left Is Fighting to Put Social Demands at the Heart of the Protests," *Jacobin*, Aug. 17, 2020, www.jacobinmag.com/2020/08/belarus-protests-lukashenko-minsk.
45. Anand Gopal, "The Arab Thermidor," *Catalyst* (Vol. 4, No. 2, Summer 2020), 125-126.
46. For multiple examples of this see ILO, *Interactions Between Workers' Organizations and Workers in the Informal Economy: A Compendium of Practice* (ILO, 2019); Ronaldo Munk, et al., *Organising Precarious Workers in the Global South* (Open Society Foundations, 2020).
47. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions," in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder Press, 1970), 163, 153-218.
48. McNally, "Mass Strike," 16.
49. Mark Meinster, "Let's Not Miss Any More Chances," *Labor Notes* (No. 500, November 2020), 3.

Western Imperialism and the Role of Sub-imperialism in the Global South

ANA GARCIA, MIGUEL BORBA, AND PATRICK BOND

AT FIRST BLUSH, JOE BIDEN'S ELECTION As U.S. president brings respite from a world threatened by Donald Trump's climate-denialist, dictator-coddling, xenophobic, racist, misogynist, rules-breaking regime. On second thought, 2021 will also initiate an unwelcome restoration of legitimacy to Western imperialism akin to Barack Obama's rule. Biden's (2020) recent *Foreign Affairs* article began by stressing how since 2017, "the international system that the United States so carefully constructed is coming apart at the seams." In reconstructing imperialism, Biden may draw upon a legislative and public-advocacy record dating to the 1980s, based upon consistent service to several internationally ambitious circuits of U.S. capital:

- *finance*, for example through supporting bankruptcy "reform," austerity in social programs, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act deregulating Wall Street, and unprecedented financial-sector bailouts;
- *merchant and agribusiness*, when promoting trade and "investor rights" deals;

ANA GARCIA is assistant professor at the International Relations Institute of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

MIGUEL BORBA is assistant professor at the University of Coimbra, Portugal.

PATRICK BOND is professor of government at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and honorary professor of geography, University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

- *technology*, through unleashing Big Data surveillance;

- *medicine and insurance*, when favoring intellectual property and opposing public financing of health care;

- *fossil fuel*, given that his climate policy will resurrect Obama's, based on insufficient emissions reductions, ongoing oil and gas drilling and pipeline transport, a refusal to pay the U.S. climate debt, and renewed reliance upon carbon markets; and

- the *military-industrial complex*, for Biden supported every war since the 1980s, leading the authoritative insider journal *Defense One* to celebrate, "Biden may not radically change the nation's military, deviate from the era's so-called great power competition, or even slash the bottom line of the Pentagon's \$700 billion budget" (Benjamin and Davies 2020).

What will stand in opposition to a Biden-administration imperialism, whose toxic ideology only replaces Trump's "paleo-conservative" nationalism with the Obama-style fusion of neoliberalism and neoconservatism? Much hope was invested in the Latin American "Pink Tide" but it faded after Hugo Chavez's 2013 death (with Venezuela's subsequent Maduro government surviving but suffering enormously from U.S. sanctions, whereas Bolivia's Movement Towards Socialism returned to power in 2020 after a coup backed by Trump and lithium-dependent battery producer Elon Musk). Since then, notwithstanding serious crises, the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South

Africa (BRICS) network has been of central interest in twenty-first-century international political economy.

This group of countries from the Global South (and East) gathered momentum after Goldman Sachs banker Jim O'Neill initially conceived the acronym BRIC in 2001 (not including South Africa) in order to identify promising markets. However, it was the U.S.-catalyzed financial meltdown in 2008 that gave the BRIC states more credibility as "rising powers." "Core" countries were losing political-economic power on the world stage, while China, along with other so-called "emerging economies," would challenge the dominant position of the United States, Europe, and Japan.

That economic crash also consolidated the G20, assimilating all five BRIC nations into the reflation of the global economy, based initially upon both an unprecedented infrastructure build-out in China and Western central bank quantitative easing plus International Monetary Fund (IMF) funding. In 2009, the first BRIC summit took place in Russia, starting a succession of annual summits that gave body and content to the group. China invited South Africa to join in late 2010.

Despite annual displays of cooperation through leadership summits and hundreds of side meetings, there are still significant asymmetries between these five countries, witnessed, for instance, in trade relations. Brazil, Russia, and South Africa are highly dependent on commodities exports, such as grains, crude oil, metals, and ore, with China a major buyer. In turn, exports from China to other BRICS nations are made up of manufactured and semi-manufactured products, creating major trade and financial deficits. A form of the classic North-South manufacturing-commodity function within the international division of labor appears to be reinforced by trade relations among the bloc's members.

If such a tendency can arise inside the

bloc, BRICS countries' foreign direct investment (FDI), trade, and credit are even more pernicious in the Global South, especially Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Ultimately, we question whether BRICS is capable of reversing historical, unequal relations of trade and investment between the "core" and "peripheries," and we identify, in some cases, an uncomfortable middle ground: "sub-imperialism."

We conclude that BRICS will therefore fail to promote new development practices that could lead to a more environmentally sustainable and socially just model. To the contrary, BRICS nations appear to be reinforcing old patterns of underdevelopment that amplify extraction of natural resources, which in turn results in adverse impacts for local communities, workers, and nature. Although the COVID-19 crisis interrupted many aspects of global capitalism, these features appear more durable.

Despite a potentially constructive geopolitical role that can be played by BRICS members (particularly China) in terms of balancing U.S. hegemony and providing competition to the Western corporations that have dominated FDI in the Global South, BRICS firms' presence there suggests the earlier expectations were overly optimistic. From the standpoint of individual peripheral countries, the current role being played by BRICS, it seems, is a force of continuity and legitimator of the global capitalist power structure, rather than one of change.

BRICS and Competing Theories of Development

Among diverse analyses of BRICS over the past decade, leading geopolitical analyst Radhika Desai (2013) was perhaps most enthusiastic: "Not since the Non-Aligned Movement and the demand for a New Economic Order in the 1970s has the world seen such a coordinated challenge to Western supremacy in the world economy

from developing countries.” Some analysts even expressed hope for a “new Bandung” in the twenty-first century, referring to a 1955 conference of 29 African and Asian countries that created the Non-Aligned Movement of 120 states (Bisio 2015, Zakaria 2013). More realistically, for Walden Bello (2014), the BRICS countries were beneficiaries of a corporate-driven globalization, “owing their rise to the marriage of global capital and cheap labor” in export-oriented manufacturing and extractive sectors. Kees van der Pijl (2017) even considered the BRICS nations as contender regimes, in the form of state-oligarchic rivals to the liberal West.

Some BRICS leaders have endorsed such a view in order to score political points with domestic constituencies. Most crudely, former South African President Jacob Zuma claimed repeatedly, “I was poisoned and almost died just because South Africa joined BRICS under my leadership” (Matiwane 2017). According to Brazil’s former Foreign Minister Celso Amorim, “BRICS corresponded with the rearrangement of global economic forces, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, and became notorious thanks to the redistribution of decision-making power within the IMF in favor of its members” (Amorim and Feldman 2011: 286).

However, it is important to ask whether greater voting power within the IMF marked BRICS as a progressive force or instead as an *ally* of the Global North. European neoliberal leadership and ongoing commitments to the Washington consensus menu of pro-corporate economic policy prevailed at the IMF after 2015, when four BRICS members achieved much greater influence following voting-weight restructuring (only South Africa’s share dropped).

This should not have been a surprise, for as Ray Kiely (2015: 2–3) argued, BRICS’ rise “owes less to state capitalist deviations from neoliberal prescriptions [that] originated in the West, and more to the embrace of globalization friendly policies.” Vijay Pra-

shad (2013:3) termed the BRICS agenda “neoliberalism with Southern characteristics. ... There is no frontal challenge to Northern institutional hegemony or to the neoliberal policy framework. BRICS, as of now, is a *conservative* attempt by the Southern powerhouses to earn themselves what they see as their rightful place on the world stage.”

But there is an even more critical characterization: the BRICS nations as “sub-imperial” powers, featuring the super-exploitation of their working classes, predatory relations regarding their hinterlands, and collaboration (although tensioned) with imperialism, especially as intermediaries in the transfer of both surplus labor values and “free gifts of nature” (unequal ecological exchange) from South to North. BRICS members’ role in multilateral governance is not anti-imperialist as sometimes advertised but instead consistent with what Immanuel Wallerstein called the “semi-peripheral” economies’ aspirations to follow Western expansionary precedents, using instruments of (corporate-oriented) multilateral power.

David Harvey (2001) observed that, just like imperial powers, new centers of capital overaccumulation need spatio-temporal fixes for their own surpluses that could not be as profitably invested at home. China’s industrial overcapacity crisis is most obvious, but this condition extends to both imperialist and sub-imperialist practices “dispersed through an uneven geography of capital surplus distribution” (Harvey, 2007). In a recent debate over the character of contemporary imperialism, Harvey (2018) remarked how mineral and agricultural commodity chains, extractivism, and land grabs that follow BRICS firms’ expansions—especially Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative—are “wrecking the landscape all around the world.” A rigid and fixed concept of “North-South imperialism” can’t account for ever more complex “spatial, inter-territorial, and space-specific forms of production, realization, and circulation” of surplus capital overaccumulated in middle-

tier economies, Harvey (2018) insists. This is not an abandonment of Rosa Luxemburg's (1968) 1913 theory of imperialism but an adaptation for new circumstances.

Likewise, influential Latin American and African theories of underdevelopment deserve revisiting. At the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Argentine diplomat Raúl Prebisch formulated a non-Western view of development economics, taking his insights to the UN Conference on Development and Trade, which in the 1970s was the launchpad for the New International Economic Order proposals (Letelier and Moffit, 1977). Prebisch used the core-periphery model to challenge Ricardian notions of comparative advantage and to promote policies that were attractive to trade unions, progressive social movements, the center left, and patriotic businesses and policy-makers. By condemning poor countries' specialization in exporting raw materials—which in turn led to declining terms of trade—Prebisch (1950, 10) showed how “fruits of technical progress” were disproportionately enjoyed by industrialized economies and societies.

In Africa, the most advanced first-generation liberation movement leaders (such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Samora Machel) agreed that neocolonial economic relations needed to be broken, resulting in the 1979 Lagos Plan of Action adopted by the Organization of African Unity (but rapidly sabotaged by the Bretton Woods Institutions; Bond 2006). The Egyptian political economist Samir Amin (1990) contributed a theory and program of strategic “delinking.”

In Latin America, the next generation of Dependency School perspectives drew on the core-periphery model but also explained “limits of industrialization” in the South—which Prebisch (1950: 6) himself had already warned of. The emerging critique was not restricted to trade relations alone but included a whole “structure of dependence,” as argued by Theotônio dos Santos (1970). Contrary

to the dominant modernization theories, especially U.S. State Department strategist Walt Rostow's (1960) “stages of economic growth,” Santos (1970, 235) insisted that “to analyze backwardness as a failure to assimilate more advanced modes of production or to modernize is nothing more than ideology disguised as science.”

Within the Marxist strand of dependency theories, Ruy Mauro Marini (1965; 1972) explained how Southern elites engaged in a so-called “antagonistic cooperation” (Marini 1965: 12) with capitalist centers of accumulation. He added that the “super-exploitation of labor” was retained under dependency due to the need to extract super-profits enough to satisfy both the revenue expectations of international capitalists and the share that corresponds to their minor associates in the periphery and semi-periphery (Marini 1972, 23). One possible outcome was the evolution toward what Marini (1972, 15) dubbed “sub-imperialism,” a concept designating “*the form which dependent capitalism assumes upon reaching the stage of monopolies and finance capital*” (original emphasis).

Watching the debate unfold from Senegal, Amin (1974, 22) agreed that Marini's theory “addresses a very real problem raised here: that of inequality in peripheral development.” If light industry arises in sub-imperial economies (including in Africa), it means “producing not only for their ‘national’ market but also for those of neighboring areas.” In the intervening period, the most destructive circuits of international capital were amplified, suffocating all but a few Global South break-out spaces (especially the newly industrializing countries of East Asia), several of which became more actively sub-imperial as a transmission belt to the world economy, suffocating their own neighbors in the process.

Overall, dependency theories were able to show that neither industrialization to the level of monopolies nor high levels of economic growth by themselves would automatically reverse the trend toward underdevelopment

or to a very distorted kind of development, one that crystalizes inequalities instead of mitigating them. “Brazilian capitalism is a monster,” Marini (1972, 20) declared, “but a logical monster.” He explained the coexistence of advanced technology and a sizable luxury goods market alongside the vast majority’s misery. Import-substitution industrialization strategies in postwar Brazil and South Africa were, in particular, biased toward supplying Western-quality consumer goods to a small market within the context of the world’s worst inequality (Nixon 1982).

Unlike the traditions of ECLAC or dependency theory, which took the desirability of development for granted, a recent movement encompassing both academic and activist worlds aims to abandon modernizing ambitions in favor of a different, non-Western paradigm, such as the *Buen Vivir* (Living Well) concept articulated by indigenous peoples from the Andean region. Although it constitutes a plural movement, still under construction, this post-developmental critique has been gaining momentum in the past two decades, mainly due to the attention given to resistance by local communities against infrastructure megaprojects threatening their livelihoods and the surrounding environments (Gudynas 2013, Swampa 2013, Escobar 2015, Kothari et al. 2019).

Also in this tradition, Aníbal Quijano (1992) introduced the concept of “coloniality of power,” since development had become a “ghost” haunting elite consciences in most Latin American capitals, preventing the return of normative ideals able to inspire their own societies (Quijano 2012, 77). If the notion of development cannot escape its Eurocentric roots, as Quijano argues, then it is mandatory to formulate an “alternative mode of existence, as the de/ coloniality of power” (Quijano 2012: 42), such as *Buen Vivir*. The same is true in many African societies where some advocate a return to “*Ubuntu*” mutual aid systems as well as societal reintegration within local ecologies—instead of ongoing,

fruitless efforts at modernization (Terreblanche 2018).

BRICS Firms Expand, Firmly Within—Not Against—the Capitalist World Order

This reminder of the big-picture development debates compels us to critique the BRICS nations’ role: Instead of being supportive of alternative approaches, their economic relationship to the rest of the Global South *reinforces* the traditional international division of labor through FDI and credit, in projects directed to the extraction of natural resources (oil, gas, minerals), and infrastructure related to them. Some might term this process the *amplification of uneven development*: a situation in which Western, dependency-inducing neocolonialism combines capitalist and non-capitalist relations, as Luxemburg (1968) argued. In today’s “post-colonial” world, there are equally extreme forms in many sites where BRICS-based firms and geopoliticians are the main actors.

China is the world’s largest economy (measured in purchasing power parity) and the main power within BRICS. Chinese foreign investment went through different phases: In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was characterized by large state-owned enterprises’ acquisitions focused on natural resources, especially energy and mining. After the 2008–2009 Western financial meltdown reinforced rising Chinese power, BRICS surfaced amidst the growing presence of the country’s private multinationals, including increased investments in extractive industries but also technology, manufacturing, financial services, and real estate.

Today, China’s Belt and Road Initiative has gone beyond Asia and Europe and has included 40 countries in Africa and 18 in Latin America. It offers recipients major infrastructure projects and credit lines (Zhang 2019; Dollar, 2019). Both phases, however, reproduced capitalism’s traditional core-pe-

riphery dichotomy: While investments in Latin America and Africa are concentrated in energy, natural resources, and related infrastructures, investments in the United States and Europe are directed to services, telecommunications, media, and high-level manufacturing (Jaguaribe 2018: 22-23).

China leads the BRICS nations' presence in Africa. The Asian giant is now the continent's biggest trade partner and one of its main investors. China is also the largest source of demand for African exports. On the one hand, according to Shen (2013, 3), by the early 2000s, almost all capital from China to Africa represented "international aid." On the other, a flood of cheap Chinese exports was devastating to Africa's small manufacturing sector, destroying the clothing, textile, footwear, appliance, electronics, and other sectors in South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and other countries that had earlier attempted import-substitution industrialization. Most of Africa witnessed a halving of manufacturing output relative to gross domestic product during the 1990s-2000s.

From 2003 onwards, there was more FDI from China, and in the following dozen years, the stock of Chinese investment in Africa soared from \$491 million to \$32.4 billion (He and Zhu 2018, 10). In 2008, during the world financial crisis, the largest single acquisition in Africa was the \$5.6 billion purchase by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China of a 20 percent share in Standard Bank of South Africa. The China Development Bank made two other large South African loan commitments initially reported at \$5 billion each: to the parastatal Transnet in 2013, to buy Chinese locomotives mainly so as to export coal, and to the energy parastatal Eskom in 2016 for a coal-fired power plant. Both were bound up in corruption scandals, the first involving payoffs to the infamous Gupta brothers who "state-captured" the Zuma government and the second, paying for Hitachi boilers after the Japanese firm had given the ruling party a 25 percent share of its local branch (Bond

2020).

In Latin America, Chinese loans totaled \$141 billion (80 percent of which were made by the China Development Bank) from 2005-2016, mainly to Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, and Argentina. Of these, \$74 billion were secured through "loan-for-oil" collateral, and many denominated in renminbi not dollars (CEPAL 2018, 23-24). The danger is a new form of financial dependency, in which China—whose currency strengthened more than nearly any other (making the loans much more expensive to repay)—is progressively more attached to the region's economies. But this amplifies the more general mode of dependency, as 72 percent of Latin American exports to China in 2016 were primary commodities. (For the rest of the world primary commodities accounted for only 27 percent of the region's exports, balanced by low-, medium-, and high-tech manufactures [CEPAL 2018, 41].)

Moreover, Chinese firms are increasingly replacing Western extractive corporations that had mastered "unequal ecological exchange," another major problem with such asymmetrical trade. The term's use in this instance refers to the uncompensated depletion of nonrenewable raw materials, and in Africa, for example, this process leads to a \$150 billion annual wealth outflow, of which a great deal is to China (Bond 2018).

As for FDI, Dussel Peters (2019) estimates that from 2000-18, there were 402 major Chinese investments in Latin America and the Caribbean totaling \$8.203 billion, mainly through mergers and acquisitions within the raw materials, manufacturing, and service sectors. Brazil received most of these investments (ten out of the top dozen), directed mainly to the energy sector, followed by Peru, Argentina, and Chile (CEBC 2019, 24). Moreover, China has largely protected its multinational corporations through 128 bilateral investment treaties (BITs) around the world (the second largest number, behind Germany). Since the 1990s, it has signed 34

BITs in Africa and 15 BITs in Latin America and the Caribbean, in addition to bilateral free trade agreements with Costa Rica, Chile, and Peru.

There are important contrasts between China and other BRICS countries, for while the former captured large market shares at the world scale and moved up within global value chains, other countries' investments are linked more to their own regional value chains and infrastructure networks (UNCTAD 2017, 55). Indian annual FDI abroad peaked at \$21 billion in 2008 (with lower rates since), and is mainly focused on natural resources, energy, and services. Two of its most aggressive entrepreneurs, Lakshmi Mittal of ArcelorMittal steel and Anil Agarwal of Vedanta mining, have played extremely controversial roles in South Africa and Zambia, respectively (van der Merwe et al 2019).

To protect the value of (and income stream from) its FDI, India signed 61 BITs, 12 of which are with African countries and another four with Latin America. India has also increased its role in aid, cooperation, technical assistance, peacekeeping missions, and improved cultural relations (Bhatia, 2010). In 2008, the India-Africa Forum Summit allowed the New Delhi government to begin consultations with African heads of state every few years; the 2015 conference attracted 29 leaders. Diplomatic, financial, and legal incentives, together with the substantial Indian diaspora in Africa, have also helped attract Indian investments (Cheru and Obi 2011: 99-100).

In Latin America, Indian FDI is generally low, but has grown in the last years through mergers and acquisitions in oil and gas, sugar, pharmaceuticals, and mining (CEPAL 2016, 56-57; Paul 2012). Trade relations remain uneven, with Africa and Latin America still mainly exporting raw materials, especially fossil fuels, while India supplies them pharmaceuticals and low- and medium-technology products (Anwar 2014; CEPAL 2016, 40-41). In Africa, Indian

public and private corporations bought large chunks of land during the early 2010s land grabs, causing conflict with residents (Cheru and Ob, 2011, 103; Anwar 2014).

South Africa is the continent's largest industrial power and, facing stagnation at home, invests prolifically elsewhere in Africa, especially in telecommunications, retail, manufacturing, mining, tourism, and construction. Some investments date to apartheid, when mining houses such as Anglo American, De Beers, and a Johannesburg predecessor of BHP Billiton (Gencor) established major operations in newly independent Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Amisi et. al., 2015). These three firms relocated away from the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (to London and Melbourne) as democracy dawned during the 1990s. Others moved up-continents including retail leader Shoprite (co-owned by Chinese capital; Carmody 2015), a company known for shutting down local supply chains so as to import their own South African goods—as simple as tomatoes—to their new shops in countries as far away as Zambia (Miller 2005).

Russian firms in Latin America and Africa specialize in natural resources and related infrastructure (Barka and Mlambo 2011). Despite economic restrictions imposed by Western powers after the 2014 Crimea crisis, increasingly modernized investments are offered in technology industries, defense, nuclear energy, and even space exploration. In steel, the firm Evraz—owned by Roman Abramovich (also owner of Britain's Chelsea soccer club)—was soon notorious for buying, milking, and then in 2016 closing South Africa's second largest steel company. A privatization program during 2017-2019 meant Moscow sold shares in its large multinationals, including those active in Africa and Latin America such as VTB Bank (quickly implicated in a major Mozambican foreign-debt fraud case), shipping companies, the world's leading diamond mining corporation Alrosa, and the oil company Rosneft (UNCTAD 2017, 66-69).

Nuclear energy firm Rosatom continues to promise competitively priced technology to several countries (although the fraud associated with its South African associates Jacob Zuma and the Gupta brothers halted that process in 2017). Although sanctions shut Moscow out of World Bank credits, Vladimir Putin did nevertheless sign the Washington Convention to access the bank's investor-to-state arbitration panel, where it has filed more than twenty cases to protect its 79 BITs and six investment agreements (including 11 in Africa and six in Latin America and the Caribbean).

Politically, Russia's engagement with Africa dates to Soviet support for national liberation movements, and diverse diplomatic relations have continued (Arkhangelskaya and Shubin 2013, 31). In 2019, Putin hosted the first Russia-Africa Summit, welcoming forty African states, co-sponsored with Egypt's military coup leader (and then elected president) Abdel Fatah el-Sisi.

In Latin America, apart from historical relations with Cuba, Russia renewed ties with Venezuela and Bolivia (with the latter even signing a \$300 million Rosatom reactor contract). Russia's arms deals in Africa were worth nearly \$67 billion in 2011 (Amisi et al., 2015) and \$14 billion in Latin America in 2013 (Ellis 2015: 14). In early 2020, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Venezuela in order to help Caracas "deal with growing U.S. pressure," just a year after Brazil's right-wing foreign minister had unsuccessfully attempted to draw BRICS into a pro-coup diplomatic stance. Moscow's economic relations with Europe and China resemble those of a peripheral country, selling raw materials, but when it deals with Africa and Latin America, Russia has characteristics of a "core" capitalist country, exporting high-tech industrial goods.

Finally, Brazil is the main FDI recipient in Latin America but also a major investor on the continent. During Lula da Silva's Workers Party government from 2003 to 2010, the orientation was to "South-South relations," which in turn set the stage for Brazil's more

proactive position in multilateral arenas. The right-wing Congress' unjustified 2016 ousting of Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, and the subsequent rise of far-right Jair Bolsonaro to power in early 2019, caused chaos in Brazilian foreign policy, especially Bolsonaro's realignment with Washington at the expense of hard-fought-for pro-South diplomatic and economic ties.

Brasilia has an ambiguous position toward Beijing, since Bolsonaro's allies in export corporations (especially agri-business) need the Chinese market while the president has exhibited Trump-style Sinophobia. When investing abroad, Brazilian multinationals focus on the extractive minerals and energy sectors, infrastructure, industrial machinery, textiles, food, and beverages (FDC 2017). The Brazilian National Development Bank was the main source of funding for the internationalization of Brazilian corporations, but Bolsonaro's ultraliberal policies reduced its influence.

Brasilia has adopted its own version of a BIT, the Agreement on Cooperation and Facilitation of Investments. Unlike BITs, ACFI doesn't provide for "investor-to-state" arbitration in conflicts with other states or affected communities (Morosini and Ratton 2015). The Workers Party of Lula and Dilma always emphasized negotiated solutions with host states, in which conflicts were kept out of the spotlight, even though in the cases of Vale mining, Odebrecht construction, and Petrobras oil, corruption and socio-ecological conflict often proved overwhelming. The people of Peru grew impatient, for instance, and Odebrecht's bribery of its leaders caused a severe backlash when three of the last four presidents were implicated in taking bribes: Two resigned (Alejandro Toledo and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski), and another committed suicide (Alan Garcia).

Conclusion

The rise and fall of the BRICS nations,

seen from Latin America and Africa, can be interpreted drawing upon these regions' radical intellectual traditions, in search of counter-hegemonic knowledge that contributes to structural change in local and global economic affairs. Apart from reproducing core-periphery and dependency relations, the rise of BRICS reinforced the deeply rooted imagery of "modernization" and "development" in an epoch when such projects were being challenged by non-Western scholarship as well as by social movements and adversely affected communities of the South. The "talk left, walk right" problem (Bond 2004) was interpreted by Sam Moyo (along with Amin, one of Africa's great political economists), when writing with Brazil-based Paris Yeros in 2011 (20) that the BRICS nations' political "schizophrenia" was "typical of subimperialism" (Yeros and Moyo 2011, 20).

While demanding reforms in the Bretton Woods multilateral institutions, the BRICS countries also created their own financial institution in 2014: the BRICS New Development Bank. But it too appears to operate much the same as a Western multilateral bank (Bond 2020). In short, the BRICS states complement, and don't confront, existing financial institutions and multinational corporations by virtue of their own assimilation into global capital accumulation patterns.

Moreover, two obvious rightward political shifts—the Modi (2014) and Bolsonaro (2019) governments—created extreme geopolitical tension and curtailed the rise of BRICS, and the present Sino-Indian border conflict festered in 2020 to the point that dozens of troops were killed in hand-to-hand combat.

The geopolitical terrain may be fluid, but in terms of African and Latin American economies, it appears incontrovertible that BRICS firms' and leaders' relations tend to deepen, rather than mitigate, the central features of the world capitalist economy hitherto dominated by the West. To be sure, the COVID-19 crisis introduces major

complications, especially when it comes to managing social conflicts and health systems (for instance pharmaceutical markets and research). Inequities are so profound that residents of all the BRICS nations aside from China were incapable of defending their very lives against state incompetence.

As for resistance, beyond merely fighting back against current economic dynamics, progressive activists within the BRICS countries have a profound challenge: better organizing the counter-hegemonic social forces that have potential on the ground, while at the same time exploring the viability of alternative modes of living that protect local communities, peasants, and workers from megaprojects carried out by home-based parastatal corporations and private conglomerates (Bond and Garcia 2015).

As seen above, multinational corporations from BRICS countries, as well as projects financed by BRICS institutions, are reinforcing accumulation patterns that are socially and environmentally predatory, destroying the forms of life and work of populations in their territories. In order to overcome this predicament, South-South relations must be built with profound respect for counter-hegemonic social forces in these countries, as well as at the global scale. The legacy of Latin American and African development theories demonstrates some of the ways of connecting economic theorizing to such concrete political struggles.

