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ISSUE

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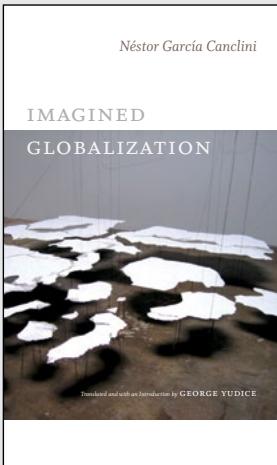
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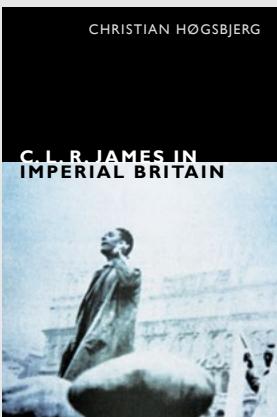
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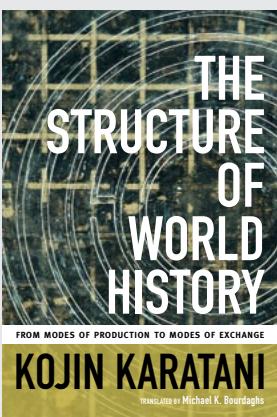


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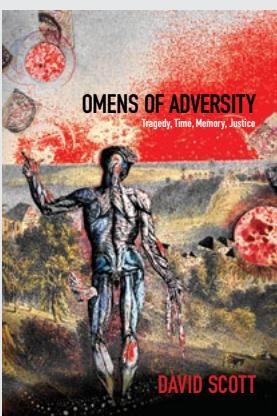
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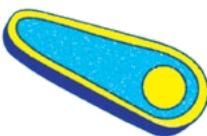
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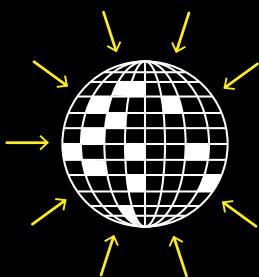
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POWER PLAY



BEING A LEFTIST TODAY is a lot like playing pinball. Every machine has two flippers with a gulf between them. They're used to knock balls toward bright and shiny bumpers. When a collision inevitably occurs, the bumper can propel the balls all across the board. For a little while, it looks and sounds promising — a lot of noise and flashing lights. Sometimes, the ball stays up for a while, racking up point after point. It feels like it's never going to come down.

But blink and it's over. Nothing changes the fact that the playing field itself is tilted downward. And with the gap between the flippers, it's only a matter of time before the ball passes through and the game is over.

In other words, we confront a frustrating paradox. Across the country, there's no shortage of inspiring activity: low-wage worker organizing, North Carolina's Moral Monday protests, immigration reform efforts, marriage equality and LGBT rights campaigns, local electoral pushes such as Kshama Sawant's in Seattle, and many others. Most of these projects give voice to widespread unease over rampant inequality and the near-total capture of the political system by elites.

Yet even where these campaigns achieve victories and make tangible gains, the balance of forces and tenor of discourse — particularly when it comes to questions of political economy — continue to move rightward.

In this context, what is the political role of socialists in the United States? How should we meet this moment to break out of the strategic impasse that we, some immediate triumphs notwithstanding, seem to be trapped in? This issue of *Jacobin* doesn't offer a definitive answer. But we do suggest some broad principles to inform our thinking and practice as we embark on a long process of reorganization and reconstruction.

The conditions that radicals now face are profoundly different from those that previous generations confronted. For the first time in history, we must deal with the challenge of a truly global capitalist system. The Soviet Union has been dead for over two decades, and despite its many failures, its collapse was a political setback for reformists and revolutionaries alike. China has become a major capitalist power, with India and Brazil not far behind, while neoliberalism reigns unchallenged in Europe and the United States. Despite the massive suffering caused by the Great Recession and the subsequent drive to austerity, Margaret Thatcher's diktat "There is no alternative" still strangles the popular imagination. Capital has gone global, but workers have yet to catch up, their bargaining power and organizational capacities undermined by international competition, automation, the decentralization of production, the growth of finance, and imperialism's relentless attack on any project hostile to these imperatives.

The making of global capitalism has been nothing short of turbulent, and the vast inequalities it has produced have angered and disillusioned billions around the world. But capital's opponents are disarmed and groping for ways to deal effectively with the new reality.

The reasons for this state of affairs aren't difficult to understand. "Actually existing socialism" and the authoritarianism that defined it have made people distrustful of grand historical projects bent on changing the world — as well as of the organizations, parties, and leaders who tried to carry them out. As the socialist left collapsed, and the labor movement it looked to as the agent of revolutionary change was defeated by a resurgent capitalism, an inchoate political mood that some have called "anarcho-liberalism" filled the void.

This spirit has characterized every major expression of left political activity from the global justice movement of the late 1990s through Occupy Wall Street. It is process-oriented, distrustful of formal organizational structures and hierarchies, and dedicated to direct action as both a tactic and an all-encompassing worldview. Its boundaries are capacious enough to accommodate the most partisan of Democrats alongside the most hardcore of Occupiers.

In the main, it has engendered a politics that, compared to earlier iterations of the Left, has been modest in its goals yet willing to adopt the sorts of

disruptive tactics pioneered by the radical movements of the past.

To be sure, anarcho-liberalism deserves credit for most of the political victories in the United States over the last twenty-five years. Its spirit and activity have sustained social movements during those lean years of neoliberal advance. The zombie remnants of the New Deal coalition, on the other hand, remain wedded to a failed strategy of pressure politics plus voting for Democrats to keep the "fascists" out. Even when they put thousands of people on the National Mall for a ritualized display of outrage, nobody really cares.

"We are the 99%" beats "One Nation Working Together" or "I'm Ready for Hillary" any day.

But the anarcho-liberal mood on its own appears incapable of generating effective long-term opposition to global capitalism. While Occupy Wall Street succeeded brilliantly in drawing international attention to the scourge of inequality, it failed to sustain itself for more than a few months and crumbled in the face of state repression.

WHAT IS ~~WHAT IS~~ TO BE DONE? WHO THE HELL IS GOING TO DO IT?

Occupy did inspire a number of offshoots doing important disaster-relief work, anti-foreclosure activism, and campaigns against police brutality. But on the whole, the relentlessly centrifugal and dissociative logic of anarcho-liberalism is a profound liability, not a source of strength. We need a unifying political project that can articulate a

compelling vision of a new society, bring together disparate campaigns and organizations on an ongoing and coordinated basis, and mount a general political offensive against the system in its totality.

Of course, *Jacobin* is not the first to make this argument — one which, absent constructive engagement with existing political efforts, amounts to little more than socialist fan fiction. The gap between the challenges we face and our ability to meet them is daunting, and we won't be able to conjure the necessary capacities through what the Old Left used to call “revolutionary gymnastics.”

Here is the crux of the problem: our traditional organizational forms — namely, the mass party and the trade union — are in steady decline, and we have yet to identify and construct adequate replacements.

We need to get down to the work of building a radical civil society: forging social and organizational “infrastructures of dissent,” developing our capacities to understand the world and articulate a compelling alternative moral and political vision, and linking these resources to a dynamic social base.

Since its inception, *Jacobin* has sought to play a role in this process by creating an intellectual space for socialists across organizational boundaries. With the aid of full-time organizers, over the next year we will be expanding the scope of that mission by facilitating nationwide reading clubs and events in order to help cultivate a culture of friendly debate and non-sectarian politicization among young radicals.

But beyond what our small project can achieve, the next step for the broader Left is to establish relationships between promising political projects and bring questions of strategy back to the center of radical politics.

This issue of *Jacobin* moves in that direction. Our special section on strategy features four pieces, each representing distinct tendencies on the Left. We sought to avoid the classic “What is to be done?” in favor of the more difficult “Who the hell is going to do it?”

Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis’ “Occupy After Occupy” argues for the enduring legacy of Occupy Wall Street. They acknowledge the limits of radical horizontalism, but see the movement as resulting in a leftward shift in discourses around economic inequality.

With authors deeply rooted in the union movement, “Occupy After Occupy” is representative of an important left-labor response to Occupy — an embrace of social movements and a recognition of their ability to transform political expectations. It's a significant advance.

Frances Fox Piven’s contribution similarly heralds the advent of a “New Protest Era.” We share her optimism about the current moment, but are looking for ways to break free of the “left wing of the possible” marriage of movement work and electoral support for mainstream Democrats. This new period of protests demands a new politics, one more comfortable with the language of socialism and ready to take action independent of the Democratic Party.

Yet our interview with Chokwe Lumumba, the former mayor of Jackson, Mississippi — conducted just a few days before his untimely death — is a reminder that in a nation spanning a continent, regional strategies are also necessary. Lumumba ran in a Democratic primary, but his background as a black nationalist, in conjunction with the organizing work of the Malcolm X Grassroots Coalition and a heavily African-American Mississippi Democratic Party (deprived of statewide office and neglected by liberals at a national level), gave the campaign a very different character than it would have had in Boston or Chicago.

Though his efforts were cut tragically short, Lumumba’s use of local elected office to spur mass activity rather than administer austerity is an inspiration for those creating militant socialist currents in the South and beyond.

Finally, “No Shortcuts” by NTanya Lee and Steve Williams represents the view closest to our own. Both are deeply involved in organizing campaigns and write from a place of sympathy and engagement with struggles on the ground. Yet they have the perspective to see that a broader strategic orientation and closer coordination is needed to more effectively challenge capitalism. They embrace organization, but reject the sectarianism of those who, consciously or not, see emerging movements as little more than recruiting platforms for socialist grouplets.

The proposed alternative is a mighty task, but the coming period will be a promising one for socialists. Of course, the logic of collective action has always been warped in favor of capitalists. If the game is to be won, the machine needs to be tilted in the other direction. ■

THE NEW PROTEST ERA



We are at the beginning of a new period of mass protests that will reshape American politics.

Strategy

Essay

by Frances Fox Piven



HERE'S EVIDENCE ALL AROUND US that we are at the beginning of a new era of mass protests. An era that might be similar in some ways to previous ones in American history: the uprising that powered the War of Independence, the abolitionist crusade that led to the Civil War and the "new birth of freedom," the great labor upheavals of the 1930s that gave us mass industrial unions and what we have of a welfare state, and the Black Freedom movement and protests against the Vietnam War decades later.

None of these protest eras have been exclusively American. The currents of emancipatory thinking that fueled the American Revolution also fueled the French Revolution; abolitionism spanned the Atlantic; the European protesters of 1968 were inspired by SNCC; and protests against the Vietnam War spread across the globe.

It is hard to fix a firm beginning for a sprawling, history-changing movement, which is inevitably fueled by disparate grievances and disparate inspirations. This current moment probably began with the Zapatistas, then erupted again in Tunisia and Tahrir Square, and again in the mass anti-austerity actions in Europe, including French riots, the protests of UK Uncut and the Spanish *indignados*, as well as student strikes in Quebec and Chile.

In this country, the highpoints of the period so far have been the Wisconsin uprisings, where students and community members rallied and occupied the State Capitol to defend public-sector workers; the Chicago Teachers Union strike, where teachers won against a notoriously hardball mayor because they reached out to parents and students in local communities; Occupy Wall Street and its many offshoots; and now the Moral Monday protests in North Carolina.

All signs suggest there is more to come, with students and fast food, retail, and domestic workers in motion.

Even at this early stage, the currents have been remarkably successful at doing one of the things protest movements do well. They have managed to raise issues that politicians and the media usually ignore and to project these issues into the public sphere. They have done this using a distinctive protest repertoire of antics and noise and crowd actions. Before Occupy, there was not much discussion of the depredations of Wall Street and extreme inequality, at least not by politicians and the press. But how could the resonance of “We are the 99%,” brilliantly projected onto the walls of skyscrapers and chanted everywhere, long be ignored? Would Barack Obama be proposing a hike in the minimum wage without Occupy and the rising murmur of discontent that it encouraged among millions of low-wage workers?

Changing public discourse is an accomplishment, and so is changing the rhetoric of politicians, but by itself they are unlikely to have a big impact on public policy. American politics is not, after all, mainly about public opinion. It is about powerful interest groups, their armies of lobbyists on alert at every stage of the policy process, and the propaganda machines that business funds.

The movements have to take a lesson from successful upsurges of the past about the kind of power that can match the power of triumphant corporations. They have to discover the power of disruption.

I do not mean raucous and noisy actions, although part of whatever a movement does is likely to be raucous and noisy. Rather, disruptive power draws on the recognition that virtually all of us are tied together in the tight and fragile networks of cooperation we call society. All of us do what we do each day following scripts specific to our roles in those networks. We cross at the light, pay our fare at the subway, go to school and the assigned homeroom, or to our job where we follow the prescribed routines, then come home and pay our bills, and so on. For the institutions that constitute society to function, we have to perform the duties attached to our assigned roles.

If we don’t — if we refuse cooperation — not only can one institution break down, but the repercussions can spread widely. Think, for example, of what would happen if the thousands of domestic workers who work as nannies refused to show up. The affected households would, of course, be distraught, but so would the businesses where female Wall Street executives, media moguls, and advertising executives work.

Although Occupy Wall Street had some communication triumphs, it did not exercise much disruptive power, the minor inconveniences of occupied public spaces and loud marches notwithstanding. But Occupy did have a brash and brilliant idea about disruptive power. It proposed a mass withholding of the repayment of debts at a time when student debt had topped a trillion dollars — this on top of trillions in mortgage, credit card, and other forms of consumer debt.

The cultural stigma against renegeing on debt is awesome, but so is its disruptive potential. The banks carry these loans on their books as assets, and the repercussions of making those assets insecure would be huge. For just that reason, of course, the arsenal of retributions would be frightening, including wage garnishment and bad credit ratings, as well as legal action against the instigators of a debt strike. Almost surely for these reasons, the idea has not gained much traction so far.

But as the larger currents of defiance and anguish spread, including to the rapidly growing service sector and its low-wage workforce, so do the possibilities of disruption multiply. Service-sector workers cannot be replaced as easily by workers in the Global South, but strikes in myriad small retail and fast-food outlets can be hard to organize, and the Walmart behemoth of stores and warehouses has demonstrated its determination

to fight worker insurgency. No question, these battles will be hard fought. And a retail chain is not a steel or automobile plant; the reverberations of a shutdown are less severe and less widespread. But there are also huge hospitals, universities, schools, and financial centers, and we have yet to see how strikes in these institutions would spread through communities and the economy.

There is another aspect of protest movements that has been given insufficient attention: the way they intertwine with electoral politics. They can be nourished or starved at birth by the political discourse created therein. As a movement grows, its successes are usually dependent on its ability to cause disarray and cleavage in electoral politics.

This isn't the way many activists usually think. Rather, they are likely to see movement and electoral work as alternative paths to political change. And activist groups typically do choose to work on one or the other. But this does not mean that movements are unaffected by electoral politics, or that elected politicians are unaffected by movements.

To the contrary, they are in continuous dialogue. For most people, politics is defined by elections and the fears and possibilities that campaigning politicians highlight or ignore. Politicians, prodded by the prospect of gaining or losing blocs of voters, may make promises and stir the hopes of prospective supporters with such talk as Obama's "hope and change" or FDR's promises to "build from the bottom up and not from the top down," to put "faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid." Or they may denigrate and disparage and crush the hopes of excluded groups with discussion of welfare queens and Willy Horton, appealing to the hate and envy of other blocs of voters to the same end of gaining electoral advantage.

This rhetoric can matter well beyond the particular election that gives rise to it. FDR helped to encourage a great uprising of industrial workers that did, for a time, change American society. Ronald Reagan helped to reverse those changes by activating the racism of the white majority and crushing the hopes that had fueled the Black Freedom movement.

So what about now? Obama's rhetoric attracted young, minority, and poor voters in large numbers and helped get him elected in 2008, and some of his early initiatives, particularly his stimulus legislation, were also somewhat encouraging.

Then, as Republican and interest-group resistance mounted, egged on by the Tea Party, the messages from the President became ambiguous, if not disheartening. It is not hard to see some of the reasons why. The crisis of the Great Recession seemed to be over, and interest-group politics was in command, while the spigots of big money had been opened wider than ever by the *Citizens United* decision.

There are other possibilities for the fruitful interplay of movement and electoral politics, particularly at the municipal level. The electoral left seems to be growing stronger in cities. The surprise landslide election of Bill de Blasio in New York City was itself — in ways impossible to measure but equally impossible to ignore — promoted by the Occupy movement. De Blasio campaigned on the Occupy message of extreme inequality, and confidently trashed the record of his billionaire three-term predecessor Michael Bloomberg.

De Blasio's first initiatives are revealing. Like many, including David Brooks and Paul Ryan, he wants to do something for the poor, beginning with poor children, so he is proposing universal pre-kindergarten classes for the city's children. What's different about de Blasio's proposal is his insistence that it be paid for by a new tax on the rich. Redistribution! This packet of proposals moves part of the way toward affixing responsibility for growing poverty.

Like Occupy, de Blasio's tale of inequality has villains. And to bolster the narrative, de Blasio followed up his effort to get state authority for the new tax with a proposal that the state legislature also give him authority to raise the minimum wage in the city. This, indeed, was bracing.

The de Blasio phenomenon owes a lot to Occupy and its offshoots. He may have to repay the debt. The new regime in New York is likely to encourage the stirrings of protest among low-wage workers, stiffen the backbone of public-sector employees whose contracts the new administration will have to negotiate, as well as energize students, the poor and working class, and the community groups that have virtually fallen off the chessboard of New York municipal politics.

The future for the city is likely to be turbulent. But for the 99%, it is also likely to be brighter than it has been in a long time. Could New York City, the home of American social democracy, rise again? Could Boston? Or Chicago or Los Angeles? It's worth trying. The coming period gives us a chance. ■

Its critics may disagree, but Occupy Wall Street's legacy has been an enduring one.

OCCUPY AFTER OCCUPY



Strategy

Essay

by Ruth Milkman,
Stephanie Luce,
(†) Penny Lewis

A

YEAR AFTER OCCUPY WALL STREET was sparked, the mainstream media reached their consensus on the movement: it failed to create change. “For all intents and purposes, the Occupy movement is dead,” eulogized the *New York Times*. In a nation with a notoriously short attention span, it’s not surprising that the lack of immediate success gave rise to lamentations about its failure.

Unlike the Tea Party, to which it is often compared, Occupy did not have a mainstream party in its thrall, nor major donors keeping its issues alive. The 2012 elections were not marked by much attention to the grievances that enlivened the two thousand protesters who set up camp in the tight quarters of Zuccotti Park in September 2011, who inspired hundreds of similar occupations across the nation.

What a difference another year makes. “Maybe Occupy Wall Street Wasn’t Such a Failure After All,” mulled *Business Insider* on OWS’s second birthday, reconsidering the received wisdom and concluding

that this was a case of “delayed success.” We agree. Occupy’s impact on US political discourse and its formative influence on many of its participants endures to this day, and its legacy continues to unfold.

The specific concerns that galvanized OWS and captured public support — surging inequality, unemployment and underemployment, the mortgage crisis, student debt, and other types of economic precarity — remain palpable, in the United States and worldwide. Moreover, the global cycle of protest that began with the Arab Spring and the 2011 movements of *indignados* in Spain and Greece, followed by OWS and its progeny, has not abated. Instead the torch has passed to other venues: the 2013 upsurges in Turkey and Brazil, for example, recapitulate many features of Occupy and the 2011 movements that preceded it.

Although each such uprising has its own unique context and internal logic, they all share certain key features: an antistatist animus and a rejection of mainstream politics. They have been led by educated, middle-class youth, making extensive use of social media.

When it suddenly appeared on our doorstep, Occupy Wall Street was an irresistible object of study for the three of us. Drawing on both survey data and interviews, we explored some basic questions: Where did OWS come from? Who were the protesters? What motivated them to join the uprising? Why did OWS gain so much traction with the media and the wider public? The result was our spring 2013 report, *Changing the Subject: A Bottom-Up Account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City*. A year later, we continue to reflect on the meaning of the Occupy movement’s historical arc and its enduring legacy.

Like many social movements, OWS did not appear out of nowhere; it was planned by experienced political activists, inspired in part by the Arab Spring and other protests around the world in the first half of 2011. The organizers of the Zuccotti Park occupation aimed to focus public attention here in the United States on the injustices tied to the global economic crisis and the staggering growth of inequality. In this respect, Occupy succeeded far beyond the organizers’ own expectations, upending the national political conversation, as we and many other commentators have pointed out.

Equally important, but less often noted, the movement attracted many participants who had

little or no previous experience with political protest, who were radicalized by their involvement in OWS and who have remained involved in progressive politics ever since. Our report’s title, *Changing the Subject*, was meant to encapsulate both these phenomena.

We reported that news mentions of the term “income inequality” rose dramatically as Occupy gained momentum over the fall of 2011, and that although the frequency subsided somewhat after the evictions of various occupations, it remained higher than in the pre-OWS period. Updating that analysis, as the graph below shows, we found that during the fall of 2013, mentions of income inequality reached the peak levels of the Occupy era once again, and at the end of 2013 the frequency of mentions spiked far beyond that level.

OWS famously refused to define its demands, a stance that was widely criticized at the time. But our interviewees passionately defended that aspect of their movement and argued that it was a key ingredient in its popular appeal. And even in the absence of formal demands, our survey data suggest that several specific concerns motivated OWS supporters. The issue most often cited was Occupy’s trademark, namely inequality and the 1%, which nearly half of our respondents cited as a motivating concern, followed by “money in politics” and “corporate greed,” student debt, and access to education.

To be sure, the issue of inequality has been reframed and arguably co-opted in the post-Occupy era. That is perhaps an inevitable consequence of its incorporation into the political mainstream. But this is the price of success: the truth is that inequality is now front-and-center in US political discourse, a direct legacy of the Occupy movement. It is no accident that the recent spate of media attention to inequality coincides with the electoral calendar, reflecting the fact that many candidates have embraced the issue. Two notable candidates are Bill de Blasio, in his victorious run for mayor of New York City, framed primarily as a critique of the “tale of two cities,” and Seattle’s new mayor Ed Murray, who is promoting a \$15 per hour minimum wage there. Although OWS activists themselves largely disdained electoral politics, their success in riveting public attention to the issue of inequality helped pave the way for the success of candidates like these.

The upward trend in media mentions of inequality also reflects recent mobilization efforts

that themselves embody OWS's lasting discursive legacy — such as the Black Friday protests of Walmart workers, the fast-food workers' campaign for a \$15 minimum wage, and the SeaTac referendum for a local minimum wage of \$15 in November 2013. All these campaigns were financed and led largely by organized labor, but some of the organizers involved were OWS veterans, and it seems unlikely that these campaigns would have been launched at all in the absence of the groundwork laid by Occupy. Similarly, OWS should get credit for the spate of efforts to raise the minimum wage in states and cities around the country. Of course, none of these examples embody the radical vision that animated OWS. But they are nevertheless part of Occupy's lasting legacy.

More in keeping with the prefigurative politics of the radical Occupiers whose vision did so much to shape the early movement, many groups remain around the country that are committed to direct action and transformative politics. According to the findings of OWS activist James Owen in a study that covered the period up to mid 2012, "Occupy organizing in NYC enabled a pluralistic network of alliances connecting over 200 nonprofits, emerging grassroots groups, religious organizations, and incorporated businesses with over 120 Occupy groups."¹ Some of the groups that are still active in 2014 include Occupy Museums, Occupy Homes, Occupy Sandy Recovery and Occupy Arts and Labor. Some former Occupiers are also creating worker cooperatives; others are engaged in training and education projects like Wildfire and seeking to strengthen other post-Occupy formations.

A key finding from our 2013 report that attracted an outsize share of attention was that Occupy activists were disproportionately privileged: typically white, college-educated, from affluent family backgrounds, and young. In terms of age, the dominant demographic was the Millennials, who, as Peter Beinart pointed out in a brilliant article, entered their "plastic years" at the turn of the twenty-first century.² Millennials not only fueled OWS, but the movement also contributed to the ongoing political formation of active participants in Occupy and many other members of this generation. Beinart amassed a wealth of data suggesting that Millennials are not just disproportionately in favor of same-sex marriage (as everyone knows) but also far more skeptical

about capitalism and class, and about mainstream politics, than their elders, and on this basis argued persuasively that they represent a new political generation.

Some of the young people we surveyed who participated in OWS were still students, but many more were recent labor market entrants with college or postgraduate education who faced dismal economic prospects after the 2008 crash, in a labor market in which precarious work was becoming the new normal. They were prototypes of what social-movement scholar Doug McAdam famously termed "biographical availability."³ It was underemployment, not unemployment, that typically rendered them available in this way. At the same time, many millennial respondents to our survey had a personal connection to the issues Occupy raised: despite their relatively affluent class backgrounds, more than half of those under thirty were carrying substantial debt, and over a third had been laid off or lost a job in the previous five years. In this regard OWS was hardly unique; the wave of protest movements around the world since 2011, although attracting a diverse group of supporters, have been fueled by this generation.

As Paul Mason so aptly puts it, "At the heart of it all is a new sociological type: the graduate with no future."⁴

This was the same generation that was infatuated with Barack Obama in 2008, and then disillusioned with the results of his election. Although we found that most OWS organizers were well to the left of Obama before 2008, the larger population of Occupy supporters included many for whom the process of political disillusion reinforced economic disappointment. As an organizer we interviewed put it, "The Obama presidency was disillusioning to a lot of people, and that's why Occupy Wall Street spread so much. We tried to get the best liberal we could, and then we got more of the same shit. Then it's either cynicism or we're going to try something completely different."

Millennials are the first generation for whom social media are the dominant mode of communication. That is why, as Manuel Castells has noted, Occupy "was born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet."⁵ OWS's reliance on social media helped meld together previously distinct activist networks into a single movement. Even those who helped plan the September 17 occupation recounted their

surprise at seeing few familiar faces from the planning meetings at Zuccotti itself.

OWS activists not only rejected mainstream US political parties as hopelessly corrupted by corporate power; they also spurned traditional left-wing organizations as overly hierarchical. More influenced by anarchist and autonomist traditions than by the socialist left, their eclectic political critique and praxis combined elements of all these traditions, united by a tactical commitment to nonviolent direct action and to prefigurative politics, which shaped the ways in which decisions were made as well as the organization of daily life in Zuccotti Park. In self-conscious contrast to the vertical structures of mainstream political parties, unions, and traditional left organizations alike, OWS embraced horizontalism.

As the movement expanded in size, however, horizontalist principles were often strained and compromised, sparking complaints that people of color, women, and other groups were sidelined.

Equally important was the transformation of OWS participants who had not previously been politicized. As one of our interviewees put it, the occupation “created the space for people to become radicalized.” Not only were such people transformed by the experience, in many cases into lifelong activists, but new networks were forged among them. Many OWS organizers told us how much they valued the personal relationships they had built with other Occupiers, and some were convinced that OWS was the beginning of a new wave of social movement activity.

It’s probably still too soon to know if they are right, but what is beyond dispute is that the basic social conditions that sparked the movement in the first place remain intact. Even if the anemic economic recovery eventually accelerates, reducing unemployment and underemployment, the Millennials will continue to confront far more restricted economic opportunities than their parents. Not only are they burdened by unprecedented debt, but many will be limited to precarious forms of employment like freelance or contract work.

Occupy itself is gone, but it does not seem farfetched to expect “the graduate with no future” to rise again, drawing as before on social media, to challenge the rampant inequalities that continue to fester in the United States and around the world. Although they will surely retain the anti-hierarchical, egalitarian approach that animated Occupy and that for many makes mainstream politics anathema, perhaps next time around they will find ways to transcend the limits of radical horizontalism, building new movements that can frontally challenge inequality and injustice. ■

1. James Owens.
2013. “*Occupy’s Precarious Pluralism: A Study of the Purposes, Identities and Politics Enabled by the NYC Occupy Movement.*”

2. Peter Beinart, “The Rise of the New New Left,” *The Daily Beast*, September 12, 2013.
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/09/12/the-rise-of-the-new-new-left.html>

3. “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer.”
American Journal of Sociology 92 (1986), p. 64–90.

4. Paul Mason, *Why It’s Still Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (Verso, 2013), p. 263.

5. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movement in the Internet Age.* (Polity, 2012), p. 168.

FREE THE LAND



In his last interview, Chokwe Lumumba discusses popular power and the past and future of revolutionary struggle in the American South.

Strategy

Interview

by Bhaskar Sunkara

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HOKWE LUMUMBA's dilemma was simple: how to be a revolutionary in a Mississippi the popular imagination would paint as anything but.

