

NewPolitics

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From the Editors

As we go to print, we have learned of the U.S. attack on Venezuela, the seizing of Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, and Trump's declaration that the U.S. will "run" Venezuela. *New Politics* unequivocally condemns this operation. We will cover these events online.

THE SITUATION IN THE United States, and in the world beyond, makes us feel like we're watching a report of one of those terrible forest fires that because of climate change have become so much more frequent and destructive around the globe. The reporter describes the extent of the fire, the square miles burned, the homes destroyed, the lives lost—but then we are relieved to hear, the wind has changed direction, it has begun to rain, and the fire fighters are hoping to bring it under control soon. Likewise, in U.S. politics the wind has begun to change.

The international situation is dismal. President Donald Trump and his Secretary of War (heading what was formerly misnamed the Defense Department—it was always about war, not defense) Pete Hegseth have sent ships, planes, and troops to intimidate Venezuela, attacking small boats and threatening the possibility of war to remove Nicolás Maduro and seize the country's oil.

Washington, which had supplied Ukraine with weapons to defend itself, is now leaving everything up to Europe and the Ukrainians. In reality, Trump supports Russia, the aggressor. Trump takes credit for the phony ceasefire in Gaza where Israel continues to use U.S. provided weapons to kill Palestinians — almost 400 since the October cease-fire in Gaza — and arm hundreds of vicious settler attacks in the West Bank.

The Sudanese civil war continues, with 150,000 killed, maybe another 400,000

dead from hunger and disease. It's a civil war but also a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. But Washington says nothing, perhaps because of Trump's business deals with the UAE bringing him hundreds of millions of dollars.

The new U.S. National Security Strategy document assigns each superpower control of its region, with the United States in charge of the Western Hemisphere, a nineteenth century vision of rival imperialist states.

Europe is pressed to adopt Trump's far-right, anti-immigrant agenda. At home, Trump's and the Republicans' war on science, education, health, and social welfare continues unabated. Trump and MAGA have fully embraced white Christian nationalism—subordinating women, excluding LGBTQ people, forbidding gender affirming care, and persecuting people of color. Trump's latest vile racism has been directed at Somali immigrants in Minnesota, sending ICE to round them up—though 80 to 90 percent are U.S. citizens. ICE, its agents masked and armed, often without warrants, increasingly violent, has become a Gestapo-like force kidnapping and disappearing our neighbors.

Fortunately there has been resistance in mass demonstrations and local rebellions. Millions rallied in No Kings protests in thousands of cities and towns. In Chicago and Los Angeles, local residents came out to support immigrants and challenge ICE agents. Worker activists and some unions are building the May Day Strong move-

ment aiming at a May Day general strike in 2028.

Trump and his gang are still in power and doing tremendous damage. But they are losing ground. In the November 2025 elections, Democrat Zohran Mamdani, a democratic socialist and a Muslim, won the New York City mayoral race. Democrats also won races for governor in Virginia and New Jersey. In California, Proposition 50 allowing congressional redistricting that will favor the Democrats won by 64 to 36 percent. In Indiana, 21 Republicans defied Trump to vote against his desired redistricting there. The latest polls show that only 39 percent of Americans approve of Trump.

Opposition to Trump is rising and resistance to the attacks on immigrants is growing, but it will take a lot more to defeat the administration's authoritarian agenda.

In this issue of *New Politics*, we try to address many of these themes.

American politics is treated in three articles: Kim Moody examines the role of the Democratic Party, which he calls "the conglomerate party of the center"; Dan La Botz surveys the growing, but still limited resistance to Trump's authoritarian agenda; and Howie Hawkins offers a "sobering but hopeful" assessment of Mamdani's coming mayoralty.

Lois Weiner looks at education policy under Trump and the fightback it has engendered. Suppressing dissent is a prominent feature of the Trump agenda, but he builds upon a long history of repression, as Samuel Barney explores in his article on incarcerating radicals.

Sex work under capitalism raises important philosophical issues. These are evaluated in a reprint of an important analysis by Nancy Holmstrom.

Turning to international concerns, Daniel Chavez opposes both U.S. imperialism in Venezuela and the Maduro regime. Amaury Rodríguez discusses the challenges

facing the Dominican left. Gilbert Achcar argues that the Gaza genocide has had profound global implications. And Michael Pröbsting challenges the claims of those who see the United States as the only source of imperialism in the world.

We offer two review essays on recent books about Stalinism. Javier Sethness contests Dominico Losurdo's attempt to whitewash the Soviet dictator, and Paul Le Blanc looks at Douglas Greene's analysis of modern-day Stalin defenders.

Samuel Farber reviews a comparison of Cuba, China, and Vietnam written by one of the leading experts on Cuba's economy, Carmelo Mesa-Lago. This is followed by a comment from Mesa-Lago and a response from Farber,

Three other review essays cover diverse topics. Daphne Lawless examines William Gillis's anarchist analysis of the science wars. Brian Bean looks at the struggle against Cop City—the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center—and draws lessons for future anti-police efforts. And Peter Ranis discusses Greg Grandin's magisterial history of the Western Hemisphere.

For shorter reviews, we have Elizabeth Rapaport considering Artem Chapeye's reflection on taking up arms to defend his native Ukraine; Brian Ward looking at Brian Jones's Black history survey; Brian Jones examining Brian Kwoba's new biography of Black polymath Hubert Harrison; Peter Prontzos taking up the question of social ecology as formulated by Murray Bookchin and explicated in a book by Eleanor Finley; and two reviews on Palestine, by Alan Sears and Rachel Eborall.

We end with a song written in memory of Gazan poet Refaat Alareer and a remembrance of Third Camp veteran Ernie Haberkern.

We hope these articles give you sustenance for the struggles ahead.

Democrats

The Rise and Fall of the Conglomerate Party of the Center

KIM MOODY

TODAY'S DEMOCRATIC PARTY HAS no recognized leaders, no coherent program to address today's multiplying problems, never had actual members, depends on the kindness of well-to-do donors, has, despite significant gains in a handful of elections in 2025, lost working-class voters of all races, and is stuck in the status quo. Many of its own advisers, officials, candidates, and office holders describe it as chaotic, leaderless, its brand "toxic," and its broader message muddled. Voters, even those who vote for its candidates agree, and say the party and its various representatives aren't listening to regular folks. The Democratic Party reached an all-time low in March 2025, when an NBC survey of registered voters conducted by Democratic pollster Hart Research revealed only 7 percent had a "very positive" attitude toward the Democratic Party and another 20 percent a less-than-enthusiastic "somewhat positive" attitude. Fifty-five percent had a negative view.

To be sure, America's oldest party got a shot in the arm in the 2025 elections

with big victories in the governorships of New Jersey and Virginia, California's pro-Democratic redistricting Proposition 50, and a number of down-ballot successes. The movement-like election of democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York revealed deep voter anger at the party regulars, but is a somewhat different matter since both candidates were actually Democrats in a deep blue city. Furthermore, Mamdani was running against the Democratic policy mainstream, and despite his efforts to court them or theirs to incorporate him, he is not exactly the favorite of the local or national party leaders or the majority of centrist Democratic pols who fear his radicalism will cost them election in 2026 despite his dazzling and carefully nonconfrontational performance when he met with Trump at the White House. Both of the newly elected Democratic governors of New Jersey and Virginia, on the other hand, were "safe" members of the centrist New Democrat Coalition (NDC) when in the House of Representatives, touted their military backgrounds, and have received nothing but praise.

As Trump's authoritarian actions became more outrageous, his approval ratings dropped, and Democrats discovered "affordability" (a cover-up for the crisis of social reproduction of the majority), the Democratic Party's ratings rose to a still deeply under water 39 percent approval and a higher than March 58 percent disapproval

KIM MOODY was a founder of *Labor Notes* and the author of several books on labor and politics including *Breaking the Impasse: Electoral Politics, Mass Action & the New Socialist Movement in the United States* (2022). He is currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of Westminster in London, on the editorial board of *Workers & Capital*, and a member of the University and College Union, and the National Union of Journalists.

after the election. Considerably worse than 50 percent favorable to 25 percent unfavorable twenty-five years ago.¹

For many on the left who have hopes for this forlorn party as the antidote to Trump and MAGA or even a potential working-class party, the answer is for the party to turn economically populist and win back the working-class voters it has lost. Indeed, even party pundits and moderate candidates and for that matter Trump et al. now talk of “affordability.” For the Democrats to deliver on the cost of living, however, they would need to address not only prices but the enormous gap between stagnant working-class income and the soaring income and wealth of the top 10 (and 1) percent in the United States that their own neoliberal practices have enabled for half a century. Even to ameliorate the situation they would need specific policies that effectively address the major problems immediately facing the majority of the population, not just “populist” rhetoric or dickering with utility rates. This would include a living minimum wage, labor legislation making union recognition automatic upon a majority joining the union, universal healthcare, free childcare, a massive public housing program, etc. That would require broadly taxing both incomes and assets of corporations and the wealthy. And this, I will argue, the Democratic Party will not and cannot do for deep structural reasons.

To fund the New Deal programs, the Revenue Act of 1935, dubbed the “soak the rich” act, raised taxes to 75 percent on incomes over \$1 million, established an inheritance tax, and proposed to raise the corporate tax rate on large companies from 13.25 percent to a modest 16.25, although Congress lowered that to 14.25 percent.² The Democrats could do this in 1935 because of the push of a deep crisis and a mass social upsurge, on the one hand, and the enabling factor of local party organiza-

tions that allowed them to win elections without big money from capital, on the other. In any case, as Roosevelt put it, “I wanted to save capital.”³ Today, without a massive redistribution of society’s wealth, a comprehensive “populist” or working-class program is impossible.

The contemporary Democratic Party, however, is stuck in the political center as the party of the status quo and has been for half a century. And the victories of centrist candidates in New Jersey and Virginia, along with the rise of California governor Gavin Newsome as a potential leader of the pack of presidential candidates only help keep it there. Furthermore, as a party ideologically and institutionally committed to capitalism, the forces keeping it in the center have intensified. Its crisis reflects the deeper changes in global capitalism. These include the prolonged crisis of productivity, growth, and inflation affecting most developed capitalist economies; the crisis of “center” and “center-left” parties in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere, including the Democratic Party itself; the changed electoral terrain of polarization and diminished competition in the United States, and above all the huge and rising maldistribution of wealth and income already mentioned. These will be examined below, but the major *political* impediment to a left turn or to authentic “populism” lies in the changed nature of the Democratic Party itself.

From Grassroots to Greenbacks

The Democratic Party of the twenty-first century is fundamentally different from that of a half century ago in its base, structure, and centers of power. Until the 1970s, the Democratic Party rested on an organized though decentralized base composed of long-standing political machines; precinct, ward, and county organizations; a system of political clubs in some cities; associated

ethnic organizations; construction and transportation unions, and from the 1940s through the early 1960s the new industrial unions—all of which had active roots in many urban and working-class neighborhoods and industrial towns. In the South, segregationist “courthouse gangs” upheld the party’s national vote and its congressional majorities for decades. That was the party of the New Deal.

The machines depended on patronage from the public trough and graft from private actors but also provided minimal social services and aid to constituents from city jobs to fixing traffic tickets. Corrupt, boss-driven, and often opposed to real reform, they nevertheless played a role in assimilating immigrant/ethnic/white and in some northern cities recently arrived Black working-class groups into politics providing dependable votes for the Democratic Party.⁴ To be sure, the Democrats had their capitalist supporters, but this grassroots voter base allowed Roosevelt and to a lesser degree Lyndon Johnson to pass costly reforms from the New Deal through Medicare and Medicaid when faced with disruptive mass social movements even over the reluctance or opposition of major sectors of capital.

All of this changed by the 1970s as the old machines dried up due to lack of patronage and demographic changes in most cities. Unions weakened and lost the ability to mobilize voters as seen in the deep decline of the union household Democratic vote as early as the 1950s.⁵ Local, county, and district party organizations were hollowed out as old-style patronage disappeared and they ceased to play an effective mobilizing role in elections. For example, a study of local party organizations revealed that by 2012 only 6 percent of Democratic Party local organizations had even “some paid full-time staff.”⁶ Unions also lost much of their ability to direct and

mobilize members politically. As for the old club system, in New York City whereas the party of Roosevelt had 703 neighborhood Democratic clubs in the five boroughs, by the early 1970s it was down to 154, while today POLITCSNY lists only 79 such organizations.⁷

Politics abhors a vacuum and it was corporate capital that rushed to fill that left by the decline of local party organization. While labor invented the political action committee (PAC) to help re-elect Roosevelt, it was the corporations that took advantage of this legal conduit of campaign money in the 1970s. The number of corporate PACs soared from 89 in 1974 to 1,467 in 1982, with their donations rising from \$8 million to \$85 million over that period more or less split between the two major parties.⁸ Candidates *and* the national committees of both parties rushed to get business donations. This rush was further energized by the torrent of income and wealth upward during the international neoliberal era that made capitalist funding of elections and the party bureaucracy on a new and larger scale possible, furthering the era of locally “hollow parties.”⁹ By 2024, 1,677 corporate PACs contributed \$152,603,615—56 percent to Republicans, 44 percent for Democrats.¹⁰

As elections became driven primarily by money, their cost rose rapidly. In 1978–80 Democratic party and local campaign committees spent just \$26.9 million on federal elections. By 1992 that had risen to \$97.2 million and by 2024 \$1.3 billion.¹² Increasingly, a big bite of this went to high-priced political consultants. A major study of such consultants found that in 1970 only about 20 percent of House candidates employed a consultant. By 1992 it was two-thirds. By the 2012 election cycle the political consultant industry had become big business, penetrating state and local politics as well and earning an estimated \$3.6 billion

MONEY & THE NEW DEAL DEMOCRATS

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1936 cost the Democrats a little over \$5 million, much of it from individual cash contributions. A far cry from the \$6 billion of 2024, even adjusted for inflation. Big business had largely deserted the Democrats and what remained was mostly “little” business—garment, smaller retailers, etc. Grassroots organizations filled the vacuum even beyond what the machines provided. The Democrats’ new “Nominators” program of \$1 fees raised a little over \$1 million through “collections from local groups, more than 5,000 of which functioned throughout the country” with most gifts being \$1.00 but all less than \$100. In fact, donations of \$100 or less rose from 18.5 percent in 1932 to 34 percent in 1936. Larger donations of \$25,000 or more brought in just 4 percent of individual contributions. As the major study of the 1936 election summarized, “Eighty-two percent of all that was given was in small individual contributions collected by local groups, and gifts from labor organizations.” In

addition, the party raised a lot of money from local Jackson Day Dinners: \$100 in Washington attended by officeholders and \$5 .00 a plate elsewhere, mostly organized by the local machines. The party also cleared about \$250,000 from ads and sales of its convention book, about half its costs covered by ads from or sales to businesses, many of which also gave to the Republicans.

Altogether, excluding ads and purchases of the convention book, businesses gave about 15 percent of the total cost of Roosevelt’s campaign. The combined contributions of labor and union-backed organizations, however, with the United Mine Workers playing a big role, actually equaled those of business at 15 percent. None of these institutional sources of funds, however, came close to those raised locally, largely in person, in small donations. More than anything it was local grassroots organizations that financed Roosevelt’s victory in 1936.¹¹ How different things are today.

up and down the ballot. As early as 1968, as the old machines were fading or already gone in many cities, the *Congressional Weekly Report* observed of the increasing use of consultants, “The most important single condition which forces candidates to look to the professionals for help is the absence of a strong and continuing party organization.”¹³

The next step was the digitalization of campaigning both to raise money and to target the most favorable voters for media and such actual contact as occurred. Political advertising, via TV, radio, and increasingly social media to a large extent replaced door-to-door contact. Spending of \$5,000

or more on digital ads via Google and Meta alone in 2024 cost \$619 million on federal elections, with Democratic money outnumbering Republican by three-to-one, according to the Brennan Center.¹⁴ Thus, the hollowing out of grassroots party organization and candidate campaigns, on the one hand, and the intervention of big business via the corporate PACs and political consultants, on the other, transformed elections *and*, as we will see below, the party itself into an increasingly elite phenomenon far removed from the atomized electorate.

By 2024, the nature of campaign and party finance had again changed as the gap between capitalist funding and that

of every other source continued to widen. Overall, according to OpenSecrets, in terms of PAC and individual contributions to candidates, parties, super PACs, and other “outside” groups, “business has a close to 7-to-one fundraising advantage.” The ratio of business-to-labor spending is sixteen-to-one.¹⁵ Corporate and trade (industry) PACs continue to account for over half of all regular PAC contributions to Democrats. The new super PAC and 527 Committee “outside” spending, legalized by the 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court ruling, once again changed and expanded how capital and the wealthy intervened in elections. Small individual contributions, on the other hand, became depersonalized as they flowed via credit card through centralized digital operations, most notably ActBlue for Democrats.

What is more, individual donations from the superrich played a much bigger role. The fifty biggest individual donors alone spent \$1.5 billion in 2024, almost 10 percent of all the money spent on the 2024 presidential and congressional elections, much of it via the relatively new super PACs.¹⁶ The cast of multi-millionaires and billionaires giving to the Democratic super PACs was mostly the same as those giving through traditional PACs or individually and most were from tech, finance, and media. But now they were even richer.

By 2024, 623 super PACs raised some \$5 billion and spent \$2.7 billion. Republican backers outspent Democrats almost two-to-one, but pro-Democratic super PACs still spent close to a billion. What was particularly new in 2024 was the huge addition of big-time crypto currency PACs that hedged their bets by giving to both parties.¹⁷ Along with continued increases in business PACs and wealthy individual donations, the cost of national elections had risen from \$3 billion in 2000 to \$16 billion in 2024. This huge amount, however,

is only for federal political campaigns. It does not include the operating expenses of party committees, transfers between committees, or state and local office campaigns. The phenomenal rise in the dependency of candidates and party organizations alike on money necessarily transformed the Democratic Party’s structures and politics.

The Separation of Party and Voters: The Conglomerate Party

The intensifying triangle of corporations and the wealthy seeking influence over politicians and parties, candidates seeking money to fund their increasingly expensive professionalized and media-driven campaigns, and national parties attempting to raise and direct money and choose the “right” candidate altered the party and how elections were conducted, nationalizing and centralizing the flow of funds. For one thing, as a major study of congressional elections argues, “House election patterns confirm that the United States has entered an era of nationalized, polarized, party-centered electoral politics that is very different from the candidate-centered world of the 1970s and 1980s.”¹⁸

This, in turn, “has a centralizing effect on American politics as the national party committees, and more recently, super PACs, have become important brokers in the collection and distribution of campaign contributions from wealthy donors.”¹⁹ As a recent *Congressional Quarterly* text concluded,

Few districts today boast strong local parties. In most places, the traditional local parties have been replaced by hybrid organizations that partner with state and national parties and their allied interest groups.²⁰

Locally raised money plays little role in House campaigns with Democrats getting only 17.2 percent of their contributions on average from their districts, down from an

already diminished 28.4 percent in 2012.²¹ This, too, is a radical change from twenty-five years ago when, according to the executive director of OpenSecrets, of those who raised \$200,000 or more for a House election 79 percent “collected that money from within their districts from people they would ultimately represent if they won.”²² Not anymore. The connection between representative and voter has been broken, that between big donor, party committee, and politician tightened.

Thus, the rise of business and wealthy donors enabled by increased economic inequality has contributed to the nationalization of campaign and party funding further increasing the relative role and centrality of the national party committees. This is reflected in the enormous growth of the budgets of the three major national Democratic committees seen in Table I that have created a huge central party bureaucracy.

Equally important in the process of centralization are the sources of these huge budgets. Table II shows the percentage of individual donations that comes from those

who gave \$100,000 or more. Along with donations to super PACS, these large contributions to Democratic party committees have soared recently from \$58.9 million in 2020 to \$125.8 million in 2024, according to FEC figures. There is no doubt that these large donors overlap, so that fewer than a thousand individuals underwrite the party’s major committees.

Not only were a tiny number of super-rich donors responsible for a disproportionate amount of individual contributions and the nationalization of political money, but the donors were concentrated in a few of the nation’s wealthiest metropolitan areas and in industries currently reaping the lion’s share of profits.²³ In order of the size of donations as counted by OpenSecrets these are: New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Washington, DC, Chicago, Seattle, and San Jose. All areas that disproportionately house high tech, finance, and media companies and investors. Not surprisingly, of the top ten political consulting firms five are in the Washington, DC,

TABLE I
Growth of Democratic Party Committees
1980 to 2024 Presidential Election Cycles

Committee	1980	2024	% Growth
DNC	\$14,669,220	\$683,665,790	4560.6%
DCCC	\$2,047,055	\$339,935,853	13359.6%
DSCC	\$1,653,849	\$275,526,331	16559.7%
Totals	\$18,370,124	\$1,299,127,974	6971.9%
GDP (billions)	\$2,985.6	\$29,723.9	895.6%
CPI			91%

DNC: Democratic National Committee; DCCC: Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee; DSCC: Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee

Source: FEC, Political and party committees, <https://www.fec.gov/data/committees/pac-party/?cycle=2024>, <https://www.fec.gov/data/committees/pac-party/?cycle=1980>; BLS, Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm?pubDate=20250803; FRED, Table Data-Gross Domestic Product, July 30, 2025, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/data/GDP>.

TABLE II
\$100,000+ Contributions
as a Percent of Total Individual Donations, 2024

Committee	# of Donors	\$100,000 +	% of Total
DNC	625	\$76,752,000	38%
DCCC	285	\$35,055,000	20%
DSCC	114	\$14,022,000	8%

Source: FEC 2023–24 Cycle, Filtered for \$100,000 or more.

area, two in New York, and one in Chicago, with only two in outlying Utah and Missouri.²⁴ Hence, the “coastal” donor-PAC-consultant-party-elite complex right-wing “populists” often point to.

The result of these developments is a hierarchical conglomerate national party composed of its individual office holders at the bottom; party caucus leaders in Congress (e.g., Hakeem Jeffries in the House, Chuck Schumer in the Senate); party committees and their leaders (DNC, DCCC, DSCC); consultants who gobble up 15–20 percent of campaign funds; wealthy individual donors (e.g., Reid Hoffman, Michael Bloomberg, Fred Eychaner, etc.); wealthy donor networks (e.g., American Bridge, Democracy Alliance, Future Forward, Next 50, and many more); and a plethora of business PACs and wealth-backed super PACs. The three official party committees are top-down bureaucracies. One study found “a DNC that is built to be an undemocratic, top-down institution.”²⁵ The others are no different. This is the *material reality* of the Democratic Party.

The party ballot line is the visible entrance to this conglomerate at its bottom floor. Voters and small-to-medium-sized donors, however, have no place in the corridors of this conglomerate party. Nor do the denizens of the party hierarchy pay much attention to what their voters think,

as a recent Gallup poll revealed.²⁶ Unlike the powerful industry lobbyists that often shape or prevent legislation, the plethora of social issue NGOs and advocacy groups that focus on Democratic politicians have little influence on party policy and, in any case, are not part of the party structure or officialdom.²⁷ The flow of money between big donors, PACs, party committees, and candidates is complex and opaque. The amounts of money and their capitalist origins that uphold the material reality of the Democratic Party are not. To imagine that entering this conglomerate party at its lowest level has no determining impact on the office holder is pure idealism.

In 1978–80, national and state Democratic committees raised \$37.2 million. By 2024 just the three national committees raised \$4.5 billion, a growth that even adjusting for inflation or comparing to GDP growth is no less incredible.²⁸ This does not include PAC or individual donations given directly to candidates or funds raised by super PACs. Clearly, the increase in money raised and spent over this period by national party committees indicates a qualitative change in the power and function of the national party bureaucracy in relation to candidates and office holders. One sign of this power is the large operating expense budgets that are to a large extent controlled by the leadership of these top-down com-

mittees.

The DNC spent a huge \$432,900,701 on operating expenses or 63 percent of its expenditures in the 2024 cycle, with a staff of 775 as of 2025.²⁹ Much of the rest goes to state committees, selected candidates' campaigns, and national convention expenses. In the 2024 cycle the DCCC operating expenditures were \$192,363,225,

The contemporary Democratic Party is stuck in the political center as the party of the status quo and has been for half a century.

which account for 58 percent of all its spending, while the rest was distributed to other party or campaign committees, direct “coordinated expenditures” to candidates, and independent (outside super PACs) funds. The DCCC employs over 400 staffers—almost two to every Democratic Representative.³⁰ Thus, the DCCC has considerable operating power and influence over House members and candidates that simply didn't exist four decades ago. It has been chaired by members of the centrist NDC for years. The DSCC has a smaller \$135,445,312 budget with 113 employees largely because it covers only 100 senators and only a third run for election in each cycle, but its operating budget was still 45 percent of its spending.

Aside from the individual donations examined in Table II, each committee gets money from transfers between committees, gifts from office holders' “Leadership” PACs, and regular PACs. Some Leadership PACs give a lot. Hakeem Jeffries' “Victory” PAC gave substantial amounts to all three

committees. His PAC and his campaign funds, however, come disproportionately from business or wealth-backed PACs. His PAC raised \$22 million in the 2024 cycle with the largest donations coming from AIPAC, Blackrock, Apollo Global Management, Lockheed-Martin, and Met Life.³¹ While the level of his generosity may not be typical, it shows that even donations from office holders to the party's leading committees, as well as to other members, have business roots.

More substantial for these party committees are regular PAC donations. The DNC gets 20 percent from corporation-heavy PACs. The twelve biggest DNC givers are all major tech and finance company PACs. Overall, according to OpenSecrets, its biggest source, excluding “other,” comes from Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate (FIRE), close to \$100 million, followed by “Communications/Electronics; i.e., tech, at close to \$40 million, with Labor at less than \$5 million.”³² The DSCC's top donor PACs include some Senators' PACs, but also an impressive list of corporate donors, again with FIRE leading by far at about \$30 million, Communications/Electronics some \$12 million, and Labor way behind again.

The DCCC received \$28 million of its budget from “affiliated” committees, which are themselves conduits of wealthy and corporate money. \$33 million more comes from the Leadership PACs of House members. Heavily corporate-funded House minority leader Jeffries is again the biggest donor at \$5 million. The remaining 40 percent of its budget comes entirely from PACs. Corporate PACs, then, account for about a third of all DCCC funds—not including corporate money that flows through the PACs of House members and others. Not surprisingly, FIRE and Communications/Electronics are again by far the leading corporate sources of DCCC funds at about \$60 million together.

Funds from just these industries plus the 20 percent of largest donations of \$100,000 or more from individuals means that at least 40 percent of all DCCC money comes from businesses or wealthy contributors. Add the 239 individuals who gave between \$50,000 and \$99,999, who would also be among the richest 1 percent of the population, the total gifts from just two major groups of corporations and a little over 500 wealthy individuals would be well over 60 percent the DCCC's income. Thus, a handful of superrich individuals and a couple of dozen corporations uphold the committee that has major influence on who runs and wins for the House of Representatives and what legislation is possible.

Take away that money and the edifice would collapse. Faced with the party's crisis, the defection of some tech moguls to Trump, and the DNC's (though not at the other two committees') cash flow problem due to paying off Harris' campaign debts,³³ party pols, strategists, and donors are already rushing to come up with ideas for improved "messaging" and for new sources of money to keep the party alive and pay for the 2026 midterm. As one participant put it, "the repeated gathering of donors to mull such ideas has felt like a ceaseless calendar of cattle calls."³⁴

The DCCC, in turn, provides campaign resources such as media and funds via "coordinated" activities that increase dependence on the committee.³⁵ Much of this goes to favored candidates who are mostly centrists, particularly in the DCCC's Frontline program to defend vulnerable seats and its Red-to-Blue candidates who attempt to capture Republican-leaning swing districts. In this way, the party reproduces the centrist majority of the House Democratic Caucus with each election. In 2022, 17 of the 35 new members of the House joined the centrist NDC compared to 11 for the Progressives Caucus; 20 percent of all Pro-

gressive Caucus members also belonging to the New Dems. In 2024, of the 33 new House Democrats, 25 or three-quarters, joined the New Dems, while just 9 joined the Progressive Caucus, two of whom also joined the NDC.³⁶ And, of course, two of the newer members of the Squad, Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowen, lost their seats in 2024 under assault from AIPAC. Similar proportions are almost certain for 2026 given that 22 of the 2026 Frontline's 26 candidates are NDC or even more conservative Blue Dog caucus members.³⁷

The idea that simply replacing the party's aging leaders and office holders with younger ones will move the party leftward is wishful thinking. Congressional leaders are not hesitating to make sure centrists and moderates win in the 2026 House primaries beyond the Frontline and Red to Blue programs. Both the House leadership-aligned House Majority PAC and the DCCC have stated they will intervene in primaries in order to win back the House.³⁸ After Spanberger's victory in Virginia, the DCCC initiated a new program aimed at Latinos and rural voters that will provide money, staff, and advertising in "competitive battleground districts."³⁹ Given the centrism of minority leader Hakeem Jeffries and the rest of the House Democratic leadership that control these PACs, along with New Democrat DCCC chair Suzan DelBene, there is no doubt which side they will support in a primary. Super PACs will also intervene and given that 98 percent of the \$4.5 billion super PAC funds in 2024 came from the top 1 percent of donors (6,786 individuals and 35 organizations), the well-to-do Democrats among them are certain to back moderates in most cases.⁴⁰ Of course, as Mamdani demonstrated, money doesn't always win, just 90 percent of the time.

So stuck in their ways, the congressional leaders even refused to back a small group

of self-identified working-class candidates running for the Senate and House against Republicans in competitive races in Pennsylvania, Maine, Iowa, and Wisconsin in 2026. Although not from the organized left, these Democrats made the mistake of talking about the hard life of most people these days and openly denouncing the “oligarchy.” In some cases, the party leaders and the DSCC and DCCC backed “safer” moderates in the primaries. As one of them said of Chuck Schumer and the DSCC, “They’re comfortable where they are at, they want to continue the status quo.”⁴¹ The DSCC also chose a more mainstream candidate over a self-styled “Prairie Populist” in the Iowa Senate race.⁴²

The flow of funds and power, of course, doesn’t end when the election is over. The new office holder remains ensnared in this permanent web of money and organization. The idea that using the Democratic primary ballot line is simply a tactic is naïve at best. It is the path to the highly organized and hierarchical reality of party organization in Congress and just about every other legislative body in the United States. Famously, House re-election campaigns and fund raising begin the day after taking office. Democratic members of the House are expected to fund raise via “call time” with substantial donors.⁴³ In addition to campaign money, some of the funds go to the DCCC, dues to the Democratic Caucus, and to other members through their Leadership PACs. Thus, with few exceptions House Democrats are both beneficiaries and conduits of business and/or wealth-based money to and from the party and fellow members. In addition, once new Representatives have committee assignments, corporate PAC money from industries affected by those committees suddenly increases.⁴⁴ In reality, the distinction between who is and who isn’t a “Corporate Democrat” is a fuzzy one indeed.

The House Democratic Caucus *leadership* is well funded and commands a staff of about 200 employees and a dozen senior staff chiefs or directors and has a great deal of power over members.⁴⁵ The leadership plays a major role in committee assignments that determine a member’s effectiveness. It also decides which bills go to which committees and which will see a floor vote in the House. As Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) said of the party Caucus, “the structural shifts in power in the House both in process and rule to concentrate power in party leadership, of both parties, frankly, but in the Democratic Party leadership (are) to such a degree that an individual member has far less power than they did 30, 40, 50 years ago.”⁴⁶ Given the leadership’s power it is not surprising that in 2024, “Congressional leadership positions attracted extraordinary outside [of district] funding.”⁴⁷

The idea that this conglomerate party would turn on its major sources of money and threaten its own existence by “soaking the rich” is an ahistorical fantasy. That’s not to say that there aren’t dissidents and those who employ populist or even class rhetoric. The Justice Democrats are already endorsing progressive candidates, more will come, and some may even win.⁴⁸ And there is DSAer Zohran Mamdani’s impressive victory in the New York City mayoral race. His campaign will inspire more DSAers to run as Democrats at various levels. But all the trends discussed above point toward the continued hold of capital and the political center on the Democratic Party as a whole. While it may win enough suburban seats to take back the House in 2026, it is not an “opposition” party that can defeat Trumpism/MAGA politically and ideologically or permanently win back a clear majority of working-class voters. At the same time, the crisis of this party of the center opens possibilities for a left alternative.

The Settings for an Alternative: The Economy

The alternative has already begun in grassroots movements in the streets and workplaces and widespread disgust with both the Democrats and Trump. But to understand the possibilities of this period a deeper look at the context is needed. I will examine three major elements of the economic, political, and social setting mentioned at the beginning. It is the interaction of these elements that can open the door to an independent left, even socialist political alternative if, and it's a big if, the left acts to take advantage of this unfolding situation. Nothing in this analysis implies inevitability.

Relative stagnation in productivity, growth, and profitability combined with a tendency toward inflation of the United States and developed capitalist economies since the Great Recession of 2008–2010 not only intensified capitalist resistance to increased taxes but brought forth demands for aid and succor for business, as in Biden's "industrial policy" subsidies to certain industries or Republican tax cuts. Yet, it is precisely this combination of slow growth, inflation (stagflation) with the continuing shift of both wealth and income upward that creates the near zero-sum situation that underlies the crisis of social reproduction, misleadingly labeled "affordability." The ownership of wealth, from which most of the economic elite's income derives, shifted from 62.6 percent held by the top 10 percent in 2000 to 87.2 percent by mid-2025, while that of bottom 50 percent fell from 3.2 percent to 1.1 percent, little of which produces income.⁴⁹

The richest households' share of mostly income-producing wealth rose by 40 percent, allowing them to account for half of all consumer spending in the United States in 2024—up from 36 percent in the 1990s. The bottom half, on the other hand, saw

their "wealth" fall by two-thirds. As the *Wall Street Journal* summarized it, "well-off people have increased their spending far beyond inflation, while everyone else hasn't."⁵⁰ "Affordability" galore at the top, cost-of-living crisis at the bottom. Short of absolute confiscation, "affordability" for the masses can only be real if the wealth and income of the superrich are heavily taxed and redistributed downward both through higher wages and extensive public programs that underwrite working-class social reproduction. This, the Democrats of today will not do.

Due to the underlying contradictions of capitalism, however, the same conditions that limit Democratic policy options simultaneously create more social conflict.

The idea that using the
Democratic primary ballot line
is simply a tactic is naïve at best.

Capital is driven by these conditions of relative stagnation to speed up and intensify work while holding down real wages and benefits even as inflation continues to erode their value and the rich get much richer. The growing efforts to increase productivity through both technology and increased workloads intensify the need and desire for resistance on-the-job as work-related stress has risen over the past period to "historic highs."⁵¹ In addition, the highly visible growth of inequality and astronomical wealth for the few is driving an anger that seeks outlets.

The number of strikes rose from 279 in 2021 to 433 in 2022 and 471 in 2023. In 2024 they fell to 359. In the year from

November 2024 to November 2025, however, there were over 500 strikes indicating that they would far surpass even 2023.⁵² At least so far, Trump has not been able to rein in worker resistance. Despite an increase in National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections until recently, and continuing efforts to organize Amazon and various efforts outside the NLRB, however, unions continue to lose more members than they gain. Trump has already gone far in dismantling the NLRB so that it will be even less of a path to new organization. The need for innovative strategies and broad alliances in workplace organizing is more urgent than ever. There are a number of such projects, notably the Emergency Workers Organizing Committee, sponsored by the United Electrical Workers and DSA (Democratic Socialists of America). A useful analysis of some new approaches can be found in the Center for Work and Democracy's report *Beyond the NLRB*.⁵³

Economic conditions, however, do not automatically produce a social upsurge. That requires the accumulation of an activist layer of the class, what is sometimes called the "Militant Minority" that provides leadership and direction at the rank-and-file level. There is evidence that this process is underway. The organized socialist left has a key role to play in this development. There are thousands of self-identified socialists in today's workforce and unions. Many belong to DSA. There are rank-and-file caucuses in several important unions including: United Auto Workers, American Federation of Teachers, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Many radicals are among those organizing at Amazon. Thousands of union members and their allies marched on May 1 in over one thousand U.S. locations, organized by May Day Strong initiated by the

Chicago Teachers Union and the United Teachers of Los Angeles. This was one of the many efforts to defend immigrant workers from Trump's mass and vicious deportation assault.

Beyond organized labor, the rise of opposition to Trump is also part of the development of activists for an alternative and to a large extent they, too, are driven by the cost-of-living crisis and obscene inequality as well as the defense of basic democratic rights. The "Fighting Oligarchy" tour by AOC and Bernie Sanders drew tens of thousands in city after city. By most accounts the "No Kings Day" was the largest political mobilization since the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations. More generally, the deep contradiction between Trump's policies and actions and his working-class supporters also opens possibilities. There is, in short, growing material for a Militant Minority, an activist layer generally, and mass movements for change. Without these the emerging potential cannot be realized. The task for the left is to turn events and projects into ongoing action and organization.

The Settings for an Alternative: The Crisis of the Democratic Party

The political crisis of the Democratic Party—driven in part by the limits imposed by the prolonged crisis of stagflation and its dependency on funding from capital—involves a lot more than simply bad polling. But it is also a result of a deeply rooted conformity to the status quo that has left the party with electoral technicians and bureaucratic officials but no real political leaders as shown in the lineup of uninspiring presidential candidates, the "leadership" of Congress, etc. Some six million people who voted for Joe Biden in 2020 failed to show up in 2024. The top reason for abstention in a pro-Democratic poll was that the Democrats "didn't have a strong

enough plan to get the cost-of-living down” and failed to address “deeper issues like poverty and inequality.”⁵⁴ The elections in Virginia, New Jersey, and New York City reversed some of this, but they are a small “blue” slice of the U.S. electorate and the Democrats still lack the concrete programs and leadership to defeat Trumpism.

According to the *New York Times* analysis, in the thirty states that register voters by party, Democratic registrations just before the 2025 elections fell in every state and overall dropped by 2.1 million between 2020 and 2025. And they fell in key battleground states as well. For example, the Democrats’ edge of registered voters in Pennsylvania in 2020 was 517,310, by summer 2025 it was down to 53,303. Republican registration went up everywhere. Furthermore, the Democrats even lost ground among new young registrants—a further sign of declining vote share to come. While there are still more registered Democrats than Republicans, the gap is narrowing and the trend is clearly a fatal one for presidential and congressional elections.⁵⁵

The forces of political moderation including its wealthy donors as well as politicians are, of course, aware of the Democratic Party’s crisis and are already organizing to keep it soundly in the center. One such new group of relatively younger Democrats call themselves the Majority Democrats. They are mostly elected officials from Congress, the states, and even local government. The House members are mostly New Democrats or conservative Blue Dogs. The group wants a “big tent” party and is solidly centrist-to-conservative judging by its membership. It will help Democrats like themselves who face tough races and will soon have both a regular PAC and a super PAC and that means money.⁵⁶

Then there was the big WelcomeFest in the California desert where hundreds of Democratic centrists gathered in June to

put an end to populism and “identity” politics. As the *New York Times* reporters put it, “Moderate Democrats are having a moment and there is a cadre of consultants and strategists ready to support them.” Panels featured such anti-woke party right wingers as Representatives Jared Golden (ME) and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (WA), Senator Elissa Slotkin, and newly converted anti-woker Governor Gavin Newsom, along with hundreds of other self-proclaimed

Economic conditions do not automatically produce a social upsurge.

centrist or moderate elected officials.⁵⁷

In a more strategic vein is the new Project 2029. Yes, an imitation of the Trumpite Project 2025, but this one composed of Democrats who think the party has a messaging and perhaps even a policy problem. Its advisory board, however, features strategists and thinkers from other think tanks, mostly from the Clinton, Obama, and Biden currents of the party. Or as Branko Marcetic of *Jacobin* put it, Project 2029 “is quite literally composed of the same lineup of people who brought the party to its knees in the first place.”⁵⁸

While much of the discussion among strategists and donors is about “message,” others are planning to invest in online media to spread the message to a younger audience. American Bridge, “one of the largest Democratic donor networks,” according to the *New York Times*, is backing a for-profit media company with a projected budget of \$70 million over the next four years. It will be designed by a former Biden White House digital strategist and will avoid the “hall monitor style of Democratic politics

that turns off younger audiences.” There are several other similar donor-funded media projects in the works to give the Democrats a more youthful and contemporary look: Project Echo, a \$52 million “influencer” effort led by former Harris aide Rob Flaherty; Channel Zero, also by Flaherty; Double Tap Democracy, with initial funding of \$250,000 from the wealthy donor network Future Froward.⁵⁹ The fact that they are run by former Harris and Biden aides suggests little more than tech-boosted centrism.

Another sign of the Democrats’ inability to move beyond the status quo was the August meeting of the DNC. The DNC is composed of state party chads, vice chairs, and various appointed members. There is nothing democratic about it, but it does provide money for state parties, organize the convention, draft the party’s platform, and set the schedule of primaries. What it doesn’t provide is real political leadership. DNC chair Ken Martin had promised to improve the party’s state and national infrastructure, but that didn’t come up at the DNC’s August meeting. Instead, the committee debated and postponed a decision on the 2028 presidential primary schedule. The DNC also rejected a motion to end military aid to Israel to end the war in Gaza. Charman Martin pulled his more moderate motion repeating the Biden policy for a ceasefire and a two-state solution but nothing about military aid—kicking the can down the middle of the road again. In other words, it did nothing to deal with the party’s crisis.

The Settings for an Alternative: The Demise of Two-Party Competition

The legitimacy of the two-party monopoly in the United States rests on the notion of electoral competition. In electoral terms, however, political polarization, redistricting, and population movements have created a situation in which only 40 to 50 or

so out of 435 congressional districts are competitive.⁶⁰ These tend to be those with large white populations of homeowners, many suburban with higher-than-average incomes.⁶¹ The political wisdom of the day is that these swing districts can only be won by moderate Democrats—as in Virginia and New Jersey. And experience shows more often than not it is not wrong. Thus, the swapping of working-class for middle-class professional voters is virtually locked in by efforts to defend or win a congressional majority as well as the presidency.

On the other hand, a consequence of this is that the vast majority of the House’s 435 seats are judged safe and in most of them there is no spoiler effect, which is the heart of the first-past-the-post electoral system’s enforcement mechanism. That is, Republicans in most Democratic districts are too small a percentage to win if a third party takes votes from the Democrats and vice versa. So, there is a significant opening for a third party to establish itself as the first or second party in many districts. This goes beyond the left’s urban home base and includes many Republican districts as well where a candidate running on a working-class program could end the “red” monopoly if it was built on grassroots organization. As I pointed out elsewhere, on average “rural” districts represented by Republicans, the majority of which are not entirely “rural,” have a higher proportion of both manufacturing and public sector workers than urban areas.⁶² Nebraska mechanic and former union leader Dan Osborn’s 2024 independent and close run for Senate didn’t win but at 46.7 percent it showed significant support across this largely rural state.⁶³ There are openings here for independent politics.

Furthermore, both registration data and polls show that the number and percent of those identifying as independents or third-party voters has grown—mostly at

the expense of the Democrats. Altogether, the proportion of those registered as independents has grown from 23 percent in 2000 to 32 percent as of 2025. In 2024, for the first time, election polls showed self-identified independents outnumbering Democrats and equaling Republicans. On top of this according to polling commissioned by NBC, 34 percent of independents are people of color, “double the share from 2012.”⁶⁴

This suggests that the young, black, and Latino voters may be more open to ditching the two-party trap. Furthermore, not only did Trump’s approval drop to 38 percent among registered voters, but 57 percent of independents opposed his Big Beautiful Bill with only 20 percent supporting it.⁶⁵ This doesn’t mean all independents are left-leaning or that most will be ready to immediately join or vote for a genuinely left working-class-based party. Still according to an August 2025 Gallup poll, only 36 percent of independents had a positive view of big business and just a slight majority of 51 percent of capitalism, while 38 percent favored socialism.⁶⁶

The same poll revealed just how out-of-step party officials, donors, consultants, and most office holders are even with those who still identify as Democrats. A mere 17 percent of Democrats polled had a positive view of big business, while only a minority of 42 percent approved of capitalism and 66 percent had a positive view of socialism.⁶⁷ This may mean a Bernie-style Scandinavian social democracy or even just a generous welfare state, but it certainly indicates a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and the conglomerate party that upholds it. Taken together, all these trends are certainly something new in U.S. politics.

Economic conditions are tending to push workers to action, while Trump’s authoritarian and reactionary actions are pushing more and more people generally

into opposition. The Democratic Party is still dependent on educated, largely suburban voters in competitive districts, while more people see themselves as political independents. It is out-of-touch even with those who remain loyal, and the electoral system has opened new possibilities for independent or third-party candidates. It’s worth remembering that throughout the 1930s at the height of the New Deal, Wisconsin and Minnesota were primarily represented in the House by the “populist” Progressive Party and Farmer-Labor Party respectively—not by Democrats.⁶⁸ Today, steps toward building local or state-level workers’ parties can be taken by running candidates where labor and social movements are most active and grassroots political organization is possible. Independent worker candidates may not win the first time out, but the converging conditions for independent class political action are favorable and it would be tragic for the left to miss the opportunity.

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Resistance to Trump Grows

Mass Marches, Local Rebellions, Electoral Victories

DAN LA BOTZ

RESISTANCE TO PRESIDENT DONALD Trump is growing, taking the form of massive, peaceful protest marches, small local rebellions against ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), Democratic Party election victories, and a gradually changing public opinion. One could even talk about a growing class consciousness. The growth of the resistance comes in reaction to Trump's attacks on public services, on higher education, on freedom of speech, on public employees and their unions, and the cruelty of the violent attacks on immigrants. There is a growing revulsion against Trump, his Make America Great Again Movement (MAGA), and the Republican Party. The Resistance grows in response to the ferocity, depravity, and viciousness of Trump's policies that are affecting millions.

The Authoritarian Counter Revolution

We are in the midst of something like a counterrevolution as President Donald Trump is creating an authoritarian state that exists to further enrich the billionaire oligarchy by eliminating government regulation and taking away social programs from working people and the poor. He is using the power of the presidency to overturn the liberal programs put in place by Democratic president Franklin D. Roo-

sevelt in the 1930s and by Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s, back in the era of economic Keynesianism. And at the same time Trump is attempting to replace the global, neoliberal capitalist order, that began in the 1980s and went into crisis in the 2000s, with a nationalist, protectionist system, and state capitalism.

Donald Trump is at the peak of his powers. He controls the presidency, both houses of Congress, and he has a servile Supreme Court that so far has failed to challenge his claim to be boss of American society. He is a billionaire himself and has the support of at least a dozen billionaire backers who donate hundreds of thousands of dollars each to his political campaigns.¹ Others corporations and wealthy individuals donate tens of thousands of dollars to his personal projects, such as the White House ballroom he is building. Trump also held two crypto gatherings at the White House recently: a digital asset summit in March 2025 and a private dinner for cryptocurrency buyers in May 2025 that raised tens of millions of dollars from investors for his crypto business.² Trump, America's most corrupt president, is awash in money and it is this that powers both him and his MAGA movement. Many of these billionaires now also hold positions in the Trump administration.

Yet one cannot say he alone represents the capitalist class, or at least not Trump and the Republicans alone. Big tech corporations, Hollywood, and the entertainment

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industry contribute most to the Democrats. Silicon Valley corporations give about 80 percent of their political money to the Democrats.³ These sections of the bourgeoisie believe that the Democrats better represent their interests, their vision for the future, and what they see as their program for the country. Some tech companies, however, have moved from the Democrats to Trump to protect their businesses. The Resistance to Trump, if it is to be successful, truly successful, must also resist the powers of these corporations and the parties they finance.

The Ideology of MAGA

Trump, MAGA, and the Republicans have been constructing an ideology as they go along, a system of thought based on ideas taken from older conservative beliefs both in their political and economic theories. First, Trump and his cabinet have increasingly become advocates of white, Christian, nationalism. White people, that is people who are white racially and culturally, were the founders of the country and they should remain the dominant group. So much for Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and native Americans who make up 40 percent of the population. These far-right ideologues claim the United States was founded as a Christian nation—despite the freedom of religion guaranteed in Article I of the Constitution—and they argue that the Christian faith is fundamental to the country. Christianity demands patriarchy, the idea that a man heads every family, and each family is made up of a man and a woman and their children. So women must be subordinate to men, and LGBTQ folk are anathema. And nationalism means the idealization of the United States that was founded by conquerors and colonists who exterminated and appropriated the indigenous people, a nation that subsequently expanded through wars with Mexico and Spain, and became the

dominant global power after World War II. The Trumpists look back with admiration on McCarthyism and the anti-Communist crusade of the 1950s, but they want to be more thorough in the future.

Trump and his legal advisers opportunistically developed a series of legal doctrines on which they base their actions and which they are using to construct an authoritarian state.

- First is the doctrine of “originalism,” which asserts that the Constitution should be interpreted as it was originally intended when it was written in 1787. In practice, this serves as a justification for the most conservative interpretations of the law, a cover for the Supreme Court’s subservience to Trump.
- Second is the idea of “the unitary executive,” which argues that the president has absolute control over the entire executive branch, of every department, agency, and office. In the past government departments were expected to exercise some independence, but no more. Based on the unitary executive theory, rather than sending bills to Congress Trump has ruled through executive orders.
- Third, is the “impoundment theory,” which claims—though Congress is supposed to decide on the budget—that the president can impound and withhold funds voted by the legislature. So Trump now takes that power from the Congress.
- Finally, there is the “major questions doctrine,” which argues that government agencies may not engage in activities that are not explicitly spelled out in the laws that created them. So for example, the Supreme Court forbid the Environmental Protection Agency from implementing a plan aimed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by shifting electricity generation from coal to cleaner sources like natural gas, wind, and solar (known as “power generation shifting”).

Taken together, these legal theories give Trump enormous power, dictatorial power. And add to this the Supreme Court ruling on July 1, 2024, that presidents have

absolute immunity for acts committed as president within their core Constitutional purview, at least presumptive immunity for official acts within the outer perimeter of their official responsibility, and no immunity for unofficial acts.

So we now live in a dictatorial regime, and that is what the Resistance is fighting.

Project 2025 Put into Action

Prior to Trump's re-election, a group of rightwing organizations and individuals created a detailed plan for his second term titled Project 2025, published by the Heritage Foundation, a rightwing thinktank. Several of its authors took up key positions in government—such as Russell Vought, now director of the Office of Management and Budget—and have been carrying out the plan. Six Project 25 authors are now cabinet secretaries and another dozen also hold high administrative positions. But Project 2025 made it possible for Trump and his crew to move rapidly and forcefully with their plan.

In his two presidential terms, Trump has cut taxes on corporations and the rich by \$4.5 trillion (projected from 2017 to 2030), which has led him to also cut social programs. For example, he cut the budget for agencies dealing with health, housing, and education, as well as those in the areas of science and the environment. Trump and the Republican Congress have proposed removing subsidies to the Affordable Care Act, the government health insurance policy that covers 44 million Americans. These changes could double or triple peoples' costs. Many education programs, from elementary school assistance to university and graduate program grants and scholarships, have been reduced. Trump has fired 300,000 federal employees, torn up their collective bargaining agreements, and effectively destroyed their labor unions.

In an attack on academic freedom,

Trump has attempted to take control of higher education, including at private universities such as Columbia and Harvard, by withholding billions of dollars in research funds, and restricted and reduced the 1.1 million foreign students who study at U.S. universities. Falsely alleging that U.S. universities are pervaded with anti-semitism, Trump has attempted to control hiring and curriculum, even demanding the elimination of some departments and programs. He offered guarantees of funding to universities that would accede to his demands, but several have refused. The goal of all of this is to transform universities, whose faculty in the humanities and social sciences are often liberal, progressive, or leftist, into more conservative institutions.

Trump has also attacked the media and the constitutional right to "freedom of speech and of the press." He has called the media an "enemy of the people" and says they produce "fake news." He insults reporters and expresses hostility toward them. He called one woman reporter "piggly." Trump has banned several news organizations from events and briefings, among them the Associated Press (AP), Reuters, and *The New York Times*. And at one time or another he has also banned CNN, Politico, *The Guardian*, BBC, BuzzFeed, and *The Washington Post*. He and his election campaign have filed lawsuits against major media such as ABC, CNN, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He has cut federal funding for the public radio and TV organizations National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System. At the same time, he uses his own social media, Truth Social, to communicate, and he promotes rightwing Fox News, Newsmax TV, and One America News Network (OANN), outlets that promote him and his policies. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the United States still exist, but they are under a fierce attack.

All of Trump's policies are rife with

racism and sexism. They are a reflection of the white, Christian, nationalist ideology that he has now completely adopted. Since taking office he has issued several executive orders ending all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs—programs intended to protect racial minorities, women, and LGBT people to create fairness in hiring, promotion, and treatment of federal workers. DEI programs have now been eliminated from all federal government agencies, which will lead to a return of racial and gender discrimination in government. Trump and his cabinet members have fired Black officials from nearly all top leadership positions—heads of agencies, generals, and admirals. The federal government layoffs will have an especially adverse effect on Black employment, since federal employees are disproportionately Black.

Refugees of color are being refused. The United States under former president Joe Biden accepted 125,000 refugees per year from countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Syria, and Myanmar, where there had been wars or other major social problems. But now under Trump, the United States will accept only 7,500 refugees and prioritize white Afrikaners who it is claimed falsely suffer from systematic violent repression.