REFERENCES

- Amin, Samir (1974). Accumulation and development. *Review of African Political Economy*, 1, Aug.-Nov., 9-26.
- Amin, Samir (1990). *Delinking*. London: Zed Books.
- Amorim, Celso, and Luiz Feldman (2011). *A Política Externa do Governo Lula em Perspectiva Histórica*. Brasília: Fundação Alexandre Gusmão.
- Anwar, Mohamed Amir (2014). Indian foreign direct investments in Africa. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*, 26, 35-49.
- Amisi, Baruti, Patrick Bond, Richard Kamidza,

- Farai Maguwu, and Bobby Peek (2015). BRICS corporate snapshots during African extractivism. In Bond and Garcia (eds.). *BRICS, an anti-capitalist critique*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Arkhangelskaya, Alexandra, and Vladimir Shubin (2013). Is Russia Back? Realities of Russian Engagement in Africa. *LSE Ideas*, 16.
- Barka, Habiba Ben, and Kupukile Mlambo (2011). Russia's economic engagement with Africa. *Africa Economic Brief* 2, May. www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Russia%27s_Economic_Engagement_with_Africa.pdf.
- Bello, Walden (2014). The BRICS: Challengers to the global status-quo. *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 29 Aug., fpif.org/brics-challengers-global-status-quo/.
- Benjamin, Medea, and Nicolas Davies (2020). King Joe and the Round Table. *CodePink*, July. www.codepink.org/king_joe_and_the_round_table_bidens_america_in_a_multipolar_world.
- Biden, Joseph (2020). Why America must lead again. *Foreign Affairs*, Mar.-Apr. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again.
- Bond, Patrick (2004). *Talk Left Walk Right*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Bond, Patrick (2006). *Looting Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Bond, Patrick (2020). BRICS Banking and the Demise of Alternatives to the IMF and World Bank. In Jose Puppim de Oliveira and Yijia Jing (Eds.), *International Development Assistance and the BRICS*. New York: Springer, pp. 189-218.
- Bond, Patrick, and Ana Garcia (Eds) (2015). *BRICS: an anti-capitalist critique*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Bhatia, Rajiv (2010). India's Africa policy: Can we do better? *The Hindu*, 15 July, www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Indias-Africa-policy-can-we-do-better/article16201770.ece.
- Cheru, Fantu, and Cyril Obi (2011). Chinese and Indian engagement in Africa: competitive or mutually reinforcing strategies? *Journal of International Affairs*, 64, 2.
- Carmody, Padraig (2015). The New Scramble for Africa. *Jacobin*, 19, www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/china-south-africa-imperialism-zambia-brics-globalization/.
- CEPAL (2016). *Fortaleciendo la relación entre India y América Latina y Caribe*, Nov., repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/40755/1/S1601196_es.pdf.
- CEPAL (2018). *Explorando nuevos espacios de cooperación entre América Latina y el Caribe y China*, Jan., repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43213/1/S1701250_es.pdf.
- CEBC - Conselho Empresarial Brasil-China (2019). *Chinese investments in Brazil 2018*. Rio de Janeiro, Sept., cebc.org.br/2019/09/23/chinese-investments-in-brazil-2018-the-brazilian-frame-work-in-a-global-perspective/.
- Dussel Peters, Enrique (2019). *Monitor of Chinese OFDI in Latin America and the Caribbean 2019*, Mar. 31. www.redalc-china.org/monitor/images/pdfs/menuprincipal/DusselPeters_MonitorOFDI_2019_Esp.pdf.
- Desai, Rhadika (2013). The BRICS are building a challenge to western economic supremacy. *The Guardian*, 2 Apr., www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/02/brics-challenge-western-supremacy.
- Dollar, David (2019). Understanding China's Belt and Road infrastructure projects in Africa. Sept. www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP_20190930_china_bri_dollar.pdf.
- Ellis, Evan (2015). *The new Russian engagement with Latin America*. Strategic position, commerce and dreams of the past. U.S. Army College Press. June.
- Escobar, Arturo (1995). *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton U.P.
- FDC - Fundação Dom Cabral (2017). *Ranking FDC das multinacionais brasileiras 2017*, www.fdc.org.br/conhecimento/publicacoes/relatorio-de-pesquisa-16375.
- Garcia, Ana (2017). BRICS investment agreements in Africa: more of the same? *Studies in Political Economy* 98:1, 24-47.
- Garcia, Ana, and Karina Kato (2020). A Road to Development? The Nacala Corridor at the intersection between Brazilian and Global Investments. In *BRICS and the New American Imperialism*. Global Rivalry and Resistance, edited by Vishwas Satgar. Wits U.P.
- Fontes, Virginia, and Ana Garcia (2013). Brazil's new imperial capitalism. In Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, and Vivek Chibber (Eds.), *Socialist Register 2014*. London: Merlin Press.
- Gudynas, Eduardo (2013). Debates on development and its alternatives in Latin America. In Miriam Lang and Dunia Mokrani (eds.). *Beyond Development*. Amsterdam/Quito: Transnational Institute/Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
- Harvey, David (2001). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford U. P.
- Harvey, David (2007). "In what ways is 'The New Imperialism' really new?" *Historical Materialism*, 15, 57-70.

- Harvey, David (2018). Realities on the ground. *Review of African Political Economy*. 5 Feb. roape.net/2018/02/05/realities-ground-david-harvey-replies-john-smith/.
- He, Canfei, and Shengjun Zhu (2018). China's foreign direct investment into Africa. In UN Habitat, *The state of African Cities 2018*. Nairobi. unhabitat.org/the-state-of-african-cities-2018-the-geography-of-african-investment.
- Jaguaribe, Anna (2018). Characteristics and directions of China's global investment drive. In A. Jaguaribe (Ed.). *Directions of Chinese Global Investments*. Brasília: Fundação Alexandre Gusmão.
- Kiely, Ray (2015). *The BRICs, U.S. 'Decline' and Global Transformations*. London: Palgrave Mac-Millan.
- Kothari, Ashish, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, and Frederick Demaria (Eds) (2019). *Pluriverse: A Post-development Dictionary*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Letelier, Orlando, and Moffit, Michael (1977). *The International Economic Order* [Part 1]. Washington: Transnational Institute.
- Luxemburg, Rosa (1968). *The Accumulation of Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Marini, Ruy Mauro (1965). Brazilian Interdependence and imperialist integration. *Monthly Review*, vol. 17, n. 7, Dec.
- Marini, Ruy Mauro (1972). Brazilian sub-imperialism. *Monthly Review*, vol. 23, n. 9, Feb.
- Marshall, Judith (2015). Behind the image of South-South solidarity in Brazil's Vale. In Bond and Garcia (eds.) *BRICS, an anti-capitalist critique*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Matiwane, Zimasa (2017). 'I was poisoned and almost died when SA joined Brics,' says Zuma. *The Mercury*, 14 Aug. www.iol.co.za/news/politics/i-was-poisoned-and-almost-died-when-sa-joined-brics-says-zuma-10782354.
- Miller, Darlene (2005). New regional imaginaries in Post-Apartheid Southern Africa: Retail workers at a shopping mall in Zambia. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 1. 117-145.
- Moyo, Sam, and Paris Yeros (2011). Rethinking the theory of primitive accumulation. Paper presented to the 2nd IIPPE Conference, 20-22 May, Istanbul, Turkey. cs.ukzn.ac.za/files/Yeros%20Moyo%20sub%20imperialism.pdf.
- Nixon, Fred (1982). Import substituting industrialization. In Martin Fransman (ed.), *Industry and Accumulation in Africa*. London: Heinemann.
- Prashad, Vijay (2013). *Neoliberalism with Southern characteristics*. The rise of the BRICS. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, May, www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/prashad_bricks.pdf.
- Prebisch, Raul (1950). *The economic development of Latin America and its principal problems*. Lake Success/New York: United Nations Economic Commission.
- Quijano, Aníbal, and Wallerstein, Immanuel (1992). Americanity as a concept or the Americas in the modern World System. *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 44, n. 4, 549-557.
- Quijano, Aníbal (2012). Bien vivir: entre el desarrollo y la des/colonialidad del poder. *Viento Sur*, vol. 12, May.
- Rostow, Walt (1960). *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. P.
- Santos, Theotonio (1970). The Structure of Dependence. *American Economic Review*, vol. 60, n. 2, May, 231-236.
- Shen, Xiaofang (2013). *Private Chinese Investment in Africa*. Myths and Realities. World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 6311, Jan.
- Swampa, Maristela (2013). Resource extractivism and alternatives: Latin American perspectives on development. In Miriam Lang and Dunia Mokrani (eds.). *Beyond Development*. Amsterdam/Quito: Transnational Institute/Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
- Terreblanche, Christelle (2018). Ubuntu and the struggle for an African eco-socialist alternative. In Vishwas Satgar (Ed), *The Climate Crisis*. Johannesburg: Wits U. P.
- UN Conference on Trade and Development (2017). *World Investment Report 2017*. Investment and the Digital Economy. United Nations, Geneva, https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/wir2017_en.pdf.
- van der Merwe, Justin, Patrick. Bond and Nicole Dodd (eds.). *BRICS and resistance in Africa* (pp. 47-72). London, Zed Books.
- van der Pijl, Kees (2017). BRICS - An involuntary contender bloc under attack. *Estudos Internacionais*, vol 5, n. 1. 25-46.
- Zakaria, Rafia (2013). From Bandung to BRICS. *Jacobin*, Oct. https://jacobinmag.com/2013/10/from-bandung-to-brics.
- Zhang, Pepe (2019). Belt and Road in Latin America: a regional game changer?". *Atlantic Council*, Issue Brief, Oct., www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Belt-and-Road-in-Latin-America-Four-Issues-to-Watch.pdf.

Latin America in the Time of COVID

MIKE GONZALEZ

"We have a choice, to die of hunger or to die of the virus."

—A MEXICAN MARKET TRADER

IN LATIN AMERICA, AS ELSEWHERE, the health crisis has exposed the brutal realities of the global capitalist system: the extreme inequality that has marked the global economy and the destruction of social services and public resources in the interests of private capital euphemistically called "structural adjustment," and later, and even more ironically, "the war on poverty" declared by the World Bank. And that has continued into the COVID era at an accelerating pace. Even in the face of what purports to be a universal pandemic, the very rich—Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates among others—have increased their enormous wealth as the bulk of the planet's population pays for the contraction of the world economy. And that will be the pattern, as the gulf between the rich and the rest grows wider and the costs of the pandemic are passed on to its victims again.

In some ways, Latin America exposes the brutality of a global capitalist system in its most naked forms. Three decades of "structural adjustments" left the state weakened and deprived the public sector of resources. At the same time, the organizations of self-defense of workers, indigenous communi-

ties, the urban poor—from trade unions to grass-roots and community organs—were repressed and undermined. Neoliberalism not only exacerbated the unequal distribution of income across the world, it systematically attacked the capacity of the majority populations to protect themselves and removed what instruments of popular mobilization existed within the state. It had already announced the nature of its project in its first experiment, the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile in 1973 and its replacement by a brutal military regime. In this way, it created the conditions that would allow the spread of the virus across the region.

The ecological destruction implied by the expansion of export agriculture laid waste to 25 percent of the Amazon rainforest, not only reducing biodiversity but also hastening the human-animal contact that is one source of the new viruses. The commodity boom of the nineties and beyond expanded mining across the region at a rate and with an urgency fueled by the Chinese construction boom. As the local state was progressively weakened by privatization and disinvestment in the public sector, those controls on production that existed were pushed aside and water supplies were contaminated, and rivers polluted, with the mercury and other chemicals associated with the extraction of gold. The widespread use of pesticides and the spread of genetically modified crops in an agricultural sector producing soya and palm oil for the world market, and the expanding

MIKE GONZALEZ is Emeritus Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Glasgow, UK. He has written widely on Latin American politics and culture, most recently with *In the Red Corner: the Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui* (Haymarket 2019) and *The Ebb of the Pink Tide* (Pluto Press, 2019).

cattle-raising across the region, took their huge environmental toll. The cost of the association of hamburgers with modernity and growth has been incalculable. And that expansion of export agriculture has reduced dramatically the amount of land available for domestic food production, replacing that food with imported consumer products and expelling millions of small farmers and agricultural workers from the land.

These former agricultural workers are now internal migrants who live in the slum cities surrounding Latin America's megacities, where the absence of sanitation, the polluted water supplies, and the fragile housing vulnerable to floods and earthquakes prepared the ideal circumstances for the rapid spread of a virus. These populations—once small farmers or workers, now without jobs as deindustrialization followed the transformation of the land—became “informal” workers, another distortion of language to veil a reality of precarious, unstable jobs along with low wages, the absence of protection at work, and a dependence on family incomes. In the overcrowded street markets, they sell cheap imitations of the luxury consumer products that are on sale inside the bright new shopping malls built by their labor. Those who cannot find work continue their perilous journeys to the United States or Europe, where they inhabit the shadow world of the undocumented—casual laborers in construction, cleaning, domestic labor, or the sex industry.

Across Latin America, the remittances from those migrants now make up around a third of the region's gross domestic product. As the public sector in Latin America, including health, education, housing, and transport, shrank, it was the remittances that filled the gap. The cruel irony is that it fell to the poor to support the poor.

Neoliberalism

In September 1973, in Chile, a military coup led by Augusto Pinochet overthrew the

popularly-elected reform government of Salvador Allende. Allende's crime was to introduce economic measures designed to take the profits from the production of copper, Chile's principal export, and use them to develop new industries and lay the foundations for a welfare state—improving the health service, democratizing education, and redistributing land and wealth for the benefit of the majority. It was not a revolutionary program, but it was driven by a democratic impulse and was actively supported by an organized mass movement. Allende was killed in the course of the coup, and the new government attributed its policies to the ideas of Milton Friedman, the guru of neoliberalism. Its argument that capital must be allowed to move freely across the planet in search of profit required the “removal of obstacles to trade.” Chile demonstrated that in practice this meant the suppression of workers' organizations, active repression by a terrorist state, and the elimination of human and civil rights. The Constitution of 1980, written by the military regime, continued in force, despite consistent opposition, until October 26, 2020, when 76 percent of those voting in a long-postponed referendum demanded a new, democratic constitution. But in the intervening years, Chile became a model for a society dominated by the interests of private capital; its state pension plan was private, and it still has no universal public health system.

The 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, occurred as state subsidies to small farmers growing maize were removed, leaving the market open to domination by U.S. corn-farming corporations. As the first “Dispatches from the Lacandon Forest” explained in their characteristically poetic language, the Zapatista communities were the victims of an expanding neoliberal global capitalism for which the local state and all public services continued to represent obstacles to the free movement of capital—one requirement of which, of course, was the severe restriction of the freedom of migrant laborers to cross the

planet in search of work.

Yet the new millennium did change the face of Latin America after a decade in which austerity and cutbacks affected the lives of the majority, including the more than 60 percent of the population working in the “informal” sector. The collapse of Eastern Europe had a profound effect on the Latin American left, which seemed to sink into a kind of melancholia as “actually existing socialism,” in its demise, was revealed to veil tyranny and dictatorship and to have been driven by the laws of motion of capitalism. The moment was famously described as “the end of history”—though that was intended to mean that capitalism now prevailed and all alternatives were now consigned to memory. Yet in a remote corner of Mexico, this was denied, and the message was broadcast widely on the newly emerging World Wide Web.

The election of Hugo Chavez to the presidency of Venezuela in 1999 seemed to signal a new “Bolivarian” epoch—a new radical nationalism opposed to neoliberalism and challenging U.S. imperialism, which Chavez did with wit and charm. The program of the new republic and the content of its new Constitution, passed by a delegate assembly late that year, promised that the oil industry, which provided 90 percent of Venezuela’s export earnings, of which only 1 percent returned to the public treasury in royalties, would now be nationalized. That income would then be employed to lift the living standards of those 65 percent of Venezuelans who had been reduced to poverty in the preceding decade; it would be invested in providing health services, education, and housing for the majority population. It was in a sense a return to the unfulfilled program of the Allende government, with its promise of reestablishing national sovereignty and breaking the economic dependence on a single product, owned and distributed by foreign capital, that had subordinated the country to an unequal and exploitative relationship with the global market. In Chile’s case, that

product was copper; in the case of Venezuela as well as Bolivia and Ecuador, it was oil.

Two events drove the new process in a more radical direction. At the beginning of 2000, the Bolivian government’s decision to sell off the city of Cochabamba’s public water company generated a movement of popular resistance that drew together workers, farmers, market traders, community activists, local students, and the surrounding indigenous communities in a Committee for the Defense of Water and Life. The movement’s determined struggle forced the government to reverse the decision and return the water company to public control. The same situation, and the same outcome, recurred in the indigenous city of Los Altos, high above La Paz, in 2003. It was a first popular victory against privatization and neoliberalism. It was not just the victory itself that was important, but also the manner of its achievement. The organized left was largely absent from the movements, and the method of organizing was inspired by indigenous traditions of struggle and by an insistence on democratic and transparent forms of organization, often based on historical experience, that echoed the anti-capitalist movement that was spreading across the world. The emphasis was on “self-activity” or “self-emancipation,” as well as on the idea of the common ownership of natural resources.

The second key event was the attempted coup against Chavez organized by the oil company managers and their multinational supporters in April 2002. The coup was a spectacular failure. Chavez was kidnapped but then released when hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans surrounded the presidential palace and demanded his return. What these events had in common was that the outcomes were driven by mass mobilizations—the majority was seizing the stage of history and beginning to articulate a vision of a different kind of society. But the movements still lacked a political project, a strategy for achieving this new world. The logic of the “new social

movements” pointed in the direction of the “participatory democracy” on which the new Bolivarian Constitution was based. For the moment, as the movements grew in Bolivia and Ecuador, overturning governments in the process, the alternative logic—the conquest of state power, of government—in the absence of an organized left did not command much authority.

The two logics came into conflict, however, in the practice of the new movements. When Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president, was carried to power in late 2005, a debate arose about the delegate convention called to rewrite the country’s constitution. The grass-roots organizations were denied representation at the meeting in favor of political organizations like Morales’s Movement toward Socialism (MAS). Similar issues emerged in Ecuador, where it was the indigenous organizations around CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) that initiated mobilizations in the 1990s. These organizations brought down three presidents in the early 2000s who had attempted to introduce measures favoring the interests of global capital. Rafael Correa, an economist, was elected to the presidency as a supporter of this new movement, which Hugo Chavez characterized, at the 2003 World Social Forum, as “twenty-first-century socialism” and others described, perhaps patronizingly, as “the pink tide.”

Through the first decade of the new century, the promised changes began to be enacted. In Venezuela, Cuban doctors staffed the new health service in the barrios, Barrio Adentro. Public education was expanded and new housing initiatives inaugurated. In Bolivia, the multinational and multilingual character of the new parliament reflected the arrival of the majority indigenous population to the center of political and cultural life, from which they had been excluded through the preceding centuries. Oil and gas production, while not fully nationalized, was placed under public control and the revenues used

to advance social programs.

This did not go without opposition. The eastern provinces, collectively known as the Half Moon (*Media Luna*), where much of the country’s oil and agricultural wealth was concentrated and whose population was predominantly white and racist, organized a systematic assault on the Morales government and laid siege to the constitutional convention. Morales supporters in the east were persecuted and killed, and the ruling groups in the region (like their fellows in Ecuador around Guayaquil) threatened to divide the country. In any event, the new constitution was passed in 2009, and Morales reached an agreement with the Media Luna to respect their economic interests in exchange for their recognition of his government. In Venezuela, the opposition was expressed through the media and by the large-scale export of capital and running down of industry.

The Tide Turns Back

The central issue facing the pink tide was how to break the dependence on a single export by diversifying the economy. Politically, the question remained the meaning of national sovereignty and the relationship between the state and the movements from below on the one hand, and between the national state and the global market on the other. How far could the nation-state exercise control over the global market? Or would the process be reversed and neoliberalism allowed to reclaim domination?

Hugo Chavez died of cancer in early 2013. In his last written document, he called for a *golpe de timón*, a hard turn of the rudder, arguing that the revolution had not succeeded in transforming the state. On the contrary, the state seemed to have absorbed the revolution. His successor, Nicolás Maduro, was elected in April that year with a bare majority. He did not have Chavez’s charisma nor his level of mass support, but beyond that the *chavista* process was starting to fail. In practice, par-

ticipatory democracy had given way to the domination of a party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, which Chavez had created in 2006 and which had become the apparatus of state power, administering the system from above. Oil production was not increasing despite repeated assurances that it would, prices for consumer goods were starting to increase, and shortages were becoming noticeable. It was also becoming clear that a new *chavista* bureaucracy in the state had inherited and continued a long tradition of corruption, and this affected industry as well as public services. The public health services, for example, and the hospitals in particular, were running short of medicines and equipment that were never delivered or were stolen. Military spending was rising and would do so at an increasing pace under Maduro. Widespread currency speculation was enabled by a system of providing importers with dollars at a very low exchange rate. Imported goods were then resold in Venezuela (or increasingly in Colombia) at black-market rates of exchange many hundreds of times the official rate. This raised the price of imported goods, the more so since local production was grinding to a halt. Throughout 2014 the right organized opposition in the streets, using burning barricades maintained by hooded youths to raise the political temperature. But when, in December 2015, the right wing won a majority in the National Assembly, the election was not an active vote for the bourgeois opposition but a warning shot to the government from a population frustrated by inflation, shortages, and endless queues at supermarkets as well as by the government's incapacity to control prices and stop speculation.

In Chile in 2012, neoliberal education reforms (essentially privatization) produced huge student demonstrations marked by both militancy and imagination. In 2013 mass protests erupted in Brazil around issues of public transport, inadequate health services, and housing, involving some two million people. In 2014 the demonstrators returned

to protest the diversion of public funds to finance the World Cup and the Olympics at the expense of public services. Corruption was again a major issue and a sign that Lula's public support was eroding. In 2015–2016 it was Dilma Rousseff, Lula's nominee for the presidency, who came under public fire with renewed allegations of corruption. The resulting crisis opened the way for Jair Bolsonaro to shift the political spectrum to the far right with his overtly racist and sexist ideology. In Ecuador, Rafael Correa was coming into direct conflict with the indigenous movement over concessions to foreign (mainly Chinese and Canadian) mining and oil companies. He accused them of "Pachamamismo"—Pachamama is the indigenous movement's term for Mother Earth and refers to their concern with the conservation and protection of the environment against the rapacity of global capitalism. By the time of Correa's resignation in 2017, it was becoming clear that neoliberalism had reclaimed its dominion in Latin America. In Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia multinational corporations had returned to the mining industry, and they dominated the agricultural sector in Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia. In Bolivia, the confrontation between indigenous farmers and the Morales government over a decision to build a highway through indigenous communities called into question the nature of the project. The highway was essentially built to favor Brazilian export interests. Bolivia was also negotiating with Asian corporations for the exploitation of coltan and lithium deposits. But the emblematic case was in Venezuela, where the Arco Minero project, covering 12 percent of the country's portion of the Orinoco River drainage basin, was put up for sale to foreign companies wishing to exploit the enormous mineral, oil, gas, and gold wealth of the area, with devastating environmental consequences.

The protest movements continued and deepened. In Nicaragua, the leader of the 1979 Sandinista revolution had created an

effective dictatorship under the Sandinista name and signed a \$40 billion contract for the opening of an interoceanic canal, which would, among other things, rob the country of its fresh water supply. When cutbacks and austerity measures were announced in 2018, mass protests were brutally repressed, leaving 600 dead and thousands injured and detained by the Ortega regime. Yet he still claimed to represent twenty-first-century socialism. In Chile that year, what began as a protest over increased transport prices became a more general protest over public health and education cuts and rising levels of poverty. In the following year, repression became more brutal and police targeted tear gas at the eyes of demonstrators, many of whom were blinded. In October that year, a mass movement of resistance in Ecuador known as *El Estallido* (The Explosion) brought together urban and indigenous movements in protest against new economic measures. The movement occupied Quito, the capital, for two weeks. In Colombia, police violence and the decline of public services as well as increasing poverty levels generated a huge protest movement in November (N-21).

The arrival of COVID-19 certainly stopped the protests in their tracks—partly because the initial lockdowns made mass gatherings impossible and were used by the state to demobilize the movements. And in part, it was the sectors of the population who were involved in the protests that were most severely affected by the virus.

The Arrival of COVID

In his study of viral outbreaks, *The Monster Enters**, Mike Davis notes that defense against the new plagues requires “the suppression of [the] ‘structures of disease and emergence’ through revolutionary reforms ... which no capitalist or state capitalist country can allow.” No such measure was taken in Latin

America, and the general conditions made it impossible to carry out when COVID arrived. With the exceptions of Uruguay and Costa Rica, no Latin American country came even close to the World Health Organization’s recommended minimal spending on health of 6 percent of gross domestic product.

Brazil under Bolsonaro now occupied third place in the number of deaths, behind the United States and India. Trump and Bolsonaro have taken the same position of dismissing the reality of the virus, both claiming it was no worse than the flu. In Nicaragua, the Ortega dictatorship was cynical enough to claim that God would look after Nicaraguans and then to summon weekly street demonstrations under the banner of “Love in a Time of COVID.” Several members of Ortega’s government have died of COVID, but numbers for the wider population are at best unclear. The most surprising and disturbing case of willful denial is Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Amlo), elected president of Mexico in 2018 as “the people’s candidate,” vowing to end corruption and restore public spending. His response to the virus has been to call for unity with Mexico’s capitalist class and delay measures for months. When asked by a journalist to explain his policy to contain the disease, he produced an amulet—a lucky charm—as his reply. In each of these cases, the cold reality is that these regimes have placed protecting the economy, and profit, before protecting the people. When the virus hit, Mexico was 200,000 doctors and 300,000 nurses short of what was needed by the public health system. Chile had no public health system at all. Peru and Colombia did take measures more rapidly, but both had seen their public sector drained of resources through the preceding years. Bolsonaro has invited loggers into the Amazon, bringing not only great harm to the biosphere but also bringing the disease to indigenous populations without medical services. Bolsonaro is a racist who has explicitly announced his lack of interest in the fate of Brazil’s indigenous communities.

The Venezuelan crisis is a tragedy. This

*OR Books, 2020, p. 18.

oil- and mineral-rich country whose Bolivarian revolution took 80 percent of its people out of poverty and promised to dedicate its oil revenues to the public good is in a state of collapse. The right-wing campaign led by Guaidó, with enthusiastic support from Trump, has done nothing at all in the face of COVID-19 and has no strategy to do more. Its erstwhile and probably future leader, Leopoldo López, who is now in Spain, has simply promised more violence along the lines of 2014. Maduro, the inheritor of *chavismo*, has overseen a developing crisis that drove five million Venezuelans into exile, has overseen shortages of basic foods and hunger in the streets, and has permitted a scarcity of essential drugs and the destruction of public hospitals while electricity and water networks are at the point of collapse. The oil industry, destroyed by technical and administrative failures, is producing barely a fraction of what it produced ten years ago. Astronomical levels of inflation have made it virtually impossible to survive. The multiplying protests over the lack of petrol supplies and other shortages are dismissed as right-wing outcries and repressed. All this in a situation of rampant corruption and an increasingly authoritarian regime dominated by the military and using them to suppress resistance. It is true, as Maduro's supporters say, that the United States has used economic sanctions against Venezuela, has financed the Guaidó campaign, and has used every forum to denounce and intimidate Venezuela. But that is only part of the explanation for the current disaster, which began before Trump. Most damning of all is the recent announcement of a new economic decree that effectively offers Venezuela's oil and mineral resources for privatization, a process that in practice began in 2016 with the Arco Minero project.

What Future?

For socialists and progressives, the devastation caused by COVID has its causes in a global capitalist system, which time and again set aside preparations for a possible future virus, as Mike Davis points out. It has cut and undermined public health provisions and privatized essential services. The system has found resources to save its own, as it did in 2008, but it will very soon come calling to demand that the victims pay the price. It is important that we are prepared and organized to resist, armed with a clear vision of the kind of society that can address the needs of the many.

This will not be preaching to empty stadiums. Hundreds of thousands of people joined protests and demonstrations across Latin America in the last three years alone, demanding proper public services and a state that responds to their needs, not the demands of the global market. In the enforced immobility of COVID, the conversation has not ended. On the contrary, the reality of climate change, the consequences of environmental destruction, the distortion of social priorities that puts profit over health and survival, the absurdity of paying off debts to the very banks and financial institutions that caused the crisis in the first place are the topics of conversations everywhere. The idea of "*buen vivir*"—a mode of life in equilibrium with the natural world that places quality above quantity, that sees cooperation and solidarity as the central human values—has found its echo in the responses of grass-roots communities and organizations throughout the region. At the center of it all will be one demand: the right to health. It is, at this moment, a revolutionary demand because it addresses directly the prevailing values of the current order and of a socialist future.

Bolivia's Elections

The Return of Democracy and an Uncertain Future

BRET GUSTAFSON

BOLIVIA HAS GIVEN THE WORLD AN impressive lesson in democracy, but reactionary sectors of the country are once again revealing their anti-democratic impulse. On October 18, 2020, the country went to the polls for the second time in a year. Despite the pandemic and intense polarization, they delivered 55 percent of the vote to Luis Arce, the candidate of the left-leaning MAS (Movement to Socialism) party. That would not be so remarkable, given that the MAS party had overseen 14 years of economic growth. But in the wake of the turmoil that followed the 2019 elections—a process that saw massive protests of fraud and, in the end, a military-backed ouster of then President Evo Morales—many thought that the time of the MAS had come to an end. They were wrong.

Evo Morales, despite his critics, had managed 14 years of economic stability and prosperity. He did so through a pragmatic rapprochement with capital—especially the natural gas industry and domestic business interests, in particular the agro-industrial elites. Frugal management of foreign reserves earned from gas exports and a generous dose of public spending had allowed for a bank full of dollars, a stable exchange rate, economic growth, and poverty reduction. To be sure, corruption cases were common, as they have long been in Bolivia. Critics also pointed to Evo's contradictions. He spoke of Mother Earth while pushing for more min-

ing and gas drilling. He touted Indigenous revitalization while running roughshod over Indigenous organizations opposed to certain state development projects. And he embodied a hyper-masculine mode of politics amidst a rising crisis of violence against women and refusals to move forward on issues of abortion rights and sexual equality. Evo and the MAS had managed to maintain hegemony by offering concessions to agro-industry as well, putting the brakes on land reform and limiting Indigenous autonomy projects to a handful of municipal restructurings. Yet all of this was countered by relative economic well-being and a deep layer of grassroots support, strong in all parts of the country.

There was, as well, widespread discontent. This was to be expected from sectors of the far right, strongest in the eastern Bolivian city of Santa Cruz. Even though banking, construction, and big ag had done well over 14 years, the end of the gas boom was near and agro-industry, in particular, was looking at serious challenges. They want more genetically modified seeds, more land, more tax breaks, more subsidies (in the form of cheap fuel and state loans), and more protection from peasant organizing. Already shaped by deep racism against Andean peoples, their opposition to Evo Morales—despite the overtures to their elites—was intense. Even before the October 2019 vote, this opposition had declared its intent, with echoes of Trump, to declare fraud if Evo was elected.

In the more moderate sectors of the urban middle classes, and even among many in the Bolivian left, there was also exhaustion with Evo Morales. Morales had deepened the

BRET GUSTAFSON is author of *Bolivia in the Age of Gas* (Duke 2020).

country's dependence on natural resource extraction and used those revenues to expand a patronage-based political system that was increasingly seen as decadent and degraded. Despite much ideological enthusiasm in the early years of the MAS (an enthusiasm still voiced by many leftists who live outside of Bolivia), it was increasingly clear to many that there was very little left of the revolutionary core of the MAS project. The concessions to big business and, of late, a series of legal measures that approved new GMO seeds and incentivized clearing of new agrarian lands in the east suggested that Evo was as much in support of big capital as of any revolutionary agenda. And finally, Evo's maneuvers to change the constitution and allow himself a third term rubbed many the wrong way, reminding Bolivians of their intense distrust of dictators and those who want to perpetuate themselves in office. Many of these moderates also opposed Evo's candidacy and were deeply suspicious of the electoral process itself.

