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# Toward Cyborg Socialism

by Alyssa Battistoni

T

HE FIRST EARTH DAY was 22 April 1970. It was also Lenin's hundredth birthday. The coincidence was not intentional.

In fact, part of the point of Earth Day was to distance the nascent environmentalist movement from New Left critiques of consumer society, suburban development, and nuclear waste. In an attempt to avoid charges of “watermelon” politics — green on the outside, red on the inside — the message of the early environmental movement, as one Greenpeace slogan explicitly stated, was “I’m not a Red, I’m a Green.” As environmentalism went mainstream, green nonprofits grew rich and powerful on corporate donations and adopted conciliatory strategies aimed at greening the world one brand name at a time.

These days, environmentalism can rival the Left’s big-tent eclecticism: rugged wilderness fantasies, New Age mysticism, and middle-class romanticism exist side-by-side with indigenous anti-nuclear protests, campaigns against urban smog, back-to-the-land agrarian nostalgia, and entrepreneurial green tech. But lately, militant environmentalism is staging a comeback — as are state crackdowns. And even the most mainstream varieties of environmentalism are inching leftward. Climate change in particular has radicalizing potential, as more and more people are beginning to question the prevailing economic system’s destructive effect on the environment. But mainstream environmental groups aren’t going to offer a coherent critique of capitalism’s ecological consequences or do the work of theorizing alternatives.

It’s ridiculous that we still bracket climate change and water supplies as specifically “environmental” issues: the questions at hand are ones of political economy and collective action. That is to say, they are things the Left has plenty to say about. But while leftists are increasingly recognizing the importance of issues

once compartmentalized as “environmental,” left perspectives on those issues remain undertheorized and too rarely discussed. That needs to change—we can’t just keep trotting out Naomi Klein whenever the topic comes up.

The Left needs more voices and sharper critiques that put our analysis of power and justice at the center of environmental discussions, where they should be. We can start by supporting and amplifying the work of environmental justice advocates who have long fought the uneven effects of environmental destruction on working communities—particularly working-class people of color and the indigenous—and other marginalized groups. But there’s more to do.

Environmental leftism tends to have an anarchist bent: anti-globalization protesters, direct-action-oriented Earth First! activists, animal-rights liberationists, and bike collectives. And because environmental problems are so place-specific, they often prompt solutions in the form of small-scale local action. Yet climate change and other global environmental challenges are systemic issues that require more than just pockets of alternative practice.

Still, if eco-anarchism doesn’t tend to scale well, sweeping critiques of the “it’s capitalism, stupid” variety aren’t very helpful when it comes to the specifics of what exactly to do about it. Socialists, too, often evade questions of how to achieve worldwide economic justice without relying on existing forms of energy production or exacerbating environmental destruction. Even leaving aside the inevitable retort that the Soviet Union was hardly an ecological paradise, old socialist dreams of maximizing production in the pursuit of abundance and equality seem increasingly untenable. What will replace them?

It’s not that we need to come up with a series of five-year plans for the environment. The exigencies of the climate crisis mean that we’re not going to get the chance to build an ecotopia from scratch. Our situation requires a struggle for non-reformist reforms—projects that buy time and allow societies to adapt to climate change and meet immediate needs, while also setting us on the path to more fundamental transformations. Without a vision and a set of concrete ideas for how to get there, we’re liable to end up with the kind of bright-green centrism that favors both bike lanes and budget cuts, solar-powered drones and microgrid-powered jails—that is, something reminiscent of Germany’s Green Party, a once inspiring effort now described by a disillusioned

co-founder as “neoliberals on bikes.” We’ve already got plenty of those.

And forget socialism in one country—ecosocialism in one country is even less feasible. The fact that ecological problems don’t respect national or institutional borders is often used as an excuse for inaction, leading to the chronic breakdown of global climate negotiations. But that interdependence should be an impetus to reinvigorate the international left—a reminder that sustainability will come only through global solidarity.

At the same time, the consequences of environmental struggles within the US are vital in light of continued American hegemony—not to mention our status as one of the world’s leading polluters. The US has not only consistently failed to commit to international treaties and emissions targets; it has also pushed to replace the more stringent responsibilities and substantial funding proposed by developing countries with market mechanisms preferred by business interests and financiers, who see opportunities for cost savings and accumulation in carbon offsets and trading—often with the support of US-based NGOs that have conceded the terms of the debate.

The failure of the American left to engage more substantially on environmental issues at home has real consequences for the expansion of neoliberalism worldwide.

The history of environmentalism is littered with Malthusianism, ecological determinism, biological essentialism, and neocolonial conservationism. Left skepticism of—or perhaps more accurately, indifference to—engagement with ecological politics is certainly understandable. But we’re not talking about preserving an idealized concept of pristine, untouched nature—we’re talking about the world we choose to make, and the world we’ll have to live in.

Green dominates the environmental landscape, from the light greenwash of “sustainable lifestyles” to the dark green of deep ecologists. But environmentalism is also black lung disease in coal-mining towns and toxic brownfields in urban neighborhoods, the iridescent sheen of an oil spill and the translucent white of melting polar ice caps.

And so I cringe a bit at the term ecosocialism—it’s too earth-toned. What we need is a cyborg socialism that points not to the primacy of ecology, but to the integration of natural and social, organic and industrial, ecological and technological; that recognizes human transformations of the natural world without simply asserting domination over it.

The Left doesn’t need to go green—to save the planet and the people on it, it needs to go red. ■

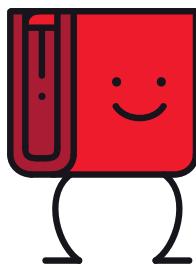
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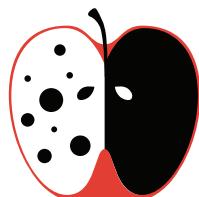
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# The Office of the Future



# A view inside C&S Wholesale Grocers, America's secret corporate empire.

**T**HE MODERN SUPERMARKET, with its promise of a limitless variety of food and household goods available for low prices, is the crown jewel of consumer capitalism. The cornerstone of all retail, the supermarket holds a seemingly permanent place in the canon of American life, yet barely appears in the broader discourse, even in discussions about our food habits. It's not unusual to debate the ethics involved with farming and food production, or to ponder the pros and cons of nonlocal food distribution, but the fact that the products will be on the shelves tomorrow and the next day is taken for granted. Virtually nobody knows how this happens, and even diligent corporate watchdogs are unaware of the existence of C&S Wholesale Grocers, which recently became the world's largest grocery distributor.

This is no accident, and it is unlikely to change despite the modest attention garnered by an August 5 piece written by Brendan Coffey and Zohair Siraj for *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Headquartered in isolated Keene, New Hampshire and routinely ranked between the eighth and thirteenth largest privately held American corporations by *Forbes*, the supply-chain behemoth boasts distribution centers from Massachusetts to Miami, Buffalo to Stockton, servicing stores from Maine to Hawaii — all without ever issuing a press release.

Its sole owner, Richard B. “Rick” Cohen, gives no interviews and makes no public appearances. Aside from the occasional vague mention in local newspapers and trade publications, C&S flies almost entirely beneath the media radar, which is what made Coffey and Siraj’s portrait of the “hidden billionaire” and his company seem remarkable; it was instantly snapped up by MSN Money, Yahoo! Finance, the *Daily Mail*, and others. In reality, the true yet subtle significance found within the lazy and over-hyped profile lies in its omissions and what they reveal about the secrecy surrounding C&S.

The only quote from a current employee of the company is provided by Brian Granger, chief legal officer and spokesman, and it amounts to an admission that the company is large and little-known. Most of the facts and figures cited in the article represent data alternately gathered or estimated by *Bloomberg*, with quotes from outside industry analysts and a Harvard professor who wrote a case study on C&S back in 2003, when the company was less than half its present size. The piece also relies heavily on interviews with Edward Albertian, whom the writers describe as “a former C&S president” without noting that he left the company nearly a decade ago.

Entirely absent is any acknowledgement of the company’s more controversial side, easily unearthed by a Google search. Not long ago, there were so many anti-C&S agitprop videos on YouTube that company executives found it necessary to begin quietly producing and releasing their own short clips depicting a reality so filled with sunshine and rainbows as to make Pollyanna blush. They have been sued countless times for everything from state and federal labor violations to massive price-fixing on a nationwide scale. In 2005, a New Jersey jury awarded \$1.2 million to Steven Summese, finding the company had illegally retaliated against him in 2003 when it fired him for exposing warehouse refrigeration practices that were in violation of the Clean Air Act and other environmental laws. As recently as 2012, the company paid a comparably modest fine of \$126,700 for Clean Air Act violations in Massachusetts.

It can hardly be expected of *Businessweek* to waste valuable space on labor issues or working conditions, but the only hint of C&S Wholesale Grocers’ storied anti-union street cred is buried in an innocent family anecdote in which Rick Cohen “persuade[d] his father to move the company to Brattleboro, Vermont, where it could build larger warehouses and hire nonunion workers” — back in the mid 1970s. Albertian relates a charming and folksy tale of how Cohen refused to allow him to put the corporate logo on the company’s fleet of trucks, attributing this to Rick’s desire to “continue to be stealthy and operate in this little, dinky Keene, New Hampshire marketplace,” leaving out the fact that trucks were left unmarked in part to deter the perceived threat, in the late nineties, of Teamster retaliation for the company’s exclusive use of nonunion drivers.

Less surprising, perhaps, is the article’s unabashed approval of Cohen’s “incentive-based” pay model for warehouse selectors, widely admired as innovative and efficient within the industry. The wet dream of

market fundamentalists and social Darwinists alike, the scheme organizes workers picking boxes and building pallets to be loaded on outbound trucks into teams that are scored as a group. Everyone is paid a base rate, but additional money is earned for speed and accuracy, while errors and delays lead to pay decreases, all of which are based on the score for the team. Naturally, workers are pitted against one another by the competitive framework and the need to struggle ever faster in order to “pull one’s weight.” Within each group, selectors have been alleged to encourage other members of their team to skip meal breaks and even work off the clock, sacrificing base pay for additional incentives.

As can be expected, the union warehouses under the C&S umbrella — usually facilities the company acquires but is unable to immediately close for legal reasons — decline to participate in such a model, but even with recent reforms to the program leading to a decrease in the potential financial incentive itself, many selectors welcome the chance to earn more than their peers elsewhere. Safety is a high priority in the warehouses, and the track record on accidents is not alarming, but no regulation can counter the long-term bodily toll of the galley-slave pace with which these selectors wheel through massive aisles on one-ton steel pallet jacks, leaping off to scoop boxes and place them neatly in ten-foot pallet formation, then back on to race off again. No one can be surprised, then, that such warehouse practices are those most frequently challenged in court.

Nevertheless, run-of-the-mill antiworker policies in the warehousing and transportation sectors — the blue-collar bulk of the company’s workforce — can in no way explain the ability of C&S Wholesale Grocers to remain so effectively in the shadows, or account for the culture of silence and secrecy that makes it possible. In fact, any answers to this mystery can only be found in the offices of the company’s New Hampshire headquarters.

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In THE ECONOMIC WORLD OF 2013, employed workers who stop believing that they are lucky to have their jobs, that they should be “grateful for what they have,” will quickly find themselves in trouble. There are always consequences for challenging a culture’s mythos, but this notion has become nearly impossible to dispute in the days since the economic crash of 2008. With so many looking for work and so few openings available,

the ability to labor someplace and collect a paycheck is universally accepted as a blessing.

Nevertheless, a June Gallup poll revealing levels of disengagement among *all* American workers at a staggering 70 percent suggests it may be time to challenge the perception — shared on both Right and Left — of the white-collar office worker as an effete, back-slapping, internet-surfing, casual-Fridaying “professional” coasting through a cushy existence. With many earning guaranteed annual salaries and even hourly clerks and assistants afforded health benefits and paid time off, the notion of organization and collective bargaining within this sector

of the workforce is increasingly treated as a fantasy. Tellingly, the Office and Professional Employees International Union represents only 110,416 white-collar workers in the US — out of a total estimated at upwards of 54 million. All this begs certain questions of those who count themselves among the Left. Is exploitation that is neither physical nor overt still exploitation? More broadly, is the purpose of organized labor limited, confined to checking off a list of old demands without venturing beyond, or is the struggle for a freer and more pleasant life ongoing?

If answers to these queries are to be found among the office workers at C&S headquarters, we must acknowledge one thing Coffey and Siraj get right: Rick Cohen is, strategically speaking, positively brilliant. While the company’s anti-union practices and warehouse schemes are readily apparent, it is a mistake to assume this trailblazing “innovation” doesn’t shape the working lives of employees in button-downs and blouses.

The figurative machinery of the grocery empire’s operations is managed from headquarters by the procurement department. Housed in the “bullpen,” a room the size of a football field packed as far as the eye can see with three or four hundred cubicles beneath garish hanging lights and an unfinished ceiling, the department is responsible for both inventory management and merchandising. Until a short time ago, it was here among the honeycomb of cubes that I spent nine years as a buyer. A certain amount of the corporate culture can be inferred merely from the bullpen’s physical setup, in which very little is left to chance. Offices housing managers, directors, and vice presidents form a horseshoe around the edge of the room, and the cubicles are kept short — the walls are roughly three feet high — to ensure that nothing happening on the floor goes unseen. Most of the people in this room are involved in the process of buying. At C&S, this can be defined very simply. With each buyer assigned several thousand items for two or three warehouses, the goal is to simultaneously avoid being out of stock and holding excess inventory.

Segregated to the north side of the room is the smaller merchandising team. Normally, “merchandising” refers to the negotiation with manufacturers for sale prices and other promotional deals ultimately found in weekly fliers and temporary price cuts at store level. Ostensibly, the team performs this function for several hundred independent grocery stores that, without a wholesaler like C&S, would lack the bargaining power to do so. In practice, this job involves the “generation of gross profit,” something

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that is often done by any means necessary. Overall, however, despite constant reminders that buying and merchandising represent “one team, one voice,” buyers and merchandisers often hold contradictory goals and rarely are provided an understanding of what the other side does.

If any of this sounds strange, it becomes even more so when compared with the broader industry. Everywhere but at the wholesale giant, buyers, merchandisers, and buyer/merchandisers (the two roles are often a single position) are trained product specialists held in high regard and rewarded with perks and conditions more closely resembling the common cushy white-collar stereotype. On average, they command a salary as much as 50 percent higher than those offered to the buyers and merchandisers in the bullpen, most of whom remain blissfully unaware.

Indeed, there are advantages to remaining nestled in “little, dinky Keene,” with its modest local population and small state college, where the corporation has the freedom to do all of this and still remain the largest and highest-paying employer. Here, it is easier to attract the eager and the inexperienced, who know nothing of industry norms surrounding pay and treatment. More importantly, local residents, especially those with underwater mortgages, children, and other family ties to the area, are less likely to go through with the relocation required of anyone wishing to use their experience to command higher pay elsewhere. These workers are more dependent on the company, and consequently more grateful and subservient.

After all, if reducing labor costs is a priority to a corporation, hiring or developing professional experts can be an expensive proposition. Despite the desire on one hand to hire people without the means to easily depart, fostering long-term employees is also expensive. The department wrings no hands at the fact that workers here who have lasted longer than five or ten years are a rarity. Not that this is altogether bad for workers. The stress-related health problems and widespread use of prescription blood pressure and antidepressant medication are so prevalent that the company represents something of a dark inside joke among Keene’s medical community, and the effects of this labor on lifespan have not yet been properly studied.

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**P**ERHAPS THE MOST INTRIGUING number to come out of the Gallup workplace satisfaction poll is the 18 percent — nearly

one in five — workers who self-identify as “actively disengaged” or who, in the words of Gallup CEO Jim Clifton, “roam the halls spreading discontent.” Personally, I found myself, the office’s token socialist, to be the only one at the C&S offices to meet this description. If these statistics are as true here as they are elsewhere, those who shared my active disengagement were wise enough to shut up about it. Official policy as defined by the oft-referenced but rarely-seen employee handbook includes a type of “honor code” that makes it a punishable offense to fail to report the malfeasance of any other employee to management or human resources.

In 2007, following the brand-new senior vice president’s announcement that times were simply too hard for the wildly profitable company to offer us our meager annual raises, I challenged him in an open meeting and subsequently attempted to start a revolt on the floor. Holding up a picture I had drawn of a stick-figure Satan spouting lies, I proudly shouted rebellion from my cubicle in the center of the room, and was met with snickers and tacit but mostly silent agreement from many of my colleagues. One, however, who either did not share my views or believed passionately in the honor code, reported my activities to management, and an investigation was conducted that nearly led to my termination.

In the years that followed, departmental success led not to shared prosperity but to a dramatic increase in expectation and job standards. During my tenure, the average size of a buyer’s desk increased nearly 300 percent. At the same time, basic requirements for service level — the method used to measure out-of-stock inventory — were raised to levels far higher than previously imagined. Once standards are changed, it is as though the old standards never existed, for they are never acknowledged nor spoken of again.

The desire of management for standardization was unquenchable, and a document formally entitled “A Day in the Life of a Buyer” became gospel. This Excel spreadsheet was a moment-by-moment guide to the myriad activities in which every buyer should be engaged at a given time of day. Its authors never acknowledged that the total time detailed amounted to nearly twelve hours, not including a break for lunch and with no time allotted for the reading and answering of daily e-mails that routinely numbered in the hundreds. Additional “time studies” would be conducted over the years in a relentless search for anomalies and inefficiencies to eliminate. Slowly but surely, the goal of making each employee interchangeable and disposable has been more effectively

realized, and with many employees having less than two years' tenure at any given time, few are ever able to identify any transformations at all.

Every two years or so, the company contracts with an outside firm to conduct an anonymous employee survey to measure satisfaction across departments in various categories. When the results are posted, employee committees known as "engagement teams" are formed to work in conjunction with management and HR to determine findings that can then be ignored. As part of two different engagement teams, I was offered a tentative opportunity to enact reforms within the established channels of the system when I was appointed the architect of a new volunteer-based peer mentoring program. With the help of a sympathetic director acting as sponsor, the program was designed to allow any employee to choose from a list of volunteer mentors someone with whom they could speak in confidence.

It was hardly collective bargaining, but at least an opportunity was being provided for some small-scale bonding of coworkers to combat the more prevalent climate of division. With the surprising approval of management, the program was rolled out on schedule, and nobody signed up. Investigating the cause, I found that people actually *were* interested, but despite the safeguards I had built into it, people were too afraid to join. They were afraid of being viewed as weak and afraid that participation would lead to trouble of some kind. It was a crushing disappointment, but it should have been no surprise in a workplace in which HR was known not for answering questions about benefits, but for a foreboding corporate manager nicknamed "the Angel of Death" who would march terminated employees through the room in a manner not unlike that of a public execution. (It should also be regarded as consistent that no current employees were willing to speak, even off the record, for this story. One told me that he feared management would read it and identify him by his manner of speech.)

Fear is compounded with ignorance: secret pay rates and criteria for promotions that are never disclosed. Promotion itself is sometimes viewed as something to avoid; on "graduating" to the lowest level of supervisor within the department, new senior buyers are instantly exposed to upper-level meetings with vicious language and brutal undertones. The increase in stress and decrease in comfort was immediately apparent anytime anyone moved into a higher position. "I wish I could just give the five

thousand dollars back," one supervisor told me many times. "It's just not worth it."

"You know," I would often remind him, "any five of us veterans could grind this whole thing to a halt."

"Don't think I don't know," he would reply.

---

**T**HIS IS THE OFFICE of the future, the one in which colleagues huddled together in pens view one another as competitors for an unknown but finite amount of resources, the one in which expertise in one's line of work is viewed as a potentially expensive liability to be abandoned in favor of deskilled automation and rote adherence to standardized routine encased in iron. This is the office in which workers are prevented from considering the possibility of joining together by confusion, fear, and carefully crafted ignorance.

The currently emerging generation of millennials is poised to inherit this promised dystopia. The disadvantages faced by the young are well-documented. Conditions such as high rates of unemployment, drastically devalued college degrees, and chronic indebtedness grant a vast advantage to those who, like C&S Wholesale Grocers, seek to "innovate" the white-collar workplace toward greater efficiencies and lower costs. Frequently and mistakenly characterized in the cover stories of national magazines as lazy and entitled, the danger that millennials will assume self-blame and buy into the workplace mythos of their forebears is very real.

But it is not within the scope of national status quo rags like *Time* to change the cultural conversation. If, at the same time, it is unrealistic to expect existing office workers living under constant threat of termination to band together and offer resistance, the responsibility to educate, empower, and envision better ways of living life falls squarely on the shoulders of the radical left and its allies within organized labor. In imitation of a bizarre ritual I am told is found at every Walmart, C&S invented a corporate cheer to force participation at the end of group announcements. It involves a cadence of clapping, followed by the cheerleader's call:

"Give me a C!"

"C!" the crowd responds.

"Give me an S!"

"S!"

All together: "C&S! We're the best!"

It's long past time workers responded with a rallying cry of our own. ■

# In the Name of Love

“Do what you love” is the mantra for today’s worker. Why should we assert our class interests if, according to DWYL elites like Steve Jobs, there’s no such thing as work?

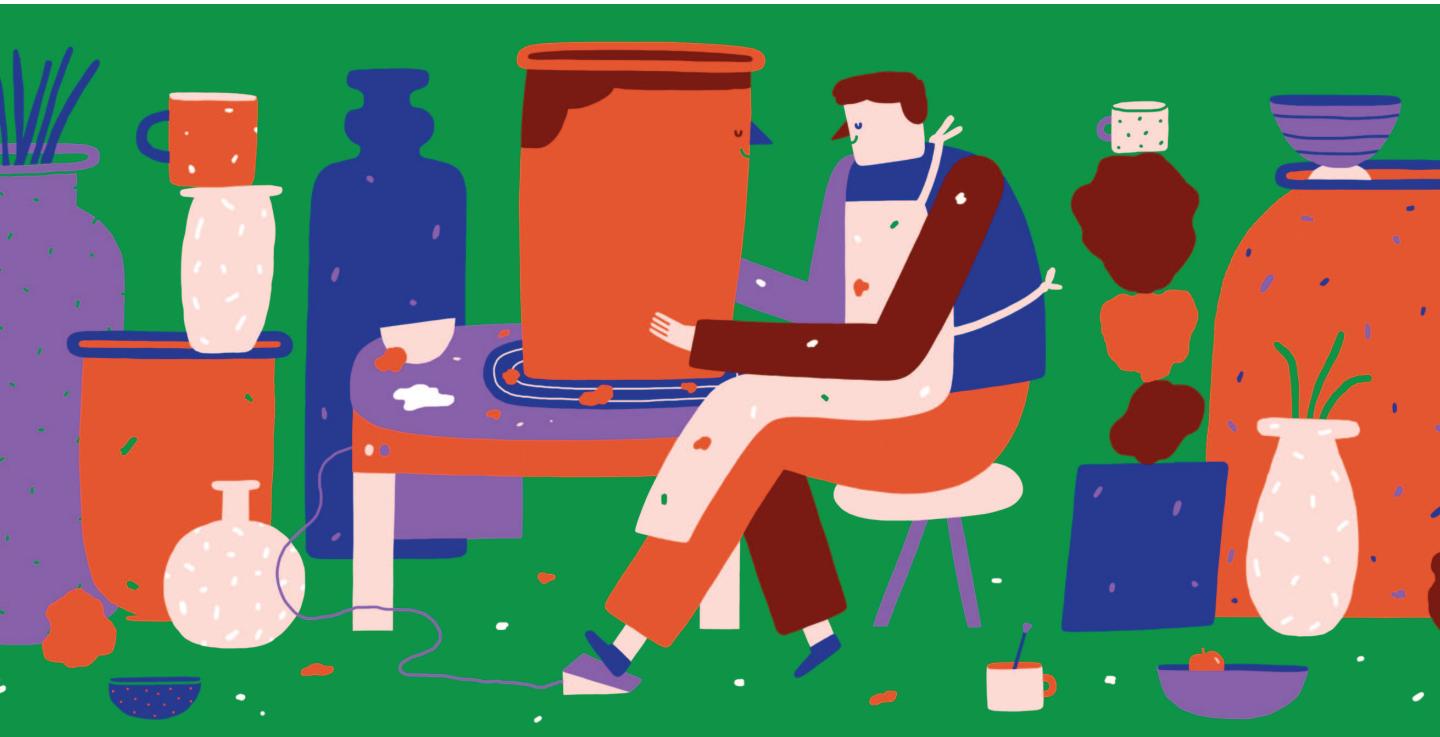
by Miya Tokumitsu

Essay

“**D**O WHAT YOU LOVE. Love what you do.” The commands are framed and perched in a living room that can only be described as “well-curated.” A picture of this room appeared first on a popular design blog, but has been pinned, tumbld, and liked thousands of times by now.

Lovingly lit and photographed, this room is styled to inspire *Sehnsucht*, roughly translatable from German as a pleasurable yearning for some utopian thing or place. Despite the fact that it introduces exhortations to labor into a space of leisure, the “do what you love” living room — where artful tchotchkies abound and work is not drudgery but love — is precisely the place all those pinners and likers long to be. The diptych arrangement suggests a secular version of a medieval house altar.

There’s little doubt that “do what you love” (DWYL) is now the unofficial work mantra for our time. The problem is that it leads not to salvation, but to the devaluation of actual work, including the very work it pretends to elevate — and more importantly, the dehumanization of the vast majority of laborers.



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Superficially, DWYL is an uplifting piece of advice, urging us to ponder what it is we most enjoy doing and then turn that activity into a wage-generating enterprise. But why should our pleasure be for profit? Who is the audience for this dictum? Who is not?

By keeping us focused on ourselves and our individual happiness, DWYL distracts us from the working conditions of others while validating our own choices and relieving us from obligations to all who labor, whether or not they love it. It is the secret handshake of the privileged and a worldview that disguises its elitism as noble self-betterment. According to this way of thinking, labor is not something one does for compensation, but an act of self-love. If profit doesn't happen to follow, it is because the worker's passion and determination were insufficient. Its real achievement is making workers believe their labor serves the self and not the marketplace.

Aphorisms have numerous origins and reincarnations, but the generic and hackneyed nature of DWYL confounds precise attribution. Oxford Reference links the phrase and variants of it to Martina Navratilova and François Rabelais, among others. The internet

frequently attributes it to Confucius, locating it in a misty, Orientalized past. Oprah Winfrey and other peddlers of positivity have included it in their repertoires for decades, but the most important recent evangelist of the DWYL creed is deceased Apple CEO Steve Jobs.

His graduation speech to the Stanford University class of 2005 provides as good an origin myth as any, especially since Jobs had already been beatified as the patron saint of aestheticized work well before his early death. In the speech, Jobs recounts the creation of Apple, and inserts this reflection:

You've got to find what you love. And that is as true for your work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do.

In these four sentences, the words “you” and “your” appear eight times. This focus on the individual is hardly surprising coming from Jobs, who cultivated a very specific image of himself as a worker: inspired, casual, passionate — all states agreeable with ideal romantic love. Jobs telegraphed the conflation of his besotted worker-self with his company so effectively that his black turtleneck and blue jeans became metonyms for all of Apple and the labor that maintains it.

But by portraying Apple as a labor of his individual love, Jobs elided the labor of untold thousands in Apple’s factories, conveniently hidden from sight on the other side of the planet — the very labor that allowed Jobs to actualize his love.

The violence of this erasure needs to be exposed. While “do what you love” sounds harmless and precious, it is ultimately self-focused to the point of narcissism. Jobs’ formulation of “do what you love” is the depressing antithesis to Henry David Thoreau’s utopian vision of labor for all. In “A Life Without Principle,” Thoreau wrote,

...it would be good economy for a town to pay its laborers so well that they would not feel that they were working for low ends, as for a livelihood merely, but for scientific, even moral ends. Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for the love of it.