It was a mission that seemed bound to alienate and polarize long before he became mayor of Jackson, home to a State Capitol building that flies a defiant Confederate battle flag and a City Hall built by slave labor.

But when I went to Jackson to profile the newly elected Lumumba last year and in my conversations with Mississippians throughout this year, I was shocked at how hard it was to find someone who didn't like him. Mainstream politicians like Rickey Cole, chairman of the state Democratic Party, and his staff were keen to show solidarity with Jackson's new administration. They talked about Lumumba's honor and integrity, whatever their

political differences. After the mayor's death in February at the age of sixty-six, Cole called him "a man by the people, of the people, and for the people."

Even city business leaders like Ben Allen, president of Downtown Jackson Partners, expressed surprise during Lumumba's administration about how clear, open, and efficient his first few months in office had been. Hampered by a lack of city revenue and hostility at the state level, Lumumba had just passed a one-cent local sales tax to fund Jackson's infrastructure. The taps ran brown and many roads were in disrepair when I visited the city, and the Environmental Protection Agency had threatened action if waste systems weren't upgraded. There was nothing especially radical about the tax, except for the fact that Lumumba took his case to the people, explaining the situation and winning consent for the measure in a referendum.

It gave a new resonance to the "sewer socialist" tradition that administered public office for generations in Milwaukee and elsewhere in the twentieth century. But there were signs that if the mayor and his Malcolm X Grassroots Movement stayed in power, the deepening of their revolution would attract something of a counterrevolution in response.

Lumumba was born in Detroit as Edwin Finley Taliaferro. He saw racism growing up, from all-white restaurants in Dearborn that wouldn't serve his family to housing and job discrimination in the inner city. It instilled a level of social consciousness in the young man, consciousness that would only grow as he absorbed the era's images: Emmett Till's battered teenaged corpse, street battles and sit-ins, and, most formatively, the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Like so many other black youth, he was radicalized. Adopting his "free name" from a Central African ethnic group and slain Congolese revolutionary Patrice Lumumba, Chokwe put ambitions of becoming a lawyer on hold to join the fight. He was attracted to the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) movement, which had roots in Detroit but relocated to Jackson. They wanted a new nation in the African-American majority counties of the Southeast.

In 1971, Lumumba joined them in Jackson — where, as in other cities in Mississippi, blacks had little political representation and nostalgia for Jim Crow was still strong. In August of that same year, local police and FBI agents raided the RNA compound. In the ensuing gun battle, during which Lumumba was not present, a police officer was killed and another, along with a federal agent, was wounded. Eleven New Afrika members were arrested. In the aftermath, Lumumba moved back to Detroit, finishing law school at Wayne State University in 1975 before finding his way back to Jackson a decade later.

But Lumumba's was not the tale of a radical coming to terms with society as it exists, like so many from the New Left. His legal career was radical and often controversial. He took on a host of high-profile cases, including those of Fulani Sunni Ali, rapper Tupac Shakur, and former Black Panther Party members Geronimo Pratt and Assata Shakur.

He never renounced the goal of black self-determination or apologized for his activism during his Republic of New Afrika years. Lumumba told me in the interview below that only his tactics had changed in light of the new political avenues now open to black militants in the South.

"At that time, in the seventies, we were locked out of government completely," he said. "We were actually victims of government violence, so we protected ourselves against that repression."

Today, the situation is different. From Tunica, in northwest Mississippi, to Wilkerson County, in the southwest, there are eighteen predominantly black counties in the state that have in the last few decades finally been able break the domination of white office-holders. Lumumba saw this as only the start of the deep transformation that the region needed.

"One of the routes to that self-determination," he told me, "is to use the governmental slots in order to accumulate the political power that we can, and then to demand more, and to build more." But he was quick to portray his movement as an inclusive socialist one. "This is not a 'hate whitey' movement. This is not some kind of a reactionary nationalist movement."

Lumumba and the activists who rallied around his campaigns hoped to establish two planks of political power: one based on people's assemblies and another on a solidarity economy, built on a network of worker-owned cooperatives. The assemblies were, for the moment, purely advisory. They started in Ward 2, while he was a councilman, but spread after his election as mayor.

Mississippi has had truly universal suffrage for only a little more than a generation. Yet Lumumba wanted to foster a democratic culture that was not just representative, but participatory. Inviting people to voice their grievances in town halls and have a say in the distribution of public resources was part of that commitment. But he had loftier ambitions: over time, he wanted the new organs of people's power, absolute and direct democracy, to replace existing structures.

He didn't even think that his government could be equated with "people's power." "That's still a struggle to be achieved; that's a goal to be reached. That's not where we are now," Lumumba cautioned.

The solidarity economy schemes were just as ambitious. While keenly aware of and open about the limits of political and economic experimentation on the local level — and seeing his new administration's efforts as transitional — Lumumba wanted to use city contracts and economic leverage to foster worker ownership. Invoking the Ujamaa concept of former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, he hoped to transform a full 10 percent of Jackson's economy into cooperatives by the end of his first term alone. The administration has been planning for months to debate and explore their options with activists and outside experts at a "Jackson Rising: New Economies Conference" in May.

It was less about spearheading a revolution from above than creating a climate of radical thought and experimentation that could take on dynamics of its own. In the meantime, even Jackson's moderates were won over by clean and efficient government and Lumumba's easy charm and humor.

That support would have been needed. Activists within the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement worried that if they went too far too fast, the state legislature could limit

self-governance in Jackson, maybe even place the city under trusteeship. What's more, both sides knew that the honeymoon period with downtown developers couldn't last either. Real economic and political transformation requires taking power away from those not keen on relinquishing it.



HIS INTERVIEW was conducted with Lumumba in February 2014, several days before he died from heart failure. For the Left, a few lessons in particular should be drawn from it. Lumumba governed to inspire movements from below, not to administer austerity. There need not be a contradiction between holding office, even executive office, and building a radical opposition.

Lumumba navigated these waters successfully despite the fact that he ran as a Democrat. Utilizing open primaries — a peculiarity of the American system — may not be the best route for socialists in northern cities where liberal machines still dominate and neutralize insurgencies from within, but it can make tactical sense elsewhere.

Nowhere is that truer than in states such as Mississippi. One of the most progressive voting blocs in the country is in the so-called Black Belt: the African-American majority counties that stretch across the Southeast. Without sufficient progressive numbers statewide to swing states in the electoral college or to elect anyone but local officials, these constituencies are ignored by presidential-cycle-minded national liberals. They shouldn't be by socialists and all those committed to building militant currents among the most oppressed.

Success doesn't come easy. But Lumumba and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement showed how years of disciplined work "serving the people," including politicized relief work after Hurricane Katrina, could pay off in the electoral arena and how those victories could expand rather than restrict popular power.

We'll need many more efforts like it in the years to come to end class and racial exploitation. And that's the only way fit to commemorate a comrade as astounding as Chokwe Lumumba.

Sunkara: You came to Jackson in the early 1970s — what was the political climate in the city like at the time?

Lumumba: When I came to Jackson in March 1971, it was just about six to eight months after two Jackson State University students — James Earl Green and Phillip Lafayette Gibbs — had been killed on the campus.

The Civil Rights Movement rocked the foundation of the white-supremacist government and culture in the South. And across Mississippi, a lot of good work was spearheaded by Fannie Lou Hamer, Vernon Dahmer, Medgar Evers and others. In 1964, they helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. That party, in the early seventies, had a profound effect on the state Democratic Party. It was forced, for instance, to mandate that half of its delegates would have to be black and half be women.

So the Civil Rights Movement had significant gains, but repression was still extreme. Discrimination on jobs was commonplace. Even though the Civil Rights Movement had pretty much nationally won acceptance of the idea that Mississippi apartheid, or Jim Crow, as it was called, had to go, in the state there was still resistance to it. It was clear that even where access had come to universities and to restaurants, that was not associated with access to power — economic or political — for blacks.

There were very few blacks that were political officials — none in Mississippi's major cities, and only some in small towns. Economically, it was still pretty much a white supremacist system. Rich whites owned production and blacks and others were relegated to the fringes.

At the same time, we still faced intimidation from right-wing forces. Klansmen populated police departments, and so on.

Around the country, a lot of black people's movements had moved from the phase of just merely turning the other cheek in the face of attacks and egregious repression to actually declaring the right to self-defense, under the inspiration of Malcolm X. And that certainly was the position that we took, which inevitably led to clashes between those who were used to preying on blacks — and particularly movement blacks, like civil rights organizers — without any kind of response, and our determination to say

that we weren't going to be victimized.

We came in peace, but we came prepared.

Given this context, during the 1970s, you were a supporter of the Republic of New Afrika movement. How do you reflect on this period in your activism? Have your political views shifted at all in regards to black self-determination and the methods in which it can be achieved?

My view on self-determination is the same. First of all, it's a fundamental right for all people — not just black people. I'd say that what has changed are the tactics, and somewhat the strategy, for reaching that goal.

In the seventies, we were locked out of government completely. We were actually victims of government violence, so we protected ourselves against that repression. But since that time, particularly in Jackson, where I am now the mayor, the population changed. The city is now 85 percent black. Many of those people have worked together with us as we fought for rights for our youth, political prisoners, the victims of racism, the prosecution of the murder of Medgar Evers, and so on.

We've been able to politicize the growing black population in Jackson, and in the state. We now have not just an 85-percent-black population, but a black population prepared to elect progressive leadership.

The tactical change here is that we now can elect black people into government, particularly into local governments and county-wide governments. And we have a whole region called the Kush region, as we've named it, on the western part of Mississippi — everywhere from Tunica, which is the northwest, all the way down to Wilkinson County, which is southwest, and everywhere in between those two points. A contiguous land mass of 18 different counties; 17 of them are predominantly black. Only one of them, Warren County, is about 47 percent black.

In those areas, the population has been now for some time electing black sheriffs, black mayors, black city council people, et cetera. So what we have determined is that one of the routes to that self-determination is to use the governmental slots in order to accumulate the political power that we can, and then to demand more, and to build more, and even to build more statewide as the leverage for our position so we

can launch an effort for more statewide control and participation by the black population.

I think it is important to say here, because I know some people will mischaracterize this, that this is not a “hate whitey” movement; this is not some kind of a reactionary nationalist movement. This is a movement that is geared toward winning the right of self-determination. It is our view that where you have a majority-black population, they have the right to have the majority of political power, to exercise the majority of the economic power and social power, to build that kind of influence. And at the same time they have a responsibility to make sure that the resources of society are equally available to all residents, whether they be white, Hispanic, Indian, and so on and so forth — particularly Indian, I would say. But all folks.

Last year, in an interview with the *Jackson Free Press*, Jackson’s police chief, Lindsey Horton, inadvertently laid out a pretty vulgar Marxist view of policing. He said that policing goes back to the biblical days — you can’t have a civilized society with haves and have-nots without the have-nots trying to take from the haves. Policing defends property.

How does administering these repressive parts of the state in Jackson clash with the movement’s values? What, if anything, can be done to change the nature of policing in Jackson, considering we’ll probably be living in a class society for a little while longer?

There have been a lot of contradictions in our struggle, and this is just another one. There are many stages of struggle that have contradictions in them. As a lawyer, people used to call me the “revolutionary lawyer” because I served political prisoners, took on causes for resistance and helped the movement move forward in many different ways. But nothing could be more of an oxymoron than a “revolutionary lawyer,” because the law itself is a reactionary thing in the United States, which has been set up, in many instances, by the people who keep us oppressed. There’s no question about that.

But that doesn’t mean that you can’t be a lawyer, and it doesn’t mean that you can’t serve the people as a lawyer, and that you can’t fight for people’s rights as a lawyer, and that you can’t do all you can in order to change the situation.

It’s the same thing in this position as mayor. And in fact, we think I can do more in this position than I could as a lawyer.

We’ve made sure that Lindsey Horton is in line with our vision that we are working to change the situation between haves and have-nots in order to bring up people who are have-nots and put them in a position where they will be equally respected in this society, where the social forces in this society will respect their equality and that, therefore, would reduce crime. Jobs and other programs reduce the need for crime. I don’t think that Mr. Horton is where I am on the issue, and he doesn’t have the background that I have, but I do believe that’s one of the obligations I have, to try to teach those who are in my administration the points that are important to the transition of society.

So, yes, we still run into some behavior which is problematic in terms of our march forward to create a revolutionary culture down here, to create a culture that challenges all repression and all types of exploitation — and the struggle against that manifests itself in many different ways — but I think so far, we’ve been pleasantly surprised at the response that we’ve gotten from people.

However, just because the people were ready to step forward and say, “Oh, I want to make that change,” does not mean that all the people who voted have a thorough understanding of what that change is, or how we’ve got to go about that change. And the same is true for all the people who work for the government.

You just alluded to your work as a cofounder of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the movement’s role in your election. How do you see the relationship between the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and your position now as mayor of Jackson? Have there been measures to maintain the independence of the movement?

Is it hard to govern without demobilizing the activists and the energy that actually got you in office? Or do you not see a contradiction between having a grassroots movement and also holding executive power?

Here again, you’re good at asking questions that present contradictions, but you certainly identified one there. It was a contradiction that

THIS IS NOT A “HATE WHITEY” MOVEMENT. THIS IS NOT SOME KIND OF A REACTIONARY NATIONALIST MOVEMENT.

was raised in Detroit when they elected their first black mayor, Coleman Young, who had some history of fighting for the labor movement and for the rights of our people. It raised itself in Chicago when Harold Washington was elected, and it's true for some cities. And it may be nowhere more manifested than right here in the city of Jackson. There is a tendency — this is what creates the contradiction — for movement groups and protest groups and other activists who are trying to get revolutionary change to put their movement on hold and to rely exclusively on the mayor and the mayor's staff to get things done for the people.

That's a mistake. Our administration has very little more control over the economic realities of our society than we did before we got in these positions. We have some technical control over those things — or technical influence, let's put it that way. But not real control — and especially in a city setting, as opposed to being in charge of the whole state. The contradictions exist. So what you have to do is, you have to tell the folks they have to be steadfast. You have to teach them that it's important to have someone in office who's trying to fight for the right things.

That's necessary, but not sufficient. It's not sufficient to win our struggle. We need to encourage the whole population to become involved in the movement for change.

To foster that kind of involvement, you've encouraged the creation of people's assemblies. Do you envision direct democracy of this type just augmenting traditional representative offices, or one day replacing them?

The people's assembly is a body where the people challenge government, ask government questions, get informed by government, and protest government when necessary. And that's a movement that we support, and we continue to support, to tell people that government is totally in their hands — and that's on all levels: federal, state, and local.

The assembly should represent all things that don't currently represent the people's authority. And in many instances, that will be some of the elected government. And some of the bureaucratic structures. So I think the people should become more and more involved in reforming and changing the structures that surround them and the people that surround them — determining who handles structures, and how they should be elected, and who should be elected — until the people's power becomes the same as, becomes simultaneous with, the development of government.

Now what does that mean? Does that mean that you have to have something different in terms of the name of the government, something different in structures? It's probably going to mean that. That's going to be for the people to decide. But right now, I don't think it would be truthful to say, even though we are building a people's government, that our government at this time is simultaneous with, and the exact same as, people's power.

That's still a struggle to be achieved; that's a goal to be reached. That's not where we are now.

You described the type of economy you'd like to build in Jackson as a “solidarity economy.” You've mentioned worker-owned co-ops and banks, community land trusts, and participatory budgeting.

How is this progressing considering the fact that you are, as you mentioned, running a city where you can't deficit-finance like we could at the national level?

Yes, there are limitations to what we can accomplish. We know that the problem is that too few people control too many of the resources

that people live on, and that's why you have your big gap between haves and have-nots.

What can we do in order to change that situation? Well, from the mayor's position, a number of these companies want to get local contracts from us. We can create rules, and that's what we've done. Jackson's open for business, but if you're going to do business in Jackson, then we say, "Look, you're going to have to employ the people of Jackson." And we say that over 50 percent of your subcontracting has to go out to what they call minorities — I don't really agree with that term, but we'll use it for the time being. It could mean Native American contractors; it could mean various other people like that. So that's something to help begin some change.

However, that's not comprehensive enough, because it leaves out a lot of the private sector who do not come through government in order to get their contracts, and the people employed by these businesses. We are a city, and I don't want you to mistake us, yet, for a revolutionary state or some other place. We can't seize corporations and turn them over to the people. We can't do that. So that's one of the limitations.

And secondly, we can have influence on trying to stop these corporations from discriminating on various different levels, because we can make it uncomfortable for them. But we don't have the ability to police that completely, because we're just a city.

What did the movement look like before you were elected, either during the campaign or before it, in terms of community work building some sort of presence in the city?

That's a good question. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement was created here in Jackson in 1990, and it was predicated by some other work you have already referred to — the Republic of New Afrika — that started here back in 1971. So over the years, a lot of work has been done. But more importantly, since 1990, we have been engaged in a lot of youth programs. We have literally been involved in helping hundreds of youths go to college who would not have gone to college, and probably would not have finished high school, had it not been for us. We have run programs where they've learned about their cultural heritage, where they've

gotten aid and assistance in the academic world, where they've had a chance to learn drama, and so many other things — and where they really became stand-up figures in their community.

We've also defended a lot of people who were the victims of racial abuse. We've done that all over the state. And that helped our situation. We helped thousands of Hurricane Katrina survivors. We literally sent tons of material aid to Gulf Coast survivors of Katrina, and we created political programs, political projects, and political organizations in order to fight the abuses that the Katrina residents were suffering.

As you know, Katrina happened in 2005. My first election to anything was in 2009, when we ran for City Council. We were also engaged in a lot of work to straighten out specific communities — building a garden, for instance, to help food flow for some people, and really for the idea of bringing people in the community together.

And we aligned ourselves with a lot of the civil rights organizations here who are working on many projects. A lot of them had to do with the so-called criminal justice system. So many people going to prison — not only those who are being wrongly convicted, but those who became sensitive to the problem that America wasn't really providing, and that Mississippi's system wasn't providing, the opportunity for a number of young people to grow up in a healthy social environment.

We united with a very progressive ACLU movement in Mississippi at the time, with the NAACP, who worked on many of these projects, and with a number of other people and organizations that were dealing with the prison situation. Fifty prisoners had been killed in jail over a five-year period in the state. So we got involved in that project and exposed that in several instances they were not all victims of suicide as had been claimed. There was some skullduggery going on.

Those are some of the things, off the top of my head, that I can tell you about that we were working on at the time of our election. And of course we were building the people's assembly before I got elected mayor.

Do you see your success in Jackson as being indicative of a model that could work nationally? I know the Malcolm X Grassroots

Movement organizes across the state, and elsewhere in the South, but have you sought national alliances with other left groups?

The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement definitely seeks alliances with other groups, and the idea of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement is to build a movement of what we call a new Afrikan people. And a new Afrikan people is the same thing as black people, or so-called “African-American people.” But it’s also to build a movement of people, period. In other words, to create a positive, progressive movement across the borders of the United States and internationally.

We fully understand that there’s no freedom for us unless there’s freedom for everybody. Martin Luther King said that at one point, and I think it’s very true. So we seek different kinds of relationships, and we want to spread the things that we are doing, which we think are useful and can help people in other places. Of course, people are going to have to organize and plan based on the conditions in their own areas.

But the people’s assembly is something we recommend, and actually, the people’s assembly is something we borrowed from elsewhere. Our use of the assembly really comes from Katrina, with the destruction of New Orleans. There was a survivors’ assembly created in order to try to help folks in the New Orleans area and in the Gulf Coast area to reclaim their land and their jobs and their educational status. We facilitated that from Jackson, which is about two and a half hours away from the Gulf Coast. But we later decided that we would create an assembly for ourselves in order to advance our political objectives, so we wouldn’t wind up in a situation like the folks did down in New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf Coast.

But yes, we certainly think that’s a model that can be exported and work for others across the country.

What has the response been from the Right in Jackson and Mississippi as a whole? Obviously, you’re contending with a hostile and very conservative state legislature.

The New Afrikan Independence Movement — which the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement is a part of, and is preceded by the Republic of Afrika and others — has been hated by the

Right. We may be the most hated group by the Right, historically. And that was reflected in the way we got elected. During the election process, those communities that are more identified with the right wing voted almost unanimously for the other candidate.

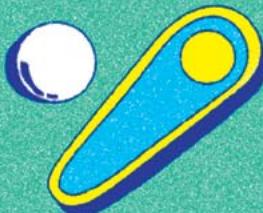
I didn’t get many of those votes at all. In fact, there was one precinct where I got three votes. But fortunately, we got overwhelming support from the majority of the city, from people who benefited from our long struggle against repression, as opposed to people who felt threatened by that long struggle. However, I would like to suggest something: since I’ve been elected, even though those forces still exist which would oppose us, we have been getting overwhelming support, initially, from all sectors of the community.

I’m sure we’re not getting it from the Tea Party, or the extreme right — don’t get me wrong. But I’m saying that clearly there are white people in the city who were persuaded by Tea Party right-wingers and others that we were the devil, who are now realizing that is not true. And they see the logic in what we’re talking about, and we seem to be getting their support.

Now, there’s a lot to that, and some other time we can both talk about it and dissect it, and I’m sure there are going to be some strains in that relationship from time to time as people have difficulty understanding the sacrifices that they have to make in order to get a really revolutionary, changed society, and the other things that are involved in our transition. But as of right now, we’re actually in a period where we’re getting overwhelming support from across the city.

As an example, we just put a referendum on the ballot and got 91 percent support. That means that we got support from every segment of the community, and the referendum had to do with work that we need to do to repair the infrastructure of our city. That’s good for us, because we’re going to march on ideas which ultimately do help everybody, not just the black population. So I think we’re on a little bit of a honeymoon still, and I’m sure there will be a lot of political struggle in the future.

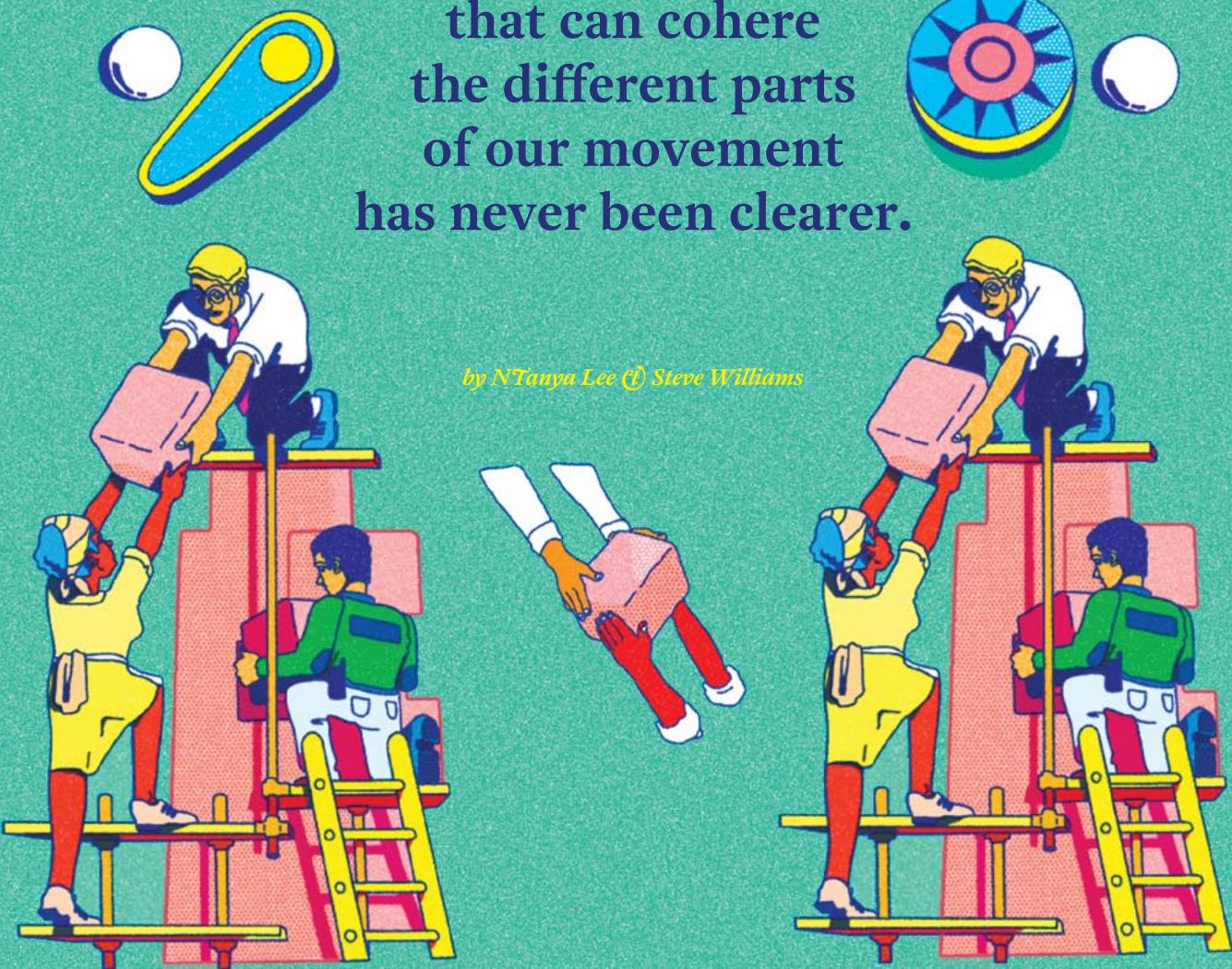
But as long as we can stay on the right side of it, keep the good ideas, and not get politically reactionary, then I think that ultimately — I’m sure that ultimately — we will win. ■



NO SHORTCUTS

We are living in dire times, and the need to develop a strategy that can cohere the different parts of our movement has never been clearer.

by NTanya Lee & Steve Williams



B

OTH OF US HAVE BEEN SHAPED by years of organizing the young, homeless people, and working-class African Americans and Latinas. After each spending more than a decade building different organizations in San Francisco, we teamed in 2012 up to interview more than 150 organizers and activists in some of the most active social-movement struggles across the country. One of the themes that emerged from our conversations is that although movement activists often use the same words, what we mean by those words can vary from person to person.

No wonder we have a hard time communicating with each other.

Strategy is one of many words with conflicting definitions. The word with which strategy most often gets intertwined is tactics. Sometimes these two words are used interchangeably. Sometimes strategy is seen as little more than the accumulation of tactics. Other times, strategy is seen as one front in a larger campaign. While we are not proposing that Webster's Dictionary deploy observers in movement spaces to rule on semantic conflicts, any process of developing movement-wide strategy demands a shared agreement on the meaning of the term. For the purpose of this article, we offer the following definition of strategy: a plan to navigate shifting terrain to accomplish defined objectives which create openings to achieve a larger goal.

Effective strategy does not exist in a timeless and placeless void. It must grow out of and relate to the objective conditions in which it is being carried out, and it must respond to basic questions like: What is our vision of a transformed economic and social structure that makes liberation possible? What is our assessment of the dynamics shaping the conditions in communities, workplaces, the environment, the United States, and around the world? What are the scenarios, given those conditions, that allow us to achieve our vision? What are the campaigns and projects that we can undertake now to bring those scenarios into being and develop our capacities while constraining the power of the ruling class?

Once we've agreed on a working definition of strategy, there's the issue of scope. Some talk about strategy at the level of a campaign. Others talk about a strategy to "take back the White House." Still others see their strategy as "just keep fighting." All of these are important. In a period that has witnessed a massive worsening of living conditions for working people and communities of color, the commitment to "keep on keeping on" is a necessary orientation. However, all of these partial victories have to be placed within a larger scope.

We enter this discussion of strategy as leftists — another term that suffers from multiple meanings. Due to the rightward jerking of the US political spectrum, progressives and liberals are often lumped together with anarchists, socialists, revolutionary nationalists, feminists, environmentalists and anyone else willing to resist the barbaric state of affairs in a confusing stew called the Left. While we believe that many of these forces should unite when possible, to lump them all together as the Left commits two fatal errors. First, it muddies what can be a useful definition of the Left. Second, it implies that these groups act as a unified political force towards a clearly defined left project, even though that's clearly not the case.

Chilean political scientist Marta Harnecker offers a useful definition of the Left as those “forces that oppose the capitalist system and its profit motive and which are fighting for an alternative humanist, solidarity-filled society, a socialist society, the building blocks of which are the interests of the working classes. This society would be ‘free from material poverty and the spiritual wretchedness engendered by capitalism.’” Based on this definition, we begin from the standpoint that the objective of any left strategy must be to topple capitalism in order to make way for an economic system that allows for all people around the world to develop their capacities to the greatest extent possible in harmony with the planet.

