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## INTRODUCING

Why We Loved the  
Zapatistas

Share This Job

Lonely Politics

Azar Nafisi interview

Feel Good Zionism

LET THEM EAT  
DIVERSITY:

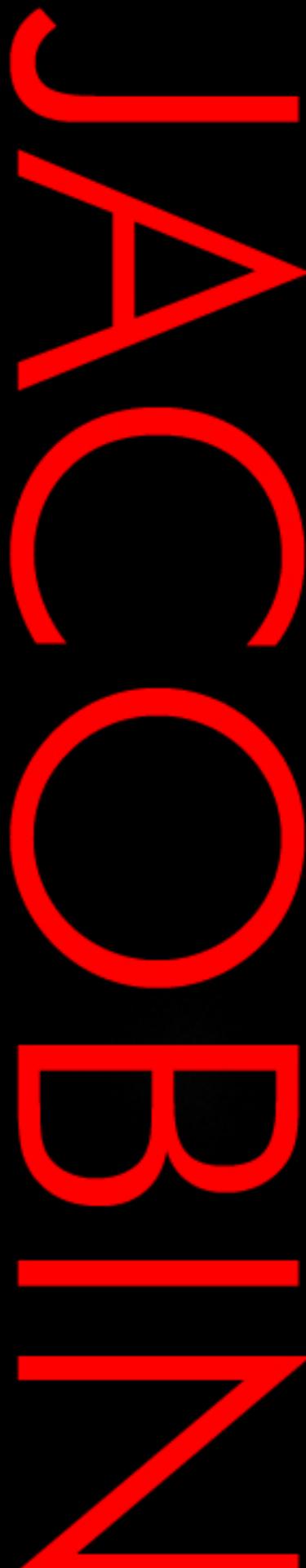
Walter Benn Michaels

Resenting Hipsters

The End of the World?



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# CONTENTS

## Editor's Note: Introducing Jacobin ...

**P**ublications with tiny audiences have a knack for mighty pronouncements. A grandiloquent opening, some platitudes about resurrecting intellectual discourse followed by issue after issue of the same old shit. We can admire the confidence of our peers, but there is something pathological about this trend.

These delusions stem from a well-warranted sense of impotence. The intellectual was born out of, and thrived throughout, the twentieth century, but left a mixed legacy. There were those who stood against bigotry and parochialism – defending Dreyfus and the universality of rights, taking stands against fascism, Stalinism, and imperialism – but they were not alone. There were others seduced by nationalism. These thinkers yearned to restore lost social integrity, to renew through catastrophe, and millions suffered for their treason. Harder to come to grips with is the role self-proclaimed internationalists had in perpetuating the illusions of official Communism. Perhaps the death of the public intellectual is deserved.

And yet, *Jacobin* was founded on the premise that there still is an audience for critical commentary. A survey of the political outlets today yields two kinds of publications. The esoteric ones, sites of deliberate obfuscation, utterly disconnected from reality. They find their foils in unchallenging rags that treat their readers like imbeciles. With mainstream pretenses, high school yearbook prose, and rosy reports of mass movements in the making, their role is even more disorienting.

We aspire to avoid both traps. Substantive engagement does not preclude entertainment. Discarding stale phrases and ideas does not necessitate avoiding thought itself. Voicing discontent with the trappings of late capitalism does not mean we can't grapple with culture at both aesthetic and political levels. Sober analysis of the present and criticisms of the Left does not mean accommodation to the status quo.

*Jacobin* is not an organ of a political organization or captive to a single ideology. Our contributors are, however, loosely bound by common values and sentiments:

- + As proponents of modernity and unfilled project of the Enlightenment.
- + As asserters of the libertarian quality of the socialist ideal.
- + As internationalists and epicureans.

We will have no editorial position beyond this. Every writer speaks for him or herself.

I only hope we can live up to these modest goals and avoid saying anything outright barbarous.

— Bhaskar Sunkara, Washington D.C.

### editorials

1

INTRODUCING JACOBIN ...

41

U.S. LABOR'S DOUBLE BIND

3

TAKE THIS JOB AND SHARE IT  
*on the politics of work*

Chris Maisano

7

WHY WE LOVED THE ZAPATISTAS  
*on the politics of resistance*

Bhaskar Sunkara

11

FEEL GOOD ZIONISM  
*on the politics of occupation*

Max Ajl

15

THE PURVEYOR OF HALF MEASURES  
*on the politics of lesser evilism*

Ian Morrison

17

LET THEM EAT DIVERSITY  
*on the politics of identity*

an interview with Walter Benn Michaels

24

THE POLITICS OF BEING ALONE  
Seth Ackerman

27

HIPSTERS, FOOD STAMPS, AND THE  
POLITICS OF RESENTMENT

Peter Frase

33

“NATIVE INFORMER”  
*on the politics of “orientalism”*

an interview with Aziz Nafisi

37

THE END OF THE WORLD  
*on the politics of fear*

James Heartfield

### culture and art

32

SALEM'S HIDDEN VALLEYS  
Gavin Mueller

39

SHIVA FOUND  
Liam Jones

# Take This Job and Share It

On loving work and hating freedom ...

BY CHRIS MAISANO

**A**s we mark the passage of another Labor Day, it's worth taking stock of the state that the U.S. working class finds itself in the midst of the Great Recession. It is, in a word, dismal. Washington Post columnist Harold Meyerson summed the situation up rather neatly in a recent editorial: "A union-free America. Growth down a little, employment down a lot. Profits and productivity up, wages flat. Health-care costs up for workers, down for employers. The return of a thriving middle class? Dream on."

Since the near collapse of the global economy two years ago, U.S. workers have been very quiet. Aside from the takeover of the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago in December 2008, the ongoing Mott's strike in upstate New York, and a couple of other high-profile actions, most tangible (*palpable*) discontent with the state of things has found public expression through the Tea Party and other manifestations of right-wing anxiety and rage.

Hearteningly, a large coalition of labor and progressive groups known as One Nation Working Together is organizing for what should be a large scale march for jobs in Washington, D.C. on October 2. I will be there, and every progressive with the time and wherewithal to go should be there too. Millions of Americans are suffering from un- and underemployment and the short term focus of the Left should be pressuring the government to create jobs and extend unemployment insurance along with other forms of income security.

But as I continue to think through the question of work within the context of the ongoing crisis and the Left's almost exclusive focus on job creation and economic growth as a response, I can't help but be reminded of a particularly powerful passage from Paul Lafargue's classic 1883 essay *The Right To Be Lazy*:

**"Instead of taking advantage of periods of crisis, for a general distribution of their products and a universal holiday, the laborers, perishing with hunger, go and beat their heads against the doors of the workshops. With pale faces, emaciated bodies, pitiful speeches they assail the manufacturers: 'Good M. Chagot, sweet M. Schneider, give us work,**

it is not hunger, but the passion for work which torments us.' And these wretches, who have scarcely the strength to stand upright, sell twelve and fourteen hours of work twice as cheap as when they had bread on the table. And the philanthropists of industry profit by their lockouts to manufacture at lower cost."

While the demand for "a general distribution of their products and a universal holiday" might seem hopelessly utopian in the current political climate, the chances of winning the kind of job creation program that will be demanded at next month's march might be similarly slim. It's staggering to think that the Republicans, who were in total disarray after the 2008 election, as the party of failed wars and economic collapse, have a very good chance to regain control both houses of Congress and the presidency in the near future. The GOP is likely to make significant gains in Congressional elections this fall, ensuring that the balance of political forces will continue to shift

against the prospects for large-scale government spending on jobs. Moreover, economies impacted by severe financial crises typically take a very long time to recover to pre-crisis levels of employment growth, if they ever do. We could very well be looking towards at least a decade of high unemployment and poor general economic performance, which doesn't bode well for President Obama's reelection chances in 2012.

Even when companies begin hiring in significant numbers again, many economists predict that this hiring will provide disproportionate benefits to high-skill workers while most everyone else is forced to take low-skill, read low-paying, jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, 8 of the 10 projected fastest growing occupations for this decade require an Associate's Degree or lower, and include jobs like food service workers, orderlies, retail salespersons, and home health aides; suffice it to say most of the rest of the top 30 are similarly unpleasant or undesirable.

While it's possible that a significant green manufacturing sector could develop in the U.S. in the coming years, there's no guarantee that it would create large numbers of decent jobs. Thanks to the introduction of advanced laborsav-

ing technologies in manufacturing, the U.S. and other countries produce more steel and automobiles with hundreds of thousands less workers than were needed decades ago, and there's no reason to think that green manufacturing would not be similarly capital intensive.

Not only does the U.S. economy tend to produce lots of bad jobs, U.S. workers tend to spend far too much of their time doing them. In 2009, the average U.S. worker worked 1,681 hours compared to 1,390 in Germany. Germany's experiments with *kurzarbeit*, a government program that provides income support to workers who accept reduced hours, has helped it avoid the problems of high and long-term unemployment that confront us here in the U.S. Instead of fighting for more work, much of which is likely to be bad, how about fighting for less work for everybody? This could be a very effective way to make sure that there are enough jobs to go around for everyone while limiting the amount of time workers spend in deadening, alienating labor.

However, there is very little discussion on the Left of the possibility of reorganizing work and limiting working time as a way of confronting the crisis and in turn providing the foundation for a revitalized labor movement. To anyone familiar with the main currents of leftist theorizing over the last century, this shouldn't be very surprising. With a handful of exceptions, we have avoided thinking seriously about these questions for a very long time.

## How We Learned To Stop Worrying and Love Work

**T**he mainstream of Marxist and socialist thinking over roughly the last century has tended to elide considerations of the organization and process of work instead focusing almost exclusively on a critique of the unjust distribution of the economic surplus produced by capitalism, although Marx himself did not fail to take the former into account. According to the traditional Marxist framework, the primary contradiction of capitalism is between the increasingly socialized system of production made possible by the development of large-scale industry on one



hand, and the private ownership and control of the means of production on the other. As the destructive effects of private control of socialized production increasingly undermine the health and stability of capitalism, the working class would seek not to abolish or significantly alter the process of production but to submit it to rational control. Instead of distributing the economic surplus created by industrial production through the mechanisms of the market and private property, it would be distributed on the basis of need through collective ownership and planning. Ownership of the means of production and control over the mode of distribution would be shifted from the bourgeoisie to the working class, but the mode of production itself would remain basically unchanged. After all, if the workers owned the means of production, wouldn't that mean that exploitation and alienated labor would, by definition, cease to exist?

In Thesis Eleven of his classic essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin identified the disastrous implications of this uncritical acceptance of the capitalist mode of production for socialist theory and practice. Under the sway of a vulgar ideology that equated technological and industrial development with historical progress toward socialism, the socialist movement in Germany trapped itself within a capitalist logic it could not escape. "From this, it was only a step to the illusion that the factory-labor set forth by the path of technological progress represented a political achievement. The old Protestant work ethic celebrated its resurrection among German workers in secularized form." As long as large-scale industry continued to churn out ever greater amounts of stuff, work was not something to be transformed or limited but rather, glorified. Consequently, the socialist movement largely stopped asking questions about the degrading effects of proletarian labor on workers. "It wishes to perceive only the progression of the exploitation of nature, not the regression of society," reads Benjamin's incisive phrase. The "scientific socialists" of the time never lost an opportunity to denigrate the utopian socialists they viewed as a clutch of romantic reactionaries, but Benjamin saw the potential value of their flights of fancy. "Compared to this positivistic conception, the fantasies which provided so much ammunition for the ridicule of Fourier exhibit a surprisingly healthy sensibility," reminding us of the possibility of a new conception of labor "which, far from exploiting nature, is instead capable of delivering creations whose

possibility slumbers in her womb."

Benjamin wrote his essay in 1940, and most Marxists and socialists failed to respond to his fragmentary but powerful criticism of the organization of work in the years that followed. If anything, the expansion and stabilization of capitalism and the integration of labor and socialist movements into central positions in the postwar political economy only made the problem worse. Until the publication of his landmark book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in the mid-1970s, Harry Braverman was practically the only Marxist thinker who paid any attention to the labor process under capitalism and the manner in which it degrades workers across all occupational categories. One could expect bourgeois social scientists to ignore the importance of these questions in order to maintain capitalism's legitimacy, but the labor movement and intellectuals of the left fatally erred in doing so as well. Braverman showed how the labor movement seemed to be intimidated or even enthralled by the complexity and productivity of capitalist production, and sought only to bargain with capital over the distribution of its product. Most Marxists accepted this circumscribed framework, limited their inquiries to it, and accepted the inevitability of modern factory production. Social democratic parties sought mainly to compromise with capitalism and sand off its roughest edges, while the Soviet Union and other Communist societies consciously adopted Taylorism and the whole apparatus of capitalist production in order to achieve rapid economic growth. As Braverman writes, "the critique of the capitalist mode of production, originally the most trenchant weapon of Marxism, gradually lost its cutting edge as the Marxist analysis of class structure of society failed to keep pace with the rapid progress of change...Marxism became weakest at the very point where it had originally been strongest." It had little to say to those who were concerned by social problems that were not distributional in character, and could not adequately deal with the breakdown of the postwar order nor the decline of the political and economic importance of the classical industrial working class.

The political and theoretical implications of the decline of that working class were main lines of inquiry explored by the idiosyncratic French Marxist theorist André Gorz. In his most well-known book, *Farewell to the Working Class*, Gorz argued that technological advances in production techniques made large swathes of the

working class increasingly superfluous, opening the possibilities of abolishing work as it is understood in capitalism and providing everyone with autonomously directed free time. Technologically advanced societies had to make a choice: "either a socially controlled abolition of work, or its oppressive, anti-social abolition." The labor and socialist movements in those societies would have to make a similar choice: "either it holds to a productivist ideology in which the development of the productive forces is seen as the essential precondition of freedom. Then there is no possibility of calling for the productive forces developed by capitalism into question...Or the movement accepts that the means of production and a considerable part of what is actually produced do not lend themselves to real and concrete collective appropriation by real proletarians. Then the problem will be changing the means and structure of production in such a way as to make them collectively appropriable." The master's tools cannot be used to dismantle the master's house - and besides, do we really want to socialize Lockheed Martin anyway?

Gorz was incorrect in arguing that capitalism was creating a jobless future. As we've seen, the Great American Jobs Machine has created lots of jobs in the past and will likely do so again when it eventually recovers from its current troubles. The problem is that a large proportion of them will suck. But he was entirely correct in arguing that the Left would remain weak and defensive so long as it remained trapped by the ideology of work and sought mainly to protect the rapidly deteriorating gains made by workers during the golden age of industrial capitalism. Instead, we should challenge the organization of work itself and fight to appropriate the free time made possible by the continuing development of science and technology:

"The very same technological developments that make it possible to free time and reduce everyone's workload also allow the Right, through the weapon of unemployment, to reinforce the old ideology of hard work and productivity just when it no longer has any economic or technical basis. Nowhere is the line separating Left and Right clearer than on the question of the social management of free time: on the politics of time. According to whether it is a politics (and policy) of the Right or the Left, it may lead either to a society based on unemployment or to one based on free time. Of all the levers available to change the social order and the quality of life, this is one of the most powerful."

## My Experiment In Freedom

The one-sided focus of most Marxists and socialists on distributional questions has obscured the fact that the animating principle of the Left is not so much equality, but rather freedom - freedom from alienating work and freedom to use our time and creativity for our own self-directed ends. Socialism does not equal the roughly equal distribution of stuff; the martyrs of the labor movement didn't give up their lives so that everyone could have the right to buy an iPhone or a plasma screen TV, or to waste their lives working at crap jobs. Marx himself was rather clear on this point. Near the end of Volume 3 of *Capital*, he famously argues that the "true realm of freedom" lies beyond the sphere of material production, and that "the shortening of the working day is its prerequisite." While the necessity for people to do some sort of potentially alienating work to ensure social reproduction will likely never be totally abolished, it should entail "the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature." So long as the Left does not seek to fundamentally alter the labor process nor shorten the working day to the least amount of time possible, it fails to act on what should be its most fundamental principles.

As an employee of a strapped government agency looking to cut costs wherever possible, I was offered the opportunity earlier this year to reduce my work week for the rest of the fiscal year to 21 hours with a concomitant reduction in my annual salary. While I was worried about voluntarily giving up 40% of my pay, my mounting dissatisfaction with the technological deskilling that hollowed out much of the appeal of my job provided me with the impetus I needed to trade some financial security for a three day work week. I can say unambiguously that working much less has dramatically improved the quality of my life, especially my psychological well-being. It has given me the ability to pursue graduate study and spend more time with friends and in political activism. It has even made me an objectively better worker from the standpoint of capitalist rationality during the three days that I am at work; I probably do the same amount of work now than I did in five days, and with a much sunnier disposition to boot.