Admittedly, Thoreau had little feel for the proletariat (it’s hard to imagine someone washing diapers for “scientific, even moral ends,” no matter how well-paid). But Thoreau nonetheless maintains that society has a stake in making work well-compensated and meaningful. By contrast, the twenty-first-century

Jobsian view demands that we all turn inward. It absolves us of any obligation to or acknowledgment of the wider world, underscoring its fundamental betrayal of all workers, whether they consciously embrace it or not.

One consequence of this isolation is the division that DWYL creates among workers, largely along class lines. Work becomes divided into two opposing classes: that which is lovable (creative, intellectual, socially prestigious) and that which is not (repetitive, unintellectual, undistinguished). Those in the lovable work camp are vastly more privileged in terms of wealth, social status, education, society’s racial biases, and political clout, while comprising a small minority of the workforce.

For those forced into unlovable work, it’s a different story. Under the DWYL credo, labor that is done out of motives or needs other than love (which is, in fact, most labor) is not only demeaned but erased. As in Jobs’ Stanford speech, unlovable but socially necessary work is banished from the spectrum of consciousness altogether.

Think of the great variety of work that allowed Jobs to spend even one day as CEO: his food harvested from fields, then transported across great distances. His company’s goods assembled, packaged, shipped. Apple advertisements scripted, cast, filmed. Lawsuits processed. Office wastebaskets emptied and ink cartridges filled. Job creation goes both ways. Yet with the vast majority of workers effectively invisible to elites busy in their lovable occupations, how can it be surprising that the heavy strains faced by today’s workers (abysmal wages, massive child care costs, et cetera) barely register as political issues even among the liberal faction of the ruling class?

In ignoring most work and reclassifying the rest as love, DWYL may be the most elegant anti-worker ideology around. Why should workers assemble and assert their class interests if there’s no such thing as work?

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“**D**O WHAT YOU LOVE” disguises the fact that being able to choose a career primarily for personal reward is an unmerited privilege, a sign of that person’s socioeconomic class. Even if a self-employed graphic designer had parents who could pay for art school and cosign a lease for a slick Brooklyn apartment, she can self-righteously bestow DWYL as career advice to those covetous of her success.

## **IF DWYL DENIGRATES OR MAKES DANGEROUSLY INVISIBLE VAST SWATHS OF LABOR THAT ALLOW MANY OF US TO LIVE IN COMFORT AND TO DO WHAT WE LOVE, IT HAS ALSO CAUSED GREAT DAMAGE TO THE PROFESSIONS IT PORTENDS TO CELEBRATE, ESPECIALLY THOSE JOBS EXISTING WITHIN INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES.**

If we believe that working as a Silicon Valley entrepreneur or a museum publicist or a think-tank acolyte is essential to being true to ourselves — in fact, to loving ourselves — what do we believe about the inner lives and hopes of those who clean hotel rooms and stock shelves at big-box stores? The answer is: nothing.

Yet arduous, low-wage work is what ever more Americans do and will be doing. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the two fastest-growing occupations projected until 2020 are “Personal Care Aide” and “Home Care Aide,” with average salaries of \$19,640 per year and \$20,560 per year in 2010, respectively. Elevating certain types of professions to something worthy of love necessarily denigrates the labor of those who do unglamorous work that keeps society functioning, especially the crucial work of caregivers.

If DWYL denigrates or makes dangerously invisible vast swaths of labor that allow many of us to live in comfort and to do what we love, it has also caused great damage to the professions it portends to celebrate, especially those jobs existing within institutional structures. Nowhere has the DWYL mantra been more devastating to its adherents than in academia. The average PhD student of the mid 2000s forwent the easy money of finance and law (now slightly less easy) to live on a meager stipend in order to pursue their passion for Norse mythology or the history of Afro-Cuban music.

The reward for answering this higher calling is an academic employment marketplace in which

76 percent of American faculty are adjunct professors — contract instructors who usually receive low pay, no benefits, no office, no job security, and no long-term stake in the schools where they work.

There are many factors that keep PhDs providing such high-skilled labor for such extremely low wages, including path dependency and the sunk costs of earning a PhD, but one of the strongest is how pervasively the DWYL doctrine is embedded in academia. Few other professions fuse the personal identity of their workers so intimately with the work output. This intense identification partly explains why so many proudly left-leaning faculty remain oddly silent about the working conditions of their peers. Because academic research should be done out of pure love, the actual conditions of and compensation for this labor become afterthoughts, if they are considered at all.

In “Academic Labor, the Aesthetics of Management, and the Promise of Autonomous Work,” Sarah Brouillette writes of academic faculty,

...our faith that our work offers non-material rewards, and is more integral to our identity than a “regular” job would be, makes us ideal employees when the goal of management is to extract our labor’s maximum value at minimum cost.

Many academics like to think they have avoided a corporate work environment and its attendant values, but Marc Bousquet notes in his essay “We Work” that academia may actually provide a model for corporate management:

How to emulate the academic workplace and get people to work at a high level of intellectual and emotional intensity for fifty or sixty hours a week for bartenders' wages or less? Is there any way we can get our employees to swoon over their desks, murmuring "I love what I do" in response to greater workloads and smaller paychecks? How can we get our workers to be like faculty and deny that they work at all? How can we adjust our corporate culture to resemble campus culture, so that our workforce will fall in love with their work too?

No one is arguing that enjoyable work should be less so. But emotionally satisfying work is still work, and acknowledging it as such doesn't undermine it in any way. Refusing to acknowledge it, on the other hand, opens the door to the most vicious exploitation and harms all workers.

Ironically, DWYL reinforces exploitation even within the so-called lovable professions where off-the-clock, underpaid, or unpaid labor is the new norm: reporters required to do the work of their laid-off photographers, publicists expected to Pin and Tweet on weekends, the 46 percent of the workforce expected to check their work email on sick days. Nothing makes exploitation go down easier than convincing workers that they are doing what they love.

Instead of crafting a nation of self-fulfilled, happy workers, our DWYL era has seen the rise of the adjunct professor and the unpaid intern — people persuaded to work for cheap or free, or even for a net loss of wealth. This has certainly been the case for all those interns working for college credit or those who actually purchase ultra-desirable fashion-house internships at auction. (Valentino and Balenciaga are among a handful of houses that auctioned off month-long internships. For charity, of course.) The latter is worker exploitation taken to its most extreme, and as an ongoing Pro Publica investigation reveals, the unpaid intern is an ever larger presence in the American workforce.

It should be no surprise that unpaid interns abound in fields that are highly socially desirable, including fashion, media, and the arts. These industries have long been accustomed to masses of employees willing to work for social currency instead of actual wages, all in the name of love. Excluded from these opportunities, of course, is the overwhelming majority of the population: those who need to work for wages. This exclusion not only calcifies economic and professional immobility, but insulates these industries from the full diversity of voices society has to offer.

And it's no coincidence that the industries that rely heavily on interns — fashion, media, and the arts — just happen to be the feminized ones, as Madeleine Schwartz wrote in *Dissent*. Yet another damaging consequence of DWYL is how ruthlessly it works to extract female labor for little or no compensation. Women comprise the majority of the low-wage or unpaid workforce; as care workers, adjunct faculty, and unpaid interns, they outnumber men. What unites all of this work, whether performed by GEDS or PhDs, is the belief that wages shouldn't be the primary motivation for doing it. Women are supposed to do work because they are natural nurturers and are eager to please; after all they've been doing uncompensated childcare, elder care, and housework since time immemorial. And talking money is unladylike anyway.

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**T**HE DWYL DREAM is, true to its American mythology, superficially democratic. PhDs can do what they love, making careers that indulge their love of the Victorian novel and writing thoughtful essays in the *New York Review of Books*. High school grads can also do it, building prepared food empires out of their Aunt Pearl's jam recipe. The hallowed path of the entrepreneur always offers this way out of disadvantaged beginnings, excusing the rest of us for allowing those beginnings to be as miserable as they are. In America, everyone has the opportunity to do what he or she loves and get rich.

*Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life!* Before succumbing to the intoxicating warmth of that promise, it's critical to ask, "Who, exactly, benefits from making work feel like non-work?" "Why should workers feel as if they aren't working when they are?" Historian Mario Liverani reminds us that "ideology has the function of presenting exploitation in a favorable light to the exploited, as advantageous to the disadvantaged."

In masking the very exploitative mechanisms of labor that it fuels, DWYL is, in fact, the most perfect ideological tool of capitalism. It shunts aside the labor of others and disguises our own labor to ourselves. It hides the fact that if we acknowledged all of our work as work, we could set appropriate limits for it, demanding fair compensation and humane schedules that allow for family and leisure time.

And if we did that, more of us could get around to doing what it is we *really* love. ■



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**F YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND** why humans wage wars, there is a gene for that.

Want to understand why men rape women? There is a gene for that. Want

to understand why the “national characters” of East Asia, the West, and Africa are different? We have

those genes covered too. Indeed, if we are to believe

most popular media, there is a gene for just about

every inequality and inequity in modern society.

Genetic determinism, and its uglier cousin social

Darwinism, are making a comeback. Armed with

large genomic datasets and an arsenal of statistical

techniques, a small but vocal band of scientists are

determined to hunt down the genetic basis of all we

are and all we do.

The relationship between genetics and biological

determinism is almost as old as the field itself.

After all, one of the foremost modern institutes of

genetics, the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, began

as a eugenics institute whose activities included “lob-

bying for eugenic legislation to restrict immigration

and sterilize ‘defectives,’ educating the public on

eugenic health, and disseminating eugenic ideas

widely.”

The latest wave of biological determinism con-

tinues this long history, but differs in a crucial way

from the past. We are at the beginning of the genomics

era — an era in which advances in molecular biology

make it possible to precisely measure minute genetic

differences between humans. Combined with the

fact that we live in a new Gilded Age where a small

global elite has access to, and needs justification for,

unprecedented amounts of wealth and power, the

conditions are ripe for a dangerous resurgence of

**T**ODAY IT COSTS \$5000 to sequence a genome, to identify the 6 billion As, Cs, Ts, and Gs that define an individual's DNA. Soon it will cost less – much less. We are told that this is a revolutionary moment. With access to detailed genetic information, medical professionals and genetic counselors will soon be able to identify the diseases we're predisposed to, and help prevent or minimize their impact through "personalized medicine."

The scientific knowledge extracted from these data is priceless. We are beginning to understand how viruses evolve, the genetic mutations that give rise to cancers, and the genetic basis of cellular identity. The sequencing revolution has allowed us to study the molecular basis of genetic regulation and identify amazing new players like non-coding RNAs and chromatin modifications. All of our ideas about biology are being reshaped.

One of the most striking results of the new sequencing studies is how similar humans actually are – we differ from each other only in 0.1% of our DNA. Yet this 0.1% of the genome gives rise to the variations we see between people in traits such as skin color, height, and proclivity for disease. An important goal of modern genetics is to relate a particular genomic variant to a specific trait or disease. To do so, scientists are developing powerful new statistical tools to analyze a wealth of sequence data from populations around the world.

The relationship between genes and observable traits is indisputable. Tall parents tend to have tall kids. Dark-haired parents have dark-haired kids. That traits are inherited has been clear since Mendel codified his famous Laws of Inheritance, inferred from statistical observations of over 29,000 pea plants. In classical Mendelian genetics, separate genes encoding for separate traits are passed independently from each other to their offspring. Thus, there is a clear mapping between genetic information, or genotype, and observable traits, or phenotype. A single gene (technically a locus or genetic location) encodes for a single trait and is not influenced by the other traits a person possesses. Furthermore, environmental factors have little influence on most Mendelian traits. Famous examples that fall into this framework include sickle-cell anemia and cystic fibrosis, each caused by a mutation to a specific gene.

However, it is now clear that the simple assumptions underlying Mendelian genetics are not applicable to most traits and diseases. Nearly all phenotypes, from height and eye color to diseases such as diabetes, emerge from extremely complex

interactions between multiple genes (loci) and the environment. In contrast to Mendelian genetics, where one can easily identify the gene that encodes for a particular trait, for many traits there is no simple mapping from genotype to phenotype.

The sheer volume of DNA sequence data now available has convinced scientists they can overcome this challenge. To do so, they are developing new scientific and statistical tools geared toward analyzing and extracting genetic information from sequence data. The goal of these genome-wide association studies (GWAS) is to provide a blueprint for decoding the information contained in our DNA, and to identify the genetic basis of complex traits and diseases. GWAS are now a staple of modern population genetics. This is reflected in the astronomical increase in the number of published GWAS in the last decade, from single digits in 2005 to more than thirteen hundred to date. There are GWAS on body height, birth weight, Inflammatory Bowel Disease, how people respond to particular drugs or vaccines, cancers, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, and more. There are actually so many GWAS that specialized viewers have been created to help scientists visualize the results of all these studies.

**G**IVEN THE INCREASING prevalence of GWAS, it is useful to explicate the basic logic underlying these studies. The concepts of phenotypic and genetic variations play a central role in GWAS. Phenotypic variation is defined as the variation of a trait in a population (such as the distribution of heights in the population of American men). Note that in order to define phenotypic variation, we must specify a population. This is an a priori choice that must be made to construct a statistical model. The choice of population is often an important source of bias where hidden social assumptions enter GWAS – this is especially true for studies that try to understand genetic variation across "racial" groups.

GWAS try to statistically explain the observed phenotypic variation in terms of the genetic variation in the same population. This is where modern genomics shines. Whereas in the pre-genomic era one had to work hard to measure genetic variation at a single locus, now one can consult a readily available public database to get the genetic variation for thousands of individuals across the entire genome. Most GWAS focus on single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs): DNA sequence variations that occur at a single base

in the genome (e.g. AAGGCT vs. AAGTCT). Scientists have observed approximately 12 million SNPs in human populations. This number may seem incredibly large, but there are 6 billion bases in human DNA. So only 0.2% of all DNA bases exhibit any variation across all sampled human populations. For a trait such as height, there are about 180 SNPs known to contribute to human height variation.

The goal of GWAS is to relate genotypic variation to phenotypic variance. This is often expressed in a concept called *heritability*, which seeks to partition the phenotypic variance into a genetic and an environmental component. Roughly speaking, heritability is defined as the fraction of the phenotypic variation that we can ascribe to genetic variation. A heritability of zero means that all the phenotypic variance is environmental whereas a heritability of one means it is entirely genetic.

Behind the concept of heritability lies a whole world of simplifying assumptions about how biology works and how genes and environment interact, all filtered through increasingly complicated and obtuse statistical models. Heritability depends on the populations chosen and the environments probed by the experiments. Even the clean distinction between environment and genes is at some level artificial. As Richard Lewontin points out:

The very physical nature of the environment as it is relevant to organisms is determined by the organisms themselves.... A bacterium living in liquid does not feel gravity because it is so small...but its size is determined by its genes, so it is the genetic difference between us and bacteria that determines whether the force of gravity is relevant to us.

All this is to say that though heritability is a useful concept, it is an abstraction — one that depends entirely on the statistical models (with all their assumptions and prejudices) we use to define it.

Most importantly for our purposes, even for an extremely heritable trait such as height, the environment can drastically change the observed traits. For example, during the Guatemalan Civil War, US-backed death squads and paramilitaries brutalized the rural, indigenous population of Guatemala, resulting in widespread malnutrition. Many Mayan refugees fled to the United States to escape the violence. Comparing the heights of six- to twelve-year-old children of Guatemala Maya with American Maya, researchers found that the Americans were 10.24 centimeters taller than their Guatemalan counterparts, largely due to nutrition and access to healthcare. By comparison, the gene known to most influence

height, the growth factor gene GDF5, is associated with changes in height of just 0.3 to 0.7 centimeters, and this only for participants with European ancestry.

Such dramatic environmental influences are commonplace. For example, the heritability of Type II diabetes, adjusted for age and Body Mass Index (BMI), is thought to be between 0.5 and 0.75 (a little less than that of height, but as discussed above, this number should be taken with a grain of salt). Currently, GWAS are able to explain only about 6% of this heritability, with no loci (genes) particularly predictive for whether an individual will develop diabetes. In contrast to genetics, an unhealthy BMI — a simple measure of how overweight a person is — increases the odds of developing diabetes nearly eightfold.

The same story holds for IQ — a staple of genetic studies on “intelligence.” Putting the validity of IQ tests aside for a moment, studies show a long and sustained increase in IQ scores over the course of the twentieth century (the Flynn Effect), pointing to the importance of environment rather than genetics in determining IQ.

Schizophrenia is another example. In his excellent blog Cross-Check, John Horgan discusses CMY5, touted as the “schizophrenia gene” in the popular press. He points out that if you carry this gene, your risk of schizophrenia rises by just 0.07% to 1.07%. In contrast, “if you have a schizophrenic first-degree relative, such as a sibling, your probability of becoming schizophrenic is about 10%, which is more than 100 times the added risk of having the CMY5 gene.” Such results are not uncommon. The field is actually very concerned about the lack of predictive power of GWAS (often discussed in the context of the “missing heritability” problem).

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**D**ESPITE THE LIMITED SUCCESS of GWAS, it is doubtful that genetic determinist claims will abate in the near future. The main reason for this is the sheer volume of new genetic data currently being generated. This data deluge is a biological determinist’s wet dream. In case you think I am exaggerating, here’s a quote from a recent study on “the genetic architecture of economic and political preference” published in PNAS, a leading scientific journal. Not surprisingly, the SNPs they identified “explain only a small part of the total variance.” Far from discouraged, the authors conclude their abstract on an optimistic note:

These results convey a cautionary message for whether, how, and how soon molecular genetic data can contribute to, and potentially transform, research in social science. We propose some constructive responses to the inferential challenges posed by the small explanatory power of individual SNPs.

The sheer hubris speaks for itself. Given the difficulty of using GWAS to explain height — an easily quantified, easily measured trait — the absurdity of claiming to identify the genetic basis of ill-defined, temporally variable, hard-to-quantify traits such as intelligence, aggression, or political preference is patently clear.

Regardless, the genetic determinist's playbook in the genomics era is clear: Collect mass quantities of sequence data. Find an ill-defined trait (like political preference). Find a gene that is statistically overrepresented in the sub-population that "possesses" that trait. Declare victory. Ignore the fact that these genes don't really explain the phenotypic variance of the trait. Instead, claim that if we only had more data the statistics would all work out. Further generalize these results to the level of societies and claim they explain the fundamental genetic basis of human behavior. Write a press release and wait for the media to write glowing reviews. Repeat with another data set and another trait.

**B**IOLOGICAL DETERMINISM seems plausible precisely because it gives the illusion that it is grounded in scientific observation. No scientist disagrees that the basic building blocks of an organism are encoded in its genetic material, and that evolution, through some combination of genetic drift and selection, has shaped those genes. But trying to ascribe human behavior, whether eating a whole bag of potato chips or waging war, to a set of genes is clearly a quixotic exercise.

As Nigel Goldenfeld and Leo Kadanoff implore in a beautiful article discussing complex systems: "Use the right level of description to catch the phenomena of interest. Don't model bulldozers with quarks." While it is certainly true that all the properties of a bulldozer result from the particles that make it up, like quarks and electrons, it is useless to think about the properties of a bulldozer (its shape, its color, its function) in terms of those particles. The shape and function of a bulldozer are emergent properties of the system as a whole. Just as you can't reduce the properties of a bulldozer to those of quarks, you can't reduce the complex behaviors and traits of an organism to its genes. Marx made the same point when he stated

that "merely quantitative differences beyond a certain point pass into qualitative changes."

If the philosophical and scientific bases of genetic determinist claims are so problematic, why is such sloppy thinking rewarded with front-page articles in the *New York Times* Science section? To answer this, we must consider not just science, but politics.

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**W**E LIVE IN AN ERA in which corporations make unprecedented profits, an elite few accumulate enormous wealth, and inequality is reaching levels approaching those of the Gilded Age. The contradictions between neoliberal capitalism and democratic impulses are continually exposed. The claims of equal opportunity underlying much of liberal thinking are becoming farce. The incongruity between what capitalism professes to be and the reality of capitalism is becoming increasingly apparent.

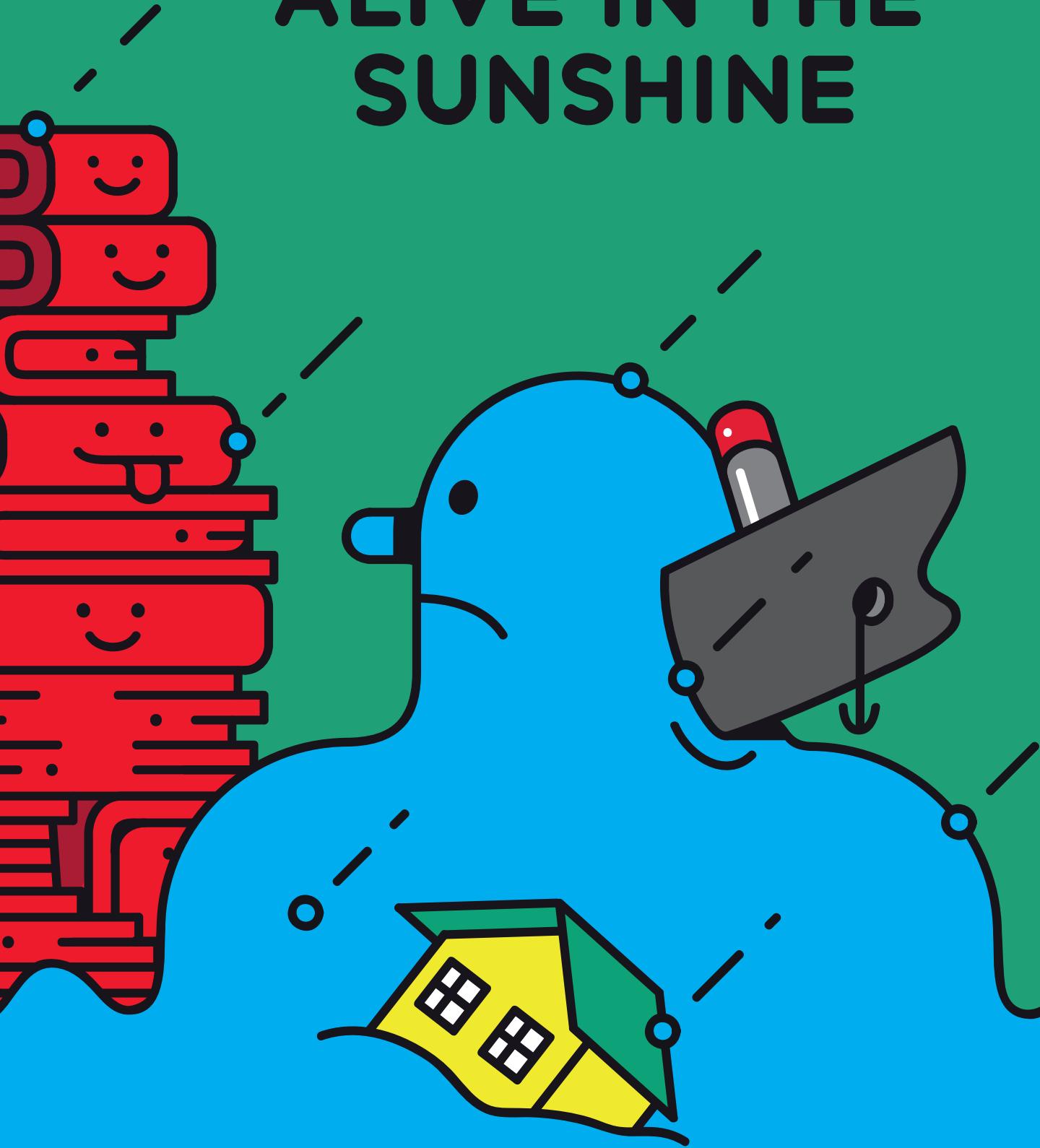
The appeal of biological determinism is that it offers plausible, scientific explanations for societal contradictions engendered by capitalism. If Type II diabetes is reduced to the problem of genetics (which it surely is to some degree), then we don't have to think about the rise of obesity and its underlying causes: the agro-business monopoly, income inequality, and class-based disparities in food quality. Combine this with the prevalence of drug-based solutions to disease pushed by the pharmaceutical industry and it is no surprise that we are left with the impression that complex social phenomena are reducible to simple scientific fact.

Biological determinism, to paraphrase the great literary critic Roberto Schwarz, is a socially necessary illusion well-grounded in appearance. Much like art and literature, science "is historically shaped and ... registers the social process to which it owes its existence." Scientists inherit the prejudices of the societies in which they live and work. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the modern incarnation of biological determinism with its decidedly neoliberal assumptions about humans and societies.

The history of biology is littered with horrifying examples of the misuse of genetics (and evolutionary theory) to justify power and inequality: evolutionary justifications for slavery and colonialism, scientific explanations for rape and patriarchy, and genetic explanations for the inherent superiority of the ruling elite. We must work tirelessly to ensure that history does not repeat itself in the genomics era. ■



# ALIVE IN THE SUNSHINE



There's no way toward a sustainable future without tackling environmentalism's old stumbling blocks: consumption and jobs. And the way to do that is through a universal basic income.

by Alyssa Battistoni

**F**OR AS LONG as the environment has existed, it's been in crisis. Nature has always been a focus of human thought and action, of course, but it wasn't until pesticides and pollution started clouding the horizon that something called "the environment" emerged as a matter of public concern.

In 1960s and 1970s America, dystopian images provoked anxiety about the costs of unprecedented prosperity: smog thick enough to hide skylines from view, waste seeping into suburban backyards, rivers so polluted they burst into flames, cars lined up at gas stations amid shortages, chemical weapons that could defoliate entire forests. Economists and ecologists alike forecasted doom, warning that humanity was running up against natural limits to growth, extinction crises, and population explosions.

But the apocalypse didn't happen. The threat that the environment seemingly posed to economic growth and human well-being faded from view; relieved to have vanquished the environmental foe, many rushed to declare themselves its friends instead.

Four decades later, everyone's an environmentalist — and yet the environment appears to be in worse shape than ever. The problems of the seventies are back with a vengeance, often transposed into new landscapes, and new ones have joined them. Species we hardly knew existed are dying off en masse; oceans are acidifying in what sounds like the plot of a second-rate horror movie; numerous fisheries have collapsed or are on the brink; freshwater supplies are scarce in regions home to half the world's population; agricultural land is exhausted of nutrients; forests are being leveled at staggering rates; and, of course, climate change looms over all.

These aren't issues that can be fixed by slapping a filter on a smokestack. They're certainly not about hugging trees or hating people. To put it bluntly, we're confronted with the fact that human activity has transformed the entire planet in ways that are now threatening the way we inhabit it — some of us far more than others. And it's not particularly helpful to talk in generalities: the idea that The Environment is some entity that can be fixed with A Solution is part of the problem.

The category "environmental problems" contains multitudes, and their solutions don't always line up: water shortages in Phoenix are a different matter than air pollution in Los Angeles, disappearing wetlands in Louisiana, or growing accumulations of atmospheric carbon. So instead of laying out some kind of template for a sustainable future, I argue that there's no way to get there without tackling environmentalism's old stumbling blocks: consumption and jobs. And the way to do that is through a universal basic income.

Environmentalists have long lectured Americans about overuse of natural resources. By now, the talking points on overconsumption are familiar: 5 percent of the world's population uses 25 percent of its resources, and emits about the same percentage of its greenhouse gases; if the whole world lived like Americans, we'd need four planets, or maybe five. We eat too much meat, drive too many miles, live in houses that are too big and too far apart, shop too much for stuff we don't need. When it comes to climate change, it's even worse than the numbers suggest: Western nations outsource a huge percentage of emissions to the places that increasingly produce our goods.