The events that followed the 2019 vote are still being debated. Some say there was fraud and no coup. Others (including myself) say that evidence for widespread fraud is thin, while the appearance of a coup is practically undeniable. At any rate, with thousands of people in the streets and the military suggesting he step down, Morales left the country. What followed was a year-long interim government characterized by corruption, brutality, and incompetence in the face of COVID-19. Perhaps for these reasons, much of Bolivia apparently changed their minds when they went back to the polls a year later and sent the MAS back into office with a near historic turn out and an overwhelming majority for Luís Arce.

What happens next is the main challenge. The new president and vice president reflect the power of the MAS to build coalitions but also hint at its internal schisms and contradictions. Arce, an economist who does not self-identify as Indigenous, is associated with the technocratic side of the MAS coalition.

David Choquehuanca, the vice president, is Aymara and is highly respected as a leading intellectual of Indigenous thought, including its critiques of rampant extractivism and Western-style patriarchy and power. At their inauguration ceremony on November 8, Arce's speech was focused on economic recovery. Choquehuanca's included an admonition (not so veiled) against continued abuse of power, the politicization of justice, and colonialist patriarchy. This does not suggest any deep division, as Arce has also embraced indigeneity and its key symbols, and Choquehuanca, clearly on the left, said that "power, like the economy, has to be redistributed." Nonetheless, some parts of the MAS coalition who identify more closely with the Indigenous position thought Choquehuanca should have been the president. Nonetheless, Evo Morales himself is said to have pushed Arce forward, hoping to appeal to the urban middle classes by positioning a "white" Bolivian at the top of the ticket. Whether that explains the electoral victory or not, the combination is for the moment creating positive reactions. Acquaintances who were

Evo Morales, despite his critics, had managed 14 years of economic stability and prosperity. He did so through a pragmatic rapprochement with capital.

increasingly disillusioned with Morales have expressed some hope that Arce and Choquehuanca can avoid falling into the seductions of power. Whether Choquehuanca's thoughtful critiques of the old way of doing politics can carry weight remains to be seen. He himself was somewhat marginalized during the latter years of the Morales government, having been unwilling to fall in line with some of Evo's

more egregious errors.

At any rate, the future will be challenging. President Luis Arce, who had been the minister of economy for most of Evo's 14 years in office, confronts lower natural gas prices and thus shrinking revenues to the state. Arce, like Evo, will have to balance often-conflicting demands from different sectors of society in a context of intense polarization. Right up to the inauguration date, the right-wing extremists of Santa Cruz were mobilized again. Despite all evidence to the contrary, they were saying the election was fraudulent. While there may have been some reason to suspect fraud when the MAS was running the elections last time, this time it is laughable. Salvador Romero, one-time employee of the U.S. government National Endowment for Democracy, was in charge of the process. The coup government oversaw it. And the MAS still won by a landslide. The extremist minorities of the east, much like the gun-toting Trump supporters of the United States, clearly do not believe in democracy at all. With young muscle-bound men in baseball hats and ski masks, they have blocked streets, and many, including those of the evangelical Christian right, are literally praying for a military coup. On November 3, the unelected civic chamber of Santa Cruz, called the "civic committee," petitioned the constitutional court to suspend the inauguration of Luis Arce and demanded an audit of the electoral process (basically a recount). Not without some humor, the judges have granted the civic committee a hearing, but scheduled it for November 10, two days after the presidency changed hands.

Evo Morales himself may also be a complicating factor. On November 9, the day after the swearing-in of Arce and Choquehuanca, he triumphantly walked across the Argentina-Bolivia border into the far southern part of Bolivia. Greeted by euphoric crowds, he thanked Argentina's president and fellow left-leaning traveler for having saved his life. He planned a two-day caravan to return

to the Chapare, his home region in central Bolivia. Publicly, he has pledged to stay out of Arce's way. Yet as the undeniable historic leader of the MAS—and now the president of the MAS party organization—he will surely play an influential role, perhaps more privately than publicly. Many doubtless support this possibility, though some fear that

The extremist minorities of the east, much like the gun-toting Trump supporters of the United States, clearly do not believe in democracy at all.

Evo's urge to return to power may somehow derail the Arce-Choquehuanca government. Many former high officials associated with Evo, such as his cabinet members, are being held at arm's length by the new government. Critics and sympathizers alike increasingly fretted about the so-called "invited" ones or the "infiltrators"*—figures who had no deep MAS loyalty or history but who had been given posts by Evo in order to curry political support. Some of these figures, such as former Minister of Government Juan Ramón Quintana, are seen as being among those who had pushed Evo and the MAS away from the more Indigenous orientation. Despite all of these internal politics—and despite his own less than ideologically-pure personal and political style—Morales is still a national and international icon of the left and the Pink Tide. As with Alvaro García Linera, the former vice president who has stayed largely out of public view since their

*Nuevo Sur, "MAS prevé limpiarse en congreso político de 'infiltrados e invitados,'" Aug. 29, 2018, diarionuevosur.com/mas-preve-limpiarse-en-congreso-politico-de-infiltrados-e-invitados/.

return to Bolivia, Morales may also play a role articulating connections with movements elsewhere. For example, during his return to Bolivia he met with Indigenous and labor organizations from Ecuador and Argentina. With Argentina and Venezuela still standing leftward, Chile having just voted to dump a Pinochet-era constitution, Peru in upheaval, and elections coming soon in Ecuador and in two more years in Brazil, we may see a new Pink Tide or at least a “Pink Flow” returning after its ebb.

The main question remains as to whether Arce will try to challenge the power of capital given that Evo had largely made amends with it. For the moment, it is unlikely. This is partly because of the risks of political and economic instability. The reactionary forces, largely backed by the banking, insurance, and agricultural capitalists of eastern Bolivia, tried to use the spurious fraud claims to counter the overwhelming mandate of the MAS and Luis Arce with a show of regional power. The country has entered into an economic recession for the first time in 14 years. Arce says it may take two years to return to positive growth. Although the left and the environmentalists would like to see a turn away from extractive industries and the destructive power of big ag, Arce may find himself supporting both of these in a bid to get the economy going again. At this writing, he has just visited the Amazonian department of Beni and promised to invest in expanding cattle ranching and agriculture—both deemed problematic by more environmentally-minded observers. Arce, who is more of a Keynesian than a socialist,

is unlikely to shift the government radically leftward or to embark on an ecologically radical rethinking of extractivism. While Keynesianism is better than neoliberalism, whether the engagement with capital can maintain the redistributive orientation of the state remains an open question.

A lot will depend on whether and how the working class and rural social movements regroup and reorganize. Before Evo, the movements were militant and at least relatively politically autonomous. During the 14 years of the MAS, many leaders became state officials and the movements were often absorbed into patron-client relations with the state. Those who showed loyalty were rewarded. Those who criticized the MAS were excluded. Recovering some autonomy is crucial to influencing political change. Now with state largesse in retreat, we may see a reconfiguration of Bolivia's historic movements that sets the stage for a return to a more progressive process of change. For the moment, the serene, serious, and patient exercise of the democratic process on October 18, 2020, showed the country's commitment to the idea of a nation and state—and a form of politics—that is meant to meet the needs of its people. Against the minority sectors voicing racism and exclusionary talk, there is a collective moral consciousness that by-and-large bristles at state violence, military intervention, and injustice. Wherever one stands on Evo Morales, and despite the challenges ahead, it is clear that at least for the moment, Bolivians continue to challenge capitalism and its orthodoxies.

In Puerto Rico, the 2019 Uprising Produces an Electoral Opening Toward the Left

JOSÉ A. LAGUARTA RAMÍREZ

AS THE EYES OF THE WORLD REMAIN fixated on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico produced a more satisfying and historic outcome for the Puerto Rican left after its local election on November 3, 2020. Puerto Rico's vote is historic (a claim that should never be taken lightly in politics) but not because of the razor-thin results of the gubernatorial race, which was the main contest of the election. Nor did Puerto Rican voters make history, as many U.S. liberals and some progressives are anxious to believe, in a concurrent nonbinding plebiscite in which the vote in favor of statehood received the majority (also by a slim margin). Nor is it especially surprising, given recent changes to the election law deregulating the process, that recounts in localities with close results—especially the capital city of San Juan—have been plagued with irregularities.

The vote is historic because it represents a major shift in Puerto Rico's party system and a breakthrough for the independence movement, the political left, and social movements. These changes, in turn, are the direct product of the popular uprising that unseated

then-Governor Ricardo Rosselló during the summer of 2019. Rosselló was forced out of office after two weeks of intense and massive street protests sparked by the publication of the text of an encrypted conversation between the governor and his all-male inner circle, in which participants mocked those killed by hurricanes Irma and María (which devastated the territory in 2017) and made violent sexist and homophobic remarks about political rivals and other public figures.

The main way in which the shift is manifested is the unprecedentedly high level of support for the third- and fourth-placing Citizen's Victory Movement (MVC) and the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), both of which publicly supported the 2019 street protests against Rosselló. In the 2020 election, MVC and PIP received 14.2 percent and 13.7 percent of the vote, respectively, according to the official first count, for a combined weight of 27.9 percent.¹ The election also reflects record-shattering *low* levels of turnout (52.8 percent of registered voters, which translates to approximately a third of all eligible voters), reflecting historical levels of disenchantment with the colony's political system. Fear of COVID-19, a complicated vote-by-mail system, and a disastrous primary process earlier this year also contributed, of course, but as I argue below, the three-decade-long tendency of declining participation is clear.

Nonetheless, the combined MVC/PIP result represents a major shift in Puerto Rico's

JOSÉ LAGUARTA teaches anthropology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY. He has participated in, studied, and written extensively on Puerto Rico's politics and social movements for many years.

party system, which was reliably de facto “bipartisan” for all of the second half of the twentieth century. The significance of this is heightened by the fact that both parties’ candidates for governor, MVC’s Alexandra Lúgaro and PIP’s Juan Dalmau, openly support independence for Puerto Rico, which has historically not been favored by the Puerto Rican electorate since at least 1952, when the current “Commonwealth” constitution came into effect. While neither candidate made independence a central focus of their campaign, neither attempted to hide or deny their personal preference.



★
“Rise up
Puerto Rican”

with the black flag
of Puerto Rico,
symbol of mourning
and resistance

Breaking the Status Barrier

Puerto Rico’s party system was centered on the political “status issue” throughout the second half of the twentieth century (previously, some parties expressed “status” affiliations, but these often fluctuated). In 1968, the electoral hegemony of the pro-Commonwealth-status-quo Popular Democratic Party (PPD) came to an end, and it began to alternate power with the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP). Both PPD and PNP have included members of the U.S. Democratic and Republican parties, which hold primaries in Puerto Rico for nominating purposes but have not typically been considered relevant by most of the population.

Marginalized during periods of economic expansion linked to the ideology of U.S. colonialism, the PIP played third wheel as the electoral outlet for the historically persecuted pro-independence movement. A handful of fourth parties or independent candidates (usually splinters from one of the three main parties) also occasionally participated. Full independence from the United States as an eventual goal remains a central aspect of

PIP’s identity. With its candidate receiving nearly 170,000 votes (the most in its history), in 2020 the PIP quintupled its 2016 performance. Founded in 1946, this is only the third time the party has surpassed 100,000 votes, and the first surpassing of 6 percent of the vote since 1956 (when it received 86,636 votes, 12.4 percent of the total voters in that election).² The feat is even more significant if we take into account that PIP was the only sector to grow significantly during this election.

In contrast, MVC does not make status part of its platform at all, hoping to attract support from all “options.” Instead, it has proposed decolonization through a constitutional convention, in which supporters would be free to support convention candidates favoring different alternatives. Lúgaro edged out PIP’s Dalmau as the third-placing candidate, but actually *lost* about 250 votes in comparison to her own independent run in 2016 (or about 5,700, if fellow MVC member Rafael Bernabe’s votes are taken into account—he was then running for governor on the slate of another minor party).

The Plebiscite Farce

The reason PIP and MVC results are more significant than the “yes” vote for statehood is that this plebiscite is actually the third one in the last eight years, all manufactured to produce a statehood “win.” In the 2012 plebiscite, for example, when two additional

The vote is historic because it represents a breakthrough for the independence movement, the political left, and social movements... the direct product of the popular uprising that unseated Governor Rosselló during the summer of 2019.

named options were given (“free association” and independence—but *not* the non-sovereign Commonwealth status quo, which many still support), statehood received 61.2 percent of “valid” votes. However, nearly half a million ballots were deposited blank in protest, which together with the results for the other two non-statehood options would have added up to 54.7 percent of the total vote. In 2017, statehood received 97.2 percent of the vote, with only 22.9 percent participation (even lower than expected in the middle of a nonelection year). This time around, “yes” received 52.3 percent of the vote, once again amidst abysmally low turnout.

These repeated charades are desperate attempts by the corrupt governing New Progressive Party (PNP) to cling to relevance by using the mirage of statehood to mobilize supporters. The U.S. Congress, however, which has the last word on anything that happens in the colony, has never committed to supporting any such outcome, and the tenor

of U.S. politics in recent years suggests that it won’t do so in the foreseeable future. While Senate Democrats recently waved the specter of Puerto Rican statehood at Republicans, as retribution for the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, it now seems uncertain at best (pending the two run-off elections in Georgia) that Democrats will retake the Senate. In any case, after 122 years of false promises by Democrats and Republicans alike, most Puerto Ricans are generally unimpressed by the prospect of being blatantly used as a bargaining chip yet again.

Medium-term Precedents

In 2008, the gubernatorial electoral landscape began to change with the appearance of non-status-oriented parties and independent candidates, which nevertheless did not garner a significant portion of the vote until 2016. In that election, Lúgaro (then running as an independent) and independent candidate Manuel Cidre together generated 16.8 percent of the vote. In 2020, in addition to PPD, PNP, PIP, and MVC, a fifth party, the Dignity Project (PD) of Christian fundamentalists received nearly 7 percent of the vote. A sixth candidate, the independent Eliezer Molina, received less than 1 percent. Together, Molina and PD candidate César Vázquez received scarcely 3,200 votes more than Cidre did in 2016.

Mainstream pundits have attempted to subtract from the moment’s significance by emphasizing Dalmau’s supposed distancing from the party’s traditional focus on independence. The numbers indisputably reflect that the PIP received the support of voters who traditionally vote for the pro-statehood PNP and voters who usually back the pro-status-quo PPD. The reality, however, is that Dalmau never disavowed either his party nor its message, and this is not the first time a PIP candidate has attempted to appeal to voters beyond the party’s base by emphasizing other aspects of the party platform (for example,

in 1996, PIP candidate David Noriega ran a far less status-centric campaign, receiving 75,305 votes or 3.8 percent of the total votes in that election).

MVC's success is also significant, less because of Lúgaro's result in the governor's race (which, as noted, reflected a slight decline from her earlier performance as an independent candidate) than because of the results of its legislative and local candidates. MVC elected two at-large representatives and two at-large senators, as well as members to the municipal assemblies of numerous towns. It also nearly elected the mayor of the politically crucial capital city of San Juan (the MVC candidate, Manuel Natal, came in second by a scant 2,300 votes—another first for a non-PPN or PPD candidate) and a representative from San Juan's third district.³ PIP, as usual, elected one at-large senator and one at-large representative and numerous municipal assembly members.

Together with reelected independent Senator José Vargas Vidot (a health care activist once considered left-leaning, but who has proven inconsistent on many issues) and the at-large senator and at-large representative elected by the “socially” (but not necessarily “fiscally”) conservative PD, there will be nine non-PPD or PNP legislators, the first time there are more than two or three in a very long time. However, only the six MVC and PIP legislators are considered reliably leftist or left-leaning.

The Left Reborn?

Many thus consider the success of PIP and MVC as a triumph for the newly electorally-significant Puerto Rican left. It is the first time since the original Socialist Party of the late 1920s and early 1930s (many of whose top leaders were actually pro-statehood and which self-destructed through a highly uneven “coalition” with the local Republican Party of the sugar planter elite) that some version of the political left is able to mobilize

nearly a third of the electorate on its own.

Like the social-democratic PIP (initially a traditional Latin American “social Christian” party that declared itself in favor of “democratic socialism” and joined the Second International in the 1970s), MVC is a left-leaning party that emerged as an alliance between various groups and individuals seeking to “overcome” the traditional status deadlock. Among these, in addition to Lúgaro's campaign, it's worth highlighting former members of the short-lived Working People's Party (PPT), which ran candidates in 2012 and 2016 (with candidate Bernabe receiving 1 percent or less in the gubernatorial races). PPT was an electoral incursion spearheaded by a Puerto Rican Trotskyist organization now known as Socialist Democracy (*Democracia Socialista*, DS). The other major factions within MVC are the Sovereign Union Movement, the Pro-sovereignty Network (former members of yet another defunct minor party), and the labor union *Sindicato Puertorriqueño de Trabajadores* (SPT), a local affiliate of the

It is the first time since the Socialist Party of the 1920s and 30s that some version of the political left is able to mobilize nearly a third of the electorate on its own.

stateside Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Both Lúgaro and the SPT/SEIU have been criticized by other sectors of the left for either personal involvement in suspect privatization deals (in the case of Lúgaro, who now claims her position on privatization has evolved) or opposing the 2008 teachers strike and attempting to raid the teachers

union's bargaining unit (in the case of SEIU).⁴ However, DS members have long insisted a tactical alliance with sectors receptive to critiques of neoliberalism is the only way to make inroads into the electoral field in order to amplify the DS anti-capitalist message.⁵

Whether this theory holds is yet to be seen, and many are rightly skeptical. However, the MVC's results can be seen as at least a partial and delicate victory for another reason: It brings bona fide active participants of the social-movement left to the legislature for the first time since at least the 1970s. In addition to Bernabe, who is an openly socialist supporter of many progressive causes, and longtime feminist advocate Ana Irma Rivera (both elected to the Senate), newly elected Representative Mariana Nogales is a prominent movement lawyer and radical feminist.

Underlying Tectonic Shifts

Most importantly, both PIP's and MVC's electoral successes can be traced directly to the uprising that unseated then-Governor Rosselló. That event was preceded by several years of combative anti-austerity protests, most markedly on each May 1, in the wake of the island's debt crisis and the appointment of an unelected "fiscal control board" (the *Junta*, as it is locally known) by the U.S. Congress in 2016 to ensure the colony's crippling, odious debt is paid off. Those protests, in turn, built on decades of mobilizations and strikes by teachers, university students, and communities threatened by displacement and environmental damage, stretching back—at least in its contemporary incarnation—to the successful 1999–2003 struggle to force the U.S. Navy out of the island municipality of Vieques.

Both PIP and MVC actively supported protests against Rosselló, and their rank-and-file members participated in them to a greater or lesser extent. Both parties also developed campaign platforms opposing not just PNP and PPD corruption but also

against neoliberal privatization and austerity policies and the presence of the *Junta*. Like Representative-elect Nogales, the narrowly defeated candidates for San Juan's third district and mayoralty are also vocal critics of the *Junta* and products of Puerto Rico's combative student and feminist movements.

Whether or not these electoral incursions will lead to demobilization, as is often the case, is an open question. However, the large anti-*Junta* movement that was at the epicenter of the 2019 Uprising has so far remained stubbornly independent. Even some vocal leftist critics of MVC leadership see the election results as a product of the uprising, reflecting new opportunities for the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial movement to expand in both qualitative and quantitative terms.⁶

In my assessment, striking the right balance between institutional participation and street mobilizations will be crucial in the next few years. However, and more importantly, at least for now the electoral result confirms and inscribes the popular victory onto the larger political landscape in a way that is strikingly different from the recent past and which will make it very hard for traditional politicians to deny, minimize, or reverse in the foreseeable future.

To understand the magnitude of this change, it is important to consider recent history. For instance, in the 1970s, the PIP and a now defunct, openly Marxist, pro-independence Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) competed for scarce votes. Starting in 1980, some PSP leaders eventually opted for a highly uneven, unspoken "alliance" with "pro-Puerto Rican" sectors of the PPD in order to "stop" the advance of the pro-statehood movement. Whether it was this tactic that stopped statehood is debatable. What is certain is that it resulted in four decades of the dilution of the pro-independence vote through the phenomenon locally known as *melonismo* (adherents of this Puerto Rican variant of lesser-evilism are popularly known as *melones*, or "watermelons": green on the

outside, red on the inside, in reference to the PIP and PPD's party colors), whereby thousands of pro-independence or independence-leaning voters supported the PPD.

This did not happen in 2020. As even the mainstream pundits insist, the *opposite* may now be true, with thousands of pro-status-quo and even pro-statehood voters turning to pro-independence and left-leaning candidates to represent them.⁷ To visualize this, one need only consider the collapse in the vote totals of both PNP (from 655,626 or 41.76 percent to 406,830 or 32.9 percent) and PPD (from 610,956 or 38.92 percent to 389,896 or 31.6 percent). It seems *melonismo* is dead, at least for now, as a dominant tendency.

These results suggest there is now a possibility, for the first time since the 1970s, of forging a left-leaning bloc that can aspire not just to represent electorally, but to *lead politically* (that is, not just institutionally, but seeking "intellectual and moral" leadership or *hegemony* in Gramsci's sense), in which the pro-independence left can participate *on its own terms*. MVC and PIP leaders have suggested their newly elected officials will seek to collaborate with each other, and many are hoping for some sort of electoral front or alliance heading into the 2024 elections.

The True "Winner"

What neither MVC nor PIP (nor their fellow travelers and critics further to the left) must forget is that the true "winner" of this election is electoral abstention. Participation by registered voters shrank for the eighth consecutive time since the historical high point of 1992 (83.9 percent), to an all-time low of 52.8 percent, a number that shrinks even further if we consider the vote total as a percentage of all eligible voters. (Continuing reductions in population size since 2004, as a result of outward migration caused by economic contractions and the impact of two major hurricanes, must also be taken into account).

The deposed Roselló entered his four-

year term with the support of 41.8 percent of voters, the weakest mandate of any Puerto Rican governor since the first gubernatorial election in 1948. The newly elected Pedro Pierluisi (who has served as the *Junta's* attorney and is mockingly known as "Pedro the Brief" after being illegally appointed Rosselló's successor and removed by the Supreme Court) will come to govern with only 32.9 percent of voters' support.

In addition, it is likely that neither PNP nor PPD will fully control either legislative chamber when the counting and recounting is done, with a staggering five independent or minor-party senators, and four independent or minor-party representatives, all but

The left is therefore in a unique historical position to grow quantitatively by nurturing disaffection among the 1.2 million registered voters who did not participate.

ensuring the already weak Pierluisi (widely perceived as a *Junta* shill) will be a lame-duck governor for the entirety of his term—if he is not ousted by protests before his term ends. This also means the PPD will have to play to the left if it hopes to have any chance of co-opting MVC/PIP growth, which the left can easily outflank by taking the lead in proposing social-justice legislation supported by pressure from "street" mobilization. MVC's left faction thus seems, for now, to have an upper hand in preventing its right flank from sliding back toward or into the PPD and PNP. Indeed, MVC's pro-statehood candidate for resident commissioner, largely considered its most conservative public figure, has already announced she is leaving the party.

The left is therefore in a unique historical position to grow quantitatively by nurturing disaffection among the 1.2 million registered voters who did not participate (and even more eligible voters who didn't even bother to register), and qualitatively by strengthening its ties to social movements. At the same time, it should not make the mistake of assuming that all 1.2 million abstaining registered voters will lean left or support disruptive protests. The challenge is to make use of the opportunity to build counter-hegemony by continuing to echo the demands of key, strategically positioned, disaffected sectors without seeking to control them (specifically workers, women, LGBTQ+ youth, and environmentally threatened communities), while providing political content to both conventional and disruptive mobilizations.

Beyond MVC and PIP lies a significant extra-parliamentary left, which includes organizations like the Feminist Collective Under Construction, the Socialist Workers' Movement, the anti-control-board Promises Are Over Campaign, several rank and file labor unions, and dozens of mutual aid groups along with hundreds of unaffiliated young people. Its potential role in keeping the electoral left in check from the inherently demobilizing pull of the colonial capitalist regime's institutions is enormous. All the same, the more combative sectors must not lose sight of the *political* character of these struggles, which will continue to oscillate rapidly between Gramsci's "war of position" and "war of maneuver."

Mutual patience on all parts, respect for tactical diversity (and each other's spheres of action or "lanes"), a long view toward shared goals, and an understanding that not all goals will be shared were all decisive to the outcome of the 2019 Uprising. They will continue to be the key to the qualitative and quantitative growth of the Puerto Rican left. If a

solid leftist electoral front can be built while maintaining the pressure of street mobilization on a much weakened colonial capitalist regime, a true sea change is not just possible but within reach.

NOTES

1. All 2020 election results are taken from the official Puerto Rico State Elections Commission 2020 election results website, elecciones2020.ceepur.org/Noche_del_Evento_92/index.html.
2. Official pre-2020 election results are available at ww2.ceepur.org/Home/EventosElecttorales.
3. In Puerto Rico, a portion of representatives and senators are elected at-large from party lists based on total number of votes, and another portion represent winner-take-all electoral districts.
4. The stateside SEIU's attempt to raid the bargaining unit of the Federation of Teachers of Puerto Rico (FMPR) in the aftermath of the 2008 teachers strike (as a result of which, the FMPR was decertified as the representative of Puerto Rico's teachers, numbering 40,000 at the time) is documented in Steve Early, *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers' Movement or Death Throes of the Old?* (Haymarket Books, 2011). The SEIU-affiliated SPT, which represents other employees of Puerto Rico's public school system, joined other business unions that refused to support that strike against an incumbent PPD government (see, for example, www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/notas/solidarios-con-los-maestros-en-desacuerdo-con-la-huelga/).
5. For a sample of this ongoing debate, see www.momentocritico.org/post/contribuci3n-al-debate-sobre-las-elecciones-del-2020-en-puerto-rico, www.bandera.org/brevses-comentarios/, www.bandera.org/politica-socialista-en-victoria-ciudadana/, www.abayarderoro.org/2020/09/respuesta-al-escri-to-publicado-en-bandera-roja-politica-socialista-en-victoria-ciudadana/, www.bandera.org/socialistas-en-todas-partes/, www.80grados.net/lo-que-esta-en-juego-elecciones-2020-y-la-posibilidad-del-cambio/, and www.bandera.org/sobre-el-articulo-lo-que-esta-en-juego/.
6. See, for example, www.bandera.org/desafecciones-y-afectos/.
7. See, for example, www.elnuevodia.com/opinion/punto-de-vista/pnp-salvaguardia-de-la-estadad/.

Belarus: The People's Fight Continues

HANNA PEREKHODA

SINCE AUGUST 9, BELARUS HAS BEEN the scene of popular protests against what is perceived to be the fraudulent reelection of President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. The presidential election results gave him a victory with 80 percent of the votes, a figure far from the counts seen by election observers.

There are thousands of audio and video recordings of electoral fraud, showing the rewriting of results, the substitution of one ballot box for another, and multiple instances of pressure on voters, observers, and election officials. According to journalists and social scientists, based on admittedly partial data, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya, the opposition candidate, actually won the presidential election. Regardless of the figures put forward, which can vary considerably from one study to another, all observations agree that the totals for the two candidates were much closer than announced by the Belarusian Central Election Commission.

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets on election night to contest the results, which they considered a massive fraud. The rallies continued for days, regularly bringing out 100,000 to 300,000 people in Minsk alone, becoming the largest demonstrations in the history of the nation of eight million people. The protests quickly spread across the country. For four months now, Belarus has been shaken by an enormous

popular protest movement.

What Explains the Unprecedented Mass Movement?

Despite the peaceful character of the movement, from the first day this summer it has been violently repressed by the riot police. The proof of the unjustified violence can be seen in the deliberate arrests of passersby, minors, and the elderly. A great many of those arrested have become sick in the crowded cells, without access to food or potable water. Prisoners who have been released have told how they were subjected to humiliation and to torture in the detention centers. There are allegations that penal authorities raped both women and men. The completely disproportionate police violence against the peaceful demonstrators and the mass arrests and torture to which the detainees were subjected fueled the mobilization, drawing in people who until recently considered themselves apolitical or even loyal to the regime.

Another issue adding to popular anger is the ineffective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by Belarusian authorities. Like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, Alexander Lukashenko was long in denial about the dangers of this disease, calling it a simple flu. In the midst of a pandemic, the president advised Belarusians to wash their hands with vodka, go to the sauna, and drink alcohol to “poison the virus.” Lukashenko went so far as to openly deny the virus’s very existence, stating that he didn’t see it “flying around here.” The government decided to go on with celebrations, football and hockey matches, and other public events including the usual May

HANNA PEREKHODA is a member of *solidaritéS* in Vaud Canton, Switzerland, and a PhD candidate in Political Science (University of Lausanne).

9 military parade, which annually celebrates the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazism.

On the one hand, such an irresponsible attitude on the part of the president has greatly contributed to his loss of credibility among the population. On the other hand, the authorities' denial of the pandemic and their refusal to introduce public health measures have led the inhabitants of Belarus to build

Despite the stereotypes that
can be found in popular
consciousness and sometimes
even among leftist activists,
Belarus is by no means a socialist
country.

horizontal ties of solidarity that later proved very useful to the protest movement. Besides these immediate causes leading Belarusians to challenge the regime, other, less explicit reasons deserve to be analyzed. The creeping deterioration in the standard of living could indeed be considered one of the main factors inspiring such widespread popular discontent.

Despite the stereotypes that can be found in popular consciousness and sometimes even among leftist activists, Belarus is by no means a socialist country. Elected in 1994 after the fall of the Soviet Union, Lukashenko effectively put a stop to mass privatization. This partial return to state management of the economy proved popular among the Belarusians, who had witnessed the sad examples of the neighboring post-Soviet countries' economies being ruined by the return of capitalism.

To this day, Belarus continues to preserve certain attributes of the Soviet socialist system, in large part thanks to sizeable subsidies from Russia. These Russian "donations" represent roughly a quarter of the Belarusian gross domestic product. Russia is seen as

the main investor and also virtually the only market of the Belarusian economy. Ninety percent of Belarus's production, especially in the agricultural sector, is exported to Russia. In addition, the country benefits from a big discount on the price of Russian hydrocarbons: Moscow allows Minsk to refine crude bought at low cost and to re-export it to Europe at market price. Russian gas is also sold to its neighbor at friendly prices. Thanks to this support from the Russian "big brother," Lukashenko could indeed "buy" social peace in his country. In return, Putin demanded full economic and geopolitical loyalty from Belarus.