Still, a strong Left needs to clarify its vision: toward what are we struggling? We all operate amidst the wreckage of a forty-year onslaught in which the neoliberal wing of the capitalist class squawked that capitalism was the end of history. The collapse of the Soviet Union and many of the socialist experiments of the twentieth century rendered much of the Left confused. On TV and in classrooms, capitalists insisted that socialism’s defeat proved capitalism wasn’t just the best way of organizing an economic system, it was the only way (Cuba, of course, being the troublesome counterexample to their free-market fairy tale). There is no alternative, they insisted.

Over time, left movements substituted resistance for principled opposition. In the United States, socialism became a word that few dared to touch. Today, there are new openings. The economic crash of 2008 has left millions of people disillusioned, disaffected, and dispossessed. Still, there is little confidence that anything else is possible, and our inability to describe a compelling alternative to capitalism renders us irrelevant to most. Any anticapitalist strategy in the United States must contend with this reality. We must provide a response to the question: toward what?

Following the leadership of socialist experiments in Latin America, we can refer to our economic system as twenty-first century socialism. Although we understand that others may prefer different terms, what is most important is clarity. The strategy we are developing aims at nothing less than a fundamental break from the logic and institutions of capitalism and the related systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism.

With a working definition of strategy and clarity on the strategy’s objective, many will leap to the question of what is to be done. This will be an error if the first task is not to answer the question of who will be doing it. The question of who are the social forces that have the potential power and the interests of fighting to bring another world into being is central to any strategy. After all, Marx did not call for anyone who harbored a grievance against capitalism to come together; no, he implored the workers of the world to unite. Leftists too often gloss over this issue. Terms like “the Left,” “the movement,” or “we” are thrown around in a way that projects a level of unity and coherence that simply doesn’t exist and overlooks deep fragmentation and institutional deficiencies.

The project of building and cohering the social forces capable of carrying out a socialist strategy must distinguish between left ideas, leftists (people who hold left ideas), left organizations (organized explicitly on the basis of unity around left ideas), and left projects (campaigns and other efforts to challenge and move beyond capitalism). While lots of forces — both leftist and non-leftist — will have to play important roles in carrying out a strategy to challenge capitalism, leftists bear a special responsibility to operate as a conscious force because of the resilience of the system and the power of the capitalist class, and the truth is that we are not yet a “we.” Any effective strategy for socialism must address the need to build and cohere the organizational and political strength of the Left and the popular forces that will play key roles in carrying out this anticapitalist strategy.

Although further social investigation needs to be conducted and analyzed, it is painfully clear that the actually existing array of left forces in the United States is insufficiently connected to and rooted amongst the very social forces that are most likely to play a key role challenging capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. This is not just a problem of representation. The integration of historically oppressed and exploited communities into the core leadership and participation of a rejuvenated US left promises to transform the outlook, practices, and demands of that Left. The reality is that left forces in the United States do not currently have the capacity that will be necessary to successfully execute a strategy for socialism. But we’re also not as far off as it might seem.

There are thousands of organizers and activists who have spent years building organic connections

in many of the sectors from which an anticapitalist project will need to grow. These activists are embedded in some of the most vibrant struggles happening today. They are organizing undocumented immigrants to confront the Obama government for deporting record numbers of people. They are organizing workers at Walmart and various fast-food chains. They are organizing against police brutality and the further expansion of the prison industrial complex. They are fighting for the expansion of public education and public transportation. They are fighting against the commodification and surveillance of the Internet. They are building up communities' capacities to confront climate change in Richmond, California; Black Mesa, Arizona; Detroit, Michigan; and the Far Rockaways in New York City. Organizations like National People's Action and Climate Justice Alliance are taking important steps to outline what a break from capitalism might look like. The work of the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland and the People's Assemblies and worker co-ops being built in Jackson, Mississippi are examples of concrete experiments that will build popular capacities and give shape to our evolving vision of an alternative to capitalism. These organizations and projects are rooted in the very sectors that will need to play key roles in a left project.

Most of these organizations and projects are not explicitly leftist. Many of the organizers and activists anchoring them nevertheless do consider themselves leftists, though few of them are members of existing left organizations. 65 percent of the organizers and activists that we interviewed in 2012 identified their politics as anticapitalist. Some of these organizers have been working for more than twenty years building working-class institutions. Others became active during the Occupy movement and have made a lifelong commitment to social transformation. They are out there, and together, this constellation of would-be cadre is positioned to revitalize the next Left in the United States.

Despite — or quite possibly because of — all of this work, an overwhelming number of organizers do this work with the sober realization that what we are doing is not enough. That in the face of an increasingly audacious and coordinated capitalist class, all of this powerful work is, at its best, merely slowing the relentless march of neoliberal onslaught and climate catastrophe. So many of these activists have expressed a hunger to have their work break out of the archipelago of

issue-based silos to establish a larger left project.

If this were to happen, if the thousands of organizers across the United States were to position themselves and their work in the context of a rejuvenated Left along with existing radical individuals, organizations, and institutions, the balance of forces would be fundamentally altered. The who of socialist strategy would begin to take shape, and the Left would be in a position to craft strategy that grows from a vision of what we're struggling toward, and with whom (and against whom) we're struggling. For these reasons, building linkages between existing left formations and existing social movements must be the central preparatory task of any effective left strategy. We need the who.

Luckily, we do not take up this task without precedents or guidance. As Marta Harnecker has documented, Latin American leftists faced a similar challenge as they sought to mount a more unified resistance to the neoliberal assault of the 1990s. Harnecker's analysis points to the critical role played by leftists who engaged themselves in the day-to-day struggles of various social sectors, including workers, women, indigenous communities, and communities of Afro-descendant peoples. By organizing; developing the leadership capacities of rank-and-file members; studying the relationship of their struggles to the exploitative and oppressive systems of capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism; and connecting their own struggles to the struggles of other popular forces, they built a movement that was able to take bold steps forward.

While the conditions in the United States are clearly distinct, the experiences of leftists in Latin America do hold important lessons for those here looking to strengthen resistance struggles and to build the capacities to execute a larger strategy that directly confronts the capitalist system. Two imperatives grow from this assessment.

First, all leftists not currently engaged with social-movement organizations should develop relationships with organizations, especially those that cultivate a protagonistic role for working-class communities, communities of color, and women. As we've discussed, simply having left ideas is insufficient; we must engage organizational vehicles through which we can put those politics into motion. In these relationships, leftists must avoid the corrosive practice of treating movement organizations — especially grassroots organizations — as mere instruments which carry out left

ideas. They are not front-groups to be led. This support must be guided by a respectful mutuality that recognizes that social-movement organizations often innovate unique contributions to left theory and practice, as the women's movement did in the 1970s.

Leftists should support them to develop their capacities to continue their fights against the worst ravages of the new world order. This might take different forms. Some leftists may volunteer as organizers. Others may provide administrative and logistical support. Still others might align their academic or professional work in such a way to provide institutional support to these organizations. Whatever the forms, the resistance organizations will have additional capacity, and more leftists will be able to learn from front-line struggles. The end result will be a greater and broader openness to socialism.

Second, leftists who are already engaged in social-movement struggles should make time and space to engage in broader discussions that break out of the archipelago of issue-based silos that organizations so often operate within. This is not a small task. Resistance is critical, and the demands of building and managing campaigns are relentless. Taking time to read, reflect, and theorize can feel like an indulgence if not completely irrelevant, especially if it's not clear that you won't be alone. The interviews that we did with organizers and activists across the country made it clear that others are hungry for this type of reflection and coordination. The project that we have taken up, LeftRoots, is an attempt to provide just such a space to support the ideological and practical development of social-movement activists, and there are other initiatives emerging too. Efforts such as these will be critical to cultivating a new generation of ideologically sharp and practically skilled leftists who can help cohere a social force in itself and for itself that demands a break from the capitalist system.

These two imperatives are complementary. As renowned labor organizer General Baker once said, "We have to turn thinkers into fighters and fighters into thinkers." Steps like these will encourage more people to join and revitalize the US left. With a broader array of anticapitalist activists rooted in different movements, constituencies, and regions, the Left will be better positioned to craft a dynamic strategy that allows us to mount a concerted challenge to the capitalist system.

Such a strategy will be an active and present component of all of our struggles. Organizations and movements will feel ownership over it and use it to inform the actions that they take. Some activists will be inspired to take on new roles of leadership and responsibility. Organizations will experiment with innovative tactics with the goal of realizing a larger objective. Movements and organizations will see one another as partners in a larger struggle for liberation that crosses issue, identity, and geography. Such a strategy will make possible those things that currently seem impossible.

This is no quixotic search for a unicorn. As was the case in many of the most vibrant social movements throughout history, such a strategy guided the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Documents like *The Path to Power* and the *Freedom Charter* provided a strategic outlook that gave independence to different movements and also linked them. As an example of their impact, when students in Soweto went on strike in 1976 to protest the apartheid regime's attempt to impose the language of Afrikaans in the classroom, the workers' movement, the women's movement, and the movement of civic organizations all saw that strike as a part of their own struggles. Their strategy was not "Everyone, come work on the issue that I'm working on." With a guiding vision and a clear analysis of social forces, different organizations were positioned to play distinct yet complementary roles in toppling the apartheid regime. This is the type of strategy that a growing US left must aspire to.

We are living in dire times, and the need to develop a strategy to challenge capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy is becoming more and more clear. We must nevertheless avoid the temptation to cobble together an incomplete strategy in a desperate attempt to match the urgency of the moment. The US Left has a unique opportunity to forge a strategy that coheres different parts of our movement and expands our capacities to match the scale of the crisis and the tyranny of the 1%, but to do this, we must clarify our vision and deepen our roots in those sectors that have the deepest interest in transcending capitalism.

If leftists believe that such a strategy to confront and transcend capitalism is essential, then we have no choice but to do all of the patient and deliberate work necessary for such a strategy to come into being. We can do it, but there are no shortcuts. ■



Bad Science

Free-market academic research policies have unleashed medical quackery and scientific fraud, forcing consumers to pay premiums for discoveries we've already funded as taxpayers.

by Llewellyn Hinkes-Jones

Essay

AT THE HEART of the US healthcare system's profit-based approach to medical science is the harsh truth that money alone can prolong life. Take, for example, the class of genes dubbed "tumor suppressors." Because of their ability to regulate cell growth, tumor suppressors are at the forefront of cancer-prevention research. A positive test for mutations in a tumor suppressor gene like BRCA1 or BRCA2 is a leading indication of high risk for breast or ovarian cancer. But despite the potential life-saving importance of the discovery, the cost of the BRCA1 and BRCA2 test is prohibitively expensive. At \$4,000 a test, it is four times that of a full genetic sequencing. The only reason the price for a potentially life-saving evaluation could be this outrageous is due to the actions of one company, Myriad Genetics. While the Supreme Court recently struck down Myriad's claim to the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, declaring that human genes can't be patented, Myriad continues to assert its monopoly on the test for susceptibility to breast cancer.

What's even more egregious about Myriad's price-gouging is that many of the costs of developing the BRCA1 and BRCA2 test have already been paid for by the public. The research to identify those genes as cancer triggers was publicly funded through the University of Utah School of Medicine. Myriad Genetics was simply a startup founded by researchers at the university to take possession of the patent after the test's discovery. And it was only because of the Bayh-Dole Act that this could take place.

At the time of its passage, the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act was intended to drive innovation in academic research. By removing restrictions on what universities could do with their scientific discoveries, it would ostensibly bring more money to the university system. To pay for their work, academic research facilities could now sell off their patents, or hand out exclusive licenses to private industry. With a monopoly on intellectual property provided by the patent, the private sector would be incentivized to quickly develop those patents into advanced consumer products and services.

The supporters of Bayh-Dole claimed that the opportunity to make more money would push academic science to make more discoveries and encourage private industry to bring more of those discoveries to market. Not long after its passage, the financial repercussions were already being realized. Researchers at Columbia University applied for patents on the process of DNA cotransformation, known as the Axel patents, that would eventually earn the university hundreds of millions in licensing fees. The Cohen-Boyer patent on recombinant DNA would earn Stanford over two hundred million. Along with the 1980 *Diamond v. Chakrabarty* Supreme Court decision that allowed biomedical material to be patented, it was the beginning of the biotech boom. Universities scrambled to build advanced research labs to make new claims on intellectual property from software to DNA sequencing that could be patented and sold to the public.

Previously, discoveries made by public universities could only be given out to private industry through non-exclusive licenses. Private entities could develop new drugs and new inventions based on groundbreaking research, but so could any other company. The supporters of Bayh-Dole argued that this grace period was essentially a disincentive to innovate. If one company didn't have exclusive rights to an invention, then there was little money to be made in its development. Why bother innovating if the competition could do the same and eat away at the potential profit margin? Inventions would be left to "rot on the shelf."

Yet what might seem like an arcane bit of legal minutia related to intellectual property is at the forefront of the university research system's decline. The public-license restriction protected academic research from descending into an intellectual-property gold rush. Removing it has unleashed a flood of capital from private industry

eager to possess a monopoly on cutting-edge scientific advancements. Private bodies now help fund academic institutions in return for priority in the process of "tech transfer" — the exclusive licensing of publicly-funded research to private industry. Giant pharmaceutical conglomerates like Merck and GlaxoSmithKline fund partnerships with private and state universities on projects to research currently incurable diseases, with the explicit stipulation that those companies will reap the benefits by obtaining exclusive licenses on any forthcoming discoveries. Those discoveries, whether they are related to the original aim of the project or not, are then turned into overpriced, brand-name pharmaceutical drugs.

Not only do patents push higher prices onto consumers, they burden the research world with the increased costs of paying for the intellectual property needed to do further research. Research labs have to pay thousands of dollars for the strains and processes needed to build upon current developments, adding more costs to cutting-edge research. The profit-driven atmosphere of the current research system is a far cry from the one Jonas Salk worked in when he discovered the cure for polio. His discovery, which affected millions around the world suffering from a debilitating disease, was effectively given away for free. While Salk rhetorically wondered whether it was acceptable to "patent the sun" to make a profit, today's race for intellectual property claims is quickly approaching that absurd proposition.

Though having more money invested in public education and hastening the development of new technology is ostensibly a public good, the influence of capital from private industry is largely corruptive. Combined with the sharp decline in state funding for education, Bayh-Dole has helped privatize the public university system. Without those public funds, universities have become ever more dependent on private investment through grants and donations. And with that money comes corrosive influences on academia.

Nowhere is this conflict of interest as prevalent as in pharmacology and biotechnology. Academics in those fields are commonly paid to sign their names to ghostwritten journal articles, promote drugs, and discover drugs based on market potential rather than the public good. They earn outsized consulting fees and lucrative speaking deals at industry-funded conferences in exchange for their compliance. In the case of Pfizer and their

SALK RHETORICALLY WONDERED WHETHER IT WAS ACCEPTABLE TO “PATENT THE SUN” TO MAKE A PROFIT. TODAY’S RACE FOR INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY CLAIMS IS QUICKLY APPROACHING THAT ABSURD PROPOSITION.

anticonvulsant drug Neurontin, academics were paid \$1,000 a paper to sign their names to journal articles written by unknown medical ghostwriters and to speak at conferences extolling the virtues of a drug, initially intended for epilepsy sufferers, to treat anything from bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and insomnia to restless leg syndrome, hot flashes, migraines, and tension headaches. Not only are consumers misinformed about the safety and efficacy of the prescription drugs they take, but they pay the costs three times over: by funding public university research to discover these drugs, by paying the higher costs on patented drugs, and by accepting the pharmaceutical industry’s tax write-offs for their university sponsorships.

Even with limited public funding and an increased dependence on private financing, universities haven’t stopped spending, particularly on new facilities. A McGraw-Hill Construction survey estimated that over \$11 billion had been spent on construction by higher education institutions between 2010 and 2012. By floating massive bonds to pay for new biomedical research facilities and state-of-the-art gyms, schools hope to attract the students, star researchers, and funding that will help pay for it all. But these schools have wildly overcommitted themselves, and by doing so they’ve entered into the vicious cycle of a debtor’s beauty contest. They are spending massively to do research that can attract the grants and land the intellectual property jackpot to pay for the bloated administrative costs and massive debt they’ve incurred.

The burden of this scramble for money and fame is left on the students. Over the last thirty years, tuition costs have increased sixfold. There are fewer and fewer post-graduate opportunities, even in the world of academic research where so much is being spent. The flood of private money coming to the research system hasn’t made its

way to expanding academic careers. Instead of employing more staff scientists, underpaid post-doctoral students are hired for half the cost to produce the eye-catching research that attracts grant money. Those students then go on to graduate into a science field flooded with other post-docs who are in direct competition for the dwindling number of established research positions available. The result is a highly competitive job market where too many are left fighting for fewer positions.

Across the whole university system, the pressure to cut costs means that tenure-track positions are being replaced by adjuncts with low pay and no job security as the salaries of administrators and college presidents continually rise.

In what Georgia State University economics professor Paula Stephan has referred to as an academic pyramid scheme, the resulting discrepancy between underpaid post-docs and adjuncts with minimal career prospects and the diminishing number of tenured, well-paid, and established star scientist positions mimics a tournament structure for scientific inquiry. It is a cutthroat beauty-contest atmosphere that takes its toll on the science being done. More and more earth-shattering studies by star scientists need to be published in prominent journals to garner the attention and the grants needed to keep up appearances and keep the lights on in the lab. In Stephan’s words, “Bigger is seen as better: more funding, more papers, more citations, and more trainees — regardless of whether the market can sustain their employment.”

The end result is a greater imperative not just to publish or perish, but to publish groundbreaking, provocative insights into our understanding of the world around us that require further investigation in highly respected journals — or perish. In the words of Stephen Quake, professor of bio-engineering at Stanford, it is “funding or famine.”

EVENTUALLY, THE MARKET-BASED APPROACH TO ACADEMIC RESEARCH CEASES TO BE ABOUT SCIENCE BUT ABOUT ATTRACTING ATTENTION AND MONEY UNDER THE GLOSS OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH.

dants in food. This, in turn, has called into question the whole supplemental vitamin industry, which is based in large part on the need for more antioxidants. The positive effects of omega-3 fatty acids on everything from cancer prevention to brain development have been challenged after follow-up stories showed no significant effect. The benefits of regular mammograms have been called into question as the results of the Canadian National

Within that decision matrix, the incentive to falsify findings, cut corners, and cherry-pick data becomes more advantageous. Whatever it takes to get more papers out the door and more grants coming in. It has come to a point that academics are insisting “there is no cost to getting things wrong. The cost is not getting them published.” In a meta-analysis of published research for the Public Library of Science (PLOS), John P. A. Ioannidis placed the blame specifically on the financial underpinnings of research, noting that “the greater the financial and other interests and prejudices in a scientific field, the less likely the research findings are to be true.”

The results are readily apparent. The overwhelming number of retractions due to flawed methodology, flawed approach, and general misconduct over the last decade is staggering. Stories in almost every field have seen a rash of inaccuracies. The percentage of scientific articles retracted because of fraud has increased tenfold since 1975. Only a fraction of heart disease and cancer studies have held up to scrutiny as their results were not reproducible. The free-radical theory of aging, once a well-regarded theory of how antioxidant enzymes affect cell life, has been thrown out, along with the USDA’s guidelines for measuring antioxi-

Breast Screening Study showed no decline in the rate of mortality from breast cancer owing to their use, and regular testing sometimes led to overdiagnosis.

While there is certainly still a center of reputable, respectable, and reproducible science, it is surrounded by a cloud of inaccuracy and chicanery. Enthusiastic discoveries about possible cancer cures are swallowed whole and regurgitated by a media desperate for content that is unwilling or unable to decipher the false leads, flawed methodology, and erroneous statistics used to get those results. The public’s understanding of controversial topics like genetically modified organisms and endocrine disruptors is muddled further by the release of inaccurate studies supporting each disputed side. Those stories are then turned into short-lived diet fads and health scares, like those linking autism to vaccinations at birth.

Results that are quick to produce and quick to publish are more likely to be inaccurate. Proper science takes time, and refuting flawed science can take even longer. While it took over nine months to disprove a recent genetic test for autism, it took only three days for the original study to go from submission to print. In that time, few of those who heard the exciting news of the initial discovery will likely hear of the disappointment surrounding its correction. When a paper is published trumpeting the discovery of a genetic test for longevity, it immediately inspires cottage industries dedicated to providing longevity exams. When that paper is retracted — not because of fraud or misconduct but because of a flawed approach — those genomic testing operations don’t necessarily disappear overnight. They survive in a gray-market economy that profits off the public’s lack of knowledge of current scientific research.

The privatization of academic research not only hinders the scientific process, it also means that direct corruption — where scientists are paid off by private industry to deceive the public about toxins in their food or pollution in their air — has more opportunity to continue unabated. Researchers desperate for funding to maintain their positions and sustain their work are more susceptible to financing from industries eager to distort science to their own whims. It only encourages the perverse incentives of the free market to take advantage of what were once public institutions. When the health risks of cancerous flame-retardant

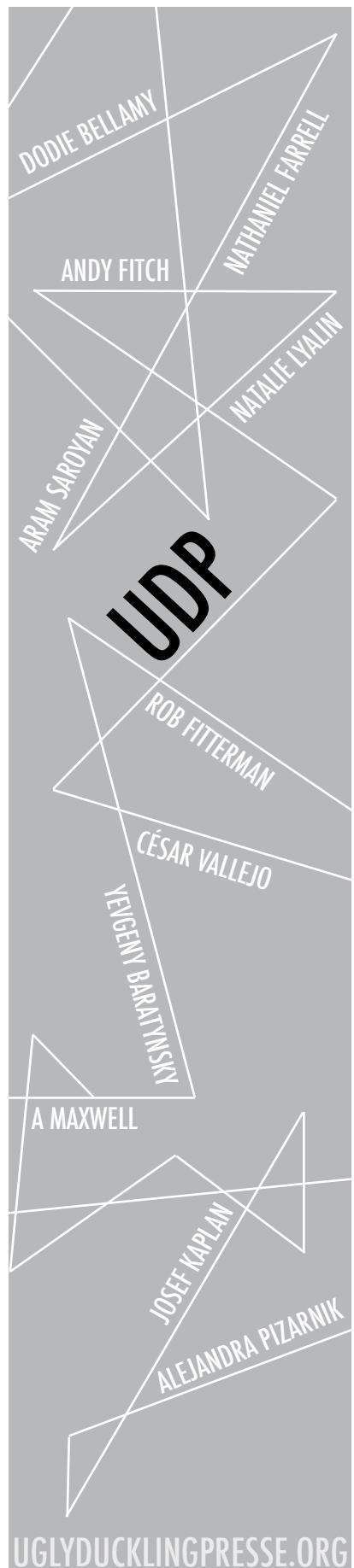
chemicals can be distorted by an industry eager to make money off of their proliferation, then science ceases to work for the public interest. Eventually, the market-based approach to academic research ceases to be about science but about attracting attention and money under the gloss of scientific research.

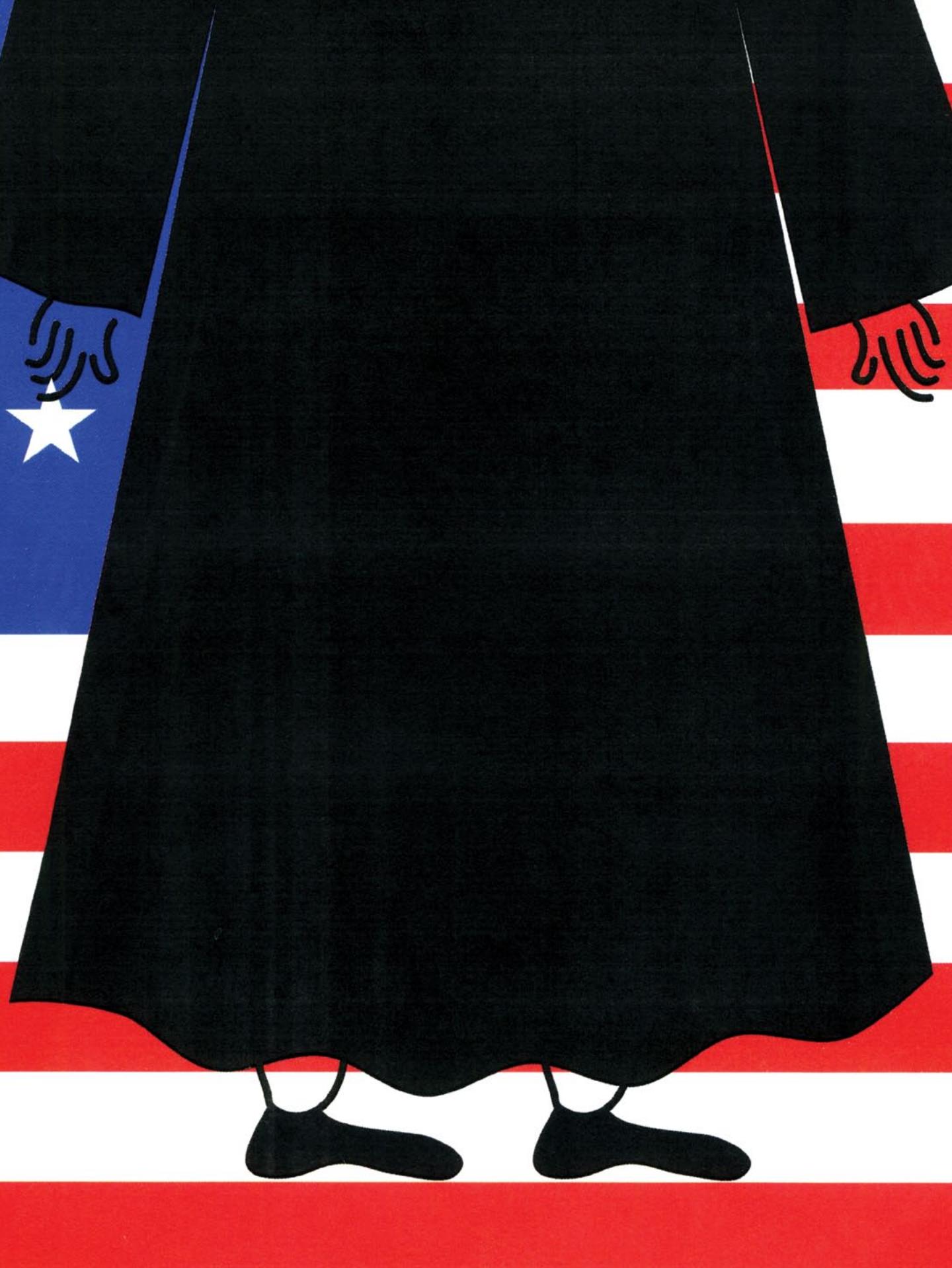
If anything, the neoliberal approach to academic research is a return to the privately funded, pre-tenure origins of the university system when numerous schools were simply research labs and promotional arms for private industry rather than institutions of knowledge advancing science in the public interest. Back then, professors worked at the behest of the school's donors and board of trustees. They could be easily fired for outspoken criticism or for publicizing research that affected the school's or their donors' bottom line. Supporting labor rights, advocating for socialist policies, believing in evolution, advocating against slavery, or informing the public about the toxic consequences of copper smelting fumes could lead to instant dismissal. Thorstein Veblen went so far as to acknowledge an unspoken blacklist amongst academics:

So well is the academic blacklist understood, indeed, and so sensitive and trustworthy is the fearsome loyalty of the common run among academic men, that very few among them will venture openly to say a good word for any one of their colleagues who may have fallen under the displeasure of some incumbent of executive office.

With tenure and public funding, researchers could speak freely and focus on topics that avoided short-term, consumer-based, money-making propositions. Advancements that might not have an immediate profit potential could be developed without a constant need to publish or perish. In the postwar era, government investment in academia and research led to many of the innovative breakthroughs we take for granted today. What so many have ascribed to the advancements of the digital revolution, from the internet and GPS to the DNA sequencing found in the Axel patents, were once large-scale, government-funded projects developed on university campuses begun decades before the Bayh-Dole agreement was even conceived of.

Despite the claims of Bayh-Dole proponents, those inventions have not been left on the shelf to rot. ■





Waiting for SCOTUS

By fixating on the Supreme Court, liberals have inherited the framers' skepticism of popular sovereignty and mass politics.

by Rob Hunter

SITTING JUSTICES of the Supreme Court do not relinquish life tenure lightly. Ruth Bader Ginsberg provoked a squall of protest from liberal commentators recently when she dismissed suggestions that she retire before the end of President Obama's second term. In 1972, William Douglas scrapped his retirement plans when Richard Nixon's reelection conjured the specter of a hostile replacement. But perhaps no justice was ever more determined to stay put than William Howard Taft. In 1929, two weeks after Black Tuesday, the former president turned Chief Justice declared, "I must stay on the court in order to prevent the Bolsheviks from getting control."