Such international disparities have, of course, long presented a challenge to those concerned with both domestic and global justice: how to acknowledge that America's poor are wealthier than most of the world without simply concluding that they're part of

the problem? But while discussions of consumption tends to focus on a universal "we," as epitomized by the famous Pogo Earth Day cartoon — "we have met the enemy, and he is us" — it's important to look more closely within the rich world rather than simply heaping scorn on national averages.

Depictions of American consumerism tend to focus on the likes of Walmart and McDonald's, suggesting that blame lies with the ravenous, grasping masses. Meanwhile it's trendy for the wealthy to appear virtuous as they drive Priuses, live in homes that tout "green design," and eat organic kale. But whether you "care about the environment," believe in climate change, or agonize over your coffee's origins doesn't matter as much as your tax bracket and the consumption habits that go with it.

Consumption doesn't correspond perfectly to income — in large part because of public programs like SNAP that supplement low-income households — but the two are closely linked. The US Congressional Budget Office estimates that the carbon footprint of the top quintile is over three times that of the bottom. Even in relatively egalitarian Canada, the top income decile has a mobility footprint nine times that of the lowest, a consumer goods footprint four times greater, and an overall ecological footprint two-and-a-half times larger. Air travel is frequently pegged as one of the most rapidly growing sources of carbon emissions, but it's not simply because budget airlines have "democratized the skies" — rather, flying has truly exploded among the hyper-mobile affluent. Thus in Western Europe, the transportation footprint of the top income earners is 250 percent of that of the poor. And global carbon emissions are particularly uneven: the top five hundred million people by income, comprising about 8 percent of global population, are responsible for 50 percent of all emissions. It's a truly global elite, with high emitters present in all countries of the world.

But that doesn't mean America is off the hook altogether. The global wealthy may consume far more than the rest, but global consumption can't be leveled out by bringing everyone up to even Western median levels; consumption in rich nations, even at relatively low levels of income, has to decline if we're to achieve some measure of global equality.

For those in rich countries, this sounds suspiciously close to an argument for austerity: we've been profligate, and now the bill is coming due. That may be easily reconciled with more ascetic strains of environmentalism and anti-consumerist left currents. But for those who aren't bothered by decadent

## **THE INDIVIDUAL AGONIZING THAT CONSTITUTES CONSUMER POLITICS ISN'T GOING TO GET AROUND THE FACT THAT THE GLOBAL ECONOMY DEPENDS ON MORE OR LESS INDEFINITELY EXPANDING CONSUMPTION.**

consumption so much as by the fact that so few are able to enjoy it — and who are wary of recalling Soviet bread lines — the prospect of limiting consumption is deeply worrisome.

It's hard to talk about consumption without a whiff of moralizing disapproval, as if there was something inherently wrong with having nice things. So the condemnations of consumer culture that once occupied social critics have largely fallen out of fashion, seen as too Puritan, too patronizing, too snobbish — and maybe even too boring. We get it already.

But it's important to distinguish between different types of consumption. For all the resonances in the rhetoric of anti-consumerist environmentalism and austerity, reducing public consumption would actually be an environmental disaster. Reductions in public goods tend to produce increases in private consumption: people drive cars instead of taking the bus, move to a house with a yard instead of going to the park, buy books and home entertainment systems instead of going to libraries and museums, drink bottled water instead of tap — if they can afford to. Those who can't just have to go without.

It's hard to think of many things more disingenuous than arguing that addressing environmental issues will impose unacceptable restrictions on the American standard of living while simultaneously promoting austerity measures — yet that attitude is pervasive in mainstream political discourse.

And while having stuff doesn't make you a miserable soulless materialist, as some of the shriller anti-consumerist rhetoric would suggest, it doesn't necessarily make you happier, either. Rather, the "status treadmill" frequently does the opposite:

fueling anxiety, inadequacy, and debt under the banner of democracy and freedom. Meanwhile, consumer guilt has led to an explosion in "green" products — recycled toilet paper, organic T-shirts, all-natural detergents — but most do little more than greenwash the same old stuff, bestowing a sheen of virtue on their users, suggesting personal choices will save the planet. But the individual agonizing that constitutes consumer politics isn't going to get around the fact that the global economy depends on more or less indefinitely expanding consumption. In fact, consumption has come full circle and become virtuous: protesting sweatshops and ranting about exploitation is passé; buying gadgets is the new way to lift people out of poverty. And so it's not just workers who are threatened with jobs blackmail — we're all threatened with consumption blackmail, wherein consuming less will put millions out of work worldwide and crash the global economy. Even our trash is creating jobs somewhere.

Indeed, you can't talk about consumption without talking about production — which brings us to jobs, which environmentalists have long been accused of killing. To be sure, the history of environmentalism is littered with projects aimed at keeping patches of nature free from human impact, often demonizing workers in the process. And industry has long taken advantage of the popular stereotype of job-killing tree-huggers to resist improving safety and pollution standards, threatening that forced installation of sulfur scrubbers or proper ventilation of workspaces will put thousands out of work.

Such estimates of job loss tend to be wildly exaggerated scare tactics, while the jobs that dirty

industry projects claim to create are usually vastly overhyped. TransCanada, for example, has claimed that building the Keystone XL tar-sands pipeline would create twenty thousand jobs, while the State Department projects something more on the order of five thousand, most of them temporary. But regulations sometimes do kill jobs within industries, even if on balance they often create more — and sometimes they destroy industries altogether. And while nakedly extractive occupations like coal mining and oil drilling are the standard examples of practices that the shining eco-future will render obsolete, a closer look implicates less obvious industries and kinds of work.

A “green economy” can’t just be one that makes “green” versions of the same stuff, or one that makes solar panels in addition to SUVs. Eco-Keynesianism in the form of public works projects can be temporarily helpful in building light rail systems and efficient infrastructure, weatherizing homes, and restoring ecosystems — and to be sure, there’s a lot of work to be done in those areas. But a spike in green jobs doesn’t tell us much about how to provide for everyone without creating jobs by perpetually expanding production. The problem isn’t that every detail of the green-jobs economy isn’t laid out in full — calls for green jobs are meant to recognize the fraught history of labor-environmentalist relations, and to signify a commitment to ensuring that sustainability doesn’t come at the expense of working communities. The problem is that the vision they call forth isn’t a projection of the future so much as a reflection of the past — most visions of a “new economy” look a whole lot like the same old one. Such visions reveal a hope that climate change will be our generation’s New Deal or World War II, vaulting us out of hard times into a new era of widespread prosperity.

But the Keynesianism underpinning that vision was the answer to a problem that was identified as underconsumption rather than overproduction: it was intended to jump-start demand rather than reduce supply. If overconsumption is actually the problem, we can’t fix it by consuming more, however eco-certified the products. Indeed, the very idea that green jobs will drive economic recovery is closely tied to notions of continued American hegemony: green tech is the next big thing, the rhetoric goes, and America needs to get ahead in the global race to innovate. But nearly every country in the world harbors similar hopes. That the wealthiest country in the world is so panicked at the prospect that others might catch up reveals the fallacy of the notion that

continued growth will somehow reach an endpoint in which everyone enjoys a decent standard of living.

Continued growth isn’t the only way to get there. The mythology surrounding the New Deal often obscures the fact that labor’s response to the Depression was not to make more work, but to share existing work more broadly by shifting to a thirty-hour workweek; Keynes himself famously predicted we’d be down to a fifteen-hour workweek by the end of the century. The decision to use fiscal policy to stimulate consumption instead was a way of avoiding deeper structural changes — to grow the pie rather than ask who was eating most of it. Since then, instead of increasing leisure time, productivity gains have largely increased private consumption for an increasingly small number of people. These days, of course, people are having leisure forced on them — it’s employers who are cutting hours and workers who are desperate for more. It’s clear that we can meet needs with vastly less labor than will support a population dependent on stagnating wages. While neoclassical economists pose the consumption-leisure tradeoff as a choice made by individuals, whether or not people work in the first place is clearly determined by decisions made at a society-wide level.

It’s beginning to look like we should have taken the other New Deal. We need to explicitly shift toward working less — to reorient the consumption-leisure tradeoff towards the latter on a social level — and share the work that remains more evenly. The sociologist Juliet Schor says we could work four-hour days without any decline in the standard of living; similarly, the New Economics Foundation proposes we could get by on a twenty-one-hour workweek. Meanwhile, David Rosnick and Mark Weisbrot suggest that the US could cut energy consumption by 20 percent by shifting to a schedule more like Western Europe’s, with thirty-five hour workweeks and six weeks of vacation — certainly not a panacea, but hardly impoverishing for a start. In a study of industrialized nations over the past fifty years, Schor, Kyle Knight, and Gene Rosa find that shorter working hours are correlated with smaller ecological footprints.

While making people work shitty jobs to “earn” a living has always been spiteful, it’s now starting to seem suicidal. So perhaps it’s time to reclaim job-killing environmentalism, this time not as a project that demonizes workers, or even work — but rather, as one that rejects work done for its own sake. Instead of stigmatizing, criminalizing, and imprisoning the unemployed and “non-industrious poor,” perhaps we

should see them, as David Graeber suggests, as the “pioneers of a new economic order”—one where we all work and consume less, and have more time for other pursuits.

In fact, addressing environmental issues suggests the need not only for new kinds of jobs but for new approaches to work altogether. No work or human activity, however removed from “the land,” is without environmental impact—but some work is less material-intensive than others. An ecologically viable future will rely on many kinds of work that are typically undervalued, or not considered work at all—caring for people and ecosystems; building communities; learning and educating. This emphatically doesn’t mean we should all become artisans engaged in small-scale production; to the contrary, there are dangers in romanticizing supposedly “natural” and unalienated forms of labor. Rejecting fast food in favor of gardening and canning, for example, might just reinstitute a toilsome regime for women; acknowledging the problems of certain maximalist projects can’t mean ceding liberatory goals. But done right, a reevaluation of work from an ecological perspective could elevate the unpaid work of making a social, livable world.

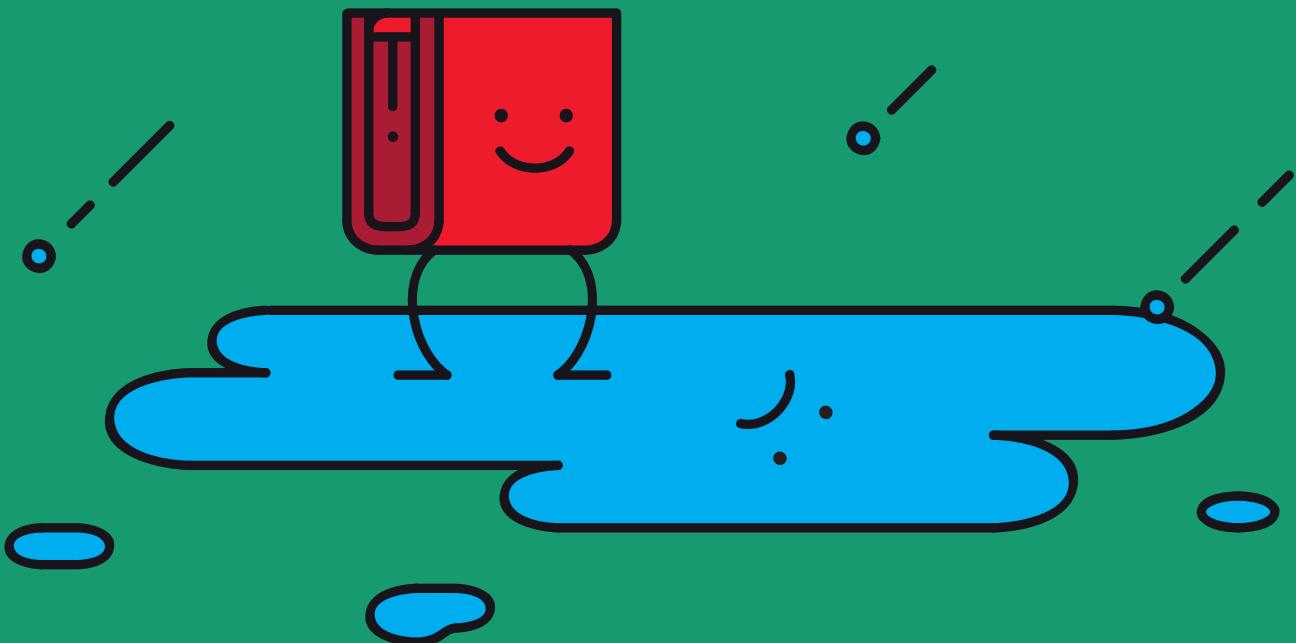
Proposals to shorten the workweek are often defended on the basis of giving people more time for what they will—to spend time with friends, family, and loved ones, start a band, write a novel, cook a meal, and so on. But calling those activities “leisure” diminishes their importance in making a life with less stuff a worthwhile and fulfilling one. Likewise, the word “leisure” doesn’t credit the fact that strong communities are as important for surviving natural disasters as strong seawalls. If we’re paying people to build the latter, shouldn’t we also pay them to build the former?

As it turns out, some of the most interesting efforts to rethink the relationship between work, production, and nature are thus far taking place in unlikely places: namely, in the payment-for-ecosystem-services (PES) framework that now dominates mainstream environmental economics. The general idea is to identify different ecological processes—pollination, say, or soil fertility—and put a price on them. It sounds like a quintessentially neoliberal strategy—and indeed, that’s often how it’s been deployed. But the ideas originally motivating payment for ecosystem services in many ways recall those of the radical feminist Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s. Wages for Housework pointed out that capitalism depends on the socially reproductive labor of the

household, and by calling that work an act of love, makes it free. By demanding recognition of and payment for household labor, the Wages for Housework movement sought to unsettle assumptions about “women’s work,” force recognition of undervalued work, and force a reconsideration of the relationship between reproductive labor and traditional notions of the productive economy. Forced to pay the costs of reproducing life, capitalism would no longer be viable.

As with Wages for Housework, in which the concrete demand for payment acted as a provocative starting point, the demand for payment for work done to and by ecosystems was originally meant as an unsettling metaphor: the first step in a broader project of changing the way we think about the relationship between human society and the natural world. Concocted not by political radicals but by largely apolitical ecologists desperate to protect the systems they studied from destruction, payment for ecosystem services began as an attempt to value the work that we call nature and make free: it sought to recognize the ecological functions that are taken for granted, to acknowledge that livelihoods don’t exist separately from environments, and to reject old, often racialized ideas of conservation that emphasize keeping humans out of pristine environments. While it was never anticapitalist in intent, there was always an element of destabilizing absurdity in the prospect of pricing the entire planet.

In practice, however, while the ecosystem-services framework has been deeply uneven in its implementation, it has often served to advance privatization and commodification of the services it claims to protect. The monetary value produced by ecosystems is frequently captured and consolidated by powerful local actors, or translated into tradable commodities like credits for carbon markets, which have been wildly volatile and largely failed to achieve goals of either environmental protection or poverty alleviation. PES programs that assign value to ecosystems without attention to equity and ownership often incentivize states or speculators to take over suddenly-profitable natural assets, dispossessing people of access to subsistence holdings and delivering benefits solely to investors. Meanwhile, dividing ecosystems into packages of services to be traded and sold loses sight of the complexity and interdependence of what’s supposedly being preserved. In short, like so many ideas, payment for ecosystem services has largely been captured by neoliberalism.



But the underlying principles may still be salvageable — recognizing the use value of ecosystems, that so-called environmental issues can't be separated from questions of livelihood and broader society, and that the world we live in is constituted by human and “natural” work alike. Those principles gesture toward an economy that recognizes the value of the care given to ecosystems, and the value of the work necessary to sustain life — the work of reproducing the very world in which we live. And they recognize the value of *not* working, of *not* producing, as in programs that pay people not to cut down trees — compensating them for income lost in the name of global sustainability.

We need to think seriously and expansively about these kinds of work and value — and about the real costs that “sustainability” will impose on individuals and communities. And we need to recognize that this is a truly collective project — that individualized, atomized systems of work and reward are increasingly untenable in the face of the interdependent tangle in which we're enmeshed.

How might we do that? To begin with, by divorcing

income from conventional notions of production, and by instituting a social wage in the form of universal basic income. Basic income won't, in and of itself, solve environmental problems; it won't replace coal plants with solar panels or ease pressure on depleted aquifers. If instituted as a justification for cuts to other social programs, it would be disastrous both socially and environmentally; robust public services are necessary if we're to live on less. But it marks a critical starting point in rethinking the relationship between labor, production, and consumption, without which environmental hand-wringing will go nowhere.

More pragmatically, in providing an alternative to dependence on destructive industries and removing the threat of job blackmail from communities desperate for livelihoods, it makes change a real option, giving workers and communities more power to demand protections against environmental harms. It can start to reorient social focus away from an eternal game of consumption catch-up toward the good life.

It admittedly won't do much to curb the upper bounds of consumption, at least not right away. But it

might point in that direction. Environmentalists like to point to World War II for evidence that people will accept restrictions on consumption for the sake of a shared cause, but the so-called Greatest Generation didn't exactly accept rations with a patriotic grin. What that experience does demonstrate, however, is that while people don't like limiting consumption under any circumstances, what they really don't like is cutting back if everyone else isn't doing the same. That sentiment is typically mobilized in service of anti-welfare politics: why should I have to work if someone else just gets a check? But during the war, it went the other way: over 60 percent of the population supported capping incomes at \$25,000 a year, a relatively paltry \$315,000 today.

Of course, the post-work future has long been over the horizon; to propose it as a solution to such time-sensitive problems may seem wildly, even irresponsibly utopian. The revolution might happen in time to avoid environmental catastrophe, but we probably shouldn't count on it, though some African climate activists have put basic income grants, financed by wealthy nations' payment of ecological debt, at the centerpiece of their demands.

Even the US presents some interesting opportunities. One prominent alternative to a straight carbon tax or cap-and-trade system is a policy known as tax-and-dividend, in which the proceeds from a carbon tax would be distributed unconditionally to all citizens — similar to the oil dividend paid to every Alaskan resident. It's defended as a compensatory mechanism for the higher energy prices that would result from a carbon tax; in more bluntly political terms, it functions as a bribe to garner support for a tax that would otherwise be unpopular. There are plenty of criticisms to be leveled against the plan as currently designed, particularly if it's considered a stand-alone climate solution — individual dividends won't maintain levees, support public transportation systems, or build affordable urban housing. But it's also a potential wedge into new obligations and relationships: the first suggestion of an unconditional guaranteed income, financed mostly by a tax on the environmentally destructive consumption habits of the wealthy. It's an assertion of public ownership of the atmosphere, and the staking of a new claim to public resources.

Viewed as a bulwark linking unconditional livelihood provision to environmental sustainability, it could be the beginning of a much larger project of ensuring decent standards of living for all regardless of productive input, while reclaiming environmental

commons from the false yet persistent narrative of tragedy.

That may seem overly hopeful about dim prospects. To be sure, it must be emphasized that this is meant as a suggestion for a general direction rather than a precise solution. While we can draw ideas from past efforts to cope with environmental problems, there are no real precedents for what we now face. We're going to have to figure some of this out as we go — which is another argument in basic income's favor. Addressing environmental problems will entail significant and widespread changes, yet without a commitment to unconditional social provision, talk of resilience, flexibility, and adaptation are all too easily collapsed into justifications of perpetual precarity.

Observing the protests outside the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009, reflecting on the apparent tension between the recognition of limits cautioned by those claiming "there is no planet B" and the limitlessness implied by chants of "everything for everyone," Michael Hardt suggested the need to "develop a politics of the common that both recognizes the real limits of the earth and fosters our unlimited creative capacities — building unlimited worlds on our limited earth." Virginia Woolf might seem an odd place to turn in response, but her essay *A Room of One's Own*, while best known as a classic piece of feminist polemic, could serve just as well as a manifesto for such a politics. In it, she reflects on the "instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition" which keeps "the stockbroker and the great barrister going indoors to make money and more money and more money when it is a fact that five hundred pounds a year will keep one alive in the sunshine." With that five hundred pounds, she wrote, came the freedom to think and write as she pleased. We should add a few more things to the list — universal healthcare, a bus pass — but figuring out what it takes to keep all seven-billion-plus people on the planet alive in the sunshine will be the fundamental task of the twenty-first century.

The post-work future is often characterized as a vision of a post-scarcity society. But the dream of freedom from waged labor and self-realization beyond work suddenly looks less like utopia than necessity.

Finding ways to live luxuriously but also lightly, adequately but not ascetically, won't always be easy. But perhaps in the post-post-scarcity society, somewhere between fears of generalized scarcity and dreams of generalized decadence, we can have the things we never managed to have in the time of supposed abundance: enough for everyone, and time for what we will. ■

# A Petrodollar and a Dream

Any reversal of neoliberalism in the Middle East would require challenging powerful Gulf States.

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by Adam Hanieh

A

**STRIKING FEATURE** of virtually all political developments in the Arab world today is the pivotal role of the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman. From the beginning of the Arab uprisings in late 2010, these states — in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar — have been involved in a range of conspicuous financial, diplomatic, and military initiatives, acting as the most important Arab conduits of US and European Middle East policy and working to undermine and steer the orientation of struggles across the region.

Three Gulf states — Saudi Arabia, Oman, and most notably, Bahrain — experienced their own large-scale protests, which were met with violent state repression and quiet assurances from Western governments of continued support for the status quo. The West's unqualified endorsement of the oil-rich monarchies, reciprocated in the Gulf's own essential role in backing US and European policies in the region, reveals the pattern of joint interests that govern the Middle East today. It is this axis of power that must be placed center-stage in any understanding of the politics of the modern Middle East.

One consequence of the Gulf's newfound prominence is a growing interest by many on the Left in its social, economic, and political features. This is a welcome break with times past, in which the Gulf solicited little attention beyond a narrow circle of academic specialists all too often enamored with Orientalist tropes about tribal life in the Arabian Peninsula. Nonetheless, despite this widening concern, much analysis of the Gulf and its role in the region continues to rely on simplistic theories of "rentier states," religious and tribal factors, or the supposed rise of sectarianism — frequently

peppered with lurid tales of monarchical decadence and profligate wealth.

Absent from these standard narratives, which often unconsciously echo the stereotypes found throughout the corporate media, is a deeper recognition of the profound changes that have ensued in the political economy of the region as a whole. Coming to grips with how this regional political economy operates, and the way it has changed over recent decades, is essential to explaining and interpreting the Gulf's ascendant political power.

As with much else in today's Middle East, a key place to start in understanding this regional question is the almost universal adoption of neoliberal policies by Arab governments from the 1990s onwards. The impact of these policies on various national class and state structures is well documented. What is less recognized, however, is that these policies acted simultaneously to reconfigure patterns of accumulation at the regional scale. Specifically, neoliberal transformation occurred in lockstep with the internationalization of Gulf capital.

Flush with oil surpluses through the 2000s, Gulf investors sought to expand into neighboring markets. As Arab countries opened up to foreign investment and sold off agricultural and urban land, industries, ports, telecommunications, and financial institutions, Gulf-based capital extended its reach across the region as a major beneficiary of liberalization.

The value of foreign direct investment announced by Gulf Arab investors in the Mediterranean countries exceeded those from any other region for the entire 2003–2009 period. More than 60% of all Gulf investments in the Mediterranean area went to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, and in these five countries the value of the Gulf's investments were worth more than three times that of the EU and twelve times that of North America. While these investment flows slowed in the wake of the global economic crisis, the Gulf was still responsible for the largest total value of investment projects announced in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Libya, and Tunisia from 2008 to 2010. Moreover, these figures considerably underestimate the extent of the Gulf's involvement in neighboring economies, as they do not include so-called portfolio investments in regional stock markets or direct bilateral loans and aid provided to governments.

The effects of these capital flows need to be incorporated into any assessment of neoliberalism in the Arab world. The dramatic restructuring of class relations that occurred in tandem with neoliberal reform

not only enriched national capitalist classes backed by authoritarian states, it also acted to strengthen the position of the Gulf states within the wider regional order. To a deep extent, Gulf capital has become interiorized in national class structures, coming to dominate many of the leading economic sectors of the Arab world. For this reason, the Middle East should not be treated as an agglomeration of bounded, self-contained states in which the national is sharply demarcated from the international.

This is the hallmark of what has been described as "methodological nationalism," a privileging of the national space as the vantage point from which to interpret social phenomena. The problem with this approach is that social relations are not neatly circumscribed within national borders — flows of capital and labor, and the various policy frameworks that mediate them, act to tie different spaces to one another within a totality that transcends any state. National borders, of course, still play as important a role as ever, but the social relations that we are accustomed to see as situated within the "national" should properly be seen as an integral part of the supra-national, regional whole.

## Regional Polarization and Uneven Development

This perspective reveals a stark characteristic of the contemporary Arab world: the ever-widening unevenness in the regional political economy, expressed most sharply in the polarization of power and wealth between the Gulf and the rest of the Arab world. Despite the initial puncturing of real estate bubbles in cities such as Dubai, the Gulf states emerged relatively unscathed from the global crisis of 2008–2009, and since that time have continued to accumulate growing pools of surplus capital alongside the renewed rise in hydrocarbon prices from 2010 onwards.

On the other side, the ongoing stagnation of global markets — particularly in the case of the region's most important trading partner, the European Union — and the political and social crises that wrack states such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria, have further entrenched the hierarchies of the region. These different trajectories remind us that crises are never felt uniformly, and absent political challenge they are often a boon for those in positions of power.

There are many statistical indications of this growing divergence. According to a recent report from the Institute of International Finance (IIF), a

“peak body” of the world’s largest banks and financial institutions, the net foreign assets (gross foreign assets minus external debt) of the GCC countries rose from \$879 billion in 2006 to \$1.79 trillion by the end of 2012. By the end of 2013, this figure is predicted to reach over \$2 trillion, a figure equivalent to more than 120% of the Gulf’s GDP. At the same time, the net foreign assets of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Morocco have fallen from a surplus of \$20.4 billion to a deficit of \$24.3 billion.

The same divergences are seen in current account balances. In 2012, the six states of the GCC were estimated to have a total current account surplus of just over \$400 billion, more than double their annual average from 2006 to 2010 (and, revealingly, also more than twice that of China in 2012). While the Gulf’s surpluses have reached these record levels, the rest of the Arab world has seen its balance sheets face parlous decline. The aggregate current account balance of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Morocco reached an estimated total deficit of \$35 billion in 2012, more than triple the average deficit over the 2006–2010 period.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the enormous pools of capital in the Gulf are not simply held by state institutions or Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs). The *Financial Times* reported in mid 2013 that the levels of wealth held by GCC banks, private companies, and the wealthiest individuals and families reached \$3 trillion, a figure that does not include wealth held by SWFs. Privately held wealth in the Gulf grew by 7% over the last year, and is now at a level 10% higher than in 2007 — the peak of the boom years that preceded the global downturn. One remarkable indication of this is the Gulf’s proportion of millionaire households. According to a recent report by the Boston Consulting Group, countries

from the GCC occupy five out of the top eleven spots for the proportion of millionaire households at a global level, with tiny Qatar ranked number one in the world (14.3% of households).

Of course, this wealth is not spread evenly throughout the GCC and, most significantly, these figures ignore the presence of millions of low-paid, temporary migrant laborers who make up the vast majority of the Gulf’s workforce. Indeed, one of the key reasons underlying the polarization of wealth in the Arab world is found in the presence of these workers in the Gulf. Faced with the crisis of 2008–2009 and the collapse of the property boom in Dubai and elsewhere, the Gulf states were able to utilize their heavy reliance on temporary migrant labor — equivalent to at least half of the labor force in all the GCC states — to offload the worst effects of the crisis onto those neighboring countries that provide the region with its easily deportable and highly exploitable workforce.