ICE raids have been among the most controversial and emotional issues of his administration. The ICE raids, conducted by armed, masked men and looking like kidnappings, are often violent and include arrests not only of undocumented immigrants, but sometimes of U.S. citizens. Many of those being arrested have lived and worked in the United States for years and even for decades. ICE agents snatch up people of all ages. A teenager was arrested at her graduation ceremony. There are often tearful scenes of parents and children being separated.

In this way, ICE has removed over

2 million undocumented immigrants or approximately 8,000 per day (including self-deportations). The average daily rate of formal removals has been around 729 to 759 per day. Those who succumb to pressure to self-deport may be given \$1,000 and a plane ticket. The people who are being detained and removed are made up overwhelmingly of immigrant workers and very few have any criminal record.

ICE agents are not the only uniformed men now active on our streets. Trump has claimed the cities run by Democratic Party mayors are crime infested and violent and he says that he'll clean them up. He has called Chicago a "war zone," "hellhole," and "death trap." He has repeatedly and falsely claimed that Portland, OR, is "burning down, just burning down." These accusations have been used to justify federalizing and mobilizing the National Guard to Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, and Portland. In other cases, Trump has claimed that peaceful protests against ICE require the mobilization of the Guard to protect them.

Finally, we should note that Trump has also transformed American foreign policies, and while he claims to be "the president of peace," many of his statements and actions portend war while others threaten to destabilize the world order in unforeseeable ways. Renaming the Department of Defense and now calling it the Department of War is more than symbolic. Trump, like Biden, continued to provide billions of dollars in military assistance to Israel as it carried out its genocidal war against Gaza.

Trump began his latest presidential term threatening to take Greenland, Canada, and the Panama Canal. He and his secretary of war, Pete Hegseth, have been ordering the destruction of small boats mostly in the Caribbean that they allege are transporting drugs, an unsubstantiated claim. So far, they have blown up 21 boats

taking 83 lives. There is no justification for this in international or U.S. law; this is simply murder on the high seas. At the same time, Trump has moved the Ford aircraft carrier group of several warships, and thousands of troops near Venezuela and appears to be preparing for war there.

At the same time in Europe, Trump has failed to provide the weapons needed for Ukrainians to defend their sovereignty, hoping instead to reach an economic deal with Russian dictator Vladimir Putin.

Under Trump, neoliberal capitalism has begun to give way to state capitalism, ending *laissez-faire*, deregulation, and open markets and turning instead to state intervention in the economy. The most obvious signs of this have been Trump's tariffs on countries large and small to shape global markets and to raise revenue amounting to billions of dollars. The U.S. has placed a 32 percent tariff on China, at least 35 percent on Canada, while the effective general tariff rate has risen to 20 percent.

Trump seeks to make the United States the global leader in certain economic sectors and for reasons of national security has also begun to change the economy in ways that resemble Russia and China, becoming at least a part owner of several important American corporations. The U.S. departments of Energy, Commerce, and Defense now own significant shares of American businesses. Among its biggest investment, the U.S. acquired "a golden share" in U.S. Steel Corporation in exchange for permitting its acquisition by Japan's Nippon Steel. Trump also made a deal with Nvidia and Advanced Micro Devices, issuing export licenses in return for 15 percent of the companies' revenues from sales to China of H20 chips. The Pentagon now owns a 15 percent stake in MP Materials, a rare-earth mining company, and the United States now has a 10 percent equity stake in Intel. We see here a trend toward state capital-

ism that increases the government's direct involvement in the economy, in some areas giving it a leading role.

Finally, Trump has taken advantage of the recent budget crisis and government shutdown, which lasted forty-three days, to stop funding food programs that affect tens of million. Over 730,000 federal workers were furloughed while others worked without pay and weren't paid until the shutdown ended. Trump used the shutdown to close "Democrat programs that we want to close up or we never wanted to happen." By "Democrat programs" he means social welfare programs that provide food and education to low-income people. Trump has stopped funds for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as "food stamps," that provides food to 42 million people with low or no income, that is, to 12.5 percent of all Americans. Most recipients are children, the elderly, or the disabled.

So, seeing Trump's callousness, his ruthlessness, his racism and sexism, his xenophobia, and his indifference to climate change—but above all the cruelty of him and his cabinet, millions of Americans have risen up in protest. The protests have so far taken three principal forms: large peaceful marches, local militant actions that verge on rebellion, and voters turning to the left, voting for Democrats and in some cases for progressive Democrats.

The Protest Marches Against Trump

Trump campaigned on a platform of solving America's economic problems for the country's majority, that is, for the middle and working classes. Yet recent polls reveal that 75 percent of the population say prices are rising. People mostly complain of rising costs for housing and for food, and consequently many people, including Trump's middle-class base, have been disappointed.

According to the most recent polls about Trump, only 39 percent approve of him, 57 percent disapprove, and 4 percent say they are not sure. The broad disillusionment, the sense that life has simply become too hard, forms the background and is partially the basis for the growth of the resistance.

Since Trump's second term began in January 2025, the protests have been coming every couple of months, with protestors demonstrating in hundreds of cities, towns, and hamlets across the country, each protest larger than the last, involving hundreds of thousands at first and then millions by the summer. In American metropolises like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles hundreds of thousands have filled the streets, a river of humanity. The first of these was The People's March held on January 18, 2025, two days before Trump's second inauguration. It was organized by mainstream NGOs that advocate for women, civil rights, and the environment: the Women's March, Abortion Rights Now, the Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the National Women's Law Center. The People's March was not focused on Trump. Instead, it raised all of the issues of women's and LGBT rights, racial justice, immigration, militarism, and climate changes. There were People's marches in Washington, D.C., and other cities, and tens of thousands marched and demonstrated.

The next big protest took place on February 5, 2025, and both the organization that built it and the demonstration itself took the name 50501, a number standing for fifty protests in fifty states on one day. Unlike other protests it was not a coalition of NGOs but rather organized and led by volunteers and local networks of activists. Most of the protests were held in front of state capitol buildings but some were in other cities. The protests focused on billionaire Elon Musk, who

Trump had brought into the government to head the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), an agency that ran amuck through the government, closing departments, canceling programs, and firing tens of thousands of workers. Somehow it was this protest from below that initiated the gigantic demonstrations that followed. The 50501 movement was also the principal organizer of the "Not My President Day" protest held on the national holiday, Presidents Day, February 17, 2025.

By spring, the Resistance, as expressed in these massive protests, was growing rapidly. The Democratic Party's leaders and elected officials appeared to be pathetic, presenting no resistance to Trump. And now that he had been in office for four months, people were beginning to take the measure of his administration and the disconnect between his campaign promises and the reality of his actual policies.

The "Hands Off" protest against Trump and Musk on April 15, 2025, was held in 1,300 locations in all fifty states and represented a turning point. Millions participated. Demonstrators called upon the government to keep its hands off our democracy, off our rights, off our environment, off our jobs and income, off our social welfare programs, off our bodies, off our immigrants, off our unions. Children carried signs saying, "Hands Off My Future." A Democratic Party organization, Indivisible, was the key organizer of the Hands Off protest, drawing in the AFL-CIO, the country's largest labor confederation, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and 150 other organizations.

There is little doubt the Democrats, the AFL, and the AFT, most of the other organizing groups and the millions involved in these political parades were looking toward the November 3, 2026, elections with the hope that the Democrats would win, take back the House of Representatives,

and prepare the ground to oust Trump in 2028. Most people in these demonstrations are Democrats and they would vote for Democrats in the next election. Yet the demonstrations have taken on the character of a social movement, and it is not clear that groups like Indivisible will be able to determine the movement's course, a movement of people who while they're Democrats, are sick of the Democratic Party leadership.

The next big step was the first "No Kings Day." A common sign said, "No Kings since 1776," the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed. At least five million people participated in the June 14, 2025, "No Kings Day" protests, in big cities and small towns in all fifty states, the largest yet in a series of national demonstrations. In a festive but defiant spirit, with bands and drummers, the marchers chanted, sang songs, and waved their signs with slogans opposing President Donald Trump's attacks on health care, food programs for children and the elderly, or his attacks on education and science. Some banners read "Fight Oligarchy." Some signs said, "No Kings, No Billionaires." More signs than in earlier protests said, "Fight Fascism!" In all of the protests there were more American flags and chants that expressed a desire for national redemption. Where I protested in New York City people chanted, "Whose country? Our country!"

Most recently, millions of people in 2,600 cities in all fifty of the United States participated in the second round of "No Kings" that took place on October 18, 2025. Like the earlier No Kings, this No Kings was organized by a coalition of 200 groups, the most important being Democratic Party groups like Indivisible and MoveOn and NGOS like Public Citizen and the American Civil Liberties Union, and the activist network 50501. At least seven million of us marched and rallied across America, which would make it the

largest protest in U.S. history. I marched in a labor union contingent in New York City, one of 100,000.

What were we protesting against? According to the protestors' signs, chants, and comments, people are angry about the cruel and violent ICE raids, about Trump's dispatching the National Guard and active military units to several cities, about the firing of hundreds of thousands of federal workers from their jobs, about the attacks on health, education, and housing programs, about the suppression of free speech and academic freedom, and about racist policies, such as Trump's changes in the refugee program to favor white people.

For decades the left shunned the American flag, seeing it as a symbol of racism at home and the U.S. wars against Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. But now many protestors fly the flag, reclaiming America for democracy and social justice. One protestor carried a sign saying, "Make America America Again," with a list of what he saw as American values: Free Speech, Science, Free Press, Rule of Law, Democracy, Choice (meaning the right of women to choose abortion), Due Process, and Diversity.

While the marches have been wonderful, they have not reflected the country's racial and ethnic diversity. Black people have been under represented. Because of white racism, unity between Black and white people has always been difficult. But in the recent period Black influencers in their podcasts and videos have discouraged Black participation. They have suggested that Black people already did their part in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s and more recently in Black Lives Matter protests in which 15 or 20 million participated. Others suggest that if they participate, Black people will be victims of repression. And others say protest accomplishes nothing. One has to wonder if

someone in government or on the far-right is paying some of these pundits. In some areas Latino participation has also been low, maybe because many Latinos now fear going to work, school, or the grocery store, much less joining in a political demonstration, because ICE is everywhere. In any case progressives have to encourage Blacks and Latinos to join the parade and raise their issues.

In ten months, the people in these demonstrations had become clearer about what they want, what we want. They want to take their country back from Trump, they want no dictators, no billionaires. And they know that they are fighting fascism, which if it isn't here now could be just around the corner. The enormous size of the demonstrations shows the tremendous opposition to Trump, and marching in them, being surrounded by others who feel as we do, is an expression of solidarity that gives us courage and optimism.

Local Protests Verging on Rebellion

In Portland, Oregon, where small numbers—dozens—of protestors had been marching back and forth in front of an ICE facility, Trump claimed falsely that the city “was burning,” “war ravaged,” and under attack by “domestic terrorists.” In a comic interlude, locals responded by putting on inflatable animal costumes and dancing in the streets and in front of the ICE facility. The State of Oregon and the City of Portland went to court and sought and won an injunction to stop the deployment of the National Guard to the city. People in other cities adopted the inflatable costumes and wore them in the mass marches.

As the mass peaceful protests continued, in some areas people turned to more militant action that at times verged on rebellion. In June in Los Angeles and in September in Chicago, both cities with large Latino immigrant communities,

protestors began to confront ICE officers engaged in raids and to take action to try to stop the raids. Often these were peaceful actions such as blowing whistles when immigration officers entered a community and undocumented people might be in danger. At other times protestors blocked streets with their bodies or their cars. Protestors had to be careful not to be charged with physically interfering with ICE officers, a charge that could lead to a year in prison, and not to hit them, which could lead to twenty years in prison. In the cities and states where ICE was deployed, local governments sought and often won temporary injunctions that slowed ICE operations.

In Los Angeles, a city of nine million, a third of the population are immigrants and 800,000 or 7.1 percent are undocumented, so there is an understandably strong opposition to the ICE raids. People in Los Angeles are seeing their family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors being kidnapped from the streets by ICE. And this is a city with a largely progressive population many of whom stand with the immigrants. So it is not surprising that as ICE has become more violent in L.A. and everywhere else, with ICE officers using flash-bang grenades, tear gas, and pepper spray, beating people in their custody, and firing guns, that confrontations between ICE and the community have become more tense. As ICE officers conducted raids in the Los Angeles area on June 6, dozens gathered to try to impede ICE and protect immigrants. Later in the afternoon, hundreds at the Los Angeles federal building demanded an end to immigration raids in the city. When protestors heckled the police, other officers dressed in riot gear appeared and fired rifles, launching tear gas into the crowd.

The next day in the nearby town of Paramount where there were rumors, false rumors it turned out, of a raid on a Home Depot hardware store, crowds gathered

and the police again used tear gas. In Compton, where there was a raid, protestors vandalized property and set a car on fire. Protestors threw rocks, glass bottles, and fireworks at the police who responded with flash-bang grenades, gas, and rubber bullets.

Over the objections of California governor Gavin Newsome and Los Angeles mayor Karen Bass, both Democrats, Trump then sent in the National Guard, which arrived on June 8. It was the first time in decades that any state's National Guard had been activated without a request from its governor. Democratic governors of twenty-two states called Trump's dispatch of the Guard "an alarming abuse of power." In response, protestors marched down Los Angeles streets and when faced with police and the National Guard they blocked the 101 Freeway. People dropped heavy objects from overpasses, breaking the windshields of police cars. Altogether, Trump deployed a total of 4,000 Guardsmen and 700 U.S. Marines. The president claimed he had to do so because there was a rebellion taking place in L.A.; Governor Newsome and Mayor Bass denied this. It was in fact a very localized minor rebellion in a few square blocks—but a righteous one.

Since then, protests against ICE haven't stopped; they have continued throughout the spring and into the summer and fall. On November 4, some 200 Venice High School students walked out of class and organized a protest march against Trump immigration policies.

Chicago Protests

The events in Chicago began following Trump's announcement that he was sending ICE and the National Guard to Chicago, against the wishes of Governor J.B. Pritzker and Mayor Brandon Johnson and of the people of Chicago. The peaceful march was interrupted when a red car sped through the protestors hitting a woman who had to be

taken to the hospital. Other protests were held at U.S. Navy and Coast Guard bases in North Chicago that were being used as staging areas for ICE and the Guard.

In Chicago, in September, ICE agents carried out Operation Midway Blitz—"Midway" for the name of a local airport and "Blitz" for the Nazi's term for a lightning strike. Protests in the Chicago area centered on the Broadview processing and detention center where ICE took the immigrants it arrested. ICE declared that the operation was to honor Kate Abrams, a woman killed by an undocumented immigrant who was driving drunk. ICE claimed it was going after murderers, rapists, "the worst of the worst." But most of those arrested were working-class people, almost none of whom had serious criminal records.

ICE deployed throughout Chicago, but particularly in Latino communities and made over one thousand arrests between September 8 and October 3. At the same time, hundreds of protestors gathered regularly at the Broadview ICE facility. When they protested, police showed up and in classic police practice, pushed the protestors back, using their night sticks and knocking people down. As the incidents became more violent, two people were hit by vehicles and a reporter was pepper-sprayed by the police. When "fourteen suburban moms" as they called themselves sat down and blocked the street in front of the facility, they were arrested.

Confrontations in Chicago continued for weeks as ICE agents behaved like thugs and gangsters, provoking violence and then firing on protestors with tear gas and rubber bullets. Not only protestors, but also emergency workers were overcome by the gas. Katrina Thompson, the mayor of Broadview said that ICE was "making war on my community." In other parts of Chicago, ICE agents without warrants arrested and handcuffed U.S. citizens. The activists

used their cars to try to block the streets and the gates of the facility to prevent arrests. Some of them were arrested.

While the Los Angeles and Chicago protests were the most militant and could be characterized as mini-rebellions against the federal authorities, there were protests in many other cities, including New York City, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Seattle, Austin, Boston, Washington, D.C., and San Antonio. Some protests broke out spontaneously as people rushed out of their houses to confront ICE operating in their neighborhoods. Others were organized by local Latino immigrant organizations, by state or city civil rights groups, or by churches. In some places protestors created encampments near ICE facilities or operated out of a local church or community center. State and city governments often stood up for the protestors against Trump and ICE. These kinds of confrontations are the reason that some historians, political scientists, and journalists talk about the United States heading toward a civil war.

At the Prairieland ICE facility in Alvarado, Texas, things took a violent turn as ten protestors, dressed in black and allegedly wearing body armor, were charged with luring ICE agents into an ambush and then attacking them from nearby woods with rifles, firing several shots and hitting one police officer in the neck. They were accused of being members of antifa, labeled domestic terrorists, and charged with attempted murder, facing possible ten-year to life sentences. That event was an outlier, an exception to the general rule that protests have been peaceful, if sometimes militant and disruptive. There is no sign at this point that armed attacks will become a trend. Were *agents provocateurs* behind this action?

In addition to this kind of active physical resistance in the mass movements and local uprisings there is also the resistance of university presidents who have refused

to accede to Trump's demands and of progressive law firms and lawyers who have not only brought law suits against Trump's administration but have also refused to be silenced by him.

On the Electoral Front

Most Americans who oppose Trump, those who demonstrate and those who don't, put their hope in ending his regime through elections. In the United States, third parties may win some state and local offices, but they are irrelevant in the national elections, though some are elected as independents with no party affiliation. In the November 4 national elections, the first since Trump began his second term, the Republican Party suffered a stinging defeat as Democrats won not only several important races, but also some minor ones. The results suggest a turning away from Trump that will be tested in the November 2026 mid-term elections; these have the potential to flip the Congress to a Democratic majority.

In New York on election day, November 4, Zohran Mamdani, a 34-year-old New York Assemblyman of Indian descent, a Muslim immigrant and Democratic Socialist, succeeded in defeating 67-year-old former New York State governor Andrew Cuomo to win the New York City mayoral election. He won half of the two million votes cast. He is the first Muslim to be elected mayor of New York.

Mamdani, was born in Kampala, Uganda, to parents of Indian descent and raised a Muslim. He grew up in New York City where his father Mahmood Mamdani was a professor of African Studies at Columbia University and his mother, Mira Nair, a famous filmmaker. Zohran graduated from the public Bronx High School of Science and attended the private Bowdoin College where he was a campus activist and earned a degree in African studies. He moved to New York City and in 2017 he joined the

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the largest left group in the country, then with about 100,000 members. He was elected to the New York Assembly in 2020 and as an assemblyman helped to launch a free bus pilot program. While an assemblyman, he learned about how the inflating price of taxi medallions (permits) was bankrupting some NYC yellow taxi drivers and that nine taxi drivers had committed suicide. Mamdani joined them in a 15-day hunger strike. The protest led the New York City Council to provide debt relief to the drivers.

The general election was a three-way race. In New York City the Republican Party is insignificant, so the contest in the first stage took place in the Democratic Party primary election where Mamdani had to defeat former governor Andrew Cuomo. The sitting mayor, Eric Adams, had been indicted on federal charges of bribery and campaign finance irregularities. But Trump ordered the Department of Justice to dismiss the charges with the understanding that Adams would cooperate with ICE raids in NYC. He accepted the deal, but New Yorkers were disgusted with him and he could not run for a second term with any hope of winning.

Cuomo had been forced to resign as governor of New York State after thirteen women accused him of sexual harassment, including engaging in non-consensual touching and making suggestive sexual comments—though the legal case was later dismissed. He was also blamed for covering up the deaths of elderly people in assisted living facilities during COVID. Still, he believed that he could win the election because he had the backing of the New York City financial and real estate elite. Mamdani defeated him in the Democratic primary—469,642 votes or 43.82 percent to 387,137 votes or 36.12 percent—but Cuomo then decided to run as an independent in the general election, so Mamdani

would have to defeat him again.

Mamdani ran on a platform of affordability, calling for freezing rents, making public transportation free, and providing free childcare. He also ran as a mayor who would defend New Yorkers from Donald Trump. And while it was not a central issue in his campaign, he made clear that he supported Palestine, could not support Israel as a religious state, and promised to arrest Benjamin Netanyahu for war crimes if he came to New York. His opponents labeled him an antisemite, and even suggested he was linked to Hamas; still, he won one-third of the Jewish vote. He won wide support from younger voters, renters, labor union members, and Black and Latino voters.

With DSA members as the core of the movement, Mamdani organized a massive campaign of 100,000 supporters, knocking on doors and making phone calls. Mamdani won the general election with a crushing vote of 1,036,051 or 50.4 percent to Cuomo's 146,137 or 41.6 percent. And it was a great achievement for DSA, the country's largest socialist organization. His victory also represented a victory for the Resistance and has energized it. Mamdani's victory was a defeat for President Donald Trump and his Republican Party, especially coming as it did among several other Democratic victories.

Across the country Republicans suffered defeats on November 4. In Virginia, former Democratic Rep. Abigail Spanberger defeated Republican Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears 57.4 percent to 42.4 percent to become governor. In New Jersey Democratic Rep. Mikie Sherrill defeated Donald Trump's candidate Jack Ciattarelli, a former state legislator, to win the governorship. The Democratic victors are known as "national security democrats," that is, not "hawks" but supporters of a strong military and the use of soft power, such as foreign aid. Span-

berger is a former CIA intelligence officer and Sherrill is a former Navy officer. Both are moderate Democrats, opposed to Donald Trump and his Republican Party. Their election was a victory for the opposition.

In California, Governor Gavin Newsom and the Democrats succeeded in passing a referendum on Proposition 50 that allows them to redraw the congressional districts to get more seats in Congress. They won by 64 to 36 percent, a stunning victory for the Democrats. Prop 50 was a response to a measure in Texas that will redistrict to benefit Republicans. Newsom now becomes a leading contender as candidate for president against Trump in 2028.

The far left, those who define themselves as “revolutionary socialists,” such as the groups Solidarity and Tempest, declined to endorse Mamdani because he’s a Democrat, a member of a capitalist party. They called instead for building mass movements to challenge Trump and both major parties. Most American progressives, however, look to a combination of protests like “No Kings” days and to the election of Democrats to stop Trump.

When he becomes mayor on January 1, 2026, Mamdani will face enormous challenges. One cannot ignore that since his opponents have characterized him as a dangerous antisemite supporter of Hamas and a terrorist, he could become a target of violence, of political assassination. Last year there were three political assassinations in the United States and two attempted assassinations of President Trump. New York City is the center of American capitalism and Mamdani will face stiff opposition from the city’s financial and real estate elite. To pay for his multibillion-dollar program of a rent freeze, free buses, and universal free childcare, Mamdani will have to persuade the state governor to support his goals and convince the legislature to provide the budget, a serious challenge. The Democratic

Party machine has already begun to try to control his new administration, pushing its people into top posts.

Trump at first suggested he would block Mamdani and punish New Yorkers for electing a socialist, though after a meeting between the two, they agreed they could work on issues of affordability. Still we know that Trump is not to be trusted and he could withhold funds from the city or send in ICE and the National Guard.

All of this will be a challenge for Mamdani and for DSA, which has supported him. DSA has about 11,000 members in New York City and usually about 10 percent are active members, though more became active in the Mamdani campaign. The organization has focused on electoral politics, though it also has groups that organize tenants, some members working on the immigration issue, women involved in the fight for abortion rights, and many are active in their labor unions. DSA members have, no doubt, participated in the mass marches, but without a significant organizational presence. Mamdani will have to inspire and organize DSA’s members and many others to build a movement to fight for his program. We must try to help Mamdani be as good as he can be for as long as he can. But he can only be as good as the movement that both supports him and pushes him.

The Future of the Democratic Party

The Democrats will find it hard to win coming elections as the Republicans continue to eliminate likely Democratic voters from the election rolls and redesigning congressional districts to give themselves more Representatives in the House. The Republican strategy is to multiply the congressional districts they control. The Democrats have responded in kind, but they don’t control as many states; so far only California is creating new districts.

Can we expect that Mamdani's victory will change the direction of the Democratic Party? There is no doubt that Mamdani's astonishing victory has created enormous excitement and that there will be attempts to change the Democratic Party's direction. But the Democratic Party appears to be hopelessly out of touch with the American people and it is not clear that it can change, since its main function is to represent the interests of certain sections of the capitalist class. Sanders' 2016 campaign for president, which had a program that spoke to the issues of the working class, was crushed by the Democratic Party leadership, while in 2020, faced with the opposition of the party leadership, he felt he had to give up and support Joe Biden.

How could one change the Democrats? Occasionally, one hears leftists say, "The Democratic Party is dead," but this is nonsense. Democrats have 23 state governors, compared to Republicans 27. The Democrats have 213 Representatives in the House, compared to the Republicans 219. The Democrats remain a rich and powerful political organization. What is changing in the people's sense of identification with these parties. Today 28 percent of registered voters are Republicans and 28 percent are Democrats—but 43 percent are independents. Still, neither the Green Party's valiant efforts nor DSA Democratic Party ventures has succeeded in organizing a political party on the left that might provide an alternative.

The Democratic Party (just like the Republican Party) is not a party such as one finds in some European countries with an active membership in a democratic organization. The Democrats have no members and virtually no organization at the popular level; rather they are led and controlled by the elected professional politicians, by donors who finance them, and are administered by political apparatchiks. They raise billions of dollars that go to

lawyers, political strategists, and principally to TV, radio, and social media advertising. Ordinary people play no role in setting the party agenda, establishing its goals or anything else. Groups like Justice Democrats and DSA that operate in the Democratic Party largely find they have to adopt the approach of the very party they are trying to change. Election to national political office now costs several million dollars if one is to compete, and the reform groups, progressives, and leftists must either drop out or adopt the approaches of the Democrats.

The Resistance must continue to do what it has been doing: build mass demonstrations, engage in small local rebellions, and fight to win elections to reduce the political power of the Republicans even if we have little faith in the Democrats. In these mass marches, in small local rebellions, and in elections, the American people are standing up against Trump. He continues to impose his political agenda and to militarize our society, to ignore our Constitution and laws, and we continue to fight him. We will need more militant disruptive actions, civil disobedience, and strikes on a large scale to defeat him, and there is a chance we can do it. Still, we face the threat of Trump's authoritarianism developing into actual fascism. If that happens, the Resistance will have to change as well.

NOTES

1. "Top Contributors, federal election data for Donald Trump, 2024 cycle." <https://www.opensecrets.org/2024-presidential-race/donald-trump/contributors?id=N00023864>.
2. David A. Fahrenthold, Eric Lipton, David Yaffe-Bellany, Dylan Freedman, and Devon Lum, "Who Won a Seat at Trump's Crypto Dinner?" *New York Times*, May 23, 2025.
3. Chris Maisano, "Republicans' and Democrats' Biggest Corporate Sponsors." Oct. 8, 2024, <https://jacobin.com/2024/10/republicans-and-democrats-biggest-corporate-sponsors>.

A Sobering but Hopeful Take on Mamdani's Election

HOWIE HAWKINS

I DO NOT SHARE THE EUPHORIA OF SO many progressives and socialists at the election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York City. I came away sobered by it. Many of the left are celebrating Mamdani's election as signaling a strong move to the left. I don't see it that way. Mamdani's vote underperformed other Democratic candidates around the country. I was also underwhelmed by the modest reform program and moderate strategy of Mamdani's campaign itself. I was encouraged by how Mamdani ran his campaign. The canvassing and the messaging were exemplary models that progressives should emulate, especially those of us who believe independent socialist politics are required to change the system. I believe socialists should support Mamdani and the reforms he campaigned on and be hopeful the movement that supported his campaign can grow. But overall I feel this election shows how very far we have to go.

Underperformance

The November 4, 2025, election was nationalized. It was a massive anti-Trump vote. The anti-Trump vote trumped local issues in most places. But the New York City mayoral race pivoted around local

issues and candidates. Mamdani did not get the anti-Trump bump that Democrats everywhere else got.

Mamdani's 50.4 percent¹ vote was the same percentage of the vote received by David Dinkins in 1989, the first member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the first person of color to be elected mayor of New York City. Mamdani underperformed the votes of recent Democratic mayors. Bill de Blasio received 73 percent in 2013 and 66 percent in 2017. Eric Adams received 67 percent in 2021. Mamdani and Dinkins only narrowly outpolled their opponents, Mamdani by 2.14 percent over Andrew Cuomo, Curtis Sliwa, and Eric Adams in 2025 and Dinkins by 2.58 percent over Rudy Giuliani in 1989. The opponents of both Mamdani and Dinkins ran dog-whistle racist campaigns that fear mongered about crime and the progressives' support for Palestinian rights.² The racist-in-chief, Donald Trump, endorsed Cuomo. Mamdani's mandate is barely a majority. It is sobering to consider that the racial politics of New York City do not seem to have changed much over the last thirty-six years.

While Mamdani's opposition to Israel's genocidal slaughter in Gaza and support for Palestinian rights was laudable and netted him votes across the city, according to exit polling, it is concerning that only 32 percent of people who identified their religion as Jewish voted for Mamdani.³ Some people argue that the real Jewish vote was much

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higher for Mamdani because he won the votes of many secular Jews who would not describe their religion as Jewish in an exit poll. Either way, Jews in America identify about 70 percent as Democrats and 50 percent as liberals.⁴ Even taking into account the large concentration of Republican and conservative Orthodox Jews in New York City, it is disturbing that the despicable smears about Mamdani being antisemitic and the Islamophobic fear-mongering by the Cuomo campaign and some well-funded pro-Israel groups seems to have scared off many Democratic and liberal Jews from voting for Mamdani.

Democrats swept the three Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice races by 24 percent in a state Donald Trump won the presidential election by 2 percent. In Georgia, both Democrats running against Republicans for the Georgia Public Service Commission won in 67 percent to 33 percent landslides in their respective district races, flipping counties across the state that had voted for Trump in the 2024 presidential election by wide margins.

In the two highest profile elections in this off year for state and federal elections, centrist Democrats for governor, Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey and Abigail Spanberger in Virginia, won by much larger margins than Mamdani won by in New York City where Democratic enrollment is more than two times larger than Republican enrollment, 56 percent for Democrats compared to 26 percent for Republicans. Both Sherrill and Spanberger won by the same 14 percent margin compared to Mamdani's 2 percent. Mamdani also underperformed Sherrill and Spanberger compared to the Democratic presidential vote in 2024. The 14 percent victory margin for both Sherrill and Spanberger was 8 percent higher than Kamala Harris's 6 percent win in both states. Mamdani, on the other hand, underperformed Harris by

36 percent; she won New York City by 38 percent compared to Mamdani's 2 percent.

A local example of the anti-Trump vote in 2025 was displayed in races around the city of Syracuse, New York, where I live. The Onondaga County Legislature, which represents the city of Syracuse and its suburbs and rural hinterlands, became majority Democratic for the first time in fifty years since the post-Watergate anger at Republicans in 1975. The Democrats won every contested race. Democrats also swept town council races in Syracuse suburbs that are traditionally majority Republican. Post-election interviews of candidates report that voters at the doors and on the phones just wanted to vote against Trump. Local issues had little to do with their vote.⁵

One positive lesson from
Mamdani is how he framed
his messaging around policies
that people can understand and
believe are doable.

The anti-Trump vote did not come home to the Democrat in New York City. Mamdani's Democratic vote was 15-20 percent below recent Democratic mayors and the 2024 Democratic presidential candidate. That his margin of victory was significantly lower than centrist Democrats like Sherrill and Spanberger indicates how many Democrats strayed from the Democratic line to support the not-so-subtly coded racial fear-mongering of the disgraced Democrat Cuomo on an independent line. Adams did win as a Black candidate in 2021, but he ran as the right-most candidate in the Democratic primary as a tough-on-crime former police officer.

In the general election the enrolled Democratic voters came out for Adams against the Republican Sliwa running on the same basic crime message. That Mamdani won over 50 percent of New York City voters is an achievement to celebrate and build upon. But it does not signal a strong shift to the left in New York City. I believe that the enthusiasm of progressives at his victory should be tempered by an acknowledgment that the political base for Mamdani and his movement is far from secured.

Modest Program

I was also underwhelmed by Mamdani's platform and the class politics of his electoral strategy.

Mamdani's leading policy demands are good reforms that would improve the lives of working people. But they are not structural changes that begin to democratize power in the political and economic institutions that generate extreme inequality and public sector austerity in New York City. Despite the socialist ambience of the Mamdani campaign, its policy program was not substantively different from previous liberal Democrats in New York City like David Dinkins and Bill de Blasio or Democratic mayors in many other large cities.

The headline reforms—rent freeze, free buses, universal childcare, and progressive taxes to pay for them—can be accommodated without socialist inroads into the private ownership of a capitalist economy. New York City had a rent freeze three times under Mayor Bill de Blasio in 2015, 2016, and 2020. Many cities in capitalist economies have free public transportation, from the frontline cities of Kharkiv and Kryvyi Rih in neoliberal Ukraine to many cities in social democratic Scandinavia, and over one hundred cities in the United States.⁶ Universal free childcare is available in India, Japan, and many European countries,⁷ and the state of New Mexico has recently

committed to it.⁸

Winning the progressive tax reforms to fund this program is where Mamdani faces resistance from the leaders of his own Democratic Party and the wealthy financial and real estate interests to which the corporate wing of the party is indentured. Mamdani's campaign estimates that universal child care would cost \$6 billion a year. Free buses would add another \$800 million a year. A municipally-owned grocery store in each of the five boroughs would cost \$60 million in start-up investments. Mamdani's proposed Department of Community Safety to redirect responses from the police department to social services addressing mental health crises, homelessness, transit safety, and gun violence prevention would cost the city an additional \$400 million a year. The freeze on rents in rent-regulated apartments, which cover about half of the city's units, would not directly affect the city budget. But Mamdani's biggest ticket item

Centrist Democrats for governor, Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey and Abigail Spanberger in Virginia, won by much larger margins than Mamdani won by in New York City.

is his proposal to build over the next ten years 200,000 new units of rent-regulated municipal public housing. This program is estimated to cost \$100 billion over ten years, or \$10 billion a year.⁹ Mamdani is thus looking for additional revenue to pay for over \$17 billion in new expenditures, or about 15 percent more than the \$120 billion city budget adopted for 2026.

To pay for the additional expenditures in his program, Mamdani proposes

progressive tax reforms. He proposes to raise the city personal income tax on the highest tax bracket (the top 1 percent with incomes over \$1 million incomes a year) by 2 percent, from 3.9% to 5.9%. The personal income tax hike would raise \$4 billion a year. He also proposes a hike on profitable corporations in the highest state corporate income tax bracket (income over \$5 million a year) by 4.25 percent, from 7.25 percent to 11.5 percent. This corporate tax hike would raise \$5 billion a year in state revenue, but how much of that would go to New York City would be dependent on state budgets.

Both of these tax reforms will require state approval. Here Mamdani faces the staunch opposition to any kind of tax increases from Governor Kathy Hochul and the fiscally conservative majority of Republicans and most Democrats in the state legislature. New York City does not have home rule on its local property and income taxes. State control after the 1975 fiscal crisis also put tighter restrictions on the city's ability to borrow. It was the big Wall Street banks' decision to close the bond market to New York City in 1975 that forced a state takeover of New York City finances and drastic cuts in public services. Since then, eight of the city's original nineteen public hospitals have been closed. The tuition-free city college system was replaced with tuition that has been rising ever since. Raising taxes on the rich is overwhelmingly supported by ordinary people, but opposed by state Democratic leaders and the corporate interests behind them.

Class Collaboration

The class politics of the Mamdani campaign have been in the direction of collaboration, not confrontation, with the corporate neoliberals who control the Democratic Party. Mamdani's approach to the primary election made this clear. Both at the beginning¹⁰ of his primary campaign

and again near the end¹¹ when the polls began to show he could win, the Mamdani campaign together with leaders of DSA and the Working Families Party (WFP) decided that Mamdani would not challenge Andrew Cuomo on the WFP ballot line if Cuomo won the primary. If anybody typifies the corporate neoliberalism of the Democratic Party, it is Andrew Cuomo. He was a weak candidate who had been shamed in August 2021 into resigning as governor of New York by his scandals with sexual harassment and COVID-related nursing home deaths. Mamdani would have been competitive with a campaign on the WFP line after a close primary.

Yet Mamdani's campaign showed more loyalty to the Democratic Party than Cuomo did when he ran against the Democratic nominee Mamdani on an independent Fight and Deliver ballot line after losing the Democratic primary decisively to Mamdani by a 56 percent to 44 percent margin. The Mamdani campaign's decision to not run independently against a Democratic Cuomo candidacy if Mamdani lost a close primary election indicates that the Mamdani campaign and allied organizations like DSA and WFP are more concerned with maintaining and improving their standing and access within the structures of the corporate-dominated Democratic Party than with fighting to take the power from the party's corporate wing.

In Office, but Not in Power

Mamdani has been elected to the office of mayor, but that does not give him the power to implement his program without the cooperation of other power centers that are not inclined to do so.

The first power structure standing in Mamdani's way is the Democratic Party itself, which remains firmly in control of its corporate wing at the local, state, and national levels. Only 18 of 51 City Coun-

cilors are members of its progressive caucus. The other 27 Democrats are part of the corporate Democratic machine and the 6 Republicans are even more conservative. An adamantly pro-Israel corporate Democrat, Julie Menin, is a shoo-in to be elected Speaker of the council when it reconvenes in January.

At the state level, there is no organized progressive caucus in the legislature. There is a small Socialist Caucus, consisting of 3 of 64 Senators and 6 of 150 Assembly Members. It has little political weight in a state legislature where corporate Democrats and Republicans dominate. Democratic state party chair Jay Jacobs refused to endorse

Despite the socialist ambience of the Mamdani campaign, its policy program was not substantively different from previous liberal Democrats in New York City.

Mamdani after he won the primary. Governor Kathy Hochul is a corrupt¹² corporate Democrat in the mold of Andrew Cuomo, who appointed her lieutenant governor and whose governorship she inherited when he resigned in disgrace. Hochul, who is up for re-election in 2026, is publicly opposed to Mamdani's tax reforms, which require state approval.

At the federal level, Trump has threatened to cut off federal funding for a city he had said is led by a "communist." Trump has threatened to deport Mamdani if he does not cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations. Despite Trump's threats, Mamdani received

no endorsements from the six Democratic U.S. Senators representing New York City and its suburbs in New Jersey and Connecticut, including New York Senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, New Jersey Senators Corey Booker and Andrew Kim, and Connecticut Senators Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy. Many Democratic U.S. House members representing the city and its New York suburbs refused to endorse Mamdani, including Laura Gillen, George Latimer, Greg Meeks, Grace Meng, Dan Goldman, Ritchie Torres, and Tom Suozzi.

Beyond internal opposition in his own party, Mamdani faces the capitalist power structure. Its private economic power centered around Wall Street tycoons, real estate barons, and the corporate media they own opposes Mamdani and his program. Capitalists can make or break the city's economy and public finances by their decisions—or just their threats—on whether or not to invest in the city's private sector and to finance city bonds for capital projects and refinancing existing debt.

Another independent and conservative power center is the 50,000-member-strong New York Police Department (NYPD). With about 33,000 uniformed officers and 15,000 other employees the NYPD can exert powerful leverage through street protests, work slowdowns, and political strikes. Real estate and business interests support conservative policing that patrols the boundaries of race and class segregation that make for profitable development, displacement, and gentrification, and super-exploitation of concentrated poverty. The NYPD is a conservative institution that supports conservative policing philosophies. It has a long history of surveillance and repression of progressive social movements, including in recent years the anti-police brutality protests after George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police and

the more recent protests against Israel's war on Gaza. The political power of the police defeated police reforms attempted by David Dinkins and Bill de Blasio. Mamdani seems to have decided to avoid taking on a losing power struggle with the NYPD at this time. He has reappointed the incumbent NYPD commissioner Jessica Tisch, a pro-Israel billionaire heiress with a conservative policing philosophy who has opposed bail reform and collaborated with ICE. She has strong support from the banking and real estate interests. Mamdani apparently hopes that with Tisch at the NYPD helm, the police will acquiesce to his Department of Community Safety if it is authorized by City Council legislation, even though Tisch is not in favor of the change. Bill de Blasio's appointment of Bill Bratton as NYPD commissioner, another top cop adherent to conservative "broken windows" and stop-and-frisk tactics, did not stop police from creating a political crisis for de Blasio when they turned their backs to de Blasio repeatedly when he showed up at the hospital and then the funerals of two police officers shot by a gunman's ambush soon after anti-police brutality protests rocked the city following a Staten Island grand jury refusal to indict a police officer for the chokehold death of Eric Garner. Given his limited power, Mamdani has to pick his fights. But events around crime and social protest will inevitably force him to respond. The NYPD may pick a fight with him whether he wants it or not.

Given this balance of forces, perhaps one lesson to take from Mamdani's election is that the left should not seek executive power before it has the legislative majority and popular support and an organization to carry through its program. Otherwise, the left in executive office may be forced to administer the system it started out to change.

Positive Lessons

I do think there are positive lessons to take away from Mamdani's campaign. Some online critics on the left are already posturing against Mamdani for not meeting their rhetorical litmus tests. For example, some refer to him as "Ziorahn" because he has backed away from using the slogan "Globalize the Intifada." Mamdani is trying to communicate his case against Israel's genocidal war in Gaza and for Palestinian rights in terms that broad masses of people can understand and support. Slogans that have divergent meanings for different audiences can be divisive and reduce support for the cause. He is trying to build support for what counts—his actions more than slogans, such as his support for the divestment of city pensions funds from Israeli bonds and arms manufacturers.

What also counts is on-the-ground organizing to support reforms. Some are portraying Mamdani's re-appointment of Jessica Tisch as NYPD commissioner as an irredeemable betrayal. But these performative posers are not organizing on the ground to build a campaign with the social power needed to win real police reform.¹³ On that note, it is good that a group of activists who supported Mamdani's electoral campaign are building upon their experiences to launch *Our Time*,¹⁴ a campaign to continue deep canvassing and other organizing to win Mamdani's affordability agenda. New York City DSA has launched a *Tax the Rich* campaign to push for the tax reforms that are essential for funding Mamdani's programs.¹⁵

One positive lesson the left should take from Mamdani is how he framed his messaging around policies that people can understand and believe are doable. His policy demands were concrete policies, not abstract slogans or value statements. For example, he called for a rent freeze on rent-regulated apartments, which people

can believe can be done, rather than pushing affordable housing is a human right, which people might agree is a nice idea but leaves them wondering what the candidate would do to make this happen.

Another positive lesson is the impact of Mamdani's canvass operation. The campaign says it enlisted 104,000 volunteers who knocked on more than 3.1 million doors, made 4.6 million calls, and sent 2.7 million text messages.¹⁶ The canvass was in the form of deep canvassing that listened to voters instead of preaching at them, or, as Mamdani put it, "Don't lecture, listen." Deep canvassing is different from traditional drive-by election canvassing that quickly talks about the candidate's bio and top issues and asks for support in order to identify who to mobilize on election day. Deep canvassing takes 10–20 minutes to have a conversation with people, hear what their concerns are, and share experiences to establish an empathetic relationship before giving the candidate's program. Social science research indicates that deep canvassing is the most persuasive form of campaigning, with one study concluding that it is "102 times more effective than traditional canvassing, television, radio, direct mail, and phone banking combined."¹⁷ There is evidence that Mamdani's canvassing changed the top issue for New York City voters from crime, which Cuomo, Adams, and Sliwa emphasized, to Mamdani's theme of affordability.¹⁸

Another positive lesson is the example of DSA as a dues-paying mass-membership political organization of several thousand members. It provided the initial cadre for Mamdani's campaign. DSA had the resources to pay staff to organize its members into the Mamdani canvassing, phone banking, sign posting, and other campaign activities. From that DSA core, the Mamdani campaign built out an organization of over 100,000 volunteers. In an era when

most social movements are temporary mobilizations that subside as quickly as they rise, permanent membership organizations are needed to sustain movements.

DSA functions as a political party, but without its own ballot line and independent opposition to the Democratic Party. It functions as a faction within, rather than an alternative to, the thoroughly capitalist Democratic Party. I fear too many people are concluding from Mamdani's election that democratic socialism can be successfully pursued through the Democratic Party. I would argue that if we are going to defeat the corporate power structure, we need our own party, one that is independent of the capitalist parties. We would do better to take our program directly to the people and build independent working-class power than to confuse people with our affiliation to a party whose thoroughly entrenched corporate leadership opposes our program. We would do better to focus on our own organizing without wasting time and resources on internal Democratic Party factional politics.

Advancing Municipal Socialism

It is important for the future of municipal socialism as part of a broader socialist movement that Mamdani be successful in implementing his program. Socialists should organize support for his reforms and defend him from the backlash that powerful corporate interests will unleash. We are not going to build socialism in one city, but effective municipal socialist administrations that deliver reforms that benefit working people can demonstrate to the public that socialist solutions are feasible and effective. They can create the popular foundation for more far-reaching change locally, at the state and national levels, and, indeed, internationally. Leftists around the world are watching what happens with the Mamdani administration.

I have called Mamdani's program modest. Capitalism as a system is not threatened by its reforms, although many capitalists will vigorously oppose them. They want working people so preoccupied with the daily struggles of making ends meet so they are easier to exploit. They are militantly opposed to any progressive taxes on their personal and corporation incomes.

Winning more radical socialist reforms that increase the power of working people as against the power of capitalists will be more likely if the Mamdani administration is successful in winning the reforms it campaigned for and maintains and increases popular support. An unsuccessful Mamdani administration could set back municipal socialism for years. Municipal socialism needs to be more about democratizing the structures of power than getting progressives into the existing power structure. Democratizing power would take it from absentee-owner capitalists and their minions in the city and state government and place it in democratic public city institutions.

Home-rule reforms would be a central feature of such a program. New York City should have the power to set its own income and property tax rates rather than requiring approval by a state legislature filled with people who live upstate and outside of the city.

A city-owned public bank should be a central plank in a more far-reaching program of municipal socialism. A public bank could be capitalized with the deposits the city now places in capitalist banks along with deposits from the public. It could make loans and investments to advance city priorities like affordable housing, mass transit, and clean energy. It could underwrite municipal bonds and thus free the city from Wall Street's veto power over public policy. Public banking was proposed as an option in the state legislature in 1975

as an alternative to the bankers' decision to refuse underwriting city bond financing and force public austerity on the city. A public banking movement already exists. Mamdani supported public banking enabling legislation in the state Assembly. It is time to follow through on making this public option a reality.¹⁹

Another sector ripe for socialization and democratization by a municipal socialist movement is the energy sector. Public power was another public option that

The Mamdani campaign and allied organizations are more concerned with standing and access within the corporate-dominated Democratic Party than with fighting to take power.

New Left veterans raised in the 1970s in response to the 1974 and 1979 energy crises in which energy prices shot up due to oil shortages stemming from geopolitical crises in the Middle East and price gouging by the shared monopolies of the oil and utility industries taking advantage of the crisis.²⁰ Cost control, democratization, energy efficiency, and building clean renewables were all part of the argument for public power in that era. Today the climate crisis makes the case for renewables and the public power to build them all the more compelling. A public power utility in New York City provides the political and economic power to carry through a citywide Green New Deal for a rapid transition to 100 percent clean renewable power and heating at a time when the city's incumbent investor-owned utilities

(IOUs), Con Edison and National Grid, are slow-walking the retirement of existing fossil fuel energy systems and the building of renewable alternatives. Indeed, these IOUs are planning to invest billions in new and renewed gas infrastructure that they plan to profit from for decades to come, spewing out planet-heating greenhouse gases that accelerate the existential climate chaos.

A statewide Public Power NY campaign got two bills considered in the state legislature in 2023. One bill, the NY Utility Democracy Act, would have socialized the electric power distribution utilities statewide under democratically elected local boards. That bill never got out of committee. Another bill, the Build Public Renewables Act, did pass in watered-down form. The original bill would have enabled the New York Power Authority (NYPA) to build renewables on any site on its own initiative. But the Democrats, who control the state legislature, amended it into a form of lemon socialism. It lets the existing NYPA build publicly-owned wind and solar only when private industry does not want to build at a given site. Today the statewide public power campaign is focused on getting even the watered-down bill implemented.²¹ Mamdani voted for the Build Public Renewables Act as a member of the Assembly and has expressed support for public power during his mayoral campaign. Public power would seem to be a structural reform that should be on the near future agenda of municipal socialism in New York City.

Another power-building reform would be to expropriate big landlords in New York City in order to stem rising rents and create more affordable housing for residents. In a referendum in the city of Berlin, Germany, in 2021, a 59 percent to 38 percent majority voted to expropriate large landlords with more than 3,000 units and turn the units into democratically managed public housing.²² Berlin's city government has yet

to implement that mandate, which shows why movements need to stay active between elections. Such a reform in New York City would radically alter the balance of power between landlords and tenants.

One progressive tax reform that Mamdani has puzzlingly not endorsed is to have the state keep the revenues of the Stock

Perhaps the left should not seek executive power before it has the legislative majority and popular support and an organization to carry through its program.

Transfer Tax, which generates upwards of \$15 billion a year. This tax is a tiny sales tax of one tenth of one percent on stock sales, but the revenues have been rebated right back to stock traders since the aftermath of the 1972 New York City fiscal crisis. Ralph Nader, who has been campaigning for this reform for many years, recently called out Mamdani for being "AWOL despite urgings by your numerous colleagues in the state legislature to sign on to a bill that would end the rebate and specifically allocate the many billions of dollars annually to mass transit, education, health care and environmental protection."²³ Supporting this reform seems an easy lift for Mamdani or at least the Tax the Rich campaign in New York.

A final power-transforming reform I think should be on the municipal socialist agenda is community control of the police. The Black Panther Party raised this demand in the early 1970s. It called for elected neighborhood review boards with real

investigative and policy-making powers in their communities and an elected city-wide police commission to set police department policies. The elected police commission instead of the mayor would hire and fire the police chief and discipline police officers for misconduct as well as implement services that Mamdani's proposed Department of Community Safety would undertake such as violence prevention and de-escalation interventions and better social and mental health services. It changes the power relationship between the community and the police—and the real estate industry that wants the policing to preserve race and class segregation from which it profits. It gives the community the permanent power to reform and regulate policing without being dependent on the mayor of the moment.²⁴ Chicago has moved the furthest on enacting community control of the police. The Chicago City Council adopted an ordinance in 2021 that enacted a Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability that has been elected and has pushed through some police reforms despite residual political resistance, underfunding, and limited powers.²⁵ The Chicago community control movement is now organizing for a referendum to expand the Commission's powers.²⁶

Getting to more transformative reforms depends on early successes for the Mamdani administration, which means municipal socialists need to continue deep canvassing and organizing to win more people over to the program and push the reforms through. Observing how persistent racial fears and resentments seem to be considering the narrow majorities that voted for David Dinkins in 1989 and Zohran Mamdani in 2025, deep canvassing and organizing in the communities where racism persists would seem to be a high priority for defending Mamdani from the organized backlash that is sure to come from the elitists and racists

in the political and economic power structures and for building a broader movement to support more transformative municipal socialism.

NOTES

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Education under Trump

Shock, Confusion, Fear—and Resistance

LOIS WEINER

“IT’S BEEN HELL.... IT’S JUST everything and all of it. Every time we turn around,” one experienced education worker and activist wrote me in late fall.¹ Trump’s stunningly comprehensive ideological, cultural, social, political, and economic offensive has made education workers reel.² Much work with students continues as before, while the world is turned upside down outside school walls and classrooms. Teachers worry about speaking truth in their classrooms; protecting their kids from deportations; predicting how federal cuts in funding will affect their schools, students, and jobs, as school districts cope with the financial turbulence of funding revoked, restored, or in limbo because of court orders and what seems Trump’s whim. From his first days in office Trump showed his authoritarian aims, having won support from the mega-wealthy. They either admired or turned a blind eye to MAGA (Christian nationalist, White supremacist, nativist, patriarchal, homophobic, ableist) and to Trump, who used every governmental power he could to promulgate policies to expand his power and undercut human rights.

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Though teachers and others who work in schools seem to be acquiring more confidence and energy, and some union locals have won important victories in contract campaigns, they have yet to organize a national movement, or with few exceptions, even state actions.³ Education workers were well represented among the millions who engaged in and organized protest marches. Despite having little or no leadership from school officials in most places, activist teachers organized to defend their students from ICE raids. Both national teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), joined the coalition of liberal organizations protesting the attack on democracy, civil rights, and funding for education, as well as dismantling of the Department of Education. The unions urged members to lobby, filing lawsuits to try to stem Trump’s advances. They publicized the “No Kings” marches and funded education-specific outreach through the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), which also includes SEIU, the other large public employee union in the AFL-CIO that organizes education workers.⁴ AFT and NEA were also persuaded to be signatories to #MayDayStrong, a group hosted by leaders of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

Stunned by earlier attacks on academic freedom in regard to Palestine, higher education faculty were awakened to the

need for collective voice and interventions, encouraged by the AAUP (American Association of University Professors), now merged with AFT. On dozens of campuses full-time faculty followed the lead of graduate student workers and adjunct faculty, who long ago organized with unions eager to represent this new constituency as well as expand their membership numbers beyond their traditional (diminished) base in blue collar work. The vitality of AAUP organizing is a bright spot for many reasons, including the possibility of developing alliances on campuses between all workers, what K-12 teacher activists in West Virginia's 2018 "red state" walkouts called "wall-to-wall" organizing and strikes.

After winning office on a new agenda for education (Project 2025's program), and mostly carrying it out,⁵ since the spring Trump has consolidated a new bipartisan project in education, one that intensifies and expands harm done to education in the initial bipartisan neoliberal reforms.⁶ While Trump remains moored to his far-Right, MAGA base he has also found common ground on education policy with neoconservatives, libertarians, and neoliberals through the money fueling these groups' objectives in both parties.