Douglas and Taft were both aware of the political consequences of leaving the Court. Contemporary justices are less willing to acknowledge the partisan dimensions of their office. Despite describing the current Court as "activist," Ginsberg seems to be untroubled by the prospect of a conservative replacement. This is in keeping with the prevailing mythology about the Supreme Court. As Ginsberg's colleague John Roberts put it during his 2005 confirmation hearings, justices with the power of judicial review — the power, in effect, to change the law by reviewing the constitutionality of legislation — should strive to be impartial "umpires."

Liberals lambasted Roberts for arguing in bad faith, but in reality they share his vision. In the liberal political imagination, the Supreme Court is an institution that must vindicate principles rather than practice politics. As the philosopher Richard Rorty once acknowledged, liberals "turn to the judiciary as the only political institution for which we can still feel something like awe. This awe ... is respect for the ability of decent men and women to sit down around tables, argue things out, and arrive at a reasonable consensus."

Disdaining political conflict, liberals would rather seek consensus through conversation. And they would prefer that such conversations take place only among a narrow stratum of elites and power brokers. The only “reasonable consensus” that the Supreme Court can produce is inherently anti-democratic. Liberal enthusiasm for pursuing policy change through the Court rather than through confrontation and struggle illustrates the degree to which progressive politics has become emptied of content and purpose.

In 1789 — the same year that French revolutionaries were storming the Bastille — the wealthy and landed elites of the newly formed United States were consolidating their power. The French Revolution sought to abolish the aristocracy. In the United States, however, a new aristocracy of landowners, merchants, and slavers — the framers of the Constitution, which went into effect that March — sought to prevent anything like the French Revolution from taking place on American soil. They were aghast at popular uprisings, demands for mass debt forgiveness, and state governments that appeared dangerously willing to consider subordinating the interests of creditors and mercantile elites to those of farmers and workers.

Through the Constitution, the framers were determined to put in place a system of institutions that would resist democratic pressures and mute expressions of popular sovereignty. Although the framers frequently invoked the idea of popular sovereignty, they did so not in order to constitute a collective subject, but to prevent one from emerging. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 could hardly be classed as a constituent assembly of the kind found in France. It was convened in a state of exception rather than one of revolutionary ferment. Its delegates busied themselves not with giving institutional expression to popular sovereignty, but with creating a national government whose responsiveness to democratic politics was limited. To those who carried the day at the Convention, popular sovereignty consisted of little more than presenting the Constitution to state governments for ratification — a deeply participatory and popular form of democracy was hardly what they had in mind.

The Constitution claims popular sovereignty as its authorization, but establishes a distinctly undemocratic system of institutions. Unlike the political institutions of republican France, the institutions established by the Constitution are elite-dominated, decentralized, and marked by few opportunities for direct participation by the people. These are the institutions defended by the Supreme Court when it reviews the constitutionality of legislation. In this way, the Court participates in American politics mainly by attempting to frustrate the exercise of democratic power.

Before the Civil War, the Court largely refrained from invalidating congressional legislation on constitutional grounds. The only important such episode was Chief Justice Roger Taney’s decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. Taney wrote that Congress could not forbid the extension of slavery into the territories, and added infamously that constitutional protections applied only to whites. *Dred Scott* foreshadowed the most obvious and frequent future use of judicial review: protecting constitutional boundaries against the incursions of democratic politics.

Dred Scott was not undone through another decision, but through victory over the seceding states. America’s bourgeois revolution — the mobilization and death of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, along with the emergence of a federal government with truly national prerogatives and powers — was what ended slavery, rather than the deliberations of nine old men in robes. The federal government’s victory in the Civil War was memorialized by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which established the primacy of a national conception of citizenship over the semi-feudal patchwork of citizenship rights of the antebellum republic.

But the ink had barely dried on the Fourteenth before the Supreme Court busied itself with effacing its Privileges or Immunities Clause, which empowered the federal government to protect individual citizens from abuses by state governments. (Contemporary examples of such abuses include welfare “reform,” union-busting, and all-out assaults on public education.) In the *Slaughterhouse Cases*, five justices narrowly construed the Privileges or Immunities Clause to prevent its extension into state politics — a warning that the federal judiciary could serve as a redoubt for conservative resistance to the project

LIBERAL ENTHUSIASM FOR PURSUING POLICY CHANGE THROUGH THE COURT RATHER THAN THROUGH CONFRONTATION AND STRUGGLE ILLUSTRATES THE DEGREE TO WHICH PROGRESSIVE POLITICS HAS BECOME EMPTIED OF CONTENT AND PURPOSE.

of building a national, centralized, and egalitarian state.

In the ensuing decades, the Court deepened its role as a conservative bulwark against attempts to expand the reach and authority of public institutions. Many chroniclers of the Court point to *Lochner v. New York* as the landmark case in an era of judicial reaction. However, the decision — in which the Court struck down a maximum-hour law — was not regarded as an important one by contemporaries. It was rarely cited in subsequent cases, and ultimately set aside without acknowledgement or fanfare. More important than the holding in *Lochner* were the ideological assumptions animating the decision: a genuine fear of democratic institutions peering inside the hidden abode of production, and a conviction that public policy must not be allowed to recognize class conflict. Writing for the Court, Justice Rufus Wheeler Peckham fretted that sustaining maximum-hour legislation would open a Pandora's box of insidious state intervention in the economy. Such concerns informed much of the justices' decision-making during this period. No single decision served as the cornerstone of the barrier the Court was erecting against progressive policy, and thus no single reversal would undo it.

The Court carried this ideological freighting into the 1920s and 1930s, when the justices were led by conservatives like Taft and emboldened by a raft of reforms of the federal judiciary, which gave the Court greater discretion over its docket and greater supervisory powers over lower courts. The Court became an important conservative veto point during the showdowns between labor and capital prior to the New Deal. In cases like *Adkins*

v. *Children's Hospital* (striking down a federal minimum wage law), the power of judicial review to obstruct the creation of coherent, nationwide social policy was vividly demonstrated. The conservative justices were well aware of increasingly volatile relationships between labor and management, as well as spiraling economic inequality. They were determined to obstruct democratic efforts that aimed to tame the pathologies of capitalism.

But even precedents like *Adkins* were eventually overturned or abandoned. In the 1930s, the conservatives on the Court gave way to political pressure from the New Deal coalition — such as when Franklin Roosevelt threatened to pack the Court to overwhelm the intransigent conservative justices — and stopped resisting the expansion of federal powers to intervene in the economy. The experience of the 1930s should have taught liberals two lessons: First, the Court's ability to shape national policy comes mainly in the form of overturning popular legislation. Second, an obstructionist Court — like an obstructionist conservative opposition — can be overpowered through well-organized and concerted action by coalitions of political leaders, union and party organizations, and rank-and-file activists.

The Court is capable of playing a constructive role in politics by providing jurisprudential support to specific projects. That such support is usually lent to conservative projects is no accident. The Constitution describes a decentralized polity, fragmented by federalism and obdurate in the face of popular pressure. It is therefore an ideal rhetorical launchpad for conservative efforts to roll back the redistributive state. And the Court is an ideal vehicle for such efforts. As the legal scholar Larry Kramer has argued, antipathy for democracy among conservatives as well as liberals in the second half of the twentieth century has promoted the notion of "judicial supremacy," under which the Court is naturally seen as the final, authoritative interpreter of the Constitution.

The net result is twofold: the Court is now almost always able to make its constructions of constitutional meaning stick, and many participants in politics (particularly liberals) can only conceive of making foundational decisions about the American political order in judicial terms.

With the assistance of friendly Republican administrations, the recent Rehnquist and Roberts Courts have done much to chip away at the juridical foundations of the piecemeal welfare state

that was erected in the twentieth century. The Court's conservatives began to reject the capacious understanding — arrived at during the New Deal — of Congress' ability to regulate economic activity at the state level, striking down the Gun-Free School Zones Act and part of the Violence Against Women Act. (Exceptions were made for Congress' ability to pursue conservative policy objectives, such as using federal law to undo state-level efforts to liberalize drug laws.) Under Rehnquist, the Court frequently intervened in the policy process, declaring severe limits on public power and disputing the government's competence to manage the economy. Under Roberts, the justices continue the Rehnquist Court's work, by pursuing the dismemberment of national capacities to monitor and intervene in the market, along with the quasi-feudal fragmentation of political power at the state level.

But it is important to note that the Roberts Court is only an auxiliary of neoliberal governance. Its decisions should be seen as ratifications of accomplished political facts, rather than independent moves. Simply replacing the conservative justices with liberals would amount to little in practical terms. Nevertheless, conservative judicial ratification helped to build the legal foundations of a less inclusive polity, and to preclude legalistic countermoves — the only moves liberals are still willing to consider making.

So WHY does the Supreme Court have so many liberal defenders? The answers may be found in the decades of depolitization in the second half of the twentieth century.

Never fond of agitation, organizing, and confrontation (unlike conservatives, who are well-versed in such tactics), liberals began to

imagine — as many still do — that the vagaries of political antagonism could be transcended through the majesty of constitutional law. They became infatuated with an image of the Court's role as a defender of individual rights and liberties. The main historical touchstone for this view is a collection of decisions handed down by the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren. But the experience of the Warren Court was anomalous and will not be repeated — not until there is a profound shift in American politics.

It was only in the greater political environment of centrist liberal hegemony during the middle of the twentieth century — materially underwritten by the postwar boom years and the balance, not yet wholly upset, between organized labor, capital, and the expanding national state — that liberal justices would find themselves in the right place, and with sufficient power, to temporarily achieve modestly progressive gains. The judicial accomplishments that were only possible under the postwar compact defined liberals' expectations for what the Supreme Court is capable of, even though that compact has all but disappeared today.

Despite their accomplishments, the liberals on the Warren Court were unable to lay the legal groundwork for a constitutional realignment, because truly progressive outcomes could only be achieved by razing the conservative foundations of constitutional law. The decisions of Warren and his allies disrupted legal continuity — the feudal heirloom most cherished by conservative jurists. The result in *Brown v. Board* was arrived at not through orthodox doctrinal reasoning, but through the justices' awareness of the moral necessity of school desegregation (a policy that was not fully implemented and remains a distant ideal today). The majority opinion in *Griswold v. Connecticut* — a cornerstone for modern privacy jurisprudence — rested on textually spurious reasoning. (Finding no

DESPITE THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS, THE LIBERALS ON THE WARREN COURT WERE UNABLE TO LAY THE LEGAL GROUNDWORK FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL REALIGNMENT, BECAUSE TRULY PROGRESSIVE OUTCOMES COULD ONLY BE ACHIEVED BY RAZING THE CONSERVATIVE FOUNDATIONS OF CONSTITUTIONAL LAW.

explicit right to privacy in the Bill of Rights, Justice Douglas concocted one out of the “penumbras” and “emanations” of individual rights listed in it.) And the Court explicitly created new policies governing interactions between civilians and police in landmark cases such as *Mapp v. Ohio* and *Miranda v. Arizona*. Unwilling to wait for legislative moves to reform policing, the Court arrogated the task of policymaking to itself.

The gains made by the Warren Court were modest but real. But they could not last — like many other products of the postwar compact — precisely because they were made through elite deliberation rather than mass mobilization. Most landmark cases were only loosely tethered to popular movements. Few of the Warren Court’s decisions could be described as the capstone achievements of long struggles by organized groups. When they were threatened by later conservative Courts, these decisions usually lacked broad constituencies that could be mobilized to defend them. Conservative jurists armed with the politically potent (though philosophically puerile) doctrine of “originalism” feel confident to declare such decisions constitutionally groundless.

Originalism — briefly, the doctrine that the views and preferences of long-dead politicians and judges should supersede those of the living — holds considerable sway because of its simplicity and its compatibility with conservatism. Liberals criticize originalism as arbitrary and backward-looking, even as they deploy arbitrary and backward-looking arguments to defend liberal decisions by the Court against what they call “judicial activism” by conservatives. It would be better to call it “juristocracy,” the term used by political scientist Ran Hirschl to describe the use of supreme courts as spoilers in the politics of constitutional democracies. However, the activism of recent conservative Courts is simply the result of sound juristic strategy, and of conservative justices making the most of the Court’s institutional role. It is, after all, rather straightforward to use an inherently conservative institution to defend an inherently conservative constitution. Trying to staff that institution with liberals who will attempt to make liberal interpretations of that document stick is rather more difficult.

After the heyday of the Warren Court, Republican presidents and their administrations — here Ronald Reagan and his Attorney General Edwin Meese stand out — set out to carefully reshape

the federal judiciary as a conservative barricade against further expansions of federal power. Rare missteps aside — as when Robert Bork was not confirmed to the Court, mainly because of a surfeit of candor during Senate confirmation hearings — this strategy succeeded in creating a conservative-dominated Court that would balk at the expansive interpretations of congressional power that judicially ratified New Deal and Great Society institutions.

From the liberal perspective, juristocracy is an aberration rather than the norm. In campaign literature, magazine stories, and newspaper editorials, the patchwork progressive state conjured into precarious existence in the last century is often defended in jurisprudential terms. *Act now or the Republicans will undo Roe v. Wade! My opponent wants to roll back Brown v. Board! We need to repair the damage done by those conservative activist judges in Citizens United! Republican judges are a menace to our constitutional civil rights!*

This perspective obscures the importance of concerted, organized political struggle and gives unnecessary focus to legal casuistry. The increasingly traditionalist cast of contemporary liberal Court-talk — concerned as it is with preservation of surviving precedents, and institutional continuity rather than political recreation — illustrates the pitfalls of depoliticization. Judicial liberals have abandoned mass politics only to see the brief hegemony of liberal justices undone by conservative electoral successes and the resulting conservative recomposition of the Court. Their rejection of democracy on the street has left them pining after something that looks like monarchy on the Court.

The prizes won through judicial liberalism were never secure and now appear more fragile than ever: paper-thin abortion rights, porous conceptions of privacy, and fragile protections against an increasingly militarized array of security services. Concerted mass efforts — which would have required liberals to overcome their reluctance to find allies on the Left — could have won these prizes, and kept them, by putting pressure on political institutions to enact legislation, revise administrative procedures, or even alter the Constitution.

But too many liberals conceive of minorities and marginalized groups not as allies or comrades, but as discrete isolates that only a distant Court can protect. Solidarity is not found in the

juridically-inflected liberal grammar of politics. It instead appears as something like a philosophical error: it simply cannot be the case, or so liberals imagine, that minorities can engage productively with majoritarian institutions, that marginalized groups can punch above their weight through organization and coalition-building, or that the intersectionality of oppression under late capitalism can be generative of new understandings of shared risks and common interests.

THE ORIGINAL DEFENDERS of judicial review were conservatives who distrusted democracy. Today, the importance of relying on the Supreme Court to act as a brake on democratic politics is an accepted article of faith in liberal political philosophy. Pursuing progressive policy through appellate litigation is central to the strategies of an array of liberal political organizations. Democratic presidential candidates promise to appoint judges who will defend decisions like *Roe v. Wade* and strike down decisions like *Citizens United*, but they don't promise to lead movements to expand and guarantee meaningful access to abortion, or to curb the usurpation of democratic prerogatives by plutocrats and personified corporations. Technocratic liberalism has eclipsed the vistas of deepened democracy and full social freedom that were glimpsed, however dimly, during episodes like Reconstruction and the civil rights movements of the twentieth century.

Constitutional law is not a vehicle for emancipatory politics. The Supreme Court is a tool for preserving existing constitutional arrangements of power, and liberals would be wise to remember what those arrangements were and are, and why they were adopted. The conception of human freedom imagined by the Constitution and the Court is depoliticized. It is reductively rendered in constitutional text, rather than manifested in political practice. The justices of the Court will not give consideration to values such as solidarity and social freedom precisely because such values are not constitutionally legible. Whatever gains there are to be had by deliberating over the meaning of a shared national document from the eighteenth century are more than offset by that document's hostility to collective rule for the sake of shared goods. And the experience of the Warren Court strongly suggests that creative interpretations of

a centuries-old text are the ones most vulnerable to being overturned.

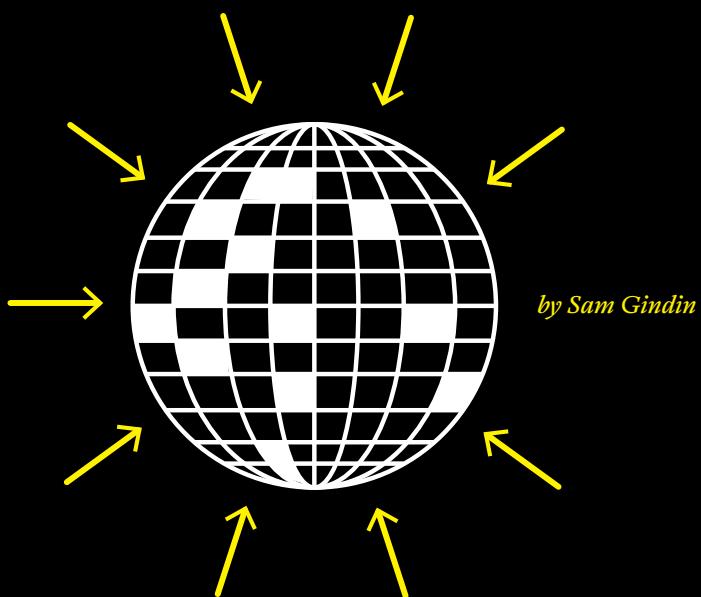
Liberals have wasted a great deal of effort trying to ensure that their preferred interpretations of the Constitution will always carry a majority of justices. A more just, anti-racist, pro-feminist, queer-friendly, and less ecologically destructive future will not appear after the right justices hear the right lawyers make the right arguments. Liberals should realize this by now. By fixating on the Supreme Court, they have inherited the framers' skepticism of popular sovereignty, of mass politics, and of the exercise of public power. They have adopted a view of constitutional politics that revolves around ideas of procedure, consensus, and finality.

There is another approach to constitutional politics, however; one known to the Left: the expression of constituent power. That means articulating grievances, confronting opponents, and promoting solidarity. These forms of politics are constitutive of alternative regimes and counter-institutions, and express the Left's challenge to ossified constitutional discourses of procedure and formal rights. But so long as liberals remain attached to the Supreme Court's aura of authority and finality, they will fail to see what political theorist Chantal Mouffe has called "the constitutive character of social division." Such division and antagonism are central to democracy.

Organizing large coalitions and confronting powerful institutions should be at the forefront of democratic politics — not judicial subtlety and clever interpretations of superannuated texts. Durable abortion rights are more likely to be secured through a broad coalition demanding universal access to single-payer healthcare than through appeals to protect the legacy of *Roe*. The reform of racist and violent policing through judicial interpretations of the Fourth Amendment is meaningless in the absence of the political will to bring paramilitarized cops to heel. Confronting patterns of gross inequality with respect to gender and sexuality is a project best pursued through intersectional alliances, not disputes over constitutional doctrine.

Liberals should abandon the search for progressive outcomes through constitutional law. It's not too late — it's never too late — to join in the search for a politics in which judicial interference with democracy is not only unnecessary but unthinkable. ■

Unmaking Global Capitalism



Nine things to know about organizing in the belly of the beast.

Essay

WHEN MARX FAMOUSLY DECLARED that while the philosophers have interpreted the world, the point is to change it, he was asserting that it was not enough to dream of another world nor to understand the dynamics of the present. It was critical above all to address the question of agency in carrying out transformative change. For Marx, that agent was the working class. The gap between workers' needs and their actual lives — between desire and reality — gave workers an interest in radical change, while their place in production gave them the leverage to act.

The fundamental contradiction of capitalism, Marx and Engels argued, was that as capitalists brought workers together to increase profits they opened the door to workers discovering their own potential. Capitalism created its own gravediggers.

What was much too insufficiently emphasized, however, was that there were also contradictions within the working class. These countered the revolutionary potentials of the class and even came to undermine workers' defensive capacities. Whatever unity workers had within a particular workplace, they were fragmented across workplaces and, as a class, were stratified by income. Moreover, their daily experiences ably taught them how dependent they were on capital. Employers organized their separate labor power, embodied science in their control over technology, and had all the essential links to finance, suppliers, and markets. And the very conditions of workers, their low wages and uncertain jobs, pressured them to think in terms of immediate improvements, not longer-term change.

Unions evolved to address workers' concerns and, through their emphasis on solidarity, provide an antidote to capitalism's pressure for working-class fragmentation, dependence, and short-termism. Yet unions are, at their core, not class organizations but sectional organizations. They represent specific groups of workers united by their employer and specific group demands, not the interests of the working class as a whole. There were, of course, moments early in their formation when this particularism spilled over into broader class demands and the mobilization of entire communities. But the very success of unions gave them their own institutional base and reinforced their sectionalism.

Absent a vision that encompasses the entire working class, and absent the goal of developing workers' capacity to democratize the economy and society, unions turned into instrumental organizations. That is, they saw their internal functioning as a pragmatic exchange between active leaders and passive members. The leaders provided services and benefits, the rank-and-file paid dues. Such organizations are especially vulnerable to top-down deal-making and bureaucratization.

Through the unique circumstances of the 1950s and 1960s, workers made gains despite these limits, and many of those gains were even passed on to the broader population. But the militancy of workers in the late 1960s contributed to a squeeze

on corporations' profits and to inflation, which in turn led to an economic crisis. Unions, unable and unwilling to extend their struggles beyond narrow economic militancy to address control over prices, investment, and capital flows, left themselves vulnerable to the state's aggressive counterattack. As Eric Hobsbawm observed of British unions, "when the labor movement became narrowed down to nothing but a pressure-group or a sectional movement of industrial workers, as in 1970s Britain, it lost both the capacity to be the potential center of a general people's mobilization and the general hope of the future."

The assault on the labor movement is generally associated with the conservatism of Reagan and Thatcher. But it is worth noting that it was Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, who initiated deregulation in the airline and trucking industries and tapped Paul Volcker to run the Federal Reserve. And in Britain, it was Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan who opened the door to Thatcherism by essentially declaring that Keynesianism was dead. It wasn't the subsequent set of policies, summarized as neoliberalism, that created working-class weakness. Rather, those policies exposed the already existing limits of the labor movement and increased the confidence of elites in further exploiting the movement's long-standing weaknesses.

What followed had an impact on working people far beyond individual living standards. The frustrations of austerity didn't generally lead to radicalization, but only increased pressures on working-class families to maintain as much consumption as they could. Absent collective solutions, they found other ways to support themselves, with profound implications for undermining the development of the working class as an oppositional class. Family members extended their hours of work, students also became full-time workers, and young couples moved in with their families to save for a mortgage or accumulate a buffer against an uncertain future. Tax cuts were seen as the equivalent of a wage increase even when they inevitably led to cuts in the social wage, and rising stock markets were cheered because stock values determine future pension levels. Looming environmental threats were overridden by the pressures of more immediate problems. Debt dependence increased and homes became assets for future security.

The ironic outcome of these forms of survival was that they contributed to reproducing the very



neoliberal zeitgeist of individualism that has so damaged working class lives. As Mimmo Porcaro has distressingly observed, “the more class position determines people’s lives, the less people think of themselves as members of a class.” With picket lines and street protests fading in relevance, cultures of solidarity and collective capacities to struggle also atrophied. Neoliberal restructuring reintroduced and aggravated the pressures of working-class life, leading American autoworker Gregg Shotwell to declare: “We are all temps. We are all disenfranchised. We are immigrants in the land where we were born.” That restructuring also broke up communities where class identities had developed across generations, dispersing workers to distant corners of their country and to foreign lands.

Furthermore, as labor markets were liberalized to mirror “market valuations” and social programs were eroded, inequalities increased not just between the rich and the rest, but also within the working class. This aggravated internal resentments and further divided workers. Workers doing relatively well resented paying taxes on their hard-earned income to support those on welfare, while welfare recipients and the unemployed were bitter about unions who ignored their plight.

Intensified competition tells a similar story. While competition may destroy particular businesses, its net effect on capital is to concentrate it and strengthen it as a class. But the impact on the workers is quite different: even if some workers gain, it weakens the main weapon workers have — their solidarity — and so weakens them as a class.

Here's what we need to understand.

In terms of the impact of historical defeats, it's worth noting that in the wake of the 1848 revolutions Marx's emphasis on changing the world and not just interpreting it underwent a reversal. Marx was too optimistic about the potential of 1848, and those disappointments led him to return to the importance of understanding the world as a condition for changing it. This search for a historical materialist understanding dominated the rest of his life. In light of our own defeats, it is likewise crucial for us to learn more deeply about the nature of the world we confront. The following observations are meant to further such a process of reflection and discussion.

Neoliberalism is just capitalism getting its groove back. It's the postwar Golden Age that's the aberration and there's no going back.

As an ideology, neoliberalism fits the no-alternative moment so well because its drive to universalize market dependence tends to depoliticize social life and its outcomes. “The market made us do it” becomes a national excuse and the capitalism-with-a-human-face of the postwar era is replaced by a capitalism with no face at all. Adolph Reed has said that neoliberalism is “only capitalism that has effectively freed itself from working-class opposition.” The great value of Reed's succinct characterization is that it takes us beyond discourse, ideology, and even sets of policies to appreciating neoliberalism in terms of a radical shift in the balance of social forces.

Neoliberalism's origins can then be understood not as a sudden turn to meanness by capitalist elites, but as the response of these elites to a crisis they could not ignore. The capitalist answer to the crisis of the 1970s, when the exhaustion of the postwar boom combined with the militancy of workers to squeeze profits, was more capitalism. Capitalist states, led by the US, moved decisively to what Greg Albo has termed “a new form of social rule,” a “class project” of drastically restructuring social relations and social institutions to the end of supporting capital accumulation and reviving profits.

It is tempting to contrast neoliberalism with the postwar welfare state and look for a return to the past. But this nostalgia reflects a profound lowering of expectations. Whatever was positive about the welfare state (and much was indeed very significant), it also had a questionable record on the role of women, class inequality, hidden poverty, and colonialism. In any case, attempts to go back to the postwar welfare state would provoke the same contradictions that spawned the eventual attack on its achievements. And of course, going back in time would mean a very radical unraveling of the dramatic shifts that have since taken place in globalization, finance, and the role of states. This is all very clear to capitalist elites. Though

capital was previously interested in a temporary compromise with labor, this is now the furthest thing from its mind, and there is no social base for a new “social contract.”

Further, a closer look at the welfare state reveals crucial continuities between that period and neoliberalism. It was during the postwar Golden Age that the building blocks of neoliberalism first emerged: the commitment to freer trade, the explosion of multinational corporations (MNCs), the rapid advance of finance to support MNCs but also alongside the growth of working-class mortgages and pensions. And it was during this period that productivism (prioritizing production in exchange for increased private consumption) marginalized more radical views of democratic control over production and concerns with social equality. That defeat, and the narrowing of perspectives and capacities it entailed, left the labor movement especially vulnerable to future neoliberal attacks.

The point is that confronting neoliberalism involves more than ethical counterarguments or an easy return to a more tolerable past. It means having a distinct alternative vision and developing the corresponding social power to challenge not just a philosophy, but the core structures of “really existing capitalism.”

2.

Don't single out finance. "Productive" capitalism is every bit a part of the problem as the "speculative," rentier kind.

Among activists, only “financialization” trumps neoliberalism as a term of abuse. As free-floating abstract capital, finance is popularly seen as speculative, parasitic, and at odds with “real” production. Much of this is true enough, but it’s worth asking why, if finance is so especially counterproductive and has done so much damage — especially during the latest crisis — have other capitalists not joined attacks on finance? Why has there been no split within capital?

The answer is only partially that many of those other capitalists have also been financialized. More important is the fact that even where this is not the case, capitalists outside of finance have come

to understand that finance is an essential part of their own success. Finance has not only provided business and the consumers they need with low interest rates; it also stands at the center of neoliberal restructuring. Finance reallocates capital to where it is most profitable, enforces the closure of plants the market deems inefficient, facilitates mergers, and through venture capital supports the development of new high-tech companies.

Especially important, though derivatives have added to the systematic risk of capitalism as a whole, the markets they are part of have served as mechanisms for companies to cope with the international uncertainties of exchange rates, interest rates, and global political developments. Without the capacity for such hedging — just as without cheap transportation — the scale of current globalization would not be possible. Finally, financial markets have played a crucial imperial function. Finance brings global savings to the US and thereby further enables the US state’s role in overseeing global capitalism.