Economists who study the social effects of a shortened work week have found empirical support for my overwhelmingly positive subjective experiences. Earlier this year, the New Eco-

nomics Foundation in Britain issued a report calling for the normal work week to be reduced from its current level to 21 hours. They find that experiments in working less are often popular with both workers and employers, cut down on environmental pollution because of a reduction in commuting, help to reduce unemployment, encourage a balancing of gender relations at home and at work, and improve workers' physical and psychological well-being. I don't mean to portray shortening working time as a panacea, and I admit that I have been able to perform my small experiment in freedom because I am a young man with low overhead costs and no familial obligations. The fact that my union continues to protect my position while I work a reduced number of hours certainly doesn't hurt either. But the potential benefits are clear and could be a central component of a new political program for the Left.

**"the animating principle of the Left is not so much equality, but rather freedom..."**

Clearly, the prospects of building a movement around such a program currently appear to be bleak. But so are the prospects of building a movement around a more traditional Left program that continues to operate under the assumptions of mid-20th century social democracy. In this time of crisis and uncertainty, all potential options should be considered and pursued. A demand for less work and more free time could be the thing that activates the formation of a new collective political subject with the capacity to pursue a class politics appropriate for the 21st century. It might create the conditions under which "a Left endowed with a future rather than burdened with nostalgia for the past might re-emerge," as Gorz incisively put it. Besides, we have already earned that general distribution of products and universal holiday that Paul Lafargue talked about over a century ago. It's time to cash in. ¶



# Why We Loved the Zapatistas



BY BHASKAR SUNKARA

**A**t the age of twenty-two, creeping towards a bachelor's in something practical, Ian Harris looked destined to join the ranks of the smug and overpaid—maybe as a marketing manager, podiatrist, or motivational speaker. His plans changed abruptly when he, by chance, attended a Progressive Student Network conference in Washington. The theme of the gathering was the hemisphere's emerging people's movements. Ian insists that his activist bona fides didn't run much deeper than owning a *Rage Against the Machine* album, but it's clear he had a sense of history. There were just and noble stirrings of the exploited and he was on their side. The year was 1994; Larry Hunter was drafting a Contract with America, Vanilla Ice was sporting dreadlocks, and Ian Harris was off to Chiapas.

"Zapatourism" saw thousands of activists descend on the southern Mexican state. Merchants in places like Tierra Adentro sold revolutionary knickknacks and handcrafts to international adventurers, while graduate students back home sold M.A. theses about "mobilizing frames under transitional conditions" and "countermovement synergy" to tenure tracks. The global climate and local conditions couldn't have been more different, but those who actually made it to Mexico were in the tradition of the Venceremos Brigade and the North Star Network. Far from passive observers, activists delivered aid, performed human rights observations, installed irrigation, and repaired infrastructure, generally conducting themselves like model internationalists. Still, Ian's stories from the front are mostly about chronic diarrhea and mosquitoes. And today, a partner in a law firm, he is by his own admission smug and overpaid.

## Context

**D**uring the Cold War-era, even for many leftists critical of the Soviet Union, attempts to pull societies in the periphery out of poverty and underdevelopment evoked romantic sentiments. Faith in the historic potential of the universal class, the proletariat, was sidelined. The Maoist exalted the peasantry; the Fanonite praised the lumpenproletariat. Photogenic Latin American guerrillas, Chinese provincials, and mid-level military officers across the rest of the Third World seemed poised to offer a shortcut to modernity and progress. Socialist enclaves were to compete with, and eventually supersede, capitalism from without.

Even before the Eastern Bloc's col-

lapse, the luster had faded from Third World nationalism. Julius Nyerere's decentralized "African socialism," based on village cooperatives, turned Tanzania from the leading exporter of agricultural products on the continent to its largest importer. The region's classically Stalinist development schemes—in Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia—suffered more calamitous fates. Lauded revolutionaries in Vietnam and Cuba lost their mystique as well. In Vietnam, victory against the United States proved to be Pyrrhic. Left to rule over a poisoned landscape, with millions dead, national liberation forces sought rapprochement with both international capital and their former adversaries. In Cuba, the fervor and charisma of the early stages of the revolution transmuted itself into something indistinguishable from the quiet repression and stagnation of Brezhnev's Russia.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the avowal of an end to History, another bonfire of illusion spread through the breadth of the Left. Eurocommunists shed all pretense and fully embraced liberalism. Postcolonial states abandoned import substitution and fiendishly courted foreign investment. Venerable social democratic parties fell under the sway of Third Way modernizers. All, whether with delight or remorse, recognized there was no systemic outlook on the world stage to rival free market capitalism. Perry Anderson put it bluntly, "Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neoliberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history."

Those who clung to anti-capitalism looked for social forces to break this consensus. They again found inspiration abroad. For a new wave of Western activists, rejecting Stalinism meant resigning Marxist analysis and "Old Left" patterns of organization in favor of post-operaismo and anarchism. John Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power* replaced Vladimir Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. To this audience the Zapatista Army of National Liberation's (EZLN) 1994 rebellion in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas took on, disproportionate to its actual import, the significance the Petrograd rising had to earlier generations.

**T**he history of Chiapas is a tragic one. The 16th century Spanish conquest cut the Mayan population in half. Not passive victims, the natives fought back—most notably in a 1712 revolt—but they were burdened by disease and faced violent repression. In time, elites from the north would descend on the re-

gion, establishing self-sufficient estates with limited links to the world market. A shift occurred around the turn of the 20th century, under the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, when Mexico embraced a model of export-oriented growth. Industrialization in Europe produced demand for food stuffs and raw materials in the periphery. A modernized elite with a taste for imported manufactured goods commanded a more centralized state and new commercial sectors and advanced social classes appeared.

The ensuing Mexican revolution's land reform barely impacted the region, but during the 1930s presidency of populist Lazaro Cardenas the indigenous became organized within Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) dominated labor unions and peasant organizations. Nonetheless, large landowners continued to consolidate estates, leaving a growing local population with dwindling parcels of land.

Elsewhere, Mexico City was an epicenter of the worldwide student and worker upsurge of 1968. Progressives organized strikes and boycotts against the party-state and came close to toppling the government. State authorities clamped down mercilessly, murdering hundreds in the Tlatelolco Massacre just days before the opening of the Summer Olympics. Faced with new levels of repression, activists went underground to take up the mantle of urban guerrilla.

Conditions within the country lead young revolutionaries down a lonely path—facing an unpopular government, but disconnected from the working class. After a period of intense activity in the early 70s, the insurgency was suppressed. Over a thousand were killed, many more simply "disappeared." Prominent guerrilla groups like the Maoist Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN) vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

**I**n Chiapas, however, militancy was on the uptick. An "Indigenous Congress" was established in the mid-70s and by 1979 over two dozen peasant organizations would declare themselves autonomist. The ruling class responded with a new campaign of violence and state terror. It was under these conditions that Subcomandante Marcos and a handful of comrades from the FLN arrived in the Lacandon Jungle in 1983. Within a decade they would forge ties with the local indigenous communities and swell their ranks to hundreds of armed members.

In the early 1990s with the ratification of NAFTA and the amendment of the revolution-era constitution to rollback land reform and allow for widespread privatization, Zapatista communities ap-

proved a military offensive. On January 1, 1994, coinciding with NAFTA's implementation, 3,000 EZLN cadre occupied towns and ranches through the state.

### Post-modern, Post-marxist, Post-material

**A**fter a brief armed revolt, the revolutionaries shifted their focus to alternative forms of resistance. Central to their effort was outreach to Western activists. The rebels produced communiqués and hosted chic guests. Thousands attended their first *encuentro* in 1996. Outfitted with a black ski mask, pipe, laptop, and a taste for pithy aphorisms, the group's enigmatic spokesperson captured the imagination of hero-starved radicals. *No Logo* author Naomi Klein, a star of the post-modern Left in her own right, wrote:

"[Subcomandante] Marcos, the quintessential anti-leader, insists that his black mask is a mirror, so that 'Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10 p.m., a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains'. In other words, he is simply us: we are the leader we've been looking for."

Their ambiguous pluralism and overtures to the politics of identity seemed a perfect counter to the "one-size fits all" ideologies and monochromatic leaders of the Old Left.

Considered in context the EZLN's tactics made perfect sense. The *foquismo* model was discredited. Where guerrilla movements still—nominally at least—contended for state power, in Colombia and Peru, the struggle had degenerated into violence against the masses themselves or wanton criminality. The Zapatistas knew they were outclassed by the army and isolated from Mexican society at large. Hoisting the red and black in the capital was not on the agenda. Their goals were ambitious, but also simple and immediate—they wanted to create an autonomous zone free of state repression and neoliberal reforms. They planned to link their struggles with other groups from across the political spectrum to oust the PRI, an ouster that would give them more room to operate. They knew that

solidarity from abroad and favorable media coverage could help blunt the military's retaliation and buy them time.

## "Resistance is, after all, a futile, symbolic act unless it leads to material change."

Why the *encuentros* had such an effect on the international Left is harder to understand. Certainly the Zapatistas' ethos was compatible with allies increasingly skeptical of both industrial growth and, after the nightmare of official Communism, state power. Revolutionaries at the turn of the 20th century sought to overturn class cleavages, a social fixture since the Neolithic Revolution. A century later, their successors aspired only to "resist" and free space from concentrated power—to negate, not create. The enemy was no longer capitalism; it was neoliberalism. Its gravedigger, not an organized working class, but a fragmented "multitude":

"On the ground, the results of these miniature protests converging is either frighteningly chaotic or inspiring poetic—or both. Rather than presenting a unified front, small units of activists surround their target from all directions. And rather than build elaborate national or international bureaucracies, temporary structures are thrown up instead: empty buildings are hastily turned into 'convergence centres', and independent media producers assemble impromptu activist news centres. The ad hoc coalitions behind these demonstrations are frequently named after the date of the planned event—J18, N30, A16, S11, S26—and when the date is passed, they leave virtually no trace behind, save for an archived website."

Klein collides with the truth by accident. After an "inspiringly poetic" protest, the movement she champions "leave[s]

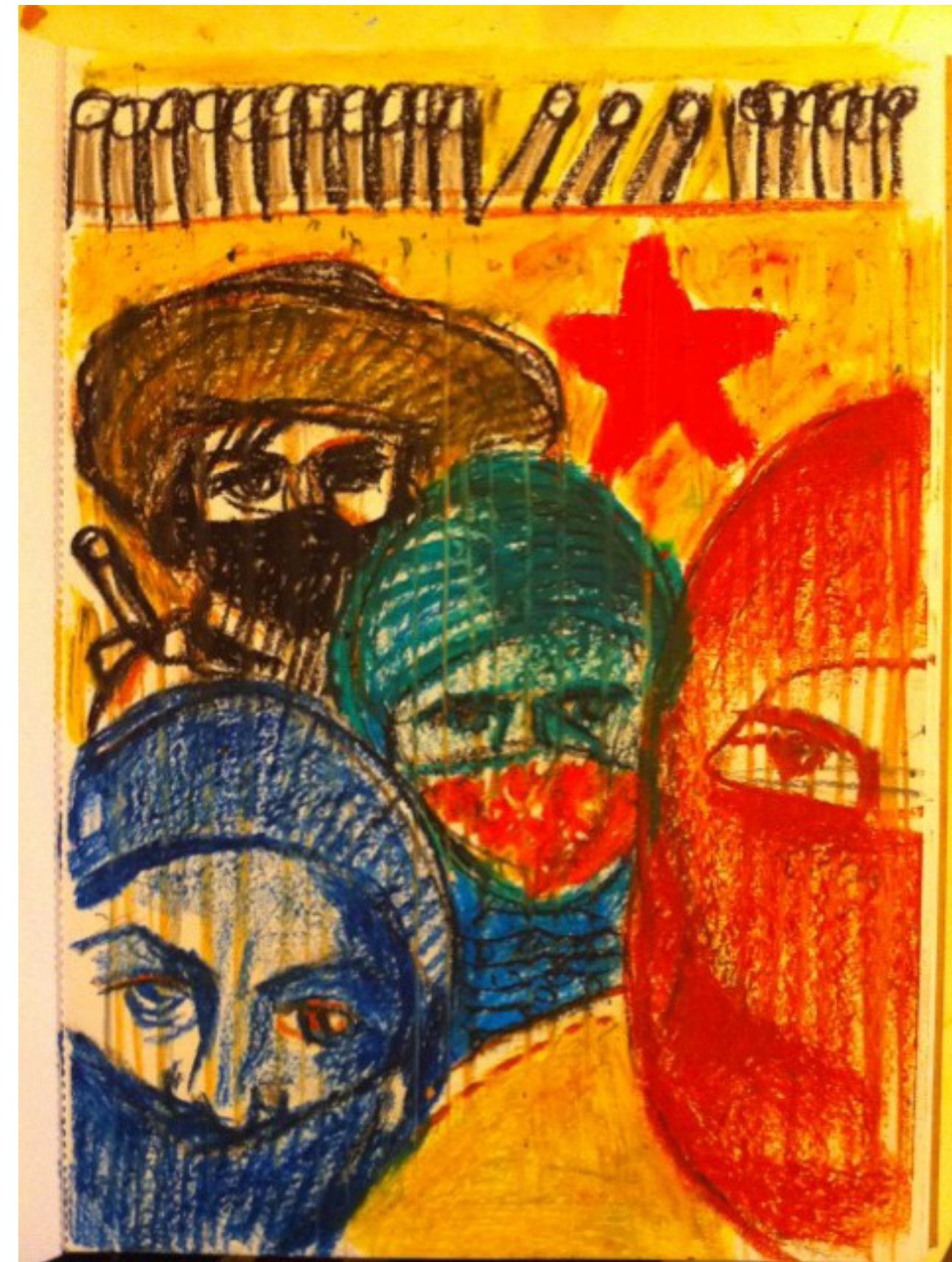
**virtually no trace behind.**" There is an unmistakable enamoring of pageantry as opposed to concrete social transformation—that which can be examined empirically. The new, post-ideological, Left, marred by anti-intellectual and anti-modernist ethos, drifted in a disconnect from both working class politics and structural critiques of capitalism. It was sustained by sentiment alone.

Sentiment also provided the lens through which movements in the global South were viewed. Not quite the liberated paradise the imagination invites, Chiapas is a deeply impoverished region without much to show for almost two decades of revolution. Illiteracy stands at over 20 percent, basic public services like running water, electricity, and sewage are luxuries, and infant mortality runs double the national average. It would be absurd to admonish the Zapatistas for failing to overcome generations of poverty in a single sweep, but is it too much to ask their privileged supporters abroad to pay more attention to the material conditions in Chiapas and less on the innovative ways they use their laptops to conjure "resistance"?

**R**esistance is, after all, a futile, symbolic act unless it leads to material change. The frequent appearance of the black bloc, a tactic in which activists don black masks to engage in ritualistic property destruction, alienating the larger mass of protestors in the process, epitomizes the new spirit. The irony is that, whatever their faults, the FLN cadre from the cities that traveled to the Lacandon Jungle took care to understand their surroundings and the local population. Yet many of those whom they've inspired have formed elitist cliques, engaging in the paramilitary nihilism of the black bloc, fetishizing physical confrontation with the police, preferring personal acts of rebellion in the here and now over the unglamorous job of organizing a conscious class movement. "Educate, Agitate, Organize" has faded into "Agitate, Agitate, Agitate!" (The more palatable and "constructive" anarchists—the food co-ops and urban gardens-type—are benign but utterly ineffectual.)

The abandonment of Marxism had more than academic consequences. With it we lost a post-capitalist vision and began to see the world in a vacuum of time and space. We lost the organizations it had taken generations to build. We spoke of the working class in the past-tense or with contempt. We took a noble struggle and turned it into a model for action.

We loved the Zapatistas, because they were brave enough to make history after the end of History.



We loved the Zapatistas, because we were afraid of political power and political decisions. We loved the Zapatistas, because we thought we could do without a century and a half of baggage. But we could have done far more for the Zapatistas if we mounted a better challenge to the system that shackles us all—neoliberalism. I mean capitalism. ¶

1 Naomi Klein, "Farewell to the End of History: Organization and Vision in Anti-Corporate Movements," *The Socialist Register*, vol. 38 (2002): 3.