Under the Radar: Trump's Buy-In to a New Bipartisan Project in Education

Understanding what's changed in education policy since Trump's election requires noting how the 2024 election was "a historical turning point," when the tech ruling class "emerged as a shaper of national power and politics, intervening decisively at a time of destabilization and realignment in the U.S. party system."⁷ Silicon Valley drives education policy now. The new bipartisan coalition share goals of privatizing education with charter schools, public/private partnerships, and intensified use of edtech,

in software and platforms for standardized testing, as well as pushing AI and online learning. One business magazine predicted Trump's education policies will "unlock new opportunities for EdTech startups focused on AI-driven learning tools, particularly those tailored to literacy development and personalized instruction." And with federal grants "favoring tech-enabled solutions, early-stage companies in the education space could see a surge in demand from school districts seeking to modernize their classrooms. Industry analysts predict increased venture funding in education technology as public-private partnerships gain momentum under this new policy direction."⁸ These policies share an ideological goal that is inseparable from capital's drive for profit, to control learning and teaching to synchronize education with work, creating a workforce suited to capitalism's current and future needs, as billionaires decide them.

The new coalition shares overlapping goals for privatization that can temporarily mediate but not erase the contestation about whether capital can dispense with democracy and liberal capitalism replaced with authoritarian rule, with Trump at the helm. This critical political difference is reflected in education policy by the wedding of authoritarianism and privatization, seen in the far-Right/libertarian plan to replace a system of public education, which it calls "government schools," with a wholly private system of schools that receives public money, one that is superficially managed by the states but controlled by the federal government's changes in school funding and regulations, as well as political campaigns to root out dissent. MAGA has shown itself both a willing partner and a wild card in the new bipartisan alliance on education, which rests on big money from big tech. Steve Bannon, formerly a harsh critic of AI, supported Trump's presidential order

expanding AI's use and limiting regulation, reflecting Bannon's understanding Trump's power and in turn MAGA's own project rely (for now) on MAGA agreeing to the power of tech companies and policies previously scorned.

In contrast to Trump and his far-Right/libertarian backers, neoliberals defend liberal capitalism insofar as profit is guaranteed, trying to sustain the regulatory framework of a public system of education under a federal umbrella, but one that will be privatized with charters, public/private partnerships, and edtech, including AI. The neoliberal alternative to Trump retains the rhetoric of schooling's meritocratic purposes as well as legal protections that address inequality, while intensifying elements of privatization that contradict its professed aim of advancing educational equality because they produce greater economic and social inequality.⁹

The overlap and divergence in these two agendas reflect shifting infusions of big money to the Democrats and GOP, as well as rivalries about tech "solutions," including AI. The deals and interlocks between Microsoft, OpenAI, Google, Amazon, and private equity, especially BlackRock, which change weekly, in turn influence their coalition's education policy.¹⁰ Currently the neoliberal core, led by Jorge Elorza who is rebuilding Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), overlaps in its positions, as was true under Obama, with the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the largest neo-conservative think tank.¹¹ Yet Elorza and his supporters in the Democratic Party are pivoting to Trump's backers and policies in ways AEI has not (yet). As one longtime analyst of big money noted, the new "end game" of Elorza Democrats is identical to a 2017 memorandum to Trump and DeVos from the secret Council for National Policy: "Abandon public education in favor of 'free-market private schools, church schools and

home schools'."¹² Like Trump and MAGA they fuse explicit anti-"identity politics" with arguments against reforms that reduce unequal outcome in schools, supporting programs that deepen privatization and business control of schools.¹³

Protecting standardized testing is a mainstay of the coalition. Though the tests are based on the Common Core, which was opposed by the Right and progressives because the standards usurped parent, teacher, and school district authority to establish curriculum, the far Right has left that fight, accepting the tests (and the profits they bring). This old struggle is reflected in a new tension, which is how testing undercuts the far-Right's campaign to destroy "woke" curricula. Standardized testing that supposedly measures a nation's ability to compete economically can't assess students' understanding of the Christian bible as a literacy text. Though Department of Education funding was slashed, money for the Institute of Education Science (IES), which decides what kinds of teaching methods and materials are acceptable, was restored. Since its creation IES has made standardized tests scores virtually the only acceptable marker of academic success.

The ideological glue holding this new coalition together is agreement about boosting capital's profits and control over what students learn, which is intended to synchronize education to the actual and intended transformation of work. This goal, apparent in the wholehearted embrace of Career and Technical Education (CTE), is a key element of the new bipartisan project, across the political spectrum. It is endorsed by the Democratic Party's center, neocons, the GOP, Bernie Sanders, longtime liberal foe of charter schools, Diane Ravitch, and AFT president Randi Weingarten, who placed op/ed pieces in news outlets throughout the country, insisting we must "Stop trying to make everyone

go to college.”¹⁴ NEA supports CTE with arguments about career readiness and helping students to thrive in school while also noting that federal funding for these programs is one of the largest sources of money for high schools and community colleges. CTE was an early cornerstone of Trump’s agenda in education, explained on Linda McMahon’s bio on the Department of Education website: “WWE created thousands of American jobs and sparked McMahon’s passion for Career and Technical Education (CTE)” the “skills-based career preparation [that] is the backbone of the American economy and the path to the American Dream for every citizen....”¹⁵ Liberal support for CTE recapitulates their acceptance of neoliberalism’s case that its privatization reforms were the best way to increase educational opportunity.

CTE was emphasized in Trump’s first term, in an initiative headed by Scott Stump, the only Trump DOE appointee whom every Democrat (and Sanders) voted to appoint. Both parties have long shared a vision of business defining students’ “workforce readiness” to make workers and the economy competitive.¹⁶ Unlike the old vocational education which occurred in (tracked) comprehensive high schools, where districts controlled curriculum and teachers and parents might have some voice, CTE in its present form outsources student learning to employers, often via tech companies that serve as employment agencies. One of the many flaws in CTE, which its supporters don’t mention, is how the jobs for which students are being trained as early as middle school may be affected by technological changes employers are making to work already, with robots and AI.¹⁷ Neoliberal influence is seen in requirements grant recipients “report disaggregated data on the performance of students by gender, race/ethnicity, special population categories, and career clusters.”¹⁸ This new alliance

mutates Trump’s vengeful purges of DEI influence in government agencies, including the military because what counts most is capital’s control over how workers are educated.

A report from the National Governors Association, “Let’s Get Ready!” provides alarming detail about what can occur when education aligns more closely with workforce needs, (determined by CEOs), for example having “future earnings and employer value” determine what is taught. Tightening the link between education and students’ anticipated future earnings has already been operationalized in many colleges and universities with elimination of entire departments. “Outcomes-based funding,” aligning education outcomes in higher education with the promise of stable funding was already tried in K-12 education in the first neoliberal push. It was justified with rhetoric of increasing educational opportunity though the carrot was “merit pay” for K-12 teachers, based on their students’ test scores.¹⁹ Advocating for education to be “powering the economy,” as AAUP and AFT have done in a joint publicity campaign, undercuts this otherwise valuable campaign’s other aims, “saving lives” and “building futures” if we understand the future business/capital wants for us.²⁰ Intensifying the connection between education and the economy means vocationalizing all of it, bringing deeper corporatization of higher education, diminished faculty voice, reduced democratic control of schools through school districts, and the subordination of children’s well-being to employers’ desires.²¹

Working with Allies and Opposing Our Foes

An inescapable reality of capitalism is that unions must function within its contradictions. However, this is different from accepting capitalism’s rules of the game,

imposed on us with capital's superior power. Capital, the bosses, and the politicians they control are not our allies when they undercut our economic and political rights, on the job and in society. They are our allies when they join us in defending democratic rights, including academic freedom, protecting teachers and students from victimization when they exercise their rights to speak and think critically. Anyone who wants to join this "big tent" is welcomed. Our "big tent" can include organizations and movements that support politicians we don't if they are criticizing Trump's destruction of civil liberties and erasure of an independent judiciary. Let's join their demonstrations, bringing our ideas, banners, and slogans that critique how policies pursued by both parties are harming schools and children. In contrast, we need to combat the politicians, organizations, and moneyed interests that aim to use public education as a profit center, destroying the environment with data centers, and changing our work in ways over which we have no say.

While NEA and AFT are "on the money" in having named the threat of authoritarianism, they have, literally, taken the money of our opponents, inviting control of our schools. Randi Weingarten, who heads the machine that determines AFT policy, has assembled a "partnership" with the most powerful tech companies to train teachers to use AI, accepting at least \$23 million. Microsoft, Anthropic, OpenAI, and the World Economic Forum are now creating lesson plans for what Weingarten, with no empirical evidence, promises will be "a curriculum that will lead to good jobs and solid careers in U.S. manufacturing."²² The NEA also accepted an "initial" \$325,000 donation from Microsoft. As occurred before with the AFT welcoming standardized testing's stranglehold over teaching and schools, resulting in teachers being fired and schools being closed, NEA

has followed AFT's lead.

At least one prominent social justice teachers union has adopted a strategy, never debated or approved by its representative assembly, to oppose public criticism of the AFT and NEA.²³ Their reasoning, explained in a private conversation, is defeating MAGA, which is fascist, is foremost and separate from fighting capital. Toward this end we need a "united front" that precludes criticism of the national unions and leadership and organizing against their policies, no matter how dangerous. This behavior and motivation for it duplicate the mistake AFT and NEA officers make in assuming they know more than members and have the right to decide strategy behind closed doors. The strategy also relies on the assumption that a savvy local leadership can protect its members and schools from the terrible harm done by the AFT and NEA welcoming the most powerful segment of capital to change what we teach. Finally, the empirical evidence of shifting interlocks in capital, how tech companies now fund and support Trump, means the AFT's "partnership" with Silicon Valley puts our union—and their local—one step away from MAGA and Trump's desire to build a global far-Right movement, which he will lead. Though Microsoft may contribute to the Democrats rather than to Trump, its partner in infrastructure projects, BlackRock, supports Trump and the GOP with huge sums and is racing to profit from Trump's authoritarian and imperial aims.²⁴

Union members have a right to know—and decide—strategy, which is exactly what occurred in the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), the AFT's California affiliate, in response to AFT's deal with tech moguls to train teachers to use AI. The two largest K-12 locals in the state, representing Los Angeles and San Francisco, collaborated with AFT Higher Ed members to pass a resolution challenging

the AFT's deal with the tech companies. The resolution's presentation of reasoned argument and its specificity of CFT's actions, as well as the collaboration of higher ed and K-12 locals model how union locals can democratize their state affiliates. Another example of the political education and organizing we need is shown in a strike wave of education workers in Massachusetts, encouraged by a democratized NEA affiliate that's led by reformers.²⁵ The tactic local leaders have used, playing nice with the national or state union, to protect one's members and gain access to power, has clearly failed to make NEA and AFT the vehicles we need to defeat the Right. NEA's rhetoric has become more militant and the union adopts resolutions in support of social justice, but its leaders show no desire or capacity to mobilize members or support officers and staff in state affiliates to do the same. Power in the AFT is even more concentrated in Randi Weingarten's hands than it was a decade ago. Its conventions, described to me by one member as being like an infomercial for dystopia, and the unwillingness of a single president of a "progressive" or "social justice" teachers union on the AFT Executive Council to challenge Weingarten's policies shows her power and the fear even of the presidents of locals accustomed to making fiery speeches, but only at home.

Social Justice Teachers Unions Need Union Democracy

Building and sustaining a culture and practice of union democracy is more difficult and more essential than ever, because union members feel pulled in so many different ways, and yet an informed, mobilized membership is our best protection against Trump and the vast resources he has, for reasons I describe fully, elsewhere. A new generation of activists needs to be educated about the principles that guided the growth

of the first movement for social justice teachers unions, and we have no time to waste. I don't underestimate the enormity of the challenge education workers face in this moment. For many, maybe most teachers, the past school year has been like none other, understandably because the society has been altered from what it was before Trump's election. Still, the penalty we will pay for failing to live up to this historic responsibility to re-form our movement is almost unimaginable.

Over the past twenty years the Right has orchestrated extraordinarily effective campaigns to make people think teachers are selfish, the schools are failing, and the solution is privatization—and weakening and/or destroying real unions. The first neoliberal push to undercut teachers unions with frontal attacks on teachers' moral and professional judgment, controlling schools and learning with standardized testing, now stands beside a Christian-nationalist project of the far Right to destroy teachers unions. A new organization that has formed, the Teacher Freedom Alliance, an appendage of the Koch-funded Freedom Foundation, has hired Ryan Walters, disgraced former head of Oklahoma schools, as its CEO. The far Right is baring its teeth, fusing anti-union and pro-Israel politics to attacks on teachers unions and public education.

These new attacks on teachers and our unions come after huge amounts of money have flowed to organizations and "independent" media promoting ideas central to the new bipartisan project in education. In research for this article I was stunned at the overlap in ideas and funding of organizations and foundations previously considered bastions of liberal thought and tech money that supports Trump. We are truly in for the fight of our lives. NEA and AFT are well known, notorious, and villainized on the Right, for their political clout. Now

is the time to use and build that power. That means going beyond the strategies the national and state affiliates have put forward, confining our actions to lobbying and participating in large mobilizations, organized by liberals tied to venture capital and private equity in the Democratic Party. We need to consider mass civil disobedience, including walkouts, which are often started by a minority of workers and then grow to become a mass movement. This is how we won rights that are being washed away with breathtaking speed. Whether education workers can rise to this challenge, no one can predict. But so much depends on our doing so.

Are the ideas I've proposed realistic? Many might have said "no" had they read this article in June, when we started the Future of Our Schools Collective newsletter on Substack. However, might readers feel differently now? Zohran Mamdani's campaign and victory in New York City's mayoral election have sparked energy and hope that will encourage education workers to think, feel, and maybe act in ways they had not thought possible even four months ago. Mamdani's victory has opened possibilities and created contradictions no one anticipated when Trump was elected and began his assault. New York City, the seat of global capitalism and the Zionist lobby's U.S. base, has elected a Muslim, socialist mayor, who was supported in the election by what is both the largest teachers union local in the world and probably the most conservative teachers union in this country, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which represents more than 200,000 NYC education workers.

No one can predict what will come now, except we are in for a wild ride.

NOTES

1. This article draws on my previously published work in the Future of Our Schools (FOS) collective Substack about this moment in education

and the relationship education workers should have with our unions to make them stand up for social justice, protect democracy, and our dignity as workers, <https://futureschools.substack.com/archive?sort=top>. Readers will find supporting references in these other pieces. When a citation has not appeared in that work, I include it here.

2. This article draws on information and analysis of other FOS members, tracing how teachers responded and rebounded to Trump's attacks. Leah Z. Owens, "Somatic Abolitionism as Possibility for Rethinking Teachers' Labor Activism," June 26, 2025, <https://futureschools.substack.com/p/somatic-abolitionism-as-possibility>; Keith Eric Benson, "What Is Enough (to achieve lasting change)?" July 3, 2025, <https://futureschools.substack.com/p/what-is-enough-to-achieve-lasting>; Erin Dyke, "Protecting Our Greenhouses: Sustaining the Struggle for Social Justice in Education," July 24, 2025, <https://futureschools.substack.com/p/protecting-our-greenhouses-sustaining>; Chloe Asselin, "Be Prepared! A call to action for educators in progressive states," Oct. 10, 2025, <https://futureschools.substack.com/p/be-prepared>.

3. "Can we talk honestly? Where's the resistance we need to defeat this onslaught?" Oct. 2, 2025, <https://futureschools.substack.com/p/can-we-talk-honestly?r=5xu5f&triedRedirect=true>. For analysis of how local bargaining can build resistance to the new and revised bipartisan agenda, see "The contract fight in education unions. Seeing possibilities, limits, and dangers under Trump and his alliance," Aug. 21, 2025, <https://futureschools.substack.com/p/the-contract-fight-in-this-moment>.

4. Space does not permit discussion AROS deserves, but scrutiny of partners, for example, The Advancement Project, shows how racial justice organizations are now funded by neo-liberal money, often through foundations that were previously considered liberal: <https://reclaimourschools.org/our-coalition>.

5. Project 2025 Tracker. A comprehensive, community-driven initiative to track the implementation of Project 2025's policy proposals. <https://www.project2025.observer/en?agencies=Dept.+of+Education>.

6. "This moment for education workers," June 12, 2025. <https://futureschools.substack.com/p/this-moment-for-education-workers>.

7. Derek Seidman, "Billionaire Ideologues and the 2024 Presidential Election," Public Accountability Project, Feb. 5, 2025, <https://>

littlesis.org/news/billionaire-ideologues-and-the-2024-presidential-election/.

8. “Linda McMahon Revamps Education Policy, Shifting Federal Focus to Literacy, AI, and School Choice,” *The Education Magazine*, May 2025, www.theeducationmagazine.com/news/linda-mcmahon-education-policy/.

9. Full discussion of why the neoliberal project has resonated with elements of the public, including education researchers, is important in understanding the limitations of the liberal response to Trump. Unfortunately, it takes me well beyond what I can address in this article. Addressing arguments advanced by liberal researchers, Kristen Buras critiques neoliberal myth-making about its success in New Orleans: www.icontact-archive.com/archive?c=1748247&f=3100&s=3172&m=397951&t=683ff6e55fceb8d669aa5ea6b8253ac84d14528c98c4873195440427f0ff88d5.

10. Readers can use littlesis.org to trace the interlocks that explain shifts on education, edtech, and school privatization. Reed Hastings? See https://littlesis.org/person/1750-Reed_Hastings/interlocks. Microsoft? https://littlesis.org/org/44-Microsoft_Corporation/interlocks. Reid Hoffman? See https://littlesis.org/org/44-Microsoft_Corporation/interlocks. The “center” of the Democratic Party is part of this shell game as well. New America?—Can we call it “left leaning” given its new interlocks? See https://littlesis.org/org/33834-New_America.

11. “Frederick” M. (“Rick”) Hess, “What Did You Expect to Happen? How DEI Wound Up in Trump’s Crosshairs,” *The American Enterprise*, April 9, 2025,

www.aei.org/articles/what-did-you-expect-to-happen-how-dei-wound-up-in-trumps-crosshairs/. AEI’s interlocks and funders show the overlap with the Democratic Party center on foreign policy and education: https://littlesis.org/org/33260-American_Enterprise_Institute/interlocks.

12. Maurice Cunningham, “Declining Dems for Education Reform (DFER) Seeks Salvation in MAGA Regime,” June 2025. <https://t.co/bTUAv1XqAx>.

13. Jorge Elorza, “Zohran Mamdani Pushes to Defund the Gifted. As with boys in girls’ sports and antipolice activism, identity politics trump common sense.” *Wall Street Journal*/Opinion, Oct. 22, 2025, www.wsj.com/opinion/zohran-mamdani-pushes-to-defund-the-gifted-68734a80?st=FAw361&reflink=deskto

pwebshare_permalink.

14. Guest essay, *New York Times*, May 6, 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/05/06/opinion/college-technical-vocational-education.html.

15. “Linda E. McMahon, Sec’y of Education.” U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO). Page last reviewed: March 28, 2025,

www.ed.gov/about/ed-organization/meet-secretary-of-education/linda-e-mcmahon.

16. Lois Weiner, “Schools should serve human needs, not ‘the economy,’” *Jacobin*, June 6, 2019, <https://jacobin.com/2019/06/bernie-sanders-education-platform-2020-campaign>.

17. “Building a Future-Ready Workforce: Insights for Employability Skills Framework 2.0,” July 2025, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/PCRN/docs/ESF-2.0-Employability-Skills-Analysis-and-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

18. <https://cte.ed.gov/accountability/core-indicators>.

19. Annie Bowers, *The Foundation for Research on Educational Opportunity, White Paper*, (n.d.) “Aligning state higher education funding with student outcomes,” <https://freopp.org/whitepapers/aligning-state-higher-education-funding-with-student-outcomes/>.

20. Press release issued jointly by AFT and AAUP, Sept. 18, 2025, “AFT, AAUP Launch Nationwide Campaign, ‘Higher Education: Saving Lives, Building Futures, Powering the Economy,’” www.aft.org/press-release/aft-aaup-launch-nationwide-campaign-higher-education-saving-lives-building-futures.

21. Ryan Pflieger, “NEPC Review: Let’s Get Ready! Educating All Americans for Success” (National Governors

Assoc., July 2025). Oct. 2025, <https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/reviews/NR%20Pflieger.pdf>.

22. Trevor Griffey, “American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Partnerships with Ed Tech Companies, 2022–25: What We Know So Far,” Aug. 6, 2025. <https://campuslabor.blogspot.com/2025/08/AFT-EdTech-Partnerships.html>. “A Moment Like Never Before,” Keynote Address by AFT President Randi Weingarten, AFT TEACH Conference, Washington, D.C., July 25, 2025: www.aft.org/press/speeches/moment-never.

23. To verify whether this is the de facto policy of the union and whether this policy had been discussed or voted on by the local’s representa-

tive assembly, I contacted an officer. He referred me to the union's office of information, which I queried. No answer has been provided. Two union members confirmed no vote or discussion has taken place about this policy, though they say it is evident in how the local relates to the AFT.

24. Peter Eavis and Maureen Farrell, "Trump Applies Pressure, Wall Street Giant Moves into Panama," *New York Times*, March 4, 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/03/04/business/blackrock-panama-canal-ports-hutchison.html.

25. Peter Allen-Lamphere and Matt Bach,

"Strike lessons from Massachusetts teachers. An interview with Matt Bach of Educators for a Democratic Union," *Tempest*, Aug. 19, 2025, <https://tempestmag.org/2025/08/strike-lessons-from-massachusetts-teachers/>. The CFT resolution contains documentation about money AFT received from its "partners" as well as how the CFT is instructed to respond now. "Education Technology Companies and AFT/CFT." It was adopted by the State Council of CFT on Oct. 4, 2025. www.cft.org/resolution/education-technology-companies-and-aftcft.

Statement by the Committee to Defend Tom Alter

On September 10th, 2025, Dr. Tom Alter, a respected and tenured professor of history at Texas State University, was fired for remarks he made at a socialist conference in his capacity as a private citizen.

He was fired without due process, a clear violation of both Texas State University policy and Texas state law. Alter is a published labor historian, a popular teacher and adviser, a proud union member, a father of two, and a socialist activist.

Texas State University's actions represent a blatant attack on Dr. Alter's First Amendment right to free speech. It is a political move to suppress progressive and leftist thought on campuses. His firing and the stripping away of his and his family's livelihood is a chilling reminder of the attacks waged on campuses around the country. Alter's firing constitutes an attack on his fundamental civil liberties, and represents a threat to the democratic rights of all working people.

The Committee to Defend Tom Alter demands his immediate reinstatement to his tenured teaching position at Texas State University. We fight for the right of Alter and people everywhere to speak out in support of socialism, the defense of Palestine, LGBTQIA and trans advocacy, anti-racism, and social justice. We are prepared to resist these very real threats by higher education and federal/state government institutions.

We call on individuals and organizations of conscience everywhere to join our campaign. If Tom Alter can be fired from his job without due process and be denied his constitutionally-protected right to free speech, this can happen to any of us.

We invite you to join us in this struggle. An injury to one is an injury to all.

For more information and to support this campaign, go to <https://defendtomalter.org/>

COMMITTEE TO DEFEND
TOM ALTER



Incarcerating Radicals

Dannemora Prison and the Class Struggle

SAMUEL BARNEY

MOST FOLKS HEAR “NEW YORK” and the looming skyscrapers of New York City (NYC) come to mind. It makes sense; the skyline is gorgeous, the city a veritable jungle of glass, steel, and concrete. Pick ten random people from around the globe and it’s almost certain that they’ll have heard of NYC. Travel farther north, though, and we come to a part of New York that is not nearly as familiar to people. I’m speaking of thick woods, vast expanses of farmland, and the Adirondack Mountains. I’m speaking of a backwater region just south of the Canadian border—the North Country.

The dialectical relationship between town and country—between urban and rural society—has always occupied a place in Marxist thought. From Marx himself to Mao to Gramsci, some of the most renowned thinkers in the Marxist tradition have made a point of examining the relationship between town and country. For example, the emergence of enormous European industrial centers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries occurred in part because of capital’s drawn-out efforts to dispossess the peasantry of its land, thereby allowing for the creation of a landless proletariat. Capital played an important role in heightening the divide between urban

and rural areas.

I focus here on a particular aspect of American class struggle—how the rural prisons of Upstate New York, and especially Clinton Correctional Facility (CCF), have been used to isolate and divide the urban-based revolutionary movements of the twentieth century. Condemning revolutionaries to CCF and other institutions like it has been advantageous for the state in that it impedes communication between the incarcerated and their allies.

Clinton Correctional Facility has existed for over 175 years. Known as “Little Siberia” to some in NYC, the complex sits just a half hour from the Canadian border. Plans for a facility in Clinton County were approved in 1844; the site was imagined as a labor camp where convicts would mine for metal. The first prisoners arrived in Dannemora in June 1845 after walking there from Plattsburgh, the largest nearby town. The mining program lasted for some thirty years, but by the mid-1870s the state government had decided it was not profitable. In 1877 prison operations pivoted. Prisoners now worked to produce more common items like shoes, brooms, and baskets.¹

Prison design changes accompanied this directional shift. Between 1879 and 1881 over 600 cells were built, a major increase in containment capacity. In the late 1880s, aging wooden walls surrounding the facility were replaced with concrete. A

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fire damaged part of the prison in 1890, but renovations were already scheduled by then. Repairs proceeded as planned and the prison gained several new additions, including a mess hall and bathhouse.

Around this time, the prison was equipped with an electric chair. Such instruments are installed for a reason, and twenty-six men were executed at Clinton between 1892 and 1913. Dannemora Prison was now a symbol of state power.

While the Dannemora facility was being renovated, the socialist movement was gaining steam across the United States and throughout the world. When capital's ceaseless drive for the augmentation of surplus value drove humanity to conflict on a scale hitherto unseen—the First World War—it proved to be a decisive moment in the history of socialism. In Russia, the Tsar was deposed in February 1917 and Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks took power later that year. Two vastly different socialist camps crystallized not long after events in Russia came to light—there were those who praised the revolutionary methods of the Bolsheviks and those who reviled them. This split became as pronounced in the United States as it did anywhere else; in Ohio, C.E. Ruthenberg—a notable Marxist—dove headlong into the turmoil.

Based in Cleveland, Ruthenberg ran for office several times while he remained a member of the Socialist Party. When war broke out in 1914, he condemned the various imperialist powers vying for predominance. He attacked the U.S. government for its entry into the war and was arrested in 1917 for comments he made about the draft during one of his speeches. He spent a year in prison for this. By the time he emerged, the Bolsheviks had seized power. A pro-Bolshevik left wing of the Socialist Party of America was coming into existence, coalescing around Louis Fraina's

"Left Wing Manifesto." Ruthenberg quickly embraced this faction and helped coordinate its press. State officials, fearful of the growing popularity of the left wing, were unwilling to let the followers of the new tendency operate unhindered.

Resurrecting in 1920 a New York State law against "criminal anarchism," which the "Left Wing Manifesto" had supposedly violated, many of the left wing socialists were arrested. Gus Alonen, tried and convicted in NYC in November 1919, was perhaps the first of them to end up in Clinton. He would be joined by three others—Benjamin Gitlow, Harry Winitsky, and James Larkin. It was the first time the repressive state apparatus had sent political prisoners to CCF in chains—it would not be the last.

Gitlow's memoirs contain valuable information about life in Clinton during this time. Gitlow recalls how the Jewish chaplain at the prison, Rabbi Judelson, let prisoners slip letters into his coat. Then Judelson would proceed to smuggle the letters out of the prison and mail them to the friends and family members to whom they were addressed. Harry Winitsky had his letter to political allies outside the prison mailed in this way.² Gitlow claimed that visitation rights for political prisoners were unfairly restricted. Once, according to Gitlow, when Agnes Smedley—a famous journalist—visited the prison, guards ordered her to leave purely because they disliked the cordial nature of her interaction with Jim Larkin.

Isaac Ferguson, an attorney and convinced revolutionary socialist, visited the convicts in 1920. He writes of the conditions he encountered in the prison; his account would later be published in the socialist press and is of interest to us.

The prison is not so bad, in comparison with others, as I had been led to suppose. Ex-Senator James L. Long, Deputy Superintendent of Prisons, ran the prison for a month this spring in an interval

between wardens and introduced various betterments which the new warden, Mr. Kaiser, has continued. It is still regarded as a punishment prison for old offenders and refractory convicts, but it is less different than formerly from Sing Sing and Auburn. The prisoners do not have so much time to themselves. Their visiting privileges are more restricted; their correspondence is more interfered with. In the prison staff there are still guards bred in the old school of man-breaking savagery.

Later, Ferguson continues,

Reading matter sent to the political prisoners is apt to be kept from them—especially *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, which some of the other prisoners are allowed freely to receive. Letters written by or to the political prisoners are frequently detained. This includes correspondence with their counsel. Important and confidential letters between Larkin and me, relating to the conduct of his case on appeal, were entirely suppressed.³

The state continued its repression by cracking down on Ruthenberg and the socialists. Ferguson, after having represented and visited earlier arrestees, came under state scrutiny himself. Ruthenberg and Ferguson were tried in October for links to the publication of the “Left Wing Manifesto.” They were convicted and sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. Both spent time at Sing Sing prison—a prison complex just north of NYC. Ruthenberg also spent part of his sentence in the CCF. It is less clear if Ferguson was ever transferred north to CCF during his imprisonment.

In 1919, the Socialist Party splintered. The Communist Party of America (CPA) was founded that same year; the two men contributed to its formation. While Ferguson and Ruthenberg were imprisoned, a complex series of party reshufflings, mergers, and further splits occurred. In 1921 this process ended with the merger of the CPA and another splinter faction, the Communist Labor Party of America. Ruthenberg

and Ferguson were set free in July 1922 after the reversal of their conviction in the New York Court of Appeals. The party they helped to found was the precursor of the CPUSA.

In prison Ruthenberg wrote of the difficulties of building the party amidst state crackdowns. His own experiences must have weighed on him. “What is argued here is that to conduct its work most effectively the Communist Party must have two arms, one out in the open, functioning publicly, the other unseen, secret, underground.”⁴ This is a point that many revolutionaries, including Lenin and the Bolsheviks, have stressed throughout the history of the socialist movement.

Isaac Ferguson’s prison experience had some impact on his willingness to openly espouse revolutionary politics—he elected to focus on his law career as opposed to party work post-1922. Ruthenberg remained closely involved with the CPA until his death in 1927; he was one of its most prominent administrators. After his death his remains were transferred to Russia, where they were buried. Their transfer speaks of Ruthenberg’s close ties to both the international labor movement and the incipient Soviet Union.

In his account of the Ruthenberg-Ferguson trial, Isaac Ferguson recounted the story of a seventh Communist whose misfortunes took him to CCF. “In July 1921 Paul Manko was sentenced to from two and one half to nine years. Treatment Manko received at the hands of the authorities was so severe that his mind was shattered and he is now in the Hospital for the Criminal Insane at Dannemora, N.Y.”⁵ Ferguson’s tale is a blistering indictment of the state. If true, it represents one more contemptible action on the part of the government. But notably, Gitlow’s memoirs contrast with Ferguson’s account on this point—Gitlow says that, at least in Sing Sing, the prison

officials treated Manko “gently.” This description contrasts sharply with what he says about his own treatment and that of the other political prisoners; he maintains that the guards treated the other leftists poorly. Gitlow’s memoirs at least seem to confirm that Manko was troubled mentally; the Communists did not object when he was transferred to the insane asylum. Whether or not state officials broke Manko’s mind after he was arrested, his arrest by those officials can be condemned; Gitlow maintains that Manko was thrown in jail for merely distributing leaflets.

Decades later, CCF would house two more revolutionaries, Sekou Odinga and David Gilbert. Sekou Odinga—formerly Nathaniel Burns—was born in Queens on June 17, 1944. As a young man in NYC, he became interested in securing equality for black Americans and joined the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which had been founded by Malcolm X. Around this time the famous Black Panther Party (BPP) started expanding across the country. Bobby Seale, one of its founders, visited NYC in 1968. Odinga and some of his friends were captivated by him, and they became New York Panthers shortly after attending Seale’s lectures.

Any revolutionary organization as successful as the Panthers was bound to be targeted by police and the state security system. Virtually the entire New York Panther leadership was indicted in the year 1969 on accusations of organizing bombings, for which they were acquitted in 1971. Odinga was one of the accused, as was Afeni Shakur, with whom Odinga worked closely. In a remarkable twist of fate, Tupac Shakur—Afeni’s son and a world-renowned hip-hop artist—spent time in CCF himself in the 1990s. It seems that the world, at times, is a very small place.

The bombing charges were dropped, but not before they damaged the cohesion of

the New York Chapter of the BPP. Similar actions were taken against other Panthers chapters and concerted destabilization efforts by police infiltrators contributed to the decline of the group. In California, the Panthers devoted considerable resources to local elections, which failed to amount to anything. This allocation of resources hurt the party further. The BPP declined throughout the 1970s and eventually fell apart by 1982.

For many former Panthers, including Odinga, the Black Liberation Army (BLA) filled the void left by the BPP. The BLA was a clandestine group committed to toppling the U.S. government and to liberating black Americans. Odinga worked closely with Assata Shakur, another former Panther and Tupac’s godmother. Odinga is credited—or accused—with helping break Assata out of the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women (a New Jersey prison). Shakur escaped to Cuba and was given political asylum there in 1984. She died in Havana, Cuba, in September 2025 at age 78, from her health conditions and advanced age.

Odinga was arrested in 1981 when a truck robbery went wrong. While Odinga was not involved in the robbery himself, one of the robbers went to him for aid after fleeing the scene; the authorities found them and gunfire was exchanged, for which Odinga would serve thirty-three years in prison. Odinga was released from CCF in 2014 and has since passed away. His role in the escape of Assata Shakur was quite memorable, and his anti-racist activism should be commended.

David Gilbert was born on October 6, 1944. He was raised in Brookline, a small community near Boston, Massachusetts. His family is Jewish. He attended Columbia University and became involved with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the 1960s. SDS was known for its demands

for racial equality and its staunch opposition to the Vietnam War. When American involvement in Vietnam escalated in 1965, SDS members held teach-ins on college campuses across the country, informing people about what was happening and condemning U.S. imperialism abroad. They quickly grew in popularity.

Years of fruitless SDS protests frustrated some of the organization's members, including Gilbert. These members were radicalized by their failures to contain the war effort and became inspired by Marxist critiques of capitalism. The new, radical segment of SDS reorganized. The group became the Weather Underground, a militant communist organization that bombed monuments and non-human targets like weapons research labs in hopes of ending the U.S. presence in Vietnam. Gilbert had several close encounters with the FBI and other law enforcement agencies; he relocated across the country multiple times in hopes of evading them.

In New York in 1981, Gilbert's luck ran out. He'd spent over a decade underground at the time of his arrest, ceaselessly pursued by the state. Gilbert was imprisoned due to his participation in an armed truck robbery in New York's Rockland County—the same event for which Sekou Odinga was arrested. Gilbert himself was unarmed, but four people died in the chaos.

CCF was the state's destination of choice for the Weatherman. While incarcerated Gilbert spent time advocating for better treatment of prisoners. He wrote an autobiography, in which he spoke about the successes and failures of the Weather Underground and its revolutionary model. While many of the organization's members showed commendable bravery and perseverance, the choice they made to go underground without a legal arm of the party like Ruthenberg described isolated them from the masses. It made them easy

to vilify. Conversely, the Communists of the 1920s forged links with the labor movement, and people became invested in the existence of the Black Panther Party because of its commitment to providing community service programs.

Gilbert's actions in the robbery earned him seventy-five years in prison. The loss of life that took place is lamentable and punishment of some kind for Gilbert was warranted. However, the political nature of his sentence cannot be ignored. Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd, received twenty-two years in prison. Were the actions of an unarmed David Gilbert more than three times as reprehensible as those of Chauvin? One might be inclined to think that the state saw a chance to rid itself of a revolutionary nuisance and took it. It has certainly done so before. The FBI's murder of Fred Hampton in Chicago in 1969 is proof enough of this.

What are we to make of the CCF prisoners and their stories? What lessons can we learn from their struggle?

First, regardless of any failings of strategy or tactics, the Socialists, Communists, and other leftists of Dannemora prison shared an earnest commitment to human liberation. Their willingness to act to realize a world without exploitation placed them fundamentally at odds with the ruling class in the United States. What the prisoners fought for—the construction of a new politics, based on an end to the exploitative capitalist system—is a project that we must resurrect today.

Second, the prisoners were consistently subjected to poor treatment. By all accounts, abuses continue in the U.S. prison system today. The socialist left must continue to demand prison reform until all prisoners are guaranteed basic human dignity while incarcerated. And perhaps, at some point in the future, we can work toward dismantling such dehumanizing institutions entirely.

While the willingness of David Gilbert and Sekou Odinga to fight for a better future was (and remains) admirable, in the end their clandestine activities only amounted to long prison sentences. Both men grew old in their cells. The Weather Underground especially developed a revolutionary model that could not possibly have yielded fruit—it largely ignored the working class and became an organization entirely separate from it. Working people will bring about profound social change, working in tandem with a revolutionary party—the party cannot go it alone. The people always have been and always will be the drivers of history.

The U.S. government has a long history of repressing radicals, which this article has tried to shed light on. It points out the role that one facility specifically, the CCF, has played when it comes to the repression of revolutionary movements. The author hopes to have introduced the reader to a piece of the past that they may not formerly have been familiar with. The history of revolutionary movements must be understood if we are to build a better future.

NOTES

1. New York Correctional History Society, “History of Clinton CF.”
2. Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth about American Communism* (E. P. Dutton, 1940), p. 118.
3. Isaac E. Ferguson, “The Political Prisoners at Dannemora: Report of Their Attorney.”
4. C.E. Ruthenberg, “The Need for Open Work.”
5. Isaac E. Ferguson, *A Communist Trial: Extracts from the Testimony of C.E. Ruthenberg and Closing Address to the Jury by Isaac E. Ferguson*.

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Sex, Work, and Capitalism

NANCY HOLMSTROM

[Editors' note: This article is reprinted from Nancy Holmstrom's From a Marxist-Feminist Point of View: Essays on Freedom, Rationality and Human Nature (2025) with the kind permission of the author and the publisher, Haymarket Books. The article originally appeared a decade ago in the online journal Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture; although the use of technology in sex work has increased since it was published, we believe the arguments in this essay remain highly relevant today. For an interview with the author about the book, see <https://newpol.org/the-relevance-of-marxistfeminism/>.]

Introduction¹

THE CURRENT DEBATE REGARDING sex work is frustrating, which is one of the reasons I am writing this article. Counter-posed positions are a good way to generate debate, but when they are false counter-positions, it is not likely to be a fruitful debate. The title of this symposium, "Sex Work: Emancipation or Oppression," is an example of this, but unfortunately it reflects the discussion. Actually this is not a new debate but harks back to debates among feminists in the 1980s and resembles debates that went on in the nineteenth century.² Recent legal changes regarding sex work in some countries and under consideration elsewhere have given the debates a practical focus and a feeling of urgency. Unfortunately the "sides" in this debate seem so solidified, it

is difficult to trust a lot of what is written, as writers pick cases and evidence that fit their perspective.

Most feminists now agree that sex work should not be criminalized; this just drives it underground and causes further hardship to those doing the work. However, this position does not take us very far, as there are countless public and private actions which might be morally/politically problematic, but where legal prohibitions would be impractical, intrusive, or counter-productive. Socialist feminists³ need to say more about the nature and context of sex work, the effects of different legal policies on women and to analyze these within our anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal values. In this paper I will primarily be focusing on the political philosophical issues central to the debate, but in conclusion I will indicate the practical directions to which I think my analysis points. Others will be addressing different programs and policies in detail.

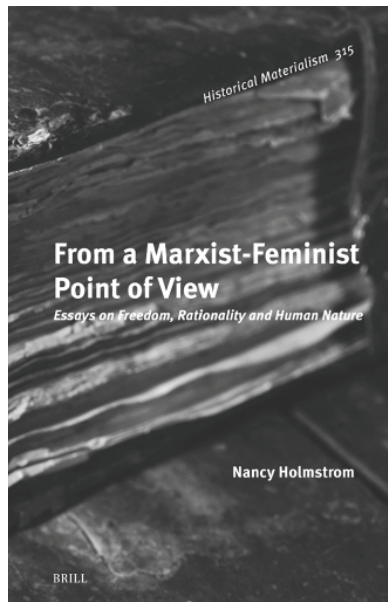
What Is Sex Work?

"Sex work" can be conceived broadly or narrowly. Women's bodies are object-

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fied and commodified throughout our capitalist and patriarchal society. Whether the commodity is toothpaste, cars, clothes, music, or food, women's bodies or body parts are used to attract buyers and excite or calm customers. (I once had to wear an abbreviated leopard print outfit for a waitress job.) So even many "normal" jobs done by women could be seen as being to some extent sex work. Then there are the jobs more usually understood as sex work, which are quite varied, from stripping, pole dancing or lap dancing, "dirty-talking" conversation, erotic massage, fetish work, pornographic modeling or acting, and selling sexual services. So the category of sex work should be seen as a continuum.

There is no question these are all work and should be recognized as such. However, although it is useful politically to unite all sex workers, for this paper I will concentrate on the sale of sexual services, usually called prostitution, as the paradigm case of sex work. It is the most stigmatized and also the most controversial and problematic from a feminist moral/political point of view. It is imperative in the discussion that we recognize and keep in mind the huge variations within the business of prostitution, depending on whether it is part-time, occasional, or full-time, whether it is in hotel suites or on the streets, whether it is high paid and relatively safe or highly dangerous and poorly paid, whether the prostitute is an adult or very young, addicted or not, subject to direct coercion or not, and so on. When we are urged, therefore, to consider the experience



of prostitutes themselves, it is important to know who it is that is speaking. But leaving aside these differences for the moment, all forms of prostitution—by definition—involve “payment for unilateral use of a woman’s body without desire or erotic attraction on her part.”⁴ I am limiting my discussion to the sale of sex by women to men, as women make up 80 percent of “the commercial sex workforce”⁵ and men are the vast majority of buyers of

sex from men as well. Transgender people appear to be over-represented in prostitution, perhaps because their access to other employment is limited by transphobia. (Despite these clear gender patterns, an odd feature of some of the debate is that it is carried on in gender-neutral language!) What I have to say about prostitution should apply to the other occupations on the sex work continuum to a greater or lesser extent depending on their proximity to prostitution.

Political/Economic Context

We live in days of hyper-charged global capitalism with greater inequality globally and domestically than at any point in history. Neoliberalism has meant cutbacks in already-meager or nonexistent social supports. Some have profited enormously in this environment, some a little, and others not at all. Women are disproportionately among the latter group. Everywhere peoples’ aspirations are higher. This political/economic context has created both a greater supply and a greater demand for

sex workers. Women now make up half of the world's migrants, legal and illegal. Some women migrate in order to become sex workers, some are recruited and helped to get into the business, often under false pretenses, and others are trafficked by criminal gangs—and these should not be conflated.⁶ Undocumented immigrants, often racialized, are particularly vulnerable to abuse. The newly rich in some countries buy a night at a brothel for colleagues and friends the way one buys a round of drinks; most men working in a globalized industry can now afford a prostitute. Sex is a multi-billion-dollar growth industry globally, and it is a central piece of many developing countries' economies. Our pensions may be invested in huge "entertainment" and "hospitality" corporations where sex is available for purchase. At the lowest end of the industry, the women are literally enslaved.⁷

Empowerment vs. Power, Agency, and Freedom

To say that all kinds of sex work are work, as they certainly are, says nothing about their voluntariness (after all, slaves work) or about what moral value we should place on this work. These are the questions to be addressed next.

The word empowerment is often used in this discussion, and it is important to distinguish it from actual power. Empowerment refers to a psychological quality of an individual. Power, on the other hand, can be used to apply to individuals or very large groups, but it refers to objective, not subjective phenomena. Note that something could be "empowering" for certain women, but dis-empowering for women in general. Also note that if something is empowering for an individual, it does not follow that they have more power. In the literature about sex services there is a lot of ethnographic evidence that prostitutes have different kinds and levels of negotiating power. Some

have little or none and others have more, for example, whether or not they can refuse to work with a particular customer or refuse to do certain acts. One study of prostitutes in New Zealand found that many said that the new law, which makes it illegal to purchase sex without a condom, had increased their ability to force clients to wear them.

Along with empowerment, the concepts of agency, emancipation, and free or voluntary choice are employed in this debate, but often in unclear ways. Acts and choices are not simply free or unfree. Rather, freedom is always relative, on a continuum, in a context. So to counter-pose oppression and empowerment, as so many writers do, is misleading. An act/choice could be more free than the alternatives, it could be an expression of agency and personal empowerment to that extent, but still be profoundly unfree because of the paucity of choices that the agent would prefer.

A poignant and extreme, non-sexual, example of this point is found in the prize-winning book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* about life in a Mumbai slum: Meena, a young woman who is forbidden to go to school, often beaten, facing an arranged marriage in a village, has a friend, Manju, whom she only talks with at the public toilets. "The minutes in the night stench with Manju were the closest she had ever come to freedom." Shortly thereafter she eats rat poison....

"She wasn't acting out of anger.... She'd thought it through—had consumed two tubes of rat poison on two other days, but had started to vomit, which led her this time to mix the poison with milk. She hoped the milk would keep the poison in her stomach long enough to kill her.

This was one decision about her life she got to make. It wasn't easily shared with a best friend." In hospital she says "I decided for myself...." "She was fed up with what the world had to offer," the Tamil women

concluded. Meena's family, upon consideration, decided that Manju's modern influence was to blame."⁸

If Meena had chosen to run away and become a prostitute the same point would apply; an agent can judge an option to be the best of the available options and choose it carefully and deliberately; hence the act could be said to be free, or empowering, or an expression of agency—but only in the most minimal sense—because at the same time, a choice is profoundly unfree if it is merely the least evil of the options available.

Consider an example further toward the free end of the continuum, of poor single mothers who choose sex work “not simply as a survival strategy, [but] as an *advancement* strategy.”⁹ They believe that sex work will be more lucrative than factory or domestic work, especially in a sex tourist destination like Sosua, Dominican Republic. Seeking to escape not only poverty, but the machismo of their countrymen, their goal is to find a tourist who will take them out of the country. In most cases, that hope turns out to be illusory and they return home as poor as when they left; this is true even for the ones who do manage to get a visa. Faced as they are both with capitalism and patriarchy, their carefully thought-out strategies, which the researcher takes pains to stress, can take them only so far. Again, this example shows there is no inconsistency between saying people are exercising resourcefulness and agency, attempting to maximize their possibilities, but within very oppressive constraints.

Thus, the conditions under which people choose determine to what extent their choices are free; these conditions can pose obstacles to doing something or they can enable them. More precisely, to say one is free is to say one is free *from* an obstacle preventing one from doing something; one is unfree *to do* something because an obstacle prevents one from doing it. Thus one

can be free to do something with respect to one obstacle and unfree to do it with respect to another obstacle. The obstacles may be physical or may involve persons in some significant way. Thus legal restrictions have been obstacles to women living their lives as they want, as has direct force or threat of force, both of which count as coercion. But people can limit others' freedom in less overt ways. Certain kinds of proposals or offers can also prevent someone from acting freely. For example, if an employer offers a dangerous and low-paid job to someone whose only alternative is starvation for her and her family, this should count as a “forcing offer.”¹⁰

Not only individuals, but social institutions may limit someone's freedom. This can be missed if we focus only on individuals. The absence of childcare can prevent a woman from taking a job and the need for medical care can force someone to take a dangerous job they hate. More generally, lack of money functions as an obstacle to people acting freely, despite the opinion of many learned philosophers to the contrary.¹¹ Certainly, it is experienced as such. Finally, internal obstacles (often caused by the external constraints) can limit one's freedom: mental illness or addiction, or lack of self-confidence, fears, patriarchal ideas of gender roles, guilt, or shame.¹² All these kinds of obstacles would have to be eliminated for women to choose more freely whether or not to be prostitutes.

A “Work Ethic Instead of a Sex Ethic”?

Calling prostitution work is an attempt to remove it from sexual moralizing and from the picture of all prostitutes as victims, thereby opening up possibilities for prostitutes to organize for rights as workers. But some critics, in particular, Kathi Weeks and Peter Frase, have argued that calling prostitution sex work buys into a

different morality, the work ethic, claiming legitimacy by association with traditional work values. And this ethic must be resisted by radicals.¹³ From their perspective, the problem with sex work is “not the sex, but the work.” Frase quotes a sex worker who says yes, it’s degraded; but so is all work in capitalist society. While this anti- (or post-) work politics has some political validity, we think it is over-simplified and unhelpful in this debate. After discussing work in general we turn to the question of sex work in particular.

If selling sexual services is work, how should we understand that work? To address this question it is worth a detour into Karl Marx’s rich discussions of work/labor, which I believe are unrivaled in their subtlety, but which have often been misinterpreted. As readers know, Marxists contend that all wage labor involves exploitation and alienation and that this is a chief reason why capitalism should be replaced by “a higher form of society,” as Marx often put it. In capitalist societies, workers are free of legal bonds but also free of any means of subsistence. Hence, they have no choice but (i.e., they are forced) to work for the owners of the means of production who control the labor process and the laborer and who get to keep the product of their labor. This—in great brevity—is exploitation and also alienation.¹⁴

Defenders of capitalism describe the situation differently, of course. In capitalism they say, everyone owns something, even if it is only “themselves,” and hence their own labor power, and therefore that the wage relation is a voluntary exchange between two individual commodity owners, simply a buyer and a seller. The two principal classes that constitute capitalism, with their vastly unequal power vis-à-vis this “transaction,” disappear. But to call either labor or labor power a commodity is essentially a legal fiction (like declaring corporations per-

sons). Certainly labor power is unlike other commodities; unlike other things I “own,” it can’t be stolen or left on the bus! This is because it consists of mental and physical energies, capacities, potentials, and hence cannot be separated from the laborer to whom they belong, but exist only in “his living self,” Marx says. Labor is the expression of these.¹⁵ Wherever my labor power/labor goes, I have to go with it; whatever is done to it, is done to me. So the worker who “sells their labor power” is selling their selves to the owner, albeit with temporal and other limitations.¹⁶ The domination of capitalists over workers due to their monopoly of the means of production is continually reproduced and increased through the process of production.

Behind Marx’s condemnation of wage labor as exploited and alienated is a very different view of what human labor can and should be. In a very early work, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* on alienation, Marx says, “The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species character.”¹⁷ Thus one aspect of alienation is alienation from the human species character. This view of the special character of human labor is elaborated upon in a much later work *The Grundrisse*, where he criticizes Adam Smith’s account of work as sacrifice, saying that while this is true of exploited work (“external, forced labor”), this is not true of work as such. Yes, work always involves some external goal, he says, but overcoming obstacles can be liberating when they are goals set by the individual; then work is “self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labor.” In the same passage he criticizes the utopian socialist Fourier, whose views sound like the anti-work writers. In contrast to Fourier’s vision of labor in a socialist society as essentially

play, Marx says “*Really free working, e.g., composing, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion.*”¹⁸ [author’s emphasis]

In *Capital III* Marx distinguishes different kinds of necessity and different kinds of freedom. He distinguishes a realm of necessity and a realm of freedom. In any society, he says there will always be some labor required by physical necessity—but this, he says, is consistent with a different kind of freedom:

Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nevertheless remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with the realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.¹⁹

This account of freedom within necessity as consisting of rational collective control underscores the connection between Marx’s view of human nature and his commitment to a radical democratic vision of socialism.

So in Marx’s view labor (work) is not inherently oppressive. In fact, when it is determined by an individual’s wants, needs, passions, it is free in the fullest possible sense. When on the other hand, the work is required by the facts of nature (i.e., what satisfies our physical needs requires work to get it), it can still be free in a more limited sense, if it is *we who* decide how to do it. Finally, within wage work, though always exploited from a Marxist point of view, there are many variations which make the work better or worse for the worker: the amount of control exercised by the worker,

how direct is the capitalist’s control over the worker/work, the remuneration and respect accorded to it, how intrinsically attractive or repulsive the work is to the worker, how difficult and how dangerous it is, physically or emotionally, and so on.

Marx’s accounts in *Capital* of the degradation of work as capitalism developed, of the loss of all “charm” and “interest,” making the work a kind of “torture,” of the de-skilling of the worker, of transforming the worker into “an appendage of the machine,” are eloquent testimony to his appreciation of this fact (as is the participation of Marxists in struggles for better working conditions.) Some workers in capitalism enjoy their work, believing it to be worthy work, some few are even fortunate enough to do for pay what they would want to do anyway. Thus Marx’s general account and condemnation of wage labor as exploited and alienated in no way denies these qualitative and quantitative differences—which we will draw on when we discuss sex work in particular. But his concluding line in the quote above about the necessity of a shorter work day reaffirms that we all need more time to pursue the activities we most care about, “really free working,” whether these be composing music, teaching children, or working on machines. We also need more time for “eating, sleeping, procreating,” but these activities do not have the same *distinctively human* importance for Marx.