We should remember, however, that Moscow itself is in a very delicate economic and political situation, especially since its military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and the sanctions by Western countries that followed. Russia no longer has the same means to help its most loyal brother-country. To continue to benefit from Russian aid, Lukashenko resorted to blackmail, threatening Moscow with rapprochement with the West. This tension hardly helped to improve relations between Russia and the Belarusian regime.

The Belarusian economy, whose stability depends very much on its eastern neighbor, has been threatened. The Belarusian authorities thought to remedy this situation by introducing numerous austerity measures and by reducing social rights. Thus, we were witnessing the undermining of the very foundations of the Lukashenko regime. Until 2020, some sort of unspoken contract regulated relations between the government and the people—Belarusians were prepared to tolerate the absence of democratic freedoms in exchange for modest social security. Alexander Lukashenko, now incapable of fulfilling these obligations as the guarantor of economic stability, began gradually to lose his political legitimacy. A feeling of deep discontent slowly spread to large sectors of the population, both in the towns and in the countryside.

In short, large-scale electoral fraud and

the refusal of Alexander Lukashenko to leave the presidency have led hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets. Police brutality further fuels the mobilization, drawing into it masses of previously apolitical people. The mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic is also reinforcing popular anger. The impoverishment of the population coupled with the reinforcement of state violence also seems to contribute to the justification of the current revolt in the eyes of Belarusians.

Actors, Demands, and the Variety of Struggles

Egotistical and well known for his macho attitudes, Lukashenko obviously didn't take seriously the presidential candidacy of Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya, a homemaker who ran for office in place of her husband, a blogger who had been imprisoned for his criticism of the government. Without any previous political or public experience, she nevertheless became the symbol of this movement.

It's no secret that Lukashenko had systematically jailed rivals or driven them into exile. Since all potential presidential candidates were excluded from the Belarusian political sphere, they were never able to participate in the elections and make themselves known. As for Tsikhanovskaya, she publicly declared that her main promise was, once elected, to leave her post and to quickly organize free and transparent elections where all candidates can run. Her candidacy was therefore seen, by herself and by her supporters, as a means of carrying out the necessary measures for a democratic transition of power in this country, after a quarter century of sclerotic authoritarianism. Having thus publicly denied her own political ambitions, the candidate was able to gain wide support from a population wary of institutional politics. The crisis of confidence and mistrust of institutional elites is a general political trend, but it can take different forms. In Belarus it has found

its expression in massive support for a female candidate whose lack of political experience is perceived as her main advantage and the main guarantee of her political "honesty."

The protests have not so far been accompanied by a precise political and economic program. Tsikhanovskaya sympathizers unite around a few simple demands: the release of political prisoners, the departure of Lukashenko, and the organization of new elections. The Belarusian political opposition, which has established itself as speaking for the whole movement, is made up of a small number of relatively well-known, but politically inexperienced, personalities. In their demands and their positions, they appear even less radical than the "ordinary" protesters. Few in number, they have become targets of repression, and thus they are unable to fully assume their role as leaders of the popular movement. Threatened by the Belarusian KGB the day after the election, Tsikhanovskaya took refuge in Lithuania. All the other members of the Opposition Coordinating Council presidium are in prison or forced exile. Therefore, the

The marches that bring together thousands of women do not put forward especially feminist demands

organized political opposition cannot play a significant role on the ground.

It should also be remembered that the opposition presidential campaign was led by three women. Two of them, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo are married to previously excluded presidential candidates. The third, Maria Kolesnikova is the ex-campaign manager of another candidate, himself in exile.

As already mentioned, the president seemed not to take seriously the candidacy of a woman. According to Lukashenko, Tsikhanovskaya, Tsepkalo, and Kolesnikova were just “three poor girls who understood nothing.” During the campaign, he made several statements about a woman’s inability to rule

The Belarusian left is working to introduce slogans with socio-economic content and to help workers defend their interests, while opposition leaders seem to be quite removed from working-class life.

the country. According to Lukashenko, the Belarusian constitution “is not made for a woman,” while society “is not ready to vote for a woman.” But in 2020 that paternalistic and macho image cultivated by the president since 1994 finally backfired. Women, especially young people, saw it as an attack on their dignity.

Women are quite visible in the movement, including in the street protests. All-female protests often take place. Their main demand is to put an end to police violence. Photos of women of all ages, dressed in white, waving flowers, and holding hands, were published on the front pages of international media. The “Belarusian Woman” thus became the symbol of the movement as a whole.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of this unprecedented female activism as the equivalent of the feminist movement as we often imagine it in the West. The marches that bring together thousands of women do not put forward especially feminist demands. This mobilization remains largely within the framework of the post-Soviet imagination, which attributes to the sexes particular “es-

sential” characteristics. In this sense, women as “mothers” are seen as naturally protective and as endowed with the role of calming and supporting their men: friends, sons, husbands, fathers, and so on. Moreover, the demonstrators use the women’s symbolic status by putting them in front of the protests during clashes with the police. It seems that the Belarusian police don’t allow themselves to beat up women as violently as men. Such a strategy plays on sexist stereotypes that women reclaim in their favor. In any case, such participation of women in the social movement is a valuable experience of self-organization and collective action. It could certainly contribute to some awareness among women of their interests and strength.

The protest movement seemed to take a decisive turn with the announcement of a general strike on August 11. Large numbers of workers in industry, transport, commerce, and information technology joined the protesters. Doctors, retirees, teachers, and college and high school students are also at the forefront of this movement. The announced general strike, however, is still struggling to become a reality, despite an attempt to relaunch it on October 26. Production came to a complete halt only in a few factories.

After Putin’s public support, Lukashenko regained his self-confidence and launched a counterattack. Police were placed at the entrances of disloyal factories to intimidate the workers. The arrests of the leaders of strike committees and of trade unionists discouraged the undecided. And these are not just simple arrests. Many detainees have reported being beaten and tortured. Since August, at least ten people have been murdered by the police, including in custody.

The fear of layoffs is real. Dozens of workers have already become victims of “preventive” dismissals. In addition, workers are entitled to fixed-term employment contracts, which allow management to dismiss employees without any compensation but which do not allow employees to resign

voluntarily since unemployment in Belarus is punishable by law.

We must also take into account the arsenal of sanctions at the disposal of factory management. Belarus has developed a whole system of control that makes a worker directly dependent on his or her workplace. Workers depend on social security that they can only get through their employers (this concerns housing, loans, vacation, and other items). Thus, material advantages can be obtained only by full subordination and loyalty. In a word, this organization of labor combines the worst of the Soviet and capitalist systems.

There is also the fear, among workers in state-owned enterprises in particular, of massive privatizations that would mean job losses if the pro-European and neoliberal opposition came to power. Such a prospect could also lead to the loss of the Russian market and the privatization of state enterprises, which represent a large majority of workplaces in the country.

Despite everything, this strike attempt constitutes an unprecedented event for Belarus, where during the last 25 years the Lukashenko regime has meticulously destroyed any mechanism of self-organization from below. The Belarusian left is working to introduce slogans with socio-economic content and to help workers defend their interests, while opposition leaders seem to be quite removed from working-class life. Made up above all of the intelligentsia, the hard core of the Belarusian opposition lacks experience, determination, and above all a critical perspective vis-a-vis the liberal discourse dominating the political and ideological field of post-Soviet countries. Its inability to forge links with the structures of workers' self-organization, to take into account the interests of the employees, and to articulate demands for social justice are major obstacles to the success of the Belarusian protest movement.

However, the fact that the workers have not yet formulated their own economic demands and confine themselves to supporting

democratic slogans cannot be explained only by the influence of the liberal discourse of the opposition. As Volodymyr Artiukh and Denys Gorbach have pointed out,* in the Belarus system of state capitalism, the economic exploiter is at the same time a state bureaucrat, which means that social demands cannot be separated from democratic slogans. Primarily, the workers see and feel the political violence of this bureaucratic class. The violence of economic exploitation remains in the shadow of the extreme physical violence of the regime that kills people with police batons right out on the streets of their cities.

At this stage, the very experience of uniting and confronting the authorities is essential for Belarusian workers. They must overcome the atomization and gain organizational experience. Those left activists who look upon the Belarusian protests with contempt must remember that class consciousness appears as a result of collective action, not the other way around.

International Context and the Role of Russia

Despite the strike and such massive and protracted demonstrations, Lukashenko still manages to stay in power. One of the main reasons for his regime's longevity is certainly the explicit support from Russia. Vladimir Putin has even declared that he would be ready to send forces to Belarus to maintain order if the protests escalate there. But why would Russia be interested in supporting an autocrat who has already lost all political legitimacy both in Belarusian eyes and internationally?

The reflex, in Moscow, is to come to the aid of its neighbor mainly for fear of the

* Volodymyr Artiukh & Denys Gorbach, "Workers' Struggles in Ukraine and Belarus," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, 11/4/20, web.archive.org/web/20201109134714/https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/43290/workers-struggles-in-ukraine-and-belarus.

domino effect. More than anything, the Russian president fears that popular protest will spread to his country, where his popularity is currently declining. Putin may decide to support Lukashenko, this time in exchange for his complete subordination. However, even if Lukashenko managed to stay in power thanks to Russian intervention, his *raison d'être*—his model of political blackmail and economic bargaining—could no longer survive.

It would also be strange if the Kremlin's support for Lukashenko didn't provoke anti-Russian sentiments among Belarusians. Indeed, the question "for or against Russia" has been until now almost absent from the discourse of the protesters. People perceived the need for a change of power in Belarus simply as an internal affair of the country. Opposition spokespersons explicitly limit themselves to one demand: the removal of the president and the organization of free and fair

Those left activists who look upon the Belarusian protests with contempt must remember that class consciousness appears as a result of collective action, not the other way around.

elections. In each of her interventions, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya does everything possible to ensure that the movement does not appear to be anti-Russian. Yet in the event of Russian interference, the ongoing conflict between the government and Belarusian society would surely turn into a serious geopolitical crisis.

Moscow could also seek a "soft" solution, putting pressure on Lukashenko to convince

him to leave his post by guaranteeing him personal security and a quiet retreat to a dacha somewhere in Russia. The post of Belarusian president would then be handed off to a person of confidence, loyal to Moscow. However, such a strategy involves a potential risk. Should Putin choose that option, he would unwittingly admit that mass mobilizations can, sooner or later, remove an autocratic president. In the current situation, when the Russian population has been demonstrating for months in Khabarovsk, openly defying Putin's power, this becomes an extremely dangerous message.

International Solidarity with a People in Struggle

The working class is the only force capable of resolving the question of power in the critical situation through which Belarus is currently passing. The self-organization of the workers has proven time and again to be the best way to challenge an authoritarian regime and ensure the success of the mass popular movement. This revolt of the Belarusian people is legitimate and deserves our full support. In Europe and throughout the world it is our duty to support the democratic slogans of the demonstrators and strikers and to show solidarity with the Belarusian left that is struggling to put forward demands with a social content.

More than ever, the organized popular classes in Belarus must take the initiative in favor of political and social change in order to prevent the frustration of this genuinely popular movement by forces opposed to their interests, whether pro-Russian or pro-Western. It is absolutely necessary to oppose any foreign interference in Belarusian affairs, whether from Moscow or other countries. Belarusians have the right to decide their future for themselves!

Unions, Democracy, and the Third Camp

Comparing Lessons from New Politics and Herman Benson

LOIS WEINER

THE DECLINE OF LABOR HAS BEEN accompanied by an opportunity we have not seen in decades. A new generation of socialists, many of them members of Democratic Socialists of America, are enthusiastically discussing the role of the working class and unions in the fight for socialism. Making the best use of this development requires critically analyzing the past several decades of struggle among labor leftists about how a commitment to socialism “from below” might inform our union activity. In this article I try to frame and spur that debate by comparing the perspective of Herman Benson with material published by other contributors to *New Politics*, founded by Benson’s contemporaries Phyllis and Julius Jacobson.

When Herman Benson died last summer, a *New York Times* obituary captured his accomplishments and political history with, for the *Times*, remarkable political accuracy. It noted Benson’s role as a prominent defender of union democracy and the roots of his political ideals in the Workers Party (WP) and later the Independent Socialist League

(ISL), which opposed both capitalism and Stalinism, breaking with Trotsky and the Trotskyists over whether the Soviet Union was a society that deserved the political support of socialists.¹

Yet for all it got right, the obituary and accolades to Benson’s impressive contributions missed a contradiction in his legacy: how his singular focus on democratizing the unions undercut what he defined as the ultimate aim of his project, revitalizing the labor movement and in doing so defending democracy in society. Benson mentored student activists from the 1960s and 70s who identified with the independent socialist tradition, a political milieu that informed his embrace of union democracy. For the WP and ISL, the struggle for union democracy was essential as a good in itself because it improves workers’ lives and because it educates the working class about ideals needed to emancipate all of humanity from economic, political, and social oppression. Union democracy is indispensable in the fight for democracy and socialism from below.²

It’s fair to say Benson became the best-known advocate of union democracy in left labor circles because of his passionate and informed support of dissidents’ struggles and his longevity in that support. He provided young activists—student radicals inspired to undertake a “turn to the working class” based on ideas articulated in “Toward the Working Class” by Kim Moody, Fred Eppstener, and Mike Flug and in Hal Draper’s “Why the

LOIS WEINER, a member of the *New Politics* editorial board, writes widely about education, labor, and politics, specializing in teacher unionism. She is currently writing a new book about how teachers, education workers, and their unions need to respond to the changed political landscape since publication of her call to action in “The future of our schools. Teachers unions and social justice.”

Working Class?”—with the rich knowledge of the labor movement Benson had acquired in his own years as a worker, supporting them as they undertook the daunting task of democratizing the unions to which Marxists had traditionally oriented. The shift from activity in the student movement toward “industrialization” adhered to the traditional Marxist definition of the working class: “into the factories and unions.”³ Benson’s tutelage, and support from the Association for Union Democracy, which he founded and led, were invaluable to union activists who could find help nowhere else in their struggles to make their unions respect the most basic tenets of democracy.

His contributions were remarkable and worthy of more respect and attention than they received during his life, a fact due in good part to the proclivity of many radicals and liberals to consider fights for democracy within unions as somehow anti-union. In reality, as Benson argued so forcefully and well, the absence of basic democratic rights for union members weakened the labor movement; the “bad press” unions received because dissidents fought for the right to fair elections, contract votes, and freedom to expose and oust corrupt officials was no news to union members, already alienated from the organizations that took their dues

Union democracy is
indispensable in the fight for
democracy and socialism from
below.

and failed to heed their voices.⁴ However, I think another factor in Benson’s not receiving his due was his insistence that the project of union democracy had to be isolated from left politics. He equated radicals’ insistence that

union revitalization went hand and in hand with labor supporting demands for social justice with ideas that he had rejected about the revolutionary potential of the working class. As he put it, “If the working class refuses to dedicate itself to the Marxist ambition, it still pursues its own. Workers’ organizations may not have taken revolutionary power, but they have almost everywhere and always been one of the chief social forces in defense of democracy in society. You may impose on your daughter the mission of becoming the president of the United States, but it is no failure if she ‘only’ becomes a good doctor.”⁵

Union democracy, for Benson, was about “free speech, fair elections, due process, fair job referrals systems, etc.,” what I would characterize as the formal, procedural protections—often denied or violated—essential for members to have voice in and control over the organizations that represent them. My experience as a union activist committed to democracy and my further work in helping reformers in teachers unions have persuaded me that democratic rights in unions depend on policies consciously crafted and carried out to encourage the idea that members “own” the union and exercise that ownership through their involvement. Such policies restrain the power of staff and officers through bottom-up control and a culture of respectful debate and criticism. A caucus, as I discuss below, is also necessary much of the time to maintain the procedures and culture that underlie the union’s democratic functioning.

Benson’s view of the working class and the implications for the fight for union democracy were reshaped when he reexamined the WP and ISL break with Trotskyism. He concluded that the test of whether a society is a workers state—who owns the property—and the concomitant belief that democratic control over productive property would insure social justice, were wrong: “No change in the form of property ownership will erase the conflict among contending social groups. As far as we can see, the need will continue to

defend people below from the administrators, bureaucrats, and privileged strata above. From that standpoint, the test is not property forms but democracy, which provides the means of that defense.” Thus the “key to social justice lies in the control of the state, that is, in the battle of democracy. Such is the inseparable link between socialism and democracy.”⁶

In Benson’s schema, the fight for union democracy is a struggle that by itself can transform the society through the vast cadre of union members “imbued with the conviction that their unions truly belonged to them and not to the salaried officialdom.” They would be a political “army of millions of missionaries who would speak up for unions and labor’s cause to their relatives, their friends, co-workers—at home, in social gatherings, in their churches and clubs, at work. And so, in time, the mood of the nation could be affected and the labor movement restored to a powerful social and political force.” His belief in the singular, solitary power of union democracy excluded union reformers offering cures for “the many social and economic ills of the nation or of the labor movement.” In many exchanges with radicals, Benson dismissed the need for radical changes that he saw denigrating the centrality of the fight for union democracy, though he conceded in one debate, “In some respects, we have a better labor movement. The entry of nurses, teachers, communication workers, and public employees has made a difference. The labor movement is more sensitive to the concerns of minorities and immigrants.”⁷ Missing was an explanation of why the labor movement had become “more sensitive” to social oppression or why this was a positive development.

Accompanying Benson’s rejection of the revolutionary potential of the working class was his dismissal of the idea of the Third Camp, which he described as a slogan designed to make as “thought-provoking as possible our opposition to what we denounced as the two warring imperialist camps. But it took on double significance. It made clear,

in the context of world war [World War II], our clear opposition to the two rival social systems: capitalism versus the new social order of bureaucratic collectivism as represented by

Accolades to Benson’s impressive contributions missed a contradiction in his legacy.

the Soviet Union under Stalin.” Like so many of his generation, experiencing dashed hopes and expectations of working-class revolution led to jettisoning consistent opposition to both capitalism and communism, that is, the notion of the Third Camp, which Benson described as “less a program of action and more a kind of mystical consolation for its adherents, a reassurance that somehow, somewhere, out there is a powerful social force that will turn our ideals of a just, democratic, peaceful society from a dream into a reality.”⁸

New Politics: A Contrasting View of Union Democracy and Socialism

Benson’s certitude about key issues in the struggle for union democracy, embrace of using the courts, and eschewing calls for unions to adopt the demands of social movements for equality, social justice, and peace, were not shared by all his former comrades in the WP and ISL whose work was published in *New Politics* (NP). For Benson as well as his critics from the left, the centrality of union democracy was a given. As Burton Hall wrote in NP in Fall, 1964, “Should unions be democratic? The question seems almost pointless. Unionism, after all is a struggle for democracy, a struggle to democratize the industrial regime. It is nothing if it is not democratic.”⁹ Union dissent was an important enough concern that the Jacobsons

helped publish *Autocracy and Insurgency in Organized Labor*, edited by Burton Hall, with Transaction Books. (The other collection they published was edited by Julius Jacobson about the Soviet Union and the socialist vision.) Because the Jacobsons conceived of *NP* as a space for pointed debate and controversy, as Phyllis noted in a 1983 speech hosted by Tamiment Library, the journal always invited responses from the union leaders its writers criticized. On the other hand, the Association for Union Democracy newsletter, the *Union Democracy Review* (*UDR*), which Benson edited, was devoted to advocacy and seldom allowed officials to respond to critiques. When I submitted a letter to *UDR* critical of violations of democracy in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) because Benson had commended it as a model of democracy (issue #36), Benson at first rejected my piece, explaining AUD took up much more serious breaches of democracy, like murder of dissidents in gangster unions. I appealed to Benson, noting the double standard to which he held white collar unions; union officials victimizing opponents by colluding with the employer to fire them was no minor problem. Benson published the piece—with a response from UFT President Albert Shanker, which I think may have been the only time a union official had the opportunity for a rejoinder in *UDR*. Decades later Benson described the longtime political connections that had led to Shanker and the UFT being considered an AUD ally.¹⁰

Burton Hall's defense of union democracy sketched a far more critical and nuanced view of using the courts than Benson advocated. In the Fall 1964 issue of *NP*, Hall concluded the "closer 'growing together' of the unions and the state power" had weakened the fight for rank and file control of their unions. In his Summer 1968 article, "Labor Insurgency and the Legal Trap," Hall examined the numerous legal barriers to rank and file control. Hall proposed as an alternative direct action, "the classic instance being the

series of post-World War II wildcat strikes in the East Coast longshore industry."

What gave that revolt its peculiarly effective character was the fact that the rebelling longshore [workers], rather than demanding that employers bargain with their rank and file organization, demanded instead that their corrupt union leadership renegotiate with the employers the terms of the collective bargaining agreements. It would seem that direct action of that kind, addressing its demands to union leadership and the employers jointly, is the approach which—when coupled with the parallel exercise of whatever legal and administrative procedures are available to the rebellious workers—comprises the rank and file strategy best suited to cope with the facts of bureaucratic labor relations. (38)

Hall's articles pre-dated debates in the independent socialist movement among my generation about whether and how to use the bourgeois courts in union struggles. Unfortunately, the reexamination of direct action and reliance on the courts he attempted to initiate didn't occur. While it may have been that Benson's strategy, which was accepted by activists who created *Labor Notes* and Teamsters for a Democratic Union, was right, discussion about the complexity of what was lost and what was gained in using the courts didn't occur. This was to the detriment of our understanding of the role of socialists in unions. As the "red state" walkouts of teachers in 2018 suggest, direct action, organized independently of unions and government regulations that establish collective bargaining, deserve the more serious attention Hall proposed.¹¹

An exchange between Hall and Benson about democracy in the Painters Union in the 1973 Spring and Winter issues of *NP*, marred for this reader by polemics that cross the border to vituperation, raises questions that have been denied the serious scrutiny they deserve: Under what conditions should

union reformers attempting to democratize their unions assume leadership? What is the role of the caucus once union reformers are elected? Burton Hall's original article cast Ralph Schonfeld, who had run on a program of democratizing the union, as having betrayed the cause, colluding with employers and retreating from pledges to end the practice of business agents appointing shop stewards. Benson, who had assisted Schonfeld in his election and in his role as president, responded in the next issue, as did Schonfeld, with Hall replying to both. Space limitations prohibit me from summarizing this rich debate, but Hall's arguments are stunningly relevant in current efforts to reform teachers unions and perhaps others as well. First, Schonfeld was elected without a majority on the executive committee and in opposition to the international union. Hence he faced considerable opposition in carrying out the reform program on which he had been elected with the support of a caucus. Hall concluded Schonfeld had made a compromise fatal to energizing the rank and file when he backed off from refusing to allow business agents to appoint shop stewards.

Hall maintained rank and file control had been undercut by Schonfeld's "backdoor compromises with the enemy or by simple bureaucratic refusal to work with fellow members of one's own caucus." Benson in turn accused Hall of being disgruntled because of the lapsed business relationship he had with Schonfeld as his lawyer. Hall assailed Benson's uncritical defense of Schonfeld and the turn against other union "reformers who have become disenchanted with Schonfeld" (Spring 1973, 64). Still, disregarding the perhaps understandable and yet unfortunate viciousness of the exchange, I think Hall's arguments about the importance of the caucus remaining a force after its candidates win office are wise and ring true, given what has occurred in unions with which I am most familiar: teachers unions that have elected progressive leaders committed to democracy

and also subject to the conservatizing pressures of leading unions with members who do not share all of their political ideas.

An irony of Benson's mentorship of activists who embraced the same political tradition that he had in his youth was that those who "industrialized" conceived of the working class in a way Benson himself called

Unionism is nothing if it is not democratic.

into question: "The goal of democratic social control of ownership is in the common interests of government and private employees, independent workers, artists, professionals, working farmers, students—the 99 percent mass of humanity. To pinch that goal into the narrow notion of 'workers' state' is to limit the appeal of the socialist message. Not 'workers' state' but 'democratic socialist state' to break the hold of capital and install democratic control over the economy." But the turn to the working class operationalized the traditional Marxist definition of which unions and work counted—manufacturing, communications, and transportation—and resulted in the exit of socialists out of white collar, public employee unions in which they had established credibility and leadership. Steve Zeluck described the vigorous challenge mounted in the American Federation of Teachers by proponents of democracy who allied with the Black community in demands for freedom and quality schools; that is just one example of the formidable influence socialists had in some public employee unions.¹² What would have occurred had socialists remained in these unions? We can't say for certain, but we do know the loss of employment in manufacturing and industrial unions and the upsurge in militancy in teachers unions suggests, at the very least, a miscalculation about not only

what was happening in capitalism but also how socialists should regard union work, what counts as work, and who comprises the working class.

Benson's strict demarcation of the issues on which one should organize in unions, legal restrictions on democratic rights, contrasted with *NP*'s perspective of a porous boundary that made advances by the working class and society dependent on unions defending social justice. This idea is perhaps most evident in Julius Jacobson's stirring defense of student radicals against their critics on the left, "In Defense of the Young," in which he defended the importance of the working class and unions while criticizing their social conservatism. Given the horrific spectacle of working-class support for Trump and white supremacy in the recent election, the arguments Jacobson made are even more salient than they were when *NP* published the piece in spring 1970 and therefore are worth quoting at length:

Who among us was not shocked by the rhetorical and physical violence of New York construction workers in their "spontaneous" assault on children, students, bearded folk and uninvolved bystanders who had the temerity to defend teenagers being beaten by wrench wielding hard-hats? Or did not suffer a touch of nausea watching workingmen with brawny arms and shrivelled souls wave Confederate flags and placards declaring affection for Agnew, Nixon, the Establishment and their hatred of peaceniks, reds, long-haired sissies, faggots and hippies. ... Certainly, there are explanations for the workers' animus toward the peace movement, and toward blacks. Although white workers generally enjoy a higher living standard today they are not economically or psychologically secure. They have no real future, they lack education and inner resources, and many people do look on them as inferiors. In other times and under other circumstances the ensuing bitterness could explode and overflow into rebellious and socially constructive

channels.

For reasons we need not explore here, that is obviously not the case today. Instead, as a form of compensation, they begin to look upon themselves as pillars of society, seeking to overcome the insufficiency of their lives through an identification with the most conservative myths and prejudices that make up the American way of life. These attitudes are reinforced by their union officials whose one source of dismay is that too many rank-and-filers are then enchanted by Wallace, Nixon and Buckley instead of Johnson, Humphrey and Daley. (4)

We need only substitute "Biden, Harris, and Rahm Emanuel" for "Johnson, Humphrey and Daley" to make Jacobson's analysis more current. The rest of the piece eviscerates arguments of intellectuals, especially Irving Howe and the "democratic left," who chastised youthful protesters while encouraging validation of the most dangerous "desperadoes"—those in the Democratic

We can't separate "the fight for democracy in unions — and society — from struggles against forms of injustice social movements emerge to fight."

Party. So much of the discussion is relevant today I can only encourage readers to read it for themselves. However, what is germane in this article to my analysis is Jacobson's explicit rejection of what was Benson's trajectory, the path of "older people who were radical or revolutionary in their youth but, having grown tired, disillusioned, and frustrated over the failure of independent socialist politics, have moved in an increasingly rightward direction, discovering en route all sorts of wondrous

things in liberal (and not so liberal) institutions and values.” (6)

The Jacobsons retained the WP and ISL ideals of revolutionary opposition to capitalism and communism, as well as the role of the working class in those struggles. One sees in *NP* through the years adumbration of the Third Camp even when the analysis isn’t presented as such. In contrast to the defense of socialist ideals in *NP*, Benson’s almost messianic belief in the solitary role of union democracy and democratized unions seems his own “mystical consolation” for the Third Camp.

Although he doesn’t identify it as such, Jacobson’s proposal to the young outlines the contours of the Third Camp, and it is noteworthy that this includes the fight for social justice as inseparable from the struggle for union democracy:

I propose: 1) that the young devote a considerable portion of their energies to building a new radical party in this country, completely independent of the two capitalist parties; 2) that the young reach out intelligently to the working class—from within the trade union movement and without—supporting their economic struggles and countering the conservative influences of the labor bureaucracy; 3) that they continue to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American troops from Indochina; 4) that they protest the monstrous mistreatment of the Black Panthers, the manner in which the past Democratic Administration tolerated and the present Nixon Administration encourages the extermination of the Panthers and the assaults on their organization; 5) that they fight for community control of the schools which, in New York City, means to wage a struggle against the reactionary Shanker leadership of the United Federation of Teachers, a leadership which appeals to the basest prejudices of its most backward members for support; 6) that they commit themselves to a consistent revolutionary struggle for

democracy—i.e. to socialism—with the realization that all forms of totalitarianism (Russian, Chinese or Cuban) are no less the enemy of socialism than capitalist imperialism. (9)

Much else *NP* has published, too many articles for me to name, elaborates the idea that union democracy and social justice are inseparable in the fight for socialism. Without realizing it, Benson himself explains why this is the case. Conceptualizing the new, historically unique configuration of economic and political arrangements in Russia as a new *social system*, which the WP called “bureaucratic collectivism,” and its symbiotic relationship with capitalism recentered the concept of capitalism as a social system, not only a set of property and political arrangements, about which Marx was clear. Forms of social oppression are embedded in capitalism (and other class societies), so there is no separating the fight for democracy in unions—and society—from struggles against racism, xenophobia, sexism, war, and the new forms of injustice social movements emerge to fight. We often see the natural affinity of social justice and economic issues when workers consider forming unions to protect their interests. Even the *New York Times* “gets” this connection, as seen in this letter to the workplace adviser in the “Business” section:

Before the pandemic, I worked in the outdoor adventure industry as a multi-day river guide. For many, it’s a dream job—living outside in beautiful places, adventuring on big whitewater. However, the rosy outside perspectives are underlain by the same plagues of the regular work force: unreliable schedules, cash tips, unpaid training, no benefits, unsafe working conditions, wage theft, racism, sexism, homophobia, fatphobia, etc.