2 Klein, *Ibid.*, 5-6.

# Feel Good Zionism

Book Review: *The Myths of Liberal Zionism* by Yitzhak Laor

BY MAX AJL

The West has been sold a bill of goods. Bronzed Jewish soldiers protecting the founders of *kibbutzim* in a Near East backwater, terraforming the desert into farmland, steadfastly creating an outpost of the West in the center of Barbary: redemption for the West's historical sins against European Jewry. It's decent—if saccharine and seriously overwrought—ad-copy for Zionism, and it's gone over well for decades in Paris, New York, Brussels, and Berlin. Like most ad-copy, it has been dishonest. Unlike most ad-copy, it is outright mendacious, something like 1940s cigarette ads advertising tobacco's salubrious effects. And Zionist intellectuals, like tobacco salesmen, are having trouble covering up an increasingly evident truth: that Zionism should be slapped with a label reading: *caution, settler-colonialism, type two: cleansing and extermination. This ideology may be harmful to the native population.*

Earlier Zionists were not in the business of molly-coddling modern Western sensibilities. They were honest, unaware the archive they left behind would be trouble. Take revisionist Vladimir Jabotinsky's scorched forthrightness: "colonization must...proceed in defiance of the will of the native population...an external power has committed itself to creating such security conditions that the local population, however much it would have wanted to, would be unable to interfere, administratively or physically, with our colonization." The ideology hasn't changed much, but the West has. So Israeli new mandarins have to try to sell settler-colonialism to Western states with populations that more and more regard Zionism's spiritual core and physical reality as somewhere on the spectrum between mildly embarrassing and overtly revolting. It is those mandarins that anti-Zionist Israeli poet Yitzhak Laor meticulously vivisects in *The Myths of Liberal Zionism*.

Laor is not much for structure. He wanders and weaves. Not a problem. The book was originally published

in Hebrew and then translated to French. The myths of the book's title are intended to muck up the minds of a European audience. As he writes, "We are not really talking to the United States, maybe because we take its love for granted." And maybe for lack of understanding. In the introduction for the English-language translation, Laor explores differences between the United States and Israel that render this lack of understanding mostly irrelevant. The most important of these center around the Holocaust and its central role in communal binding for the bastion of ideological support for Israel—the American Jewish community. As Jewish theologian Marc Ellis observes, Diasporic Jews are encouraged to feel forever guilty for not having prevented the Holocaust. We are encouraged to see Israel as threatened with "annihilation. The message is clear: unequivocal support for Israel to prevent a second Holocaust."

The corollary is that it is necessary to cultivate a cult of victimology. Children are the best potential victims, much better than grown men armed with Merkava tanks and submarines equipped with nuclear warheads. So Laor begins with an exegesis of the Zionist depiction of Israel—the national self-image as a vulnerable child. As the embodiment of Israeli nationalism, the Israeli soldier is imagined as utterly innocent: a naïf. History happens to children. Adults make history happen. Israeli soldiers "ask for a different kind of adoration, love and warmth. They arouse, they are supposed to arouse, a desire to protect them, to defend them." So the soldiers are children in need of a guardian, so too is Israel. This is the image Israel presents to the world, to America, and to American Jews: we are all wards of an ascendant American Jewry, a *responsible* American Jewry, because it is Israelis that die to protect Jewry. As Laor continues, "The soldier, as a good grandson, is extremely important if we are to understand the Israeli manipulative narrative: we are the grandchildren that the United States and

American Jews are often being called on to feel sorry for." This carefully crafted vulnerability is vital non-sense. Non-sense because Israel is a military titan with a nuclear trump card, vital because a vulnerable child demands succor and nursing. Precisely the correct image for a dependent client-garrison-state—the correct description, despite the analysis *du jour* in the solidarity movement that elides the materialist reasons for American and European materiel and diplomatic support for Israel.

The soldier is also a figure out of the Aryan imagination. Hebrew literature of the 1940s to 1970s is replete with blue-eyed blondes, at a time when the Israeli Jewish demographic, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, was hazel and obsidian. That fantasy refers back to the fantasy of an unsullied whiteness as a paragon of European civilization. This meshes neatly with American and European conceptions of whiteness and the fear of the Dark Other. Still, Laor is quite clear: this Jew doesn't exist.

He is a stand-in for the real Jewry of Israel, the majority, Arabs, many of the Ashkenazi minority, descendants of refugees from the Shoah. This is a conundrum for Zionist Arab Jews, who cannot relate to their past except as undismissible shame, as in the case of A.B. Yehoshua, perpetually bummed at being a Sephardic Jew. When oppression and dispossession map over ethnic lines, binding a community to a racially-conceived state requires racism, an abiding hatred of the Other, the Palestinian Arab. This becomes even more important when that Other is closer to the Sephardic Jewish population than to the dominant population, the Ashkenazi Jewish elite, the major beneficiary of Israeli racism. Israel is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most unequal advanced industrial economy in the world, with 40 percent of its stock market owned by a handful of families, overwhelmingly Ashkenazi. Racism glues together a national identity in lieu of cultural or class-based links which could bind Jewish Arabs to Palestinian Arabs in different and



dangerous communities of identity.

**Y**ehoshua, interviewed in 2004, does his part to tighten that binding in the most callous way imaginable. He observed that there will be a forthcoming war against the Palestinians, "Not a desired war, but definitely a purifying one. A war that will make it clear to the Palestinians that they are sovereign...From the moment we retreat I don't want to know their names at all. I don't want any personal relationship with them." That this involves turning the Palestinian people into metaphysical enemy is clear. That this cleansing violence is "fascistic" in Laor's words is also clear.

Laor chalks this up to Yehoshua's fear of ethnic "heterogeneity," an inability to deal with the "pleasant natives, sometimes a bit devious, sycophantic and especially ugly." This is the product of Zionism's inability to deal with the world and with the real, a recurring theme—we hate what we fear. This hatred binds Israel to a West that hates brown people, too. Amidst ascendant Islamophobia, elite opinion particularly hates Arabs, a hatred that it freely spreads to the general population. All of this hatred is a necessary component of a world-system in which the class structure roughly overlaps with racial hierarchies, captured in the North-South dyad. This has been pretty convenient for Europe as well: "It is through us that Europe, for reasons I shall discuss throughout the book, intensified its hatred of Islam and the Arabs," re-directing classical anti-Semitic tropes away from swarthy Judaic Semites to swarthy Islamic Semites and their *umma*. This occurs frequently—the use of anti-Semitism and philo-Zionism as an adamantine shield-and-sword, behind which European and American bigotries' official representatives can decry the Durban process, for example, or resistance to Israeli irredentism.

Laor is generous in distributing blame. If Israeli *hasbara*-istas produce the *hasbara*, the societies of the West gluttonously consume it. It suits their tastes. So received opinion in the United States and Western Europe agrees agreeably that the failure at Camp David was due to Arafat's (Oriental, so automatic) rejectionism. Here Laor maps the links between European and Israeli anti-Oriental bigotry beautifully.

He quotes Ilan Greilsammer writing in *Le Monde*: "It is enough to be an anti-Zionist, a-Zionist, post-Zionist, or a new historian who describes the massacres perpetrated by the Jews during the war of 1948 to be welcomed everywhere with open arms." Pause for a moment and answer these questions: Where does Ilan Pappé teach, and why? Why can't I find translations of Laor's poetry on the internet? Where was Benny Morris's most recent mediocrity published?

Then continue with Laor: what "Greilsammer is really driving at is the following: in any other place in the (white) world, a state of all its citizens would be a reasonable democratic and republican solution, a legitimate political idea—but this does not apply to Arabs... it is the role of the Jew, within French racism, to articulate such disdain toward the Arabs. This is the return of the colonial." The assault on anti-Zionism segues neatly into an assault on anti-Zionism's moral groundings: anti-colonial universalism. In the neo-colonial present, radical equality threatens a radically unequal world. How to smuggle in colonial ideology?

Easy: behind an anti—"anti-Semitic" discourse, from behind which anti-Arab racism can decorously emerge. And it is from this perspective that a Zionist Israeli acts as cipher for European bigotry and explains the extent of the branding operation. This is why Yehoshua does so well in European capital cities. As Laor puts it, describing another Yehoshua novel, "Here the border does not run through the hero, but rather the hero forcibly marks the border." Over there are the Orientals. We are Hebrews.

These imaginary Hebrews, rootless, de-historicized, fantastic, unreal, are counterpoised with the Ashkenazi Jew of Europe, the desperate refugee, the post-Holocaust in-gathering from the *galut*. This figure, religious, learned, intellectual, unable to defend himself—the Warsaw ghetto and the Bielski partisans forgotten—is an ugly figure in the liberal Zionist literary imaginary. He is a kike: yarmulke-wearing, effeminate, Talmud-spouting, blathering away in the Yiddish patois, equivocating, thinking, learning, and helplessly dying. That is one of the serial "Others" of Israeli civilization. But an Other presupposes a native. The *sabra* is the native. But the *sabra*, too, is clearly of European descent. As Laor writes, "Where is the

'real native'? Where is 'the indigenous culture'? There is no such thing in Hebrew literature or there appears to be no such thing. In other words, Hebrew expropriated, by the use of the term 'native' (*yalid*, pl. *yelidim*), even that status from the Palestinians," alongside "Israeli" cuisine like hummus and falafel, and Levantine architecture, too.

## "How to solve the riddle? Simple. Through cleansing, renewing violence."

These are garnishments. The core of the change in Jewish identity that Laor limns is "The metamorphosis of the Jew from non-Westerner to candidate-as-Westerner...the most central part of Israeli ideology." Through Zionism, Jewry is immured from its history: the perennial tax-collector and merchant, lingering far too obviously in the interstices of European culture. Through Zionism, the Jew becomes almost-European. Through the *sabra*, Israel becomes schizophrenically strong and weak: "the *sabra*...as a victim of circumstances, or a victim of the cruelty of the generation before him, or of the cruelty of Jewish history. In short, he was expected to be cruel, yet his cruelty was forgiven 'in advance' for he was the historical answer to the riddle of Jewish history." How to solve the riddle? Simple. Through cleansing, renewing violence.

And the Jew-as-probationary-Westerner is doing excellent yeoman work in thrashing the natives. He is permitted and expected to be cruel, in response both to historical cruelty and because Israelis are not in Europe, where the natives are slightly more in line. "What our leaders asked for, it seems, was not the Rights of Man, but the right to belong to the elite. We can

now participate in violating the rights of others." Now that Israel is a grown-up nation-state, playing with the adults, its people can enjoy the privilege of at least border-Westerners: cluster-bombing brown folk. Laor knows that this is good work. Constant conflict is good money, good for scaring up oil prices, good for weapons sales. "Why disarm ourselves if the fences not only help us be safe, but also help us stay in 'the West'? Or, in the words of the future historian: Why think of peace, if the price we will have to pay in return is a heterogeneous life?" Future historians may be less demure about the way Israel has ideologically stabilized itself and its bigotry vis-à-vis the needs of its political economy and its insertion into mercantilist neo-liberalism.

This too is convenient for a European community that would rather not see the Holocaust as a product of European civilization and its Romantic obsession with national purity, related to the racism inherent in the colonial project and an endogenous process of violent state-formation, as Arendt suggested. Instead, the Holocaust is outside history, for both Israel and Europe. For Israel, this is convenient because it re-writes Jewish history in a floating arc of "national continuity which begins with the rise of Nazism, continues with the war and terminates in the construction of the memory of the (Jewish) victims." For Europe, this is convenient because it places the Holocaust in a mausoleum marked Human Suffering, so ostentatiously elaborate that we are meant to not notice that the monument has walled off the Holocaust from the genocides the West perpetrated in the global South, privileging it, privileging Jewish suffering, now considered a sort of suffering of full human beings since the Jewish people—via Israel, modeled on the European state—are probationary Europeans.

**G**ermany gets special attention from Laor. It commemorates the dead of World War II by "transforming the memory of Nazism into that of the genocide, and the genocide into remembrance of the Holocaust," in turn setting up a neat diagram of killers and killed—Nazi génocidaires and Jewish victims. That accomplished, there is little need to look at the Holocaust as a more general instance of Western state violence. As Laor notes, the German

Holocaust Museum is in Poland, at Auschwitz, the cemetery of so many Jewish dead, now ensconced in the Western and especially Jewish imaginary as the symbol of the Holocaust. And as Laor adds, it was East, always East, where massacre took place, and so the memory of massacre is less able to contaminate Germany's cosmopolitan core. Meanwhile, "here" in the German imaginary is there—no quotation marks—in the midst of the Orient, when it comes to actual Israelis. Well-done, since Israelis are mostly Arabs or ultra-religious Jews, reviled in European culture.

But the pristine white-and-azure flag is given pride of place in German ceremonies, "symbols through which German identity is thought," redemption for its sins just against Jews and not against anyone else: blacks, Gypsies, the disabled, and dissidents. And most importantly, it has been a redemption for which white people don't have to pay. As Laor points out, this is a way of dehistoricizing German history too, a relatively cheap get-out-of-jail free card for a country in which de-Nazification failed. Quick, look over there! The German national narrative distracted, no national introspection needed, "No political price would then need to be paid by the Globkes, the Krupps, IG Farben and the SS pensioners; nor would any compensation be paid to those who did resist."

**L**aor reserves a special disgust for the intellectual artisans toiling away within Israeli society. Like Viktor Klemperer, he highlights the treason of the intellectuals as the worst betrayal. He quotes Amos Oz as writing that the Israel-Palestine conflict is, "in other words a conflict between two causes where both are as just, one as the other." What can Laor say? He says nothing. Or Claude Lanzmann, maker of the movie Shoah: "They have autonomous territories, an armed police force, weapons are everywhere."

While Israeli soldiers beat children to death, children with minds tortured by "memories of mothers screaming with fear, babies who never saw anything but armored trucks near home." Or on Camp David, Laor highlights "the role played by the Zionist left in cementing the anti-Palestinian public perception so common today." Here again is Oz: "he has incited his people against Israel and

against the Jews. Finally, he has initiated this recent burst of hateful violence," meant to wrack Jews with suffering. "The Palestinian people are suffocated and poisoned by blind hate." Laor knows that Oz laid the symbolic ground for 5500 Palestinian and 1000 Israeli dead during the 2nd Intifada. Oz scribbles away with the blood of the dead on his quill and Laor hates him for it. Laor hates Oz for another reason too. Judaism as a breathing culture has been suffocated by the Zionist Israeli narrative. The old narrative of Eastern Europe Jewry has had to be decimated. This has meant the destruction of a special memory: Holocaust-surviving, the remnant of eastern European Jewry, shtetl life. Laor is the descendant of survivors of the Shoah, with a tincture of Maghrebi Jew. He is everything the Israeli imaginary attempts to erase or to spit upon. Livid, Laor absolutely refuses to descend to the culture or the memories of Shoah Jewry. When Oz describes annihilated European Jewry as opera and ballet-viewing poly-lingual cosmopolitans, Laor explodes: "This is simply the desecration of the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, most of whom never went to the opera, never read European poetry."

As Laor writes, "The real people, those who never frequented operas or concerts, those who were deported en masse to the camps and to their deaths, were not 'ideal' in any sense. They loved their spoken language, their world which was burnt down; they were real." Oz hates the real, for reality is intolerable to the Zionist, thief of Jewish history, abuser of the Holocaust. For the Israeli Zionist, Laor has many damning words. Maybe this is an attempt to heal the culture. For American Zionist Jews, who need this book so badly, who will react to its publication like a blind man to Medusa? "I can hardly find appropriate words for them," for those who pay for the weapons that kill children, for those who will never live in their insurance-policy patch of land in the Levant. I can find appropriate words for Laor's book: it is a gift, incredible and beautiful, so wonderful that I am sure that the American Zionist community will spurn it. No one wants to read the words that will be the epitaph on the gravestone marking the burial site of your national imaginary. ¶

# The Purveyor of Half Measures

BY IAN MORRISON

Each great essayist has a quip about the two-party system. I.F. Stone wrote that it appears "like those magic black and white squares which look like a staircase at one moment and a checkerboard the next. Sometimes the two parties seem very distinct and sometimes they seem very much alike." Gore Vidal put it more bluntly, arguing that the U.S. is the only country in the world with one party of property and two right wings. Present frustrations, perhaps, are better invoked by Christopher Hitchens' remark that the system only represents two cheeks of the same derriere.

Yet folk wisdom on the Left suggests that it is easier to oppose the status quo with a Democrat rather than a Republican in power. It often seems impossible to imagine anything Left of the Democratic Party when the majority of opposition seamlessly flows into anti-Republican rancour, as the 'anti-war' movement aptly demonstrates. However, history also provides the opposite example. Franklin Roosevelt had Alf Landon; Lyndon Johnson had Barry Goldwater; today, Obama has... the Tea Party? Lesser-evil-ism has its distinctive place in American politics, yet with all the conservative saber-rattling, each was defeated by a landslide. The Tea Party appears no different.

Still the Left never fails to paint a hysterical image during Democratic presidencies. Reading some of the left-wing press (if it is even fair to describe it as such) you would think the Tea Party is some kind of fascist insurrection. The idea is as laughable as the image of Obama as a Keynesian Socialist. But putting matters of subtlety aside, what this theatrical 1930s-style political drama seems to demonstrate is just how thoroughgoing the demobilized political atmosphere within the Left (as well as the Right) actually is. Each is groping in the dark for a conflict that has long since passed.