The point is obviously not to defend finance, but rather to emphasize that it is not something separate from capitalism. The irrationalities of finance are the irrationalities of capitalism. That capitalism has made such an ultimately antisocial institution so essential to its functioning is part of what makes capitalism such an objectionable social system.

The contradiction that finance embodies is not its dysfunctionality within capitalism, but rather that along with the essential services it provides to capitalism comes extreme volatility. While there is a general concern to reduce that volatility, it is muted by a concern on the part of state and corporate elites to not go so far that any regulation might undercut what finance brings to capitalism.

3.

Globalization isn't Pandora's Box. And it doesn't mean it's now "too late" to use politics to get our hands around capital's neck.

Globalization is the third leg of the powerful triad that includes neoliberalism and financialization. It is crucial to understand that globalization begins

at home. Unless the conditions for free trade and the free flow of finance are established within each state, there can be no globalization. From this perspective, the rise of neoliberalism was very much about establishing the domestic conditions for allowing global accumulation to flourish. At the same time, the focus on neoliberalism channeled the risk of divisions among capitalist states into a common attack on the working classes within each state. What therefore distinguished the neoliberal solution to the crisis of the 1970s from the Great Depression of the 1930s was that the internationalization of capitalism was interrupted in the earlier period, while in the later one it was accelerated. This was true again in the latest crisis, with the continuation of neoliberalism closely linked to the continuation of free trade and the quick shelving of any temptation to impose serious controls on capital flows.

Like neoliberalism, globalization is not inevitable, but is a conscious “class project.” Though capitalism is characterized by powerful tendencies to, as the *Communist Manifesto* put it, “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere,” the notion of a seamless global capitalism, far from being inevitable, actually seemed impossible through the first half of the twentieth century. Global capitalism was divided into rival spheres of influence and capitalist internationalism was stymied by two world wars and the protectionism of the Great Depression. The eventual revival of globalization was not a spontaneous development but dependent on the role of states, and above all the role of the US state.

4.

Despite what we’re told, individual nation states play a bigger role in the expansion of global capital than ever before.

States are often viewed as the victims of globalization, their autonomy limited by international pressures. Or a contradiction is posed between the global terrain of economic activity and the national terrain of the state, with multinational corporations seen as having “escaped” the state. But as Leo Panitch has emphasized, rather than being the victims of globalization, states are more

generally its authors. States have mobilized the public to accept global rules and established the institutional frameworks that make globalization possible.

As part of the making of global capitalism, states have been “internationalized”: they have come to take responsibility, within their own jurisdiction, for supporting the accumulation of all capitalists, foreign as well as domestic. And so far from becoming less dependent on the state, corporations have come to depend on many states.

The underlying confusion here lies in understanding states and markets as opposites when they are in fact mutually embedded partners. Markets cannot exist without states, not only to institute physical infrastructures but enforce property rights, establish a framework for contracts, manage class relations, and address the contradictions and crises that markets inexorably bring. The liberalization of financial markets in the US, for example, led to a dramatic increase in regulatory capacities to facilitate that liberalization and its added complexities. Corporations, focused on their own competitiveness and profits, can miss the forest for the trees, and so depend on states to address, mediate, and even shape larger capitalist interests. And capitalist states, of course, depend on markets to provide the jobs and tax revenues that allow them to reproduce and legitimate themselves.

This confusion about the relationship between states and markets also brings the misperception that neoliberal globalization leads to “weak” states. But what has occurred is that neoliberal globalization has restructured rather than weakened states. It is, for example, clearly absurd to speak of the US state as weak given its aggressive military, its omnipresent intrusion into private lives, and the Federal Reserve’s role in underwriting the financial system.

The US state also has a ubiquitous role in shaping labor markets, affecting the investment climate, encouraging the research capacity of American industry, opening up trade opportunities, and so on. If there has been a loss of autonomy, it has not been that of states, but of popular input as states have increasingly distanced legislative bodies from key administrative decisions, the most prominent examples being monetary policy and trade negotiations.

5.

The American Empire isn't fading. In fact, elites around the world continue to look to the United States to lead the way for the global ruling class.

The American empire is a unique kind of empire. Coming out of World War I, the US was already the world's dominant economic power and its largest financial creditor. Yet like other states, it concerned itself primarily with its own interests and did not take on the responsibility for trying to keep global capitalism on track. That changed through the experiences of the Depression and World War II. The American state came to see that an unstable international environment, vulnerable to nationalisms that restricted economic spaces, threatened American capitalism not only abroad but at home as well.

The success of American capitalism was consequently seen as dependent on the successful spread of capitalism internationally. Especially important beyond the question of interests, the American state and American capital had, by war's end, developed the administrative and economic capacities to support the making, deepening, and, during times of international crisis, the reproduction of global capitalism.

What is special about the American empire is the extent to which it is a specifically capitalist empire, an informal empire. The British empire set some precedents in this regard, but the American empire took it to new levels. Unlike earlier empires, it generally operated through sovereign states rather than direct colonies, and primarily through markets rather than direct rule — even if its military might was never far away. This provided the American state with some anti-imperialist credibility after the end of World War II, when it supported the replacement of colonies with sovereign states. And though US support for the dispersion of capitalism implied new competitors, its mode of operation through sovereign states and markets led to many of the competitors being integrated into the larger project of global capitalism.

This new kind of empire led to a fading of inter-imperial rivalry. Whatever tensions might

occasionally erupt among capitalist states, they do not revolve around a direct challenge to American leadership. The shared assumption is that the reproduction of America's "indispensable" role is in the collective interests of all states. The structural integration of other states was evidenced as some of them actively sought inclusion in the American-led order — what Geir Lundestad labelled "empire by invitation." In other cases, like Germany and China, there was certainly criticism of the US. But this was centered not on challenging the imperial status of the American state, but holding on the American state accountable to its imperial responsibilities.

Of course this dependence on other states and the vagaries of markets inevitably threw up crises. The American state could not always prevent them (to be the leading capitalist state is not to be omnipotent) and as this limit came to be accepted, "failure prevention" gave way to the more practical project of "failure containment." The reoccurrence of such crises, especially the recent financial crisis that first exploded inside the United States, has supported more general suggestions of American decline. By some metrics, it is certainly true that the country is not as quantitatively dominant as it was, for example, after World War II. But this is too economicistic a measure. What is more significant is that in terms of the commanding heights of the global economy, the material base for the American empire persists. And in terms of the crucial importance of managing crises, the world has looked primarily to the American state to save the financial system and prevent protectionism from resurfacing.

6.

Farmongering about environmental or economic collapse isn't going to magically turn people into socialists. We have to build large, democratic organizations that can eventually reckon directly with state power.

If we take the formidable power and resiliency of capitalism seriously, then politics must revolve around developing a social force capable

of matching what we confront. There is a danger, however, that in the attempt to overcome passivity and fatalism, the difficulty of replacing capitalism will be understated, with corresponding negative effects on our politics. Three such tendencies are worth noting: crisis-mongering as a mechanism for overcoming popular passivity; ignoring the question of taking state power; and styles of mobilization that reject building the institutional capacities that might realize change.

Continuously declaring that a decisive crisis is around the corner may generate attention, but as an organizing tactic it is counterproductive. An economic crisis may scare people and bring out their most conservative instincts. It may lower expectations and make people long for the pre-crisis period (no matter how much they had previously criticized it), desperately hoping to just fix, not transform or even significantly modify capitalism. We cannot depend on crises to do our political work for us. If we think that capitalism is a system that blocks human progress then the challenge is to convince people that capitalism is the problem *even when it is working at its best*.

A related tendency is that of environmental catastrophism. To be sure, the climate crisis must be decisively confronted. But declarations that the end of the planet is only decades away if capitalism isn't radically changed now may just reinforce a sense that we are doomed and can't really do anything about it. Or, given the lack of options, it might even encourage people to jump aboard illusory market-based "solutions" that are presented as more immediate, more practical, and less risky.

It would seem much more useful, in terms of building the capacity to address the environmental crisis, to frame the issue of the environment as linked to a broader struggle that includes the redistribution of income and wealth to more equitably share the costs of environmental restraint; a cultural shift in the balance between individual consumption of goods and collective services; the development of public spaces and desperately needed infrastructural renewal (including mass transit); and the conversion of potentially productive facilities rejected by the market to the production of socially useful and environmentally necessary products and services. Such a framing would also tie the environmental crisis to the obvious need to place democratic planning on the agenda and go so far as to start talking about making private banks into public utilities so that

we have access to the financial resources to carry out the above initiatives.

Similarly, the disinterest in and even hostility to acknowledging that politics must ultimately reckon with state power prevents us from confronting power where it is most concentrated and tends to train our focus on protesting capitalism, not replacing it. The issue is not taking over a capitalist state and administering it as best we can (a perspective that justifiably raises skepticism) but of transforming state institutions in the deepest democratic sense. That is, imagining and struggling for a state whose main function, at national, regional and municipal levels, would be to support and develop our collective capacities to democratize the economy and all aspects of our lives.

The oppositional movements that have emerged most recently are not homogeneous, but they seem to share important attitudes in their style of politics and the relationship they see between mobilizing and organizing. There is certainly a great deal to praise in these movements. They have brought new generations into politics, shown that creative and audacious actions can touch a popular nerve, dared to place class politics (even if in crude form) on the public agenda, and raised valid criticisms about the politics of the various iterations of the Old Left. But if these promising seeds for a new politics are seen as being that politics, and if new social media are treated as a solution to organizing rather than a useful communication tool, then we are at a dead end.

As Alfredo Saad-Filho has noted, the glorification within these movements of spontaneity and fragmentation seems uncomfortably close to mirroring neoliberalism's own drive to free markets, individualism, and a workforce that has no stability or roots. What underlies such politics seems to be a notion that radical change will evolve out of the accumulation of protests, and so little attention is paid to developing a deeper analysis of events, the strategies needed to respond to changing circumstances, or political programs that can bring some coherence to the radicalizing project and do effective outreach. Occupy's refusal to put forth a program was at first a stroke of tactical genius because it implied that the problem was not a specific issue but the system as a whole. But in terms of longer-term movement building, this refusal soon became a severe liability.

This style of mobilization leaves little enthusiasm for coping with stable organizational

structures. The movement can bring people out, but it cannot organize them into a movement that builds and sustains an expanding collective power. Absent such structures, democracy is reduced to forms of dialogue, not shared agreements. Strategic discussions are marginalized. The consolidation of gains and drawing lessons from failures are at best secondary considerations.

Horizontalism blocks decisive collective action, and permanent protest replaces the politics of transformative change. The challenge of how to develop and spread the collective confidence and capacities to strategize, share knowledge widely, build alternative political institutions, and act is marginalized.



There are many oppressions that shouldn't be ignored. But class exploitation conditions them all.

The making of the working class is inseparable from the historical interaction of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. The working class in the concrete always includes multiple differences and identities. But left politics has, unfortunately, often been destructively polarized in terms of identity versus class.

Identity politics emerged in the 1970s, in part out of the failures of the Left to speak to and integrate specific oppressions into class politics (those of women and African Americans in particular). That this paralleled the rise of neoliberalism was no coincidence in that neoliberalism was made possible by the more general weakness of unions and the left. But while identity politics often added to and strengthened working-class politics, it also included a dangerous tendency to push the salience of class aside.

It was bitterly ironic that at the very moment the state mounted a comprehensive attack on working-class power, identity politics was parsing the working class into ever more fragmented subgroups. Though identities obviously matter very much, they cannot combine into a new politics because their essence is their separateness. Something else is needed to bring them

together in a broader, more integrated, and more coherent politics, something beyond the particularistic concerns of both identities and unions. That “something” is class.

This might be clarified by an example taken from the work of Walter Benn Michaels. As a factual matter, the insecurity that, say, African-Americans confront is much higher than that of whites whether the measure is income, wealth, education, or access to health care. This fact can be used to mobilize African-Americans as a particularly oppressed group, but that tactic also risks limiting the problem politically to the roughly 10 percent of the US population that is African-American. Such a tactical focus is, at best, likely to create only limited reform or lead to affirmative action gains that benefit only the subset of the black population best prepared to “win” in the marketplace.

The alternative is to define racially coded inequality as part of a more general class inequality and mobilize the class as a whole around universal single-payer health care, free quality education, jobs with living wages, and liveable public pensions. Only the latter approach would seem to hold out the potential to build political capacity for substantive reform and such reforms would, given the nature of existing inequalities, disproportionately support the African-American working class.

The challenge of class politics is how to bring differences together in ways that generate full respect and equality within the class — from pay equity and fighting workplace discrimination to reproductive rights, socializing family burdens like childcare, and establishing equal status for immigrants — so as to address the larger questions of full equality within society. It is in that sense that class trumps, without underplaying, issues of identity.



We need to buy ourselves some time.

The question of greater control over time is a condition for a sustainable new political movement, and it raises a specific set of demands around which to mobilize. Neoliberal restructuring of labor markets, and the response of longer paid hours per

family so as to maintain mortgage payments and consumption, have dramatically increased time pressures on the working class. Absent time to read, think, appreciate art, meet, and act, it is difficult to imagine building a movement that can take on social change in a sustained way.

A successful institutionalized movement might generate excitement among both existing and new activists and so serve to bring formerly passive time (recuperating from frustrated lives) into politically active time. This might help, but it doesn't resolve the problem of finding the individual time adequate to commit to political engagement on a scale that is essential. Any solution will have to include deep cultural changes and a radical redistribution of income.

It is, for example, difficult to imagine a solution if continuous growth in private consumption remains a goal. If, on the other hand, we take more of social productivity in terms of collective services paid for out of general taxation, time pressures could be reduced in three ways. First, services like socialized childcare and eldercare or better public transit could save a measure of personal time. Second, if the rising output per capita isn't all channelled into more consumer goods, it can go to fewer hours of necessary work — also addressing some environmental pressures. Third, this shift to collective benefits is inherently more egalitarian because the taxes that pay for them are generally based on income, while the benefits tend to be based on need.

That improved equality, reinforced by raising the wages of the lowest paid, can reduce pressures on lower-waged workers to run between two or three time-consuming jobs and concentrate on a single one. In this regard, the issue is not just the number of hours worked but the ability to control when the hours are worked. A particular area of conflict is that between the flexibility demanded by employers and the control sought by workers, part of a more general problem of work overload that exhausts us and affects how we use our "free" time.



**The best way to help the rest of the world
is to first get our own house in order.**

Social justice is by its nature universal — all Left actions must include an internationalist sensibility. But if we cannot even build unity across workplaces in the same union, if domestic unions are competing against each other for membership dues rather than building as a class, and if private and public workers are divided within the nation-state, then how can we realistically be effective across the legal, administrative, and cultural distances of international activity? How can we contribute to the transfer of technology to the Global South if we don't control production? How can we transfer income and wealth more equitably if we don't control our states? Internationalism is limited by our national capacities.

Marx and Engels famously argued in the *Communist Manifesto* that though the struggle was international in substance (what workers do domestically has indirect effects on workers abroad), it was national in form (working classes must first come to terms with their own bourgeoisies). We can and should, of course, engage in specific acts of solidarity around particular struggles abroad like a defining strike. We should mobilize to block the interventions of our states abroad that undermine experiments important to progressives everywhere. But our most important daily contributions to the international movement must begin at home. Struggles in one country create space for — and inspire — struggles by workers in other countries. This includes solidarity for migrants as fellow workers. And building the movement within each of our countries is our most effective contribution to building an international socialist movement.



The most profound defeat of the past three decades has been the retreat of the socialist left and the consequent lowering of both social and political expectations — both in what we hope for and what we believe we can collectively achieve. The idea of socialism has been sidelined as pie-in-the-sky. But what is really utopian is the promise that a better life within capitalism is around the corner. The radical must increasingly declare itself the practical. ■



Pink Collar

When writers attack bad PR, the unspoken heart of their criticism is the failure on the part of the publicist to adequately conceal that she is performing emotional work for money.

by Jennifer Pan

Essay

MODERN PUBLIC RELATIONS has, in its own parlance, an image problem. As an investigation copublished by the *Columbia Journalism Review* and ProPublica put it, the industry was literally birthed from a train wreck. In 1906, ex-reporter Ivy Lee preempted media investigations into an Atlantic City train accident by issuing a statement about the accident to reporters on behalf of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The *New York Times* printed verbatim what would later be regarded as the first press release. Since then, public relations (often broadly referred to as “communications”) as a practice has expanded to comprise almost sixty thousand workers, and intersects nearly every other industry. Though the addition of technologies such as social media and mass email distribution have added new layers of specialized labor to the sector, the fundamental premise of PR has remained relatively unaltered since its conception: Hired to promote products and people, publicists exist to solicit positive media coverage for their clients.

Now outnumbering journalists four to one, publicists are an omnipresent component of the machinery that powers creative industries like fashion, arts, and publishing, and increasingly also play central roles in social-justice movements. Though organizations such as Free Press and writers like Robert McChesney have led the charge in asserting that the proliferation of these spin doctors constitutes an insidious and growing threat to journalism and democracy, few have bothered to analyze the gendered split between journalists and publicists. In stark contrast to newsrooms, in which women have never exceeded 38 percent, public

relations operates as a solidly pink-collar sector of the creative industries and comprises a labor force that is currently over 85 percent female.

The palpable distaste for PR practitioners that continues to swell — spearheaded by the very same members of the media with whom publicists theoretically enjoy a symbiotic relationship — requires, then, a deeper look at how gendered assumptions about work continue to shape our contemporary notions of creative labor under capitalism.

The day-to-day of PR work ranges from producing press releases to manning social media accounts to planning events, but the crux of publicity is the establishment of relationships with the press. Networking with relevant editors and journalists is an essential component of PR, and includes attending industry parties, arranging pitch meetings or getting drinks with influential members of the press, and, in the case of the bigger-budgeted, company-sponsored lunches and dinners, to woo the aforementioned influencers.

In PR, a certain overlap of professional and personal relationships is not only likely, but ideal. As former beauty PR manager Mackenzie Lewis noted in an interview on *The Hairpin*,

A big part of public relations is building relationships between your brand and the media. Because brands are built by humans and humans run the media, this relationship ... often boils down to your run-of-the-mill work friendship. When I was in PR, I had an expense account and a quota of breakfast/lunch/dinner or drink “meetings” I had to go out on each week (seriously). We didn’t have new products launching that often, so I wasn’t always there to pitch a specific story. A lot of times I was there to get to know the editor better so that pitching her in the future would be easier for both of us: I wouldn’t feel uncomfortable calling her and I’d already know how and what she likes being pitched. But, like with other work acquaintances, if you go out for company-sponsored cocktails enough it’s easy to become fast friends. When you inevitably get to the stage where you’re sharing boyfriend drama, it’s not awkward to start a phone call with “I need a favor ...”

Though this elision of work and friendship is necessary for effective PR, it also forms the basis of what people find questionable about the profession. In response to Lewis’s description, her interviewer

stated, “It’s unfair to the readers not to disclose which products are great and which are there as the result of a friendship. Which is the thing that gets to me, it all seems so phony.” Phoniness is a criticism leveled again and again at PR as a practice that, after all, necessitates an expression of enthusiasm for a product because of pay rather than passion.

The notion of PR as an insidious corporate apparatus designed to pull wool over consumers’ eyes is so widespread that “flack,” once a term that merely denoted a public relations professional, has transformed into an overwhelmingly disparaging synonym for any huckster. Given that the end goal of PR is company or client gain, a healthy suspicion of publicity materials is only reasonable. But so often these misgivings manifest as indictments of the publicist and her work, rather than of the neoliberal economy that enables and necessitates this form of labor. And this is especially troubling given the disproportionate presence of women in PR. With the already high numbers of women in PR continuing to climb, Ragan Communications, a news resource for PR professionals, conducted a video interview with several senior-level publicists to discuss the source of this burgeoning “pink ghetto.” As is the case with most other forms of gendered work, assumptions about women’s “natural” traits guided the discussion.

“Women are passionate about communication, and passionate about connecting!” chirped Nora Walsh, Director of PR at the Pierre Hotel. “Women are good at multitasking,” Gemma Craven of the PR firm Ogilvy & Mather added. “That’s one of those myths that is true.... It’s just the way women are. The brain of a man is very different than that of a woman. It’s the way we evolved as human beings.” When her interviewer pressed for an elaboration of these differences, she explained, “Men go into one topic in much more depth.... If you think about it, there’s many women PRs but many more male journalists, with deep expertise in one subject.” She concluded with a rueful smile, “That’s just my opinion — it’s not based in any science!”

Communication and multitasking, of course, are precisely the “soft skills” of emotional labor that define the post-Fordist work environment, especially within majority-women professions. In *The Managed Heart*, now the reference text on emotional labor, Arlie Hochschild describes this work as that which “requires one to induce

or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” Along with flight attendants, waitresses, and care workers, among many others, publicists exchange affect for wages — specifically in the form of networking with colleagues, pitching media, and managing clients. According to Hochschild, successful iterations of emotional labor require “deep acting,” or a significant degree of identification with one’s emotional performance. The constant negotiation between one’s work role and one’s own feelings that all emotional labor necessitates enacts a psychological toll on workers.

Because emotional labor can quickly lead to burnout, Hochschild notes that it requires a certain degree of disengagement to remain sustainable. As Hochschild explains of one coping mechanism, “To keep on working with a sense of honor a person has to stop taking the job seriously.... The only way to salvage a sense of self-esteem, in this situation, is to define the job as ‘illusion making’ and to remove the self from the job, to take it lightly.” Publicists are similarly told to “depersonalize,” not to take rejection from editors to heart, not to let it get under their skin when angry clients berate them, and to maintain a cheerful disposition. This disengagement, though necessary for self-preservation, is also what often provokes the ire of editors and writers.

Journalists frequently take to Twitter to express frustration with the “bad” or insincere pitches they receive. Among media circles, a feminist journalist bemoans the fact that she’s received several weight-loss press releases in the lead-up to Thanksgiving. An arts and entertainment writer quips, “There are literally ten out of infinity publicists who do a good job.” This hostility has also seeped into less ephemeral media forms, including Gawker’s PR Dummies series, a recurring column that skewers the most banal or vapidly worded press releases that reach their editorial inboxes, and entire articles published by other prominent news outlets that serve no purpose other than to skewer subpar publicity work.

In one such example, Slate’s Matthew Yglesias described opening with excitement a press release ostensibly about new episodes of TV shows *New Girl* and *The Mindy Project*. To his dismay, however, they were actually promotional materials for luggage tags, nebulously linked to the aforementioned shows with the throwaway line that the

main characters in the shows, as young professional women, were “always on the go.” Yglesias’s piece then proceeded to refute the line by demonstrating the ways in which the characters were *not* on the go (unemployed, couch potato), concluding, “The cupboard of clichés just seems perhaps a little too thin for publicists to come up with anything better.”

The Awl ran a longer iteration of this complaint by Adam Plunkett, an assistant literary editor at the *New Republic*, titled “The Stupid Online Marketing of Stupid Books.” In the piece, Plunkett described being deluged by press releases for pulpy romances and self-help books, materials which ascribed wildly inflated adjectives such as “exceptional” and ludicrous turns of phrase like “often shocking but never gratuitous” to the products advertised. Plunkett used this “bad” work to reaffirm his own position as a cultural gatekeeper, stating, “Nearly all the PR e-mails show the publicists in the dubious position of applying the logic of digital marketing, which knows that everyone’s dumb and impulsive, to a group of people occupationally devoted to refining their readers’ tastes at least enough to read books in the first place.”

In parallel if less explicitly hostile attempts to combat the flood of unwanted PR, outlets such as Mashable, Mediabistro, and xoJane have published articles such as “The Dos and Don’ts of Pitching Journalists” and “5 Things PR Does That Piss Off Media.” However, when PR Newser, subsite of Mediabistro subsite ran a response called “11 Things the Media Does That Piss Off PR,” the backlash was swift. Though the list identified mostly rude and dismissive behavior toward PRs by journalists — such as “answering the phone like a jerk” and “forgetting the client’s name during an interview — Matt Pearce, a reporter for the *LA Times*, smirked on Twitter, “I am not sorry about most of these things.” David Herndon, a video coordinator for Downriver, Michigan’s *The News-Herald*, further huffed, “I’m serving the public, not the PR lucky’s best interest.”

These examples all shed instructive light on the position of the publicist’s labor in the creative industries. Often, ill-written press releases come under fire for being useless or inappropriate to the recipient. But these “bad” press releases still literally form the basis on which writers are able to produce work. Taken into consideration with the sobering statistic that 60 percent of news nowadays comes from the government, 23 percent from

PR firms, and a mere 14 percent from journalists themselves, it's clear that however irritating unsolicited press releases may be to the discerning literary editor or culture writer, they are largely a successful means of conveying information to media. That an increasing portion of news is made up of PR is naturally cause for concern. But centering one's outrage for this incursion on the publicist who is doing her job seems to sidestep the larger problem, and in fact obscures another insidious component of the neoliberal work environment that guides the creative industries.

When writers attack bad PR, the unspoken heart of their criticism is the failure on the part of the publicist to adequately conceal that she is performing emotional work for money. The creative industries, so often seen as a liberatory alternative to the corporate grind, trade on the passion of their workers. People forgo higher salaries and better employer-sponsored benefits for work that is stimulating, flexible, and aligned with their personal interests. As the wisdom goes, one should pursue creative interests for love and not for money. So the idea of performing passion for a wage becomes especially anathema, and the phoniness of PR work is used as a foil for the more authentic work of the writer or editor. (In his Awl piece, Plunkett makes it a point to note that no book-review editor goes into the field for money.) Though the sentiment seems, on its face, a gesture toward rejecting estranged labor, under capitalism, privileging the work of the artist over that of the person who promotes the art relies on gendered conceptions of what constitutes valuable work, and furthermore supplements a neoliberal work ethic that demands an absolute identification with one's employer and neglects the fight for better wages or shorter days in exchange for prestige or passion. Publicity, therefore, is not so much a corrupt form of work as it is a symptom of the way that neoliberalism structures all work.

We should concern ourselves with the plight of the publicist because what is demanded of her is exactly that which is increasingly demanded of all knowledge workers under neoliberalism. Though women still disproportionately fill professions like PR in which emotional labor plays a central role, the white-collar work order requires of most not only a specific workplace affect (usually known as "professionalism") but also an identification — or, at the very least, the appearance of identification — with one's employer.

In times of recession, when jobs disappear, these affective requirements tend to intensify. *Time* magazine recently highlighted a study in which a number of employers cited millennials' lack of "soft skills" as the cause for youth unemployment, but as Demos blogger Matt Bruenig pointed out, these are precisely the stringent standards that employers can ask for when the labor supply is in abundance. Bruenig notes that "in a robust economy with sufficient aggregate demand that is operating at full capacity and full employment, you will not find employers turning people away on the claim that they lack team-playerness. If this is not totally made up, it is a luxury of a period where there is a huge stock of surplus labor to draw upon." If all workers are increasingly subject to these requirements, the dismissal of the publicist as a corporate shill or a purveyor of a kind of false consciousness that interferes with the otherwise unsullied work of the journalist not only reifies a gendered hierarchy of labor, but additionally eclipses the primacy of emotional labor for all workers under neoliberalism.

A

STUDY RELEASED in March 2013 by the American Psychological Association identified women aged 18–33 as the most stressed demographic in the US. In their coverage of the report, the *Guardian* noted, "Women in the survey reported feeling less valued than their male coworkers, less satisfied with their salaries, less likely to agree that their 'employer provides sufficient opportunities for internal career advancement.'" The women polled in the study reported anxiety, sleep disorders, and alcohol abuse as consequences of unrelenting workplace pressure.