Notice that this critique of wage labor is distinct from a critique of the work itself. A great deal of the work done in capitalism would not be done in a socialist society (e.g., wasteful production of junk or products designed for obsolescence, figuring out how to get people to buy things they don’t need, or manufacturing instruments of torture). On the other hand, much other work that is done today would be necessary in any society, including an ideal non-capitalist one, although it would be done in humane

and environmentally sustainable ways. The latter point entails that there would have to be *substantially less* production of things altogether. This eco-socialist argument dovetails with the goal of the anti-work writers. Meanwhile, however, an anti- (or post-) work politics should not be used to deny the important qualitative and political differences between types of work or the importance of the struggle for better jobs. Therefore we can ignore this perspective in our analysis of sex work.

Is Sex Special?

Most prostitution, and sex work in general, is exploited in a Marxist sense in that pimps, brothel owners, and perhaps multinational corporations are making a profit from the sale of the prostitute's labor. But if this exploitation were removed because the prostitute worked for herself, as some do today, or for a sex workers' cooperative, would it still be problematic? In other words, does the moral/political objection to prostitution go beyond the exploitative character of most of the work? If it were decriminalized, should it be seen as similar to any other service work? *The Economist* recently editorialized for just this position with a cover depicting a sexy young woman cutting her ball and chain, and some feminists agree. The key to her freedom according to *The Economist* is the Internet, allowing her to transact freely with prospective clients, negotiate the services and price, and pointed to websites where clients can evaluate their experience, like on Trip Advisor, and sites where prostitutes can expose bad clients, e.g., Blacklist. The web service would be something like Task Rabbit, but instead of selling babysitting, shopping, housework, painting, paper work, etc., the services would be sexual intercourse (anal intercourse at a higher price), fellatio (without a condom at a higher price), spanking or heavier S&M (also more ex-

pensive), masturbation, etc.²⁰

Though the precarity of the working conditions are similar and perhaps the average pay might be the same (because so many can enter the business so easily), or better, I do not think that the latter commodified sexual services are the same as the service work done by the Task Rabbits. This opinion is not based on sexual prudery (on the contrary), on outdated romantic notions, or on the belief that all prostitutes are victims (though many are). In part, my judgment regarding most instances of prostitution is based on the political economic context discussed earlier; economic pressures put the choice to do this work decidedly on the unfree side of the free/unfree continuum for the great majority. However, even for those in a situation allowing a greater variety of choices that are not totally awful, I believe that prostitution is not "simply a kind of service work" and is not work that feminists should regard as unproblematic.

What is the prostitute selling? Certain sexual services. But just as rape is not primarily about sex, prostitution is about more than that. For most individuals, sexual satisfaction is, after all, as Carole Pateman has pointed out, always "at hand." And sexual services cannot be separated from the sale (or rent) of the body that supplies those services.²¹ The client is buying the right to use a woman's body as he wishes, without any desire on her part. Once she has contracted to provide a particular service—assuming she has this power to set limits—she has to allow him to *enter into* her body, her vagina, her mouth, her anus, to put his hands all over her body, and she must do whatever she has contracted to do to his body with her hands and mouth. This is domination at a most intimate level, whether or not he plays the dominating role in the interaction; it may be he who wants to be penetrated or spanked. It is the client's power to determine that and how he gets sexual

satisfaction from a prostitute that makes male domination central to prostitution, not a male desire to dominate.

And, except at the lowest end of the business where there is no pretense, she must pretend to be enjoying it; the interaction, therefore, is always a charade, a performance on the prostitute's part. Thus what the client is buying (renting) is not only her body, but the (appearance of) her emotions. If she just lies there and looks at her watch, he will not be satisfied; an important part of what he is buying is the appearance of her pleasure. His motivation may be to dominate a woman, to affirm his masculinity to himself or others, to have (particular kinds of) sexual experiences because he cannot get them without paying for them, or he may be looking for bodily/emotional connection (kissing costs more too), or to have a "girlfriend experience" without responsibilities. Whichever it is, the prostitute is selling him the right to use her body in this way. This indicates an important difference from the employment contract, as Pateman has pointed out. What the capitalist is paying workers for is to use their bodies to make products, and workers' bodies can be replaced by machines. Not so in prostitution.

Of course, "emotional labor" is not unique to prostitutes. Arlie Hochschild's work²² has shown how much work today, especially by women, involves emotional labor, where workers pretend to feel what they do not feel because delivering the service in a certain way is part of the service. She shows that there is a serious cost: the alienation of workers from their feelings. The flight attendant becomes estranged from her smile, she says; it is not hers anymore. Hochschild's powerful work is illuminating of the emotional dimension of most prostitutes' work, but it does not convey the half of it since other emotional labor jobs do not involve letting a client

use her body as he wishes. While Pateman's distinction between the employment contract and the prostitute/client relationship is less true of service work, many services—from bank tellers to sales people to financial planners—are now self-service through machines and the Internet. Even flight attendants, because of speed-up and feminism, are no longer required to give such personal feminized service.

It is because human sexual experiences are highly intimate and both physical and emotional that they can range from ecstatic to horrific and everything in between. Only with great effort of dissociation is sex ever *purely* physical, which can be a useful defense, but this often takes a psychic toll. Consider the fact that prostitutes, especially street prostitutes, as well as soldiers and war victims, often suffer from PTSD, whereas other low-status, dangerous, physically demanding jobs don't have that particular effect, which is due to its emotionally damaging experiences, as much as violence and fear of violence.²³ The body is where we experience pleasure and pain. Indeed, it is the original site of emotions, of our very selves. Research has shown that babies who are not picked up and held are damaged emotionally and may "fail to thrive" physically, even when their basic physical needs are met. So the right kind of physical contact is crucial to emotional and physical well-being. On the other hand, the wrong kind of physical contact can be traumatic. Even when conscious memory is gone the body retains experiences, e.g., of abuse, which is why abusers were usually abused as children. That's why we tell children that they should decide if they want to be touched and how. Thus selling sexual services is not like selling other services. Selling intimate bodily experiences is a kind of ultimate alienation (which has degrees, as discussed above).

In a non-patriarchal, non-capitalist society, would this still be true? Yes and

no. Since human beings are simultaneously physical and emotional/social beings, the body and its experiences, early and throughout life, including how an individual decides to use it, would still be crucial to that person's physical and emotional well-being. In the absence of patriarchal and capitalist pressures to use their bodies in dangerous and degrading ways, some women might nevertheless choose to provide sex to strangers without desire on their part. (Let us take at face value their answer to the question of why they choose this.) Some might even choose to do it as a regular thing, as a service to those who were unable to satisfy their sexual and emotional needs through personal relationships. But if so, that would be more like being a sex therapist than what is understood today as a prostitute (consider the film *The Sessions*). The crucial point is that the power relationships of the society at large and between the two people would be totally different—and hence both its nature and its effects, both individually and socially, would be different.

My description of sex in prostitution as ultimate alienation is similar to sex in patriarchal marriages in that husbands control when and how they have sex with their wives. (Consider how recently the very concept of marital rape was considered incoherent.) Sometimes women do not get to choose their husbands in the first place or they do so for financial reasons. Thus socialist feminists have always been fierce critics of traditional marriages. Emma Goldman referred to “prostitution—public and private,” saying “...it is merely a question of degree whether she sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or to many men....” From the nineteenth and early twentieth century figures like Emma Goldman and Alexandra Kollontai to socialist feminists today, the central goal has been sexual liberation: the freedom to choose if and when and how and with whom to have sexual

relations. Women should be free to choose whatever partner, male or female, they want and to have sex for love, for lust, for friendship, for fun, for procreation, for comfort, or whatever else the lovers want. Fortunately, in developed countries especially, women and men are more and more able to form personal relationships based on love and friendship rather than direct coercion from families and the law.²⁴ Same-sex couples are a dramatic example of the enormous expansion of human freedom and personal happiness that this has brought.

The fiction at the heart of capitalist ideology that one can sell parts of one's self without selling oneself, and that doing so is an exercise of freedom rather than domination has led to the commodification of everything that people do not resist in defense of other values,²⁵ intruding into the most intimate areas of our lives. Libertarians see nothing wrong with selling one's organs. But while that may be all a person has to sell, this should never be construed as a free act. The same is true of sex; it may in fact be the only “commodity” a woman has to offer on the market, but this should be understood as an expression of the poverty of her choices in our capitalist patriarchal system.

What Is to Be Done?

Given our global political/economic system, both the demand for prostitutes and their supply are not likely to be eliminated anytime soon. The challenge for socialist feminists therefore is how to support women working as prostitutes without giving up our critique of the work and the institution of prostitution. But support for the women in the business must always be conjoined with struggles to change the political economic conditions that push so many into it. We should fight for jobs with living wages, affordable housing and childcare, substance abuse programs, help

with immigration problems, and whatever else sex workers say they need.

A first step is recognizing that prostitution is work and that those in the business deserve the same protections as citizens and as workers as everyone else. Egregious conditions sometimes exist in the industry, including debt bondage and other slavery or slavery-like conditions. However, these are neither inherent nor unique to the sex industry. Women and men are trafficked or caught in debt bondage to work in agriculture, manufacture, carpet weaving, and as domestics. But of these super-exploited people, prostitutes are the only ones who are also criminalized, depriving them of what international and local legal protections exist. Though not enforced as they should be, these conventions provide some basis for pressure by those affected and by their supporters. Therefore all laws against the selling of sex should be removed. Then prostitutes will be free to organize and work with other sex workers and activist organizations to improve their conditions and those in other industries. Given their limited options some women will choose prostitution as the best available option; indeed some go to great lengths to get into the industry. They should not be deprived of their right to make this choice.²⁶

In recent years other legal changes have been put into effect that seek to protect prostitutes and promote feminist goals. In 1999 Sweden adopted a law de-criminalizing the selling of sex, but criminalizing the client, the pimp, and the brothel owner. It has since been enacted elsewhere and has become known as the Nordic model. I am sympathetic to their goals of protecting the women in the trade, but reducing the number of women choosing it, which, they argue, is in the best interests both of prostitutes and women throughout society (and ultimately of men as well).²⁷ However, I have some doubts about the model. If in fact

prostitution is the best option for a woman given her particular circumstances, then criminalizing her clients will make it difficult for her to do the job. Sweden's social support system gives women better choices than in most countries. However even there it is not clear how the law has worked. (I leave others to examine this question in detail.) In poorer countries, and less generous countries like the United States, such a law would be counterproductive to prostitutes' interests. They are doing the work because they feel they have to.

A variant of the Nordic model that would not have this disadvantage is more attractive to me: de-criminalizing both the selling and the buying of sex, but criminalizing pimps and brothel owners. The reasons are simple. First, no one should be allowed to profit from the labor of prostitutes except prostitutes themselves. Second, the profitability of the sex business creates an enormous incentive to recruit women into the business. Such a law would help to eliminate that incentive. One line of objection to this proposal would be that prostitutes need the protection they get from pimps and brothels. My response is that prostitutes could organize to provide for themselves whatever benefits they may sometimes get from pimps and brothels. They can hire someone as a driver or bodyguard; they can rent an apartment from which they can work and organize the work themselves in a cooperative way. Another objection would be that such a law could expose friends, relatives, employees, and landlords of the prostitute to arrest because they are mistaken as pimps and brothel owners. This is possible, just as innocent parents are occasionally arrested for child abuse. This shows the importance of careful crafting of the law to minimize the arrest or harassment of those who are not pimps or brothel owners. It also would require education and training of the police and active

involvement by prostitutes' organizations to monitor the effects of the law.²⁸

I offer the above proposal in a very tentative way. I am far from an expert and the crucial question is how it would work in practice. At this stage I think we need to experiment with different legal and social models and see what works and what does not, working toward best practices to advance the interests of those in the sex business and support those who wish to leave. Whatever legal changes and social policies are considered vis-à-vis the sex industry, the organizations of sex workers themselves should be given a central role in formulating and implementing them. But finally, legislation should never be the central part of the discussion.

NOTES

1. This article was originally going to be co-authored with Johanna Brenner. For reasons of space, different foci, and somewhat different conclusions, we decided to do separate articles. But her contribution was invaluable throughout the writing of this article. I also wish to express my thanks to the following for their helpful suggestions and comments: Alexandra Holmstrom-Smith, Laura Esikoff, Jan Haaken, Meena Dhanda, Eleni Varikas, and Elizabeth Rapaport.

2. *The Economist*, Aug. 9, 2014; Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore* (New York: Verso, 2014). Some reactions include Katha Pollitt, "Why do so many leftists want sex work to be the new normal?" *The Nation*, April 21, 2014; Sarah Ditung, "Toying with Politics," <http://sarahditum.com>. For the earlier debates, see Ann Ferguson, Ilene Philipson, Irene Diamond, and Lee Quinby, and Carole S. Vance and Ann Barr Snitow, "Forum: The Feminist Sexuality Debates," *Signs* 1984, vol. 10, no 1; Judith R. Walkowitz, "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Britain," *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

3. I am using "socialist feminist" to include "anyone trying to understand women's subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates

class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation, with the aim of using this analysis to help liberate women." Cf. Holmstrom, *The Socialist Feminist Project: A Reader in Theory and Politics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002).

4. Carole Pateman (and Charles W. Mills), *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 227.

5. *The Economist*, Aug. 9, 2014.

6. For example, the English anti-trafficking law does not require that a person is trafficked for sex against their will or with the use of coercion or force. Simply arranging or facilitating the arrival in the United Kingdom of another person for the purpose of prostitution is considered human trafficking. This is not helpful to those who have been coerced or deceived into becoming sex workers.

7. See Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999) for a horrific discussion of the lowest end of the industry. Bales, one of the world's experts on slavery, estimates that there are a half million to a million prostitutes in Thailand of whom one in twenty is enslaved. (Slavery is not limited to the sex industry. His conservative estimate is 27 million people.)

8. Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2014), 185–88.

9. Denise Brennan, "Selling Sex for Visas: Sex Tourism as a Stepping Stone to International Migration," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, eds. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002).

10. This is Gertrude Ezorsky's apt phrase. *Freedom in the Workplace?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007).

11. John Rawls is among those who deny that lack of money is a limitation on freedom, though he says it may affect the "worth" of someone's liberty. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971); Philip Pettit (*A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001]) groups poverty with "natural limits" on freedom like illness.

12. For fuller discussion and references, see Nancy Holmstrom (and Ann Cudd), *Capitalism For and Against: A Feminist Debate* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 145–85.

13. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2011); Peter Frase, "The Problem with (Sex) Work," www.peterfrase.com, 2012.

14. Nancy Holmstrom, "Exploitation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, (1977), vol. 7 no. 2, 353–69; "Alienation, Freedom and Human Nature," in *Alienation Redux: Marxist Perspectives*, ed. Marcello Musto and Vesa Oittinen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

15. In his early work, Marx talked of workers selling their labor; later he changed this to labor power. Though the distinction is crucial for the theory of surplus value, it is not important to us here.

16. The illusion that labor power is an entity separable from the person may have come to seem more plausible after Descartes' separation of the mind from the body and his identification of the self, the "I" with the mind. This entails both an ontological and conceptual separation of the body from the person, along with the devaluation of the body, leading to intractable skeptical problems.

17. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx-Engels Collected Works (MECW)*, vol. 3, 276–77.

18. *The Grundrisse, MECW*, vol. 28, 530. This example shows that Marx's conception of humans' distinctive kind of productive activity is not limited to material production and is in no way "productivist." It is strikingly similar to what some contemporary psychologists call "flow."

19. *Capital III, MECW*, vol. 37, 867.

20. This is based on the extensive survey of sex work advertisements reported in *The Economist*, Aug. 9, 2014.

21. Melissa Gira Grant insists that the prostitute is not selling her body but selling sexual services (*Playing the Whore*, 94).

22. Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2012).

23. Empirical research on these matters is difficult to do and more difficult to assess, particularly since so much of the work is clandestine, especially at the low end of the industry, including the not-insignificant number of prostitutes working in slavery-like conditions. Hence their experience at the low end of the business will be under-represented in the data. Nevertheless the data show that prostitution is dangerous, but that the conditions under which it is done can either

heighten or minimize the dangers. Street workers are at greater risk of violence from clients, but 17 percent of indoor workers had experienced attempted rape. Hardly a normal service job. Stephanie Church, Marion Henderson, Marina Barnard, Graham Hart, "Violence by clients towards female prostitutes in different work settings: questionnaire survey," *The BMJ*, vol. 322 (3), March 2001, 524–25. Other researchers show high rates of PTSD even among indoor sex workers. Melissa Farley et al., "Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: An Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Trauma Practice* 2 (3/4), 2003, 33–74. How much this would change with legalization is debated. Prostitutes' protection against AIDS is likely enhanced by legalization as it increases their ability to insist on the use of condoms (www.avert.org/sex-workers-and-hiv/aids.htm). However, since *The Economist's* survey showed men will pay more for sex without condoms, this could act like the "forcing offer" described earlier.

24. Whether these are legalized as "marriages" or not is not as important as the fact that increasingly numbers of people today are in long-term intimate relationships based on mutual desire and respect. Thus "marriage" has been able to be fundamentally reformed in a way that prostitution cannot be, though the conditions may be somewhat improved. Cf. Pateman 2007, 227.

25. Elizabeth Anderson, "The Ethical Limitations of the Market," *Economics and Philosophy* 6 (1990): 179–205.

26. This is the strong position of Anti-Slavery International, which argues that it is prostitutes' exclusion from society that encourages slavery and slavery-like conditions. See Jo Bindman, "An International Perspective on Slavery in the Sex Industry," in Holmstrom 2002.

27. See the interview with Kajsa Ekis Ekman, author of *Being and Being Bought* in *Feminist Currents*, Jan. 20, 2014, for a sympathetic account of the law and its effects.

28. The Red Umbrella Project (www.redumbrellaproject.org) is the kind of organization I have in mind. It works to "amplify...the voices of people in the sex trades through media, advocacy and storytelling programs." They helped change the law allowing police to use a woman having condoms as evidence of her engaging in prostitution and they have observed and done a report on New York's special Anti-Trafficking Courts to see how they have worked in practice.

Venezuela and the Global Left

No to Both Authoritarianism and Imperialist Aggression

DANIEL CHAVEZ

AS THE GLOBAL RIGHT ADVANCES AND socialists worldwide grapple with how to build left alternatives, Venezuela's crisis raises fundamental strategic questions that extend beyond regional borders. The current political, economic, and social situation under Nicolás Maduro's government represents one of Latin America's most complex contemporary authoritarian cases. It requires clarity from the international left on how to navigate between opposing authoritarianism and resisting imperialism.

Following the fraudulent presidential elections of July 2024, the Maduro government has intensified its authoritarian trajectory, while facing a multidimensional collapse. At the same time, Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency has heightened interventionist threats. U.S. Navy operations in the Caribbean have caused numerous civilian casualties, and mass deportations have targeted Venezuelan migrants. Meanwhile, the anti-government camp has fractured, with key sectors aligning with international far-right forces.

Venezuela's crisis raises fundamental strategic questions for socialists worldwide. How should the left engage with Maduro's

authoritarian regime? Do we need to defend Venezuela against imperialist threats? What about the rising popular opposition? These questions require answers that go beyond sectarian stances and acknowledge the complexity of the Venezuelan situation.

Maduro's Authoritarian Consolidation

Maduro's government has drifted into becoming a fully autocratic regime. The process of authoritarian consolidation has been gradual, with social and political repression intensifying after the July 2024 presidential elections, effectively reducing popular mobilization. In those elections, people voted for change, but the official electoral results were never released. The National Electoral Council (CNE) has not published detailed results by state, party, or municipality.

The state is strong on coercion but weak or non-existent on protecting social rights. As of May 2025, public sector workers' minimum income (combining basic salary and bonuses) stood at approximately US\$160 per month, with the basic minimum wage alone being much lower, at around US\$3.00–3.50. Meanwhile, the basic food basket costs between US\$500 and US\$700 a month. To survive, families must resort to informal work, remittances from migrants abroad, and bonuses distributed through local participatory mechanisms—what Venezuelans call *matar tigritos* (“killing little

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tigers”), meaning quick and informal work that uses whatever skills people have to earn money to cover basic needs. The economic and social crisis has generated an exodus of nearly eight million Venezuelans—almost a third of the population.

Yet Maduro and his business partners are absolutely convinced they must never give up power, no matter what they have to do to keep it. Political prisoners remain incarcerated in harsh conditions. Many are held incommunicado, without private lawyers, unable to see family members, and with seriously worsening health conditions.

Far-right Alliances

On February 8, 2025, the European Parliament’s far-right group, Patriots for Europe, met in Madrid under the slogan “Make Europe Great Again.” Leaders including France’s Marine Le Pen, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, Italy’s Matteo Salvini, and Spain’s Santiago Abascal, attended. During this meeting, the main leader of the Venezuelan opposition, and this year’s Nobel Prize winner, María Corina Machado, intervened via streaming to thank “the work of the Patriots for Europe group within the European Parliament, which has always been at the vanguard of the struggle for the Venezuelan people’s freedom.”

Her participation confirmed historical alliances between the right-wing opposition leader and global reactionary forces. Machado enthusiastically supported the Trump government’s expulsion and imprisonment of alleged *Tren de Aragua* members in the Terrorism Confinement Centre (CECOT) in El Salvador, arguing a link between the criminal gang and Maduro’s government. This is precisely the argument the White House has used to declare the Venezuelan gang a terrorist organization, accusing people of membership for reasons as banal as having a crown-shaped tattoo.

Trump’s Return and the Escalating Imperialist Aggression

The relationship between the Maduro government and the White House has fluctuated in recent years. In January 2025, Trump’s special envoy, Richard Grenell, arrived in Caracas. A transactional, mutually functional relationship between the governments seemed possible at that time. Maduro’s government actively participated in Trump’s deportation policy, including sending planes belonging to Conviasa, the Venezuelan national airline, to collect deported migrants. Good will toward the Trump administration was evidently motivated by questions around sanctions and oil policy.

In the second half of this year, the U.S. government significantly shifted its policy. Chavismo’s most vocal opponents reached the White House and secured positions in the Senate and House of Representatives. From Florida, Republican politicians like

Only through principled internationalism can the left meaningfully contribute to overcoming Venezuela’s authoritarian maze, while defending Latin American self-determination against resurgent imperialism under Trump.

Marco Rubio have built careers on direct opposition to the global left, promising to vigorously attack the Cuba-Nicaragua-Venezuela triad. For many Venezuelans, the “American dream” has suddenly and catastrophically vanished, yet they still hope

Trump's government will strongly oppose Chavismo. The harshest measures against the Venezuelan government are only just beginning, and military escalation cannot be ruled out.

Reject Military Actions

Socialists worldwide must categorically reject U.S. naval operations in the Caribbean, carried out under the pretense of fighting drug trafficking. These operations have included bombings of Venezuelan vessels, resulting in dozens of deaths since the beginning of September, impacting coastal communities and increasing the risks of conflict. Such actions, violating international law, do not solve issues like drug trafficking, which is used as an excuse for interventions that prioritize geopolitical interests over regional peace.

Venezuela is extremely weak in the face of foreign aggression. Internationally, it is practically isolated. Internally, the social fabric is torn apart. Instead of recognizing this and taking steps toward national reconstruction—for example, releasing all political prisoners—the Maduro govern-

militarization of civil society. And it disregards the 1999 Constitution (CRBV), which emphasizes peace and dialogue.

Venezuelan progressive political and civil society organizations, such as the Plataforma Ciudadana en Defensa de la Constitución (Citizen's Platform in Defense of the Constitution), have issued urgent and compelling calls. They appeal to all democratic and popular forces and the broadest spectrum of the Venezuelan opposition to set aside political or ideological affiliation and overcome all forms of sectarianism and arrogance. They call for left forces to radically distance themselves from any belligerent adventure and from all forms of foreign interference. This means openly rejecting all forms of interference and promotion of violence by foreign powers on Venezuelan territory, as well as the repressive actions of Nicolás Maduro's own regime.

Questions for the International Left

The international left cannot defend an authoritarian government that systematically violates human rights, keeps 900 political prisoners in deplorable conditions, and has presided over the exodus of millions fleeing intolerable living conditions. The regime's consolidation of power through electoral fraud, systematic repression, and the suspension of fundamental rights places it squarely within patterns of authoritarian rule that socialists have historically opposed. Nonetheless, this necessary critique must not lead to alignment with right-wing opposition forces, whose alliances with international far-right movements show how segments of the opposition have embraced reactionary politics incompatible with genuine democratic transformation.

True anti-imperialism involves strengthening popular sovereignty, democratic institutions, and social movements.

Venezuela's crisis raises strategic questions for socialists. How should the left engage with Maduro's regime? What about popular opposition? These questions require answers beyond sectarian stances.

ment relies on a single and ineffectual response: the mobilization of millions of militia members. This has worsened the atmosphere of conflict and deepened the

Maduro's regime has systematically sought to destroy all of these. The left must therefore support the country's sovereignty, while demanding that the government take measures to genuinely strengthen it: releasing political prisoners, restoring democratic freedoms, and engaging in peaceful dialogue to achieve a constitutional resolution.

The challenge lies in building international solidarity that strengthens autonomous popular organization within Venezuela, rather than bolstering either the regime or the right-wing opposition. This involves recognizing that Venezuelan workers, students, community organizers, and ordinary citizens seeking dignity, democracy, and social justice are the true popular opposition, whose struggles align with left principles.

Colombian president Gustavo Petro represents Latin America's democratic Left. In a recent message on social media, Petro said:

I don't defend Maduro, I didn't recognize his election, but even less do I defend an invasion of Bolívar's homeland. That would be the ultimate betrayal of the history and future of all of Latin America and the Caribbean. Venezuelans' problems are resolved by Venezuelans. That is the principle of people's self-determination.

Petro's formulation provides a framework for the international left. Only through principled internationalism can the left meaningfully contribute to overcoming Venezuela's authoritarian maze, while defending Latin American self-determination against resurgent imperialism under the Trump administration. Venezuela's future depends not on external saviors—whether imperial or otherwise—but on the Venezuelan people's ability to build democratic alternatives that transcend both authoritarianism and reaction.

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The Dominican Left

Crisis and Prospects

AMAURY RODRÍGUEZ

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC's revolutionary left is caught in a continuous crisis at a time when the Dominican state is under the complete control of the capitalist class and the far right is on the rise both locally and internationally. Mostly self-identified as Marxist-Leninist and generally Maoist-inspired, these left-wing organizations emerged in the 1960s and were quite active throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. One main distinguishable trait of these organizations is their membership composition, that is, historical militants with an average age around seventy years old.

The old Dominican left has a strong connection with environmental struggles that focus on the fight against mining multinationals like Barrick Gold and in defense of all natural resources. Meanwhile, there are almost no leftist worker or student organizations. With a draconian labor code that prohibits strikes and the ongoing neoliberal assault on public education, the existing labor unions and student organizations play a marginal role in the fight against state repression and the co-optation of activists by political parties, NGOs, and the state. Although there are small feminist, LGBTQ, and anti-racist youth collectives,

their political orientation does not fully align with leftist or revolutionary politics.

Similar to other countries in the Caribbean and Latin America, waves of revolutionary struggle and authoritarian political shifts tend to shape and influence the direction of Dominican politics. In that respect, the old Dominican left follows in the footsteps of the campist/tankie left in their blind support of bureaucratic socialist states. On top of it all and in total contradiction with revolutionary politics, these left-wing organizations sympathize with the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) economic bloc that not only continues to trade with the racist Zionist state carrying out the Gaza genocide but also includes far-right governments like that of Russia's Vladimir Putin and India's Narendra Modi. Operating with a Cold-War mentality, BRICS governments champion the idea of a multipolar capitalist world order divided into distinct geopolitical camps in confrontation with U.S. imperialism.¹

At a gathering on July 13, 2025, six left-wing Dominican organizations discussed their present calamity by reflecting on the current state of the left and its future ahead: the Movimiento Popular Dominicano (Dominican Popular Movement, MPD), the Partido Comunista del Trabajo (Communist Party of Labor, PCT), the Movimiento Caamañista (Caamañista Movement, MC), Fuerza de la Revolución

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(Force of the Revolution, FR), Referente de la Izquierda Dominicana (Reference of the Left, RID) and Partido Patria para Todos y Todas (Fatherland for All Party, PPT). The gathering is part of the old left's goal to mend the rift created by political differences and historical conflicts. According to one participant's report, delegates at the event recognized "the left's mistake in neglecting political work with the working class, peasants, youth, women and the cultural terrain." Moreover, in a rare moment of honesty for a left that has not always been self-critical, attendees admitted that "the left currently lacks a generational change, a serious situation that must be urgently addressed in order to overcome it."²

While it's true that the Dominican left is in need of new blood, the crux of the matter lies beyond generational change. Replacing the old guard without changing political course amounts to no renewal or change at all. Besides age, the main problem facing the Dominican left is class and ideological collaboration as some sectors of the old left backed current right-wing President Luis Abinader's presidential campaign in 2020 and even formed alliances with Abinader's party, the pro-market Partido Revolucionario Moderno (Modern Revolutionary Party, PRM). This was the case of the Communist Party of Labor (PCT).³ But the PCT has a track record of opportunist electoralism. In 2007, the PCT's secretary general caused a stir when he and other members met with Pedro de Jesús Candelier, a former head of police with a long history of police brutality and extrajudicial killings who was running for president on a tough-on-crime, populist platform.⁴

While sectors of the old left support electoral politics and have no qualms about outright class collaboration, left-wing groups such as the Caamañista Movement (named after Francisco Alberto Caamaño, one of the leaders of the 1965 revolu-

tion) have over the years maintained an abstentionist orientation that has created a disconnect with the working class. The Caamañista Movement's abstention from elections left it politically unprepared when it characterized the Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (Dominican Liberation Party, PLD) government as a dictatorship that would never lose elections. As a consequence, the Caamañista Movement did not understand the institutional continuity represented by the PRM winning the elections.⁵

Right-wing Hegemony

Under President Luis Abinader, a wealthy businessman of Lebanese descent and close ally of Washington and the Zionist state, Dominican society is living under an undeclared and de facto state of emergency that has suspended constitutional rights for working-class people, specifically, Haitian immigrants, Dominicans of Haitian origin, and black Dominicans. In a populist response to the demands put forward by the Marcha Verde (Green March) movement that emerged in 2017, and because the old left failed to push the movement beyond liberal demands, Abinader campaigned as a candidate for change based on an anti-corruption and liberal platform that included abortion rights. Using a well-orchestrated marketing campaign, Abinader promised to "restore democracy" and create an "independent justice and separation of powers" (which has completely failed) after two-decades of right-wing rule by the PLD. Abinader soon moved to the right after getting elected.

Coming to power during the Covid-19 crisis, Abinader relied on harsh repressive measures to enforce lockdowns and carry out mass arrests of black Dominican youth in the barrios (poor, working-class neighborhoods) where even partying in the streets came under attack by police forces.

Since 2020, Abinader, while scapegoating Haitian people for the country's social ills, has carried out mass deportations of Haitian immigrants regardless of their legal status. Abinader and his government have also tolerated the growth of the local fascist movement and its paramilitary wing, the Antigua Orden Dominicana (AOD). On March 30, for example, his government allowed a fascist march in Hoyo de Friusa, a mixed Haitian-Dominican neighborhood. This turned out to be an inflammatory provocation meant to further polarize Dominican society on the issue of immigration and continue to spread xenophobia and anti-Haitian racism. Abinader's government not only authorized the march but provided a military escort from the Ministry of Defense at the request of the neo-Nazis. When violence erupted, the government and the AOD unanimously declared that the violence had been the work of mysterious "infiltrators" who were never identified despite dozens of arrests. And finally, the government did what the march demanded: it completely demolished a neighborhood with more than three hundred buildings, to racially cleanse the area. A week later, Abinader announced a series of fifteen anti-Haitian government measures including the elimination of the right to free public health care for immigrants.⁶

Abinader has not acted alone as the rest of the political class has been complicit in abetting the racist and anti-Haitian campaign under way.

As usual, the ruling class in the Dominican Republic uses racism as a political weapon to divide and rule. As left-wing writer Lilliam Oviedo observes, this current reactionary campaign relying on fascist elements "is aimed at obscuring (and, if possible, denying) the existence of class struggle."⁷

Under such a repressive climate, dissent is barely tolerated and the Dominican left

has not been able to effectively challenge President Abinader, the far right, or these reactionary policies. As for the old Dominican left's political weakness vis-à-vis the government, one can mention the missed opportunity during the commemorative march for the sixtieth anniversary of the April 1965 revolution, a march led by the left and that was relatively large and diverse in composition. But when the government demanded that the march be racially cleansed and that organizers not allow Haitian workers to attend, the old Dominican left did nothing to challenge the government's orders. After the march came under repression with a police attack on elderly sugarcane workers and then attacks by fascist paramilitaries when the march dispersed, the leftist organizations that organized the march actually thanked the government for largely respecting the march (and refrained from denouncing the attacks and repression). This created a disconnect with young activists who saw no reason to thank the government.⁸

Meanwhile, large numbers of ordinary people have come to the conclusion that electoral politics will not lead to real change while the lack of progressive or revolutionary alternatives continues to leave the political field open to right-wing nationalism and far-right politics.⁹

An Ongoing Crisis

The crisis of the Dominican left is not a new phenomenon. It has its roots in the *Doce Años* (Twelve Year) period under President Joaquín Balaguer (1966–1978) who presided over a counter-revolutionary regime put in place by U.S. occupation troops after the defeat of the 1965 democratic revolution that aimed to restore Juan Bosch to power. Deposed in a U.S.-backed right-wing military coup in 1963, Bosch's reformist government represented a breath of fresh air after becoming the first demo-

cratically elected government since the fall of the U.S. aligned, pro-Israel Trujillo dictatorship in 1961.

A staunch anti-communist, Balaguer's extermination campaign against revolutionary militants, unionists, and other political dissidents beheaded most of the leadership of the Dominican left and sent hundreds of people into exile. Under the Balaguer regime, death squads like the Banda Colorá (the Red Gang) launched a killing spree of leftists, students, and journalists.¹⁰ But the repressive tentacles of the state also reached the exile community. In 1971, the murder of Maximiliano Gómez (also known as El Moreno), a leader of the Dominican Popular Movement (MPD) sent chills throughout the Dominican political landscape. Gómez's murder, widely believed to be the work of a CIA agent, took place in Belgium where he lived in exile. Following his murder, another murder, this time a more heinous crime, shocked the Dominican left when a woman's body parts were found in suitcases in Brussels and later identified as Miriam Pinedo, widow of Otto Morales, former general secretary of the MPD killed in 1970 by a police unit in the Dominican Republic.¹¹

Concomitantly, sectarianism and splits fractured and further weakened the left for decades to come. One particular event, the Sino-Soviet split, led to leftist infighting as revolutionary organizations quarreled over which organization represented the vanguard revolutionary party and had the correct political line despite the fact that some of these groups lacked any kind of formal structure and in most cases lacked a basic knowledge and understanding of Marxism.

But it was the hemispheric turn to armed insurrection, spearheaded by the Cuban Revolution and Che Guevara's Foco Theory, that played a major role in splitting the Dominican left into smaller grouplets

and sects. The failure of armed struggle, specifically the defeat of the 1973 guerrilla invasion launched from Cuba by former Colonel Caamaño, proved catastrophic in the end. Its defeat not only dealt a serious blow to the idea of overthrowing the bloody Balaguer regime through military force but it was so demoralizing that it led to a spate of accusations and reprimands within a left movement under constant surveillance by both the state and the CIA. Within the Dominican context, the guerrilla foco had become an ineffective and useless tactic that ended up prolonging the regime. In a 1975 interview, Rafael (Fafa) Taveras, a leading revolutionary leader at the time who spent five years as a political prisoner argued that "the facts speak so clearly that even the blind can see them: The guerrilla foco is not and will not be viable in the country."¹²

By 1978 the regime suffered a resounding electoral defeat at the hands of the nominally social-democratic Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (Dominican Revolutionary Party, PRD), opening a new political cycle which found the revolutionary left in a new political terrain: a transition period marked by the dominance of reformist politics embodied in both the PRD and the PLD.

While the left continued to persevere in this political climate, it sabotaged itself by undermining its own efforts. For example, in what is considered one of the most important working-class gains of the 1980s, the formation of a workers' party, the Partido de los Trabajadores Dominicanos (Dominican Workers Party, PTD), the sectors of the left involved in its formation ended up capitulating to reformism and joining the ruling PRD as an electoral ally.

However, the PRD abandoned its "revolutionary nationalism," embraced neoliberalism, and followed the advice of the International Monetary Fund to restructure the economy by imposing a

structural adjustment program. As a result, in April of 1984, a large segment of the population took to the streets in what became a popular revolt against the high prices of gas and food, putting an end to the social-democratic and progressive image cultivated by the PRD. This event opened the floodgates for the return of Balaguer to power in 1986.

The other hegemonic reformist party, the PLD, which was at the center-left of the political spectrum but by the 1990s also embraced neoliberalism, attracted members of various formations such as the Partido Socialista Popular (People's Socialist Party, PSP), the Comites Revolucionarios Camilo Torres (CORECATOS) and the Partido Socialista (Socialist Party, PS). Interestingly, in this transformation from socialist ideologies to soldiers of neoliberalism, anti-Haitian racism is fundamental, especially for those former revolutionaries who came from petty-bourgeois and middle-class backgrounds like Miguel Cocco, a former leader of CORECATOS, who played a key role in the formation of the xenophobic and anti-Haitian Frente Patriótico (Patriotic Front), an electoral alliance that brought together the PLD with ultra-right politicians like Balaguer and Vincho Castillo, two racist propagandists who served in the Trujillo dictatorship.

As in the heyday of Stalin's Soviet Union and the Chinese People's Republic under Mao Zedong, sections of the Dominican left looked at repressive, statist, and nationalist political projects as models to emulate in the fight for an anti-capitalist and emancipatory future.

Waiting for the Messiah

In response to the climate of terror under Abinader, sectors of the Dominican left are debating the construction of an electoral left front for the next election period in 2028. Unlike South American countries

like Brazil, Argentina, or Ecuador where a left-wing wave brought to power reformist and progressive governments, the Dominican Republic lacked a strong social movement that could have tilted it to the left.

Since the emergence of the Pink Tide regimes, the old Dominican left has borrowed and, in many cases, copied some of the language and political orientations that emanated from the left turn in the Americas. Instead of marching to the beat of its own drum, the old Dominican left adopts moderation, bringing it closer to reformist, center-left, and progressive currents.

By having abandoned street mobilizations for electoral politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Socialist Bloc, some sectors of the old Dominican left have focused their energies on electoral politics instead of organizing workers and peasants and mobilizing the masses in the streets. Adopting this approach meant cultivating an air of "respectability" in order to appeal to moderate and middle-class voters by shedding leftist demands, as in the case of the Force of Revolution (FR), which was once a promising left-regroupment spearheaded in 1996 by the now defunct Partido Comunista Dominicano (Dominican Communist Party, PCD) and several smaller left-wing organizations.

Once again, the old Dominican left is mired in frustration for failing to build a long-lasting electoral alternative. By not prioritizing the political mobilization of workers and popular sectors regardless of their nationality and, in this way, challenging the racist campaigns that have characterized Dominican politics since the late 1990s, this electoral focus has opened the way for the further fragmentation of the working class.

Historically speaking, the Dominican ruling class has played a reactionary role in the Caribbean and Latin America given

its subservient relationship to American imperialism. In 1937, the state carried out a genocide against Haitian people and black Dominicans on the Dominican-Haiti border. Consequently, it is important for revolutionaries in the Caribbean region to get a clear understanding of the political situation in this small Caribbean nation and the possibility of building a united front with neighboring Haiti with the aim of fighting mass deportations of Haitians from Dominican soil, imperialist intervention in Haiti, ecological destruction in both countries, as well as supporting popular self-defense against the business elite-backed gangs in Haiti while fighting for civil liberties on both sides of the island.

Building a New Socialist Left

It is evident that it will be extremely difficult for the leaders and organizations of the Dominican Republic's historic left to restore their credibility and prestige as they continue to support pseudosocialist, authoritarian regimes that repress their own people. Further, the old left's undemocratic practices, reformism and nationalism, constitute an obstacle to rebuilding a new left that is internationalist, anti-racist, feminist, working-class, pro-LGBTQ, pro-immigrant, and unabashedly socialist.

It will take some serious struggle and organizing in working-class neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools for the consolidation of a new Dominican left. In that sense, to rebuild an anti-capitalist left that is democratic and non-dogmatic and that will eventually lay the foundation for the formation of a revolutionary socialist party, there has to be a break with the highly centralized, bureaucratic, and top-down leadership party model. Thus, it is imperative that workers, peasants, LGBTQ people, Haitian immigrants, and other popular sectors play a leading role in the socialist movement.

Additionally, radical sectors within the diasporic communities that oppose the Dominican state's reactionary policies can also contribute to building a new left project. It is crucial that this new left reclaim the history of anti-imperialist resistance and at the same time maintain a clear and firm stance regarding the fight against U.S. imperialism as well as new imperialist powers that are making inroads in the Americas, including China and Russia.

Finally, key to the new left's success will be establishing collaborative relations with Haitian popular organizations that will cement its effectiveness in the fight against local ruling classes and their international backers who exploit and oppress the people who share the island. After the recent approval of the reactionary anti-abortion and pro-boss Penal Code, the left should play a role in the defense of abortion and women's rights as well as LGBTQ people under attack.¹³

Despite the obstacles and difficulties in building a revolutionary left, there are possibilities to building such a movement. For instance, the *Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores* (Socialist Workers' Movement, MST), which is involved in some of the most important struggles today, is laying the foundations for building a revolutionary socialist movement that is internationalist, anti-racist, feminist, and anti-imperialist.

The current international mobilization in solidarity with the people of Gaza and against the Zionist genocide represents another source of socialist and revolutionary renewal as the Palestinian liberation movement continues to provide political clarity in the fight against genocide, empire, and racism. One such revolutionary organization that has the potential to revitalize the Dominican left is the *Movimiento Dominicano en Solidaridad con Palestina* (Dominican Solidarity Movement with

Palestine), which is aware that the struggle for liberation is intertwined at the local and international level and connects the struggle against the Zionist state of Israel with the struggle against mass deportations of Haitian people, the racist Dominican state, and the far-right.¹⁴

NOTES

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The 2026 Daniel Singer Prize

The Daniel Singer Millennium Prize Foundation is offering a \$10,000 prize for a published article addressing the following:

"Why and how have ethnonationalism and anti-immigrant politics become a central response to the crises of inequality, climate change, capitalism, and war? What forms of resistance have emerged?"

We will consider essays that explore these questions in the context of any one state, or internationally.

Daniel Singer was a committed socialist with a courageous respect for the facts on the ground. His journalism was descriptive, analytical, elegantly written, and accessible for a popular audience. These are the qualities the Singer Foundation hopes to honor with the Daniel Singer Prize.

More information about the prize can be found on our website:
<https://danielsingerprize.org/>

The Gaza Genocide in World-Historical Perspective

Book Launch at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

GILBERT ACHCAR

[EDITORS' NOTE: A book launch was held on November 10, 2025, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, for Gilbert Achcar's new book, The Gaza Catastrophe: The Genocide in World-Historical Perspective, published by the University of California Press (2025). What follows is the text of the talk he gave,¹ which he edited for publication.]

THE FIRST POINT I WANT TO MAKE is that the genocide in Gaza has become very widely acknowledged from a lot of sources. And just to be clear, I want to remind you of the definition of genocide upon which those legal scholars and organizations that affirm that what has been going on in Gaza is a genocide base themselves. The key sentence of the definition refers to “acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part”—thus, not a matter of number but primarily of intent to destroy—“a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such.” That’s the definition on the basis of which people affirmed that a genocide has been ongoing in Gaza.

At the beginning, there was huge outrage at the use of this term. It was even labeled with the ubiquitous accusation of

antisemitism hurled at any criticism of Israel. When South Africa started its action at the International Court of Justice, two months into the war, at the end of 2023, use of the term was met with outrage, especially from western sources and western governments. However, over the long period since then, the nature of the discussion has changed from one dominated by those denouncing vehemently the acknowledgment of the genocide into what I would today describe as a new case of genocide denial. Every genocide has produced some form of denial: best known is Holocaust denial but there are others, like the official denial of the Armenian genocide by the Turkish state. Every genocide finds a public for denial, usually among those belonging to the state or nation that has perpetrated the genocide. We are now in that kind of discussion about Israel’s genocide in Gaza: those who still refuse to acknowledge the fact are engaging in genocide denial.

Over the two years and the continuous killing and destruction that have been taking place in Gaza, increasing numbers of people and organizations have used the term “genocide” and acknowledged its occurrence. Toward the end of the first year

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of Israel's onslaught, the two major global human rights organizations—Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch—both produced reports acknowledging the genocide. This past summer, two key Israeli human rights organization did likewise. The best known of them is B'Tselem, which published a report with a remarkable and very courageous title for an Israeli organization: "Our Genocide."²

And then acknowledgment of the fact has kept progressing among public opinion, including in the United States and among Jews. A recent poll has shown that close to 40 percent of American Jews consider that Israel has committed a genocide.³ Forty percent! If you add the 10 percent who say they don't know, that makes one half, which is similar to the proportion of people who acknowledge this genocide in the American population as a whole.⁴ This says a lot.

The Spanish prime minister has himself used the term recently, affirming that a genocide is happening in Gaza. This was the second EU government after the Irish one that referred to this fact. Most European governments are still in denial, however. For what is at stake in this regard is not a semantic or dictionary debate, or a historical one. It bears very clear consequences. If a government were to acknowledge the genocidal character of the war that Israel has been waging in Gaza since October 2023, it wouldn't be able to maintain relations with that state, especially military relations, without being officially complicit in the crime against humanity. Britain for instance maintains military relations with Israel—trade and cooperation. There is the EU-Israel Association Agreement, part of which was supposed to get frozen before the announcement of the "Trump peace plan," which practically nipped the initiative in the bud. The debate about genocide thus entails immediate consequences.

The figures for the death toll in Gaza

are absolutely abhorrent and appalling. There have been until now close to 70,000 direct deaths from bombing, to which you should add, according to an estimate made by physicians early on, at least four times this figure for the indirect deaths—people dying because of the destruction of medical and health infrastructure in Gaza and other circumstances, including the very orchestrated hunger that is part of the genocidal means. When it becomes possible to draw a real balance sheet of this awful massacre, it may well show that some 10 percent of Gaza's population were killed as a result of Israel's onslaught. But as I already mentioned, genocide is not a matter of number.

The definition of genocide is about "intent to destroy in whole or in part." So it's not a valid argument to put the bar at the level of the Nazi genocide of six million European Jews, which was an almost total extermination, and then say that anything below that is no genocide. The same Western governments that deny the fact of genocide in Gaza were very much insisting on using the label for Bosnia, for instance, where both in absolute and relative terms, the massacre was clearly less than what has happened in Gaza.

Then comes the issue of intent, which is also used in denying Israel's genocide in Gaza. I would say in this regard that the genocidal character of Israel's onslaught was actually clearly identifiable from the very start. Three days into the onslaught, on October 10, 2023, I described what had started as a genocidal war in my weekly column in Arabic.⁵ More importantly, because it was written in English and much more visible, six days into the war—on the 13th of October—Raz Segal, an Israeli-American scholar of Holocaust and Genocide Studies based in the United States, published in the American publication *Jewish Currents* an article about the onslaught strikingly titled "A Textbook Case of Genocide."⁶

These early acknowledgments of the nature of what was going on indicate that the intent was identifiable from the start and at various levels. The primary level is that Israel's onslaught started with a blatantly open violation of international humanitarian law, i.e., the law of war, in targeting the civilian population. You surely remember the infamous statement by Israel's war minister, the so-called defense minister, Yoav Galant, on October 9. It attracted a lot of attention at the time. He said, "I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel, everything is closed.... We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly."⁷⁷ This was about shutting off a whole territory and its entire civilian population without any distinction. Here was already a blatant violation of the law of war, one key pillar of which is the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Here was a whole civilian population being targeted and punished for an attack by a few thousands of armed men.

Then there was the stated immediate goal of the war, which was the eradication of Hamas. This is a genocidal goal indeed. Why? First of all, it makes no distinction between the organization's armed wing that carried out October 7 and the rest of the organization. The armed wing is called the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, whereas Hamas is a mass organization of over 100,000 members that has been ruling the Gaza Strip since 2007 and developed therefore an entire civilian administration. Thus, the goal of eradicating the whole of Hamas, an important component of the Gazan society, is in itself genocidal. So that was the stated intent.

Then there's the means, which is also quite clear in this regard. Very early on, it was apparent that Israel had started the destruction of the Gaza Strip. The violence

and intensity of the bombing from the very beginning was absolutely terrible. And mind you, Gaza is one of the most densely populated territories on earth. It has a very high demographic density, with 44 percent of the population children under 15. And yet Israel started bombing, destroying, flattening out whole parts of that territory, including the use of huge 2,000 lb. and 1,000 lb. bombs, which are not designed to be used in urban settings because of their potentially terrible impact on civilians. No discrimination among targets is possible when such bombs are dropped on a civilian urban concentration. As a result of all that, it has been estimated that 70 percent of those killed—and this refers only to the direct victims of the bombing—are children and women. I specify women because there are no women combatants in Hamas. The ideological nature of Hamas does not allow for the recruitment of women as combatants.

So, however one looks at it, there has been an obvious violation of all laws of war, with the clearly intentional killing of a large part of the Gazan population and the destruction of most of its dwellings with the obvious goal of pushing the survivors to leave. It's a genocide perpetrated in order to implement ethnic cleansing. Israel, of course, had no intent to destroy *all* of the Gazans, but it clearly intended to kill a sizable proportion of them and destroy their habitat as a way to push the survivors to leave the territory. That intent too was very clear. A document was leaked early on from the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence explaining that the best scenario would be to push the Gazans into Egyptian territory.⁸ Those who try to defend the Israeli point of view on this in denying the genocide will tell you that it has been the most moral war ever, because Israel's armed forces have warned the population to leave each area they were preparing to bomb. Well, when

you look at the size of the territory, a very small territory, and you know that not all the population can leave at once or on short notice any part of it, you understand how hypocritical this is.

And it gets even more hypocritical when combined with the excuse that Hamas is hiding behind human shields. First of all, imagine that a group has taken a large number of hostages, and the police intervene, shoot everybody, and then say, “we had to, because the bad guys had taken the hostages as human shields.” This would be met with a huge outcry. So, the excuse that Hamas has been using civilians as human shields and that it is the reason why Israel has been killing so many civilians is just incredibly hypocritical. It is even more blatantly so because Israel knows full well that Hamas fighters don’t need human shields since they have tunnels—they built more tunnels than the London underground. They built a whole network of tunnels for their own use, not for the civilian population, and they hid there. That’s why you can be sure that the vast majority of the 30 percent of direct victims who were male adults were non-combatants.

This genocide is no accident: it is rooted in a history that makes it a foreseeable outcome of what happened on October 7. I describe October 7 in the book as “the most catastrophic miscalculation ever in the history of anticolonial struggle.” It was a huge miscalculation indeed: I can’t believe that anyone would do it in full knowledge of what would happen. That is why I argue that it was a catastrophic miscalculation and explain why, but a miscalculation that must be placed in the history to which it truly belongs, which is not the history of Europe, Nazism, and the Holocaust. October 7 should not be understood as “the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust” or any such description that aims at putting what happened on that day in a historical

sequence that would make it a continuation of Nazism. This, it was absolutely not. You can be sure that had their oppressors been Buddhist, or Protestants, or belonged to any other religion, the Palestinians’ response would have been the same. The issue was not about Jews as such, and it is not “antisemitism” that motivated those who attacked on October 7. Theirs was a reaction to the colonial oppression perpetrated by Israel.

And the history of anticolonial struggle has indeed seen other October 7s. In the book, I describe a similar event that took place in Angola in 1961. Read its description, and you will see how striking the parallel between the two cases is: the same type of attack with similarly catastrophic consequences. The fact remains, however, that October 7 was but a pretext. The attack was seized by the Israeli state and government as an opportunity to launch an onslaught that has been out of all proportion with October 7. The principle of proportionality is central to the laws of war. Thus, even if we took it for granted that an occupier has a right to self-defense against the exercise by the occupied of their right to resist occupation, the occupier would still need to adhere to the legal limits imposed by proportionality. And very obviously from the very start, it was clear that Israel’s response was hugely disproportionate.

Incidentally, everybody has heard about the 1,200 victims on the Israeli side of October 7. Many fewer people know about the 1,600 Palestinians who died in this operation. That is, from the start there were more Palestinians killed among the five to six thousand who crossed the fence surrounding Gaza than they killed Israelis. Israel’s relentless killing of Palestinians beyond that point was therefore disproportionate from the very start, another illustration of the genocidal intent. And even if some still believed after one month that Israel was

exercising a right to self-defense, two years into the onslaught, no one can deny that Israel is committing massive war crimes. Denial of the Gaza genocide has become just that: a new instance of genocide denial.

It is my contention moreover that there was a genocidal potential inherent in the very nature of the Israeli state. Not because it is Jewish, of course, but because it is colonial. Colonialism entails a genocidal potential in and of itself. Colonial enterprises, and even more so settler-colonial enterprises, entail a genocidal potential. Think of North America or Australasia, to take two famous historical cases of settler colonialism. Colonialism committed genocides until well into the twentieth century. Even after the defeat of Nazism, the French state, led by those who had been fighting the Nazis, perpetrated a huge massacre in Algeria in 1945, and two years later, a second one in Madagascar, with tens of thousands of people killed.

The history of colonialism is indeed riddled with genocidal massacres. However, the closer you get to contemporary times, the more it takes a special kind of political force for this genocidal potential to be realized, in the sense that the openly racist worldview that was seen as normal in the nineteenth century was no longer normal in the second half of the twentieth century. Some progress was made in that regard.