Thousands of temporary migrant workers were sent home from the Gulf in the wake of the crisis, while recruitment of new workers slowed dramatically. From 2008 to 2009, the outflow of Indian workers to the United Arab Emirates fell by 62.7%, to Bahrain by 45%, and to Qatar by 44%. For Bangladesh, the number of workers traveling to Saudi Arabia and the UAE (the destinations of more than 60% of all Bangladeshi overseas workers), fell by 89% and 38% respectively in 2008 and 2009. For Pakistan, the number of registered overseas workers in the Gulf also fell precipitously — for workers going to the UAE (the largest destination of overseas Pakistani workers) there was a 36% drop, to Qatar a 60% drop, and to Kuwait a 75% drop in 2008 and 2009. In the Arab world, one indication of the Gulf’s ability to displace the effects of crisis to its surrounding peripheries was seen in the drop in worker remittances to Yemen (a 17.7% fall) and Jordan (5.2%) during 2009.

These figures confirm the particular way in which the class structures underpinning Gulf capitalism shaped its response to the global crisis. Unlike other countries in the region that had to deal domestically with rising unemployment pressures and the drying up of export markets, the Gulf states were able to displace the worst effects of the crisis onto those surrounding countries that had formed the supply lines of the massive temporary workforce underpinning class formation in the Gulf. This was labor market flexibility writ large, an indication of the hyper-capitalist dystopia that hides behind the Gulf’s ebullient self-image as playground of the super-rich.

## THE GULF’S EXISTENTIAL STAKE IN MAINTAINING BOTH ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH IMPERIALISM AND THE CONTINUATION OF THE REGION’S UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT BRINGS WITH IT PROFOUND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS.

# ANY REVERSAL OF THE PATTERNS OF NEOLIBERAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST, AND THE REGION'S SUBORDINATION TO WESTERN POWER, IS NECESSARILY TIED UP WITH CHALLENGING THE GULF ITSELF.

## The Political Question

Overlaying these regional patterns is, of course, the pivotal position of the Gulf states in the structure of imperialist power. As oil-based global capitalism fully consolidated in the wake of the Second World War, the Gulf was consciously integrated as a key pillar within the architecture of US domination that arose during that period. Two important features of contemporary capitalism — the internationalization and financialization of capital — gave the Gulf's commodity exports and financial surpluses enormous strategic weight within the global political economy. For these reasons, control and domination of the Middle East has remained an essential goal of Western powers well into the twenty-first century. The US, Britain, and other states offered unequivocal military, political, and other protections to the Gulf monarchies in return for ensuring the uninterrupted flow of hydrocarbons into the world market at the right price, and the steady redirection of petrodollar surpluses into Western financial markets (most importantly, US Treasuries).

These features of the relationship with the Gulf remain overriding concerns today, particularly in the context of the rise of potential rivals to US power. The reliance of these emerging powers on Gulf oil (as well as gas and petrochemicals) means that US domination of the region takes on an even more pronounced importance today. India, for example, imported 44% of its crude oil from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE in July 2013, up from 36% in 2011. China now relies on the Gulf states for a quarter of its imports, compared with 21% in 2007. While the interdependences that exist between the US and Chinese economies mean that their relationship cannot solely be reduced to one of rivalry, continuing US domination of the Middle East nonetheless gives it a powerful potential source of leverage should the need arise.

The Gulf also retains a vital significance as a major market for Western states, particularly for weapons sales and various construction and engineering contracts. In 2011, US global weapon sales tripled to \$66.3 billion, a record high that represented more than three quarters of the world's arms market. The principal reason for this jump in sales was entirely due to the Gulf states, with Saudi Arabia signing a massive deal to purchase \$35.4 billion of weapons from the US — ranking it as the largest US customer in the world (99% of Saudi purchases of arms were from the US). In the same year, the UAE ranked third in purchases from the US (\$4.5 billion). From 2008 to 2011, Saudi Arabia ranked number one in global arms purchases of all countries in the Global South, constituting more than one quarter of all arms transfer agreements in those four years.

The US is not the only Western country benefiting from this vast arms bazaar; German newspapers reported in August 2013 that the country's military sales to the Gulf, principally Qatar, were set to reach record levels this year. Britain has also come under heavy criticism for its sale of crowd-control equipment, guns, and ammunition to Bahrain while the kingdom was engaged in fierce repression of domestic protests.

The umbilical cord that ties the Gulf states to Western power is not separate from the neoliberal transformation of the region discussed above — both represent different modalities of the way that the Middle East is inserted into the world market. The Gulf's existential stake in maintaining both its relationship with imperialism and the continuation of the region's uneven and combined development brings with it profound political implications. It is for this reason that the leading GCC states — notably Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE — have taken a much more aggressive role in attempting to steer the outcomes of the revolts that have shaken the Arab world over the last three years.

Western interests in the region are now largely articulated through the Gulf states in both a political and an economic sense. This does not mean that there are no rivalries or differing perspectives between the Gulf and Western states, or within the Gulf itself, but these rivalries need to be situated within a framework of shared interests that recognizes that the Gulf's location at the apex of regional hierarchies is a consequence of the same processes that have generated the conditions for mass revolts in the first place.

## Egypt and Syria

**T**hese dynamics can be seen clearly in Egypt and Syria. In both countries, uprisings against authoritarian regimes have similar roots — the dispossession and exclusion of the majority of the population as a result of neoliberal reform, and the enrichment of a tiny layer of elites closely connected to authoritarian regimes, overlaid by a global crisis that considerably deepened the polarization of wealth and power.

In the case of Egypt, the Gulf states have played a leading role, since the ousting of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, in attempts to mute the extent of political and economic change. In the first phase, this took place with the strident and clumsy backing by Qatar of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), whose leadership attempted to continue along the same neoliberal trajectory as the Mubarak regime while outlawing strikes, demonstrations, and other mobilizations. In the second phase, following the overthrow of the Brotherhood by the Egyptian military in mid 2013, the rush of aid and political support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states continues to underpin the military's repression of supporters of the MB and the wider social and political movements. In both phases, the Gulf's political and economic power has been squarely aimed at returning Egypt to a reconfigured status quo, through quashing any attempt at addressing the grievances that sparked the uprisings.

In the case of Syria, the Gulf states, led particularly by Saudi Arabia, are engaged in an ongoing attempt to cultivate influence and support among the forces waging a struggle to topple Assad's regime. Most recently, this was indicated by reports that the Saudi monarchy had allegedly agreed to fund and organize the training (through Pakistan) of the Army of Islam, a force established in late September through the coming together of over forty Syrian rebel groups.

Nonetheless, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the

other Gulf states have consistently sought to extend their influence over various Syrian armed groups, this should not be taken to imply that the uprising itself can be falsely painted as a mere extension of those states (much less US imperialism). The movement to overthrow the Assad regime, in which the "Islamic fundamentalist" strain is a minority (although one that appears to be growing), faces both the regime's armed power and the attempts to entrench sectarian divides.

The Gulf is a key actor in the latter tendency, and in this sense, the Syrian uprising faces two very difficult struggles — one against the regime itself and one against the pernicious influence of forces allied with the Gulf. In this context, the deliberate strategy of brutalization and dispossession waged by the government means that time plays very much against the fortunes of the uprising. This understanding helps to explain the apparent rapprochement between the US and Russia over attitudes towards the Assad government, with both world powers appearing to seek some kind of continuation of the regime for at least the coming period.

In the longer run, it is likely that all external forces are jostling for their own version of the situation that transpired following the uprising in Yemen, with a largely cosmetic change that removes Assad but maintains the core of his repressive state and its ability to defend the interests of both domestic elites and the regional balance of power.

## Rivalries

**I**nterwoven with the clear unanimity of interests that mark the Gulf countries and Western power in the Middle East — rooted ultimately in the way that the region has developed over the recent neoliberal period and its ongoing centrality to the balance of global power — are the rivalries that nonetheless continue to exist between different states. Internal to the GCC itself, this has been expressed most sharply in the political sparring between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with both states backing different, contending Islamist movements across the region (Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Saudi Arabia, various strains of Salafism.)

The events of 2013 in Egypt were a clear indication of these inter-GCC rivalries, with Qatar condemning the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi by the Egyptian military, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE strongly cheered the military's actions. Indeed, over \$12 billion in

various forms of aid was provided to the new military government in the immediate aftermath of the coup by the latter three Gulf states.

Similarly, in the case of the US and the Gulf, the US government's apparent warming of relationships with Iran over recent weeks has been met with a disapproving response from Saudi Arabian officials (as well as from Israel, in a clear demonstration of the other side to the joint interests that exist across the region). These conflicts were powerfully highlighted when Saudi Arabia turned down a two-year seat on the UN Security Council in November 2013, with Saudi officials pointing to the lack of international intervention in Syria, as well as strains with the US over the latter's resumption of negotiations with Iran, as the reasons for its rejection of the seat.

While these tensions are undeniably real, they should not detract attention from the salient fact that all the Gulf states and the US continue to share a common perspective on the region as a whole. There is no indication to suggest that any of the Gulf states fundamentally disagree on the trajectory of Egyptian neoliberalism, whether steered by the Muslim Brotherhood or a military-led government, or the nature of the regional order constructed by Western states over the past few decades. We should not mistake contingent, temporary differences of opinion, or the continuing reality of national rivalries, for any fundamental strategic divergence over the future of the region as a whole. Indeed, in many ways, the coexistence of the different tactical orientations of these various powers acts to reinforce in their diversity a common overall trajectory, enabling the axis of US-Gulf power to reproduce itself as a hegemonic force.

## Challenging Gulf Power

A major conclusion emerging from this narrative is that any reversal of the patterns of neoliberal development in the Middle East, and the region's subordination to Western power, is necessarily tied up with challenging the Gulf itself. For this reason, political struggles in the Gulf are immensely significant, and form a direct continuity with those found elsewhere in the Middle East. The case of Bahrain clearly stands out in this regard, where despite severe repression by the al-Khalifa regime, protest movements continue to mobilize across the country. During 2011 and 2012, demonstrations also broke out in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait

involving citizen populations who felt politically and economically excluded from the enormous wealth of these states.

These struggles have received far too little attention (and solidarity) both within and outside the region. But beyond these movements, a vital element of challenging capital and state in the Gulf must be the defense of the region's migrant workers. The exploitation of these workers is an integral part of how working classes have formed in the Middle East and is essential to the ways that Gulf capitalism continues to project its power and deal with crises.

There needs to be a serious attempt to build cross-regional campaigns with workers who come from beyond the Middle East, based on the extension of the rights of citizenship, the right to organize, and working conditions. Workers from India and the Philippines, are part of the region's working classes — not foreigners, "guest workers," or "domestics." There are huge barriers in the way of such campaigns (linguistic, cultural, and political — not to mention the entrenched racism against migrants found throughout much of the Arab world), but to abstain from this struggle only further reinforces the fracturing of class solidarity across the region. It is noteworthy, for example, that the killing of two migrant workers in Saudi Arabia in early November during a deportation campaign that saw the arrests of tens of thousands of migrants, elicited little comment from either inside or outside the Gulf. It is estimated that a remarkable one million migrant workers have been forced to leave Saudi Arabia (the world's second largest source of remittances, after the US, from 2006 to 2012) in just the last three months.

There are no long-term, national solutions to the problems facing the Middle East that leave the control of such immense wealth in the hands of so very few. This is not meant to imply, of course, that revolutionary movements will immediately start from the regional scale without passing through a confrontation with national ruling classes. But the point is to see these different scales of struggle as inseparable. Without a regional orientation that points strategically to tackling the position and power of the Gulf monarchies, there will be no fundamental change in the region.

In 2014, the notion of a pan-regional struggle might seem utopian, but the events of the last few years confirm its necessity — and it is exactly this specter that has provoked such great concern in the corridors of power in Washington, Riyadh, and Doha. ■

# Bahrain's Fate

## On Ibrahim Sharif and the misleadingly-dubbed “Arab Spring.”

by Omar AlShehabi

**T**HE ARAB UPRISINGS have unleashed fraught issues around identity, allegiances, and national sovereignty. Within the struggles for a better future, opportunism and sectarian politics abound. Amid suffusing uncertainty, some opt for despotism, while others yearn for the old stability of Western colonialism.

Although the events have unleashed many a movement, activists that oppose the hydra of Western intervention, despotism, and sectarianism that confronts the Arab world are a rarity. Ibrahim Sharif, a Bahraini opposition figure, is a prominent exception. And, manifestly, a dangerous one: he is currently in prison, having been tortured, and facing the remainder of a five-year sentence. His plight has barely registered beyond Bahrain’s shores, but there is no better story than his to illustrate the complexity of this pressing and incumbent fight.

Sharif was born on 15 May 1957, the ninth anniversary of the Nakba — which saw the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Arabs from historic Palestine — and the establishment of the state of Israel. His birthplace was Muharraq, the second-largest island in the Bahraini archipelago, and at that time the hub of political opposition to British colonialism. Sharif’s home was in Steeshan, a lower-middle-class neighborhood deriving its name from the English word “Station,” after the old central bus station that used to be located at the top of the neighborhood.

As with most people in Steeshan, Sharif’s family came from a Huwala background — a Sunni ethnicity that populates the two coasts of the Gulf, between the colliding Arab and Persian cultures. Such movement between the Gulf’s two worlds used to be commonplace, especially in a maritime economy built on mercantilist trade, well before the drawing of borders and the advent of modern nationalities in the region.

Sharif's family came to Bahrain in the early twentieth century from Behdeh, a small village on the eastern coast. He came from a Sayyed lineage, his family claiming descent from the Prophet Mohammed's daughter. Sayyed families have much less resonance among Sunni discourse than Shi'a, as the concept confers much more social, economic, and religious prestige and benefits to the latter.

The Huwala are a minority in Bahrain. Some members within the other ethnic groups look on their claims of Arabness with suspicion, due to their roots on the eastern coast of the Gulf. This perspective suggests a racial view of Arabness, imagining it can only be determined by clear and unbroken lineage to a tribe from the Arabian Peninsula. This blood-based identity discourse contrasts sharply with the modern notion of Arabness accompanying Arab nationalism, which takes language to be its primary trait.

This complex historical lineage has led many Huwala in Bahrain to embrace Arab nationalist currents, and the city of Muharraq, where most Huwala are concentrated, has become that movement's main urban center. This is common among many minorities in the Arab world. For example, Christians and Alawites also disproportionately fill Arab nationalism's ranks. The ideology has been presented as a unifying, non-sectarian, non-racial force that could guard against the tyranny of the majority and facilitate development in societies prone to sectarianism and ethnic divisions.

And indeed, sectarianism and ethnic politics, although present, took a back seat in 1950s Bahrain. The neighborhood in which Sharif grew up was a melting pot of ethnicities. His family frequently attended Shi'i religious places for worship and ceremony, a common phenomenon. A more defined segmentation was the urban-rural divide — the urban centers were more cosmopolitan, enjoying the benefits of a modern infrastructure sooner than the countryside. Naturally, the two main cities, Muharraq and Manama, were alive with radical politics, while rural sectors tended toward social and religious conservatism.

## Family History

**S**HARIF'S GRANDFATHER was a *mulla*, but his father was influenced by the rising tides of Arab nationalism and anticolonialism then dominating the wider Arab world. Bahrain had been a British protectorate since the mid nineteenth century, with the *pax Britannica* both dictating the

island's international politics and economics and heavily influencing local political affairs. A tense but dependent relationship with the Al Khalifa, the local ruling family who have controlled the island since 1783, prevailed. Previously unstable and vulnerable to threats from the Persians and the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula, the British cemented the rule of Al Khalifa, gradually rearranging the institutional governance structure, though occasionally reorganizing local rulers within the same family when their interests so required.

By the mid 1950s, Bahrain was pulsing with anti-colonial sentiment. Living minutes away from the British Royal Air Force base, Sharif's political awakening was in Muharraq. His first political idol was Gamal Abdul Nasser, then by far the most popular leader in the Arab world. He was held in strong affection by the local people, who still remember his stopover in the island in 1955 on his way to the Bandung conference of the Non-Aligned Movement, when, much to the annoyance of the British, he was given a rapturous welcome.

As a primary-school student, Sharif participated in the March 1965 uprising — a series of strikes and demonstration that began in Bapco, the local oil company where his father used to work, which was still under British management. A strike protesting the layoff of hundreds of local workers quickly escalated into protests and riots. They continued for weeks before the local authorities and the British jointly put them down — part of the intermittent peninsular labor unrest that has been erased from court histories of the region and rentier-state theories alike.

Amid this atmosphere, Sharif finished high school, where he excelled, and moved to Lebanon to continue his studies in the mid 1970s. Bahrain had achieved independence in 1971, after the withdrawal of the British from their posts east of the Suez. A new constitution was inaugurated in 1973, followed by parliamentary elections in the same year, which were supposed to herald the advent of democratic politics on the island. But emboldened by rising oil revenues and frustrated by parliament's lack of cooperation, the local rulers terminated constitutional rule, declaring a state of emergency that lasted twenty-five years. Colonialism had officially ended, but despotism was coursing through the Bahraini political system.

At the American University of Beirut, Sharif found himself in the epicenter of progressive politics in the Arab world. There, he formally entered political activism. Initially approached by the Muslim

Brotherhood, he rejected their overtures due to their poor reputation in Bahrain at that time, where they were seen as politically weak and unsupportive of anticolonial and democratic movements. Instead, he decided to join the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), an organization with roots in the Arab Nationalist Movement, a pan-Arab revolutionary organization with chapters around the Arab world, which took an ideological turn towards Marxist-Leninism twinned with a tactical turn to armed struggle.

Sharif also became active in student union organizations — when he moved to Texas after the civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, he established a chapter of the Bahrain student union there. It was also during his time in North America that he met his future wife, Farida Ghulam, a political activist and a student at Concordia University in Montreal. Although Farida was Shi'i, this posed no problem for Sharif, and they would eventually marry in Bahrain.

But he could not finish his studies in North America. On his way back from a student union event in Canada in 1980, he was stopped by the authorities for carrying flyers and donations in support of Palestinian and Dhofari revolutionaries. He was handed over to the Americans. They interrogated him, expelled him on charges of terrorism — a familiar incantation — and remanded him to Bahrain. There he spent two weeks in prison, where the government detained him for belonging to the PFLOAG — then, along with the communists, the main threat to the dynasty.

After his release, Sharif found work at a local bank, where he would stay for the next three decades. It was an odd post for a leftist, but not unusual in Bahrain as a whole, which had become the hub of Middle East financial services as banks migrated from Beirut during Lebanon's civil war.

The eighties were a politically quiet decade for Sharif and the PFLOAG. Successive crackdowns by the authorities on student and labor activism tamped down the movement's power. Meanwhile, amid the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet-Afghan war, Islamism was ascending, leaving leftists in Bahrain and more broadly struggling and isolated, increasingly untethered from a mass base.

## False Reform

**N**INETEEN-NINETY was a turning point. The fall of Communism and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait catalyzed calls for

reform across the region. In Bahrain, a popular movement for the restoration of parliamentary democracy, spearheaded by both progressives and Islamists, quickened throughout the nineties. Sharif returned to political activism during this period, his house becoming a progressive organizing node.

By the end of the nineties, after a grueling period of civil strife, the current King Hamad ascended to the throne. He promised a new era of reform. He released prisoners, allowed exiles to return, and permitted political societies to officially form. Sharif quickly helped establish WAAD, an officially registered group and heir to the PFLOAG. Given global and regional changes, the movement changed — some might murmur, diluted — its ideology to an inchoate liberalism aimed at uniting nationalists, liberals, and progressives in a popular front.

WAAD and the other leftists, in turn, aligned themselves with Shi'i Islamist opposition societies, by far the most popular groups on the street. This alliance quickly faced problems, with the leftists accused of acting as the coat's tail of the Islamists, putting a respectable liberal face on an increasingly "Islamist" opposition.

It did not help that splits started to striate the societies themselves, particularly after the passing of the new constitution of 2002 and the parliamentary elections held in the same year. Both were widely regarded as shams, with many complaining that the regime had no interest in substantive reform. The constitution was written behind closed doors, and granted the half-elected legislature scant powers. The vast majority of the opposition boycotted the 2002 elections. In turn, Sunni Islamists with loyalist tendencies populated the parliament.

Soon, grumbles grew that an opportunity had been missed, and many felt that the opposition should participate in the upcoming 2006 elections, creating a split between the hawks, who saw participation as legitimating an illegitimate political system and refused it on principle, and those who thought that the elections provided a media opportunity — a way to reach the people and embarrass the regime. Sharif fell within the latter camp. The formal societies ended up running in the second 2006 elections, in which he ran and lost his seat. The more popular Shi'i Islamist opposition, however, gained eighteen out of forty legislative posts.

This disagreement led a splinter group of the hawks to leave both the Islamists and the formally registered leftist societies in order to form their own movement, HAQ — one that refused to register under

the restrictive new laws that straitjacketed the formal societies.

## Ibrahim as a Leader

In 2008, WAAD's founding father decided to step down and open up the leadership ship to the younger generation. This was Sharif's moment, and he was duly elected as the new Secretary General. Before then, he had been relatively unknown. He was not particularly striking physically, with a heavy physique and rounded facial features. Still, his charisma, knack for numbers, and ability to put arguments coherently and swiftly built his reputation. Railing against the misuse of public lands and corruption, one of his appearances on national television even led to a minister's firing — and, subsequently, the shutdown of the television program on which he appeared.

With these scandals looming, WAAD entered the 2010 election campaign, with Sharif running for the seat in his old neighborhood in Muharraq. The political map had changed drastically since the seventies, with the historic city largely emptied of citizens through urban decay, the slow demise of the Left, and the rise of sectarian politics. What came to be known as the Sunni street had become considerably more conservative, hewing to the government and filled with chatter about the intentions of its Shi'i counterpart.

Nevertheless, the 2010 elections and Sharif's performance appeared to be a watershed moment, with many defying the regime's wishes and voting for WAAD candidates. Indeed, even though Sharif and the Left lost the elections, they galvanized the street in an unprecedented manner.

Still, the government seemed to be in a comfortably commanding position. The formal opposition was effectively contained within a lame-duck parliament, and the more radical elements outside of the official institutions were strongly curtailed by a slew of trials and imprisonment, on charges of terrorism and plotting to overthrow the regime.

Then came the Arab Spring. Amid the insurrections in Tunisia and Egypt, cyber-activists in Bahrain called for a Day of Rage on 14 February 2011. Security forces killed a protester, and the number of protesters, initially small, swelled greatly the next day during his burial.

The funeral procession ran near to the now infamous Pearl Roundabout. Protesters turned it into their own Tahrir, and the Pearl became the center

of the protest movement for the next month. Sharif quickly became a movement favorite. He was one of the few well-known politicians to lead the funeral procession, and was one of the first to arrive at the Pearl — literally on the protesters' shoulders. Being Sunni in an overwhelmingly Shi'i crowd added symbolic power to his presence.

The sectarian divide was the most formidable political obstacle facing the protesters, and their initial response was savvy and calculated. Aware that the media was their strongest weapon, they carried flowers to policemen, in a staged image that would cause some to christen it the Uprising of the Roses. They also toned down on the violent or religious connotations of the chants, with Bahraini flags replacing sect-based figures and symbols. The initial and brutal response of the government and the resulting shock from the casualties and severity of the attack garnered sympathy for the opposition — both internationally, and among local Sunnis.

But local sympathy from the "other side" started to fray as time wore on, and the opposition slowly fell into the sectarian quagmire — one that the government had, in so many ways, created. Protests spread from the Pearl Roundabout across the island, as many set up camps in the country's main hospital complex. Marches even reached Riffa, the royalty's heartland. Simultaneously, chaos on the streets increased — vigilante groups appeared, sectarian clashes occurred. The opposition split, with the more radical elements breaking from their previous stance of calling for a constitutional monarchy, and instead demanding a republic. Given that all those who made the republican demand were from a Shi'i Islamist background, many Sunnis construed this as a call for an Islamic Republic, along the lines of the theocracy in Iran. Calls grew louder for government intervention.

It emerged only later that throughout the month of protests there were backdoor talks between the Crown Prince, considered the more liberal wing within the regime, and the official opposition — Sharif included. They were frantically trying to reach an agreement before the more "radical" elements of both sides could take over.

I remember meeting Sharif a few days before the crackdown. We sat at a burger restaurant, and I asked him about their main demand. He said, "The most important is to elect a constitutive committee representative of the people to write a new constitution for the country to replace the current one. Everything else is secondary."

I said, “You realize they will not accept that, and that this basically means there will be a showdown.”

He looked up from his hot dog, paused, and then nodded.

“Yes, it probably does.”

The showdown wasn’t far.

## Showdown

**O**N MARCH 14, Saudi troops entered Bahrain over the causeway. A day later, the King declared a state of emergency. Pearl Roundabout was cleared of protesters, and over the subsequent two months, dozens were killed, thousands arrested, and thousands more fired from their jobs.

On March 17 at dawn, dozens of masked men arrested Sharif. Over the subsequent weeks, he endured beatings with plastic hoses, sexual assault, sleep deprivation, and solitary confinement. His case was not unusual.

Sharif’s arrest did, however, stand out for a different reason. He was the only leading opposition arrestee that did not come from an Islamist political background. The arrest of a secular Sunni went against the regime discourse of a Shi’i plot to take over the country. Sharif had proved a serious pain to the authorities over the past few years, and the timing seemed right for his foes. His popularity was at a nadir among the Sunnis, the same community he did so well with only a few months previously in the elections. Resentment and fear of the Shi’i protesters was at its apex.

Sharif was seen as a traitor for siding with them.

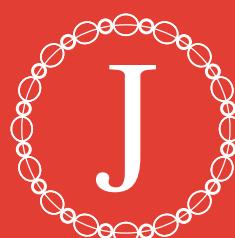
Giant billboards with photos of him and other opposition figures went up in Muharraq, reading, “No amnesty. We demand the harshest punishments on the traitors,” coupled with a depiction of a hangman’s noose.

Since then, the protest movement has shown remarkable resilience. There have been officially sanctioned protests in the suburbs and clashes with the security forces in the capital, Manama, in addition to Molotov cocktails and roadblocks made of burning tires. For its part, the state has shown no real intent to make substantial political reforms. An uneasy and unsteady political stalemate is in effect.

Society continues to be split on sectarian lines. The fall of the regime has become the opposition rank-and-file’s main demand, but the legal parties continue to call for a constitutional monarchy. Many Sunnis, long dormant, have mobilized. Although

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lacking confidence in those wielding power, they think that Bahrain is a front line in a regional battle between the two sects — a battle requiring conscientious and sustained preparation, with the other side far more advanced than they.

This division suits the regime well, ensuring that no ecumenical movement is able to emerge, as has happened in the past. One crucial factor that worries the regime post-crackdown is its abysmal international image — with the attendant negative impact on Bahrain's small and open economy. Its diversification efforts away from oil have hinged on attracting Foreign Direct Investment and international events like the Formula One, and the non-oil sector is extremely sensitive to its reputation abroad. Although not yet catastrophic, due to high oil prices, the economy has stagnated, with the public deficit and debt climbing at alarming and unsustainable rates.