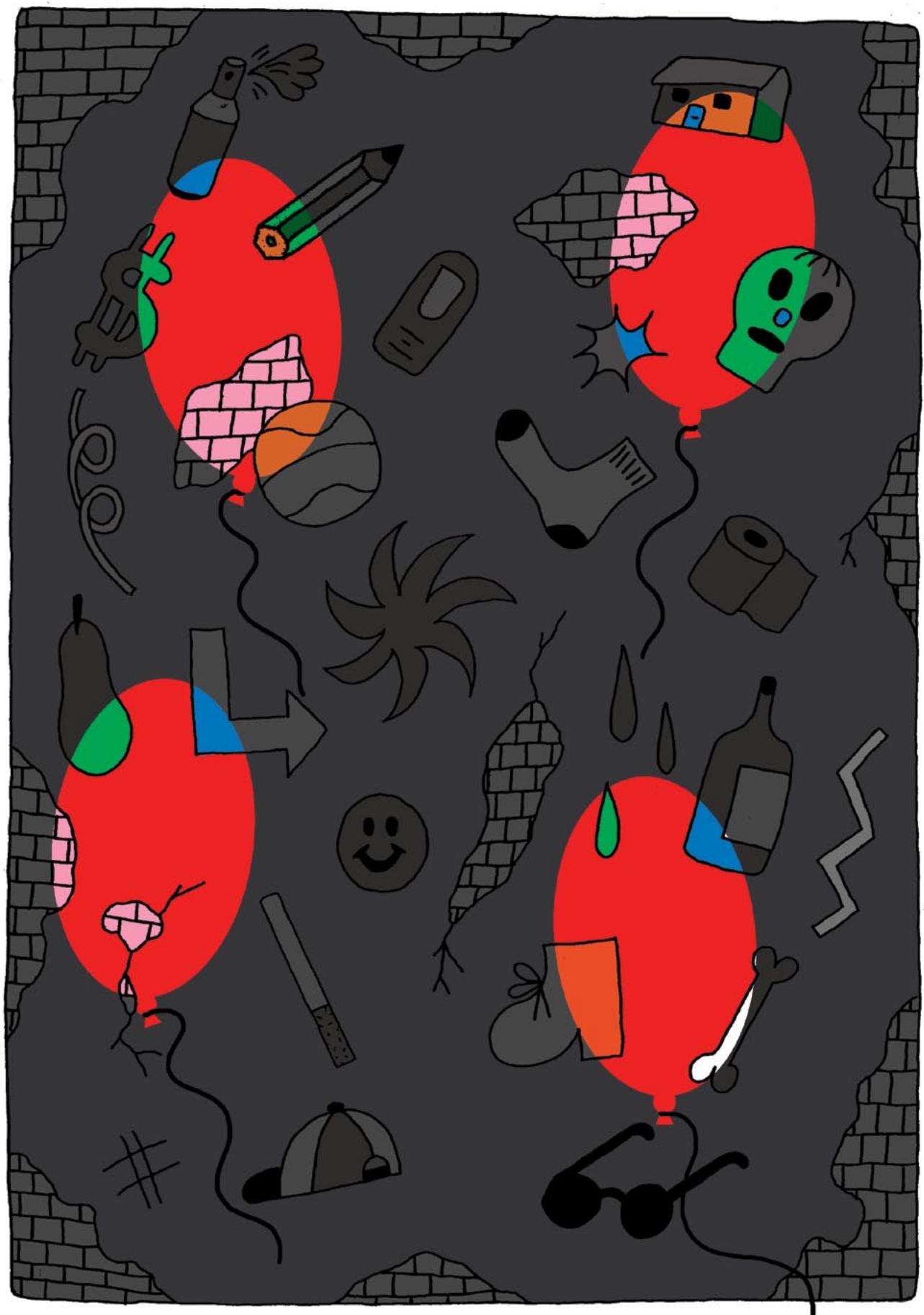
Around the same time the report was published, another article on essentially the same predicament was making the rounds. Presented as a style section piece on youth issues, Todd Wayne's much-circulated "The No-Limits Job" in the *New York Times* highlighted the increasing struggles of would-be upwardly-mobile college graduates attempting to cultivate careers in creative fields, all of whom were required to endure long hours and meager pay to enter their chosen industries. With the exception of *Intern Nation* author Ross Perlin — who weighed in as an expert rather than one of the exploited, noting that young people

THAT AN INCREASING PORTION OF NEWS IS MADE UP OF PR IS NATURALLY CAUSE FOR CONCERN. BUT CENTERING ONE'S OUTRAGE FOR THIS INCURSION ON THE PUBLICIST WHO IS DOING HER JOB SEEKS TO SIDESTEP THE LARGER PROBLEM, AND IN FACT OBSCURES ANOTHER INSIDIOUS COMPONENT OF THE NEOLIBERAL WORK ENVIRONMENT THAT GUIDES THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES.

trying to enter creative fields were increasingly “convinced to invest themselves body and soul” in their labor — Wayne’s interview subjects were all women. Few commentators bothered to notice. In the now typical knee-jerk lambasting of style-section musings on millennials, Wayne’s piece and the entry-level workers profiled therein were met with smug disdain. Honing in on the plight of one of the women interviewed in the piece — a twenty-eight-year-old book publicist who found herself working well over forty hours per week and tethered to her Blackberry even in her ostensible downtime — Gawker writer Max Rivlin-Nadler sneered, “Ah, pity the publicist. Wait. No, *don’t*. Publicists are awful.”

Publicity, like all emotional labor, is grueling and mostly thankless work. This year, PR ranked fifth on CareerCast’s annual list of the ten most stressful jobs in the US (coming in not far after military personnel and firefighters). Publicists work long days, often putting in eight hours or more at the office, then overseeing events or attending networking functions in the evenings, which can skew their hourly earnings below minimum wage, especially for entry-level employees. According to *Fortune* magazine, publicists make 75 percent less than advertising executives — their closely related but decidedly less pink-hued counterparts. As the magazine further elaborates, “In popular culture, ad execs are immortalized with powerful characters like *Mad Men*’s Don Draper, who positions Kodak’s slide projector for success in part by single-handedly christening it the ‘Carousel,’ while PR execs are portrayed by characters like *Sex and the City*’s Samantha Jones, who seem to do nothing but throw parties for a living.” The problem, however, isn’t just misconception — it’s also the failure to recognize that “throwing parties” (shorthand for the process of booking a venue, organizing entertainment, negotiating payments, securing media coverage, sending invites, monitoring the door, attending to guests, and overseeing cleanup) is still labor.

To ask that publicists do better, then, is to demand a speedup of their affective labor. It also indicates a failure to recognize that, as Hochschild explains in *The Managed Heart*, one mode by which emotional laborers can resist overwork is through a reinvention of the industrial slowdown. Hochschild turns to flight attendants as a case study, noting that in the response to the increasing numbers of passengers and reduction of downtime in the 1970s, United Airlines flight attendants enacted emotional labor slowdowns by pushing the limits of workplace dress code with casual shoes or extra jewelry, or smiling less broadly at passengers. It’s similarly conceivable that PRs, in response to the overwhelming demands of the job, may resist through the “bad” work that so many criticize, including mass-blasting releases instead of carefully researching and deferentially pitching individual journalists. As the conditions of the publicist increasingly overlap with those of all knowledge workers, people in every profession should recognize and confront the demands of affective labor as their own, rather than setting them up in opposition to “real” work. ■



A Red with an FBI Badge

On reactionary novelist James Ellroy and his Underworld USA trilogy's surprising treatment of communism and anticomunism.

by Peter Berard

“

T'S TIME TO EMBRACE BAD MEN and the price they paid to secretly define their time. Here's to them.”

So James Ellroy intones at the end of a soliloquy opening *American Tabloid*, the first volume in the Underworld USA trilogy. The bad men he hugs close include the Mafia, J. Edgar Hoover, assorted politicos, and tycoons like Howard Hughes. The novels illuminate a conspiratorial hidden history of the United States from just before the Cuban Revolution in 1959 to the Watergate break-ins in 1972, told across two thousand pages in Ellroy's signature style: strings of tight, telegraphic phrases interspersed with police-report exposition and Grand-Guignol violence. The style — experimented with in his earlier work, but perfected in *Underworld USA* and his first memoir, *My Dark Places* — is innovative enough to be worth the price of admission for anyone who values literary invention.

Anticommunism — as an ethos and a way of life, more than as an idea — drives the action of the books. Ellroy's performance as a public figure over the years has sometimes verged on talk-radio-style right-wing ranting, and his fiction is at times calculating in its violation of liberal sensitivities through racial stereotyping.

Yet readers who picked up the Underworld trilogy as the novels appeared between 1995 and 2009 found themselves — after nearly two thousand pages, and in the wake of more bloodshed perpetrated by assorted “bad men” later than anyone would want to remember — reading the elegy for an elusive American Communist femme fatale that ends *Blood's a Rover*, the final volume.

This is a major transition: the consequence of a rigorous pursuit of knowledge of one's self and of one's world, as undertaken by a strange, conflicted, highly talented man. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis wrote of Ellroy that "in his pitch blackness there is no light left to cast shadows and evil becomes a forensic banality." There is a grain of truth in Davis's criticism, even if his subsequent characterization of Ellroy as "a neo-Nazi in American writing" goes overboard. But Ellroy is canny and honest enough with his darkness — and willing to allow in the light of historical inquiry, if not of morality — to be able to say something important.

GOOGRAHY is destiny," Ellroy occasionally likes to proclaim in his public appearances and interviews, an interesting position for a man who has also claimed to have never looked at an atlas until middle age, when his second wife bought him one. But it rings true. He has a nose for the geography of power. The power structure that the characters work for is an array of fiefdoms, a "democratic feudalism," to use Corey Robin's term, that makes the Holy Roman Empire look sane by comparison. Ellroy's America is Charles Portis' "pelagic America," the land-sea at the heart of North America where the odds and ends of Europe, with the help of a little capital and a lot of forced labor, could make society in its own image. In Underworld USA, this is a welter of parochial mini-worlds, governed by sleazy thugs and stitched together by a skein of national institutions. (Ellroy and Portis, whether they want to or not, definitively rebuke Burke's vision of small "organic" communities.) This is the nexus between the Mafia and the corporate world that takes the people's money, the police forces headed by Hoover's FBI that monitors them, and mass entertainment that keeps them pacified and spending.

These forces also drive pelagic Americans into the cities, where their various hatreds rub up against each other. Underworld USA lingers on Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Miami, cities where the management of arriviste rural Americans through violence, segregation, bread, and circuses was turned into an art. Like Ellroy's parents, most of his viewpoint characters are middle Americans who came to cities. Dwight Holly, Wayne Tedrow, and Kemper Boyd are the sons of pelagic nobility

(Indiana Klansmen, Nevada Mormons, and Tennessee aristocrats, respectively — and Ellroy himself might be the last American to actually give a damn about being of WASP descent, as opposed to a generic whiteness). Pete Bondurant comes to Los Angeles from perhaps the most isolated part of prewar North America: rural Quebec. Perhaps because of this, Bondurant, the terrifying animating force of the first two books, is clearest on what anticommunism is about: "anticommunism is good for business." J. Edgar Hoover, overseeing the whole thing like a terrifying cross between Gollum and Sauron, is a good small-town Indiana boy himself. The Mob figures, though Italian and Jewish, speak the same language of big money and small, personal domination as do the Mormon bigwigs with whom they hobnob in Las Vegas. The only figures in the book that don't — Bobby Kennedy (Jack could fake the same noblesse), the blue-blooded CIA men, French mercenaries, and towards the end, a cabal of those rare birds, effective American communists — give off a faint otherworldly aura.

This, then, is the "Free World." The actions taken to uphold it fall under the rubric of anticommunism. "Anticommunism makes strange bedfellows," J. Edgar Hoover says early in *American Tabloid*, and it's the consequences of these strange couplings that drive the action in the books. Anticommunism in Underworld USA isn't a matter of ideology or geopolitics. White American leftists (for the most part — more on this below) figure as harmless and well-meaning; Soviets don't figure at all. Anticommunism is about keeping the suckers fat, ignorant, and happy, and their masters — those at the nexus of organized crime, politics, and the corporate world — secure.

Some communists, like the Cubans, threaten the system directly by cutting off Mafia and United Fruit profits. That said, most forces targeted by the anticommunist strange bedfellows — the civil rights movement, student radicals, those liberals who believe enough to get in the way — threaten the system not monetarily but ontologically: by attempting to make it kinder, gentler, less ignorant. They would disrupt the existence epitomized by the brilliantly nauseating scenes Ellroy depicts of Teamsters and those other parts of the working class favored by military Keynesianism enjoying their idea of paradise: all slot machines, cigars, booze, and prostitutes, with cheap lounge acts affirming — over and over again in leering, unsubtle terms — the white working man's whiteness and

masculinity. Racism, sexism, violence, sleaze, and chintz are not by-products of the system: they are the system, they are what make it worthwhile. They are what bound pelagic America into a superpower; the New Deal, the Atlantic Charter, and Fordism are incidental, or necessary but banal, conditions of existence.

Most of the protagonists in *Underworld USA* affect a superiority to the system they protect. The masses enjoying the show are dismissed as “geeks,” and most of the masters — gauche Sam Giancana, insane Howard Hughes, closeted voyeur Hoover — are depicted as little better. Partial though they are to posh hotel suites and drugs, Ellroy’s heroes aren’t in it for the money. The terror they wreak is its own end, as crucial to their sense of self as the vile and open racism of their society is to that society’s functioning. Pete Bondurant is constantly violently putting things in order: tabloid magazines, paramilitary camps, taxi-services-cum-crime-rings. This order consists of keeping races and genders separate, unequal, but functioning together, typically to make money via blackmail and violence. Bondurant is personally invested in this order, and the way in which his systems need the disorderly — black people and “geeks,” Cubans who just can’t seem to run a cab stand properly, the list goes on — to function seems to rub his always-tender temper raw. Still, only geeks (like the Klansmen everyone holds their noses and works with) suggest eliminationist solutions. The system needs to be maintained, not overturned. The system’s violence needs to be applied to the nonviolent so that the capacity and will to use violence remains intact. It’s circular, but if conservatism has one truth, it’s that the circular exists and sometimes we need to cope with it. Rarely, one of Ellroy’s tough guys can opt out, when they meet the right woman and the violence gets a tad much for them, but the world can no more opt out of systemic violence than it could opt out of gravity.

ELLROY once criticized Raymond Chandler by saying that Chandler wrote the man he wished he was, where Dashiell Hammett — a Pinkerton thug-turned-Communist Party member — wrote the man he feared he was in fact. Turned back on its originator, that criticism works well in evaluating Ellroy’s characters. Stone

killer Pete Bondurant, sly charmer Kemper Boyd, lantern-jawed enforcer Lyle Holly are all good characters that move the action along, the sorts of men Ellroy would have liked to be. Don Crutchfield is a more honest character, closely reflecting Ellroy himself: an LA kid with a missing mom and a wino dad, spurned by nice girls and hippie girls alike, scared, resentful, obsessive. From there, the progression from peeping tom to cop groupie to junior private snoop to right-wing thug-in-training seems wholly natural. Crutchfield, before getting in with president killers and coup plotters, seems to be drawn from Ellroy’ own experience; his mother was murdered (a case still unsolved) when he was a child and he, too, snooped and perved his way around 1960s Los Angeles. Crutchfield is the opening for Ellroy’s real-life vulnerabilities to come through into his written work.

Womankind exists at the center of Ellroy’s universe of men. Ellroy has called himself a romantic, seemingly meaning a mash-up of two senses of the word: philosophical romanticism, with its disavowal of formal rationality, and romantic love as thought of by twentieth-century Americans. By using romantic love as a deus ex machina, redeeming racist thugs with body counts in the triple digits, Ellroy is both coppering out and being entirely true to himself and his philosophy; his goals are not ours. Those viewpoint characters who do not acquire a true female love die violently and without any real redemption. The love of a good woman allows a few characters to get away from the violence altogether, and some to die in a state of grace.

As it turns out, a particular kind of love does most of the redeeming in *Blood’s a Rover*, the last and most compelling of the trilogy: the love of leftist women. The plot of *Blood’s a Rover* is a fascinating fractal complex mess, as complicated as the rest of the trilogy put together, but at the center lies the sort of Red conspiracy that might have justified some of the anticomunist violence that motivated the action in the rest of the book. However, it’s clear Ellroy admires these communists, and so, eventually, do his characters.

At the center of the action is a confederacy of femme fatales led by the enigmatic Joan Rosen Klein, and Jack Leahy, a red-diaper baby who wormed his way into the FBI directly under Hoover’s nose. Jack’s father “was a Red with an FBI badge. He was grooming Jack to become a cop revolutionary.” Both Jack and Joan are veterans of an

endless struggle, and have acquired the scars and gravitas to distinguish themselves from the callow liberals Ellroy complains about in fiction and in interviews. Joan and other left-leaning female figures are the engines of most of the redemption the series has to offer. Love for Joan makes Dwight Holly turn on Hoover, love for a black woman makes Wayne Tedrow into an anti-imperialist guerrilla. Don Crutchfield, the character closest to the author, delivers his elegy decades after the events in the trilogy, when he is a successful private detective, but still searching for the elusive Joan (as Ellroy searched for his mother in *My Dark Places*). Ellroy famously disbelieves in closure. Joan doesn't bring closure, but strong women bring redemption throughout Ellroy's work — in Crutchfield's case, the pursuit of her, rather than her actual presence.

It would be a mistake to make more out of this than it is. Romantic love and violence burnout as ethical answers to the world is obviously insufficient, though if such forces can turn right-wing thugs the way Ellroy seems to think they can, more power to them. The closest Ellroy has come to a real statement of political intent is his self-description as a "Tory mystic." Elsewhere he has described himself as a mixture of Marxist and conservative. What these have in common is a rejection of liberalism and the bourgeoisie, for better and for worse. This is in keeping with Ellroy's love of shock (and schlock) and his deeply pessimistic worldview. He's been at it again recently as his next book nears print, ranting against Obama, hipsters, "rock-and-rollers" (the man is aging) and making much of his Tory leanings.

Some of this elicits yawns and some of it chuckles, but unlike other right-left straddling provocateurs (Christopher Hitchens comes to mind), Ellroy's work continues to impress and improve, both in terms of his craft and in terms of clarity and humanity of vision. Compare *Underworld USA* with the earlier works in the LA Quartet (most famous for *LA Confidential*). While good reads, the novels that comprise the quartet — *The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *LA Confidential*, and *White Jazz* — were much more conventional works. Ellroy engaged in significant historical research for these novels — his 1950s Los Angeles feels gruesomely real — but he did not surrender himself to it as fully as he did later on. Or perhaps the history of LA simply brought out something different in him than did the history of the United States.

In the LA Quartet, leftists are pathetic, not worth anyone's time — neither that of the perpetrators of the Red Scare or of those the leftists would purportedly help. In fact, there's even a leftist femme fatale in *The Big Nowhere*, but she's the opposite of Joan — a fake leftist, a rich girl playing Red and seeking authenticity by sleeping with Mexican men, a spiteful caricature in a series full of them, but more memorable for the seemingly deeply-felt resentment behind it:

The woman hated her father, screwed Mexicans to earn his wrath, had a crush on her father and got her white lefty consorts to dress stuffed-shirt traditional like him — so she could tear off their clothes and make a game of humiliating paternal surrogates. She hated her father's money and political connections, raped his bank accounts to lavish gifts on men whose politics the old man despised; she went to tether's end on booze, opiates and sex, found causes to do penance with and fashioned herself into an exemplary leftist Joan of Arc: organizing, planning, recruiting, financing with her own money and donations often secured from her own body.

All the same, this represents a step up for Ellroy from his real right-wing kook days (he was a supporter of the American Nazi Party at one point in his youth, according to his memoirs), but was still well within right-wing tough-guy shock jock territory. Glimmers of the writer he would become exist in the LA Quartet, but he was not there yet.

This development shows in Ellroy's public persona, as well. He doesn't gadfly as much as he once did; he's toned down both his love for throwing around vile racist and sexist epithets and the *ain't-I-a-stinker* justifications for doing so. His obsessive stalker quality can still make one's skin crawl, but turned towards historical inquiry, it drove him to some actual truths: his understanding of what made anticomunism has truth to it that other (nicer, more formally educated) people would — and have, and do — miss.

The study of history made him a better writer and (somewhat) less of a troll in the bargain. Ignorant self-love was a key support for the white man's hell-paradise seen in *Underworld USA*. Ellroy kicked out the prop of ignorance from his own persona in order to rhapsodize that world, and in so doing changed his perspective, and has followed that change to some fruitful and logical conclusions. That's a decent first step for anyone. ■

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Change the People

A recent book on musician Fred Ho reveals some starting points for a modern radical avant-garde.

by Alexander Billet

FRED HO has been staring death in the face for almost a decade. In 2006, the prolific avant-garde saxophonist and composer was diagnosed with cancer. In late 2012, his doctors told him that the cancer had metastasized. A statement posted on his website in January of last year reads:

In 2012 we learned that the cancer had now reached stage 4b metastasis. A condition considered terminal.

But having optimized himself with a raw extreme food diet, spiritualizing himself with the elimination of ego, immersion in the love of so many friends, his family and supporters from around the planet, and coming to peace and carrying no baggage of any kind, Fred's legacy is monumental and will be celebrated throughout 2013.

This seems an idiosyncratic way to greet the news that you may be dying, but to anyone who is familiar with Fred Ho's art and music, it's hard to imagine him taking it any other way. In *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul: The Radical Art of Fred Ho*, he is described with eccentric yet vivid labels, at once a revolutionary Marxist and a self-professed Luddite, an ecocentric matriarchal socialist, a devout atheist who, in his own words, is "trying to find a sound that will bring down the walls of Jericho."

Summing up Ho's corpus of work is likewise a slippery task. The music he composes and performs is instantly recognizable as jazz, yet it also incorporates elements far beyond most conceptions of the genre. Ho himself dislikes the very term "jazz," describing it as a word with racist origins used to diminish the importance of non-white music.



Nor is his music confined to albums or performances in dark clubs; he has composed and collaborated on several large-scale operas that incorporate whole orchestras, dance, martial arts, and multimedia. He has authored a handful of books exploring the nexus of art and politics. He even designs his own clothes, seeking out fashions that are at once bold and completely original. To say Fred Ho defies convention is such an understatement that it's almost an insult to the man.

It may go without saying that, despite being honored by contemporaries and his alma mater of Harvard, emissaries for the Big Three record labels aren't banging down Ho's door (not that he's particularly bothered by that). Neoliberalism's assault

on the cultural resources of working and oppressed people, combined with the tight consolidation of the record industry, has left precious little space for discussions of aesthetic liberation. Notions of the avant-garde are perhaps more marginal than they've been in decades. Which, ironically, makes such discussions all the more urgent.

Further complicating matters is Elvis Costello's adage that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." A book like *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul*, intended as a thorough examination of Ho's work, naturally comes up against this sticky truth. Editors Tamara Roberts and Roger Buckley have taken a somewhat novel tack; the book includes not just essays on Ho's compositions,

operas and life, but anecdotes and ruminations from friends and collaborators; there are even a few poems inspired by the man peppered throughout. It's an unorthodox tack to take, but ultimately effective. What one takes from the book is a sense not just of the importance of Ho's work but of how a new, vital, politically engaged, even dialectical avant-garde art might look.

Returning to the Source

HO'S MANTRA, repeated several times in one way or another throughout *Yellow Power*, is straightforward.

Revolutionary music, as he sees it, must "go to the people, speak to the people, change the people." It's certainly simple, and yet it opens up a whole host of questions about how one reaches listeners on the almost subconscious levels in which art flourishes. How does one provide for an audience an art that breaks the mold while at the same time giving them something they want to hear?

Diane C. Fujino's essay "Return to the Source" is a particularly illuminating starting point for this question, providing a view of Ho's early ideas on art vis-à-vis the New Communist Movement of the 1970s and 1980s as well as mapping the limits of the New Left's aesthetic practices. Fujino's title is taken from a speech of the same name by liberation leader Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau. She refers back to this speech in order to insist that Ho's work is similarly informed by a desire to celebrate art forms popular among Asian and African-American masses in order to reassert their independence:

Cabral asserted that no colonizing force or oppressor can successfully dominate without destroying the culture of the oppressed peoples. Maintaining one's culture, turning back toward one's cultural heritage, or recreating a liberatory culture (because as Cabral emphasizes, no culture is fixed or flawless) in the face of colonialism is thus a revolutionary act.... Rooted in Cabral, Ho asserts, "Oppressed people don't begin to fight their oppression until they resist the identity and historical image their oppressor makes of them."

This is particularly prescient given Ho's Chinese heritage. Asian Americans are constantly held up as a "model minority," the racial category that proves racism doesn't really exist and assimilation is the key to prosperity. Ho's own upbringing,

illustrated at several points in the book, provides a corrective to those myths.

Much of what Cabral lays out — particularly the rejection of cultural assimilation in favor of racial pride — is what attracted Ho to Maoism in the 1970s. While much of the Old Left was seen as having equivocated on questions of racism, the New Communist Movement saw it primarily as a question of national liberation. Inspired by struggles in the Third World, a great many artists from the Black Arts Movement — including the recently departed Amiri Baraka — made a turn toward Maoism because of the movement's refusal to compromise on the issue.

In fact, both Baraka and Ho were for a time in the same organization: the League of Revolutionary Struggle. The League was the result of a fusion of a handful of Third Worldist and revolutionary nationalist organizations. These groups were prone to sweeping statements and demands on many issues, including art. At the same time, there can be little denying that many of their adherents and sympathizers produced compelling artistic expression. Some of them — Archie Shepp, for example — provided key innovations in the field of free and avant-garde jazz.

That the Asian-American movement isn't as widely recognized as the Black and Brown Power movements is tragic in its own right; not least of all because the jazz created by Asian and Pacific-American artists as a complement to that movement could be equally magnetic. Just as BAM jazz artists often experimented with African polyrhythms and genres in order to emphasize the specifically non-Western nature of their music, so did Ho and other Asian artists explore ways to inject the sounds of their heritage as signifiers of cultural pride: Cantonese opera, Japanese *tanka* poetry, Filipino *randallia* music. But this approach also brought with it a severe shortcoming. Says Ho:

By and large, these attempts at a revolutionary theory of APA art and culture simply reiterated standard [Marxist-Leninist] views (mostly from Mao's Yenan talks on literature, art and revolution) on the political and class nature of art, the propaganda value of popular forms, the question of aesthetic form and its dialectical, yet subordinate, relationship to revolutionary proletarian content.... The major limitation of the American Left's theory and practice in cultural work has stemmed

from the influence of socialist-realism (the Zhdanov policies of the Soviet Union), commonly regarded as agit-prop. This theory regards art solely for its utilitarian value as a vehicle for propaganda.

It is worth unpacking this history, because Ho's best work has sought to face the quandary of how art can attack the evils of capitalism — racism, sexual oppression, exploitation, and imperialism, not to mention what the culture industry does to music itself — without becoming forgettably propagandistic. What's more, despite Ho's urge to move beyond the narrow confines of effective Zhdanovism, the approach yielded an essential ingredient in his recent work.

The "Popular Avant-Garde"

TAKE, FOR EXAMPLE, "No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger" from *The Sweet Science Suite*, Ho's "choreographed musical tribute to Muhammad Ali," which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music this past October. The composition is at once catchy and profoundly challenging, veering from orchestral jazz to the instrumentations and arrangements of Vietnamese folk music to fleeting moments of soul and funk that signify the Champ's signature swagger. Obviously, Ho's baritone sax plays a key role. Though there are no words, those with even slight knowledge of Ali will surely catch on to the theme of Afro-Asian solidarity embodied both in his well-known rebuke to the draft and in the music's incorporation of sounds that at first listen don't seem to mix.

Ho's works — his operas, performances, and compositions — generally proceed from this logic. He is fond of calling himself a "popular avant-gardist," employing an irreverent, almost deconstructionist ethos to material lifted from pop and folk cultures. His operas generously borrow from Asian fables, Japanese manga, and Bruce Lee films and invert them with aplomb. *Deadly She-Wolf Assassin at Armageddon!* uses the popular manga *Lone Wolf and Cub* as its starting point to tell a tale of individuals' awareness of their place in history's battles. His womanist opera *Warrior Sisters: The New Adventures of African and Asian Womyn Warriors* features Asian women performing African roles and vice versa in its attempt to embody Afro-Asian solidarity.

The most informative and engaging passages of *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul* are those that illustrate just how this approach sets itself apart. Ho's outlook, as Kevin Fellezs posits in his essay, shares with Antonio Gramsci an understanding of "the popular" as a locus of intersecting interests, rhetorics, and representations, a space of both conformity and opposition to elite culture."

This interweaving of different genres is a far cry both from the static, Kipling-esque presentations of "world music" and the low-ball cynicism of postmodern pastiche. Arthur J. Sabatini, in his piece dissecting Ho's operas, cites both Walter Benjamin and Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the "carnivalesque" to describe the meaning of these artistic gestures. Broadly stated, this is a concept in which elements of society segregated from each other by social or legal practices come together to create new narratives that challenge the established order. And so it is with Ho's bringing together of various aesthetics that convention tells us don't work. It is not only the juxtapositions that create the interest, but the new kinds of instinctive consciousness that can potentially spring from them.