As pundits from Washington to Wichita never cease to remind us: "bipartisan" is grace. Sectarian politics, which allows us to judge the ideological spectrum, are hardly on offer today. Even reforms, moderate or reactionary, are so rare within the US that whenever

any action is taken it gives off a peculiar sense that the government has somehow been hijacked and perverted. The Right struck this posture over the health insurance reform, and certainly, this is how the Left experienced the Bush-era. At each moment, the continuity between administrations always appears hard to register, as the rightward drift - irrespective of the party in power - too often appears as the 'irresponsible' act of a powerful individual.

"It appears that it would take a revolution just to pass a meager reform..."

As President Bush was about to leave office the philosopher Robert Hullot-Kentor made a prophetic remark on this score. "[Bush] remains among our representative men," he claimed. "It could be argued that the Bush administration, as a whole, has unstintingly bestowed a deeper good look at the country than we perhaps ever received before." We should only hope that Obama can shed the same light. As he goes on the campaign trail promising to build an "infrastructure bank" and protect Social Security, rather than cheering for his paltry Social Democratic side, critics would do better to underscore how even investing in infrastructure, once the ultimate bipartisan 'issue,' has begun to look like pulling teeth. A turn towards some type of Keynesian approach to the state is not on offer. Even the most tepid reforms are

caught in a deadlock. Liberal legislation, like The Dream Act or the Employee Free Choice Act, have the odds staked against them. One recent study has it that in the 1960s only eight percent of major Senate bills were subject to filibuster, however now, the figure stands at around seventy percent. It appears that it would take a revolution just to pass a meager reform, and perhaps, that is exactly how one should look at the situation.

Reforms always have unintended consequences. What can appear like a victory at one point can seem retrospectively as a tactic for demobilization. The Democrats insistence on using legislation and the courts to push for social reforms has for this reason caused considerable confusion among the would-be Left. Many fail to see that the Democratic Party (and the Republicans in their own way) have nothing to gain from mobilizing popular support around anything other than elections. Even when a few northern Democrats supported Civil Rights, the party never sought to organize mass support, but rather always took a legislative or judicial route. This has meant that "ever since World War II," as Christopher Lasch perceptively points out, "[the Left] has used essentially undemocratic

means to achieve democratic ends, and it has paid the price for this evasive strategy in the loss of public confidence and support." This is not a denunciation of Brown vs. the Board of Education or The Voting Rights Acts, the pillars of the Civil Rights movement, Lasch refers to. Rather it is an assessment of the Civil Rights agenda judged on its own terms. It is essential to remember that a law and its practical effect are quite different. The Civil Rights leader, Bayard Rustin, was correct to point out in the late 1960s that despite all the "judicial and legislative victories which have been achieved in the past few years [...] Negros are in worse economic shape, live in worse slums, and attend more highly segregated schools than in 1954." Hard as it is to accept, this unromantic view should be taken to heart. We should not take comforted in the past, but rather allow ourselves to be challenged by it.

The inadequate Cold War liberalism behind the Civil Rights movement deserves special emphasis today, particularly after the recent controversy over the March on Washington, catalyzed by the 'Restoring Honour' and 'One Nation Working Together' rallies. Both are nothing but cynical get out the vote campaigns with vague populist messages, and neither compares to the historic 1963 march. That much is clear. But what they do signify is an important shift in historical imagination.

During the Bush years, vintage 1968 politics appeared to be all the rage; The comparison between Vietnam and the Second Gulf War was constantly evoked. Students for a Democratic Society, almost spontaneously, was brought back from the dead by university and high school students. Today, the early sixties attempt to realign the Democrats into a European-style Labor party (by using the Civil Rights Movement and the power of organized labor to flush out the Dixiecrats) has gained new purchase. However, not only did this strategy, embodied in the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party, fail at the 1964 Democratic Convention (with the help of Walter Reuther and some good-old party pragmatism), retrospectively, this strategy was deeply flawed. Globally, European social democracy was entering a new phase of decline, signified by

the Godesberg Program adopted by the German Social Democratic Party which renounced any association with Leftist ideology. In fact, just as the traditional Labor parties of Europe were arriving at the conclusion that being administrators of the welfare state had become the best of all possible options, that particular historical compromise between labor and capital began to unfold. That this decaying model could be grafted onto the American political scene was a profound illusion then and even more so today.

The most conscious members of the coalition pushing to realign the Democratic Party were aware of this problem in the mid-sixties. One group, which included not only Bayard Rustin but also Tom Hayden and James Boggs, warned in the "The Triple Revolution" about a "cybernetic revolution" with "almost unlimited productive capacity which requires progressively less human labor," which is to say, the startlingly high levels of unemployment we currently live under. These issues, of course, have become all the more complex since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the shift from post-Fordism to contemporary neoliberalism. In the years since the Great Society programs in the 1960s the Democrats have spiraled farther and farther away from anything that even remotely resembles mid-century

social democracy. Bill Clinton, and now Obama, make this painfully obvious.

What is needed today is not a re-fashioned social democracy, 'New Deal' coalition, or, even worse still, a "populist initiative" that would "mirror of the Tea Party movement," as Bill Fletcher recently proposed. The Left cannot keep on putting around wondering why people do not act in accord with their own 'economic self-interest.' Any re-fashioned Left will need to move ahead of the historical curve, cleanse itself of crude populist baggage, and take into consideration the far reaching transformations that have taken place since the collapse of the New Left. That would necessarily entail assessing the continuity between administrations, while more importantly, critiquing past attempts at maneuvering through the peculiar two-party system. Unfortunately, frustration and anger about the economy and 'irresponsible government action' do not readily transform into left-wing politics. Looking back at the twentieth century should make that abundantly clear. That the Left has largely disappeared across the globe irrespective of the various political parties in power points to a historical dynamic that demand more than ever a clear basis of critique, which, currently, is desperately lacking. ¶

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

Livia, 62, retired cosmetics factory worker: "I'm lucky to be in good health, but it's not the case with everybody. I had [my pension] thanks to others who fought for me, so I'm fighting for others. I've always fought to defend ideas, values. I go to all the mobilization days."

Danielle, 60, who works in professional training: "I'm not here for me. My pension is already taken care of. It's for future generations. I always have a hope, maybe it's utopian, but I think that things can still change. I've been a union member in the CGT since May '68, even though I'm from a right-wing family. In the business world, I learned very fast that if there aren't people in solidarity, together, facing the leaders, there's no balance, you're always getting nibbled away at."

Marie-Laure, 56, elementary school

teacher: "Beyond the issue of pensions, there's a real problem of society. The middle class, which we're part of, is being pulled down. The class below doesn't have enough to live. We live longer, it's true, but not necessarily in good health. I hope they listen to us, because what's going on is indecent."

Bernard, 45, an IT manager in an aeronautics firm: "I've gone a few times to Anglo-Saxon countries, I've seen granddads of 70 selling shoes. I don't think that's a good model of society."

\* \* \*

"Model of society" ... "solidarity" ... "I'm not here for me" ... problem of society." Today, this language is absent not only from the Tea Party right, but,

unfortunately, also from the main currents of the American left. And yet, this language, by its very existence, stands as proof that despite the inexorable global forces allegedly responsible for the acid bath in which society is currently being dissolved, it remains possible to "think society." One day, at a highway roadblock organized by truck drivers in northern France, a Belgian long-haul driver, furious to find himself stuck, got out of his vehicle to confront the French unionists. "Your pension reform, it's like that everywhere - in Belgium, too. What are we going to do, shut down the country, like you?"

"Well, yeah" came the answer. ¶

Though he might not appreciate the cliché, Walter Benn Michaels is no stranger to controversy. In the early 1980s he wrote a series of articles with Steven Knapp entitled “Against Theory,” in which it was argued that literary works meant only what their authors intended them to mean. He created a stir beyond the Ivory Tower with a 2006 book, *The Trouble with Diversity*, premised around the idea that a focus on cultural diversity at the expense of economic equality has stunted resistance to neoliberalism.

# Let Them Eat Diversity

**Neoliberalism is often presented as a unified, homogenous ideology, but you differentiate between “Left” and “Right” neoliberalisms—what’s the difference and which one dominates American politics today?**

The differentiation between Left and Right neoliberalism doesn’t really undermine the way it which it is deeply unified in its commitment to competitive markets and to the state’s role in maintaining competitive markets. For me the distinction is that “left neoliberals” are people who don’t understand themselves as neoliberals. They think that their commitments to anti-racism, to anti-sexism, to anti-homophobia constitute a critique of neoliberalism. But if you look at the history of the idea of neoliberalism you can see fairly quickly that neoliberalism arises as a kind of commitment precisely to those things.

One of the first major works of neoliberal economics by an American is Becker’s *[The] Economics of Discrimination*, which is designed precisely to show that in competitive economies you can’t afford to discriminate. Foucault sort of marks the beginning of neoliberalism in Europe with the horror at what the Nazi state did and the recognition that you can legitimize the state in a much more satisfactory manner by making it the guardian of competitive markets rather than the guardian of the German volk. And today’s orthodoxy is the idea that social justice consists above all in defense of property and the attack of discrimination. This is at the heart of neoliberalism and right-wing neoliberals understand this and left-wing neoliberals don’t.

**What’s at the heart of your work is that equal-opportunity exploitation is what we’re moving towards, or at the very least it’s an ideological goal of the ruling class. So, what explains the shift in the way capital has historically acted—using racial and ethnic divisions to better exploit the working class?**

Well, I think there’s absolutely no

question that is true. Capitalism throughout the 19th century and through much of the 20th was classically imperialist, which is basically impossible without racism, without a massive commitment to what amounted to European-American White supremacy. But one of the things that’s become obvious -- leaving the racism question aside, leaving the discrimination question more generally aside, -- is that the condition of capital changed fairly radically in the 20th century. Of course, people have different accounts of why that is. Even those on the Left who agree that the falling rate of profit is central don’t agree on whether it’s a structural necessity or a contingent development. But almost everyone agrees that neoliberalism involved internationalization in a way that cannot be reduced to what imperialism was before and that it involved, above all, a kind of powerful necessity for mobility not of only of capital, but of labor.

Stalin famously won the argument but lost the war over whether there could be socialism in one country, but no one has ever been under the impression for more than a millisecond that there could be neoliberalism in only one country. An easy way to look at this would be to say that the conditions of mobility of labor and mobility of capital have since World War II required an extraordinary upsurge in immigration. The foreign born population in the U.S. today is something like 38 million people, which is roughly equivalent to the entire population of Poland. This is a function of matching the mobility of capital with the mobility of labor, and when you begin to produce these massive multi-racial or multi-national or as we would call them today multi-cultural workforces, you obviously need technologies to manage these work forces.

In the U.S. this all began in a kind of powerful way with the Immigration Act of 1965, which in effect repudiated the explicit racism of the Immigration Act of the 1924 and replaced it with largely neoliberal criteria. Before, whether you could come to the U.S. was based almost entirely on racial or, to use the

then-preferred term, “national” criteria. I believe that, for example, the quota on Indian immigration to the U.S. in 1925 was 100. I don’t know the figure on Indian immigration to the U.S. since 1965 off-hand, but 100 is probably about an hour and a half of that in a given year. The anti-racism that involves is obviously a good thing, but it was enacted above all to admit people who benefited the economy of the U.S. They are often sort of high-end labor, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen of various kinds. The Asian immigration of the 70s and 80s involved a high proportion of people who had upper and upper-middle class status in their countries of origin and who quickly resumed that middle and upper middle class status in the U.S. While at the same time we’ve had this increased immigration from Mexico, people from the lower-end of the economy, filling jobs that otherwise cannot be filled—or at least not filled at the price capital would prefer to pay. So there is a certain sense in which the internationalism intrinsic to the neoliberal process requires a form of anti-racism and indeed neoliberalism has made very good use of the particular form we’ve evolved, multiculturalism, in two ways.

First, there isn’t a single US corporation that doesn’t have an HR office committed to respecting the differences between cultures, to making sure that your culture is respected whether or not your standard of living is. And, second, multiculturalism and diversity more generally are even more effective as a legitimizing tool, because they suggest that the ultimate goal of social justice in a neoliberal economy is not that there should be less difference between the rich and the poor—indeed the rule in neoliberal economies is that the difference between the rich and the poor gets wider rather than shrinks—but that no culture should be treated invidiously and that it’s basically OK if economic differences widen as long as the increasingly successful elites come to look like the increasingly unsuccessful non-elites. So the model of social justice is not that



the rich don't make as much and the poor make more, the model of social justice is that the rich make whatever they make, but an appropriate percentage of them are minorities or women. That's a long answer to your question, but it is a serious question and the essence of the answer is precisely that internationalization, the new mobility of both capital and labor, has produced a contemporary anti-racism that functions as a legitimization of capital rather than as resistance or even critique.

**You just identified the problem, increasing social inequity and heightened class exploitation in recent decades, but you also did something that you didn't do as much in your book, which is give credence to objective economic forces—the crises of social democracy, stagflation, capitalist restructuring, union busting, etc.**

Well, I wrote the book four or five years ago and I know more about it now than I did then. So yeah, that's true, the book is in a certain sense a response to what seemed to me very visible on the surface, but I had much less of a sense of how that situation came about. One of the things that's been useful—I know it's been useful for me, but I think it's actually been useful in general for at least some people on the Left in thinking about these issues—has been the popularization of the concept of neoliberalism, which has given us a better ability to periodize the history of capitalism and especially of events since World War II. You get a different vision of what postmodernism, for example, is when you begin to see postmodernism as the official ideology of neoliberalism and that's a vision you can't have until you have a kind of sense of what neoliberalism is. Others, of course, were alert to this long before I was.

**Speaking of the postmodernists, you focus a lot on academics and academia in your book, but one could argue that correlation doesn't equal causation. An academic might be spending too much time writing about hybridity and difference and identity movements might be marching in the streets, but is this actually preventing class-based movements from emerging?**

I don't know if it's preventing it. My thesis was never that it prevented class based movements from emerging. I mean I never meant to present a theory about what has prevented class-

based movements from emerging in the U.S. and I certainly didn't mean to imply that what people do in English classes did it. Although, of course, given the class position of the students in those classes, it's probably right to say that English departments and elite universities more generally do a very good job of providing the upper middle class with its impressively good anti-racist, pro-gay-marriage conscience. But the more striking thing here is that when it comes to respecting difference, the academic world is hardly very different from the corporate world. The kind of distinctions and divisions that academics have learned to make in various identity categories are absolutely matched in sophistication by the ones that are made by any major U.S. corporation.

There do things that corporations would do that academics would never think of. I've never been in the worst bullshit cultural theory class that actually took seriously the idea that we really should think of first born children and middle children belonging to separate cultures, but there are corporations that do indeed have organizations designed precisely to deal with the cultures of first born and middle born and youngest children, so I don't think that business America should be at all ashamed of its performance in relation to academic America.

It's true, we in the university are in some sense the research and development division of business, but in this regard business has also exceeded us. So I think actually there is a whole lot of continuity between ways in which Americans think of these issues both in the academy and outside. And then beyond that if you get to the core of it, anti-discrimination—which is after all something we are all, including the general American public, committed to—has become the almost exclusive criterion of political morality. American society today, both legally and politically, has a strong commitment to the idea that discrimination is the worst thing you can do, that paying somebody a pathetic salary isn't too bad but paying somebody a pathetic salary because of his or her race or sex is unacceptable. That is, in some sense, built into the logic of liberal capitalism, but it has reached new heights in the last 30 or 40 years. And from that standpoint the American academy is really only following along with what is been central to American society more generally.

The most vivid image of that is going to be same sex marriage. I mean Stonewall was, what, in 1969? So, it's almost exactly 40 years ago, and the idea that gay rights would include or should include same sex marriage was

seen as ... I don't know if anyone even had that idea, I mean I'm old enough to have been around then, and I might have missed it, but I don't know if that was on anyone's agenda even as a utopian fantasy. Today it's going to be a reality; it is in five states, on its way to being a reality in six states. That's not been produced primarily by academics, that's due to a shift in American society itself. And it is on one hand a completely admirable shift, I don't think there is any doubt that you have a freer, more just society if you allow same-sex marriage, but on the other hand it is a shift that is in no sense oppositional to capitalism.

## "Are you kidding me? I've been called a racist for twenty years."

Major social changes have taken place in the past 40 years with remarkable rapidity, but not any in any sense inimical to capitalism. Capitalism has no problem with gay people getting married and people who self-identify as neoliberals understand this very well. So I think the main thing to say there is that, maybe in the book a lot of the examples tend to be academic examples, but I think you can find examples in American society everywhere of the extraordinary power, the hegemony of the model of anti-discrimination, accompanied by defense of property, as the guiding precepts of social justice. You can see this in the study that people have recently been making fun of—the one that shows that liberals are not as liberal as they think they are. What it showed was that when people were asked about the question of redistribution of wealth they turned out to be a lot less egalitarian than they thought they were. People who characterized themselves as "extremely liberal" nevertheless had real problems with the redistribution of wealth. And someone pointed out, I think he teaches at Stanford, that that's the wrong way to

think of this, because yes it's true that especially as people get more wealthy they tend to become less committed to the redistribution of wealth but there are lots of ways in which they become "more liberal"—with respect to gay rights, antiracism, with respect to all the so-called "social issues," as long as these social issues are defined in such a way that they have nothing to do with decreasing the increased inequalities brought about by capitalism, which is to say, taking away rich liberals' money.