Events in the Arab world, especially Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, have further agitated sectarianism. Unfortunately, many (but not all) within both camps have opted to cynically use the language of freedom, dignity, and human rights as Trojan Horses to disguise sectarian interests. One very vocal member of the opposition, a Shi'i Islamist with supposed leftist inclinations, told me that what happened in Iraq over the past ten years, starting with the US invasion and the subsequent sectarian division of the country, is the best role model for future governance of the Middle East. Two sentences later, she stated without any hint of irony that she opposes Western intervention against the Bashar regime in Syria. This sectarian logic abounds on both sides and is illustrated vividly by developments within the local communist party, whose members have openly split based on sectarian affiliations.

I asked Sharif what he thought of what had happened. Looking considerably aged and having lost a lot of weight, he had been reading and thinking a lot in prison. He likened current political perturbations to the rapid movements of the French Revolution. Bahrain and the Arab world, he said, are still only in the initial stages of shifts likely to be filled by revolutions, counterrevolutions, and civil strife. It should not be forgotten, after all, that very few of the leaders of the French Revolution started off with a republican vision, and for years even many of the Jacobins continued to call for a constitutional monarchy.

For Sharif, the principles of democracy are yet to be learned, not only by wider society but even

by activists themselves, and they will take time to ingrain. He believes that Bahrain's opposition is more advanced than that of other Arab countries, especially Egypt, because leftists and secular activists have adapted to coalition-building and working with Islamists in the opposition. He contrasted this with Cairo, where progressive revolutionaries had yet to adapt to the practicalities of forming coalitions with alternative forces.

There are reasons to be skeptical. Ultimately, Bahrain is a small island chain, its history perennially overdetermined by outside forces. Currently, the dominant players are Saudi Arabia and the United States. The latter's Fifth Fleet has been based in Bahrain for more than half a century. Iran's influence also lingers, openly supporting the opposition, while Saudi Arabia stands strong behind the regime.

At the same time, both the government and the opposition are frantically jostling for Western, especially American, support. Although the presence of the Fifth Fleet and the relationship with Saudi Arabia means that the Americans will ultimately back the monarchy, institutions like the National Democratic Institute (NDI), The US-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) have increasingly funded opposition groups, in what looks like a cynical game of hedging their bets.

## What's to Come

Bahrain's and the region's future remain captive to despotism, foreign powers, and sectarianism. In the current climate, central issues regarding the distribution of wealth and class relations have taken a backseat, with society's marginalized frequently pitted against each other behind sectarian fronts. What's more, Bahrain's location in an oil- and capital-rich region, so central to the vitality of global capitalism, makes any progressive change doubly difficult. But never impossible.

And so the island — and the region as a whole — more than ever needs individuals like Ibrahim Sharif: those gifted enough to fend off despotism, imperialism, and the sectarianism which is its handmaiden, and exemplify a struggle that can lead poor Shi'i and poor Sunni of Bahrain, Damascus, and Baghdad alike to see that what they have in common is more important than what is different between them. It is that hope, and only that hope, which offers a future for the region. ■

# The Bad Kind of Unionism

When police unions have widened their gaze beyond issues like compensation and working conditions, it's been almost exclusively to conservative ends.

by Shawn Gude

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HEIR PROFESSION is heavily unionized. Culturally, they have more in common with bus drivers than business executives. Many come from working-class backgrounds.

Yet on the beat, police come in contact with — to question, to arrest, to brutalize — the most disadvantaged. This presents a problem for radicals. If the Left stands for anything, it's worker emancipation and labor militancy. But police and others in the state's coercive apparatus, workers themselves in many respects, are the keepers of class society. Their jobs exist to maintain social control and protect the status quo.

The introduction of unions to this portion of the state raises additional concerns. Can "coercive unions" ever advocate for the broader working class, rather than members' narrow self-interests? Or are police unions irredeemably reactionary?

It's easy to focus on the individual over the institution. Not a few police officers are drawn to the profession out of a desire to "serve the public." Many genuinely want to serve, and take great pride in their chosen occupation. Police don't have to enjoy breaking up protests; they don't have to be racists or hate homeless people. But once they decide to do their jobs, institutional exigencies overwhelm personal volition. When there's mass resistance to poverty and inequality, it's the cops who are summoned to calm the panic-stricken hearts of the elite. They bash some heads, or infiltrate and disrupt some activist groups, and all is right in the world again.

Such is the inherent defect of law-enforcement unionism: It's peopled by those with a material interest in maintaining and enlarging the state's most indefensible practices.

It's hard to imagine how it could be any different. Chicago teachers, exemplifying the kind of social-movement unionism that defends the working class broadly, organized the community before their strike by trumpeting a vision of equitable education. The Left cheered. How could anything similar be achieved by prison guards? A police strike would appear to signal an incipient authoritarianism, cops untamed by democratic dictates. How could empowering police — increasingly militarized and shot through with a culture of preening brutality — yield anything but stepped-up repression? How could the traditional socialist goal of worker self-management result in anything but a dystopia of metastasizing prisons, imperious cops, and Minuteman-esque border-patrol guards? The best we can hope for from police, it seems, is passivity.

As Kristian Williams documents in *Our Enemies in Blue*, professionalized policing arose in the United States amid urbanization in the 1820s and 1830s. Controlling “dangerous” classes (principally of the industrial working variety), more than ameliorating any pronounced spike in crime, was the reason for its formation. The institution had its roots in slave patrols, which were established to control the behavior of slaves — the “dangerous” classes of that day.

In the late 1800s, when more workers banded together to improve their situation, elites once again blanched. Police broke up strikes, confiscated pro-labor newspapers, and arrested radicals. States like Pennsylvania set up forces to deal with labor stoppages. Free speech and free association were subordinated to private property.

In this respect, little has changed. The activist who is doing anything of value expects to be under surveillance, and is on the lookout for *agents provocateurs*. Where capital is concerned, cops are custodians, and the First Amendment is flotsam.

Other subtler — primarily ideological — forms of policing have long existed. The police officer, border patrol guard and corrections officer only step in when abstract injunctions need to be made tangible. When all attempts to modify citizens’ behavior have failed, they appear — to intercept undocumented immigrants forced from their home countries by Global North-favoring trade agreements, to watch over incarcerated drug dealers from deindustrialized wastelands. When they exercise their power, it’s far from subtle; they are the state’s monopoly on violence incarnate. And they have a vested interest in seeing their power increase unchecked.

When police unions have widened their gaze beyond issues like compensation and working conditions, it’s been almost exclusively to advance conservative ends. “Police,” as Williams puts it, “organize as police, not workers.”

They’ve bitterly opposed civilian review boards (and, if established, have sought to undermine them). They’ve fought the placement of names and badge numbers on officer uniforms. They’ve resisted rooting out police misconduct. “The modern police union movement,” criminologist Samuel Walker argues, “originated largely in reaction to the civil rights movement and its criticisms of police conduct during the 1960s.... Any local unions originated or at least became more militant in response to specific police-community relations initiatives in the 1960s.”

And police unions aren’t even the worst actors.

In the hovel of coercive unionism, the California prison guards union (the California Correctional Peace Officers Association) is the leader. The organization has long defined itself as separate from the mainstream labor movement. Politically, the California prison guards aren’t wedded to the Democratic Party, and institutionally, they’re not affiliated with either of the nation’s labor federations. The association has proven its ability to parlay mass incarceration into increased political power, membership, and dues. They bankroll “victim’s rights” groups, they fight anti-incarceration referenda, they funnel millions to Democrats and Republicans who adopt law-and-order stances.

When tougher sentencing became the new norm several decades ago, the organization was small — membership totaled about five thousand, and their budget didn’t crack a half a million dollars. They now represent more than thirty thousand correctional officers. In 2008 alone, they spent nearly \$5 million to elect sympathetic candidates and, more importantly, to defeat a ballot measure seeking to reduce the prison population through treatment instead of incarceration. Other prison-guard unions have benefited from the prison boom, but none have been able to capitalize on the carceral state as well as the CCPOA. The union looks at the marginalized and sees an opportunity for enrichment.

Two of the CCPOA’s ideological cousins are the National Border Patrol Council (NBPC) and the National ICE Council. Unlike the CCPOA, the two are inhabitants of the House of Labor — they’re member unions of the American Federation of Government Employees, which is affiliated with the AFL-CIO. On immigration, however, they’ve bucked the

# BUT THERE'S CAUSE FOR SKEPTICISM. CAN AN ESTABLISHED AMALGAMATION OF POLICE AND PRISON GUARDS REALLY ADVANCE THE WORKING-CLASS STRUGGLE?

federation's pro-reform line (a line that has already conceded far too much to the Right).

Above all, both organizations are interested in more enforcement — despite the Obama administration's deportation of undocumented immigrants at a faster rate than any previous president. The two groups' preferred term for undocumented immigrants is "illegal aliens," of course. ICE Council President Chris Crane, the *New York Times* wrote in June, has been "the most frequent witness on Capitol Hill during this year's immigration debate and the favorite expert of conservative critics of the Senate measure."

On top of trying to scuttle any path to citizenship, the border-patrol union has resisted efforts to restrict its violent mandate. "If you don't throw rocks at Border Patrol agents," the NBPC's charming vice president said in November, "you won't be shot."

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**T**HERE ARE COUNTEREXAMPLES — including, ironically, among police in apartheid-era South Africa.

In the 1980s, black police officers in that country were enforcers of their own subordination. Internally, they were mired in low-level positions and lacked collective-bargaining rights; externally, they couldn't arrest whites, yet had to quell unrest that threatened to topple the racist Afrikaner government. Economically desperate and typically lured from rural areas by the promise of a paycheck, some, having coarsened once on the force, patrolled restive townships unsympathetically.

Revolutionary organizations and community members urged black police to join the struggle for liberation. In September 1989, they got their aggrieved

dissident — Gregory Rockman, a slim, mustachioed lieutenant in a Cape Town suburb. The thirty-year-old lambasted the riot police — "a pack of wild dogs," in his estimation, that "feasted on the people" — and said he sought "a whole new era of police in South Africa [and] to assure the public they are not enemies but protectors."

The next month, Rockman presided over the establishment of the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU) — the first real trade union in South Africa, according to the sociologist Monique Marks.

Their first demonstration resulted in the arrest of Rockman and twelve others. Membership mushroomed, but so did management repression. Cops who tried to join were suspended or fired, meetings were broken up by tear gas, and members were bludgeoned with batons. With resistance came solidarity. "The sight of policemen in uniform singing freedom songs and shouting anti-apartheid slogans touched off popular demonstrations of support," scholar Gavin Cawthra wrote in his 1993 book *Policing in South Africa*.

Intimately linked to the African National Congress, conceived in the crucible of anti-apartheid struggle, the POPCRU's infancy was a study in social-movement unionism. On their website, they still trumpet their devotion to "advancing the working-class struggle within the criminal justice system."

But there's cause for skepticism. Can an established amalgamation of police and prison guards really advance the working-class struggle? Collective bargaining has been won, apartheid has been vanquished. No longer is the POPCRU, in Marks' words, a "dissident grouping." What, then, distinguishes this "civil rights union" from a standard US police union? For Marks, this seems to be the wrong comparison. Just as the POPCRU functions as a "watchful eye" that

propels the attenuation of police authoritarianism, so too can black political associations drive reform.

The US equivalent group would be the National Black Police Association. They oppose the death penalty, support affirmative action, and condemn police brutality. They aim to “to be the conscience of the criminal justice system, and to enhance the quality of life in the African-American community.” But the group does not unequivocally oppose the unconscionable War on Drugs, a caging frenzy so colossal that the US now imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa during apartheid.

Founded in 1972, just a year after Nixon launched the War on Drugs, the NBPA has been an anemic force for pacification. Over the same decades, the war has ravaged communities of color, the number of racial minorities and women on the beat has increased substantially, and the NBPA has been the “conscience of the criminal justice system.” That the increased presence of women and minorities on the force — laudable, no doubt — hasn’t fundamentally lessened the country’s system of social domination should sober enthusiasts of police reform.

To its credit, the AFL-CIO staked out a strong position against mass incarceration this year. In September, at the federation’s quadrennial convention, federation president Richard Trumka called it “a betrayal of the American promise.” He said, “the practice hurts our people and our communities, it keeps wages low, it suppresses democracy, and we can’t afford to imprison so many people. Nor can our families, our communities, or our country afford the loss of productivity of these people.” Trumka’s forceful statement, and the related resolution, were notable in that the federation’s largest union, AFSCME, counts prison guards among its members. No doubt mindful of this tension between social justice and narrow self-interest, the resolution chiefly indicted the private prison industry, charging “our nation’s profit-driven justice system [with] producing a level of mass incarceration that is anything but just.”

Admirable as the resolution was, it’s likely purely rhetorical, at best a suggestion that locals linked to the prison industrial complex change their tack. The AFL-CIO’s organizational structure is such that the federation has about as much power to compel an obdurate affiliate to change its behavior as a parent does with a grown child. As the AFL-CIO’s constitution states, member unions “are affiliated with, but are not subordinate to, or subject to the general direction and control of, the Federation.” The late journalist Robert Fitch believed this inscribed

corruption in the very structure of organized labor. Corrupt or not, the independence of locals unquestionably constricts the federation’s ability to steer coercive unionism in a more constructive direction.

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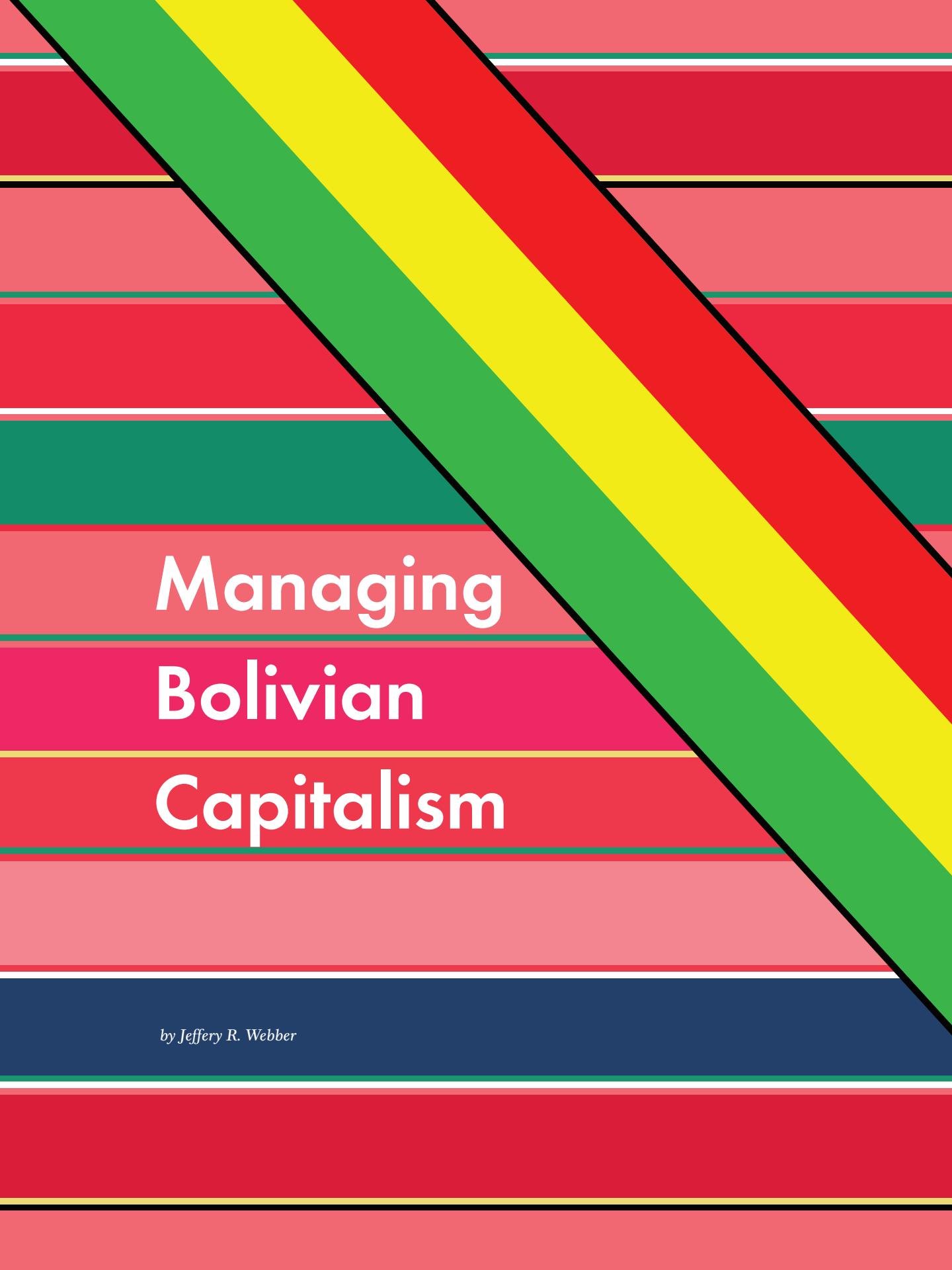
ocialists, recognizing the contradictions of the democratic capitalist state — by turns securer and seizer of freedom — can simultaneously love Medicare and loathe the NYPD. We recognize that, through struggle, workers have secured the occasional spot on what Marx called the executive committee of the bourgeoisie. Pro-labor liberals are in more treacherous territory. Unable to navigate the nuances and paradoxes of the public sector, their anti-austerity message is, “Don’t cut the jobs of teachers, firefighters, and police officers.” For them, the function of all three occupations is identical: to serve the public good.

Pro-labor liberals see a revanchist Tea Party and cuts in food stamps, and crouch to defend a monolithic state. They see a dying labor movement in which the number of union workers in the public sector now eclipses those in the private sector, or some cops standing against GOP attacks on collective bargaining rights, and they believe the police are their natural allies.

But they overlook whose class interests are served when police are dispatched, as compared to other government workers. Teachers teach, cops serve capital. The homeless man arrested for public intoxication has been treated more punitively than the Wall Street trader whose avarice breeds homelessness. This is the system the police, prison guards, and the border patrol maintain.

Becoming agents of progressive change would require that unions in these occupations negate their own power, that they work toward their own abolition. Absent this development, parochialism seems to be the only model that’s realistic in the here-and-now. Bargain for decent salaries and benefits. Accept the constraints that communities and elected officials impose. Act as professional associations, constituted strictly to advance member interests rather than social change or class struggle. Meanwhile, workers and organizers under the same union umbrella — AFSCME, primarily — can place internal pressure on their coercive counterparts in the hopes of smoothing out their worst traits.

But allies? Hardly. The cop who rallies for collective bargaining today will be protecting Goldman Sachs tomorrow. ■



# Managing Bolivian Capitalism

by Jeffery R. Webber

# Evo Morales's administration has scored

some successes, but it has failed

to deliver on its more radical promises.

INTERNATIONALLY, capitalism is in crisis. But in Bolivia, South America's poorest country, it's being managed with some success by the government of Evo Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party, now three-and-a-half years into its second term in office. Surely, there have been triumphs worthy of celebrating, but those with deeper, more anticapitalist ambitions ought to be wary of the new state administrators and their metrics of development.

On a Friday evening in late June, I sat down with Marianela Prada Tejada in the office of the Ministry of Economics and Public Finance. She's presently the executive of the cabinet that runs the ministry, and has been working in different posts within it since 2007. She began our conversation by noting the bad reputation left-wing governments developed over the years in terms of economic management in Bolivia.

Pinning this baggage mainly on the unprecedented hyperinflationary crisis that occurred under the watch of the short-lived Democratic Popular Unity (UDP) administration in the early 1980s, Prada Tejada believes that UDP failure opened the door for the long neoliberal night that followed. As a result, a collective notion has lived on in the country's imaginary, which says that "progressive governments, governments of the Left in Bolivia don't know how to administer the economy of the country." Even worse, she laughed bitterly, this time, with Morales, it was an Indian in charge. There was no doubt for the racist opposition that "a left-wing Indian was going to be a disaster for the country."

With hindsight, even by neoclassical standards, it seems Morales has been a better night watchman over private property and financial affairs than the Right could have hoped for. "Thankfully," Prada Tejada told me, "with a very responsible administration of the economy, all of this speculation that there would be a crisis, that we wouldn't be able to run the economy, has disappeared."

But if such stress on fiscal responsibility on the part of the government was beginning to sound reminiscent of introductory economic textbooks in

the United States, she assured me I was mistaken. “We don’t see macroeconomic stability as an end in itself. We don’t believe in the maintenance of stability at any cost. Rather, we think of it as a medium through which we can achieve all the rest of the policies of the government. We can achieve these policies without distorting the economy. Starting from this vision, the Morales government has been able to achieve an extraordinary level of macroeconomic stability since it assumed office, indeed stability without precedence in the country.” She paused for emphasis. “Every year we’ve run budget surpluses, we’ve accumulated substantial international reserves, and inflation has been controlled at every moment, apart from a brief deviation from this trend.”

Amid a commodities boom driven by China’s dynamism, aggregate economic growth has been steady in Bolivia, averaging 4.8% between 2006 and 2012, with an apex of 6.1% in 2008 and a low of 3.4% in 2009, in the immediate fallout from the world crisis. The first quarters of 2013 have witnessed 6% growth, with above-average projections for the year as a whole from even the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Growth has been maintained in spite of a general and accelerating decline in mining-mineral prices at the international level since April 2011, with the prices of lead dropping 10%, tin 14%, and silver 28% in 2013 alone.

## Living on Gas

**B**OLIVIAN GROWTH hasn’t suffered thus far because natural gas prices and regional demand for gas have been moving in the opposite direction. The export of natural gas to Brazilian and Argentine markets continues to outpace all other national exports. Between January and May 2013, the value of external sales of natural gas reached \$5 billion, up 15.6% relative to the same period in 2012. According to figures from the National Statistics Institute of Bolivia, gas exports constituted 52.8% of total exports in the first trimester of this year, followed by industrial manufacturing (24.2%), mining (17.2%), and agriculture (4.5%). Last year, the country logged a record peak of foreign direct investment, again mostly in gas. The Morales era, as Prada Tejada rightly notes, has witnessed an unprecedented accumulation of international reserves, and inflation rates have been clamped at levels that would keep Milton Friedman resting peacefully in his grave.

The general development strategy, according to Prada Tejada, is to “take advantage of the possibility of

growth through the exploitation of natural resources, with the state capturing the surplus and redistributing it to social programs and to other economic sectors that generate employment.”

Indeed, Morales has been able to capture a bigger share of the rent generated from this commodities boom than did orthodox neoliberal regimes of the past, due to moderate increases in the taxes and royalties exacted from multinational petroleum companies, even if this doesn’t warrant the label “nationalization.” As a result, there have been notable declines in poverty and extreme poverty, and improvements in health and education.

One redistributive channel of rent to the poorest sectors has been a series of targeted cash-transfer programs, which now reach roughly a third of the population — Bono Juancito Pinto (funds to encourage children to attend school), Renta Dignidad (a small monthly payment to the elderly poor), and Bono Juana Azurduy (funds to improve healthcare for expecting mothers, as well as medical care after birth). Official government figures suggest an impressive fall in poverty from 60.6% of the population in 2005 to 45% in 2011, and extreme poverty from 38.2% to 20.9% over the same period. Rural areas have been most affected, with extreme poverty falling from 62.9% in 2005 to 41.3% in 2011.

Unsurprisingly in this context, the government is popular. In a poll of the major cities conducted in June of this year, the administration’s nationwide approval rating was 54%. In El Alto, the indigenous shantytown that borders the capital city of La Paz, support sits at 66%. And, for the first time, just under half the population of Santa Cruz — historically the national heartland of reaction and white supremacy — approves of the government, even though it’s led by the country’s first indigenous president. Indeed, Morales as a personal figure is more popular than his administration as a whole, enjoying an extraordinary 73% approval rating in El Alto, and 51% in Santa Cruz.

The right-wing electoral opposition remains in a shambles. Samuel Doria Medina, a multimillionaire, leads the National Unity Front, the main political expression of the Right at the national level. Across the country, National Unity captured a dismal 21% approval rating in the same poll, notably failing even to inspire its natural base in Santa Cruz, where a meager 28% of residents expressed support. For its part, the center-left party Movement Without Fear, led by former La Paz mayor Juan del Granado, split from a long alliance with the government in 2010. It is presently going through internal elections to establish

its candidate for the 2014 presidential race, but no one is expecting much of a challenge to Morales from this camp, as its geographic influence doesn't extend much beyond the capital and its immediate vicinity.

## Interlocking Layers

**I**N HIS RECENT BOOK *The Rule of Law as Tyranny*, Luis Tapia, one of the great interpreters of Bolivia's most influential twentieth-century Marxist René Zavaleta Mercado, and now a left-wing critic of the Morales government, provides a moving cartography of the series of overlapping and intertwined social cleavages that cut across Bolivian history.

First, there is a structure of cleavages of a national or colonial type. Within this type there is, on the one hand, a division on a world-scale between the impoverished country of Bolivia and the various manifestations of neocolonial power arrayed above it. On the other hand, and still within the national-colonial cleavage, we encounter the internal colonial division between the economically and politically powerful light-skinned descendants of the Spanish colonizers, and the historically oppressed indigenous majority of workers and peasants. Bolivia is one of only two countries in Latin America — the other being Guatemala — where the indigenous population survived the conquest as a majority.

A second structure of cleavages, for Tapia, is rooted in the uneven economic development of capitalism. This includes the combination of different modes of production, capitalist and noncapitalist, over the course of Bolivian history. Also within this capitalist cleavage, there is the specific formation of the Bolivian working class since the late nineteenth century, which occurred on top of and through the already long-established internal race relations.

A third and final structure of cleavages is constituted through the competing ideological currents and clashing conceptions of culture and nation that grew out of and informed the evolution of the colonial and capitalist axes of power.

These myriad forms of domination and oppression, I discovered, are captured in a single frame through the architecture, geography, and sociology of the World Bank offices in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Sopocachi, in central La Paz. I arrived in late June for my morning appointment with a senior economist of the Bank's Bolivian operations. I'm cleanly shaven, nicely dressed, and packing my University of London credentials and Canadian

passport. At the base of one of only a few skyscrapers in the city, I detail my intentions and offer up my various papers to the indigenous Aymara security guard at the reception desk.

His hand is marked with the familiar tattoo indicating service in the military. In Bolivia, this is an ostensibly obligatory component of citizenship, but the wealthy consistently and openly buy their way out. The elevators are unlocked and I make my way up to the skies. The office space is mostly glass, but the receptionists and secretaries sit behind a slightly discolored, transparent, seemingly bulletproof shield, and address newcomers through speakers. I'm ushered into the waiting area, and eventually into a meeting room. Two light-skinned Bolivian economists arrive and we're served coffee and tea by an indigenous woman.

The city of La Paz, the highest capital in the world, is situated in an Andean valley which once was a giant lake. Ascending the mountainous walls of the valley, the poor build their brick or adobe houses, often without legal permit, and therefore always subject to the whims of the state. The higher the altitude, the more precarious the earth, the thinner the oxygen, and the gustier the winds. The poor live high. The poorest live in El Alto, a shantytown where 82% of the population identify as indigenous. It sits on the high plain, or *altiplano*, directly above the valley, and is contiguous with the capital city. On the top floors of the opulent bank offices, you're almost face-to-face with the escalating networks of poor *barrios* running down to the city center.

## Colonial Banking

**I**GIVE MY PROFESSIONAL CARD to both Bank officials, and while I begin the interview addressing the senior economist, I notice in my periphery that the junior one starts surfing the internet on his tablet. I'm sure he's going to find my research profile and that this meeting will sour quickly, but he remains mute for the formal part of the interview, and I am able in the end to conduct the process without hiccups.