What advice do you have for starting a union in a nontraditional workplace? There is excitement among the guides, but none are organizers.¹³

The stirrings of opposition to oppression

are often molecular, occurring without being apparent to those not closely involved—until resistance crystallizes in political actions, often protests and demonstrations. Arguments such as Benson’s that union reform must take up “class” demands first ignore much history, most recently the origins of the 2018 teacher walkouts in activists’ work in social movements outside of labor.¹⁴ Fusing social justice concerns with creating democratic unions is complex and difficult, a work in process that is never complete. But one key is learning how to cast struggles so they are seen as a function of workers’ self-interest, not allowing them to become competing demands for scarce resources.

Discussing how that can be done is urgent, but the starting point is taking up the challenge. In that regard, the pages of *NP* have much to teach us.

NOTES

1. Sam Roberts, “Herman Benson, Who Fought Union Corruption, Dies at 104,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/nyregion/herman-benson-who-fought-union-corruption-dies-at-104.html.
2. Documents of the International Socialists (U.S.) 1969-1986. www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/is-us/IS-documents/index.htm.
3. “The heart of the ‘third camp,’” *Workers’ Liberty*, May 9, 2012. www.workersliberty.org/story/2012/05/09/heart-%E2%80%9Cthird-camp%E2%80%9D.
4. Daniel Randall, “Herman Benson (1915-2020): No Socialism Without Democracy,” *New Politics*, July 17, 2020. [newpol.org/herman-benson-](http://newpol.org/herman-benson-1915-2020-no-socialism-without-democracy/)

1915-2020-no-socialism-without-democracy/.

5. Herman Benson, “1939: Soviets Invade Poland. Defensist? Imperialist?” *New Politics* (No. 62, Winter 2017). newpol.org/review/1939-soviets-invade-poland-defensist-imperialist/.

6. “The heart of the ‘third camp,’” *Workers’ Liberty*.

7. Herman Benson, “Real Unions and Unreal Unions: A Reply to Dan La Botz,” *New Politics*, July 11, 2013. newpol.org/real-unions-and-unreal-unions.

8. “The heart of the ‘third camp,’” *Workers’ Liberty*.

9. Articles in *New Politics* published in its first two decades are currently available online only in an archive digitized by Ron Unz. The editorial board is shifting this archive to the *New Politics* website. If you’ve read this endnote and you haven’t contributed to the current fund appeal, you can help us make this transition with a donation: www.newpol.org.

10. “Sober thoughts after inspiring years of union organizing,” *Union Democracy Review* (Issue 199, 3,5, April/May 2013).

11. Lois Weiner, “The Red State Walkouts,” *New Politics*, April 6, 2018. newpol.org/red-state-walkouts/.

12. In “The UFT Strike: A Blow Against Teacher Unionism,” *New Politics* (Winter 1968), 5-14, Steve Zeluck describes the considerable influence of opposition activists in the American Federation of Teachers. www.unz.com/print/NewPolitics-1968q1-00005/.

13. Roxane Gay, “Whitewater Unions, and a Toobin-Like Bathroom Mistake,” *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/10/30/business/nontraditional-union.html.

14. Erin Dyke and Brendan Muckian-Bates, “Social Movements Gave Rise to the ‘Teachers’ Revolt,’ Not Bernie,” *New Politics*, Nov. 6, 2019. newpol.org/social-movements-gave-rise-to-the-teachers-revolt-not-bernie/.

The Techniques of Justice

Orwell and Camus on a Hanging and the Guillotine

KRISTIAN WILLIAMS

GEORGE ORWELL ONCE IMAGINED “a remarkable anthology” consisting entirely “of pieces of writing describing executions.” He supposed, “There must be hundreds of them scattered through literature.” Without looking into the question, he could immediately cite examples from Zola, Thackeray, *A Tale of Two Cities*, “a letter or diary of Byron’s,” Arnold Bennett’s *Old Wives Tales*, a Jack London short story, “Plato’s account of the death of Socrates,” and “a great number of specimens in verse, for instance the old hanging ballads.”¹

Naturally Orwell would himself supply a worthy contribution to such a collection, with his autobiographical essay, “A Hanging.” That short piece recounts an execution in Burma, for which Orwell was present as part of his job in the police. The largest portion of the essay concerns the walk from the cells to the gallows, with the condemned man surrounded by guards. The fatal event is itself described but briefly and without drama. Then, a closing scene portrays the uncomfortable moments after the execution, the guards and police standing around, talking and drinking, clearly unsettled but trying not to act it. “Several people laughed,” he remembered, “— at what,

nobody seemed certain.”²

Recalling the incident later, Orwell remarked, “There was no question that everybody concerned knew this to be a dreadful, unnatural action.” This sentiment, he assumes, must be common among any who witness an execution, and its effect is apparent in the literature. “The thing that I think very striking is that no one, or no one

Camus and Orwell both understood that the justification for state violence depends on a sort of abstraction.

I can remember, ever writes of an execution *with approval*. The dominant note is always horror.”³ The exceptions—for example, the “newspapers ... smacking their chops over the bumping-off of wretched quislings” after the war—are almost certainly produced by people who “had not had to watch the actual deed.”⁴

Albert Camus made much the same point in his essay “Reflections on the Guillotine”: “The man who enjoys his coffee while reading that justice has been done would spit it out at the least detail.”⁵ Camus begins his essay by recalling the time that his father attended a public execution. It was the execution of a field hand who had “slaughtered a family of farmers” in Algiers, “including the children.”

KRISTIAN WILLIAMS is the author of *Between the Bullet and the Lie: Essays on Orwell, Resist Everything Except Temptation: The Anarchist Philosophy of Oscar Wilde, Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America, and American Methods: Torture and the Logic of Domination*.

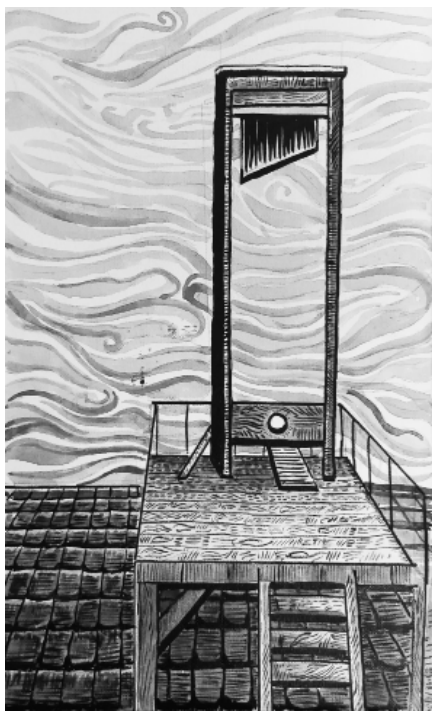
The elder Camus “was especially aroused by the murder of children,” and “thought that decapitation was too mild a punishment for such a monster.” And yet, to witness the actual event disturbed him greatly. “What he saw that morning he never told anyone. My mother related merely that he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit.”⁶

Camus and Orwell both understood that the justification for state violence depends on a sort of abstraction, of describing it in such a way as to not convey too specific an image of the actual event. In his essay “Politics and the English Language,” Orwell argued,

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. ... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: This is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: This is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: This is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.⁷

The moral outlook is almost Christian. We are all guilty.

Camus likewise thought that “officials and journalists ... have made up a sort of ritual language, reduced to stereotyped phrases.



Dana Morgenstein

Hence we read at breakfast time in a corner of the newspaper that the condemned ‘has paid his debt to society’ or that he has ‘atoned’ or that ‘at five a.m. justice was done.’”⁸

Orwell knew from close observation the awful reality that such phrases covered over, and his experience in the Imperial Police left him with “an indescribable loathing of the whole machinery of so-called justice.”⁹ It is the details, he saw, that mattered, and the force of “A Hanging” depends exactly on such details, even very minor ones. He tells, for instance, of the prisoner stepping around a puddle, a fact that pressed home “what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man”: “this man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive”—yet in a few minutes’ time, he would no longer be.¹⁰ It is the details that allow us to see the incident as it is—at scale, so to speak. They reduce its dramatic effect

and show it, neither as a great tragedy nor as an exemplary act of justice, but as a senseless piece of cruelty, banal and absurd.

Camus uses a similar technique in "The Guest." In that story, a teacher in a remote Algerian village is pressed into service transporting a prisoner, an Arab, to a nearby town where he is to be tried for murder. Only a couple of lines describe his crime, and literally one word—*prison*—stands for his punishment. Instead of the gruesome murder, the police investigation, or the trial, the story is concerned with the small, involuntary intimacies that the two men share during their brief time together—the eating, sleeping, pissing, and the walking.¹¹

In "The Guest," as in "A Hanging," the protagonist is haunted by a feeling of complicity with the machinery of punishment, and in the background of each story there looms the context of colonialism. Reflecting on his time in the police, Orwell later commented on the impossibility of justice when the authority responsible for administering it is not considered legitimate: "The thief whom we put in prison did not think of himself as a criminal justly punished, he thought of himself as the victim of a foreign conqueror. The thing that was done to him was merely a wanton meaningless cruelty."¹²

In "The Guest," there are rumors of a planned revolt among the Arabs, and the danger that the suspect's kinsmen will try to free him. At the end, the teacher refuses to hand over the prisoner. He walks him to a kind of crossroads and offers him a choice: One path leads to the village, and prison; the other leads to a tribe of nomads who will hide him—freedom, but at the price of exile. The Arab walks away, toward the town, to accept his punishment. The teacher returns home to find a threat: "You handed over our brother. You will pay for this."¹³ It is a perfect absurdist parable. One man, given the choice between prison and exile, chooses prison. The other finds himself conscripted over his objections, complicit despite his intentions, and

condemned without regard to his actions; the defining moment of choice ultimately makes no difference.

The moral outlook is almost Christian. We are all equally guilty. We share in the crime of the murderer, and we share in the crime of the society that punishes him.¹⁴ We can accept responsibly, as the murderer does when he chooses the path of judgment; or we can refuse it, as the schoolmaster does when he leaves the prisoner at the crossroads. But

Each of these pieces of writing is,
in its way, a kind of protest.

in either case, we are equally condemned.

Camus undoubtedly viewed this tale as a portrait of the human condition. But it can also be read as a critique of colonialism as a system destructive of human freedom and corrupting to all it touches. Orwell, as well, wrote about the difficulty of escaping the logic of colonialism once one has become enmeshed in it. Another essay reflecting on his time in the Imperial Police, "Shooting an Elephant," recalls an incident when, as a young officer, he was dispatched to respond to an elephant that had gone rogue and killed a villager. By the time Orwell finds the beast, it had calmed, but nevertheless a crowd had gathered, and feeling the pressure of their attention—"two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly"¹⁵—Orwell decides at last that he has no choice but to shoot the animal. Likewise, at the end of his novel *Burmese Days*, the protagonist John Flory, a white timber merchant in Burma, realizes that he is—psychologically speaking—alone and lost in a strange and hostile land; he is an alien to the Burmese, he has been disgraced in the eyes of the Europeans, and he has failed his only real friend, an Indian doctor. He depends

on the colonial system, which he despises, for everything. It has made him what he is, and he hates what he has become. In the end, his only escape is through suicide.¹⁶

Each of these pieces of writing is, in its way, a kind of protest. In terms of theme, Orwell's "Hanging" and Camus' "Guillotine" are explicitly critical of capital punishment; implicitly, they attack colonialism, as do *Burmese Days*, "The Guest," and "Shooting an Elephant." Underlying them all is an aesthetic concern with clarity and specificity, which turns out to have both an ethical and a political import. By their form and by their technique, these stories and essays privilege concrete detail over abstraction and personal experience over ideology, and so they also offer a defense of the individual—of individual judgment and individual dignity—as against the impersonal systems of power that constrain us and corrupt us.

NOTES

1. George Orwell, "As I Please (3 November 1944)," in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, volume 3: *As I Please, 1943 - 1945* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 267.
2. George Orwell, "A Hanging," in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, volume 1: *An Age Like This, 1920 - 1940* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 47.

3. George Orwell, "As I Please (3 November 1944)," 267.
4. George Orwell, "As I Please (3 November 1944)," 267-8.
5. Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 187.
6. Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," 175.
7. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, volume 4: *In Front of Your Nose*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 136.
8. Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," 176.
9. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harcourt, Inc., 1958), 146.
10. George Orwell, "A Hanging," 45.
11. Albert Camus, "The Guest," in *Exile and the Kingdom*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage International, 1991).
12. George Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier*, 147.
13. Albert Camus, "The Guest," 109.
14. "The victim, to be sure, is innocent. But can the society that is supposed to represent the victim lay claim to innocence? Is it not responsible, at least in part, for the crime it punishes so severely? ... Every society has the criminals it deserves." Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," 206.
15. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, volume 1: *An Age Like This, 1920 - 1940*, 239.
16. George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, in *Burmese Days, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Coming Up for Air* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

AN EXCHANGE

Community Schools: Progressive Reform or Privatization Trojan Horse?

Community Schools Will Help Unions and Education

DYLAN CRAIG

AS VARIOUS FORMS OF COMMUNITY schools gain ground throughout the country as a way to address the challenges faced by low-income school districts, they also provide a unique opportunity to create bottom-up, democratically controlled school governance, giving stakeholders a voice about allotment of funds and programs. Community schools aren't a panacea for inequality—education alone can't solve that. However we can rethink control and power in our school system by combining the renewed interest in community schools with two other promising developments in union negotiations—open bargaining and “bargaining for the common good”—together winning back the com-

munity control that was long fought for in communities of color.

Today's version of community schools promotes parent involvement and “wrap-around services” in the school, such as health care and counseling, based on specific community needs. The history of community schools actually highlights education unionism's past of alienating and disenfranchising communities of color.¹ The idea of community schools has been tried before to give power to marginalized communities within already existing public structures. Such was the case for the infamous struggle in 1968 in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of New York.² Seeing no progress in integration, the majority African American and Puerto Rican neighborhood decided to create a school where the community held power in the decision-making process, including hiring decisions. After the removal of teachers who were opposed to the community-control philosophy, the United Federation of Teachers disputed the legality of the firings, ultimately resulting in a strike, as the union claimed due process was not followed.

DYLAN CRAIG is a teacher in District of Columbia Public Schools and a member of the Washington Teachers Union. He has held leadership roles in two teachers unions and is active in organizing committees. His writing has appeared in *Maryland Matters*, the *DC Metro DSA's Washington Socialist*, and *EducationDive*. He holds master's degrees in English and in Teaching. @dylankeithcraig on Twitter.

The bitter strike, pitting marginalized communities who wanted a voice and self-determination against the city's powerful teachers union, had a lasting effect in supporting the view of education unions as only protecting the teachers and focusing on pay and tenure.³ As schools in communities of color produced poor results, unions were seen as keeping badly performing schools open with unqualified teachers. Proponents of neoliberalism have exploited this situation, notably in the 2012 Supreme Court case *Vergara v. California*, in which the Court ruled that "permanent employment" violates the rights of students. Moreover, education unions often continued to ignore the issue of a majority white teacher population in urban areas. As an attempt to gain a voice in the education process, many parents embraced market-based solutions that focused on "parent trigger laws" and "parent choice," where parents and students could apply to various schools, including charters, while poorly performing schools lost funding and enrollment or were transformed into charters if a petition got enough parent signatures.⁴ Actually, charter schools were originally envisioned as something similar to community schools, with a focus on teacher-run administrations, but were quickly co-opted by corporations and their political allies in both parties.⁵

The 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike challenged this history of antagonisms by organizing with community allies for contract demands that moved beyond pay and tenure. This form of organizing began to spread to other education unions, as contract negotiations took a new form.⁶ The term and idea for "Bargaining for the Common Good" was solidified in 2014, when Georgetown University's Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor hosted a conference by that name.⁷

Community schools are really an extension of the bargaining-for-the-common-good philosophy, and this is one of the reasons we see a reemergence of interest and support for

them. However, we can only turn them into truly democratic institutions if we implement a second change in contract negotiations: open bargaining, which allows all union and community members to join negotiations rather than bargaining in the usual manner of closed sessions reserved for the board, union negotiators, staffers, and lawyers. Like bargaining for the common good, demands are formed within the union and larger school community through various coalitions, but now the community and all union members can show up to the actual negotiating sessions, though voting rights are often still reserved to traditional parties. With open bargaining, union members and the public are aware of the negotiating process at every step. In the weakest forms of open bargaining, all union members and the public are allowed to attend negotiating sessions, but in the most democratic forms, public discussion is a regular feature and coalitions are formed to help draft and negotiate specific areas of the contract, all of which are then voted upon as a whole. Ideally, very little negotiating is done away from the public forum. Opponents of the process believe open bargaining makes it difficult to make strategic concessions and constrains productive conversations for the sake of public perception and fear of legal repercussions. But these complaints seem hollow when we consider that it should be up to the public to decide what is considered "productive conversation" and a "strategic concession," especially when dealing with public funds. Open bargaining is a process of expanding and vitalizing democracy, allowing stakeholders to play a role and feel a sense of ownership and say in their public institutions. It builds on the rationale that is leading many school districts to change to elected boards—democracy should be spread; power should go to those in the community that the institutions serve, not simply technocrats appointed by a central office. It can be a messy process, but it creates parent and community investment.

Today's proposals for community schools look much less radical than what was demanded by communities in the 1960s, as the focus is on adding nontraditional school facilities, such as health and community resources, with a limited focus on democratic community control. Still, advocates are pushing for more than just a rhetorical commitment to community input and partnerships, embodied by the "community school coordinator." For most proposals, including those outlined by the Coalition of Community Schools, a coordinator assesses the needs of the school and acts as a liaison among the school, community, parents, and resources that will be a part of the wrap-around services the school provides. The Coalition of Community Schools even describes this position as a "community organizer."⁸ If done well, this helps navigate the relationships necessary for a strong community school.

However, integrating community resources and pushing for more parent involvement will not necessarily translate to creating schools that fully serve students and communities as public institutions, where stakeholders feel heard, valued, and part of the resource allotment and development. This is done when the community school coordinator position moves into a community organizer role, using the methods of bargaining for the common good and the fully democratic form of open bargaining. The organizer could work with the unions as well as other stakeholders to coordinate demands. Each group of stakeholders may elect leaders or spokespeople to share and defend demands. Experts, such as those in the health field, would also be consulted in order to help with negotiations and service implementation.

Once the groups of stakeholders have decided their demands, they would present them to the other working groups and the community in sessions open to the public, where available funds, resources, and initiatives are discussed and debated. From the start, there would be transparency in funds and allot-

ment potentials that would be up for debate among all stakeholders, with proposals on funding allotments and program development that could be openly debated and developed further. While the process could get messy, debates could be prolonged, and tensions could build, in the end our schools could be transformed in a bottom-up democratic process that makes all feel a part of one of the most important public institutions in the community, while also creating an invaluable learning opportunity for students as they play a role in the governance of their own school.

Ideally, this discussion would lead to a finalized allotment of funds, and within a larger bureaucratic school system, these demands would go to the larger board and then be negotiated further, ideally in the same open-bargaining fashion. This may also include the entire community coming together to request additional funding from the larger school board, similar to what teachers unions and communities already do at budget hearings. Again, a very similar process to what was just outlined is already in place where unions use the open bargaining format for contract negotiations; it would just be a matter of bringing the process down to an even more local level.

Such public participation may avert another danger common in community school creation and education in high-poverty areas—that of privatization and predatory partnerships, including schools that partner with private organizations or universities to implement programs with little actual community oversight, or organizations dangling funds in front of the school if they agree to show "data" that the school is successful, thus providing more funds to a software company that capitalizes on student data collection and private information. One software vendor, inBloom, by the Gates Foundation, partnered with eight states and districts and collected extensive data before shutting down after parent and activist resistance to the data sharing.⁹

When these decisions have been made for schools, they have been made at the discre-

tion of administrators or politicians, often with vested interests, usually financial, and removed from community members, teachers, and students. While there is no way to promise these types of predatory partnerships would not be introduced during discussions, there would be community oversight to expose the harmful conditions and exploitative manners under which these partnerships operate, and the community could move toward more reciprocal community partnerships.

Even the ideal forms of community schools are not a panacea for the social and economic ills we face. No sort of education reform could solve these problems, even though reformers, politicians, and pundits often claim that education is “the great equalizer.” We need a vast redistribution of wealth, and social programs that address the inequalities of our economic and material realities. Community schools address nonacademic needs with which students come to school, but these problems have roots in capitalism and require larger systematic change. While I see the creation of the most radically democratic community schools as a step in the right direction, it is only a small step in the full redistribution of wealth and power, the rest being beyond the scope of this essay.

Still, we can use the systems for community schools currently being developed to create schools that are truly built *with* and *for* the community they serve and that become areas of resistance to exploitation. These methods can continue to grow as community schools move beyond areas of concentrated poverty and into every neighborhood, as most proponents of the design hope they will. Local unions and communities can build the solidarity to realize what was lost in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood, and through this creation, we will have stakehold-

ers who feel invested in the process and heard through democratic action, all working with the common goal of helping students and neighborhoods to the best of their abilities. These goals are ambitious, but the seeds are there, and it is what our students and communities deserve.

NOTES

1. Michelle Fine and Michael Fabricant, “What It Takes to Unite Teachers Unions and Communities of Color,” *The Nation*, 24 Sept. 24, 2014., www.thenation.com/article/archive/what-it-takes-unite-teachers-unions-and-communities-color/.
2. Mike Stivers, “Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Fifty Years Later,” *Jacobin*, 9 Dec. 9, 2018, jacobinmag.com/2018/09/ocean-hill-brownsville-strikes-1968-united-federation-teachers.
3. Bob Peterson, “Which Side Are You On?” *Rethinking Schools* (Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 1993), rethinkingschools.org/special-collections/which-side-are-you-on/.
4. Josh Cunningham., “Parent Trigger Laws in the States,” *National Conference of State Legislatures*, 15 Oct. 15, 2013, www.ncsl.org/research/education/state-parent-trigger-laws.aspx.
5. Stan Karp, “Charter Schools and the Future of Public Education,” *Rethinking Schools*, rethinkingschools.org/articles/charter-schools-and-the-future-of-public-education/.
6. Joseph A. McCartin, “Bargaining for the Common Good,” *Dissent Magazine*, Spring 2016, www.dissentmagazine.org/article/bargaining-common-good-community-union-alignment.
7. “Bargaining for the Common Good,” *Georgetown University Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor*, lwp.georgetown.edu/bcg/.
8. Coalition for Community Schools, “Community School Coordinator,” *Coalition for Community Schools*, www.communityschools.org/leadership/coordinator.aspx.
9. Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, “Inbloom Background,” *Parent Coalition for Student Privacy*, www.studentprivacymatters.org/background-of-inbloom/.

Community Schools and the Dangers of Ed Tech Privatization

JOHN ADAM KLYCZEK

BOTTOM-UP DEMOCRACY THROUGH community schools sounds like a great idea. However, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the federal legislation funding pre-K-12 schools that replaced “No Child Left Behind,” requires “full-service” community schools to incorporate public-private partnerships that facilitate “wrap-around services” managed by data analytics.¹ Consequently, ESSA incentivizes the corporatization of community schools through “surveillance capitalism.”² Although Dylan Craig believes “open bargaining” and “bargaining for the common good” can mitigate such privatized data surveillance, ESSA fundamentally structures community schools as vassals of corporate-government partnerships, with Big Tech wrap-around services, such as health care, crime prevention, and workforce planning, through Big Data.

Community Schools Are Charter Schools on Steroids

According to ESSA, “the term ‘full-service community schools’ means a public elementary school or secondary school that (A) participates in a community-based effort to

coordinate and integrate educational, developmental, family, health, and other comprehensive services through community-based organizations and public and private partnerships.”³ As public-private educational partnerships, community schools are essentially the same as charter schools, which are private corporations subsidized by public taxes.⁴ The only difference is community schools are required to facilitate “family, health, and other comprehensive services,” or “wrap-around services,” through public-private partnerships.

As Mr. Craig acknowledges, “charter schools were originally envisioned as something similar to community schools, ... but were quickly co-opted by corporations and their political allies in both parties.” Given ESSA’s mandates for “full-service” public-private partnerships, community schools are structured for corporatization similar to their charter school counterparts. In fact, community schools pose even greater threats of privatization because ESSA mandates not just academics through public-private partnerships, but also health care, crime prevention, workforce training, and other wrap-around services.⁵

It might sound like community schools are more democratic since they partner with community-based “stakeholders” to provide wrap-around services. However, these wrap-around services require public-private “pipeline” partnerships with business stakeholders bent on privatizing community schools by reducing them to clearing houses for corporate-government contracts.⁶ By requiring community schools to provide

JOHN ADAM KLYCZEK has an MA in English and has taught college rhetoric and research argumentation for over eight years. He is the author of *School World Order: The Technocratic Globalization of Corporatized Education* (TrineDay Books); and he is a contributor to *OpEdNews*, the *Dissident Voice*, the *Intrepid Report*, and the *Centre for Research on Globalization*.

wrap-around counseling through public-private partnerships with “community-based” businesses and other corporate stakeholders, ESSA’s “pipeline services” mandates will siphon public taxes into private companies that pipeline health care, crime-rehabilitation, and workforce-training services to community schools.⁷

Big Tech Wrap-Around with Big Data and Surveillance Capitalism

Privatization under the guise of community-based partnerships is pernicious enough. But it’s even worse when Big Tech dominates such public-private partnerships through a Big Data panopticon of “surveillance capitalism.”⁸ While oligarchic technocrats tout their data-tracking technologies as democratic instruments of “personalization” and “equity,”⁹ the track records of such tech barons demonstrate that “personalization” means data-mining consumers’ psychological profiles to target them with behavioral advertisements,¹⁰ and “equity” means trickle-down redistribution of resources to subsidize centralized social-engineering and workforce planning by corporate technocrats.¹¹

Although Mr. Craig hopes community schools can use “open bargaining” and “bargaining for the common good” to prevent corporate-government data-mining through “privatization and predatory partnerships,” these hopes are dashed by ESSA’s data-tracking requirements for community schools. ESSA stipulates community school pipelines must assess “the academic, physical, non-academic, health, mental health, and other needs of students, families, and community residents.” In addition, pipelines must record “annual measurements” of “outcomes” data. In other words, community schools are required to track data pertaining to the health, crime risk, and workforce readiness of community “stakeholders.”¹²

For example, according to the Rand Corporation, New York City Community Schools

“engage in strategic data collection and analysis ... conduct[ing] an annual assets and needs assessment of ... academic, health, social, and emotional needs.” Such “needs assessments” are “shared among all school partners through data inquiry and collaborative data review.”¹³ In turn, all the community schools’ public and private partners are authorized to surveil students’ psychometrics and biometrics to “personalize” corporate-government workforce training, health care, mental wellness care, and crime prevention.

Indeed, consider the public-private data-tracking at Richmond Community Schools in Michigan, where new COVID-19 hybrid-learning policies require students to “utilize Schoology and Microsoft Teams to access assignments, videos, and assessments and to submit homework.”

The Schoology platform is a subsidiary of Power Schools,¹⁵ which provides data analytics through tech partnerships with corporations such as Microsoft, Amazon Web Services, McGraw Hill, Cengage Learning, Carnegie Learning, and FIS Global. Additionally, Power Schools partners with digital ID companies such as identiMetrics, which provides “unified biometric ID management”; and Eyemetric Identity Systems, which “combine[s] 3D facial recognition technology with ... [an] automated alert system.” Power Schools also tracks medical data through partnerships with School Day, which analyzes “AI-enhanced ... real-time wellbeing data for schools, districts, and educators”; and EduHealth, which enables “school nurses to collect, track, and manage student ... health history and documents in a single button click.” Moreover, Power Schools flags “precrime” algorithms through partnerships with School Safety Manager, which “identif[ies] kids in distress and turn[s] around behavior that could become violent” through “threat assessment and ... tracking [that] keeps distress from growing to shootings and other violent acts.”¹⁶

This network of public-private “wrap-

around” partnerships between Richmond Community Schools, Schoology, and Power Schools is just the tip of the Big Data panopticon as the Gates Foundation exploits the COVID lockdown to “reimagine education” through a “Screen New Deal” that monetizes predictive learning analytics.¹⁷ To ensure ongoing success, the Gates-financed InnovateEDU has developed a post-COVID “Connector” app that pipelines student data from Google Classroom into Google’s Big-Query database, while InnovateEDU partners with Cortex,¹⁸ a learning-analytics platform linked to Learnsphere’s data-sharing repository modeled after InBloom.¹⁹

In the final equation, community school amalgamation of education, health care, criminal justice, and workforce planning into a singularity of corporate-government Big Data will usher in an American version of China’s dystopic Social Credit technocracy, which algorithmically dictates students’ access to schools, jobs, health care, transportation, housing, due process, and even food.²⁰

Bargaining for the Corporate Good

Mr. Craig believes community schools can avert corporate data-tracking through “open bargaining” and “bargaining for the common good.”

However, while bargaining for the common good attempts to level the negotiating table by dialoguing with all community-based stakeholders, working-class public stakeholders are pitted against well-funded corporate stakeholders such as data-analytics companies that capitalize on student data through partnerships with community schools.²¹ As a result, the lobbying efforts of well-financed corporate interests will hijack bargaining for the common good.

Mr. Craig contends open bargaining can mitigate the power brokering of corporate stakeholders by including the broader community in negotiations. However, as Mr. Craig admits, open negotiations do not neces-

sarily bear upon voting procedures, as “voting rights are often still reserved to traditional parties.” Despite open negotiations, the wider community is divided into separate interest groups that delegate voting authority to the representative “leaders” and “experts” who are privy to final deliberations at the “larger board” where binding votes are cast. In the end, open bargaining defers to hierarchical chains of special interests dominated by corporate interest groups.