The truth is, it's hard to find any political movement that's really against neoliberalism today, the closest I can come is the Tea Party. The Tea Party represents in my view, not actually a serious, because it's so inchoate and it's so in a certain sense diluted, but nonetheless a real reaction against neoliberalism that is not simply a reaction against neoliberalism from the old racist Right. It's a striking fact that what the American Left mainly wants to do is reduce the Tea Party to racists as quickly as humanly possible. They're thrilled when some Nazis come out and say "Yeah, we support the Tea Party" or some member of the Tea Party says something racist, which is frequently enough. But you can't understand the real politics of the Tea Party unless you understand how important their opposition to illegal immigration is. Because who's for illegal immigration? As far as I know only one set of people is for illegal immigration, I mean you may be [as a Marxist], but as far as I know the only people who are openly for illegal immigration are neoliberal economists.

First of all, neoliberal economists are completely for open borders, in so far as that's possible. Friedman said years ago that, "You can't have a welfare state and open borders," but of course the point of that was "open the borders, because that'll kill the welfare state." There's a good paper you can get off the web by Gordon Hanson, commissioned by whoever runs Foreign Affairs, and the argument is that illegal immigration is better than legal immigration, because illegal immigration is extremely responsive to market conditions.

So it's quite striking that you have all this protesting against illegal immigration, and especially at a time when it's down. So why are people so upset about it? They are upset about it not because it has gotten worse, it hasn't, but because they somehow recognize that one of the primary sort of marks of the triumph of neoliberalism in the U.S. is a very high tolerance of illegal immigration, and that illegal immigration is the kind of ne plus ultra of the labor mobility that neoliberalism requires. I mean that's why for

years—even though it's a kind of contradiction in terms—as a policy it's worked well. The Bush administration did everything it could to talk against illegal immigration but leave it alone and I'm sure the Obama administration would do the same thing except its hand's being forced by the Tea Party. So you get these people who are saying illegal immigration sucks, and even Glenn Beck will say "immigration good, illegal immigration bad" and, what he's reacting against is not, as he thinks, socialism but currently existing capitalism, but he has no clue.

In fact, he's become obsessed in an interesting way with communism though as far as I can tell we have zero communists not only in the U.S., but almost anywhere else in the world. But you can sort of see it, because they recognize in illegal immigration a form of capitalism that has finally begun to emerge as a threat to the middle class and even a little bit to the upper middle class, but the only way that they can conceptualize it is as "communism." They are so committed to a kind of capitalism, which neoliberalism is in fact destroying, that when they see neoliberalism in action they just identify it as "communism."

**But isn't there a problem with saying things "close the borders," "restore the welfare state," etc. I mean the welfare state was obviously a golden period of human civilization ...**

I don't know of anyone who's advocating "close the borders."

**Well, at the very least, against open borders, against labor matching the mobility of capital, so basically you're looking back with nostalgia instead of looking forward. Instead of adapting the labor movement to the global climate as it is by internationalizing labor unions and other vehicles of working class political representation.**

Well, for sure the labor movement should be doing that although we know it isn't. Some argue that limiting immigration could help restore the unions and that's obviously false and I'm certainly not saying that the Tea Party has the diagnosis right. The Tea Party thinks that immigrants are taking away their money. It's not immigrants who are taking away their money; it's neoliberalism that's taking away their money. And this is true even though the Tea Party is a disproportionately upper middle class movement. There is some debate about that, but what the Times survey shows, at least in part, is that Tea Partiers in

general are richer than most Americans, closer to the top 20 percent than they are to the middle. But if you look at the distribution of income in the last 10 years what you're struck by is that the top 20 percent looks like it's done very well in relation to everyone else and the top 10 percent looks like it's done very well in relation to everyone else but it's the top 1 percent who have really made out like bandits. And if you separate out the top 1 percent from the rest of the 19 that makes up the top 20, the 19 have more or less stayed still, they have not increased their proportion of the share of the U.S. income very much over the past 10-15 years. Almost all the increase has gone to the top 1 percent. So you now have a threat even to the upper middle class, which for the first 15-20 years of neoliberalism benefited from it tremendously, but which is now not exactly losing ground in relation to the country as a whole, but is losing ground in relation to this new phenomenon, this extraordinary success of the top 1, or to some extent, the top 5 percent. And you begin to see those people actually feeling a certain sense of anxiety. I remember years and years ago Jameson saying, it must have been in the 70s, that inflation was god's way of making the middle class feel the force of History. Well, we don't have inflation, but you can completely see this redistribution of wealth as god's way of making the upper middle class begin to feel the force of History. And the Tea Party I see as one response to that.

**You mention Tea Party angst, but if we are moving towards an "equal opportunity exploitation" with the ideal of a more diversified elite, wouldn't that naturally cause a degree of White male status anxiety ...**

People always bridle when I say this, but I really doubt that the main issue here is White male status anxiety. Obviously I'm not in a position to say there aren't people who are experiencing it. What I'm saying is that people in the Tea Party movement have a problem that is realer than "White male status anxiety," that the economic shifts that are taking place, the more and more extreme inequality, the more and more going to the top, no doubt some people may be unhappy because of loss of status, but many millions more are going to be unhappy because of the loss of actual money. So my point isn't really to deny the phenomenon of status anxiety, it's just to point out the extraordinaire eagerness of American liberals to identify racism as the problem, so that anti-racism (rather than anti-capitalism) can be the solution.

**Your putting aside of questions of "status anxiety" has gotten some people angry, Richard Kim wrote disparagingly in *The Nation* of the backlash against affirmative action. He characterized your work as, "Seething, misplaced, amnesiac resentment [...] masquerading as class-consciousness." Do these rather explicit allegations of racism catch you off guard or ...**

Are you kidding me? I've been called a racist for twenty years. Ever since I published the beginning of *Our America*, the first article that went into *Our America*, which was an argument that there was no such thing as race, including the social construction of race. People used to label that "liberal racism," now they don't bother to say it's "liberal." That Richard Kim thing is pretty blatantly empty. He's saying, "It's racism, Michaels is upset, because there's all these Black people on campus and there are all these Asian people on campus and all these Latinos on campus" ... first of all, I don't know anyone who's actually upset by this. We're upset, because there are no poor kids on campus. But even when Kim is confronted with an argument which says explicitly—"look the problem with affirmative action is not that it is a form of 'reverse racism,' the problem with affirmative action is that it doesn't get at the group that actually is excluded from universities and that is poor people," all he can think of to say is "see, that guy's a racist." I have no idea how to respond to that other than to say that whatever one's personal feelings might be (even if I were experiencing the dread "White male status anxiety"!), the group that is actually excluded from American universities is poor people, and that's true, whether it is "racist" or not. "You're a racist" is not even an attempt to counter the truth of the argument; it's just pure ad hominem of the most uninventive and, in this case, the most unconvincing and irrelevant type.

**But even people who agree with the substance of your work have had some criticism of your manner of argumentation. Doug Henwood, for example, mentioned, "Walter Benn Michaels doesn't always phrase things to his advantage—he aims to provoke, which is an impulse I deeply understand, but he may end up putting people off who should really listen to what he has to say." Do you intentionally provoke or does the tension arise from the incompatibility of political positions between you and your opponents?**

I try to put things as sharply as I can. I'm not interested on the other hand in provoking everyone so I'm the only person who's saying the right thing. On the contrary, it has been very comforting to discover over the past five or six years that there are plenty of people who have views similar to mine and who are actually better at expressing them.

## "Victimization that does not take place through discrimination is invisible."

I essentially try to make the argument as clearly as possible and sometimes that's going to cause more problems and disputes and sometimes not, but that stuff doesn't matter to me. And I know that some people don't actually criticize the argument, but criticize the way in which it's put. I think it's Doug's view that there are lots of people who really dislike what I'm saying and for that matter what Adolph [Reed] is saying and wouldn't dislike it so much if it were put differently, but I don't really agree with that. I think they really dislike it and it doesn't matter how it is put. They wouldn't be less annoyed if it was put less pointedly. And a lot of them think of themselves as being on the Left and they think it's especially inappropriate for people to come along and tell them that the thing they like best about themselves, their anti-racism, is not in and of itself a left-wing commitment.

**On the relationship of the academic Left to the White working class, do you see it one of neglect or outright contempt?**

You know it is kind of striking that universities think of themselves and are thought of by their opponents—gratifyingly for the universities themselves—as the most liberal institutions in America today. You have a vision of social justice in which it consists of nothing but basically non-discrimination and no uni-

versity faculty is outraged by that. But I don't think it's because professors are psychologically indifferent to the working class, I think it's because they're indifferent to the phenomenon of exploitation. Professors don't really worry about any form of inequality that isn't produced by discrimination. We worry a lot about whether women are treated fairly in math classes but we don't worry at all about that the salaries of the women who clean our offices. More often than not I would guess we feel like those salaries are what those women are worth.

Victimization that does not take place through discrimination is invisible and that's why it's worth remembering that the vast majority of poor people in the country are White. After all, the country is about 70 percent White and if you look at the bottom quintile of income it's about 61 percent White, so it's an absolute majority. Sure, some will acknowledge "Appalachia" at least, but it's 61 percent and there aren't that many people in Appalachia. They are in Chicago, they are in Washington, you don't have to go that far to see poor people and the minute I say something like that the Richard Kims of the world say "See all he's worried about is the injustice being done to poor White people," but it's obvious that that's not the point. It's obvious that the utility, as it were, of poor White people in this discussion is that they are poor not because they are the victims of prejudice; they are poor because of other structures of exploitation.

The fact that most of our poverty is not produced by prejudice should suggest to us that if we are actually concerned about poverty, no matter how much anti-discrimination work we do we are not going to take care of the poverty problem, certainly not in our little test group, the 61 percent of the country who are poor and White. So there are two ways to deal with that; one you say "Okay maybe it's true that we should focus a little less on discrimination and a little more on other forms of dealing with this inequality," or, two, the state of the art thing which is to say, "No actually it's false. White people have been the victim of discrimination, because the lower class is itself a victim of discrimination."

I wrote a piece on this last year based on the Gates episode for the London Review of Books, a review of a book that had just come out in the U.K. about extending anti-discrimination to deal with the White working class, as if the problem with the White working class was that it was insufficiently respected and that if you could only get a few more White working class guys up at the top ... basically just treating the White

working class as if it were an identity. That's cutting edge neoliberalism.

**Gordon Brown certainly was from that Scottish working class**

Yeah absolutely, so at that point it's not that you prefer identity categories to class categories. Now you've completely labeled the last class category anyone was willing to recognize—the working class—as an identity category and you can treat it the same way you would race.

**What role do you see the legacy of the New Left in the 60s having in this? Is there sort of a nostalgia in the same way people like Christopher Hitchens and Paul Berman revive the rhetoric of the fascist, anti-fascist struggle, is the same thing happening with the politics of anti-racism and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement?**

It's a harder question; in the case of Berman you're obviously right. Berman and Hitchens they are basically returning to a sense that the evil is "totalitarianism" and the remedy is "liberalism." And once you get the "liberal," "totalitarian" dichotomy going, you're always going to choose liberalism, and capitalism now counts as a solution rather than a problem, even for writers who are supposedly on the Left.

Your New Left and civil rights question is more complicated. There is almost a kind of liberal nostalgia for the time in which anti-racism wasn't so mainstream in American society. Today we're living in a deeply anti-racist society ... officially committed to anti-racism ... which you can tell when Glenn Beck thinks it's a good idea to couch his criticism of Obama by calling Obama a "racist." It's the killing word to say to anyone. That doesn't mean that there isn't still racism, it means that there is an important sense in which anti-racism is absolutely the official ideology because no one can imagine themselves to be committed to racism. It's become a kind of moral imperative rather than a political position, deployed by the Right as well as the Left. I don't know if that involves a kind of nostalgia for the New Left. The question about the role of the New Left is harder and would have to be thought through in relation to the emergence of the new social movements of the 70s and 80s and what the connection is between those two things. And there may be good work on that but if there is I don't know it.

**In your book you also describe how categories of class have been turned into a culture—like it's a heritage to be proud of—why is studying working class literature in the same way we study, say, African-American lit "profoundly reactionary?"**

In so far as it suggests that they think the way to deal with the working class is by respecting it. You can get the beginning of that in Raymond Williams if you're a literary critic, the sort of profound nostalgia for a certain version of the working class. If you genuinely thought that working class virtues were real then of course it would make sense to be nostalgic for them and think it really is better to belong to the working class. But of course the whole concept of the working class depends on there being a class structured society. My argument is fairly straightforward. To be poor in America today, or to be anything but in the top 20 percent in America today, is to be victimized in important ways and in so far as we're appreciating the characteristic products of victimization, we are not actually dealing with exploitation, but rather enshrining victimization, treating it as if it had value and therefore ought to be preserved. And that's obviously reactionary.

**Like the Richard Geres of the world viewing Tibetan poverty as a commendable stand against materialism.**

Completely. There are two ways to deal with this question. The identity way is to think about the way we deal with difference and learn to respect difference and negotiate with difference—so that it's not a problem being different. That's completely true on the cultural level, although I think it's completely empty—a topic for another conversation and a different book on what's wrong with the idea of culture—but at least it makes sense. If the problem is not respecting difference, then the solution is to start respecting it. But if you think of difference in terms of a class structure where the essence is "more than" or "less than" and not just different from, the problem is not just that poor people belong to a different culture, it's that poor people are deprived of hundreds of opportunities that rich people are not deprived of and the important thing is not to appreciate their deprivations or the things they remarkably manage to do in spite of their deprivations but to get rid of the deprivations.

**What did Obama's election do to perceptions of race and class? It was sort of seen as a triumph for poor black and brown people around the world. Has it shattered illusions or simply disoriented?**

With respect to class, it's hard to say that it accomplished very much for poor black and brown people, or poor white people, for that matter. About race, when I was writing *The Trouble the Diversity* it never crossed my mind that Obama or anyone else could become the first Black president of the United States within a couple of years. I thought we were officially anti-racist but not officially anti-racist. So in a certain sense, it did testify to the success of anti-racism. But it obviously did not produce a "post-racial" America. It did not get rid of racism, on the contrary, there are now more overt expressions of racism than there were four or five years ago, precisely because the fact that we have a Black president does bring out a racism, which is still in the American body politic. I have no doubt if somehow we managed to elect a Jewish president there would be a lot of more anti-Semitism showing up than there is now, but that wouldn't really mean there would be more anti-Semitism. It would be a mark of the triumph over anti-Semitism that you could elect him, but it wouldn't make anti-Semitism go away. But what the election of Obama has accomplished is to make it completely clear that there is zero connection between having a Black president and having a president (or, indeed, a Democratic Party) that has any real interest in attacking the increasing inequalities of American life.

**Y**ou know you live in a world that loves neoliberalism when having some people of color who are rich is supposed to count as good news for all the people of color who are poor. The argument for Obama is he's there, so I can be there too, but all the white male presidents we've had haven't done much good for poor Whites, and in a country where there's now declining social mobility (less than in Western Europe), it's hard to take even the traditional solace in the fact that the empty claim that anyone can grow up to become President now includes Black people. None of this will make any difference unless we start thinking about the politically relevant question, eliminating the gap between the rich and the poor. ¶



# THE POLITICS OF BEING ALONE

## TEA TIME IN AMERICA

This issue of *Jacobin* is scheduled to go to bed shortly before the midterm elections, so the present article will drift to sleep blissfully unaware of its outcome. But 2010 already seems certain to enter the annals alongside dates like 1938, 1946, 1978, 1994: all were years of midterm elections that brought miraculous regeneration for the hardy species known as the American Right. We should do well to remember that history did not begin the day Rick Santelli heckled “the losers” on CNBC. On an August afternoon in 1938, twenty thousand Midwestern Republicans gathered in an Indiana cornfield in what *The New York Times* called a “carnival atmosphere” to eat fried chicken and corn on the cob amid fluttering red, white and blue bunting, and to listen to the worthies of the Party of Lincoln declaim for an “end to the New Deal trend toward dictatorship and return to the ‘American way’ of government,” for a “mighty fight to save the United States as we have known it for 150 years.” The “Cornfield Conference” of 1938 was the organizing brainchild of a millionaire Republican jukebox entrepreneur named Homer E. Capehart—an accomplished ranter on the topics of socialism and the welfare state, a portly, pink-cheeked man in suspenders, soon to be a senator. It was held in the trough of the “Roossevelt recession” of 1937-38 and three months later the Republicans, basking in such rhetoric, picked up 81 seats in the House and six in the Senate.