What strikes me immediately is the Bank's overwhelming esteem for the macroeconomic management of the Morales administration. "Our overall evaluation of the economic record of the Bolivian government is very positive," the senior economist notes. "We are living through a cycle of growth that begins, in fact, before the first government of Evo Morales,

really as far back as 2003, but then accelerating in 2005 and 2006. So we're in a cycle of almost ten years of growth, something we haven't experienced in Bolivia for decades. With careful macroeconomic administration on the part of the government, within a spectacular external environment, this has permitted economic growth and, more importantly, a reduction in poverty, as well as a reduction in inequality."

This generic praise then concentrates on Morales's record of fiscal austerity. "Since data has been recorded," the Bank official emphasizes, "we have never had a situation in which for several years there has been a consistent budget surplus, as there has been since 2006. This is unheard of in Bolivia; it's absolutely atypical. This has resulted in a situation in which the public sector is receiving more than it is spending, which has meant an increase of savings for the government steadily since 2006."

Similarly noteworthy has been the "enormous accumulation of international reserves by the Bolivian state, flowing from massive sales of gas and mineral exports. This has led to a huge flow of dollars, and thus the growth in international reserves." If this weren't enough, the Bank sees reason to celebrate the financial sector as well. "The banks have never had a situation so healthy. They have grown incredibly."

Against this overarching environment, the World Bank has been able to build a close working relationship with the Morales administration, indeed one far closer in some ways than that with its predecessors. "The years immediately prior to 2006, as a result of political uncertainty and the rapid changing of presidents that we experienced, the work of the Bank in Bolivia had been reduced dramatically," according to the economist, "because basically there was no one definitively in government with whom to develop a strategy." Morales assumed office in 2006, after the overthrow by way of mass protests of neoliberal presidents Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003, and Carlos Mesa Gisbert in June 2005.

According to the Bank official, the initial contact with the government was "timid" because "we were new partners who still didn't know each other." But since that time, "we progressively moved closer in our relationship, with a lot of openness and flexibility on the part of the Bank. And so, very significantly, already by November 2006 we had established a two-year strategy with the new government," which defined key development priorities and the pillars of cooperation between the two entities.

Since then, among other agreements, a medium-term strategic accord between the Bank and the

government has been arrived at which will last until 2015. The thirteen World Bank projects now active in Bolivia have ushered in over \$500 million, two-thirds of which are geared toward "improving productivity in rural development," according to the official. The rest of the funds are geared toward infrastructure projects like road and highway development, as well as urban development initiatives.

A June 2012 IMF report on the financial institution's consultation process with the Bolivian government echoes the World Bank's accolades: "Prudent macroeconomic policies, accompanied by strong terms of trade, have allowed Bolivia to achieve impressive economic results over the last several years." If the Morales regime is initiating a long transition away from capitalism, and is in confrontation with imperialism, it would appear that for now, at least, it has the most powerful international financial institutions on board.

While speaking to World Bank officials in La Paz, I was taken back in time to a debate in London I participated in on Venezuelan politics immediately after the reelection of Hugo Chávez in October 2012. One of the other speakers, virulently anti-Chávez, was an economist from the conservative Economist Intelligence Unit. After attacking Chávez's record for what he took to be inflationary populism, he wistfully pointed to Bolivia's regime of austerity and macro-economic stability as a model for reasonable and rational Latin American governments to emulate.

## Realpolitik

**W**HEN I ASKED Prada Tejada about the weaknesses of the economy from a self-critical government perspective, she suggested that "one is the extent to which we've been unable to rupture fully with the preceding neoliberal model. Neoliberalism was introduced in this country through the Presidential Supreme Decree 20160 in 1985. Our government has abolished this decree. But neoliberalism only started with this decree, and from that basis, developed for over twenty years, resulting in an entire juridical and policy structure, and forms of thinking that are still with us today — the idea, for example, that there really is nothing possible beyond neoliberalism."

Because the MAS government did not come to power "through a violent revolution or armed struggle," Prada Tejada maintains that "we continue to live alongside the structures of the old state. The bureaucratic logic of these structures has not been

broken.” This leaves Bolivia “in a situation with two competing systems: the old one that has not finished dying, and the new one that has not yet been born. And, unfortunately, the old one has a tremendous historical weight and legacy on the present.” In sum, she explained, “it’s not possible to change the neoliberal model overnight.”

A parallel narrative is maintained in an interview I did during the same week in June with Manuel Canelas, a member of the editorial board of the new left-wing magazine *El Desacuerdo*. Canelas is one of the sharpest journalists critically defending the broad parameters of the present regime, and his conceptualization of rupture and continuity parallels in many respects the prolific analytical writings of vice president Álvaro García Linera. There is a dance in Canelas’s thinking between certain theoretical abstractions rooted in Latin American Marxism and critical European social theory on the one hand, and a resolute pragmatism when it comes to economics on the other.

“Morales’s assumption to office in 2006 marked a sharp change in the country,” Canelas argued. “The new government was able to unify two imaginaries that have run in parallel form throughout the history of the Bolivian left, and indeed the Latin American left. One is associated with the national-popular, from the period of import-substitution industrialization and the first populisms in the region, and the other is indigenism. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s there weren’t many points of coincidence between the two in Bolivia or Latin America generally. José Carlos Mariátegui is the Latin American theorist who historically tried to deal with this most thoroughly, but as vice president Álvaro García Linera has pointed out, the more traditional Marxism of Latin America had a limited epistemology in terms of being able to understand the question of ethnicity. The political project of the MAS incarnates both of these imaginaries in the figure of Evo Morales.”

I mentioned to Manuel that I agreed that these two imaginaries played a fundamental role in the 2000–2005 left-indigenous insurrectionary cycle, whether or not we could agree that they have been ultimately embodied in the person of Morales. But how does this story of rupture correspond to political-economic realities when we return to the concrete from these various abstractions? I pointed out to him what I took to be an apparent distance between García Linera’s radical speeches abroad to audiences of the international left, as in the recent Left Forum plenary in New York, and what is actually being carried out in terms

of economic policy within Bolivia by his government.

“I read this as a practical response to the realities on the ground in Bolivia,” Canelas stressed. “But what I read as pragmatism, others, for whom I have a great deal of respect intellectually, read as cynicism. I think García Linera has an appropriate blend of a long-term vision of radical change and a short-term vision that responds to the material realities of the country. He wouldn’t last two days in power if he tried to implement today his discourse at Left Forum, because it’s plainly evident that the social base of the MAS much prefers South Korean development models to Cuban ones.... Beyond ethically irreproachable platforms, if you govern, you need to improve the conditions of life of the people.”

Canelas was tired of what he and García Linera take to be facile, idealistic critiques coming from some quarters of the Bolivian left, which ostensibly don’t take into account the material obstacles to transitioning out of neoliberalism, much less capitalism.

The conversation reminded me of the one I had with Prada Tejada, a dialogue peppered with literary references to the works of Eduardo Galeano and expositions of Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation. I didn’t doubt her ideological commitment to transforming Bolivia’s economy. But what exactly are the early signals of any structural transition to a new model? What are the basic rhythms defining development in Bolivia under Morales, and what can we say about their relationship to the colonial, capitalist, ideological, and ecological cleavages that have run through Bolivia’s history?

When pushed, Canelas acknowledged that a story of rupture does not really work when it comes to political economy. “In spite of certain exaggerations in statements on the economy by the government, we are absolutely not living in any kind of postcapitalism, because given the realities we’ve inherited it would be impossible to try to do so,” he says, returning once again to the realism of this view, as compared to what he sees as the utterly idealist forms of critique coming from the radical Bolivian left. “More than that,” he sums up, “what we’re living through are very classical processes of modernization and economic development.”

## Getting Primary

**T**HE PROMINENT Uruguayan political ecologist Eduardo Gudynas provides a different set of clues for unpacking the present Bolivian moment in his analytical interventions on

## **INDIGENOUS SELF-GOVERNMENT IN BOLIVIA IS TO BE DEFENDED BY MORALES, IT WOULD SEEM, ONLY WHEN THE CLAIMS ARE TO TERRITORIES MARGINAL TO THE STATE'S DEVELOPMENT PROJECT.**

the “new extractivism” of center-left governments in South America. He positions the Morales regime and others directly within the logic of endless accumulation and expansion. In 2010 and 2011, South America achieved an average growth rate of 6.4%, with Paraguay hitting 15%, Argentina 9.2%, and Uruguay 8%. As we have seen, after a dip in 2009, Bolivia’s economy picked up again in 2010, 2011, and 2012, and even jumped to 6% in the first part of 2013.

Dynamics in South America and across the world market have set off a concerted shift towards the acceleration of mining, oil and gas extraction, and agro-industrial monoculture throughout the continent.

In other words, the uneven mutations of the ongoing world crisis have not resulted in low growth rates on an aggregate level across South America — at least not yet. Similar to the orthodox neoliberal period, massive multinational corporations are deeply imbricated in the extension of extraction at the heart of this commodity-led growth everywhere in the region. Those cases in which center-left governments have entered into joint contracts between state-owned enterprises and multinationals, and negotiated relatively higher royalties and taxes on these extractive activities, are no exception.

Skimming from the rent generated, many South American governments have established what Gudynas terms “compensatory states,” whose legitimacy rests on the modest redistribution achieved through the priming of often pre-existing cash-transfer programs to the extremely poor, without touching the underlying class structure of society. Indeed, the reproduction of these political economies

depends on states prioritizing the maintenance and security of private property rights and juridical environments in which multinationals can profit.

Because the legitimacy conferred by relatively petty handouts runs on the blood of extraction, the compensatory state increasingly becomes a repressive state, on behalf of capital, as the expansion of extraction necessarily accelerates what David Harvey has called accumulation by dispossession, and the variegated forms of resistance it regularly spawns.

These have been precisely the parameters defining the ongoing political crisis of the Territorio Indígena del Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure (TIPNIS) in Bolivia. Morales’s greenlight in 2011 to a decades-old plan to build a highway connecting Villa Tunari (in the department of Cochabamba), north to San Ignacio de Moxos (in the department of Beni) through an indigenous territory and national park was the catalyst of crisis in this instance. The TIPNIS highway conflict has set off indigenous marches by those asserting their right to self-government and prior consultation before any development project is planned and executed.

The government in turn has sponsored counter-demonstrations, as well as police repression of the opposition, who it claims is manipulated, even led, by foreign NGOs and the domestic right. While there is evidence that American interests and the Bolivian right have sought to intervene in the crisis to their own ends — as they will always do given the opportunity — the organic character of the movement’s core is difficult to dismiss even by the most blinkered government loyalists. It is worthwhile to note, too, the presence of voices within the TIPNIS indigenous

marches that have been critical of their organizations' leaderships for being insufficiently attuned to the Right's attempts to co-opt their struggle.

But the steamrolling of the rights to self-governance of indigenous communities resisting highway construction through their territory illustrates the coercive wing of the compensatory state in action. Indigenous self-government in Bolivia is to be defended by Morales, it would seem, only when the claims are to territories marginal to the state's development project.

Canelas disagrees. "In the case of the TIPNIS," he told me, "I have a lot of friends who broke with the government. What worries me," he continues, echoing almost to the letter the administration's line, "is that if you have the material conditions that we have in Bolivia you can't have the environmental vision of Switzerland. It's a country that is incredibly poor. And there's a correspondence in this country between the absence of highway infrastructure and poverty. A political party that took up a political-ecologist stance of not developing the TIPNIS, and not developing petroleum, and I don't know what else, would never win even five thousand votes in this country. From academia, it's more or less easy to propose theoretical incoherence between the statements and practice of the vice president, but it's another thing if you have to govern. You have to respond to the social base of the country, and what they will support, and so you have to be more conservative."

Dunia Mokrani and Pilar Uriona reject this kind of politics of ultimatums in the latest issue of Latin America's most important journal of critical sociology, *Observatorio Social de América Latina*. In the context of the Morales government's vilification of TIPNIS protesters, "it becomes increasingly difficult to develop a dialogue that does not negate the legitimacy of demands for the improvement of the material conditions of life of the most vulnerable populations in Bolivia, while at the same time not rejecting as illegitimate the choice of indigenous peoples to preserve their territories and strengthen their own systems and forms of authority and decision making. This also needs to be recognized as absolutely valid."

The compensatory state, according to Gudynas, co-opts and coerces in response to such signs of opposition, and builds an accompanying ideological apparatus to defend multinationals — an ideology in which communities of resistance are vilified as internal enemies acting in concert with, or even in the pay of, various instruments of imperialism. The

discursive gestures of state officials, of course, safely set to one side the obvious imperial character of the dispossessing activities of multinational corporations — now called "partners" rather than "bosses" in development — within the matrix of the new extractivism.

The logic of extractivism has its particular expressions in the Bolivian case. In regards to natural gas extraction, it's worth remembering that in the first administration of orthodox neoliberal Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993–1997), the Bolivian state attempted to extend the area designated for gas exploration and exploitation to approximately thirteen million hectares. When this initiative was defeated through indigenous resistance in different areas of the Amazon, the multinational petroleum corporations were forced to concentrate on their mega-gas fields in the south of the country, above all in Tarija.

At the end of 2011, however, Morales had taken up this bit of the defeated mantle of Sánchez de Lozada, and proposed the extension of gas exploration and exploitation to roughly twelve million hectares — an area four times as great as that in 2009. Of this area, close to 50% was conceded entirely to multinationals. New government measures introduced in 2012 will likely significantly increase this area, bringing the level of extraction of gas in the country to unprecedented levels.

Likewise, in mining, spokespeople for the Morales government have announced initiatives for the large-scale expansion of mining activities beyond those in the traditional zones of the *altiplano*, or western high plateau, where mining has been underway since the colonial era. Much of this new mining will involve opening new frontiers into the Amazon.

Similar to other cases of dispossession from Mexico to Chile, the geographies being encroached on in Bolivia for extending gas and mineral extraction, together with the growth of agro-industrial production (the majority of which is soya production under the control of Brazilian capital), include protected areas of biodiversity and indigenous territories which are currently among the last regions of the country relatively free of industrial and commercial activity, and which are, at the moment, governed by ecologically sustainable economies. It is the logic of accumulation by dispossession at the heart of this tripartite process — mining, gas, and agro-industry — that has generated the TIPNIS conflict, and which will generate many more socio-ecological conflicts into the future.

I met with Pilar Uriona on this same trip to Bolivia.

In addition to being a member of the Bolivian committee of the OSAL editorial board, and acting as the coordinator of the Bolivian left and workers' archives for the Amsterdam-based International Institute of Social History, she is one of Bolivia's most creative socialist-feminist theorists. "There is undoubtedly this context of the pressures of the external market and Bolivia's dependency," she told me when I asked her about continuities of extractivism under Morales, "but I don't believe in the idea that there are no alternatives. We are capable of experimenting with different modalities of self-sustenance."

It angers her that radical critics are often represented in the steady condescension of government rhetoric as infantile ultra-leftists who just can't understand the material obstacles to real economic and ecological change in the present moment. "In any case," she noted, "the question has never been whether the extraction of natural resources is good or bad in its totality, but rather the question is one of sustainability. We have to take advantage of our natural resources to meet our needs, but we also need to set limits on this exploitation, and these limits need to have some association with our discourse. If you're going to say that you are not going to damage Mother Earth, there are limits to continuing with extractivism. Obviously we are integrated into the international market based on our hydrocarbon and mining industries, but there are limits to this model of development, where the immediate economic benefits run up against our future, our environment, our quality of life: the component parts of the idea of *buen vivir*, living well, one of the discursive ideas of this government. At what point does the government's commitment to neo-extractivism contradict this commitment to *buen vivir*? I don't believe that we're so dependent on the external environment that we are incapable of saying no to Brazil over the construction of a highway running through TIPNIS, or that we can't negotiate so that highways are developed elsewhere."

### The Laboring Classes

**A** GLANCE AT THE CONDITION of the laboring classes in the context of the primary commodities boom provides more reason for concern. Between 2010 and 2011, for example, the first year of the second Morales administration, unemployment experienced a small drop of one point to 7.9%. The drop was associated, according to economists at the left-wing think tank CEDLA, to conjunctural

factors such as a spike in commerce and construction and an increase in public investment resulting in more social-service employment. At the same time, the industrial manufacturing sector was shedding workers. This is indicative of a more general trend in which new demand for jobs tends to be concentrated in non-unionized, temporary contract work, with low skill and even lower pay.

The economists at CEDLA also examined rates of underemployment, which they see as having visible and invisible components. Visible underemployment occurs when people are obligated to work fewer hours than the normal working day, while invisible underemployment occurs when individuals receive a salary or wage that is insufficient to cover the cost of goods indispensable for survival. Underemployment of these two kinds grew to 17% of the working population in 2011.

The Morales government has advertised its successes in improving the minimum wage over its period in office, but these claims, according to CEDLA, generally fail to take into account rising consumption costs, and particularly the rising cost of basic food items over the same period, which have spiked above the rate of inflation. For the poor, who spend a much bigger proportion of their income on food than the rich, this is a vital point. Meanwhile, both minimum and average wages in Bolivia remain the lowest in Latin America.

Natural gas and mining, the real pillars of the Morales extractive strategy, still accounted for 18% of total GDP in 2011, well above agriculture (9.78%) and manufacturing (7.78%). But in neither economic sector do the most technologically advanced, capital-intensive, privately-owned components produce much employment. As a result, one celebrated feature of Morales's approach to mining has been a strategic alliance with the so-called cooperative mining sector, which does account for a significant number of jobs. For all the attention the nationalization of the Huanuni mine received early in the Morales administration, the total state-owned mining sector employed only 6,186 workers by 2010. Cooperatives, by comparison, employ 65,828 workers, while other large and medium non-cooperative private mines account for 7,297 workers.

The interests of the cooperative sector are represented at a national level through the National Federation of Cooperative Miners (FENCOMIN). Their influence in the current government is reflected in the fact that the first Minister of Mines for Morales was Walter Villarroel, a former president of

FENCOMIN. Current MAS senators Efraín Condori, Pascual Huarachi and Andrés Vilca were presidents of FENCOMIN between 1998-2000, 2005-2006, and 2006-2010 respectively. The current Vice-Minister of Cooperative Mining in the MAS government, Isaac Meneses, was president of the cooperative federation of the department of Oruro. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that of the 879 private mining concessions granted in the country between 2008 and 2012, 514 went to the cooperative sector. In geographic scale, the sector went from controlling 73,000 hectares of concessions in 2008 to 216,000 hectares in 2012. The total number of cooperatives in operation grew from 447 to 1,400 over the same period.

While the term cooperative has an egalitarian ring, the reality is that this system is organized across an extremely stratified array of social groups, at the top of which is an emergent bourgeoisie in control of medium-sized entities, and, still higher up the food chain, now very large private enterprises. These, in turn, are in the majority doing contract work for private international mining giants, who purchase significant amounts of the minerals extracted from the cooperative sector and commercialize them outside the country. Because of their unique juridical status, cooperatives pay few royalties and no taxes to the state.

What is most important, however, for any profile of the laboring classes, are the lower layers of the cooperative order – the new informal, precarious, contracted-out proletarians. These workers are exploited in the extreme, and often under conditions reminiscent of the colonial period. Within cooperatives, monthly salaries don't exist. Pay varies according to what each worker is able to extract, usually utilizing virtually no modern machinery, in a fixed amount of time. Normally the pay is terrible, given the fact that many are working in mines that have long since been tapped dry of their riches. In those cooperative mines that have been the subject of investigation, scarcely 16% of the workforce receives any social security in addition to pay.

The lack of mechanization, technology, and coordination of the work in the cooperative mines creates hazardous environments. The lung disease silicosis is rampant in the workforce, as are rheumatic disorders stemming from exposure to toxic gases. Indelible damage to body posture from the confined mining areas is a common problem, while exposure to massive extremes in temperature is at the root of other health problems. Risk of death due to uncoordinated explosions, mine collapse, and exposure to toxic gases

is a constant worry in workers' lives. While many cooperative miners work an eight-hour day, there are regular reports of working days lasting up to sixteen hours in some cooperatives. The participation of children in this workforce is also high, and has been denounced by the International Labour Organization.

A government describing itself as socialist might be expected in the face of this reality to be transitioning toward the extension of the state-owned mining sector along with the expansion of worker and social control in these entities. But the Morales government has consistently supported the growth of the cooperatives, while simultaneously pushing forward a new mining law which it hopes will attract higher levels of investment from foreign multinationals.

It's no surprise, then, that in May, through the initiative of the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), state-employed miners went on a strike for better pensions and salaries that lasted over two weeks, and shut down highways with roadblocks as well as closing the mines themselves. They were met with police repression and ideological defamation campaigns by the vice president and other representatives of the government as right-wing enemies of the "process of change." That strike is over, with minor concessions granted to the workers, but the negotiations between the COB and the government on pensions continues unresolved.

## Gramsci in Bolivia

INCREASINGLY, critical Latin American theorists are returning to Gramsci's notion of passive revolution in an attempt to conceptualize the processes of containment occurring in many South American states presently occupied by left governments.

For the Italian-born, Mexican-based theorist Massimo Modonesi, for example, the South American passive revolution today involves a process of modernization pushed forward from above, which partially and carefully recognizes demands coming from those positioned below; through this process, the state managers guarantee more the passivity and silence of the popular movements than their complicity.

New state-society relations are built up by these regimes, creating precarious but surprisingly lasting equilibriums that function for the reproduction of extractive capitalism amid an expansionary period in commodity prices. At the top of the new configuration of power rests a charismatic populist alongside the institutional mechanisms of bureaucratization.

In the Bolivian case, Tapia has perhaps done more than most to advance this argument. He tries to understand how a radical left-indigenous insurrectionary process that overthrew two neoliberal presidents through mass mobilization was contained and redirected into the consolidation of a state-capitalist process of modernization from above, built on an alliance with multinational capital interested in extracting natural resources during a commodities boom.

The recent commentary of Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar is another expression of the Left's attempt to wrestle with this phenomenon. Gutiérrez was born in Mexico and studied philosophy and math before becoming deeply involved in the struggle of exiled Salvadoran members of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in Mexico in the 1980s.

Taking a page from the FMLN, Gutiérrez went to Bolivia in the 1980s, becoming a founding member of the Tupak Katari Guerrilla Army (EGTK), together with her then-partner and current Bolivian vice president Álvaro García Linera. After accompanying the Aymara and Quechua indigenous insurgencies of the late 1980s and early 1990s in the western highlands, she spent five years imprisoned in Bolivia. When she was released, she was briefly a member of the left-wing Bolivian intellectual collective The Commune (which also included Tapia and García Linera, among others). Gutiérrez then returned to Mexico to write up a doctoral thesis in sociology on the left-indigenous insurrectionary period.

She was in Buenos Aires in late June, and while there discussed contemporary politics in Bolivia and Ecuador with an Argentinian journalist: "What is obvious is that in those countries where social mobilization was strong, the predominance of the interests of the most powerful transnational capital remains in place, and indeed appears to have 'captured' the state forms that have been rebuilt after the shock of the last decade... as in Ecuador or Bolivia, where indigenous peoples again and again have to defend their territories against the imposition of politics without their consultation, while their lives are threatened by new forms of looting – while, in South America, supposedly this is being advanced for the well-being of these same indigenous peoples."

As the recent sociopolitical eruptions on an incredible scale in Dilma Rousseff's Brazil attest, however, the comfortable turnover of passive revolution is hardly guaranteed. Since Morales began his second term in office, the contradictions between

the different social movements historically aligned with his program and the ruling state managers have been intensifying.

The so-called *gasolinazo* in December 2010 witnessed urban popular revolts against an austerity measure ending subsidies to domestic gas consumption. A series of strikes and conflicts in the mining sector has sharpened the gulf separating the interests of state-employed miners and the elite who control the cooperative sector, and is increasingly forcing the Morales government to make its class commitments clear. The TIPNIS conflict, more than any other, has challenged the government's claims to be building a plurinational state, one attuned to the historic demands for self-governance by the different indigenous nations within Bolivian territorial space. Indeed, TIPNIS seems to have revealed the weight of the logic of the regular accumulation of capital in Bolivia in the current period, and the state's commitment to reproducing the necessary conditions underlying that accumulation.

Politically, the chasm between the government's rhetorical commitment to revolutionary transformation and its practical developments in economic policy has begun to wear not only on the alliances between social movements and the state, but also within different sectors of the governing party itself. Major figures representative of the party's most left-wing and anticolonial components have abandoned ship, or been forced out in recent years, including Lino Willca, Román Loayza, Félix Patzi, Alejandro Almaraz, Alex Contreras, Raúl Prada, Gustavo Guzmán, and Pablo Salón. Furthermore, Canelas reported ongoing conflicts – some verifiable, others still political rumor – between the powerful Foreign Minister, David Choquehuanca, and Vice President García Linera, which reached peaks in internal debate within the government over the *gasolinazo* and TIPNIS. While an electoral challenge to the Morales administration from the Left is unlikely to garner much support in 2014, the near future is likely to see the amplification of those already visible tensions.

The dispiriting reaction of the Morales government so far has been to more rigidly coordinate the movements of the popular Andean peasant organizations that remain loyal, and to delegitimize critics on the Left as reactionaries in disguise, even while forging closer electoral linkages with formerly right-wing opposition forces in Santa Cruz.

It's all quite some distance from the "twenty-first-century socialism" Western commentators often laud. ■



# Regrounding Hollywood

*Gravity* represents a return to the “sensation cinema” of the 1910s.

by Eileen Jones

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**R**AVITY is one of those intense film experiences that people discuss in terms of their bodily reactions to it. Although such viscerality tends to be deplored by film critics, they've jumped on the *Gravity* bandwagon along with the general public. Enthusiasm for the film got pervasive enough to bring the usual damp personalities out of the woodwork, keen to explain to everyone why they're wrong to feel things. What, they ask, is so great about a movie featuring Sandra Bullock hyperventilating in space?

For the record, here's what's so great.

*Gravity* represents a return to “sensation cinema,” in particular the fast-paced female-centered action serials of the 1910s such as *The Perils of Pauline*, *The Exploits of Elaine*, and *The Hazards of Helen*. Borrowing the relentless crisis structure from the old serials, *Gravity* features the same kind of catalyzing breakdown of technology as in *The Hazards of Helen*, plus the action heroine who grapples with it. When Sandra Bullock's character is faced with the absurdly impossible task of hopscotching from one type of spacecraft to another in oxygen-free zero gravity, she enacts a millennial version of Helen's awesome leaps from motorcycle to train to speeding car in one continuous chain of disaster-avoiding stunts and thrills.

This is a good development, because Hollywood desperately needs an alternative genre film model to the increasingly dull and cumbersome action/sci-fi/fantasy/superhero epic that's been the tent-pole propping up the American film industry since the 1980s. Other than the emphasis on action, the two approaches to genre film are opposites. Sensation cinema tends to be short and fast — *Gravity* clocks in at a brisk 91 minutes — while tent-pole films are long, often weighing in around two-and-a-half hours, and operate on a principle of piling on value in exchange for the exorbitant price of movie tickets, in the form of big stars, massive spectacle, and a padded running time.

Sensation cinema flows swiftly from one thrill to the next, gathering momentum; tent-pole films tend to lumber along between big set-piece action scenes, heavy on the hardware and weaponry and involving a cast of thousands. Sensation cinema establishes a precarious situation and then spins out the wild possibilities in a series of enjoyably hair-raising escapes from death, whereas tent-pole films tend to have, as Joe Bob Briggs used to say, “way too much plot getting in the way of the story.”

It was quite a poignant thing, hearing the first reactions to *Gravity* when it opened. People expressing amazement at being viscerally affected by a film, almost unable to believe they felt something intensely because of a film. Yes, it’s come to this. We no longer expect movies to move, in any sense of the word.

But *Gravity* helpfully points us back to the sensation cinema practices of the silent era, and it’s dimly possible that the American film industry might save itself by learning, or relearning, from them.