Far from a “bottom-up democratic process,” open bargaining for the common good of community schools defaults to a top-down process: “Community school coordinators” pose as “community organizers” while lobbying for corporate stakeholders that buy off union leaders in order to harvest and monetize student data through public-private wrap-around pipelines.

NOTES

1. United States, *Every Student Succeeds Act*, Public Law 114-95, 114th Congress, S. 1177, Dec. 10, 2015, www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf.
2. Shoshana Zuboff, “Shoshana Zuboff on Surveillance Capitalism: VPRO Documentary,” *YouTube*, Dec. 20, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIXhnWUmmVw&feature=emb_title.
3. United States, *Every Student Succeeds Act*.
4. Joanna Smith and Priscilla Wohlstetter, “Understanding the Different Faces of Partnering: A Typology of Public-Private Partnerships,” *School Leadership and Management* (Vol. 26, No. 3, July 2006), www.researchgate.net/publication/228379968_Understanding_the_different_faces_of_partnering_A_typology_of_public-private_partnerships.
5. Partnership for the Future of Learning, “Community Schools in ESSA State Plans,” in *Community Schools Playbook*, Aug. 29, 2018, communityschools.futureforlearning.org/chapter-9.
6. Dave Guymon, “Public-Private Partnerships: The Real Future of Education,” *Edutopia*, June 17, 2014, www.edutopia.org/blog/public-private-partnerships-future-of-education-dave-guymon; Institute for Educational Leadership, “Coalition Funders,” *Coalition for Community Schools*, 2020, www.communityschools.org/about/funders.aspx; Suzie Boss, “Projects and Partnerships Build a

- Stronger Future,” *Edutopia*, Jan. 11, 2013, www.edutopia.org/blog/projects-partnerships-pbl-suzie-boss.
7. Joan Wasser Gish and Mary Walsh, “Brown Center Chalkboard Memo: Improving Student Achievement by Meeting Children’s Comprehensive Needs,” *Brookings Institute*, Dec. 12, 2016, www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2016/12/12/memo-improving-student-achievement-by-meeting-childrens-comprehensive-needs/; United States. *Every Student Succeeds Act*.
8. John Laidler, “High Tech Is Watching You,” *Harvard Gazette*, March 4, 2019, news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/03/harvard-professor-says-surveillance-capitalism-is-undermining-democracy/.
9. Mark Doumba, “The Great Reset Must Place Social Justice at Its Center,” *World Economic Forum*, July 29, 2020, www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/great-reset-must-place-social-justice-centre/; World Economic Forum, *The Great Reset*, 2020, www.weforum.org/great-reset; World Economic Forum, Saudi Aramco, Unilever, and Willis Towers Watson, “Whitepaper HR4.0: Shaping People Strategies in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” *World Economic Forum*, Dec. 2019, www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_NES_Whitepaper_HR4.0.pdf.
10. Kevin Granville, “Facebook and Cambridge Analytica: What You Need to Know as Fallout Widens,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/technology/facebook-cambridge-analytica-explained.html.
11. Arvind Krishna, “IBM CEO’s Letter to Congress on Racial Justice Reform,” *IBM*, June 8, 2020, www.ibm.com/blogs/policy/facial-recognition-sunset-racial-justice-reforms/; Edwin Black, *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America’s Most Powerful Corporation* (Random House, 2001).
12. United States, *Every Student Succeeds Act*.
13. William R. Johnston, et al., “Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative,” *RAND Corporation*, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR3200/RR3245/RAND_RR3245.pdf.
14. Richmond Community Schools, “Return to Learning Plan,” *Michigan Safe Start Plan: Michigan’s 2020 Return to School Roadmap*, 2020.
15. Schoology, “PowerSchool to Acquire Schoology, Creating the Most Comprehensive Unified Classroom Solution for K-12 Education,” *PowerSchool: Press Release*, Oct. 24, 2019, www.schoology.com/news/powerschool-schoology.
16. PowerSchool, “PowerSchool Partner Program,” *PowerSchool: Powering Brighter Futures*, 2020, www.powerschool.com/company/powerschool-partner-program/.
17. Naomi Klein, “Screen New Deal: Under Cover of Mass Death, Andrew Calls in the Billionaires to Build a Hi-Tech Dystopia,” *Intercept*, May 8, 2020, theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/.
18. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “To Provide Business Planning Consulting Support to InnovateEDU,” *How We Work: Grants Database*, April 2000, www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2020/04/INV-005811; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “To Support Availability of Awareness of Resources that Support Students with Disabilities During Distance Learning Due to COVID-19,” *How We Work: Grants Database*, May 2020, www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2020/05/INV-017840; InnovateEDU, “Projects,” 2019, www.innovateedunyc.org/projects.
- PR Newswire; “InnovateEDU Develops Free, Open-Source Data Extraction Tool for Google Classroom During COVID-19,” *Business Insider*, May 18, 2020, markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/innovateedu-develops-free-open-source-data-extraction-tool-for-google-classroom-during-covid-19-1029212457#.
19. The Hechinger Report, “Carnegie Mellon Project Revives in Bloom’s Student Data Dream: Privacy Controversy to Be Dodged by Not Storing Student Names, Addresses or Social Security Numbers,” *US News & World Report*, July 27, 2015, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/07/27/carnegie-mellon-project-revives-failed-inbloom-dream-to-store-analyze-student-data; “Explore: Data Repositories,” *Learnsphere: A Community Data Infrastructure to Support Learning Improvement Online*, 2018, learnsphere.org/explore.html.
20. “China Is Using Coronavirus to Boost Its Dystopian Social Credit System: Mess Up Your Travel History? You’ll Be Publicly Shamed for a Year,” *Wired Magazine*, March 3, 2020, www.wired.co.uk/article/china-social-credit-coronavirus; Charles Rollett, “The Odd Reality of Life under China’s All-Seeing Credit Score System,” *Wired Magazine*, June 5 2018, www.wired.co.uk/article/china-blacklist; Journeyman TV Foreign Correspondent, “Social Credit: China’s Digital Dystopia in the Making,” *YouTube*, Oct. 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evBzPwCdeHI&t=41s>; Wall Street Journal, “How China Is Using Artificial Intelligence in

Classrooms," *YouTube*, Oct. 1, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMLsHI8aV0g&feature=emb_title.
 21. Philadelphia, Penn., Office of the Mayor, "City Partners with IBM on New STEM Program in Community Schools," July 25, 2017, www.phila.gov/press-releases/community-schools/

city-partners-with-ibm-on-new-stem-program-in-community-schools/; Google, "How Mason City Community Schools Use Jamboards to Give All Students a Voice," *Google for Education*, edu.google.com/why-google/case-studies/mason-city-community-schools/.

Craig Responds

JOHN ADAM KLYCZEK'S PRIMARY apprehension to the idea of community schools seems to be the threat of Big Tech infiltrating the school system. Central to his argument is the language of "pipeline services" from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). For Klyczek, the pipeline is deterministic. While I strongly oppose the influence and control that tech companies have in my school's curriculum and beyond, I can't help but feel the reaction to community schools is a bit premature. While ESSA may very well have language that risks a privatized pipeline capitalizing on school data collection, it's important to keep in mind ESSA is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and there have been *eight such reauthorizations*, each with new language.¹ The language of "pipeline services," alongside language on community schools, did not exist before ESSA. Thus, it's not naive to assume the language may not *necessarily* survive the next reauthorization—especially given enough public pressure. If the language does survive, it does not mean it is the end of the fight.

This leads me to what is perhaps the most striking assumption in Klyczek's response: Union and community pressure is not just prone to but will *inevitably* succumb to corporate co-optation. Again, I find this reading deterministic and overly pessimistic. It is due to public pressure that the ESSA included language for community schools.² Teachers unions are a vital part of the labor

movement; their collective action and community allies are central to teachers union wins in large districts, like the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) struggle, which rallied community support in coalitions and persuaded nearly 90 percent of the union membership to vote to strike.³ CTU and the reform movement within teachers unions it sparked are a powerful reminder that the bitter collision between community and teachers in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike need not be our future. The parent involvement in school communities is often organized and ready to take on powerful entities, as I noted about the InBloom case. Now, if democratic control were to be gained in individual schools as I propose, local community members and unions could better organize around the issues that Klyczek discusses, potentially finding methods to meet the current data-reporting requirements in ways that serve the individual school and not tech oligarchs. If a suitable method cannot be found, communities can fight to change the language.

Of course, in order to provide wrap-around services, private partnerships will be a part of community schools, as, sadly, it is difficult to find social services outside of the private system under neoliberalism. Still, this is not a reason to reject a democratic form of community schools that can provide essential private services to communities, especially when it could be under the watch of an involved community and union.

Klyczek has flagged very important pit-

falls that can occur as we move toward more democratic schools that serve communities. Still, I see the seeds of democracy forming even in challenging circumstances, and I think it is important for the left to focus on positive alternatives and pathways, discussing current and past initiatives that can be scrapped or pushed to transform the free society that we wish to see. This is especially true for how the left can reimagine unions and education and move toward a bottom-up and sustainable system.

NOTES

1. New America, "ESSA," www.newamerica.org/education-policy/topics/federal-education-legislation-budget/federal-education-legislation/essa/.
2. Coalition for Community Schools, "ESEA Reauthorization," *Coalition for Community Schools - Because Every Child Deserves Every Chance*, www.communityschools.org/policy_advocacy/esea_reauthorization.aspx.
3. Noreen Ahmed-Ullah and Joel Hood, "CTU: Nearly 90 Percent of Teachers Vote to Authorize Strike," *Chicagotribune.com*, June 11, 2012, www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2012-06-11-chi-ctu-chicago-teachers-vote-to-authorize-strike-20120611-story.html.

Visit *New Politics* on the Internet at www.newpol.org

A Leftist Perspective on China's Environmental Destruction

AU LOONG-YU

AS “PART OF CHINA,” WE Hong Kongers have seen how China's economic growth has contributed to the degradation of its environment. To be fair, Hong Kong's economic takeoff had already harmed its environment before China took over the city. We witnessed all our beautiful beaches becoming polluted. The relocation of Hong Kong's factories to Guangdong since the 1990s, instead of alleviating pollution, has, ironically, further exacerbated the city's environmental destruction. For decades thick clouds of smog have hung over us as Guangdong became a great export-processing zone. The sky only became cleaner, again ironically, when the pandemic swept across the nation, shutting down many factories.

Beijing and its supporters around the globe have always claimed that China's kind of “socialism,” or whatever label one would prefer, gives it a strong advantage of governmental control over the nation and hence

China's Engine of Environmental Collapse

RICHARD SMITH
Pluto Press, 2020, 320 pp.

efficiency in overcoming disasters such as economic crises or pandemics. Even if this theory can be empirically proven, the question remains, at what cost?

This is the question Richard Smith tries to solve in his new book *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*. The book gives an overview of the depth of China's environmental disasters.

In 2018, China's carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions were nearly as great as the combined amount from the five next-largest emitters (the United States, India, Russia, Japan, and Germany). Yet China's population was only 68 percent as large as the total population of those five countries, and its gross domestic product was just 32 percent as large as their combined GDP. The planet cannot be saved from cooking itself without significantly cutting China's emissions.

Smith quotes climate scientists who published new research last year showing that, based on present trends, “Global warming is going to ‘all but erase’ Shanghai, Shenzhen, and ‘most of the world's great coastal cities by 2050’—barely thirty years from now.”

Sweatshop of the Waterworld?

Waterworld, the 1995 post-apocalyptic movie, depicted a world totally submerged under the sea after the melting of the polar ice cap. When the film was released, climate skeptics saw it as just another science fiction movie.

AU LOONG-YU is a labor campaigner and writer based in Hong Kong. He was one of the founders of Globalization Monitor, which supports labor and environmental struggles in mainland China. He left GM in 2010 to work full time on researching and writing about China. He has written two books: *China's Rise: Strength and Fragility* (Merlin Press, 2012) and *Hong Kong in Revolt* (Pluto Press, 2020).

Meanwhile no one believed that China would soon emerge as the sweatshop of the world and as such would become an important part of the main engine of global emissions, great enough to bring about a real waterworld in the not too distant future.

Behind the rise of China is first and foremost an obsessive drive toward more

The planet cannot be saved
from cooking itself without
significantly cutting China's
emissions.

industrialization. In forty years, the party-state has turned a peasant nation into an increasingly urban one. The urban population now accounts for more than half the country's total, and China has become the second largest economy in the world. Without China's sweatshops, Americans would find it hard to acquire an affordable iPhone.

China's Engine is impressive for the vast amount of empirical evidence it contains. But a reader may also be saddened, as I was, to learn how grave the crisis in China is today. For a country the size of China, industrializing is in itself a historic event, but that became catastrophic when done at breakneck speed. Smith tells us,

In 1990, China's share of the world's manufacturing output by value was just 2.4 percent. By 2006 this had risen to more than 12 percent, and to nearly 25 percent by 2015. By 2015 China produced 80 percent of the world's air-conditioners, 70 percent of its smartphones, and 60 percent of its shoes, while accounting for 43 percent of global clothing exports. China became the world's largest exporter in 2009, overtaking Germany, and world's largest manufacturer in 2015, ending America's 110-year run at the top. Its export indus-

tries now produce everything from basic consumer goods to computers, cars, and components for Boeing aircraft. In 1980 China's per capita GDP was just \$250, less than that of Pakistan. By 2014, total GDP had surpassed Japan to rank second behind the U.S.

China's rising consumption and its rapid industrialization feed into one another, with little regard to the impact on resources. Smith quotes a 2011 study by the Earth Policy Institute at Columbia University that calculated that

If the Chinese economy were to keep growing by around 8 percent per year, average per capita consumption would reach current U.S. levels by around 2035. But to provide the natural resources for China's 1.4 billion people to consume on a per capita basis like 330 million Americans consume today, the Chinese—currently 18.5 percent of the world's population—would consume as much oil as the entire world consumes today. It would also consume more than 60 percent of other critical resources.

It does not require special talent to envisage that such a drain on resources will necessarily destroy the fragile ecological balances of our planet. Smith reminds us that

China's cumulative emissions between 1965 and 2018 are now more than two-thirds those of the U.S., and according to one assessment, based on present trends 'China will be responsible for the most atmospheric carbon dioxide in less than 20 years.' The atmosphere doesn't care about per capita emissions, only total atmospheric CO₂ concentrations. As the world's largest emitter by far—accounting for 30 percent of total global emissions, against 15 percent for the U.S., 10 percent for the EU, and 7 percent for India—"socialist" China is by far the leading driver of planetary climate collapse.

Take the car industry as an example. Forty years ago most Chinese workers and

even lower-ranking officials rode bicycles to work. I still remember the spectacular views of unending and gigantic streams of cyclists riding through the busiest roads in Beijing when I first visited there in 1983. In less than two decades, the Chinese Communist Party demolished most of the bicycle lanes in the cities to make way to motor cars. When “reform and opening” began in the early 1980s, China’s car industry was negligible. By 2017, China was producing 25 million cars per year and another four million commercial vehicles. Today China has more registered vehicles on the road than the United States. The consequence: “In 2015 the government reported that 31 percent of Beijing’s smog came from motor vehicles, 22 percent from burning coal, 18 percent from industrial production, and 14 percent from construction dust.”

Smith devotes the whole of Chapter 4 to a report on how the rise of Chinese manufacturing has polluted China’s water, soil, and food: “The industries that are most responsible for this disaster are mining and chemicals. Of all the dirty industries that the West shipped to China in the 1990s, chemicals were the worst, and by the 2000s China had become the largest manufacturer of industrial chemicals.”

A big portion of these chemicals ended up in the food offered to Chinese people as well:

Chinese netizens joke that the food safety scandals have taught people a lot about chemistry. As one put it, “We learned of paraffin from toxic rice, learned of dichlorvos [an insecticide] from hams, learned of Sudan Red [a dye] from salted duck eggs and chili sauce, learned of formaldehyde from hotpot, learned of sulphur from tremella [jelly fungus], and ... melamine from Sanlu brand milk.”

Labor and Environment

One of the strengths of *Chinese Engine* is that it touches, although briefly, on how work-

ing people and their workplaces are directly affected by the degradation of the environment. Environmental protection in China has already gone beyond the phase where it is mainly a concern of the rising middle class, as common urban folk are now also getting involved whenever they are annoyed by polluting government projects such as incinerators and chemical plants. But the Chinese environmental protection community is rarely concerned about workplace pollution, and slum areas where migrant workers live are often without clean water and air. The book reminds us again how the two issues of environment and labor go hand in hand. Chapter 2 has a section on workplace deaths, which mentions that

workers are injured, or suffer from silicosis, chemical poisoning, cancers, and other industrially induced diseases. ... Chinese health authorities and researchers say that around 23 million are suffering and dying from silicosis, many of them the construction workers who drilled the tunnels and built the foundations of China’s cities and infrastructure with little or no safety equipment, sacrificing their lives to build and overbuild the country at “China speed.” This compares with 11.5 million silicosis-impaired workers in India, 2 million in the United States and 1.7 million in Europe.

This is confirmed by certain labor non-governmental organizations’ studies that are

Behind the rise of China is first and foremost an obsessive drive toward more industrialization.

designed to raise awareness among workers and the public about the subject. Many industrial actions have been centered around

these issues. A *China Labor Support Network* unpublished report of 2016 reminded us that

by the end of 2012, occupational disease hazards existed at around 12 million enterprises across the whole country and around 150 million people were exposed to occupational hazards. ... By the end of 2014, the country had a reported total of 863,600 occupational disease cases, of which 777,200 were reported pneumoconiosis cases, 53,700 were occupational poisoning cases including 26,300 acute occupational poisoning cases and 27,300 chronic occupational poisoning cases.

In 2019 the Hong Kong-based *Globalization Monitor* surveyed 651 Chinese workers about the pollution they had observed in their living and working environments. The migrant workers were living and working in five cities across four provinces. It found that

- “20 percent of all workers said that the air around where they were living was either polluted or very polluted.
- 34 percent of workers said that they did not have access to clean water where they were living.
- 27 percent of workers reported air pollution in the workplace, and many described experiencing adverse effects related to the polluted environment.”

Hasn't the Regime Done a Lot for the Environment?

One of Beijing's major arguments in defense of its “rights to development” (hence the “right to emissions”) is that although China is now the country with the most emissions, per capita they are still a fraction of those of the United States. This argument is problematic, not only because it quietly smuggles in its logic of a race to the bottom in relation to emissions (why always compare oneself with the worst practices instead of the best?) but also because it ignores the fact that China's per capita emissions have more than tripled between 1990 and 2013. China does need

development for its poorest population, but it does not necessarily have to be at the price of tripling per capita emissions. This is because China's per capita resource consumption has

Without China's sweatshops,
Americans would find it hard to
acquire an affordable iPhone.

also risen sharply, reaching 1.62 times the world average in 2008. Again, this kind of “per capita” statistic could be misleading if taken out of context. Let us not forget that while the rich enjoy extravagant lives, China has 600 million people with a monthly income of 1,000 renminbi, as we learned from our Premier Li Keqiang last May. This is more than 40 percent of the Chinese population. The two social strata emit very different amounts of CO₂, obviously.

China's state-led growth also means that when it decided to invest in certain industries, funds would immediately flow to them. The same is true of renewable energy. The 2005 Renewable Energy Law stipulated that renewable energy should account for 20 percent by 2020 (with non-hydropower renewable generation to account for 1 percent of all grid-connected electricity by 2010 and 3 percent by 2020). According to Smith, by 2018 the share of renewables was increased to 26 percent, which exceeded the target. China has invested more money in renewable energy and electric vehicles than the rest of the world combined. The problem, however, is that among renewables, it was hydropower that dominated, and the dams that hydropower rely on are not so environmentally friendly. On top of this, since solar and wind power have irregularity problems, they always need fossil fuel plants as backup, and in China the abundance of coal makes coal-powered plants

a favorable choice for local governments. The choice here is not just a technical choice however. Smith tells us,

China's political economy presents additional problems due to the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the economy, the nature of intra-bureaucratic competition in this system, and the strong preference of local officials for locally available and reliable coal over often distantly produced renewables with uncertain reliability and price. Consequently, even when solar and wind power are available, many local officials and SOE [state-owned enterprises] bosses in China prefer not to rely on it. And ... Beijing generally cannot compel its subordinates in the localities to adopt renewables over fossil fuels.

That is also why

even out in Xinjiang, which has the most installed wind power in the country, the bulk of electricity is supplied by coal-fired plants. Given the ready availability and cheapness of coal, given its 24/7 reliability, and given the lack of electricity storage or the means to compensate for fluctuations via market trading, Xinjiang's resource-intensive industries such as mining ... prefer to rely on predictable and stable coal power and "export" their wind and solar power.

The result of the competition to use coal-powered plants locally while exporting renewable energy to other provinces is that much of the electricity produced fails to reach its destination. And some of the electricity generated is without any grid connection—local authorities' investment in renewables is often driven by the sole aim of getting subsidies from the central government, with little regard to whether the electricity generated is properly transmitted and consumed.

Another example of the abuse of the word "renewable" is the electric car solution. Beijing planned to phase out fossil fuel cars while phasing in electric cars to solve urban pollution. Elon Musk opened a Tesla factory

in Shanghai to tap into the market. But where does the electricity come from? It mostly comes from none other than coal-powered plants.

Smith worries that if China continues its path of "development," and continues to double or triple its GDP, then its CO₂ emission is also set to double or triple. Yet as far as China is concerned, there is not much leeway left to emit more CO₂ into the air:

The UN IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] calculated in 2013 that if we're to keep global warming below 2° C, humanity must not add more than 880 gigatons of CO₂ emissions to the atmosphere before 2050. Collectively, we've already used up more than half of that "carbon budget" leaving us a remaining budget of just 349 gigatons. Scientists say that if China's planned coal bases come on-stream, its CO₂ emissions will soar and China will devour the budget for the entire world by 2050—and doom the climate.

The Peculiarity of the Chinese Regime

Smith heavily criticizes China's performance in cutting emissions, placing China's policies within the indictment of global capitalism, of which China is a part. The title of the first chapter suggests this: "The 'China Price': Police State Capitalism and the Great Acceleration of Global Capitalism." Global capitalism's triumph over working people all around the world in the past several decades has been partially underpinned by China's "police state capitalism": China's "dramatic cost reductions is made possible by the provision of vast numbers of semi-coerced ultra-cheap workers to power light manufacturing for export—kept cheap, at least up to the mid-2000s, by the police-state-led militarization of employment in the export zones, including the suppression of worker resistance and unionization efforts."

It is global capitalism that is responsible for accelerating environmental destruction.

Consumerism has taken a new form in what the author calls, “disposable workers producing disposable products for a disposable world.” This is reflected in what Smith calls “trashion fashion,” where the number of fashion seasons increased from two a year in the 1960s to one hundred “micro-seasons” today. But this is impossible without the input of China. The garment industry, in which China is a big exporter, is one of the best manifestations of such absurdity. Today the world consumes nearly three times as much fabric per capita as in 1950, primarily thanks to China.

The sudden availability of such a huge pool of ultra-cheap workers also spurred a minor industrial revolution, enabling producers to annihilate most of the remaining categories of durable goods and replace them with cheaper, disposable alternatives. With the disposables revolution, local tailors and alteration shops, shoe repair shops, appliance repair shops, television [repairers], furniture restorers, re-upholsterers, and the like all but vanished in the West as it became cheaper to toss and replace than repair. This in turn spurred an unprecedented acceleration of global natural resource plunder.

The \$2.5 trillion global clothing and footwear industry is responsible for 8 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. It uses so much water that “in Central Asia the Aral Sea has nearly disappeared because cotton farmers have diverted the rivers that used to fill it.”

The discussion of China’s role leads us back to the question that Smith asks in the introduction: “Why can’t China’s ferociously authoritarian government suppress pollution from its own industries?” According to the author, this is because China’s existing “bureaucratic collectivism” forbids it. In discussing the above-mentioned “fragmentation and compartmentalization of the economy, the intra-bureaucratic competition,” Smith goes on to explain,

This book presents a Marxist “mode of

production” theorization of China’s bureaucratic-collectivist political economy, its class structure, surplus extraction relations, its drivers, contradictions, and tendencies in which the foregoing policies and practices can be understood as built into, rational, and even necessary for ruling-class reproduction in this system. I argue that the Stalinist bureaucratic-collectivist system established by Mao Zedong, and then modified 30 years later with Deng Xiaoping’s marriage of capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism, is driven in the main by statist-nationalist extra-economic drivers that are at least as powerful, if not more powerful than the market drivers of capitalism.

He further elaborates this idea in the section “China’s Hyper-Growth Drivers” (Chapter 5) where he says, “Capitalist economies are driven by a single maximand: Profit. China’s statist-bureaucratic mode of production is driven by a different maximand: Maintaining the security, power, and wealth of the party bureaucracy. . . . Central planning replaces market competition’s role in shaping economic development and prioritizing and funding desired industries.”

He then identifies three drivers of this bureaucratic collectivism: 1) maximizing economic growth and self-sufficient industrialization, 2) maximizing employment generation, and 3) maximizing consumption and consumerism.

The strength of this chapter is that it provides a vivid analysis of the mechanisms of bureaucratic collectivism, interweaving the three drivers with the peculiarities of the Chinese bureaucracy and arriving at the conclusion that China under this regime will necessarily continue its trajectory of state-led growth with no regard for the consequence of environmental collapse.

One cannot fully understand the bureaucratic regime without understanding the word *guanxi*. Chapter 6 deals with *guanxi*, or “connections.” But this English translation does not fully convey the Chinese meaning. The

Chinese have a motto which literally says, “if you have *guanxi* then everything is *mei-guanxi* (If you have connections then everything will be fine).” This kind of clientelism is not unique to China, but the gigantic scale of the Chinese version is, to the extent that it has not only permeated within the state, but also across the whole of society. In Mao’s era the way that common people lived often relied on what kind of *guanxi* they possessed. In the post-Mao era *guanxi* may take new forms, but in substance it has become even more important. *Guanxi* subjects the country’s laws, the party’s charter, and governments’ regulations to its own hegemony, from top to the bottom. This is also what is causing the gigantic scale of corruption. In my view, this is also promoting huge centrifugal forces within the ranks of the government and the party.

However, there are questions about the thesis of bureaucratic collectivism that remain to be clarified. It is not very clear whether this regime as a whole is a version of capitalism or not. If China’s statist-bureaucratic mode of production is driven by a maximand other than profit, then does that suggest it is a distinctive mode of production other than capitalism? If it is a mixture of capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism, then what are their respective weights in the economy?

I have doubts about this theory because it greatly underestimates the significance of the private sector, which now accounts for more than half of the Chinese GDP. Even if the state controls the commanding heights of the economy, more than half of the economy is governed by market mechanisms. How are we going to factor in the private sector without jeopardizing the analytical value of the theory?

Even in the state sector, while it is true that the top command can make countless plans and investments to boost old and new industries, disregarding the profit imperative, once production begins, profitability is still one of the main criteria. Central planning does exist, but it has shrunk greatly compared

to Mao’s era, and certain market mechanisms have been introduced to the state sector, especially at the provincial and local level. The fact that many zombie state enterprises made no profit at all does not nullify profitability as a measure when evaluating their performance. Yes, the regime may not be able to solve the profitability issue fully at home, but that is precisely one of the incentives for China to export its problems, that is, to

China’s rising consumption and its rapid industrialization feed into one another, with little regard to the impact on resources.

export its superfluous capital, hence the great outflow of foreign direct investment (FDI), followed by the Belt and Road Initiative. This FDI will be deployed in the pursuit of both targets: the Chinese state’s expansionist ambition and profitability. Mao’s China never had that option.

A second lack of clarity concerning the bureaucratic-collectivist thesis is that it suggests continuity between Mao’s and post-Mao China, with no mention at all about a rupture between the two periods. In contrast, I argue that there *is* a rupture, summarized by a popular saying in the 1980s and 1990s among not only diehard Stalinists but also state sector workers: “We strived so hard for decades but woke up from a sleep only to find the country has regressed back to the pre-revolution era.” Mao’s China suffered from underinvestment and underproduction, while the post-Mao era faces the opposite scenario. In the former case, the bureaucracy did expropriate the working people collectively (I am skeptical about Mao’s China being a “deformed worker state”), but it was in the form of use value; the

bureaucracy had no way to accumulate their wealth in the form of exchange value. In the latter case, the bureaucracy now is well known for owning overseas bank accounts. Mao's regime relied solely on administrative coercion to whip up productivity, which proved to be unsustainable and hence was replaced by a leap forward to capitalism. Another incentive drove party leaders to join the club of global

China has more registered vehicles on the road than the United States.

capitalism: Only with a full return to private property could they pass their wealth to their children. In order to do that, the party had to brutally repress those who demanded democracy and the punishing of corrupt officials. The rupture point was precisely the moment of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. Only from then did China's takeoff (both in terms of the capitalist turn and of industrial takeoff) begin. In order to do this, Deng and his successors had to bury the old economic order, or at least major elements of it. A rupture does exist and this needs to be explained.

Despite certain theoretical ambiguities, the book is still valuable for readers. It not only gives us a reliable overview of how and why the Chinese regime necessarily destroys the environment but also points out that China's "authoritarian advantage" (as argued by some) is not really the future. Smith asks repeatedly, if Xi Jinping is so powerful, why can't he just ram through the transition to renewables and solve the fossil fuel problems? Smith's answer is that he can't because "for

all his nominal authority, in reality power is shared widely throughout the 90-million-member party. Beijing can't systematically enforce its writ against resistance from below because it can't systematically fire insubordinate bureaucrats."