Here we come to another potential inherent in the very nature of the state of Israel, which is the drift to the right. Israel's original colonial condition was aggravated by its combination with direct open occupation. To the ethnic cleansing that took place in 1948 was added the direct occupation of new territories and subjugation of their large Palestinian population since 1967. These conditions were to lead inevitably to a drift to the right. This was predicted from the start by many critics of Zionism—in particular, Jewish critics of Zionism who

emphasized this potential. Such prognoses were made despite the fact that the Israeli state was widely perceived in Europe as a beacon of socialism during its first two or three decades. Zionist social democracy—the social-democratic wing of the Zionist movement—presided over the founding of the state and ruled it for close to three decades. But the far right of the Zionist movement came to power in 1977, less than thirty years after the founding of the state and ten years after the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

This far right is represented by the Likud party, which is heir to the Zionist movement's original far right, a tradition whose founder, Vladimir Jabotinsky, was an admirer of Mussolini and Italian fascism. These people won Israel's parliamentary elections for the first time in 1977 and out of the forty-eight years that elapsed since then, Likud has been in power for thirty-five. It has become the dominant party in the Israeli state, while Labor Zionism has shrunk to a very small force. And the drift continued. At some point Ariel Sharon—who had been the commander of Israel's invasion and occupation of Lebanon in 1982, the man associated with the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, who had been prosecuted in Israel for his responsibility in those massacres—this man organized an openly anti-Muslim provocation in Jerusalem in September 2000 and used the uprising that he triggered to win the Israeli election in February 2001. He then launched the most brutal onslaught on the 1967 occupied territories since their occupation, the most brutal until the present genocide in Gaza, and the persecution of the population of the West Bank.

This drift to the right was also accompanied by a revision of the military doctrine of the Israeli army, which used to hypocritically claim—and still claims—that it is “the most moral” of all armies. After its fiasco in

Lebanon, which it had to leave in the year 2000 after eighteen years of occupation without securing its goals, the Israeli military designed a new doctrine whereby the civilian environment of the enemy would be destroyed in response to an attack in order to deter this enemy from undertaking any further action against Israel. This military doctrine openly violated the laws of war. It was practiced for the first time in 2006 in Lebanon itself. Israel took revenge on Hezbollah after a commando group had crossed the border from Lebanon, killed three soldiers and abducted two. The Israeli army killed over one thousand Lebanese civilians and destroyed large civilian areas where Hezbollah is politically dominant, including urban concentrations south of Beirut.

The same drift to the right brought Netanyahu to power after he had built himself up as a right-wing challenger of Sharon within Likud. When, under the pressure of the military, Sharon ordered the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Netanyahu stood vehemently against it. He ended up heading Likud, from which Sharon had to split, came back to power in 2009, and remained prime minister for twelve years, until 2021, beating the Israeli record for longevity in this position. He then came back as prime minister at the end of 2022 with a coalition that included two groups described as neo-Nazis in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* by another Israeli scholar of genocide. The label is no exaggeration indeed. They really are neo-Nazis, very openly racist, very openly advocating ethnic cleansing, extremely right-wing, and prone to violence. The two groups are often designated as being far right, but they actually are ultraright, to the right of the far-right Likud. One of the two groups is the heir to a current that was banned for terrorism in Israel itself in 1994, and likewise in several western countries: the Kach group, whose

leader was Meir Kahane. These guys are now ruling Israel in coalition with Netanyahu. Such are the political conditions that made possible the perpetration of the Gaza genocide, this realization of a potential inherent in the very nature of the colonial enterprise of which Israel is the outcome.

Finally, a few words about the subtitle of this book, which presents the Gaza genocide as a watershed in world history. We are obviously at a very alarming moment in history. It is commonly acknowledged in the media that we are seeing the demise of the so-called rules-based international order, the liberal concept of which goes back to a liberal U.S. president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His vision, expressed in the 1941 Atlantic Charter, translated into post-World War II institutions such as the United Nations; the International Court of Justice; the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Genocide Convention, from which I quoted; the 1949 Geneva Convention, the new international humanitarian law. A whole set of institutions came into being, but the rules-based order did not function during the next decades due to the Cold War, which started very early on after Roosevelt's death in 1945 and his replacement by the rabidly anti-communist Harry Truman. Soon after, the latter green-lighted the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Five years later, he engaged in the Korean War. The rules-based order got de facto suspended.

With the end of the Cold War, manifested by the unification of Germany in 1990, then-president George H. W. Bush, Bush senior, proclaimed a New World Order—a phrase that became very famous at the time. He described it as a world order in which the rule of law will be dominant and the weak vindicated against the strong. The International Criminal Court was created, followed by the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the resolution on

the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The idea was that the international community cannot let a government massacre its own population in the name of respecting its sovereignty. There was even talk of a new “cosmopolitan” order.

But all these illusions were quickly dispelled in turn. The 1990s were years of transition to a new Cold War. In my previous book, titled *The New Cold War*, I describe how the world moved from the old Cold War to the new, and how the latter developed until the war in Ukraine. But the rules were once again quickly violated by those who were pretending to champion them. The 1999 Kosovo war was carried out circumventing the UN Security Council, which is the only body that can legitimize a war other than a war of self-defense according to international law. In 2002 the United States withdrew its signature from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, just two years after having signed. That was when the Bush Junior administration was preparing the 2003 invasion of Iraq, an even more blatant and serious violation of international law.

The illusion of a rules-based order was maintained nevertheless because western liberals could still blame the conservatives; some U.S. Democrats could lay the blame on the Republicans. George W. Bush was succeeded by Barack Obama who boasted about his early opposition to the invasion of Iraq—an invasion that was likewise opposed by the liberal governments of France and Germany. So, the illusion and pretense of liberal sticking to principles was maintained. The liberal pretense then reached a peak with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This war was portrayed as opposing liberalism to authoritarianism, with the West confronting a Russia that has taken on the mantle of the former Soviet Union. This renewed Cold War discourse was promoted by Joe Biden under whose watch Russia’s

invasion of Ukraine started. He even convened “summits for democracy” with the participation of U.S.-friendly authoritarians, very much in Cold War fashion.

Gaza put an end to that. Of course, it’s not Gaza alone. The genocide is the culmination of a series of events, but it is a very significant turning point nonetheless because the double standard, the hypocrisy, became obvious to everyone. Not only were the attitudes toward Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Israel’s invasion of Gaza radically different, but Gaza has even been, as I maintain in the book, the first joint U.S.–Israeli war ever. None of the wars waged by Israel before Gaza could be fully described as such. The United States supported some of Israel’s previous wars, but only up to some point after which it pulled the brake. In the case of Gaza, Washington fully supported Israel’s genocidal war by providing thousands of 2,000 lb. and 1,000 lb. bombs and other weapons; providing a military cover for Israel to deter regional powers from intervening; and fully adopting the stated war goals to the point of systematically rejecting calls to ceasefire during several months, and inciting other western governments to reject them likewise.

The huge contradiction between the positions on Gaza and Ukraine has been obvious to everybody. The International Criminal Court indicted both Putin and Netanyahu, but its warrants elicited very different attitudes from the United States and Europe. This opportunistic behavior led to the final discrediting of the liberal pretense of abiding by a rules-based international order. It clearly revealed itself as pure hypocrisy, and this betrayal of liberal values, this discredit of the liberal discourse, fueled the global rise of the far right. Neofascism has been on the rise for quite a few years. Its progression accelerated after the 2008 economic crisis and the influx of refugees from Syria and elsewhere. So, the

increase in migration, particularly political migration of refugees, against a background of economic crisis fueled the growth of neofascist forces, while the betrayal by the so-called liberals of their own values and principles facilitated their growth. In a very direct way, Joe Biden facilitated the “second coming” of Donald Trump. Kamala Harris herself recently acknowledged that Biden’s incapacity to show any empathy for the Gazan people played a significant role in her defeat. It had a major impact on her campaign, especially since she didn’t dare openly take her distance from Biden’s attitude.

Another and final element in the contribution by self-proclaimed liberals to the rise of the far right is their complicity in its banalization and the whitewashing of its antisemitism. Gaza has been intensively used for that. In the name of a joint repudiation of antisemitism after October 7, a demonstration was organized in France with the participation of the far-right antisemitic movement of Marine Le Pen, along with the Socialist Party and the “centrist” Macron. Israel’s far-right government, arguably the furthest to the right of all elected governments in the world, has become a magnet for the global far right, recently organizing an international conference attended by key neofascist figures. The western far right—including the German AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) and the Austrian FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) that are directly rooted in historical Nazism—have become the staunchest supporters of the Israeli state. In the name of repudiating antisemitism, what we are witnessing is in fact a convergence on the

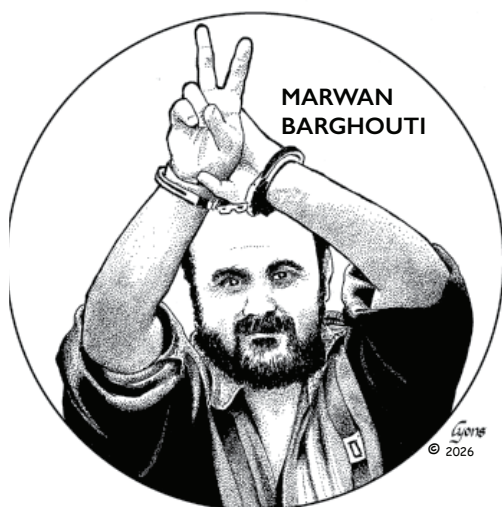
present-day equivalent of antisemitism, which is Islamophobia. That is indeed what the Israeli far-right government and all western far-right forces have in common: anti-Muslim racism is their common ideological leitmotiv.

Thus, in that sense as well, Gaza has become a focal point in the global struggle against neofascism. Hence the battle for the defense of freedom of expression on the Gaza genocide in solidarity with the Palestinian people, a freedom that has been increasingly under threat and severely repressed. In the United States most spectacularly, where students and faculty standing in solidarity with the Gazan people have been viciously persecuted under the present neofascist administration, the second Trump administration. This is another illustration of the world-historical significance of Gaza.

NOTES

1. The recording is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2Ab5BIURvQ>
2. https://www.btselem.org/publications/202507_our_genocide
3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/10/06/jewish-americans-israel-poll-gaza/>
4. Quinnipiac University Poll, 27 August 2025, https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us08272025_ubru23.pdf
5. <https://bit.ly/3MKMjGq>
6. <https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide>
7. https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/defense-minister-announces-complete-siege-of-gaza-no-power-food-or-fuel/
8. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/intelligence-ministry-concept-paper-proposes-transferring-gazans-to-egypts-sinai/>

CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



Marwan Barghouti, member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. A champion of anti-colonialism and an advocate of Palestinian freedom and sovereignty, Barghouti was imprisoned in Israel in 2002 and has been in solitary confinement off and on, most recently since October 2023. Despite international calls for his release, Israel refused to include Barghouti in the November 2025 prisoner exchange because of his symbolic role as the foremost leader of the Palestinian people.

“As many want us today to be overwhelmed by the potential consequences of a new spiral of violence, I will continue... pleading to deal with its root causes: denial of Palestinian freedom.”

“There will be no peace until Israel’s occupation of Palestine ends. You can’t have occupation and peace at the same time.”

“While our political prisoners rot in their cells, our babies are bombed in their sleep, and our families are starved to death, what choice is left but armed resistance?”

“Chains will be broken before we are.”

“Being hopeless is a privilege we can’t have as [Palestinians.]”

A message from Marwan Barghouti to his granddaughter Talia, whom he’s never seen, as she started her first year of school in 2021:

“My life, every year may you be well. Every year may you be my beloved. And every year may all the children of Palestine be well.”

— Marwan Barghouti

How (Not) To Apply the Marxist Theory of Imperialism in the Twenty-first Century

MICHAEL PRÖBSTING

IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT ONE OF the most debated issues among Marxists in recent years has been the question of imperialism in the twenty-first century. The accelerating rivalry between the Great Powers of West and East, the U.S. invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Israel's genocide in Gaza, and Russia's war against Ukraine and its military intervention in Syria—all these make it obvious that imperialism is not an issue of the past.

Last year, two progressive writers, Immanuel Ness and John Bellamy Foster, each published a long essay in which they attempted to apply the Marxist theory of imperialism to the conditions of the twenty-first century.¹ Both are prestigious university professors in the United States, and Foster is also editor of the well-known magazine *Monthly Review*.

In their respective essays, the two academics polemicize against what they call “Western Marxism.” According to them, this tendency fails to understand

the nature of modern imperialism and, consequently, adapts to the Western powers. Ness denounces several authors, including me, as “neo-conservative Marxists” and “New Cold War theorists” who supposedly “support the expansion of U.S. dominance in Eastern Europe, East Asia, West Asia, Africa and beyond.”

As a matter of fact, Ness and Foster are representatives of what we can call the “Multipolarista School,” i.e., advocates of the ideology of a “multipolar world system,” which is a cover for a policy of support for the new Eastern Great Powers China and Russia. It is therefore no accident that they praise China as a “socialist” country.

True, some of their criticisms of several left-wing authors, who ignore or underestimate the relevance of imperialist super-exploitation of semi-colonial countries (the so-called Global South), are, by and large, correct. However, in the end, they both fail to understand the essence of the Marxist theory of imperialism.

A few months ago, I published a first reply to Ness and Foster that dealt with their mistaken analysis of China.² As I showed in this as well as in other works, China had been transformed into a capitalist state in the 1990s and later even became an imperialist power.³ In the following essay I will not repeat my arguments on China's class character, but will focus on their

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wrong approach to the Marxist analysis of imperialism.

Having a Hard Time with the Dialectical Philosophy of Marxism

Foster and Ness, the latter more explicitly, claim that the so-called principal contradiction in imperialism would be the exploitation of the countries of the Global South by the rich metropolises. Ness states:

Following Mao Zedong, Torkil Lauesen observes that the principal contradiction is embedded in a historical and material conjuncture which is not static but changes based on the dialectical forces in the world. In the context of the world system, the contradiction shifted from the Global North's working class to a global system where the center of capitalist exploitation converged on the Global South after the Second World War. To comprehend the "principal contradiction," attention must focus on understanding Western and Northern imperialism and working-class resistance in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Consequently, they wrongly criticize those who insist on the concept of inter-imperialist rivalry as an integral part of Lenin's theory. In contrast, the two American academics effectively remove Great Power rivalry as an essential feature of imperialism from their theoretical concept.

This is a blatant revision of the orthodox Marxist theory of imperialism and makes it impossible to understand the current period of world capitalism. The mistake starts already with the very category of "principal contradiction," a vulgar mechanistic category that was invented by Stalin and his sycophant "philosophers" in the 1930s and quickly adopted by China's Communist Party leader Mao Zedong. Theoretically, this concept subordinates all contradictions to a single one—the "principal contradiction." It has served in the past as theoretical justification for the subordination of the national and international class struggle to

the actual foreign policy goal of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

However, one will look in vain for such a category of "principal contradiction" in the writings of Marx and Lenin. Their concept was rather a dialectical one in which reality was viewed as a complex totality of various contradictions and not as one in which all kinds of contradictions are schematically subordinated to a singular "principal contradiction." Hence, Marx viewed history as a "rich totality of many determinations and relations,"⁴ and, Lenin spoke about motion—"the essence of space and time"—as "a unity of contradictions."⁵

Ness's vulgar mechanism is also reflected in his criticism of the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács and his book *History and Class Consciousness* (HCC). True, this book contains several weaknesses, as Abram Deborin—the leading Soviet philosopher in the 1920s before he was effectively silenced by Stalin—has pointed out.⁶ However, Ness's critical remarks reveal a lack of dialectical understanding.

For Marx and Engels, class consciousness is a direct extension of the material being of the worker, but in *HCC* Lukács pursues the notion of working-class subjectivity as expressed in the communist party, a view which modifies class struggle from material dialectics into a philosophical abstraction.

Leaving aside that it is pretty difficult to discuss philosophical issues without "philosophical abstraction," speaking about "class consciousness" as "a direct extension of the material being of the worker" reflects an extremely mechanistic understanding of the contradictory character of consciousness in general and class consciousness in particular. Obviously, the Anglo-Saxon pragmatist is having a hard time with the dialectical method of Marxism. Of course, class consciousness is *determined by* and *develops within the context of* the material being of workers. However, this is a

contradictory process. If it were simply a “direct extension of their material being,” things would be pretty easy. Workers could quickly see through the mechanism of class exploitation, join forces, and rise against the capitalists. Mission accomplished.

However, as everyone knows, things are not so simple; consciousness and its development are a highly complex process. Workers first have to act as a collective, gain experience in struggles, etc., in order to develop *class* consciousness. And even then, they have to overcome the reactionary influence of all kinds of (petty-)bourgeois ideologies with which they are bombarded on a daily basis—from school to media and from church/mosque to the bourgeois and reformist parties. For all these reasons, the most advanced workers (and non-proletarian militants) need to unite in a revolutionary party, elaborate a scientific Marxist worldview, and transmit such in order to help the mass of the proletariat in developing a socialist class consciousness. As Lenin explained in various writings—most importantly in his famous pamphlet *What Is to Be Done*—consciousness and its development is a complex process requiring the direct intervention of the revolutionary party. Class consciousness is *not* a “direct extension of the material being of the worker,” but rather the result of experience in class struggle and intervention of the subjective factor—all within the context of the “material being of the worker.” Ness and Foster might revere Lenin in the field of the theory of imperialism, but not in the field of political struggle.

It is therefore not surprising that Ness makes repeatedly disdainful remarks about Hegel, the father of modern dialectics whom Marx and Lenin considered a crucial source for dialectical materialism.

Ness and Foster might accuse us of discussing “philosophical abstraction” but, in fact, the above-mentioned statements

reflect the mechanist and undialectical approach of the two academics that forms the methodological basis of their understanding of imperialism.

Building on Only One Aspect of Lenin’s Theory of Imperialism

While Ness and Foster more or less correctly criticize various authors for ignoring or underestimating the relevance of imperialist super-exploitation of semi-colonial countries, they themselves make a methodologically similar mistake: they largely ignore another, no less important, aspect of Lenin’s theory of imperialism—the rivalry between the Great Powers. They have a political reason for ignoring this element of Lenin’s theory as this serves their denial of the imperialist nature of new Great Powers like China and Russia. But here, let us focus on the theory of imperialism.

As every student of Lenin’s writings knows, Great Power rivalry was one of the key features of his understanding of imperialism. In his famous book on imperialism, he wrote that “an essential feature of imperialism is the rivalry between several great powers in the striving for hegemony.”⁷ And in another essay, he stated: “Imperialism is a fierce struggle of the great powers for the division and redivision of the world.”⁸

In fact, both camps are mistaken in their identification of the essence of Lenin’s theory—those who claim it would be imperialist super-exploitation of the Global South as well as those who consider it to be inter-imperialist rivalry. These two features constitute crucial elements of Lenin’s theory, but they are rather different consequences of one and the same essence of imperialism. And this essence is monopolism—both in the field of economy as well as politics. More precisely, it is monopolism in the age of the final stage of capitalism, its stage of decline.

In Lenin’s most important essay on

imperialism—"Imperialism and the Split in Socialism"—in which he could express himself freely (his better-known book was written for the legal press with Tsarist censorship in mind), he provided a comprehensive definition of imperialism:

We have to begin with as precise and full a definition of imperialism as possible. Imperialism is a specific historical stage of capitalism. Its specific character is threefold: imperialism is monopoly capitalism; parasitic, or decaying capitalism; moribund capitalism. The supplanting of free competition by monopoly is the fundamental economic feature, the quintessence of imperialism. Monopoly manifests itself in five principal forms: (1) cartels, syndicates and trusts—the concentration of production has reached a degree which gives rise to these monopolistic associations of capitalists; (2) the monopolistic position of the big banks—three, four, or five giant banks manipulate the whole economic life of America, France, Germany; (3) seizure of the sources of raw material by the trusts and the financial oligarchy (finance capital is monopoly industrial capital merged with bank capital); (4) the (economic) partition of the world by the international cartels has begun. There are already over one hundred such international cartels, which command the entire world market and divide it "amicably" among themselves—until war redivides it. The export of capital, as distinct from the export of commodities under non-monopoly capitalism, is a highly characteristic phenomenon and is closely linked with the economic and territorial-political partition of the world; (5) the territorial partition of the world (colonies) is completed.⁹

Both inter-imperialist rivalry as well as imperialist super-exploitation of (semi-) colonial countries are results of the domination of the world by political (Great Powers) and economic monopolies (corporations). As Lenin states, such monopolism is a necessary feature of "decaying and mori-

bund capitalism." Such decay, in turn, has its causes in the deepening of the fundamental inner contradictions of capitalism. On the one hand, the contradiction between the productive forces and the production relations, which results in over-accumulation and changing of the organic composition of capital and, consequently, the tendency of the profit rate to fall; and, on the other hand, the contradiction between the internationalization of productive forces and the borders of national states. Furthermore, rivalry and super-exploitation provoke the acceleration of such crises of capitalism.

Naturally, this is not a linear but rather a dialectical process in which drastic events of the struggle between classes and states can result in a deepening of the crisis (e.g., the October Revolution and the revolutionary crisis at the end of World War I) or its temporary moderation (e.g., the period of the Long Boom as a result of the massive destruction of productive forces in World War II, the absolute hegemony of the United States within the capitalist camp, the Yalta agreement between imperialism and Stalinism, and the defeats of working-class struggles in 1945–48).¹⁰

Likewise, as I've discussed elsewhere, not all features of imperialism always have the same relevance. For example, as just mentioned, the outcome of World War II resulted in the hegemonic role of the United States within the capitalist camp since other imperialist powers were either defeated (Germany and Japan) or became allies in a subordinated position (Britain and France). Washington's domination was reinforced by the fact that all imperialist states had no alternative but to accept U.S. leadership in order to wage their Cold War against the Stalinist states. Hence, the inter-imperialist rivalry was overdetermined by another contradiction—that between Western powers and the USSR-led camp of Stalinist states. However, such long-lasting

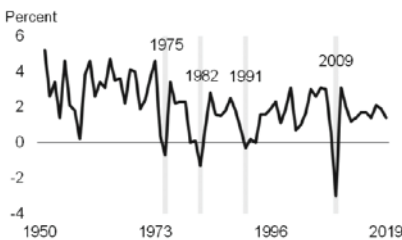
collaboration between the United States and its Western allies was not based on a supposed qualitative transformation of imperialism—as Claudio Katz or Promise Li¹¹ have recently suggested—but on concrete and temporary historical conditions that have been undermined by the collapse of Stalinism in 1991 and that have faced new contradictions and challenges with the rise of new imperialist powers like China and Russia.¹²

Historic Decay of Capitalism

The historic decay of capitalism can be observed in the long-term tendency of decline of its output growth that, in turn, is ultimately caused by the tendency of the profit rate to fall. Since we have dealt with these issues elsewhere, we shall limit ourselves to presenting a few figures that demonstrate the declining dynamic of the capitalist world economy.¹³ As one can see from the figures in Table 1 and Figure 1, there has been a continuous decline in the growth rates of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—both in total as well as per capita—since the 1950s. One should note

Figure 1: Average Annual Growth of Global GDP Per Capita 1950–2019 ¹⁵

B. World per capita growth



that these tables do not include the figures for the Covid depression of the world economy, which started in late 2019 and which included the worst slump since 1929.

Figure 2 shows the development of the profit rate in the twenty largest economies (G20 states) in the last seven decades. As one can see, there has been, as Marx predicted, a long-term tendency of the profit rate to fall over the last seven decades.

Figure 2: Rate of Profit in G20 Economies 1950–2019 ¹⁶



It is no accident that Ness and Foster ignore the decline of capitalism and the tendency of the profit rate to fall as the fundamental factors for the evolution of the inner contradictions of imperialism as they belong to the Monopoly Capital school associated with the works of Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy and of which Foster and his *Monthly Review* are the best-known representatives today. This school mistakenly locates the underlying cause of capitalist crisis in the lack of demand and the resulting lack of realization of surplus value.

In contrast, orthodox Marxists locate the fundamental cause of capitalist crisis in the law of the tendency of the profit

Table 1: Average Annual Growth of Global GDP 1960–2019 ¹⁴

1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2011–17	2019
4.9%	3.93%	2.95%	2.70%	2.58%	2.75%	2.5%

rate to fall, which basically means that in the long run the share of surplus value becomes smaller relative to all of the capital invested in production (in machinery, raw materials, etc., as well as wages paid to workers). Therefore, the surplus value that can potentially be used for the reproduction of capital on an extended level becomes relatively less. This inevitably leads to disruptions and crises and a historic tendency of decline as it becomes less and less profitable for capitalists to invest in the expansion of production. Phenomena like overproduction or underconsumption are a result, not the ultimate cause, of the tendency of the profit rate to fall.

Marx himself considered the law of the tendency of the profit rate to fall to be the most important law of capitalism:

This is in every respect the most important law of modern political economy, and the most essential for understanding the most difficult relations. It is the most important law from the historical standpoint. It is a law which, despite its simplicity, has never before been grasped and, even less, consciously articulated.¹⁷

Various Marxist writers have defended and further elaborated this theory in the twentieth century until today, among them Henryk Grossmann,¹⁸ Ernest Mandel,¹⁹ Paul Mattick,²⁰ David Yaffe,²¹ Andrew Kliman,²² Alan Freeman,²³ Deepankar Basu,²⁴ Esteban Ezequiel Maito,²⁵ Guglielmo Carchedi,²⁶ and Michael Roberts.²⁷

The Theory of “Ultra-imperialism” in New Clothes

Another result of Ness and Foster’s removal of Great Power rivalry from their understanding of modern capitalism is that they end up with a version of the theory of “ultra-imperialism” that had been elaborated by the German social democrat Karl Kautsky at the beginning of World War I. Foster speaks about a “U.S.-dominated rules-based imperial order,” i.e., a global

imperialist order that is dominated by a single Great Power and its subordinated allies. At the same time, both Ness and Foster deny the imperialist character of China and Russia. In other words, in their view inter-imperialist rivalry would have been superseded by a global imperial order led by a single power. In a certain sense, this concept bears similarities to Kautsky’s theory, which considered it possible that the Great Powers would be able to overcome their conflicting interests in order to jointly exploit the working class and the oppressed peoples.

Hence, from the purely economic standpoint, it is not impossible that capitalism may still live through yet another phase, the transfer of cartel-policy into foreign policy: a phase of ultra-imperialism, against which, of course, we must struggle as energetically as we do against imperialism, but whose perils would lie in another direction, not in that of the arms-race and the threat to world peace.²⁸

The horrific events of World Wars I and II and the current tensions and arms race between the Great Powers have shown that the theory of “ultra-imperialism” is a revisionist pipe dream. Just as Kautsky became a de facto defender of one camp of imperialist powers (the Central Powers led by Germany in World War I and the Anglo-Saxon allies in the 1930s), so are Ness and Foster supporters of the camp led by Chinese imperialism.

It is because of Ness and Foster’s adoption of the ultra-imperialism theory that they consider the concept of “multi-polarity” as something progressive. As they deny the imperialist character of China and Russia, they cannot imagine the existence of several powers as constituting different, rival *imperialist* powers but rather as conflict between imperialist and non-imperialist (or even socialist) powers.

The concept of “multi-polarity” is nothing inherently progressive. It postulates

an imperialist global order dominated by several, rival powers as superior to one dominated by one power (the United States).²⁹ In fact, both the unipolar as well as the multipolar world order are equally reactionary because both are dominated by the class enemies of the workers and oppressed.

Do the Majority of Workers in Western Countries Belong to the Labor Aristocracy?

Finally, one has to point to another consequence of Ness and Foster's distortion of Lenin's theory of imperialism. In his writing, Lenin elaborated the thesis that the monopoly bourgeoisie is able, thanks to imperialist super-exploitation of the (semi-) colonial countries, to bribe the upper strata of the working class in the metropolises—the labor aristocracy.

One of the chief causes hampering the revolutionary working-class movement in the developed capitalist countries is the fact that because of their colonial possessions and the super-profits gained by finance capital, etc., the capitalists of these countries have been able to create a relatively larger and more stable labor aristocracy, a section which comprises a small minority of the working class. This minority enjoys better terms of employment and is most-imbued with a narrow-minded craft spirit and with petty-bourgeois and imperialist prejudices. It forms the real social pillar of the Second International, of the reformists and the "Centrists"; at present it might even be called the social mainstay of the bourgeoisie.³⁰

While for orthodox Marxists, such labor aristocracy is a small minority of the working class, Ness argues instead that the majority of workers in Western countries have become labor aristocrats acting as "willing or unconscious conspirators and beneficiaries in the pillage of the Third World."

Certainly, in the West there is labor exploitation of Black and Latino people, migrant workers, low-waged women, and other oppressed peoples. The aristocracy of labor thesis indicts the majority of the West as willing or unconscious conspirators and beneficiaries in the pillage of the Third World.

Here we see another nonsensical consequence of Stalinist theory of the "principal contradiction," which removes not only the contradictions between Great Powers but also those between the monopoly bourgeoisie and the majority of the working class in Western countries! In the real world, however, capitalists are increasing the exploitation of the working class—in the Global South as well as in Western countries—which is reflected, among other things, in the declining share of labor in national income. As the IMF showed several years ago, the adjusted labor share declined from about 77 percent (1980) to 70 percent (2014) in the "advanced economies" (an often-used term of bourgeois economists for Western imperialist countries) and about 85 percent to 75 percent in the so-called "emerging market and developing economies" (a term for the Global South).³¹ Only the upper strata of the working class has been able to increase their share.³²

However, Ness wants to remove exploitation and the class contradictions within North America, Europe, and Japan in order to justify their focus on the "principal contradiction" between, on the one hand, China and the Global South, and on the other the Western powers.

In summary, we can see the inner logic of the imperialism theory of Ness and Foster. Their support for imperialist China (which they call "socialist") is inextricably linked to their denial of the essence of Lenin's theory of imperialism. They ignore the concept of capitalist decline, they eliminate the inter-imperialist rivalry as an essential feature of modern capitalism,

and they distort the concept of the labor aristocracy. All this makes it impossible to understand the development and the inner contradictions of imperialism in the twenty-first century. However, without a correct understanding of imperialism today, it is impossible to fight it!

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Losurdo's Stalin

JAVIER SETHNESS

THE LATE ITALIAN MARXIST Domenico Losurdo's *Stalin: History and Critique of a Black Legend* exalts and even deifies the long-ruling Soviet despot Joseph Stalin (1924–1953).

Indeed, the text's cover and inside cover art strikingly depict Stalin with a halo, and the book's contents often read like a "Greatest Hits for Tankies." In effect, Losurdo likens

Stalin to a god threatened with desecration by wayward rivals like Lev Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, and Nikita Khrushchev. As critic Ross Wolfe observes, the author thus promotes "nothing less than the (re)entry of Stalinism into the realm of philosophy, a new school of falsification, all in service of justifying the course history has taken."¹

In his effort to contest his subject's demonization by the West, Losurdo suggests that this infamous general secretary of the Soviet Politburo has been unfairly tarred with a "Black Legend" of sorts. Yet, as we will see below, there is plenty of evidence for such a "Black Legend" in Stalin's case, just as there is a plethora of evidence for the parallel historical crimes of the Spanish Empire (1492–1976). Like neo-Stalinists, present-day apologists for this empire, in-

cluding members of Spain's Popular Party and Vox, largely dismiss critical and realistic discussions of Spain's colonial past as a distorted *Leyenda negra* ("Black Legend")

opportunistically promoted by contemporary competitors like the British Empire.

Along these lines, *Stalin* is full of questionable praise for its object of study. Losurdo describes Stalin as the

Stalin: History and Critique of a Black Legend

DOMENICO LOSURDO

Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro and
Henry Hakamäki, trans.
Iskra Books, 2008/2023

"eminent theorist of the national question," based on the Bolshevik's authoring "an essay of undeniable theoretical value [sic] (*Marxism and the National Question*)" (1913). Losurdo touts the Soviet Union's rapid industrialization and modernization under Stalin's "developmentalist dictatorship." He does so, despite acknowledging that these policies involved the imposition of highly anti-egalitarian industrial policies, an abandonment of class struggle in favor of vastly expanded production, and the further empowerment of a bureaucratic-managerial elite. Moreover, the author misleadingly claims that Stalin "was committed to helping the [Second] Spanish Republic" when it came under attack from Francisco Franco's Nationalist rebellion in 1936. Above all, Losurdo commends Stalin's leadership during World War II, especially Operation Barbarossa, the code name for Nazi Germany's devastating 1941 attack on the Soviet Union—the largest invasion force in history!²

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In his dubious attempt at historical salvage in *Stalin*, Losurdo laments the general secretary's reduction to a "scapegoat" for the "tragedy and horror of Soviet Russia."³ By contrast, in our review here, we will provide a more critical account, based on the historical record, plus anarchist and socialist commentaries. We will then turn to reflecting on the paradoxical convergences linking Losurdo's anti-imperialism with anarchism and Third-Camp socialism. In closing, we will consider some of the ominous present-day echoes of Stalinism in the toxic phenomenon of campism, especially as seen in the breakdown in left-wing solidarity with Ukrainians under genocidal attack by the Russian State.

Losurdo and Stalin

Ideologically, *Stalin* denies, distorts, and omits key parts of Stalin's legacy. The idea, peddled by Losurdo, that Stalin sought to aid the beleaguered Second Spanish Republic is belied by the fact that he looted its treasury through fraudulent arms sales, often sending Republican forces useless weapons without ammunition. In reality, rather than defeating Franco *per se*, Stalin's intervention in the Spanish Civil War was aimed at controlling the course of events and keeping the revolutionary anarchists and Trotskyists in check.⁴ Even such a pro-Soviet historian as E. H. Carr acknowledges that the Republic had become "the puppet of Moscow" before its fall to Nationalist forces in 1939.⁵

Notably, as well, Losurdo applauds Stalin for supporting the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, given that the Soviet Union was the first State to formally recognize Israel. This is despite the fact that the creation of the Jewish State involved the mass-dispossession and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, in an event known as the Nakba, which undoubtedly persists, as seen in the Gaza genocide.⁶ Although Losurdo

opens *Stalin* by discussing public mourning for the Soviet leader in Israel after his death in 1953, he fails to disclose that, besides legitimizing the Jewish State diplomatically, Stalin directly armed and trained Israel's nascent military, which was engaged then (as now) in war crimes against Palestinians.⁷ In parallel to this lapse, Losurdo omits that Stalin had the Jewish Soviet anti-fascist Solomon Mikhoels killed in 1948, so as to prevent the latter from bringing to light the wartime genocide of Soviet Jews by the Nazis.⁸

Furthermore, Losurdo downplays Stalin's responsibility for the Holodomor famine in Ukraine (1932–1933). He cites bogus charges from the last of the rigged Moscow Trials (1936–1938) to discredit Bukharin, Stalin's Bolshevik rival, target, and eventual victim. He misrepresents Stalin's misrule prior to, and at the start of, Operation Barbarossa. In particular, Losurdo dismisses as fake the widespread reporting that the so-called Man of Steel suffered a nervous breakdown and fled Moscow for his dacha

Losurdo's emphasis on the slavery and imperialism of Western societies, and his apologia for Stalin, may lead one to a proper balance—in favor of the Third Camp.

upon learning of the Nazi incursion, and he broadly resists squaring with the fascist and Russian-chauvinist dimensions of Stalinism itself, as identified by Trotsky, the anarchist Voline, the theologian Nikolai Berdyaev, and socialist Rohini Hensman, among others.⁹

Losurdo likewise ignores how Stalin's Terror (1936–1938) undermined military readiness ahead of the long-anticipated Nazi invasion, which Hitler had outlined as early as in *Mein Kampf* (1925). Historians Catherine Evtuhov and colleagues explain that the Stalinist Terror involved the execution of “60 percent of the marshals,” around 90 percent of “the highest army commanders, all the admirals, about 90 percent of corps commanders,” and several “divisional and brigadier generals.” Rather than acknowledge any of the Soviet Union's early losses during the German blitzkrieg, either—from the fall of Minsk and Kyiv to the immediate destruction of one-fourth of the Soviet air force—Losurdo cheers on Stalin's supposed military genius.¹⁰

The author only fleetingly acknowledges the notorious Nazi-Soviet Pact that

While he aptly decries the “deportation of the Cherokee people ordered by Andrew Jackson,” Losurdo only indirectly mentions the mass-deportations of minorities ordered by Stalin.

was signed just prior to Hitler's invasion of Poland and the start of World War II, claiming at once that Moscow had no other choice, but also, that Stalin somehow atoned for this error by going on to lead the Red Army in repelling and defeating Hitler.¹¹ In reality, he omits that this deal involved Stalin leasing the Germans a secret U-boat base in Murmansk; supplying the Nazi war-machine with wheat, oil, and war matériel; and handing over German Com-

munists to Hitler's forces.¹² More lucidly than Losurdo, then, Hensman outright calls Stalin a “Nazi collaborator.”¹³

In a similar vein, while Losurdo does briefly discuss the “so-called Holodomor” in Ukraine, only to dismiss it as a Ukrainian-nationalist myth, he guards silence about the similarly devastating famine that affected Kazakhs around the same time, owing—like Holodomor—to Stalinist policies of requisition and forcible collectivization, combined with poor climate conditions.¹⁴ He accurately observes that the “policy of ‘terrorist famine’ with which Stalin is accused runs deep through the history of the West,” yet this truth can hardly be used to excuse Stalin's crimes, as the author apparently seeks to do. While he aptly decries the “deportation of the Cherokee people ordered by Andrew Jackson,” Losurdo only indirectly mentions the mass-deportations of Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Meskhetians, Kalmyks, and other ethno-religious minorities ordered by Stalin during World War II.¹⁵

Stalin: A Critique

A more critical account of Stalin might emphasize that, rather than build socialism, the general secretary actually vastly accelerated the construction of state capitalism in the Soviet Union. He did so by imposing economic policies of “primitive socialist accumulation,” forcible collectivization of agriculture, super-exploitation of the working class, and “Five-Year Plans” mandating State-led industrial expansion and military modernization. In reality, Soviet society even under Stalin's predecessor Vladimir Lenin was deeply marked by class divisions between workers and a bureaucratic elite, with the working class reduced to a new serfdom due to domination by a single, all-encompassing employer (otherwise known as a monopoly): namely, the Soviet State.¹⁶ Stalin's reign only entrenched such class di-

visions more deeply, while intensifying the war waged by the Kremlin against the peasantry. As such, in *Nationalism and Culture* (1937), the German anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker declares that “[m]onopoly of power must disappear, together with monopoly of property,” denouncing a “new absolutism” and “new economic feudalism” that have arisen in the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Undoubtedly, as Hensman and the late historian Martin Malia discuss, Stalin built up a “State Capitalist Empire” while rehabilitating Tsarism, Russian patriotism, heterosexism, and patriarchy. He did so, as the late Trotskyist Chris Harman notes, while exploiting millions of enslaved workers in the Gulag.¹⁸ According to Malia, Stalin’s invention and mobilization of new orthodoxies—particularly his framing of all of his rivals, from the anarchists, “the Populists[,] and the Mensheviks to the Trotskyites,” as irredeemable enemies of the people—went hand-in-hand with his persecution and mass killings of his opponents, including nearly all of the “Old Bolsheviks,” and even many of his own followers.¹⁹ George Orwell satirizes such Stalinist dynamics in his well-known dystopian science-fiction novel *1984* (1948), which Sandra Newman recently adapted as *Julia* (2023), hence providing a much-needed feminist take on the original cautionary tale.

The Third Camp

Potentially, against the author’s best intentions, some of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist points Losurdo raises in *Stalin* could jibe with anarchism and Third-Camp socialism, which both oppose the hegemony of Washington and Moscow. Despite all the aforementioned disgraces, Losurdo actually concedes that Lenin and Stalin’s regimes were “ruthless [...] dictatorship[s],” that Stalin fashioned himself after the infamous Tsar Peter the Great, and that Stalin’s rule led to the “advent of autocracy.” To his

credit, if only in passing, Losurdo expresses sympathy for political prisoners incarcerated in the Gulag, and he acknowledges the criminality of the 1940 Katyn massacre of thousands of Polish officers and prisoners of war, which was carried out on Stalin’s orders by the NKVD (predecessor of the KGB).

In an attempt to avoid contemplating Stalin in a vacuum, however, Losurdo makes important criticisms of the wide-ranging contemporary “concentrationary universe” created by Western imperialism. He points to a plethora of murderous and genocidal violence on the part of Euro-Americans, as seen during British imperial rule over India, Ireland, and Iraq; the British military repression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya; the antebellum and Jim Crow U.S. South; the settler-colonial genocides of Indigenous peoples in Australia and North America; the counter-insurgent war waged by the United States in the Philippines; the U.S. mass-internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the war on Cambodia—among other crimes perpetrated by the nominally liberal United States and United Kingdom.²¹ Losurdo rightly stresses that the Soviet Gulag echoed many similar Western concentrationary spaces, yet, to reiterate, two wrongs do not make a right.

In this sense, to contemplate Losurdo’s emphasis on the racial slavery and imperialism practiced by Western liberal societies, while engaging in a critical reading of the same author’s apologia for Stalin, may lead one to a proper political and philosophical balance—that is, one in favor of the Third Camp.²² Along these lines, we should consider the horrors of Stalinism, along with Losurdo’s view—shared with Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, and others—that liberalism effectively underwrote Nazi Germany, without overlooking the arguments

made by Rocker and Critical Theorists (including Marcuse) that liberalism dialectically also underpins the libertarianism of anarchism and Marxism.²³

Conclusion: Stalinism, Campism, and the Russo-Ukrainian War

The Stalinist concept of “socialism in one country”—or, rather, one *empire*—is intimately connected with the toxic phenomenon of pseudo-anti-imperialism in our time. Otherwise known as campists—in an allusion to one’s siding with either the “First” (Western) or “Second” (Soviet/

Soviet society even under Stalin’s predecessor Lenin was deeply marked by class divisions between workers and a bureaucratic elite.

Eastern) World, or Camp—pseudo-anti-imperialists usually promote the cause of the Second Camp against the First, as is reflected in their apologia for Russia, China, Iran, and Syria’s former Assad regime, among other bureaucratic-authoritarian rivals of the West.²⁴ In subscribing to campism, pseudo-anti-imperialists clearly contradict the anarchist and socialist imperatives of internationalism, egalitarianism, and working-class self-emancipation.

Once disconnected from such fundamental principles, campists readily proceed with the promotion of deadly disinformation that serves their cause, such as denialism over Assad’s use of chemical weapons during the Syrian Civil War or China’s present-day genocide of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and other ethno-religious minorities. They typically do so, while de-emphasizing

and distracting from undeniable everyday atrocities—especially Russia’s genocidal war on Ukraine. Such practices echo the past denial of Stalinist crimes, as evinced in Losurdo’s book, along with the “continuous and often hefty leftist support” the Soviet regime enjoyed, in the words of Eric Heinze—not to mention Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ongoing blatant rehabilitation of Stalin’s legacy.²⁵

At a basic level, it is undeniable that the plight of Ukrainians at the hands of the Russian military has much in common with that of Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli armed forces. Still, while present-day leftist critics of the First Camp do well to center the horrors and injustices of the Gaza genocide, many overlook the parallel genocide in Ukraine—perhaps due to a mistaken sense that this atrocious war is either unremarkable or “constructive,” its victims “unworthy.” While this formulation is taken from Edward S. Herman, an unrepentant second-campist who used it to criticize Western media and politicians, it can help to illustrate the extent of the problem of leftist denialism, when the shoe is proverbially on the other foot. Other factors inhibiting an unequivocal left-wing embrace of the Ukrainian cause likely include a combination of indifference or hostility to national self-determination in Eastern Europe, and deference to the Kremlin, perpetrator of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which ranks highly within the Second Camp.²⁶

By contrast, as remedy, we must resist the dehumanization, militarism, and imperialism of both camps, while supporting the cause of the anti-authoritarian, internationalist Third Camp as best we can.

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Stalin's Latter-Day Defenders

PAUL LE BLANC

A SERIOUS DEVELOPMENT ON THE left—accompanying a flourishing of “campism” (i.e., seeing the world as divided into a U.S.-led “imperialist camp” and a “progressive camp,” which includes dictatorships in Russia and China and elsewhere)—is the rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin, elevating him into the Revolutionary Pantheon, justifying the policies and practices for which he has long been condemned. For many, this smacks of the “revisionist” project advanced by such people as David Irving: seeing Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement as representing a reasonable German patriotism, denying the reality of a Holocaust destroying millions of Jews and others. While many on the left have effectively challenged Nazi apologists and Holocaust deniers, a systematic left-wing critique of the new wave of Stalinist revisionism has been missing. Until now, thanks to the efforts of Douglas Greene. Grover Furr—one of the authors Greene critiques—describes him as an “incompetent and dishonest Trotskyite.” But this isn't quite right.

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Greene's Identity

I first became aware of Douglas Greene during the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, when he organized a series of diverse left-wing speakers (some far more prominent than me) to give informational, agitational, and educational talks for the consideration of the mostly young activists gathered at Boston's Occupy encampment. From online contributions in one or another Trotskyist or Trotskyist-influenced site, I soon found that he was a writer as well—part of an undefined but vibrant left-wing collectivity discussing left-wing history and theory, sometimes putting forward ideas I disagreed with (far more critical of *Jacobin* and of DSA [Democratic Socialists of America], for example, than I was inclined to be), but always offering thoughtful comments and to a significant degree going in a positive direction. Then, as “an independent Marxist and historian” with no clear organizational affiliation or academic credentials, he began to publish books.

I've recently acquired Greene's first book, *Communist Insurgent: Blanqui's Politics of Revolution* (Haymarket, 2017), but it was his second that I chose to read first, *A Failure of Vision: Michael Harrington and the Limits of Democratic Socialism* (Zero Books, 2021). It was far better than the ultra-left hit piece I had expected. Despite an oc-

In Stalin's Shadow: Leon Trotsky and the Legacy of the Moscow Trials

DOUGLAS GREENE
London: Resistance Books, 2025

casional gap or inaccuracy, it was seriously researched, packed with useful information and interesting ideas. Whether or not one fully agrees with him, he is someone worth reading.

As already noted, however, there was an urgent need to quite seriously confront the recent works of Stalin's latter-day defenders—works undermining the democratic and humanistic qualities at socialism's very core. Greene has moved forward to fill the gap. His third book is a quite interesting but prohibitively priced, 350-page hardback, *Stalinism and the Dialectics of Saturn: Anticommunism, Marxism, and the Fate of the Soviet Union* (Lexington Books, 2023). His fourth is the volume under review.

Greene's Gallery

Greene presents a gallery of four Stalin defenders.

One is the already-mentioned Grover Furr (1944–), professor of medieval English literature at Montclair State University in New Jersey, who has from 2011 to 2025 published at least seventeen books defending Stalin—in some cases with a primary focus on demolishing Trotsky. This quantity of publications causes Greene to devote two chapters to Furr; his conclusions are devastating:

The trouble with Furr's work is not just that he makes up facts.... [H]e can cite genuine data in support of his claims. A cursory look reveals that his work is filled with abundant quotes, facts, and snippets of real information.... It is full of facts and footnotes.... [Yet] his overarching approach is to cherry pick data to fit his pre-existing conclusions. To achieve this, Furr utilizes a two-pronged approach of inflating any facts that he believes support his conclusions, and he either discredits or ignores everything which contradicts his thesis. (131)

While not formally identified with any political group, an examination of Furr's

Montclair State website includes a Politics and Social Issues page that has a link to the homepage of the Progressive Labor Party, with this comment: "Ever since the anti-war and anti-racist movements of the '60s I have found this to be the best of the 'alter-native' sources. Relentlessly anti-capitalist, resolutely pro-worker and pro-employee generally, it's the best source of *class analysis* of the world's events." Beginning in 1962, as a Maoist-oriented split-off from the Communist Party USA, at moments it played a significant role in U.S. "new left" activities of the 1960s and early 1970s; it then broke "to the left" from Maoism, and shrank into what many perceive as an ultra-left, self-isolating, and irrelevant sect.

Perhaps the most prestigious of Greene's subjects is the late Italian scholar Dominic Losurdo (1941–2018). At first adhering to the massive but increasingly

Despite divergences, *most* Stalin defenders would be inclined to agree with Grover Furr's approach: Stalin never lied and was basically correct in all that he sought to do.

reformist Italian Communist Party, in the early 1990s Losurdo participated in a substantial break-away, Communist Refoundation. By the end of the decade, this group splintered—and Losurdo joined one of the smaller splinters, which adopted the old name "Italian Communist Party" and was influenced by the late post-Mao Chinese "market socialist" leader (Mao had persecuted him as a "capitalist-roader"), Deng Xiaoping. But Losurdo's prestige has flowed

not from his political history, but from his academic and literary achievements.

As director of the Institute of Philosophical and Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Urbino, Losurdo taught history of philosophy as faculty dean of educational sciences. He was also prominent in professional associations devoted to the study of Marx, Hegel, and Leibniz.

But most important, he produced a number of significant works that combined his revolutionary political commitments with his scholarly expertise, including *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (Verso, 2014), *War and Revolution: Rethinking*

In Stalin's Shadow isn't hobbled by an exclusive reliance on Trotsky and Trotskyists in determining what is and isn't so.

the Twentieth Century (Verso, 2020), and *Democracy or Bonapartism: Two Centuries of War on Democracy* (Verso, 2024). His most controversial works, however, have become more generally available (certainly for those reading in English) since his death: *Stalin: History and Critique of a Black Legend* (Iskra Books, 2023) and *Western Marxism: How It Was Born, How It Died, How It Can Be Reborn* (Monthly Review, 2024).

There are two lesser-known figures with whom Greene deals. They lack the quantity and quality of output of Furr and Losurdo, but also enjoy a certain influence: Ludo Martens (1946–2011) and Bill Bland (1916–2001). Martens was a prominent figure in the Belgian far-left, a founder and leader of the Maoist-oriented Workers' Party of Belgium. His key work on this

topic, *Another View of Stalin*, was published in 1994. Bland, originally from Britain, moved to New Zealand in the 1930s, where he became active in the Communist movement, and after returning to Britain, played a prominent role as an educator in the Communist Party of Great Britain. He drifted toward Maoism after the mid-1950s, but by the 1970s had concluded that Albanian Communist leader Enver Hoxha's represented a preferred alternative to Chinese Communist "revisionism."

Greene's Achievement

A problem with all-too-many of those responding to what is presented by Stalin's defenders is an inclination to settle for old clichés and contemptuous dismissal—but Greene's approach is far more engaged, substantial, interesting, and useful. He gives serious attention to the four defenders of Stalin, each of whom has a different, distinctive approach. He clearly and dispassionately states their actual positions, often with generous quotes, and then frankly explains where he thinks they go wrong. He begins by sketching the social-political context from which they emerge, then gives a sense of some of their major ideas and the deficiencies of those ideas, shifting to the actual "how" and the "why" of the Moscow Trials and of the more extensive purges and repression in the USSR of 1935–39. He concludes with an exploration of "conspiracy theories," while considering what whirled out of control in the Soviet Union of the late 1930s and also what to make of the resurging attacks on anti-Stalinism by Stalin's latter-day defenders. The final chapter also has hints of relevance for the irrationalism and conspiracy theories related to today's right-wing resurgence.

As a bonus, Greene generally includes in each of the chapters an interesting "interlude," focusing on something related to the general topic, with intriguing subtitles:

Vyshinsky's Tribunal; Leon Trotsky, Georges Danton, Judas Iscariot, and Benedict Arnold; Spanish Inquisition; The River of Blood; The Confession; Wails at a Gangster's Funeral; Shattered Faith.

Among the strengths of *In Stalin's Shadow* is the fact that it isn't hobbled by an exclusive reliance on Trotsky and Trotskyists in determining what is and isn't so. His scope is far more interesting than that, and refreshingly wide-ranging. He isn't afraid to connect with the serious scholarship of such figures as Sheila Fitzpatrick and J. Arch Getty (neither of whom is in any way "Trotskyist"—and both of whom have sometimes been accused of "Stalinist" leanings). He makes good use of their valuable contributions. Getty, for example, notes how impossible it would have been for Stalin to be "all powerful"—dovetailing with Fitzpatrick's attention to Stalin's reliance on a somewhat diverse team for the development and implementation of what are seen as "Stalinist" policies.

Another strength of Greene's work is that he doesn't simply lump together the four figures in his gallery but emphasizes important differences in the ways they deal with Stalin. Of course, they all unabashedly defend Stalin's interpretation of Marxism (i.e., his "Marxism-Leninism"). They also embrace the four elements of his basic political orientation: the "socialism in one country" commitment; the "revolution from above" that promoted forced collectivization of land and hyper-industrialization; the extensive and brutal use of repression against political opponents; and the consequent cultural regimentation to mold "correct" attitudes among the population.

And corresponding to the insight of Fitzpatrick and Getty, none of them believe that Stalin somehow did it all. Yet here is the realm in which disagreements unfold among the defenders. There are divergent accusations that the defenders level against

Stalin's comrades:

- Some of those claiming to support him were actually working against him (generally to enhance their own power and material privileges) at the expense of Stalin's good and revolutionary intentions.
- The development of a Stalin "cult of personality" (which Stalin allegedly did not support) was used by such double-dealers to cover their tracks.
- Some (such as the heads of the secret police) were also in league with foreign powers—imperialists, Nazis, etc.—and used their authority to protect corrupt Communists and repress honest Communists. In making this case, Grover Furr devotes considerable attention to the alleged duplicity of NKVD head Nikolai Yezhov.