Sensation cinema used to encompass a range of genres, from crime melodrama to action-adventure to the “thrill comedy” of Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. (The great French serial *Les Vampires*, with its daredevil female anti-heroine Irma Vep stunting through every episode, is one of the more well-known and admired examples of sensation cinema nowadays.) The genres had in common a tendency to regard the modern world as a surreally dangerous place of continuous shocks, jolts, and crises, requiring a new kind of person to navigate it. The trauma of the modernist experience was converted into “trauma thrills” actively sought by audiences of the walking wounded who flocked to see fantastical versions of what they were experiencing everyday on city streets, in factories and high-rises, on heavily trafficked roads and in packed trains and trolleys.

As argued by film scholar Jennifer Bean in “Trauma Thrills: The Early Action Cinema,” the *Hazards of Helen* serial represents both the deep anxieties and the exciting possibilities of the modernist experience. If you look at episodes of *Hazards of Helen*, you see a young woman facing a single technological malfunction that spirals into a series of life-threatening near-disasters in the form of the failed workings of mass transportation and mass communication. While the male bosses place all their faith in the efficient functioning of their machinery, Helen spots the inevitable breakdowns and cheerfully heads out to grapple with them.

The Soviet theorists and filmmakers of the 1910s and 1920s were particularly interested in these kinds

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of American films, which they studied in terms of cinema’s capacity to foster the creation of revolutionary subjects. According to Jennifer Bean, Sergei Eisenstein drew on the example of sensation cinema in developing the shock effects of montage for his “cinema of attractions.” The idea was to create an impact of “dynamic, uncertain volatility” through the moving image of the moving body, and, in the process of jangling the nerve endings of the audience, to “make things strange, and thus to cut a reflexive path through the viewer’s habituated response to the everyday.”

In the service of creating such an impact, Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky argued that filmmakers

should “stop wasting film on psychological rummaging and all those arty prose poems clearly alien to the constitution of cinema.... Plot in film is only necessary to motivate the *tryuk* [trick, stunt, acrobatic feat].”

Helen’s tricks, stunts, and acrobatic feats are a response to as well as a reward for recognizing the inevitable malfunctioning of a complex system. Helen is the progressive New Woman of the 1910s because systemic breakdown can be played to her advantage, destabilizing her male bosses and keeping her athletically on the move and exhilarated by movement.

Unfortunately, in *Gravity*, our contemporary Helen (Sandra Bullock) possesses no such joyful energy. She’s “Dr Ryan Stone,” elevated in status but incapacitated in every other way. “Stone” is one of those metaphorical names, referring to the character’s deadened sensibilities and tendency to sit there dumbly when action is imperative. When she stops being stony, she starts weeping and contemplating suicide.

It’s been argued by various critics that the weakest point of the film is the mess of “psychological rummaging” on the part of screenwriters Alfonso Cuarón (who also directs) and his son Jonas, resulting in a stunted female character with a ponderous backstory about a deceased daughter. It takes many near-death space-traumas and a hallucinatory visit from George Clooney to finally restore her will to live.

And it’s true that this character arc is merely tiresome, unless you think of it in sensation-cinema terms. Then you see it has power: witnessing this moribund character get moving is a huge relief and a genuine thrill. *Gravity*’s starting point is not the New Woman of a progressive era who welcomes systemic breakdown and leaps into action as a liberating force, but the fitting heroine for our dismal time. We get a glum, played-out career woman with cosmetically perfect muscle tone but no apparent athleticism, who’s so incapacitated by depression she’s inert and useless in a crisis. She’s a “genius” who helped design part of the spacecraft, but she knows almost nothing about how to fly it. The inspiring phrase that finally motivates her to make the extra effort to save her own life isn’t any memorable rallying cry; it’s George Clooney’s glib, prosaic little line, “You can always do something.”

This line is almost painfully relevant to our current state of bogged-down political helplessness. We should all hit the streets carrying signs saying “YOU CAN ALWAYS DO SOMETHING.” Maybe that would help us figure out what, exactly. It worked for Dr

### Ryan Stone!

To see such a hopeless drip of a character forced from stasis to movement, from miserable quiescence to desperate risk-taking action that overcomes even the most incredible odds, is exactly what we need to experience viscerally a thousand times over. In Stone’s defense, her “hazards” are infinitely more hazardous than Helen’s. Helen could thrive in an industrial world that was complex and daunting but still comprehensible. The allegorical “space” of *Gravity* offers no such comforts; as the film starts by informing us, “life in space is impossible.” Much has been written about the formidable combination of 3-D CGI, innovative camera effects, robotics, and elaborate wire-work in *Gravity* necessary to make us feel the dreadfulness of zero gravity, no oxygen, and the human being’s total reliance on perfectly functioning technology to survive in such conditions.

The environment is entirely alien, the technology necessary to live in it has gone far beyond our ken, and humans float around haplessly waiting for the next systemic breakdown and trying to come up with the motivation to keep on struggling. It’s hard not to identify with that set of circumstances.

Cuarón “makes things strange” by shocking viewers with the now-unfamiliar physical symptoms provoked by sensation cinema, and keeping us in something like the state of electrified disequilibrium recommended by Soviet theorist-filmmakers as a precursor to acquiring revolutionary viewpoints. Among Cuarón’s earliest shock effects is making us feel the nausea of sharing Stone’s point of view while un tethered and spinning in space, and the edge of panic when we realize there’s no immediate prospect of the spinning coming to an end as she, and we, drift and revolve through the void. Then Cuarón enforces so rigorous a crisis structure that it finally achieves a kind of hilarity and exhilaration at the prospect of further crises.

We become crisis junkies. When, in a crazy rush of climactic scenes, Ryan Stone manages to ride a fire extinguisher to the last spacecraft, survive the craft’s fiery reentry into Earth’s atmosphere, live through the crash-landing, then nearly drown in the ocean, all I could think was, “Great, what’s next? Shark attack? Cannibals on the island over there? Let’s keep this party going!”

Dr Ryan Stone never really manifests any love of crisis for the sake of its revivifying shock. But out in the audience, we learn to appreciate it, with something like the bracing energy of good old Helen, a queen of disequilibrium. ■

# In Praise of White Elephants

Though easy targets for fiscal hawks, public architecture that's luxurious and dramatic — even excessive — should be ours as a right.

by Owen Hatherley

**A**CCORDING TO SANTIAGO CALATRAVA, there is a Communist conspiracy against him in the Valencia City Council. The hometown of the world-famous engineer-architect is littered with his structures, which have become tourist calling cards — here he has designed the City of Arts and Sciences, a multi-building arts complex, along with metro stations and bridges. The conspiracy, if it is one, has emerged because of the huge expense involved in the upkeep of those structures, which a cash-strapped council is no longer able to undertake to the architect's exacting specifications.

While most “icon” buildings are demonstratively useless — often galleries and museums whose form is of far greater importance than their functions — what Calatrava specializes in is infrastructure, or rather, making things that should be entirely functional utterly useless. He is not a particularly original designer. His railway stations are visibly inspired by the faintly kitsch futurism of the high Cold War era, evoking especially the “organic” concrete structure of Eero Saarinen’s TWA Terminal for JFK Airport. Calatrava’s railway stations in Zurich and Lisbon, or the incongruously immense (and frankly, breathtaking) Guillemins Station in the Belgian steel town of Liège, are intended to give the effect of an immense organism into whose concrete ribs you are plunged in order to buy your ticket and get your train.

The organic metaphor is ubiquitous and deliberately played upon by the architect — the concept is the metaphor, and the metaphor is an advert, an easily remembered cliché. Here, Calatrava is a truly heinous offender — his description of the new station for the World Trade Center site in New York as “a dove released from a child’s hand” deserves pride of place in the annals of architects’ bullshit. There’s also no doubt his stations need a huge amount of maintenance to keep their sheen. Although his designs make great play of their structure, making a spectacle of their bone-like frames, these are invariably painted a gleaming white, as nothing is loathed — especially by urban regenerators — so much as bare concrete.

But that constant maintenance is only one of the problems with Calatrava’s work. For a trained engineer, he has notoriously little interest in economy of structure. As a rule, since the mid nineteenth century, the aim in bridge design has been to achieve the greatest structural feats with the scarcest of means — to do “more with less,” in Buckminster Fuller’s phrase. That line probably reached its peak in recent years with Norman Foster’s Millau Viaduct, which spans a vast canyon with little more than thin spindles of concrete and steel. For Calatrava, though, organic metaphor trumps all, and the structural purpose of his bridges — in Dublin, Salford, Dallas, Venice and elsewhere — is subordinated to their rhetorical purpose, as sweeping statements of the transformation of industrial docks and canals into showpieces of real-estate speculation. They must billow, swoop, and spiral, because otherwise they wouldn’t be eye-catching as advertisements. The preference for shiny cladding leads to some literal pitfalls — his bridges in Venice and Bilbao both have tiles which, it’s been claimed, are too slippery to walk on. The resultant lack of interest in economy is now rebounding on the architect, although he could fairly plead this is what he was hired for.

The city of Valencia evidently has very good reasons for wanting to prosecute Calatrava. But as the monuments to the neoliberal boom become white elephants, we should not get too carried away with schadenfreude (though come to think of it, one can easily imagine Calatrava designing an airport “inspired by the form of the bones of a white elephant”).

The UK, for instance, now faces the question of what to do with a legacy of large and dramatic arts centers, galleries, and museums built in post-industrial cities outside the capital. Like Calatrava’s

work, they are a matter of rhetoric and regeneration, obvious signs that “something” was “being done” for these stricken towns: the National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield by Nigel Coates; The Public in West Bromwich by Will Alsop; the New Art Gallery in Walsall by Caruso St John; the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art by Erick van Egeraat; and Urbis in Manchester by Ian Simpson, among many others.

Most of them were at least partly funded by the National Lottery, and a tax on the poor to fund the arts is not admirable. Many, if not all of them, are as architecturally vacuous as Calatrava — one-line architectural blipverts. Some, like Sheffield’s “pop centre,” were abandoned within a couple of years of their opening. Others, like Urbis or The Public, are shifting their functions toward something less arty. Though there’s truth to the argument that this money could have been better put toward, say, an industrial policy, or research and development, rather than buildings that offer few tangible benefits to the towns in question other than jobs serving coffee and “outreach” to local schools, it is conservatives who see no reason why provincial cities should have arts centers in the first place. Such things are for London — why should the plebes want to see installations?

But that same argument is used against public infrastructure spending. During the boom, Spain — in great contrast to Britain — poured money into public transportation, with a post-industrial city like Bilbao building a Foster-designed Metro system. The exorbitance of the Athens Metro, extended for the purposes of the Calatrava-designed Olympic complex, is often used as an exemplar of the foolishness with which Greece spent before its financial collapse.

The Left should be very careful here, as this is an austerity argument — an argument against public space and the public good. An argument, essentially, that we cannot have nice things — that bridges, railway stations, and art galleries are somehow dubious means of spending “taxpayers’ money.” The twisted right-wing mutation of social democracy that dominated Europe during the boom seldom had the public interest at heart, and every concession to it had to be balanced by something profit-making. But for its conservative successors, the public interest is entirely nonexistent.

Public buildings and structures that are luxurious, dramatic, even excessive — if hopefully less whimsical and egotistical than those of Calatrava — should be ours as a right, not as a reservation for the wealthy. ■

# My Brooklyn, Not Yours

*Every time I go back to Brownsville it is as if I had never been away. From the moment I step off the train at Rockaway Avenue and smell the leak out of the men's room, then the pickles from the stand just below the subway steps, an instant rage comes over me, mixed with dread and some unexpected tenderness.*

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by Laura Tanenbaum

Books

**S**O WROTE LITERARY CRITIC Alfred Kazin at the start of *A Walker in the City*, his 1951 account of his return to his old neighborhood.

To the contemporary ear, the tenderness is not unexpected. From Kazin's pickles to officially sanctioned nostalgia for the Dodgers and Coney Island; from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Betty Smith's chronicle of life among Williamsburg's immigrants in the early twentieth century, to *Crooklyn*, Spike Lee's love letter to 1970s Bed-Stuy, and Jonathan Lethem's immensely popular *The Fortress of Solitude*, nostalgia has played an outsized role in the way Brooklyn has been depicted, thought about, written about, and talked about. Brooklyn nostalgia has long had a high kitsch factor, as Woody Allen acknowledged two generations ago in *Annie Hall* when he gave Alvy Singer a more-Brooklyn-than-Brooklyn upbringing: he didn't just go to Coney Island every summer, he lived there, and he didn't just live there, he lived under the Cyclone.

But Brooklyn nostalgia has done more than sell hot dogs and baseball memorabilia. As Suleiman Osman outlines in *The Invention of Brownstone*



Brooklyn, in the early 1960s a flourishing literature of what he terms “urban pastoralism” challenged developers and urban renewal through nostalgic appeals to the authenticity of “urban villages” and daily street life. These writings by artists, activists, and academics, most famously Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, inspired and shaped the views of “brownstoners,” homeowners who sought to resist

the tide of suburbanization and white flight. But by the 1970s, Osman shows, coalitions between brownstoners and low-income residents had unraveled; Democratic New York City mayor Ed Koch turned this politics toward conservative ends. Koch “reveled in ethnic kitsch and cultivated a folksy image of a neighborhood New Yorker” while complaining about “poverty pimps.” It was the Southern strategy

with an outer-borough accent.

More than thirty years later, the crush of development marches forward. Brooklyn is a global brand: overpriced trinkets to be sold at Brooklyn Pizza in Manila, Brooklyn Coffeeshop in Curitiba, Brazil, or one of the other global Brooklyns featured in *New York* magazine's retrospective of the Bloomberg era. But hip culture in the United States has long had a deep romantic and nostalgic streak, and the hipster's most recent incarnation, central to the current branding of Brooklyn, has been no exception.

The role of artists and hipsters in gentrification — specifically, their degree of complicity in the resulting displacement of low-income residents — has been endlessly debated. Were they the developers' dupes, their victims, or their willing accomplices? Less often commented upon is the implicit equation behind these questions: associating artists with gentrification suggests that an artist has to be white. This is a particularly bitter irony for a borough and a city that has historically been and remains home to some of the most important African-American artists, musicians, filmmakers, writers, and intellectuals in the country. Looking at hipster culture in relationship to *their* work offers alternative ways of thinking about how the city changes, how we remember it, and what it might mean to oppose the march of neoliberal development without relying on a nostalgia that reflects our memories and desires more than our actual history.

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**F**OR MANY African-American writers and intellectuals, nostalgia is first and foremost a mechanism by which white Americans deny what is obvious and readily apparent about their country's history. In 1961, James Baldwin wrote "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" in response to his friend Norman Mailer's infamous "The White Negro," which celebrated violence and sexual potency as an antidote to an overcivilized, conformist society. Under Mailer's macho posture, Baldwin found a wounded child whose presumed sophistication belied an investment in American notions of innocence: "I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream, unfailingly and unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives."

The nostalgia of white liberals like Kazin was more measured, but perhaps not as reasoned as they

thought. Osman argues that laments like Kazin's upon visiting his old neighborhood represented a new strain in liberal thinking about the city. Elegizing the slums where they grew up or with which they felt ethnic solidarity and recognition, they theorized that the problem with the "new slums" — that is, neighborhoods that were no longer white — was that they lacked the social cohesion of earlier slums. They embodied atomization and alienation, the very things gentrifiers associated with suburban life and were hoping to escape by creating a suitable urban middle-class alternative. Because this was a moral argument based on subjective measures, it was impossible to tell how the pull of one's own childhood might affect the analysis. As Osman notes, the great urbanist Marshall Berman took pains to distance his anti-development classic *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* from this sort of nostalgia, emphasizing the crimes that Robert Moses had committed against Berman's boyhood home in the Bronx, rather than mourning for it.

This yearning for a lost sense of community lives on today in the most potent political formation of hip culture: the highly nostalgic, romantic strain that Mark Grief calls "neo-primitivism." Bike culture, local food culture, and artisanal culture attempt to connect hipsters to the neighborhoods they're accused of gentrifying. Relentlessly local even as Brooklyn becomes a global brand, this strain has much in common with the earlier, civically minded generation of brownstoners. In *New York*, Annie Novak, founder of a Greenpoint rooftop farm, asserts her bona fides: "People can make fun of hipster culture as much as they want, but at the end of the day, it's a lot of people who are doers." Where brownstoners had tried to defend city life at a time it was presumed to be in decline, neo-primitivists look to the city for ways to respond to looming ecological catastrophe.

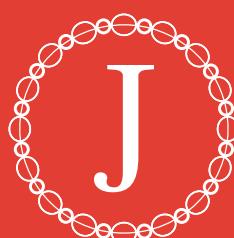
If Kazin, Berman, and Jacobs wrote political arguments that drew on the emotional resonances of expressive literature, Jonathan Lethem's 2003 novel *The Fortress of Solitude* was in turn a kind of civic project, positing an imagined and usable past that could offer a sense of investment in the borough to which many had recently arrived. It tells the story of Dylan, the son of early brownstoners in Gowanus, and his friendship with Mingus, the son of a once famous musician. Dylan's mother embodies the contradictions of white liberalism; Dylan attends a public neighborhood school with Mingus through junior high, but their paths separate when he attends the public but exclusive Stuyvesant High School and the fictional Camden College, "one part lunatic preserve

**THE ROLE OF ARTISTS AND HIPSTERS IN GENTRIFICATION — SPECIFICALLY, THEIR DEGREE OF COMPLICITY IN THE RESULTING DISPLACEMENT OF LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS — HAS BEEN ENDLESSLY DEBATED. WERE THEY THE DEVELOPERS' DUPES, THEIR VICTIMS, OR THEIR WILLING ACCOMPLICES? LESS OFTEN COMMENTED UPON IS THE IMPLICIT EQUATION BEHIND THESE QUESTIONS: ASSOCIATING ARTISTS WITH GENTRIFICATION SUGGESTS THAT AN ARTIST HAS TO BE WHITE.**

for wayward children of privilege, those too familiar with psych counseling and rehab to follow older siblings to Harvard and Yale.” *Fortress* returns obsessively to Dylan’s childhood, recreating a wondrous and fantastical experience of boyhood. Children in this pre-helicopter-parenting world are excused from productive labor and market logic, devoting endless hours to consuming music and popular culture. The boys even find a ring that allows them to fly, a particularly ingenious solution to the problem of Brooklyn real estate. Their artistic fathers are not so lucky: Mingus’s father is an almost-famous soul singer who, like so many musicians in the hip canon, suffers the tragic fate of the pure artist, while Dylan’s father slaves away on his experimental film and endures the praise of science fiction fans obsessed with the cover art he hates. Dylan’s obsession with his childhood is not only the hipster’s neverending quest for authenticity, but a desire to evade the material realities of adult life, racial and economic divisions that can’t be

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overcome by the right cultural signifiers.

By the time Lethem's novel came out in 2003, Dylan's self-conscious whiteness was no longer just a quirk of his fictional character but an obsession of hip culture. Since at least the 1980s, black music and culture have become so prevalent in the mainstream that their embrace no longer signals rebellion or outsiderness. Yet rather than reflecting a new multiracial ethos, much of the hipsterdom of the 2000s has become obsessed with its own whiteness. At its most insidious, there were manifestations of so-called "ironic racism," which looked a lot like the real thing. In "What was the Hipster," Mark Grief quotes Vice founder Gavin McInnes, who told the *Times* in 2003, "I love being white, and I think it's something to be proud of." In its more tepid forms, what John Leland called "Caucasian Kitsch" closed the nostalgia circle: where once immigrants and their children pined for the old neighborhoods they had fled, now the sons and daughters of the suburbs returned with T-shirts commemorating Midwestern state fairs, resembling less the dropouts of hipster lore than E. B. White's famous description of "a boy arriving from the Corn Belt with a manuscript in his suitcase and a pain in his heart."

*Fortress'* obsessive nostalgia and its idealization of childhood as a utopian pre-political space also found analogues throughout hip culture. Like Lethem, filmmaker Wes Anderson takes childhood not only as a subject but as an aesthetic. Similar impulses can be found in writers like Dave Eggers, Michael Chabon, and Jonathan Safran Foer, whom Melvin Jules Bukiet disparaged as the "Brooklyn Boys of Wonder," using this obsession with childhood and unearned transcendence over historical traumas: "Take mawkish self-indulgence, add a heavy dollop of creamy nostalgia, season with magic realism, stir in a complacency of faith, and you've got wondrousness."

For earlier generations of immigrants and their children, the longing for the old neighborhood was inextricably bound up with the great migration of African Americans to cities and neighborhoods throughout the north. For African-American artists, however, the neighborhoods shaped by this migration would themselves become objects of nostalgia, especially as the ravages of deindustrialization, the Reagan era, and the drug war took their toll. Most famously, Spike Lee's depiction of Brooklyn offered a vision that was both nostalgic and critical. In *Do the Right Thing*, Sal's pizzeria embodied all the ways that the localism of the "urban village" could be oppressive rather than quaint, overworking and underpaying its black

employees while disrespecting its black customers. Nevertheless, Lee showed the same affection for the community elders and for those trying to carry on the civil rights legacy that Kazin shows for the ladies on the stoop and the old leftists toughing it out through the fifties. Five years later, in *Crooklyn*, Lee returned to the Bed-Stuy of the seventies, reveling in the details of street life celebrated by generations of chroniclers of Brooklyn childhoods; he opens with a montage of kids playing classic city games. Both films suggest that one need not offer a naively romantic view of the neighborhood in order to understand it as something vital and worthy of preservation, something largely ignored when the media hype around gentrification uses ahistorical visions of "urban decay" to suggest there is no alternative to neoliberal development.

At the same time, other black artists have suggested the extent to which, in the neoliberal city, the neighborhoods offer less and less protection from the real engine of the city: not real estate per se, but capital. Although set in many of the same Brooklyn streets, Michael Thomas's 2007 novel *Man Gone Down* departs as radically as one could imagine from Lethem's fantastical twist on the pastoral. While the narrator evokes his childhood, his focus is on the relentless present of Bloomberg's city. As crushed by adult cares as Dylan is immune from them, Thomas' protagonist is a writer who can't finish his book, can't pay the rent, and can't resolve his relationship with his wife and children. Thomas writes about the city in a way that cuts against the urban pastoral's romanticism and the nostalgia of so many depictions of the borough. Working construction, his narrator sees buildings as sites of drudgery rather than labors of love or promising investments. And he laments the renter's constant insecurity:

I've seen too many apartments in New York City. Single or married with children, I've looked at too many, met too many brokers, tried to appease too many racist landlords, negotiated with too many slumlords while looking for that special something. They were all too small, too dark, too dangerous, and certainly, all too expensive.

Gently skewering the pieties of brownstone culture, he notes he prefers Starbucks to the local independent coffee shop because there at least there's a chance a black person will be working the counter. As he navigates the city, scrounging money for rent and tuition, the aspects of street and neighborhood life celebrated by Jacobs and her contemporaries — and by current boosters of "revitalized" neighborhoods — look like a trap. It is not "the old neighborhood," or

any neighborhood, that draws him in, but the steel and concrete of the highways and bridges, and the in-between spaces where he can be anonymous:

I cut across the shadow realm because I cannot stand it right now. I walk in lightless Brooklyn, where the sun never seems to reach, between the jail and Fulton Mall, where strays run, miscreants, gypsy cabs, nannies released from bondage, fry joints, usury shops — they will never “fix” this part of Brooklyn. And of course my response is dichotomized, but I’ll take a petty criminal over a suck-ass any day.

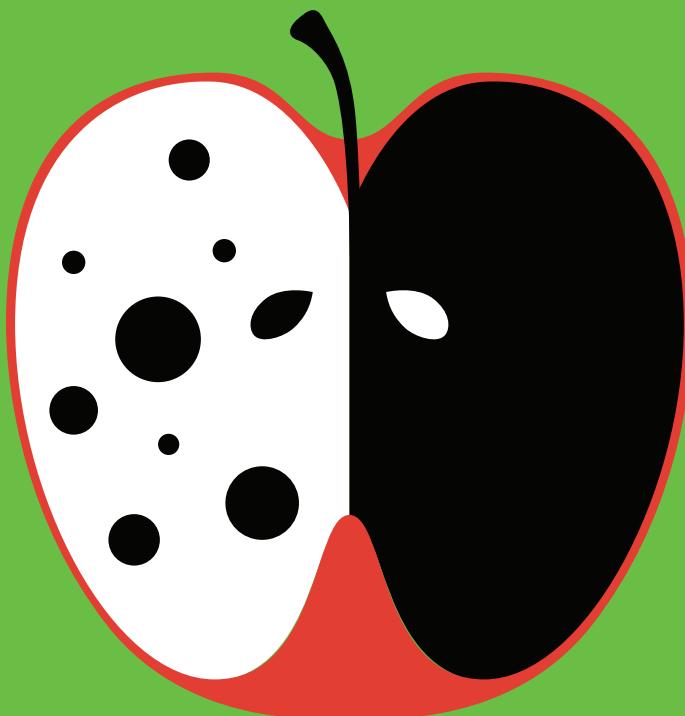
*Man Gone Down* draws heavily on *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison’s 1952 classic novel. Like Ellison’s, Thomas’ narrator is unnamed, and like him, he is in exile. Ellison’s narrator flees the South after a confrontation with the leader of a college based closely on Morehouse College. In *Man Gone Down*, the protagonist takes us between his current life and scenes from his childhood in Boston, depicting the racism of that city and the burdens placed on a highly educated African American raised in the legacy of the Civil Rights movement. Like *Invisible Man*, *Man Gone Down* asks what it means to tell a coming-of-age story without nostalgia, to try to enter the adult world without the fantasy of a home or childhood to which we might return. Ellison’s protagonist arrives in Harlem during the Great Depression. In one particularly famous scene, he witnesses a protest against an eviction. His spontaneous speech leads to his involvement with “the Brotherhood,” the novel’s version of the Communist Party. As Barbara Foley recently noted, Ellison’s depiction of the party gave fodder to the Cold War line that communist support for Civil Rights was wholly opportunistic and may have been crafted to disguise the depth of his own experiences with the Left. Reading the novel today, however, what is striking is the hyper-politicization of the New York it portrays. Ellison’s defense of individualism, the sense that his protagonist must escape society in order to evade the various factions attempting to use him for various political and social ends, seems nearly quaint in comparison to Thomas’ novel. Thomas’ protagonist breaks with an academic mentor and with childhood friends. In the adult world, connections are inevitably transactional, tenuous, and dependent on one’s ability to keep treading water. At the end of one section, he ends a run by looking across the water to Brooklyn. A memory of his mother comes and goes. For Thomas, there are no villages to be preserved, even in memory: “The dead are quiet now, soon they will be gone, for that is the price of empire.” A similar vision appears in Colson

Whitehead’s *The Colossus of New York*, a collection of short essays which, despite frequently appearing on cheerful bookstore displays next to coffee-table books about the Brooklyn Bridge, presents the most horrific portrayal of the city as a machine fueled by human labor and suffering this side of *Metropolis*. For Thomas’s narrator, the possibility of politics is cut off by the overwhelming power of the city’s unseen elite and the weight of the Civil Rights movement on his formative years.