Does that sound familiar? This year, *The New York Times* tells us, eight candidates from the Tea Party have a “good or better” shot of winning Senate seats, among the 37 seats at

by Seth Ackerman

stake. This is a tsunami. If the whole Senate were up for election, at this rate we could look forward to twenty-two Tea Partiers in the upper chamber next year. What does it tell us about the state of American political life? The colorful outer fringes of the movement have spawned candidates of the Christine O'Donnell or Sharron Angle stripe: outlandish characters, catnip for MSNBC liberals, who give off that special aura of otherworldliness peculiar to American extremist politics. (On the Left, witness the 9/11 truthers, chemtrails watchers and assorted monetary cranks). Angle has voted against water fluoridation. She advocates "Second Amendment remedies" to government tyranny and warns of Dearborn, Michigan falling under the grip of Sharia law. Strangely, she also seems close to the Scientologists. Liberals hear such talk and, predictably, cry fascism, but they couldn't be further from the mark. Listen to the ranting of the Angles and you won't hear the slightest echo of torch-lit parades or of uniformed thugs with identical salutes. On the contrary, the rhetoric tells of long, lonely evenings of solitary study, the musty smell of the dog-eared tract, the flickering glow of the monitor, the hothouse brain. This politics feeds on isolation; it's allergic to militant collective struggle. No one ranting about black helicopters and Project MKULTRA will ever organize a March on Rome.

Beyond this outer fringe, though, lies the sturdier, relatively saner core of the Tea Party (really, just another name for the timeless conservative base), the part of the movement with which liberals have a harder time coming to grips. Here we find ourselves squarely in the venerable tradition of Homer Capehart and his Cornfield Conference. "The hope and change the Democrats had in mind was nothing more than a retread of the failed and discredited socialist policies that have been the enemy of freedom for centuries all over the world," says Senator Jim DeMint. This, not black-helicopter anxieties, is the real lingua franca of Tea Party-ism. In April, The New York Times polled self-described supporters of the movement and compared their answers to the general population. Two questions yielded by far the biggest differences between the two groups: whether the respondent preferred a bigger government providing more services or a smaller government providing fewer services (38 points); and opinions about government benefits for the poor (35 points). Nothing else came close: not abortion (9 points); gay marriage (10 points); gun

control (14 points); or whether Obama favors blacks over whites (14 points).

The creed is ancient; it's passed from father to son. But to get at its essence you have to look behind the facade preoccupation with "government." Read the answers given by young conservative activists to a 1960 survey asking them to describe the influence of their parents' politics. They all have the same ring:

"Brought me up to believe in the individual and to see him as the center of society, not the state."

"Because I was raised on the premise that each man has the responsibility of independence and to provide for himself and his dependents."

"They have trained me to be responsible for my actions, self-reliant, desirous of education, believing in an absolute God..."

"I was raised a Taft Republican and raised in the older morality of self-sufficiency, honor, etc."

"Primarily in the day-to-day values which they have taught me—self-reliance, Victorian morality, rigid honesty, and honor, etc."

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"Self-reliant" .. "provide for himself" ... "independence" ... "self-sufficiency." At the center of the Tea Party lies this stolid Taft Republicanism. It's leagues away from the passions of the noisiest fringe types, the birthers and deathers and tenters who fret about masturbation and the gold standard. It's a politics about the man who stands alone, about life as a solitary struggle, about society as a silent stream of elementary particles.

Is it any wonder this philosophy is ascendant in the U.S. today? We're living in the twilight of a grand societal project whose aim has been to strip the individual down to an isolate – a competitor confronting his fellow competitors in a never-ending struggle for survival. Each of us is now fashioned into a petty proprietor of our personal skills, a bundle of assets we must market and invest in and keep competitive, and the labor we can furnish, for most of us, is all we can count on. The genius of this project lies in its cumulative effect: the more individuals must compete, the more their ties of solidarity are sanded down; the more

solidarity frays, the more minds narrow to the Hobbesian horizon of possessive individualism. In the end, the program succeeds by generating its own support.

Even in those areas where the wrecking project has ostensibly failed to penetrate, the ethic can still be seen. Consider the elderly Tea Partier who declares that he wants "the government out of my Medicare." How is that possible? Medicare is a universal program of social insurance, the single most popular function of the U.S. government. Yet while its historic champions, the Democrats, have always defended the program rhetorically, never in recent memory have they done so on the grounds that it embodies a social choice, a bond of solidarity. Their argument, rather, has been that Medicare is a good that belongs to "you" (not to "us"), a good that red-handed Republicans are always trying to snatch away. Thus, even as they preserve this remnant of the welfare state in law, the Democrats have already privatized it in our minds.

**"No one ranting about black helicopters and Project MKULTRA will ever organize a March on Rome."**

What happens if we change the scene to France, where the national mobilization against Sarkozy's pension reform is ongoing as I write? A reporter for Le Monde recently asked some of the demonstrators in Paris why they had come out to protest. As a counterpoint to the conservative activists of 1960, here were some of their answers:

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

theactivist.org

culture. consciousness. critical thought.

A close-up photograph of a man with dark hair, a well-groomed beard, and a mustache. He is wearing a red bandana tied around his head and a brown leather vest over a white t-shirt. He is holding a dark bottle in his left hand and a black coffee cup with a white lid in his right hand. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile and his tongue slightly out. The background is dark.

BY PETER FRASE

FOOD STAMPS,  
**HIPSTERS,**  
& THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT

**R**ecently, a friend of mine became the object of the Internet's daily Two Minutes' Hate. An artist who's been unemployed and down on his luck, he had the misfortune of appearing in a story which Salon.com decided to call "A Hipster on Food Stamps." The article followed some college-educated but poor and underemployed people trying to eat tasty, nutritious meals while relying on food stamps. To me, it was a poignant commentary on both the failure of American capitalism and the deep pathologies of our food system.

But what the article seemed to call forth in its readers was unending bile and rage directed at people deemed insufficiently deserving of a public benefit. The title certainly didn't help. Calling someone a "hipster" is a license to spew all kinds of demented hate. Since the term carries connotations of slackers and trust funds, the image of "hipsters on food stamps" is designed to provoke the conclusion that someone is lazily taking advantage of the system. Certainly that was how things played at the blog of the libertarian *Reason* magazine, which mocked the notion that someone might both deserve economic assistance and make art and wear odd clothes.

One wouldn't expect any better from libertarians, who have built an entire ideology around the world-view of 12-year-old boys. But they aren't the only people who react to stories like this with rage or contempt rather than empathy. Consider the following comment, left under my friend's response to the article about him:

I'm sorry but you are a selfish, whiny leach. I can say this because I am a middle-aged woman and have been trying to find work for two years without success though I have a masters degree in a fairly desirable field. I have dwindling savings and two kids. Because I stayed home with them for a few years I don't qualify for unemployment and that has also damaged my marketability in the job world. Despite all of this I have never resorted to public assistance and will not. In addition, I have a back problem that surgery did not correct so I am in physical pain 24 hrs a day. Still I have taken temp jobs and we have cut back in many ways. I am proud of my fortitude and resourcefulness, because we will make it through this time and my kids will learn valuable lessons from me about self-reliance.

Here we have a person who has been marginally employed for two years and suffers physical pain 24 hours a day—and rather than demanding something better for herself, she demands that other people suffer more!

Vicious and unhinged discourse

is widespread on the Internet, but this example is worth noting because the sentiment it expresses is by no means unique. This attitude—a petty and mean-spirited resentment—is depressingly common even among the working class. It sometimes seems to amount to no more than the sentiment that justice consists in everyone else being at least as miserable as you are. At one level, it's an attitude that reflects diminished expectations, and can be partly blamed on the weakness of the Left and the defeat of its historical project: when you don't believe any positive social change is possible, there's little left to fall back on but bitterness and resentment.

This resentment is also at the heart of a lot of hating on "hipsters." People see others whom they perceive to have lives that are easier, cooler or more fun than theirs, and instead of questioning the society that gave them their lot, they demand conformity and misery out of others. But why? The false (but not without a grain of truth!) intimation that hipsters are all white kids who are subsidized by their rich parents legitimizes this position, but even if it were accurate it wouldn't make the attitude of contempt any more sensible. For even if creative and enjoyable lives are only accessible to the privileged, that's not a damning fact about them so much as it is an indictment of a society that has so much wealth and yet only allows a select few to take advantage of it, while others are forced to waste their lives chained to their useless jobs and bloated mortgages.

Today, the work ethic still serves as a guiding value from one end of the political spectrum to the other. The Right, including its latest "Tea Party" iteration, presents itself as the defender of the hard working many against the slothful and indolent. To take just one recent example, a Republican candidate for Governor of South Carolina has proposed mandatory drug testing for recipients of unemployment insurance, echoing an early proposal from Utah Senator Orrin Hatch. On the Left, the rhetoric of "working people" and "working families" is ubiquitous; indeed, in the wake of Clinton's assaults on the welfare state, it seems that the poor can only justify their existence and their access to benefits and transfers if they can somehow be portrayed as "working." So New York State's social democratic quasi-third party calls itself the "Working Families Party," and the union-led One Nation march in Washington promotes the slogan "Putting America Back to Work".

Such appeals to the moral superiority of work and workers are often rooted in producerism: the notion that the fruits of society's wealth and labor should return to those who directly perform productive labor. Producerism is hostile both to parasitic elites at the top of society and to the allegedly unproductive indigents at the bottom, hence its relationship to the political Left and Right is ambiguous. But in post-industrial capitalist society, "work" has come to be disconnected from any conception of directly producing something or contributing work with any specific content. Work is increasingly defined formally: as whatever people do in return for wages. With

ment for the capitalist class. After years of struggle, discipline was imposed on pre-capitalist people who rejected regimented "clock time" and were prone to take a holiday on "Saint Monday's day" whenever they had been too drunk the Sunday before. In America, a Protestant ethic equating work, salvation, and moral virtue arose in an economy full of artisans and small farmers, and was maintained only with great difficulty through the transition to more grueling and alienated forms of industrial labor.

In the 20th century, perpetual war and labor's Fordist compromise with capital provided a moral and material justification for the work ethic: during wartime (hot or cold), work could be equated with the patriotic struggle for national preservation, while the post-war golden age rested on an understanding that if workers submitted to capitalist work discipline, they would be rewarded with a share in the resulting productivity increases in the form of rising wages.

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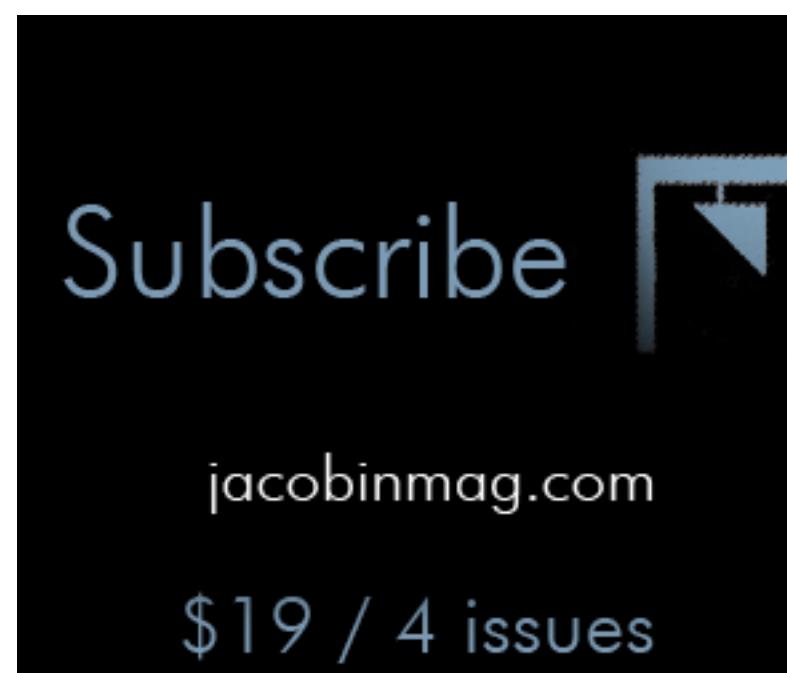
Whether his art is any good or not, my artist friend on food stamps contributes more to society than the traders at Lehman brothers, by simply not wrecking the global financial system. He may

this elision, the material foundation of the work ethic is gradually undermined, and today the absurdity of the work ideology becomes readily apparent. For while it has never been the case that labor was rewarded in proportion to its contribution, it is now quite obvious that wage work is not identical to productive activity, and that the rewards to labor have lost any connection to the social value or desirability of the work performed.

Indeed, it sometimes seems that the distribution of wages is, to a first approximation, the exact inverse of the social utility of work. Thus the workers closest to our most fundamental needs—food and shelter—are non-unionized residential construction workers and migrant fruit pickers, lucky to even earn the minimum wage. At the same time, bankers are given millions for the invention and trade of sophisticated credit derivatives, even though most of their work is equivalent to—and as we've now discovered, quite a bit more destructive than—betting on the outcome of the Super Bowl. This perverse reversal of values has a fractal quality, as well, so that even within individual occupations the same inverse relationship between wages and social value seems to hold. Plastic surgeons have easier jobs and vastly greater earnings than pediatricians, and being a celebrity pet groomer is more lucrative than working in an animal shelter.

The threads of a different ethic are all around us, if we begin to think of all the subtle ways in which our activities contribute to social wealth outside of paid labor. Feminists were the pioneers, showing how all of capitalism, and all of human history, was predicated on a vast and invisible structure of reproductive la-

bor performed mostly by women, mostly not for wages. The rise of new ideologies of communal production, like Open Source and Creative Commons, have revealed how much is possible without the wage incentive. Even the great new robber barons of the digital age, Google and Facebook, are instructive. Their value rests, on the most basic level, on the work of millions of users who provide content and information for free. If it is increasingly impossible to disentangle the productive and unproductive parts of human activity, then we can reconstruct the old producerist dogma in a new way: everyone deserves to be provided with the means to live a decent life, because we are all already contributing to the production and reproduction of society itself. The kind of social policy that follows from this position would be very different from the narrow, targeted, programs like Food Stamps, whose very narrowness make it easy to demonize one group in society as parasitic—whether the demonized group is welfare queens in the 90s or hipsters on food stamps today. Rather than the "deserving" or "working" poor, with its connotations of moral judgment and authoritarian social control, it is time to begin speaking the language of economic and social rights. For instance, the right to a Universal Basic Income, a means of living at a basic level that would be provided to everyone, no questions asked. Against the invidious politics of the work ethic, it's time to argue that some things should be granted to everyone, simply by virtue of their humanity. Even hipsters. ¶



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# End the War Threats and Sanctions Program Against Iran Support the Struggle for Democracy Inside Iran

We, the undersigned, oppose the U.S.-led campaign to impose harsher sanctions on Iran, and the ongoing threat of war against that country. Despite Washington's claims, its policy is clearly not animated by a genuine concern for protecting the world from the threat of nuclear war; otherwise how could Washington support such nuclear-armed states as India, Israel, and Pakistan, or maintain its own huge nuclear arsenal? Nor is U.S. policy driven by the goal of defending democracy. If it were, how could the United States support brutally authoritarian regimes such as those in Saudi Arabia and Egypt?

Months after it began its recent program to sanction Iran for its nuclear activities, the United States, in a move described by the *New York Times* as "more symbolic than substantive," fears the foreign media and denied visas to eight Iranian officials, citing their role in the post-elections crackdown. This symbolic gesture cannot obscure the fact that Washington's fundamental motivation for imposing the comprehensive sanctions aimed at Iran's nuclear program is to neutralize or eliminate a major threat to its power in the region.

In June 2009 people around the world were inspired by the courageous protests in Iran, when hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, took to the streets to demand their democratic rights. Since then the Iranian government has tried to repress the movement: hundreds of political prisoners remain behind bars, often tortured, deprived of medical care, and forced to live under dangerously unhealthy conditions. We support those who struggle for democracy and social justice inside Iran.

Far from helping the Iranian people, sanctions and war threats strengthen Ahmadinejad's regime, helping it to shift the blame for worsening economic conditions from itself entirely onto the external enemy. In the past the Iranian elite has proven able to circumvent sanctions, but if Washington actually succeeds in preventing Tehran from importing refined petroleum, exporting oil and other items, and conducting normal trade and banking activities, over time millions of ordinary Iranians will suffer.