Splintering

Not all the defenders are in agreement with each other's various points. For example, Bill Bland contends that within the Communist International a blatantly reformist "people's front" line became dominant despite Stalin's own revolutionary intentions and that Comintern chieftain Georgi Dimitrov was a secret enemy of Communism, serving not Stalin but instead erstwhile Nazi captors and imperialist masters. All of this goes too far for some of Stalin's defenders.

On the other hand, it seems likely that, despite such divergences, *most* Stalin defenders would be inclined to agree with Grover Furr's approach: Stalin never lied and was basically correct in all that he sought to do; the confessions wrung out of the Moscow Trial defendants prove that they and Trotsky were working with imperialists and fascists to destroy the Soviet Union; it is likely that they were guilty of even more criminal activity than what they confessed to.

It is Dominic Losurdo who is not in full agreement with this. He is not reliant on the forced confessions of the Moscow Trials, and for him, Stalin's hands are far

from clean. His line of argument is similar to the classic defense of Stalinism by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Humanism and Terror* (1947), which consciously inverted Arthur Koestler's anti-Communist novel about the purges, *Darkness at Noon* (1940). Losurdo argues:

One need not be a Communist to recognize that "Stalinism," with all of its horror, is a chapter in the liberation movement that defeated the Third Reich and that provided the impetus for anticolonialism and for the struggles against anti-Semitism and racism; every honest historian knows this. (Quoted by Greene, 27–28)

Greene notes that for Losurdo, "Stalinism was a historical necessity for the USSR since it represented political realism" (28). He continues:

Losurdo argued that Trotsky's "utopianism" needed to surrender to Stalin's "realism." However, Trotsky was unable to accept this alleged necessity and accused Stalin of betraying the revolution. Ultimately, the division between radicals and moderates inside the Communist Party resulted in a bloody civil war. (28–29)

In this "Bolshevik Civil War" Trotsky,

For Losurdo "it does not matter how absurd or stupid the show trials were, what matters is that Stalin was on the right side of history and Trotsky was not."

Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, and others ended up plotting against Stalin and his policies—leading to their own betrayals,

which culminated in bloody purges and the Moscow Trials. Losurdo, while not relying on trial testimony, does cite other bits of evidence, which Greene conscientiously demolishes. But these bits are beside the point. "However tragic Losurdo may consider the Bolshevik Civil War and the purges," Greene notes, he believed that they were "necessary for the construction of socialism." Greene sums up that for Losurdo "it does not matter how absurd or stupid the show trials were, what matters is that Stalin was on the right side of history and Trotsky was not" (49).

Conclusions

To get to the bottom of this, one must examine what actually happened in history—which goes beyond what is possible within the confines of the present book review. Provisional thoughts, however, can be offered.

Greene summarizes his own consideration of the evidence with the comment that "the narrative of the Moscow Trials was an irrational worldview expressing itself in Marxist jargon" (250). Such irrationality, and the horror of the consequent policies (following Losurdo's line of argument) resulted in the construction of a so-called socialism so corrupted that it was incapable of enduring. This raises questions as to whether Stalin was "on the right side of history."

It seems worthwhile to consider Greene's proposed alternative: "Based on Marxist reason, not conspiracist mysticism, it is possible to not only understand the world, but to truly liberate people from oppression" (252).

Comparing China, Cuba, and Vietnam

SAMUEL FARBER

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among the scholars studying the Cuban reality abroad and within Cuba, particularly among Cuban economists with respect to his criticism of the official use of the island's statistics several decades ago. My own works regarding Cuba have depended to a considerable degree on Mesa-Lago's contributions to the study of the country over many years.

What Do Statistics Say about China, Vietnam, and Cuba?

Mesa-Lago points out that before the

economic changes that Deng Xiaoping initiated in China in 1978 and that Vietnam inaugurated with the new policies of *Doi Moi* (renovation or innovation) in

1986, these two countries were below Cuba in the great majority of socioeconomic and social welfare indices. Now, however, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the profound crisis that Venezuela is undergoing,

which under the governments of Chávez and Máduro became the most important source of aid for the island, the situation has radically changed, with the two Asian countries scoring well above Cuba in most of these very same indices. In fact, Cuba is also going through a big crisis with the emigration of hundreds of thousands of people, the deterioration of access to consumer goods such as food and of public services such as electricity and garbage collection. For Mesa-Lago, the principal reason for these changes is that China and Vietnam, much more than Cuba, have allowed for the open functioning of private enterprise. According to the statistics presented in this volume under review, 96.7 percent of Vietnamese enterprises and 89.7 percent of the Chinese, are not the property of the state,¹ while this is only the case for 21.9 percent of Cuban enterprises. At the same

Comparing Socialist
Approaches. Economics
and Social Security in Cuba,
China and Vietnam
CARMELO MESA-LAGO
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time, the proportion of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) owned and controlled by the state has declined to 37.3 percent in Vietnam and to 40 percent in China while in Cuba the state's contribution to the GDP is 90.8 percent (51). As part of this reality, Mesa-Lago points out that Cuban non-

Before 1978 China and Vietnam were below Cuba in socioeconomic and social welfare indices.... Now, they score well above Cuba. For Mesa-Lago the reason is that they have allowed private enterprise.

state enterprises, in the countryside as well as in the cities, have been subjected to many restrictions, taxes, inspections, and changes in economic policy that have impeded their development (24).

In Cuba, only a small proportion of agriculture is in private hands while in Vietnam and China a large proportion is privately run. According to Mesa-Lago, this is the reason that China and Vietnam are self-sufficient in food production while Cuba must import the great majority of those products. Perhaps the most important problem of Cuban agriculture is that the reforms that have been carried out in Cuba have been accompanied, as we earlier indicated, by many obstacles created by the government, which have significantly contributed to a very low agricultural productivity. While 17 percent of the labor force works in agriculture, agriculture generates only 2.6 percent of the GDP (23). In

terms of industrial production, China and Vietnam are respectively very advanced and advanced while Cuba is going through a deindustrialization process, including the almost total collapse of the sugar industry. This process has been accompanied by a large wave of new hotel construction while the number of tourists continues to decline. Exports have increased in the two Asian countries while they have decreased in Cuba. This is exactly the opposite of what has happened with inflation, which has decreased in China and Vietnam, while it has increased in Cuba (51).

In terms of the economic growth of the three countries between the years 2009 and 2020, i.e., before the pandemic, while China and Vietnam respectively grew 7.4 and 5.9 percent, Cuba only grew 0.9 percent in the same period.² This should not be surprising because the rate of gross capital formation, which is a critical index of economic growth, constituted in 2019, 43.1 percent of the GDP in China, 26.8 percent in Vietnam, but only 11.5 percent in the case of Cuba (57). This decline of the Cuban economy does not seem to have affected the very high degree of literacy (still 100 percent), the same percentage as in Barbados and about the same as in Argentina and Uruguay (99 percent), according to statistics provided by Mesa-Lago and UNESCO. Nor does it appear to have been affected very much, perhaps paradoxically, by the poor physical state of schools and the substantial abandonment of their profession by Cuban teachers. This economic decline, together with the limited but real growth of private enterprise, has had a significant effect in the notable increase of inequality with an increase in the Gini coefficient estimated by the Cuban sociologist Mayra Espina Prieto as 0.407 compared with 0.357 in Vietnam and 0.385 in China (57). In the case of Cuba, the remittances sent by relatives in the United States and other

countries have also played a very important role in the increase of inequality, especially if we consider that Cubans of African descent receive far fewer remittances than white Cubans.

Mesa-Lago provides very important data regarding Cuba's health especially considering its importance in the positive image that the Cuban government has projected abroad. To begin with, Mesa-Lago points out that there are various health systems in Cuba. The largest one is the public system, but there are other generally superior health systems such as the one covering the armed forces, State Security, and high officials of the Communist Party. In addition, foreigners who pay for medical services with hard currencies such as dollars and euros have access to much better medical facilities and services (91).

In terms of the number of doctors for every ten thousand inhabitants, we find that Vietnam is in first place with an index number of 8.8 while it is 8.6 with Cuba and only 2.0 with China. It is exactly the opposite with the number of beds in hospitals, with China in first place with a 5.5 index number, Cuba in second place with 3.0, and Vietnam in the third place with 2.8 (115). With respect to the rate of infant mortality (for every 1,000 inhabitants) Cuba continues to be at the head of the three countries with a 5.0 rate followed by China with 5.6 and Vietnam with 13.9 (116-7).³ Nevertheless, several academic articles have questioned the validity of the data offered by the Cuban government arguing that they underestimate the number of infant deaths.⁴ At the same time, Cuba is way below the other two countries with respect to the rate of mortality post-partum of mothers, with an index of 176.3 (for every 100,000 births) while the index for Vietnam is 46.2 and China scores 17.8 (117). The Cuban rate of 176.3 is worse than the situation that existed in 1955

(before the triumph of the Cuban revolution) with a rate of 145.0 (116-17 and note 19 on p. 273).

It was with the Covid pandemic that the Cuban government had the biggest failure with its own people. It is estimated that in 2021, when the pandemic had already spread in the three countries, Cuba had the highest rate of excessive deaths (the internationally used criteria to measure Covid's impact) with China with the lowest number, followed by Vietnam and Cuba in the third place with the highest average of 163, three times that of Vietnam's rate and 82 times China's rate (119).⁵ The principal reason for the high incidence of deaths caused by Covid in Cuba is that the government waited too long for the vaccine developed by Cuba to be ready for use in the country. While waiting for that development, Cuba rejected the aid offered by the World Health Organization (WHO), an organization with which Cuba has had good relations for many years.

At the same time, when Mesa-Lago examined the changes that had taken place in Cuba from 2008 to 2019, he found a very significant decline in the number of hospitals and available beds in the remaining hospitals and in the number of local medical centers, nurses, and technicians. The total number of doctors did not decrease because doctors had been converted into an export item (115). The Cuban state charges foreign countries for its medical services based on their capacity to pay, which includes some countries who obtain Cuban medical aid entirely free. But from the money paid by the recipient countries to the Cuban government, the Cuban doctors involved typically receive approximately 25 percent. As a result, the number of available doctors to attend their Cuban patients has been reduced as has been notably the case with family doctors, half of whom work outside the country, thereby creating a

shortage of this service in the island. Even so, many Cuban doctors desire those jobs outside of the country for various reasons including the access to the consumer goods they can buy abroad.

Gender Equality

Mesa-Lago pays special attention to gender equality. In that context, the author takes note of the different proportions of the labor force made up of women in the three countries. Vietnam occupies first place with a 47.4 percent proportion, while China occupies second place with 43.5 percent and Cuba is in third place with 39.4 percent (138). Although the Cuban rate is somewhat lower than that of the other two countries, we must bear in mind that it is much higher than that of prerevolutionary Cuba where according to the 1953 census (the last census carried out before the 1959 Revolution) only 13.7 percent of women worked outside the home and among these women more than 25 percent were domestic workers.⁶ Cuba finds itself in second place in the number of weeks (18) with paid maternity leave granted by the state while Vietnam is in first place with 24 and China in third place with 14 to 23, a significant variation based on regional differences (138). At the same time, pensions have been a great problem given the high inflation that Cubans have had to endure during the last several years. Although Cuba has the highest coverage for men and women among the three countries (68 percent) compared with 45 percent for China and 28 percent for Vietnam, pensions in Cuba, compared to those in China and Vietnam, are not indexed for inflation (128, 138). As a result, the incidence of poverty in Cuba is more noticeable among old people than in the rest of the population. Finally, with respect to women, perhaps the most useful index is that of Gender Inequality, a combined measurement used by the Development

Program of the United Nations to assess gender disparities in many countries. Cuba occupies third place under that index with a coefficient of 0.304, Vietnam is in second place with 0.296, and China is in first place with a 0.168 index (138).

To make sense of the great amount of data utilized in his book, Mesa-Lago tries to present a summary of his data according to various categories. For example, in social security the author selected fifty-one indices based on their importance and comparability. The ranking of these three countries, with the lowest numbers being the best, the first one is China with 1.57, Vietnam is second with 1.74, and Cuba is in third place with 2.20 (187). The situation is different in what Mesa-Lago calls social solidarity, which refers to equality of benefits and among different sectors of the population. In this area, which covers health, non-contributory social assistance, and pensions, Cuba occupies first place (1.50), Vietnam is in second place (1.79), and China is in the third place (2.25) (139).

Aside from the very informative comparisons of China, Vietnam, and Cuba, Mesa-Lago presents quite useful data with respect to various aspects of Cuban reality. The principal theme here concerns the economic blockade of the island that the United States established at the beginning of the decade of the sixties. There is no doubt that these abominable reprisals on the part of the U.S. empire were not motivated by the love of democracy and human rights, but to eliminate the threat of a country that had been, to various degrees, under U.S. control since 1898. Cuba was then establishing its independence from the U.S. empire and getting indispensable material support from and allying itself with another empire hostile to the United States. As Mesa-Lago recognizes, the U.S. embargo (or blockade), which was strengthened under Donald Trump,

has lasted for more time and with greater strength in Cuba than in Vietnam and has resulted in more adverse effects for Cuba (20). Nevertheless, this affirmation needs to be qualified: although the economic impact of the measures adopted by Washington against Cuba for more than sixty years have undoubtedly been more damaging, Mesa-Lago points out that Vietnam suffered nine years of war against France (1946–1964) and twenty years of war against the United States (1955–1975) that devastated its society and economy and converted it into one of the most poverty-stricken countries in the world.

With respect to China, the great damages caused in that country by the warlord conflicts after the establishment of the republic in 1911, the war against the Japanese invasion and occupation, and the war between the armies headed by Chiang Kai-Shek and Mao Zedong were disastrous in their effects. To these we have to add the incredibly costly policies of Mao Zedong. The so-called Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) that provoked an enormous famine with millions of victims, while the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) provoked the death of one to two million people. They were no less destructive than the atrocities (including the widespread use of napalm and the creation of “strategic hamlets”) carried out by French and U.S. imperialisms in Vietnam.

On the other hand, many Cubans were killed and injured during the Bay of Pigs invasion in April of 1961, aside from the victims of numerous terrorist attacks and sabotage carried out in Cuban territory by the CIA, and of course the large number of victims of Cuban government repression against non-violent dissidents. According to Mesa-Lago, while the Cuban government estimated in 2021 that the losses caused by the U.S. blockade amounted to \$130 billion, these losses were partly com-

pensated by the USSR, including subsidies through the higher prices that the USSR paid for Cuban products, in the amount of \$65 billion from 1960 to 1990. Cuba

Mesa-Lago recommends the operation of a private health system to “compete” with the public system without considering the social and political context and consequences.

also received from Venezuela \$100 billion in the period 2005 to 2017. In addition to the contributions to Cuba by those two countries, the debt with other foreign countries such as China, Russia, Mexico, and the so-called Paris Club, was forgiven in the amount of \$42 billion. Moreover, the very active economic relations with Canada and the European Union also partially compensated for the U.S. blockade (21–22). Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that these compensations have not remedied the structural effects of the blockade, as for example the U.S. government’s prohibition to invest in Cuba and its effects on the economic development of the country. Moreover, during the last several years, and for the foreseeable future, Venezuela has substantially curtailed its aid to Cuba, and no other country is currently playing that role. Russia, for example, has made many promises, but has not delivered much yet. In conclusion, there is no doubt that in a comparative context, the great loss of life and damage to Vietnam’s economy and society and the long history of China’s twentieth-century travails described above were more

extensive than those affecting Cuba.

Should Vietnam and China be a Model for Cuba?

Many of the Cuban sympathizers of the two Asian systems ignore that they are not less antidemocratic and authoritarian than the Cuban regime. The independent human rights organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) pointed out in its *World Report 2025* that the rise to power of a new leader in Vietnam after an intense internal struggle did not diminish the implacable repression of human rights carried out by that government. According to the HRW report, the Vietnamese authorities continue to forbid independent human rights organizations, as well as independent unions, religious groups, the mass media, and all organizations that operate outside the government's direct control.

During the last year (2024) the Communist Party leader Tô Lâm, who had been at the head of the notorious Ministry of Public Security, assumed the much more important position of general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party after an intense struggle during which he was able to replace in their positions five members of the Political Bureau of that party. Under the previous ministry headed by Lâm, the police incarcerated many dissidents, a repression that continued through 2024, which was facilitated by the control that the government exercises over the criminal justice system that, as in Cuba, is neither impartial nor independent.⁷ Another HRW report said that Vietnam is providing false information with respect to union freedom in that country to obtain or maintain preferential tariffs in its international commercial activities. This report maintains that Vietnam does not allow independent unions to represent workers. The leaders and functionaries of the so-called Vietnamese Confederation of Workers are

appointed by the Vietnamese government and at the level of the enterprises, almost all its leaders are appointed by their managements. In fact, in April of 2024, the Vietnamese police arrested Nguyễn Văn Bình, a high functionary of the Ministry of Labor, because he had advocated substantial labor reforms and more union autonomy.⁸ It is important to underline that the control that the Vietnamese state maintains over the working class and peasantry in that country—forbidding independent unions and associations—considerably facilitates the accumulation of capital by foreign and Vietnamese capital.

The Situation in China

China's as well as Vietnam's political and economic system descends from the totalitarian one-party state that Stalin established in the USSR, although of course with national adaptations. Given those common origins, it should not be surprising that the most important characteristics of Vietnam's political system also apply to China such as the one-party state and the suppression of all independent political and union activities. Like in Cuba and Vietnam, there is only one central union organization, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). This organization is controlled by the state through the ruling Communist Party, the function of which is to maintain the discipline of the workers from above, thus facilitating their exploitation.

China has modernized to a substantial degree, and its standard of living has improved considerably, especially in the big cities. But the price that the working class and peasantry have paid for that "progress" has been truly extraordinary and probably worse than the early industrialization experience of advanced capitalist countries such as Great Britain. Among the many horrors suffered by the Chinese people we find the *hukou* system, which although

it has been relaxed to a certain degree by local functionaries in some second- and third-rank cities, continues to be rigorously implemented in the largest cities such as Beijing. This system segregates immigrants who emigrated from rural zones, who are still registered as people who live in the countryside, thereby excluding them from urban social services that are superior with regards to housing, schools, childcare, and government subsidies. This system has played a very important role in the exploitation and oppression of those immigrants by domestic as well as foreign capital.

Unlike Vietnam, there has been a lot of resistance in China in the form of wildcat strikes among workers, and peasant protests against the expulsion from their lands to make way for the expansion of enterprises and urban areas. These social disturbances considerably increased toward the end of the nineties and beginning of the twenty-first century. During that epoch, tens of millions of public sector workers were fired and thrown into a labor market for which they were unprepared, provoking a subsistence crisis. The Chinese government admitted there were 87,000 protest incidents

The defense of adequate pensions, public health, and public education may constitute a backstop wall in defense of public welfare if capitalism triumphs in Cuba.

involving more than twenty-five people in 2005. Finally, there is a paradox that while on one hand China is an important producer of equipment for the protection of the environment, it has become the worst

transmitter in the world of pollutants such as carbon dioxide in the last twenty years. Chinese industrialization has provoked a considerable contamination of air, land, and waters. Finally, we must not ignore the oppression endured by the minority nations such as in Tibet and Xinjiang recently extended to the important coastal city of Hong Kong.⁹

The Changes that Mesa-Lago Proposes for Cuba

Although this is not a book dedicated to developing solutions for the economic problems that Cuba confronts, it does outline certain proposals. Thus, for example, Mesa-Lago proposes: (1) the total legalization of PYMES (small- and medium-sized private enterprises), authorizing them to expand so they can absorb the surplus state labor force; (2) allowing private farmers and cooperatives to be truly autonomous, freeing them from their obligation to hand over to the state (at prices fixed by the latter) part of their production through the state institution of Acopio; (3) allowing Cubans living abroad to make investments in Cuba; (4) allowing private enterprises to make all decisions about where to invest and about what they can import and export independently from the state (199, 230).

From the point of view that favors a socialist and democratic exit for Cuban Communism, which prominently includes the notion of self-government for those who work in the city as well as in the countryside, this is not a program compatible with such a perspective, although there is a degree of overlap with Mesa-Lago's proposals regarding agriculture. Small farmers must be left in peace and be allowed to grow and sell whatever they want without the impositions of Acopio, an agency that should be abolished. In this context, government intervention should be limited to certain questions such as the regulations

concerned with the working conditions and health of producers and consumers, and of course the environment. Perhaps the most important thing to do in this context would be to institute a progressive income tax system to limit and avoid the uncontrollable growth of economic inequality in the countryside. These taxes would at the same time create an agricultural development fund to introduce modern forms of cultivation, especially those that protect the environment and diminish and eliminate the most onerous agricultural tasks and the high degree of physical deterioration that

The real discontent of Cuban workers of all kinds has manifested itself in a dramatic exodus abroad and in street demonstrations.

farmers and peasants commonly develop.

With respect to the right to freely import goods from abroad it is important to consider that a significant class differentiation already exists in Cuba that could easily result in a wave of imports such as automobiles (as has already begun to occur under the current relaxation of import controls) and luxury items that would do very little to promote Cuban's economic development. Under current social and political circumstances, citizens and economic entities should have the right to import articles from abroad, but especially if these involve the country's scarce "strong" foreign currencies such as euros and dollars, there should be limitations on the importation of non-essential luxury goods to maximize the contribution of those imported articles

to the general as well as to the individual welfare. By the same token, the state should have the right to prioritize the importation of capital equipment and related goods essential to economic development.

Concerning the small- and medium-sized enterprises, we must bear in mind that the Cuban government considers that a medium-sized enterprise includes any firm with up to one hundred employees. Surely, such a number implies a fully capitalist enterprise with a bureaucratic administrative hierarchy to administer it, which would have very serious consequences for the type of society that would develop after the death of the bureaucratic and one-party state "socialism." Unfortunately, there has been no sign of the germs of a worker's movement on the island oriented toward the creation of independent unions and therefore open to the possibility of a working-class control from below of the places they work in for a major part of their lives. The real discontent of Cuban workers of all kinds has instead manifested itself in a dramatic exodus abroad especially since 2022 and in street demonstrations to express their protest regarding the scarcity of basic consumer articles and the blackouts that have recently become a part of Cuban reality. This is a tradition that began on July 11, 2021, with large demonstrations throughout the country followed by more local ones in the following years, although both have been repressed by the government with hundreds of people sentenced to heavy prison terms.

Mesa-Lago's Proposals for Health Care in Cuba

Unfortunately, Mesa-Lago makes certain recommendations without considering their social and political context and consequences. For example, Mesa-Lago recommends the operation of a private health system to "compete" with the public

system (224–27). The experiences of other countries have clearly demonstrated that such a private system, given class inequalities, would have a middle- and upper-class clientele with the resources to obtain luxury treatment without waiting and other uncomfortable realities of a massive health system in a relatively poor country. An even more serious consequence of Mesa-Lago's recommendations would be the decline in popular support for a public system that would inevitably become the system used by the poor and people with fewer material resources. This can be clearly seen in the United States where there is the Medicaid medical system for the poor and people with few material resources and the Medicare medical system for all people who are older than sixty-five independently of their economic means. It is because of that difference that the great majority of politicians are fearful of *openly* advocating benefit cuts in Medicare while repeatedly and openly trying to cut Medicaid benefits. Because Medicare is a program characterized by its universal coverage without any evaluation of the patient's economic resources (no means testing) it has become a bit of a "sacred cow" that few dare to criticize publicly. Because of this feature of Medicare, attempts to reduce its benefits are usually full of hidden undisclosed deficiencies and subterfuges. This is true of the privatization of Medicare through the Medicare Advantage programs that in reality, but not openly, reduce benefits to its recipients.

Mesa-Lago himself confirms the validity of this critique when he cites the case of Vietnam. As he explains, there are long lines to obtain medical services in Vietnam's public hospitals, while it is much easier to obtain medical attention in those privately owned. In fact, the private hospitals sponsored by foreign institutions (like French and Japanese hospitals) are the best and most expensive. On the other hand, poor

families, children below the age of six, the disabled, and students have the right to receive free medical attention in public hospitals but are subject to the previously mentioned long waiting periods (92).

Mesa-Lago's Proposal for the Age of Retirement

Mesa-Lago tends to treat the question of retirement as a purely economic if not actuarial problem, and certainly not as a social problem. In the case of China, although it is rapidly becoming a much richer country, Mesa-Lago recommends that pensions should be adjusted to the population's life expectancy and that the government should develop incentives and encourage people to retire later in life. In addition, he argues that the norms for early retirement should be reinforced to avoid their "improper use" (206).

Three years ago, in January 2023, the issue of retirement captured international public attention when France's president, Emmanuel Macron, increased the age of retirement from sixty-two to sixty-four. This governmental decision provoked large protest demonstrations and strikes in that country, as well as widespread public discussion about the necessity of retirement from a working-class and human point of view. In other words, life should not be limited to the many years of work, but also to the years to enjoy and pursue other interests while most people are still relatively healthy. That worthy goal merits the public subsidy to retirement funds if this becomes necessary to maintain the social gains obtained as the fruit of union and people's struggles, instead of eroding them, even if this is done gradually. Healthcare, education, and a relatively early and dignified pension, among other activities, are worthy of public financing even beyond the funds specifically dedicated to those purposes, as in the case of pensions. Finally, we should

consider that the defense of adequate pensions, public health, and public education may constitute a backstop wall in defense of public welfare if capitalism triumphs in Cuba, be it through present government institutions such as GAESA (the powerful economic wing of the Cuban armed forces that already controls most of Cuba's economy) or through private capitalism.

In conclusion, Mesa-Lago's new book is truly encyclopedic and very useful. Its exhaustive scope has obliged this reviewer to present a relatively small sample of its data in a selection inevitably influenced by his interests with respect to these three countries.

This is the English-language version of a two-part article that appeared in the Cuban dissident journal *CubaXCuba* on Sept. 3 and Sept. 4, 2025.

NOTES

1. Nevertheless, a research center at Stanford University maintained that state property in China is very mixed with private property. According to one report published by the Center, firms that have invested in other firms represent approximately 80 percent of total capital in China's economy. Within this 80 percent of the economy, the total capital for firms that have some degree of state investment has increased from 61 percent in 1999 to 85 percent in 2017. At the same time, the total capital of the firms that are the exclusive property of the state has declined from 41 percent in 1999 to 25 percent in 2017. "Reassessing the Role of State Ownership in China's economy," Stanford Center on China's economy and Institutions, fsi.stanford.edu/china-briefs/reassessing-role-state-ownership-china's-economy (n.d.)

2. According to Cuban official sources Cuba's GDP declined 1.1 percent in 2024 and 11 percent in the last 5 years. "Avanzar en la recuperación económica requiere de un cambio de enfoque en la gestión," *Granma*, July 14, 2025, 1 and "Economía cubana ha decaído un 11 por ciento en los últimos 5 años," *Cuba Debate*, July

14, 2025, 1.

3. According to figures released by Cuba's Health Minister, José Angel Portal Miranda, Cuba's infant mortality had surged to 8.2 deaths per 1000 live births in the first half of 2025, up from 7.4 during the same period in 2024. CEDA US-Cuba News Brief, July 18, 2025. Issue No. 800.

4. See the sources in support of that argument in Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Sergio Díaz-Briquets, "Healthcare in Cuba: Sustainability Challenges in an Ageing System," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 53, no. 1 (Feb. 2021), 133-59.

5. This comparison is partly based on the unreliable data provided by the Chinese authorities. After the government relaxed its very strong restrictions in Dec. of 2022, there was a veritable explosion of the virus. Researchers consider that the official rate of 83,500 deaths (before Feb. 9, 2023) is extremely low because it only counted the infected Chinese people who died in hospitals, without considering those who died at home. In addition, the government only counted those deaths due to a failure of the respiratory system, while it ignored those who were infected but died due to failures of the liver, kidneys or cardiac system. In conclusion, four groups of independent academics estimated that the number of Chinese people who died because of a Covid infection ranged from a million to a million and half people. James Glanz, Mara Hvistendahl and Agnes Chang, "How Deadly Was China's Covid Wave?" *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/02/15/world/asia/china-covid-death-estimates.html>

6. Samuel Farber, *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959. A Critical Assessment*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011, 187.

7. Human Rights Watch, *News Release*, "Vietnam: Repression Deepens Under New Leader. No Easing of Restrictions Under General Secretary To Lam," Jan. 16, 2025.

8. Human Rights Watch, *News Release*, "Vietnam: False Claims on Labor Rights. Seeking US Trade Preferences, Hanoi insists Workers can Organize," May 8, 2024.

9. Richard Smith, *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*, London, England: Pluto Press, 2020, and Eli Friedman, et al., *China in Global Capitalism*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2024.

Comparing Cuba, China, and Vietnam

Observations on an Outstanding Review of My Book

CARMELO MESA-LAGO

PROFESSOR SAMUEL FARBER HAS TAKEN time and significant effort to review my latest book *Comparing Socialist Approaches: Economics and Social Security in Cuba, China and Vietnam* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2025). So far, his review is the longest and most profound published, and he adds information from his own that is very useful. His description of my book in the first part of his review is faithful to my text, quite positive, and very readable. I am grateful therefore for his review.

My observations are addressed to the second part of his review in which he (1) discusses the authoritarian nature of the socialist market in China and Vietnam, and (2) critically evaluates two of my social-security policy proposals for Cuba.

1. The authoritarian nature of China and Vietnam political regimes

Farber's states: "Many of the Cuban sym-

pathizers of the two Asian systems ignore that they are no less antidemocratic and authoritarian than the Cuban regime." Although he does not specifically mention me, since this is a review of my book most readers will assume that I am included. My book (342 pages) is entirely devoted to the economic-social models of the three countries and to measure their economic and social-security performance, not their politics. I am not a political scientist and including that subject in the book would have been impossible. The Introduction of my book (pp. 9–10) examines asymmetries of my knowledge and experience on economics and social security in the three countries. I have devoted sixty years of my academic life to researching those two topics in Cuba (and also to other two major interests, social security and comparative economics systems), but I knew little about China and virtually nothing about Vietnam, the reason that my book took three years to write. Nevertheless, I fully agree about the anti-democratic and authoritarian nature of the three regimes, and in my book cite political scientists that support that view.

In Appendix 1, "China policy shift in the [socialist-market] model under president Xi and its effects," I cite economic scholars that document how Xi's extended his mandate (not seen since Mao Zedong),

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increased concentration of power (including a shift from decentralized to centralized planning) and expanded party control of enterprises (“most companies now have communist party cells that have taken over decision making”). I also show that these autocratic policies have contributed to the slowdown in China’s economic growth (249–53). In footnote 1 (Chapter 1), I note that my book does not deal with political science but I cite Chinese and foreign scholars’ opinions on the authoritarian nature of China’s regime.¹ Finally, in footnote 3 (Chapter 2), I quote Jonathan London’s characterization of the Vietnamese model as “market-Leninist, a combination of party political control, a market economy and a mixed welfare regime of public and private entities.”² Farber summarizes both Vietnamese and Chinese authoritarianism.

2. My policy proposals

My proposals are on social security not only for Cuba but also for China and Vietnam and are explained in the last chapter of my book (forty-four pages). Farber selected two social-security issues for discussion: health care and the age of retirement. He states, “Unfortunately, Mesa-Lago makes certain recommendations without considering their social and political context and consequences. For example, Mesa-Lago recommends the operation of a private system to ‘compete’ with the public system,” but he omits my first recommendation: a universal and unified public health system with better efficiency. Furthermore, Farber picked one recommendation that took half of a line versus ten pages of some four hundred recommendations; the omitted recommendations precisely showed that indeed I do care about “social-political context and consequences.” For instance, extending health coverage to the poor and informal-self-employed workers and providing non-contributory pensions to the poor. I

gave priority to those vulnerable groups protected through social assistance (which have been sharply cut in Cuba) instead of Farber’s concern with the age of retirement of formal-salary workers with good wages in developed countries (see below).

Readers of the review will get the incorrect view that I am a neoclassical economist and strong supporter of privatization, just the opposite of my work in the last sixty-seven years, a fact that Farber fully omits. My ideology is based on Keynesianism³ that expanded all over the world since the mid 1930s until the 1980s. Influenced by Keynes, British progressive social reformer William H. Beveridge developed social security, the base for the modern social welfare state: “protection from the cradle to the tomb.” In 1935 U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt promoted the Social Security Act that introduced pension and unemployment social insurances. The program was extended in 1965 when president Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Medicare and Medicaid Act. The latter was expanded by President Barack Obama in 2010 with the Affordable Care Act. In Latin America, the first countries to implement social insurance were Chile (1924), Uruguay, Cuba, and Brazil (1930s), and Argentina (1940s).

In the 1960s and 1970s, University of Chicago professor Milton Friedman, a neoclassical economist, turned the cycle again and advised Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and President Ronald Reagan in the United States and his ideas influenced many countries in the world. Some of Friedman’s students (the so-called Chicago Boys) advised dictator Augusto Pinochet in Chile with their neoclassic policies and advocacy of privatization of public services including health care and pensions. In several books I have been critical of this right-wing ideological change, particularly but not only in Latin America. Take these five books for example:

• *Desarrollo de la seguridad social en América Latina* (Santiago de Chile: Naciones Unidas, Comisión Económica para América Latina [CEPAL], 1985). This book, written while I was regional adviser to CEPAL, introduced the study of social security in that institution and was critical of Chilean privatization of pensions.

• *Changing Social Security in Latin America: Towards the Alleviation of Social Costs of Economic Reform* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994) shows how social security could cover the cost of the devastating structural economic reforms.

• *Reassembling Social Security: A Survey of Pension and Healthcare Reforms in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), a deep analysis of how re-reforms retrogressed privatization in pensions and health care either re-establishing public systems or a mix of public and private systems.

• *Re-Reforms of Privatized Pensions Systems*, editor and author of four chapters (Munich: Zeitschrift für ausländisches und internationales Arbeits- und Sozialrecht, 2012), a series of essays by experts of the re-reforms in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Hungary.

• *Evaluation of Four Decades of Privatization of Pensions in Latin America (1980–2020): Promises and reality*, a systematic evaluation of the dismal performance of pension privatization in half of the countries in Latin America, contrasting its promises with the reality.

These books have been reviewed by eighty-four prominent scholars and entities like the International Labor Organization (ILO), CEPAL, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, which labeled me the “master of social security in Latin America” and coincide with my rigorous criticism of privatization of pension and health care in Latin America. For instance, Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, professor of economics, Oxford University, wrote in 2009: “It offers a demolishing criticism of the [structural] reforms but never falls into simplistic or superficial arguments,

presenting instead numerous facets that enrich our understanding of such processes. A monumental work that excels for its wealth of information, rigor of the proposals, and the very interesting and ambitious research agenda that leaves us for the future.”

In addition, I have evaluated social security programs in twenty-two countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, sponsored by the ILO, CEPAL, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and governments. I demonstrated the flaws and provided multiple recommendations to undue privatization reforms. Chilean socialist president Michelle Bachelet appointed me in her international pension commission to re-reform the privatized pension system, which provided fifty-seven important recommendations.

The Age of Retirement

According to Farber: “Mesa-Lago tends to treat the question of retirement as a purely economic if not actuarial problem and certainly not as a social problem.... In addition, he argues that the norms for early retirement should be reinforced to avoid their ‘improper use’.” Farber ignores all the literature on the subject, including that of the ILO that stresses financial-actuarial sustainability as a key social security principle. If the pension system is not financially-actuarially sustainable in the long run, all other ILO principles (universal coverage, benefit sufficiency, social solidarity, gender equity, and so forth—what Farber calls “a social problem”) will go bankrupt. Early retirement (let’s say at 57 instead of the statutory age of 65) will have the same result. This was the recent case of Costa Rica, a solid democracy with one of the most successful social security systems in Latin America, where early retirement provoked a serious financial-actuarial imbalance of its pension program that required a “parametric” reform in order to save said program. A

parametric reform is one that implements adjustments (for instance, increasing the age of retirement often too low, rising insufficient contributions, even cutting some generous benefits) to save a public pension system and avoid the threat of privatization, whereas a structural economic reform radically replaces a public system with a private one as Pinochet did in Chile, while re-reforms are those that change privatized systems into either public or mixed systems (combining public and private piers).

In order to support his argument, Farber brings up the 2023 massive protests in France against president Emmanuel Macron's increase in the retirement age from 62 to 64. Farber supports "the necessity of retirement from a working-class and human point of view.... [L]ife should not be limited to the many years of work, but also to the years to enjoy and pursue other interests while most people are relatively healthy." According to him, the solution to the problem should be state subsidies. I have written several articles on the issue of aging and pension reform. The age of 64 in France is well below that of other industrialized countries: it is 67 in Denmark, Holland, Italy, and Norway; 66 growing to 68 in the United Kingdom; 66 in Spain, Ireland, and Portugal; 65 rising to 67 in Germany and Belgium, and 65 in Canada, Hungary, Japan, Luxembourg, Poland, and Slovenia. Moreover, countries much less developed than France have a retirement age of 65, like Azerbaijan, Honduras, Mexico, and Nepal. Finally, life expectancy at retirement age is over 83 years in France, but the average of developed countries members of the OECD is one year lower, therefore a French retiree lives at least one year longer than in other developed countries. It is obvious that the retirement age of 64 is rational and necessary to avoid a catastrophe (Mesa-Lago, 2023).⁴ In Latin America, too-low retirement ages have bankrupted the

pension systems of Argentina and Brazil, which are largely supported by growing fiscal transfers. At the beginning of the Cuban revolution and until 2008, ages of retirement were among the lowest in Latin America (60 for men and 55 for women) but Cuba had a very high life expectancy hence the state had to cover 44 percent of its expenses. A parametric reform in 2008 added five years to the retirement age for both genders, but accelerated aging (Cuba has the oldest population in the region) eventually increased the state subsidy and the ultimate cost was a reduction of 50 percent of real pensions (adjusted for inflation).

Summarizing, I have played a significant role in Latin America and elsewhere, showing the failure of privatization and advocating re-reforms to reinforce public systems and their financing-actuarial equilibrium. To propose expansion of benefits against the reality and without proper financial measures is irresponsible because this will bankrupt the public pension system and open the door to privatization.

NOTES

1. Among those cited is political scientist Jorge Domínguez who labeled the three systems as one-party authoritarian, "The Democratic Claims of Communist Regime Leaders," in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 54 (1-2), 2021: 45-65.

2. London, Jonathan, 2023, "The Communist Party of Vietnam: Consolidating Market Leninism," In *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam* (Abingdon: 2023): 21-47.

3. John Maynard Keynes, the British founder of this economic ideology, the most influential economist of the 20th century, took a middle way between communism and capitalism, advocating state interventions to cope with the adverse effects of a free market economy, for instance, government creation of jobs and stimulation of demand to combat unemployment as well as depressions and great recessions, solidly based on a robust democracy.

4. Carmelo Mesa-Lago, ¿Es justificada la insurrección por las pensiones en Francia?, *Letras Libres*, May 17, 2023;+

Reply to Carmelo Mesa-Lago's Comments on My Review

SAMUEL FARBER

APPARENTLY, CARMELO MESA-LAGO misunderstood the purpose of my review. I was specifically reviewing his recent book published in 2025 comparing Cuba, China, and Vietnam, and was certainly not attempting to evaluate his life's work. Nevertheless, I did acknowledge, at the beginning of my review, some of his most important contributions and my intellectual debt to his Cuba scholarship.

Regarding Mesa-Lago's evaluation of the Chinese and Vietnamese regimes, it is evident that he adopts an interpretation of those two countries that almost ignores the degree to which their economic and political aspects are integrated into a single whole. That is why the undisputable rise of Chinese economic power cannot be separated from its political system that, as has been widely recognized, has historically suppressed domestic consumer demand. The regime has also seriously curtailed economic and social rights through its elimination of independent trade unions and the establishment of the *houkou* system that prevents the masses of internal immigrants, especially in the big cities, from claiming social benefits reserved for its permanent urban residents. In other words, Chinese economic success is not separable from its capital accumulation regime made possible by its massive suppression of political and social rights. Moreover, this overall Chinese socio-economic and political system has

prevailed regardless of the varying degrees of centralization of its economic planning, which seems to play a central role in Mesa-Lago's analysis of China.

Moreover, when I criticized the Cuban political current that advocates the Sino-Vietnamese model for Cuba, I did not particularly have Mesa-Lago in mind. However, I was not aware at that time of Mesa-Lago's reply to another critic that appeared in the Cuban dissident journal *El Toque* on February 22, 2023. In that reply, Mesa-Lago expresses a clear preference for political democracy in China and Vietnam, but at the same time concedes that "if there was a choice between the present situation in Cuba and a change towards a market socialism with an improvement of the standard of living of the Cuban people, but without democracy, I would lean towards that kind of change, because the terrible situation which the Cuban people are suffering, hurts me." Although I recognize Mesa-Lago's sincerity in supporting political democracy in Cuba, I would submit that his political concession weakens the struggle against dictatorship and authoritarianism in Cuba.

Health Care

In his reply, Mesa-Lago insists on the desirability of a more efficient universal and unified public health system, which according to his new book, would be in

competition with private medicine. But, as I pointed out in my review, Mesa-Lago himself acknowledged in the book under review that in Vietnam the public health system involves long waiting lines while the private system does not. This is hardly surprising when you have a health system that only the more affluent sections of the population can afford, and another system for everybody else. The division in health care that Mesa-Lago advocates is bound to diminish social solidarity and strengthen a “look out for number one” individualistic mentality. In a single health care public system, the whole population would have a vested interest in defending the system from budget cuts and the encroachment of hostile governments. This has been the case in both Britain and Canada where there is overwhelming public support for their respective versions of socialized medicine notwithstanding creeping privatization, repeated past budget cuts, and the serious health crisis produced by the Covid pandemic resulting in long waiting times. Otherwise, you would have a situation like that of Medicaid and Medicare in the United States where the former service for the poor has far fewer defenders than Medicare’s universalistic service for those 65 years and older.

Finally, any single public health system would need to be democratically planned, although not necessarily by the central government. Instead, duly elected representatives of the various sectors affected by the medical plan, from providers to consumers, would decide the policies of the public medical program. Among other things, they would have to make sure that the existing facilities and resources are equitably distributed throughout the country. Otherwise, we would have something like the primarily “free market” system of pre-revolutionary Cuba where the 21 percent of the population who lived in the Havana metropolitan

area had access to 60 percent of physicians, 62 percent of dentists, and 80 percent of hospital beds in the whole of Cuba. At the time, public medicine in Cuba compared poorly with private medicine, even though the latter also varied in quality. The Cuban press frequently provided exposés of the miseries of public hospitals, especially in the case of Mazorra, the notorious institution in charge of treating the mentally ill. (See Jennifer L. Lambe’s excellent *Madhouse: Psychiatry and Politics in Cuban History*, Univ. North Carolina Press, 2017).

Retirement

Mesa-Lago points out that several countries have higher ages of retirement than France where massive protests took place against raising the age of retirement in 2023. This is true but misses the critical fact that France’s lower age of retirement was not a chance event but the product of more advanced working-class and popular struggles. Thus, the 2023 mass movement was an attempt to prevent the erosion of previous gains in the French retirement’s system. Although not related to Mesa-Lago’s arguments, I am reminded of my Cuban youth when conservatives bragged about Cuba being more socially and economically advanced than most Latin American countries with the implication that people should not have been complaining too much. In any case, in November of 2025, with the continuing public pressure and with the survival of the present French government at stake, the government announced that it was suspending the application of Macron’s 2023 change of the age of retirement.

Regarding government subsidies, both conservative and Keynesian economic approaches assume as a matter of course that most of the economic surplus in any given economy is privately controlled by big private businesses and is therefore not directly available to subsidize social and economic

priorities such as maintaining a lower age of retirement. Thus, although French president Macron may or may not be a “bad person,” that is not the important issue, but rather that he was working in an economic system and environment favorable to imposing restrictions on public services for the sake of the so-called economic stability of the private profit system, while reinforcing the notion that every program should in one way or another pay for itself. Obviously, not all products and services can be subsidized, in which case an economy would collapse. But things would be very different if the total economic surplus were available for society and its duly elected democratic representatives to make democratic decisions about its use, especially if economic productivity in the economy was relatively high. Even in crisis-ridden Cuba, the Cuban government manages to obtain an economic surplus, in great part at the expense of popular consumption. But instead of investing it in agriculture and industry to better feed the people and further develop the country and its general standard of living, it uses it to build an increasing number of luxury hotels, notwithstanding the near collapse of tourism. Even in the top tourist year of 2018, when close to five million tourists arrived in Cuba, the hotel occupation rate was approximately 50 percent. In any case, that governmental economic decision to use practically all available resources to build hotels was made without any input from the Cuban workers and people most affected by it.

Cuba at the Crossroads

Cuba is undergoing a very serious economic crisis, even worse than that of the 1990s following the collapse of the USSR. The current crisis, which has worsened since the publication, a year ago, of the book under review, includes a massive emigration of close to a million people since 2022, food

shortages, inflation, a major energy crisis featuring frequent and major blackouts throughout the whole country, and the spread of diseases such as chikungunya and Dengue fever facilitated by a hot and humid climate and the near collapse of garbage collection mainly caused by the shortage of oil. The over sixty-year-old U.S. criminal economic blockade hardened by the Trump administration has doubtlessly played an important role in creating this situation, but it has been by no means the only or even principal factor producing the crisis as the Cuban government and its “campist” friends abroad would argue. It is the Cuban regime’s anti-democratic decision making from above that systematically creates and encourages a climate of economic indifference, neglect, and carelessness among both lower-level managers and workers. As was the case in Eastern Europe when it was ruled by the Communist regimes, the chronic shortage of agricultural and other consumer goods considerably worsens the situation facing Cubans.

Nobody knows what will happen after the historic revolutionary leadership passes from the scene. The three major surviving veterans of the rebel leadership of the 1950s who provide what is left of the regime’s political legitimacy (Raúl Castro Ruz, José Ramón Machado Ventura, and Ramiro Valdés Menéndez) are all well into their nineties and are not likely to live for much longer. A likely inheritor of the central power in Cuba is GAESA (Grupo de Administración Empresarial, S.A.) the business branch of the Cuban armed forces that already controls a very large section of the Cuban economy, including such areas as tourism, banking, and foreign trade. Although large-scale protests against economic hardship and political oppression encompassing the whole nation broke out on July 11, 2021, with more localized protests taking place in the following years, no

significant political groups have emerged from those numerous protests to politically oppose and challenge the government.

The Cuban exile community primarily residing in South Florida (there are other important concentrations of Cubans abroad such as in Spain) has been led and dominated by the hard political right that has for many decades been more than willing to trample on the civil liberties and democratic rights of any internal dissidents. This phenomenon has a very long history as reflected for example in the 1992 Human Rights Watch report titled “Dangerous Dialogue.” While this community showed some signs of political pluralism in the presidential elections held in 2012 and 2016 when Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton almost evenly split the vote with the Republican candidates, this has changed considerably since then with the politically aggressive organizing carried out by Trump’s Cuban-American followers, while Florida Democrats have characteristically done little or nothing to counteract it. It remains to be seen whether Trump’s willingness to treat Cuban refugees as badly as those originating in other countries will affect the results of the 2026 elections when three conservative Cuban American congresspeople will face the voters.

Thus, the prospects for a Cuban socialism that is thoroughly democratic and thus from below, are not good, at least for now.

Even among democratic opponents of the regime, the reign of the market is taken as gospel truth. The issue is not whether there would be any private market and capital in a socialist and democratic Cuba, but whether that private capital and market would be *dominant*, instead of the economy being dominated by democratic planning with the maximum participation and control of those who labor to make it prosper.

That is why I have argued for the concrete benefits of public as opposed to private services, defending, for example, the necessity of a monopoly of public education, thereby limiting if not eliminating the hidden and not so hidden injuries of class and race at least during childhood and adolescence, although of course recognizing the right of a religious education for those who want it held in non-public facilities after their classes in public school. Along the same lines I have been arguing, as this article shows, the potential benefits of a public health service serving all Cubans. In turn, the preservation and radical improvements of such public services can also serve as stopgaps in the likely future struggle to prevent Cuba going completely capitalist, whether this capitalism is sponsored by GAESA in what could be a Putin-style Cuba, or one sponsored by a private capitalism strongly backed by U.S. and particularly Cuban-American capital.

Realism in Revolt

DAPHNE LAWLESS

IFOLLOW WILLIAM GILLIS—VETERAN anarchist activist and writer, and trained physicist—on Bluesky because he’s funny, and because he makes me think. If you share his burning hatred for fascism, a sneering (remember that word) contempt for establishment liberalism, and deep disgust for Stalinists, “tankies” and other authoritarian Leftists, I’d recommend it. It also helps if you like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

One reason why I enjoy his work is that he flips a lot of widely held assumptions about anarchist beliefs. For example, the clichéd response to the concept of prison/police abolition is that anarchists (or libertarian communists) must be foolish utopians who think that everyone is deep-down good. On the contrary, Gillis’s closely argued position is that some people *are* just plain “bad,” due to whatever combination of nature and nurture, but that these “bad” people are precisely the ones who will become cops and judges. Hence, abolition of those structures, and their replacement with informal social incentives based on game theory, is the only way to stop bad people.¹

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Did the Science Wars Take Place? The Political and Ethical Stakes of Radical Realism

WILLIAM GILLIS
Center for a Stateless Society, 2025*

It’s also fun, when you’re watching liberals discuss why “prison abolition” couldn’t work because the only alternative is lynch mobs, to toss in Gillis’s article on the moral im-

perative to Kill Your Local Rapist and see what happens.²

But I’ve always appreciated Gillis’s commitment to science as a concept and, more importantly, as a practice. We live

in increasing conditions of “weaponised unreality”³ where the ascendent form of “postmodern fascism” is built around not Blackshirts fighting in the streets but the creation of an “alternative reality” based on social media bubbles and captured mass-media outlets of the FOX/GB News variety, in which the downwardly mobile masses *voluntarily* segregate themselves. Expanding from its origins in Christian “creation science” and the tobacco industry, populist science denial has been weaponized over decades to prevent any serious attempt at mitigating climate change—and, more recently, has pushed forward from outrage at COVID-19 restrictions to “antivaxxers” apparently rejecting the germ theory of disease itself.

A strict adherence to scientific materialism *used* to be the common sense of

*Free to download at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/william-gillis-did-the-science-wars-take-place>

the Marxist movement. In the era of the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions, with the world being turned upside down, the *Communist Manifesto* spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of “subjection of Nature’s forces.” The only problem was that the tools of science (and the fruits of its suc-

If capitalism and racism
justified themselves by an
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cesses) were in the hands of the bourgeoisie, who had used it to defeat feudal oppression and were keeping it away from the exploited proletariat. In Ferdinand Lassalle’s famous phrase quoted by Rosa Luxemburg, the key to the golden future was to *bring workers and science together*.⁴

How, then, did we end up in a period where a lot of the radical Left—especially those coming out of the social movements of the 1980s and the 1990s, and the academic currents vaguely described as “postmodernist”—end up critical or even denialist toward science, ending up helplessly swept along by the new populist obscurantism? Gillis’s *Did the Science Wars Take Place?* attempts to tell the story.

Veterans of the Science Wars

As Gillis tells it, in the years following World War II, in the developed Western world, the hard sciences (STEM—science, technology, engineering, mathematics) saw increasing patronage from the military-industrial complex, and in reaction, the humanities became increasingly “left-coded.” Gillis brings in the fascinating historical

footnote that this is a reversal of how things used to be:

Before the second world war, the hard sciences carried relatively low-class associations and were hotbeds of leftism while in contrast the humanities broadly a place of retreat for the remaining aristocratic class or at least their culture and values.... [O]verall the hard sciences carried a particularly pedestrian cultural association closer to a trade school than a dinner party discussing Cicero. The mark of a classical aristocrat (like the brahmin in India’s caste system) is not having to think about actual material reality; that’s left to the help.

Moreover, the hard sciences were clearly associated with radicalism—which is defined as attempting to grasp reality at the roots (*radix*)—whereas the humanities of the time were fixated on conserving culture and warning about the dangers of rapid change—the classic position of reaction. (25)

Gillis elsewhere makes an explicit appeal to class by categorizing the “brahmin” academy’s attitude to the STEM disciplines as “janitors” (151). The argument that the hard sciences, as materialistic, should be politically radical should make an obvious kind of sense for anyone coming from the Marxist tradition. As Gillis notes, Albert Einstein was a cosmopolitan socialist, and theoretical physicists were disproportionately targeted by McCarthy’s purges. But this is so different from the consensus discourse of the contemporary radical Left—based in the humanities and social sciences academia for many decades—as to provoke a shock. We might remember, however, that Peter Thiel—billionaire tyrant, doyen of neoreaction, and declared enemy of the Antichrist—has a postgraduate degree in philosophy.

Gillis suggests that a liberal and Leftist skepticism toward science relates to the post-World War II concept of fascism and Stalinism as different forms of “to-

talitarianism,” which “presented fascism as the opposite of the liberal value of pluralism, diagnosing the core evil as essentially universality” (28):

[Hannah] Arendt simultaneously perpetuated a framing of truth itself as totalitarian and “despotic” because of the way that it obliges us, casting dishonesty as necessary for democracy (supposedly a good thing and somehow at odds with fascism). This account of “totalitarianism” as any absolutism beyond democratic negotiation and compromise quickly transformed into an attack on anarchism. (45)

For intellectuals in this tradition, science thus increasingly became conflated with technocracy and the kind of “instrumental rationality” which Adorno and Horkheimer claimed led to Auschwitz. By the late twentieth century, scientific “antirealists” were arguing that the idea of a single scientific truth was itself oppressive, antidemocratic, authoritarian; often with reference to “quantum” mumbo-jumbo, even though “almost every major contemporary interpretation of quantum mechanics is realist” (167). But Gillis insists that there is nothing essentially liberatory in anti-universalism:

fascism is nothing if not a militant declaration of difference.... The nazis were fervent opponents of homogenization; they built their base on critiquing globalization and positioned themselves as the defenders of national difference and diversity. (46-47)

Gillis traces “postmodernism” as a movement outside of academia to the milieu around the journal *Semiotext(e)*, which introduced French poststructuralist thought of the 1950s and 1960s to the American radical intellectual culture of the 1970s. While the French poststructuralist J.-F. Lyotard defined postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (in line with Arendt’s anti-totalitarian pluralism), Gillis suggests that a certain

credulity in U.S. culture—an earnestness about philosophical idealism, as opposed to French “playfulness”—was in fact the essential ingredient in this new synthesis. The most reactionary sections of the U.S. ruling class loudly champion this idealism. Norman Vincent Peale’s *Power of Positive Thinking* is notoriously one of Donald Trump’s favorite books, although the belief he’s actually read it demands a certain leap of faith. And darlings of the tech-billionaire class such as Elon Musk and Steve Jobs credit their success to a certain “triumph of the will” (which eventually led Jobs to reject scientific medical care for the cancer which killed him).

Accordingly, the 1970s and 1980s postmodern Left (including the anarchist movement) expanded postmodernism from a “post-dogmatism and rejection of ‘mental imperialism’” (24) into valorization of all kinds of alternative, non-rational, “ways of knowing.” This included ecofeminist and decolonial epistemic relativism of the sort which categorized science as essentially “male” or “white,” thereby (Gillis argues) opening the door to “Leftist” rehabilitation of transphobia and nationalism.

Outright occultism of the “chaos magic” variety also became popular:

Premodern magical systems often thought that physical reality in one sense or another was language, and thus could be hacked or remade by language. When some structuralists and poststructuralists argued—from the other direction—that everything was language, it should be no surprise that the audience most enthusiastically receptive of the emphasis on metaphor and symbolic conflation were those trying to resuscitate magical thinking. (85)

One of the responsible parties in this regard—*Semiotext(e)* editor and infamous pedophile Peter Lamborn Wilson aka “Hakim Bey”—is a recurring villain in the text, to my personal satisfaction.

The apogee of this kind of thinking was the mid-1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet bloc seemed to have put paid to the credibility of socialism in general and Marxism in particular and the idea that *any* type of deviance from Reagan and Thatcher's "There Is No Alternative" might form a site of resistance was appealing. If capitalism and racism justified themselves by an appeal to science (at least to the "dismal science" of economics)—perhaps science wasn't all it was cracked up to be?

A few years ago, I indexed a reprint of a 1990s cultural studies book (John Fiske's *Media Matters: Race and Gender in US Politics*) that celebrated a Black activist operating a low-frequency radio station out of an urban area, promoting Afrocentric conspiracy theories about HIV as a biological weapon, as an example of epistemic liberation. Today, we can recognize that as the ancestor of the COVID denialist movement that gave so much impetus to Right-populism and fascism. By misrepresenting "consensus reality" as oppression, the postmodern Left found itself helpless when fascist movements built their own, internally consistent "alternative realities" around hateful conspiracy theories, in which reality becomes whatever Great Leader (Trump, Musk, even Putin) says it is.

The "Science Wars," strictly speaking, came out of a hoax perpetrated by left-wing mathematics professor Alan Sokal against the postmodernist journal *Social Text*. A special issue of this journal in 1996 published an article from Sokal that began by describing the idea "that there exists an independent world" as a "dogma," going on to

a long denunciation of this "dogma" via plainly silly arguments peppered with copious quotations from postmodernism aligned academics, and in particular editor Stanley Aronowitz.... Sokal declared quite frankly that physical reality itself, not merely our theories of it, "*is at bottom a social and linguistic construct.*" (62)

The Sokal hoax effectively demonstrated that postmodernist thought, if not openly promoting the "antirealist" conclusion that reality is in the mind of the observer, had no principled objections to such ideas. This "went viral," leading to general hilarity in the mainstream media at what the loopy-lefty academics were up to and angry responses from the latter themselves. As Gillis notes, "both *Social Text* and conservatives had a shared interest in equating postmodernism with the entire academic left" (64).

This led to an unfortunate alliance where many of the worst reactionaries in the 1990s—like the fans of Charles Murray's scientific racism in *The Bell Curve*—joined in on the anti-postmodernist side. "Outright hostility to feminism, multiculturalism, and decolonial struggles was an incessant infection among the critics of antirealism and relativism" (253). Ironically, though, contemporary reactionaries are *overwhelmingly postmodernist themselves*, embracing Nietzsche and Heidegger and seeing politics as a competition of narratives:

in [Jordan] Peterson's hands, the core problem with "postmodern neomarxists" is the marxist part (where "marxism" is treated so generally as to be synonymous with anyone holding egalitarian values or struggling for the liberation of oppressed groups). (4)

"Postmodernists far predate Jordan Peterson in whining about 'cancel culture' and feminism run amok," Gillis notes (230). "Literature departments certainly had no issue conjoining postmodernist fads with conservative politics. At Yale, the 'gang of four' literature professors who pushed Derrida and deconstruction into Anglo-American literary criticism in the '70s were staunch conservatives" (239).

Alan Sokal himself now addresses Right-wing conferences to support transphobic ideas. Gillis argues that Science

Wars partisans like Sokal have slipped from being defenders of scientific or radical realism to being defenders of “fundamentalist realism,” Gillis’s term for a defense of social common sense; “at the end of the day his ar-

Whereas radical realism carves
reality at the joints, common
sense is what tells you the Earth
is flat.

gument is that we must hold onto a rickety concept of ‘sex’ for political reasons” (274). Whereas radical realism carves reality at the joints, common sense is what tells you the Earth is flat.⁵

Lived Experience

Gillis has what the postmodernists might call “lived experience” of the horrors that happen when antirealism is brought out of the academy into everyday life. He grew up in a Christian Scientist family active in Left-wing politics, where an abusive parent turned the New Age bromide that “you can change your own reality” into extreme gaslighting:

It should not be surprising that believing your thoughts entirely construct reality is a highway to abuse. Feeling mad? Brutally take it out on your children and then—when you feel a touch of guilt—you can *literally rewrite history* by believing it never happened.

The only hitch is if your children (or the material evidence) persist in claiming the thing you believe never happened did in fact happen. Such infringement upon your autonomy to believe what you like and live in the resulting personal reality is obviously *aggression* and *oppression*.... As our mother screamed in outrage sev-

eral times a week our entire childhood, “*What would it benefit you to believe that happened?!!*” (156–7)

In that milieu, these personal consequences were also political consequences.

I’m intimately connected to a number of old comrades who now struggle with life-long physical disabilities as a result of the batshit spiritualism and medical quackery frequently justified [in the 1990s–2000s] with postmodernist arguments. On the ground, I’ve repeatedly watched as militant struggles were derailed by folks convinced that abandoning any notion of objective reality was a more profound strike against oppression, a strike against the hegemonic and imperialist meta-physical beast that is truth. (7)

Similarly, his contempt for transphobic feminism’s reification of gender roles is buttressed by his experience as an eight-year-old boy hearing the volunteers at a women’s shelter that he could not be admitted, his gender rendering him “ontologically dangerous” (279).

Indulge me in getting autobiographical myself for a few paragraphs. I can sympathize with Gillis, having grown up in a secular but extremely controlling family whose reaction to my depression was to shove a self-help book entitled *BE HAPPY!* (imperative exclamation mark) in my face and demand that I do so to stop embarrassing them. My reaction to that, for most of my life, was precisely to “wall off my own epistemic universe.” You could also use Alan Moore’s line from *The Ballad of Halo Jones* about “pacing the Universe, looking for a way out.”

Physical reality wasn’t an anchor attaching me to sanity, but a prison with no hope of escape. I wanted to believe, as Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea’s *Illuminatus!* put it, that liberation could come through the imagination.⁶ For a decade or more, I believed in any sort of woo for about ten minutes at a time. In particular, I was a huge fan of the feminist neopagan

author Starhawk, whom Gillis mentions with particular derision (37). However, the point at which I could no longer be a neopagan was the point where I understood that the others in the room weren't talking about fairies and energy balls as a kind of "kayfabe" to access an alternate state of consciousness, but were *really seeing that shit*, or at least had talked themselves into believing in it.

I shamefacedly admit that, at the height of my fascination with such ideas, I remember falling into the trap Gillis describes of "pluralism" and "diversity" becoming gateways to reactionary conclusions. I remember being tempted to a sneaking regard for the nightmarish North Korean regime's ability to "opt out" of globalized civilization. Or to recoil at the Iranians fighting for freedom in 2009 because they would just become integrated into the neoliberal world.

Gillis's observation that

the reason that folks continually fall into the trap of thinking that believing random mysticism or conspiracy theories equates resistance to the powers that be is that it feels freeing to discard the harsh self-checks of epistemic diligence. (137)

reminds me of a flat earther I once knew. This character quite unironically told me that his belief system had "liberated" him to "revel in the mystery" of the cosmos, rather than having to face what Homer Simpson would describe as "stupid reality." As Gillis puts it in what is surely another autobiographical aside:

If you really want to be ungovernable, we are told, then forget organizing insurgent strikes on oil pipelines and instead addle your brain with psychedelics and annoy the local Food Not Bombs with your tales of machine elves. Suffice to say, in the struggle against power, such embrace of "difference" hasn't made a difference. (212)

Feelings aren't facts, some might say.

"Freedom isn't a feeling, it isn't poetry or a metaphysical declaration, it's a relation in the physical world," says Gillis (137). It is the *capacity to act*, and requires the *closest* connection to material reality.

Funnily enough, this attempt to find a "cheat code to reality" was exactly the same impulse that attracted me to the Critical Theory of the postgraduate humanities (Althusser, Lacan, Adorno, etc.). As Gillis understands, poststructuralism grew out of the yearning of the French intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s for "an opening of possibilities beyond the static totality of Stalinism" (17). But eventually I passed through that into a critical form of Marxism, which just got more critical as the years went by. Yes—I somehow ended up in a materialist philosophy through trying to find a way out of material reality. Talk about the "heart of a heartless condition."

A Difficult Read

Did the Science Wars Take Place? will be, for most of the people reading this review, a *difficult* read. Not because it's heavy on theory or jargon—although it does assume a certain level of background knowledge. For example, it's nowhere explained that the title is a reference to postmodernist godfather Jean Baudrillard's seminal provocation *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991). In fact, Baudrillard only gets one, passing mention in the text—and similarly, one of the main villains of the piece, Paul Feyerabend, is never given an introduction. The reader is expected to know who he is and what he did (nothing good).

One real difficulty is that it doesn't quite hang together as a unified text, in places resembling a compilation of a dozen or so of the author's provocative social media threads. The actual history of the "Science Wars" is only one thread of the book; certain chapters deal with various definitions of "antirealism," or a discussion

of “compression” as a key determinant of the validity of scientific theory. Gillis asserts this as a deliberate strategy: “To tackle any subsection of things would leave the overall metanarrative of postmodernism room to retreat or ignore” (309).

The book is legitimately *very funny* in places. I particularly appreciated the footnote about the contributions to mathematics of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber (146),⁷ as well as Gillis’s anecdote about his Christian Scientist mother squaring off

Radical realism as the
scientific worldview is thus the
anarchistic worldview; if you’re
not an anarchist and a rebel, for
Gillis, you’re not a scientist.

in a kind of “magical duel” with his occult goth girlfriend (85). On the other hand, its relentlessly polemical tone can get a bit overbearing in places—the number of times the bad guys in the text are described as “sneering” honestly begins to look like projection after a while.

A greater potential difficulty is this is an uncompromisingly anarchist work, and I use the term “uncompromisingly” with great precision. The book is less a narrative of the Science Wars than it is a rambunctious defense of “radical realism”—by which the author includes both the physical scientific method and anarchist politics.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the essence of Gillis’s argument is that science literally *is* anarchism. Science is not a pragmatic tool, but a worldview in and of itself: “an orientation, value, cognition style and attendant accumulation of strategies,

practice, tacit knowledge, and rich models” (147). Like anarchism, science rejects the universal validity of “democracy,” the popular will, or even consensus; “the regularities of the universe are coldly antidemocratic; scientific fact is ultimately not up for a vote. In many cases it’s not really even up for discussion” (126). A reality that really was infinitely malleable to social consensus would, as in democratic politics, tend to be dictated by whoever is best at “malicious strategies of negotiation” (153), and hence be inherently authoritarian:

someone can control you simply by cutting off your ability to recognize or approach the truth, locking you in a passive humble stasis, curtailing your ability to predict the results of your actions.... In countless ways, power studiously works to produce uncertainty. (212)

In contrast:

stubbornly holding onto belief in a fixed objective reality outside the social makes one a threat to the social fabric and almost every other participant in society. The physicalist is, in essence, deeply and viciously anti-social. They elevate something outside of society above society and partially suborn themselves to it.... We are not amenable to pressures upon our self-interest (or pressures to adjust our relevant interests) and so are not good citizens or participants in the game of power but rather get viewed as almost roadblocks, indigestible irritants. (153)

Radical realism as the scientific worldview is thus the anarchistic worldview; if you’re not an anarchist and a rebel, for Gillis, you’re not actually a scientist. “I firmly believe that scientists could stand to build a little more fire in their bellies and to cultivate self-perception as a tiny minority of righteous insurgents in a world that does not share their values or goals” (219).

As mentioned above, the mainstream Leftist reader will probably also be shocked by how down Gillis is on “pluralism.” But as we are discovering to our horror as

“information bubbles” proliferate in the social media era, a culture without a shared baseline of reality is incapable of collective action and prey to the fascist creep. Gillis would probably, with a wry smile, agree with the classic statement of the Catholic Church that “error has no rights.”

In the turn of the millennium anti-capitalist movements in which Gillis came up, the proletariat as universal class was replaced in the activist imagination with a patchwork quilt of irreducible differences against “the establishment”—Paul Kingsnorth’s “One No, Many Yeses.” For Gillis, this “abhorrent ‘tolerant pluralism’” (228) constructs the Left as a “coalition of underdogs” with “the unifying value of particularity” (47). This inevitably results in *campism*, a blind eye turned or justifications made for local or subaltern patriarchies, tyrannies, and imperialisms that happen to be our allies, in which women, queer people, or inconvenient objects of oppression become “zones of sacrifice” (318).

In contrast, the idea that individuals or small groups might have access to truth “threatens to spawn uncompromising political radicals who become convinced that we know better and are thus willing to take unilateral direct action” (291). One example of this would be the Three Way Fight strategy of anti-fascism, where the State and fascist movements are seen as distinct enemies that are themselves sometimes in conflict with each other, rather than interchangeable.⁸

Given these stakes, “failing to curb-stomp evil values is simply complicity in evil” argues Gillis (221). “This is not to fetishize violence as some universally superior tactic...but to highlight the irrational aversion to taking ideas seriously enough to act” (288). Again, it might be hard for some on the contemporary Left to grasp Gillis’s point of view: he doesn’t *want* the broadest possible mass movement. He doesn’t *want*

social peace.

While post-Stalinist socialists have talked ourselves out of “intellectual arrogance,” Gillis retorts that there is nothing more arrogant than scientific truth:

As any anarchist knows, our world is drowning in hesitant timidity. Most of the horrors we’re surrounded by are underpinned less by arrogance than by indoctrination in humility holding people back from revolt. The very first thing the liberal education system seeks to beat out of children is any confidence that might lead to action against injustice.... An individual giving an account of objective physical reality is resistant to argument or social pressure in a similar way to a tyrant who does not have to listen to a peasant. (125–6)

Foucault famously spoke about wanting to “shut the mouths of prophets and legislators”; surely, says Gillis, nothing could do that more effectively than Galileo’s *Ep-pur, si muove*—in the same sense, presumably, as the incontrovertible evidence of the tape recorder sometimes succeeded in shutting his mother’s mouth.

If Gillis would probably despise me for drawing comparisons in his vision to Marx and Engels, he’d probably do so doubly when I say that this moral and political absolutism reminds me of not only Catholic doctrine, but a more potty-mouthed version of Ayn Rand. *The Fountainhead* is an *exhilarating* read in places because it tells you that, yes, with bravery, smarts, and principles, you *can* be a hero when the whole world is full of stupid, malevolent conformists. The same is true for this book, with the added feature that it lacks a nasty rape scene.

It’s probably also worth mentioning that Gillis is specifically a *physicist* as opposed to any other vocation of scientist. Physics, as the study of the most fundamental forces of the universe, is surely the most “radical” (going to the roots) form of science in Gillis’s sense of the term:

Just as the universalism of physics threatens all other fields and discursive communities, the universalism of anarchism attacks all domination, not merely a few specific instances or expressions of it. (320)

Gillis would even proudly reclaim the term “reductionist” (86), to the point where philosophers and humanists might bristle at his categorization of the “hard problem of consciousness” as “a set of mystical confusions” (204). Gillis gives over most of a chapter to a dissection of the transphobic turn of Sokal and other “science warriors” as an example of *not being reductionist enough*—that is, of reifying social categories of “gender” and “sex.”

In contradiction to those who suggest that there is a natural human tendency to unreality, “kids are natural-born scientists, and how our education system beats it out of them” (175). Gillis emphasizes that for him, science is *beautiful* as well as true, in a sense that John Keats might have recognized. Some people might get excited by the illusory “liberation” of Lamborn Wilson’s vision of the universe as essential chaos; Gillis, on the other hand waxes rhapsodic about the experience of scientific discovery:

we gesture at this experience with terms like “elegance” or “beauty” or just run out into the city screaming “eureka!” overwhelmed by the orgasmic bliss of such undeniable contact with the real... reality outstrips our cognitive capacities, not in the sense of being unknowable like random noise, but in the sense of having deep order behind the initial chaos that we ourselves could not have imagined on our own. (179)

Gillis’s intransigent and uncompromising world is also one of startling joy.

Something for the Commies

A socialist without a sense of humor is going to be brought up with a jolt seeing Karl Marx referred to as a “monster” (231)—and then possibly confused by the last sentence

of the book being “We have a world to win.” And I don’t even want to think about how many times a *liberal*, pro-capitalist reader might grimace reading this text.

However, despite Gillis’s sharp characterization of Marx and his intellectual tradition, a Marxist, even one from the Leninist tradition, will find much to admire and even agree with in this book. He discusses class as a reality, albeit one

It might be hard for some to grasp Gillis’s point of view: he doesn’t *want* the broadest possible mass movement. He doesn’t *want* social peace.

much more nuanced and complicated than vulgar Marxists would have it (314–7). Similarly, his argument that the interest in “indigenous ways of knowing” from the postcolonial academy was a diversion from interrogating power relations and material conditions in indigenous communities would have Marxist heads vigorously nodding; as would his aside that “the truly ardent zealots of anti-universalism overwhelmingly share a relatively privileged class” (46). Meera Nanda’s “radical political project of physicalism to ‘desacralize’ and ‘demystify’” might be compared to the famous injunction to “the ruthless criticism of all that exists” (155). And to the *Communist Manifesto*’s vision as capitalist modernity as a state of affairs where “all that is solid melts into air,” including borders and injunctions against grasping reality:

This emergent universalism is the nightmare of fascists. All around the world, in every culture, bright kids leave their small towns and come back irreversibly transformed. No matter where they origi-

nate from or where they travel, they end up convinced of many of the same alien beliefs. Weird ideas that spontaneously arise and flourish the more their children travel, the more contexts they are thrust into. To the parochial reactionary watching these transformations, this effect is a lovecraftian horror. (217)

This is particularly refreshing where large constituencies on what I've called the "Conservative Left"⁹ have set themselves out as *anti-modernity* rather than anti-capitalist, dreaming of closed borders, fixed genders, cultures staying where they are, and a 1960s-style industrial economy.

Similarly, Gillis's argument that pluralism cannot *do* anything, due to "its allergy to the existence of simple facts or truths that might oblige action rather than unending open interpretation" (266), bears an ironic resemblance to Leninist arguments for "democratic centralism"—for example, Trotsky's famous quip about endless "discussion" being like drinking salt water¹⁰—or the classic arguments against the "Popular Front" in which differences are submerged at the expense of being able to take action, and in favor of the "United Front" for common action despite principled differences. Like the Marxists whom he despises (at least, I'd suggest, the good ones), Gillis wants to *make things happen*.

Gillis's invective against the form of antirealism that suggests that we can simply "dream patriarchy out of existence" (81–82) is refreshing in an era in which the Left seems to have abandoned the program fetishism of previous years with endless appeals to imagining a utopian future. On the other hand, he argues that physics' "radical focus on underlying root dynamics" is actually counterposed to Marxism's "inclinations...towards 'holism' and 'dialectics'" (32). In other words, for Gillis, Marxism is *not materialist enough*.

"Scientific socialism" of the twentieth century was a fraud of power, bearing a family resemblance to what the Thiels and

the Musks are trying to do today—under the rhetoric of objective reality, nothing but power-crazed mediocrities attempting to reorder the world by force of will. For Trofim Lysenko, substitute Curtis Yarvin or any of the lunatics who think that Artificial General Intelligence will replace all human labor "someday soon." But if you really believe in science, if you see the struggle for the new world in the terms of *The Internationale* as "reason in revolt"—is Gillis right? Do you have to, to put it in the pseudo-religious language used by some, "become an anarchist" if you believe in objective reality? These questions are left up to the reader, and I do recommend that you all become readers.

NOTES

1. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/william-gillis-bad-people>
2. <https://c4ss.org/content/59691>
3. www.instituteofunreality.com/
4. Some older thoughts from me on the subject can be found at the following blog: <https://chaosmarxism.blogspot.com/2020/09/science-like-nature-must-also-be-tamed.html>
5. This last is a quote from the *Principia Discordia*, a 1960s underground mystic text and ancestor of the "chaos magic" associated with Lamborn Wilson that attracts so much of Gillis's ire. I think it's very funny that it's appropriate to Gillis's argument here.
6. I'm relieved to note that Robert Anton (not Peter Lamborn) Wilson gets a positive mention from Gillis as having pushed back on the extreme antirealism of the *Semiotext(e)* milieu.
7. A riff on a well-known 2006 maths paper that discussed Kaczynski's number theory with a footnote describing him as "Better known for other work": <https://arxiv.org/pdf/math/0511366>
8. See an earlier review of mine on the subject: <https://buttondown.com/Fightback/archive/part-1-neither-horseshoes-nor-fishhooks-book/>
9. <https://buttondown.email/Fightback/archive/against/>
10. www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/10/sect.htm

The Fight Against Cops

BRIAN BEAN

WALKING DAILY TO THE GROCERY or the bus stop, one block from my home in Chicago, I pass a red octagonal traffic sign that has been improved with a sticker reading “Stop Cop City.” It is not uncommon to see the slogan of a movement over seven hundred miles away in Atlanta fighting to stop the construction of Cop City—otherwise known as the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center—stickered, painted, and wheat-pasted on surfaces around our Midwestern metropolis. The local struggle in Atlanta to stop Cop City became a national movement that resonated due to its resilience, creativity, flexibility, and popular militancy. In both its hope and its tragedy, Stop Cop City portends both the trajectory of intensification of the police state in a world in crisis and the contours of what our resistance can be like. We can learn from this organizing of everyday Atlantans, providing vital lessons for our movements against racist cops and cages.

Thankfully these lessons are recounted

No Cop City, No Cop World: Lessons from the Movement

MICAH HERSKIND
Mariah Parker, and Kamau Franklin, eds.
Haymarket, 2025

in the tremendous recent book, *No Cop City, No Cop World: Lessons from the Movement*, edited by Micah Herskind, Mariah Parker, and Kamau Franklin. The volume collects the voices and perspectives of participants

in a series of essays recounting the many angles of the struggle. The book really captures what it feels like to be in a movement, the electricity and solidarity

of people in motion, moving forward with great speed at times and crashing against entrenched barriers at others, of debates about strategy and tactics, of people finding roles and figuring out what to do and how to organize as they are being thrown forward by the pace of history. Along with its strength at capturing a historical snapshot of an inspiring movement, the book presents a series of powerful lessons about a struggle that is both local—against a cop training facility in Atlanta—and international, reflecting the intensification of the police state due to ongoing capitalist crisis and the movement from below against it.

Among the lessons we gain is seeing how policing is a ruling-class solution for the economic and political crisis driven by capitalism. We see how the integration of a Black bourgeois political class in cities like Atlanta produces few answers to structures of anti-Black racism in this country. We see how a united movement with a diversity of tactics can—to quote the editors in their

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introduction—"overwhelm the enemy on all fronts and with all tactics to make Cop City as untenable, toxic, and challenging as possible for those working to build it" (5). Atlanta forces us to take seriously the perfidy and determination of the police state and the repression used against us if challenged. Marlon Kautz—cofounder of Atlanta Solidarity Fund—lays this out starkly in his essay in which he points out that this challenge is "one which any future movement must prepare for if it intends to challenge the powerful and win" (242).

The Atlanta Way: Context for the Struggle

Like the red oak and Loblolly pines of Weelaunee forest defended by the movement, *No Cop City, No Cop World* firmly roots the current struggle in time and place. Mekko Chebon Kernell writes of the forests being the ancestral land of the indigenous Myskoke peoples stolen by the ravages of settler colonialism. The book includes an eviction notice a group of Myskoke organizers delivered to Atlanta's mayor Andre Dickens. No Cop World means Land Back. Layered upon the ghosts of settler-colonial dispossession, the Atlanta Press Collective describes how the current location was also the site of the Atlanta Prison Farm, tracing a "straight line of carceral violence" through six decades of abuse and torture that occurred there on literally hundreds of unmarked graves. Moving into the contemporary, the excellent essay by journalist Micah Herskind provides an understanding of the political economy of Cop City's construction. In an analysis evoking Ruth Wilson Gilmore's seminal work on the construction of California's mass-incarceration edifice, Herskind puts forward that "Cop City is the Atlanta ruling class's solution to a set of crises produced by decades of organized abandonment in the city" (13).

Herskind maps out changes in the city dating back to rapid, publicly funded private development and gentrification fueled by Atlanta's hosting of the Olympics in 1996. This exemplifies trends in many American cities related to the decline of manufacturing and the rise of finance, investment, and real estate (FIRE) capital. In the words of Sean Larson and Tyler Zimmer writing in *Rampant* (rampantmag.com/2020/02/who-runs-chicago/) writing about the Chicago example: "the central feature of FIRE is that it sees cities not as living environments for people, but as investment climates for capital." The result of this was that Atlanta policymakers worked to ensure that the city had a "good business climate" for investment. By 2022 outlets like *Money* and *Realtor Magazine* named Atlanta as the "best place to live" and the "top real estate market" in the country, while it was at the same time "proclaimed the most unequal city in the country" (15). This polarization is of course no accident. What is termed "the Atlanta Way" of strategic partnership between white economic elites and Black political leadership meant that the always racialized project of gentrification correlated with the organized economic abandonment of Black Atlantans. And of course, the shock troops of that project are the police, meaning that while affordable housing and homeless shelters were being closed, the Atlanta Police Department budget continued to grow—today accounting for a third of the city budget.

And then it exploded. The 2020 George Floyd and Breonna Taylor rebellions surged through the country's streets. In Atlanta, one focal point of the uprising became the police killing of Rayshard Brooks in a Wendy's parking lot in the weeks after the national protests began. The community immediately responded to the murder of Brooks by burning the Wendy's to the ground and initiating a community occupa-

tion of the parking lot in attempts to set up the Rayshard Brooks Peace Center (56). In response, Atlanta's corporate class demanded stability and thus the city and the private Atlanta Police Foundation moved to push forward the Cop City project to "provide a material investment in police capacity on the heels of the uprising, as a project to prepare for and prevent future rebellion" as well as an "ideological investment in the image of Atlanta...as a stable securitized city that will protect their interests" and as another example of repurposing public land, in this case valuable greenspace, into an opportunity for more development (14).

No Cop City is systematic in breaking down the ruling class interests driving Cop City. Mariah Parker's chapter in the book—"Boss Terror"—traces the completely overlapping list of corporations and CEOs who "slip plunder into the piggy banks of their local police foundations" to directly subsidize the sprawling training facilities (60 million in private dollars to Cop City), high-tech surveillance, and lethal gadgetry of the police. Eva Dickerson outlines how, along with the corporate elite, the city's "Black misleadership class"—including progressive Democratic party luminaries like Stacy Abrams and Raphael Warnock—"lends respectability to racial inequality."

One of the critical lessons is that "for organizers, obeying the law is not a reliable strategy for avoiding repression."

In Herskind's chapter and throughout the book the significance of Cop City as a localized iteration of a strategy being pursued nationally is continually noted. An estimated sixty-nine similar "Cop Cities"

are being planned in cities around the country as local governments aim to reinforce the police fix for the various consequences of capitalist crisis. I write about this in my recent book on policing (*Their End Is Our Beginning: Cops, Capitalism, and Abolition*, Haymarket, 2025) that "for the ruling class, all the problems created by this tumultuous situation [of capitalist crisis and revolt] have one primary solution: more police" (188). "State reliance," I write, "on repressive 'solutions' has intensified and will continue to do so" (188). Cop City, and the intensity that it was pushed through, is a starkly clear example of this.

"Get Up, Get Out, and Get Something": Lessons of Advances

From the heroic organizing in Atlanta we can draw relevant and poignant lessons for our organizing around the country. Chief among these is the strength of the movement in trying to operate on many fronts to pressure and contest the destruction of the forest and construction of the fancy pig pen. *No Cop City* outlines the impressive breadth of these. One example was that understanding the collusion of capital and mainstream media, and knowing that the "corporate media was not going to report accurately or favorably on opposition to a policing project that the city power structure had coalesced around," the Atlanta Community Press Collective (ACPC) worked to not just document the movement, and raise up alternative voices, but to craft a counter-narrative and "make the day-to-day workings of local government accessible to the public" as a tool for action (162). The ACPC continually responded to the narratives of mainstream media and Hannah Riley notes in her chapter that the city complained regularly about how the ACPC stymied their attempts to control the story. Ashley Dixon, an organizer with Southern Crossroads,

gives a how-to on the nitty-gritty work of canvassing, knocking on doors, holding townhalls, and family-friendly events with facepainting and bouncy houses to build the movement at the same time that others in the book outline the important role that direct sabotage of the machinery used in construction played. Paul Torrino's essay "The Saboteurs" and an anonymous account of one of the forest defenders who lived in the forest attempting to stop its destruction approaches the topic with a directness and groundedness that sometimes is absent from some pieces that seem to fetishize sabotage.

Torrino smartly points out that sabotage as a tactic is often deployed by left-wing activists as what he calls "militant reformism." The theory of change being that "if the project or industry becomes more expensive than the foreseeable profits or benefits, it will be canceled"—essentially a pressure campaign akin to a mass call-in campaign against a politician, albeit carried out with flame and baseball bat. In the example of Stop Cop City, Torrino outlines a different strategy of "fighting like win-

What does it mean that one of the powerful slogans that many of us chanted was the confident declaration that "Cop City will never be built!"

ning matters," meaning not just hoping to problematize the actions of the building of the forest but seeing the acts of direct action and sabotage as a component of trying to build a "widespread mass radicalization" antagonistic to the police and structures of

government. The breadth of the sabotage and the strength of the movement that refuses to be split by the "good protester / bad protester" dynamic and grows through these tactics reflects this. In her essay, Eva Dikerson writes of this dynamic, saying, "when we are closer than ever to cohering a mass of people who understand that we are at war with the state, the effectiveness of sabotage cannot be overemphasized." Torrino also smartly embeds this discussion of sabotage by describing the different and necessary roles that "underground" and "aboveground" activists play, noting that "underground" actions alone don't actually build the kind of "mass orientation" needed, even given the important roles that sabotage plays. Torrino provides one example in which a direct action at a construction company resulted in the employee coming out to tell the activists that their company was no longer involved "because you guys are a fucking nightmare and you broke all our fucking windows." Direct "nightmarish" action gets the goods. But "move things fast to change a few things right away, move things slow to change many in the long term," he writes.

The book outlines the many facets of this mass orientation, with descriptions of Morehouse and Emory students discussing building a student movement, ongoing legal challenges by long-term environmental groups like the South River Watershed Alliance, and a narrative of the important role that groups like Community Movement Builders played mobilizing the Black community as essential to contesting the Black Democratic party narrative. Organizers Kamau Franklin and Curtis Duncan offer a healthy description of solidarity and why they did not see it an issue that early on many of the people on the ground were white. The initial "lack of participation from the larger Black community" led to more self-critique of how to mobilize Black

organizations rather than the “pushing against non-Black support” that sometimes counterproductively arises in movements, particularly those more fixated on online spaces. The chapter talks about the amassing of this support, culminating in a large demonstration directed at the mayor, with Franklin taunting Mayor Dinkins with the rhetorical quip “is this enough Black people for you, Andre?”

Along with the coexistence of bouncy castles and the burning of construction vehicles, of sylvan encampments and indigenous stomp dances, one of the best examples of the Atlanta activists’ ability to create a “multi-tactical movement” aiming to “use all the tools at our disposal to stop Cop City in its tracks” was the organized petitioning attempting to force a public referendum on the matter (175). After a City Council meeting regarding the planned construction shattered the record for in-person turnout, resulting in a marathon fourteen hours of testimony of people speaking against Cop City, organizers launched a campaign to force a public referendum. With a clear unity of principles, the initiative to “Let the People Decide” was started in June of 2023 with no money, no offices, no Georgia-specific ballot-initiative experience, but with a team of talented organizers sure that “everyone knows their people and where they are, so go find them” (176). They set out to get the 58,000 signatures on a petition needed to call a public referendum on Cop City. And find them they did as tireless organizing and appealing to democracy allowed them to smash through their goal, getting 116,000 signatures. This underscores the mass popularity of the struggle as no politician in Atlanta’s history has ever gotten that many votes, indeed that amount is more than double the number of people who voted for the current mayor. Stopping the creation of this police playground was more popular than

any elected official in Atlanta’s history. But the attempt at referendum also underscores the blatant lack of democracy and intense repression in Atlanta, presenting massive challenges—from which another layer of lessons can be learned.

“Forever Hollerin’ ‘Hootie Hoo!’ When We See Cops’: Lessons of Setbacks

The intense reaction to the movement to stop the construction of the training facility presents a clear picture of struggles against the police. The chapter about the referendum—written by Mary Hooks and Kate Shapiro, two organizers with Southerners on New Ground—details how the mass, democratic, and public strategy resulting in record-breaking levels of support at council meetings and on the petition was met by the city blatantly ignoring democracy. The city deployed a vast array of administrative and bureaucratic obstacles to reject the clear mandate for a referendum from Atlanta’s residents, from the city clerk refusing to accept the petition, to city councilors encouraging Atlantans to call the police on canvassers, to legal challenges to verify signatures, to publicly publishing—essentially doxing—the personal information of all petition signatories, to the city council refusing to put the issue on the ballot, to many other “shenanigans.” On top of this the state also resorted to more brute methods of intimidation, violence, and murder.

In the chapter “Defending Our Movement,” Atlanta Solidarity Fund (ASF) founder Marlon Kautz describes some of the lessons. Kautz describes a substantial campaign of police terror designed to break up the movement. Regular raids by paramilitary SWAT police on homes and in the forest camps, filling children’s bedrooms with tear gas, people being arrested for writing No Cop City in chalk on sidewalks, mass arrests of people for attending

a benefit concert, terrorism charges and the use of the RICO Act to charge as racketeering activities as simple as flyering and labeling the ASF a “criminal organiza-



Manuel “Tortugueta” Terán

tion” (229). And, of course, most criminally the cops carried out the cold-blooded assassination of activist Manuel “Tortugueta” Terán as activists sat on the ground in their tent with their hands up in an early morning police raid. Kautz writes: “The powerful interests behind a project [like Cop City] can only advance by interfering with public participation in governance, and such interference requires repression. This is a major obstacle for the movement against Cop City, and one which any future movement must prepare for if it intends to challenge the powerful and win” (242).

One thing I found curious is that sadly Cop City was built before the book went to press. But this fact is essentially absent from the book. How do we, without losing the inspiring lessons that are also present—reflect on that fact in the context of the obstacles laid out. What does it mean that one of the powerful slogans of the movement that many of us chanted was the confident declaration that “Cop City will never be built!” Now that it has been built, how does that refract any of the lessons of the experience of those that fought, and those that suffered, and those that died. When we “fight like winning matters” how do we talk about our losses?

In any case, one of the critical lessons Kautz shares about Stop Cop City that we should all solemnly heed is that “for organizers, obeying the law is not a reliable

strategy for avoiding repression” (244). This insight is essential for movements to really grasp: it is *how much* our activity materially or ideologically threatens those whom we oppose and not the legal definitions of the activity that determines whether the state will act against us. Therefore, he writes, “a plan to avoid repression is a plan to lose. Movements that intend to win must plan from the beginning to withstand repression” (245). To do so activists must build an infrastructure in advance to prepare for the repression bound to occur should their movement actually pose a challenge to the powerful. They should also try to reframe this work beyond just ways to reduce the harm caused by the forces of repression but attempting to “approach each new attack as an engine for future growth” by always looking to revise and expand movement practices to try to expose the vulnerability of a state resorting to more blatant forms of repression. On the last point, which seems quite important, I would have appreciated more concrete description from Kautz. Most critically though Kautz, and many others in the book describe the importance of the movement resisting the distinction of “good” or “bad” protesters to push back against the criminalization of dissent that these experiences of Stop Cop City show us are always going to be deployed against our movements even if care is taken to “obey the law.”

Resistance Is Everywhere

The Stop Cop City movement writes like fiery letters upon Belshazzar’s wall the stakes of what our movements for abolition are up against. In Atlanta, we see the local government cast democratic norms to the side, deploy a massive campaign of legal challenges and obfuscation, mobilize the entirety of corporatized media as stenographers for the police, wage a campaign of police harassment and arrest, attack with

militarized SWAT raids, mass arrests, issue terrorism charges, essentially outlaw movement organizations, and assassinate an activist. All of this because regular citizens didn't want a forest to be razed and a fancy training facility built for the police. The state carried out a massive, multi-faceted campaign of repression deploying an arsenal of resources and tactics was meted out even though what was at stake was not even as core as something like taking away the cops' guns, decreasing their ranks, holding them accountable, or even making it more difficult to carry out their violent behavior. The state attacked, with lethally

Policing is a ruling-class
solution for the economic
and political crisis driven by
capitalism.

violent force, in reaction to a movement merely attempting to halt the cops' *expansion* of new tools and resources. If Cop City was not built it would be—as I write in my book—“a minor setback for capital, but [the state's] response was violence and murder. If we strike closer to the heart of their power and wealth, we can only expect a heavier hand of repression. We know the ferocity with which they are capable” (207).

We must prepare.

This expansion of cops' ability to use violence, this intensification of the police state is in some ways a long arc if one looks at—for example—the visible difference between a blue-coated beat cop of the late nineteenth century, and the stormtrooperesque super soldier of today's departments. But this intensification of the police state is—as *No Cop City, No Cop World* lays out—one that is a product of capitalist crisis, a crisis that portends to not only not go away but to deepen. “The stakes seem to be rising for both sides,” writes Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her expansive contribution to the collection, and what is at stake is clearly class war. And, as she reminds us, “you can't reform a war away” (278). Rather the war must be won by smashing the police state, the cops, and the very means that our opponents use to carry out reaction, repression, and counterrevolution.

The reason that the struggle to Stop Cop City has such importance is that it reflects the struggles of the future. “Cop City Is Everywhere,” the book's editors write in the conclusion, but also “Resistance Is Everywhere.” As a tremendous document capturing the heartbeats and voices of a struggle from which we have a lot to learn to educate us on the battles of the class war we are currently fighting, it is a compass for liberation. The voice of the martyr Tortuguita is one of those contained in the text: “When all hope seems lost, Class war.” Struggle is hope, and our hope is in struggle.

Grandin's New View of the New World

PETER RANIS

LATIN AMERICA HISTORIAN Greg Grandin, always aware of the subtexts of events and processes, combines a literary and cultural flair that makes *America América: A New History of the New World* both readable and enjoyable. His book is a carefully documented and choreographed study of the Western Hemisphere from Patagonia to Alaska. Grandin divides his 700-page tome into fifty chapters with seductive titles, often ironic and humorous, that keep the reader engaged, surging forward with continuous interest. Yet it is a dense book meant to be read slowly while evaluating its themes.

Rarely do historians of South America have the breadth to study Latin America and North America in depth as Grandin does. He gives us a history that continually parallels developments in South and North America as well as continually consider-

ing the impact of European politics into and through World Wars I and II. The author is confident that his book will be a dramatic departure from past histories of the Americas. He believes it is more than a history of the Western Hemisphere, but rather a study that connects the global order through the present conjuncture. It does.

Grandin shows how our present-day North America necessarily turned out as it has because of the changing twists and turns among British, French, Spanish, and U.S. interests. Grandin shares the view of Venezuelan Francisco de Miranda, who fought in the U.S. War of Independence, the French Revolution, and the Latin American wars of independence, that the U.S. upper-class business and political elites were provincial and pedestrian. When Jefferson and Adams spoke of *America* they were referring to the United States. When Miranda and Simón Bolívar used the word *América* they meant all the Americas, north and south.

The introduction itself is a dense forecasting of the book's novel interpretation of the historical development of the Western Hemisphere. Grandin rightly gives much space to the powerful critique

America América: A New History of the New World

GREG GRANDIN
Penguin Press, 2025

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by the theologian Bartolomé de las Casas of the dehumanization of the indigenous Americans in his early- to mid-sixteenth century appraisals of the Spanish conquest. He saw the Native Americans as very human and the equal of their enslavers. Grandin quotes las Casas as writing, "The Spanish came like starving wolves, tigers, and lions, and for four decades have done nothing other than commit outrages, slay, afflict, torment, and destroy." The massacre of indigenous peoples represented, "the greatest genocide in history," wrote historian Tzvetan Todorov. It is estimated that the indigenous population was decimated by 85 to 90 percent in a hundred and fifty years, upwards of 56 million people perishing by the mid-seventeenth century. Las Casas believed the entire conquest as "unjust, iniquitous, tyrannical, and worthy of the fires of hell." But Las Casas lost the debate on his defense of indigenous people to other Catholic theologians who saw the conquest as just and believed that the Spanish monarchs had both the spiritual and temporal power of sovereignty over the world's people, both believers and heathens.

Grandin then turns his attention to the Puritan settlements of North America. As in Spanish America, the English plundered, destroyed, and, above all, killed and drove out the indigenous peoples. In fact, the English considered the land as being an empty place—*vacuum domicilium*—that could be pacified and settled at will. As opposed to the Spanish religious debates about the role of Latin American indigenous peoples, in North America there were no theological misgivings about the terrors unleashed in New England.

Grandin gives important space to John Locke's *Two Treaties of Government* as one of the bedrock theories of government that saw in the new settlements of North America an application of his theory of 1689 as applicable to the creation of a civil society

that existed prior to politics and money. Locke's views were based on the belief that this "New World" was pristine, inhabited by "artless peoples whose simplicity offered a window back in time to what Europe was like before written records and political society." As the colonists decimated the original inhabitants of North America, they soon embarked on the importation of slaves to build the new society.

Grandin turns his attention again to Latin America where the break with Spain was led by the privileged *criollos* but the passion for independence came from below—from the truly oppressed and dispossessed. Simón Bolívar made clear the connection to the United States. In his first public speech on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth of July (1811), he spoke of the need to break the "ancient chains." Crucially, Grandin makes clear the marked differences of the first South American constitutions from those of the United States as they asserted social rights prior to the rights of "life, liberty, property and other natural rights." By 1819, Bolívar led a unified revolt that helped found Gran Colombia, uniting what are now Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, northern Peru, and western Guyana. Mexico achieved its independence in 1821. Subsequently, in Latin America, there were continental crises and disunity.

In the United States, European powers were removed and the rights of Native Americans were swept away. While in North America many Native Americans were exterminated or perished from disease, with the survivors confined to reservations, in South America, indigenous peoples, be they Mapuches or Mayans or others, were permitted to remain in their historical lands based on *uti possidetis*, the rights of possession, defined by legal demarcations as derived from Roman law.

Latin America's later confederations did not achieve their aspirations, despite

the Panama Congress of 1826, which did not eventuate in unity but in splintered republics. The United Provinces of Central America broke into Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, and war between Brazil and Argentina led to the creation of the Republic of Uruguay. The death knell of a Latin American confederation was evident and so noted by Bolívar's last letter to a friend in which he commented that after two decades of endless warfare, he was certain of only a few things: America is ungovernable, to serve the revolution is as futile as plowing the sea, and history is running in reverse; America is heading toward "primitive chaos."

The two Americas were clearly divergent by the nineteenth century. The separateness among the South American countries no doubt led to the establishment of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which warned the European powers against further attempts at intervention in Latin America. Though the European possessions in the Caribbean remained, Mexico, Chile, Gran Colombia, and Argentina were to be free of European colonization. The United States' sense of universal ideals was mixed with westward expansion at the expense of Native Americans and Mexicans. In Latin America there tended to be less race war than class war against the landed barons. Grandin writes that in nineteenth-century Latin American countries such as Brazil, racial frontier violence was never as central a component of national identity as it was for the United States.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Latin Americans began to distinguish themselves from the Anglo-Saxons of the North and not in benign terms. Slowly, by the end of the nineteenth century, increasingly after the Spanish-American War, the North Americans were censured as Yankee imperialists. Carlos Calvo and José Martí more and more criticized the Northern

behemoth. With the United States' growing imperial taste for intervention in Latin America, Carlos Calvo, an Argentine jurist, published what became known as the Calvo Doctrine, which held that foreigners in Latin America were owed the rights of national citizens but were not awarded additional rights, like calling on their government to intervene politically or militarily on their behalf. José Martí had warned that a U.S. war with Spain would not be to free Cuba but to take Cuba. Cuba did manage to maintain its nominal independence, saddled as it was by the Platt Amendment, but the United States began to be seen as a New Empire in the making. Marines landed in Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras for short periods and occupied Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic for decades.

In essence, the first major rebuttal against U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere was the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910. As Grandin writes, "It was a revolt by a poor country not just against Anglo-Saxon capitalism but also against its justificatory myths and enabling laws." The United States had billions of dollars invested in Mexico in mines, utilities, agricultural land, ports, and factories, and North Americans living in Mexico owned half of all Mexican property value. Francisco Madero, the leader of the uprising against Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship, was with the complicity of U.S. ambassador Henry Lane Wilson removed from office and later assassinated by Victoriano Huerta, leader of the military coup. The death of Madero unleashed another rebellion that led to years of bloody struggle led by the historic figures of Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, and Venustiano Carranza opposing the Huerta regime. The struggles pitted "*los de abajo*," the underdogs, against the landed and capital interests and caused the death of more than a fifth of Mexico's

people. Woodrow Wilson, as Grandin writes, “drifted left” and aligned with the mass uprising representing the Mexican peasants, workers, nationalists, and socialists. Mexicans, Wilson was quoted as saying to journalist Walter Lippmann, have the “sacred right of Revolution.” And he proved as much by landing marines in the port of Veracruz ostensibly because Mexican officials failed to salute the U.S. flag on a docked ship; U.S. firepower inflicted hundreds of deaths on the Huerta military garrison.

The revolutionary forces who defeated Huerta then split, with the Conventionists of Zapata and Villa fighting against Carranza’s Constitutionalists. With the assassinations of Zapata and Villa, the more moderate leaders of the Mexican Revolution—Carranza and Álvaro Obregón—won the revolution and wrote the radical Constitution of 1917, a document of historical significance.

The Mexican Revolution culminated in the world’s first democratic-socialist constitution. The constitution’s Article 123 gave the state preeminent powers as well as social and labor rights for its citizens unknown elsewhere. It provided a guaranteed minimum wage, equal pay for men and women, and welfare, education, and health care provisions. It also protected the right to unionize, strike, and receive social security upon retirement.

Article 27 was a centerpiece of progressive legislation. Land and water belonged to the nation and couldn’t be alienated, and the new legislation provided the resources for the societal benefits of the Mexican people. One of the article’s most advanced provisions gave the state the right to confiscate private property to distribute to landless peasants in agrarian communes known as *ejidos*. It allowed the Mexican government the right to regulate private property on behalf of the public interest, what could

be considered an early form of eminent domain.

Finally, Article 3 provided that the state would provide free, secular, and mandatory education through high school.

The 1917 Mexican Constitution preceded the first Soviet Constitution of 1924. So when Luis Cabrera, an intellectual close to president Carranza, was asked if Bolshevism was a problem in Mexico, Cabrera answered that Mexico had nothing to fear from Bolshevism because its “best part” had already been “incorporated” into Mexico’s Constitution.

In the United States in the 1930s, FDR established the “Good Neighbor” policy, initially related to the world but subsequently directed at the Western Hemisphere, that is, giving up the right of intervention. This sentiment was well intentioned but was followed by contradictory U.S. policies after World War II. Importantly, Grandin reminds his readers that fascism stalled and political liberalism and social welfare reforms took place not because of a socialist or labor party. FDR’s “New Deal” made significant changes in working-class lives as his multiracial and multiclass coalition swelled.

Under FDR, the United States was largely successful in creating an anti-fascist majority, as was progressive Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas, who called the largest protest march in Mexican history, condemning Germany’s persecution of the Jews as well as providing two million dollars to aid the Spanish republicans, 40,000 of whom went to Mexico after Franco’s victory. Again Grandin demonstrates his capacity to connect Latin America not only to the United States but to the world at large. As a poignant reflection, Grandin writes of the ideological and heroic commitment of socialist Salvador Allende, health minister in Chile’s popular front government during World War II, and Communist poet Pablo

Neruda in saving Spanish exiles and Jewish refugees entering Chile.

On the U.S. front, Vice President Henry Wallace, a staunch progressive close to FDR and head of the Board of Economic Warfare in 1941, saw the future for Latin America was to help win the war but to “win the peace later on.” In 1943, Wallace sought to broaden the New Deal in Latin America to keep conservatives in check, traveling eleven thousand miles, visiting factories, mines, and plantations. Received by enthusiastic crowds, he told a rally, “We are of the New World, we North and South Americans.” Elsewhere he gave the message, “The working population of the continent is the strongest and the only safeguard of democracy against fascism.” As many readers will know, the tour hastened Wallace’s marginalization and paved the way for the red-baiting Senator Harry Truman to replace him on the Roosevelt ticket in 1945, affecting the ending and aftermath of World War II.

Interestingly, Latin American nations, perhaps because of the impact of the Mexican Constitution, approached the United Nations meetings with their focus on political, social, and economic rights, including the right to work, to organize labor unions, to enjoy rest, leisure time, and adequate pay, and to have access to basic needs of food, housing, health care, and education. Most of these proposals became part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Twenty of the fifty nations that signed the Charter of the United Nations in 1945, bringing the organization into existence, were from Latin America. Latin America also had a significant impact on the post-World War II military alliances. In 1947, the United States became a member of the Rio Pact, a hemispheric mutual defense treaty. In 1949, as the Cold War emerged, NATO was established modeled on the Rio Pact. In 1954, SEATO was formed,

also based on the Rio Pact. John Foster Dulles, an early stalwart of the Cold War, said, “there would have been no NATO, no SEATO, no Rio Pact without the contribution of Latin America,” while Churchill said, “There would have been nothing,” but for Latin America.

Grandin then turns to a theme that has always intrigued economists the world over. It was Latin Americans, mainly economists, reacting to the U.S. and international lending organizations and the various policies that were aligned with them and others, that departed from the classic economic principles of international trade. I would emphasize that the debates revolved around the uneven terms of trade between the United States’ high value-added exports and the lower-priced raw materials and agricultural exports of Latin America. For the Latin American economies, the ascendancy of the U.S. economy and its multilateral dominance became the problem. Raúl Prebisch, founder of Argentina’s Central Bank, became critical to this debate. Prebisch contended that there was a structural imbalance between the manufacturing and raw material-exporting countries. Again I would add that Prebisch argued that binational trade locked lesser-developed countries into continual underdevelopment. Prebisch’s most famous proposition regarded the need for Latin American economies to embark on import substitution industrialization. The Latin American economies had to grow inward and industrialize.

The assassination of Jorge Gaitán, a very popular progressive candidate for the presidency of Colombia in 1948, was a major watershed event in Latin America and had its roots in the past and its impact going forward. The elimination of this popular anti-establishment leader led to the Bogotazo uprising that destroyed much of central Bogota and put oligarchic Latin

American governments into the crosshairs of future reformers and revolutionaries. His death resulted in years of struggles between liberals and conservatives known as *La Violencia*. It has always been significant for me that at the time of Gaitán's murder Fidel Castro was in Bogota as part of a contingent of activist students. Its impact on Fidel Castro could be measured in that in only five years he began the successful 26th of July movement that ousted Fulgencio Batista, military dictator of Cuba.