Perhaps the most vivid meditation on the politics of nostalgia and race is one that’s not set in Brooklyn at all. *Medicine for Melancholy*, a low-budget film from 2007, flips the script by depicting black hipsters. As the film begins, Micah and Jo wake in a sunny loft in San Francisco after a one-night stand neither remembers. Micah caresses Jo into spending the day with him, and the two wander around the city. For Micah, a gear-head biker who makes his living selling aquariums, indie-ness is not a style but a problem. “Everything about being indie is tied to not being black,” he laments to Jo, who views his race-consciousness as passé and self-indulgent. Micah’s bedroom sports a poster quoting a planning commission’s recommendation for the redevelopment of Fillmore with the word “Lies” silkscreened across it. In a *New York Times* article, director and screenwriter Barry Jenkins described the origins of the film in his experience moving to San Francisco. Development and gentrification have reduced the city’s African-American population to 7 percent, half of what it was in 1970, a figure Micah cites in the film. In one scene, the couple stumbles into a community meeting of San Francisco residents bemoaning the lack of affordable housing in the city. *Medicine* reflects the contradictions of hipster culture not only because of its interrogation of race, but because of Micah’s challenge to individualism. Jo wonders why he can’t take what he wants from hipster culture and leave the rest — a mirror of the question asked by those who have historically defended their appropriations of black culture. But Micah stubbornly — perhaps unfashionably — intuits that some collectivism is needed to make city life bearable: race is one way to speak to that need.

Now that discussion of last decade’s hipsters has settled comfortably into its farcical stage, instead of anticipating its inevitable rediscovery, we should consider how the association of cultural production with economic and social status not only determines who is permitted to become an artist; it distorts our understanding of the art we already have. ■

# The Schizophrenic State



**Barofsky, Neil. 2012.**  
**Bailout: How Washington Abandoned Main Street While Rescuing Wall Street**  
**(Free Press: New York).**

**Blyth, Mark. 2013.**  
**Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea**  
**(Oxford University Press: Oxford).**

# The American government's response to the 2007–8 financial crisis reveals an increasing tension between its domestic and global responsibilities.

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by Nicole Aschoff

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HE REAL ELIOT NESS wasn't nearly as cool as De Palma made him out to be in *The Untouchables*. But no matter, Neil Barofsky was still pretty chuffed when Treasury officials likened him to the Prohibition agent. Barofsky felt like Ness during his twenty-seven months in the DC swamp, where "bullshit, ego, politics, turf, and credit" ruled the day, and only he and his SIGTARP (Special Inspector General of the Troubled Asset Relief Program) team stood between Wall Street bankers and hundreds of billions of bailout dollars.

Last year Barofsky published *Bailout: How Washington Abandoned Main Street While Rescuing Wall Street*. The book is a memoir of sorts that aims to call attention to the "hijacking of both the bailouts and the government itself by a handful of Wall Street financial institutions and their executives." Barofsky hopes that the American people will be as pissed off as he was when, as director of SIGTARP, he found out that Washington had been "captured by the banks." He wants us to wake up and do something to "break our system free from the corrupting grasp of the megabanks."

A noble objective, to be sure.

The Office of the SIGTARP is a special agency established by Congress in 2008. SIGTARP's website posts quarterly reports, offers a hotline to report TARP abuse, boasts about sending bankers to jail, and warns Americans about mortgage-modification scams. SIGTARP was the result of a compromise between the Executive and Congress over the implementation of TARP, a hotly contested piece of legislation originally designed to provide Treasury with a pool of money to buy up toxic assets, alleviate the mortgage crisis, and restart credit flows. Congress didn't want to write a blank check to the Executive, but got queasy at the prospect of a financial meltdown. SIGTARP is designed to act as a watchdog for American taxpayers, using

its law-enforcement capacity to prevent fraud, waste, and abuse linked to the \$700 billion bailout program.

In *Bailout*, Barofsky recounts his bafflement at being nominated for the directorship. Surely the fact that he was “a nobody” with an “aversion to bullshit and hypocrisy that occasionally led to an Asperger’s-like bluntness” would make him unsuitable for the adventure. No, no, Barofsky was perfect for the job. His background as a prosecutor for the Southern District of New York, combined with his experience busting mortgage fraud and his stint investigating the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia prepared him to fight the Treasury. Just in case, he brought his lucky dead-FARC-soldier bayonet — a memento from the “esteemed” Colombian National Police — to Washington with him.

TARP had already doled out hundreds of billions of dollars to the banks by the time Barofsky and his right-hand man, Kevin Puvalowski, got keys to their office — conveniently located next the Treasury cafeteria and atop a broken sewage pipe. The space, a harbinger of things to come, screamed, “Welcome to Washington, asshole. Fuck you. Really, I mean it. Fuck. You.” Barofsky had to quickly learn the ropes, face a Congressional hearing, find people willing to work for SIGTARP, get garbage cans for the office, and convince Treasury to start enacting fraud regulations before the next bailout installment to the banks went out.

Hank Paulson (Secretary of the Treasury under Bush) had just pulled a major bait-and-switch, using the latitude given to Treasury by the TARP bill to create the Capital Purchase Program (CPP) — a straight-up bailout of the banks — instead of using TARP funds to buy up toxic assets, as originally intended. Through the CPP program, Treasury funneled money directly to big banks like Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs by buying up preferred shares of stock. According to Paulson, avoiding the looming problem of bad assets and underwater mortgages was justified because the CPP program would stimulate lending and “get credit flowing.”

Looking over the program his first few days in office, Barofsky realized that there was no protection against banks “cooking their books” to make themselves look healthy enough to qualify for TARP funding, and no language forcing banks to actually use the money to get credit flowing again. When Barofsky tried to convince Treasury to introduce oversight mechanisms into the CPP contracts, Treasury was adamantly opposed, arguing that SIGTARP oversight would frighten banks away from participating.

The Bush-Obama changeup brought preparation for a new bailout program called TALF (Term Asset-Backed Securities Loan Facility). The program was designed to resuscitate the securitization market by lending \$200 billion from the New York Federal Reserve to hedge funds, financial institutions, and other big investors to buy new TALF bonds — bonds formed by lumping together student loans, car loans, credit-card debt, and small-business loans. Investors could borrow 95 percent of the money they needed to buy the bonds from the Fed, and if the bonds turned out to be worthless, no problem. The loans were “non-recourse loans,” so the borrower could simply give the bonds back and be off the hook for the money.

Aside from providing a taxpayer-funded floor on losses, TALF was ripe for fraud, particularly collusion between bond buyers and sellers. When Barofsky confronted Treasury about the program’s problems, they gave him the brush-off — said he didn’t understand “that the biggest players in these programs — the big banks and investment firms — would never risk their reputations by trying to rip off the government. The reputational damage they’d suffer would be far greater than any potential profit.” Besides, the bonds would be AAA-rated by the credit-rating agencies, so the taxpayer could rest assured that the “loans backing the bonds were properly underwritten.” These, of course, are the same rating agencies that wildly overrated the asset-backed securities that caused the crisis in the first place, but William Dudley (acting President of the New York Fed) was hopeful, saying: “...we’re confident [the ratings agencies] won’t risk being embarrassed again.”

Ever the wordsmith, Barofsky later told Puvalowski: “These guys haven’t just drank the Wall Street Kool-Aid, they ripped open the packets, added the water, stirred it up, and are now serving it to us on a \$700 billion taxpayer-funded service platter.”

Amid all this, Treasury still hadn’t done squat about TARP’s mandate to stem foreclosures. Following Tim Geithner’s confirmation and months of criticism from members of Congress, it issued a vague pronouncement about a \$50 billion housing program. When Barofsky asked the department for details about the plan, he got the usual run-around, with officials saying no details had been finalized. Yet a week later, President Obama unveiled the Home Affordable Mortgage Program (HAMP) at a speech in Arizona. HAMP was designed to modify mortgages for millions of homeowners whose mortgages were underwater. Treasury would contract out the job to mortgage-service providers who would be paid

# **“BLYTH ARGUES THAT “THE MORAL FAILINGS OF INDIVIDUALS ARE IRRELEVANT FOR UNDERSTANDING BOTH WHY THE FINANCIAL CRISIS IN THE UNITED STATES HAPPENED AND WHY AUSTERITY IS NOW PERCEIVED AS THE ONLY POSSIBLE RESPONSE, ESPECIALLY IN EUROPE.” INSTEAD, THE CRISIS HAPPENED BECAUSE CAPITAL AND THE US STATE HAVE BEEN FOLLOWING A FAULTY “INSTRUCTION SHEET” FOR THE PAST THIRTY-FIVE YEARS.**

for every mortgage they modified. Unbeknownst to SIGTARP, Treasury had been quietly working on the program for months with BlackRock and the Trust Company of the West Group — two giant investment houses that stood to profit from the program.

The program was a disaster. HAMP didn’t provide homeowners with a way to reduce their principal and offered no relief for people who’d lost their jobs. Barofsky begged Treasury to at least make a public-service announcement warning homeowners against mortgage fraudsters pretending to be part of HAMP, but Treasury refused. The program was so disorganized that Treasury changed the mortgage-modification rules nine times in the first year, and the average homeowner applicant had to submit paperwork to their mortgage servicer six times.

The program was also rampant with abuse. Many homeowners were told by their mortgage servicer to stop making payments on their mortgages so they could qualify for HAMP and participate in the trial-mortgage modification program. The mortgage servicer would then collect late fees while the owner waited months and months for the trial modification to be finalized. Many homeowners were rejected after

months of waiting and slapped with a “deficiency” bill, charging them for the difference between their trial mortgage monthly payments and their original monthly payments, along with a mountain of late fees.

Barofsky and Puvalowski were baffled. Why would the Treasury launch such a shoddy, ill-designed, underfunded program? Calls to SIGTARP’s helpline were nonstop, but it seemed like Treasury really didn’t care at all about the suffering of so many borrowers. Instead, the program appeared to be just more gravy for the banks. Barofsky later discovered in a meeting with Geithner that this was precisely the purpose of HAMP. It was designed to “foam the runway,” giving banks relief from the surge of foreclosures by stretching them out over a longer period of time, thus allowing the banks to absorb the losses more slowly while they pulled in bailout money through the other TARP programs. “HAMP was not separate from the bank bailouts; it was an essential part of them.”

HAMP and TALF were just two examples of the 24/7 TARP clusterfuck. The SIGTARP team was flummoxed by the behavior of the Treasury in its response to the crisis. Why had it shown such callous disregard for the American taxpayer while pushing truckloads of free money onto the banks with no strings attached? For Barofsky, the answer is simple: “the entire crisis was unleashed by the greed of a small handful of executives who exploited a financial system that guaranteed that no matter what risks they took … the US taxpayer would cover their losses.... The US government had been captured by the banks.”

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**M**ARK BLYTH agrees that the bailout was executed poorly. He even questions whether the banks should have been bailed out at all. But he doesn’t buy the bad apples theory. In his recent book, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Blyth argues that “the moral failings of individuals are irrelevant for understanding both why the financial crisis in the United States happened and why austerity is now perceived as the only possible response, especially in Europe.” Instead, the crisis happened because capital and the US state have been following a faulty “instruction sheet” for the past thirty-five years.

The central thrust of *Austerity* fits with Blyth’s broader theory of institutional change that emphasizes the power of ideas to shape societies and, in particular, institutions like the state. Blyth argues that a new set of ideas emerged during the crisis of Keynesianism. These ideas ultimately delegitimized

## THE NEOLIBERAL INSTRUCTION SHEET THAT EMERGED TO DISPLACE THE KEYNESIAN ONE IN THE 1980S MAY HAVE BEEN BASED ON NEOCLASSICAL IDEAS, BUT IT DIDN'T GIVE RISE TO UNIFORMLY NEOLIBERAL PRACTICES.

the Keynesian instruction sheet and replaced it with a new one emphasizing neoclassical principles like inflation control and monetary stability. Blyth argues that the inability of Keynesian ideas to effectively address the economic and political crisis of the 1970s created a moment in which the embedded liberal order became vulnerable to attack from business groups and their political allies who opposed the Keynesian principles of a strong state and redistributive growth.

Amid the crisis, these groups were able to develop a new instruction sheet that displaced old ways of thinking about political economy, and they forged a new consensus that ultimately coalesced into a new neoliberal institutional order.

In contrast to Barofsky's account, in which the state was hijacked by a few greedy Wall Street bankers, Blyth emphasizes how powerful ideas wrote the state into irrelevance and created a climate in which the financial sector could do no wrong. In the process, the role of the state was reduced to nothing more than a provider of "courts, weights, measures, and defense goods" because the instruction sheet demanded that the state "stay as far away from the market process as possible."

Blyth's book has two main interconnected goals. The first is to argue that "this crisis is first and foremost a private-sector crisis" and was definitely not caused by state profligacy. Instead, "seemingly unconnected and opaque parts of the global system of finance came together to produce a crisis that none of those parts could have produced on its own." The toxic cocktail combined three parts financial shenanigans — collateral deals in the US repo markets, mortgage-backed derivatives and repo transactions, and correlation and tail risk — with one part climate of bad ideas resulting from hegemonic neoclassical

economic theories. If the state played any role in causing the crisis, it was "cause only by omission" because "states chose not to regulate derivative markets."

Included in the neoliberal instruction sheet is a centuries-old prescription for dealing with financial crisis that we thought had gone the way of "old-time religion": austerity. Thus, the second emphasis of the book is on how a private-sector banking crisis was transformed into a sovereign debt crisis in which the rest of us are forced to pick up the tab. In a political-economic turn that would have Polanyi rolling over in his grave, austerity is once again being heralded as the only possible solution in Europe, with devastating consequences.

In the early days of the financial meltdown, when US bankers and government officials were running around like chickens with their heads cut off, it looked like Europe might get through the financial crisis relatively unscathed. But European leaders were quickly disabused of this notion when it became clear that European banks had been engaging in their own shady practices. Blyth synthesizes the problem nicely: European banks had been gorging on sovereign bonds from the PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain), which had a slightly higher yield than Northern European bonds, and had become so hyper-leveraged (40 to 1 in some cases) that they were literally too big to bail, let alone fail.

The problem, of course, is that European countries, thanks to that "doomsday machine called the euro," can't enact their own stimulus programs like the US is doing. Only the European Central Bank can print money, and it's founded on a set of "ordoliberal" monetary principles that say "if states have broken the rules the only possible policy is a diet of strict austerity to bring them back into conformity with the

rules.” The problem with this strategy, Blyth convincingly argues, is that it won’t work because austerity doesn’t work. It’s also “unfair” and leads to dangerous social outcomes. After all, as Blyth reminds us, the Nazis rode to power on a wave of public fury caused by disastrous austerity policies during the Weimar Republic.

If austerity is so dangerous and ineffective, why are the European states willing to swallow the austerity cure again? Blyth gives three reasons. First, “in a democracy you can hardly come clean about what you’re doing and expect to survive.” If European leaders admit that they’re really just bailing out the banks, they’ll be out of a job. Second — and this is related to the first reason — the “epistemic hubris” behind the European monetary project has created an institutional framework that is simply “incapable of resolving the crisis it faces,” resulting in permanent austerity.

And finally, the most important reason: “What we learned in the 1930s has been forgotten.” We all forgot that austerity doesn’t work. Blyth argues that the whole ugly decade of the 1930s taught society (economists included) that austerity doesn’t work, but in the time since then “broad ideological and institutional shifts” have “bit by bit brought austerity back to the status of common sense.”

This last explanation beggars belief. Anyone watching Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, Africa for the last three decades or more, Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and on and on, is certainly aware that austerity doesn’t work. That it wreaks havoc on the societies in which it is enacted. That it destroys ways of life and quite literally kills people. We know these things. Blyth acknowledges that austerity was tried “with limited success in the Global South,” but apparently only the good folks over at the World Bank were paying attention. European policy makers haven’t had time to pick up a copy of Stiglitz’s *Globalization and its Discontents*.

This blind spot in Blyth’s analysis betrays more than Eurocentrism. It is part of a blinkered view of the global economy that is most apparent in his perspective on why the US, which supposedly follows a much stricter neoliberal instruction sheet than Europe, is not following an austerity program. According to Blyth: “when the crisis hit, the United States may have been on the right ideologically, but it was very much on the left in terms of economic policy.” But “if austerity becomes the policy mantra of the United States anytime soon...we can expect it to be equally destructive there, too.”

Currently, the US is dumping truckloads of money into the financial sector every second of every day. The Federal Reserve buys \$85 billion worth of low-interest-rate Treasury bonds and mortgage-backed securities every month. This is certainly not to say that the austerity hawks hold no sway in the US. They do. This year’s budget sequestration — a result of the 2011 Budget Control Act — will cut \$85 billion from the budget in the 2013 fiscal year, and there’s a good chance the Fed will drift in a hawkish direction despite the recent nomination of “dovish” Janet Yellen. But in the broader scheme, the US state is not following austerity principles. Instead, it is following a twisted neoliberal form of Keynesianism in which the US state dumps money indiscriminately into the financial markets hoping that they will correct themselves, or reboot themselves, or whatever markets “naturally” do, while screwing over the working class.

But according to the neoliberal instruction sheet, this shouldn’t be happening. This type of stimulus is precisely the kind of thing Milton Friedman railed against, so why is it happening at a time when neoliberalism seems stronger than ever? Blyth gives a simple explanation: Americans love us some guns — we have seventy million handguns alone. But most of us don’t have a lot of money. When Lehman collapsed, and the possibility of empty ATMs loomed, the US government was terrified that we would take our guns and go all *Death Wish* on each other. This fear, combined with the potential collapse of the US banks’ collective asset footprint, sent “US policy makers running to the tool shed for a solution.” The solution: TARP.

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**T**HIS BRINGS US BACK to Barofsky’s central question. Why did the US government enact such a ridiculous bailout that seems to go against both the neoliberal instruction sheet and basic common sense? Blyth’s focus on ideas is useful—it gives us a better sense of why the crisis happened in the first place and how ideas matter in the development of institutions—but it doesn’t do much better than Barofsky at explaining why the US chose to indiscriminately pump liquidity into the financial markets.

To answer this question, we must change our unit of analysis and broaden our understanding of neoliberalism. We must look at the whole world and the role of the US state within it. Just as we could have predicted Greece’s disaster by looking to the history

of austerity policies in Latin America and Africa, so we can puzzle through Treasury's seemingly inexplicable behavior by looking at the role of the US State and Treasury in superintending the global economy.

The neoliberal instruction sheet that emerged to displace the Keynesian one in the 1980s may have been based on neoclassical ideas, but it didn't give rise to uniformly neoliberal practices. In the realm of finance and trade in particular, the state and the market are inextricably linked in the development and management of the global economy. As Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch argue, the new rules and regulations for the operation of the "free market" in the neoliberal era have led not to state retreat, but rather to "the restructuring and expansion of linkages between states and markets." While particular states might be pushed to enact austerity policies vis-à-vis their own sovereign economies and people, the United States can't run a global austerity program and hope to contain the volatility that has accompanied the rise of global finance. And it doesn't.

The Treasury-Fed hybrid has taken on an explicitly "crisis-management" role in the global economy. There were seventy-two financial crises in low- and middle-income countries during the 1990s alone. Treasury played a central role in managing these crises, sometimes quietly through backdoor bridge loans, and sometimes more explicitly through its international arm, the International Monetary Fund. This suggests that, prior to the 2007–8 financial meltdown, Treasury was likely well aware of the risky practices in the private shadow-banking world but was confident, based on its ability to handle previous crises (like Mexico during the mid nineties), that it could contain any crisis that came up. Though it is now clear that Treasury underestimated the scale of the risk, a half-decade after the crisis they seem confident that the worst is behind us.

But this containment has come at a high political cost. There is an increasingly uneasy tension in the US state between its responsibility toward its own sovereign population and its duties in superintending the global economy. It has managed this tension over the past seventy years by slowly transferring control over decisions regarding international policy and domestic economic policy from Congress to the Executive Branch.

Exposing this tension and power play between the Executive and Congress is where Barofsky shines, and what makes *Bailout* an interesting book. Barofsky sees the Treasury as an institution designed to manage the economic affairs of the country for the

good of its people, not as an institution designed to manage the global economy. He finds "the condescension expressed toward the public about the right to know exactly how our money was being used" by Treasury infuriating. This condescension is rooted in Treasury's belief in itself as leader of the global economy, no longer subject to the petty requests for fairness and truth (occasionally) demanded by Congress. Congress is seen as nothing but a roadblock to Treasury's ability to manage its global affairs. So, while the increasing power of the Executive and the decreasing power of Congress to dictate economic policy is a well-established phenomenon, *Bailout* illustrates just how messy the tension between Congress and the Executive can be.

Barofsky's account also raises questions about the political sustainability of the present moment. If Barofsky, an elite member of the professional class, is denied access to the channels of decision-making and sees the system, broadly speaking, as broken, it spells a real problem for both capital and the state. This problem is brewing in the US, and it is also why Blyth is so worried that austerity might be slithering across the pond to the US shores. *Tea Party v. Wall Street and the Executive*, while occasionally amusing, is a clear sign of the cracks in this dual role of the US Executive. Can the US State rule the global economy without the consent of its ruling elite?

Giovanni Arrighi pondered this question two decades ago when he considered whether the US was on the verge of becoming a "true world government." For Arrighi, the answer was "emphatically" no, precisely for the reasons we're seeing play out now with the government shutdown and repeated debt-ceiling showdowns. The ruling elite are not willing to "renounce the trappings and substance of national sovereignty" in the name of a nebulous global project, especially when the global machinations of the Treasury are perceived to run counter to their own interests — whether these interests are "progressive" or reactionary.

It is clear that neither neoliberal Keynesianism nor austerity is working. Both strategies are, as Barofsky and Blyth aptly demonstrate, having devastating consequences. The global economy isn't going to become less volatile anytime soon, despite China bankrolling American (and European) "recovery" strategies. The dual role of the US Executive will become increasingly fraught amid global volatility and historic levels of domestic inequality. It's clear the ruling elite don't have the capacity or will to solve this crisis. ■

# Our Plans for 2014: Jacobin Needs Your Help

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**F**UNDRAISING APPEALS are hard to write. Stealing lessons from MoveOn.org and the savviest of American liberals, the original headline of this post was going to be: “Time is running out to defend Obamacare from Birther Tea Party Republicans!” Alas, it wasn’t really Chuck Schumer sending me missives titled “Re: Bhaskar, I need your help.” The emails still got opened, though.

Our readers are too smart for those kinds of tricks. But that doesn’t solve my dilemma: what can I say to get you to give, again, to our young project?

The last year has been an eventful one. *Jacobin* has more than tripled in size. On an average day, ten thousand people will visit our website, despite the fact that our small editorial core can only prepare a new essay or two daily. Our print publication, too, has reached new heights, with subscription rates and newsstand performance surpassing all our expectations. This issue, we’re printing 3,000 more copies than we did in April.

The quality hasn’t suffered for it, but improved — *Jacobin* remains a confident and open platform for the socialist left, with a combination of intellectual sophistication, political commitment, and cultural literacy that, warts and all, will stand as a model for others in the future. This new issue, “Alive in the Sunshine” is especially strong. The essay on the environmental crisis by Alyssa Battistoni anchoring it is both pragmatic and visionary — embodying the best of the democratic socialist tradition.

But *Jacobin* remains on the precipice of crisis, a fiscal cliff that requires us to constantly seek subscribers and new avenues of support, or perish. The burdens of publishing in print don't need to be rehashed here. Time after time we've run into trouble, only to be reminded of what we can accomplish when we're supported by our readers. With your help in 2013 we've been able to do things like hire a circulation manager, appoint an online editor, redesign our website, increase our print runs, link up with labor and community groups, and release more free content.

A broader audience for our work and politics has been the result. The attention paid to *Jacobin* is good for the Left, opening up space for radicals of all stripes and advancing socialist thought.

Your contribution will ensure that *Jacobin* continues to flourish in 2014 — please give now. Without institutional support or a large donor base, *Jacobin*'s existence is more precarious than that of publications with less reach and influence. We need your help.

Digital subscriptions are just \$19: encourage your friends to buy one or get them a gift subscription. Donations are also appreciated, as we rely on them to make up shortfalls. Contributions can be made online at <http://jacobinmag.com> or mailed to Jacobin Press, P.O. Box #541336, Bronx, NY 10454.

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**MOVING FORWARD**, on a shoestring as ever before, here are some projects that we're excited for in the coming year.

1. The release of "Class Action." *Jacobin* teamed up with the Chicago Teachers Union's CORE Caucus and other allies to produce a color booklet on neoliberal education reform. Five thousand copies will be in the hands of labor and community activists by the time this letter is in print.  
We will sponsor a similar project, "Sick Days: The Philadelphia School Nurse Shortage," as well. That effort was initiated by Katrina Ohstrom — the tireless photographer who we granted a fellowship to in order to document closed and closing public schools in Chicago.
2. The first wave of *Jacobin* titles, published in partnership with Verso Books and Random House, will be released on 11 March 2014. Another wave is soon to come.
3. We'll finally be fulfilling our promise of more video content. Earlier this year, we were pleased to announce the addition of Rebecca Rojer, our new multimedia editor. She's putting the finishing touches on a few impressive projects, including a film essay to accompany our education reform booklet.
4. *Jacobin* Radio. The first episodes of our new podcast series have already been recorded and will be released later this month. Hosted in South Africa, Chicago, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, with syndication on local terrestrial stations, it's an undertaking that will inform and politicize new waves of listeners.
5. This November, we inaugurated an event series in New York, which we will continue into the new year. Exhibitions and panels are also planned around our anti-austerity supplements in Chicago and Philadelphia. Beyond that, we're coordinating a nationwide series of reading groups, playing a small part in rebuilding a culture of open exchange and debate on the Left.

We only rarely beg for money — but if you value *Jacobin* and want to support this programming, now is the time to help. ■

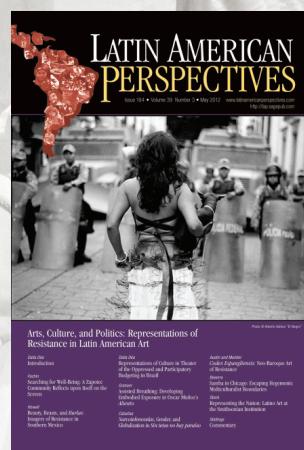
# LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

## Rethinking Indigenous Art or the American Continent

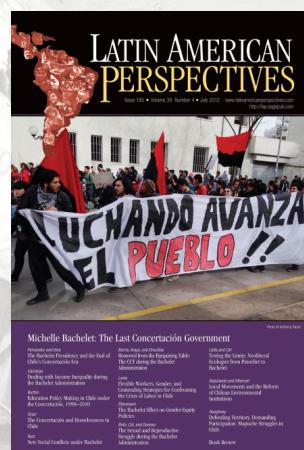
Girado and  
Pan-American  
(1940–1970)  
to an Ongoing



Arts, Culture, and Performance: Art, Activism, and Performance



Arts, Culture, and Politics: Representations of Resistance in Latin American Art



Michelle Bachelet: The Last Concertación Government  
Reviews and Previews  
The Concertación Government and the End of the Chilean Political Cycle  
Credit: © Agustín Lira  
Dealing with Income Inequality During the Bachelet Administration  
Reviews  
Education Policy Making in Chile under the Concertación Government  
Reviews  
The Concertación and Bachelet in Chile  
Reviews  
New Social Policies under Bachelet  
Reviews  
Books Received

Gonzales

The Institute  
A New Place  
Indigenous  
Artists

Becker

The Limits  
Ecuador

Lewis

Art, Activism, and Performance

Indigenous Art Dreamers Meet Sobornos

Realities: The Slow Demise of Federal

Indian Politics in Mexico

1951–1970

"Latin American Perspectives fills a vital gap in our knowledge of this area, which is not currently covered by other journals."

Dawson

- Helen I. Safa, University of Florida,

Histories and Memories of the Indian

Boarding Schools in the Americas

and the United States

Past President, Latin American Studies Association

Olivera

Comment

Book Review

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**"All the people on the planet,  
workin' 9-to-5 just to stay alive,  
how come?"**

—Beyoncé

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