We don't want Iran, or any other country, including our own, to have nuclear weapons. But even the U.S. government admits that Iran does not now possess nuclear weapons and has no imminent prospect of acquiring them. Moreover, Iran has no less right than any other nation to develop civilian nuclear power. Many of us oppose the use of nuclear energy by any country, both for environmental reasons and because

## SELECTED LIST OF INITIAL SIGNERS

For the full list of 8 countries, go to [www.cpdweb.org](http://www.cpdweb.org).  
Michael Albert, Stanley Aronowitz, Ed Asner, Mohsin Badjatia, Leslie Cagan, Noam Chomsky, Howard Davis, Martin Duberman, Lisa Dugger, John Fetter, Bill Fletcher, Jr., Barbara Garrow, Sam Gindin, Greg Grandin, Arun Gupta, Thomas Hargrove, Nader Haskar, Michael Hollingshead, Institute Center for Peace, Freedom and Social Justice—Massachusetts, Doug Israely, Melinda Joya, Kathy Kelly, Dan La Botz, James Lavelle, Jim Lefebvre, Robbie Madnick Lerner, Michael Lichtenstein, Barry MacKell, Puerto Maestri, Dave Miers, Scott McLean, Leo Pfeiffer, Peace Action, NY State, Friends For Peace, Danny Postol, Matthew Rothschild, Sheila Simon, Stephen R. Shalom, Cindy Sheehan, Heather Simonds, David Swanson, Marisol Tex, Chris Tamm, Steven Yaffee, and Carol West.

of its link to nuclear weapons — but that is not the issue in the present U.S.-Iran confrontation. The United States, a major producer of nuclear energy and by far the leading nuclear weapons nation, which continually upgrades its own conventional and nuclear arsenal and tolerates the possession of nuclear weapons by other nations and aggressive powers, has no moral legitimacy when it tries to punish Iran for its nuclear activities.

U.S. belligerence — its continual warnings that "all options remain on the table," possibly including armaments of an Israeli attack — only creates strong inducements for Tehran to seek nuclear weapons for its defense, or to become, like Japan, "nuclear-weapons capable," i.e. possessing all the elements necessary to make a bomb without actually manufacturing one. And it's not just Iran: U.S. militarism has helped to create a Hobbesian world in which more and more countries come to believe that their survival depends on nuclear "deterrence."

The United States can best reduce the danger of nuclear war by taking major steps to divert itself of nuclear weapons as part of a new, democratic and socially just foreign policy. This would include initiating both nuclear and conventional disarmament, encompassing missile "defense" as well as more obviously offensive weaponry; ending its predatory wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; supporting a Nuclear-Free Weapons Zone in the Middle East; giving real support to Palestinian rights rather than continuing one-sided support to Israel; and dismantling its more than 1,000 military bases around the world. Such steps would help undermine the rationale for Iran and other countries developing their own nuclear weapons. These actions would also be the most effective way to strengthen women's, labor, and other democratic movements in the Middle East, and to promote the interests of ordinary Americans and real peace in the world.

October 2010

 **Johns Ladd and Thomas Harton,  
Co-Directors, CPD**

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# Salem's Hidden Valleys

Review: "Yes, I Smoke Crack" / "Water" EPs

BY GAVIN MUELLER

Nestled among deliberately amateurish photos of blowjobs and hipster junkies at the Museo Universitario del Chopo was a cluster of photos entitled "Hidden Valley." Ugly teens rode BMXs, fucked around with paintball guns, popped pills and hit one another with sticks in a barren field between a parking lot and a housing development. Suddenly, in the middle of Mexico City, I was back at home in the suburban wastelands of the Midwest. I knew this "space of anarchy" well; not specifically of course, but generically, and absolutely. Away from parents, teachers and cops, Hidden Valley is the type of place you can experiment with adolescent stupidity as you futilely resist the first onset of Middle America ennui.

I think the wastoids in Salem know it too. They're officially from Chicago, but I know better. White kids are rarely "from" Chicago. No, they're usually refugees from crappy Midwestern suburbs and dying towns, desperately in search of culture but finding only public transit and better drugs. Salem's music — a hazy, loping, lo-fi electro — fits that rudderless Rust Belt existence as guilelessly and artlessly as a glassy stare. I can't say it's good per se, but it speaks to me. And probably others -- there are many of our breed, born under Reagan into a world where our destinies have already been mortgaged. Not "no future" in the cool Johnny Rotten rallying cry sense, but "no future" in that withdrawn, hopeless, Gummo type of way. Not sexy or cool. Not even sad. But maybe a little scary.

They've got a couple EPs and singles out, and enough buzz that later this month when their album drops, you'll probably hear about it. The hype references My Bloody Valentine and DJ Screw—the only way we can talk about cultural products is like the pitchmen in Altman's *The Player*, Cool Thing X + Cool Thing Y—but nothing they've put out so far approaches the sublimely hallucinogenic heights of either of those acts. Instead, what I hear most distinctly in the drag-tempo 808 beats, cheap synths, and dark druggy atmosphere is vintage Three-6-Mafia. Not the more commercial

was the perfect soundtrack for a directionless summer in a directionless region in a world where the future is terrifying when it's not simply unthinkable. Salem jettisons the samples and the gangbang fantasies for the fuzzed-out synths more befitting of three young art-school drop-outs, but the vibe is remarkably similar.

This is why the music of Salem speaks more to me than that of more polished, professional and literate indie bands to which my white college-educated self should be demographically attracted. Instead of presenting a simulacrum of a time when people believed that rock could offer world-altering truth, change hearts and minds, and soundtrack youthful romances, Salem delivers the starkness of what neoliberalism has left us — drugs and death. Instead of nostalgia, whether painful or idealized, you've got numbed verses like "It's hard to remember / What we did last November." There's not even any sex: Salem's music is too slow for the club and too weird for the bedroom. As Holland says, "Sex has nothing to do with making music," and anyway, the antidepressants have robbed him of his libido. I think Salem's conscious of the distinction between their music and the more entitled upper middle class fantasies of their peers -- at a disastrous show for the privileged Twitterati of SXSW, they played their music from a recording while smoking a cigarette in front of footage of a car-crash. This isn't simple *épater le bourgeoisie*, it's more inward-focused and nihilistic than that. When the ruling class is as insulated and unresponsive as it is today, why bother with a fuck you? Might as well get high.

And so, if despite the resolute shittiness of their recording technology and concert personas, Salem manages to conquer a corner of the indie market, maybe it's because their sexless, artless, undanceable electronic lurch resonates with a post-crash youth that increasingly recognizes its own rapidly declining fortunes, taking refuge in its remaining Hidden Valleys — their own narcotics-infused headspaces. ¶

"Salem delivers the starkness of what neoliberalism has left us—drugs and death."

In their pre-Oscar days, Three-6-Mafia figured prominently in my own forays into the Hidden Valleys of suburban Ohio. We were a little older than the kids in the photos at El Chopo -- shitty used cars instead of BMX bikes -- but we were on the same mission: finding those gaps away from the surveilled world of work and shopping (both located in strip malls) so we could savor a little bit of what freedom might taste like. A quixotic journey through empty fields, neglected parks, and shitty condo developments, I tilted at windmills of suburban dreams that were already crumbling under deindustrialization, aided in this task by my McDonald's coworkers and the shitty weed I bought from them. The grim, opiated horror-rap of another declining metropolis, with beats that don't bounce so much as churn inexorably,



# "Native Informer"

## An Interview with Azar Nafisi

Azar Nafisi is the author of the bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and most recently *Things I've Been Silent About*. Nafisi is currently a visiting Fellow and lecturer at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C.

**After the success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* you were attacked by some intellectuals on the Left, Hamid Debashi, among others. He called you "the personification of that native informer colonial agent." Were you surprised that the book was stridently criticized by the Left and not just by supporters of the regime in Iran?**

You know, in one sense I don't take that sort of criticism seriously because it doesn't take itself seriously. It claims to be based on fact, but it's fantasy. Things that have been attributed to me, for example about the war in Iraq or other military interventions, are false. Even before the war in Iraq I was publicly against it. It's in the record. It's in the talks I've given, it's in the articles I've written. Being a staunch supporter of human rights I would never back military intervention in another country, especially Iran, because for me democratization means change from within.

Apologists of a regime like the Islamic Republic, even "Left" apologists, always underestimate the readers. They underestimate the public, who are not dumb. So that part of it I don't take seriously and I never try to respond to them because that is how they make their names known, by people engaging in this sort of "de-

bate," which is not a real debate, I always welcome [real] debate.

**Your time in Iran might have prepared you for denunciations ...**

That language is actually the kind of language that was used by the officials when I was back in the Islamic Republic. Everything they opposed was immediately portrayed as "American" or "Zionist," and everyone became a "counter-revolutionary." And much of this is still happening in Iran today.

If you are genuinely progressive, if you come from a position of what I think the real Left should come from, then you would always, whether it is the case of something happening in the U.S. or Iran or any other part of the world, take the side of the truth. And this sort of condemnation towards the people would live in a country like Iran or what they call the "Muslim World" under the guise of supporting them is really, I don't know what kind of word I can use, it's terrible.

To say that to be Muslim means that you don't want freedom of choice. To say that to be Muslim means you don't want the pursuit of happiness and that such notions are Western ploys.

To say that when young men and women in Iran read *Lolita* or other works of Western literature they turn themselves into agents of imperialism, these

are things one hears in the West more than among regular people in Iran. We didn't have these debates when I was living in Iran and if the regime accused people of something like that everybody knew that this accusation was false.

And, anyway, my book was brought to people's attention, not by people on the Right. The first real attack on my book came from Norman Podhoretz's [neoconservative] magazine *Commentary*, his grandson wrote a scathing article on my book. From *The Nation* to *The New York Times* to Susan Sontag and Margaret Atwood they thought this book was ... well I don't want to summarize what they individually thought, people can go and read ... But I think that it's not healthy for the intellectual community to create this atmosphere of guilt by association, a sort of intimidation and thuggery.

**You allude to a construct developed by Western commentators between the so-called "authentic" Muslim versus the "inauthentic" Muslim, so you being a secular student of English literature ...**

Yes, which in itself is very essentialist in nature. Muslims are like the rest of the world. We have progressive Muslims, reactionary Muslims, fundamentalists Muslims, we have secular Muslims.

In Iran's history, Turkey's history, Lebanon's history, the history of these countries — especially in the late 19th century and the early 20th century — many of the changes in terms of modernization in these countries came not because of the local intellectuals were kowtowing to the West, but because of internal dynamics of struggle and change, in the same way change came to the West.

It's not as if women in the West were enjoying fantastic rights. If you go to the history of the West, women in America in the late 19th century when they were asking for their rights, they were called all sorts of names and were told that the Bible didn't accept this sort of behavior and that women should stay at home. In Switzerland women weren't granted the right to vote until 1971.

This sort of segregation and imprisonment of what they call "Muslim" in a formula, is in itself very dangerous and it seeps to the extremes of both Left and Right. My duty as a writer and as an intellectual is to bring out the variety, bring out the contradictions, bring out the paradoxes in the world. There are so many people that are Muslim, some of them are terrible and some of them are fantastic. Some of them are imprisoned by this regime. There is no one portrait of what a Muslim is.

Being really progressive, being faithful to the ideals of the Left, its revolutionary essence, means to see the world in its variety and not to impose formulas on it.

**Speaking of the Left, you were initially attracted in your youth to Maoism and radical Third World nationalism. What attracted you to this kind of politics in the first place?**

Yes, it was during my student years and I learned a lot from that. I never abandoned those principles. These are for me, not political questions. I do not like as a writer and a teacher to belong to any political group. I like to keep my independence. It's not merely from a political agenda or a political grouping, but I think it is essential to establish that where we went wrong was not where we wanted more political freedom for the Iranian people, that we were for human rights, we went wrong with our authoritarian mindset. We wanted democracy and equality in Iran and I don't think, in hindsight, Maoist China was the best model for us to look at.

There was something essentially wrong with our theories and that was something I learned when I went back to Iran. I realized that that authoritarian mindset is dangerous and the first thing you have to do is criticize yourself. Some

people claim to be on the Left and then ask, "Why is she criticizing the movement she was a part of?" It is exactly because I first question myself before I first question others. And I don't think you could trust me as a writer who writes about democracy if I didn't question my own attitudes, which were authoritarian.

And since we're talking about change and woman's rights, I left the US in 79' and at that time nobody would have dreamt that Hillary Clinton would run for president or that someone named Barack Hussein Obama would become president. Someone named Barack Hussein Obama in the 70's would not be allowed into certain clubs or places. Countries change. If change is good for America, I don't know why change is not good for Iran.

**You mention the Iranian Left and its faults. That Left, in a way, helped facilitate the Islamists' rise to power and even supported some of their reactionary social policies. At what point did you decide to break with the traditional Iranian Left?**

I mentioned in my book that when I lived in the U.S. I had become quite disenchanted already. Because if you consider yourself as a writer or an intellectual, independence of mind would be at the forefront of your concerns. I went back to Iran with the realization that I did not want to belong to any political group the way I had when I was in the U.S. as a student.

And of course, at the time, politics was everywhere. At every step politics would confront you. What you taught in class, how you rank your students, whether or not you shook hands with a male student became a political statement. It was what I saw in practice then which led me to criticize this mode of thinking. I thought having this sort of slavish attitude was very dangerous.

**Do you see the generality of movement of the Green Movement as a good thing? Or do you have a problem with people like Mousavi who played such a hand in some of the earlier crimes of the regime having such prominent roles in the opposition movement?**

There are many interesting things about the Green Movement. About Mousavi and Karroubi, people who were once officials of this regime and now are the "opposition," I remember during the cultural revolution in Iran when people like myself and hundreds of thousands of students were against

the closing down of the universities, obviously Mr. Mousavi and his wife were on the other side. For me, the fact that they have been forced to take sides with civil society shows that that movement, which from the start resisted the laws of the Islamic Republic, was a legitimate movement. It also shows the ideological failings of the Islamic regime. It is not just liberals or Christians or Jews or Marxists who are criticizing the state, it is people who might find it in their immediate interests to support it. From that point of view I see it as something positive.

We're not here to merely change regimes; we're here to change mindsets, because if you don't change people's mindsets, if they don't understand the benefits of an open society, there is always a danger there will be another repressive regime. So it is to the people's credit that the movement is so diverse.

But that does not mean that now that Mr. Mousavi is an "anti-revolutionary" we're all in the same boat. There are many groups who have brought about what is called the Green Movement. They are very different from one another and at some point Mousavi and people who were part of the regime need to be answerable for the part they played. And this is not just for revenge, which I don't believe in. If we want to believe what people say now, we have to know how they treat their past. If they accept that there was something wrong with the past and what they participated in was wrong, then you can believe that they want real change.

And for me, some who is not ideologically inclined one way or another, for me whom the life of ideas really matters, I think these debates and discussions are very vital and should be at the heart of the movement.

**One of the parts of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* that struck me was your discussion of the era of "proletarian literature" and writers like Mike Gold, figures who are often forgotten. After an initial fascination with authors in this genre, you began to think that writers like Fitzgerald, more "bourgeois" writers, were in fact more subversive than the consciously revolutionary ones. Do you care to explain?**

You know, I learned a lot by writing my dissertation on what was called "proletarian literature." What I realized from writing that dissertation was

that writing in one sense goes against everyday politics in the sense that politicians try to simplify everything; they try to formulate everything, and in a sense, condense your life. Writers try to complicate things rather than formulate and give answers. They pose questions. A writer like Fitzgerald, who always had this fixation on wealth and this desire and urge to be rich and live that kind of life, was naturally going to criticize the people he surrounded himself with. He transcended his own impulses in his books. Who are the real villains in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*? It is Tom and Daisy, the wealthiest characters, who are blind towards others. The whole book becomes, ironically, a condemnation of the sort of blind wealth that makes people not see others, that makes people use others as instruments.

This makes Fitzgerald very relevant in today's America and the problems that we face now, in terms of replacing passion and meaning with a utilitarian sense of success.

For me, to be democratic means that each area of human endeavors should be both independent and interdependent. Literature becomes genuinely subversive and critical when it is independent, because when it's independent it has to reveal the truth and the truth for me is always a call for action.

I quote in *Reading Lolita* Theodor Adorno who says the highest form of mortality is not to feel at home in your own home. And that is why I choose deliberately books that were not political to show how they could become politically subversive. It was far easier to choose [more overtly] political novels, but I wanted to show why ideas and imagination matter. And why we cannot take them out of our lives and have an open and democratic society.

I think right now this is one of the problems we have in this country. The crisis we are facing is not just economic, it's also a crisis of vision and imagination.

#### **Are there any contemporary Iranian writers you'd like to recommend?**

At the end of my most recent book I put together a list of authors who have been translated into English. It's older, but one book I always recommend is *My Uncle Napoleon*. I also mention Shahnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men*, but some of my favorite Iranian writers, including some fantastic poets, have unfortunately not been translated into English. ¶

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# The End of the World

On the power of fear

BY JAMES HEARTFIELD

"There are five years left to save the planet." That is what the World Wildlife Fund said – three years ago – so by 2012, it is all over. Some were a bit more optimistic. Volcanologist Bill McGuire, of the UK Government's Natural Hazard Working Group gave us seven years to save the planet, and that was back in 2008, so we have till 2015. The New Economic Foundation's Andrew Simm gives us one more year, till 2016, when we will face "irreversible climate change" that will be "catastrophic." 2016 is also the date named by Gaby Hinsliff, of *The Guardian* newspaper, as the tipping point, covering Sir Nicholas Stern's 2006 report into climate change. Hinsliff's colleague George Monbiot was more alarmist, still, saying in 2008 that we have almost certainly left it too late to avoid catastrophic climate change.