The Need for Utopia

PERHAPS one of the more controversial choices on the part of the editors and writers is to include discussions of Ho's lifestyle — his vow to live on \$15,000 a year, the "extreme raw diet" mentioned above — in *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul*. Some of the more anecdotal contributions to the book, from friends and collaborators like Ruth Margraff, Magdalena Gómez, and Kalamu ya Salaam, stray into similarly personal waters, examining his interactions with fellow artists and, fleetingly, some of the darker corners of his personality.

This may at first glance seem a misstep, and admittedly these sections can be repetitive. An interesting supposition arises from the discussion of Ho's lifestyle, however: namely that as an artist, it's his job to underscore the ways in which the personal is political.

And indeed, Ho's artistic transgressions in this light — his gender-bending costumes, his juxtaposition of characters and musical modes that seem disparate — take on an enlightening air if we keep in mind that capitalism has shaped literally all aspects of our lives. Bill Mullen's piece,

“In Fred Ho’s Body of Work,” summarizes just such a holistic outlook. Framing Ho’s integration of the personal and political through his art with a quote from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Mullen reminds us of just how profoundly commodification and production for profit have warped our connections with nature, with sexuality, with our very sense of what it means to be human. While it may not be constructive to investigate our own lifestyles in, say, a strike committee or a tenants’ organization, art is where we may ask questions that open the door to other, more fulfilling ways of being, free from the strictures of a system that views us and our labor as disposable.

Art may in fact be one of the only methods through which we can ask such questions of spiritual and ontological vocation in a fruitful and productive way. In the words of Angela Davis, quoted by Fellesz in his essay:

Art is a form of social consciousness — a special form of social consciousness that can potentially awaken an urge in those affected by it to creatively transform their oppressive environments. Art can function as a sensitizer and a catalyst, propelling people toward involvement in organized movements seeking to effect radical social change.

There will surely be those who read this and dismiss it as utopian pretense. But one of the contemporary American left’s greatest weaknesses is its skittishness regarding the concept of utopia. The ways in which neoliberalism has cut us off from the belief that humans can collectively build a better world goes hand in hand with the sidelining and co-optation of the avant-garde. It’s hardly a coincidence that these projects have been written off as fanciful and elitist.

This is precisely what makes *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul* such an edifying book. There is naturally no substitute for actually listening to Fred Ho’s music and seeing his productions. It is these compositions that inspire, not the descriptions of them. That this collection gets closer than most to bridging that gap speaks to its strengths. Though he has been tragically unsung, Ho’s work is a connection to the vibrant and wonderful tradition of the radical imagination. However much longer he may be for this world, there can be little doubt that he’s left important lessons for a nascent radical culture to grab hold of. ■

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Crocodile Tears of the Wolf

The Wolf of Wall Street's eleventh-hour Hail Mary doesn't atone for the rest of the film's gleeful celebration of rich assholes.

by Eileen Jones

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HE WOLF OF WALL STREET and *American Hustle* were both up for multiple Academy Awards this year: *wows* with five nominations, *Hustle* with ten. They've been widely perceived as "rival" films, and at the time of their release back in December, there was strong social-media pressure to take sides and defend one against the other.

I had no qualms about picking sides: I was on any side that opposed *The Wolf of Wall Street*. If the rivalry had been *Scary Movie 5* vs. *The Wolf of Wall Street*, I'd have picked *Scary Movie 5*.

The Wolf of Wall Street is a film that follows the old Cecil B. DeMille rule of shooting biblical epics: you spend nine-tenths of the film wallowing in the goofy big-budget spectacle of Hollywood stars and extras rolling around fleshly in campy Babylonian orgies, knowing you'll get credit for your high-mindedness in the final tenth of the film, when God shows up to rebuke the sins of the people and destroy the large, tacky sets. Audiences leave the theaters both titillated and proud of their piety. And that's the sweet spot where the big box-office bucks and Academy Awards are.

It's a formula that never seems to fail, if you want to talk surefire cons. Scorsese and company have been all over the press solemnly holding up their one-tenth of a movie that supposedly shows the consequences of fraud on a massive scale, and sternly repudiating the suggestion that nine-tenths of their film plays like a gleeful celebration of Wall Street assholes.



Screenwriter Terence Winter (*Boardwalk Empire*, *The Sopranos*) is especially good at expressing huffy indignation at the very notion that the filmmakers are condoning the illegal excesses of people like Jordan Belfort, who titled his memoir *The Wolf of Wall Street* in honor of his own mass bilking of working-class people investing their small savings in penny stocks:

The whole idea of people saying that it glorifies bad behavior — I mean, anyone who watches this movie and thinks that they want to emulate any of the stuff they see on screen has got a screw loose, as far as I'm concerned. If you think that's glorifying bad behavior, really, you should talk to somebody about that.

Winter's disingenuous heavens-to-Betsy expression of shock that anyone would want to imitate super-rich young men, portrayed by film stars, shown buying anything they want, having all the sex they want, and doing all the drugs they want, for most of the film's running time, is typical of the way the director, writer, and stars of the film promoted it.

Their protestations might be more persuasive if it weren't for revelations like this video titled "Leonardo DiCaprio on Jordan Belfort:

Entrepreneurial Icon and Motivational Speaker." In it, DiCaprio plugs Belfort's post-jail career in these terms:

Hello, I'm Leonardo DiCaprio, and some of you may know that I'll be playing Jordan Belfort in a new film, *Wolf of Wall Street*.

What separates Jordan's story from others like it is the brutal honesty in which he talks about the mistakes that he's made in his life. I've been in his company many times, but there is nothing quite like Jordan's public speaking, and his ability to train and empower young entrepreneurs. Jordan stands as a shining example of the transformative qualities of ambition and hard work. And in that regard, he is a true motivator.

This bland endorsement is an apt addendum to *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which is in itself a bland endorsement of Jordan Belfort's Excellent Adventures as a Young Turk of Wall Street who defrauded thousands of small investors to bankroll his own obscene lifestyle, and to build a company comprised of avaricious would-be Belforts. The film's blandness is somewhat disguised by actor-y shouting, shock cuts, druggy slapstick, and a lot of naked female bit players and extras who are

YOU KNOW YOU'RE AT AN INTERESTING POINT IN AMERICAN HISTORY WHEN YOU CAN OVERTLY SCORN "WE, THE PEOPLE" IN A MAJOR HOLLYWOOD FILM AND GET APPLAUSED FOR IT.

artfully shaven and positioned just so for your viewing pleasure.

These gaudy effects serve to assure you that, for all the laffs and hijinx, there's something very scandalous being deplored here, and Scorsese and company are eager to talk about how much they deplore this sort of thing.

What sort of thing, exactly? Well, greed, for example. It's bad. But on the other hand, it all has to do with our survival instinct, as DiCaprio points out in an interview for *Hollywood Reporter in Focus* with Scorsese, Winter, and costar Jonah Hill.

"I think it has to do with the evolution of our species, honestly," philosophizes DiCaprio. And Scorsese helpfully chimes in: "It's part of human nature. All of us, under certain circumstances, are capable of despicable acts." Winter notes sadly, "History repeats itself. We're not learning from our mistakes."

They're just holding up a mirror to what's going on in the world, see; it's all such a shame, really, the way humanity isn't progressing. But toward the end of the interview, Hill strikes a hopeful note: after months spent playing a character who's such a slave to his selfish primal urges that the actor found himself becoming less kind and thoughtful to people, now he's inclined to restore the balance by being more kind and thoughtful.

So we've got that going for us. If any of us little people encounter Jonah Hill, he'll probably try to be nice.

Few films have ever bored and enraged me simultaneously to the extent that *The Wolf of Wall Street* has. Years I've waited for a revival of black comedy, a kind of *Dr. Strangelove* for the nation's financial meltdown. It might signal our readiness to grapple with the farcical horror of our contemporary economic and political life in America, the way the apocalyptic hilarity of *Dr. Strangelove* in 1964 seemed to tee up the culture for the angry sixties radicalism to come.

But with *Wolf of Wall Street*, we find that slack, noisy nonsense is what we're going to get instead. I know plenty of critics found the film electrifying

and revelatory (I read their reviews so you won't have to), but it astonishes me how anyone can.

Are you fascinated to watch Hollywood insiders playing Wall Street insiders, frolicking on their frequently-shared turf of cocaine-dusted hookers? Are you wowed to get another look at the huge, garishly decorated houses, yachts, helicopters, and ludicrous Batmobile-like cars of the 1%, if they're shot by a top Hollywood cinematographer from the best possible angles? Does it amaze you to discover that many Wall Street stockbrokers have engaged in illegal activities in order to make and keep their money, if you can hear about it from a smirking Leonardo DiCaprio looking you right in the eye from up there on the big screen, as if he were your personal buddy?

The answer for many people seems to be "yes" to all of the above. This mystifies me.

The details of these Wall Street ratfuckers' lives are numbingly familiar, as are their lightly fictionalized cinematic counterparts. American movies have been representing their douchebaggery for decades, to the point that Belfort's exploits seem like the stuff of played-out movie clichés. Corrupt corporate money-men have been the cold-eyed, suit-wearing bad guys in a thousand thrillers and action flicks. Consider the multitudes of rascally young Charlie Sheen-ish antiheroes who've infected movies since the eighties, first shown learning the ropes of ripping people off the Big Business way, and then repenting their sins in that crucial last reel where the phony moral of the story goes.

And don't forget all the jolly comic relief we've gotten out of their coke-smeared noses and two-thousand-dollar suits and exhibitionist sex and smarmy patter! Remember that sleazy, lecherous stockbroker with the shit-eating grin in the first *Die Hard* who thought he could scam his way out of a hostage situation by sales-talking the head criminal mastermind and calling him "Boopy"? That guy was hilarious!

That was 1988, people. We've been laughing at these guys for going on thirty years now. It's taking us a while to figure out maybe they aren't so funny.

But here we go again in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, in which Martin Scorsese insistently presents old news and tired character types as fresh, firsthand insight. Critic David Thomson of the *New Republic* approves of Scorsese's affectionate look at Jordan Belfort and his dick-swinging chums because "rascality thrives in America, our last vitality." For Thomson, this Scorsese film is "not just the funniest he has ever made but the first in which there is an authentic daring."

Drink in that statement for a moment, Scorsese fans. Consider *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *King of Comedy*, and *Goodfellas* as films that lack "daring."

According to Thomson, this brand-new *Wolf of Wall Street* daring consists of setting aside any of the moral complexity that had afflicted Scorsese's earlier films, and replacing it with

a brazen awareness that the American system is corrupt not because bad people seek to exploit it, or because there is some evil in the hearts of men, but because American opportunism requires corruption and nerve. The inevitable conclusion is that there is no such thing as corruption. There is just the exhilaration of screwing everyone — and so, for the first time, the gang in a Scorsese film is delivered with more jubilation than dread.... This is unflawed delight, a work of exultant nihilism. At last Scorsese has abandoned the priesthood.

It's a brave new world, this America in which there's "no such thing as corruption." Convenient, too, for certain people.

Sight and Sound critic Nick Pinkerton agrees with David Thomson that *wows* is a total gas, but argues that those who don't like the film probably can't handle the way it "leaves us on the hook, squirming," forced to

admit that the same base drives and puerile fantasies that Jordan exploits exist somewhere in oneself.... *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a film about insatiable appetites, and as such it needs to coax saliva. Leaving *Wolf*, one might have a hankering to huff a mountain of cocaine, just as leaving *The Godfather* one might have a craving for pasta sauce.

Though it's hard to believe that any adult of even moderate experience and self-acceptance would squirm over admitting to base drives and puerile

fantasies, it's true that *The Wall of Wall Street* tentatively implicates the audience in Jordan Belfort's triumphal march. The last shot of the film is a long pan over the stupefied faces of an audience attending one of Belfort's motivational seminars, which surely can be interpreted as a bunch of rubes within the film mirroring a bunch of rubes watching the film. We're all presumably slack-jawed enablers of these con men.

The film requires that we accept DiCaprio playing a particularly impressive con man. There are many long scenes of DiCaprio as Belfort making the big phone-sale ringed by his awed coworkers, or bellowing out team-building speeches to fist-pumping employees. These are clearly meant to convince us that he's a charismatic Wizard of Con.

But the fact is, the speeches are unimaginative and DiCaprio is a very limited actor. All you have to do is imagine a star of major wattage and mercurial invention in the same role — say, Robert Downey, Jr when he's really cooking — and you begin to wonder if perhaps Scorsese's playing a deep game by casting DiCaprio again. (And again and again and again.)

Is it blandness that he's after, a kind of financial-sector banality of evil? Consider that if you look at YouTube footage of Belfort giving speeches, he's surprisingly ineffectual as well; there's one Stratton Oakmont company party speech that's particularly embarrassing because Belfort can't even get his own employees to listen to him, and is reduced to calling "HelllOOOooooo...?" into the babbling crowd.

Perhaps Scorsese means to suggest that the American public is now so stupid and degraded that even the dullest, most fatuous scammer can get the better of us if he's persistent enough.

Figuring out what Scorsese could possibly think he's doing is a testing challenge in recent years, but never so testing as when interpreting *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The film's final scene seems to open itself up to many readings, each one unsatisfying in its own way. For example, much is made of the fact that this motivational seminar is taking place in Auckland, where Belfort has presumably been exiled after his short, cushy prison term for fraud and money laundering.

This makes his hapless audience a bunch of New Zealanders. They respond with distressing straightforwardness to Belfort's first educational exercise, when he presents each audience member

in the first row, one after another, with a pen, and commands him or her to “sell me this pen.” The first audience member says it’s a good pen, the second that it’s a well-made pen, the third that he likes this pen, and so on into the fade-out, an implied infinity of seminar-attending chumps who will never get rich conning anybody.

This is meant to evoke the much earlier scene when Belfort was first putting together his team of crack penny-stock salesman, working-class hustlers all, and he commanded one of them to “sell me this pen.” Without pausing, the Born Hustler says, “Write this down.”

Belfort replies, “I can’t, I don’t have a pen.”

The Born Hustler says, “See, there you go, supply and demand.”

It’s presented as a little bit of American street genius, the like of which is going to rocket Belfort and his team to the big time over the heads of all the well-connected upper-class bastards clogging Wall Street. After that golden start on the road to epic levels of fraud, putting Belfort among the supposedly simple Aucklanders is like marooning Henry Hill in suburbia in *Goodfellas* — they’re forever exiled from the gorgeously reprehensible worlds they love.

Sort of. You have to keep shifting around mentally, trying to make aspects of the film work: let’s say that pen ad-lib was a genius sales technique; let’s say DiCaprio can play a charismatic con man who makes riveting speeches; let’s say that in the end, Scorsese means to indict American audiences for sharing Jordan Belfort’s vision of “the good life,” or New Zealand audiences for having no innate American hustle, or all audiences everywhere because every human has the capacity for despicable acts and we’re not learning from our mistakes.

Or something.

But there’s one thing you can’t say while watching this movie and trying to explain to yourself what it’s all about. You can’t say it evidences the remotest interest in taking the consequences of our current, specific, appalling economic system seriously — always keeping in mind that comedy can take things very seriously indeed, in terms of rigor, coherence, and insight. (For proof, see the Martin Scorsese filmography up through 1990.)

Watching the film, I clung to one last hope that it would do something interesting when it came to the issue of class, which is sitting there throughout the film, in plain sight but not doing

a whole lot. Though Belfort and Co. are initially presented as working-class schlubs triumphing with street smarts no Ivy Leaguer could possibly possess — another crowd-pleasing angle meant to endear them to audiences — it’s never indicated that they’re engaged in anything but a somewhat rowdier version of what old established firms are doing.

In fact, Belfort is tutored at his first job by an Old Guard Wall Streeter, played by the newly skinny and newly interesting Matthew McConaughey, who teaches him about the necessity for frequent masturbation and a constant coke-and-booze buzz when on the job, and gives him a primal chest-pounding beat to groove to when fucking over the world’s gullible masses.

In general, the issue of class remains inert for most of the film, except for trite bits here and there. Belfort trades in his dark-haired working-class wife for a stereotypical trophy blonde suitable for upper-class men, for example. (Though she’s got just as thick an accent as his wife, and like Belfort and his pals, comes from Bayside in Queens.)

There’s only one truly electrifying class-oriented moment in the film. It comes after Belfort scorns the FBI agent (Kyle Chandler) determined to convict him for fraud by telling him someday he’ll look around at the regular people whose interests he’s supposedly defending and see how dull and worthless they are. And sure enough, the FBI agent, who should feel triumphant after bringing down Belfort and his cohorts, rides home on the subway and looks around dismally at the working-class people riding along with him, just as Belfort prophesied.

“Poor” is right! The camera lingers on them to confirm it beyond any doubt: what a bunch of losers. Plain, badly dressed, spiritless, not worth defending.

You know you’re at an interesting point in American history when you can overtly scorn “we, the people” in a major Hollywood film and get applauded for it. No danger of any public-spirited citizen standing up in the theater and shouting, “Screw you, Marty! Right back at you, you sell-out scum! Go snort some more coke with Leo and Jordan!”

No, the worse Scorsese gets — the more his great cinematic gifts and judgment desert him — the more praise he collects. After this lavish awards season, expect the next Scorsese film to hit a tragic all-time low. ■

Bulletproof Neoliberalism

To understand how a body of thought became an era of capitalism requires more than intellectual history.

by Paul Heideman

“W

HAT IS GOING TO COME AFTER NEOLIBERALISM?” It was the question on many radicals’ lips, present writer included, after the financial crisis hit in 2008. Though few were so sanguine about our prospects as to repeat the suicidal optimism of previous radical movements (“After Hitler, Our Turn!”), the feeling of the day was that the era of unfettered marketization was coming to a close. A new period of what was loosely referred to as Keynesianism would be the inevitable result of a crisis caused by markets run amok.

Five years later, little has changed. What comes after neoliberalism? More neoliberalism, apparently. The prospects for a revived Left capable of confronting it appear grim.

Enter Philip Mirowski’s *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. Mirowski maintains that the true nature of neoliberalism has gone unrecognized by its would-be critics, allowing the doctrine to flourish even in conditions, such as a massive financial crisis, that would seem to be inimical to its survival. Leftists keep busy tilting at the windmill of deregulation as the giants of neoliberalism go on pillaging unmolested.

Mirowski identifies three basic aspects of neoliberalism that the Left has failed to understand: the movement’s intellectual history, the way it has transformed everyday life, and what constitutes opposition to it. Until we come to terms with them, Mirowski suggests, right-wing movements such as the Tea Party (a prominent player in the book) will continue to reign triumphant.



The book begins with the war of ideas — a conflict in which, Mirowski argues, the Left has been far too generous in taking neoliberals at their word, or at least their best-publicized word. We have, in effect, been suckered by kindly old Milton Friedman telling us how much better off we'd all be if the government simply left us “free to choose.” But neoliberals have at times been forthright about their appreciation for the uses of state power. Markets, after all, do not simply create themselves. Joining a long line of thinkers, most famously Karl Polanyi, Mirowski insists that a key error of the Left has been its failure to see that markets are always embedded in other social institutions. Neoliberals, by contrast, grasp this point with both hands — and therefore seek to reshape all of the institutions of society, including and especially the state, to promote markets. Neoliberal ascendancy has meant not the retreat of the state so much as its remaking.

If Mirowski is often acidic about the Left’s failure to understand this point, he also recognizes that the neoliberals themselves have been canny about keeping the real nature of their project hidden through a variety of means. Neoliberal institutions tend to have what he calls a “Russian doll” structure, with the most central ones well hidden from public eyes. Mirowski coins an ironic expression, “the Neoliberal Thought Collective,” for the innermost entities that formulate the movement’s doctrine. The venerable Mont Pelerin Society is an NTC institution. Its ideas are frequently disseminated through venues which, formally at least, are unconnected to the center, such as academic economics departments. Thus, neoclassical economists spread the gospel of the free market while the grand project of remaking the state falls to others.

At the same time as neoliberal commonsense trickles down from above, Mirowski argues that it also wells up from below, reinforced by our daily patterns of life. Social networking sites like Facebook encourage people to view themselves as perpetual cultural entrepreneurs, striving to offer a newer and better version of themselves to the world. Sites like LinkedIn prod their users to present themselves as a fungible basket of skills, adjustable to the needs of any employer, without any essential characteristics beyond a requisite subservience. Classical liberalism always assumes the coherent individual self as its basic unit. Neoliberalism, by contrast, sees people as

little more than variable bundles of human capital, with no permanent interests or even attributes that cannot be remade through the market. For Mirowski, the proliferation of these forms of everyday neoliberalism constitute a “major reason the neoliberals have emerged from the crisis triumphant.”

Finally, Mirowski argues that the Left has too often been sucked in by neoliberalism’s loyal opposition. Figures like Joseph Stiglitz or Paul Krugman, while critical of austerity and supportive of the welfare state, accept the fundamental neoclassical economic precepts at the heart of neoliberal policy. Mirowski argues that we must ditch this tradition in its entirety. Even attempts to render its assumptions more realistic — as in the case of behavioral economics, for example, which takes account of the ways real people diverge from the hyperrationality of *homo economicus* — provide little succor for those seeking to overturn the neoliberals.

For Mirowski, these three failures of the Left go a long way toward explaining how neoliberals have largely escaped blame for a crisis they created. The Left persistently goes after phantoms like deregulation or smaller government, which neoliberals easily parry by pointing out that the regulatory apparatus has never been bigger. At the same time, we ignore the deep roots of neoliberal ideology in everyday life, deceiving ourselves as to the scale of the task in front of us.

Whatever criticisms of Mirowski’s analysis are in order, much of it is compelling, particularly in regard to the intellectual history of the NTC. Mirowski’s insistence on the centrality of the state to the neoliberal project helps correct the unfortunate tendency of many leftists over the past decade to assent to neoliberal nostrums about the obsolescence of the state. Indeed, Mirowski goes further than many other critics who have challenged the supposed retreat of the state under neoliberalism.

Loïc Wacquant, for instance, has described the “centaur state” of neoliberalism, in which a humanist liberalism reigns for the upper classes, while the lower classes face the punitive state apparatus in all its bestiality. But Mirowski shows us that the world of the rich under neoliberalism in no way corresponds to the laissez-faire of classical liberalism. The state does not so much leave the rich alone as actively work to reshape the world in their interests, helping to create markets for

MIROWSKI PLACES FAR MORE EXPLANATORY WEIGHT ON THE CONCEPT OF EVERYDAY NEOLIBERALISM THAN IT IS CAPABLE OF BEARING.

the derivatives and securities that made (and then destroyed) so many of the fortunes of the recent past. The neoliberal state is an eminently interventionist one, and those mistaking it for the austere nightwatchman of libertarian utopianism have little hope of combating it.

It's here that we begin to see the strategic genius of neoliberal infrastructure, with its teams of college economics professors teaching the wondrous efficacy of supply and demand on the one hand, and the think tanks and policy shops engaged in the relentless pursuit of state power on the other. The Left too often sees inconsistency where in fact there is a division of labor.

Mirowski's concern to disabuse his readers of the notion that the wing of neoliberal doctrine disseminated by neoclassical economists could ever be reformed produces some of the best sections of the book. His portrait of an economics profession in haggard disarray in the aftermath of the crisis is both comic and tragic, as the amusement value of the buffoonery on display diminishes quickly when one realizes the prestige still accorded to these figures. Reading his comprehensive examination of the discipline's response to the crisis, one is reminded of Freud's famous broken kettle. The professional economists' account of their role in the crisis went something like (a) there was no bubble and (b) bubbles are impossible to predict but (c) we knew it was a bubble all along.

Incoherence notwithstanding, however, little in the discipline has changed in the wake of the crisis. Mirowski thinks that this is at least in part a result of the impotence of the loyal opposition — those economists such as Joseph Stiglitz or Paul Krugman who attempt to oppose the more viciously neoliberal articulations of economic theory from within the camp of neoclassical economics. Though Krugman and Stiglitz have attacked concepts like the efficient markets hypothesis (which holds that prices in a competitive financial market reflect all relevant economic information), Mirowski argues

that their attempt to do so while retaining the basic theoretical architecture of neoclassicism has rendered them doubly ineffective.

First, their adoption of the battery of assumptions that accompany most neoclassical theorizing — about representative agents, treating information like any other commodity, and so on — make it nearly impossible to conclusively rebut arguments like the efficient markets hypothesis. Instead, they end up tinkering with it, introducing a nuance here or a qualification there. This tinkering causes their arguments to be more or less ignored in neoclassical pedagogy, as economists more favorably inclined toward hard neoliberal arguments can easily ignore such revisions and hold that the basic thrust of the theory is still correct. Stiglitz's and Krugman's arguments, while receiving circulation through the popular press, utterly fail to transform the discipline.

Mirowski also heaps scorn on the suggestion, sometimes made in leftist circles, that the problem at the heart of neoclassical economics is its assumption of a hyperrational *homo economicus*, relentlessly comparing equilibrium states and maximizing utility. Though such a revision may be appealing to a certain radical romanticism, Mirowski shows that a good deal of work going on under the label of behavioral economics has performed just this revision, and has come up with results that don't differ substantively from those of the mainstream. The main problem with neoclassicism isn't its theory of the human agent but rather its the theory of the market — which is precisely what behavioral economics isn't interested in contesting.

In all, Mirowski's indictment of the state of economic theory and its imbrication with the neoliberal project is devastating. Unfortunately, he proves much less successful in explaining *why* things have turned out as they have. The book ascribes tremendous power to the Neoliberal Thought Collective, which somehow manages to do everything from controlling the economics profession to reshaping the state to forging a new sense of the human self. The reader is left wondering how the NTC came to acquire such power. This leads to the book's central flaw: a lack of any theory of the structure of modern capitalism. Indeed, the NTC seems to operate in something of a vacuum, without ever confronting other institutions or groups, such as the state or popular movements, with interests and agendas of their own.

To be fair, Mirowski does offer an explanation for the failure of popular movements to challenge neoliberalism, largely through his account of “everyday” neoliberalism. At its strongest, the book identifies important strategic failures, such as Occupy’s embrace of “a mimicry of media technologies as opposed to concerted political mobilization.” However, Mirowski extends the argument well beyond a specific failure of the Occupy movement to propose a general thesis that developments like Facebook and reality TV have transmitted neoliberal ideology to people who have never read Friedman and Hayek. In claiming that this embodied or embedded ideology plays an important role in the failure of the Left, he places far more explanatory weight on the concept of everyday neoliberalism than it is capable of bearing.

At the simplest level, it’s just not clear that everyday neoliberalism constitutes the kind of block to political action that Mirowski thinks it does. No doubt, many people reading this article right now simultaneously have another browser tab open to monster.com or LinkedIn, where they are striving to present themselves as a fungible basket of skills to any employer that will have them. In this economy, everyone has to hustle, and that means using all available means. That many of these same readers have probably also done things like organize against foreclosures should give pause to any blurring of the distinction between using various media technologies and embracing the ideology Mirowski sees embodied in them.

Indeed, the ubiquity of participation in such technologies by people who support, oppose, or are apathetic about neoliberalism points to a larger phenomenon on which Mirowski is silent: the labor market. Put bluntly, it is difficult to imagine anyone engaging in the painfully strained self-advertisement facilitated by LinkedIn in a labor market with, say, 2 percent unemployment. In such a market, in which employers were competing for comparatively scarce workers, there would be very little need for those workers to go through the self-abasing ritual of converting themselves into fungible baskets of skills. In our current situation, by contrast, where secure and remunerative employment is comparatively scarce, it is no surprise that people turn to whatever technologies are available to attempt to sell themselves. As Joan Robinson put it, the only thing worse than being exploited by capitalism is not being exploited by it.

In evaluating the role of everyday neoliberalism, it is also helpful to move, for the moment, beyond the perspective of the United States, where the NTC has clearly had great success, and adopt that of countries where resistance is significantly more developed, such as Venezuela or South Africa. Especially in the former, popular movements have been notably successful in combating neoliberal efforts to take over the state and reshape the economy, and have instead pushed the country in the opposite direction. Is it really plausible that a main reason for this difference is that everyday neoliberalism is more intense in the United States? I doubt it. For one thing, the strength of Venezuela’s radical movements, in comparison with the US, clearly antedates the developments (social media, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and so on) that Mirowski discusses.

Moreover, it is just as plausible that the entrepreneurial culture he describes is even more extensive in the slums of the global South, where neoliberal devastation has forced many poor households to rely on at least one family member engaging in semi-legal arbitrage in goods salvaged from garbage or made at home. Surely such activities provide a firmer foundation for commercial subjectivity than having a 401(k). That resistance has grown in such circumstances suggests that looking to malignant subjectivities to explain popular passivity is an analytic dead-end.