Studies of bureaucracy have long showed that subordinate bureaucrats are far from powerless. The emperor can kill any mandarin at will, but he needs his bureaucracy to carry out his orders. Being so remote from real lives, the great emperor is easily fooled by high or low bureaucrats collectively, even sometimes becoming the prisoner of his subordinates. This kind of thing happened often throughout the history of Imperial China. For instance, it was said that Emperor Daoguang of the Qing dynasty complained to his minister about the high price of the eggs he ate. "Five taels of silver per egg, how expensive!" The minister knew that he could not tell the truth about how corrupt the emperor's kitchen had long been, and that one egg cost no more than a very tiny fraction of one tael of silver, so he only replied, "Oh yes, therefore I never eat eggs." If the emperor did not even know the rough price of the eggs he devoured daily, how could one expect him to know the real national situation? The present pandemic has already proved the impotence of the party-state in stopping the COVID-19 virus from first spreading in Wuhan and then nationally. Increasingly the impotent bureaucracy and their chief become a problem, not a solution, for the crisis-ridden country. The Chinese pseudo-emperor and his bureaucracy are simultaneously strong and impotent. The next time someone talks about China's "authoritarian advantages," we need to remind ourselves that we must simultaneously grasp the thesis and antithesis of this same bureaucracy.

Helen Keller's Socialism

KEITH ROSENTHAL

"The seeds of socialism are being scattered far and wide, and the power does not exist in the world which can prevent their germination."

—HELEN KELLER

"There is a pertinence and connection between [Helen's politics and] our current historical moment (even one hundred years later). She has a lot of things to say to us. ... She had belief in the power of the young to move us a few steps closer to the kind of world we'd like to live in. So I hope this film speaks to new generations of activists and gives them some nutrition for the good fight."

—JOHN GIANVITO, Q & A with the director, *Her Socialist Smile* (2020)

A DIRECTOR WOULD NORMALLY BALK at the prospect of making a movie about an historical subject on whom there is an extreme dearth of extant audio or visual material. In fact, director John Gianvito did precisely that twenty years ago when he first began exploring the possibility of making a movie on the under-appreciated socialist politics of Helen Keller. Gianvito had originally discovered Keller's radical political history within the writings of the influential "people's historian," Howard Zinn, about whom Gianvito would later make an award-winning documentary (*Profit Motive and the*

Whispering Mind, 2007).

Unfortunately for Gianvito, the primary medium by which Keller (who was blind and deaf) communicated her voluminous thoughts was, of course, that of the written rather than aural or visual word. Additionally, much of Keller's personal archive of photographic and recorded content was destroyed over the years in a series of tragedies (a house fire in 1946 and the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001).

Recently, however, Gianvito decided to revisit the project. The renewed popularity of socialist ideas following the 2008 global crisis of financial capitalism, the rise of the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movements, the historic campaigns of Bernie Sanders within the Democratic Party primaries, and the meteoric growth of Democratic Socialists of America—all these signs pointed to a revived relevance of socialism in the United States.

Her Socialist Smile

DIRECTED BY JOHN GIANVITO
Traveling Light, 2020.

KEITH ROSENTHAL is the editor of *Capitalism and Disability* (Haymarket Books, 2019), and the author of "The Politics of Helen Keller" (*International Socialist Review*, No. 96, 2015) and "Disability and the Russian Revolution" (*International Socialist Review*, No. 102, 2016).

In this light, Gianvito adopted a different conception of the Keller vehicle. The scarcity of primary audio and visual source material was inescapable, Gianvito recognized; but perhaps this was quite metaphorically fitting for a subject who made use of neither the sense of sight nor sound.

The resultant, imaginative *oeuvre* is the documentary *Her Socialist Smile* (2020), which recently received a limited run through the 58th New York Film Festival (held entirely online this year due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic). The 1 hour, 33 minute movie is an interesting bricolage of white text against a black background; an eclectic selection of thematic music; scenes of nature in states of change and at rest; topical clips from newsreel and other secondary historical sources; professional narration and voice acting performed by Carolyn Forché; and the rare gem offering firsthand recordings and photographs of Keller speaking, writing, working, and playing.

All of this makes the documentary appear as an unlikely combination of worlds. With its text-on-screen format overlaid by musical and narrative accompaniment, one experiences the anachronistic universe of silent film; its interspersed shots of icicles melting in springtime or a slug making a herculean pilgrimage across

Much of Keller's personal archive of photographic and recorded content was destroyed over the years in a series of tragedies.

the face of a boulder strike one as eminently modernist in form.

This latter aspect of the movie may not be quite so eagerly met by those whose primary attraction to the title stems from a desire to learn more about Keller's socialist thought.

There are odd stretches of long minutes in which on-screen bees pollinate flowers and flies buzz around an animal carcass. There is also an odd exception to form when the viewer is presented with the lone instance of political analysis, not by an interviewee discussing Keller's politics, the various U.S. social movements of which she was a part, or the complexities of disability political theory in Keller's time and now. Rather, the movie is given over to a four-minute clip of Noam Chomsky speaking at an event in 1989 on the ideological repercussions of the Cold War and the differences between the "opportunistic ... Leninism" of the 1917 Bolshevik "coup" in Russia (an event which Keller, incidentally, viewed as a revolutionary beacon of socialist hope to the world) and the "mainstream Marxist movement" represented by the German Social-Democratic Party and the likes of Anton Pannekoek.

However, leaving aside questions of appropriate analyses of the social nature of Russia over the seventy-plus years between workers' revolution and "the fall of Communism," the central political content of *Her Socialist Smile* is both inspiring and edifying. Keller lived during the tumultuous years spanning 1880 to 1968; she identified as a socialist for sixty of those years, and was heavily involved in all of the major socialist and radical movements and organizations in the United States for roughly fifteen of those years, beginning in 1908 when she joined the Socialist Party.

Throughout this period she participated in protests for women's equality and Black freedom. She organized in solidarity with workers strikes and anti-imperialist initiatives. She toured and gave speeches on behalf of the Socialist Party of America and the Industrial Workers of the World. She offered her prestige to movements affiliated with the American Communist Party. She supported the struggle against nuclear weapons and the anti-communism of Cold War McCarthyism. She wrote prolifically on the topic of social

revolution, workers' power, socialist strategy, the injuries of economic inequality, the violence and opposition to democracy of the capitalist class, the oppression of the disabled

With its text-on-screen format overlaid by musical and narrative accompaniment, one experiences the anachronistic universe of silent film.

and the economically marginalized, and the hope of a society reimagined around the principle that "the welfare of each is bound up with the welfare of all."

Gianvito provides us with a taste of this all—a taste of Keller's political genius. There

are certainly elements of the documentary that are wanting. For instance, Gianvito inexplicably leaves out any discussion of Keller's association with the anti-colonial movements of the 1940s and 1950s; the concomitant Non-Aligned Movement, whose leading figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Josip Tito, drew the keen interest of Keller; or the affection with which Keller regarded Henry Wallace's 1948 Progressive Party campaign for U.S. president. Further, Gianvito's documentary does not include any analysis of the politics of disability, which were of course integral to Keller's lifework.

Nonetheless, *Her Socialist Smile* is a welcome contribution to the contemporary proliferation of socialist-educational materials. If the movie does nothing more than whet the audience's appetite for more of Keller's politics, and socialism in general, then it can be considered a great success.

Please ask your librarian to subscribe to *New Politics*.

Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* The Occlusion of Political Economy

STEPHEN STEINBERG

ISABEL WILKERSON IS BY TRADE a journalist and a storyteller. In her previous book, which garnered scores of awards, she traced the Great Migration of Blacks escaping the yoke of oppression in the South to less perilous, though still fraught, lives in Northern cities. She narrates this history through the lives of three people, in over 600 pages, perhaps a record for what Clifford Geertz coined “thick description.”

Tomes have been written by historians and sociologists documenting the Great Migration, but none with a riveting title like *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which conveys the human ramifications and drama of this turning point in African American history. With her genius for storytelling, Wilkerson narrated “the untold story” of the Great Migration.

In her sequel, *Caste*, Wilkerson breaks out of the lexical stranglehold associated with the term “race.” Her revelation was that there are compelling affinities among different forms of subjugation and domination, ranging from centuries of slavery in the United States to the untouchables in India and Jews in Nazi Germany. I am going to sidestep the debates among critics who insist that these systems of hierarchy are not comparable. For Wilkerson,

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

ISABEL WILKERSON
Random House, 2020

the affinities provide stark proof that subjugation and domination take varied forms. And with her trademark as a wordsmith, she declares that “race, in the United States is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who the person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that

holds each group in place.”

This is the acuity and captivating prose that speak to Wilkerson's readers as she brings to light the multifarious ways in which caste and race are the twin toxins of the human spirit. Her penetrating optic and voluminous research allow her to ferret out a deep and detailed account of the lived experience of the victims of race and caste. Ultimately, her storytelling engenders a reluctant awareness of *our* muted complicity. This is where thick description allows readers—and white readers in particular—to bear witness to the horrors and soul-killing facets of race and caste. Her adroit storytelling jumps off the page, and we should not be surprised that Ava DuVernay has found the raw material for her next film.

Few Americans have more than flimsy knowledge that slavery existed for almost two centuries before the colonies revolted against English rule. Indeed, Gerald Horne has persuasively argued that the American Revolution of 1776 was precipitated by fear that the English were on the verge of eliminating slavery in the colonies. Nor is

STEPHEN STEINBERG is a longstanding contributor to *New Politics*. His book *Counterrevolution: The Crusade to Roll Back the Gains of the Civil Rights Revolution* is scheduled for publication by Stanford University Press in 2021.

it generally known that the Constitution that declared in its Preamble that “all men are created equal” also sanctioned slavery, which persisted for eight decades until finally dismantled by a Civil War that culminated with the emancipation of slaves through the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865—though without any restitution whatsoever for centuries of unpaid labor. Our culture and political institutions do little to raise consciousness of the extent that racism is baked into the fabric of American society. Against this background, the unexpected uprising of youth after the police murder of George Floyd was a rare wake-up call that the shadow and legacy of slavery still sully American society and make a chimera of our flawed democracy.

Let me provide an example of Wilkerson’s wordcraft as it pertains to the recent scourge of police killings of Black men, even when they pose no threat to police. What is this if not lynching by another name? These murders are meted out with impunity and rarely exposed in newspapers, much less courts of law. Against this background, consider Wilkerson’s understated but breathtaking depiction of a “lynching tree”:

In the middle of Main Street in a southern American town, there stood a majestic old tree, an elm or an oak or a sycamore, that had been planted before modern roads were paved. It held a sacred place in the hearts of the townspeople, though it was an altogether inconvenient location for a shade tree. It blocked traffic, coming and going, and motorists were forced to curve around it to get through town. It was the potential cause of many accidents, given that motorists could not always see past it or know for sure who had the right of way.

And yet it could not be cut down. It was the local lynching tree, and it was performing its duty to “perpetually and eternally” remind the black townspeople of who among them had last been hanged from its limbs and who could be next.

The tree was awaiting its appointed hour, and the white townspeople were willing to risk inconvenience, injury, and death, even to themselves, to keep the tree and the subordinate caste in their places. The tree bore silent witness to black citizens of their eternal lot, and in so doing, it whispered reassurances to the dominant caste of theirs.

In other passages, Wilkerson does not spare her readers graphic and gory portrayals of the savage mutilation of Black bodies and even the prize collection of body parts as souvenirs. Her account resonates with Eric Lott’s provocative analysis of lynching postcards that were sent to loved ones. Wilkerson singles out one such postcard from Waco, Texas, in 1916, which reads, “This is the Barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left with the cross over it. Your son, Joe.”

I noted above that Wilkerson is by trade a journalist and a storyteller, though I hasten to add that she has taught and lectured at hundreds of colleges and universities across the nation. It is noteworthy that this 500-page book centered on race and caste has climbed to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. However, it behooves us to pick up the other end of the stick, and engage another version of storytelling.

The glaring omission in *Caste* is political economy. Of course, Wilkerson is not oblivious to the uses of caste, both to elevate and enrich the higher caste and to consign the lower castes to perpetual subordination and degradation. The problem is that she ambiguously attributes this disparity to “history” and “tradition.” As a result, Wilkerson offers no *theory* of caste, and therefore when she reaches the end of book, she has no vision for eliminating caste beyond an exhortation to dispense with the atavisms of the past and to cultivate our common humanity. Readers are left to lament the horrors and injustices of caste, without stopping to contemplate the extent to which domination and suppression are anchored in major political and

economic institutions. No doubt many readers like it that way, lest they are confronted with their own complicity and expected to forgo the advantages and privileges of caste. Or lest they are called upon to pay reparations for centuries of plunder of Black labor, as is advocated by Black activists such as Manning Marable, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram X. Kendi, or most recently, William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen.

To cut to the chase, capitalism and colonialism receive only peripheral treatment in Wilkerson's narrative. To be sure, slavery receives copious treatment in *Caste*, but the book stops short of addressing the *origins and functions* of slavery and its relevance to the present, which would lead to a critique of how the legacy of slavery is embedded even today in our retrograde democracy. Instead, readers are left to ponder *The Origins of Our Discontents*, as in the subtitle, and to envision "A World Without Caste," as in the epilogue.

In 1847—15 years before the Civil War—Karl Marx offered another narrative that shed light on the political economy of slavery. Marx wrote, "Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry." In one epigrammatic sentence, Marx summed up the relationship of slavery to the emerging industrial revolution in the United States and England. Cotton provided the raw material that was exported to nascent textile industries in New York and Birmingham, which exploited the labor of women who produced clothing for global markets. Indeed, one can trace the entire history of the slave trade as providing the labor that spawned the early phases of both capitalism and colonialism. Thus, it can be said without hyperbole that American capitalism was built on the backs of slaves. Small wonder that America's founders shrugged off the two congenital evils—slavery and colonialism—as "a necessary evil."

Wilkerson has delivered on her promise to tell the story of caste, with vibrant and revelatory prose. I am less impressed with

the professional reviewers who fell over each other with vacuous encomiums about this "instant classic." Sadly missing are thoughtful critiques that challenge readers to think beyond their comfort zone.

In contrast to the hype, consider the following review in the *Black Agenda Report*, a left publication with a focus on issues of race and racism. The reviewer, Anthony Monteiro, is an organizer with Philadelphia's Saturday Free School, a Du Bois scholar, a community educator, and a radical and activist. To quote Monteiro,

A *New York Times* reviewer called Isabel Wilkerson's new book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* "an instant American classic and almost certainly the keynote nonfiction book of the American century thus far." It is neither. Oprah says it "might well save us." It won't. ... Wilkerson's arguments turn attention away from actual racial and class conditions, to a non-material and made-up reality she calls caste. ... In the name of caste, she flips reality on its head, from working people to their alleged deeply held beliefs; beliefs so deep in their consciousness that they seldom recognize them. Such analysis works in polite parlor discussion, or in university faculty lounges, but is completely meaningless to the lived experiences of Black folk and workers.

Monteiro has "picked up the other end of the stick." He brings to light the limits of storytelling, despite its compelling optic on the wrongs of the past. Beyond that, it is imperative that we shift the focus from the sins of the past to the powerful structures and institutions that *continue* to consign Blacks disproportionately to the fringes of American society and its system of rewards.

My contention is that the high point of the civil rights revolution was the passage of landmark legislation in 1964 and 1965 and that, contrary to general belief, we have been moving backward ever since. As early as 1968, in *Where Do We Go from Here*, Martin Luther King Jr. conveyed his apprehension that the Civil Rights Movement was moving

backward, not forward. As he wrote,

The step backward has a new name today. It is called the “white backlash.” But the white backlash is nothing new. ... The white backlash is an expression of the same vacillations, the same search for rationalizations, the same lack of commitment that has always characterized white Americans on the issue of race.

King already feared that the writing was on the wall: “Blacks got their rights, and they should ask for nothing more.”

Indeed, the three major initiatives of the civil rights era—school desegregation, protections against employment discrimination, and voting rights—have all been eviscerated or rolled back, thanks in large part to the perversity of the Federalist Society in conjunction

with the increasingly reactionary Supreme Court. The euphoria over the election of the first Black president was quickly extinguished with the election of Donald Trump and the surge of the far right.

Yet to be seen is whether this is the dying gasp of white supremacy or whether racism has emerged with renewed force, regardless of the outcome of the 2020 election. There is much political work to be done to repair the damage of Trumpism, not to speak of the possibility of even more dangerous demagogues on the horizon. Just as Wallace was a premonition of Trump, we cannot be sure that the American cocktail—of racism, nativism, sexism, and other retrograde proclivities—is not also prone to recrudescence.

Looking Back at Maoism and the Global Left

KEVIN B. ANDERSON

AS AGAINST NEARLY A CENTURY OF debates over Stalinism, the international left has never come to terms with Maoism, especially its global impact. Disillusionment with Stalinism is marked by clear, indeed tragic, dates in international politics: the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 that launched

Maoism: A Global History

JULIA LOVELL
Alfred A. Knopf, 2019

World War II, the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. These events are well remembered and sometimes debated, in this journal and elsewhere. With Maoism, the following dates also mark

tragic events for the global left, yet they have not gotten the attention they deserve: the collapse of the Maoist Indonesian Communist Party in 1965 due to miscalculations that brought on murderous repression by the military with the help of the CIA, China's rapprochement with U.S. imperialism in 1971-1972 as Nixon was carpet-bombing

KEVIN B. ANDERSON is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (2010) and the co-editor of the *Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (2004).

Vietnam and embarking upon his reelection campaign, the Maoist Khmer Rouge's autogenocide, or Mao's lean toward South Africa and Mobutu's Zaire against African revolutionaries in 1975-1976. To be sure, the fact that these Maoist-impacted events took place in the Global South rather than Western and Central Europe goes some distance toward explaining the relative lack of attention. But that is no reason to continue such a marginalization today.

Maoism became a pole of attraction in the 1960s for the Black Panthers and Students for a Democratic Society in the United States, for a number of African revolutionaries and nationalists, and for the French far left, among others. Many saw Maoist China as the product of a successful socialist revolution carried out by people of color. And while it gradually lost its sheen as an international phenomenon, this came not so much with a bang as a whimper, without the furious debates that marked 1939, 1956, and 1968. The fact that there was no clear reckoning has helped the ideological influence of Maoism to persist to this day, often indirectly.

One example can be found in the structuralist and post-structuralist theories that have impacted so many academic fields. These theories pushed for a concentration on what orthodox Marxists termed the superstructure, especially its cultural and ideological dimensions. Here the affinity with Maoism lies not merely in the fact that some of the intellectuals associated with structuralism and post-structuralism were influenced by Maoism, people like Louis Althusser, or Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida early on. Their affinity with Maoism also lies in an indisputable theoretical point, that Maoist thought sought to displace structure with superstructure, most famously with the Cultural Revolution.

A second example is the extreme voluntarism of Maoism, from slogans like "Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win" or "U.S. Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger" to adventurism or worse

in the sphere of revolutionary politics: the Indonesian Communist Party, Pol Pot's Cambodia. Again, while few on the activist left today identify with Maoism, aside from groups like the Naxalites in India, the Maoist parties in Nepal, or the Communist Party of the Philippines, its voluntaristic spirit persists in more subtle and indirect ways in some of the far reaches of Antifa and anarchism. This continuity makes Julia Lovell's brilliant book important for the left, and not just in historical terms.

While there are countless histories of international Communism focusing on the parties, groups, and intellectuals associated with Stalinism from the 1920s onward, Lovell's book fills an important gap as the first comprehensive history of Maoism as a global phenomenon. It is the product of archival research, of participant interviews, and of a careful synthesis of previous scholarship. Lovell is not part of the radical left but an academic historian whose book is nonetheless of paramount importance for us. And some of her findings are eye-opening.

One of these concerns the gestation of Edgar Snow's hagiographic 1937 account of Maoism just after the Long March, *Red Star over China*. Lovell shows that Snow's book was choreographed and closely edited by Mao and other party officials: "Snow's English transcript of the translator's version of Mao's words" was "translated into Chinese, corrected by Mao, then translated back into English" (76). As the book progressed, party representatives continued to shape its narrative: "As Snow toiled on turning notes into copy through the winter of 1936, his interviewees continued to send him a stream of amendments: telling him to remove any trace of dissent with Comintern policy, to expunge any praise for out-of-favor Chinese intellectuals, to tone down criticism of political enemies turned allies, to talk up anti-Japanese patriotism" (76-77). This was the first, but not the last, romanticization of Maoism on the part of the global left.

Another key juncture Lovell elucidates is the massacre of half a million Indonesian leftists and suspected leftists in 1965 by the army and its Islamist allies, with considerable assistance from the CIA. How did this transpire? It was widely known by the early 1960s that Mao had formed an alliance with the left-leaning nationalist Sukarno, who had sponsored the 1954 Bandung conference of “Nonaligned” countries. Attended by Chinese but not Soviet representatives, Bandung was an important marker in the birth of the third world. It was also common currency on the left that the massive, legal Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), which after the Sino-Soviet split became the largest ally of China among the world’s Communist parties, was caught off guard by the ferocity of the repression in 1965–1966. Indonesia was also seen at the time as the greatest debacle of Maoism as an international movement by the independent revolutionary left, which noted that the PKI did not act substantially differently from the pro-Moscow Communist parties in opportunistically sidling up to a nationalist dictator without building up enough of an independent political or military capacity. But the truth turns out to be more complicated—and more damning to Mao.

The events leading up to the PKI-led abortive insurrection and the brutal repression that followed have long been shrouded in secrecy. Lovell does not succeed in fully cracking this secrecy, given the Chinese regime’s suppression of its own history. Nonetheless, she marshals enough evidence to confirm that the defeat of the Indonesian left lay at Mao’s doorstep as much as that of the PKI leadership and that the PKI’s disastrous miscalculations were impacted by Mao’s own voluntarism. To demonstrate this, Lovell reproduces a version of an August 1965 conversation between Mao and PKI leader D.N. Aidit, in which Mao calls upon Aidit to “act quickly” against the conservative army leaders at a time when Sukarno’s ailing health placed the PKI alliance with him in

jeopardy (178). If this is true, Mao made a strategic miscalculation on a par with Stalin’s decision not to allow German Communists to ally with the Social Democrats as Hitler was coming to power. Be that as it may, the ideological influence of Maoism on the PKI was equally deleterious.

As Lovell recounts, alluding to Mao’s disastrous effort to transform the Chinese countryside via “People’s Communes,” which caused the mass famine of the late 1950s, “In the voluntarist style of the Great Leap Forward, Aidit began to eschew the kind of careful, patient mobilization that had taken place through the 1950s, in favor of statements that emphasized high Maoism’s ‘spirit, resolve, and enthusiasm’” (168). And while Aidit talked of organizing a paramilitary force to counter the regular army, and Sukarno did so as well, and China promised vast amounts of armaments, nothing substantial was actually done even as PKI rhetoric against the military escalated. Then, on September 30, 1965, the PKI, acting with apparent Chinese encouragement, moved to incapacitate the military leadership. They killed a number of generals, but the action quickly backfired due to lack of support on the streets or within the military, especially after the ailing Sukarno refused to join their cause. All this allowed the remaining Indonesian generals to orchestrate one of the greatest political massacres in history and to set up a conservative, anti-labor regime that persists today in modified form in a somewhat more democratic polity.

A second revelation on Lovell’s part concerns Mao’s relationship with Pol Pot and what is sometimes called the Cambodian autogenocide, when up to two million people—a quarter of the population—died from starvation, overwork, and executions during the years 1975–1979. The U.S. war in Vietnam, which Nixon extended to Cambodia in 1970, had led to massive bombings that killed a large number of civilians. As peasants fled the bombs raining down on rural areas, where the Khmer Rouge—essentially the

Cambodian Communist Party—was based, the population of the cities swelled, making famine a real possibility.

When the U.S. war effort collapsed in 1975, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge took power, entering the capital, Phnom Penh, and evacuating virtually the entire population at gunpoint. This was part of a harebrained scheme, inspired by Maoist projects like the Great Leap Forward, to empty the cities and build "socialism" in the countryside based upon a precipitous increase in the working day along with minimal food allowances. It all came crashing down as Vietnam invaded in 1979, overthrew the Khmer Rouge, and installed a more rational version of Stalinism closer to the Soviet version to which it was allied.

While the fact that the Khmer Rouge was inspired by Maoism has been known for decades, Lovell puts a point on it: "The evacuation of the cities was an extreme version of Cultural Revolution-era rustification. The creation of the mess halls and the abolition of family dining replicated the collectivization of the Great Leap Forward" (255). Moreover, she shows that Maoist China was deeply committed to the Pol Pot regime, awarding it the biggest aid package Beijing had ever offered, \$1 billion in grants and interest-free loans. Even the black cloth for the pajama-like uniforms imposed by the regime was imported from China. In 1975, soon after the Khmer Rouge came to power, but after they had completely evacuated the cities at gunpoint, top leaders Pol Pot and Ieng Sary met privately with Mao. During their conversation, Mao reportedly said, "We approve of you! Many of your experiences are better than ours," to which Pol Pot replied, "The works of Chairman Mao have led our entire party" (241). The aging and infirm Mao, who had only a year to live, seemingly felt thwarted by the way he had been forced to call off the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. He also stated, "What we wanted to do but could not manage, you are achieving"

(241). Pol Pot expressed similar sentiments three years later but with the suggestion that he had outdone even Mao: "Mao stopped his Cultural Revolution, but we have a Cultural Revolution every day" (259).

The horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime led to a rude awakening for many left-wing intellectuals who had embraced Maoism as a more militant and anti-bureaucratic alternative to Russian Stalinism, especially in France. Foucault and others now distanced themselves not only from Maoism, but also from Marxism altogether. In this era, the Parisian New Philosophers targeted "totalitarianism" in such a way that they were unable to support genuinely left-wing movements like the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, all the while taking inspiration from the gifted but very right-wing Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. All of this helped usher in something like neoconservatism in France.

The chapter on Africa chronicles a remarkable and sustained commitment on Maoist China's part to support African nationalists and revolutionaries in the 1960s, almost always in competition with the Soviet Union. China gained substantial support via Julius Nyerere's Tanzania, one of the few African countries liberated in the first wave of independence movements to avoid either right-wing military-strongman rule (Congo-Kinshasa[Zaire], Ghana) or ostensibly left-wing authoritarianism (Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea). Nyerere, who espoused *ujamaa*, a form of rural socialism, and who supported liberation movements in southern Africa as the leader of the chief "front-line" African state in the struggle with apartheid South Africa, received considerable Chinese aid. So did Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union, an avowedly Marxist revolutionary party that later established a brutal left-wing dictatorship. Lovell highlights these relationships and paints a much more positive portrait of Maoist policy toward Africa than other regions. This has some validity, given accomplishments like the Tan-Zam railway,

completed in 1975 at tremendous cost to the Chinese and which freed Zambian copper mines from economic dependence upon South Africa by creating a rail line through Tanzania.

But Lovell ignores completely Maoist China's greatest failure in Africa, one that sullied its reputation within the global left almost as much as did the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime. This was the Angola war of 1975, which took place as this mineral-rich southern African country was prying itself loose from Portuguese colonialism. Over the years, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) became the most left-wing and deeply rooted of the country's African liberation movements. But because the MPLA was backed by the Soviet Union, China from the 1960s onward supported the more right-wing National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), which based itself in Mobutu's Zaire. Mobutu, one of Africa's most reactionary and kleptocratic rulers, had come to power by orchestrating the assassination of renowned African liberation leader Patrice Lumumba. Portugal began to pull out of Angola and its other colonies in 1975, having experienced in 1974 its own left-wing revolution to overthrow a fascist regime in power since the 1920s. Portuguese revolutionary officers, who had themselves been radicalized by contact with African revolutionaries, sought to hand over power to the MPLA.

At this point UNITA (and another smaller right-wing nationalist group) made a bid for power, backed not only by Mobutu and the United States but also by apartheid South Africa, which dispatched troops into southern

Angola. This placed China on the same side as South Africa. When UNITA, Zaire, and South Africa suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of some 36,000 Cuban troops sent over with Soviet aid, that humiliation was also China's, as Mao now found himself exposed to the world as an ally of South Africa. For those on the left with the strongest commitments to African and Third World liberation, China's betrayal of the African liberation movement in Angola became a point of no return. Tragically, the MPLA regime, hardened by the long decades of civil war with the U.S.-funded UNITA that followed, devolved into an authoritarian and kleptocratic state. Still, Mao's support for forces allied with South Africa played a role in the disillusionment with Maoism across many sectors of the left, especially those involved in Black liberation. For some, this resulted in a disillusionment with Marxism, period.

It is not surprising that Lovell, a scholar of China, is on surer footing when analyzing Maoism's impact on nearby countries like Indonesia or Cambodia than in discussing Africa. Still, she is to be commended for having written the first survey of Maoism as a global project. Overall, this is a work of deep scholarship and careful judgment. It contains a wealth of material indispensable for the twenty-first-century left to consider if we are to avoid the terrible mistakes of the past. And given the fact that Maoism—or at least theoretical and political patterns similar to or derived from it—persists today, from some forms of academic radicalism to some tendencies in the activist left, this book also speaks to us today, if one is able to read it with an expansive frame of mind.

China's Workers Battle Apple and Foxconn

NICKI LISA COLE

IN OCTOBER 2020, THE WISCONSIN Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) ruled that Foxconn had breached elements of its contract with the state to build a new LCD factory in exchange for \$3 billion in tax subsidies.

Rather than build the large, Gen 10.5 facility it promised, which would employ as many as 13,000 people, Foxconn built instead a much smaller Gen 6 facility and has failed to meet its contractual hiring targets. The WEDC concluded that the unusually small Gen 6 facility “may be better suited for demonstration purposes rather than as a viable commercial glass fabrication facility.” As a result, the WEDC cancelled Foxconn’s first subsidy payment. (See extensive reporting on this issue by *The Verge*, www.theverge.com.)

This news is a rare blow for Foxconn, which has grown to be the world’s largest industrial employer thanks in large part to the

significant corporate welfare it has received from the Chinese government and others. Foxconn, of course, is contesting the ruling.