But still, here we are, and the world has not come to an end. Predicting the end of the world might seem like a daft thing to do. Seventh Day Adventist Ellen White said the world would come to an end in 1850. The Sixteenth Century mystic Mother Shipton at least had the sense to put the date of the end of the world in 1881, so that she would not be around to get called out on it. The Jehovah's Witnesses worked out that the Book of Daniel put the end of the world in 1914 – which did turn out to be a bit hairy, but not yet the end.

Putting a precise date on the end of the world – especially an imminent one – has proved too easy to falsify, so today's fashion is to name an invisible "tipping point" at which it will become impossible to turn back the clock. Oil executive turned green entrepreneur Jeremy Leggett says that we will reach 'peak oil' – the point at which the oil starts to run out in 2013. "Peak Oil" is not the exhaustion of the reserves, but the point at which reserves cannot meet demand, so it is a bit harder to disprove, but on the contrary, seems to be shown by rising prices.

The end of the world has proved to be a weirdly tempting prediction, made by many. But the ways that the world will end are many.

As worried as we are today about

global warming, forty years ago people were worried about global cooling. In their 1976 book Climate Change and the Affairs of Men Iben Browning and Ned Winkless wrote 'all respectable scientists know that global cooling is inevitable'. Certainly Newsweek covered the threat of a "Cooling World" on 28 April 1975, saying that a report to the National Association of Scientists warned "a major climatic change would force social and economic adjustments on a worldwide scale" – which might sound familiar, except that the climatic change they were worried about was a fall in global temperatures. One source for the fears of a cooling world was a Central Intelligence Agency that said 'leaders in climatology and economics are in agreement that a climatic change is taking place and that it has already caused major economic problems throughout the world'. But remember that the climate change that was worrying the CIA back in 1974 was the "global cooling trend." The coming ice age panic was reported in *Time* magazine, 24 June 1974, illustrated with a graphic showing the expanding arctic (just as today's climate change alarmists show us the shrinking arctic).

Climate change is only one of the many catastrophes that wait in the wings. Resource depletion is another that has often caught the imagination. In 1970 the cyberneticists Donella and Dennis Meadows, Joergen Randers and William Behrens warned that industrial growth was using up the Earth's resources and predicted that in the year 2100 "collapse occurs because of non-renewable resource depletion." The report *Limits to Growth* was paid for by the industrialists' "Club of Rome," but it struck a chord with the unwashed hippies of America who embraced its warning of resource depletion. 1970 was also the first Earth Day, when Green activists stood up against corporate greed and for the simpler life – and *Limits To Growth* became part of the script. David Bowie sang "Five Years, that's all we've got..." As with today's "Peak Oil" people, rising commodity prices seemed to show they were right.

Behind the math in the *Limits to Growth* is a common sense point: the

world cannot go on forever, and the more we use up, the less oil, coal, minerals and natural gas there will be left. Just to be clear, the world cannot go on forever – in one billion years the Sun will be so hot that life cannot carry on here, and in five billion years the Sun will become a red giant so large that it would occupy the same space through which the earth orbits. So there you have it, the earth will indeed come to an end in five billion years, and all life on earth will come to an end in one billion years – not that that should worry you and I too much, since there is little chance that we will be alive by 2100. As Keynes said, in the long run, we are all dead.

Surely, though, resources will run out long before the sun superheats the globe?

**A**t the time when *Limits to Growth* was published, Sussex University scientist William Page pointed out the error of assuming that reserves were a known, or fixed quantity. Page referred to a 1944 review saying that had it "...been correct the Americans would by now have exhausted their reserves of about 21 of the 41 commodities examined" in the review. Page disputed the timescale of absolute resource depletion with a simple illustration of the un-tapped mineral wealth in the world's seawater:

1,000,000,000 years supply of sodium chloride, magnesium and bromine

100,000,000 years supply of sulphur, borax and potassium chloride

1,000,000 years supply of molybdenum, uranium, tin and cobalt

1,000 years supply of nickel and copper

16,000 million tons of aluminium, iron, and zinc.

Furthermore, writes Page, with drilling going no further than six of the 25-40 miles of the earth's crust, reserves have hardly been touched yet. Page's point is not that the resources of the Earth are

infinite. Only that the *Limits to Growth* computer model massively understated them. He predicted then that, in principle, resources were sufficient for "... perhaps tens of thousands of years". As Page says "...the most pressing limits to growth are not geological: Mother Nature has put ample on the planet". Rather "...what limits there may be come from man's economic and technological ability to exploit these resources". A simple proof of Page's numbers was given by the late Julian Simon, who in 1980 bet one of the report's supporters, Paul Ehrlich, that ten selected minerals would not rise in price – and in 1990, Ehrlich, having lost the bet, paid Simon \$576.07.

The mistake that the *Limits to Growth* team had made with their data was to take current estimates of reserves as if they were fixed, failing to see that when oil and other minerals rose in price, it would become profitable to look further, and discover further reserves. More to the point, though, was the attempt to underscore an argument with a headline-grabbing warning of the coming apocalypse.

However, it is much more than news manipulation that draws people to believe that this is the end of days. Apocalyptic fears arise from a psychological need to invest political claims with a dramatic underpinning. In today's overcrowded market of fears a mundane claim that things could be better if we did things a bit differently has little purchase. Activists, often isolated from wider society, who want to believe that their goals are important do not know how to make them resonate without blood-curdling warnings of disaster to come.

So it was that health-campaigners with the laudable aim of checking the spread of the HIV virus in the 1980s played down the evidence that the disease was largely restricted to high-risk groups. Instead, they warned that a heterosexual epidemic was around the corner – a warning that proved to be wildly overstated. In Britain, the Leeds-based scientist Richard Lacey was reported in *Nature* as saying that virtually a whole generation of people might die of the "human form" of Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis, or mad cow disease. On the basis of Lacey's reports One World reported that, "recently, it was estimated that 34 million people could be infected by 1997." Other epidemics that have driven people to panic include the terror of Avian Flu (1993), or more recently Swine Flu spreading from Mexico, which

led the British Health Service to buy 38 million vaccines from drug company GlaxoSmithKline – though in the end the feared epidemic never materialized.

**C**ampaigners against genetic engineering traded in scare stories, too. In 1997 Dr Mae-Wan Ho of the Open University warned that genetic engineering could lead to transgenic DNA being "taken up by gut bacteria and by gut cells, and, through the gut, into the blood stream." Worse, genetic engineering was leading to new disease-inducing viruses, shown in outbreaks of monkey pox and Hansa virus. Edinburgh genetic scientist Arpad Pusztai was lauded as a martyr when he was sacked after a study showing GM potatoes caused cancer in rats. To the critics, GM was a vast experiment on the public. As it turned out, Pusztai's study was wrong, there was no risk of cancer. Mae-Wan Ho's fears were unfounded. 280 million Americans have eaten thousands of tons of GM Soya, Tomatoes and Rice without any gut-borne mutations or weird GM diseases.

**"Our age has mostly put away the grand political projects..."**

Fears focussed on the environment and health are not the only candidates for the end of life as we know it. A growing anxiety about the runaway economy, and in particular the rise in indebtedness came to a head when banks collapsed at the end of 2008.

The banking crisis led to a revival in interest in the economic theories of Karl Marx, who had predicted a crisis of capitalism. For those few stalwarts of Marxism, bruised by long years of unpopularity, it was all too much. They could not resist announcing the collapse of capitalism. According to historian Eric Hobsbawm "it is certainly greatest crisis

of capitalism since the 1930s" – which is justified by the losses on the balance sheet, but little else. The economic crises of the 1970s and early 1980s provoked social conflict that came close to breakdown, leading to a revolution in Portugal, and the overthrow of the pro-Western regime in Vietnam. The banks losses, the size of the bailout and the job and budget cuts that have followed did lead to riots in Greece and protests across Europe, but nothing on the scale of the 1970s – still perhaps that is around the corner. The comparison between the losses of the 1970s and 2008 only truly shows that stock values were wildly overstated, paper values only, whose loss has not led to the collapse of the system overall. Istvan Meszaros' claim of two years ago that "we have reached the historical limits of capital's ability to control society" looks like a veteran socialist's wishful thinking, rather than a realistic alternative.

Of course it is not just the Left that trades in overstated fears for the future. The Right has raised absurd spectres of social collapse, since long before Ronald Reagan told Jim Bakker that "we may be the generation that sees Armageddon." Twenty years after the collapse of the Communist Bloc, and with European Social Democracy more committed to the market than ever before, the American Right is seriously fighting against the Marxist Socialist who somehow snuck into the White House, Barack Obama (evidence of Obama's socialist leanings are to be found in the great sums of money that he has handed over to ... Wall Street and large corporations). The Right's fears for the order of property owners gives rise to an extraordinary inflation of the incidence of crime. Police chiefs in America and Britain whipped up crime statistics throughout the seventies and eighties to justify additional costs. Crime panics focused on 'muggings' and drugs were used to criminalise people of colour and migrants in histrionic ways. For the Right, Social Breakdown is an ever-present threat to the American way of life. Often those fears for America are focused on aliens. To Arizona Governor Jan Brewer people crossing the border from Mexico without official sanction is nothing less than "an invasion." Cranking up fears of Islamic terrorists George Bush's government oversaw the greatest increase in police powers since the Second World War, with the creation of a Department of Homeland Security that integrated the secret services,

customs and immigration departments.

The fear – or perhaps thrill – that we are at The End of Days is one that the film industry has happily plundered. Films rehearse The End over and over again, from tales of environmental catastrophe in *The Road*, *The Happening*, and the *Day After Tomorrow*, to those of alien invasion in *Independence Day*, *Cloverfield*, or countless Zombie films. Jeopardy puts bums on seats – and the End of the World is jeopardy en masse.

**I**magineing The End lends humdrum life a greater profundity, by putting our own isolated selves into a much larger picture. “After me, the flood,” said King Louis XV of France. Victor Serge said that his fellow revolutionaries bent themselves to their purpose by thinking of themselves as “dead men on leave.” At the other end of the political spectrum, the Nazis created a cult of death, and their philosopher Martin Heidegger thought that being in the face of death (being-towards-death)

was the only authentically free attitude.

Our age has mostly put away the grand political projects that our forebears used to make sense of their own place in the scheme of things. Postmodernist philosophers mocked those “grand narratives” like the forward march of labor, or the rational subject. According to the philosophers such ideological frameworks were suspect because they were oriented towards an end point (called “teleological,” or even “eschatological”).

In the words of the late professor of postmodernism, Jean François Lyotard, we need “incredulity to all grand narratives.” Funnily enough, having cleared away all the “end-oriented” ideologies of socialism and liberalism our post-modern age has proved to be a sucker for stories of The End. Where is the incredulity towards that grand narrative?

We are far too wise to fall for any utopian dreaming, but instead we have fallen prey to any number of dystopian nightmares. The real change, it seems was not a loss of illusions, but the trad-

ing of positive visions of the future for nightmare scenarios around the corner. Far from setting us free, the change has made us slaves to histrionic fears. Even the most ardent proponents of the case for action on climate change have noticed that cranking up fear does not move people to act, but instead paralyses them.

All political claims that start by warning of disaster ought to be viewed with scepticism. That does not prove that they are not true. Each case needs to be looked at on its own merits. For all I know, Mexico really is planning an invasion of Arizona, starting with an infiltration. And maybe one third of Britons are nursing as yet undiagnosed CJD. It seems unlikely, but that is not disproof.

Much more important, we need to understand the conditions that make us more susceptible to an appeal to our fears than an appeal to our hopes for the future. To begin to crack that weakness would surely be the beginning of an altogether more positive culture. ¶

# Shiva Found

BY LIAM JONES

Traipsing through an alley,  
between bins of shit and ash  
you saw him sat in a lotus repose.

You knew it was him because  
of his locks: tangled and ancient.  
A sadhu unknowing of any observers.

You could see the great Ganges,  
squalid and yellow, trickle then pour  
from the leg of his trousers.

Like the sage he was,  
the dishevelled ascetic, misplaced  
in his concrete wilderness,

He spoke to you secret  
sanskrit tones, hard to decipher,  
but you thought you heard “Spare change?”

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# U.S. LABOR'S DOUBLE BIND

Last year, an illuminating article in *The New York Times* compared the European labor movement's willingness to engage in militant street protest with the U.S. labor movement's almost exclusive reliance on electoral and legislative maneuvering to attain its goals. Accompanying the article were two photos: one of workers in France's Confédération Générale du Travail marching through the middle of Marseille wearing hardhats, wielding flares, and raising fists to protest the Sarkozy government's economic policy, and one of a solitary United Auto Workers member sitting in a lawn chair outside of a GM plant in Flint, Michigan, with nothing but concrete and chain link fences stretching to the horizon. United Steelworkers president Leo Gerard supplied a now infamous quote:

"I actually believe that Americans believe in their political system more than workers do in other parts of the world," Mr. Gerard said. He said large labor demonstrations are often warranted in Canada and European countries to pressure parliamentary leaders. Demonstrations are less needed in the United States, he said, because often all that is needed is some expert lobbying in Washington to line up the support of a half-dozen senators."

Things must be really bad, because the AFL-CIO and allied groups are sponsoring a rather large protest rally in Washington, D.C. under the banner of One Nation Working Together. But again, it is instructive to compare the orientations of the European labor movement and the U.S. labor movement. This week, European workers engaged in a series of militant street protests against austerity programs around the European Union, including a march on the European capital in Brussels and a general strike in Spain. The latter is especially significant, as it was called by the unions against the ruling PSOE, the Spanish unions' traditional political ally.

In contrast, even though the U.S. labor movement finally feels compelled to put its members in the streets to demand government action to deal with the jobs crisis, the One Nation protest is not an expression of militant opposition to the government or to capital. If anything, the protest seems to be conceived as little more than a massive get out the vote operation on behalf of the beleaguered Democratic Party, whose core voters and big donors are discouraged by its timidity and its sinking prospects in this fall's Congressional elections. One Nation's organizers have provided bus captains (I am one) with materials encouraging us "to keep the momentum of 10.2.10 going strong until 11.2.10," the date of the Congressional elections, when we will all be expected to march dutifully to the polls and pull the lever for anyone who has a D next to their name to keep the nasty Rs out of office. Perhaps this is residual adolescent zealotry, but I personally would rather light up some flares, don a hardhat and bring some of the spirit of this week's European protests home on November 2.

Looking at the history of the U.S. labor movement, especially the upheavals of the 1930s, it seems as if there

have been two key conditions for labor movement growth, which are interrelated: 1) the creation of legal regime that encourages worker self-organization, and 2) a federal government that is at least relatively friendly to the labor movement. In the early 1930s, workers were ready to move but the nation's antiquated labor law regime (and the AFL's commitment to craft unionism) held them back. This changed with the National Recovery Administration's Section 7(a) and subsequently, the passage of the National Labor Relations Act, which gives us the legal regime in place today. And in the great labor wars in Toledo, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Flint, and around the country during the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration did not automatically take the side of capital and granted labor some room to maneuver. Under these conditions, labor was able to reverse its long slide into powerlessness and establish itself as a major force in American political life for decades.

One of these conditions was met in the election of 2008 when Democrats took the White House and secured large Congressional majorities. In return, labor expected to receive passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would have made significant changes to the labor law regime, fulfilling the other condition for labor movement growth. But this didn't happen, even though the labor movement was indispensable to the Democrats' electoral success. Since the Republicans are poised to make big gains in elections this fall, there's little chance that EFCA or something like it will be passed any time soon. If the two conditions listed above are still valid, this means that labor will likely have little chance to grow in numbers or political power for the foreseeable future, creating the very real possibility that labor's long decline may indeed be terminal.

U.S. labor appears to be caught in something of a double bind. It can't grow unless the Democrats have a large majority and make changes to labor law. But even when Democrats have this majority, labor doesn't currently have the power to compel them to make those changes no matter how much money or how many foot soldiers they provide to Democratic campaigns. Yes, it would be nice to keep the Republicans out of power because their economic program is profoundly stupid, but continually electing Democrats to office will do little to confront the deep crisis afflicting workers in the U.S.

Adolph Reed, Jr. sums up the situation with characteristic clarity in a recent article in *New Labor Forum*:

"Creating alternative courses of action that can help navigate our way out of this political impasse seems to me to be a vastly more important discussion for us to have than wondering what we might be able to win from a Democratic Party and administration over which we, in any event, have no control."

I currently have no idea what a way out of this impasse might look like, and I'm not sure if anyone else knows either. But criticizing the labor movement's codependent relationship with the Democrats is a good place to start. ¶

— Chris Maisano

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