If everyday neoliberalism doesn’t explain the comparative weakness of the US left, what does? This is, of course, the key question, and I can do no more than gesture at an answer here. But I would suggest that the specific histories of the institutions of the American left, from the Communist Party to Students for a Democratic Society to labor unions, and the histories of the situations they confronted, provide us with a more solid foundation for understanding our current weakness than the hegemony of neoliberal culture does. Moreover, with a theory of capitalism that emphasizes the way the structure of the system makes it both necessary and very difficult for most people to organize to advance their interests, it becomes very easy to explain the persistence of a low level of popular mobilization against neoliberalism in the context of a weakened left.

If Mirowski’s account doesn’t give us a good basis for explaining why popular resistance has been so lacking in the US, it nonetheless suggests why he is so concerned with explaining the

supposed dominance of neoliberal ideology among the general population. From the beginning, he raises the specter of right-wing resurgence, whether in the form of Scott Walker surviving the recall campaign in Wisconsin, the Tea Party mania of 2010, or the success of right-wing parties in Europe. However, much of this seems overstated, especially from a contemporary perspective. The Tea Party has, for all intents and purposes, disappeared from the front lines of American politics, and the Republican Party, while capable of enacting all kinds of sadistic policies on the state level, has remained in a state of disarray on the national level since the 2006 congressional elections.

More fundamentally, the argument that the voting public embraces neoliberalism doesn't square well with recent research by political scientists like Larry Bartels and Martin Gilens emphasizing the profound disconnect between the policy preferences of the poor and what transpires in Washington. What appears to be happening is less the general populace's incorporation into neoliberalism than their exclusion from any institutions that would allow them to change it. Importantly, this alternative explanation does not rely on the Left conceit that rebellion lurks perpetually just below the placid social surface, ready to explode into radical insurgency at any moment. It simply contends that the political passivity of neoliberalism's victims reflects a real diminution of their political options.

Mirowski's failure to address these larger institutional and structural dynamics vitiates much of the explanatory power of his book. On a purely descriptive level, the sections on the intellectual history of neoliberalism and the non-crisis of neoclassical economics illuminate many of the hidden corners of neoliberal ideology. However, if Mirowski is right to suggest that we need to understand neoliberalism better to be successful in fighting it — and he surely is — then much more is needed to explain neoliberal success and Left failure.

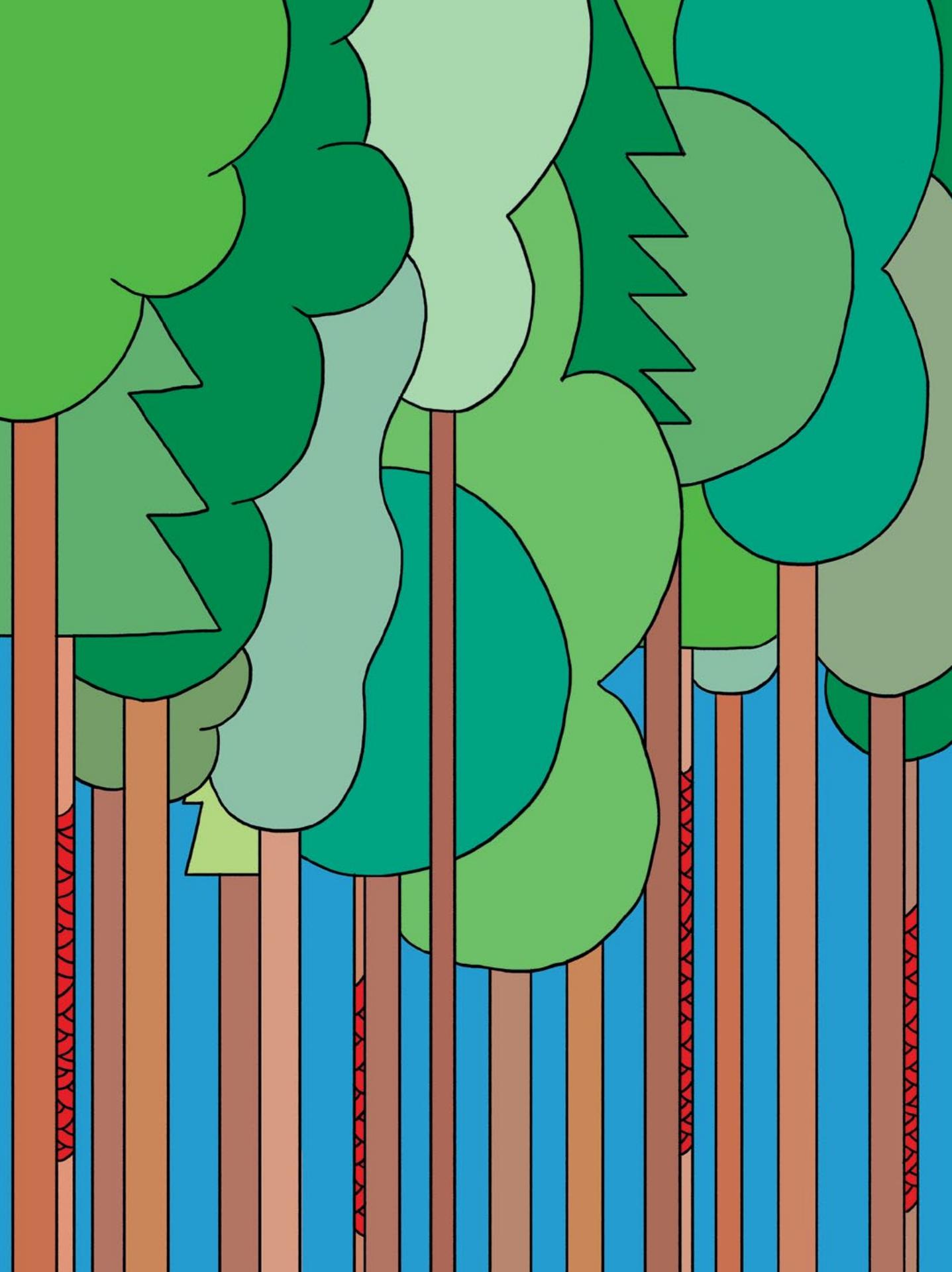
To understand how a body of thought became an era of capitalism requires more than intellectual history. It demands an account of how capitalism actually works in the period in question, and how the ideas of a small group of intellectuals came to be the policy preferences of the rich. Mirowski has given us an excellent foundation for understanding the doctrine, but it will remain for others to explain its actual development. ■

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Reading Jhumpa Lahiri Politically

Jhumpa Lahiri's failure in *The Lowland* is not one of style, but of sensibility. She has little investment in the spirit of the Naxalite movement she chooses to depict.

by Nivedita Majumdar

J

HUMPA LAHIRI does not like to be categorized as an immigrant writer, and her latest novel, *The Lowland*, is her strongest argument against that pigeonhole. Her discomfort with the label is understandable. After all, she has refreshingly little in common with diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, or Chitra Divakaruni. Unlike them, she does not brandish her immigrant status as an epistemologically superior vantage point, nor is she anxious to prove herself as a worthy native informant. Her writing is free of the exotic.

A second-generation immigrant, she is firmly grounded in the culture in which she was raised. Yet, growing up with parents for whom home would always be elsewhere, she gets the immigrant experience, especially its melancholia. Of what she knows, she writes masterfully. Indeed, prior to *The Lowland*, her fiction has been almost exclusively an engagement with immigrant angst in its many hues.

For *The Lowland*, partly set in Calcutta in the sixties and seventies, during the throes of the Maoist Naxalite movement, her ambitions are of a different order. She steps out of the sphere of navel-gazing immigrant fiction and frames the novel with a political movement of which she has no experiential knowledge. Like Lahiri's earlier work, *The Lowland* made a splash as a finalist for both the prestigious Man Booker

Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction, and yet, almost every major review of the novel has remarked on the stagnant quality of the narrative, the flat, detached characters, and the tepid pace. None, however, has identified the cause for this failure in an otherwise extraordinarily skilled writer. The single reason that is sometimes cited is Lahiri's inability to translate her mastery of the short-story form into that of the novel. But her first novel, *The Namesake*, does not suffer from this supposed shortcoming, so that explanation remains unconvincing.

No, Lahiri's failure in *The Lowland* is not one of style, but of sensibility. She has little writerly investment in the ethos and spirit of the political culture she chooses to depict, exhibiting neither imaginative curiosity about that era and its politics, nor genuine sympathy for the cause that motivates some of her characters. Lahiri, remarkably skilled at mapping the tapestries of emotions, flounders here in the construction of compelling characters. Naxalism is the catalyst for the plot, and her characters' actions are often shaped by the movement, but because Lahiri herself cannot muster much sympathy for her characters, the affective is hollowed out of political meaning and the central characters denuded of a compelling structure of motivation. The failure, however, is not a general one; aspects of the novel that are less connected to the political movement do not fare as poorly. In fact, characters who remain untouched by Naxalism are delineated with the precision and care that have long been characteristic of Lahiri's fiction.

The novel starts out in the Tollygunge area of Calcutta in the 1950s, centering on a middle-class family with two little boys. The bright and sensitive brothers, Subhash and Udayan, share an unusually close bond. But the bond breaks in the late 1960s as Udayan becomes involved with the Naxalite uprising and Subhash finds himself unable to fully relate to the movement. Choosing his own path, Subhash leaves to pursue doctoral studies at a university in Rhode Island. He returns home after receiving news of Udayan's death — he was killed by the police for his involvement in the Naxalite movement. While in Calcutta, Subhash meets Udayan's pregnant widow, Gauri, whom he then marries and takes back to Rhode Island with him. Their relationship never works, and Gauri is unable to connect even with her daughter, Bela. Subhash, however proves a tender father to the girl. When

Bela is twelve, Gauri moves to California to pursue an academic career, abandoning both daughter and husband. After decades of separation and angst for all characters, a secret from the past concerning Udayan and Gauri's role in the Naxalite movement is revealed. There is a redemption of sorts for all characters in the end.

The Naxalite movement, central to the plot, has maintained a noticeable presence in India. It began in 1967 with a peasant uprising in Naxalbari, a village in northern Bengal near the Nepali border. Initially led by armed members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the movement later broke away to form the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). It has largely followed Mao's doctrine of "people's war." The movement, born in the countryside, spread to the cities during the 1970s, attracting mainly educated, unemployed youth energized by the peasants' struggle for rights and recognition. A brutal counteroffensive empowered by draconian anti-terrorist laws brought the first phase of the movement to an end.

At the heart of Lahiri's narrative are two killings: the assassination of a policeman by Udayan and his comrades and Udayan's own subsequent execution by the police. In response to the brutal repression of peasant uprisings, the Naxalite movement in urban areas adopted what was called the "annihilation program," which targeted people in uniform such as police officers and paramilitary personnel. Udayan's involvement in the assassination of a policeman, we're given to understand, is part of this Naxalite strategy. He is a participant in the planning of the act, in procuring crucial information; he is present when the police constable was stabbed to death and he painted a slogan with the blood of the dead man. We learn of Udayan's attempt at escape from the authorities, his haunting remorse for his action, his capture, and his family's bearing witness to his execution without trial by the police. The manner of Udayan's execution is consistent with the history of a draconian anti-insurgent operation which included on-the-spot shooting of known Naxalite cadres.

While the reader is offered thorough representations of Udayan's militant act and subsequent execution, the narrative is empathetically invested in only one of these events. There is a clear narrative distinction in the way the two deaths are treated. Udayan's execution by the police is presented as objectionable, even regrettable. But Lahiri does not dwell on the incident, she offers

little to elicit the reader's sympathy for Udayan, nor does she encourage our moral outrage. While we know that Udayan participated in the assassination of a policeman, the text does not allow us to relate to the motivations behind that act. There is no depiction of the world and inner lives of Udayan and his comrades that could embed the assassination in a political and emotional framework. In sharp contrast, the policeman is located in an identifiable and sympathetic milieu. Prior to his death, we're given an intimate portrait of him as father to a young child, someone for whom policing was merely a job.

Lahiri portrays his murder as an unambiguously grievous crime. The manner of Udayan's execution, on the other hand, is noted only in passing and elicits little beyond a rote condemnation of police brutality. The text's real investment rests in the authorial judgment of the policeman's assassination.

Udayan's connection with the Naxalite movement is portrayed with neither empathy nor even conviction. As part of his political training, Udayan leaves for the countryside for a month to live and work with agricultural workers. Instead of just alluding to rural poverty as a sociological phenomenon, here was an opportunity for Lahiri to dwell on the motivations behind Udayan's political beliefs. Through Udayan's experiences, the narrative could have explored what it means to live under grinding feudal oppression, to be forced into a subhuman existence for generations, and

to pass it on to one's children. She might have woven into the narrative the everyday texture of deprivation, injustice, and humiliation. That would have humanized and contextualized the militant peasant uprisings against feudal landowners.

In fact, Naxalism is rarely embedded in the experiences of the characters; the brothers learn of Naxal activities through the news or from fellow passengers on a train. It creates a cinematic effect of the camera zooming out from its focus on private lives to a city caught in the whirlwind of a political agitation. Thus, there is mention of Udayan and his comrades attending political study groups and of their militant activism, but little engagement with the lives of those young people and what drew that generation to sacrifice their immediate interests and safety to make common cause with the rural poor. In a measured authorial voice, the novel notes the draconian counterinsurgency operations, during which nearly everyone under age thirty was treated as a suspect; the rampant state-sanctioned torture of young activists; the disappearances; and the killing of unarmed prisoners.

But again, what was the experience of it all? Udayan is killed by the police for his activism but there is scant focus on the texture of his moral outrage and the impossible courage that must have fuelled his politics.

The narrative does not portray why and how someone like Udayan would have been drawn to the movement. How did Udayan and others of his generation transcend middle-class insensitivity to the plight of the rural poor? What was their own experience of a crippling social and economic system? In what ways did political organizing channel their energies? What was it like for Udayan to be young in Calcutta in 1969 and know that he was part of a worldwide movement for social justice? The little that we learn of Udayan's character surfaces through the memories of Bijoli, his grieving mother. Bijoli reminisces about Udayan's intelligence, his sensitivity, his concern for the poor and the weak, yet these characteristics do not acquire much resonance beyond the distraught recollections of a bereft mother.

The trope of a mother reminiscing about her revolutionary son inevitably evokes comparison with Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*. There, too, the young son was a Naxalite killed in counterinsurgency operations. The mother's bereavement becomes her reason to connect with the world of Brati, her dead son; for her it becomes essential

LAHIRI'S ISOLATION OF AN ACT OF NAXALITE VIOLENCE FOR LITERARY EXPLORATION, WHILE PROVIDING LITTLE MORE THAN A CONVENTIONAL OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEXT, HAS THE EFFECT OF DEPOLITICIZING, EVEN CRIMINALIZING, THE ENTIRE MOVEMENT.

that his ideals do not remain mere abstractions. Through the mother's empathetic quest, Devi's readers connect with Brati, and with the deepest motivations of a young, idealistic generation. By the end of the book, the reader shares the author's searing denunciation of Brati's state-sponsored execution. This is in striking contrast with Lahiri's treatment of her protagonist. Shorn of a similarly empathetic reading of the character and the movement, Udayan's killing becomes a simple parable of crime and punishment.

Udayan's death is not the only novelistic indictment for the "crimes" of the movement. Lahiri reserves an even more severe judgment for Gauri. She escapes Udayan's fate, and moves to the United States, where she begins life anew with his brother and her daughter. Through this move, Lahiri places Gauri in her familiar territory of immigrant experience. But Gauri is unlike her other immigrant characters; there is little authorial sympathy for this character. Her move to another country produces in her neither curiosity for the new nor nostalgia for the old. It is this pervasive indifference, a fundamental inability to connect, which becomes Gauri's punishment for her part in the Naxalite movement.

Initially Gauri strikes one as a remarkably interesting character. In her life experiences, her interests, her relationship with Udayan, her flouting of all familial expectations through her marriage and her nascent involvement in the Naxal movement, there is much potential for compelling character development. That promise, however, remains unfulfilled. Once Gauri marries Subhash and moves to Rhode Island, her character becomes increasingly opaque. Her one distinguishing characteristic is a resistance to all relationships. The hardships of her earlier life notwithstanding, her descent into a stubborn decades-long emotional withdrawal is almost inexplicable. In the end, her long, successful, and austere life, free of sustained emotional attachment, could have been ascribed to authorial excess and left at that, were it not for another failure on Gauri's part. She abandons her twelve-year-old daughter, Bela, with hardly any explanation and pursues her own life without regrets. This abandonment of her child cannot be dismissed as mere authorial excess. The reader is forced to judge Gauri for the cruelty of her act, if not her intentions. And decades later, when Gauri learns from an unforgiving Bela that, in contrast to Gauri's emotionally barren life, both Bela and

Subhash thrived in their own ways, the reader can't help but find some satisfaction in this emotional justice.

Why does Lahiri reserve such judgment for Gauri? Udayan is executed by the state, but Gauri is punished by her author for her participation in the Naxalite movement. She, too, played a part in the assassination of the policeman by Udayan and his comrades; it was her job to observe and report back on the policeman's daily routine. In fact, it is through her eyes that we see a man walking his little son home; a father-son companionship both quotidian and precious. Gauri's guilt, even though unstated, emotionally paralyzes her. Udayan confesses to Gauri that after what he has done, he could not bring himself to parent a child, and since their guilt is shared, Gauri's life becomes an acceptance of that punishment. Even though she gives birth to their daughter, Gauri finds herself unable to forge a bond with her child. Udayan's words thus become a joint prophecy.

As *The Lowland* unfolds, we see that the story is about the indictment of that one militant act in which Udayan and Gauri were both involved. It is about the long-term consequences of the political assassination of a man who was also a father. After such crime, what forgiveness? By making the assassination the source of the narrative's moral and emotional logic, the novel reduces the movement itself to an act of crime. Lahiri's depiction of Naxalism is largely in tune with conservative historiography — a selective rendering that casts the movement as well-intentioned but wrong-headed and devastating in the way it played out. Lahiri's isolation of an act of Naxalite violence for literary exploration, while providing little more than a conventional overview of the context, has the effect of depoliticizing, even criminalizing, the entire movement.

Lahiri is entitled to her critique of the Naxal strategy of "annihilation" that targeted state officials. My issue with the novel does not relate to her position on a particular strategy; rather it is that while locating it at the heart of her narrative, Lahiri does not provide a humanized reading of the Naxal movement. It is entirely possible to be critical of aspects of a movement or even of a movement in its entirety while offering contextualized, intimate portrayals of its origins, justifications, and dynamics. A. Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies*, for instance, provides a scathing critique of the later-stage militancy of the Liberation Tigers

of Tamil Eelam, while at the same time offering a deeply historicized and sympathetic portrayal of the driving force behind the Tamil movement. In that novel, the political is explored through the intimate life experiences of the characters; it is never a state-constructed backdrop. Sivanandan's empathetic investment in the historical process is a characteristic sadly lacking in *The Lowland*.

Lahiri has remarked that her inspiration for the novel was an incident that took place in her grandparents' neighborhood in Calcutta. Two brothers who were Naxal activists had been executed by the police in front of their family. For Lahiri, the poignancy of the incident is located in its familial core; the political is incidental. In her rendering, the familial and the political may intersect at times, but usually run on parallel tracks. She is unable to appreciate how the political can dwell within the realm of the affective. In exploring the different contexts of the incident, she had to acknowledge the political, but there seems to have been little genuine curiosity regarding the motivations of the executed brothers.

Since the political is of little interest to Lahiri, the politics she subscribes to are grounded in an easy and available critique of left radicalism. Thus Udayan, grappling with the perceived futility of the movement as well as his own imminent death, questions Che Guevara's belief that the "revolution is the important thing and that each one of us alone is worth nothing." In the established tradition of left-bashing, Lahiri's character is made aware of the sanctity of the individual over and above any political process. Lahiri remains oblivious to the possibility that, for a character like Udayan, the cause of a revolution could be inherently personalized and its experience not in contention with other aspects of individuality. Similarly, Gauri, confronted with the failures in her own life, is drawn to the news of Naxal leader Kanu Sanyal's suicide. Her dark fascination with the leader's final act is far more compelling than her interest or involvement in the movement ever was. Ironically, the political meaningfully resonates with Lahiri's characters only for imagined messages of defeat and loss.

In sharp contrast to Udayan and Gauri, Bela, the second-generation immigrant and hapless victim of a marriage of convenience, benefits from the writer's abundant empathy. While Gauri's motivations in abandoning her daughter remain obscure, Bela's crippling suffering is carefully

portrayed. Lahiri's remarkable skills in depicting the nuances of pain and its after-effects are at play in Bela's quest for emotional anchors. Rejecting the pseudo-stability of a world that has failed her, Bela embraces the counterculture lifestyle of an agricultural apprentice, a farmhand, living in commune-like arrangements with an unstable income and strong commitment to organic living. Underlying her choices, the narrative claims, there is a "certain ideology ... a spirit of opposition."

Such oppositional ideology, which often originates from private angst and transforms little beyond lifestyle choices, has Lahiri's blessings. Bela's parents, however, are censoriously judged for advocating another ideology that seeks a far more fundamental transformation of exploitative structures. Lahiri's empathetic rendering of Bela's life speaks to her strength. The unfortunate part is that Lahiri's empathy is limited only to characters like Bela and the universe she inhabits.

Lahiri may dislike the label "immigrant writer," but it is doubtful that *The Lowland* will do much to change that reputation. Her earlier writing may be limited by a narrow range of sympathies, but there at least Lahiri is deeply connected with her subject. To have drawn the character of Gogol in *The Namesake*, Lahiri had to have been truly invested in the travails of immigration. The greatest failing of *The Lowland* is that while the Naxal movement is academic to Lahiri, it is still the primary catalyst for the plot. In an interview with NPR, the author expressed her reservations when she spoke of the Naxal activists as "basically kids" attracted by an ideology with a certain appeal. The mature, responsible Subhash echoes the authorial position when he is skeptical that an "imported ideology could solve India's problems."

Whatever the merit of such critique, Lahiri could have chosen to express her perspective through a literary and humanistic engagement with the political. Instead she simply patronizes and dismisses the movement, a gesture that resonates well with her liberal readers, who embrace multiculturalism but shun "extremist" ideologies.

Ultimately, Lahiri remains confined by a sensibility invested in cultural knowledge unencumbered by questions of power and ideology. It is a sensibility that works well within the bounds of immigrant and familial fiction. *The Lowland*, unfortunately, crumbles under the burden of a subject that remains outside its author's ambit of sympathy. ■

We released *Class Action: An Activist Teacher's Handbook* with the Chicago Teachers Union's CORE Caucus in February. Since then, almost five thousand copies of the booklet have already been distributed to educators and school support staff in Chicago; New York; Boston; Portland; Newark; Washington, DC; Milwaukee; Philadelphia; Baltimore; Tennessee, and elsewhere to help support rank-and-file activity.

As these things are prone to doing, our project ran long — the final supplement is 118 pages, more than the 50 we had budgeted for. But it was so fantastically designed by *Jacobin*'s resident creative genius Remeike Forbes, and the photography by Katrina Ohstrom and written contributions (by CTU President Karen Lewis, economist Dean Baker, *Jacobin* editors Megan Erickson and Shawn Gude, Joanne Barkan, Lois Weiner, and many others) were so strong, we couldn't bring ourselves to cut it down more or reduce our planned run.

Unfortunately, this produced a substantial budget shortfall, which we hope to make up through the sale of a limited set of print booklets and the help of our readers. Donations can be sent online at jacobinmag.com/donate/ or by post to PO Box 541336, Bronx NY 10454. Booklets are \$12.95 within the United States, \$5 extra for Canadian orders, and \$10 more for everywhere else.

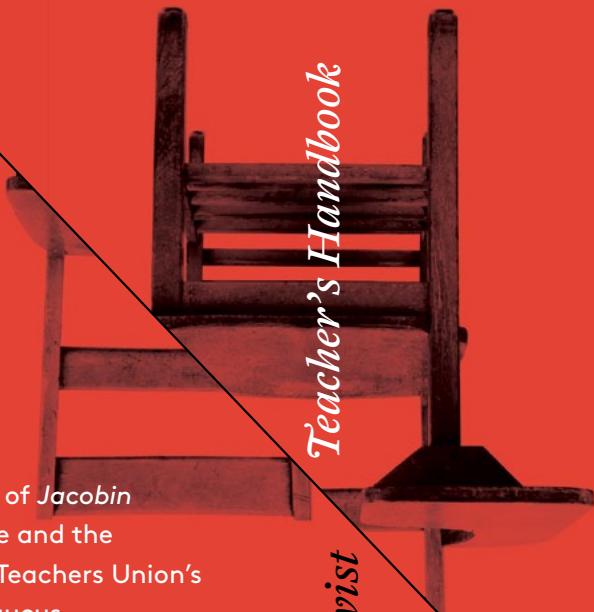
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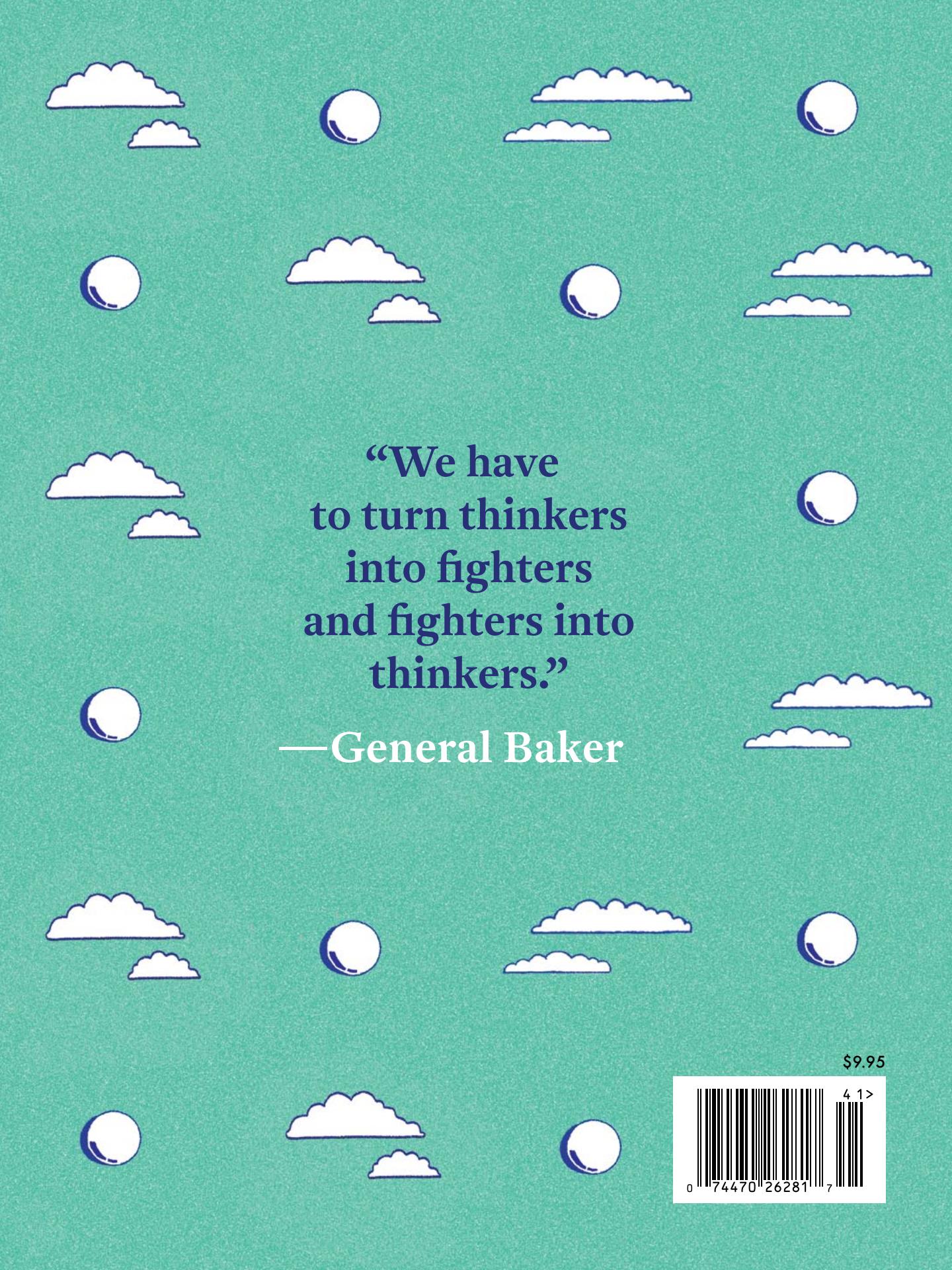
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