This incident, and Foxconn’s response to it, is typical of the company: It promises

the world but delivers hell, as the authors of *Dying for an iPhone* lay bare. Based on undercover research at Foxconn factories across China; interviews with workers, line managers, government officials, students, and teachers; and the blogs, songs,

poetry, and chat message confessions of workers, authors Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai illustrate how the economic successes of Apple, the world’s most valuable company, and Foxconn, China’s largest exporter, are interconnected and mutually dependent and are built upon the soul-crushing labor of China’s youth. Carefully balanced between first-person accounts from Foxconn workers and data-rich socio-historical and political-economic context, the narrative is poignant, compelling, and heartbreaking—doing the work that C. Wright Mills called for when he wrote about the need to recast “personal troubles” as “public issues.” Impeccably researched and engagingly written, *Dying for an iPhone* is an instant classic in the genre of workplace ethnography. Its academic rigor makes it a perfect university teaching text, and its tone and language ensure that it will succeed among the popular audience as well.

Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers

JENNY CHAN, MARK SELDEN,
AND NGAI PUN
Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020

NICKI LISA COLE, PhD, is a senior researcher at the Know-Center and a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Science, Technology and Society, hosted by the Science, Technology and Society Unit, Institute for Interactive Systems and Data Science at Graz University of Technology (Austria). She is a sociologist with expertise in global political economy, global value chains, and consumer culture, with a focus on the social, environmental, and economic challenges to sustainability in the electronics industry.

Centering the Voices of Workers

With *Dying for an iPhone*, Chan and her co-authors present the first-ever book focused on Foxconn. Yet, it is not a book *about* Foxconn, but about how Foxconn “controls and utilizes labor,” as told directly by workers. Based on research carried out from 2010 through 2019, the book is subtly framed by the scholarly analysis of global political economy and global value chains. In the context of China’s shift to a capitalist economy embedded in global systems of production and trade, the authors demonstrate how political-economic shifts created a “new working class” within China composed primarily of young, rural migrants to urban centers. Noting its million-strong global labor force, the authors paint a picture of Foxconn as a hungry monster that sucks in, chews up, and spits out China’s youth, with virtually no benefit to show for it. The book evocatively demonstrates how familial and personal relationships, labor and class politics, and even educational pathways and outcomes have been completely reconfigured by these shifts in Chinese society. More troubling, *Dying for an iPhone*, hardly a hyperbolic title, shows that outcomes of Foxconn’s brutal labor regime, including mental and physical injury, illness, and disease are widespread, and death on the job or as a result of it is not uncommon. Aiming to “assess the extent to which the Chinese state and global tech corporations fulfilled their responsibilities to protect workers in the context of transnational production,” Chan and her co-authors help workers to demonstrate that they unequivocally do not.

Dying for an iPhone begins and ends with the worker suicides that have occurred at Foxconn. The book opens with the first-person account of survivor Tian Yu, who was just 17 years old when she jumped from a Foxconn dormitory and is now paralyzed from the waist down. A migrant from a rural area, Yu recounts the isolation, exhaustion, and despair she experienced after just one month of work-

ing at the facility. At the end of the book, the authors rely on the poetry of Xu Lizhi, another Foxconn worker, who died by suicide in 2014, to similarly articulate the exhaustion and hopelessness he experienced prior to his occupational death. Both are examples of the book’s greatest asset: the profound respect that is shown for Foxconn’s workforce, manifested in the in-depth interviews, embeddedness in their communities, and long-term relationships that were necessary to bring such a rich portrait of humanity and suffering to life.

In between these two portraits, the authors demonstrate how the rise of Foxconn is typical of the “Asian miracle,” in which Taiwanese electronics firms established from the 1960s capitalized by first outsourcing production to China, where labor and the cost of production were cheaper, and thereafter, on the corporate welfare doled out by the Chinese state. Part of that corporate welfare package was the creation and maintenance of a massive pool of surplus labor. Initially this was through disinvestment in state-owned businesses, and later it was by supporting development of new Foxconn facilities inland, nearer to jobless rural populations where wages are lower than in the now-developed coastal areas. The state also coerces the labor of teenage students of technical colleges by pinning their educational standing and program funding to submission to Foxconn’s brutal labor regime. (What’s that Apple says about education being in its DNA?)

That regime is compellingly detailed throughout the book but comes into specific focus in a chapter that counterposes the day-to-day realities of working the production lines with Foxconn’s and Apple’s corporate propaganda. Readers may already be familiar with the conditions that are typical to Foxconn, which have now been widely reported in the media, by civil society groups, and academic researchers. What *Dying for an iPhone* adds to this well-known list of offenses is how Foxconn management rotates day- and night-shift workers every few weeks to dis-

rupt their equilibrium and prevent them from forming the strong ties necessary to successful resistance. Foxconn's increasing reliance on temporary and contracted workers and on the labor of student "interns" also serves this end as well as that of pushing down wages.

The authors also reveal that Apple, as Foxconn's biggest customer, is squarely to blame for conditions within the factories. The production schedule, and quotas and cost cuts, imposed by Apple are shown to be the direct cause of the inhumane working schedules, unmeetable production demands, unsafe factory conditions, and lack of a living wage experienced by workers, as Foxconn prioritizes profits and placating Apple over workers' safety and dignity.

The crux of the issue, the authors conclude, is that China prohibits trade unions. The corporate-run unions that stand in their place exist really to surveil workers and root out "troublemakers" who raise complaints. By prohibiting unions, harassing and imprisoning activists and journalists, and hampering the work of civil-society organizations, the state maintains and reproduces a large, flexible, and precarious labor pool. A detailed account of how the Chinese state channels labor disputes into an individualized judiciary process reveals yet another tactic that ensures that a labor movement cannot form. And, when it disregards the multitude of labor, human rights, and environmental laws that are broken in processes of production, the state placates large brands like Apple at the expense of its citizens.

In the absence of trade unions, workers and their families try in earnest to get justice via both official channels and protests. They engage in frequent protests—some riotous, some covert (slowdowns and intentional damage on the line)—which give the lie to those who claim workers are happy to have these jobs and that the current form of capitalist industrialization is good for China. The authors see hope and promise in this struggle and conclude by calling for a broad-based social

movement in support of workers' rights. Yet, they also demonstrate how workers' demands are typically met with symbolic compromises that neutralize the unrest, rather than with meaningful change.

Opportunities to Do More

For its many strengths, *Dying for an iPhone* misses a few opportunities. While the authors do occasionally make the point that the conditions observed are common to the electronics industry generally and the realities of globalized production and supply chains more broadly, the subtle ways in which this is done may undermine the point. There is value to making this argument more prominently, lest readers come away with a picture of Foxconn and Apple as bad actors operating in an otherwise acceptable system. In the same vein, the narrative could do with a stronger connection to the global trade policies and corporate tax systems that provide the larger context and conditions in which Apple and Foxconn operate.

As a result, *Dying for an iPhone* leaves some lingering questions, like what allows this situation to continue? The authors make clear the roles of Apple, Foxconn, and the Chinese state here, but what about us, the readers, or our governments? What can we do about it? Pinning hope on workers alone to rise up seems a lot to ask of a population that has no time for anything but work or sleep and who suffer from mental and physical exhaustion as a norm. Telling the reader what they can do to hold accountable the global capitalist system that creates and maintains these conditions, in their home countries and around the world, might have made for a more meaningful conclusion for readers.

But perhaps that is asking too much, because *Dying for an iPhone* is an excellent book and fills an important gap in the literature. It would make a great gift this year, especially for someone who is expecting a new iPhone.

Capitalism, Romanticism, and Nature

JOHN MOLYNEUX

ROBERT SAYRE AND MICHAEL LÖWY'S *Romantic Anti-capitalism and Nature* is an extremely interesting book—enjoyable, informative, and intellectually stimulating.

Naomi Klein says of climate change, “This changes everything.” She is right, and among the things it changes are not only current political perspectives but also our understanding of past texts. The classic example of this is John Bellamy Foster’s reinterpretation of Marx in his key work, *Marx’s Ecology*. I could not say how often I had read these lines from *The German Ideology*:

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, hydrographical, climatic, and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.¹

Romantic Anti-capitalism and Nature: The Enchanted Garden

ROBERT SAYRE AND
MICHAEL LÖWY
Routledge, 2020

But after *Marx’s Ecology*, I read them differently. Foster’s recent book *The Return of Nature* recuperated the radical ecological scientific tradition (Lankester, Engels, Morris,

Caudwell, Haldane, Bernal, Needham, and others), and Sayre and Löwy’s *Romantic Anti-capitalism* does something similar for the romantic cultural tradition stretching back to the eighteenth

century. The authors examine in turn the American travel writer from the 1770s, William Bartram; Thomas Cole, the American landscape painter from the early nineteenth century; William Morris; Walter Benjamin; Raymond Williams; and the contemporary activist, journalist, and writer Naomi Klein.

Of these, I found the discussion of William Bartram particularly intriguing because he was completely new to me and because of his strikingly modern combining of love for the wilderness and serious respect for its Native American custodians. I was also very pleased to see the comments on the nineteenth-century poet John Clare, whose significance I had not previously appreciated. Of the figures of whom I had previous knowledge, it was the reassessment of Walter Benjamin, highlighting the prescient ecological element in his thinking, that I found most enlightening. However, all the analyses, including the introductory consideration of Romantic anti-capitalism as a distinct

JOHN MOLYNEUX is the editor of the Irish Marxist Review and on the steering committee of the Global EcoSocialist Network.

weltanschauung, raise important questions of theory and perspective.

The book's central theme is that there exists a romantic anti-capitalist worldview,

It is partly in the nature of both
Marxism and ecosocialism
to challenge and cross the
narrow boundaries of academic
specialisms.

by no means confined to what is known as "the romantic era" (c. 1775 – 1850), that is characterized as "the romantic protest against modern bourgeois civilization and its destruction of the natural environment, ... a cultural critique, or rebellion, against capitalist-industrialist modernity **in the name of past, pre-modern or pre-capitalist values** [my emphasis – JM]" (1, 4). Further, contained in this worldview are valuable insights for the contemporary struggle to defend the future of humanity and nature in the face of ecological catastrophe. Sayre and Löwy provide much evidence in support of this proposition.

An excellent feature of this work is its interdisciplinary approach embracing "expressions of romantic culture from a wide variety of different areas: literature, travel writing, painting, utopian vision, cultural studies, political philosophy, and activist socio-political writing" (1). Far too much theoretical work remains confined within the narrow boundaries of academic specialisms. Of course it is partly in the nature of both Marxism and ecosocialism to challenge and cross such boundaries. Then there is the fact that, although the book is deeply erudite, as one would expect from its authors, it is nonetheless written in very clear and straightforward language and not in the tortured and almost impenetrable

prose of so much academic discourse. This goes hand in hand with the book's intellectually open character. I don't mean by this that it is eclectic or lacking a firm Marxist core but that it demonstrates a commendable ability to engage with and learn from diverse sources and perspectives.

Now to the issues that the book raises and that I want to explore: 1) the truth status of romantic ideas; 2) the problem of critiques of capitalism based on pre-capitalist values; 3) the formulation of the class basis of romanticism; 4) the question of progress; and 5) the "idealist" formulation of ecological anti-capitalism.

The Truth Status of Romantic Ideas

Sayre and Löwy discuss the meaning of "romantic" in academic cultural history, but I think it is useful also to remember that the word has at least two meanings in popular discourse. It refers, of course, to "romantic love" and second, perhaps by association, to notions that are considered fanciful, impractical, and, by implication, not really true. In short, it is often used pejoratively, and I think the pejorative associations still clings to some extent to the academic usage. But should this be so? Let me quote this book at some length:

Romanticism of course does not have a single birth date. But if we wanted to pick one moment as a symbolic starting point it might be 1755, the year in which Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*. This astonishing document constitutes perhaps the first romantic manifesto, with its ferocious critique of modern civilization and celebration of the "noble savage." ...

While Voltaire, the great proponent of Enlightenment and progress, pictures indigenous peoples as anthropophagic barbarians in his philosophical satire *Candide* (1759), the romantic Rousseau sees them as "the true youth of the world." ... The savage "breathes only

rest and freedom,” while civilized man “works until he dies” and is “proud of his serfdom.” In fact, Rousseau emphasizes, the barbarian “refuses to bow his head to the yoke that the civilized person bears without grumbling” and prefers the most dangerous freedom to the most peaceful submission. In a passage that seems almost to foresee anticolonial struggles, Rousseau argues that the love of freedom is so strong among “savages” that they “are willing to face hunger, fire, iron, and death to keep their independence.” Although the philosopher’s “state of nature” may be a fiction, his portrayal of the life of primitive peoples is almost surely based on travellers’ reports. Rousseau in any case often explicitly refers in his essay to specific groups: Hottentots, Caribbeans, and “savages of the Americas.”

In the *Discourse* Rousseau also denounces modern destructive behavior towards the natural world. He admires “the immense forests that the felling axe never mutilated,” and regrets that civilization has made of the human being a “tyrant over himself and over nature.” Worried that the expansion of agriculture might lead to “the destruction of the soil,” of its fertility, that is, he quotes a passage from Buffon’s *Natural History* (1752). (6-7)

My point here is that the “romantic” Rousseau’s picture of “the noble savage,” the indigenous foragers, has proved far more factually accurate than that of “Enlightenment man” Voltaire, as has been shown by anthropological work such as Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics* and Richard Borshack Lee’s study of the Kung!San. A similar empirical validity applies to Rousseau’s concerns about forest felling and soil destruction.

I am not, of course, saying that all assertions and conceptions advanced by romantic thinkers are factually true any more than all assertions made by social scientists or even Marxists turn out to be factually true, merely that the label “romantic” should not be seen as *prima facie* evidence of lack of empirical va-

lidity. I think it is likely that Sayre and Löwy would agree with this point, but I thought it was worth drawing out.

Then there is the question of metaphorical truth. Sayre and Löwy’s adoption of Weber’s phrase “the enchanted garden” (as applied to “Asiatic cultures, with their magical beliefs”) immediately brought to my mind Colin Turnbull’s, highly “romantic” anthropological study of the Mbuti pygmies of the Congo, *The Forest People*. My point is not that the “magical” beliefs of these people and their “enchanted” sense of oneness with their forest environment and its other inhabitants are literally true, but they may express a metaphorical truth about their relationship with nature. If later religion is “the heart of a heartless world” and “the opium of the people,” should these “magical” beliefs be seen not just as a product of ignorance but as an expression of an unalienated and thus vibrantly intense relationship to nature? For a contemporary example of what I mean, take the great paintings of Van Gogh. His depictions of cypress trees and stars in the night sky are expressions of emotional intensity, not inaccurate representations due to lack of knowledge of dendrology and astronomy.

Critique of Capitalism Based on Pre-capitalist Values.

Sayre and Löwy cite this type critique as the defining characteristic of romantic anti-capitalism, and I think that is right, but it raises the question of which pre-capitalist values. In Chapter 3 of *The Origin of the Family*,² Engels critiqued capitalist politics and society from the standpoint of the Iroquois gens; William Morris condemned modern capitalist production in comparison with the artistic qualities of artisan production in the Middle Ages, and they both drew revolutionary socialist conclusions. Others criticized modern capitalism in the name of an idealized picture of the feudal social order and drew highly reactionary conclusions. Marx and Engels discuss this

in *The Communist Manifesto* in the section on "Feudal Socialism," and this outlook had considerable cultural influence in the twentieth century, for example in the literary work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound (who was led by it into outright fascism), and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Moreover, while it remains the case that socialists today can and should invoke the values of foraging societies and indigenous peoples, especially in terms of their relations to nature, socialist criticism of contemporary society also needs to be on the basis of the existing values of the modern working class, especially the values of social solidarity engendered in collective struggle. There is also a role for values drawn from the future in terms of an appreciation of the potential for human development generated by capitalist production but inhibited by capitalist inequality and priorities. As Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*,

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.³

This leads directly to the question of the class basis of the romantic outlook.

The Class Basis of Romanticism

Here, I am not satisfied with the way this is posed by Sayre and Löwy. In their conclusion they write, "The social origins of the figures we have discussed are by no means homogeneous, showing that the general perspective they have in common is not determined in any mechanistic way by social class" (129). In itself this is clearly true, but for Marxism it is not the social origin of authors that indicates the class basis of their outlook, it is the class to which they are drawn and whose

interests they represent and articulate. From this perspective we have not one romanticism but several, depending on to which class they are affiliated. Thus, Shelley and Morris are romantics who are drawn to, perhaps pulled by, the working class, despite being not the

The label "romantic" should not be seen as *prima facie* evidence of lack of empirical validity.

least proletarian in origin, whereas others like Wordsworth, Keats, and D.H. Lawrence (the son of a miner) are not. In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels variously designate bourgeois socialism, petty bourgeois socialism, feudal/aristocratic socialism. Perhaps we should similarly distinguish different romanticisms.

The Question of Progress

Sayre and Löwy hail Walter Benjamin as "the first Marxist thinker to break with the ideology of 'progress'" (130). If by the ideology of progress is meant a deterministic belief in the inevitability of progress (and of socialism) then this is certainly to Benjamin's credit, though Gramsci, at the very least, preceded him. But if what is implied is a denial of any progress and that history is simply a growing pile of debris, then this seems to me very problematic. In my view, the development of the forces of production, which has been immense, is real progress in the potential of human beings to use nature to meet human needs. It increases our ability to feed people, it increases our life expectancy, and it increases our capacity to understand our world and our universe. However, the degree to which this potential is realized is hugely impacted by the nature of the relations of production,

and the fact that those relations are alienated and exploitative means that every increase in human productive potential is simultaneously an increase in the potential for destruction of both humans and nature. Thus the future of humanity, indeed its very survival, is in no way guaranteed or inevitable but will depend on the outcome of struggle.

The “Idealist” Formulation of Ecological Anti-capitalism

This is somewhat removed from the central theme of the book and not a disagreement, merely a comment prompted by Sayre and Löwy’s observations on Naomi Klein. They describe Klein’s *This Changes Everything* as a “superlative” book, but they also criticize Klein’s tendency to employ idealist formulations about capitalism:

Klein’s way of presenting the forces responsible for disastrous climate change is far from the Marxist approach to capitalism as a mode of production. She often seems to see the culprit as being mainly an ideology—market fundamentalism, free-trade orthodoxy, the extractivist mind-set (19, 25, 63, 86, 443, 459 – 460)—and the struggle for change as a “battle of world-views.” Of course ideology is important. . . . But putting the primary emphasis on ideas risks leading to a purely “idealist” view of the process, instead of a systemic “materialist” one. (117)

This is a valid criticism, and I would add that Klein’s tendency here is not accidental. It is both reflective of the current broad environmental movement and appealing to it. It is a movement that, in general, instinctively

much prefers idealist to materialist formulations and thinking, partly for class reasons. The idealist formulation is also related to Klein’s, and the movement’s, ambiguity on the question of reform or revolution. If what needs to be changed is basically an “attitude” or “mind-set” rather than a set of material social relations of production, this leaves open the possibility of the required change being achieved without resort to an actual physical revolution. Undoubtedly, Klein’s vagueness on this issue greatly increases her reach, popularity, and influence and thus may even be a conscious strategy. Unfortunately, I think it is also an illusion.

This in turn has a bearing on a wider concern, which is connected to the central argument of *Romantic Anti-capitalism*. While it is true that the romantic tradition contains many insights that are helpful to incorporate into the movement today, and Sayre and Löwy perform a service by highlighting this, there is also the danger that romanticism and romantic formulations can be used to obscure the hard reality of what will be required to overthrow capitalism, namely proletarian revolution, and this should be guarded against.

There is much more to be said, but I will stop here and simply reiterate my commendation of this book for its range of insights and multiplicity of provocative ideas.

NOTES

1. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm.
2. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch03.htm.
3. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm.

A Story from a Defeated Struggle

ALEX DE JONG

IN JANUARY 2020, SRI LANKA'S president confirmed what many already feared: that more than 20,000 people who disappeared during the country's civil war were dead. They were among the victims of the repression of the Tamil Tigers in May 2009. The Tigers' defeat ended, for now, 26 years of military struggle for self-determination by the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

In *Losing Santhia: Life and Loss in the*

Struggle for Tamil Eelam, Australian socialist Ben Hillier tells the story of one participant in this struggle. Santhia was a leading member of the Tamil Tigers who joined the movement as a teenager and died as a refugee in Indonesia, in 2017. She was 42 years old.

Speaking with surviving activists and refugees, Hillier combines their memories of Santhia with the history of the conflict. Hillier's illustrated essay throughout contains excerpts of poetry written by women members of the Tamil Tigers. The text is part political commentary and part reporting from the aftermath of the Tigers' defeat.

Oppression and Resistance

At its peak, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a formidable movement, capable of resisting state forces and estab-

lishing its own de-facto state in the north of Sri Lanka. Hillier relays how people he interviewed expressed their pride as members of an oppressed minority who finally won a state they felt was their own.

Hillier traces the roots of the conflict to

Sri Lanka's history as a British colony. Like other colonial powers, the British applied a strategy of divide and rule on the island, pitting the Tamil minority

against the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. The end of British colonialism came as a result of a negotiated settlement that left a Buddhist Sinhalese elite in political power. Unlike in other former colonies where a common struggle against the colonial power brought forth a new national identity, the dividing lines drawn by the British persisted.

After independence, religion, ethnicity, and state power increasingly combined into a reactionary form of nationalism, and "from the 1960s 'Sinhalese' and 'Buddhist' became synonymous." This combination was symbolized by the increasing political activism and power of Buddhist monks who regarded the Tamil minority as an existential threat to the Buddhist Sinhalese. The 1972 constitution defined the country as a "unitary state," denying the Tamils a right to self-determination.

During these years, Sri Lanka had a large, self-declared Marxist left. A nominally Trotskyist party, the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party, literally: Lanka Equal Society Party), had gained mass support in the late

Losing Santhia: Life and Loss in the Struggle for Tamil Eelam

BEN HILLIER

Interventions, 2019, 164 pp.

ALEX DE JONG is editor of the socialist journal *Grenzeloos* and co-director of the IIRE Amsterdam.

forties and joined the Fourth International. In his memoirs, Livio Maitan, a leader of the Fourth International at the time, discussed the evolution of the party.* Already in 1960 he described the situation the LSSP found itself in: “Given its largely Sinhalese composition, it always appeared as a party of the ‘other’ nationality to Indian [Tamil] workers,” while its support for minority rights was “not seen as truly ‘national’ from the point of view of broad layers of backward workers and other Sinhalese.”

To overcome this weakness, the party needed to create organic links between the movements of Tamil and Sinhalese workers, “an absolute condition for which,” Maitan wrote, was “the intransigent defense, without any hesitation or holding back, of the minority’s national rights.” Unfortunately, the LSSP choose the opposite path and supported Sinhalese bourgeois political forces. A few years after Maitan urged it to support the rights of the Tamil minority, the LSSP was expelled from the Fourth International.

Sinhalese chauvinists increasingly whipped up violence against the Tamil minority, leading to bloody pogroms. During the seventies, Tamil radicals started to form armed revolutionary groups. Some of these saw their struggle as part of a revolution that needed to be Sri Lanka-wide and considered the Sinhalese working class as a potential ally. But in the absence of strong, reliable allies among the Sinhalese and facing increasing racist violence, Tamil movements increasingly focused on their national struggle.

A turning point would be a 1983 pogrom known as “Black July.” Hillier writes, “The violence spiraled as monks, backed by the police and military, mobilized Sinhalese mobs in more orgies of violence.” The violence left as many as three thousand dead and more

than one hundred thousand homeless. Tamil youth flocked to join the armed movements, chief among them the LTTE. Some years later, Santhia, still in high school, joined the Tamil Tigers.

The Tiger State

During years of war, the Tamil Tigers built up strength and support. Eventually, in early 2002, they signed a ceasefire with the Sri Lanka government, allowing the Tigers to consolidate their position. The Tigers constructed a shadow administration, with its own police and judicial system, education and health institutions, among other entities. By this time, the LTTE had abandoned the demand for secession, instead demanding a form of autonomy.

But this situation was temporary, as different Sinhalese forces opposed the kind of structural changes that would have been required to meet Tamil demands for self-determination. Buddhist monks organized Sinhala chauvinist mobilizations against any kind of federal system or power sharing. Hillier quotes an army general who bitterly complained about being victimized by the contempt expressed by Tamil youth. All liberation movements, Hillier writes, share something: “some proud authority unable to comprehend the hatred of the people whose everyday deference is interpreted as a sincere display, rather than a performance later cursed in private.”

Internationally, the movement became known for assassinations as it pioneered suicide-bombing as method of attack. But the movement cannot be reduced to this violence, and Hillier shows how it was a contradictory combination of liberation and authoritarianism. The movement’s need for mobilization went against conservative norms and challenged ideas of hierarchies based on caste, gender, and clan. The involvement of women in the struggle, including in armed operations, went against sexist norms as the necessity

*Livio Maitan, *Memoirs of a Critical Communist. Towards a History of the Fourth International* (Dagenham: Merlin Press, 2019).

of mobilization broke old taboos. Women gained new positions of authority and confidence. Their gains were real, but their position remained contradictory as the Tigers also enforced sexist norms. For example, women working in civilian Tiger institutions were required to wear traditional and restrictive dresses. At other times, caste practices were tolerated on pragmatic grounds.

Like many other armed movements, the Tigers extended the logic of war beyond that of the fight against the government army. To assert their dominance over the Tamil movement, the LTTE organized the assassination of leaders of rival Tamil movements and of socialists who opposed its orientation toward guerrilla struggle. Inside the movement, power ultimately remained in the hands of a patriarchal figure; the authority of founder and leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was unchallenged. This was a liberation movement without democracy.

Defeat

In 2005, Mahinda Rajapaksa, a hard-line Sinhalese chauvinist (and older brother of the current president) won the Sri Lanka presidential election. Sinhalese chauvinist forces continued to mobilize to crush the Tamil movement. The Tigers had developed more and more into a conventional army, but in purely military terms, they were no match for the government army. In Hillier's estimation, the ultimate cause for the defeat of the Tamil Tigers lies in a changing international situation. Hillier describes the role of India, the United States, Canada, and European powers in international crackdowns against the Tigers' fundraising in the Tamil diaspora and in blocking arms shipments.

With the aid of a faction of traitorous former Tigers, the Sri Lankan state went on the offensive. As state governments pushed through the Tiger defenses, more and more people fled. In early 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared a "No Fire Zone" within

Tiger-held territory, supposedly to provide safety to civilian refugees. The army subjected the No Fire Zone to sustained bombardment. The government refused all attempts to broker a ceasefire and continued the offensive. In May 2009, Prabhakaran himself was killed.

The victory of the Sri Lankan state was made possible, in part, by Western support, but as Hillier writes, aid for it "also came from states at odds with the West. Aid worth billions of dollars was offered by China, Russia, Iran, Libya, and Pakistan." The Tamils' international isolation was complete. On May 27, 2009, an Orwellian UN Human Rights Council resolution praised the government of Sri Lanka for "protecting human rights," while condemning acts of terrorism by the Tigers.

How many were killed in the war is unknown. In addition to thousands of combatants, tens of thousands of civilians were killed—most were killed by government forces. Attempts to investigate the scale of the killings and human rights violations were obstructed by the Sri Lankan government and its international allies. In February 2020, Mahinda Rajapaksa, appointed as prime minister by his brother a few months earlier, declared Sri Lanka was withdrawing from a United Nations resolution investigating alleged war crimes.

The war was lost, and what remains of the Tamil movement is now desperately struggling to defend minimal democratic rights.

Questions for the Future

Hillier ends his essay by asking, what next? The areas of the former Tamil Tiger state have become occupied territory. After the 2015 election defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa by his former ally Maithripala Sirisena, repression eased somewhat, but the government's policy of Sinhalization continues. Drawing a comparison with policies of the Israeli state, Hillier describes it as a strategy of creating "facts on the ground." The Tamil language

is erased from the public sphere as streets and other place names are changed, Sinhala capital and the army's economic projects push out Tamil enterprises, and the government attempts to change the demographic composition of the area by bringing in large numbers of Sinhala.

The last section of the book is composed of the text "Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam Freedom Struggle," written by the Tigers' chief negotiator Anton Balasingham on behalf of the Tigers' political committee in 1983. It describes the early Tamil Tiger view of the history of the island, of the national question, and of their rationale for launching a military struggle. The text is an historical document, showing how, like many other national movements at the time, the Tamil Tigers expressed their struggle in "Marxist-

Leninist" terms, even though the movement never claimed to be communist.

Rather than an academic article or a comprehensive overview of the complicated history of the struggle, *Losing Santhia* is a text that helps the reader understand the motivations and viewpoints of participants in an often ignored or mischaracterized struggle. The logical allies of the Tamils, Hillier writes, "remain the impoverished Sinhalese workers and peasants. ... It remains the island's greatest political catastrophe that the once powerful Sinhalese left failed to stand with the Tamils and launch a united fight for the liberation of all exploited and oppressed people."

By letting Tigers speak for themselves, Hillier enables readers to hear from survivors of this tragedy.

New Politics
294 New York Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11216 USA
Address Service Requested

NONPROFIT
ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BROOKLYN, NY
Permit No. 84

IN THIS ISSUE

The whole issue of defunding the police was a brilliant intervention, because it immediately connected the issue of police abuse and violence to this larger issue of the failure of the state.

Keeanga-Yamahitta Taylor

RACE, CRISIS, AND RESISTANCE IN THE UNITED STATES

Ridding ourselves of a uniquely malicious and bizarre president is reason to celebrate, but . . . it is misleading to see the election as a victory of democracy over authoritarianism. Biden's win is the triumph not of democracy but of an oligarchic status quo, itself an increasingly authoritarian system.

Thomas Harrison

BIDEN REPLACES TRUMP:
A MALIGNANT "NORMALCY" IS RESTORED

The U.S. elections demonstrated that "bourgeois democracy" is not a gift of the bourgeoisie and that the right to vote has to be fought for and defended by mass struggles.

Robini Hensman

THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES:
A SOCIALIST VIEW FROM AFAR

Bolivia has given the world an impressive lesson in democracy, but reactionary sectors of the country are once again revealing their anti-democratic impulse.

Bret Gustafson

BOLIVIA'S ELECTIONS: THE RETURN OF
DEMOCRACY AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE