

NewPolitics

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From the Editors

Donald Trump is president, again. We will need to organize across sectors to resist the coming attacks on working people, immigrants, the LGBTQ community, and what he calls “the enemy within.” The Left is, of course, that “enemy.” Trump will go after unions, Black voting rights, women’s reproductive rights, and especially trans people. And his “drill, baby, drill” policies will continue and exacerbate the climate crisis that threatens human survival.

Trump will aggravate many of the world’s already existing problems. In the Middle East and North Africa region, his appointment of pro-Israeli hardliners will continue the American government’s support for the slaughter and dispossession of Palestinians. We can expect him to end support for Ukraine and force it to cede a fifth of its territory to Russia. His nationalist America First orientation will likely worsen already tense political relations with China.

Trump and his Project 2025 inner circle have already promoted a kind of “brown international” of far-right parties. The president-elect has expressed admiration for strong-man leaders such as Vladimir Putin of Russia and Narendra Modi of India. On social media Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and the Netherlands’s Geert Wilders have expressed their elation at Trump’s election. Around the world authoritarianism is on the march and democracy is in retreat.

Still there have been some bright spots. In South Korea, President Yoon Suk Yeol’s imposition of martial law led to a popular rebellion that blocked the establishment of military rule while singing “Feliz Navidad,”

with new Korean lyrics meaning, “Impeachment is the answer.” In Uruguay, the socialist Frente Amplio was again elected to the presidency. And in Syria, people opened up the prisons and released the thousands detained there after Assad abandoned the country. Social movements can still defeat authoritarianism and win power.

Here in the United States, Trump says he will be a “dictator for a day.” Who will resist and how? The Los Angeles City Council, and other towns and cities, passed sanctuary resolutions while the L.A. Unified School District reaffirmed that it will continue to be a sanctuary for immigrants. The ACLU, NAACP, and other such groups are preparing for legal battles to protect our civil rights, while immigrant groups are organizing at the state and local level.

Most labor unions know that a Trump labor board will make fights for union recognition and contracts more difficult and some are readying themselves—some for the struggles to come and some to try to make deals. Still, at the moment, few labor or social movements are prepared for Trump’s promised mass deportations and his threats to call a state of emergency and mobilize the military to handle immigration and social protests. Trump’s second term, his white supremacy and authoritarianism, and what some see as a step towards fascism, will challenge every movement and activist.

In this issue, Howie Hawkins addresses a political paradox: how could an electorate that is quite progressive have chosen a far-right president?

A special section provides a deep dive into the far right, in the United States and beyond, and how we can fight it. Frieda Afary takes up the definition of fascism and how it might be resisted. The far right in the United States, however, is not just white, as Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes discuss in their interview with Eric Maroney on America's Multiracial Right. For Carl Davidson and Bill Fletcher Jr. the way to challenge the right is by building a Third Reconstruction, a multiracial movement for justice. Matthew Lyons looks at how extreme right-wing ideologies become part of the mainstream. Richard Seymour, in his interview with Phil Gasper, argues that the "disaster nationalism" of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, and other far-right figures, is moving in the direction of a new form of fascism but is not there yet, and it is still possible for the left to defeat it. And Shannon Ikebe describes the growth of the far right in Europe, and the way the French left has worked to fight it.

Two articles focus on questions confronting the labor movement. Jeff Stilley reviews the career of Frank Walsh to understand the limits of labor progressivism. And Richard Smith offers a pro-labor approach to dealing with the issue of tariffs and human rights with respect to China.

This issue also has a section on the Middle East. Prominent leftwing scholar Gilbert Achcar explains what has happened in Syria and then offers crucial background for understanding the region more generally. In her essay "Razan Zaitouneh for President," poet and scholar Mohja Kahf

asks us to join her in imagining a brighter future for Syria. Leila al-Shami discusses some of the challenges facing Syrians today. And Saeed Rahnema provides some important historical context to Assad's fall. In an article focused on Eastern Europe, but with profound implications for Palestine, Samuel Farber reviews the history of Zionism.

Turning to culture, Nedjib Sidi Moussa examines the way in which Richard Wright was received by the French left during the Cold War.

Finally, we offer reviews of several important books. Steve Early discusses two recent volumes on labor struggles: Hamilton Nolan's *The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor* and Eric Blanc's *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*. Dan Fischer reviews Ashley Dawson's book on environmentalism from below. Roger Bybee reviews Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Stolen Pride*, a study of Trump voters. And Hank Kennedy takes up Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish struggle.

We will need all of the insights in our articles and reviews as well as the experiences of our movements in order to resist Trump and the far right. The Republicans have become a far-right party and the Democrats have no interest in defending the working-class majority. More than ever, we need an independent political alternative. We have the numbers and the potential power to stop him and turn the country around. Together, working collectively, and organizing against oppression and exploitation, we will fight for freedom, for justice, and for equality for all.

A Political Paradox

A Progressive-Leaning Public Elects a Far-Right President

HOWIE HAWKINS

WHY DID AMERICAN VOTERS, WHO by substantial majorities favor progressive economic, social, and international policies, elect a plutocratic, racist, America First jingoist as President?

From an examination of election results, exit polls, and other public opinion polling, I draw three conclusions about this paradox:

The economy was the top issue. Trump focused on it and Harris did not.

People of color were the swing vote. Trump did not expand his white base so much as Harris lost hers among people of color.

The majority of Americans favor progressive policies, which should encourage us to keep organizing during the second Trump administration.

Voters wanted change to address the economic concerns they were feeling. Trump posed as the change agent—“Trump will fix it.” Harris posed as the candidate of stability and the status quo—“We’re not going back.”

Trump did not expand his white working-class base, as much commentary would have it. He mainly mobilized the pre-existing cross-class, white-supremacist base that Republicans have built since the white backlash against racial equality began in the 1960s. Meanwhile, Harris gained

2.7 million more white votes than Biden had received in 2020 but lost 8.9 million votes of people of color that Biden had won. Trump won 2.0 million more votes from people of color than he had in 2020, but many more people of color, 6.9 million of them, did not vote for either Trump or Harris. Economic concerns were the top issue for people of color.

The far-right Trump Republicans may have captured the whole federal government—President, Supreme Court, House, and Senate—but strong majorities of Americans still favor progressive policies, which should give us hope as we organize progressive political alternatives during four more years of Trump.

In the rest of this article, I will present the data and arguments that support my conclusions and discuss the paradox of the election of a right-wing government by a progressive-leaning electorate.

It’s the Economy, Stupid!

James Carville, who coined this campaign mantra, believes it was still true in 2024 and the polling data backs him up.¹

Trump’s 312 to 226 Electoral College vote has been called “decisive”² and even a “landslide.”³ However, if just under than 115,000 votes in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin had been cast for Harris instead of Trump, Harris would have won the Electoral College count.⁴ The anti-majoritarian distortions of the Electoral

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College do not give us a good sense of what voters wanted in this election.

Looking at the national popular vote gives us a more accurate sense of voters' hopes. The first thing to note is that only 31.7 percent of the estimated 244 million eligible voters⁵ cast their ballot for Trump.

A slight majority of the 63.9 percent of eligible voters who actually cast ballots elected Trump by a narrow margin of 1.5 percent of the popular vote—49.9 percent for Trump over 48.4 percent for Harris. Trump's vote of 77.3 million was 3.1 million votes more than he received in 2020. The difference, however, came down to 6.3 million fewer votes for the Democratic candidate, from 81.3 million for Biden in 2020 down to 75.0 million for Harris in 2024.⁶

How did the Democrats lose 6.3 million voters? The two major exit polls,⁷ which I will refer to here as the CNN and Fox polls, indicate that the economy was the top issue for voters and that Harris lost those voters by large margins. The CNN poll showed that 32 percent of voters ranked the "economy" as their top issue and Harris lost those voters by an 80 to 18 percent margin. The AP poll showed that 39 percent ranked the "economy and jobs" as their top issue and Harris lost those voters by a 62 to 37 percent margin. The CNN poll showed that the top issue for voters was democracy at 34 percent, which Harris won by 81 to 18 percent. Democracy was not an option in the Fox poll. All other issues were far behind the economy and democracy. This polling indicates that Harris lost enough traditionally Democratic voters worried about the economy to lose the election.

The 2024 election was a change election. Many working class and lower-middle class Americans are angry at the economic precarity that the powers that be have given them after five decades of corporate neoliberalism. Trump presented himself as

the outsider, anti-establishment, change candidate, while Harris ran as the candidate of stability and the status quo.⁸ The swing vote was the 8.9 million 2020 Biden voters among people of color who Harris lost, not so much to Trump as to disaffection and abstention from voting for the incumbent Democrats that Harris personified.

The exit polls indicate that those 8.9 million 2020 Biden voters who did not vote for Harris in 2024 may have come out for a Democrat who campaigned as a change candidate on a progressive populist economic agenda. Instead, Harris limited her progressive appeals to abortion and democratic rights while campaigning with Republican celebrities for center-right voters, touting the billions she had raised from wealthy donors, and projecting "joy" when so many Americans were hurting. She was tone-deaf to the economic problems of working-class and lower-middle-class Americans. Nearly 80 percent of Americans report living paycheck to paycheck and over 70 percent have less than \$2,000 in savings to cover emergency expenses.⁹ Payroll jobs are being replaced by gig jobs. Pensions are disappearing. Earning a college degree requires debt for all but the most affluent. In 67 percent of two-parent families both spouses are employed, while in single-parent households, 85.6 percent of fathers and 76.2 percent of mothers are employed, making childcare a major expense for most families with children.¹⁰ Real wages adjusted for inflation had declined 1.8 percent during the Biden years as the election approached.¹¹ Yet Harris championed no progressive populist economic reforms that could give people living these experiences hope for a better future.

By 2020, after 50 years of neoliberal economic policies, wealth inequality in the United States was at an all-time high, surpassing that of the Gilded Age of the 19th century Robber Barons, according to

research by an economist specializing in economic inequality, Gabriel Zucman.¹² The wealth of the top 1 percent jumped up nearly \$15 trillion during the first three years of the Biden/Harris administration, from \$30 trillion at the end of 2020 to \$44.6 trillion at the end of 2023, according to the Federal Reserve.¹³

Trump's narrative blamed those toward the bottom of the class hierarchy for the problems that working-class and middle-class Americans were feeling. He punched down and scapegoated immigrants, people of color, disabled people, trans people, news organization, and social and climate justice demonstrators. Instead of punching up at the giant corporations and the superrich oligarchs who have enriched themselves through neoliberal economic policies, Harris welcomed them into her coalition. Nor did she forthrightly defend the people Trump was targeting. Instead, she reinforced Trump policy narratives by saying she could do them better. She ran as a tough-on-crime former prosecutor against Trump the felon. She campaigned on doing better at restricting immigration than Trump because she would sign the mean-spirited Republican-drafted anti-immigrant bill that the Biden administration had acquiesced to 2024, but which Trump then told Republicans to kill because he wanted to campaign on the immigration issue. The Democrats' accommodation to this anti-immigrant bill was one of many cases where the Democrats legitimized the Republican policy agenda instead of fighting it. Harris also reinforced the Republican narrative on energy and climate change by answering the question about climate in the presidential debate by boasting that the Biden administration had produced more oil and gas than the Trump administration had and highlighting her commitment to fracking.¹⁴

Some have argued that Harris' belligerent

militarism and unwavering support for the U.S.-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza lost her many voters. If Harris' had said she would condition arms to Israel on adherence to human rights, which is U.S. law and supported by a majority of Americans,¹⁵ would she have won over the votes

Harris gained more white votes than Biden but lost 8.9 million people of color. Trump won more votes from people of color but 6.9 million didn't vote for either.

of progressives and especially Muslims who were angry at Harris' position on the war in Gaza? She may have gained some voters if she had, but the polling indicates the war in Gaza was not a central issue for many voters. About 1 million of the 1.5 million Muslim registered voters voted in 2020 and at least that number was expected in 2024. The exit poll evidence for how Muslims voted is contradictory. A much-publicized exit poll by the Council for American Islamic Affairs (CAIR) found that the Muslim vote went 53 percent for the Green Party's Jill Stein, 21 percent for Trump, and 20 percent for Harris. An arms embargo on Israel was the signature policy of the Stein campaign. If the CAIR poll is right, Stein would have received around 500,000 Muslim votes out of her total of around 860,000 votes, which would mean a steep drop-off of traditional Green voters that seems unlikely. The Fox poll, on the other hand, found that the Muslim vote went 63 percent for Harris, 33 percent for Trump, and 4 percent for "other," which presumably means mostly for Jill Stein. According to the 2020 Fox exit poll, Biden

won the Muslim vote over Trump by a similar 64 percent to 35 percent margin as Harris. In any case, polling indicates that the war in Gaza was a top issue for only a small group of voters. A mid-October Harvard-Harris poll asked voters for their most important issues and found that the Israel-Hamas conflict was ranked 15th on the list at 6 percent and at only 3 percent when asked for the most important issue for the voter personally. The war in Gaza ranked far behind inflation at 39 percent and the economy and jobs at 29 percent in the Harvard-Harris poll. The polling evidence indicates that the economy, not the war in Gaza, was the motivating issue for far more voters.¹⁶

The Swing Vote Was Black and Latino

The conventional mass media narrative holds that the Trump electoral coalition is based in the white working class. The data, however, show that the political realignment of conservative white working-class voters from the Democratic Party into the Republican Party that began in the 1960s has stalled under Trump.¹⁷ The big jump of white working class and middle class voters to the Republican column began six decades ago with the white backlash to civil rights, school desegregation, fair housing, and affirmative action by white people fearful of competition from below by people of color for good jobs, college educations, and favored status. Goldwater's campaign for "states' rights" against federal civil rights and desegregation policies began the political realignment, with the Republicans winning the five Deep South states for the first time since 1880. Running coded white backlash campaigns in 1968, Nixon with his "southern strategy" and Wallace with his pro-segregation "states' rights" message received a combined 64 percent of the white working-class vote. Nixon received

70 percent of that vote in 1972.¹⁸ Carter did recover enough of the conservative white vote in 1976 to win all the southern states with his talk of "ethnic purity," "black intrusion," and "alien groups" in reference to neighborhood and school integration.¹⁹ Clinton in 1992 again recovered a substantial portion of the conservative white vote and won several southern states with his racial dog whistling about being tough on crime and welfare.²⁰ But rather than stemming the flow of white voters to the Republican Party, the messaging of Carter and Clinton served to normalize the Republicans' racial messaging to white voters.

The white supremacist Republican base for Trump, which includes a section of white working-class voters, pre-existed Trump. The overall trend in racial attitudes among whites since the 1960s has been the other way, toward more egalitarian racial attitudes,²¹ a trend that has continued in the Trump years.²² The declining but still significant portion of whites who oppose racial equality in principle and especially in policy and practice are now concentrated in the Republican Party.²³ Trump's racially coded message seems to appeal to white people of all classes who are more racially intolerant. But his levels of support indicate that the white supremacist vote has declined substantially since the Nixon years.

Race remains a major factor in the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans, but what about class? Occupation would provide the clearest indication of working-class voters, who are those who earn a living doing non-supervisory manual, service, and clerical jobs. Exit polls, however, have not asked about occupation. Their data do cover educational attainment and income, which we have to use as rough proxies for class.

Using educational attainment, the CNN exit polls since 2016 indicate that Trump has not gained votes among work-

ing class whites. White voters without college degrees voted for Trump by 66 percent in 2016, 67 percent in 2020, and 66 percent in 2024. White male working-class voters for Trump measured by lacking a college degree have hardly changed either, from 71 percent in 2016 to 70 percent in 2020 to 69 percent in 2024.

Trump won 56 percent of all voters without a college degree, which brings Trump's non-college degree vote to 49.5 million, or 64 percent of his 77.3 million total. It is impossible to know from the exit polls exactly how many of these non-college degree people are working class or middle class. But it is safe to say that a large portion of Trump's non-degreed base is middle class because there are tens of millions of middle-class people without college degrees who are small business owners and their spouses (an estimated 16 million people²⁴); supervisors and middle managers in factories, trucking, warehousing, construction, and services; police, prison guards, and border patrol; and other middle-class occupations.²⁵

People of color, who are about two-thirds working class²⁶ and account for a third of the presidential vote, were the swing vote in this election. Trump received 1 percentage point less of the white vote in 2024 compared to 2020 (57 to 58), but he received 1.3 percentage points more of the people of color vote in 2024 compared to 2020 (9.7 to 8.4). Even more important in the decline in support of people of color for Harris was the 10 percent decline in both the Black and Latino turnout. These people did not vote for Trump or Harris. People of color still supported Harris over Trump by a 64 percent to 33 percent margin, but that was a significant decline from the Biden over Trump margin of 71 to 26 percent in 2020 and the Clinton over Trump margin of 74 to 21 percent in 2016.

Black and Latino voters are not broken

down by education separately from all people of color in the CNN exit polls, which could give us a sense of their vote by class. But gender is identified and Trump gained significantly among both Black and Latino men. For Black men, the Trump vote was 13 percent in 2016, 12 percent in 2020, but jumped nine percentage points to 21 percent in 2024. For Latino men, the Trump vote was 32 percent in both 2016 and 2020, but jumped up 22 percentage points to 54 percent in 2024. The vote of Black women for Trump has remained below 10 percent, with Trump getting 4 percent in 2016, 9 percent in 2020, and 7 percent in 2024. The vote of Latino women for Trump, however, has increased, from 25 percent in 2016 to 30 percent in 2020, to 39 percent in 2024.

The numerical vote totals by race in 2020 and 2024 shows more clearly how people of color were the swing voters in 2024 who voted for Trump or, in much larger numbers, did not vote for either Trump or Harris. The numerical vote totals show us from which groups Trump gained 3.1 million votes and Harris lost 6.3 million Democratic votes from what Biden received in 2020. Among white voters, Trump gained 1.1 million votes while Harris gained 2.7 million votes in 2024 compared to Biden in 2020. Among Black voters, Trump gained only 0.1 million votes in 2024 over 2020. But Harris received 0.2 million fewer Black votes in 2024 than Biden did in 2020 (dropping from 14.9 million to 14.7 million). Among Latino voters, Trump gained 1.0 million voters while Harris lost 4.7 million votes in 2024 compared to Biden in 2020 (dropping from 13.4 million to 8.7 million). Among Asian voters, Trump gained 0.2 million votes and Harris lost 0.5 million votes. Among other people of color, Trump gained 0.7 million votes while Harris lost 0.7 million votes. Comparing the total votes of white people to all people of color, Trump garnered 1.1

million more white votes and 2.0 million more people of color votes, which accounts for all of Trump's total of 3.1 million more votes in 2024 compared to 2020. Harris gained 2.7 million white votes but lost 8.9 million people of color votes, a net loss of 6.2 million votes.²⁷

The main story of the election results is not that white voters, let alone the white working class, rallied to Trump, but that people of color voted in significantly lower numbers for Harris compared to Biden four years before. Compared to 2020, Black turnout was down 3.5 million and Latino turnout was also down 3.5 million. Trump's additional 2.0 million people of color votes is 65 percent of his 3.1 million increase in total votes.

While people of color have been voting by large majorities against Trump, polling indicates that his somewhat increased appeal in 2024 as well as the lower voter turnout by Black and Latino voters is due to economic concerns. The CNN and Fox exit polls did not report what the top issues were for Black and Latino voters separately from voters as a whole. But other polls indicated that the economy and health care were the top two issues for Blacks and Latinos. An AP poll found that Black voters considered the economy (79 percent) and health care (56 percent) to be the two most important issues.²⁸ A Pew Research Center poll found similar results among Latino voters, with 85 percent of Latino voters saying the economy was very important to their vote in the 2024 presidential election, followed by health care (71 percent).²⁹ The conclusion to draw from this data is that economic issues were an important factor moving some Black and Latino voters either to Trump as the change candidate promising economic improvements or to not voting for Harris as they did for Biden because she did not offer a compelling message on the economy.

Income is a weak indicator of class

because many people in middle-class occupations as well as working-class occupations make family incomes in the middling \$30,000 to \$100,000 a year range, who accounted for 48 percent of all voters in 2024. The CNN exit poll found that Trump won these middle income voters 52 percent to 46 percent in 2024, while Harris won the 11 percent of voters with family incomes below \$30,000 by a 50 to 46 percent margin and won the 41 percent of voters with family incomes over \$100,000 by 51 to 47 percent.³⁰ Given these small margins up and down the income scale, which were similar in Trump's previous races in 2016 and 2020, it is clear that income classes were not a good predictor of voter choices and that the white working class is not Trump's primary voting base.

Another indicator for class would be the union vote. The CNN exit poll found that union voters preferred Harris over Trump by a margin of 53 to 41 percent. This margin is similar to Biden's 56 to 40 percent and Clinton's 52 to 42 percent margins over Trump. The union vote spans the occupational spectrum from low-wage manual, clerical, and service jobs to middle-income jobs requiring college degrees, including teaching, nursing, and many jobs in government agencies. These degreed jobs have traditionally been considered professional middle-class jobs because they had a degree of autonomy and authority not found in working-class occupations. But with the expansion of corporate-style hierarchies with intrusive supervision in both the private and public sectors, these degreed jobs have become more like traditional working-class jobs. With unionized workers representing only 10 percent of the overall workforce and just 6 percent of the private sector workforce,³¹ these margins in favor of the Democrats tell us more about the political culture and member education of unions than about the working class as

a whole.

One more factor to consider is non-voters. They are disproportionately young, not college educated, lower income, working class, and people of color. Their political preferences, according to a 2020 study, were 33 percent Democratic, 30 percent Republican, and 18 percent third party, reflecting the close division of the nation as a whole, but also their distrust of the major parties and the efficacy of voting, which is reflected in their relatively high 18 percent identification with third parties.³²

This disaffection from the major parties extends to those who do vote. Voting for the lesser evil is widespread. The CNN exit poll found that 48 percent of Harris voters voted “mainly” against Trump and 38 percent of Trump voters voted “mainly” against Harris. In 2020, 60 percent of Biden voters voted “mainly” against Trump and 30 percent of Trump voters voted “mainly” against Biden. The question was not asked in 2016. These results are consistent with annual Gallup Polls, which show the percentage of people who want a third major party hovering around 60 percent for the last decade.³³

What all this polling data indicate is that race and education, not class, are the principal social divisions motivating party preference. White people and people without a college degree tend to vote Republican. People of color and people with college degrees tend to vote Democratic. Class is not much of a factor. The Trump Republicans have not become a working-class party as some pundits would have it, but remain a cross-class coalition as the Republicans have always been, as have the Democrats. The party elites for both of them are the wealthy and corporate funders and the middle-class professionals who populate the parties’ state and national committees, the politicians’ campaign and public office staffs, and the parties’ associ-

ated think tanks, public relations firms, law offices, advocacy nonprofits, and, for the Democrats, union bureaucracies, and for the Republicans, white Evangelical and Catholic churches. Regular working-class and middle-class people have little say in determining policy platforms and choosing the nominees other than voting in primaries and general elections among the candidates that have been pre-selected by party elites.

Progressive Majority

If regular working-class and middle-class people have little say in party politics and elections, we can get an indication of where they stand politically from how they voted on ballot initiatives in 2024. Trump Republican majorities in control of the presidency, Supreme Court, and U.S. House and Senate may mean rightwing control of the federal government, but when voters had a chance to vote directly on policies, they tended to vote for progressive positions on economic and cultural issues.

Voters approved seven out of ten initiatives to establish a state constitutional right to abortion. All three “school choice” initiatives for public vouchers for private schools failed in Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska. Utah voted to increase public school funding. Massachusetts voted to eliminate high-stakes testing in public schools. California repealed a ban on municipal rent control. Pro-unionization measures passed in Massachusetts and Oregon.³⁴

Minimum wage increases passed in Alaska, Missouri, and Nebraska, but lost narrowly in California 51 to 49 percent and lost in Massachusetts for tipped workers. An Arizona initiative to cut the minimum wage of tipped workers was defeated. Throughout 2024, minimum wages were increased in 88 jurisdictions — 23 states and 65 cities and counties; 70 jurisdictions raised the minimum wage to \$15, including

53 jurisdictions to \$17 an hour or more. The federal minimum wage has been \$7.25 since 2009 and remains so in 20 states.³⁵

A dozen measures related to ranked choice voting (RCV) were on the ballot. RCV is of particular interest for indepen-

A right-wing president was elected despite a progressive-leaning electorate. It is clear from polling data that there is a majoritarian base for progressive politics.

dent political action because its single-seat form eliminates the “spoiler problem” for third party candidates and its multi-seat form also creates proportional representation that would give the independent left its fair share of representation and power in legislative bodies. RCV is a reform whose momentum was accelerating going into the 2024 election. In 2000, just two municipalities still used RCV in its proportional form that had been instituted in two dozen cities by progressive reformers between the 1910s and 1940s. By 2020, RCV was again practiced in two dozen cities and two states. Going into the 2024 elections, RCV was used in 51 jurisdictions, including 2 states, 3 counties, and 46 cities, several of which have proportional RCV.³⁶

Two measures to repeal RCV were rejected (Alaska and Bloomington, Minnesota). Four measures in support of RCV were adopted (Washington, D.C., Richmond, California, and Oak Park and Peoria, Illinois).

All five initiatives that proposed statewide RCV failed. The Oregon initiative was simply for RCV for all state and federal of-

fices. It lost decisively 58-42 percent, which was a disappointment for RCV advocates in a state where two counties and two cities already use RCV, including the largest city, Portland, which uses the multi-seat proportional representation form of RCV for its city council. RCV advocates were divided on whether to support the other four initiatives because they combined all-comers primaries where the candidates receiving votes among the top four or top five advance to the RCV general election. These proposals failed in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, and Nevada.

A Missouri initiative to prohibit RCV passed, but it also prohibited non-citizen voting, the part of the measure that its proponents featured. Seven other states passed prohibitions on non-citizen voting. These bans on non-citizen voting seemed designed more to mobilize the anti-immigrant Trump base with the false narrative that non-U.S. citizens are somehow participating in U.S. elections in large numbers. While legal non-citizen residents are allowed to vote in school board and/or municipal elections in a small number of municipalities in three states—two in California, three in Vermont, and 16 in Maryland—there was no movement for non-citizen voting in the states where the bans did pass—Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Wisconsin.³⁷

Many advocates of RCV opposed the RCV initiatives that included top four or top five all-comers or jungle primaries.³⁸ I opposed them with the slogan of “Ranked Choice Voting, Yes! Jungle Primaries, No!” The advocates for top four or five primaries call them open primaries, but that is branding, not an accurate description. Many states already have open primaries where voters can choose which party primary to vote in on primary election day. The jungle primaries eliminate party primaries. They

put the candidates of all parties in one all-comers primary. This strips parties of their right to choose their own nominees. Voters of every party and no party are voting for the top four or five who move on the RCV general election. Parties are important for democracy. It is how ordinary people can associate to discuss their problems, formulate policies to remedy those problems, and organize activities and nominate candidates to advance their remedies. This kind of participatory democracy is of particular concern for those of us who want a principled and democratically-accountable independent party of the left.³⁹

On economic and class issues, polling shows that strong majorities of Americans support social democratic policies for more economic security and fairness.

- 62 percent want a Job Guarantee⁴⁰
- 62 percent want a Minimum Income Guarantee⁴¹
- 60 percent want Medicare for All⁴²
- 65 percent want a Green New Deal⁴³
- 68 percent want Rent Control⁴⁴
- 63 percent want More Public Housing⁴⁵
- 86 percent want to Raise the Minimum Wage⁴⁶
- 64 percent want a \$17 Minimum Wage⁴⁷
- 73 percent want Universal Free Child-care⁴⁸
- 57 percent want Tuition-Free Public College⁴⁹
- 78 percent want to Increase Social Security Benefits⁵⁰
- 79 percent want to Tax the Rich and Big Corporations⁵¹
- 70 percent approve of Labor Unions⁵²

On cultural issues, polling also shows majorities on the progressive side of the culture wars supporting anti-discrimination, equal rights, and pro-democracy reforms that protect social and political minorities.

- 53 percent want a path to Citizenship for Undocumented Immigrants⁵³
- 63 percent want Abortion to be legal in all or most cases⁵⁴
- 71 percent want Same-Sex Marriage to be legal⁵⁵
- 74 percent want Transgender People treated with respect⁵⁶
- 63 percent want to Abolish the Electoral College⁵⁷
- 61 percent want Ranked Choice Voting⁵⁸

On foreign and military policy, public opinion is complicated from a progressive point of view. 77 percent hold a progressive internationalist view that “America has a moral obligation to stand up for human rights and democracy around the world.”⁵⁹ However, human rights and democracy are not top foreign policy priorities for a majority of Americans. In one poll, that view is the top foreign policy priority among five options for only 15 percent of Americans, behind physical defense (30 percent), international cooperation (24 percent), and economic gains (20 percent), and ahead of constraining aggressors (9 percent).⁶⁰ In another poll with four options for the most important obligation of the U.S. government, promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law across the globe was the second priority (25 percent), behind maintaining constitutional rights (41 percent) and ahead of protection from foreign threats (24 percent) and promoting economic prosperity (10 percent).⁶¹

Polls indicate that a majority takes a pro-human rights position on the two major contemporary wars in which the United States is involved. Polling showed a growing majority opposing military aid to Israel as the Gaza genocide continued, increasing from 52 percent in late October 2023 to 61 percent in early June.⁶² A 61 percent majority of American support still

favor military aid for Ukraine's defense against Russia's invasion, although support is sharply divided between Democrats (89 percent), independents (64 percent), and Republicans (32 percent).⁶³

Where majority opinion departs from the progressive position is its strong support for high U.S. military spending. 67 percent agree with the statement "America must remain the world's greatest military power, no matter the cost."⁶⁴ 51 percent support increased military spending and 23 percent support the current level of high military spending, while only 14 percent want to reduce it.⁶⁵ With conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, rising tensions over China and Taiwan, and worries about the vulnerability of U.S. physical and digital infrastructures to terrorism and cyberattack, it is not surprising that many Americans, including those with generally progressive views, support high military spending.⁶⁶ 65 percent of Americans expect the U.S. to be involved in a war in the next five years. However, it is also clear from that same survey that strong majorities of Americans do not support the use of military force for other than defensive purposes.⁶⁷ Only 4 percent of Americans believe military force should be used to defend human rights and only 1 percent to promote democracy abroad. Most Americans prioritize other policies to promote democracy, including setting a good example (52 percent), working through international organizations like the United Nations (28 percent), and foreign aid (8 percent).⁶⁸

What this polling on policy positions indicates is that a progressive majority supports social democratic public policies, although not a socialist transformation of the capitalist system. Increasing numbers of Americans have a favorable view of "socialism." By 2021, that included 41 percent of adults, 45 percent of women, 51 percent of young adults, and 60 percent of Black

Americans.⁶⁹ But what most Americans who are favorable to socialism mean by it is social democratic public programs within capitalism,⁷⁰ not changing the system to a full economic democracy structured around social ownership and democratic planning and administration of the major means of production. There has been no polling about socialism as social ownership and democratic planning. In the absence of a strong socialist movement and party with mass education and influence, discussion about an alternative system of democratic socialism has been confined to far-left margins away from mainstream political discourse.

The 2024 presidential election was a paradox. A right-wing president was elected despite a progressive-leaning majority in the electorate, especially on the economic issues that were voters' top concerns. It is clear from polling data we have reviewed here that there is a majoritarian base for progressive politics. The right-wing base of the Republican Party has not grown so much as the Democratic Party has not provided a progressive alternative.

Some would argue that the Democrats could win back control of the federal government by running on a progressive populist economic program. I would argue that the wealthy funders and professional cadre who control the Democratic Party are congenitally committed to a neoliberal corporate agenda. The Harris campaign reflected their politics. I would argue that the political vacuum for progressive politics can best be filled by an independent party of the left. But that is a discussion for another time. For now, let's finish on the optimistic yet challenging note that there is a huge political vacuum on the progressive left to be filled, one way or another.

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Assessing One of America's Great Labor Progressives

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FRANK P. WALSH (1864–1939), a progressive defense lawyer from Kansas City and political ally of Woodrow Wilson, almost single handedly created a worker-friendly labor control system during World War I. Throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, U.S. politics were dominated by politicians who had not recognized the legitimacy of labor unions or collective bargaining, and the court system regularly issued injunctions against unions engaging in strike activity (de Leon 2015; Greene 1998). As co-chair of the 1918 National War Labor Board (NWLB), Walsh pushed it in directions that laid the foundations for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NWLB was the first federal body to effectively recognize and enforce the right to organize unions. Granting that it did not formally endorse the creation of new unions, the NWLB briefly rewarded and protected shopfloor industrial unionism in practice. On that note, Walsh hoped the board would help Black workers in the South to gain a foothold in the union movement, with mixed success (Conner 1983:81–83; McCartin 1997:115; Zieger 2000:135). The NWLB

experiment, forced ahead by Walsh, was the prototype for labor law around collective bargaining in the 1930s.

Although paradoxes and contradictions abounded in labor law after 1935, this essay examines an underappreciated source of inspiration for the Wagner Act and NLRB system of collective bargaining—Frank Walsh's activities in the 1910s.¹ Walsh's strategy rooted itself in radical agitation from within the halls of power and state legitimacy, while consciously remaining aloof from the internal struggles of labor and leftist organizations. Walsh's approach proved highly effective during the accommodation of labor by Democrats. In this essay, I will examine the limitations of Walsh's strategy using a Gramscian lens.

In short, Walsh's political effectiveness in the 1910s came from his role as a traditional intellectual who could act authentically as liaison between Democrats and the restless working class. Although he remained committed to the interests of the working class, his approach was tragically flawed in three ways: Walsh placed excessive trust in Woodrow Wilson, in American state institutions, and in the notion that once reforms were achieved, they could not be taken away (McCartin 1997: 200). These beliefs limited his considerable potential for pushing the country by preventing him from becoming an organic intellectual. Part of the reason for Walsh's trust in Wilson and aligned Democrats is that they took up

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an accommodationist strategy toward the labor movement during the 1910s. This was a period of proletarian upheaval and radical industrial unionism among miners and transit, garment, and textile workers. After being rebuffed by Republicans in 1906 and 1908, and following the Democrats selecting a major union official to chair the House Committee on Labor in 1910, the AFL gave their first presidential endorsement to Wilson in 1912 (McCartin 1997: 12–37). The mainstream labor movement gave Wilson not only votes, but also a way to control an explosive working class. Significantly, Walsh used this opening to push the enactment of policies that were conducive to industrial unionism.

Although Walsh should be considered one of the most important figures on the path toward collective bargaining, his legacy also includes the limitations of pursuing legal strikes² and of linking working-class politics to the Democratic Party. He may have achieved more with a shift toward embracing organizational membership and discipline, but instead he resisted any infringement on his individual independence. In the language of Antonio Gramsci, Walsh never became an organic intellectual. These tragic limitations make him a difficult figure for leftist scholars to fully embrace, while he was too radical and confrontational for liberals to claim.

Walsh's political biography demonstrates that agitators within the political system should move toward organizational discipline outside of electoral logics, particularly when the political environment becomes hostile to their influence. For those who tend to reject insider tactics out of hand, his story exhibits how powerful such tactics can be in the hands of an anti-opportunist, even if the gains are temporary and dependent on the political landscape. Walsh's achievements also represent the upper limits of attempting to use patriotism

and the two-party system to leftist ends, and of modern agitation methods disconnected from mass organization. Rather than ask “reform or revolution?” in the abstract, the lesson suggested by Walsh's experiences is that insider agitation has its time and place—if agitators do not demobilize working-class activity in exchange for influence.

Trump won the 2024 election as I made final revisions to this essay. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor convincingly argues that a key reason why Trump could make a comeback is that left leaning movements demobilized once Biden defeated him in 2020.³ Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights groups, climate change activists, LGBTQ groups, and others may have fought local defensive campaigns, but remained quiescent in challenging national Democrats. At the same time, politicians with working-class appeal, like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, traded allegiance to Biden for access. I will return to the current moment in the conclusion but hope the reader notices that Walsh took a different approach with Wilson in office—one that helped push inclusive working-class formation forward, rather than demobilizing it. Nonetheless, there is a tension in this paper between my desire to bolster Walsh's historical importance and left credentials with my argument that his path is ultimately not one to be imitated in the current moment. The limitations imposed on the Left by the U.S. Constitution (Ovetz 2022), the two-party system (Moody 2017: 107–70), and the Democratic Party (Eidlin 2018) should caution influential progressives today from taking too much inspiration from Walsh's approach in the current moment.

Walsh's Significance

As a defense lawyer-agitator, Frank P. Walsh made three major contributions to

the working class during the Progressive Era (1900–1920). First, he exposed the direct hand that John D. Rockefeller Jr. had in events surrounding the 1914 Ludlow Massacre in Colorado, thereby revealing the hidden economic and political might

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of analogous titans of industry, which the nascent public relations industry had effectively concealed. Second, Walsh convinced President Woodrow Wilson to establish the eight-hour work day for 400,000 railroad workers through the 1916 Adamson Act. Third, he laid the political and institutional groundwork for collective bargaining, later hinted at by Section 7(a) of the 1933 National Labor Relations Act and solidified in the 1935 Wagner Act.

From 1914 to 1920, Walsh was one of the most effective and recognizable advocates for industrial democracy, collective bargaining, and working-class women's rights. "Walsh, more so than any others who grasped the term," observed historian Joseph McCartin, "linked industrial democracy to the right to join unions and tied this right to the nation's democratic heritage, suggesting a vision of a new and just workplace" (1997: 28). Although American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers kept him at arm's length, most trade unionists, revolutionary syndicalists, Socialists, rank-and-file militants, and free

speech advocates did not merely respect him, they revered him. Historian Graham Adams Jr. noted that, "Labor and radical journals [had] elevated Walsh to the status of a national idol" by 1915 (1966: 170).

Through Congress's Commission on Industrial Relations (1913–1915), his own Committee on Industrial Relations (1915–1916) and National Labor Defense Council (1917–1918), and the White House's National War Labor Board (1918), Walsh established the precedence and political framework for government intervention in industrial relations on behalf of workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain. Despite the ongoing historical debates about the origins of the Wagner Act—is it explained by politicians choosing to benefit workers, or by a workers' insurgency that necessitated reform? (Blanc 2022b)—New Deal legislation clearly had its origins in Progressive Era class struggle (Scott 1959) and immigrant-led "new unions" in the 1920s that took the lessons of the 1910s to develop a broader vision of what role the federal government could play in industrial relations (Montgomery 1994). Several scholars have traced the direct connections between New Dealers and World War I-era progressives, often specifically mentioning Walsh as a key link between the two eras (Conner 1983: x; Dubofsky 1994: 109; McCartin 1997: 224; Ovetz 2018: 369). This essay contributes a sustained analysis of Walsh's import and the strategy behind his actions.

Assessing Walsh

To observers of Frank P. Walsh past and present, he represented a reckless inciter of the masses (Davis 1963; *The Nation* 1915b), a hero of the humble working person (Barton 1913; Bradley 1966; Dubofsky 1994: 53–75; Meehan 1962: 210–11; Stromquist 2006: 106, 194), and a man whose considerable gifts of persuasion helped to

incorporate a militant working class into the two-party system and bureaucratic state (Conner 1983: 180–85; Fink 1997: 107; *The New Republic* 1915; Ovetz 2018: 371, 393, 420–22, 454; Weinstein 1971: 185–88). Walsh is impossible to briefly categorize, and each interpretation holds some element of truth. Indeed, the most sophisticated depictions of Walsh highlight both his genuine championing of worker power and an assessment that he ultimately failed to permanently transform workers' structural position (Greene 1999: 250; McCartin 1997: 22; Montgomery 1987: 361). This essay, based on archival research in Walsh's correspondence, demonstrates that he was guided by a commitment to supporting a militant and inclusive labor movement. His failures did not stem from a liberal orientation to class struggle or higher loyalty to Democrats, but rather an overly optimistic view of the possibilities of insider tactics.

Walsh genuinely hated poverty, the corruption of democracy by corporate interests, and social injustice.⁴ Whenever Walsh made strategic alliances with the Democratic Party, Woodrow Wilson, and the World War I war machine, he did so with the conviction that he could wield these institutions as weapons to go well beyond what they were designed for. Whatever short-sightedness we may attribute to him, my own review of his papers at the New York Public Library has made clear to me that Walsh was definitely *not* an opportunist on behalf of the Democratic Party, nor of his own political career. Part of my motivation for writing this essay is to show the limitations of insider agitation through a figure that was as independent of the Democratic Party and genuinely concerned about the entirety of the working class as possible. Some of the criticisms of Walsh from a left perspective give the impression that Walsh was a partisan liberal who

pretended to be populist. However, even when I critique Walsh's failure to evolve a strategy after the end of the war, my hope is that the narrative that follows shows that Walsh was never fully incorporated into the Democratic capitalist apparatus.

Curiously, one reason Walsh is so difficult to categorize is that his mixture of insider political strategy with public antics appears demonstrably opportunistic. "Part outlaw, part actor," as Joseph McCartin described him, "Walsh constructed a public persona as a militant maverick, which was calculated to give him maximum leverage in the world of pragmatic politics. It was his skill in pulling off this role that made Walsh so attractive to both the reformers and the radicals of his time" (McCartin 1997: 24). But Walsh never ran for office because he could not resign himself to compromising his principles to please various supporters.⁵ And when he eventually realized how ephemeral his influence was with Wilson and the Democrats by the middle of 1919, he refused to support his former allies in the 1920 elections.

[NOTE: A discussion of the Commission on Industrial Relations is omitted here to save space, but will be available on our website.]

Wilson's Reelection

Walsh's influence among workers grew ever deeper through the summer of 1916. The railroad Brotherhood, 16 independent unions, threatened a national strike, making Wilson extremely nervous about his prospects for reelection. Wilson made a show of inviting Walsh to the White House for advice. Incredibly, Wilson actually followed through—he pushed the Adamson Act through Congress to head off the strike, which established the eight-hour work day for railroad workers without any stalling tactics of, for example, forced arbitration. Gompers and Easley watched dismayed from the sidelines as Wilson followed

Walsh's lead, rather than Walsh acting to dampen mass action with empty promises (Green 1956: 235; Greene 1999: 259).

After the Commission on Industrial Relations submitted its final reports, Walsh launched his own organization, the Committee on Industrial Relations, purposefully choosing a name nearly identical to that of the Congressional body which had powers to compel evidence and testimony. The group aimed to provide legal and media resources to the labor movement, and to create a space for a range of working-class advocates to collaborate. Had it been successful, it might have worked like what sociologist Aldon Morris calls a "movement halfway house." That is, an organization like the Highlander Folk School which assisted mass movements with resources and strategy, and thus were essential to the success of the Civil Rights Movement (Morris 1984). Walsh's hope was to include radicals, militants, and conservative unionists in its activities (McCartin 1997: 33). Walsh used the Committee as a public relations and legal support network for industrial unionism. The Committee, for example, flooded Minnesota with pro-strike propaganda during a summer of 1916 IWW strike in the Mesabi Range (Dubofsky 2000: 190). After providing similar support for a Machinists strike in Pittsburgh, an employer called for Walsh's assassination in the newspapers (Montgomery 1987: 326). Despite strong support from miners, Gompers ensured that most AFL unions turned a cold shoulder to the Committee.

However, rather than use their considerable credentials among mine workers to advocate for militant industrial unionism and expanding membership, Walsh and Mother Jones focused on ensuring the workers would vote for Wilson's reelection (Montgomery 1987: 363–65). Walsh, to his credit, felt uncomfortable making public statements about internal union

politics. Yet the only outlet he seemed able to seize upon at this moment was to use his influence to gain votes for a Democratic politician. One politician in the Socialist coalfields of southeast Kansas wrote that "Frank P. Walsh is the only man in the world who can swing this Socialist vote

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to Wilson" (quoted in Greene 1999: 265). Although he refused to allow the Democratic Party to dictate his campaigning schedule or stump message, "Frank Walsh hailed the Adamson Act, with characteristic hyperbole, as the beginning of a 'worldwide' movement that meant 'the beginning of the end' for 'industrial despotism'" (McCartin 1997: 34).

This cashing in of political capital on behalf of a politician seemed particularly onerous to Walsh's friend Emma Goldman. She begged him over the fall of 1916 to spend his time instead fighting for the freedom of Warren Billings and Tom Mooney against the organized effort to frame them for the bombing of the Labor Day parade in San Francisco that July. Goldman knew Walsh was privately a radical person and had previously supported leftist elements of the Mexican Revolution. After meeting with him in person, Goldman wrote that she "left Walsh with a feeling of impatience at the credulity of this radically minded man and his co-workers in the Wilson campaign. It was an additional proof to me

[Goldman] of the political blindness and social muddle-headedness of American liberals" (1970: 586). Walsh did go on to trade his help on the 1916 campaign for a great deal of influence shaping wartime labor markets to the benefit of worker militancy. Yet he failed to get more involved with the organizational life of left-labor movements once wartime accommodation to workers ended with an employer counter offensive and Red Scare.⁶

Packinghouse Arbitration and the National War Labor Board

The United States entered the Great War in early April of 1917, soon after Wilson took the oath of office for the second time. Walsh did not wish to see America go to war, but he also believed that if he played his cards right he could shove pro-war reactionaries to the side and direct the war economy in favor of working people (Montgomery 1987: 358–59). A month after the election, Walsh already warned a friend in St. Louis that, in reference to staying out of the European war, "we are in for a mighty disappointment, notwithstanding the best efforts that Wilson himself may put forth" (NYPL Walsh Papers, Box 4, 4 December 1916, Walsh to Cook). That same day Walsh wrote to anarchist labor organizer Anton Johanssen that he not only believed in Wilson's candidacy, but also felt compelled to remain in the good graces of the administration due to "the importance of a few of us keeping our eye on the gun during the very close future in Washington" (NYPL Walsh Papers, Box 4, 4 December 1916, Walsh to Johanssen). Walsh probably understood that, on the one hand, President Wilson was thin-skinned and held grudges against anyone who directly criticized him. On the other hand, Wilson gave free rein to his appointees—people he chose based on how well they stroked his fragile ego, not for conforming to a restrictive political project

(Hochschild 2022: 209–10, 236, 316).

Many of Walsh's radical friends assumed he would come out against the war, but when he refused to lend his name to the anti-war People's Council for America for Democracy and Peace, some were furious (Montgomery 1987: 372). Worse, when the AFL and Wilson administration created the pro-war American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, he agreed to put his name on the board (McCartin 1997: 66–68). Even the Industrial Workers of the World did not formally oppose the U.S. entry into the war, but endorsing a nationalist front was another thing entirely. Ever confident in his abilities to leverage insider access for the cause of labor, Walsh bided his time rather than publicly throw his lot in with radicals.

After Gompers helped bring about the demise of the Committee on Industrial Relations, Walsh tried to establish another "halfway house" called the National Labor Defense Council, with a similar goal of supporting industrial unionism. The hope was that the new organization could more successfully convince trade unionists that they merely offered legal and media support services, rather than directly telling unions how to organize workers or engage in political action. The organization fought the suppression of radical literature in the mails, and sent an investigation team to Bisbee, Arizona, where miners had been violently deported from the region in which they were striking (McCartin 1997: 70–72).

His first opportunity to use his courtroom brawling skills during the war came in early 1918 when President Wilson forced compulsory arbitration on the nation's meatpacking trust and packinghouse workers. The packinghouse union hired Walsh to represent them in front of Judge Samuel Alschuler in Chicago. Approaching the hearings much as he did the Commission on Industrial Relations, Walsh compelled

the public to question what the justification for entering the war meant if hardworking people at home lived in abject poverty. Walsh asked, "Why should industry be made safe for autocracy while soldiers are dying on a thousand battle fields to make the world in general safe for democracy?" (Walsh quoted in McCartin 1997: 83).

Walsh made sure to explicitly include women in such arguments: "I saw [at a packinghouse], for instance, a great long table there, at which women were sorting meat. I asked what they were doing. I saw a man and a woman sorting.... I could see no difference in the employment of that man and that woman." Before Judge Alschuler rendered his judgment, the butchers' labor paper gushed, "With accustomed force and emphasis, our champion, Frank P. Walsh, drove home a compendium of incontrovertible facts to prove the justice of the contentions of the organized packing-house workers. A more sound and logical summary in open court has never been offered" (NYPL Walsh Papers, V. 67, March 1918, *The Butcher Workman*).

In strategizing for these hearings, Walsh worked closely with Chicago-based militants John Fitzpatrick, Edward Nockel, and William Z. Foster. When Alschuler returned his arbitration decision in late March, workers across the country had cause for elation. The federal government had, for the first time, stepped into a labor dispute involving a socially diverse and mostly unorganized proletariat in order to force huge concessions on the employers (Dubofsky 1994: 74; McCartin 1997: 83).

Soon after the Alschuler award, President Wilson created the National War Labor Board in an attempt to stem the tide of wildcat strikes paralyzing the war economy (Conner 1983: vii). No one seriously expected much to come from the NWLB—it had no Congressional-legal mandate to compel employers to enter its voluntary

arbitration. Additionally, Wilson appointed polar opposites as co-chairs—Walsh and the anti-union former president William Howard Taft. Surely this little outfit would simply pour water on workers' militant energy and keep Walsh busy spinning his wheels in meaningless bureaucratic work (Dubofsky 1994: 71–75).

But Walsh worked his peculiar charm on Taft. Entering the NWLB work, Taft was staunchly anti-labor and virtually anti-Walsh.⁷ Nonetheless, Walsh's charisma worked almost immediately. Walsh wrote the principles that would guide the NWLB's decision-making approach, and he amazingly convinced Taft not only to sign off, but to bully the capitalist members of the NWLB to approve them. Although the principles stated that neither capital nor labor should alter existing conditions (namely, union recognition status), they also encouraged shopfloor organizing, living wages, and equal pay for equal work (Conner 1983: 36). Over time, Taft would move even further toward a progressive point of view regarding labor, especially after visiting textile mills in the South and witnessing firsthand their brutal working conditions. Taft later told Walsh that he had convinced Taft to leave behind his beloved Adam Smith (Adams 1966: 222–23; Dubofsky 1994: 72; McCartin 1997: 87–88).

As with the Commission on Industrial Relations, Walsh tempered his public statements at the outset of the NWLB, attempting to reestablish a semblance of neutrality. He wrote, "Capital has been at fault, and so has labor." Walsh did not hesitate to establish patriotism as the watchword of the NWLB's mandate: "The chief concern of the Board has been to keep the war industries at top speed. A week's delay in any one of the large munition works might mean defeat for our armies." Leaning even harder into embarrassing liberal aphorisms, he claimed, "There is no conflict of ideals,

there is only a misunderstanding of them” (Walsh 1918a). In other moments, however, he could not help but admit he did not really believe the old National Civic Federation canards, stating, “anyone who hopes to lay down a ‘constructive’ program that both sides to the labor situation will accept, is chasing rainbows” (Walsh 1918b).

In June and July of 1918, the NWLB, contrary to its intended purpose, helped fan the flames of wildcat strikes by quickly intervening with rulings friendly to workers, including equal pay for women workers. As it turned out, President Wilson’s nationalization of the Western Union telegraph company on 16 July, coming almost seven months after he nationalized the railroads and forced arbitration on the packing-houses, made for a compelling threat to employers to go along with the NWLB during the war. From the workers’ points of view, all they needed to do in order to get a raise during out-of-control inflation,

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or to reinstate co-workers fired for union organizing, was to threaten a strike, call in the NWLB, and wait a few weeks to win their case. “The NWLB had indeed instituted a mini-legal revolution by making the right to unionize real and by requiring employers to bargain collectively” (Dubofsky 1994: 73). Political scientist Robert Ovetz summarized the dynamic: “Government intervention made the costs of escalation extremely low while rapidly raising the

opportunity for achieving desired gains. This had the effect of encouraging workers to quickly circulate their struggles to other shops, companies, and industrial sectors” (2018: 391). The powerful agents of capital wanted to wring Walsh’s neck, and their friends in military intelligence agencies monitored his mails hoping to find something incriminating or embarrassing, but to no avail (McCartin 1997: 91).

However, over the late summer of 1918 the militant District 55 of the International Association of Machinists in Bridgeport, Connecticut, broke out in open revolt. Walsh desperately tried to use the NWLB to get war production there back on track in a way favorable to workers. He appealed directly to Wilson for help, which instead took the form of a bitter pill. Despite threatening the employers with nationalization if they did not listen to the NWLB, he also told the workers in no uncertain terms that they would be drafted for the front lines of battle if they did not immediately return to work (McCartin 1997: 141). The powerful industrial union in Bridgeport was decimated. Wilson had already used Walsh to get reelected, and apparently his patience had grown thin with the rank-and-file militancy that Walsh’s shenanigans were encouraging.

Despite the short-lived effectiveness of the NWLB, it nonetheless inspired and paved the way for further industrial unionism, particularly in the steel industry after the war. The organizer of that effort, William Z. Foster, stated in 1918 that “the Federal administration was friendly; the right to organize was freely conceded by the government and even insisted upon.... The gods were indeed fighting on the side of Labor” (quoted in Dubofsky 1994: 74).

Yet as soon as the war was over, the direct influence of the NWLB evaporated and capital launched an all-out war on the labor gains of the 1910s. Although Walsh

had believed that his victories up until that point ratcheted up workers' rights to a higher floor, to his credit, he recognized how wrong he had been the moment the crackdowns began. As panic set in, he issued empty warnings to industry: "If those who talk glibly of getting back to normal wages will but face the cold facts, they will understand that they are advocating a policy as inhuman, as atrocious, as destructive of human freedom as any of the crimes committed by the Imperial German Government" (Walsh quoted in *The Nation* 1918).

He desperately proposed that the NWLB declare itself a permanent body and issue a blanket ruling establishing collective bargaining for the whole country—in effect proposing by fiat what later became the 1935 Wagner Act. Taft, however, had no intention of using an emergency wartime board created by the Executive branch to legislate industrial relations. Walsh resigned from the NWLB as soon as this effort failed and shifted his efforts to representing workers in front of the increasingly irrelevant NWLB (McCartin 1997: 176–77). Notably, he helped women streetcar conductors in Cleveland advocate for themselves against not only their employers, but also the male transit union (Bradley 1966: 98–99).

As soon as the war ended, right-wing attacks on radicals and workers' rights gained even more traction (Hochschild 2022). Walsh threw himself against this tide for several years. Let us return to the question driving this essay—what lessons do Walsh's experiences teach us about the limits of insider agitation? I first take up his strategy of combative insider agitation to explain why liberals do not claim his memory, then I use Gramsci to demonstrate Walsh's limitations within left politics.

Agitating Within the System

Walsh's insider strategy of agitating within

the outer limits of the Democratic Party, the war machine, and the U.S. Constitution went far, and helped set the table for the Wagner Act. Admirably, to get the most out of this strategy, he made many of his liberal friends uncomfortable and was willing to burn personal and political bridges when the moment called for it. Once the right-wing backlash of the 1920s took root, Walsh was no longer useful as a "labor and radical whisperer" for powerful interests. The influence he had at the national level turned out to be very short-lived in retrospect.

His hesitancy to completely break from the Democratic Party left him driftless and unremembered in the 1920s and beyond. "No other political figure of his time, or perhaps of any time in American history, so clearly personified the possibility and the potential character of a labor party as did Frank Walsh," David Montgomery averred. "His strategy for creating such a party, however, was to mobilize a hegemonic labor caucus among the Democrats" (1987: 361). At the end of the Wilson Administration, when Walsh was most frustrated with Democrats, an opportunity came along to blaze a different path—an opportunity that was tragically missed.

In late 1918 and early 1919, Walsh's militant labor friends in Chicago and across Illinois formed an independent labor party. Edward Nockels in particular kept Walsh apprised of their activities from the start, and Walsh assured him that he watched closely with approval. The episode affirms both Walsh's sympathies with industrial unionism, and his hesitancy with getting caught in the middle of internal labor politics. A labor paper editor named K. C. Adams attacked the third-party push and claimed Walsh had spoken ill of John H. Walker, who was in fact one of Walsh's militant friends. Walsh respectfully asked Adams to retract the statement, to which

Adams responded with a bizarre and angry letter. Walsh seemed genuinely hurt and confused by the whole affair. Although he remained loyal to his radical labor friends, Walsh seemed a bit more hesitant to travel to Chicago to speak at party rallies after the dust-up (NYPL Walsh Papers, Box 7: 21 November 1918 to 28 January 1919, correspondence with Nockels and Adams). Years earlier, in a letter to a Kansas City labor organizer, Walsh had written, "You know how earnest my effort has been to hold aloof from all internecine or factional difficulties in the ranks of organized labor," indicating that such detachment was a conscious choice (NYPL Walsh papers, Box 2, 24 July 1915, Walsh to Mittelstadt).

Walsh's ultimate strategic shortcoming was not that he fetishized laws or that he did not think systematically about economic inequalities, as historian James Weinstein argued (1971: 185–88). The political problem distilled is that Walsh believed in the individualistic democratic promise of the Constitution over and above his strong internationalist⁸ and radical instincts. He could have switched strategy in the 1920s. His failure to do so is clarified by Gramsci's writings on intellectuals.

Traditional Intellectual

Walsh's Achilles' heel was his firm resistance to anything resembling organizational discipline. Although Walsh put his name on dozens of organizations throughout his career and started several of his own, he thought of them as associations of like-minded, yet independent, actors. On the one hand, Walsh had no problem ignoring, criticizing, or quitting groups like the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy when they did not serve his left-leaning political goals.⁹ On the other hand, Walsh never truly transcended his origins as a traditional intellectual into an organic intellectual. Neither labor organiza-

tions nor revolutionary groups could ever claim him as one of their own in terms of organizational discipline. This was a tragic outcome, as Walsh had every opportunity to embrace organizational life during the right-wing domination of the 1920s.

In the words of Antonio Gramsci, traditional intellectuals "put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group" (Gramsci 1999: 138). Indeed, as a member of the Progressive Era's version of a "professional middle class," Walsh never tired of rhetorically contrasting himself to lackeys of corporate power among his fellow professionals in law. Three brief examples suffice: "It is ridiculous to say that judges declare the law as they find it. They declare it the way they believe it to be, and they believe it to be the way they want it to be"; "This is a government of the people, by the federal judges, for the special interests" (Walsh quoted in *The Commoner* 1911). "I have no judicial poise, I don't care to have judicial poise. Judicial poise is a bar to human progress" (Walsh 1915 quoted in Meehan 1962: 70).

Why do traditional intellectuals take pleasure in making such declarations? Back to Gramsci: "The whole of idealist philosophy can easily be connected with this position assumed by the social complex of intellectuals and can be defined as the expression of that social utopia by which the intellectuals think of themselves as 'independent', autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc." (Gramsci 1999: 139).

Writing about the goal of working-class hegemony, Gramsci further elaborated: "One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically' the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in

simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals" (Gramsci 1999: 142). I want to emphasize that Walsh was conquered ideologically by working-class interests. He was not a traditional intellectual on behalf of corporate liberal interests. Unfortunately, because he never moved into organizational discipline, Walsh lost his influence once Democratic accommodation ended.

I do not intend to downplay the important and courageous legal defense work Walsh did in the 1920s on behalf of labor militants and radicals (Bradley 1966: 92–93; Meehan 1962: 112, 130). But had he embraced his new outsider status in 1919 and thrown himself into the politics of left organizations by shedding his identity as a progressive ally external to decision making processes in collective action, his considerable talents may have been more fully utilized.

Conclusion

The lesson I draw from Walsh's life is that the usefulness of intellectuals and insider agitational tactics should be evaluated with an analysis of political context. Traditional intellectuals using an insider strategy (crucially, while resisting opportunism) can be quite useful for a labor or left movement in terms of building working-class hegemony. Walsh demonstrated this on the symbolic front with his ability to influence public discussions to link poverty directly with industrial despotism. He also created institutional inventions through the 1918 National War Labor Board, illustrating what was possible in industrial relations for the New Deal reformers who created the American system of collective bargaining.

Although it was inevitable that the push for industrial democracy would eventually face a powerful backlash from within the Democratic Party as well as the state, it would be a mistake to conclude that Walsh's activities in the 1910s were

meaningless. When labor and the Left are ascendant, and powerful people reach out for advocates like Walsh to act as mediator, it forms a moment, however brief, where much is possible. In reviewing the history of the ascendant labor-Left movement during the 1930s, labor sociologist Eric Blanc concluded that, "it took a combination of workplace militancy and government-level political initiatives to bring about labor's unprecedented wins. Both were essential—and neither were simply an effect of the other" (Blanc 2022a).

As I write these words, liberalism's hegemony has been shattered to an unprecedented extent in the United States. Tens of millions of Americans yearn for a politics free of corporate power, neo-liberal international trade relationships, and imperial foreign policy intrigue. The cynical co-optation of identity politics by Democratic politicians has lost its credibility. Something we can take from Walsh's story is that traditional intellectuals who care about the working class should make a concerted effort at contributing their skills and political capital toward building a strong labor-Left that is independent of the Democrats as members of labor unions, rank-and-file caucuses, leftist political organizations, and other groups directly connected to the interests of a socially diverse working class. The people I have in mind include past and present officials with a close resemblance to Walsh like Lina Khan, Nina Turner, and Robert Reich. We can also consider politically influential online streamers like Jon Stewart, Sam Seder, Emma Vigeland, Roland Martin, Hasan Piker, Krystal Ball, Kyle Kulinski, Rashad Richey, and More Perfect Union. An example of someone with a large social media presence who has already made a shift toward organic intellectual status is Adam Conover, who was deeply involved in the 2023 Writers Guild of America

strike as an elected union negotiator. My concern, however, is that many influential voices in the progressive left seem to be focusing already on how the Democrats can be taken over or pushed to the left in the next election cycle. They would do better to heed Kim Moody's words in this publication: "Socialist electoral politics need to be organized on an entirely different mass, grassroots basis with an entirely different strategy outside the real-time institutional confines of the Democratic Party and its ballot line."¹⁰

When the political opportunities particular to an era close off, it is imperative that such insiders shift gears. When radical progressives like Walsh lose their usefulness to people in power, they must recognize this as the moment to embrace an outsider status and contribute to organizational life from below. Whether they as individuals transform into an organic intellectual, or step aside for other organic intellectuals, such moments require outsider strategies of survival and capacity building within labor-Left movements.

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NOTES

1. Many wonderful scholars have worked hard to ensure that Walsh would not be left out of the history books entirely, notably Graham Adams, Jr., Valerie Jean Conner, David Montgomery, Melvyn Dubofsky, Joseph McCartin, Julie Greene, and Shelton Stromquist.
2. Whether we view the NLRB system as a problem *per se* (Dobbs 2004:72, 236–38), overly restrictive from around 1940 onward (Tomlins 1985), or only since the Reagan Administration (Trumka 1987), collective bargaining in practice has become a system of controlling class solidarity.
3. 9 November 2024 episode of *The Dig* podcast, <https://thedigradio.com/podcast/democratic-dealignment-w-keecanga-yamahtta-taylor/>

4. Walsh's true political principles can best be evaluated by looking at who he kept up the closest political relationships with. The pattern only begins to emerge after spending a significant amount of time with his correspondence, which makes clear that Walsh avoided setting his radical inclinations down on paper, preferring to talk with his closest collaborators in person—conversations which are thus lost to the historian. These figures included Chicago labor militants John Fitzpatrick and Edward Nockels, California anarchist labor organizer Anton Johanssen, leftist economist Basil Manly, and Kansas City left-leaning newspapermen George P. West, William P. Harvey, and Dante Barton.

5. When pressured to run for Missouri governor in 1911, he admitted he could not stomach the coalition-building compromises that seeking political office makes necessary. "I'm done with compromise. I'm not going just to strike a bargain with other men to get a little here and a little there. There's too much sham in it all." He came to see his political future in using the developing techniques of public relations in a mass media society on behalf of the working poor. "I've told you where my work lies—in the outer field with the agitators, the men who won't stand for lies because they are old" (Walsh quoted in *The Commoner* 1911). When declining a 1918 effort to recruit him to run for senator of Missouri, Walsh wrote that, "It is just simply not in my organism of conception of my location in life that I should hold public office. I know

that I would be less useful there than as a free agent, just sloshing around as I have been all of my life" (NYPL Walsh: Box 7, 13 December 1918 Walsh to Reedy).

6. While some scholars have emphasized Walsh's importance to Wilson's reelection (Greene 1998), some skepticism is in order. As Walsh himself pointed out to his friends, his campaigning for Wilson was not particularly effective in the grand scheme of things (NYPL Walsh: Box 4, 12 November 1916 Walsh to Wise). Walsh spent most of his time stumping in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. Out of those states, only Ohio contributed electoral votes to Wilson, where Wilson clobbered Hughes by over seven percentage points. Thanks to Julie Greene for pointing me to the Goldman quote.

7. The Commission on Industrial Relations had gone after businesses owned by Taft's family members, and Walsh had unsuccessfully pressured Taft to submit himself to a Walsh-orchestrated public faying over the former federal judge's anti-union decisions from the 1890s (Conner 1983: 19–20).

8. See Bradley 1966.

9. Walsh resigned from the AALD shortly after the conclusion of the war, motivated by his disgust at AALD slander against the Russian Revolution (NYPL Walsh Papers, Box 7: 30 December 1918, Walsh to Wolfe).

10. https://newpol.org/issue_post/the-partys-over/

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China's "No Human Rights" Comparative Advantage vs. Western Tariffs

A Pro-Labor Alternative

RICHARD SMITH

CHINA'S EMERGENCE AS THE WORLD'S pre-eminent low-cost manufacturer in the 1990s and 2000s devastated Western industries, cost millions of American jobs and was heavily responsible for the election of anti-free trade Donald Trump in 2016 against Hillary Clinton. Clinton championed the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade deal that would have shipped more jobs to Asia just as her husband's "NAFTA WE HAFTA" accelerated the deindustrialization of America in the 1990s.¹ Trump pulled out of the TPP on his first day in office and then launched his trade war with China imposing tariffs of 25% to 50% on Chinese solar panels, washing machines, steel, aluminum and other commodities. Biden maintained Trump's tariffs and added more. In his 2024 campaign, Trump threatened to levy 60% tariffs on all Chinese goods, but as president-elect he dialed this back to an additional 10% on all Chinese goods.² Yet Trump's tariffs are

an inept strategy that has not "reshored" industry to the United States.³

Ain't No Duty High Enough

According to the World Bank, between 2017 and 2022 China's share of U.S. imports fell from 22 to 16 percent—largely thanks to Trump's tariffs. But instead of reshoring production back to the United States as he promised, Chinese companies just relocated much of their final assembly of Chinese components to Vietnam and other countries that are "deeply integrated into China's supply chains" with the result that, directly or indirectly via re-exports from Vietnam, etc., China "remains the top supplier of imported goods to the U.S. in 2022." And while "there is some evidence of nearshoring [mainly to Mexico], there is no consistent evidence of reshoring."⁴ In fact, Trump's tariffs not only failed to bring back jobs; more jobs were lost to retaliatory tariffs from China and the European Union.⁵ Meanwhile, American consumers have been saddled with paying for his tariffs via inflated prices.

In my view, the left should do what it can to shift the conversation about tariffs on Chinese goods to a conversation about leveling the playing field by fighting to win workers everywhere the right to unionize and to strike and to achieve the democratic

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Dan Wasserman/Boston Globe/TNS

rights of free speech, free press, habeas corpus, and meaningful elections.⁶

President's Biden's 100 percent tariff on Chinese electric vehicles and 50 percent tariff on solar panels are misguided and doomed to fail. They're doomed because Chinese companies' advantage in the world market is not so much massive state subsidies, which thanks to Biden's industrial policies American companies now also enjoy, nor even to their huge economies of scale, vertically integrated in-house production of EV batteries, and coordinated national supply chains, as to their *deeply below-market labor costs*. That's the main reason why China's leading EV manufacturer, Warren Buffet-backed BYD auto, can profitably sell a Tesla-equivalent in the United States for \$12,000, which means that "Even with a 100% tariff, BYD

will have the cheapest EV in the market at under \$25,000."⁷

According to a recent Reuters analysis of Chinese job listings, current Chinese auto manufacturing wages are from 9 to 19 times lower than in the United States: "Adverts from 30 auto firms showed hourly salaries of 14 yuan (\$1.93) to 31 yuan (\$4.27), with Tesla, SAIC-GM, Li Auto and Xpeng at the higher end."⁸ By comparison, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in March 2024 U.S. average hourly wages in motor vehicle manufacturing were \$37.18. The UAW's victorious six-week strike last year won a 25% hike, boosting wages to \$42.60 for assembly line workers and \$50.57 for skilled trades over the four and a half years of the contract.⁹ U.S. auto industry labor costs are comparable to those in Europe's leading

manufacturing economies.

In China's democratic neighbors, auto manufacturing wages are lower but still multiples of those in China. South Korean auto workers earn an average of \$11.60 per hour, Taiwanese \$9.85.¹⁰ In Japan auto wages are on a par with those in the United States. Furthermore, China's labor cost advantage in auto assembly *extends all the way through the supply chain from manufactured components to raw material inputs* as both Chinese and Western automakers in China "buy Chinese" to take advantage of China's ultra-low-cost producers in every field.

Well, why is industrial manufacturing labor *uniquely* cheap in China?

China's Police-State Advantage: Unfree Labor

The reason labor is so cheap in China is because the so-called "People's Republic" of China isn't a democracy. It's a totalitarian police state dictatorship that bans independent unions and has ruthlessly suppressed wages to enrich the Communist ruling class, attract foreign capital and companies to modernize China's economy, and export goods at prices that undersell manufacturers in capitalist democracies. The Chinese have no freedoms, no civil rights, no human rights, no property rights—none that can be defended in China's courts against the arbitrary power of the party-state. The party-state can do whatever it wants to its subjects who have no recourse. They're effectively state slaves. Chinese "netizens" regularly complain on Weibo (China's twitter equivalent) that Xi Jinping is turning China into "West North Korea."¹¹

China's constitution formally enshrines numerous freedoms. Article 35 of the 1982 iteration of its constitution stated that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration." In the early morning

of June 4, 1989, at Tiananmen Square, Beijing, thousands of workers, students, and common people who had come out to support the million-strong two-month long democracy protests were massacred for the "crime" of attempting to exercise those bogus freedoms and rights. Government troops reserved special brutality for the members of the Beijing Autonomous Workers Federation (BWAF), formed in April in bold imitation of Poland's Solidarity trade union. When Premier Li Peng declared martial law on May 19, the incipient union called for a general strike to prevent a military onslaught. When the PLA tanks and APCs finally broke into the square at 1:15 AM the morning of the 4th, the BWAF tent encampment was their first target. According to UK documents released in 2017, more than 10,000 students, trade unionists and their supporters were mowed down with machine guns, run over by tanks and bayoneted by the self-styled socialist party-state.¹²

With all the powers of the police state arrayed against its politically powerless captive working classes who, realistically, cannot escape China, this has enabled domestic and foreign private companies and state-owned employers to impose the harshest, most exploitative—and immensely profitable—labor regimes seen anywhere in the world since the industrial revolution and plantation slavery of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries: excruciating wage-slavery, forced labor, and prison slave labor.

From State Slavery to the "Suicide Express"

The emergence of suicide prevention nets is unprecedented in the entire history of industrial capitalism founded, supposedly, on a "free" labor force.

JACK LINCHUAN QIU¹³

"Wage slavery" is no joke in China. Chinese

workers are not just "overworked and underpaid." They are, in Chinese University of Hong Kong professor Jack Linchuan Qiu's words, "modern twenty-first century slaves"¹⁴—formally free but substantively unfree. Tens of millions of China's workers aren't even formally free.

- At Foxconn's notorious militarized factories that make iPhones and iPads for Apple and devices for other companies, the workers are nominally free. They hire on and can quit. But the work regime is so intense, so brutal, the hours so exhaustingly long (12+ hour days, commonly 20 days straight without a day off¹⁵) and the pay so low that since 2010 the bosses have had to wrap the factories with "anti-suicide" nets and install jail bars on the windows of its worker dormitories to stop desperate workers from embarrassing the company by jumping to their deaths to escape the despair and hopelessness of their factory lives, as many continue to do. On the first page of their book *Dying for an iPhone*, Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai quote from a workers' blog: "To die is the only way to justify that we ever lived. Perhaps for the Foxconn employees and employees like us, the use of death is to testify that we were ever alive at all, and that while we lived, we had only despair." Worker turnover is high at Foxconn but the available alternatives are not necessarily better so Foxconn has not yet run out of unfree wage-slaves.

- Then there is the *laogai* archipelago of "reform through labor" camps where since 1949 some 50 million prisoners have endured years, decades, even lifetimes of slave labor producing products for domestic consumption and export.¹⁶

- Finally, there are Xi Jinping's notorious Xinjiang Uyghur prison slave-labor factories where millions of workers produce cotton, aluminum, electronics, solar cells, inputs for EVs, and other products.¹⁷ Fast-fashion giants Temu and Shein can sell their garments and other products at prices "too cheap to be true" because they use forced-labor inputs and compel their piecework garment workers to work 18-hour days 7 days a week for 2 U.S. cents per item.¹⁸

In 1982, after the rise of the Polish Solidarity trade union, the Communist Party deleted the right to strike from its constitution (not that it was ever action-

Deeply below-market labor costs mean China's BYD auto can profitably sell a Tesla-equivalent in the United States for \$12,000.

able anyway).¹⁹ China's only union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), does not represent workers against the state or private employers. It represents the state against the workers. Its job is to "act as a transmission belt to transmit labor policy from the Party down to the workers."²⁰ Independent trade unions are illegal. Collective bargaining for wages and conditions is not permitted, only party-controlled "consultation."²¹ Labor organizers who have tried to organize independent unions are jailed and/or "disappeared."²²

"Socialist" China lacks even basic regulatory agencies to protect workers' health, safety and job security—no OSHA, no NIOSH, no NLRB. China's regulatory agencies, like its courts and police, are toothless tools of the Communist Party.²³

Strikes are illegal but since 2010 workers in China's autos, electronics and other plants have fought back with thousands of wildcat strikes, winning wage concessions and forcing the government to repeatedly raise the minimum wage.²⁴ In the 1980s-2000s Chinese industrial workers in the joint-venture factories in the coastal Special Economic Zones like Shenzhen worked 12+ hour days for an average of 57 U.S. cents per hour.²⁵ Wages are higher today but

still far below those in industrialized capitalist democracies. Even with thousands of strikes every year, the current average hourly wage for factory workers across all industries in China is just 28 yuan (\$3.87).²⁶ At Foxconn's iPhone assembly factory in Shenzhen, jobs are currently advertised at rates of 19 to 20 yuan (US\$2.76 to US\$2.90) per hour.²⁷

No tariff can offset China's police state-enforced union-free, OSHA-free, NLRB-free, EPA-free, human rights-free labor-cost advantage, let alone compete with tens of millions of laogai and prison slave workers.

China Is Not Our Enemy

We should not be trying to "hold China back." The enemy of American workers is the American capitalists who offshored their jobs to semi-slave sweatshops and prison slave labor in China.

Besides self-defeating, Trump's and Biden's tariffs are misguided because they both pit America against China in a nationalist race to "hold China back." In 2019 Trump told Fox News that China "was catching us ... [and] If Hillary Clinton became president, China would have been a much bigger economy than us by the end of her term. And now it's not even going to be close.... China wants to replace America as the world's leading superpower" [but] "it's not going to happen with me."²⁸ In 2021 Biden told reporters at the White House that "China has an overall goal ... to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world. That's not going to happen on my watch because the United States is going to continue to grow."²⁹

This kind of nationalist chauvinist talk is deeply offensive to the Chinese. Many Chinese are justifiably furious at America. After all, China is the second largest

industrial power in the world and has a population more than four times larger than the United States. Why should Americans care if China's GDP exceeds ours someday, which it's likely to do in any case? China isn't our enemy. Who are Donald Trump and Joe Biden to say that the Chinese should not be "allowed" to become richer than Americans? Already, eight countries including *Ireland* are richer in per capita GDP terms than the United States.³⁰ Get over it. Trump and Biden shame America by begrudging the Chinese their hard-won gains and rightful place in the world. Chinese workers did not steal American jobs. American companies stole those jobs by offshoring them to China where they could multiply their profits by exploiting China's enslaved workforce for less than a dollar an hour and no EPA "burden." What's more, Biden's new tariffs are directed at the very industries the world needs: electric cars, EV batteries, and solar panels. Why should we suppress production of those?³¹

How to Get a Pro-Worker Level Playing Field

Biden said "I'm just looking for fair competition" for American workers and companies. Well, the only way to get fair competition is to level the playing field. Ralf Brandstätter, chief of Volkswagen China, recently called for just that. Instead of curbing trade with tariffs to protect home industries, he proposed inviting Chinese manufacturers to "buy car parts in Europe and assemble them there using European workers. Then they have to handle a European labor force, European enterprises, and they have to compete in the same environment as we are competing [in]."³² That would indeed both level the playing field and undermine the Communist Party's charge that the self-styled "free trade" West is using extra-market restraints (tariffs) to hold China back. It would provide fair

wages for German workers and incentivize European auto companies to compete on quality and innovation instead of protecting old fossil fuel technology behind tariffs.

Recently, some Chinese EV manufacturers have responded to tariffs by announcing plans to produce cars in Europe. That's a start. But if they just assemble knocked down kit cars produced in China and shipped to Europe in boxes to avoid tariffs, they will still benefit from most of that extra-economic forced-labor "China price" advantage over EU producers.³³ EU governments, companies and unions will need to demand production with EU-made components if they want a level playing field.

Trump could and should do the same. 2024 is not 2018. There was no significant inflation in 2018 but what with Covid supply-line shortages, the record national debt, and his own first round of tariffs, inflation is a major issue today. Piling on more tariffs is only going to hit Trump's working-class voters the hardest. Trump would do better to tell Chinese automakers, battery manufacturers, solar panel makers and others that henceforth if they want to sell their products in the United States, they will have to manufacture them in the U.S. with U.S. labor, under U.S. environmental protections, and source inputs from U.S. suppliers or foreign sources that meet U.S. labor and EPA environmental standards—like German and Japanese automakers have been doing for decades.

The Chinese government could hardly complain since that's exactly what it demands of major European, American, and Japanese auto manufacturers operating in China. All the major producers are required to manufacture their cars in China if they want to sell them in China. They've also been pressured to source local parts from Chinese suppliers, which mostly they prefer to do anyway because Chinese inputs are

cheaper.³⁴

Forcing Chinese companies to produce in the United States would help restore the U.S. industrial base in high-tech sectors, boost industrial employment, defuse the trade war, reduce anti-Chinese racism, and avoid more tariff tax inflation—a win on all counts.

Indeed, this is already beginning in solar panel manufacturing thanks not to Donald Trump but to Joe Biden. His Inflation Reduction Act funded a joint venture solar panel plant, Illuminate USA Corp., in Pataska, Ohio. The company is 51% American-owned and 49% owned by a private Chinese company, Longi Green Energy Technology Co., a world leader in solar panel manufacturing. Opened in 2024, the company brought more than a thousand good-paying jobs with health insurance and other benefits. The panels are made with photovoltaic cells and glass from Malaysia and aluminum frames from Vietnam. While key materials aren't yet produced domestically, Illuminate is "actively working to expand its US supply base." This company and similar China-linked companies plan to build more than a dozen plants in the United States with 30 gigawatts of module-making capacity, enough to supply three-quarters of current U.S. panel demand.³⁵

It remains to be seen whether Trump will embrace this trend or just keep pounding the Chinese with more tariffs. Trump is unpredictable as we know. He's not a nationalist so much as a narcissist and a grievance-driven opportunist uniquely suited to turn the long-standing grievances of working-class Americans betrayed by the Clinton "New Democrats" NAFTA and CHINA SHOCK sell-outs and abandonment to his own advantage.

Instead of more tariffs, Trump could even applaud his own brilliance by cutting an artful deal with the Chinese to bring

their solar, auto and battery companies to the United States instead of stopping them at the border with insurmountable tariffs. That would be a rational, non-confrontational, non-inflationary strategy to boost American industry and recapture lost American jobs. But that might be too rational for our wrecking ball president-elect who prefers to break things rather than solve problems. So we'll see.

Ultimately, the only way to level the playing field to the advantage of workers in both China and the Western democracies is to raise wages in China. That's why the UAW supports trade unions in U.S. auto plants in Mexico. As the Detroit News reported in February 2022, the union views higher wages in Mexico as good news for workers on both sides of the border. Unionization in Mexico is giving U.S. workers an equal chance of winning future products to build, while simultaneously boosting Mexican wages: "Their wages go up, that helps us," said Eric Welter, UAW Local 598 shop chairman at Flint Assembly ... it makes us more competitive and helps us not to have to make future sacrifices. We're on a more level playing field in the future."³⁶

Whither China?

Of course, China is not Mexico. The only way Chinese workers are going to win wages and conditions comparable to the capitalist democracies is when the Communist Party falls and is replaced by a political democracy. To be sure, that seems unlikely anytime soon. Yet police states were peacefully replaced with democracies in neighboring Taiwan and South Korea. And for his part, Xi Jinping faces an unprecedented convergence of economic, social, and political crises, what he calls: "unimaginable perils and dangers," "terrifying tidal waves and horrifying storms"³⁷—a demographic crisis expressed in the country's collaps-

ing birthrate and rapidly ageing society; a ramped up trade war with Trump; a deepening economic slowdown and spreading unemployment despite surging exports and global dominance of solar panels, EVs and batteries; a deflating housing bubble

No tariff can offset China's police state-enforced union-free, OSHA-free, NLRB-free, EPA-free, human rights-free labor-cost advantage.

kept aloft only by infusions of state funds to build more ghost cities for China's ever fewer and older people; hopelessly indebted local governments after decades of splurging on "blingrastructure" and needless housing now forced to cut salaries and unable to pay maintenance workers, teachers, police, etc.³⁸; sharply increasing strikes and protests combined with shocking incidences of "revenge against society" attacks including mass stabbings, murder by car crash, and other indices of societal disintegration.³⁹ And this is not to mention the Communist Party's heavy responsibility for cooking the climate that's on course to flood the world's coastal cities including Shanghai and Hong Kong by 2050.⁴⁰

On top of all these threats, Xi's decade-long anti-corruption drive which has taken down more than a million officials and his jailing of prominent capitalists and seizure of their companies has earned him millions of enemies inside and outside the Party and accelerated flight of talent and capital out of the country.⁴¹ Xi has purged so many generals (52 since 2014 including heads of the nuclear Rocket Force that he himself appointed) and defense ministers (2, also loyalists handpicked by Xi) over

allegations of “deep-seated problems with politics, ideology, work style, discipline” and dubious “political loyalty” that even though he reigns as supreme commander, he can’t trust his own praetorian guards to protect his personal safety.⁴² That’s why this past summer he resorted to the desperate expedient of appointing his wife, singer-turned-first-lady Peng Liyuan (who also held the rank of Major General in the Song and Dance Division under the PLA’s General Political Department) to the Central Military Commission (CMC)’s little-known Examination and Evaluation Commission to vet prospective top military appointees and insure their loyalty to Emperor Xi.⁴³ Like Mao Zedong himself who turned against so many of his allies including his protégé defense minister and heir apparent Lin Biao, that in the end he could only rely on his wife Jiang Qing (who was herself arrested weeks after Mao’s death in 1976), Xi is well aware that there is no lasting loyalty, no guaranteed security in the Game of Thrones that is China’s gangster Communist Party mafia.⁴⁴

Xi and his Party have no solution to any of these deep problems and systemic contradictions. His only “solution” is fiercer repression, tighter censorship, and intensified surveillance⁴⁵ but this only postpones the inevitable reckoning. Xi Jinping’s situation today is not so different from that of his “deep friend” and “strategic ally” Bashar al-Assad.⁴⁶ Chinese people were shocked, and many inspired by, the completely unexpected and abrupt collapse of Assad’s all-powerful and Russian-backed police state. “Could that happen here too?” many are asking. Given that the ideologically bankrupt Communist Party has run out of ideas and has no plausible alternative, no Deng Xiaoping waiting in the wings, a Syrian-like collapse of the Party is not so inconceivable.⁴⁷ The East German Communists never saw it coming either.

Joe Biden made history as the first American president to stand with workers against the bosses when he walked the picket line with UAW workers’ Local 174 Willow Run plant at Belleville Michigan in September 2023.⁴⁸ If only he had adopted the same approach to China. But in this and in so many other areas (Ukraine, Palestine), Biden was politically conflicted and a coward. Instead of decrying “China’s unfair advantages” he should have publicly supported striking Chinese workers against their bosses and the police state.⁴⁹ He should have publicly told Xi Jinping to tear down its Great Firewall, restore the right to strike, permit free independent trade unions, permit the free speech, free press, freedom of association and right to protest that are inscribed in the country’s bullshit constitution.⁵⁰ Xi says “universal rights, freedom, democracy, and a free press are bourgeois values and inappropriate for the Chinese people.”⁵¹ China’s people beg to differ. In every upsurge from the 1919 May Fourth Movement to the 1989 Tiananmen protest, to the “white paper protests” in November 2022 against Xi’s Covid lockdowns, the cry of the Chinese people has always been for democracy and human rights. In cities across China, the “white paper” protestors chanted

We want freedom! We don’t want to be slaves!

We want human rights! We want democracy!

We don’t want dictators, we want to vote!

Xi Jinping step down! Communist Party step down!⁵²

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What Is Fascism and How Can We Resist It in the United States?

FRIEDA AFARY

THE ELECTION OF DONALD TRUMP as a second-term U.S. president is a catastrophe for the United States and the world. Although some have called Trump a fascist (Paxton, 2024 and Stanley, 2018 and 2024), there has been insufficient discussion in the mainstream media and the Left on what fascism is, what makes Trump a fascist, and what is required to resist fascism in the United States today.

In this article, I would like to summarize the views of some scholars of fascism, pinpoint the features that make Trump a fascist, and draw some conclusions for resisting fascism in the United States today.

What Is Fascism?

The following is the etymology of the word as described by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024):

The word *fascism* comes from the Latin *fascis*, which denotes a bundle of wooden rods that typically included a protruding axe blade. In ancient Rome, lictors (attendants to magistrates) would hold the fasces as a symbol of the penal power of their magistrate. The first European fascist, Benito Mussolini, adopted

this symbol both to recall the greatness of the Roman Empire and to reinforce his authority as the eventual dictator of Italy. Fascist regimes like his required their citizens to be as unified as the tightly bound fasces.

In his *Anatomy of Fascism* (2004), Robert Paxton argues that fascism is an ideology specific to the twentieth century and beyond. It is the product of the age of mass politics and characterizes a specific type of response to economic, social, and political crises. Fascism is a popular movement against liberalism, socialism, and Marxism. Its classic examples are Italy under Mussolini (1922–1943) and Nazi Germany under Hitler (1933–1945), regimes that brought about mass violence, a world war, and the deaths and extermination of millions. In the United States, Paxton argues, the rule of the Ku Klux Klan in the South from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1960s should be viewed as an early form of fascism. Nazi Germany also learned much from the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow South. (Wilkerson, 2020)

Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal

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restraints, goals of internal cleansing and external expansion. (Paxton, 2004, p. 218)

The specific features of fascism according to Paxton are the following:

- Adoration of male leadership and superiority of the leader's instinct over reason and thought.
- Utter contempt for reason and intellect.
- The belief that one's group is a victim.
- Belief in the superiority of one's nation or race.
- Need for a purer community by exclusionary violence.
- Promotion of "internal cleansing" and external [imperial] expansion through wars.
- Justification of any action against internal or external enemies.
- Right determined solely by the prowess of one's group in a Darwinian struggle with other groups.

Paxton emphasizes that most fascist regimes use anti-capitalist language. However, at most, fascism replaces market capitalism with monopoly and state capitalism. It replaces class struggle with productivism, Social Darwinist "survival of the fittest," and a Hobbesian "war of all against all."

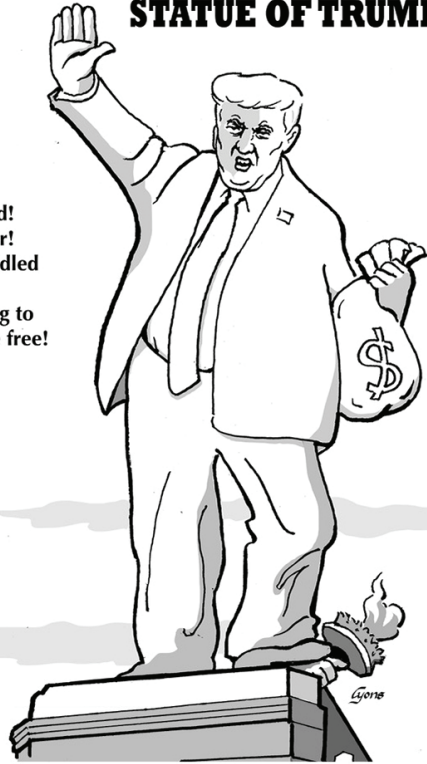
He also warns against analyses that identify fascism as a mental disorder. Most fascists are ordinary people and can even be viewed by members of society as "good people."

How Does Fascism Work?

In order to understand how fascism works, Paxton thinks that we need to understand the distinction between fascism and authoritarianism. While authoritarian rulers

Unveiling the new **STATUE OF TRUMP**

No tired!
No poor!
No huddled
masses
yearning to
breathe free!



want to demobilize the public and cling to the status quo, fascists want to excite the public with rhetoric and political spectacle. They offer "a new way" with a single-party state and economic programs.

In his opinion, a more important distinction between fascism and authoritarianism is that while under authoritarianism, people are *forced* to live under an undemocratic society, under fascism, most people *voluntarily give up* democratic institutions.

Paxton also notes that the fascist relish for war and exclusion can come in new forms, not always as anti-Jewish but also anti-Muslim, and with new symbols and new internal enemies such as immigrants.

He recognizes the following key elements in the fascist ascendancy to power:

- Polarization.
- Deadlock.

- Mass mobilization against internal and external enemies.
- Complicity by existing elites who choose to bow to the fascists and facilitate their ascendancy.

Paxton emphasizes, however, that as a form of rule, fascism is destabilizing. It is

In an authoritarian system,
people are forced to live
under undemocratic rule.
However, under fascism, people
voluntarily give up democratic
institutions.

doomed to destroy itself and many humans through endless internal wars and imperial expansionist wars.

Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) also singles out imperialism and internal wars of "purification" as fundamental elements of fascism. Her work analyzes the ways in which fascism uses imperialist expansion, anti-Black racism, and antisemitism to promote its aims.

Arendt argues that fascist regimes build on the fragmentation of their societies, the atomization of their populations, and the anger of those who have lost their former economic and social status. It bribes them in various ways and promotes unquestioning obedience to the leader.

Paxton does not agree that German society in the pre-World War II period was atomized. However, he does agree that the bulk of the German "Aryan" population was bribed by the Nazi regime and remained silent about the atrocities of the Nazis because they benefited from the regime. The concentration camps and the Holocaust of the Jews in particular became a source of job creation and job promotion for many

Germans.

Jason Stanley's *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (2018) explores the specific ways in which fascism ideologically conditions large segments of the population under its rule. He focuses on the ways in which fascism takes advantage of economic and social dissatisfaction to promote dehumanization of segments of the population labeled as "the enemy." According to his study, fascism operates in the following ways:

- Promotes mass imprisonment, expulsion and mass extermination of those "enemy" segments.
- Creates a mythic past and rewrites history to promote an extreme nationalism.
- Promotes propaganda.
- Promotes anti-intellectualism.
- Denies reality by replacing reasoned debate with lies, fear, and anger.
- Promotes hierarchy based on the "natural" dominance of a group and not based on knowledge.
- Promotes "law and order" by dividing society into the chosen and the lawless.
- Opposes any challenge to patriarchal manhood. Promotes the patriarchal man as the protector of women.
- Turns the rural population against the urban population through anti-city rhetoric.
- Promotes the chosen nation as the "hard workers," "makers" in contrast to the Others as "lazy" and "parasites."
- Continues "waving the banner of nationalism in front of the working class in order to funnel the state spoils into the hands of oligarchs."

All of the features Stanley singles out apply to Donald Trump. In fact, Stanley's book was written as a response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Let's examine Trump's fascist features further.

What Makes Trump a Fascist?

Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) is about xenophobia, mass deportation of undocumented immigrants, and an assault on the "enemy within," which he defines as liberals, socialists, Marxists, or any leader, judge, attorney, journalist, activist, or intellectual who opposes him and has challenged him.

Given that 77 million U.S. citizens voted for Trump in the 2024 election, it can be argued that he has persuaded 77 million people to give up democratic institutions voluntarily.

Trump also exhibits the following features that are compatible with the fascist playbook:

- Claims that Americans have been victimized.
- Promotes extremist theocratic nationalism.
- Promotes the cult of the leader who is "always right."
- Promotes monopoly capitalism in the name of being for "the little guy."
- Promotes patriarchy and seeks to crush any efforts at gender fluidity.
- Promotes disinformation, book bans, and erasure of history.
- Promotes economic wars against friendly nations and jingoistic threats against others.

One aspect that distinguishes Trump from classic fascism is that he does not advocate a strong welfare state for his MAGA base. This is why Robert Paxton had hesitated calling Trump a fascist up until a few years ago. After the January 6, 2021, white supremacist coup attempt, however, Paxton changed his mind and identified Trump as a fascist. In that coup attempt, he saw a violent extremist movement "bubbling up from below ... and that's very much like the original fascisms. It's the real thing." (Zerofsky, 2024)

Although Trump does not offer a welfare state to his base, he could use the mass incarceration of undocumented immigrants and other "enemy" groups as a means of generating revenue through prison slave labor. He could also follow the model of the Convict Leasing System of the post-Reconstruction U.S. South that would involve arresting people from targeted groups and turning them into slaves hired out for work. (PBS, 2011) In either case, MAGA supporters could be employed as prison/labor camp wardens and police state agents.

The current system of mass incarceration in the United States includes approximately 2 million people in prisons and jails. (Sentencing Project, 2024) Many of those incarcerated do perform various forms of labor for a pittance. However, most U.S. prisons are currently not-for-profit entities.

Trump's talk of being for "peace" and against U.S. wars abroad also flies in the face of reality. His support for Vladimir's Putin's brutal imperialist war against Ukraine, and Benjamin Netanyahu's genocidal war on Palestinians, as well as Trump's own jingoistic threats against the equally jingoistic Chinese government all reveal his strong militarist ambitions. Trump's tariff wars against friendly nations such as Canada, Mexico, and European states should also count as wars with highly damaging consequences for those countries and for the U.S. public.

How Can Trump's Fascism Be Effectively Resisted?

Examining the features of fascism, as articulated by the various scholars discussed above, we could argue that fascism requires mass rejection of reason/critical thought and mass following of the ideology of Social Darwinism and survival of the fittest. It also requires the complicity of leaders who may not believe in fascism but bow to it and facilitate its growth.

During her presidential campaign, Kamala Harris called Trump a fascist. However, the Democratic Party leadership is not offering us any direction on how to fight against fascism. Many of its leaders are now talking about finding “common ground” with the Trump administration and wishing it well. A few are even calling on Biden to grant Trump a pardon. (Sifry, 2024 and Bouie, 2024) To the extent that they do talk about any “resistance,” it is about relying on the U.S. Congress at a time when the Democrats do not have a majority in the House of Representatives, will lose their majority in the Senate starting in 2025, and face a Supreme Court with an extreme Right majority that has already given absolute immunity to Trump.

When fascism backed by Big Tech billionaires like Elon Musk wins electorally, most Democrats seem to be willing to play ball with it. The Democrats’ talk of “common ground,” however, along with the dismissal by Department of Justice Special Prosecutor Jack Smith of the criminal cases against Trump for his role in the January 6, 2021, violent white supremacist coup attempt, are indeed examples of the type of complicity that the historian Robert Paxton has warned us about.

This complicity can lead us to forget some facts about the 2024 election. Trump did not win by a landslide. The U.S. public is still split down the middle. Trump received 77.3 million votes versus Harris’s 75 million votes. That amounts to a 49.8 percent share of the popular vote for Trump versus Harris’s 48.3 share. There was only 1.5 percentage points between the two. (CNN, 2024)

At the same time, in the latest election, Trump gained 47 percent of the Latino male vote, 24 percent of the Black male vote, and 53 percent of white women’s votes.

The main issues that the Trump cam-

paign used to gain votes were the following:

- Misogyny/misogynoir and the weaponization of gender debates.
- Antiimmigrant hatred and the view that undocumented immigrants are “criminals” and “parasites.”
- The view that naked capitalist exploitation is the pathway to economic growth for the working class and the middle class.
- The claim that Trump would bring about “peace” to end wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

A serious resistance movement against fascism needs to ponder these facts. It needs to work thoughtfully and act strategically to reach as many people as possible to discuss these very issues and offer convincing fact-based explanations and alternatives to change minds and hearts.

In order to resist fascism in an effective way, we need both mass street demonstrations, and the ideas, language, and explanations that help us combat disinformation, ideological conditioning, and hate. We need to offer the vision of a humanist alternative to capitalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia.

After the November 5 election, a coalition of nationwide progressive organizations such as Indivisible, Public Citizen, Move On, and the Working Families Party called on people nationwide to step forward and host a series of public in-person and virtual meetings to talk about forming a resistance movement. That network, which called itself “Worth Fighting For,” will come to an end before Trump’s inauguration on January 20. At this point, most progressive organizations are working at the local and state level. No organization or network of organizations is taking responsibility for building a truly nationwide resistance movement against fascism. Unfortunately, an array of small organizations, immigrant rights groups, and community groups without nationwide coordination and funding will simply not

be enough to resist fascism.

The Trump administration, however, is ready to launch its assault on immigrants, shut down the opposition media, and prosecute democratic leaders, lawyers, judges, journalists, intellectuals, and activists who have stood up to Trump and his MAGA movement.

December 22, 2024

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America's Multiracial Right

Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes Interviewed by Eric Maroney

DANIEL MARTINEZ HO SANG and JOSEPH E. LOWNDES are the authors of *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019). The HoSang and Lowndes co-edited volume of essays, *The Politics of the Multiracial Right*, will be published by NYU Press in 2025. HoSang is a Professor of American Studies and Political Science at Yale University. He serves as a Race and Democracy Fellow at the Roosevelt Institute. Lowndes is a Visiting Distinguished Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Hunter College, CUNY, and is the author of *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism*. They were interviewed by Eric Maroney, who is an Associate Professor at Connecticut State Community College, a graduate student at the University of Connecticut, and a member of the Tempest Collective.

Eric Maroney: *I am looking forward to hearing more about your project, *The Politics of the Multicultural Right* (forthcoming). From what I understand of the book project, it seems to have grown out of your earlier collaboration, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity*. Can you tell *New Politics* readers a little bit about this new project and what drew you both to the study of the New Right?*

Daniel HoSang: As you noted, Joe and I have been collaborating for a while now. Part of what we looked at were earlier emergences of this phenomenon, in the Pacific Northwest in particular, at the role of men of color in militias and in street Trumpist groups. We looked at Patriot Prayer. We also looked at the ascension of a new generation of Black Republicans, and more broadly how the Right was embracing a certain form of multiculturalism as they thought about building new coalitions, especially in the wake of Trump's 2016 election.

I think we were surprised. I largely bought into the idea that as Trump moved the party and his campaigns further to the

right, relying on nativist and racist rhetoric, it would have the opposite effect, limiting any possibility for a multicultural coalition of the Right. Obviously, that appeal grows in 2020 and by that time, we recognized that there are lots of different stories about the new inroads to the Right that MAGA and many other parts of the Right are providing. We found that you couldn't just describe this phenomenon through a single story. That's how we got started on this idea of an edited volume by different writers—who had different expertise in the context, history, and cultural dimensions of how these appeals are working at different sites. We wanted to put their work in dialogue to see what it illustrated not just about the multiracial Right, but also about what these defections and movements reveal about politics today, about multiculturalism, about the limits of liberal appeals to identity, about diverse peoples' ability to be mobilized around the Right, et cetera.

Joseph Lowndes: When we set out to write *Producers, Parasites, Patriots*, the impetus in that project was seeing, on the one hand, how in the wake of the Great Recession,

white working class and white poor people were starting to be described by conservatives in terms that were usually reserved for people of color: welfare dependent, culturally disorganized, or even genetically incapable in some ways. Simultaneously, we saw the emergence of Black and Latino elites in the Republican Party and in corporate America as well. We wanted to ask, how do we think about race and class in these seemingly changed conditions. One of the changes that we have arrived at is a new Gilded Age, which is probably not even a useful term at this point because the inequities are so much more radical than they were in the twentieth century. That led us into trying to look at where and how these right-wing appeals were being articulated and what kind of politics were being generated from them.

One of the things we thought about at the time was the degree to which poor whites were dropping to the bottom and no longer being guaranteed the same kinds of New Deal forms of security that had bolstered the white working class and had brought them into the middle class. Everything that the mid-twentieth century had brought in terms of the GI Bill, the Federal Housing Authority, suburbanization, and everything else had been steadily eroded between the opioid crisis and long-time stagnant or declining wages. There were parts of the country where it was clear that white people were suffering. I think we were kind of hopefully thinking that this could be a moment where people would be willing to abandon whiteness as a political category—that in a neoliberal economy, it no longer serves its purpose [in generating a relative privilege].

This was before Trump came along and then the 2016 electoral primaries happened and it looked like a whole lot of white people who had been left out of the political system came roaring back in a kind

of rageful, racist populism. It turned out that this was not a static picture of white people alone, but there was also a developing relationship between conservative or right-wing politics and people of color. We witnessed this not only in the Republican Party but also in the militia-right, the street-fighting fascist right, the Evangelical right—a variety of sites. We published *Producers, Patriots, Parasites* in 2019, but this phenomenon of the multicultural right was a growing trend. As Dan said, there is not a single explanation here that would tell us why various Latino communities find themselves on the Right, why Black men might be beginning to move in this direction, or how and why Vietnamese Americans, Filipino Americans, South Asian Americans are beginning to vote conservative. We felt we needed the work of sociologists, historians, political scientists, and ethnic studies scholars to help tell the many stories that are a piece of this broad tectonic shift.

EM: *I appreciate the emphasis that there is not a single story here, that there are different factors that animate this movement, but could you say something more specifically about why and how this broader non-white coalition or audience has been drawn to Trumpism? What does the Left need to understand to effectively counter this movement?*

DH: A couple of factors do give us something of a framework to understand it. The first is there are many more organized inroads and appeals from the Right. Mostly this is organized in a top-down fashion, but these appeals are made to an array of historically progressive constituencies including many communities of color. By contrast, a generation ago very, very few people of color found a home in the Republican Party. Through the 1990s, the GOP was largely satisfied with building a white conservative base. Part of the appeal, as the party who

would protect white conservative interests, was actually not making appeals to people of color. Instead, the GOP positioned itself as the party that would protect white interests from people of color.

We talk about this in the introduction to the forthcoming book, this dynamic change slowly beginning in the 2000s when George W. Bush apologizes for the Southern strategy and there is even some talk about moderating the party stances around immigration, in particular, to appeal to voters outside the traditional base. You also see the Libre Institute of the Koch brothers appealing to Latinos through Spanish-language materials. Also in this period, people like Stephen Bannon and Andrew Breitbart are kind of keeping their eyes open for young Black conservatives who could be brought into their work and world. There are also some more localized grassroots efforts. Groups like Turning Point USA are really trying to appeal to a multicultural audience and using the language of identitarianism and liberal identity politics to do so.

The second element we can consider is just the defections around liberalism itself—defections around the broad limits of a liberal agenda that has failed to address so many dimensions of the current economic crisis. At many of the [conservative] rallies we go to, I would say that's the first thing I noticed. People just feel exhausted by it. They feel that both individually, the candidates, and the Democratic Party itself don't stand for anything. It's not standing for transformation; it's abiding by the status quo. It's also just culturally unappealing to them. They, at least those who have moved over or who are exploring, are finding more energy and possibility in the Right.

JL: At a deeper level, one of the things that Dan and I have long talked about is that American political culture is built on settlerism and Black slavery. Those

are racial formations themselves, but they also embed a logic into U.S. politics that is both authoritarian and proprietarian. The basis for racial capitalism is capitalism and the basis of settlerism is tied up in the fantasy of autonomy, independence, land ownership, and so on, but those ideas can slip their leash. They can slip their racial origins and become available sets of beliefs, almost religious beliefs, to Americans more broadly. White supremacy is fundamental to everything we see, but in ways that are now deeply threaded into the bedrock of American politics so that you can have expressions of authoritarianism and neo-liberal capitalism that can draw in many kinds of people [without abandoning white supremacy].

We don't want to say that race is no longer relevant or that we have arrived at some kind of post-racial experience that is Trumpism, or worse that we can blame the rise of the far right on people of color. However, as Dan was saying, there are appeals that are drawing in a nontraditional base: anti-government appeals, appeals to personal autonomy, to small business ownership, to Evangelical morality, to law and order. All of these things are discourses that have broad organizing capability, and it really just took the Right getting over enough of its basic racism to begin to exploit that in a way. It's not that the far right is no longer racist or that it is no longer filled with white supremacists—because it is—but the riddle is how this stuff exists cheek by jowl with multiracial conservatism? That is what you see. The Right is a mix of these things together. The presence of one does not negate the presence of another. In some ways, there is kind of a weird co-constitution going on.

EM: *To follow up on some of the observations about white supremacy, is there a danger to overemphasizing the presence of a racially or ethnically diverse new Right? I'm thinking about the talking points that circulated im-*

mediately after Trump's reelection that Latino men were responsible for his victory. Is there a kind of danger in focusing too much attention on multiracial conservatism as one element of a rightward movement?

JL: I think that's a really great question and there is probably a lot more to be said than what I can offer here. I think for us, one of the things we found was that no one was talking about this. Political scientists but also scholars in general as well as liberal journalists and pundits have had their fingers stuck deep in their ears when it comes to acknowledging this is a phenomenon. So, we have kind of had to shout it from the rooftops for the last few years just to make it visible, just so that people would stop using the word white nationalist or white supremacist every time they spoke about the far right, or ignoring that fact that all kinds of people can be moved in conservative directions.

There is also a kind of condescension that non-white conservatism could only be the result of either cynicism or false consciousness. That evacuates the question of agency for people of color, and so we wanted to say, look, there is a lot more going on here. The phenomenon has to be looked at in a more complex way rather than through a self-serving notion that people ought to be progressives. However, I do sometimes worry about overplaying it. There was some liberal press that came out right after the election sort of suggesting that Latino men are the ones to blame for the whole thing, or that Black men are to blame for the whole thing, and of course, that's complete nonsense. It's a much broader Right phenomenon that we are talking about. These groups may be part of that phenomenon, but they didn't lead it; they are not the cause of it. I think there is that danger of overemphasis, but it's also why you have to talk about these things as trend lines within a broader movement.

The other thing that I would say is that you have to think about these things intersectionally. You have to consider how these things interact with gender and sexuality. Some of these inroads to the Right come through other phenomena, through incel discourses or other kinds of misogyny, reproductive, or anti-trans politics. We want to mark the ways that those spaces are potentially multicultural as well.

DH: I would just say that it's less about emphasis and more about what is the interpretation. There are these liberal interpretations that downplay the ongoing nativism and racism within the far right. It's a false idea that if there are people of color on the Right then these spaces have shifted and become open and welcoming. We never make claims like that. We also reject the flip side of that argument, which is that people of color inevitably find their political home within liberalism or the idea that evidenced by their transphobia or nativism, they were kind of secret conservatives all along and that they just needed to discover it—that's not right either.

The other thing is not to make claims that there have been broad shifts in politics, that people no longer care about racism, no longer care about those forms of domination—I don't think that's right either. But I will say this, there was a question in the *Times/Sienna* poll (10/13/24) asking Latinos when Trump is talking about immigration, do you think he is talking about you? A majority said, no, he's not. That's a significant finding. Does that mean that people are suddenly identifying with nativism in a different way—I don't think so, but amid this kind of regime of vulnerability and terror that migrants all over are facing, it's not surprising that people are worried about identifying with those who are going to come under the maw of this terror machine. The effect of that is to encourage more people to say, well, one strategy to get

away from that violence and humiliation is, perhaps, to see if I can cast my lot there [among the Right]. That is very different from saying that people no longer want to be part of what we might call a multiracial, socially democratic movement that helps meet their needs. From my perspective, none of that has changed. The surprising part, though, is that people are wondering, given the Democrat's failure to deliver that for them, is there some possibility in these new [Right] formations.

JL: I think that last part is really important. Just to underscore what Dan is saying, we are in a very open political moment right now, where the institutions of liberal democracy are no longer capable of managing the multiple crises we are experiencing (if they ever were). Across the board people sense that and that means we are also in a moment where peoples' political identifications are shifting and there are many possibilities. We are not saying that this is an inevitable telos or a march towards the Right or the far right; still, the openness of the moment means that people are open to different kinds of political identifications and different kinds of appeals.

That is another reason to make this intervention now so that we have our eyes open to the fact that there are different kinds of political possibilities out there. We have to be unstuck, and we have to recognize that there is political creativity on the Right to shift these things, so that we can respond.

EM: *Following up on Dan's example about the Times/Sienna poll and the context you just provided, Joe, it strikes me that these appeals and identifications may resonate very differently in material rather than ideological registers. What I mean by this is that identifying with the Right may not have the same kind of seductiveness for Latinos if Trump, as is expected, unleashes ICE in the northern*

cities and begins rounding people up. A person's political identification is not going to exempt them from racial profiling.

DH: Just on that point, I think there is a lot of discussion of the hope, some of it well-placed, that when the most violent and far-reaching overreach occurs, it will sober people up to conclude that's not what they wanted. That seems absolutely plausible if the worst forms of deportation occur—for example, kids being ripped from their parents. On the other hand, I do think the Right has been steadily building on this division between the kind of worthy, innocent, good subject—good Black subject, good immigrant subject, good Latino subject—who should be exempted from it. I think the question is, how effective will that be in actually pulling people in? When Mayor Eric Adams said I am down with doing more deportations, he said he is doing it in the name of protecting immigrants. To Joe's point, this is an active project that is in formation. People like Bannon think there are enough people who can be drawn into this way of thinking.

Paola Ramos's book, *The Defectors*, on Latinos makes the point that this is a group that's shifting. It's changed. Most Latinos now have spent more time in the United States. A majority consume English-language media. We have to keep open the possibility that their incorporation into the Right's project may be successful. We have to be critical of the idea that Latinos will experience a "proper" shift back or snap back to critiques of nativist violence automatically. That also has to be won.

EM: *Is it possible to describe an anatomy of the multicultural conservative movement or coalition? What is its electoral footprint, its presence in the militia movement, its presence in fascistic street politics, and its presence in the cultural arena? What is the glue that holds this grouping together? And what of the role*

of women and queer people? How do they fit into this project? Are they part of the glue that holds this grouping together or are they sometimes invited in?

DH: I don't think it's a singular coalition. My sense from, for example, going to events like Turning Point USA conferences or Trump rallies is, it's not just that there are many inroads, there are many politics and narratives and points of connection that are bringing people into the room. This also speaks to the contradictions in the project because, as we know, there are elements of capital that will lose out significantly if mass deportations take place.

What I have been struck by, in these conservative spaces, is that the Right is willing to tolerate a certain amount of variance and contradiction as they are starting to pull in these defectors and figure out where it goes. I don't think that they are clear about which element will win the day. People across race are clearly drawn to the energy of the Right, the kind of insurgent profile and feel that ring-wing spaces have been able to produce, but where it goes seems still very much up in the air.

It's clear to me that, especially anti-trans politics, is connected to a critique of liberal authority, but there has also been an incorporation of figures like Peter Thiel and other queer men and women. In Paola Ramos's book she talks about the founder of Gays Against Groomers, a Latino South Florida guy. My point is that attraction to, and incorporation into, the Right is less about these fixed blocks of people that are for or against. It's been quite amazing to see what political scientists have often called linked fate—that if there is a perceived attack on some member of your group that you identify with—that dynamic is not altogether gone but also it is clearly not working in the same ways that we imagined it before.

JL: I think this question of glue really

matters. I keep trying to think of historical parallels—not just right-wing parallels but other kinds of realigning moments in U.S. politics. Fascist movements always have this kind of slapdash heterogeneous quality to them. By contrast, if you look at the New Deal coalition in 1932, there you have a strong, in some ways authoritarian, president who comes in with both Houses and the backing of the social movements on the ground. There was an organized union movement that was demanding collective bargaining, that was deeply organized in the auto industry and elsewhere. There were progressive liberals, national planners—various forces that were interested in changing American institutions to really embed a new relationship between the federal government and the states or between the executive branch and the other branches, but you still had functionally robust institutions.

In contrast, now we are experiencing this realignment among crumbling institutions, discredited institutions, a Supreme Court that has no popular legitimacy, a Congress that has been broken for many decades now, an executive branch that swings back and forth between whatever executive orders each president can put in there. Under these conditions things are much different and we are trying to make sense of what that means, but I think authoritarian nationalism is a kind of glue that holds the Right together. The Republican Party is now a Trumpist party. From trunk to tail, the whole thing is a MAGA party. In some ways you don't need the fascist street movements or the militia movements as you did once, because this has all been absorbed into the party.

I do think this idea of nationalism, especially the anti-immigrant rhetoric, is key to a multiracial possibility. The Western civilization stuff that the Proud Boys and others were talking about—upholding

the values of the West rhetoric—anybody can be a part of that, right? That can be a multiracial thing. That was the Proud Boys' line. Also, evangelical politics have grown massively in the past couple of years—the Evangelical right and Christian nationalism. Turning Point USA started out as a libertarian organization and then slowly became a far-right and increasingly Christian nationalist grouping. A certain kind of Christian civilizational politics and, above all, authoritarian politics can pull a multiracial formation together. As Dan talked about before, in a brutalized neoliberal society, you can either be the one doling out the cruelty or the recipient of that cruelty. It is almost as simple as that; in some ways, this is what these politics come down to.

This connects the gender part of it to the capitalist part of it to the authoritarian part of it—this idea that you have winners and losers, conquerors and conquered. That is an appeal that can be seen running all the way through the Trump campaign ... through all the far-right social movements that are connected, and it's what connects the oligarchic billionaire class to Trumpism. Democratic elites and media elites are not just bending the knee, they are happily coming over to the Trump side because that is where their interests are.

DH: I think the bending of the knee and Democratic deference is revealing another argument that we, and others, have made, which is that much of this right-wing energy is not antagonistic to the dominant strains of market-based liberalism. Instead, they are kind of the fullest expression of it. That is both materially true, as when people point out that Trump is building on Obama's and Biden's deportation orders, to even the fact that the MAGA coalition itself now comes from a wide range of sectors, political thinking, etc.

This positions us against the idea that this is a force from outside that is attacking

the heartbeat of liberalism, but instead it's coming from within it in many ways and is the natural culmination of the failures of liberalism.

EM: *Is there a class character to the multicultural Right? I am thinking about two essays in the volume: "Hip-Hop Republicans: Understanding the Politics of Hip-Hop and Conservatism" and "She's the Sister You Never Had": Conservative Online Women's Magazines and the Politics of Race." Do these essays suggest a generalizable shared (middle) class ideology or are the figures at the center of these projects motivated by individual grift?*

DH: On the class thing, you can have critiques of the failures of the current neoliberal disaster and precarity, which is not just about what's in your bank account or your paycheck but also some sense of deep pessimism and feeling of emptiness about the future, and people can experience that up and down the class hierarchies. Wage workers can experience the grind of it working in a nursing home, but also even professionals trying to make it on a salary in a city can experience it as well. It's less about what is promised to a sector of the workforce and more about where the Right has been able to make those inroads. The grift, in my observations, is everywhere. It's most focused on the core Trump base. Again, at these Turning Point events, there are infomercials every twenty-five minutes, and everyone is hawking something. It's true on all of their platforms, and it's true for the influencers of color that they are bringing in, so it's not either or.

EM: *This isn't just a book project for the two of you. In early fall, you hosted a symposium on the multicultural right in New Haven, CT, but this was not a traditional academic summit. You invited local organizers and community members to take part. Can you talk about the symposium, particularly the final day, which put academic scholars in conversation with community prac-*

tioners? What was the intent in structuring the symposium this way, and what can other scholar-activists learn from this structure?

DH: These political questions can't be answered by scholars and researchers alone, in fact dominant frameworks haven't allowed them to engage and take these questions seriously, but I think organizers on the ground see it. Organizers have to be responsive to changes that allow them to see differently. I am also struck with how the students Joe and I work with are much more flexible in their thinking. They are much more alert to this, and they get it. This is a phenomenon that requires lots of people from lots of different points of entry to be in conversation together—people who are not tied to strict frameworks of explanation about what is or isn't happening here.

I recently did a workshop with colleagues in SEIU 1199, the healthcare workers union. We started out by asking who is seeing this rightward movement within their organizing spaces. One organizer shared that she has a beautifully fierce homecare worker that accompanies her on one-on-one meetings to talk up the union. This worker has been talking up the union, but also talking about why they are voting for Trump. Others report even immigrants' rights organizations and leaders considering a Trump vote. How that gets explained and understood is not going to come from social scientists.

The why of it—what are people thinking, feeling, experiencing—that has to be done in the field in places where people are talking to real people. The “what is to be done” question that we were exploring on the last day of the symposium, produced a kind of consensus around the failures and limitations of a politics of representation that isn't speaking to people's needs anymore. It's certainly not a choice for an anti-identitarian colorblind universalism, but the prevailing forms of anti-racist lib-

eral politics that has ascended over the last twenty years are very much at the heart of these defections, ambivalences, et cetera. The gap between language and people's material experiences of the world is part of what the Right has focused on.

JL: We are in a historic moment of failure of the liberal institutions, a moment of radical economic shifts and a polycrisis. Liberal anti-racism, it turns out, wasn't even anti-racist, but, in any case, it was not adequate to the task. It was never adequate to the task. Responding through DEI models, which are only designed to help people of color at an elite representative level, is not going to do it. The liberal version of emancipation was never up to the task and in conditions of intensifying pressure, this is what has created the conditions for new kinds of fascist power.

DH: I do think that there is an opportunity here, as well, to the extent that this is forcing a rupture with sets of strategies and political aspirations that were never going to build something much more durable and solid. It has exposed something that the Left and liberals have needed to reckon with, and in that sense, I certainly won't call it a good thing, but it's made clear that what we have to do now is not simply redouble on old theories about identities or that there is a singular class politics that can unite people. What this phenomenon is revealing is just how dynamic and shifting this moment is. All moments of shift provide new kinds of openings, so that's partly to your question about creating spaces where people can share and try to figure out what's happening, versus coming and saying we have this set of phenomena, how do we make it fit into a framework that we know to be true. We have ideas and hunches, but we don't have a singular way to say this is what the emergence of a multicultural Right reveals about the true structure of social formations.

“Abolition Democracy” and a Third Reconstruction

A Path for Defeating Fascism and Moving Toward Socialism

CARL DAVIDSON AND BILL FLETCHER JR.

IN THIS EXPLORATION, WE WANT TO advocate a new strategic narrative about our future. All futures, especially one tangled in the complexities of fascism and socialism, are best rooted in a deep exploration of our past. And since all narratives require a good use of metaphors and analogies, as well as uncovering new facts, we want to start with an unusual but powerful one. Let’s call it “The Black Sea Conundrum.”

The Black Sea, situated to the northeast of the Mediterranean, is unusual in multiple ways. Most especially, it is a sea comprised of two seas narrowly and uniquely connected. How so? There are two “rivers” of sorts, one of fresh water and another of sea water, with fresh water flowing out of the Black Sea into the Aegean, and saltwater flowing in. However, due to the flow paths, the lower saline “river” filling the Black Sea never reaches the surface. The lower sea, therefore, never receives oxygen. Without oxygen, this layer contains very little living organic material, making the bottom of the Black Sea dead and a liquid museum

of wrecked ships.

This dual flow, while only recently discovered, has been going on for nearly 8,000 years. It means there are really two seas contained in the Black Sea, and they rarely mix. Yet, the Black Sea as we know it could not exist without both seas existing in opposition. Together they constitute one of the Earth’s largest seas. Still, the Black Sea is dynamic and some of the water at the bottom will periodically make its way to the top.

Appreciating the nature of the Black Sea, therefore, can help us understand the complexity of U.S. history. Most of us are taught a history that is at once linear and supposedly all-encompassing. Yet the reality is far more complicated and essential to understand. Why? Because it is an *overdetermined* history, to borrow a phrase from the French Marxist, Louis Althusser. And as with our “seas” at the bottom and the top, there are issues that must be understood in all of their complexity.

U.S. history is a compilation of histories, perhaps a dozen of them. In the first cut, ours is a history from the standpoint of the ruling classes of the racialized settler state, while it is also a history from the standpoint of the subaltern classes. We can call this the historical contradiction between the peoples and their ruling adversaries. In a second cut, moreover, it is also a history of the struggles of the subaltern

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classes and peoples among themselves. We can call this the histories of contradictions among the peoples. Likewise in the first cut, factions of the ruling classes also collide and contend. As socialists, we must contextualize our work and tasks between and within the top and bottom seas. This does not mean exaggerating the splits on top or glamorizing, romanticizing or demonizing the contending subaltern blocs below. Rather, it means that we are partisans. We best understand U.S. history by grasping the audacity of the emancipatory movements, all of which faced a situation where the odds were against them and the situation was grim, to paraphrase the words of a major character from science fiction.

Abolition Democracy, Reconstruction & Counter-Revolution

The emancipatory efforts of the African slaves and the resistance of Native Peoples to the settler state's westward expansion existed from day one, even if only minor at times. They were at the heart of the complicated question of what form of capitalism would prevail in the United States in the 19th century. Why complicated? Because the initial accumulation of capital combined extermination of the Indigenous for their land, the expropriation of Africans for their labor, and the exploitation of the indentured for their labor time. The critical flashpoint—when the contradictions came together—was in the period 1860-1880. This was the period of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the 1876 Counter-Revolution against Reconstruction. For the First Nations, the major wars against them were waged throughout, ending by 1900.

There were several major fractures within the movements that created the First Reconstruction. One was the split of the pre-1865 alliance between some white women suffragists and the Black Freedom

movement. Another was between the "poor white" Scalawags in the South against the slavocracy; Scalawags became partners in Reconstruction with the Freedmen. Still another was between the "white" labor unions of the North, who ignored or opposed Reconstruction. We could go on. We don't want to discount other major events, e.g., the U.S. War on Mexico, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the overall rise of a union movement against the steel, coal and railroad bosses of the Gilded Age. But we are saying that the conflicts comprising Reconstruction and its overthrow were the central contradictions that shaped an era of national rebirth.

W.E.B. Du Bois coined the provocative term "abolition democracy," which both described a moment and a movement. It was a moment in that it spoke to the period of the Civil War and Reconstruction, which was a period of a social revolution fundamentally different from the 1776 War of Independence (calling it the "American Revolution" is a bit of a stretch). At the same time, the Civil War and Reconstruction was a movement, to put it mildly. It was an elemental rising, and often called the Second American Revolution, or alternately, the completion of the First. It was a movement that encompassed the formal abolitionists of the North, but also the masses of former African slaves and their Scalawag allies who sought to redefine democracy not only in the Southern states, but in the U.S. as a whole.

As Manisha Sinha clarifies in her exceptional new work, *The Rise and Fall of the Second American Republic: Reconstruction, 1860-1920*, Reconstruction was far more than a Black vs. white affair. Black Reconstruction was an alliance of the laboring poor, both Freedmen and Scalawags, backed by Radical Republicans in Congress. It was a period during which a battle was underway to move the U.S. toward a

more egalitarian democratic state. Du Bois called the new governments taking shape in the South “the dictatorship of labor” that, while based in capitalist economics, were also engaged in multiple mass, democratic projects and movements challenging existing property relations. In basic ways, Black Reconstruction was opposed to the trajectory that won out, i.e., the consolidation of war-born manufacturing into monopoly capitalism and the rise of U.S. imperialism. And in describing Reconstruction’s violent overthrow, Du Bois insisted on describing the defeat of abolition democracy as a class defeat of labor by capital, rather than simply a victory of “white” over Black.

Angela Davis, in her *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons and Torture*, uses Du Bois’s term particularly in connection with opposition to the prison-industrial complex and the carceral state. We agree with her and her analysis. While not suggesting she would disagree, we are using the term “abolition democracy” in a broader context. As mentioned, abolition democracy had its strongest point as an effort to complete and solidify emancipation. This meant the eradication of the plantocracy and all vestiges of slavery. Although, as Sinha argues, Reconstruction and its aftermath was also directly related to the “resolution” of the Native American question. The usage of the term “abolition democracy” in the 19th century, however, was fundamentally and mainly focused on the future of the former African slaves, the peoples who were becoming the subaltern nation of African Americans. In any case, Sinha was quite right in including the questions of Reconstruction in the West, the subjugation of conquered Mexicans, the wars with the Cheyenne, Apache and Navajo, and the segregation and attempted deportation of the Chinese.

So, at its peak, abolition democracy was uneven. Yet it pointed in the direction

necessary for a transformed United States. Elements within the abolition democracy movement recognized the immorality of westward expansion, but the fight against westward expansion was not a dominant theme in the movement. In that sense, “abolition democracy” was not yet a unified theory or objective. Rather, it was a motion, but a revolutionary motion nonetheless.

Abolition democracy and the fight to preserve and extend Reconstruction were efforts equivalent to the Tecumseh’s efforts towards a massive, Native American confederacy (claiming the Northwest Territory as a “Red Homeland”) in the first decade of the 19th century; the Taiping Rebellion in China (1850-1864); and the Paris Commune (1871) in France. These were each mass upheavals and campaigns, revolutionary experiences that were profoundly transformative, yet still failing in their fundamental objectives. In each case, counter-revolutionary forces were able to gain the upper hand and brutally crush these mass insurgencies of the various subalterns concerned. The mass insurgencies, moreover, were not themselves led by a cohesive revolutionary theory embedded in organizations capable of building a successful strategy. They also ran into the challenge of timing, i.e., seizing the right moment in order to strike and pursue the enemy until success was achieved.

Abolition democracy must be understood, then, as going beyond not only the efforts of the 19th century, but also beyond the newer efforts in connection with our current more focused struggles against the carceral state. It is best seen strategically as a stepping stone toward what has come to be referenced as the “Second” and “Third Reconstruction

The Third Reconstruction and the Fight for Power

The First Reconstruction was, of course,

1865-1877. The “Second Reconstruction” is a metaphorical reference, roughly, to 1954-1973. This was the “Long 1960s” of civil rights campaigns and the Black Revolt after the assassination of Martin Luther King. During these years major victories were won for racial and gender justice, as well as victories on matters of occupational health and safety, and the environment (and globally, the advances and victories of national independence and liberation struggles). There is debate as to exactly when that moment ended, but by the 1973 recession, it was apparent that the progressive social movements had stalled.

The term “Third Reconstruction” has emerged over recent years to reference progressive political power won within the context of bourgeois-democratic capitalism. When the term first circulated, there was some debate as to whether it was referencing a future of “socialist reconstruction” in the U.S. That debate largely closed in favor of conceptualizing it as a means of discussing a more immediate task of winning what has come to be known as *governing power*. This is to be distinguished from a socialist movement winning *state power*, or even “breaking up” an existing state power and creating a new one to move away from capitalism. It was also meant that Reconstruction was not simply to project a pressure campaign for a downward reallocation of resources.

The “Third Reconstruction” then, is an aspirational reference. It is what left and progressive forces should be seeking to achieve. It is not a set of policies or demands, although it does include policies and demands. Like the original Reconstruction, the Third Reconstruction needs to be conceptualized as a political realignment. It’s not a realignment only in terms of voting patterns or even the emergence of a new, mass political party (or a cluster of parties). It’s a realignment in terms of

the forces in government—and the popular bloc they represent—which see themselves as engaging in a struggle both inside and outside the democratic capitalist state. It’s a struggle, we wish to emphasize, which is

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a battle on the ground as well as within the institutions of the state and civil society, including but not limited to the government.

Seeing the Third Reconstruction as about more than a set of demands will immediately make it suspect to many left and progressive forces. How so? Because it necessitates the construction of a bloc or alliance of various class forces and social movements that are not always aligned. Some will be so strategically, but others will only be so tactically. Such an alignment cannot be of the left and core progressive groups alone, but also must engage the vacillating middle forces, those organizations, groups and prominent individuals that are frequently uneasy with the left, even while they are terrified of the right.

In our immediate conjuncture leading into 2025, a version of this alignment has been coming together in opposition to Donald Trump and the MAGA fascists. This alignment goes by many names, but it is objectively a broad front opposing the right and the measure it seeks to implement. It has no overall organizational structure yet, and does not have a longer-term program. In that sense it is very different

from the French “New Popular Front” with its four electoral groupings that, both, stood against the French fascists in 2024 as well as promoted their own program. Our “B-4”—or broad front opposing the right—is a collection of organizations and individuals who frequently share little in common except their antipathy towards MAGA. While this is very necessary at this moment, it is not an alignment that can last. One can hear this in the voices of more traditional Republicans. While they are clear with their hatred of Trump, their intention remains that of forming a new party or restoring some variant of the Republican Party. They still want, in the long run, to dominate the U.S. political scene.

Like the original Reconstruction, the Third Reconstruction must advance a platform of deep structural reforms. For the first, this included the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. It also could have included—had it not been for Andrew Johnson and his allies—the complete disenfranchisement of the leaders of the former Confederacy—both government and military—as well as major land reform in the South, such as the “40 Acres and a Mule” formulation of William Tecumseh Sherman, William Stanton, Charles Sumner, and Thaddeus Stevens.

Reconstruction did introduce public schools and voting rights, as well as the protection by the government, at least initially, against terrorism. Additionally, significant worker self-organization and militancy emerged, particularly in the early days of Reconstruction. What might have happened to the Westward expansion, however, is a matter around which there has been considerable debate. Westward expansion and a democratic resolution of Reconstruction would have been in contradiction in many respects.

Reconstruction initially split the ruling classes. The obvious split was be-

tween Northern industrial capital and the Southern plantocracy (plantation capital). Reconstruction involved the political suppression of the Southern plantocracy and some limitations on their political activity, particularly after the end of the Andrew Johnson administration. Northern capital, however, was never homogeneous, and the GOP was divided between radicals and liberals. The radical GOP wanted Reconstruction to advance in democratizing the South. The liberals saw the South as a haven to spread manufacturing, managed locally by the “Bourbons.” Among other things, a significant democratization of the South would have had other implications for the North, such as wider democracy for labor, something that probably became clearer in the context of the great 1877 railroad strike, though by that time the die had been cast.

Reconstruction was able to accomplish much of what it accomplished precisely because of the combination of the mass abolition-democratic movement, the creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau as a branch of positive governing power, and the split within the ruling circles. With that split, the more radical elements of the Republican Party, in alignment with the mass of freed Africans and many poor Southern whites, were able to make an historic and strategic breakthrough for a few years.

There are myriad additional lessons and warnings contained in the experience of both the original Reconstruction and the “Second Reconstruction” for today’s left and progressive forces. Some are very important, while others are too numerous to be reviewed here.

The first of central importance is the aim of the struggle for power. The struggle for power is not mainly reflected in demands to be placed on the existing ruling elites. At certain moments, the demands for change must become demands for power to

be taken from them, and specifically, the rising to power of new class forces and social movements that represent the interests of the subaltern forces. This demand for power distinguishes a serious, mature left from those who rely on demands for the elites to change policy largely because they do not wish to dirty their hands with the work of electoral coalition-building, Get Out the Vote work and governing.

One distinction worth repeating is between redistributive demands and structural demands. The former aims at getting a bigger piece of the pie by redistributing wealth downward. The latter aims at altering the structures of power to favor subaltern institutions. Both are needed, but the former alone keeps us bound up with liberalism.

The second important lesson is just this critical point about coalition-building. The Shawnee leader Tecumseh probably understood it best in his efforts to construct a massive, North American alliance of Native Americans to lay the foundation for a nation-state of the Native Americans. The conscious and patient work of building an alliance necessitates compromise and the ability to negotiate the constructive resolution of contradictions. It also necessitates the utilization of contradictions among adversaries and splits within the circles of the ruling elite.

The history of the First Reconstruction demonstrated a multi-class alliance for social revolution. This alliance was very tricky. Among other things, while it included Southern labor Scalawags, as in the Free State of Jones," it did not involve the Northern white workers—after the end of the Civil War—due to their insistence on the racial exclusion of African and Asian workers from organized labor, as well as growing class resentment of the Northern industrial capitalists by Northern white workers. That said, the battle for Recon-

struction was, objectively, a battle that was still in the interest of the Northern white workers since it engaged a fight to expand democracy as well as change the nature of the forces who were occupying political power (at least in the South).

A so-called "class-against-class" strategy would not only have failed but would have represented a misunderstanding of the moment. And it was the white-exclusive National Labor Union (NLU)—the first national labor federation—that advocated just that. Specifically, they called upon the emancipated African workers to abandon the Republican Party in favor of a labor party though the NLU would not permit the emancipated African workers or Asian workers—not to mention Native Americans—to enter the ranks of their unions!

Though the 19th century Republican Party was unable to consolidate around the objectives of its radical wing, the refusal of African workers to abandon the Republican Party was quite understandable. It was the Republican Party that was the party of Reconstruction and emancipation. What the white workers of the NLU were offering was not even a pipe dream. Thus, we can see in Reconstruction the failure to have an instrument willing and capable of prosecuting the emancipatory struggle to its fullest, combined with other factors which then opened the door to counter-revolution.

A similar conclusion can be arrived at in looking at the "Second Reconstruction." The social movements that began to congeal following World War II, and flourished by the 1960s, brought with them both modest and transformative reforms. Through these movements a progressive bloc emerged, though a bloc with myriad contradictions. The Democratic Party, much to its own surprise, became the principal political instrument to collect together these social movements and give them electoral voice. But it did so in a

manner to make the demands compatible with New Deal capitalism, and the turning of a blind eye towards the full ramifications of U.S. imperialism.

The great debate in the 1960s was epitomized by Bayard Rustin’s contrasting of the “politics of protest” vs. “the politics of power” (“From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Commentary*, February, 1965). Rustin identified a central challenge for the progressive social movements, although he created an antagonistic contradiction between the two directions rather than recognizing the relationship that was essential to build. Rustin also emphasized changing the configuration of the Democratic Party, rather than constructing a new bloc—inside and outside of the Democratic Party—that could champion the demands of the progressive social movements.

Nevertheless, Rustin was onto something. The shying away from the fight for political power by much of the left, turned over that terrain to liberals, and failed to prepare the left and progressive forces for the full counter-revolutionary effort of those who, after the failure of the Goldwater campaign, became the germs that built the “New Right” Neither electoral abstentionism nor third-party politics have been deeply rooted in any effective strategy to achieve power in U.S. conditions. To a great extent they have been illusional or apocalyptic, that is, expecting some sort of spontaneous, mass political cataclysm to awaken the masses to the need for a new direction. This applies to the national Socialist Party campaign of Eugene V. Debs as well, although there were some exceptions at state-level and municipal victories.

What To Build?

Much of the discussion of a Third Reconstruction has taken place in the absence of discussion of a strategy to win govern-

ing power. Useful exchanges concerning matters such as voting rights, women and reproductive choice, gender freedom, the environment, reparations, new forms of economic development, and even the need for a democratic foreign policy have circulated over time. But without strategy, the danger is that this becomes a wish-list.

Left/progressive discussions of the fight for power in the recent past have, quite logically—though problematically—tended to focus on winning power in cities and counties. There have been some notable exceptions, such as the work of the New Virginia Majority and some other similar formations. The problem, which was in evidence in the aftermath of the first Black political upsurge (circa 1969) and, later, the Black-led political upsurge of the late 1970s–1989, was the ability of the white right, through control of state legislatures, to restrict the ability of cities and counties to operate, i.e., what is known as state preemption. Progressive efforts by officials of color were repeatedly undermined by Republican state legislatures. This has continued to happen and was seen in evidence in the attacks on living wage ordinances by state legislatures.

This points to the need for strategies that focus on winning power in states. Municipalities and counties can be a steppingstone, but it is critical that campaigns at the municipal and county level educate the electorate to the restrictions that are often imposed on municipalities and counties.

Thus, winning states necessitates a whole different approach to united front work. It necessitates building agreements that cross the lines of urban, suburban, and rural districts and precincts. But it also has to deal with the reality of the paramilitary right, especially in rural and semirural areas. Left/progressive forces will need to (1) build a front against MAGA, and (2) build a left/progressive or left populist

core for a longer-term struggle. Operating in Republican-dominated areas will increasingly take the form of "underground" activity—at least in the beginning—given the bullying and threatening activities of MAGA. This means, cores of neighbors will need to be quietly organized around a progressive platform, helping to break isolation.

One of the lessons from the First Reconstruction was the manner through which the white terrorist groups, e.g., the Ku Klux Klan, operated to intimidate the population. In many cases, the first targets of these white terrorists were white Unionist Republicans (progressives!) who were siding with the freed Africans and the forces of Reconstruction. The objective of the terrorists was to frame the struggle against Reconstruction as a struggle of white against Black, rather than a class struggle led by the freed African population. We have and will continue to see similar approaches by MAGA, which means schooling activists in various forms of self-defense and operating much like union organizers who are working in a non-union facility, i.e., carefully identifying potential members of a core and building carefully until there is a critical mass that can go public.

Fighting for power, and fighting for the Third Reconstruction is not only an electoral project. As with the First Reconstruction, various institutions were created that gave voice to the freed Africans in particular, and the Southern poor more generally. In the current situation, the growing interest in "mutual aid" and the solidarity economy needs to move from a matter of defense and/or survival, into efforts at securing power. The formation of worker cooperatives and housing cooperatives is an example. Creating alternative methods of work and housing can be a matter of

survival as well as inspiration. They are also schools of struggle. If workers can govern a co-op, why not govern their city economy, and so on, moving upward. If connected to progressive political governance, these can work in tandem with broader economic and land development strategies.

Strategy must base itself on a combination of one's objectives as well as a careful analysis of the current situation and the tendencies at play. Although the Democratic Party establishment probably asks itself about winning this or that state, a comprehensive discussion by leftists and progressives about winning governing power in a state either does not happen, remains superficial, or is an appendage to what the Democratic Party establishment has concluded.

Let's start in a different place. If we want to move towards a Third Reconstruction and block right-wing efforts at a Constitutional Convention (which would repeal our rights), we must make assessments, state-by-state, of the balance of forces. Specifically: what are the key municipalities and counties to win; what municipalities and counties can we afford to lose; what are the critical progressive and reactionary social movements in the state (and, how are they organized, financed, etc.); what are the key opinion-makers/influencer; what are key media (traditional and social); and major economic tendencies. Through compiling this information and analyzing it, left/progressive forces will be better positioned to construct a strategy toward winning power rather than remaining stuck in the politics of opposition and self-expression.

Following this path and recognizing that this is not an election cycle process, can bring us closer to turning the "Third Reconstruction" into a concrete reality rather than a utopian dream.

Bringing Far-Right Politics into the Mainstream

MATTHEW N. LYONS

A KEY ELEMENT OF DONALD TRUMP'S presidential career has been his symbiotic relationship with the organized U.S. far right. This relationship has been unprecedented for any U.S. president or major party presidential candidate, but it has also been complex and unstable and has evolved considerably over the past decade. Exploring Trump's changing relationship with far-right politics can help us understand and prepare for the looming catastrophe that will be Trump's second presidency.

By "far right" in a modern U.S. context, I mean those rightists who reject the legitimacy of the existing political system—as opposed to rightists who are system loyal. In ideological terms, the most important far-right currents over the past few decades have been white nationalists (who want to create an all-white nation by overthrowing or seceding from the United States), Christian theocrats (who want to replace the secular republic with a theocracy), and Patriot movement activists (who emphasize freedom from state intrusion and often reject governmental authority above the local or even individual level). Additionally the alt-right, or alternative right, first emerged

around 2010 and by 2016 represented a distinctively online movement that synthesized white nationalism and a particularly virulent strain of misogyny.¹

In 2016, Trump's relationship with the far right centered on the alt-right, whose online attacks on Trump's opponents—both Republican and Democrat—helped put him in the White House and were repaid by big boosts in visibility and recognition for the alt-right. Although many alt-rightists were enthusiastic about Trump's campaign, they saw him as someone who was useful to their cause, not as someone who shared their politics. In 2017, Trump's first year in office, many alt-rightists soured on what they saw as Trump's cooptation by the conservative establishment, and after the murderous Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville their movement itself collapsed from a combination of infighting, media deplatforming, and anti-fascist countermobilization.

In 2020, Trump's relationship with the far right centered more on the Patriot movement, which that year spearheaded a series of protests against COVID "lockdowns" and a wave of violent attacks against Black Lives Matter protesters. Patriot activists generally embraced President Trump more wholeheartedly than the alt-right ever did. Although largely rejecting federal government authority, and with a history of killing cops, as a rule they endorsed his efforts to expand the federal government's

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repressive apparatus, which they rationalized as defense of a populist upsurge against sinister elites. In return, Trump's fear-mongering helped validate Patriot groups' conspiracism and base-building efforts.

After the 2020 presidential election, Trump's false claims of widespread voter fraud inspired the "Stop the Steal" campaign and the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, an insurgent attempt by Trump supporters to overturn the election results by force. These efforts led tens of millions of Americans to reject the validity of the voting process, which is supposed to be the foundation for the whole U.S. system of government, and thus at least temporarily move towards far-right politics by abandoning loyalty to the established political order.

By 2024, the far right as an independent, active force was in a relative lull, partly because of the Biden administration's crackdown against January 6 attackers (including seditious conspiracy convictions against leaders of both the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys) and partly because of cooptation by Trump and the MAGA movement. While some white nationalists have kept their distance from electoral politics, others—specifically the Groyper led by Nick Fuentes—have positioned themselves as the right wing of the Republican Party. Meanwhile, the massive New Apostolic Reformation network—arguably the most powerful theocratic force in the United States today—has entrenched itself firmly in the MAGA coalition.²

In this context, the creative tension of past years between the independent far right and the mainstream right has, for now, largely been replaced by a new dynamic of bringing key elements of far-right politics into the Republican Party itself. The Republicans' embrace of election denialism has been pivotal to this shift. Many Republican leaders initially denounced

the January 6 attack on the Capitol but later reversed themselves, and Republican leaders are now expected, if not required, to endorse claims that the 2020 election was stolen. Voter fraud claims have tended to spread, undermining the legitimacy of any national, state, or local election that doesn't go the way rightists want. Meanwhile, MAGA forces have continued the decades-old incremental process of taking supremacist attacks on immigrants, trans people, and other oppressed groups that were pioneered by far rightists—as well as conspiracy theories such as the white supremacist "Great Replacement"—and making them more and more acceptable and integral to mainstream politics.

Donald Trump's increasingly authoritarian tendencies also reflect the process of bringing far-right politics into the mainstream. Trump has a long history of admiring figures like Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin, but his dictatorial ambi-

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tions have gotten more blatant, as in his comment about being a dictator on day one in the White House and his frequent threats to use the state apparatus to punish political enemies. Having millions of people accept and applaud this outlook has helped legitimize authoritarianism in U.S. political culture. Rhetoric aside, in 2024 MAGA forces seized control of the Republican Party more tightly and systematically than

ever before, remaking it in ways that break sharply with pluralistic traditions. They packed the party's organizational leadership with Trump loyalists, scrapped the traditional program-writing process to impose a new party program by fiat, and subjected party staff members to loyalty tests, even at the cost of organizational capacity.

These changes didn't turn the Republican Party into an insurgent organization, but the party is now dominated by those who appear ready to set aside the established institutional framework for the sake of personal loyalty to a charismatic leader

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with dictatorial tendencies. At the same time, by refashioning the Republican Party in his own MAGA image, Trump has encouraged many far rightists to give him another chance, discouraging them from independent actions that might conflict with his political project and effectively corralling them once again into a kind of contingent system loyalty.

The U.S. political system has never been a democracy but, as many critics have warned, under Trump's second presidency it's going to get a lot more authoritarian fast. We can expect a range of moves to expand the federal government's repressive apparatus, from cracking down on political opponents to mobilizing the military to aid in mass deportations. Building on the conservative-dominated Supreme Court's 2024 decision awarding presidents broad legal immunity for "official acts," Trump

will also try to grab more powers for the executive branch, further eroding the constitutional system of checks and balances. These moves will be aided by Republican control of both houses of Congress, the hundreds of judges Trump appointed during his first term, and four years of MAGA movement planning on how to circumvent legal roadblocks and how to reshape the federal bureaucracy to do Trump's bidding. As authoritarian culture becomes entrenched, we can also expect increased repression at state and local levels, primarily in Republican-controlled areas but also in Democratic-led ones.

Bringing far-right politics into the mainstream means we can expect increased repression from non-state forces as well as from the state apparatus. Employers and school administrators may exercise tighter control, but vigilante groups may also boost their attacks on oppressed communities and the left, as they did during the George Floyd uprising in 2020 with Trump's blessing. Vigilante forces may also help the MAGA movement circumvent institutional checks on Trump's power. The January 6 attack broke the taboo against deploying masses of violent activists to harass, threaten, and disrupt the workings of government, and it's likely that MAGA forces will build on this precedent. At the same time, because some independent far rightists still regard Trump as too timid, they may undertake actions that clash with what the Trump administration is doing, but this allows Trump loyalists to frame the official plan as more reasonable and rational by comparison.

Counterintuitively, even Trump's increased support among people of color arguably reflects far-right influence to a degree. Various explanations have been offered for why Trump made substantial gains among Latinx, Asian, and Black voters in 2024, from economic grievances

to internalized racism. A neglected factor may be that sections of the far right (outside of white nationalism) have been actively recruiting people of color for years. You can see this to a limited extent with groups such as the Proud Boys, and on a vastly larger scale with New Apostolic Reformation, which is a genuinely multiethnic and multiracial network and includes people of color (and women) in high leadership positions. NAR appeals to people of color, in part, through other supremacist themes such as transphobia and denial of reproductive rights, but also by welding distorted forms of anti-racism to their vision of God's kingdom on earth.³ This ability to co-opt twisted versions of radical themes is a long tradition in far-right politics, from the "socialism of fools" that has scapegoated rich Jews for capitalism to claims that Muslims must be excluded because of their supposed homophobia.⁴

The far right's dynamic influence on the mainstream right isn't the only political interplay that's contributed to the rise of Trump's authoritarian nationalism. For several decades, the Democratic Party, too, has acted as enabler of the Republican Party's rightward shift. Since the late 1970s, Democrats have been complicit with Republicans in making neoliberalism the dominant form of capitalist rule, expanding the repressive state apparatus, and strengthening military interventionism—policies that in some ways laid the groundwork for Trumpism and in others fueled a right-wing populist backlash from which Trump has benefited. Over the past four years, the Biden administration has embraced slightly watered-down versions of Trumpist policies on China, trade, and border restrictions for asylum seekers.⁵ Over the past year, Democrats have also been complicit in vilifying and suppressing protests against the U.S.-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza—a suppression

campaign that's likely to intensify sharply under Trump. And in the 2024 presidential race, Kamala Harris tried to defeat Donald Trump in large part by wooing Republican support, while refusing to meaningfully address the profound economic and social problems and inequities that have helped fuel populist anger, a strategy that failed spectacularly.⁶

Given the Democratic Party's role in helping to fuel Trump's rise—and more fundamentally its structural role as defender of ruling-class interests—relying on the Democrats to lead opposition to Trump would be disastrous. The situation we face going into the second Trump presidency is grim, but it's far from hopeless. MAGA forces will face institutional barriers, internal conflicts (for example between military interventionists and anti-interventionists), the incompetence of many Trump appointees, and other challenges as they try to carry out Trump's program. The MAGA movement embodies not just a drive to defend privilege and hierarchy but also people's genuine rage at being beaten down and disempowered, and a basic challenge for the Left is to speak to that rage in ways that are liberatory rather than supremacist. Yet left to their own devices, many Democratic leaders are likely to concede more ground—or at most try to rally people around a hollow and dysfunctional "democracy." The best hope for fighting the Trump catastrophe and laying the basis for positive social change is to build independent, grassroots-based oppositional forces that offer radical possibilities, not defensive holding actions.

Portions of this essay are adapted from the blog post, "Notes on Trump/MAGA 2024," Three Way Fight, October 27, 2024, three-wayfight.org/notes-on-trump-maga-2024/.

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Fighting the Threat of Disaster Nationalism

An Interview with Richard Seymour

RICHARD SEYMOUR is a writer and broadcaster from Northern Ireland and the author of numerous books about politics including *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* and *The Twittering Machine*. His writing appears in *The New York Times*, *London Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *Prospect*, *Jacobin*, and several other publications, including his own *Patreon* platform. He is an editor at *Salvage* magazine. Phil Gasper interviewed him in early December 2024 about his latest book, *Disaster Nationalism*.

Phil Gasper: *Your new book is called Disaster Nationalism, and this is your label for the far-right movements and parties that have emerged in countries around the world over the past couple of decades or so. Can you start by saying a little bit more about what you mean by disaster nationalism? What insights does this label give us about these far-right movements, their origins, and potentially where they're headed?*

Richard Seymour: In the first instance, I needed some sort of label for a right-wing nationalist movement that isn't quite fascism, isn't yet fascism, but is obviously not civic nationalism either. The term "disaster nationalism" first occurred to me because I'd been paying attention to the Brexit right in the UK, noticing their fascination with ideas of collapse, of downfall, the pound sliding, you know, chaos. And the idea of going to war. [Nigel] Farage famously said, if they don't deliver Brexit, I shall get my rifle and put on my fatigues and go to the front line. They like that imagery and the imagery of invasion. Immigration as invasion is a regular trope.

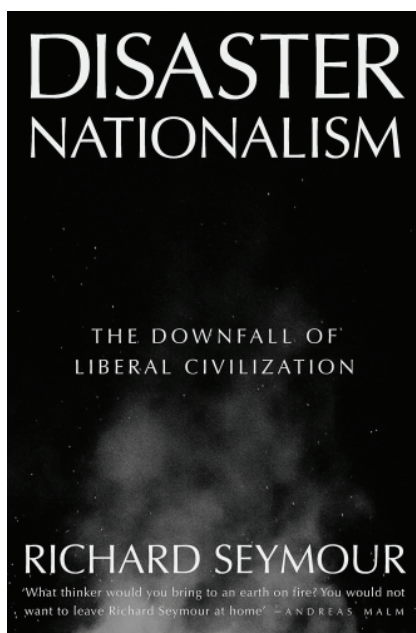
But looking more broadly, I realized

that I've been seeing this for some time. I mean, in the US, for example, the Tea Party was obsessed with the idea that something dreadful was coming out of Medicare. It was going to be death panels, FEMA death camps. Obama, his birth certificate wasn't real. He was a secret Kenyan and a socialist who was going to crush middle-class property. All that stuff.

Looking further afield, it's everywhere. In India, right-wing Hindu nationalism thrives on the idea of a grand Muslim plot to dominate and crush the Hindu fabric of the Indian nation. One example of this is their idea of so-called Romeo Jihad, which is where, allegedly, Muslim men woo and seduce Hindu girls into relationships so they can convert them. We've got the same sort of stuff about bathroom predators, about satanic, communist, pedophile elites, coming from QAnon. We've got the idea that sex education is teaching children to be gay—that came up in Brazil. All of this stuff is global. And it's always obsessed with some sort of catastrophe that is being visited on people by very evil groups and very evil rulers.

I think the thing that nailed it for me was watching what happened with the Oregon wildfires in 2020. I talk about this in the book, but briefly, the wildfires were the worst on record. They should have been expected to be, because climate change has been making wildfires much worse than they needed to be. There have to be wildfires, of course. The planet is meant to burn—it's got plantable materials, oxygen, lightning, yada, yada. But these wildfires were out of control, and they were deadly. And they resulted in people being expelled from their homes, people losing their homes—tens of thousands, I think—and a lot of people dying. But during that wildfire, a lot of local people decided that it wasn't actually climate change, but that these fires had been lit by Antifa activists. And they've been hearing for a long time on the internet that Antifa was engaged in a plot, a conspiracy, to annihilate white conservative Christians. Because they couldn't do it face to face—you know, try that in a small town—they had to do it by some sneaky means, like setting fires.

And so, this mass apocalyptic fantasy spreads spontaneously. It didn't require Donald Trump or the local police to start it, they only helped it spread. And so this is a different level of analysis than one that talks about leaderships and elected governments and parties. Those are all very important. But a lot of what's happening here is on the model of a social contagion. And we



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kind of know what social contagions are like, because we know about the civil rights movement, we know about political protest and how it spreads. And also, any fad or product that needs to be spread will spread in a similar sort of fashion, which is typically the S-curve—mosey along for a bit and then, suddenly, there'll be the inflection, and then it will reach a new plateau.

So that's what's been happening with a lot of these right-wing, far-right, I would say,

movements. They were building slowly in the late 1990s, early 2000s, and there's a number of inflections. I think you can see a number of S-curves, building one on top of the other. So you can see 9-11 contributing its role in mainstreaming state brutality, torture, Islamophobia, surveillance, extraordinary rendition, carpet bombing, all of this sort of stuff. The credit crunch and the ensuing austerity programs, you can see that hardening civil society in ways that make people, on the one hand, quite unhappy, because the society is becoming more broken down and atomized, and on the other hand, much less trusting, and much more likely to blame poor people and migrants and so on for the problems that they're dealing with. And then I think COVID was another inflection altogether.

PG: *It accelerated the trends.*

RS: There were three moments of acceleration, I would say, and all of them have to do with some sort of crisis of capitalism.

Not straightforwardly a crisis of accumulation, of course, but in terms of the world system, a crisis that radiates through every level, starting with 9-11, then the credit crunch, then COVID. And at each point, it has shaken people up. And at the same time, the secular trends of neoliberal society, making it more unequal, more unhappy, have created some of the fissile material for these explosions.

So that's disaster nationalism. And the main point I'd make about disaster nationalism is that it's a compensatory ideology. Because when you're confronted with real disasters that you can't really do much about and you have very little power, it gives you disasters that are totally made up, but which you can, in principle, do something about, and which are sort of personalized. So it's much easier to imagine shooting Antifa than, as I say, shooting climate change or capitalism. These are abstract phenomena that are difficult to conceptualize properly, let alone do anything about.

The prolonged project of neoliberal disempowerment, the evisceration of substantive democracy, the destruction of the unions, and of civic society, I would say, left people needing some alternative way of feeling efficacious of not being paralyzed. That's what these ideologies give—an animating disaster, something to take up arms against.

PG: *You've used the metaphor of social contagion. What's the role of social media in this? Some people see these developments as dependent on social media. Or do you think social media just happens to be the means by which these developments have taken place, and we could have seen something similar twenty years ago, before the rise of the main social media platforms?*

RS: I think it would have been a different type of thing. But, of course, the thing about social media is that it catalyzes and

potentiates existing trends, it doesn't cause anything that wasn't already there. But I would say that the social industry, the way in which our social relationships are being reshaped around computing technology, around mobile privatization, to use Raymond Williams's term, and the way in which for a lot of people that's their social life now, it's no good saying the internet's not the real world. It is. If that's how you do your social life, that's the real world.

And that real world happens to be also a simulacrum. It happens to be a system in which you basically contribute on the basis of regularly producing digitally produced images, digital images, whether you do so by writing a tweet, or uploading something on Instagram or TikTok, or whether it's just that your engagement with the device and the way in which you pause and scroll contributes to how the feed is generated. It can be in any number of ways, but basically, you are contributing to the production of images, and that's your social life. Well, I would say that the social industry was designed by people—rich white men from Northern California, basically—who made it reflect their values, their aspirations and their obsessions, their values being hierarchy, celebrity, competition, status, etc. So they made it a status game.

Twitter is basically a rip-off of an old app that was developed for activists, using the technology of texting to allow activists to communicate without being busted by the police. And this was used outside the Republican National Convention, the Democratic National Convention. And the police spent forever trying to force the app to hand over its records and, you know, lock people up, not with much success. But it was a very good and useful thing at the time.

But Twitter basically made it without any of the kind of security options or whatever. It was designed as a system of surveillance, as far as Twitter was concerned.

Everybody's watching everybody else. Nobody is being watched by the company. And it's designed on a commercial basis to extract data. So they took something that was useful for activists and they turned it into something that is basically a status game, a "like" hunt. And everybody has an incentive on that medium to basically constantly try and stab one another in the back. You know, it's a neoliberal playground.

One of the things that it does is filter social and political life through these volatile interactions, where essentially what matters is how many likes you accumulate, which therefore means what matters is what tribe you belong to. The result has been a tendency to harden and ossify cultural divisions. Think about it as the difference between a weather front and a border. A border is hard and it's militarized and it's violent. A weather front is porous, it's mobile. That's how cultural differences usually work out. This has tended to make them into something much more polarized. And I don't mean polarized in a way that would be useful. Most of the time it's not. Most of the time it's polarizing people around issues that are entirely contrived. For example, Gamergate was a nonissue. It was based on the idea that women in gaming are getting ahead by using sex and so on. Just standard male resentment. There was nothing to talk about there, but it became a huge thing. Same thing with Obama's birth certificate, Birthergate, a nonissue, and yet it became a major vector of reaction.

So, the fact that it is able to generate these regular little ecstasies—everybody cruising towards the same conclusion or slogan or idea—purely because of its way of organizing emotions and connections, like-to-like between people, has created a new vector of politicization to the right. And I don't think it's straightforward because the left has used it too, sometimes quite efficaciously. But I think the bias has been

towards, I would say, a form of politics that is dependent on the symbiosis between—if I can put it in American terms—let's say, Trump reaction and resistance liberalism. They sort of fire off one another in these media. And the result is that both seem a lot more important than they actually are. It has a performative effect. Ultimately, they do become important. I mean, Trump, for example, was a celebrity, but he wasn't politically important. But he built himself out of Birthergate. And then he became worth about two billion dollars to Twitter.

And, you know, you can see these little resonance machines being built throughout the 2010s between a new far right, which is filled with grifters and people with stuff to sell, often male supplements and what have you, but also reactionary neo-Nazi ideas sometimes, whatever. And the social industry is raking it in because ultimately, for them, they're not really bothered about what the content is, they're bothered that people are engaging. And if you post some Nazi shit, either people are going to be engaging because they're Nazis or because they're titillated—you know, they hadn't thought of looking at this stuff before, and it's just been put in front of them—or they're going to be engaging with it because they're really offended, and they want to argue against it. The machine doesn't care why we engage. It just takes engagement as a sign of approval and keeps going.

When we talk about social media encouraging extremism, that term can be misleading, but I encourage people to think of it in terms of extreme sport. In other words, it's something that is associated with an adrenaline high. So it can be Nazi stuff, or it can be really conspiratorial stuff, which can be politically ambiguous. What it can't be is anything that's hard work. What it can't be is anything that requires you to think. So it's basically disinfotainment. It makes your consumption

of political ideas, of news, and whatever, fun and thrilling, like a Hollywood movie. I think that started with the *Loose Change* movie. I don't know if you remember that. It was a sort of 9-11 truth documentary. And it was very exciting and so on, but it was nonsense. Well, that showed that this tendency was already there.

So yes, to some extent, I would say, after all that, the social industry has catalyzed trends that were already at work. And had it not been for the invention of these apps and these platforms, probably the tone and the characteristics of it would be different. It wouldn't have so much celerity. It wouldn't go so rapidly. It wouldn't have such turnover in terms of its ideas. It would probably have more consistency in terms of its focus. I think more of a straightforward, traditional Islamophobic focus, for example. Whereas with the social industry, I think they can shuffle very quickly between different points of excitement, different rallying points, different ideas. So yeah, it contributes.

PG: *Let's talk a little bit more about the relationship between disaster nationalism and classical fascism, because you discuss this in the book and elsewhere. You've said that disaster nationalism isn't a return to fascism. You've also said it's not yet fascist. That second formulation leaves open the possibility that it's developing in that direction. So what are the similarities, what are the differences? Is disaster nationalism going to remain a distinctive version of far-right politics, or is it converging on what we saw in the 1920s and 1930s?*

RS: If and when we see fascism, a mature fascist threat, it will not look like the 1920s and 1930s. That world, of colonialism, of global racial sovereignties like segregation, apartheid, all the rest of it, that's gone. The nation state is a fully globalized phenomenon. You could almost think about the difference between the fascism of formal

subsumption versus the fascism of real subsumption. Capitalism has thoroughly saturated the planet. And when you look at the kind of far-right movements that are rising in Brazil, in the Philippines, in India, just for example, these are big populous states, they're middle-income countries. They probably aren't growing as fast as they want to be, they feel under the shadow of China, and there's a little bit of a sense of, you know, we're being left behind here. But they're still quite well off. The old idea of a destitute Third World just does not hold. So, different situation, and that means different forms of fascism.

One thing that would be very different today is the way in which race and racist ideology works. Do not think that today the major way in which racism works is through, for example, skin [color] or the body, physiognomy, phenotypes, that kind of thing. I also think that increasingly, cultural essentialism is rolling back somewhat. Islamophobia is a very important form of cultural essentialism, but I watched the alt-right cheering when the Taliban retook Afghanistan. So their Islamophobia is somewhat conditional, and it's contextual.

I think they've been welcoming to black, non-white, mixed-race leaderships. Enrique Tarrio is an obvious one. A lot of the lone-wolf Nazis have been non-white. The guy, I can't remember his name, who played a leading role in organizing the pogroms in the UK, mixed-race, Finnish Nazi. Different racial politics. I think they're much more concerned about your metapolitical affiliation. In other words, where do you stand on the big issues? And if you stand in the right place, then that's as good as being, as it were, white.

I think whiteness, although it's an obsession of the liberal resistance—you know, this is white supremacy, that's what Trump represents—I don't think so. I don't think he would have got the increase in support

from black voters and Latino voters and Asian American voters and so on. I think that the situation is changing. So that's one way in which it would be different.

PG: *There's a significant far-right movement in the Chinese American community on the West Coast.*¹

RS: Yeah. The idea that whiteness was the only source of reaction was always a cliché, and it was basically, I think, people looking for an easy and obvious answer.

In terms of the differences between what we see today and what we saw in interwar fascism, manifestly, we don't see big parties, right? We don't see big paramilitary movements. There are forms of collective organized violence today, but they're much more like a kind of armed shitstorm. In other words, on the pattern of social media organizing, like, for example, the militias that went after Black Lives Matter in the U.S. Several of them were organized on social media. Utah Citizens' Alarm was formed basically overnight, had 15,000 members, just because it started there with a Facebook post. But you had a bunch of people there who were already armed and willing to do stuff. So, you had a militia.

I think what we see today is not so much big parties and paramilitary movements. What we see are flash movements, which are usually a situation in which a political line can develop. So the Yellow Vests is an obvious one.² The Yellow Vests wasn't a right-wing movement necessarily, but it had right-wing and left-wing elements. It created a political situation on the basis of a hashtag and a slogan. And the Nazis were involved, the Front National were involved, and the left was involved. And the left argued against the inclusion of the Nazis. So that's the kind of situation that we see.

And pogroms—and we've seen many of them recently—are an example of how a form of online organizing that doesn't

necessarily have to be consciously political or right wing (even though it is, and it's racist and what have you), often starts from some sort of local issue and a citizenry up in arms. So in the case of the UK, it was rumors about some guy who murdered a bunch of children. Rumors spread that he was a migrant, that he was a Muslim. And so you had a kind of vigilante movement spring up and that became the pogroms that we saw. So that's the kind of thing that we see.³

And then on the other side, in terms of political leadership, it tends to be celebrity leaders, usually without any kind of major centralized organized structure around them, but with dark money, with unusual connections within the state and within the capitalist class, usually to capitalist outliers. The one exception to all of this is India, because there you do actually have a big centralized political movement with paramilitary organizations, with a dominating party that has colonized the apparatuses of the state. But what's noticeable is that even there, they haven't overthrown parliamentary bourgeois democracy. They haven't tried to crush every last human and civil right. They could make that attempt. I mean, they're quite powerful and they've got the arms if they want to do it. But presumably one has to conclude that the nature of the capitalist crisis is not yet severe enough for that to be a realistic option.

So, I think that's part of what's going on. But I also think we're partly seeing things happen here, which are basically prefigurative. They're experimental, in other words, like in insurrections and so on. These are actions being carried out by people who don't have the political maturity, ideological maturity, or experience to achieve their objectives. But by doing the things that they're doing, they're achieving experience. And they're objectifying themselves, they're learning a way of being in the world. And

they're creating the kinds of repertoires of action that are going to turn out to be quite useful to them in the future.

I think probably the most important way in which contemporary incipient fascism, if you could call that, is different, is that it has thoroughly internalized the culture of neoliberalism. Not just the sort of political economy, which we see with Modi, Orban, Le Pen—they've all experimented with authoritarian neoliberalism—Bolsonaro, straightforwardly, Javier Milei. Trump, I expect, will be leaning on the cyber-libertarian wing of neoliberals in his second administration. We see all that, but also culturally, they are what Wendy Brown calls sociophobic. In other words, they are paranoid about any claim made on behalf of society. They're absolutely averse to the idea that any claim on behalf of society could infringe their freedom of movement, their freedom to dispose of their property as they see fit. Social distancing is communism, masks are muzzles, that kind of thing.

So, they're paranoid about the claims of society. And they don't worship the state in the way that interwar fascists did. They support and approve of what they regard as the good guys within the state, which is usually the repressive apparatuses. But they're paranoid, extremely paranoid, about the reach of the state in terms of its medical and welfare interventions. They have always had lurid, totalitarian fantasies about this. So they don't worship the state, they don't approve of society, they're not collectivist, even in the sort of contradictory way that interwar fascism was. They have no interest in an anticapitalist agenda. Interwar fascism often represented itself in opposition as anticapitalist. It didn't deliver on it in office, but usually their proposals included substantial reforms—a politics of what Michael Mann would call class transcendence. You reform class, change its spiritual meaning, [you're] not overthrowing it, but you're

nationalizing the class system, as it were.

Nobody's interested in doing that today. Instead, it's all about growth, growth, growth, muscular capitalism. Take off all the fluffy woke constraints, all the politically correct stuff about the environment, health and safety laws, you know, drill, baby, drill and we're going to do amazing stuff. We're going to have amazing growth and it's going to be very, very, muscular. So muscular national capitalism, not a kind of utopian anticapitalist ideology. It's not a kind of romantic anticapitalism, it's beyond that. That goes back to my point about the difference between the fascism of formal subsumption and the fascism of real subsumption. We're in a different phase now.

PG: *In explaining this in the book, you're critical of the slogan "It's the economy stupid." So maybe you can say a little bit about that and why you think that's not the right slogan to raise to understand the rise of the far right.*

RS: Of course, it always depends on what you mean by the economy, because I think a lot of people would say, well, hold on a minute, Seymour, you're saying it's not the economy, but we just saw an election which Trump won on the basis of inflation. Inflation was the number one issue, galvanizing voters. And when you looked at who said that they had been badly affected by inflation, overwhelmingly, it was Trump voters. When you looked at who said they hadn't been affected at all by inflation, it was Harris voters. And that partly accounts for the flipping of the class valences of the vote between 2020 and 2024.

However, I would say a number of things. First, if you're struggling, and you're angry with the political system and you're angry about inflation, it's not a foregone conclusion that you would turn to Trump. That's not obvious to me. That is something that requires some further explanation.

Second, there's a relationship between how people experience economic shocks and how they act in the world, but it's mediated. Crucially, it's mediated by another type of economy, which is known as libidinal economy, the economy of emotions, the things that you go through in your life. So if we didn't understand that mediating step, we would not be able to explain how it is that people start off with really difficult class experiences—and this isn't always the left behind or the poor or whatever, that's actually not the case. By and large, it's people who have experienced some form of class decline in their lifetime, both middle class and working class, but particularly the poorest are the least interested in this kind of politics. And, certainly, trade union members usually aren't interested in it either.

The people who are most interested are people who are traditional middle class, radicalized new middle class, elements of the professionals, and sectors of the working class who get paid a little bit more, live in the posher end of town, that kind of thing. Anyway, how does the experience of decline turn into resentful nationalism? How does it turn into "I think my problem is going to be solved by getting rid of the migrants," and so on? One of the things they found in Europe is that if you're in a workplace where there's a great deal of unevenness in terms of conditions and status, the workers who have full-time contracts and get paid a little bit more and aren't precarious—this depends on whether they're organized, of course, but in unorganized workplaces or badly organized workplaces, they regard their situations as being one where they have an interest in common with the bosses. They see themselves as belonging to a little island of prosperity that they've worked their way into. And they see the problem as the moochers and the migrant workers and people coming in

to try and get a share of this scarce wealth. And so they see things from the point of view of the bosses.

Okay, that makes a certain amount of sense. And it would help explain the sort of grumbling deference to people like Donald Trump, a billionaire, as he likes to say. But also, if you look at what's going on with people who've experienced relative class decline, think about what neoliberalism has done to society. It's not just that it's made society more unequal, although, of course, it has done that. One effect of that is to make the slope of decline very steep—you can fall fast. Another effect is that they created this culture of social sadism towards the poor, and deference towards the rich. Trump was a beneficiary of that deference before he became a politician. Whereas people were having their doors kicked in for not being able to pay their bills and so on. And we got television programs making this into entertainment.

If you are used to a certain kind of recognition and status by virtue of being in some way better off than somebody else—whether you're just a slightly better-off worker, or whether you're somebody who's run a medium-sized business and it's been quite successful, and suddenly since 2008 it's been going downhill and you're losing money—you can suddenly see yourself being thrown into the big turbulent mass of humanity, and you lose all your distinction. Suddenly, you're just one of them. And you know, from experience that nobody gives a shit about them, that they aren't very highly regarded at all. And that's your future. They're terrified of that.

So I think that when we talk about the economy, we really want to look at how the economy affects people differently. What kinds of life experiences does it act upon? Rather than assuming that just because you've been through an economic shock, you're going to react politically one way

or another. I think it's telling that the vast majority of times, financial crises tend to benefit the far right. They do also benefit the left, but to a much lesser extent. Electorally, they benefit the right. Now, that's a really interesting thing to me, because that suggests that maybe it problematizes our crisis theory. And I know there's a book by Ståle Holgersen from the Zetkin Collective arguing just this point.⁴ So it may be that it throws our crisis theory into some sort of problematic relief.

But I think it also means that when people's ontological security is threatened, the only way in which they would not respond by moving to the right would be if they had some kind of collective organization to which they passionately belonged. And if you look at the early 1930s, say, before the Third Reich, there's an argument that could be made there that the effect of the capitalist crisis was to throw people out of those organizations, to make class politics less relevant and less salient. Large numbers of unemployed people, but they don't have any bargaining power, whereas those who remain employed, you know, they're organized, but they're sticking to the Social Democratic Party out of fear of something worse. In other words, at moments of crisis, the kinds of things that we on the left look to, to organize people in a radical way, are themselves thrown into crisis. Our habitual modes of organization are thrown into crisis. And that's when fascism can gain a foothold, or when, in this case, incipient or inchoate fascism can gain a foothold, just at the moment when the left—as weak as it has been for these many decades, and as tenuous as its recovery has been—is thrown into a crisis along with capitalism.

Fascism has a certain unfair advantage in this situation, I think, because of their lack of rigor, their lack of scruple, their programmatic opportunism. And that was

one thing that the early fascists understood very well about themselves. Programmatic opportunism means that they are very well able to move quickly, to take advantage of a situation, and to manipulate as they see fit.

PG: *I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the environmental crisis and disaster nationalism. One of the arguments you make in the book is that there are real disasters that the world is facing, particularly the climate crisis, yet the far right has focused instead on imaginary crises. But there's a connection between the real crises and the paranoid fantasies. Could you elaborate on that a bit more? I'm also interested in hearing your thoughts on why major sectors of the capitalist class are willing to go along with this, because in the long run, it poses major problems for them. They need to address the real crises, but at the moment they're not doing that. We see this in the failure of the COP talks and the failure to reach an agreement about what to do about plastic pollution. It's as if they're ostriches with their heads stuck in the sand. Their focus is on short- or medium-term profitability, not on the bigger crisis that might undermine the whole system.*

RS: In terms of the bourgeoisie, the idea of a far-sighted long-term planning bourgeoisie, or fraction of that bourgeoisie, went out of fashion with neoliberalism. Short-termism has been the fashion and it's been incentivized and disciplined by financial markets, so that essentially, if you're not delivering short-term profits, you're out. And the whole system of debt and speculation forces capitalists, even if they had some idea of their long-range interests, to act against them. I think Neil Davidson wrote a pretty good essay on this—on why neoliberalism is incapable of defending the interests of the capitalist class.⁵

But I think also the only instance, to use the Poulantzian language, where a general capitalist class interest could be organized would be the state.⁶ And it would be at

the point of organizing a particular class coalition within the state, that you might get some sort of forward-thinking capitalist class strategy. And to some extent, you did get that with Biden. But only to a very limited extent, and only insofar as it was competing with China.

Essentially, what we get from the order of nationalized capitalism, where the state plays a pronounced role—which is the most that they can do for us in terms of any sort of executive planning for the future of capitalism—the most that you get is the kind of policy you get from Chinese state capitalism. On the one hand, we exploit fossil fuels to the last drop. On the other hand, we do everything possible to build up our competitive advantage in green technologies. And, you know, China is obviously way ahead of any other country, as far as I'm aware, in terms of electric vehicles. Their electric cars are way, way ahead of Tesla and all the rest of them. Electric trains. They've got the technology, they've got the infrastructure, they've been investing. That's what you get from the capacity of a party-state to oversee the whole system and to impose its political priorities on the system of production.

Biden didn't exactly attempt to do anything like that, but he did try and even up the competitive disadvantage. That's the most you're going to get, I think. And I think that even then it's resisted, you know. There are sections of finance capital that really didn't like what Biden was doing, particularly the fact that he was doing stuff for organized labor. Now, I'm no fan of Joe Biden—Genocide Joe—but I think it is fair to say that he was more pro-labor than any Democratic president has been for a long, long time. On that issue, he tried to do something, and they didn't like it. But the fact of the matter is that it was a sensible pro-capitalist measure to tilt the balance in favor of labor. And they can't

see that. Structurally, they're incapable of cognizing the benefits of a kind of liberal reformism. So I think it's something to do with the structural stupidity of capitalism, to put it like that. It's the way it breaks up and distributes knowledge and frustrates its effective aggregation in political terms, and in other ways, too. So that's that part of it.

In terms of the relationship between this new far right and the environment, it's interesting because up till now, overwhelmingly, the emphasis has been on denialist conspiracy theory. They basically, as Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective put it, took over the denialist apparatuses that were built up by fossil fuel industries, just as they were being abandoned.⁷ So these fossil fuel companies decided it was no longer worth bothering with denial. We're going to go with climate governance and bank on kicking the can down the road, a very effective strategy, it has to be said. But they [the far right] took up the junked apparatuses, the ideas, the myths, etc., and they associated it with stuff like immigration, borders, and a threat to middle-class property. There was an idea that climate change is a hoax, that it's going to take your wealth away and give it to the moochers of the Third World. That was something Anders Behring Breivik argued, Pamela Geller argued, that Trump argued. So that's been the dominant tendency. I don't think that's sustainable. But you can see that there is still some mileage in, let's say, a kind of nihilistic politics of fuck it, let the planet burn, party like it's 1999, drill and drive. Let us drive everywhere we want to drive. Let us enjoy the last few days of auto mobility and petro-modernist freedom. Fuck the snowflakes and the future generations, that kind of thing.

But that's not going to be tenable as we start to see societies really suffer. And that's already happening, like really suffer from wildfires, floods, storms, tornadoes,

desertification. You know, you're going to see major production problems, major supply shocks, and lots of death. I don't know what happened with the tsunami that was just about to head to the coast of California the other day, but that kind of thing is not going to be surprising. I mean, we already saw these massive storms kill, I think, hundreds of people in Florida going up into middle America—whole towns flooded, things like that. Now, what then does the far right do if it intends to have something practical to relate to? The tendency has been for a version of green nationalism—in the model of lifeboat ethics developed by Garrett Hardin⁸—to say essentially, look, we are past our carrying capacity, we can't take in any more people. And if we do, we're going to have a much more depleted environment, a much more polluted environment. And essentially, there's the idea that the migrants themselves are the pollution, because they're matter out of place, and therefore they're dirt. So there's that idea. Now by the way, just to clarify, this idea that a nation is a lifeboat in this context is nonsense. The planet is the lifeboat. Moving between different nations doesn't make any difference at all.

But the other side of it is to say, essentially, as Marine Le Pen does, these people who move around, they don't have a homeland. And because they don't have a homeland, they don't care about land and nature. They're nomads, we care about the homeland. And so again, this is about renovating a kind of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, blood and soil. I think that's the logical direction they're going to have to take.

So at the moment, the way in which disaster nationalism works is to deflect from the real crisis that's right before us and demands radical solutions. It demands action to tackle capitalism, if not overthrow capitalism, because we're not there, to

contain capitalism, to shackle it and to roll back its operations, and to destroy a huge amount of profit and capital. Okay, that's threatening. That's difficult. And the far right instead gives you a disaster that you can relate to much more easily, and that isn't threatening, and that doesn't require you to think about challenging anyone with real power and doesn't require you to challenge the system. Crucially, you could have a crisis involving the murder of a lot of people like, for example, the QAnon fantasy, you know, the day of awakening the storm, the day of the rope. They're going to murder thousands of leftists and so on, send a bunch of people to Guantanamo. But you could do all that without changing the system one iota. Okay, so that's one side of it.

But I think the next step will be that the crisis is “matter out of place.” It's mutant biology. I think we'll also hear that the crisis is democracy, that the democratic state can't cope with the ecological crisis, which in a way, has an element of truth to it. It's not because it's democratic states, it's because a bourgeois democracy is intrinsically limited in how it can deal with planetary processes. So there will be an appeal to a kind of eco-fascist dictatorship, based upon violent borders, and probably a renewal of imperialism.

We're in an interesting moment here, where the far-right disaster nationalists are ambiguous about imperialism. They're very critical of what they regard as woke imperialism—wars for humanitarian purposes, that kind of thing. And they have been critical of the war party, you know, Liz Cheney and Kamala Harris and all the rest of them basically being violently pro-war. And there's a certain nativist element, an isolationist element, and to some extent it's an expression of ideologies of imperial decline. But I think if you end up with the eco-fascist regimes, there's no choice but to plunder. There's no choice but to take

rare earth metals, for example, to look for whatever you can to build up a sustainable energy system, given that in the next energy system there'll be a much lower energy density than we've been used to with coal and oil and gas and so on. And that means that we're going to have to have a huge infrastructure using a great deal of steel and titanium and cobalt and all the rest of it. That's going to require a lot of extractivism. I mean, there's no getting around that, and that can be done in more or less cooperative ways, more or less imperialist ways.

I think eco-fascism probably in the long run means predation. It means, if we just look at how Trump views the world system today, his open cynicism, the fact that basically he thinks that powerful people should be allowed to do what they want. And I think if it was up to him, I think he might even have said this, just let Putin have Ukraine, whatever, because he's a tough guy, and tough guys should get what they want. And there's a kind of open brazen, *realpolitik*. I remember he was interviewed, and he was asked about Putin back in 2017. And his answer was, do you really think we're so innocent? Do you really think we haven't done anything?⁹ And correctly, of course. The hypocrisy of the liberal media is legendary, but the mask is coming off, and [with] the normalization and valorization of brutal *realpolitik*, and brutal predation, I think we would end up in a very, very dark place. And that's kind of what we're seeing prepared now, under the rubric of disaster nationalism.

PG: *That's grim. The final thing I wanted to ask you about is building opposition. Unfortunately, the left is weak in most countries. I agree with you that the economic crisis doesn't automatically lead to the triumph of the far right, and it has opened possibilities for rebuilding the left as well. And there have been attempts, but they've mostly been failures. Recent efforts to build broad left parties have not*

been outstanding successes. So what do we need to do to counter the rise of disaster nationalism and the far right? What are the steps that we can take to build a more effective left?

RS: You see, I think we give up too quickly. And I understand why that is. But the fact of the matter is, if I look at the situation in the UK today, with Nigel Farage and Reform UK surging in the polls, they don't have this really deep penetration of British society. They don't have a lot of members. They have now become a proper party, as opposed to a corporation, but their roots don't go deep. They're basically beneficiaries of a strategy by Farage of, you know, sensing which way the wind is going. He's very good at this. He senses the trend. He knows when there's a crisis coming. He jumps in and exploits it. He's had excellent timing throughout a series of crises. And, you know, this is just the latest situation.

Now, Farage is not a fascist, to be clear. He's a bourgeois rightist who experiments with fascist ideas and hangs about with fascists. But the point I'm making is that their success has not been done on the basis of building up huge organizational power. They don't even get a huge amount of money. The idea that this is all dark money coming from billionaires—not really. It's just middle-class civic action, standard middle-class civic activism. That's where UKIP came from in the first place, and then the Brexit party, and now Reform UK. They get a little bit of money. Farage and his colleagues, like Richard Tice, have some money. They're very good at investing and making money on the stock market. They're *nouveau riche*. But they're not really part of the capitalist class. They don't really reflect capitalist class interests. That's important. But they've grown.

The left, I think, has kind of internalized defeat. I think, first of all, when Corbyn was leader of the Labour Party, we were far too soft. The argument that people

bought and accepted was that we have to pursue a broad-church policy, because otherwise the right will kick us out and there will be a crisis. I think the left should have argued forcefully, no, the more you give them, the more they will take. Force them to make a move, and every time they make a move it's going to hurt them. And it did. Every time they tried to have a coup against Jeremy Corbyn, it hurt them. So we should have been more aggressive. That's the first thing.

Second, once it was clear that Corbynism was over, rather than disappearing and crying into our beer for three or four years, we should have thought about starting a new organization, because there are now, I don't know, a couple of hundred thousand people, maybe more, probably a lot more in the UK, who were members of the Labour Party because of Jeremy Corbyn, who want to be part of the left-wing movement, and who haven't changed their ideas all of a sudden. And there's no way for them to make their political will efficacious. So they retreat into passivity. And they'll come out for the big marches for Palestine, for Gaza, but there should be an organization for them, an organization that's not about standing in elections, *per se*, although I'm all for electoral campaigns where it can do something. But it's about how to maximize our force.

One of the problems is that the parties that tended to be built in the last decade, tended to be obsessively electoral, and they got swallowed up by the electoral system. Look at what happened to Rifondazione [in Italy]. Look at what happened to Syriza [in Greece]. I think to some extent Podemos [in Spain] too, and maybe Die Linke in Germany, although Germany is a weird country with many, many, many pathologies and problems, not just parliamentarism. I think that Charlie Post was right when he said we are in an era where the problems are

like those facing the Second International, not the Third International.¹⁰ The problems are not those of reform versus revolution. We're not in that situation. We don't have to argue about that, because there's not going to be a revolution, certainly not in time to avoid the climate crisis. But the problem of unifying people on the basis of a common militant strategy, that does matter. So I would like us to have a bash at this.

I do think we need to build unions, of course. I'm very much in favor of that. But the thing about it is that even union activism needs to be, in order to be politically efficacious, federated at some level. There needs to be some nodal point of communication where unions and cooperatives and street movements and single-issue campaigns are all connected. They're all feeding into something. So that would be my answer.

I think if we had done that, we could have taken quite a number of seats [in the UK general election]. I mean, look how weak Labour's win was. You know, they got two-thirds of the seats, but they got a third of the vote. They got fewer votes than Jeremy Corbyn did when he lost in 2019. It's a joke. We could have taken seats from them. If we'd known, we could have stopped the health secretary, Wes Streeting, from getting elected. Some young woman called Leanne Mohamad could have taken the seat from him. If we'd known, and if we'd organized, and if we'd helped, that's the kind of thing we could have been doing. We could have been much more efficacious. Instead, it was like paralysis, and waiting, and too much credulity. People wanted to believe what Keir Starmer was saying. I didn't get sucked in by Starmer but I think, to be fair, everybody who went in for the Corbyn project got pulled to the right a little bit, and also was forced into a kind of faux naivety, pretending not to understand what is glaringly right in front of you, the

overwhelming hostility and enmity of the system and the overwhelming odds against you succeeding now. You need to be in this for the long game.

And that's the final point I would make about this. You know, we talk about fascism. They thrive on paralysis. They thrive on the emotions of despair and revenge, which are also cultivated by the neoliberal center. The neoliberal center basically says, stay at home. Don't do anything. We don't want you to be active. The far right says, no, come out. We want you to do something. Go and start a pogrom. Go and start a riot. Go and kill some people. We recognize your aggression. We value your aggression. We give you something to do about it. Well, the left should be in that mix. We should be recognizing and valuing people's aggression, which is valid and legitimate. It's not always legitimately directed, but people have a right to feel pissed off and angry and want to do something. So we should be in that game. And we should be breaking out of the sort of stalemate of permanent paralysis and internalized defeat and auto subalternization.

So we need a party, I think. We need militant organization. We obviously need to rebuild in unions, but it's not going to be just about the unions. It's got to be much bigger than that. It's got to be about building up social capacities wherever we can in organizations, like building against the rent rises in your community or against water privatization, whatever the issue happens to be. And I think that that would to some extent undercut the ability of the far right to project influence far beyond their real social depth. So that would be a crucial thing.

When they engage in organized collective violence, I argue in the book that this is not a problem for them. It's not an electoral embarrassment. It's not going to cause problems for Trump if people engage in a pogrom, or vigilantes go out shoot-

ing black people, or whatever it happens to be. That's a unique selling point. That really organizes. It excites and agitates their base. They really love it. We saw that in the summer of 2022, when Bolsonaro was going around saying leftists should be machine gunned. We see it in Israel—we saw it even before the genocide began. We saw it with the pogroms in the West Bank. We see it in India, the pogroms in Delhi in 2019. And since then, it's just nonstop escalation, rhetorical and physical towards something like a genocidal situation there, frankly. They thrive on collective violence, and it makes their members and their base feel powerful.

We need to have forms of emergency intervention. We need to have capacities to do that, because this is going to happen again and again. We need to be capable of responding quickly and immediately when there's something escalating. There's an attack on a mosque, for example. We need to have emergency community organization. We should have those networks built up—people who are willing to go out and march against them and send them home with their tails between their legs every single time. Because if they aren't sent home with their tails between their legs, if they aren't sent home humiliated and beaten, they will see it as a glorious thing. They'll be excited. They'll be energized, and they'll want to come out and do it again, and it will spread. So this is partly about how to intervene in a social contagion when it's just taking off. You really need to cut it off immediately. Otherwise, it will have its own dynamic and it will spiral.

I don't think I've given you any sort of magical solutions that you couldn't have thought of yourself. We're talking about party, union and street organizing. That's it. I don't have any new ideas. I do have a sense of the emotional dynamics that need to be involved there, because—this

is the final thing I'll say—I think the most important point I make is that it can't just be bread and butter politics. It's not just about bribing people, as it were. Vote for us and win a toaster or whatever, this kind of transactional politics. Of course, you won't get anywhere if you don't defend people's material interests, like Bernie talked about healthcare, and he also talked about the billionaire class and why we should oppose them. But he also had this bigger sort of vision, ideology, about standing together. If we stand together to change the country, a bunch of people united by the improbable adventure of trying to change a country. Quite animating, quite exciting.

We need to think about how do you get to a situation where people who maybe start out interested in an organization because they want to defend their material interests, like their rent or wages or whatever, or because they agree on one particular political issue, how do you get to a situation where all the members need that organization? They need one another. So Marx talks about this dialectic. You start off in the union wanting better wages, you discover that you need one another, and it reaches a point where you will strike to defend the union even if you lose wages, even if your conditions get worse. And then the most radical endpoint of that, of course, is the need for universality. Once you've discovered that need for one another, you realize that you might need everybody else, too. You might need to live in an equal world. I think that's something so far from where we are at the moment, which is quite bleak in some ways. But you do see snippets of that in left-wing organizations and unions, church groups, all that sort of thing. People engaging in

everyday acts of solidarity. That's how we're going to build the emotional counterpoint to fascism, I think.

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The Far Right in Europe and the Fight Back in France

SHANNON IKEBE

THE 2020S HAS BEEN A REACTIONARY period in Europe. Across the continent, the far right is in ascendance, gaining footholds everywhere and entering government in multiple countries.

The far right leads the governments in Hungary and Italy, with the regimes of Viktor Orban and Giorgia Meloni dominant in these countries. At the end of 2024, the far right supports or participates in the government in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland. The far-right party is the largest in parliament in Austria, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and the German state of Thuringia; they are a close second in Saxony and Brandenburg (Germany) and Flanders (Belgium). Additionally, far-right parties occupy at least 10 percent of the parliamentary seats in Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden; and in Greece, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom, they are polling above 10 percent.¹ Very few parts of the continent are untouched by this scourge.

The rise of the far right is not a new phenomenon in Europe, but the current situation is systemic, continent-wide, and appears to be durable. When Jörg Haider's

Freedom Party joined the Austrian government in 2000, diplomatic sanctions were placed on the country, and Jean-Marie Le Pen reaching the second round of the French presidential election in 2002 provoked a sense of profound shock and a national crisis. Today, such events and worse occur regularly, becoming a normalized, everyday occurrence of European political life. Despite their presentation as the bulwark of moderation and civility, establishment parties are complicit in this situation. Their pursuit of neoliberal austerity created the basis for populist discontent, which the far right attempts to capture; and their offensive against the left weakened an alternative articulation of the discontent in an emancipatory direction.

The European Ruling Class Suppresses the Left

In the early 2010s, imposition of vicious austerity after the financial crisis sparked the most powerful working-class uprising in a generation, most notably in Greece and Spain. Indignant precarious workers occupied the Syntagma Square in Athens and Puerta del Sol in Madrid, demanding an end to the neoliberal paradigm. Mass demonstrations and general strikes shook the old order. In parliamentary politics, new left parties that grew with the movement of the squares—Syriza and Podemos—achieved a spectacular rise.

In Greece, Syriza won the elections in

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January 2015 with a commitment to reverse the memoranda imposed by the Troika, the leading European Union economic institutions, with Alexis Tsipras becoming prime minister. Syriza's election was met with an all-out assault by the entire European establishment. As Yanis Varoufakis recounts,² the negotiation of the Troika with the Syriza government was not simply aimed at maximizing the returns for German banks, but especially at crushing any political alternative to the austerity paradigm. On this point, the entirety of the "extreme center"—social democracy as well as conservatives—was united.³ Greek people continued to support rejection of the draconian memorandum, voting for this position by a large margin in the referendum called by Tsipras in July. However, merely a week later, Tsipras capitulated completely to the European ruling class by accepting an even worse memorandum, betraying the Greek workers and destroying the Greek left.⁴

The defeat of the Greek anti-austerity movement and destruction of Syriza as a leftist force in July 2015 weakened the European left as a whole. In Spain, Podemos came close to overtaking the social democratic PSOE ("*sorpasso*") in the 2015 and 2016 elections, but *sorpasso* turned out to be an elusive goal, and the party was weakened by "lawfare" of illegal police surveillance and manufactured judicial controversies. In Britain, the left's rise was achieved inside the Labour Party, as Jeremy Corbyn rose to leadership with unprecedented levels of support from the mobilized base. Corbyn repelled the Blairite opponents in the parliamentary party with a renewed popular mandate from the members in 2016, and came close to winning the 2017 elections with a popular manifesto; but Corbynism was defeated by powerful internal enemies in the Labour Party, who preferred to sabotage their own party's electoral chances

to prevent a Corbyn victory, as well as the relentlessly hostile media apparatus.

While political dynamics in each country are distinct, the suppression of the left alternative across Europe meant that austerity continued unabated. It has enabled far-right parties to capitalize on discontent with the status quo, drawing support especially from blue-collar or manual workers and those in worse economic situations,⁵ while offering them false solutions. In the 2020s, as inflation soared and its cost was mostly imposed on the workers, this pattern was further exacerbated. It is not that the working class as a whole has shifted to the far right; the pattern is the fracture of the working class, as urban, multicultural fractions of the class have generally continued to be the base of the left. Without the left that can unite various fractions of the working class against the far right, the latter grows quickly.

Collaboration with the Far Right

As the far right gained support, its entry into government in multiple countries has been facilitated by the center right. Abandoning their prior *cordon sanitaire*, conservatives are increasingly willing to cooperate with the far right across the continent. The case of Sweden demonstrates this clearly. The Sweden Democrats (SD), a party with an explicitly neo-Nazi origin led by Jimmie Åkesson, received 20 percent of the votes in 2022, becoming the second largest party in parliament. The conservative Moderate Party had long rejected any cooperation with SD, but their position began to weaken in the late 2010s, under Ulf Kristersson's leadership. After the 2018 elections, the conservatives formed coalitions with the far right in many municipalities, and soon they began to seek cooperation on a national basis. In 2022, Kristersson and other bourgeois party leaders negotiated the Tidö Agreement, an extensive confi-

dence and supply agreement with SD that incorporated many of their key demands. In pursuit of power, any principled objections fell away. The most illustrative is the case of Romina Pourmokhtari, a Liberal

The far right poses less of a problem for the capitalist class and their political representatives than the radical left does.

politician who had publicly advocated for rejecting any cooperation with SD. Three months before the election, she called SD's politics "infinitely more dangerous than the challenges Sweden faces today"; she then became a cabinet minister in the government dependent on the far right.⁶

A similar pattern of center-right collaboration with the far right has repeated in many countries. In Italy, where the far right is already larger than the center right, they coordinated and ran as part of the same coalition even before the election. In Finland, the center right has led a coalition government with the far right since the 2023 election, forming the "most right-wing government in Finnish history" of Petteri Orpo.⁷ In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) became the largest party in 2023, and even though he was blocked from becoming prime minister himself, three other conservative parties had no problems forming a coalition with his party. In Spain, the conservative People's Party (PP) formed governments in multiple regions with the far-right Vox,⁸ which minimizes the evils of the Franco dictatorship or worse. Even in Germany, where the taboo against collaboration with

the far right should be the strongest, the Christian Democrats' leading figure Friedrich Merz hinted at cooperation with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) on a local level;⁹ even though they still reject it at the state and federal level,¹⁰ it is questionable how long such principles will be sustained.

Acceptance of the far-right governments internationally has followed a similar trajectory. Those in Hungary and Poland regularly faced conflict with other EU states, even though EU integration contributed to Orbán's rise¹¹ and European capital benefits from his economic policy that enables more exploitation of Hungarian workers. With Meloni, however, there is not even a pretence of opposition; she has been actively embraced by the European establishment,¹² once she pivoted to Atlanticism and softened Euroscepticism. The establishment parties are, of course, not identical, equivalent, or similarly guilty as the far right. However, repeating the pattern since the dawn of capitalism, the far right poses less of a problem for the capitalist class and their political representatives—even when it is not their first preference—than the radical left does.

On immigration policy, indeed, the European establishment is following the far right; the far right sets the agenda, the center right promotes it, and the center left follows. Meloni's attempt to prevent refugees from claiming asylum rights in Europe—through repression of organizations rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean,¹³ cooperation with authoritarian regimes in North Africa and processing of asylum claims in a country outside the EU—has been praised and followed by the EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and British prime minister Keir Starmer, among others.¹⁴ Meloni's anti-migrant policy is an acceleration of the violent logic of "Fortress Europe," which the European establishment has pursued.

The situation in Denmark is another case in point. The Danish center-right government has implemented a raft of policies designed to weaken asylum rights and make lives of immigrants as difficult as possible, under pressure from the far-right Danish People's Party.¹⁵ This immigration policy, which is seen as a model for the European far right,¹⁶ has now been thoroughly embraced by the Social Democrats,¹⁷ further entrenching it. The center left plays an active part in perpetuating this vicious cycle, as the anti-immigrant discourse increasingly becomes "common sense" and the hateful, fascist rhetoric of "great replacement" is normalized.

On social and labor policy, the far right and the center right together pursue further austerity and attacks on the working class, contrary to the far right's occasional appeal to economic populism. Åkesson claims to "restore the People's Home,"¹⁸ a reference to the Swedish welfare state in its heyday, combining it with a xenophobic interpretation of the "people." But they are not even "welfare chauvinists"; the far right in government across the continent continued attacks on the welfare state and workers' rights. In Sweden, the SD is an active partner in the ongoing privatization and deterioration of the once social-democratic welfare state.¹⁹ In Finland, the Orpo government launched a massive attack against the labor movement—the agenda includes undermining their right to political strikes, weakening of national and sectoral collective bargaining, and worsening job protection and sick pay.²⁰ In the Netherlands, the austerity attack targeted the universities particularly viciously,²¹ imposing hundreds of millions of euros of cuts and decimating thousands of jobs in the sector already characterized by precarity. In Italy, the far-right government scrapped the "citizen's income,"²² a limited program of minimum income guarantees for the poorest Italians,

while further deepening precarity by promoting short-term employment contracts.

The far right's rise has degraded and poisoned political discourses,²³ as they propagate anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ, as well as racist speech, influenced by the U.S.-style "anti-woke" discourse. In many countries, their narrative includes fascist-friendly interpretations²⁴ of their country's history.²⁵ The far right has targeted the media and cultural institutions that can present an opposition to their rule, especially where they control the government. Orban has largely succeeded in seizing much of the Hungarian press,²⁶ while Meloni is attempting to do so through increasing control over the public broadcaster RAI.²⁷ It appears that stopping the far right's momentum is difficult in many countries, with one potential exception: that of France.

Social Mobilizations in France

France occupies a decisive position in this political landscape in Europe. The far-right *Rassemblement national* (RN) came first in votes in the European parliament and the National Assembly elections this summer and Marine Le Pen has a serious chance of winning the next presidential election. At the same time, France remains one of the few countries where the left is vibrant and growing, and forms a serious force against the far right. Instead of the far right dominating the challenge to the status quo, and the "extreme center" posing as the sole alternative to fascism, the political field is clearly divided into three camps; bourgeois liberals (Macronists), the far right and the radical left.

The strength of the radical left in France today comes from many cycles of popular struggles over the past decade. *Nuit debout* in 2016, against the neoliberal labor reform that reduced protection against dismissal, was the first spark. Inspired by the movements of squares that emerged earlier

in the decade with Tahrir Square, *Nuit debout* occupied the Place de la république in Paris, and created a new foundation of mobilizations. The French left and organized labor then led a significant wave of mass strikes against Macron's pension reform (an increase in retirement age, among various cuts) in 2019–20 and in 2023, mobilizing millions of supporters.

On immigration policy, the far right sets the agenda, the center right promotes it and the center left follows.

The *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) of 2018–19 was another significant social mobilization in this period. Its political articulation was more ambiguous—its initial trigger of opposition to the fuel tax included an anti-ecological tendency, and far right sympathy was present in the movement. However, the movement did clearly target economic inequality and the rising cost of living, and helped discredit Macron and his politics. With a base in rural areas, the movement used innovative tactics, including the use of yellow vests as a visible symbol and blockading of roundabouts, and organized weekly mass demonstrations across the country, while facing violent repression by the police.

Facing a series of popular uprisings, French governments have taken an increasingly authoritarian approach. The Socialist Party (PS) government of François Hollande and Manuel Valls forced through the 2016 labor law reform without a parliamentary vote, using a special constitutional provision, Article 49.3. Despite the failure of the immediate aim, the mobilizations

were successful in weakening support for the PS government. After attacking their own base, the PS collapsed; Hollande's approval rating dropped to the unprecedented 4 percent in late 2016, forcing him to abandon his re-election bid. The dynamic of the PS collapse was more similar to Greece's rather than that in other countries, where the center-left parties retained their dominance. This is what provided an opening for the radical left, in the form of *La France insoumise* (France Unbowed, LFI), founded by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. In the 2017 presidential election, Mélenchon obtained 19.6 percent of the vote and was only 1.7 percentage points short of Le Pen, who advanced to the second round against Macron.

The waves of social mobilizations also made Macron deeply unpopular and further strengthened the left. In 2022, the LFI made a breakthrough, with Mélenchon winning 22 percent of the votes and only one point behind Le Pen; the PS candidate Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, obtained a mere 1.7 percent. Mélenchon's performance gave LFI decisive leverage to create an alliance for the legislative election—*Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale* (NUPES) with the PS, the Communist Party, and the Ecologists. The LFI was predominant within NUPES, which makes France a unique case in Europe today. NUPES rose to second place in the legislative election, depriving the Macronists of a majority in the Assembly. Lacking a parliamentary majority, the Macronist governments began regular recourse to passage of legislation without parliamentary approval (using Article 49.3), most notably to pass the wildly unpopular pension reform in 2023, further eroding the legitimacy of the government.

The far right also grew in the same period. Racism, xenophobia, and misogyny are obviously the driving force for their sup-

port, fueled by proliferation of right-wing media such as CNews. Le Pen's claim to "dediabolisation"—normalization—of the party, as well as pretention to economic populism, further broadened support. Le Pen has claimed to support economic redistribution²⁸ and even "social justice," which attracted strong support in the post-industrial RN bastions and among *gilets jaunes* supporters.²⁹ In 2022, Le Pen obtained 41.5 percent of the votes in the second round for the presidential election, compared to 33.9 percent in 2017; the RN also gained a major presence in the National Assembly for the first time, going from 8 seats to 89 seats.

***Nouveau Front Populaire* and the 2024 Legislative Elections**

The dramatic events in the summer of 2024 emerged out of this context. The RN came first with a large lead in the European Parliament election on June 9, and Macron unexpectedly dissolved the National Assembly. The left immediately mobilized against rising fascism, on the streets as well as electorally. Labor unions, student associations, social movement groups, and left parties united to organize regular street demonstrations, bringing hundreds of thousands out into the streets on June 15. For the snap election, the sense of anti-fascist urgency brought left parties together to create the *Nouveau Front populaire* (NFP), with the name clearly invoking the 1930s struggle.

The NFP proposed a common program,³⁰ whose flagship policies included abolition of Macron's pension reform, price control of essential goods, and raising the minimum wage to 1600 euros a month; these were proposed as the urgent measures of rupture for the first 15 days. For a broader agenda, they advocated for ecological planning of the economy, a wealth tax, expanded construction of social housing, abolition

of Macronist laws limiting immigrant and asylum rights, as well as democratization of the French state through creation of the sixth republic. After weeks of frenetic campaigning, the first round of the election saw the NFP in second place, behind the far right. For the second round, the NFP took the principled step of withdrawing all their third-placed candidates in constituencies where a fascist came first. The presidential camp (Ensemble) reciprocated it with the NFP, though to a more limited extent.

The night of July 7, 2024, was a euphoric one for the French left. Overturning the widespread expectation of a first-place finish for the far right, the NFP prevailed on top in the second round, defeating the RN and Ensemble in seat counts. After a period of negotiations between the NFP parties, they nominated Lucie Castets as their common candidate for prime minister. A civil servant working for the city government of Paris and an activist for improving public services, and without an attachment to one of the parties, the young and previously little-known Castets effectively served as the public face and symbol of the NFP's unity.

If Macron was committed to anti-fascism, he would simply have appointed Castets as prime minister. But he sought to govern on anti-socialism, more so than anti-fascism. He rejected her nomination on the basis that she lacked a majority, even though it was his own party that prevented this majority. After dithering for two months, Macron appointed Michel Barnier, a conservative politician from the Republicans, whose majority was dependent on the fascists; a perfect embodiment of "Macrono-Lepenism," as LFI calls it. Barnier's government fell in three months, after it passed cuts to social security yet again through Article 49.3; the RN opted for voting against Barnier, in order to maintain their populist image. As of this

writing, Macron has appointed François Bayrou, from his own political camp, as yet another prime minister. A stable government remains unlikely.

Future Prospects

The LFI represents a rare success story in the 2020s European left. Mélenchon's charisma, strategic acumen, and principled pursuit of independence from the PS, played a pivotal role in the LFI's breakthrough, which was by no means a certain outcome at the beginning. They built a solid, enduring base in the popular neighbourhoods in the urban areas and *banlieues*, with a program of solidarity and rupture. They skillfully combined tactical flexibility with principled politics; their strategy in 2024 involved prioritizing defeat of the RN at the ballot box, while rejecting any disingenuous overture from the Macronist camp, which would involve selling out on the political commitment. Initially a party solely focused on Mélenchon, they developed young leading figures such as Mathilde Panot and Manuel Bompard, who have become household names in France this year through their role in the summer elections and the National Assembly.

The path forward is challenging and by no means certain. It is imperative that the LFI maintains a predominant position in the NFP. If the balance of power shifts towards the PS, left unity is unlikely to be maintained, as the PS feels emboldened to reject the common program of the left and seek closer cooperation with the Macronists. The right-wing of the PS has always resisted cooperation with the *insoumis*, and the PS once suspended an alliance with the LFI,³¹ attacking the latter's position for Palestinian solidarity. After the summer of 2024, the anti-LFI tendency in the PS surfaced more; if they gain more influence, it would have a devastating impact on the popular front, benefitting the Macronists

and the far right.

The events of this summer also highlighted the question of internal democracy in the LFI. As sociologist Manuel Cervera-Marzal has meticulously documented,³² LFI's structure is very top-down, and members have few rights or leverage to change or oppose the leadership's positions. This came to the fore dramatically this summer, when several prominent long-time LFI figures—such as Alexis Corbière and Danielle Simonnet—were suddenly stripped of the party's nomination, presumably due to their disagreements with Mélenchon. Corbière and Simonnet ran against the official LFI candidates and won, forming a new group—*L'Après*. This dispute precipitated the departure of other prominent and independent-minded LFI figures, including feminist writer Clémentine Autain as well as journalist and filmmaker François Ruffin.

As LFI leadership's supporters argue, there is a case to be made that these dissidents were shifting the party rightwards, as attested to by the fact that *L'Après* caucuses with the Ecologists in the parliament. Furthermore, Ruffin's lack of commitment to anti-racism³³ should be vigorously criticized. However, weak internal democracy in LFI remains a concern. Even if the LFI leadership has so far performed brilliantly, the leadership of any left party faces immense structural pressure to compromise with the political and economic forces of capital, especially when they come to power or are close to it. The power of grassroots militants is always essential in keeping the leadership from succumbing to such pressure.

Even as the far right rises all across Europe, the French summer of 2024 showed that anti-fascism can spark mass mobilizations, and that the left can effectively counter their rise. The only way to defeat the far right in a durable way is through an alternative model of political economy,

rooted in solidarity and an exercise of popular power over capital. Such a prospect may not be particularly likely in the near-term, even in France. However, the potential victory of the French left represents the greatest hope to reverse the tide of the far right across Europe. The trajectory of the struggle is unpredictable; but it is certain that the struggles in France will be of decisive importance in coming years.

NOTES

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Understanding the Middle East

An Interview with Gilbert Achcar

GILBERT ACHCAR has been a major left commentator on international affairs for many years. He grew up in Lebanon and has lived and taught in Paris, Berlin, and London. He is just retiring as professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London. His many books include *The Clash of Barbarisms* (2002, 2006); *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky (2007); *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010); *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (2013); *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2013, 2022); *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (2016); and *The New Cold War: The United States, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine* (2023). His new book on Gaza will be coming out from the University of California Press in the summer. He was interviewed on December 9 by email by Stephen R. Shalom of the New Politics editorial board, with revisions being made through December 19.

Stephen R. Shalom: *As you know, our plan was to talk about some of the broad dynamics at play in the Middle East region, rather than on any of the day-to-day developments. But then we've just experienced quite an extraordinary week in Syria.*

Gilbert Achcar: You could even say quite an extraordinary weekend.

SRS: *Indeed.*

So, we have to talk first about what's happening in Syria, before turning to our discussion of more foundational matters.

GA: That's fine.

Part I

SRS: *Let me begin by asking about the role of Israel and the United States in Syria.*

In the days since the collapse of the Assad regime, we've seen Israeli troops cross the border from the occupied Golan and seize further Syrian territory. This has led some analysts to say that this shows that Israel—and its main backer, the United States—were the main

driving forces in what's happened in Syria in recent weeks.

GA: That's a very skewed interpretation of things, since if it shows anything, it is that Israel is very cautious about what is happening. If it is forcibly seizing the buffer zone, which was created in 1974 as a result of the 1973 war, that's to prevent those new forces that are now coming to the fore in Syria from getting closer to the border of the annexed Syrian territory, the part of the Golan Heights that was occupied by Israel in 1967. This territory was formally annexed by Israel in 1981, an annexation that Donald Trump, during his first term in office, recognized officially for the first time of any U.S. president. So that's what the Israelis are doing.

They're also bombing the military capabilities of the old regime, some apparently related to the production of chemical weapons, to prevent the rebels from seizing them. By behaving in this way, Israel is actually creating conditions that are not conducive to good relations with any future

government in Syria, if ever that possibility existed.

And as for the United States, Washington has been observing and monitoring developments with caution. They, like Israel, are happy that Iran has been dealt a severe blow, with the downfall of the Assad regime. But, like everyone, they have a big, big question mark about what will come next. They have worries about how the main rebel force, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) will behave if it manages to control this big swath of territory that fell into its hands. And they are even worried that ISIS could seize the opportunity to launch a new offensive in the northeast of Syria.

There are those who believe that any local actor is but the puppet of some external actor. Such people can't acknowledge any agency for local actors. That's, of course, a very poor way of perceiving the situation.

SRS: *But surely the condition of Iran and Hezbollah and Russia—forces outside of Syria, external actors—did play a big role in the collapse of Assad.*

GA: Of course. That's beyond any doubt. And it is a powerful rebuttal to all those who claimed for so many years that Assad was a real popular leader, that the Syrian population was very supportive of the Assad family's regime, and that that's why this regime managed to survive. Well, now we have proof that the Assad regime fully owed its survival first to Iran's intervention, which prevented its collapse in 2013—that was when Hezbollah entered Syria at the behest of Iran, sending thousands of fighters to prop up the regime. And even with Iran's support, the regime was again on the brink of collapse two years later, which led Moscow to intervene in September 2015. Russia dramatically added to a key superiority that the regime already had, namely, the monopoly of the skies. It benefited from this monopoly courtesy of the U.S.

government, which under Barack Obama vetoed any delivery of antiaircraft weapons to the Syrian opposition. This is why you never heard even of helicopters being shot down, let alone fighter jets. The opposition was unable even to counter helicopters. The regime extensively used its fleet of helicopters to drop barrel bombs—these were very barbaric, indiscriminate attacks on urban zones killing a huge number of people. And the Syrian opposition fighters could do nothing. They didn't have any antiaircraft weapons; they didn't have MANPADs, i.e. portable antiaircraft weapons. The United States didn't provide any and none of the countries neighboring Syria that were allied to the United States were allowed to send that kind of weapon. That includes Turkey, which actually produces these weapons. Recall the famous Stinger missiles that the United States provided to the Afghanistan Mujahideen when they were fighting the Soviet occupation? These are produced in Turkey under U.S. license, but Turkey didn't have the right to deliver a single one of them to the Syrian opposition.

So, Russia's intervention in 2015 was the second time the regime was rescued by a foreign actor—first Iran, then Russia. And it survived with the combined support of Russia and Iran. Russia's contribution was mainly its air force, with also a few troops there. And Iran's was mainly troops from Lebanon, from Iraq, from Iran itself even including Afghan troops based in Iran. And that's how the regime survived. For a long time, one could joke about Bashar Assad that the only territory upon which he had some sovereignty was his presidential palace. Beyond his palace, the Syrian regime's territory was either under Russian or Iranian dominance. What happened in the recent period is that Russia had to remove most of its air force from Syria. According to Israeli sources, there were only some fifteen Russian planes left there.

So very little was available to support Assad, since Iran's main force in support of the Syrian regime, which was Hezbollah, was dealt a very heavy blow in Lebanon. It was no longer really in a position to rescue the regime. And that's when HTS decided to seize the opportunity. They were preparing for it. They saw a window of opportunity in light of the Russian withdrawal and the severe setback that Hezbollah was experiencing starting in September. They therefore began preparing themselves. And once the ceasefire was concluded in Lebanon, they attacked. Of course, they did not want to attack while the war was going on in Lebanon, because that would have appeared as if they were joining Israel in combat. So, they waited until it was over and then attacked. Having been deprived of foreign support, the regime collapsed just like the U.S. puppet regime in Afghanistan in 2021. It was exactly the same kind of collapse.

We are against both American imperialism and Russian imperialism as well as Iran's reactionary intervention abroad. And the result of foreign domination is always similar. Whether the puppet master is Russia or the United States, puppet regimes are puppet regimes. And the Assad regime had become one for a very long time, except that it was a puppet with two competing masters, giving it a little bit of space. All this has collapsed and is over now.

SRS: *Previously, it seemed like Israel and Russia had an understanding that despite Russia's backing of Syria, it would allow Israel to attack certain targets in Syria, without deploying its anti-aircraft systems against the attacking Israeli planes.*

GA: Yes, that has been going on for several years. Israel has been quite frequently bombing Syrian territory—more specifically, Iranian concentrations or pro-Iran concentrations, like Hezbollah forces,

within Syrian territory—without Russia, of course, intercepting any of these planes or firing any of the anti-aircraft missiles that it has deployed over Syrian territory. There was obviously an agreement between the two countries, Israel and Russia. This also explains why Israel did not take a position on the Ukraine war. It did not come out in support of the Ukrainians, like the Western bloc. Israel adopted a sort of neutral attitude towards the war because of this deal that existed between Israel and Russia. Now, of course, this is over because Russia's presence in Syria has been very much reduced. Moscow is no longer in a position to greenlight or block any action by Israel on Syrian territory. And I wouldn't bet on Russia being able to keep its two bases—air and naval—in Syria for long. Or else that would be almost like Guantanamo, where you maintain a base in a country with which you don't have any friendly relations. The Syrian opposition can't have friendly relations with Moscow, who's got a lot of Syrian blood on its hands. That would be quite awkward.

SRS: *Does Russia still physically have anti-aircraft missiles in Syria?*

GA: Yes, it has, of course, if only to protect its bases. Any of their forces that were deployed in other parts of the territory I presume have been redeployed or brought back to the bases that they have in the coastal area. I can't see them keeping isolated forces anywhere else. And likewise, the Iranians completely withdrew their troops into Iraq and from Iraq back into Iran. Hezbollah fighters that were still in Syria went back to Lebanon. And that's it. Lots of articles in the media have been explaining that this is a huge defeat for Iran and its so-called axis of resistance. Well, that's an accurate description of what happened. No possible question about that.

SRS: *In terms of the victorious forces in Syria,*

aside from HTS, can you describe some of the significant players?

GA: Syria today is a patchwork, a full political-military patchwork. First, you have several foreign forces. Iran withdrew its forces, but you still have Russian forces there. Then you have Turkish forces on the northern border occupying bits of Syrian territory. You have U.S. forces, deployed in the northeast to back the Kurdish forces, which are dominant in a big part of the country. It's a quite sizable part—one-quarter of the Syrian territory. You have an area in the south on the Jordanian border dominated by opposition forces that are linked to the United States. And you have a genuine popular uprising in the Druze area of the south, Suwayda—the province of Suwayda, around the city of Suwayda—that linked up with local forces in Daraa province.

And, of course, there was the region in the northwest that was under HTS control. HTS forces have now spread to other parts of the country where the regime collapsed. However, HTS's army is not large enough to control all the territory that fell into its hands. What happened is that the regime collapsed, exactly like you had in Afghanistan, except that HTS does not have the same force that the Taliban had. It's smaller, weaker than what the Taliban were. And it would be hard for them to impose themselves on the Kurds, just as it would be hard for them to really get rid of those Syrian opposition forces that are completely dominated by Turkey, which are in the north. Likewise, I can't see them managing to really exert full control over Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, and all these cities. Nor over the coastal area where you still have Russian forces. HTS has not really spread everywhere, although the state has collapsed everywhere.

There are areas where the state has collapsed and a vacuum was created. And

this is related to the nature of the state. It's a kind of state akin to that of Libya or that of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, which are states that are really family ruled, family owned—I call them, along with the monarchies in the region, patrimonial states. They function like monarchies, actually. The state apparatus is so much linked organically to the ruling family that when the regime collapses, it's not only the regime, it's the whole state. What we have witnessed in recent days in Syria is not a regime collapse. It's a state collapse. The whole state collapsed, and any idea that there might be some smooth transition process is just an illusion.

It is just impossible, given the situation of the country and the number of occupation forces on its soil. The worst, of course, is the Israeli occupation. Israel is now in a very hegemonic position in the region after what they did starting from Gaza, then Lebanon, then Syria, and they are now planning to strike at Iran.

Let me be clear. I fully share the joy of the tens of thousands of people who got freed from jail, from the chains of the Assad regime. It is a huge relief that this carceral regime has ended, that so many people are able to go back to their cities, to their homes, that refugees can go back to their homeland. But this is not a revolution. This is the collapse of a regime that hasn't been replaced by any form of popular democratic organization. And therefore, from a left-wing perspective, we should also be worried about the future.

At the very least, we must be very cautious and not fall into the kind of euphoria that led some people to characterize the events as the resumption of the Syrian revolution. The Syrian revolution, the one that started in 2011, has been dead for a long time unfortunately. The only possibility for a resumption of that uprising, was seen in 2020 in Suwayda, in this regime-controlled Druze area that I mentioned, where you

now have some kind of popular power. There you had repeated popular uprisings against the regime since 2020, renewing the slogans of the 2011 popular uprising. They briefly spread to other parts of Syria, but there was no form of organization able to generalize this popular uprising to the whole country—or at least the whole Arab-majority territory of Syria because the Kurdish-majority part belongs to a different political category. So, unfortunately the Suwayda uprising did not spread, and the regime repressed it, quite harshly as usual. But now, with the collapse of the regime, they have revived their movement. But it is limited to only one part, one province of Syria.

There are progressives in other parts of the country who are trying to organize something at the level of civil society, from below, to fight for rights, democracy, and social demands. How far they will manage to do something is hampered by the fact that the regime has been such a terrible tyranny that little potential is left. Most of the opposition-minded people have left the country. There has been a huge exodus from Syria over the years. One-quarter of the population has left the country, if not more. Not to mention those that were internally displaced who represent close to one-third. The situation is very difficult.

Part II

SRS: *Thanks for that survey of recent developments in Syria. I'd like now to turn to the rest of the Middle East region, focusing not so much on recent events, but trying to understand the background to what is going on.*

Let's look first at Palestine. U.S. support for Israel during the current genocide has been criminal and shameful. To what extent do you explain Washington's policy by strategic interests, by domestic factors, or by the perspectives of policymakers?

GA: Actually, it's more than just U.S. support. It is the first major joint U.S.–Israeli war, in all the history of Israeli wars from 1948 to 1956 to 1967. Even 1973, where you had real U.S. support, but Washington pulled the brake at some point. Likewise, in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, or in 2006, in Israel's second war on Lebanon, or the wars on Gaza in 2009 and 2014—none of them was or could be described as a joint U.S.–Israeli war like this one.

The United States—and here I mean the Biden administration, and indeed, Joe Biden himself—bears a huge amount of responsibility for arming Israel, for providing most of the bombs that did most of the damage in Gaza, the destruction and the killing of so much of Gaza's population. And Washington contributed to funding this war and fully endorsed its goals to the point of blocking any Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire. This is the first time we've seen this degree of U.S. shared responsibility—and I've been observing Israeli wars for a very long time. I can see the huge difference.

And now the question becomes, why did the United States—or why, to be more accurate, did Joe Biden—do it that way? Here I believe that no “vulgar materialist” interpretation makes sense. Because it is obvious that from the point of view of U.S. imperialist interests in the region and beyond, this kind of blind, unconditional support to Netanyahu is counterproductive and not good policy. And you've had some people in the foreign policy establishment—you can read them in *Foreign Affairs* and other leading journals—criticizing the approach Biden has taken. So, to explain that the current U.S. partnership with Israel stems from the interests of U.S. imperialism doesn't make much sense. Of course, it is in the interest of U.S. imperialism to support the Israeli state as a proxy force, as a watchdog for U.S. interests in the Mideast,

and especially toward the Gulf area, which remains a strategically key area for both oil and oil money. But this kind of blind support jeopardizes U.S. interests. And I can't see any explanation that makes sense of it except the dimension represented by Joe Biden's own pro-Israel stance.

This is the first U.S. president in history who has publicly repeated several times that he is a Zionist. Not just that he supports Israel, but that he's a Zionist. He's proud of being a Zionist. And that explains a lot. The record of Joe Biden as a Congressperson is well-known: a very pro-Israeli record. It's one of the most pro-Israel records. Keep in mind, that when Joe Biden was campaigning in 2020, people believed—in part based on his own promises—that he would revert to an Obama-like policy on the Middle East. That he would therefore reverse some of the measures taken by Trump, like moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, closing the U.S. consulate in Arab Jerusalem, closing the Palestinian Authority's office in Washington, or condoning the annexation of the Golan. Yet once Biden settled into the White House, he did none of that. On the issue of the Middle East—just like on the issue of China, by the way—Joe Biden has not been a continuation of Barack Obama. He has been the continuation of Donald Trump. And on the issue of Israel, he even went beyond Donald Trump. One can wonder whether Trump would have gone to the extent that Biden did in offering unconditional support to the Israeli state. I mean, that's a question mark. But anyhow, Biden did it. And Trump, anyway, could not have done more than what the Biden administration did in supporting Israel. It was basically a political choice. U.S. imperialism remains the same, but there can be big shifts in policy from one president to the other nowadays. Gone is the time of the so-called bipartisan consensus in foreign policy. This has basically ended in

recent years. Donald Trump has completely ended that. And Biden has continued in that sense, in representing this right-wing shift in U.S. politics regarding Israel. On the issue of Israel, Biden satisfied even the U.S. far right. The U.S. Republicans and the MAGA people were only very mildly critical of what he did on this issue, much less than about Ukraine or anything else. And so even though Biden portrayed himself as someone who was almost a progressive, on this particular issue he concurred with the U.S. far right, with the U.S. pro-Israeli far right. I can't think of any other explanation for what the Biden administration has been doing that makes sense and is convincing.

SRS: *What about the issue of annexation of the West Bank? Trump backed off from this during his first presidency, but now he has several strong annexationists in his new administration. That wasn't a part of Biden's policy. Biden has imposed sanctions against some settlers, and so on. These may be trivial in the larger picture of the genocide, but nevertheless, it does seem like a distinction, no?*

GA: No, there's not much difference. The annexation of the Golan is what Trump officially acknowledged. And Biden did not reverse this. Right? On the issue of the West Bank and Gaza, remember the "Deal of the Century"? This peace plan so-called that Jared Kushner drew up for his father-in-law. And which Trump proclaimed with great pomp and circumstance. Well, this deal is not very different from whatever Biden's views were about the West Bank and Gaza: some kind of rump so-called state, which looks like Swiss cheese, and in exchange for part of the territories that would be annexed by Israel, Palestinians would be given some bits of territory in the Negev desert, close to the Egyptian border. So basically, there's not a qualitative difference between this kind of vision and that of Biden. Biden did not proclaim any vision

that could represent a breakthrough. He did not even come out clearly with a position against the settlements. From that point of view, the Obama administration in which he was vice president had a much clearer attitude in condemning the settlements. So no, there's not much difference, really. Biden was the continuation of Donald Trump and Donald Trump II will be the continuation of Joe Biden. There is no major discontinuity on the issue of Israel and the Middle East between Trump I, Biden, and Trump II.

SRS: *You refer to Biden's personal views. But many analysts—for example Mearsheimer and Walt, authors of *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*—argue that divergences between Washington's Middle East policy and its strategic interests are best explained by the influence of the pro-Israel lobby. What do you think of their view?*

GA: This explanation falls short of telling us why this lobby is more effective with some than with others when it comes to actual policies. It boils down to a sort of conspiracy theory instead of understanding other factors that can be much more important, such as the basic interests that guide U.S. foreign policy or the idiosyncratic inclinations of the people in charge. George W. Bush's crowd really did not need the Israel Lobby to convince them of invading Iraq, a goal that many of them had been lobbying for during the Clinton administration. They saw Iraq as a big prize for the United States, a key factor in making what they called the "New American Century," both due to its own oil resources and to the fact that controlling Iraq would tremendously enhance U.S. hegemony over the whole Gulf. If anything, Israel was far more interested in getting Washington to strike at Iran than at Iraq, which had been turned militarily into a basket case by the U.S.-led onslaught in 1991. And

when Israel requested a green light from the Bush administration in 2008 to strike at Iran's nuclear installations, they did not get it, as a *New York Times* investigation revealed at the time. So much for the Israel Lobby thesis.

SRS: *Okay, let me move on to ask about some of the Arab regimes. Let's start with Saudi Arabia. For many years, Saudi Arabia was known as the most religiously fundamentalist, reactionary country in the world. And now they have a sort of reformer image in their leader.*

So, my question is: Is there actually a change? If so, what is the significance of that?

GA: What they have today is an avatar of "enlightened despotism." The regime's despotism has not changed a bit. On the contrary, if anything, it's even more despotic. But the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman—sensing that the young people in the kingdom were becoming very frustrated with the very austere way of life that was imposed on them, especially after their social condition improved considerably with the wealth created by the oil money—decided to liberalize the "moral" system in the country. And in that sense, there is definitely a real change. Amazingly, women today in the Saudi kingdom are freer in their clothing and external appearance than they are in Iran. It used to be the reverse. So, the change is at that level, not at the level of politics, because there are still no elections or no voting rights, not for women and not even for men. Now you have concerts, music, cinemas, everything that was prohibited. There used to be a very obscurantist kind of system, resembling what you had with some of the fundamentalist sects in the United States where they were dominant in U.S. history. So, you had the same in the Saudi kingdom. And that has changed, but that doesn't mean that politically it has become liberal.

SRS: *One often hears reference to “the Gulf states,” putting them all into one category. And indeed, they have certain common characteristics: their oil money, their monarchies, and so on. Yet it seems there are some substantial differences in the interests between them. Can you help us understand what those differences are?*

GA: Yes, of course, there are substantial differences between them, to the point that during Donald Trump’s first term there was a boycott of one of them by the rest. Qatar was boycotted by the United Arab Emirates, the Saudi Kingdom, Bahrain, and others. They have made different political choices in terms of regional policy. Qatar took over from the Saudi kingdom in the 1990s the tutelage over the regional organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. Until 1990, the Brotherhood was closely linked to the Saudi kingdom but got repudiated because it could not condone the U.S. deployment against Iraq that led to the first Iraq war in 1991. So, a very few years later, Qatar became the Brotherhood’s sponsor in place of the Saudi kingdom, which of course irritated the Saudis.

Then you have the United Arab Emirates, which is harshly hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood. And the two of them—the UAE and the Saudis—combined to ostracize Qatar in 2017.

SRS: *Why was the UAE harshly critical of the Muslim Brotherhood?*

GA: It’s difficult to find one single explanation. They pretended at some point that there was a Muslim Brotherhood plot against their state, but they also recruited security people from Egypt who had long experience in repressing the Muslim Brotherhood. So, a combination of factors. But again, you know, in such very centralized kinds of regimes you can’t always find a rational explanation. It can often be just personal idiosyncrasy.

Another difference became more and

more significant with the Arab Spring, the Arab uprisings beginning in 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood played a key role in trying to steer and even hijack these uprisings. And behind them was Qatar. And that was resented completely by the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates, which are classical, conservative, reactionary regimes opposed to any subversion. They resented Qatar’s role in backing the Muslim Brothers, whom they saw as troublemakers. They tried to punish Qatar, seizing the opportunity of Trump’s presidency, who let them do it. The UAE had built a close relation with the Trump crowd. It is even believed to have contributed to funding the Trump campaign in 2016. And then in 2020, with the Democrats coming back to the White House, the boycott of Qatar was ended just before Trump left office.

So yes, you have differences among the Gulf states. These are the most polarized. Then you have others like Kuwait or Oman that keep a rather low profile in regional politics, out of conservatism, but also to avoid trouble. In sum, the Gulf states have many similarities, especially economically and to some extent socially, but politically they have rulers upholding different political perspectives.

SRS: *A little over a year ago, Iran and Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations after a break of seven years. Was this a real rapprochement? And what is the status of their relationship now?*

GA: I think that the Saudi kingdom, having suffered a setback in Yemen, and afraid therefore of Iran’s increasing clout in the region, was happy to seize the opportunity of China’s offer of mediation, to mend fences with the Iranians. They did this in order to preserve themselves from Iranian action against them. Don’t forget that you also have an important Shia population in the Saudi kingdom. It’s a minority, but

it's an important minority. And Iran has various means through which it can exert pressure on the kingdom.

And then you had the Gaza war. This was rightly seen by most of the populations in the region as the horror that it is. It made the Saudis happy that they had not joined the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the so-called Abraham Accords of establishing formal relations with Israel during the Trump administration. They had been cautious, because of the Iran factor. The United Arab Emirates doesn't have the problem of antagonizing its public opinion because it is a very artificial state, with a population, close to 90 percent of whom are migrants without any rights. That's not the case in the Saudi kingdom, which has a sizable native population. And they're afraid of Iran's pressure in outbidding them in condemning Israel. Therefore, they are now playing at denouncing the genocide and criticizing Israel. But these are very hypocritical stances, because if they really wanted to do something against the genocide, it would have been enough for them to call for an embargo on oil exports to all the countries that support Israel, as they did in 1973. Back then the Arab oil embargo triggered a major global economic crisis. This time, however, the Saudi rulers did absolutely nothing of that sort. They did not call for any Arab boycott or Muslim boycott or whatever. So, when they denounce the genocide in Gaza, they are shedding crocodile tears. They're being totally hypocritical.

SRS: *You referred to the Saudi defeat in Yemen. Can you tell us a little bit about what the situation there is. There was one point when there was a tremendous Saudi bombing campaign and mass starvation going on, and U.S. weapons support for the Saudis. What happened next?*

GA: U.S. support at the time of Obama was

quite restricted because this administration was not happy with the Saudis intervening in Yemen in 2015, an intervention that was led by the young crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who was minister of defense at the time. The Saudi intervention consisted mostly in the use of its air force—very brutally and murderously. But on the ground the Houthis had much more motivated fighters than those on the other side. And then there started to be dissensions on the other side, between Southern separatists, and others, and between the UAE and the Saudis. All this enabled the Houthis to seize a large part of the territory and entrench themselves there. They also began to develop—with the help of Iran, obviously—a missile capability that could threaten the Saudi kingdom. They actually sent a few missiles and rockets towards Saudi targets, and that of course was very worrying for the Saudi rulers, which basically led them to stop their direct involvement in the fighting.

SRS: *What is the situation now in Yemen?*

GA: Now you have one part of the country that is under the Houthis, who are the Shia equivalent of the Taliban—more accurately, they are Zaydis, which is a specific sect of Shiism. They are the closest to the Taliban anywhere. They are called the Houthis, but their official name is “partisans of God,” Ansarullah. And they have a very reactionary moral code. You won't see women in the pictures of demonstrations that you get today from Yemen. The rest of the country is very unstable, there is no unified homogeneous force controlling it. It is rather a coexistence between various territories dominated by this or that group.

The Houthis have used the opportunity of Gaza to outbid both the Saudis and their Yemeni Sunni opponents on the issue of Israel. They've fired missiles at international shipping and at Israel. I don't

think that they are crazy enough to believe that they are really inflicting great harm on Israel—it has been quite limited—but politically, they have used their action very intensively against the Saudis and against their Yemeni opponents.

SRS: *Does the United Nations still recognize as the legal government that motley crew of forces outside of Houthi control?*

GA: There is a Yemeni government that is supposedly the continuation of the coalition government that was formed after the dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh relinquished power in the autumn of 2011. But UN agencies work with both sides when it comes to humanitarian issues. Yemen is what the mainstream calls a “failed state.” It’s not the only one; there are many now in the region. The category started to be used in the Horn of Africa with Somalia. But now you have Yemen. You have Sudan. You could describe Syria, of course, as a “failed state.” Libya is one, too, and even Iraq and Lebanon to a certain degree. These are all states that collapsed and got divided among different forces.

SRS: *One of the failed states you mentioned is Libya. It seems like in Libya there are several foreign players involved with the different factions. Can you help us understand what’s going on there?*

GA: Libya is both a failed state and the kind of state that we mentioned previously—a patrimonial state, like in Assad’s Syria, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, or in the monarchies, where the regime is not separable from the state. In a patrimonial state you can hardly overthrow the regime and keep the state. The collapse of the regime leads to the collapse of the state. And when the state collapses and there is no unified force capable of replacing it, that’s when you get the dominance of different factions and very quickly foreign involvement. The rival factions themselves will look for foreign

sponsors to support them. That’s what has happened in Libya, for instance.

Libya got essentially divided into two parts, west and east. In the western part, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic forces were dominant and supported by Qatar and Turkey. In the eastern part you have a mixture of remnants of the Gaddafi regime and locals led by a man who had split from Gaddafi and became a CIA asset for a while, namely, Khalifa Haftar. These forces in the east got backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia. So, Libya became a theater of conflict between various forces, like Syria has been for many years, as have other countries in the region and into the Horn of Africa.

SRS: *But in Syria until a few weeks ago, we thought that Assad was in charge to some degree, but in Libya it seems much less clear that there’s anyone who can claim to speak for the country.*

GA: That’s because geographically there’s a major difference between Syria and Libya. Libya is geographically composed of two parts, which are quite distinct, and between them you have a substantial stretch of quasi-desertic land. That’s not the case in Syria, where the heartland of the country was under regime control. The regime controlled something like two-thirds of the territory of Syria (putting aside the Israeli-occupied Golan), with one-third controlled by others: a big chunk, close to one-quarter of the territory by the Kurdish movement in the northeast, a much smaller territory controlled by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham in the northwest, Druze forces in the Suwayda province, and on top of all that Russian and Iranian forces in the regime-controlled areas and Turkish and U.S. forces in the north and northeast. Now, of course, the state that existed in the Syrian heartland, shored up by Iran and Russia, has collapsed, and the big question is, will it be possible

to rebuild a unified Syrian state? That's the big challenge.

Whereas in Libya, the situation sort of stabilized into two states. It's a kind of partition of the country between the eastern province and the western province, Tripoli and Benghazi. And although Haftar tried for a while to conquer the rest of Libya from Benghazi, he was defeated in this endeavor, with Turkey helping the other side. So, you've now got some stabilization of the situation between two rival-controlled parts of the country. Partition is often the dynamic in "failed states." In Sudan, where there is a war between two fractions of the country's armed forces, the disintegration of the state is leading to some kind of de facto partition on the ground.

SRS: *This is quite a depressing picture that you have presented. Are there any reasons for hope going forward?*

GA: Yes, absolutely. I always draw a distinction between optimism and hope. Optimism is the belief that the best will happen. Unfortunately, there is little ground for optimism today in the region, I'm afraid. But there is still some ground for hope. Because you have every now and then popular movements like that which involved the people in Suwayda, in Syria, since 2020 despite all the horrors of the civil war and the regional war fought on Syrian territory. There have been some important social movements in a country like Morocco, for instance, which not long ago witnessed major strikes, including a long and massive teachers' strike. So here and there, there is some potential.

In 2019, there was a second wave of the Arab Spring, as it was called, which involved Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. That wave was defeated, of course, and in

the case of Sudan, the situation turned into a tragedy because of a very specific reason, which is that the armed forces split and clashed. Instead of a fight between revolution and counter-revolution, you got the counter-revolution splitting and engaging in a civil war. Nevertheless, before this happened in 2023, you had a tremendous mobilization of young people spearheading the popular movement in Sudan, who managed to resist a coup by the military. There was a coup, but they thwarted it in the sense that it failed in imposing itself. The popular movement was able to prevent the military from prevailing and ruling until the military entered into this fratricidal clash that engulfed the whole country in a bloody war between two warrior camps.

In the Algerian Hirak of 2019–2021, peaceful protests led to the ousting of the president. In Iraq you had a promising uprising in 2019, that was quelled. But the potential is still there, and that's the reason for hope. The big question, however, is whether or not the young people will manage to build networks that could be the organizational leadership of change. And whether they can build a political leadership smart enough to know how to navigate in these very, very complex circumstances that exist in the region. And especially how to win the rank and file of the armed forces to the side of change, to the side of revolution. That's a very big challenge. But there is room for hope.

Even in Syria today, we can hope that a progressive movement will manage to appear and raise its head. Given that HTS is not, or not yet at any rate, in a position to really control the whole of the country, there's reason for hope. Not optimism, but hope.

Razan Zaitouneh for President

Imagining Future Syria

MOHJA KAHF

RAZAN ZAITOUNEH FOR PRESIDENT. That is, I know the human rights lawyer has not been found since she and three staffers of the Violations Documentation Center¹ were forcibly disappeared² on December 9, 2013. Back in 2011–2012, from the diaspora, I worked with Razan a few times over Skype, doing what I could to love on the nonviolent grassroots uprising and to amplify their efforts at documenting atrocities—including those committed by armed rebels.

I understand the grim odds of Zaitouneh being alive today. Still, “Razan Zaitouneh for president” speaks my fantasy of a future Syria where Razan could run for president: an undivided Syria with intact sovereignty and equality for all genders. A stalwart ally of Palestinian liberation with an autonomous Kurdish region and Kurdish rights everywhere equal to Arab rights. A pluralist democracy with an independent judiciary and economic self-sufficiency—free from neoliberal exploitation.

As a poet, it is my task to imagine.

MOHJA KAHF, born in Syria, poet, novelist, and scholar, was honored in 2018 by the Democratic Black Caucus of Northwest Arkansas for Lifetime Achievement in Inclusion in Education. A professor of comparative literature and Middle East studies at the University of Arkansas on lands of the Osage and Quapaw nations, she is a winner of the Pushcart Prize for her writing, which has been translated into Turkish, Japanese, Italian, Arabic, German, Portuguese, Urdu, and French.

Today, at the dawn of a post-assad³ Syria, Razan would be in her forties. I imagine her running for president in her sixties. The twenty intervening years beginning now will have been perilous ones for Syria.

In the first euphoria of emerging from assad’s grip, Syrians laden with habits formed under dictatorship yield to a tendency to idolize military leaders. People say things like, “Give the new government a chance; it’s only been a month...a year now,” and, “So they want women to dress a little more modestly. Would it kill you?” Even Syrian men not invested in religious ideology passively accept the extra layer of male privilege the new “pragmatic Islamist” order offers them, or readily accept de-prioritizing gender. Despite Syrian feminist protests, even some of the women who during the 2011 revolution led protests efforts and organized local governance, even women who became household breadwinners and raised children singlehandedly in icy tents in Idlib, are harangued to postpone gender struggles with the familiar refrain: “Now is not the time. Syrians need food and water.”

Buoyed by such acquiescence, new de facto leaders embolden ideas in the populace about women being “biologically unsuited”⁴ to be cabinet ministers, downplay incidents of sectarian mob violence and deny human rights violations by their own ranks, issue decrees they have no legitimate mandate to issue from government offices

they have no mandate to hold, and practice little accountability to the citizenry—much like the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces did in Egypt post-Tahrir. Initially, Syrians tolerate this because they need basic services: gas for cooking, potable water, food they can afford to buy with the weak lira. To deliver these, the de facto rulers appease Turkish backers by continuing hostilities against Kurdish forces in the north and east. They seek from the United States and the European Union relief from sanctions by doing little to address Israeli incursions on Syria's sovereignty, Israel's bombing of multiple Syrian cities, and its ongoing genocide in Gaza.

After restoring basic services, the new authorities distract Syrians from questioning their appeasement of foreign powers. They erect monuments to martyrs who fell during the fight against Assad, holding celebrations whose profundity no Syrian who lived through Assad's horrors can deny. They use the fear of Syria becoming fragmented into statelets to rally popular support, and pursue financial and legal reparations from Bashar, another nationally unifying cause. Pretending to negotiate a new constitution, they monkey-wrench the process indefinitely, blaming those who demand healthy debate over the text.

All the while, without directly imposing legal restrictions on women, the new authorities encourage restrictive views of gender in the complex spectrum of Syrian society. Orientalist condescension from foreign organizations does not help Syrian gender activists fend off the specious attack that their concerns stem from Western influence. Simultaneously, majoritarian



Razan Zaitouneh

Syrians bask in promoting a conservative, sectarian “Make Syria Sunni Again” cultural agenda.

However, great numbers of grassroots Syrians, used to dissenting out loud since 2011, mobilize. They apply skills learned in the all-too-quickly marginalized non-violent protest movement—creating new counter-cultures, publishing anti-sectarian newspapers, organizing local democratic self-governance, drafting petitions and press releases, and a thousand other resistances disguised as mundane life⁵—to demand accountability, equal gender rights, and recognition of Syria's history of oppressing indigenous Kurds. Syrians of all genders, who played key but often unrecognized roles in the original protests, keep cultivating a rising characteristic among the populace: civic efficacy, the belief that “I can change my country.”

This is the belief for which blogger Tal al-Mallohi⁶ was imprisoned at age seventeen in 2009. It is the belief that unarmed

Syrian citizens perceived as marginal possess meaningful roles in deciding the path of the nation. For this, Rima Dali,⁷ Kinda al-Zaour,⁸ Ahed Elhendi, Lina Wafai,⁹ Rami Nakhle, Suheir Attassi,¹⁰ Khawla Dunia, Suhayb al-Ammar, and thousands of nonviolent Syrian activists were hunted, imprisoned, exiled, or killed. (For this kind of multi-axis dissent, back in our all-too-real timeline, the armed rebels turned on Razan Zaitouneh and disappeared her.)

A new protest movement arises, led by Suwayda province, Deraa, coastal Syria, and the Ghouta. After two to five years of grassroots pressure and nationwide petitions, fair elections are finally held. Predictably, these elections bring mostly Islamists and neoliberal capitalists to power, with a few token others. Yet these Islamists must negotiate with a far more pluralistic Syrian demographic than Egypt's.

As new cohorts of Syrians embrace civic efficacy, more women come to know their self-worth. They trust themselves. They lose patience¹¹ with the perpetual postponement of gender equality "for the greater good." More Syrians understand the national civic need to sustain internal dissent and accountability; from the margins comes valuable insight.

Meanwhile, the Islamists finally getting their ballyhooed day in power face the mundane realities of governance: collecting garbage, providing health services, and maintaining the power grid, with the financial crutch of Qatari monies not always there to rescue them. These tasks, and Islamists' domestic and foreign policy missteps, reveal their fallibility, and the aura of their ideological sanctity fades. A decolonized indigenous ethos exploring humankind's evolution past violence in intimate alliance with the earth, trees, and the ocean begins to emerge in Syrian youth culture.

In this period, farmers in Quneitra and

Deir Ezzor pioneer a "grow what you eat" program, steering Syria toward national economic self-sufficiency and away from dependence on Turkish aid and Gulf investors. Arab Syrians, disgusted at being coerced into killing fellow Syrians in the northeast for a Turkish agenda, build greater solidarity with Kurds. A new generation of Arab Syrians learns the once-forbidden truth: that the Baath regime committed atrocities from 1963 onward, uprooting Kurds from their homes in the so-called "Arab Belt," just as Palestinians were uprooted by Zionists. That March 12, 2004, was not an anti-Arab soccer squabble, but a Kurdish intifada for basic human rights.

A third nationwide protest movement emerges, women-led, with key centers in Salamiyeh, Suwayda, Jableh, Hasakeh, Daraa, Qamishlo, and Kafrenbl. The visible protests are just the tip of an iceberg of slow but persistent societal change, driven by seamstresses with a "weave what you wear" campaign, schoolteachers, farmers' unions, and other fully independent labor unions.

Finally, only three nationwide protest movements and two decades of struggle later, Razan Zaitouneh runs for president. Her crossover respect among Syrians of diverse ethnicities, genders, and religious communities secures her win. Voter participation reaches an all-time high, fueled by vigorous debates over her candidacy. Detractors attempt to smear her—perhaps with private swimsuit photos, as misogynist bullies did to women of leadership in the Syrian Revolution—but fail to overshadow her political know-how.

During Zaitouneh's administration, Syrian struggles for gender justice persist. Having a woman in power does not dismantle gender inequity and often provokes backlash. Simultaneously, Syrian dissenters, welcomed as a strength in post-assad Syrian society, challenge ongoing neoliberal exploitation by fat cats still trying to remake

Syria as another Dubai or late capitalism's candy-land.

President Zaitouneh prioritizes Palestinian liberation in international negotiations, understanding that only through justice for Palestinians can Syria hope to regain the Golan.¹² Syrians continue processing the traumas of the Assad era for decades, just as Palestinians will continue reckoning with Nakba trauma for generations after their Right of Return is recognized and they repatriate, and a new era begins for Palestinians together with no-longer-Zionist former Israelis in New Palestine. Imagining possibilities is a necessary step in rebuilding Syria.

NOTES

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Syria After Assad

Leila al-Shami Interviewed by Sacha Ismail

LEILA AL-SHAMI is a British-Syrian activist involved in human rights and social justice struggles in Syria and the region for 25 years. She is co-author with Robin Yassin-Kassab of *Burning Country: Syrians in War and Revolution*. She blogs at leilashami.wordpress.com, and is co-founder of the media collective *From the Periphery*. She was interviewed by Sacha Ismail, a British socialist and labor activist who is trade union liaison officer for the UK Ukraine Solidarity Campaign. He blogs at southlondonsocialist.wordpress.com.

Leila al-Shami: The overthrow of Assad was certainly not how I expected 2024 to end. Syrians have been fighting this regime for so long; its end opens up so many possibilities that didn't seem to exist a month ago. There are many difficulties and challenges—but the fact that the genocidal regime has ended, its prisons have been liberated, and Syrians who have been displaced all over the world can go back and people start to organize, that's immensely positive.

Sacha Ismail: *Have many people gone back yet?*

LaS: Yes, a significant number already. But it should also be registered that many refugees can't currently go back. Many of my friends in Europe desperately want to be in Syria right now, but they're also very worried about losing their residency status in the countries they're in. We don't know how stable the next period is going to be; there could be new outbreaks of violence, or remnants of the old regime trying to destabilize things. Even though Syrians have kicked out Iran and Russia, there are still foreign states involved, with Israel expanding in the south and conflict in the north

between Kurdish led-forces and Turkish proxies. On top of that the economy's destroyed, many people's houses no longer exist—so it's not always clear what they're going back to.

We need to find ways to put pressure on European states to create mechanisms for people to return and contribute to rebuilding the country without losing the possibility of getting out again if they need to. In fact, the first announcements from European Union states were not anything about aiding the struggle for justice in Syria or supporting reconstruction, but instead suspending asylum claims!

SI: *Assad's fall is a blow for freedom; but the regime was overthrown by groups that are a very long way from the democratic grassroots movements of the early period of the struggle, after 2011. Given the reactionary and authoritarian politics of HTS [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the Islamist organization now effectively leading the new Syrian government] and similar groups, how do you analyze what's going on? How do we defend and expand "democratic space" in Syria, as you put it in a recent article?*²¹

LaS: I think it's not quite right to say Assad

was brought down solely by HTS. What's happened is the cumulation of 13 years of struggle; that shouldn't be erased. HTS seized on an opportunity; I actually don't think they were expecting to overthrow the regime, only a much more limited operation in the north of the country—but they were surprised by how quickly regime forces fled without a fight. Then even just on a military level, it wasn't solely HTS, there were other forces involved in these battles, in Homs, for instance, and in the south of the country.

Moreover I don't think everyone fighting with HTS is necessarily ideologically aligned with them. People tend to go where there are opportunities, where there's money and where there are weapons. Many of those liberating particular cities were people who had previously been displaced from them. There's lots of videos of young men talking about being driven out of their homes when they were teenagers, over a decade ago, and now they're returning.

I'd say there was broad participation and even some elements of renewed popular uprising against the regime. However, it's true we now have a situation where HTS is in power in the transitional government, and that's of concern given where they've come from, with their roots in Al-Qaida and the jihadi movement, and what they represent even now. Their rule in Idlib [the capital of the enclave in the north west from which the HTS forces broke out in December] was certainly authoritarian. In the past they carried out sectarian attacks against minorities, and they continued to crack down on democratic voices.

Now they do seem to really be trying hard to reach out to minority communities, and they say the new system of governance will be shaped with broad input from across society, not just imposed by them.

The evidence so far suggests this new regime is perhaps surprisingly responsive to popular pressure. So, for instance, af-

ter there were protests against regressive changes they wanted to make to the school curriculum, they retreated and said they only remove its Ba'athist elements, glorification of the old regime and so on. In Idlib as well they did shift how they governed in response to public pressure and moderated over time.

I always believed the phase after Assad fell would be extremely difficult. There isn't an organized democratic opposition that has big influence on the ground. For me the most important thing is maintaining a democratic space where people return and start organizing long-term. As long as that space exists, I believe we can push towards a more democratic system in Syria. For that reason, I'm actually pleased they're not going to hold elections for four years. If elections were held tomorrow, it would likely mean a landslide for HTS, because they're the most organized force in the country and because they're currently idolized for their role in overthrowing Assad. More time allows the possibility of other currents organizing and building themselves up.

SI: *Is that a consensual view among democratic and left activists? Or do some take the view that four years gives HTS time to entrench themselves?*

LaS: You're right, a lot of people are arguing that. It is of course a possibility that HTS will entrench its power. In my view, however, some are a bit unrealistic in thinking there's an alternative at the moment. Alternatives still have to be built.

SI: *What's the process for creating a constitution?*

LaS: There was meant to be a "National Dialogue Conference" in January; it has now been postponed. We're all looking to see how broad and participatory that will really be, how inclusive it is of women, of minority groups, of civil society, even of the

political opposition leadership in exile—which doesn't have mass support on the ground but does include important figures who need to be involved if we're going to have a real pluralism of voices. At the moment we don't know how the conference will be constituted. It's something that civil society groups and gatherings in Syria, for sure, are discussing.

You don't need four years to create a constitution. The opposition in exile did a lot of work on this question, and in any case the issues with the old constitution were not necessarily its specifics but the fact it was a farce that didn't really affect how Syria was governed. For me the question of the constitution is much less important than the question about democratic space for organizing, and whether there's a vibrant civil society; but of course people have a range of opinions on that.

SI: *Who are the exile opposition leaders you refer to?*

LaS: There's the Syrian National Coalition, which was based in Turkey for years. They were originally set up to do international negotiations on behalf of revolutionary Syrians, to gain international support, money, weapons and so on. They were a coalition of different political persuasions—some liberal, some Muslim Brotherhood-types, some leftists, and some of the Kurdish parties. Over time they became so distant from what was happening on the ground that they became the butt of Syrian jokes—negotiating in five-star hotels in discussions that went nowhere, at times accused of corruption and being beholden to foreign powers. They became irrelevant: later on, there were negotiations between the various regional powers intervening in Syria, and they weren't even invited. As I say though there are significant figures involved, with a great deal of political experience, who need to be involved in the transition process.

SI: *So: what democratic struggles on the ground would you flag up as most important?*

LaS: Lots of things are starting up, and our focus over the coming period should be finding out more about what is being done on the ground and how we can support it. There is already vocal agitation by women's organizations and groups calling for women to be included in the transitional process and for their rights to be respected by the new government; and similar agitation from a range of minority communities.

People are calling for justice and accountability. Organizations dedicated to prisoners' rights and to state accountability have been working with the families of prisoners and the dead or disappeared to address this in a number of ways. One aspect is about protecting or recovering evidence, some of which has been destroyed or not properly safeguarded by the authorities. It needs to be collected and given to organizations that will preserve and protect it, so families and loved ones have clarity about what happened to people; and to ensure accountability of those who have committed war crimes.

This is not only a matter of those imprisoned, killed, or disappeared by the Assad regime. The regime was responsible for the overwhelming majority of civilian deaths, but other factions have also committed crimes. Since Assad's fall, there have been demonstrations specifically about the disappearance of the "Douma Four," democracy activists and human rights defenders who were likely taken by the Islamist opposition group Jaysh al-Islam. And what about those imprisoned by HTS, whose families have protested for their release, in Idlib and Aleppo?

SI: *What about workers organizing? What signs this is beginning to happen, or that there are discussions about it? I did read a report² that mentioned a strike by firefighters in*

Damascus in protest at a decision of the new government, and about lawyers organizing. However, I assume the conditions are difficult.

LaS: There are a number of factors that mean workers' organization is starting from a very low base. One is the structure of the economy in Syria. Most of the economy is based on small, family-run businesses, with all that implies for collective organizing. A second is the co-optation by the Ba'ath Party over decades of any independent workers' organization; unions and so on were effectively destroyed and replaced by or transformed into parastatal organizations over which workers had no control. This is the experience generations of workers had of "trade unions." This meant that the bigger-scale, largely state-run sections of the economy were hostile ground for organizing too.

In the early days of the revolution, after 2011, maybe up to 2014, new independent trade unions were set up in various sectors and parts of the country—the Union of Free Syrian Students, the Union of Free Syrian Doctors and so on—and became quite significant. However, in the last decade the conditions for such organizing have of course become much less favorable, and I've heard much less of these unions. I hope there will be renewed efforts in this direction.

SI: *Am I right that socialism as an idea is widely discredited in Syria because of its association with the old regime, as well as the general political conditions in the world?*

LaS: Absolutely, it's a problem that to the end the Ba'athist regime presented itself as socialist. But another factor is the bad response of wide swathes of the left globally to the Syrian revolution, which has created a lot of animosity to leftists and by extension any kind of socialist project. That's not to say there aren't many leftist Syrians, but the terrain on which they are

now organizing is not favorable. Even I, as a leftist who works with many amazing leftists all over the world, feel this: my first reaction if I meet a left-winger is to fear they are an Assad apologist.

It can't be overemphasized how distant from, in fact radically opposed to, state ownership in Syria has been to anything like socialism. It was always intertwined with a system of crony capitalism, benefiting the Assad family and their clients—many of them Alawis [the ethnoreligious group that dominated under the Assads], but also a layer of Sunni businessmen who constituted an important part of the regime's support. Then progressively, within the state-dominated system, more neoliberal elements were introduced. Crucially subsidies that millions of Syrians relied on were progressively removed. This kind of policy accelerated after Bashar Al-Assad came to power [in 2000], and by 2011 poverty and unemployment were absolutely chronic and wages were low. I remember this very vividly from when I was living in Syria. Many people worked two or more jobs to provide for their families. Of course this was also a factor in the protest movement beginning.

SI: *What are the debates now about different programmes for economic reconstruction? Is the automatic trajectory more neoliberalism?*

LaS: [HTS / government leader] Ahmed al-Sharaa [also known as al-Jolani] has already said there will be a move to a more free-market economy. As on many issues, I don't think it's his place to say that; this is supposed to be a transitional government, and such vital questions need to be decided through a process with real participation and debate. However, to be honest I think anyone likely to come to power is going to promote a free-market economy. There needs to be discussion about shaping the specifics of what that looks like, about how

widely the mass of Syrians benefit from reconstruction. The starting point of that is again about popular organizing at the grassroots, including by workers.

Immediately there is an issue about lack of international support for rebuilding the economy. The German foreign minister has just been in Syria and indicated there will be no substantial aid provided unless the transitional government meets a series of conditions; meanwhile the Americans have said they are not removing sanctions, in fact they've extended them for five years [while making amendments to allow some humanitarian aid].

This is obviously hugely detrimental to reconstruction, but also to democracy in Syria. If the West continues to boycott Syria, the dominant players will be the Gulf states, who care much less about promoting any elements of democracy or inclusivity as a condition of aid.

Much of the Western left campaigned to remove sanctions on the Assad regime. So what will they say now? It's something the better sections of the Western left should take up, anyway.

SI: *Does the old regime have significant residual report?*

LaS: Yes, it has some. In late December there was a protest in Damascus for a secular state and, unfortunately, quite a number of well-known regime supporters were involved in organizing it. There weren't many revolutionary flags in the crowd, though there were some. This was potentially a setback for secularism, a danger that as with socialism it becomes associated with the counter-revolutionary cause.

Some of the former regime supporters genuinely fear Islamism, but there is also a strong element of potentially losing their privileged position in society now that Assad is gone.

The other noteworthy element is all the

warlords and so on, on various sides, who have benefited from the war economy and therefore have an interest in seeing Syria destabilized so that conflicts continue.

However, I believe the overwhelming majority of Syrians, whether pro-revolution or pro-the former regime, have an interest in seeing the country return to some kind of normality and a stable situation. People want a functioning economy and a functioning country and I think that greatly strengthens resistance to attempts to prolong or regenerate armed conflict, and hopefully can override them.

SI: *What's your assessment of attempts to fan sectarianism on various sides?*

LaS: Actually I've been struck that so far there hasn't been a mass outbreak of intercommunal, sectarian violence. We're seeing for now isolated incidents that are undoubtedly being fanned and stoked by various actors to spread fear in communities and provoke violence. There's a lot of misinformation being circulated—for instance when the killing of former regime army officers and torturers is presented as persecution of Alawis. We shouldn't support random killings, we should support a legal process of justice and accountability, but it's a different matter from sectarian persecution. The flip side is that ensuring justice and accountability for the crimes of the old regime will help prevent wider outbreaks of sectarianism, and reassure minority communities that they are not a target.

To be fair the HTS leadership at least seems genuinely very concerned to try to prevent sectarian conflict.

SI: *The Kurdish question is obviously very important. How do you see it?*

LaS: It is undoubtedly a main flash point. The so-called Syrian National Army is really working to Turkey's agenda, which is to try to put an end to any claim of Kurdish autonomy in the north. More

broadly, though, there are not many Arab voices speaking out in defence of the Kurds. Some of this is Arab chauvinism or nationalism, which was promoted by the Arab-dominated Ba'athist regime. In the early days of the revolution, the Syrian National Coalition alienated the Kurdish population by refusing to even consider Kurdish autonomy. HTS have made some reasonable statements to reassure Kurdish communities, but at the same time they've failed to call out the Syrian National Army for the abuses and atrocities it is carrying out against Kurds.

Opposition to the Kurdish project is not all because of Arab chauvinism though. Some of it is political: for example, the perception that Kurdish-led forces at times collaborated with the Assad regime. There is also a genuine problem that over years the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces, the main Kurdish-led political-military coalition in north-east Syria] pushed its control well beyond the areas where Kurds have a clear majority and clamped down on any opposition. It created a system of rule that many found preferable to the Assad regime and ISIS, at the time when there weren't other alternatives; but now these communities would rather be governed by the transitional government. There have been protests against the SDF and some people arrested and shot, in Raqqa and other areas.

There are some difficult issues here. However, I've always supported Kurdish autonomy and I continue to support it. All communities should play a role in the future of Syria, in accordance with the specific needs and aspirations of each community. I believe a decentralized system could be the model which can ensure unity and stability long term.

SI: *What do you think about the view that exists among some on the left globally that Rojava is an anarchist paradise or something like that?*

LaS: Western leftists sometimes like slogans more than reality. In reality it's a mixed bag. A lot of what has been done in the Kurdish areas is genuinely progressive. Notably women's participation in political life and elevation to leadership positions, which is something I would wish to see all over Syria. There is also a genuine element of multi-ethnic political representation and governance, although you can question whether that would not also have existed in some form even without the specific PYD political project [PYD: the Kurdish party that dominates the SDF, linked to the PKK in Turkey]. In areas with mixed communities, people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds participated in local governance throughout the revolution. In Manbij, for instance, before SDF rule, the local council was already both Arab and Kurdish.

In any case, the idea that it's an anti-authoritarian, libertarian force is misguided. They have clamped down on opposition in the areas they run, not only Arab opposition but Kurdish opposition too. When I was in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2016, I came across a lot of young Syrian Kurdish men fleeing forced conscription by the PYD. There's a lot of people imprisoned in the SDF-run areas, and in recent weeks a significant number of arrests. That is not just a matter of jihadists or people supporting the Turkish agenda. There are communities with understandable grievances.

On the other hand, you can see why the Kurdish people and even the SDF leaders feel under siege and are highly distrustful. Like the Druze in the south, they're now being told to give up their weapons to a new Syrian army. I think it would be a mistake for them to do that without some real guarantees. In any case, it is a priority to speak out against the Turkish-backed forces and the atrocities they are committing. This risks sparking wider inter-ethnic

conflict and is an obstacle to future stability

SI: *The British media talks quite a lot about ISIS, for obvious reasons. Is it a real issue now?*

LaS: I think it is a real issue: there could be a resurgence. There are reports from eastern and southern Syria, though I don't know how accurate they are, of ISIS remnants capturing regime army caches and so have more access to weapons than they've had for a long time. We need to look into this.

The Kurdish-led SDF fought ISIS, of course, but so did various Arab, including Sunni, groups—including in fact HTS. One problem now is that after the fall of the regime Israel destroyed large amounts of Syrian government weaponry and military equipment, putting the new government in a much weaker position in this regard. Meanwhile if the U.S. withdraws its support for the SDF that could add to the ISIS problem.

SI: *If the left wants all foreign military forces out of Syria, how do we address that dilemma, in terms of U.S. support for the Kurds, which Trump may well withdraw for malign reasons?*

LaS: I don't know I have that much I can add except to say it is a dilemma. In general we should favor the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria: but this requires real assurances being provided for the Kurdish community that their rights will be respected.

SI: *Can you say a bit more about the intervention of outside powers?*

LaS: To start with Iran, lots of their military infrastructure in Syria has been completely decimated by Israel, and what's left has been pulled out, so militarily they're no longer a presence or problem. Where many think they are still playing a role is in the spreading of sectarian propaganda, coordinated in an organized way from inside Iran.

Russia I'm less actually clear on now.

They've done a partial pull-out, but they seem to still be present in the bases in the west of the country. Clearly they're having discussions with HTS, but beyond that it's unclear.

The main worries at the moment are Israel and Turkey, which are extremely active and aggressive in the south and north of the country.

SI: *And how could the upheaval in Syria influence other countries?*

LaS: I tweeted in the first couple of days of the regime falling that so many people in the countries of the "Arab Spring," who have faced a vicious counter-revolution, might now be looking to Syria with some kind of hope. It shows that there is hope, that both domestic and foreign oppressors can be defeated. We will see if it leads to a revival of people's struggles in some of those countries.

Syria was always presented throughout the region as the bogeyman—if you protest against your government you're going to end up like Syria, you're going to be completely destroyed. However, there's light at the end of the tunnel, as it turns out. Maybe that will help revive some activism in the region.

Many people in Lebanon will of course welcome the fall of a regime that previously lorded it over their country too. It is hard to know what it will mean for Hezbollah, who have their own problems after being so battered by Israeli attacks. Their murderous intervention in Syria in support of Assad—continuing in force even at times when Israel was invading Lebanon—was not popular amongst many at home.

SI: *You've flagged up the failings of the Western left on Syria. Can you unpack this further?*

LaS: The basic issue is that large parts of the Western left focus only on U.S. and Western imperialist powers, leading them to apologize for or support other imperial-

ists, such as Russia or in the case of Syria, Iran. Even worse, this means in many cases not supporting people's struggles against oppression, whether that's domestic oppressors or foreign imperialisms. This is a huge problem that is bigger than Syria, bigger than Ukraine: we see it playing out in many other struggles. Hong Kong is one that immediately comes to mind. By the way, this is why so many Syrians at all levels of society enthusiastically support Ukraine, which has been beautiful to see.

Campism is a very regressive and dangerous ideology that is destroying the Western left internationally at just the time we need to be building our strength and unity against rising fascism and authoritarianism, against the climate crisis, against increasing conflict. We're not in a place to do that because of these reactionary "left" actors whose politics have little connection to struggles happening in the real world.

In the case of the Syrian revolution, many Western leftists did everything they could to defend the Assad regime and malign and slander the Syrian opposition, calling them all jihadists, or CIA-backed, or agents of Israel—that one's very popular at the moment—and all the rest of it.

SI: *There's an irony, that many of the same leftists are in other contexts uncritical or supportive of Islamism.*

LaS: It depends which Islamists. Syrian democrats were slandered as Islamists and presented as something to fear, but then the same left-wingers have no problem with Hezbollah or Hamas. It's campism again: you don't analyze the forces on the ground, it's really only who they're resisting that matters. If it's Israel and the United States, leftists are supportive, no matter who's fighting them; but if it's another camp, they take a very different view.

I should stress that most of the Westerners I've worked with in support of

Syrian struggles are leftists. There is still a strong strand of the left who believe in internationalism from below and have a decent analysis. I also think the invasion of Ukraine did force some people to reassess Syria, through the channel of Russia's role in both. I would also question whether there was an element of not having such negative stereotypes about white Europeans. In any case there was some positive reassessment.

Nonetheless, the *dominant* organized left has been terrible. The main so-called anti-war organizations, whether that's Stop the War in the UK or Code Pink in the U.S., have in one way or another supported brutally repressive regimes against the wishes of the local populations, including in Syria. That's also true of leading political figures on the left, Jeremy Corbyn, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and so on, and also prominent left-wing intellectuals. It's a long history too—if you take Noam Chomsky, for instance, it goes back to what he said about Bosnia in the 1990s and even issues before that.

Since the Assad regime fell many of its apologists are trying to rehabilitate themselves as legitimate critics, with concerns about the rights of minorities and so on. We need to highlight the role they've played, because these people will never be allies in liberation struggles

SI: *Last but not least, what practical solidarity is needed?*

LaS: In terms of internationalist calls, we should call for all foreign militias to leave Syria. We should call for an end to sanctions on Syria so that Syrians can go forward with the rehabilitation and reconstruction they desperately need. I think there's also a role for international justice and accountability mechanisms for people accused of war crimes—primarily regime people, but also from other factions that committed war crimes. Related to this, we need to

support people fighting for transparency and documentation relating to prisoners and the killed and disappeared.

Beyond that, it's a matter of identifying who on the ground is organizing what struggles for peace, for democracy, for women's and minority rights, and for social justice; and providing as much political and practical solidarity as we can. In the coming months it will become much clearer who

those groups and individuals are.

NOTES

1. United, Not Homogenous," Jan. 5, 2025, <https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2025/01/05/united-not-homogenous/>
2. Omar Hassan, "This revolution is just getting started": an encounter with the left in Damascus," Red Flag, Jan. 3, 2025, <https://redflag.org.au/article/this-revolution-is-just-getting-started-an-encounter-with-the-left-in-damascus>.

CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



Omar Aziz (Abu Kamel), *Syrian anarchist, economist, intellectual and revolutionary*. Aziz was living in exile in Saudi Arabia and the United States, but returned to Syria in 2011 at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War against Assad's regime. Aziz helped distribute desperately needed humanitarian aid in the Damascus area, and in his writings advocated for grass roots revolutionary organization: local councils, four of which were established in the suburbs of Damascus in opposition to the Assad government. In 2013 he was arrested; he died shortly after.

Omar Aziz wrote about "the innate ability of people to govern themselves without the need for coercive authority."

He "promoted local self-governance, horizontal organization, cooperation, solidarity, and mutual aid as the means by which people could emancipate themselves from the tyranny of the state."

"The local Damascus area committees became examples of non-hierarchical self organization to have emerged from the countries of the Arab Spring."

"By March 2016 it was estimated that there were 395 active councils in cities, towns and neighborhoods."

— *Leila Al Shami*

"A revolution is an exceptional event that will alter the history of societies, while changing humanity itself."

The new self-organized social formations that are emerging "will allow people to take autonomous control of their own lives, to demonstrate that this autonomy is what freedom is made of."

"We [the councils] are no less than the Paris Commune workers. They resisted for 70 days. We are still going."

— *Omar Aziz, shortly before his arrest*

Syria: From Secular Dictatorships to Islamist Populism

SAEED RAHNEMA

THE INCREDIBLE AND THUNDEROUS fall of the Assad regime marks a new phase in the life of this war-torn country. Syria has never experienced a moment of peace since its inception. Various nationalities and ethnic groups, with diverse religious affiliations, have lived in this ancient land, either under the control of colonial or imperialist powers or subjected to military dictatorships. Understanding the complexities of the present moment is impossible without a brief look at the country's tragic history.

The Ottoman Empire controlled Syria and its environs since the early sixteenth century. In 1918, in the midst of World War I, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, with the backing of the British Empire, launched a rebellion against the Ottomans. After the war, Hussein's son Faisal took over rule of Syria with the support of the emerging Arab nationalist movement. But this coincided with the occupation of French forces. Anti-French sentiment was growing and, for a time, the "Arab Kingdom of Syria" was created. But it did not last. Eventually, with agreements between the British and French

imperialists, the area was ceded as a League of Nations mandate to France. In 1920, the French military deposed Faisal—whom the British made King of Iraq—and many Syrian intellectuals went into exile. Syria remained under the harsh rule of French imperialism until "independence" in 1946.

A better understanding of the political situation in Syria requires an appreciation of multiple and interrelated dimensions, namely, imperialism, Arab nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, military dictatorship, Arab neoliberalism, and involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Below, we will briefly touch on aspects of each of these.

Imperialism and Arab Nationalism

During the French Mandate in Syria, France secured its dominance by exploiting ethnic and religious differences, including regionalization of the country according to the areas in which each of the religious minorities was concentrated. Accordingly, they formed separate state governments for the Alawites—an offshoot of Shia Islam (about 12 percent of the population) and Druze (about 3 percent). The Sunni majority (about 74 percent) and Christians (about 10 percent) wanted to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria, but the Alawites, who at the time were largely rural and among the poorest people, many of whom worked for Sunni landowners, cooperated with the French despite the initial and spo-

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radic conflicts. France incorporated many of them into the army and administrative apparatus, thinking that a Syrian government made up of this minority would need French support forever.

When France withdrew from Syria in 1946, the majority of army officers and government cadres were Alawites, Druze, and Sunni Kurds. Successive governments since Syria's independence have been drawn mainly from the Alawite minority, the most notable of these being the Assad family. This provided the basis for the anger and resentment of the Sunni majority, which was the forerunner of Arab nationalism, and the anger of Syrian Christians, who, unlike Lebanese Christians, were not inclined towards the French.

In 1928, parliamentary elections were held, and a draft constitution was created, which was rejected by France, leading to uprisings against French rule. In 1936, France agreed to recognize Syria's independence but retained its military control over Syria.

Another significant issue was France's decision in 1939 to cede (for its own interests) the Alexandretta (Iskenderun) region—a critical coastal area in the Mediterranean, part of the Aleppo province—to Turkey. The Turkish population of this area was a minority, with the majority being Syrians of different ethnic groups. The loss of this important area sparked nationalist sentiment in Syria. Previously, the ground for nationalism had already been laid during the Ottoman era, especially after the rise of the Young Turks in 1908 and the imposition of the Turkish language, and was intensified by the fall of Faisal. It was after the Alexandretta issue that Syrian nationalist youth began to form organizations that led to the formation of the Arab Ba'ath Party, officially founded in 1946. In 1952, it merged with the Arab Socialist Party and created the Arab Baath Socialist

Party. It was in this context that the Syrian Arab Republic was formed—despite having a sizable non-Arab population.

Military Dictatorships and Religious Fundamentalism

After independence, Syria witnessed the formation of unstable governments and successive coups. In 1958, Syria joined with Gamal Abdel Nasser, the most prominent figure in the Arab world after he nationalized the Suez Canal, in forming the United Arab Republic. This alliance brought no benefit to Syria, effectively turning it into a kind of colony of Egypt governed by a dictatorial regime. Syrian nationalists, including the Ba'ath Party, which had initially supported this unity, began to pursue alternative solutions. In 1961, a group of Syrian officers seized political power and dissolved the United Arab Republic. In 1963, officers affiliated with the Ba'ath Party organized another coup. Internal Ba'athist conflicts led to yet another coup in 1966. The defeat of Syria in the 1967 war with Israel, discussed below, further fueled internal divisions, and in 1970, Hafez al-Assad, who was then the minister of defense, took power in an internal coup.

Assad's rise to power marked the end of the regime's instability and the beginning of an unchallenged dictatorship. Although, like many other Syrian post-independence leaders, he was from the Alawite sect, he established a secular regime. The first constitution of 1930, which had been revised several times, required the president to be Muslim, but in 1973, Assad removed this constitutional requirement, marking the beginning of Islamists' more intensive opposition to his rule. Violent confrontations between these factions and the regime, along with ongoing political assassinations, deepened the violent atmosphere in Syrian society and triggered a form of civil war. The Muslim Brotherhood, which

had long gained influence among Syria's Sunni majority, increased its activities in predominantly Sunni cities. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, which had brought a fundamentalist Islamist—though Shia—regime to power, had encouraged the Syrian Sunni fundamentalists to challenge Assad's power. Following a ban on the group and the flight of its leaders, repression escalated. The Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in the city of Hama in 1982 led to a widespread massacre by the Syrian military. That same year, Israel invaded Lebanon, and Israeli military confrontations with Syrian forces, which still had a presence in Lebanon, further exacerbated the situation inside Syria.

"Infatih": Arab Neoliberalism

The economic policies of Syria's early post-independence governments, in the absence of a capitalist class—aside from merchants and a few industrial owners—were characterized by state capitalism with some social welfare programs under the guise of "socialist" policies. Starting in the 1970s, under Hafez al-Assad's rule, a gradual shift towards open-door policies, known as "Infatih"—similar to the post-Nasser programs in Egypt launched by Anwar Sadat—was adopted, and a capitalist class began to emerge around the regime.

With the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War and Syria's support for Iran, the Arab states distanced themselves from Syria. Iran's aid, including cheap oil and other financial supports, could not sustain the necessary investments for economic development. The Assad regime therefore resorted to other means of supporting the country's economy, including the production and trafficking of drugs. In 1991, the government adopted a new Infatih policy, which was essentially a form of Arab neoliberalism. This was largely in response to the demands of the emerging capitalist class, primarily made up of the children

and cronies of military and government officials. By this time, private investment

Syria, like many other Arab countries, used the Palestinian issue as a pretext for advancing its political agenda rather than truly seeking Palestinian liberation.

had overtaken state investment. Like in other countries, the rapid growth of a new middle class changed the class structure of Syrian society, further deepening the class divide between capitalists, the new middle class, and workers and peasants.

When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, who had neither the interest nor the ability to lead politically. The same neoliberal policies continued, and the limited reforms that had been promised failed to materialize. Attempts to improve relations with the United States, especially during the "War on Terror," and Syria's cooperation in the U.S. outsourcing of the interrogation and torture of detained Islamists did not lead to any substantial change. With the onset of the "Arab Spring" in 2011 and the brutal suppression of the peaceful uprisings, Syria's political and economic problems reached a peak. Over a decade of civil war, coupled with U.S. sanctions, destroyed Syria's economy, exacerbated poverty and misery, and intensified the anger and dissatisfaction of the Syrian people.

Involvement in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

From the very beginning, Syria has been more involved in the Israeli–Palestinian

issue than any of its Arab neighbors. During the first Arab–Israeli war (1947–1949), Syria lost the hugely important UN-declared “demilitarized zones” near Lake Tiberias and the Jordan River.¹ In the 1967 war, Syria also lost the Golan Heights. The loss of the Golan, which Israel annexed in 1981 despite UN Security Council resolutions, was a significant blow to Syria, both strategically—with its 1,000-meter-high elevation—and economically. The area is rich in agriculture, livestock, and, more importantly, water resources, with discharges reaching about 3,000 liters per second. After occupying the Golan Heights, Israel expelled more than 170,000 Syrian villagers and allowed about 15,000 Druze to remain. It confiscated fertile lands and established Jewish settlements. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Syria was able to regain part of the region, now called the “buffer zone,” where United Nations peacekeepers (UNDOF) are stationed, the same area that Israel has once again occupied after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

Under the Assad regime, Syria, like many other Arab countries dealing with Israel, used the Palestinian issue as a pretext for advancing its political agenda rather than truly seeking Palestinian liberation. For instance, when King Hussein of Jordan carried out a massacre of Palestinians in 1970, Salah Jadid, leader of the left-wing faction of the Ba’ath Party and effectively the country’s number-one figure, asked Hafez al-Assad, who controlled the air force, to provide cover for Palestinians fleeing to Syria, but Assad refused. (Following ideological disagreements, Assad later orchestrated a coup and removed and imprisoned Jadid, who died after twenty-three years in jail.) Hafez al-Assad even created the pro-Syrian Palestinian group As-Sa’iqa to rival and weaken Yasser Arafat and Fatah. Moreover, when he intervened in Lebanon’s civil war,² he fought on the

side of the right-wing Christian forces against the leftist and Palestinian coalitions, partly hoping that the United States would pressure Israel to return the Golan Heights to Syria. Throughout the reign of both Assads, Syria provided no real assistance to the Palestinians. However, Syria’s involvement in ongoing wars with Israel and its rising defense costs have only limited the possibility of improving the conditions of the Syrian people.

The Rapid Collapse

The series of factors mentioned above increasingly distanced the Assad regime from the Syrian people and further and further delegitimized it. The more the regime’s distance from the people grew, the more it became dependent especially after 2015 on its two sole foreign allies—Russia and Iran. These allies, in turn, used Syria to advance their own policies.

Russia has had a close relationship with Syria since the Soviet era. Syria has been strategically important to Russia, especially since the Soviet Union’s naval bases in Egypt were dismantled, and Syria has been the only possibility for the presence of the Soviet/later Russian naval fleet in the Mediterranean.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been close to Syria both religiously and strategically from the beginning, particularly concerning Lebanon and Hezbollah and the regime’s anti-Israel policy, and provided substantial military and financial assistance to maintain Assad’s rule.

However, a series of unpredictable events in the region and beyond began to trouble these two main allies of Syria. Russia’s war with Ukraine and NATO’s counteraction, coupled with broad sanctions, severely limited Russia’s economic and military capacity, forcing a reduction in its support and military presence in Syria. Iran, too, faced more difficulties after

the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack and Israel's genocidal and destructive response, which included renewed conflict with Hezbollah and severe damage to it, as well as the Iran–Israel missile war related to Israeli assassinations of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders. The continuing sanctions and the confluence of several internal crises further constrained Iran's ability to offer large-scale assistance to Syria. With the reduction in foreign support, the Assad regime could no longer maintain power on its own.

Opposition forces, which already controlled significant parts of the country, began to advance, sensing the weakness of the Assad regime. A careful review of reports and credible writings reveals the sequence of events. On November 27, 2024, the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a splinter faction of al-Qaeda, merging with other Islamists, began its advance. It was joined by the Syrian National Army (SNA), a faction armed, trained, and funded by the Turkish government, which includes

When France withdrew from Syria in 1946, the majority of army officers and government cadres were Alawites, Druze, and Sunni Kurds.

jihadist elements and has been deployed in the past against Syrian Kurds. Aside from historical rows with Syria, Turkey faced two significant issues: the presence of nearly three million Syrian refugees in the country and the existence of a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria near the Turkish border. Taking advantage of new developments, Turkey supported both HTS and the SNA. A third group, distinct from the other two, is the

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), primarily consisting of Kurdish forces that govern the region of Rojava autonomously and cooperatively. Their military branches, including the women's units, fought heroically against ISIS. The support of the United States and the presence of American troops in the area prevented Syrian and Turkish forces from attacking them. This group also initially occupied areas in the southern part of its region (Deir ez-Zor) and to the west (across the Euphrates River).

In the initial reaction to the rebel offensive, the Assad regime sent forces to confront the opposition. The Russians immediately entered the scene and bombarded many rebel positions. As the fighting continued, in the south of Syria, in the Daraa region near the Jordanian border (which was the starting point of the 2011 uprising and civil war), independent opposition forces, not connected to the extremist factions, clashed with the Syrian army and liberated the area. As the fighting progressed, Syrian soldiers, dissatisfied with their situation, showed little interest in fighting. The regime's hasty decision to raise their salaries did little to help. One Syrian battalion, along with all its equipment, even fled to Iraq and surrendered. From this moment on, the opposition's advance continued without resistance, and major cities, including Damascus, were eventually occupied.

This process of rapid regime collapse shows that, contrary to many claims, the fall of Assad's regime in eleven days was not a pre-designed foreign conspiracy, although when the regime started crumbling, foreign actors got involved. When Assad "heard the voice of the people" (the famous line used by the Shah of Iran just before the fall of his regime in 1979) and realized that his army was not fighting and his allies could no longer keep him in power, he signaled that he was willing to step down. The

Russians reached the same conclusion. It is unclear who contacted the leadership of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to inform them that Assad would leave and that there would be no need to attack and destroy the capital and government institutions. The Russians evacuated Assad and his family, and Assad's prime minister remained behind to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power to the opposition. The terrifying experience of Iraq and the "de-Ba'athification" policy implemented by the U.S. occupiers, which played a major role in the creation of ISIS and the power vacuum that resulted from the dismantling of government ministries and institutions, encouraged both sides to reach this compromise.

The opposition leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammed al-Julani), craftily appeared with a democratic façade and promises of unity, claiming to respect the rights of all ethnic and religious minorities, the right of women to choose their attire, and guaranteeing property rights, all while assuring that there would be no threat to the United States and Europe. He also declared that Russia could retain its airbase in Hmeimim and its naval base in Tartus.

The people of the Middle East are well acquainted with such promises during political transitions. There is no doubt that the fall of Assad's regime marks a significant turning point in the history of Syria and the Middle East. The joy of the majority of Syrians at being freed from a brutal dictatorship and the absence of political freedoms and democracy is entirely understandable. The important and complicated issue, however, is the nature of the political system that will, in practice and not just in words, replace the old regime. The sad reality is that the main force of this regime is the Islamist extremists. Once they stabilize their rule, they will implement policies based on their funda-

mentalist religious beliefs. We have seen this in Iran and Afghanistan. Secular and progressive forces in Syria, weakened by decades of suppression, killings, and exile, are scattered and frail. Syrian society faces numerous internal and external challenges. There are deep ethnic and sectarian divisions, a bankrupt economy, and the return of millions of refugees will only add to the problems.

External pressures and threats will be intensified. Israel, as the biggest winner of current events, is already exploiting the situation, reoccupying "temporarily" [*sic*] the demilitarized buffer zone in the Golan Heights. (More inexplicable is the inaction of the 1,100 UNDOF peacekeepers stationed in the area.) We may soon witness the expulsion of Syrians of different ethnicities living in this strip. Simultaneously, Israel has conducted extensive bombing campaigns, destroying Syrian military and naval bases and facilities, thereby obliterating the country's capabilities to resist future Israeli attacks.

Turkey is another major winner, expanding its influence in Syria through its proxies and preparing to end the semi-autonomous region under the Kurds as soon as the 900 remaining American forces leave the area. Already, the SNA has taken over some areas under Kurdish control. Interestingly, when the Kurdish SDF moved west of the Euphrates to repel Turkey's proxy attacks and took control of that area, the U.S. commander ordered them to vacate the area immediately, threatening to withdraw support for the Kurds if they didn't comply.

Washington is in a most farcical situation, waiting to see whether the new leader, who has a \$10 million U.S. bounty on his head, would behave, and has already started negotiations with him. If so, Syria will ideally be expected to join the "Abraham Accord" and, with the influx of Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari funds, follow a new round

of neoliberal “infatih” and unite with the other Arab friends of the U.S.–Israel. But if, in a less likely situation, this demand is not fulfilled, and depending on the extent to which Syria stays away from the United States, the country will be dragged to the ground with crippling sanctions and, if necessary, with a military attack.

Russia is one of the major losers of these transformations. It is less likely that it could fully maintain its air and naval bases, but it will try its best to have a limited presence and continue selling arms regardless of the new regime’s shape or political nature. China, also indifferent to the new Syrian regime’s intentions, will try to develop its relations and enter into long-term economic cooperation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is undoubtedly the main loser in these events. The two regimes of the Islamic Republic and Syria had the closest relationship. The Islamic Republic spent billions of dollars to maintain its presence in Syria. It resorted to all sorts of actions, including sending Afghan refugees in Iran to fight against Assad’s opponents. A large and unspecified number of members of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and dozens of its “generals” were killed in efforts to maintain Assad’s power. Syria was a crucial part of the “Axis of Resistance” and a route for the passage of military and financial aid to Hezbollah, as well as for exerting influence in Lebanon to further the regime’s anti-Israeli policies. With the loss of Syria, the possibility of assisting Hezbollah, which successive Israeli strikes had already debilitated, has been lost as well.

The bitter reality of the current political moment is that despite the end of over half a century of Assad family dictatorship,

Syria still faces deeply complex issues. The religious sectarianism of the newly empowered Sunni majority against the Alawites, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Shiites, Ismailis, and Druze, and the ethnic sectarianism of the Arab majority against the Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, and Circassians, will remain significant obstacles to democracy in Syria. Another troubling reality is the presence of religious fundamentalists in the government. The return of the Golan Heights, which is not only politically but also economically vital for Syria, will not be easy, and constant tension with Israel, especially with the rise of more extreme right-wing religious forces in that country, will complicate matters further. Turkey’s interventions and its efforts to weaken and strike at the Kurds will also be a major barrier to establishing democracy in Syria. The Islamic Republic of Iran will try its best to continue its intervention in Syria in various forms.

Like other countries in the Middle East, Syria needs a secular, democratic, federal, and progressive government. However, despite all the pessimism expressed in this article, if the secular forces opposing Assad act in unity at this moment, before the new regime is firmly established, they may be able to force the current ruling power to adhere to some of the promises made by its leader in recent days.

NOTES

1. Saeed Rahnema, “Obstacles to Palestinian-Israeli Peace,” *New Politics* (Dec. 9, 2023), <https://newpol.org/obstacles-to-palestinian-israeli-peace/>.
2. Saeed Rahnema, “How Different Is the Fourth Israeli Invasion of Lebanon?” *New Politics* (Nov. 27, 2024), <https://newpol.org/how-different-is-the-fourth-israeli-invasion-of-lebanon/>.

Zionism: A Sui Generis Settler Colonialism

SAMUEL FARBER

SETTLER COLONIALISM IS VERY MUCH alive in the state of Israel today. Open a newspaper anywhere in the world and you are likely to see reports about Israel's genocidal war in Gaza and about Palestinians injured and killed in the West Bank, the demolitions of their homes, and the expulsion of the families who had lived there since long before the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. Jewish settlers, mostly of the Orthodox religious persuasion, are doing everything they can, including the creation of aggressive settler militias, to expand their control of that Palestinian region with the tacit—and often explicit—approval of the Israel Defense Forces.

The origins of Israeli settler colonialism can be traced to the several waves of Zionist immigrant settlers or *aliyot* (the plural of *aliyah*, “ascent” in Hebrew) that played a critically important role in constructing Israeli society. The first three, and most important, *aliyot* took place from 1881 to 1923; but it was only the second and third *aliyot* (1904–1914 and 1919–1923 respectively) that left a model and legacy of landholding and administration for the Zionist state. As scholars Gershon Shafir¹

as well as Yoav Peled and Horit Herman Peled² have pointed out, the goal of the first aliyah was to settle the land through privately owned, self-sustaining farms that hired experienced and cheap Palestinian agricultural labor. But according to these authors this model failed because, at the time, the Zionist movement did not have the financial resources to acquire land for the newly arriving settlers, especially as the price of land had skyrocketed due to Zionist demand and because under both Ottoman and British laws land already owned by Jews could be legally sold to non-Jews. This problem was solved with the practice established by the second *Aliyah* to develop self-employing cooperative settlements on non-alienable, nationally owned land financed by public funds. This new approach also led to the settlers' “conquest of land” from the Palestinians and their exclusion from Jewish-owned and -controlled land. It also established the foundation for the “conquest of Jewish labor,” which minimized and downgraded, when it could not eliminate, the participation of Palestinians in the economy at large, a situation somewhat like the treatment of Native Americans in the United States.

This characteristic of the Israeli case makes it different from other settler colonies, such as South Africa, where the native population was indispensable as the labor force to be exploited by the white colonialists. The Israeli settler colonialist

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case was also different in that a new social category of people, namely refugees, fleeing in desperation from the Nazi totalitarian system expanding in Europe after the early thirties, arrived in Palestine. Theirs was an immigration based on fear and persecution far more than economic or political reasons. These immigrants were critical in considerably enlarging the Jewish population of Palestine, with 35,000 Jewish refugees arriving there after Hitler took power in Germany in 1933 (about three times that of the previous year), over 45,000 in 1934, and more than 65,000 in 1935.³ This massive immigration to Palestine surpassed, just in those three years, the combined numbers of the first three ideological *aliyot*. Large numbers of refugees from the postwar displaced persons camps arrived in later years, particularly in the late forties and early fifties. The establishment of the state of Israel further encouraged that immigration, with 101,828 Jews arriving in 1948; 239,954 in 1949; 170,563 in 1950; and 175,279 in 1951.⁴ While most of these people did not become settlers in the tradition of the first three *aliyot*, if they were not already, they were quickly transformed into Zionists who condoned, at least implicitly, the systematic discrimination against and repression of Palestinian Arabs.

We must keep in mind that this process of emigration to Palestine took place at a time when it was very difficult to enter the economically developed capitalist countries, as had been the case with Great Britain since 1905 and the United States since 1924 with the adoption of immigration laws that sharply restricted the entry of Eastern Europeans among other groups of foreigners. It is important to note, as Zachary Lockman did in his book *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948*, that of the approximately 2.4 million Jews who left Tsarist Russia and Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1914,

85 percent went to the United States, 12 percent went to other Western Hemisphere countries (mostly Canada and Argentina), Western Europe, and South Africa. Less than 3 percent went to Palestine, and a substantial proportion of these, did not stay there for long.⁵ Considering this, an argument could be made that absent the nativist and racist U.S. immigration legislation of the 1920s that established the quota system there might not have been a state of Israel, or at least not with the size and form it took after its foundation in 1948.

Comparatively speaking, it is certainly true that Palestine was not the only place where new waves of immigrants joined the earlier founding settlers. This was also the case of the United States, Canada, and Australia, to name the most prominent countries where this occurred. A similar process occurred with the lesser-known case of Algeria, where the French authorities were compelled to populate Algeria with white immigrants from the Mediterranean

While 206,000 Polish Jews
voted in the international
Zionist congress elections of
1935, only 116,000 did so in
1937 and 114,000 in 1939.

basin (Spain, Corsica, Italy, and Malta) from the very beginning of their rule.⁶ But this immigration, like most of the immigration into the above-mentioned English-speaking countries, was overwhelmingly motivated by economic forces, sometimes reinforced by the desire to flee religious and political discrimination, while the Jewish emigration to Palestine from the early thirties to the early fifties was overwhelmingly motivated by extra-economic

factors, including the immediate need for physical security and protection from the liquidationist totalitarian Nazi rule, or of its consequences, as witness the tens of thousands of Jews who ended up in displaced persons camps after the end of the war. And unlike in other cases, for these Jewish survivors, it was impossible to return to places from which they came, such as Poland, due to the waves of antisemitism and pogroms taking place there, whether during the war, as in the case of Jedwabne in 1941, or after the war, as in the cases of Krakow on August 11, 1945, and of Rzeszow and especially Kielce in 1946.⁷

It is perhaps ironic that for many decades, the Zionist movement itself was not interested in massive Jewish emigration to Palestine. The principal Zionist leaders accepted the usually limited number of immigration certificates issued by the British Palestine Mandate authorities and trained the selected Zionist volunteers who were not only able and willing to move to Palestine, but also able to contribute to the economic development and the physical defense of the Zionist settler society and polity. This selective Zionist policy was consistent with the notion expressed by David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, that if it came to choosing between ten thousand Jews who would be beneficial to Palestine and the “rebirth” of Israel or a million Jews who would be a burden, the ten thousand Jews should be saved.⁸

These selected certificates contradicted the criteria for membership used by the Zionist movement for which the only requirement was a monetary contribution to the Zionist organization, in the form of a “shekel” to be purchased from the organization itself. This was a passive conception of membership that did not commit the new, especially adult, members to any kind of actual involvement in political activity. This was compatible with the socioeconomic

character of the sections of the Jewish middle class (primarily based on people working in the small business and professional sectors of the economy) that constituted the bulk of at least the leadership and cadres of mainstream General Zionism. This political current led by Chaim Weizmann, a scientist and first president of Israel, was the predominant Zionist tendency from the movement’s earliest years until the late nineteen twenties. General Zionism left a political and ideological legacy that continued to influence later dominant Zionist tendencies.

Zionism as a European Political and Social Movement

Perhaps the most significant feature revealing the sui generis character of Zionist settler colonialism is that it emerged from a political and social movement that, during the years preceding World War II, was in sharp competition with other Jewish political movements in Poland (the focus of this article) and the rest of East Central Europe, where European Jewry was concentrated during the interwar period. There was an intensely politicized society, particularly among the younger generation of Jews born between the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. Most of the members of these cohorts joined one or another of the competing Jewish (and sometimes non-Jewish) political and social movements vying for their support. There were hardly any politically apathetic Jewish youth. This was facilitated by the fact that the Jewish community was far from being socially and religiously monolithic. This was certainly the case in Poland, the most important Jewish center with its approximately three million Jews (some 10 percent of the total Polish population before World War II). Jewish scholar Max Weinrich, a founding member of the culturally influential

Yiddish language YIVO organization, described Polish Jewry in 1935, as culturally and socially divided into four camps: a traditional [religious] camp, a Yiddish secular camp permeated by socialist and communist influence, a Zionist-Hebraist stratum, and the assimilated environment.⁹ The Yiddish secular camp included the vital Jewish labor movement that was for the most part under the leadership of Bundist and Communist anti-Zionists.¹⁰

Contrary to what some critics of Zionism maintain, Zionism was in fact an important part of Jewish social and political life in interwar Poland and East Central Europe, particularly during what historian Ezra Mendelsohn calls Zionism's "formative years," 1915 to 1926. But as we shall see, Zionism suffered from substantial organizational ups and downs, notwithstanding its large organizational apparatus of a couple of hundred people.¹¹ If we use electoral success as an indicator, we find that mainstream General Zionism¹² ran candidates and often succeeded in the elections held under the Polish republic established after World War I. Mendelsohn notes that Zionist candidates tended to do well in parliamentary (Sejm) elections but much less so in city council and Kehile (Jewish community) elections. It is also worth noting that Zionist candidates tended to do better in the south (Galicia) and in the northeast border areas (the so-called Kresy) than in central, so-called Congress, Poland, which included Warsaw, Łódź, and other big Polish cities.¹³

In any case, Zionism's attempt to obtain hegemony in the Jewish political world was strongly resisted and contested by other Jewish political forces, such as the socialist Bund on the left and the religious anti-Zionists on the right. In fact, there were occasions when mainstream General Zionism was electorally defeated by even relatively small political groupings such as

the Folkists, a nonsocialist, anti-Zionist Yiddishist formation that counted amongst its leaders the well-known Jewish historian Simon Dubnow. Symptomatically, this defeat took place in the municipal election held in Warsaw in 1916 when the Folkist candidate accused the Zionists of making unprincipled deals with the Orthodox and the assimilationist Jews as well as with antisemitic Poles.¹⁴

The Zionist movement undoubtedly got a big boost, in terms of attention by the Jewish public, from the Balfour Declaration of 1917, but as Mendelsohn explains, the great expectations the Balfour declaration created were soon replaced by bitter disillusionment. The World Zionist Organization was incapable of funding large-scale *aliyah* to take advantage of the favorable historical conjuncture, and the British government, notwithstanding the Balfour Declaration, was not prepared to allow unlimited emigration to Palestine. However, in 1924–26, when the United States was just beginning to implement a restrictive immigration quota system, for the first time more Polish Jews emigrated to Palestine than to that country. However, this fourth *aliyah* ended in 1926, when Palestine entered a period of economic crisis that not only ended this *aliyah* but forced many Jews who had already emigrated to Palestine to return to Europe.¹⁵ As a Zionist activist cited by Mendelsohn noted, this situation led to a severe crisis and a truly unprecedented Zionist collapse by 1926.¹⁶

During the 1930s, and particularly after the death of Marshal Józef Piłsudski in 1935, the rise of extreme antisemitism in Poland combined with the British decision to substantially diminish Jewish emigration to Palestine on account of Palestinian Arab resistance as manifested in the major 1936 Revolt. These led to the decline of the relatively moderate General Zionism of the first quarter of the twentieth century

and the rise of right-wing and left-wing forces. On the right, there was growth of the ostensibly more militant and militaristic Zionist revisionism, which borrowed much from the traditional militaristic Polish right and from Italian Fascism. And on the left, there was Jewish anti-Zionism principally represented by the Bund.¹⁷ According to the historian Kenneth B. Moss, while 206,000 Polish Jews voted in the international Zionist congress elections of 1935, only 116,000 did so in 1937 and 114,000 in 1939. At the same time, there was a dramatic rise in Jewish electoral support for the socialist Bund: municipal elections in December 1938 and May 1939 brought large Bundist victories among Jews in many large cities and even in some smaller places. Moss suggests that some of those who voted for the Bund in 1938–1939 were new supporters previously unfamiliar with the party's culture, program, and ideology.¹⁸ It is tragic that the rise of left anti-Zionism in Poland happened shortly before Poland was attacked by Germany from the west and the USSR from the east (as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) marking the beginning of World War II on September 1, 1939. These invasions ended Polish independence and placed the Jewish people in extreme danger.

The Nature of Mainstream Zionist Politics

Mainstream General Zionism demonstrated a strong proclivity to a politics of transaction focusing on the deals it could make with friends and enemies alike and stood in stark contrast with the Jewish working-class socialist Bund and other left-wing organizations (including some socialist-Zionist *youth* groups) that placed their main emphasis on mobilizing and organizing their members for political action on behalf of their goals.

Aside from its reliance on the politics

of transaction, the mainstream General Zionism that predominated until the late twenties was rooted in some of the most pessimistic and conservative features of Jewish Ashkenazi political culture, particularly the idea that antisemitism is an incurable and permanent feature ingrained in every social and political organization if not the human condition itself. Consistent with this outlook, mainstream General Zionism, like many other ethnic nationalisms, by and large abstained from even trying to win over non-Jewish majorities, or at least sections of it, to fight against antisemitism. Instead, it adopted a purely transactional approach based on the notion that because they are weak, Jews should use their scarce political resources in exchange for the support of the powerful to advance the goals of Zionism, i.e., the emigration of Jews to Palestine. This outlook led mainstream General Zionism, and later the state of Israel, to make opportunistic deals with every kind of political party and force, including bloody dictatorships in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere.¹⁹ This political attitude was shared by the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine (the Yishuv) that led them, for example, to sign the Haavara Agreement with the Nazi government in August 1933, allowing Jews to leave for Palestine. This agreement materially benefited Germany since it greatly facilitated the takeover of Jewish commercial and residential property, although German Jews were allowed to transfer a small proportion of their property to British Mandatory Palestine. This took the form of emigrants selling their assets to pay for German goods sent to Palestine in their name. The agreement also violated the international boycott of Germany, and for this reason many Jews opposed it, including even the right-wing Revisionist Zionists. This transactional approach drew on old, even medieval, Jewish traditions represented by the historical

figure of the *shtadlan*, the intercessor with the non-Jewish authorities on behalf of the Jews, and the vehicle through which the Jews paid ransom (or bribes) to the authorities to obtain their desired concessions. As a modern adaptation of that ancient tradition, Zionism eliminated the *shtadlan* middleman and carried out the bargaining process directly.

In contrast with the transactional politics of Polish mainstream General Zionism stood the socialist Bund's alliance with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), whose position on Jews and antisemitism was wobbly and sometimes fearful but who on several important occasions was won over to fight and defend the Jews against the actions of Polish antisemites. Polish mainstream General Zionism did make (usually unsuccessful) proposals to other Polish minority groups for building joint political action, but when it came to try to win over at least part of the 70 percent of ethnic Poles in the country, mainstream Zionism was generally not interested. Undoubtedly, as difficult as that task would have been, the failure to try was related to the Zionist notion of the inevitable and incurable nature of antisemitism.

Possibly the most important example of mainstream General Zionist politics appealing to the powerful involved its dealings with Scottish-born white supremacist and antisemite Arthur Balfour, who, as British prime minister in 1905, had presided over the parliamentary approval of the Aliens Act primarily aimed at stopping Jewish immigration to Britain. On November 2, 1917, Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour issued on behalf of the British government the so-called Balfour Declaration supporting the creation of a "national home" for the Jewish people in Palestine. The Declaration was the product of intensive lobbying by important Jewish and non-Jewish British politicians and personalities prodded by

Chaim Weizmann. In his memoirs, Lloyd George, who had become British prime minister in December 1916, stated that the Declaration was a reward for the important work that Weizmann, as a chemist, had done in the production of acetone for the Ministry of Munitions.²⁰

More generally, the mainstream Zionist

Unlike in other cases, for these Jewish survivors, it was impossible to return to places from which they came, such as Poland

transactional approach to World War I was devoid of any democratic political principles. The Zionists did not oppose both sides of the imperialist war from the perspective of the right of self-determination of all nations against colonial and imperial rule, which included the Tsarist empire's oppression of the millions of Jews under its rule. In fact, the policy of the Zionist movement, as transmitted by its emissaries who functioned as roving organizers, was to ask Jews to enlist in the armies of their respective countries to show themselves as the most loyal subjects of their respective governments, to earn the respect and gratitude of their rulers. Partly because of this policy, half a million Jewish soldiers, including Zionists, faced each other on European battlefields at the beginning of the war, with their numbers doubling as the war went on, some of them politically motivated by the rationalization that their country's victory would hasten the conversion of their Zionist dreams into reality. Similarly, right-wing Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky moved to create a national Jewish military unit to join

the British army, presumably to improve the chances of obtaining Palestine as a reward from the British government. In Lwow, in eastern Galicia, Zionists raised a Jewish army at the outbreak of the war following the example of Polish nationalist followers of General Pilsudski, who supported the war against Tsarist Russia to pursue his Polish national aspirations and supported the Austrian imperial aims that Pilsudski perceived as favoring Poland's interests.²¹

Most socialist (and liberal) parties tended to support one of the contending sides in World War I; namely, the side of their own government. In doing so, the socialist parties were breaking with the antiwar policies adopted at the congresses of the Socialist International. While mainstream international Zionism officially declared its neutrality in the war, this position was entirely disregarded by Zionist national sections on both sides of the conflict. This was like the behavior of most socialist parties except for the important difference that the Zionist national sections were acting in conformity with the long-held Zionist policy of supporting their own governments. Thus, at the outset of World War I, German Zionists in Berlin—at the time the center of world Zionist political activities—joined in support of the war effort and even discontinued publication of *Die Welt*, the politically important international Zionist organ. Shortly after, German Zionists managed to become officials of the German occupation in the Ober Est region, which comprised present-day Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Courland (western Latvia). German General Erich Ludendorff, the head of that German-occupied zone, even permitted collections for the Zionist controlled Jewish National Fund in the areas under his control. Zionists such as Franz Oppenheimer, a medical doctor turned social scientist, who played an important role as a theoretician of the early Zion-

ist settlements in Palestine, went so far as to maintain that only under Prussian discipline would Jews be able to develop normally.²² Nevertheless, it is doubtful that a victorious Germany would have been interested in supporting Jewish settlements in Palestine, since unlike the British who wanted to have a friendly ally to make the route to its important Indian colony more secure, Germany had no such equivalent interest, aside from the fact that it was actually allied in the war with the Ottoman empire, then ruling Palestine.

On the domestic front, mainstream Zionist commitment to transactional politics was perhaps even more devoid of any politically principled basis including a willingness to do business with declared antisemites and other enemies of Jewish interests. Thus, for example, in January 1919, Zionist members of the Sejm supported the right-wing candidate Wojciech Trampczyński for marshal of that parliamentary body, in return for which they were given seats on various parliamentary committees. Although in the following year, the mainstream Zionist parliamentary group changed its policies to vote with the left on matters of general interest while remaining wholly independent on matters of specific relevance to Jews, it never veered away from its transactional politics with its deeply ingrained opportunistic political roots.²³ Thus, several years later, in 1925, the Polish government reached the so-called Ugoda agreement with the mainstream Zionist parliamentary deputies who were supposed to gain from the agreement several concessions to improve the living conditions of Polish Jews. But partly under the pressure of the Polish far right, the government reneged on its promises on living conditions and did not even bother to publish the text of the agreement. As historian Ezra Mendelsohn put it, “the Ugoda was now seen more and more as a shameful episode

in modern Zionist history.”²⁴ It is clear in this instance that the Polish government did not have much to fear from the predictable lack of militancy and even gullibility of the Zionist parliamentarians.

It is true that mainstream General Zionism sometimes acted to better the conditions of the Polish and East Central European Jewries where they lived and to defend them from antisemitism. In an important sense, this was a predictable byproduct of the Zionist aspiration to hegemony over Jews in Europe in order to enhance its bargaining power vis-à-vis the gentile authorities to pursue the Zionist’s ultimate goal of emigrating to Palestine.²⁵ That is why Zionists ran for political office and demanded national rights and autonomy for the Jewish community in its dealings with the various governments of the Polish Republic established after World War I. That is also why Zionists were sometimes willing to and, in a sense, had no choice but to engage in self-defense struggles against pogroms and other forms of antisemitic attacks. Historian Jan Rybak cites several instances of such defense struggles organized by Zionists including their response to the pogrom that took place in Kazimierz, the Jewish section of Cracow, in 1918. As described by Rybak, about 100 Jews that included Zionist activists and members of Poale Zion and its youth group—i.e., the most politically active Zionist sectors in contrast with the middle-class mainstream General Zionists who usually did not participate in self-defense activities—armed themselves with sticks and iron rods among other weapons to confront the pogromists while several thousand Jews gathered to protect their neighborhood.²⁶

The Ups and Downs of European Jewish Interest in Palestine

Among the numerous Jews in Poland and East Central Europe there was very little

interest in emigrating to Palestine based on historical or religious reasons such as the mythical restoration of the long-lost Jewish homeland. The great majority of Orthodox religious Jews, led by their party Agudat Yisrael, thought of Zionism as sacrilegious since only the Messiah could restore Jews to their “ancient home.” Only a relatively small minority of Orthodox Jews belonging to the Mizrachi organization supported and were part of the Zionist movement. Basing himself on the accounts of Zionist emissaries (roving organizers) in Poland, historian Kenneth B. Moss writes that these emissaries encountered very little “full-fledged investment in socialist-Zionist ideology or any kind of myth-infused relationship to the Yishuv [Palestinian Jewish community] and its achievements....” The Zionist “idealists” among the local Zionist youth that emissaries visited across the length and breadth of Poland seem to have been substantially outnumbered by a large group of young people driven by a raw desire to leave Poland and by a smaller but far from negligible subset of searchers pulled towards critical enquiry regarding the realities and potentialities of the Yishuv and Poland alike.²⁷

In general, the Polish and East European Jews of the interwar years wanted to know if Palestine was a viable place for them in terms of its size and economic prospects, as they were considering fleeing the increasing antisemitism that was taking place in Poland, particularly in the 1930s. Marshal Pilsudski’s Sanacja government, which ruled Poland from 1926 to 1935, was relatively tolerant of the Jews, but when he died in 1935, and under the pressure of the rabidly antisemitic Endecja party led by Roman Dmowski (and with Hitler in power in neighboring Germany), Poland became increasingly oppressive of its Jewry, especially under the military-led OZON (Camp of National Unity) regime

that succeeded Pilsudski. Included among the highly oppressive new measures implemented in the 1930s were quotas sharply limiting Jewish entry into Polish universi-

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ties, and the segregationist practice of allowing Jews to sit only in certain parts of school classrooms. In addition, there were organized boycotts of Jewish businesses, which were generally small, but that quickly worsened the economic situation of the Jews. Physical attacks on Jews by right-wing thugs in Polish streets also became part of the Jewish reality.

It could be said that as a general tendency, it was the Jewish defeats and pessimism about their condition and the lack of alternatives perceived as realistic and actionable that constituted the basis for Jewish attraction to Zionism in Poland and East Central Europe in the interwar years. But this must be qualified by those factors that made emigration to Palestine a practical impossibility. Even though such emigration became more feasible under British than Ottoman rule (before World War I) the British allowed only a certain number of Jews to emigrate to Palestine and this became even more limited after the Arab revolt that began in 1936. This situation led in turn to the British White Paper of 1939 that stipulated that only seventy-five thousand Jews would be allowed to emigrate to Palestine during the following five years. This was part of a Brit-

ish effort to limit the Jewish population to no more than a third of the total number of Palestine's inhabitants. Restrictions were now placed on the transfer of Arab land to Jewish ownership.²⁸ One result of the White Paper was a decline in Jewish interest in emigrating to Palestine except as a last resort and often via an illegal escape route. During this new period, the Balfour Declaration became in many ways a dead letter, although this had little practical effect during the World War II years when the international maritime transport of civilians entirely ceased in Europe. In sum, British imperialism had many different interests, and it is doubtful that loyalty to the Zionists and the Balfour Declaration ranked high among its commitments.

It is worth noting, as historian Jan Rybak has pointed out, that political enthusiasm in response to the revolutions in Russia and elsewhere often replaced Zionism. Rybak writes that towards the end of 1919 and first half of 1920, an increased number of radicalized Jewish activists began to rethink their relationship to Palestine as a national homeland and destination for Jewish emigration. "Why do we need Zionism if we have real socialism," exclaimed one activist.²⁹

European Zionist Knowledge of the Situation of Palestinian Arabs

Living in a European context that regarded Palestinian Arabs as socially and culturally alien, if not inferior, mainstream Zionist thought not only avoided discussing them, but even tended to negate their existence by talking about Palestine as an empty land, after Israel Zangwill's motto, "Palestine is a country without a people; the Jews are a people without a country," an example of what social psychologist Leon Festinger called "cognitive dissonance," which is an attempt to seek internal consistency by negating or distorting a reality that may

create dissonance. Other Zionists were willing to acknowledge the realities of a Palestine occupied by Palestinian Arabs, and in a relatively more benevolent and patronizing way, preferred to think of Zionist activity, particularly in the economic field, as a general good to be shared by Jews as well as by Arabs, thereby eliminating in their view the structural basis for conflict.

Opposed to those views, the Jewish socialist Bund, in the context of their ideological and political struggle against Zionism, emphasized the serious conflicts that Zionist entry into Palestine would generate with the Palestinian Arabs who had lived and worked on that land for centuries. Some left-wing Zionists seem to have shared some of the concerns that troubled the Bund. Historian Kenneth B. Moss cites the example of Zionist emissary Miriam Shlimovits, in her report about her visit with members of the group HeHalutz (which trained young Jews for agricultural settlement in Palestine) in the town of Kolki in 1933 to 1934. Shlimovits mentions critical questions that members of HeHalutz had raised regarding Jewish Zionist activity in Palestine, which included “doubts about the socialist *kosherness* of the struggle for Hebrew labor.” Moss clarified that this occurred in the context of ideological disputes that these members were having with other Zionists, among them the right-wing revisionists (as well as, one would assume, other Zionist groups directly benefiting from the exclusion of Palestinian Arabs).³⁰ Of course, the Arab revolts of 1929 and especially the one that broke out in 1936 and was widely reported on in the international media could not but make Jews in Poland and elsewhere aware of the Palestinian Arab opposition to Jewish immigration.

A Concluding Note

The issues analyzed here are part of the his-

tory that eventually led to the establishment of the state of Israel, to the accompanying Palestinian Nakba, and later to the extension of Zionist military rule over entirely Palestinian areas such as the West Bank. This is a tragic story because, among other reasons, Palestinian Arabs ended up paying an astronomical price for the genocidal and barbaric European antisemitism. The intense politicization of the Jewish population in Poland and East Central Europe during the two decades between the two world wars, including the rise of Jewish socialist anti-Zionism in the late thirties, was powerless and unable to stop Nazi brutality from wiping them out, notwithstanding heroic efforts such as the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion in 1943. It is also tragic because millions of Jews came to see Zionism, and the oppression of Palestinian Arabs, as the only alternative after the killing of six million Jews under Nazi rule. Even if Palestine was the only possible place for Jewish refugees to enter, that in no way justified the long history of Zionist oppressive and discriminatory practices against Palestinian Arabs who have been justified in protesting and rebelling against Zionist rule.

NOTES

1. Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
2. Yoav Peled and Horit Herman Peled, *The Religionization of Israeli Society* (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2019), 31–52.
3. Tom Segev, *A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 244.
4. Jewish Virtual Library, A Project by AICE, American Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 1993.
5. Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies. Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 25.
6. Adam Shatz, *The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 121.

7. Jan T. Gross, *The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and Michał Borwicz, "The Orchestration of Rage," in Adam Michnik and Agnieszka Marczyk (eds.), *Against Anti-Semitism. An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Polish Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 78.
8. Cited by Segev, *A State at Any Cost*, 343.
9. Kenneth B. Moss, *An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 100.
10. Moss, *An Unchosen People*, 283.
11. Ezra Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland: The Formative Years, 1915–1926* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 333.
12. Mainstream Zionism (usually referred to as General Zionism after 1907) should be distinguished from left-wing Zionism and from right-wing revisionist Zionism that differed from the mainstream current in some important respects, while maintaining crucial similarities with it. There were also marginal Zionist minority currents such as the "spiritual" Zionism of Ahad Ha'am that made no territorial claims on Palestine; the at-the-time still existing Territorialist camp that preferred an emigration location other than Palestine; and Poale Zion. The latter organizationally broke with the international Zionist organization from 1909 to 1939, preferring Yiddish to Hebrew as a way of reaching the Jewish working class, and unlike mainstream Zionism, which strongly supported the war on *both sides of the conflict*, joined the Zimmerwald movement in supporting neither of the contending World War I camps.
13. Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of Central Eu-*

- rope Between the World Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 19, 22.
14. Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland*, 50–51.
15. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of Central Europe*, 60–61.
16. Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland*, 261.
17. Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland*, 337.
18. Moss, *An Unchosen People*, 317.
19. See, for example, Lenni Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1983).
20. Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 187.
21. Jan Rybak, *Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe: Nation Building in War and Revolution, 1914–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 27–59.
22. Rybak, *Everyday Zionism*, 27–59, 151–98.
23. Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland*, 132.
24. Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland*, 307.
25. We can note here some similarity to the role played by conservative Black leaders in the Civil Rights movement. Moderate Black leaders such as Roy Wilkins, leader of the NAACP, did everything he could to stop Black radicals from carrying out their action plans. But at the same time, in order to maintain his own authority and prestige as well as that of the NAACP, he had to do some things on behalf of Black people.
26. Rybak, *Everyday Zionism*, 151–98.
27. Moss, *An Unchosen People*, 218–19.
28. Segev, *A State at Any Cost*, 285.
29. Rybak, *Everyday Zionism*, 244–86.
30. Moss, *An Unchosen People*, 217.

Richard Wright and the French Left

A Controversial Reception

NEDJIB SIDI MOUSSA

THE DISCUSSIONS SURROUNDING Donald Trump's reelection were notably prevalent in France's political discourse, resembling the treatment of a national issue. This phenomenon can be attributed to the longstanding historical ties between the two nations. Nevertheless, the imbalanced dynamics between the leading and seventh largest economies in the world is often viewed through the prism of "cultural imperialism," generating both fascination and aversion within the French Left.

Numerous examples from the twentieth century highlight this trend, particularly during the Cold War, when the expansion of American power paralleled the decline of the French empire. The rising importation of cultural commodities, like music, cinema, and literature, frequently incited significant controversies among educated groups, especially those influenced by the pro-Soviet French Communist Party (PCF), which was the leading political force at the end of World War II.

This essay focuses on the critical response to the works of Afro-American author Richard Wright (1908–1960) as perceived by the French left. Additionally, the discussions surrounding his literary

contributions and political engagement highlight ongoing concerns, including the conflict between nationalism and internationalism, the viability of a Left that remains autonomous from both Wall Street and the Kremlin, the fluctuation between essentialist and universalist perspectives, and the challenge of envisioning an emancipatory path that transcends partisan sectarianism.

The popular daily *Ce soir*, run by the Communist writer Louis Aragon (1897–1982), condemned what it termed the "coca-colonization of France" on December 31, 1949. This phrase, which combined anti-imperialist ideology with nationalist sentiments, was later reiterated by *L'Humanité*. On March 4, 1950, the official newspaper of the prominent PCF proclaimed that "the French won't be coca-colonized," illustrating a nationalistic reaction to the perceived threat from "Uncle Sam."

The critique of American imperialism frequently exhibited a degree of ambivalence, despite its intensity. For example, the official weekly publication of the PCF, *France nouvelle*, disseminated the Zhdanov Report on October 25, 1947, which underscored "the American plan to enslave Europe." Nonetheless, between 1945 and 1948, the Communist weekly *Les Lettres françaises* championed the books of Wright, alongside other leftist publications that enthusiastically embraced the French trans-

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lations of his acclaimed novel *Un Enfant du pays* (*Native Son*) and his autobiography *Black Boy*, in 1947.

The anti-imperialist discourse of Communist intellectuals was largely shaped by the strategic imperatives of the Soviet Union, leading to the promotion of anti-

Initially celebrated as a “genius autodidact,” by 1948 Wright was labeled a “saboteur,” accused of attempting to “incite foolish racial animosity between Blacks and Whites.”

American campaigns alongside a sustained engagement with the “Black question” in the United States. In the 1940s, Wright captured the interest of leftist critics in France due to his notable accomplishments, yet his public disassociation from the Communist Party USA diminished his favor among the pro-PCF press.

In February 1948, Jean Kanapa (1921–1978), a Communist intellectual who was influential during the cultural Cold War in France, launched a fierce attack on Wright in an article that criticized “American cultural imperialism” from a patriotic viewpoint. At that time, Wright was living in Paris and had close ties with the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), who directed the existentialist journal *Les Temps modernes*, as well as with the Senegalese intellectual Alioune Diop (1910–1980), who edited the pan-African magazine *Présences africaines*.

In doing so, Kanapa mirrored the criticisms from American Communists directed at Wright, aiming to challenge the French cultural elite that lauded the renowned

author. Yet, *Les Lettres françaises* initially celebrated Richard Wright as “a genius autodidact” on September 10, 1947. However, by February 5, 1948, he was labeled a “saboteur,” accused of attempting to “incite foolish racial animosity between Blacks and Whites” and of portraying African Americans in a manner akin to that of racists, in stark contrast to Langston Hughes (1901–1967), who was largely “ignored” by the Parisian cultural establishment.

The ties between Wright and the French Communists further eroded after his address at an international meeting convened by the Revolutionary Democratic Rally (RDR), an independent leftist party, in December 1948. Speaking to a crowd of five thousand Parisians, which included significant figures such as poet André Breton and writer Albert Camus, Wright concluded his discourse on intellectual freedom and authentic internationalism with the statement: “The world is greater than America or Russia. Humanity is greater than America or Russia. That is a fact. If we believe it, we shall conquer.” His notable speech was featured in the socialist daily *Franc-Tireur* on December 16, 1948, as well as in *La Gauche*, the official organ of the RDR, on December 20, 1948.

In response, André Wurmser (1899–1984) penned a provocative article for the Marxist monthly *La Nouvelle critique* in January 1949. The Communist journalist criticized independent leftist intellectuals for creating confusion among the French people at a time when the threat of “American colonization” was becoming increasingly apparent. Wurmser took issue with Wright for equating America and Russia, which the famous writer labeled as “symbols of the nationalistic scourge of our times.” Although Wurmser condemned nationalism, the French journalist supported both internationalism and patriotism, referencing the socialist leader Jean Jaurès

(1859–1914): “while a little dose of internationalism separates a man from his country, a large dose brings him back.”

The hostile campaign did not cease. In February 1949, Jean Kanapa, director of *La Nouvelle critique*, reviewed “two novels about the situation of Black Americans”: Chester Himes’s *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* (*S’il braille, lâchez-le...*) and Ann Petry’s *The Street* (*La Rue*), both translated into French. Contrary to the favorable responses from the French cultural press, Kanapa asserted, “I have a distaste for these works, and I even regard them as *fraudulent*; rather than making a positive contribution, they detract from the emancipatory efforts of Black individuals in the United States.” This Communist intellectual contended that both Himes and Wright undermined the alliance between Black individuals and the white working class by characterizing this relationship as “unstable” or “temporary.”

Richard Wright’s participation in the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists, which took place in Paris in September 1956, was noted without hostility by Marcel Egretaud (1910–1976) in an article for *La Nouvelle Critique* published in November 1956. The French activist lamented the absence of the Communist artist Paul Robeson (1898–1976) and the pan-African intellectual W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963), whom he referred to as “eminent sons of the American people” who were unable to overcome the constraints of McCarthyism. In September 1960, Wright was favorably cited by Monique Lafon in the Communist magazine. Nevertheless, the “materialist” author was strategically opposed to the Senegalese intellectual Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) to challenge the Negritude movement and its celebration of “ancestral customs.” Furthermore, the French translation of his novel *The Long Dream* (*Fishbelly*) garnered acclaim from Marie-Thérèse Moget in *La Nouvelle*

Critique in October 1960. Wright passed away shortly after experiencing a form of “rehabilitation” by two French women.

In contrast to the media outlets associated with communism, the socialist press, which largely aligned itself with the United States, along with independent intellectuals, continued to express their support for Wright. After World War II, the literary critic and left-wing activist Maurice Nadeau (1911–2013) played a significant role in promoting him in cultural circles in France. When Nadeau interviewed Wright for the leftist daily *Combat* on May 11, 1946, the notorious writer delivered the following statement: “There is not a black problem in the United States, but a white problem.” When Nadeau reviewed *Native Son* for *Combat* on July 11, 1947, the journalist wrote: “the genius oversteps racial, social and national categories within which it was born and flourished.”

Nadeau’s analysis placed Wright, celebrated as “one of the greatest writers of our time,” in opposition to Claude McKay (1890–1948) and Langston Hughes, whose literary works “distinctly exhibit their ethnic backgrounds.” In a similar vein, Nadeau reviewed *Black Boy* for the socialist weekly *Gavroche* on February 4, 1948, contending that “the book should not simply be included in the canon of black American literature, but rather esteemed as a masterpiece overall.” Through his commendation of this exceptional writer, the French journalist underscored his own humanist and universal principles, which are foundational to his revolutionary ideals.

While reviewing the French translation of *The God That Failed* (*Le Dieu des ténèbres*) on June 8, 1950, Nadeau could not conceal his disappointment. This collective volume, edited by Richard Crossman, a key anti-communist activist in the British Labour Party, prompted a critical response from the literary critic. Although he ac-

knowledgeable Ignazio Silone's perspectives, Nadeau appeared to dismiss Wright's input, articulating his critique with a pointed statement: "An intellectual who seeks validation from the Communist Party regard-

"The world is greater than America or Russia," Wright concluded. "Humanity is greater than America or Russia. That is a fact. If we believe it, we shall conquer."

ing his intellectual status is either naïve or overconfident."

Despite the harsh criticism, the bond between Nadeau and Wright remained intact. Following the establishment of his literary magazine *Les Lettres nouvelles*, the leftist journalist featured two of Wright's essays: "Ce que tu ne sais pas ne peut pas te faire mal" (*What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You*) in June 1953 and "Suis-je un Africain?" in December 1954. The latter publication heralded the forthcoming translation of Wright's book, *Puissance noire* (*Black Power*). Nadeau served as the editor for the volume in his series titled "Le chemin de la vie" (*The Path of Life*), which was published by the Parisian house Corréa/Buchet-Chastel in 1955. *Black Power* received a favorable review from the French poet Serge Brindeau (1925–1997) in *La Revue socialiste* in January 1956. Nonetheless, Brindeau remarked that "R. Wright seems to have decided to abandon his scruples as a rationalist and largely positivist intellectual, seemingly motivated by a sense of responsibility."