Grandin notes that at the same time, the Bogotazo fell in famously with the deepening Cold War in which the United States was engaged in a global anti-communist campaign. With the support of many Latin American dictators in the 1950s, namely, Batista, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Duvalier in Haiti, Stroessner in Paraguay, Odría in Peru, Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela, and Somoza in Nicaragua among others, the United States began a far-flung counterinsurgency campaign against worker and peasant mobilizations in Latin America. So Latin America became one sphere for the deepening of the Soviet versus U.S. struggle for world domination. One of the most blatant cases of U.S. imperial intervention was the 1954 overthrow of the progressive Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz by a cabal made up of the CIA and the United Fruit Company because Árbenz's land reform program threatened to distribute land to peasants working the banana plantations. Árbenz was ousted and Castillo Armas was installed as president by the CIA after a military-backed invasion from Honduras. Grandin writes of the reversal of Árbenz's policies: the execution of activists, imprisonment of peasants, and the resulting decades-long civil war. I would add that Fidel Castro was in Mexico at the time of the ouster of Arbenz preparing for the rebellion against the Batista dictatorship.

Patterned after the U.S. involvement in

Guatemala, the Eisenhower government followed by JFK's government thought the interventionist model could be repeated. In Cuba, Fidel Castro's policies of land reform via the expropriation of landed estates, and nationalization of utilities and U.S. industrial interests gave rise to U.S. government fears. When U.S. oil companies in Cuba refused to process oil the Soviet Union was sending to Cuba, Castro nationalized the refineries and Eisenhower cut Cuba's sugar quota, which led to more confiscation of U.S. property. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 resulted, this time, in the U.S.-supported Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 (a notorious failure). But U.S.-backed coups were successful in the 1960s in other Latin American countries such as the Dominican Republic, Guatemala (again), Honduras, and even in the much larger country of Brazil in 1964.

Grandin writes that by the end of World War II, Latin America had influenced the great powers, at least theoretically, to recognize the sovereign equality of all nations and abrogate the doctrine of conquest and it provided a model for a world system of mutual interests and respect. I would argue that in practice Latin American governments, though achieving independence early in the nineteenth century, have largely had no answer to U.S. imperial dominance in the Hemisphere, as Grandin himself explains. Grandin could also have spelled out the important intellectual dependency writers who have made a major contribution to political economy theory adopted worldwide. Writers such as Andre Gunder Frank, Fernando Cardoso, and Enrique Faletto whose works in the 1960s and 1970s were very impactful in their critiques of the modernization theory promoted by W.W. Rostow. Rostow had written of the lock-step five stages of modernity from traditional economies, preconditions for takeoff, drive to maturity,

and high mass consumption. Dependency theorists argued that this theory ignored the contexts of Latin American dependent, colonial structures and uneven terms of trade. Grandin later in this chapter writes that Fidel Castro took positions against the orthodoxy of Soviet Union communism becoming too «ecclesiastic.» I believe there is much evidence that it was rather Che Guevara who made the major critique of the Soviets as supporting national interests and coexistence. This has been corroborated by Castro's creation of a Cuban Communist Party structure similar to that of the Soviet Union, Cuba's principal benefactor.

In Grandin's final chapter, he writes of the destruction of Chilean socialism by the Augusto Pinochet coup of 1973 and the economic shock theory emanating from Milton Friedman's so-called Chicago Boys at the University of Chicago who proposed deregulation, privatization, and austerity. I would add that the ending of the Allende experiment with democratic socialism reverberated around Latin America and was furthered by coups in Argentina and Uruguay with the radical restructuring of their economies and the triumph of liberalism and, later, neo-liberalism.

Greg Grandin finishes his massive tome with an epilogue, not a conclusion, perhaps rightly since his book is an important epic, a dramatic and studious rendition of the two Americas. In his final commentaries, he necessarily has to turn to a deepening of a unilateral U.S. interventionism not confined to Latin America but globally as well. While in the United States itself, a financialized, deindustrialized economy has led with the rise of Walmart and Amazon to the end of Main Street. The United States ramped up its police and military spending, in a sense occupying its own country, magnified, of course, in Donald Trump's second administration, that would

back-end Grandin's book. I believe Grandin is a bit too sanguine that Latin America continues to hold the authoritarian right at bay with a coherent social-democratic agenda. Yes, this is true for Mexico under Claudia Sheinbaum, Brazil under Lula da Silva, and Colombia under Gustavo Petro, and others, but there are serious outliers like Javier Milei of Argentina, Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, and many others. But Grandin adds an important perspective in which he eulogizes Latin America for being that part of the world where the left most continues its "fidelity to universal humanism." He adds that Latin America today is the most peaceful continent in terms of state-to-state relations, and its social-democratic heritage is often led by indigenous-led social movements and political parties. The second proposition would face many counter arguments I suspect.

Grandin in his epilogue writes that Latin America's commitment to a social-democratic left and its progressive gender, race, and sexuality equality outlook is because of its struggle against Spain that combined independence with emancipation from subsequent governmental repression. This seems too optimistic a historical view given that it has in the two centuries often experienced oligarchic rule and civil society repression as Grandin so well describes. His more convincing conclusion notes the difference between Latin America humanism and North America's long history of denials of indigenous and Black rights and its later oppressions within civil society. Grandin closes his magnum opus with a positive take on a promising social-democratic Latin America with a negative regression worldwide led by the United States but including, among others, the authoritarian nationalisms of Russia, China, and Israel.

War, Masculinity, and Class Divisions in the Ukrainian Military

Reflections of a Ukrainian Volunteer

ELIZABETH RAPAPORT

THIS SHORT MEMOIR CHARTS THE PATH of a forty-year-old Ukrainian writer and journalist who volunteers for military service days after Russia invades on February 24, 2022. He reaches this decision much to his own surprise while fleeing Kiev with his wife and children. The author describes himself at the time of the invasion as a pacifist, a leftist, a feminist, and a man deeply attached to his children. Artem had been the stay-at-home father of his seven- and nine-year-old sons. I would add to this description that Artem is a moralist committed to being as honest as possible with himself and his readers about the choice he makes to join the army and its impact on how he understands himself and his country.

Artem is a patriot who regards the Russian invasion as a monstrous war crime. He is also something of a romantic nationalist. Artem idealizes and feels great compassion

for and guilt toward “real” Ukrainians, the peasants and manual workers, the salt of the Ukrainian earth. The American equivalent would perhaps be respect and affection for “the heartland.”

He contrasts these real Ukrainians with his own caste or class, professional and commercial city dwellers. Artem is proud to be a volunteer and proud

that leftists of his class were more likely to volunteer than centrists. He is shamed by the fact that the majority of volunteers are working class. Working-class men also fill the ranks of the military because they are drafted—at increasing rates as the war drags on—while middle-class men can readily evade. Artem comes to regard the decision to serve for men like him who have a choice as the test of manhood.

No American generation has faced the choice between serving and avoiding military service since the draft ended after the Vietnam War. But thousands of Americans who feel some pull toward joining up face this choice each year. With his country under brutal attack, Artem sees this choice as primal, existential, for himself as a man. He is of course aware that women volunteer; but it is men who face the choice between

Ordinary People Don't Carry Machine Guns, Thoughts on War

ARTEM CHAPEYE

Trans. Zenia Tompkins
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joining or shirking while other men go into the army. For women it is a supererogatory choice: No one expects women to serve. Artem discovers that for him the shame of shirking is unbearable while the risks of war and the price of separation from his family can be borne. It is striking that early in the timeline of this memoir Artem resists judging other men's choices, but after soldiering for two years he renders judgment on the men of his class solely on the basis of whether they volunteer.

Artem is ill prepared for the national and personal crisis caused by the invasion. Despite the Russian armies massed on three sides of his country and eight years of fighting and occupation in the east, Artem was persuaded that a land war in twenty-first-century Europe was "inconceivable"—until bombs fell on Kiev. Something like this attachment to the idea of social evolution or progress, this cognitive dissonance, the idea that a reactionary overthrow is not really possible, infects a good deal of elite liberal thinking in the United States today. The little thought Artem had given to that possibility of invasion led him to expect that he would flee in keeping with his pacifist outlook. Yet within two or three days he

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decides to enlist. When he tells his wife he finds that she had already understood that he would join the army.

Artem's decision to enlist is precipitated by the experience of "Spanish shame." "Spanish shame" is the literal translation of

a Ukrainian idiom with no English equivalent. On the first night of their journey west Artem's family stops in a village where he witnesses a middle-aged villager called back to military service. That man's son is passing through town on his own flight west. Knowing of his father's recall, the twenty-something middle-class son skulks and hides and continues his flight. "Spanish shame" is "the feeling you get when someone else does something shame-worthy, but you're the one who feels ashamed" (18). Artem sees the father uncomplainingly go back into the military while the son takes advantage of the ease with which middle-class as opposed to working-class men can avoid service.

Middle-class advantage derives in part from greater resources. The Ukrainian draft system also advantages the middle class. A man registers at the place of his birth, his official domicile. The bureaucracy loses track of the mobile middle classes, people like Artem and the villager's son. They don't live in their birthplaces. When Artem sees the father show up and the son hide, he is overcome with Spanish shame, shame for the action of another. The son allows another man, his father in this case, to go as it were in his place; he evades danger and hardship because other men go.

Artem likens his choice of whether to leave his family or join the army to the seminal Sartrean fable of the youth who must decide between joining the French resistance or caring for his aged mother. The analogy is far from exact. As much as his children need their father, they have Artem's admirable and competent wife to care for them. His pain at separation from his sons is the hardest thing Artem endures in the military. Artem subscribes to Existentialism. Like Sartre he believes, and his account of two years in the military accordingly documents, that you become the choices you make; they shape your character

and outlook. Artem scrupulously and at some length examines his decision to join. He distinguishes his choice from that of others who in his estimation deserve more honor, display more courage. For example, men who come back from abroad to join or men who unlike Artem are in combat units. For men who have faced this choice or can imagine facing it, these moral vignettes may be acutely evocative.

For other readers the memoir would likely be of most interest because of what it reveals about Ukrainian society and its army. Ukrainian military volunteers skew older than in typical militaries. Many volunteers are men forty to sixty years of age, fathers and grandfathers. Their bodies and their frames of references are not those of younger men we expect to find under arms. Their backs ache. They pass around pictures of their children and grandchildren, not their girlfriends. Military life also reveals the class fissures in Ukrainian society. The peasants and manual workers volunteer and suffer the draft, the middle classes may choose to volunteer; the plutocrats and their children are nowhere to be seen.

When the invasion starts, Artem is filled with love for every Ukrainian and every blade of Ukrainian grass. After two years in the army he loves only his comrades in arms. Eerily, after the first few months of the war, it becomes possible to live a fairly normal civilian life in Kiev, despite civilian casualties and forays to bomb shelters. Coming to Kiev on leave as a seasoned soldier, Artem cannot tolerate the normal rhythms of the city and the enjoyment of small luxuries around him. He has developed as much contempt for men who “fight on the economic front” or “the cultural

front” as for those who fled the country. Nor can he bear the memories of his own pre-war life sparked by his return to the city. He cuts his leave short to return to his unit. He is comfortable only with his comrades.

His feminism is also tested. Before the

His pain at separation from his sons is the hardest thing Artem endures in the military.

war he had easy answers: Equality of the sexes. At the beginning of the war, he is careful to acknowledge the contribution of women caring for children on their own while sending money and supplies to aid the military effort. After two years in the army, he is struck by the persistence of sex roles in war. Men go off to fight while women stay with the children. This is as true in his own pre-war progressive circle of friends as it is for Ukrainians of all classes. He is unsure where his revisionist thinking will lead him and hesitates to express it. He notes but does not elaborate on the presence of many feminists among the female volunteers. Nor does he elaborate on the bitter remark, “If being killed or disabled in a war is the ‘price of male privilege’ it is a high price to pay” (98).

Artem is still in the army at the close of this memoir. He is a very different man in many ways, although still very much a self-examining moralist. He is a soldier, albeit one who desperately misses his children.

Black History in the Age of Trump

BRIAN WARD

IN RECENT YEARS, THE NATIONAL conversation about race, history, and education in the United States has become increasingly polarized. The rise of right-wing movements and the resurgence of Trumpism have been fueled, in part, by a mythical narrative of American history—one that presents the United States as an unblemished beacon of freedom and progress. This narrative, however, omits the truths of the nation: the legacies of slavery, segregation, settler colonialism, and systemic racism. In the wake of the massive Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of 2020 a national conversation about race was opened. Since 2020, much like in the past, there has been a concerted effort by reactionary groups led by the MAGA movement to suppress or censor discussions about these uncomfortable truths. It is within this context that Brian Jones's book *Black History Is for Everyone* emerges as a vital and timely intervention.

Historically, periods of social upheaval have often led to renewed attention to marginalized voices and narratives, the BLM movement is no different. The current backlash has taken center stage of

Black History Is for Everyone

BRIAN JONES

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late. Efforts to introduce curricula such as Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies have faced fierce opposition in states like Florida, where lawmakers and activists have sought to restrict or ban discussions of race, often labeling them as Critical Race Theory (CRT). The term CRT has been weaponized in public discourse, used to attack any attempt to address systemic racism or the realities of Black life in America. According to reporting from *Education Week*, dozens of states have introduced or passed legislation aimed at curtailing the teaching of race and racism in schools.¹ The AP African American Studies course itself has been the subject of controversy and political maneuvering.²

Despite this backlash the younger generation is craving this type of education, one that doesn't sugarcoat and one that tells all sides of the story. As an educator in the Madison, Wisconsin, area I see this every day, even my most conservative student is interested in looking at all perspectives of the story. In addition to the required courses, I teach electives like African American Studies and Indigenous Studies and the interest in those classes has only increased since the 2020 uprisings.

Black History Is for Everyone begins by asserting that Black history is not a niche subject reserved for a single month or a specific group of people. Instead, it is a vital

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part of the collective human story, shaping societies, cultures, and institutions across the globe. The book's central thesis is that understanding Black history is essential for everyone—not just for Black individuals or communities—because it offers critical insights into the development of modern society, the persistence of inequality, and the possibilities for a more just future. Jones says,

Ultimately, I came to believe that Black history is for everyone, because Black history is an invitation to rethink everything. But learning to see the world differently, learning to rethink what you think you know, isn't easy, and it doesn't always feel good. (p. 4)

This rethinking is what the right-wing fears the most. If young people and beyond start to question the origins of this country and the narrative that they are fed throughout their lives this could further radicalize them to think a better future is possible.

Black History Is for Everyone succeeds in making complex historical topics accessible without oversimplifying them. One of the most compelling aspects of *Black History Is for Everyone* is its emphasis on the dangers of historical amnesia. Jones warns that attempts to sanitize or erase the difficult parts of America's past do a disservice to students and society as a whole. The book argues that confronting the realities of slavery, segregation, and ongoing racial injustice is necessary for building a more just and equitable future. By engaging with the "hard history" of the United States, students develop the skills to think critically about the present and to challenge the myths that underpin reactionary movements

The book is broken up into four parts, Race, Nation, Revolution, and Education following the Black experience and its diversity throughout. Jones engages in the debates in the Black community and the hopes and dreams that were set forth by those communities. This history ranges

from making democracy a reality to public education.

When talking about the early development of race in the Americas, Jones notes that it wasn't a foregone conclusion that segregation, permanent slave status, and other atrocities would be a reality. Though people were stolen from Africa and enslaved, laws did not immediately make this a brand that the enslaved could never wash off. It took time. Jones said,

it is important to recognize that this was a process that took time. When I'm teaching this history, I often share a timeline of the slave laws in early colonial Virginia. You don't bother to write down a law to stop people from doing something they never do or can't do. Like a child constantly changing the rules of a game when he isn't winning, the Virginia Slave Code shows us, by its prohibitions, the existing behavior that was widespread enough to be a problem. (p. 31)

This is to note that the ruling class had to go out of their way to create and codify race laws in order to divide people such as poor whites and those enslaved Africans because they were not abiding by that order. Jones uses his ancestors to demonstrate his point. Showing that he came from a long line of free Blacks who fled states like Virginia, where free Blacks could not live, then heading to North Carolina and through intermarriages via poor whites, Indigenous people and other free people of color weaved in and out of the "Black" designation on the census. His personal story helps the reader follow the changes in culture and the law and the social construction of race.

As we enter an age where even the most basic bourgeois democratic rights are under attack, Jones reminds us that this is nothing new. One must understand that at the establishment of the United States only 6 percent of the population could vote. The basic liberal idea of one person, one vote

was meaningless unless you were white and owned property. Jones suggests that it is African Americans who have been the vanguard to protect and expand our limited democratic society. He says, "Black people have been the most consistent force in U.S. history for democratizing this democracy." (p. 49)

This is demonstrated by the experiment of reconstruction where activists from the abolitionist movement made strides to make the ideals of democracy a reality. For a brief moment there were attempts at a multi-racial democracy (though women could still not vote). Through the Freedman Bureau public education became a reality in the South for the first time. Black Americans set the foundations for these institutions that all people benefit from today.

Throughout the book Jones does not describe a single Black experience but grapples with the difference of opinions especially when it comes to accepting or rejecting the United States as a national project. Individuals like Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King Jr. embraced the nation and how the words of the constitution, especially the Civil War amendments, could integrate them into the body politics and make the United States a liberatory nation. This was the goal especially of Douglass who lived long enough to see the hope during reconstruction to the dawn of modern U.S. imperialism.

However, there was another Black experience that rejected the U.S. nation state and sought a different future with an internationalist perspective. This was notable in organizations such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association organized by Marcus Garvey and the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. This perspective is most popularized by Malcolm X, among others, who often talked about how the United States was operating exactly

how it is set up. Jones says,

Whereas other Black leaders emphasized the hypocrisy of the United States, Malcolm emphasized its consistency. In Malcolm's hands, the political horizon of separatism, however far away in reality, opened a rhetorical space to make a more radical critique of the United States. That critique included the Democratic Party. Whereas other Black leaders hoped to influence the Democratic Party to support civil rights, Malcolm harbored no such illusions. (p. 58)

These critiques were made famous in his well-known speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet." This way of thinking made Malcolm and others more willing to critique the American war machine, especially during the Vietnam War.

These two perspectives were not in isolation but in conversation with each other and Douglass and King and others were influenced to shift their positions at times too. This leads Jones into his chapter about the Haitian revolution and the idea of Black liberation outside the system. These themes of reform or revolution continue to show up in the book and are part of Black history in America. The reality is that it's complex. Jones engages this issue at the end of the book noting that some people believe that Black history is problematic because it is "fundamentally unpatriotic." He says,

Little do they know that so many of the leading lights of Black-led social movements in North America did, in fact, fight for change from a place of love, including love of country. But it won't do to respond, "No, everyone you learn about when you study Black History loved America" or "Black history is American history." That's not true, either, and it's really beside the point. Nations of people, like races of people, are relatively new in human history, and therefore it is entirely appropriate that we consider them both as objects of study, including critical study, no unquestioned loyalty. Classrooms are places for critical inquiry,

debate, and disagreement. Emotions are part of the learning process, and teaching is relational.... In the process of a deeper engagement with Black history, teachers and students are also learning about each other. (p. 153)

Jones shows the complexity of the Black experience and the current terrain in the classroom and the debate over how our youth engage in these topics.

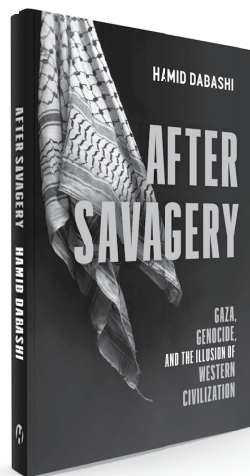
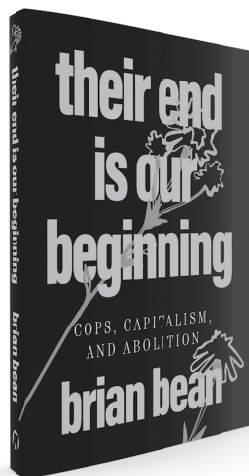
In conclusion, *Black History Is for Everyone* by Brian Jones is an essential resource for educators, students, and anyone interested in understanding the true scope of American history. The book provides a thoughtful and accessible overview of the importance of Black history, while also addressing the political and cultural forces

that seek to suppress it. In a time when discussions of race and history are under attack, Jones's work serves as a powerful reminder that the study of Black history is not just for Black students—it is for everyone. By embracing a more inclusive and honest approach to history, we can equip the next generation with the knowledge to build and fight for a better future.

NOTES

1. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>
2. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-ap-african-american-studies-came-under-attack-a-timeline/2023/02>

NEW BOOKS FOR CHANGING THE WORLD



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A New Biography of Hubert Harrison

BRIAN JONES

FOREMOST AMONG THE STREET-CORNER speakers who held audiences spellbound in early twentieth-century Harlem was the man dubbed “Black Socrates”—Hubert Henry Harrison. He was a working-class radical intellectual and polymath from Saint Croix who was well-known and widely influential in his adopted home, Harlem. He was a leading participant in two large social movement trends: he was a popular socialist speaker who appeared alongside legends of that movement, such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Big Bill Haywood, and he was a “race-first” man who mentored some of the twentieth century’s most important Black leaders, such as Marcus Garvey and A. Philip Randolph. Harrison was also a central figure in what later became known as the “Harlem Renaissance”; he collaborated with bibliophile Arturo Schomburg and assisted with the planning of the acquisition of Schomburg’s personal Black History collection that set the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library on the road to becoming

Hubert Harrison: Forbidden
Genius of Black Radicalism
BRIAN KWOBA
University of North Carolina Press, 2025

the world-renowned Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Harrison was a voracious reader, taking in several books a week (and by some accounts, a day). He was a scholar who was just as comfortable out of doors as inside them; if multiple first-hand reports are to be be-

lieved, Harrison regularly lectured to Harlem street-corner crowds of hundreds for hours at a time on topics as wide ranging as literature, religion, African history, sexual politics, and the latest advances in science and technology.

And yet, today, outside of Black History enthusiasts, Hubert Harrison is little known. But he has, in a sense, posthumously recruited enthusiasts to set the record straight. The late independent scholar and activist Jeffrey Perry was an indefatigable promoter of Harrison’s legacy. Perry edited Harrison’s selected works and wrote a two-volume biography. I distinctly recall, around 2008 or 2009, hearing Perry speak about Harrison for the first time and feeling surprised that I had not heard of him before. Learning about this prolific and dynamic Black radical was a profound moment of discovery for me, and Perry’s enthusiasm was infectious. I was immediately hooked and would, in turn, talk about Harrison to anyone who would listen—he has that

BRIAN JONES is an educator and author. He works at the New York Public Library and writes about Black education history and politics. His most recent book is *Black History Is for Everyone* (Haymarket Books, 2025).

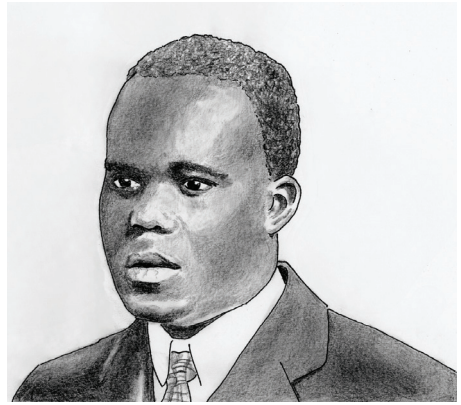
effect on people.

Now, for the second time in the twenty-first century, Harrison has another formidable champion: Brian Kwoba, an assistant professor at the University of Memphis. His *Hubert Harrison: Forbidden Genius of Black Radicalism* is an analytical biography of this long-overlooked figure's political contributions, a study that builds on Perry's work and extends it.

Kwoba's book follows the chronology of Harrison's life, more or less, but is also organized into thematic chapters covering the many dimensions of Harrison's political thought and activism. The effect is to create what Kwoba describes as "essentially nine different minibooks" on an extraordinary figure. Kwoba enjoys metaphor, and commits early on to the use of two to describe Harrison's contributions: he was both a "crystallizer" and a "touchstone."

Inspired by a comment from one of Harrison's contemporaries who credited him with having "crystallized the radicalism of the New Negro in New York..." (2), Kwoba notes that in chemistry the difficult breakthrough of crystallization "can become the seed form for a rapid and widespread proliferation of a new structure" (3). Kwoba thus sets out to show how Harrison crystallized various innovations (intellectual and organizational) that outlived him.

Kwoba also applies to Harrison a term that Harrison himself used to describe the relationship of Black people to U.S. democracy—the touchstone. A touchstone, Kwoba reminds us, "is a hard, dark stone that is used to test the purity of precious metals by seeing what kind of streaks they leave behind when rubbed against it" (7). Just as Harrison believed that "the Negro is the touchstone of the modern democratic idea," demonstrating the purity of U.S. democracy, or lack thereof, so too does Kwoba believe that Harrison can serve as a touchstone to test the claims of the Socialist



Hubert Harrison

Party, the Garvey movement, and the idea of the Harlem Renaissance.

Restoring Harrison to the narrative of each, Kwoba argues, shows their respective shortcomings. To illustrate each example, Kwoba skillfully uses voluminous archival materials, Harrison's papers, including diary entries, notes, articles, and books by Harrison and his contemporaries. There is not space here to assess all of Kwoba's claims, but among the most well supported are: Harrison's good-faith attempt to work within the Socialist Party made him a touchstone that revealed the party's commitment to "white-first" politics, not the emancipation of the whole working class (chapter 1); he crystallized Harlem street speaking and other forums for free thinking and learning outside of formal schooling (chapter 3); Harrison developed a unique brand of class-conscious "race-first" politics, including a posture of humility and curiosity toward Africa (chapters 4 and 5); and he crystallized a "generational shift" in favor of more liberated sexual politics, including birth control, and against the repressive Comstock laws (chapter 6); Harrison crystallized a form of mass organization from which Garvey learned and remixed to great success, while also being a touchstone for that movement, a first-hand

witness to Garvey's less-than-scrupulous way of doing business (chapters 7 and 8); and Harrison's exclusion from the canon of Harlem Renaissance literature is consistent with the explicit intention of the white funders of the "renaissance" narrative to promote non-radical Black cultural production (chapter 9).

Harrison's role as touchstone also helps us understand how such a man can be forgotten. People are often remembered by the collectives to which they contribute. Through publications, awards, ceremonies, rituals, and so on, organizations and institutions help us hold on to the names of their brightest lights. But for the Socialist Party, the Garvey movement, or the mavens of the Harlem Renaissance, lifting up the name of Hubert Harrison was, to say the least, awkward. His support for progressive thinking on sexual politics may have also been a factor. "The individuals and organizations he criticized," Kwoba writes, "not only felt stung by his criticisms but also harbored disdain for his advocacy and practice of free love in the sex-negative age of Comstockery" (313). Instead of acknowledging his influence and contributions, these groups found downplaying or erasing them, especially after Harrison's untimely death at the age of forty-four, was more convenient.

Harrisonians, then, have their work cut out for them—restoring Harrison to his rightful place in those narratives, while also helping us understand the breadth of Harrison's political context. As Harrison read and spoke and acted on such a broad array of topics, so too our narrator must take a wide view. Mostly, Kwoba is able to effectively use Harrison's own words and actions to illuminate both the history and Harrison's place in it.

At other times, when providing histori-

cal context or illustrating a point, Kwoba sets Harrison aside almost entirely to teach us about the Russian Revolution (7 pages) or the rise of U.S. imperialism (5 and a half pages) or, most perplexingly, the clean energy discoveries of Serbian inventor Nikola Tesla (5 pages). In each case Harrison warrants only brief or tangential mentions. Kwoba knows that Harrison was interested in science, but has no evidence that Harrison was interested specifically in Tesla. Why devote five pages to Tesla? He was, Kwoba argues, another example of a genius who has been "scandalously marginalized" because his radical solutions challenged ruling-class priorities (316).

The questions of imperialism and revolution are more to the point. Kwoba is, like Harrison, a Bolshevik at heart. Throughout the book, Kwoba's strident, class-conscious, anti-capitalist tone fits his subject and meets our moment. Like Harrison, Kwoba has been on a similar personal journey absorbing revolutionary socialism (where, as he acknowledges in the preface, we met, and shared an interest in Harrison), exploring African history and identity, and rethinking gender and sexuality.

In Harrison's time, opposing the war and supporting the Russian Revolution could get one deported. Today, in addition to the scourge of similar political repression, our collective stakes in addressing multiple global crises (including, of course, the need for clean energy) are arguably higher. "Hubert Henry Harrison's significance," Kwoba writes, "...lies in his crystallization of radical answers to radical problems that continue to haunt humanity right into the twenty-first century" (1). Kwoba's book is a multidimensional portrait, offering new ways to encounter one of the twentieth century's most important Black radicals.

What Is Social Ecology?

PETER G. PRONTZOS

MURRAY BOOKCHIN, WHO WAS BORN and raised in New York City, was one of the most significant thinkers—and activists—in the twentieth century, beginning with his pioneering ecological analysis *Our Synthetic Environment*, which was published over six decades ago (1962). His first major work, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, was published in 1971 and it had a huge impact on many political, social, and environmental movements.

Over the next three decades, Bookchin, wrote and lectured on an impressively wide range of issues, including the nature of cities, anthropology, the Spanish Civil War, technology, social movements, and political philosophy. He coined the phrase “social ecology” to denote the central element in his world view: that the ultimate source of humanity’s domination and exploitation of nature is based on the continuing domination and exploitation of human beings by those in positions of power in society.

While there are obviously many forms of domination and oppression, Bookchin focused primarily on two intersecting types: the political and the economic, exemplified by capitalism and the state (which he described as “the cesspool of bourgeois

parliamentarianism”). Another key element in Bookchin’s thought was the idea of “unity in diversity,” the notion that both nature and human societies are healthier

and more flourishing when there is harmony between the various elements in the system and its overall structure. His suggestions as to how such a society can be democratically organized form the basis

of his notion of “communalism,” starting with the smaller units of society, e.g., co-ops, neighborhoods, and cities, with power flowing upward to larger confederations.

One of Bookchin’s primary insights is that due to the unprecedented productive power of modern technology all scarcities in the world—food, medical care, education, even free time—are all artificial and unnecessary.

He also argued that even those of us living in the richer countries are oppressed, not just by the need to sell our time and creativity to survive, but also because we have lost sight of our true, compassionate humanity and have been conditioned to give up our dreams. The ultimate source of these problems is, in Bookchin’s view, the result of the global capitalist economy, which prioritizes corporate greed over both people and nature.

(An informative discussion of his life and ideas can be found in *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Book-*

Practicing Social Ecology: From Bookchin to Rojava and Beyond

ELEANOR FINLEY
Pluto Press, 2025

PETER G. PRONTZOS is professor emeritus of Political Science and Interdisciplinary Studies at Langara College, Vancouver.

chin [Oxford], written by Janet Biehl, who was his companion in his last two decades: <https://vancouversun.com/entertainment/books/books-ecologist-murray-bookchin-predicted-climate-change-50-years-ago>)

His influence has spread ever further since his death in 2006 and had been put into practice in a number of places around the world—most notably in Kurdish-controlled areas in the Near East. Nobody has described these movements and ideas better than Eleanor Finley in her *Practicing Social Ecology: From Bookchin to Rojava and Beyond*.

Finley, a researcher in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, begins her exploration of social ecology by alerting the reader to the fact that Bookchin's ideas can be quite complex and that understanding "his work requires commitment and patience and, often, a robust background in philosophy, Marxian theory, sociology, and anthropology." Yes—but that should not deter anyone from giving it a try, and it is for this reason that Finley's book (and the glossary that she

them in their organizing and community building.

Chapter 2, for instance, outlines the major elements of Bookchin's ideas, to provide the background needed to understand the theories and practices of the groups discussed. The next chapter focuses on the more personal and interpersonal dynamics that are necessary to create viable and effective movements and societies. Another section considers the idea of popular assemblies and direct democratic governance, in which power moves from the bottom up. "Popular assemblies lie at the heart of social ecology."

To illustrate this approach, she also provides case studies of these efforts in places like the United States, Spain, Chile, Poland, Mexico, and especially in the Kurdish region of Rojava. She explains that "In 2012, the Rojava Revolution became the first major uprising to invoke Bookchin's vision, bringing confederal direct democracy to the center of global geopolitics and redefining 'democratization' in the Middle East."

One of the defining elements of the Rojava Revolution is the role played by women. For instance, the Kurds have two citizen-led militias, one of which is the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), which has fought off attacks from Syria, the so-called Islamic State, and especially Turkey (which "consistently ranks among the top human rights abusers").

Equality between women and men, *hevalti*, not only includes defense and decision-making, but it also means that, "daily chores such as cooking and cleaning are split evenly between women and men...." *Hevalti* is also "a revolutionary generosity of spirit."

It's important to stress that the Rojava Revolution is just the most well-known of these attempts to apply Bookchin's insights. Finley points out that "Legacies of self-governance can be found in every corner of

To Bookchin "revolutionaries have to revolutionize themselves." Finley adds "Even the best democratic procedure cannot make up for the dysfunctional habits we learn while living under capitalism."

includes) is so helpful, as it offers readers a way to understand and connect many of Bookchin's ideas, as well as explaining how groups around the world are trying to use

the globe,” and that in the last twenty years, countless civil society projects have been created...including environmental and

One of Bookchin’s primary insights is that due to the unprecedented productive power of modern technology all scarcities in the world are artificial and unnecessary.

ecological initiatives, women’s collectives and cooperatives, community-based justice, artists collectives, student unions, popular education projects, and village communes.”

Reading about all these attempts to organize truly democratic and ecological movements recalls a very profound comment made in the movie *The Maltese Falcon* by Humphrey Bogart (as Sam Spade): “It’s not always easy to know what to do.”

Looking at the larger picture, it is vital that promoting direct democracy, human rights for all, sustainable economies, healthy social connections, and educational opportunities (especially in affinity groups) for everybody to fulfill their best potential (what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*) will take a lot of time, patience, and effort. Bookchin understood that “revolutionaries have to revolutionize themselves.” And as Finley elaborates: “Even the best democratic

procedure cannot make up for the dysfunctional habits we learn while living under capitalism.” That is why she also points out the need for “emotional healing” as part of the revolutionary process.

Indeed, Finley writes that an activist from the Pacific Northwest told her that projects usually fall apart “due to people’s inability to handle their own trauma.” But healing cannot be done alone, which is why working with other people in a supportive and non-judgmental environment is so important. She also references the work of Dr. Gabor Maté, whose most relevant work is his *The Myth of Normal*.*

Finley sums it all up with this insight at the end of the book: “Reconciliation with nature is, at the end of the day, a reconciliation with ourselves.”

And at the risk of stating the obvious, if people fail to create truly democratic and ecological societies, then the future is dark indeed. As Martin Luther King Jr. understood, the choice is “chaos or community.”

In that context, one of the last things that Bookchin said to me when I visited him in Burlington, Vermont, may be even truer now: “These days, I’m not trying to make a revolution,” he said. “I’m just trying to preserve The Enlightenment.”

These days, we need to do both, and Finley’s book is an excellent guide to doing just that.

*My review of this book can be found on p. 45 of this link: <https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2024/04/CCPA%20Monitor%20Spring%202024%20WEB.pdf>

Palestine in Context

ALAN SEARS

THE GENOCIDAL ISRAELI ASSAULT ON Gaza since October 7, 2023, is the latest development in the ongoing process of dispossession and erasure aimed at Palestinians since the Nakba of 1947–48. People around the world have mobilized in solidarity with Palestine to demand an end to these horrors, including campaigns for boycott, divestment, and sanctions in response to a call to action by over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations in 2005. This book is an essential toolkit for this global movement, mapping out the global power relations that sustain Israeli settler colonialism in a way that offers a compass to those navigating the complexities of building effective resistance.

Adam Hanieh, Rob Knox, and Rafeef Ziadah have written an engaging book that provides a sophisticated marxist analysis of the ongoing Israeli regime of erasure and dispossession directed against Palestinians. This book uses an anti-racist, anti-colonial, and ecological marxist lens to examine the centrality of oil-centered capitalist development to the politics and economics of the Middle East and the foundational role of

racialized settler colonialism in the Israeli project. The book is engagingly written and intentionally brief, clearly designed to reach activists and help them develop the analysis they need to mobilize sustainable movements founded on strong connections of solidarity. “Real solidarity,” they write, “comes from understanding the systems that create injustice, and building against those systems in ways that strengthen us all” (p. 85).

Oil-Centered Capitalist Development

One of the challenges facing activists mobilizing in solidarity with Palestine is to understand how Israel gets away with this ongoing campaign of genocidal erasure. The governments of the United States, Canada, Britain, and other Western powers not only ignore Israeli violence against Palestinians, but actively support it through extensive aid, the provision of diplomatic cover, and the suppression of domestic solidarity movements. Activists sometimes see Israeli impunity as the result of pressure applied to governments by a pro-Israel lobby. Of course, there are pro-Israel advocacy organizations at work, but fundamentally the orientation of Western governments toward Israel reflects their own stakes in the system of racialized and colonial global power relations oriented around oil-centered capitalist development.

Resisting Erasure:
Capital, Imperialism
and Race in Palestine
ADAM HANIEH, ROBERT
KNOX, RAFAEF ZIADAH
New York: Verso, 2025

ALAN SEARS is a long-time queer socialist activist and Sociology Professor, recently retired from Toronto Metropolitan University. He has written on sexualities, work, and radical organizing and is a member of Faculty for Palestine.

The book maps out the process that made Israel such a valuable partner as the United States sealed its place as the dominant imperial power and capitalist economies were increasingly fueled by oil and its by-products. The period after World War II saw a major reconfiguration of global relations in fossil capitalism. Oil overtook coal as the most important source of fossil fuel in the most industrialized economies, though coal use remained high. The rise of oil, and with it the proliferation of petroleum-based plastic technologies, was associated with extensive economic restructuring, transforming the ways things were made and distributed, as well as global supply chains. The oil reserves and geographic location of the Middle East made it a crucial player in oil-centered capitalist development.

The postwar world also saw a major reconfiguration of global capitalist power relations, with a decline in the role of the older imperialist powers such as Britain and France and the rise of the United States, which emerged as “the most dynamic force in global capitalism, rivalled only by the Soviet Union and its allied bloc” (p. 20). The emerging imperial power of the United States and its allies was challenged by a global wave of anticolonial uprising. In the Middle East, oil production was controlled by a small number of big Western firms. This control was brought into question by national liberation struggles in the region connected to the postwar wave of anticolonial revolt. Gamal Abdel Nasser, who in 1952 overthrew the regime of British-supported King Farouk in Egypt, argued that oil was “an unalienable Arab right” (p. 23).

The key place of the Middle East in oil-centered capitalist development meant that the United States and its allies needed to try to shape the politics of the region over the long term. One fundamental element of their strategy in the region was to

secure their relationship with a regional power that was not susceptible to domestic popular uprisings or national liberation politics. Israel, founded on a racialized settler colonialism that buffered it against these mobilizations, proved to be an ever more important partner.

Racialized Settler Colonialism

The book provides a specifically marxist account of the role of racialized settler colonialism in establishing Israel's place in regional and global power relations. The Israeli state is based on a system of settler superiority organized around specific racial hierarchies that are “part of a longer history of colonial expansion and imperial domination” (p. 65). The settler-colonial project involves very specific forms of racialized class formation, prioritizing settler labor, and deploying or excluding the labor of Palestinians in specific ways, varying with the political priorities of the moment. This system of settler superiority can only be sustained through a relentless and brutal regime of dispossession and erasure directed at Palestinians.

The racialized dehumanization of Palestinians renders them “legitimate targets of violence” (64). Meanwhile, the settler population is cast as the unique bearer of European standards of civilization in the Middle East, making Israeli a reliable ally for Western powers. As Hanieh, Knox, and Ziadah argue, “Israeli settler-colonial capitalism functions *through* its racialization of Palestinians; and it is this process of racialization that produces anti-Palestinian racism” (p. 64).

The Israeli state uses this racialization to routinely categorize Palestinian political expression as terrorism. The book shows how the Israeli states's everyday violence against Palestinians and its dehumanizing administrative regime of surveillance and control is justified as “security.” This racial-

ized and Islamophobic conception of terror and security has been generalized globally, so that the expression of solidarity with Palestinians has frequently been cast as support for terrorism requiring a security response that attempts to stifle mobilization.

One important contribution of this book was to demonstrate the way this set of racialized relations, with its specific conception of civilization and the threat of terror, is expressed in international law. In the early twentieth century, as Britain issued the Balfour Declaration to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the Palestinians who already lived there were seen as insufficiently productive (according to specifically capitalist criteria) to warrant full political and legal rights, and therefore “they were entitled to be dispossessed of their lands and ‘civilized’ by the advanced Europeans” (p. 68). With the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, this racial logic expressed through international law included a conception of Palestinians as an ongoing threat, warranting military targeting and killing as “self-defense.”

Palestinian Resistance

Palestinians have mobilized to resist this racialized settler-colonial project. The book shows that one of the key challenges for Palestinian resistance has been to overcome the fragmentation caused by the ethnic cleansing of the 1947–48 Nakba. Many Palestinians ended up as refugees, now constituting the largest refugee population in the world (p. 35). Those remaining were divided between those who stayed in Israel and attained citizenship and those who lived in the West Bank and Gaza, occupied by Israel since 1967.

The three basic demands of the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions reflect the historic goal of the Palestinian resistance to build a unified movement that addresses the situation of all Palestinians.

First, end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Second, grant full rights to Palestinian citizens of Israel. Third, recognize the right to return of Palestinian refugees driven from their homes, their land, and their communities. Overcoming fragmentation has been at the core of the Palestinian politics of resistance.

The book examines one of the crucial moments in this history of resistance, the popular uprising of the First Intifada beginning in December 1987. Palestinians mobilized in ways that infuse the activity of meeting basic needs for life-making (food, housing, health care, culture, childcare, and education) with active resistance and struggles for liberation. This deliberately short and tightly argued book unfortunately does not have the space to delve into the rich and multifaceted history of this uprising to provide readers with a sense of the transformative power of the Palestinian resistance at that time, but no single source can do everything.

The Israeli response to this uprising was ultimately threefold. First, the Israeli state mobilized violence; killing, injuring and imprisoning large numbers of activists. Second, the Israelis deployed new administrative measures to regulate and further fragment the Palestinian population, including passes, checkpoints, and curfews. Finally, the Israelis worked toward normalization, partnering with layers of the Palestinian leadership to craft the Oslo accords in 1993, which launched a very limited form of self-government—the Palestinian Authority. This book richly examines this politics of normalization, showing how it served to “present a Palestinian face to the occupation” (p. 39) while opening up new possibilities for Israeli integration into the regional economy of the Middle East.

The United States is fully committed to this strategy of normalization, “integrating Israel more fully into the broader regional

order by deepening its political and economic ties with Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies” (p. 89). As I write this review, we are getting news of the current planning by the United States and Israel for the future of Gaza, which aims to deepen this normalizing integration. The book identifies the effort to eliminate the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) as one important dimension of this normalization strategy, “an attempt to redefine millions of

Palestinian refugees as so-called economic migrants, stripping them of their right to return, and recasting the challenge facing them as one of ‘absorption’ into neighboring countries” (pp. 93–4). This book offers crucial resources to help activists mobilize effectively to defeat this genocidal normalization, guided by a rich understanding of the power relations we are challenging and the potential lines of solidarity to build the power from below.

Gaza’s Horrors

RACHEL EBORALL

WE ARE TOLD THAT TO CHANGE THE future, we need to understand the past. In *Witness to the Hellfire of Genocide: A Testimony from Gaza*, Wasim Said compels us to witness, feel, and understand the present to change the now. This is not a retrospective account written by historians or anthropologists; it is written from the epicenter of an unfolding genocide. It demands that we confront the present in all its brutality. Wasim Said writes not for posterity but for survival, and in doing so he transforms memoir into a weapon of truth. Wasim Said, a 24-year-old physics student, was forced to replace

Witness to the Hellfire
of Genocide: A
Testimony from Gaza
WASIM SAID
New York: 1804 Books, 2025

his ambitions “of being an explorer of the universe with the dream of securing a sack of flour.” Wasim Said describes writing as an exploration in the meaning of life, and this testimony is his way to be remembered. The desired to be remembered in the face of death and the dying feels essential, a way of knowing that you made a mark on the world. This desire is even more poignant as the writer is aware that there may be no friends

or family to remember him as the genocide intensifies. This book is more than a personal testimony; however, it documents the collective endeavor of the Palestinian people to survive and as such demands that we redouble our efforts to ensure that Palestine is free.

Most literature on genocide is writ-

RACHEL EBORALL is a mental health worker, shop steward for Unite, and a member of rs21.

ten after the atrocities have ended. Said writes from within the inferno, his words shaped by the roar of F-16s overhead and the knowledge that bombs are falling as he writes. His vulnerability is palpable. He describes a world where conventions are reversed: light, once a symbol of hope, now signals death as flares illuminate burning homes.

What makes Wasim's narrative all the more heart-wrenching is his portrayal of the stark contrast between human vulnerability and the monstrous machinery of war. The vulnerability of the Palestinian people is described in sharp contrast to weapons that have horrific qualities. The deafening roar of fighter jets, the buzzing of the drones, the monstrous size of a battleship, shells randomly falling from the sky, the tanks that circle and retreat, of course these monsters of war are accompanied by the army of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The vile elements of the Israeli state are compared to the very human qualities of the Palestinians who are haunted by the specters that accompany: war, hunger, fear,

and cold.

This is not a sanitized account. Wasim Said does not shy away from the moral compromises and desperate acts that genocide and war breed. Wasim Said describes ordinary Palestinians engaging with war profiteers, clashing with criminal gangs, arming themselves to protect flour, and even longing for death as a merciful escape. The honesty is harrowing, but necessary. It also hit a raw nerve as I realized that I had become desensitized to the images of war. Reading the accounts was an emotional experience unlike seeing constant images in which I am passive consumer. This book necessitates reflection and reignites the shock and anger of the injustices faced by the Palestinian people.

This is more than a memoir; the book insists that we bear witness to the present in its totality—the humanity, the injustice, and the pain. It is a memoir of heroism and vulnerability, but also a challenge to the world beyond Gaza: to redouble our efforts to stop the genocide and then to never stop until Palestine is free.



Dana

Refaat Alareer*

Words & music by Steve Siegelbaum

A teacher and a poet was Refaat Alareer
He taught his Gaza students that hope can
conquer fear
What was he doing when bombs dropped from
the sky
Writing his own epitaph: If I must die

*These are the words—the good poet wrote
If I must die—let it bring back hope
A kite like an angel flying above
If I must die—let it bring back love*

So welcome to the city where not a building
stands
Yonder sat the poet, a poet's weapon in his
hand
And welcome to the playground where the
bullets fly
As children also pose the question: If I must
die

*These are the words—the good poet wrote
If I must die—let it bring back hope
A kite like an angel flying above
If I must die—let it bring back love*

Walking through his family's ancient lemon
grove
The fruit that's lying on the ground is ready to
explode
Today there are no lemons for making lemon-
ade

STEVE SIEGELBAUM is the co-founder of two New York City public schools, one of which he led for twenty years. A lifelong political activist, and along with his wife, Bobbi, he is an original member of Pete Seeger's Walkabout Clearwater Chorus (1984) and an active member, since 2013, of Jewish Voice for Peace–Westchester.



REFAAT ALAREER

It's only blood will flow—from a live hand
grenade

*These are the words—the good poet wrote
If I must die—let it bring back hope
A kite like an angel flying above
If I must die—let it bring back love*

From deep beneath the Gaza sands to high
above the clouds
The voices of the poets hang suspended like a
shroud
As his students learned from Refaat the poems
of Shakespeare
We will learn the hope and love of Refaat
Alareer

*These are the words—the good poet wrote
If I must die—let it bring back hope
A kite like an angel flying above
If I must die—let it bring back love*

If I must die—let it bring back love

*Key: D ©2025
audio: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eZrqLE8ae22cjWbdSUMyyu5ou9KYIxAo/view>

Ernest Haberkern

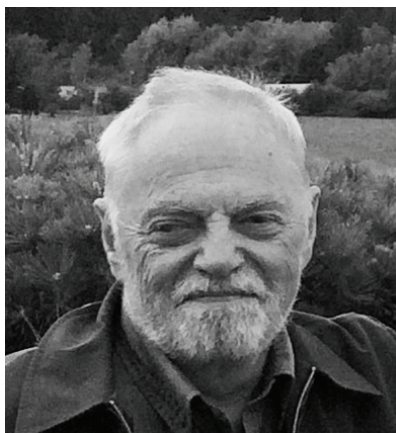
Third Camp Revolutionary Socialist

DAVID FRIEDMAN, DAN LA BOTZ, AND SAMUEL FARBER

FROM THE 1960S TO THE twenty-first century, Ernie Haberkern dedicated his life to the socialist movement as writer, editor, and publisher of articles and books on socialism as well as a serving as the union representative for his coworker members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees at the University of California at Berkeley.

Ernie was born in Springfield, Ohio, but his family moved to the St. Louis, Missouri area when he was eight years old, and he grew up in Union City. After graduating from high school, he went off to study at the University of Notre Dame, where he won a Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship for graduate study during the 1958–59 academic year. With that financial backing he went on to the University of California at Berkeley (UCB) to study classics, but in the end earned a degree in statistics and earned a living as a computer programmer at UCB, while devoting most of his time and energy to socialist work.

At Berkeley he became involved in the social movements of the era, the Free Speech Movement (FSM), the civil rights



movement, the United Farm Workers, and the anti-Vietnam War movement. In that milieu he met his wife and life-partner, Rosalyn, and they married in 1962.

In these years Haberkern became an active socialist. He joined the Democratic Socialist Club of the Socialist Party of which Hal Draper was also a member. That group, the Young People's Socialist League, and other activists from the Congress of Racial Equality joined together in 1964 to create the Independent Socialist Club (ISC), of which Haberkern was a founding member. The intellectual and political leader of the ISC was Draper with whom Ernie would be closely associated until Draper's death in 1990. At the center of ISC politics was the notion that there was a worldwide three-cornered struggle for political power between the capitalist

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countries, the Communist or bureaucratic collectivist countries, and the working class. The ISC stood with the latter, the Third Camp.

The foundation of the ISC in the fall of 1964 coincided with the explosive growth and total victory of the FSM where the ISC played an important role in great part because of the major influence of Hal Draper's public speeches, political advice, and particularly his widely read pamphlet *The Mind of Clark Kerr*. In that context, Ernie played a very important role in organizing the ISC. This ranged from his organizing the regular setting of a political table facing Sproul Hall, the UCB's administration building, which had been made possible by the victory of the FSM, to his organizing of political meetings within and outside the university campus. Ernie made sure there was always a stock of the pamphlets and books putting forward the group's politics as well as classics by Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, and Trotsky.

When the ISC transformed itself into the International Socialists (IS) in 1969, Draper and Haberkern continued in the organization for a time. Haberkern authored the important "Resolution on American Imperialism, the NLF and the Right of the Vietnamese to Self-Determination," which called for the military victory of the National Liberation Front, but rejected political support of its Stalinist Communist politics and leadership.

But in 1971, Draper and Haberkern left the IS because of disagreements about the group's early position on the trade unions, which they regarded as sectarian and

counterproductive to comrades who were actually active in unions. They wanted the group to seriously commit to nonsectarian work within the unions, a position the IS later adopted, but only after Draper and Haberkern had left. In the course of the debate over the trade unions, they came to believe that the IS was following the organizational model of a sect, which they rejected. They left the IS, along with several others, with the goal of forming a "political center," an organizational concept that they outlined in a 1973 position paper, "Anatomy of the Micro-sect."

Draper and Haberkern first formed the Independent Socialist Committee and then later the Center for Socialist History as educational and publishing organizations. Then for the next two decades Draper and Haberkern wrote, edited, and published a number of books on socialism. Ernie co-edited, with Arthur Lipow, *Neither Capitalism Nor Socialism: Theories of Bureaucratic Collectivism* (2010). After Draper's death in 1990, Ernie completed the later volumes of Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: War and Revolution* (2005). Their works represented a major contribution to socialist theory.

Ernie retired in 1993 and continued living in Berkeley until 2022, when he and Rosalyn moved to Portland, Oregon, to be near their daughter, Annie. Ernie died there on Dec. 28, 2024. Our condolences to his widow, Roz, also a long-time socialist comrade going back to the University of Chicago in the late fifties and early sixties, and to the rest of his family.

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Daniel Singer Foundation Prisoner of Conscience Award of \$5,000 to Marwan Barghouti

MARWAN BARGHOUTI IS KNOWN AS THE **“Palestinian Mandela”** who was imprisoned 23 years ago on false accusations. He is a Palestinian leader who has always argued that resistance to occupation does not mean terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians. He was one of the leaders of the Palestinian Liberation Organization who argued for a two-state solution.

He is by far the most popular Palestinian leader, and polls show that he would be elected to lead the Palestinian Authority, if he were free. In the recent exchange of prisoners with Hamas, Benjamin Netanyahu — following a request by his far-right minister Ben Gvir — refused to include Barghouti among the 2,000 Palestinian prisoners who would be liberated. They want to avoid, by all means possible,

the presence of a Palestinian leader who has a reasonable approach to the conflict.

Barghouti is one of the few, if not the only, Palestinian figure able to unite the Palestinian people around an anti-colonial perspective and a two-state solution. This is why the archenemies of peace governing Israel now refuse to free him.

The Daniel Singer Foundation, established to honor the memory of Daniel Singer, the well-known Jewish-Polish journalist and writer who was committed to a humanist and democratic socialism, demands Barghouti's immediate release. The Foundation bestows its Prisoner of Conscience Award on Marwan Barghouti as a protest against his inhuman treatment and in the hope that his leadership can help advance the cause of the Palestinian people.