Anti-colonialist and socialist author Daniel Guérin (1904–1988) emerged as

a significant supporter of Richard Wright within the French leftist movement. Between 1946 and 1949, Guérin traveled to the United States, where he engaged with Trotskyist activists and intellectuals, including C.L.R. James (1901–1991). Upon his return to France, he published a two-volume work titled *Où va le peuple américain?* (*Where Are the American People Going?*) in 1950 and 1951. This publication was edited by prominent French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre as part of their series "Les Temps Modernes" for the Éditions Julliard publishing house. The second volume notably focused on the theme of the "Negro revolt." During this time, Guérin also met Wright, who, along with Camus and Sartre, co-signed a collective statement condemning the American government's refusal to grant a visa to Guérin. This statement was published in *L'Observateur* on April 19, 1951. Shortly thereafter, Guérin invited Wright to speak at an event organized in Paris by the leftist weekly.

The French translation of *The Color Curtain* (*Bandoeng. 1.500.000.000 d'hommes*) was released in 1955 under the editorial guidance of the right-wing, pro-American thinker Raymond Aron (1905–1985) as part of his "Liberté de l'Esprit" (Freedom of the Spirit) series, published by Calmann-Lévy. Nevertheless, Guérin reviewed Wright's book for *France Observateur*, the successor to *L'Observateur*, on February 23, 1956, remarking: "The concept of 'racial inferiority' was a fundamental aspect of the Bandoeng Conference. The ideological differences were overshadowed by the strong and often irrational impact of the 'anti-racist racism' that existed among colonized peoples. Wright is forthright in his assessment, emphasizing the limitations and failures of the Conference."

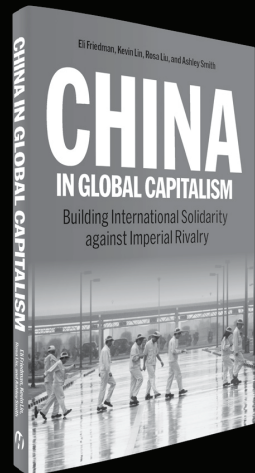
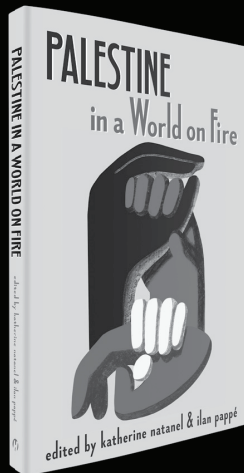
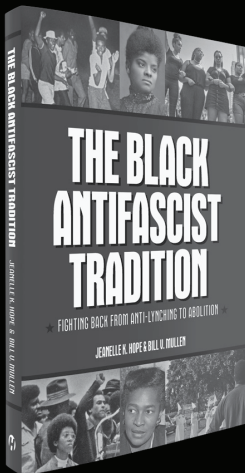
In 1963, Guérin articulated his persistent engagement with the "Black question"

by publishing *La Décolonisation du Noir Américain* (*The Decolonization of the Black American*). A decade later, he released a revised edition titled *De l'Oncle Tom aux Panthères noires* (*From Uncle Tom to the Black Panthers*), which he dedicated to his esteemed friend Richard Wright, recognized as “the master of the American novel.” The first chapter of this work, which delves into the analysis of racism, emphasizes the contributions of Afro-American writers. Guérin remarked, “It is difficult to find a reader who can approach the works of Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, to mention only a few prominent figures, without experiencing a deep emotional engagement.”

Presently, certain aspects of the debate may seem peculiar or outdated. The collapse of the Soviet Union has diminished the significance of the PCF, and the socialist press in France has nearly disappeared.

Nonetheless, this does not indicate that sectarian behaviors or hegemonic inclinations have ceased to exist. At the same time, for various reasons, both favorable and unfavorable, the appeal of the United States has risen among French activists and intellectuals, especially those in search of experiences and narratives to address racism. This legitimate endeavor is often tied to selective appropriation, the neglect of historical contexts, and a focus on identity rather than a socialist viewpoint. But the contentious responses to Wright during the Cold War reveal that these issues are not recent. Furthermore, these controversies highlight that an independent path is always possible. Working-class internationalism, in conjunction with secular humanism, persists as an effective approach to avoid transatlantic misunderstandings and to confront the pressing challenges that we currently face.

NEW BOOKS FOR CHANGING THE WORLD



Looking Up or Down for Labor Revitalization?

STEVE EARLY

TWO YEARS AGO, THE BUREAU OF Labor Statistics released updated union density figures for 2022. The number of union members was larger by several hundred thousand. But per usual, the unionized portion of the total U.S. workforce was smaller than the previous year—this time declining to 10.1 percent from 10.3 percent. (Due to continued workforce growth averaging 1.5 million annually, that’s now down to an historic low of 10 percent).

As *In These Times* labor columnist Hamilton Nolan reports in his new book, *The Hammer*, this was not good news after “a year in which unions were historically popular with the public, high profile union drives were heavily covered in the mainstream press, and Democrats controlled Washington.”

Two female labor leaders, highlighted

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The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor

HAMILTON NOLAN
Hachette Books, 2024, 260 pp.

We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big

ERIC BLANC
University of California Press, 2025,
312 pp.

in Nolan’s book, had varying reactions. Liz Shuler, new president of the AFL-CIO, hailed “the momentum of the moment we are in” and the large numbers of “working people rising up despite illegal opposition from companies that would rather pay union-busting firms millions than give workers a seat at the table.”

Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants/CWA and a member of the AFL-CIO executive council, offered

a more self-critical assessment. According to Nelson, “these numbers are incredibly disappointing” and a sign that “the labor movement is not meeting the moment.” To better respond to workers “real desire to join unions,” she argued that the latter will have to do “something pretty extraordinary.”

In *The Hammer* and Eric Blanc’s just published *We Are the Union*, both authors tackle a perennial question facing the labor left—namely, what kind of break with business as usual, within organized labor, would help many more workers win union recognition, first contracts, and strikes.

Both books went to press before the results of the 2024 presidential election

were known. Even in the more favorable scenario of a Kamala Harris presidency, major unions would have still struggled to consolidate recent contract campaign and strike gains, while trying to figure out how best to “go bigger” in their new organizing.

Now they will be fending off an all-out right-wing assault under a second Trump Administration, this time guided by the union-busting agenda of Project 2025, from the Heritage Foundation. Labor will not have friends at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) like General Counsel Jennifer Abruzzo; her Republican successor and Trump-appointed federal judges hostile to collective bargaining, will reverse, as quickly as they can, the many helpful NLRB enforcement actions of the last four years.

Breaking with Business as Usual?

Nolan and Blanc bring a shared generational perspective on the revived labor militancy and flurry of new organizing recounted in their books. Both come from union families shaped by the radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nolan grew up in the south, where his parents once belonged to the October League, a Maoist group that believed they should take blue collar factory jobs to become “embedded in the proletariat.” The author’s first and only organizing experience, as a reporter, was at Gawker, a now defunct new media outlet whose editorial staff in NYC unionized with the help of the Writers Guild-East.

This 2015 victory was followed by organizing wins at other online publications like *Salon*, *HuffPost*, *Slate*, *Vox*, and *Vice*. As Blanc documents in greater detail, the News Guild’s initial failure to capitalize on this union revival among younger media workers soon led to a successful internal union challenge to the Guild’s longtime national president, Bernie Lunzer. Since he was defeated in 2019 by Jon Schleuss,

a then 31-year-old organizing committee member at the *Los Angeles Times*, the Guild has become what Blanc calls a “powerhouse of new organizing.”

Now a labor relations professor at Rutgers, Blanc grew up in San Francisco, where his father was a longtime central labor council activist and advocate for a labor party. His mother was an elementary school teacher, elected as president of the United Educators of San Francisco on a reform slate ten years ago. A former high school teacher himself, Blanc’s own previous book, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*, chronicled the 2017-18 uprising in public education in Oklahoma, West Virginia, Arizona, and other states.

Both authors rely on case studies of recent organizing, bargaining, or strike activity to make their argument about what needs to be done to change the current imbalance of power between labor and

To keep their spirits up during their difficult contest with management, *Times* organizing committee members reassured each other that “we have more power than we know.”

management in the United States.

In *The Hammer*, Nolan first profiles a model 20-year collaboration between the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to build Child Care Providers United (CCPU), a state wide organization of family day care providers who now number 40,000 in California.

One key element of this effort was encouraging often “marginalized and ignored working people” to act like they were part of a union, long before they had an established bargaining unit. As Nolan reports, CCPU “got thousands of workers to pay voluntary dues of ten dollars a month long before any collective bargaining law covering them was passed.” Their continual grassroots mobilization, aimed at state legislators in Sacramento, won a series of financial concessions prior to Gov. Gavin Newsom signing a bill finally “giving child care providers the right to negotiate as a group” five years ago.

Turning to the private sector, Nolan similarly praises the integration of internal and external organizing, contract campaigning, political action, and chain-wide walkouts by hotel workers in Las Vegas and other cities. As a national organization, Unite-Here is only “moderately sized.” But its three hundred thousand members have long punched way above their weight, thanks to what Nolan calls “deep organizing, bitter strikes, militaristic discipline, and collective sacrifice by tens of thousands of working people.”

Even amid widespread layoffs, due to pandemic disruption of the hospitality industry in 2020–22, Unite Here “rolled out its most ambitious election door-knocking campaign in history.” More than 1,000 of its well-trained, highly motivated rank-and-filers fanned out in Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Georgia to help prevent right-wing Republicans from gaining control of the Senate. (With a new cohort of volunteer canvassers, the union tried to have the same electoral impact in battleground states, last fall.)

National Bargaining Fights

In his detailed account of a 2021 contract fight between the new corporate owners of Nabisco and several hundred workers at its Portland, Oregon plant, Nolan

confirms that “blue-collar union strength not only still exists, but is still able to be a bulwark against the vampires of capital.” The national organization involved—the 138-year-old Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM)—was not known to be a “particularly bold union.” Yet many of its rank-and-file members rejected industry-wide demands for concessions, backed up by lay-offs and outsourcing threats across the country that year.

The result was strikes at Frito-Lay, Nabisco, and Kellogg’s. (After the 11-week walk-out by 1,500 cereal makers in three states, one of the BCTGM local presidents involved, Dan Osborn, decided to run for the U.S. Senate as a labor-backed independent candidate from Nebraska.) In Portland, the new owner of Nabisco was Mondelez International, a “gargantuan, self-described global snacking powerhouse.” In an earlier bargaining impasse, Mondelez (like Boeing and other major firms) froze its defined benefit pension plan contributions and offered cheaper 401(k) coverage instead.

When management lawyers went to the bargaining table in 2021, the company had just closed cracker factories in Georgia and New Jersey, throwing nine hundred BCTGM members out of work. The price of keeping Portland open, they implied, was healthcare concessions, scheduling changes, and keeping temps in the plant.

Members of BCTGM Local 364 had already staged a sickout over pandemic related contract violations involving the use of temps. But they were part of a national contract bargaining process that involved Nabisco workers in four other states who were not necessarily “pissed enough to walk out.”

No Contracts, No Snacks

In August, 2021, the first national Nabisco

strike since 1969 occurred anyway, with far less planning and coordination than Unite Here employs in its multi-state work stoppages at a nationwide hotel chain. Fortunately, Portland-area labor solidarity activists, in other unions and in Democratic Socialists of America, intervened in a helpful way. They encouraged strikers like Donna Jo Marks, one of the many brave rank-and-filers profiled in Nolan's book, to avoid over-reliance on traditional picketing because strikers were already being temporarily replaced by busloads of scabs protected by private security guards from the same strike-breaking firm hired by Nabisco.

Marks and her co-workers started building broader community, labor, and political support for their fight against this brand-name company. One of the most famous names in Hollywood, actor Danny DeVito, tweeted his support—"NO CONTRACTS, NO SNACK," which became the motto of the strike. Portland's newly unionized women's professional soccer team, the Thorns, showed up to picket, en masse. As production with a scab workforce lagged and Nabisco had greater difficulty filling orders, the broader disruption of global supply chains during the pandemic proved to be a strike ally as well.

After five weeks, a new contract offer, with modest raises and a \$5,000 signing bonus, was put to a vote. Most Portland strikers voted against the deal, because of concerns about new scheduling language; three-quarters of Nabisco workers nationally voted "yes" because the new contract "largely preserved the benefits of previous ones" (although not in the area of pensions).

In Nolan's view this and other BCTGM strikes four years ago nevertheless "played a significant role in the nationwide realization that workplace organizing offers a path for regular people to *do something*" and, in the process, can renew workers' "belief that

all is not lost, that people power is still real."

The Starbucks Model

As the Portland strikers returned to work, Starbucks baristas at three coffee shops in Buffalo were preparing for separate NLRB-conducted votes in December, 2021. A clear cut 19 to 8 victory at just one of them helped inspire like-minded fellow Starbucks workers across the country to join a network of rank-and-file organizers called Starbucks Workers United (SBWU). By late 2024, backed by Workers United/SEIU, they had helped 11,000 of their co-workers win bargaining rights at 500

Nolan confirms that "blue-collar union strength not only still exists, but is still able to be a bulwark against the vampires of capital."

Starbucks locations. They're now engaged in an on-going campaign to bargain a first contract with a \$110 billion firm employing 380,000 workers, which makes it one of the biggest restaurant companies in the world.

To Eric Blanc, this "worker-to-worker" organizing breakthrough is worthy of close study and wider emulation. Starbucks' workforce was widely dispersed and fragmented into small, retail store size groups. SBWU had to develop union majorities, unit by unit and maintain them before, during, and after hotly contested NLRB elections. To discourage the spread of unionization, countless workers were harassed, several hundred were fired or suspended for their union activity, and, most consequentially, locations that voted for collective bargaining were illegally denied wage and benefit improvements granted to

non-union stores, as an incentive to keep them that way.

This was not membership recruitment conducted under the more favorable conditions of an SEIU-AFSCME campaign among publicly-funded child care providers in a union-friendly state like California or a Communications Workers of America (CWA) drive among wireless phone store workers covered by a card check and neutrality agreement, negotiated with an already unionized parent company.

Instead, for over two years, SBWU supporters faced a “scorched earth union busting campaign of unparalleled intensity and breadth,” which, according to Blanc, cost an estimated \$250 million. It was orchestrated by Littler Mendelson, a corporate law firm notorious (and often victorious) in the field of “union avoidance.” The author’s interviews with SBWU founders take readers of his book behind the scenes of an amazingly durable grassroots effort that began when “ten young radicals started salting Buffalo Starbucks stores in early 2021.”

Worker to Worker

By November of that year, billionaire Howard Schulz, the company’s founder and CEO, had to make a personal visit to Buffalo to help counter the influence of these pro-union “partners,” who he later complained were “outsiders trying to take our people.” Schulz’s appeal to company loyalty didn’t work; on average, over the next six months, SBWU filed almost two representation election petitions per day, imprinting what Blanc calls “worker-to-worker DNA into the entire subsequent trajectory of the campaign,” which could not have taken off, using a traditional staff intensive approach. Because of its do-it-yourself spirit, the campaign’s initial election win rate was a remarkably high 80 percent, Blanc reports.

Collective action—especially work

stoppages—were “key to sustaining momentum and forging solidarity” and keeping the pressure on management, he believes. “In addition to periodic nationwide mobilizations, many Starbucks strikes were begun locally as responses to grievances at their stores.” According to the author, SBWU also “did a great job fighting for and highlighting partial concessions from management secured along the road to a first contract.”

That goal suddenly became more achievable in February, 2024, when “Starbucks raised a white flag” and agreed to “begin bargaining in good faith and stop illegally denying equal benefits to unionized workers.” (Whether this process actually leads to a first contract remains to be seen; if the company’s new CEO changes course, in light of Trump’s victory and the resulting hobbling of the NLRB, labor relations at Starbucks could turn brutal again, very quickly.)

As Blanc sums up the lessons of the Starbucks fight so far, his good advice for labor organizations lagging behind is as follows: Develop and train more rank-and-file leaders in non-union workplaces, who “can self-organize and train others.” Use digital communication tools like Zoom “to quickly and widely scale up drives across huge spatial divides ... so workers can directly coordinate and support each other without relying as much on paid staff and union resources.” Increase funding for “widespread salting at strategic targets,” like Workers United did in upstate New York with a “crew of radical salts” whose efforts led to the formation of SBWU. And be ready to seize high-profile opportunities to “spread unionization as widely as possible,” as SBWU organizers did when they were deluged with appeals for organizing help from baristas around the country. In short, Blanc argues, “the labor movement needs to finally start acting like a movement again.”

New Voices at the AFL-CIO?

Unlike Blanc, Hamilton Nolan does much wistful thinking about the national AFL-CIO becoming an effective catalyst for mass organizing. When Service Employees President John Sweeney and Mine Workers President Rich Trumka took over the national labor federation in 1995, after winning its first contested election in a century, there were similar high hopes, on the left, that their “New Voice” slate—and headquarters staffers hired after it won—would help launch new industry-wide drives.

Under the old AFL-CIO regime of Lane Kirkland, the labor federation had already created an Organizing Institute “to train thousands of new organizers, jump-start union organizing nationwide, and reverse the decline in union density.” The OI’s first director was Richard Bensinger, now a Workers United staffer whose key Starbucks campaign role has become what Nolan calls “the capstone of a four-decade career of successful organizing.”

After Sweeney was elected, Bensinger led the charge to get all AFL-CIO affiliates to spend 30 percent of their budgets on organizing. But this New Voice attempt “to reorient the priorities of organized labor crashed on the rocks of big union apathy and independence.” A decade later, some of the biggest AFL-CIO unions—SEIU (under Sweeney’s successor, Andy Stern), the Teamsters (under James Hoffa), the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the Laborers—responded to that setback by creating their own new and improved U.S. labor federation. The Change to Win coalition quit the AFL-CIO with a quarter of its membership—more than five million workers who were not much consulted about staying or leaving.

According to Nolan, CTW was also not able “to organize effectively on a large scale, although there were some valiant attempts.” It was soon wracked with internal

dysfunction and jurisdictional conflicts of its own; by 2009, its better affiliates like Unite-Here were trickling back into the AFL-CIO. Others—like SEIU, the IBT, and the Carpenters—have still not “re-joined the AFL-CIO, secure in their belief that to do so would be a waste of time and money.”

Despite this useful reality check on prior efforts to reform the AFL-CIO or create an alternative to it, *The Hammer* entertains the fantastical notion that a single left-leaning member of the AFL-CIO executive council—namely, AFA-CWA leader Sara Nelson—could have been a more successful institutional change maker than the New Voice coalition and/or its later CTW defectors.

Labor Politics as Fantasy Baseball

This part of Nolan’s book reads like a labor politics version of playing fantasy baseball. It reprises his own gushing fan-boy coverage of Nelson’s many trial balloons about running for AFL-CIO president during what was expected to be Trumka’s final term in office. During that time, the charismatic and media-savvy AFA/CWA president became a much-applauded speaker at left labor events, solidarity rallies, and strike picket-lines. According to the author, she was trying to position herself as someone who could become a “spokesperson for the working class as a whole,” instead of being tethered to the job of “running an individual union” with “its narrow focus on a single industry.”

Nelson gave frequent press interviews, on a variety of labor and political topics. She made headlines in 2018 by calling for a general strike to protest President Trump’s furloughing of 800,000 federal workers during that year’s government shutdown. (In the four years that Nelson had served as president of her own 50,000-member union, she had not personally led a single

strike but, via that speech alone, she become “a national political figure,” according to Nolan.) The result was a wave of “enthusiasm for Nelson among the long-suffering radicals in organized labor” because they had, at long last, found “a credible candidate

To Eric Blanc, this “worker-to-worker” organizing breakthrough is worthy of close study and wider emulation.

to make unions badass again.”

Unfortunately, 72-year-old Rich Trumka had a sudden heart attack and died in 2021. The AFL-CIO’s 55-member executive council quickly named its Secretary Treasurer to serve out the remaining ten months of his term. This enabled Liz Shuler, a former local union and headquarters staffer for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to enter the 2022 AFL-CIO convention as a truly unbeatable incumbent president. Nelson ended up not challenging her—for the practical reason that no major union, including AFA’s own parent organization, CWA, supported that personal ambition!

Since taking over, Shuler is talking up her own plans for shifting more federation resources into what Nolan calls “a splashy new Center for Transformational Organizing.” It will have “the staff and resources to build multi-union coalitions to carry out the sort of sprawling, national campaigns necessary to unionize strategically important targets like Amazon, the gig economy, or the green-energy industry.” But the author remains unimpressed with the Center’s \$11 million a year budget (“better than nothing, but hardly adequate to be ‘transformational’”).

According to Nolan, “when you sweep away the words and look at the actual substance of the plans, you find the same old AFL-CIO.”

An Organizing Boost from Union Reform

Within the United Auto Workers (UAW) and NewsGuild/CWA, recent union democracy and reform struggles at the top have led to substantial organizational change, according to Blanc. This has taken the form of expanded organizing, more rank-and-file engagement in contract campaigns, and creative strike action. As labor researcher Chris Bohner has argued, direct election of top officers by UAW and Guild members—instead of the convention election system more widely used—was essential to ousting old guard leaders and making both unions more attractive to non-union workers, as an organizing vehicle, in their respective industries

Given the UAW’s much bigger size, the positive impact of the election of Shawn Fain and other members of Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) to leadership positions, two years ago, is more widely known. Blanc captures a common dynamic of both election upheavals, “in which small pockets of newly organized, radicalized young workers played an out-sized role.” He lauds the UAW’s reformed leadership for new internal and external organizing initiatives which have “raise[d] expectations, tap[ped] into anger at corporate overlords, and show[n] that workers can win big through mass militancy.”

It was no easy task rallying a rank-and-file understandably “cynical and checked out” after years of Solidarity House corruption and dysfunction. Yet, in 2023 bargaining with the Big Three, using membership education and mobilization, unprecedented bargaining table transparency, and a selective strike strategy, the UAW was able to

make major gains, after years of divisive and demoralizing concessions. As a result, newly energized and inspired UAW supporters at Volkswagen in Tennessee achieved a major southern organizing breakthrough just a few months later.

The catalyst for a similar organizational shake-up in the now 30,000-member NewsGuild was the election of Jon Schleuss as its new president five years ago. As Blanc recounts, his main credential as a candidate was leading a “worker-to-worker” drive at the *Los Angeles Times*, a non-union paper for 135 years. Unlike Fain in the UAW, Schleuss had never been an elected local officer or appointed national union rep. In fact, he was the only person in his new bargaining unit of 460 actually paying dues to the Guild, because it was not yet covered by a collective bargaining agreement with dues check-off.

Shaking Up the Guild

In 2018-19, *Times* staffers were not the only newly-organized workers at new or old media outlets still bogged down in difficult first contact talks. And, if they were upset about how those were being handled—as many were—they couldn’t do much about it. While having the right to elect their local negotiating committee and participate in any subsequent ratification vote, when a tentative agreement was reached, they were otherwise disenfranchised from “union politics.” Guild supporters at the *Times*, like Schleuss, had no elected officers of their own yet or the ability to send voting delegates to the union’s national convention.

On his own dime, Schleuss went to the 2019 Guild convention anyway. With backing from three locals, he got himself nominated as a candidate for national president in a race everyone assumed was a shoo-in for Bernie Lunzer, the 61-year-old incumbent. (The affable Lunzer had been a full-time union office holder in the

Guild for as long as his challenger had been alive!) Schleuss was not able to run as part of a UAWD-style reform ticket, because none of his fellow dissidents were, at the time, able or willing to join such a slate. All Guild national officers, executive council members, headquarters and field staffers, along with most local union leaders, favored Lunzer and the status quo.

Nevertheless, the young journalist proved to be an effective organizer of restive media workers nationwide. As Blanc notes, Schleuss was initially backed just by his own co-workers in Los Angeles—who could not vote for him—his own meager bank account, and activists in a few reform-minded locals, like the New York Guild, who volunteered time and money to help elect him. That took two national membership votes in 2019, after Guild headquarters’ bungling of the first election required a re-run, sought by Schleuss.

During a rare union presidential campaign debate, Schleuss called for “tapping the creativity of our members” in better organized campaigns against newspaper take-overs by hedge-fund owners and others “intent on destroying journalism.” If elected, he pledged to seek more resources from the Guild’s parent organization, CWA, and expand rank-and-file participation in the union’s “Member Organizing Program.” This MOP draws on four decades of CWA-backed member-based organizing in the public and private sector—using the model favored by Blanc for all unions (i.e., training and deploying active members, on a “lost-time” or volunteer basis, to recruit non-union workers in the same industry or occupation as their own.)

Union Rebuilding

Aided by higher turn-out and a growing volunteer network, Schleuss beat Lunzer in the second round of mail balloting, becoming Guild president for the next four years

and joining the CWA Executive Board, where he serves alongside fellow *Labor Notes* supporter Sara Nelson. As part of the broader organizing surge that made this possible, nearly 11,000 media workers won bargaining rights in more than 200 new units between 2018 and 2023, according to Blanc. In the last four years, the union has helped workers secure 100 first contracts.

During the last five years the Guild has invested heavily in on-line and in person training of activists who want to get involved in external and internal organizing, contract bargaining, job actions, and strikes. In April 2024, it sent one of the largest delegations of any union—150 members—to the *Labor Notes* conference in Detroit, to share their experiences and learn from workers in other unions.

By last fall, when Guild members walked out at a legal publication called *Law360*, it was the union's 24th strike of the year. The targets included *Teen Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and other media outlets, large and small. In 2023, 36 newsrooms were struck for varying lengths of time. While many of these were quickie strikes, not open-ended ones, 100 workers at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* have been out for two years, in the longest-running strike in the nation. As Schleuss noted in one of his recent and always detailed monthly reports,

thousands of Guild members now “know that the way to move management is by building escalating pressure campaigns that win supermajorities of support ending in a work stoppage.”

In his interview with Blanc, Schleuss recalls that when he and other Guild supporters signed up enough co-workers to get an NLRB election seven years ago, they knew their job was not over. After winning that vote, “we would still have to do everything we could to fix the union—to make it more focused on organizing and more focused on building rank-and-file power.” To keep their spirits up during their difficult contest with management, *Times* organizing committee members reassured each other that “we have more power than we know.”

Achieving that collective realization helped make the difference between victory and defeat at a major newspaper non-union for more than a century. And in Schleuss's view, it's a source of empowerment whether you're “struggling against an employer who is fighting you every step of the way or you're a rank-and-filer pushing against deadweight union leadership.” The strength of Blanc's *We Are the Union* and Nolan's *The Hammer* lies in their inspiring examples of workers fighting back and winning on both fronts.

Continuing Struggles for a Greener World

DAN FISCHER

GRASSROOTS DELEGATES FROM 142 countries assembled in Cochabamba, Bolivia, fifteen years ago and endorsed treaties defending Mother Earth, compensating the plundered Global South, and stabilizing warming near pre-industrial levels. Having attended that conference, Ashley Dawson examines in *Environmentalism from Below* “what an envi-

ronmental liberation movement that began from the needs of the Global South would look like.” Following the tradition of Joan Martinez-Alier and Ramachandra Guha’s “environmentalism of the poor,” Dawson provides important accounts of proletarian and peasant land defense struggles having little in common with the corporate greenwashing and fortress conservation passing for environmentalism.

The first chapter, “Decolonizing Food,” opens with the 2020–2021 autonomous encampments that compelled Narendra Modi’s government to repeal three laws deregulating India’s agricultural sector. Dawson rightly highlights the globalized coordination of La Via Campesina (LVC) with its estimated 200 million members

across 81 countries. Citing David Montgomery’s research on declining soil fertility, Dawson illustrates the ongoing relevance of nineteenth-century warnings from Justus von Liebig and Karl Marx of agricultural disruption to biogeophysical cycles.

Against ecomodernist proposals to salvage capitalism’s agricultural biotechnologies, Dawson convincingly argues that the Green Revolution has been “effectively a program of chemical carpet-bombing” and that genetically modified organisms “are expressly designed for domination.” Dawson could have strengthened his case that small-scale agroecology can feed the world had he emphasized LVC’s opposition to the Global North’s wasteful animal consumption levels, a leading cause of deforestation, biodiversity depletion, and global warming.¹

The next chapter, “Urban Climate Insurgency,” begins with Chileans’ 2019 insurrections that achieved the repeal of subway fare hikes. Without framing themselves as environmentalists or decarbonizers, participants succeeded in protecting access to public transportation. Dawson then discusses sustainable communities such as the Uruguayan Federation of Mutual Aid Housing Cooperatives, which cooperatively builds and manages com-

Environmentalism from Below: How Global People’s Movements Are Leading the Fight for Our Planet

ASHLEY DAWSON
Haymarket Books, 2024, 336 pp.

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

munal housing, and Cape Town's Empower Shack, which builds neighborhoods of solar

The Green Revolution has
been effectively a program of
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domination.

panel-covered and water-recycling houses clustered around courtyards with trees and playgrounds.

Oddly, Dawson champions Slum Dwellers International (SDI) as “organized along lines very similar to *La Via Campesina*.” Aside from having a comparatively vertical structure, SDI shies away from the radical anti-capitalism that LVC advocates. Unmentioned by Dawson, SDI has accepted millions from the Gates Foundation, among other neoliberal NGOs, and has been favored by the South African government as a palatable alternative to the grassroots Abahlali baseMjondolo.² This isn't to deny the benefits of mutual savings and credit programs that SDI members coordinate.

Next, a chapter titled “Reclaiming the Energy Commons” begins with India's Adivasi communities' resistance to coal mining and logging (although a critical discussion of the Naxalite rebels' ideology and methods would have been welcome³) then moves to South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal Province where the assassination of organizer Fikile Ntshangase hasn't halted mobilizations against coal mining. Stressing an overlooked abundance of environmental victories, Dawson cites the finding of Martinez-Alier and his co-authors that

up to 27 percent of extraction projects are halted when confronted starting in the proposal phase and with an adequately diverse mix of tactics.⁴

However, Dawson's descriptions of public solar and wind infrastructure remain grounded more in aspiration than actualization. After highlighting South Africa's “One Million Climate Jobs” campaign, launched by the Alternative Information and Development Centre and supported by unions including the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, he acknowledges the proposal lost traction due to disagreements “between those who believed that the South African labor movement should maintain its longstanding alliance with the ruling ANC party, and those who believed that workers needed a more independent, militant federation.”

Given his predominant focus on South Africa and India, Dawson doesn't discuss China's leading role in expanding world solar and wind energy capacity nor the related contradictions entailed both in mineral extraction and China's expansion of coal, oil, and gas. There's likewise little discussion of how societies of Southwest Asia and North Africa could utilize their plenitudes not of petroleum but of sunlight. Although Dawson can't be faulted for omitting such topics, readers seeking a comprehensively global account will need to supplement this volume with other studies.⁵

Dawson's final chapter provides a convincing case “Against Fortress Conservation.” As an example of the abuses under top-down conservation, it describes India's Kaziranga National Park where park guards killed 106 local people in the two decades up to 2017. Rejecting proposals to establish protected areas encompassing at least half the planet, Dawson overlooks that radical social transformations could make such ambitions consistent with his own advocacy for “an alternative mode of conservation

grounded in the work of Indigenous people and local communities to preserve their lifeworlds.”⁶

Dawson’s proposals for climate debt and border abolition will become increasingly urgent given climate-driven impoverishment and dispossessions projected for coming decades. Researcher Marten Scheffer and co-authors predict that 30 percent of the world’s population will inhabit insufferably hot regions by 2050. Given such migration, strict border enforcement would spell social catastrophe. Compensating the South for climate impacts and facilitating sustainable technology transfers will be essential for climate stabilization.

The 2010 grassroots Cochabamba accords, reproduced in the book’s appendix, remain relevant despite the Bolivian government’s role in coordinating them and anti-extractivist critique from some members of the country’s indigenous population.⁷ The conference’s People’s

Perhaps the Global South will lead the way, following Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, in which less developed societies initiate worldwide social transformations.

Agreement found, “Humanity confronts a great dilemma: to continue on the path of capitalism, depredation, and death, or to choose the path of harmony with nature and respect for life.” Achieving even the Paris Agreement’s goal of keeping the temperature increase to 1.5°C—let alone Cochabamba’s precautionary 1°C level based on 1980s’ research led by Egyptian anti-colonialist and scientist Mostafa Tolba—will minimally require something

like 2020’s lockdown-induced levels of decarbonization to be sustained year after year. This would mean an end to endless economic growth and thus an end to capitalism. With deeply sunk costs in fossil fuel industries, the Global North is unlikely to initiate such a trajectory.⁸

Perhaps instead the Global South will lead the way, following Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, in which less-developed societies initiate worldwide social transformations.⁹ Dawson’s examples of communities organizing around truly living well (*buen vivir*), public rather than private affluence, and establishing peace with the Earth, offer hopeful seeds of such a radical and necessary future.

NOTES

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Rural Shame Helps Fuel Trump Backing by Poor

ROGER BYBEE

IN THE WAKE OF THE NOVEMBER 5 Election, the question again arises: Why do such large segments of Americans vote against their own immediate and seemingly obvious economic interests?

In particular, what drives the rural *very* poor into the arms of politicians like Donald Trump whose servility to large corporations and billionaires is so transparently obvious? Pike County in eastern Kentucky exemplifies, in extreme form, this confounding pattern as part of the second poorest Congressional district out of 435. It ranks lowest on a “well-being” index of all counties in the nation. Across the United States in 2021, the rate of deaths from drug overdoses in the United States was 32 per 100,000; in Pike County, the rate was 91 per 100,000.

Pike County is also the second most conservative district, with the county rewarding Donald Trump with 80 percent of the vote in 2016, 2020, and 2024. The stance of Trump on a wide swath of issues affecting the working class and the poor—the minimum wage, universal healthcare as a right, strong taxation of corporations and the super-rich—is simply outside ordinary political discourse in the county. Talk is dominated by the discussion over the new visibility of trans people, the “stolen” 2020 election, and the “threat” posed

by immigration.

This paradox of poverty coexisting with right-wing politics that deepen the poverty and reinforce stark inequality in Pike County

is the relentless focus of Arlie Russell Hochschild, a UC-Berkeley sociologist, who in *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right* presents crucial insights into this syndrome. Hochschild immersed herself thoroughly in the lives of Pike County residents in

their communities and isolated “hollers” for six years. The product of her deep dive in Pike County is the fascinating, richly detailed *Stolen Pride*.

Pike County has been devastated by the simultaneous disappearance of mining jobs and an immense inflow of opioid pills driven by a pharmaceutical industry unconcerned about widespread addiction and overdose deaths.

Hochschild carefully peels back the layers of daily life to reveal how the emotions of shame and loss of pride so deeply colors how individuals and the community view social and political issues. “If you succeeded, you felt proud. If you failed, you felt shame” in what Hochschild calls the emotional “pride economy.”

But these judgments about oneself occurred within the framework of a severely crippled material economy. Kentuckians have felt intense pride in being of use through hard work and personal responsibility. Yet “their beleaguered economy greatly lowered their chance of success

Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right

ARLIE RUSSELL
HOCHSCHILD
New Press, 2024, 400 pp.

ROGER BYBEE is a long-time labor journalist and instructor, now retired, who has written for many publications.

and vulnerability to shame. This presented victims with a dilemma: how to respond to unwarranted shame.”

The reality of disappearing work and high wages creates few options except for the “unwarranted shame.” One indicator of shriveling opportunity for success: the number of coal jobs in Kentucky fell from 30,498 in 1990 to 3,874 in 2020. (In particular, job losses actually accelerated rapidly under Donald Trump despite his talk of restoring coal jobs, with Pike County coal jobs falling from 6,460 to 3,911 during his administration.) The remaining coal jobs are non-union and are based on “mountaintop removal,” which leaves behind stripped landscapes, polluted water, and the constant danger of coal-slurry pools collapsing on communities located below.

Efforts to compensate for the loss of possibilities for success and rekindling a renewed sense of personal pride, like teaching ex-miners and other displaced workers skills in computer coding, have failed to fill the gaping holes in the area’s economy. Along with the sharp decline in well-paid job opportunities, people in Appalachian communities like Pike County have experienced a sense of painful loss in their heritage and their land now despoiled by mountaintop removal, while their proud tradition of ingenuity has been devalued in the twenty-first-century economy.

In this context of declining opportunity and a loss of social cohesion, one response has been reliance on OxyContin and other opioids. Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia were targeted by huge drug companies, led by Purdue Pharma, and literally millions of pills flooded these areas, as Eric Eyre details in *Death in Mud Lick: A Coal Country Fight against the Drug Companies that Delivered the Opioid Epidemic*. In Pike County, opioids have produced ruined lives and numerous deaths through overdoses.

Across the nation, the spread of opioids

now claims nearly 100,000 American lives annually. With an economy of rapacious corporate offshoring of jobs and other sharp reductions in the prospects for those without college diplomas, there has been a sharp growth in the use of opioids and other “diseases of despair”—namely, drugs, alcoholism, and suicide. America witnessed about 600,000 more deaths than expected during the 1999–2017 period, as Anne Case and August Deaton outline in *Diseases of Despair and the Future of American Capitalism*. “Especially hard hit has been white, blue-collar men without a bachelor’s degree,” Hochschild points out.

Paralleling the self-destructive behaviors associated with a loss of self-worth, there is also a marked outward-facing pattern of hostility toward recipients of government assistance despite the widely recognized landscape of widespread poverty afflicting Pike County. Even though Kentucky receives 40 percent of its state budget from the federal government, and more visibly, 22 percent of Pike County residents relying on SNAP (food stamps) benefits for survival, resentment is high against those who are labeled “takers” rather than “makers.” But more people actually receive SNAP than bother to vote and hence lack political power.

This has proved to be extremely fertile ground for Donald Trump, whose claim of a stolen election in 2020 (despite sixty-two court cases finding no proof of fraud) dovetails with the sense that Pike County, too, has been somehow victimized by outside liberal forces and its residents’ sense of rootedness also “stolen.”

Trump is hailed by some in Pike County as “our bully” willing to take on the Democratic Party, the media, and federal government, collectively perceived as “the bigger and badder bully,” which Pike County alone cannot fend off, as Hochschild explains.

Trump has skillfully played out what

Hochschild calls an “1-2-3-4 anti-shame ritual” that resonates forcefully in Pike County where shame is never far beneath the surface of consciousness. The ritual begins with a provocative statement or action by Trump—whether it be leaning on Georgia officials “to find 11,780 votes” or, more recently, threatening to punish and jail his opponents among Democrats and “the enemy within.” Stage 2 is the predictable public shaming by liberals and progressives. Third is Trump’s claim to be an unfairly picked-on “victim,” asserting to his followers that “I am a victim for you” and “I’m in pain, as you are. I’m suffering *for you*.”

This is followed in Stage 4 by Trump “roaring back” by launching crude, bombastic, transgressive, and menacing counterattacks on his critics, with shocking accusations of such sins as being “Communist,” “Radical Left,” or “corrupt.” The roar is designed to rally his most hard-line followers, overwhelm critics with its ferocity, and

put unprepared critics on the defensive, if not in fear of “retribution.” A central aim: to reframe public discourse through the use of extreme language and proposals that come to dominate discourse.

But even in Pike County’s politically forbidding, barren environment and the overarching influence of Trump, new organizing efforts keep popping up and reaching out to seek independent political power. Coalitions emerge to protect the environment from immensely destructive coal mining via mountaintop removal. Local movements challenge political machines rooted in serving corporate interests like coal, other portions of the fossil-fuel industry, and major utilities.

But as insurgent groups battle the corporate-controlled economy, they still must tenaciously battle the deeply rooted fatalism and passivity flowing from the “pride economy,” which *Stolen Pride* so insightfully explores.

Introducing a new film produced by Ukrainian Feminist Workshop, Lviv, Ukraine

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Sasha Romantsova,
Executive Director of the Center for Civil Liberties, 2022 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Tetiana Hranchak, *Board Member of the Ukrainian Library Association, Professor and PhD in History and Social Communications*

Wonda Powell, *Professor Emerita of History, Los Angeles Southwest College*

Nasrin Sotoudeh, *Iranian feminist attorney and human rights activist*



English audio with subtitles in Persian, Chinese, Spanish, French

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0er16ufXQxM>

Understanding Öcalan

HANK KENNEDY

AN OLD PROVERB SAYS THAT “The Kurds have no friends but the mountains.” There’s a great deal of truth there. The Kurdish people, split between Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, have been used and abused by a murderer’s row of stronger nations, including Turkey and the United States. With the publication of *Freedom Shall Prevail: The Struggle of Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish People* (PM Press, 2024), the Kurds can also count on comics creators Sean Michael Wilson and Keko, a Kurdish artist.

Wilson has worked on many left-leaning comics before, including *Parecomic: The Story of Michael Albert and Participatory Economics*; *Fight the Power! A Visual History of Protest Among the English Speaking Peoples*; and an adaptation of George Orwell’s autobiographical essay “Such, Such Were the Joys.” Wilson has also worked on comics in other genres and his *The Faceless Ghost*, an anthology of Japanese folklore, was nominated for the prestigious Eisner Award. This is Keko’s first book but he shows promise and should have a bright future in the medium.

The two present the biography of Abdullah Öcalan, known to supporters as

HANK KENNEDY is a Detroit area educator and socialist who writes regularly on the connection between comics and politics.

Freedom Shall Prevail:
The Struggle of
Abdullah Öcalan and
the Kurdish People
SEAN MICHAEL WILSON
AND KEKO
PM Press, 2024

“Apo” (Kurdish for “uncle”). *Freedom Shall Prevail* would make a good companion to *Their Blood Was Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War On ISIS*, also from PM Press (2022), as the two cover similar topics. Öcalan is considered a terrorist by Turkey and its allies, including the United States. Wilson and Keko present a different side to Apo, currently in solitary confinement in a Turkish island prison. Their Öcalan is a courageous free-

dom fighter, who bristled at injustice even in childhood. His influence can be seen in Rojava, the Kurdish region in northern Syria whose YPG and YPJ units, the latter composed entirely of women, fought off the Islamic fundamentalists of ISIS.

Freedom Shall Prevail is framed by an

Wilson’s writing reads like a Stalinist’s retelling of Lenin’s childhood, where every incident serves some didactic purpose.

interview. A young woman named Louise asks Estella, a veteran of the Kurdish freedom struggle, about the life of Öcalan. Estella obliges, beginning with the leader’s

childhood in a rural village in Turkey. The childhood segments actually make for the most difficult reading. Wilson's writing can be overwrought and it never sounds like dialogue an actual child would say. Sample: "The story of retaliation of Cimo

The most moving scene comes when Öcalan tries his hand at recruiting people from his old village.

and Miho, who had thrown stones at me, became as important to me as the first uprising against the tyrannical state." It reads like a Stalinist's retelling of Lenin's childhood, where every incident serves some didactic purpose. The art in this section does it no favors. Keko recreates the environment of a Kurdish village in a few lines, but for some reason, he gives his child characters a splotch of white at the crown of their heads. It makes his child characters look like they're prematurely balding.

Things pick up once Öcalan leaves his village and moves to the city of Nzip. He never loses his sense of outrage at the injustices he witnesses. Civil servants get fat off bribes, Kurdish language and culture are repressed, girls are married off to rich old men. All of this radicalizes him to the point that he founds a revolutionary movement to overthrow Turkish oppression. The most moving scene comes when Öcalan tries his hand at recruiting people from his old village. One old man holds up a stick. "Young man," he tells Apo, "we are like dry wood. Will you ever make this grow again? We cannot rise again. The dead in the grave are more alive than we are." At this, he drops the stick at Öcalan's feet. It's powerful stuff, ably illustrated by Keko, and

shows how determined those early Kurdish freedom fighters were to continue after that reception.

Part I of *Freedom Shall Prevail* focuses on Öcalan's life and struggles before he was imprisoned, Part II showcases how the Kurdish movement changed afterwards. For one, the old Marxist-Leninist (i.e., Stalinist) ideology that had guided Öcalan and the movement was dropped. It was replaced with something new: democratic confederalism. Simply put, this is a form of libertarian anti-capitalism built around bottom-up democracy. The thinking of eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin is a key influence, but not the only one. The discussions around this ideological shift within the movement could have made for interesting reading yet this is mostly glossed over. The movement's new emphasis on women's liberation Jineology (Kurdish for "the science of women and life") is given more attention.

The short length (approximately 160 pages) of *Freedom Shall Prevail* presents problems. Readers are briskly taken on a tour of vast amounts of history, with a plethora of unfamiliar names and dates thrown at them. Anyone not deeply immersed in Turkish and Kurdish history could find themselves lost. There are a few ways to fix this pacing problem. One would be to make the book longer. Barring that, the framing device could be excised as it doesn't add anything (especially since most of Part I is narrated from Öcalan, not Estella's point of view) but takes away space that could have been used for clarification of events or topics.

What makes this lack of depth more frustrating is the lack of a section that should be mandatory for any nonfiction comic: a suggested reading list. A full bibliography would be even better, but I understand that would take up even more page space. As it stands, I have no

idea which sources Wilson and Keko are pulling from or where I could go to learn more about Öcalan or the Kurdish freedom movement. This hampers *Freedom Shall Prevail's* ability to work as an introductory text for the topic, thereby undermining the text's ability to educate.

This comic was published with the backing of two groups worthy of support—the Peace in Kurdistan Campaign and the International Initiative “Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan—Peace in Kurdis-

tan”—so it is work in service of a good cause. Keko's work dramatizes the brutality of Turkish oppression in a way only images are capable of. Comics historian Paul Buhle blurbs on the back cover that this is a “fine and revealing” book. Very true, although the writer and artist could have done a better job at pacing out their narrative and giving their audiences resources to educate themselves. Therefore, it only partly succeeds at being a jumpstart for readers interesting in Öcalan and the Kurdish movement.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS FOR THE 2025 DANIEL SINGER PRIZE

The Daniel Singer Millennium Prize Foundation is offering a \$10,000 prize for an article published in English during 2024 which addresses the rising popularity of right-wing ideas and movements among workers in many countries.

This xenophobic, nativist, anti-immigrant and, in some cases, neofascist ideology has become widely popular, representing a deadly threat to democracy and social justice.

How can one explain this upsurge? Why has the far right gained the support of so many working people? Has the left made mistakes that have eased the rise of the right? What is being done by the left, by democratic socialists, by anti-fascists, to confront this danger?

These are some of the questions that could be considered by contestants for the Daniel Singer Prize.

For submission guidelines and to nominate an essay go to: danielsingerprize.org.

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